
***Onyekulufa and Atu-mma: Breaking the Barriers of Gender
Discrimination in Health-Related Indigenous Masquerade
Performances in Nigeria***

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ABSTRACT:

The prevalence of various health challenges that have contributed to high mortality rates among women and children in Nigeria in recent times is usually attributed to illiteracy and ignorance. Because the prevalence rate is higher in rural communities, there is need to explore alternative modes of communication that are familiar to these communities. There is some valuable information on various health challenges embedded in masquerade-based indigenous performances and shared at cult gatherings that consciously exclude women. This discriminatory attitude discourages the accessibility of useful information that could engender healthy practices and encourage behavioural change. Interestingly, however, a few masquerade cults have transcended gender-based discriminatory exclusion to embrace wider involvement. Yet some have not. This research is an investigation into what has been responsible for the perpetuation of discriminatory practices, using two masquerade cult groups: the *Onyekulufa* and *Atu-mma* of Umuoji in Idemili North Local government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria as models. It recommends a culture-centred approach to the transformation and repositioning of masquerade performances for effective health communication in rural communities.

Key words: Performance, culture, health, communication,

INTRODUCTION:

The high prevalence of various health challenges and sicknesses have contributed to high mortality rates among women and children in Nigeria. Among the causes of this situation are ignorance, illiteracy and lack of access to good health facilities especially among rural dwellers. In 1997 CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination

against Women) recommended improved health services and new information methods for women and children in local communities (Madunagu 98). Thus there is need to exploit alternative, familiar and peculiar approaches that could expand the frontiers of health information platforms. Masquerade performance is one indigenous, familiar, peculiar, and hitherto neglected form that has the capacity to engender this expansion. And some of them do communicate health information, beyond mere entertainment. Sadly, the women who are usually saddled with the responsibility of bringing up children and who are mostly exposed to situations that dispose them to health challenges are excluded from the decisions that frame most of these performances.

This paper argues for a culture-centred approach that consciously reappraises the gender biased attitudes inhibiting the value of certain indigenous performances as veritable avenues for effective health communication in local communities. The culture-centred approach is anchored on the pioneering research of Mohan Dutta, exploring alternative health communication strategies for local communities where traditional methods had failed to yield desired results. According to Louise Phillips; "... the culture-centred, dialogic approach uses the concept of the *subaltern*- that is, the condition of being under, erased, absent or cut off from the main discursive articulations of civil society. Subaltern voices, then, articulate ways of knowing which are excluded from dominant spaces of knowledge production" (Phillips 68). This approach manipulates the interaction among structure, culture and agency to create fresh and inclusive practices that challenge communication attitudes driven by exclusion and neglect. In this context, structure refers to the institutions and body of rules and procedures that govern the choices available to the members of a community. Culture is the entire dynamic and complex way of life of a people that provides the framework for articulating and comprehending the structures, while agency constitutes the capacity of community members to make informed choices about issues that concern them. Mohan Dutta posits that the culture-centred approach "...challenges the dominant paradigm through its very focus on engaging with subaltern participants, who have typically been silenced in the dominant health communication discourse. It becomes a site of engagement where multiple meanings are at play, forming a complex and intertwined web of dynamic cultural meaning around health issues" (Dutta 107). The objectives of this approach are to expand participatory spaces and discover new avenues for the creation of development infrastructures for the articulation of

health issues in local communities (Parker 81). Therefore, the target of intervention is usually the value systems that determine the attitudes encouraging bias and exclusion, to examine “... how the assumptions and values that characterise a particular culture shape and direct the behaviour of individuals within that culture (MacLachlan 26). So in this case, the value systems embodied in traditional masquerade performances that contain health information require interrogation.

Masquerades, generally known as *Mmuo* or *Mmanwu* (spirit) in the Igbo language, constitute a very important cultural personality among the *Igbo* people of South-East Nigeria. Most organized communities in the South-Eastern States are associated with one form of masquerade or another. Some of these masquerades are performed during specialized festivals and rituals, and through seasons, whereas some others feature more frequently. However, it may surprise a passive observer to discover that some of these Masquerade performances traverse the confines of mere performance, to delve into public health issues. But the intricacies of the dominantly patriarchal society, the stratification of the masquerade practices into cult groups and the specification of gender roles raise certain questions as to how far the women folk can have the capacity to make informed decisions about the health related information transmitted through these masquerade performances, because exclusion “... has negative emotional, psychological, and behavioural consequences” (Williams 291). Therefore a culture-centred appraisal becomes very essential, as it “... engages with questions of marginalization by interrogating the erasures in the dominant structures of health” (Dutta 139).

