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**At the Threshold: Childhood Masking
in Umuoji and Umuahia**

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One of the greatest mysteries of my childhood was knowing the home of the masquerades. In due season they would appear at dawn terrorizing or entertaining the village, depending on the nature of the particular masquerade. The war was on.¹ I was a barely three-years old. My hometown, Umuoji, is in today's Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State, in Igbo country. The hostilities did not quite stop the seasonal rhythm of the masquerades, in part because, as I understood later, the sacred Python of the Idemili River, *Eke Idemmili*, kept the Nigerian soldiers away from Umuoji.² *Ayaka* and *Ajikwu*, both night masquerades, continued to instill dread of the profoundest type in the dark dry season nights, and no one dared leave a lantern burning even in their inner rooms without drawing the ire of the masquerade. Perhaps the most terrible thing about *Ayaka* was its haunting voice that would sound so close when, as we were told, it actually was several miles away. And how was that possible? Only the initiated knew. The nights were dreadful, but by morning, everywhere it would be quiet (except for the distant thundering of mortar fire from the war and Ogbunigwe),³ for the masquerades would have returned to their underground abode. On occasion, the only physical evidence of the nocturnal visits would be a table or chair—left by a careless trader in the village square—neatly anchored high up on the branches of the tall Indian almond tree. Who else but the superhuman *Ayaka* could perform such feats? For *Ayaka*, and indeed any other masquerade to return again, the initiated would perform necessary rites, pour palm wine into the ant hole, and the masqueraders would come forth, moving backwards from the belly of the earth, the abode of the spirits.

The war ended in 1970. We returned to Umuahia, the present capital city of Abia State, where I was born, and where my family had lived prior to the war.⁴ It was a time for rebuilding, at least in the former Biafran region. But I was quick to notice that the masquerades in the Ndume-Ibeku community there were very different from those in my hometown of Umuoji. There were no *Ayaka*,

Onyekulufá, *Àjikwù*, or the mother of masquerades, *Ijélé*. But there was a thriving culture of children's masquerade especially during the Christmas or, less so, Easter season. We lived in a large tenement and most of the families came from outside the Umuahia area; most of the parents worked at the School of Agriculture, Umudike, at the Government College, Umuahia or the Rural Education Centre, which later became the Umuahia Campus of Alvan Ikoku College of Education.

At Christmas time, the girls would spend several nights learning new dances while the boys planned mask displays, often also including music ensembles. This way, the awareness of gender difference was subtly reenacted. The practice periods, therefore, were times for closer gender bonding. Although the adult masking tradition in Umuoji was different from that in Umuahia, children's masquerades in both were very similar, perhaps because they did not involve ritual. Rules of proper conduct hardly existed. There were no requirements other than being a young male living in the area—unlike in adult masking where one had to be a native of the given community to participate. Also young boys were not necessarily expected to appreciate the seriousness of masking—which at the childhood stage was mainly a means of entertainment. Because the children did not yet “know” the masquerade—which happened only during the initiation ceremony—they could get away with such things as removing their masks in full view of everyone without incurring any sanction.⁵ This often happened after long hours on the road with the dry season afternoon temperature so high, the air still humid, and the costume stifling. Usually, when the masker was fatigued, he would signal his companions so they could find a secluded place to get some rest. Yet, certain procedures aimed at affirming the necessary secrecy of masking, though not enforced, were observed in children's masquerades. While, for instance, the girls would practice their new dances in the tenement courtyard, the boys preferred the backyard, keeping away from prying eyes, especially of the girls in the neighborhood. Similarly, to ensure sufficient anonymity, the masker would borrow some of the costumes from his peers so as not to easily give away his identity, but this was not always, if ever, successful. It is important to point out the two different types of children's masquerades: the aggressive, cane wielding type, and the dancer type usually accompanied by music makers. The first was more prevalent in the Umuoji of my childhood, the other more fashionable in Umuahia.

In Umuoji, the major masking period is the Uzo-Iyi festival season that usually takes place in March-April, but as a child I never had the opportunity to witness this event.⁶ For me and my brothers, and cousins at Umuahia, Uzo-Iyi increasingly assumed mythic qualities, especially because as we were told, it was the occasion when the finest masks like *Ógwùlúgwù* and *Ógòlò*, and the most spectacular including *Ijélé*, *Óbá Mmílí*, and *Nkénekwù*, performed at the town square. But every two years when we traveled home to Umuoji for Christmas we had the opportunity take part in the children's masquerades, which

