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Traditional Festivals and Masquerades: *How They Connect to Christmas in Eastern Nigeria*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS AND MASQUERADES

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Tall masquerade (Izaga) in southeastern Nigerian festival tradition. Photo credit; Wikipedia.



In many Igbo communities of Eastern Nigeria, Christmas is not only a Christian celebration but also a season deeply connected to traditional cultural practices. One of the most distinctive elements of this cultural expression is the display of masquerades and community festivals. These performances, rooted in pre-colonial Igbo cosmology, have evolved to coexist with Christianity and have become a major part of Christmas celebrations in the East.

01

Origins of Masquerades in Igbo Culture

Masquerade traditions, often referred to as “Mmanwụ” in Igbo language, are an ancient cultural practice that can be traced back centuries. Historically, masquerades represented the spirits of ancestors, deities, or symbolic forces. They served multiple functions, including entertainment, social regulation, spiritual communication, and the preservation of communal identity.

Masquerade societies such as the Ekpe, Ogene, Odo, Agaba, and Omaba traditions held both ritual and administrative authority in their communities. The masqueraders were believed to embody non-human beings, and their appearances reinforced communal respect for ancestral power. While the masquerade institution predates Christianity, it has remained resilient, adapting to new social realities.

02

Cultural Significance of Masquerades

Masquerades traditionally signified social order, moral discipline,

communal unity, and identity. They appeared at funerals, harvest festivals, initiations, and community ceremonies. Beyond entertainment, they acted as cultural archives, preserving forms of music, dance, costume design, and storytelling. Their performances also helped transmit values such as bravery, respect for elders, justice, and collective responsibility.

03

The Arrival of Christianity and Cultural Adaptation

When Christian missionaries arrived in Igboland in the 19th century, they initially opposed masquerade practices, viewing them as pagan. However, by the mid-20th century, many Igbo communities found a way to blend traditional cultural life with Christianity. Christmas became a major homecoming season, and local festivals, music, and masquerades naturally aligned with this period, when families reunited and communities became vibrant with activity.

Over time, masquerades became less about spiritual ritual and more about cultural identity and entertainment, making them acceptable to communities that had become predominantly Christian.

04

Why Masquerades Became Linked to Christmas

Several factors explain why masquerades are widely displayed during Christmas:

Christmas is the peak period for Igbo homecoming (known as “going

home” or “ị lọ Ụlọ”). This influx of family members creates the ideal audience for elaborate festivals and masquerade shows.

Christmas falls during the dry season, which is culturally preferred for festivals because it allows outdoor gatherings, travel, and communal performances.

With the influence of Christianity, masquerades gradually shifted from sacred rituals to community entertainment. Christmas provided the best opportunity to showcase them without conflict.

Masquerade performances attract tourists, indigenes, and returning diaspora members, increasing spending in the community. Christmas thus became the economic peak for cultural festivities.

Christmas is a time for unity, and masquerades reinforce communal bonds through dance, music, satire, and shared celebration.

05

Types of Masquerades Seen During Christmas

Different regions showcase different masquerade forms during Christmas:

Agaba and Ajofia: Known for dramatic displays and strength.

Odo and Omaba (mainly Nsukka and Enugu areas): Appear cyclically and often coincide with festive seasons.

Ekpe masquerades (influenced by Efik-Ibibio cultures): Appear in some Igbo communities of Cross River and Akwa Ibom regions.

Comic masquerades such as “Oriakụ” or “Nwa onye ụka” that

entertain children and adults during holiday gatherings.



Photo credit; Wikipedia.

Acrobatic and dance masquerades that perform at squares, markets, and village arenas.

These masquerades contribute to the colorful and energetic environment associated with Christmas in Eastern Nigeria.

06

Modern Interpretations and Cultural Revival

Today, masquerades during Christmas are increasingly viewed as cultural heritage rather than spiritual institutions. Many local governments and cultural bodies organize end-of-year festivals that



include masquerade parades, traditional wrestling, dance competitions, and music concerts.

Social media and tourism have also expanded their visibility, and many young people now see masquerades as symbols of identity and pride. Despite modernization, the Christmas season remains the most active time for these cultural performances.

Masquerades have evolved from ancient spiritual institutions into vibrant cultural symbols that enrich the Christmas season in Eastern Nigeria. Their presence reflects the unique ability of Igbo culture to adapt while retaining its core traditions. As Christmas continues to be the most significant homecoming period for Igbo families, masquerades and festivals remain central to the celebration, reinforcing community identity, strengthening social ties, and preserving cultural heritage.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

Law Graduate / Creative & Research Writer.



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