Masquerade performances are rooted in culture and play several roles ranging from religious, political, to social. Ossie Enekwe acknowledges that,

Masking is the most popular, the most versatile and the most entertaining public performance in Igbo land. From the religious point of view, a mask has the force of invocation and introduces extra human forces into the human sphere, making possible the displacement of chronological time by primordial time in which mythical beings commune with the living and manifest their powers. From aesthetic point of view masking is a synthesis of many art forms, including costuming, impersonation, miming, sculpture, music, dance,

poetry, movement, dialogue and painting ... Masking is the soul of Igbo theatre. (Enekwe 56)

The performances constitute a means through which communities define their cultural worth and sustain shared values and identity. The concern of this paper is with those performances that play largely social roles, but deliberately exclude women usually for the sake of sustaining dominance and control. In his study of the Yoruba *Egungun* masquerade, for instance, David Ker notices the deliberate adoption of ambiguous representations by male masquerade cult groups to "... terrify non initiates [particularly women]" (Ker 11). And in his own study of Igbo masquerade societies, Nonso Ekpunobi concurs that; "These societies were kept secret from women and children, mainly the two groups the community intends to control (Ekpunobi 49).

Women are very important in the quest for national development in Nigeria. Their roles in the family, the community and the nation cannot be overemphasized. Yet in many parts of the country harmful traditional practices are committed against women. These discriminatory traditional practices contribute to underdevelopment.

A closer study and analysis of the *Onyekulufa* and the *Atu-mma* masquerade cults of Umuoji in Idemili North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria and what they stand for, reveals possible ways of exploiting the potentials of indigenous masquerade performances to foster healthier local communities and discourage gender discrimination.

While in the research field to discover the full potentials of both the *Atu-mma* and the *Onyekulufa* masquerades, it was remarkable to notice the chauvinistic manner with which the custodians of masquerade cults dismissed suggestions about the inclusion of the female folk or any possibility of allowing them to experience these masquerades first hand. One objective of this study is, therefore, to find a way of protecting the female folk from extreme deprivation, by showing that masquerade performances like *Onyekulufa* and the *Atu-mma*, can actually provide the desired alternative media for delivering health information that are particularly useful to women if identified gender biases in many of these performances are eliminated.

A research of this nature requires some field activities and interaction with masquerade cult groups, gender representatives, and custodians of both the *Onyekulufa* and *Atu-mma*. The

researchers therefore designed a number of questions that guided the sessions with identified respondents:

- I. What is the *Onyekulufa* and *Atu-mma* Masquerades about?
- II. What traditional roles do the masquerades play in the community?
- III. Do the masquerades transmit any health-related information?
- IV. Why are women restricted from being active participants in the masquerade rites/performances?
- V. Since the *Onyekulufa* and the *Atu-mma* treat women-related issues, would it not be necessary for women to have more chances/roles during the performances?

Using the random sampling method, data was collected from the following groups in Umuoji:

- Association of Native Doctors (*Otu dibia*) mostly elderly men and women
- Young Men (22-35yrs)
- Young Women (21- 35yrs)
- Men (40yrs and above)
- Women (40 yrs and above)

THE UMUOJI PEOPLE

Umuoji is an autonomous town in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra state located some 11km NE of Onitsha, the town covers an area of about 40sq km on the north of Idemili river valley. (Ekpunobi 1) The town is firstly divided into two segments *Mgbago* (highland) and *Mgbada* (lowland) People found in these two areas often exhibit shared and peculiar cultural traits and idiosyncrasies. The town, consisting of 23 villages, is traditionally divided into four quarters which are Eziora made up of six villages, Ifiteora made up of four villages, Dimechem made up of eight villages and Akala made up of five villages. The *Igwe* (kingship) of the town is rotated amongst these quarters.

Umuoji people are deeply rooted in their culture and belief systems and as such would give anything to protect and uphold them. The predominant attitude of the community is captured in this statement: “*anyi bu di uka mana anyi ama hapu omenala anyi ka onwu o. O bu uka na eme ka aga si na Omenala di njo*” (we are Christians but we will not leave our traditions and

customs of our people to die, there is nothing bad in our traditions rather it is the church that sometimes makes these traditions look bad). The customs and traditions of Umuoji people have brought them into international lime light. A popular occasion is their *Uzo Iyi* festival. *Uzo Iyi* presents a platform where culture, the community and performance meet to stimulate a synthesis that encourages continuity.

A participant reports that,

Uzo Iyi (the way to the stream) was actually a women driven occasion, called *Igechi Mmili* (blocking the stream). It is the ritual process of blocking the streams so that no one goes there during the festival period. Before the festival the people would fetch as much water that will last them for four market days. Once the streams are blocked nobody is allowed to go there.

The month of the festival is March. It ushers in the planting season. *Uzo Iyi* has transcended slowly from a communal event to an international one. People come from different parts of the world to witness it. This is probably due to the array of creative masquerades that display incredible skills during the occasion. These masquerades are a wonder to behold. Since each village is expected to display masks that encapsulate its peculiar identity and overall prowess, a lot of energy goes into creating them. Individuals with similar interests in masquerades and performance also come with their respective *Mmuo* (masquerades) but such must be carefully created so that the mask and its patrons do not become objects of ridicule. The likeness of these masquerades range from animals, to spirits forms, and stock characters depicting familiar persons and idiosyncrasies. An example of a mask that has consistently appeared in *Uzo Iyi* is the *Ezemmuo*, which is said to possess metaphysical powers. *Ezemmuo* has a particular position during every festival and no man or woman can take that place unless the person is ready to face the usually dire consequences. The purpose of stating all this is to give a background to the subject under study.