usually took place on December 26, while the adult masks performed after that date. The children's masking day was dreaded by everyone because the maskers would go to absurd extents to corner their victim. Often, a child masker hides in the bush for several minutes patiently waiting for someone to come near enough before engaging the person in a chase, whip in hand. This way, one's chances of making a “hit” was increased. Needless to say, this unnerved girls and pre-middle-aged mothers, the usual victims of such stealth tactics. For this reason, such masquerades were derisively called *Mmonwu Ukwu Aja*,⁷ and when spotted in the market square, an enthusiastic crowd of boys and girls taunted the masquerade, calling it *Opia-onye-kwu-akwu* (one-that-flogs-a-stationary-person). For these chaser masquerades, light costumes and non-cumbersome face masks are preferred to the more elaborate types that added a lot of drag, therefore impeding the masker's ability to race about. One particularly favorite type, called *Magbàdà*⁸ or *Ògbá Magbàdà*,⁹ was made of a medium-weight woven cotton fabric, by weavers from the northern Igbo area, or bought from northern Nigerian traders. The costume covered the masker from head to toe, and sometimes a sparse raffia skirt was tied around the waist. Two small perforations in the face area allowed the masker an almost unhindered viewing field. Sometimes, however, the mask had a small wooden headpiece—like the one on *Úlaga* or *Òji-onu*,¹⁰ that was pushed to the masker's back when moving at full speed. Compared to costumes that included regular wooden face masks, the *Magbàdà* child masker did not have to hold the face mask in order to stabilize it when engaged in a chase. It therefore enjoyed the reputation of being the most dreaded cane-wielding masquerade.

Apart from proving one's speedy prowess by the number of “hits” recorded before sunset, another significant part of childhood masking in Umuoji had to do with proving one's ability to endure pain. This took the form of engaging another masker by mutually flogging each other until one surrendered. For this, those who had the time, spent several weeks prior to the outing day in the bush searching for prime *Alo-anyasi*, a particularly popular shrub known for its toughness, and flexibility.¹¹ The youngest maskers used softer whips made from the mid-rib of the long leaves of a particular plant usually found in family shrines. Doubtless, this was one way of establishing one's place within the age group or circle of friends.¹²

The masking culture in Umuahia is not as elaborate as that of Umuoji. For the adults the major masquerade is *Èkpè*, which usually performs during the annual *Iri ji* (new yam) festival at the village square. The more prevalent masquerades are generically called *Èkpó*—often so huge and ugly that pregnant women are encouraged not to look at them, else their ugliness infect the child in the womb. Years later in art school I would learn that both *Èkpè* and *Èkpó* were derived from among the neighboring Ibibio-Efik who live in the Cross-River area. The children's *Èkpó* masks, however, are usually very colorful, with decorative patterns to enhance their attractiveness; they, too, are made else-

where, perhaps also by Ibibio artists. The face masks, and raffia frills to complement the costumes are usually bought by the mothers as presents for their sons.

Occasionally, we prepared our own raffia skirt to be worn over the fabric costume. As part of the preparations, we also constructed our own drums. These were made from open-ended beverage cans covered on one end with a cellophane membrane tied down with dry strands from banana trees. The membrane was stretched taut by means of orange thorns carefully pushed in at the outside edges. With a few of these drums a bona-fide orchestra came alive to accompany the masquerade as we visited homes to perform for money and, less preferably, sweets. During the outing, it was often necessary to look out for menacing adult masks that usually carried machetes. At the sight of one we would make a tactical detour, and if the danger was very unambiguous we found the quickest route to safety.¹³

Older boys danced the more spectacular *Òji-onu*.¹⁴ This is the quintessential dance masquerade that requires a full complement of drummers, rattle shakers, and, most importantly, a flutist. The art of making the two-hole flute from bamboo sticks, like that of constructing cellophane drums for the younger boys, was a full-time hobby during the Christmas holidays. During this period also, the boys would carve the *Òji-onu* head mask, which, technically speaking, is one of the simplest masks. Although, eventually, preference was given to the more refined and colorful ones bought in the Umuahia main market, which had a section where, on occasion, we would go with a parent to look at the masks and music-making paraphernalia.¹⁵ Within any given group of boys, the best dancer was selected to perform with the mask since the success of the entire display depended largely on the masked dancer's ability to translate into dance, the lyrical song of the flute. Like *Ùlàgà*, *Òji-onu*'s performance was so popular that a competent ensemble was always assured of impressive gifts of money by appreciative spectators.

Through it all, the experience of childhood masking was, to say the least, complex, perhaps due to the different levels of the individual child's relationships with masking as peer activity, as social performance, and as personal experience. As peer activity, there was no doubt as to its use as measures of courage and strength, which translated to respect within the group. As social performance, it indicated whether the boy—as son or brother or friend to other members of the community—would develop into a fine specimen of manhood as constructed within that community. As a personal experience, it straddled various psycho-emotive states. The very first outing elicited anxiety and suppressed fear—anxiety about the known, such as being able to impress one's spectators by either dancing very well, or making numerous “hits,” depending upon the nature of the masquerade. And about the unknown, such as finding out what it felt like to be behind the mask, *to be the masquerade*. Then there was the question of power inherent in masked performances. Behind the mask you could, if necessary, get back at another child with whom you had a score to

settle, without fear of retaliation—especially if that other was a masked boy, or a girl from school or the neighborhood. The thrill of watching such a victim the day after trying to figure out unsuccessfully if you were the “merciless” masked one was one of the most memorable experiences of childhood masking.

In spite of all the excitement of Christmas masquerades in Umuahia, and the occasional thrills in Umuoji, it was with great anticipation that we—myself and my two older brothers¹⁶—looked forward to *Ikpuni* or *Ima mmonwu*¹⁷ back in our hometown. For as yet, we were but children, far removed from the secrets of the masquerade; nothing prior to the induction process prepared anyone for the *real* thing. Naturally, it happened at different times for each one of us since we had to do it with our age-grades. I still remember that very day, in 1978, the day, in Umuazu, Umuoji, when in the eyes of my kinsmen, women, and friends, I ceased to be a child. That day I finally learned how the masquerade emerges from the belly of the anthill. And the source of *Àyàkà*'s fearful voice.

Notes

1. Nigeria-Biafran (civil) War, 1967-1970.
2. The majestic python, whose beautiful skin patterns are said to have been painted by the creator at the dawn of the world, is revered in Umuoji and other Idemili towns.
3. Ogbunigwe (Mass Killer) was the dreaded, mysterious explosive device invented by Biafran engineers during the war.
4. The often-misunderstood concept of “hometown,” in Nigeria at least, refers to where one's father comes from and not necessarily the town where one was born. The idea, of course, is that the individual maintains active contact with the ancestral home, often through town unions, age grades, kindred meetings, and other socio-cultural organizations operative within the given community. Although I was born and spent most of my childhood in Umuahia, where my father and mother come from, Umuoji, remains my hometown. The situation is complicated by “documentary evident,” like a birth certificate that often names one's place of birth, which in the scheme of the individual's life matters very little.
5. In Umuoji, for instance, *itikpo isi mmuo*—an untranslatable concept that defies mere description, but which for the sake of textual *convenience* might be called “the coming out of the adult mask in public”—would receive great sanction, including heavy fines imposed by the masking society. This usually happened during occasional violent fights between rival groups of boys from neighboring villages. As such moments, the burden was on the uninitiated males and women to avert their eyes from the sacrilege. Nevertheless, the “errant” child masker, who knew very well it was wrong to do so, would often be at the receiving end of harsh jokes days, even weeks, after the event. For this reason, many a child endured discomfort in his costume, even sobbing behind the mask, while struggling to keep his dignity and reputation intact.
6. Uzo-Iyi is the most popular annual festival in Umuoji. Unlike so many other ceremonies that have been adversely affected by Christianity, it remains the most important cultural activity for Umuoji people. It is the occasion when the town's twenty-four villages display their most important masks. But individual masks perform in the weeks leading to the Uzo-Iyi ceremony.
7. “The mask lurks behind walls.” The implication of this nomenclature is that agile, confident maskers come out to the village square and take challenges from race-ready spectators, while the lazy maskers get to their unwary victims by stealth.

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8. *Mgbàdà* is a small antelope-like animal known for its quickness in the bush.
9. The *Mgbàdà* dancer or masker.
10. *Òji-onu* is described below.
11. Those of us who came home only about two weeks before Christmas brought with us our own cache of *Alo-Anyasi*, or we relied on the generosity of home-based peers for supplies.
12. This consensual flagellation was not restricted to child-maskers, for young boys often participated in this as part of the displays for spectators. Initiated adults, along with their masquerades, had their own more brutal version of this activity. However, as a test of manhood, it was not as elaborate as the groom-eligibility *Sharo* performance among the Hausa-Fulani of northern Nigeria.
13. It was perhaps in order to avoid these kinds of encounters that the children and adult masquerades were and are danced on separate days in Umuoji, although it was more likely a way to separate the "real thing" from the foibles of children.
14. The equivalent of *Òji-onu* in Umuoji is the *Úlágà*.
15. This market at Umuahia is not a typical "tourist" market, as the buyers are mostly people from the town or neighboring communities. Also the traders, such as my mother, who sell masks and musical instruments, also sell materials used for herbal medicine and religious rituals.
16. I was the third of five boys in a family of nine siblings. My mother had three sons after the first girl. And with two sisters separating me from my younger bothers, the latter could not share with the older boys, their boyhood experience.
17. Both terms refer to the process of induction into the adult masquerade society. The first means "entering the earth," the second "knowing the masquerade." These terms indicate an ontological connection between masquerades and the earth, which in Igbo cosmology, is the abode of the ancestors. So entering the earth to know the masquerades means also, by implication, connecting and communing with the ancestors.



I.1. The mask was made by the boy's father in imitation of the adult mask *Kalengula*. Northern Kete peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photograph by David A. Binkley & Patricia Darish, 1982

I.2. Adult *Kalengula* mask. Northern Kete peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photograph by David A. Binkley & Patricia Darish, 1982.