The *Atu-mma* and *Onyekulufa* Masquerade Performances

Two masquerade performances of the Umuoji people are consciously isolated for this study. *Atu-mma* and *Onyekulufa* are communal masquerades that are deeply involved in social change through satiric songs and performances. Though they engage in so many other issues of societal concern the interest of this research is in their transmission of health information.

Onyekulufa

Onyekulufa is a masquerade cult of *Umuoji* people with significant relevance. It is “...a nocturnal masquerade serving the social function of pointing out and ridiculing members of community found wanting (Ekpunobi 50). *Onyekulufa* appears occasionally during notable *Umuoji* festivals like *Uzo Iyi*. If a member of the *Onyekulufa* cult dies, every village that belongs to the masquerade cult comes to the compound of the deceased in the night after he has been buried and performs (singing and dancing) till the early hours of the next day. They delve into serious issues, for instance, calling on women that committed abortion to desist from such acts, advising youths and adults alike to go for HIV/AIDS test and know their status, and encouraging women to protect their homes, their health and their children. Regrettably, the women that should be the primary beneficiaries of the information are not involved in the production process of this media. During the day, when *Onyekulufa* appears at the *Uzo Iyi* women and non initiates can come near to listen but due to the mystery the masquerade is already enshrouded in women prefer not to go close. During the night appearance, women can only listen but are not allowed to participate. As a result, the possibilities of advancing the value of the masquerade as an effective media of health communication are grossly impeded, for as Onaiwu Ogbomo points out, “in some traditional societies men have created taboos and restrictions around purely natural biological functions which severely limited women’s public participation, and thus, placed obstacles in the path of their advancement” (Ogbomo 354). Several reasons are adduced for the exclusion of women from the *Onyekulufa*. Some of the men interviewed in the course of this research believe that involving women in the masquerade group would expose the secrets that protect the identity of the mask bearers, and demystify the supernatural powers attributed to the masquerade, as women are usually perceived to be flippant. Some others are just reluctant to let go of age-long chauvinistic attitudes that bestow dominance on men over women. Yet some argue that the inclusion of women would destabilise the formal stratification of the community according to gender roles. From the foregoing it is obvious that apart from the preponderance of men looking down on women due to their physiognomy, it is not always as simple as men trying to maintain, sustain and perpetuate patriarchal order to subjugate and relegate women to the background rather there seems to be a conscious effort among the men folk to hold tenaciously on to their spirituality and age long traditions.

Atu-mma

This masquerade is general known as a great entertainer. *Atu-mma* performs with a group which includes singers and musicians. Musical instruments are mostly traditional ones like *Ogene* (metal gong), *Ekwe* (wooden gong) and local drums. The masquerade appears at funerals, wake keeps and at other ceremonies where they are invited. Ekpunobi observes that “...masquerades like *Atu-mma* or *Ogba Mgbada* provide moral and emotional support to the mourners as their performance usually leaves one in an elated spirit. (Ekpunobi 50) *Atu-mma* performances are coloured with several songs that centre on morality and health. An example is a popular song that deals with sexual promiscuity: “*Akwuna mmuta Nwa Akwuna ka oga bu. Akwuna tulu ime Akwuna ka oga abu*” (if a prostitute gets pregnant she will definitely give birth to a prostitute). The masquerade goes on to talk about the dangers of premarital sex, prostitution, teen pregnancy and other issues of communal moral interest. But an interesting factor is that most of the songs are centred on women, who are always blamed for the wrong things that happen in the community. It is encouraging that this performance intends to achieve behavioural change as well as reorientation of attitudes, but it should not encourage gender discrimination by identifying just one gender while consciously excluding the other.

People get excited whenever *Atu-mma* starts singing. The masquerade is encouraged to mention the names of culprits that had violated communal moral codes. At first it would refuse and community members would offer some money, drinks, and meat to the masquerade group. Children would join by begging and women would try to cajole the masquerade. Then it would spill the names and the arena is agog with excitement while the culprits would leave shamefully. If the persons are not present, then their relations would leave the arena. *Atu-mma* encourages audience participation and involvement. It is not scared of anyone. It exposes all offenders. For instance, it cautions rich politicians to be careful the way they sleep around with teenage girls of the community, warning that “very soon a maternity will be opened in his (the politician’s) name”. Their satirical statements abound. In order to further distribute as well as preserve the well orchestrated songs, the masquerade group produces them on Compact Discs (CDs), and during festivals like *Uzo Iyi* the CDs are sold to raise money for the sustenance of the group.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

There is no doubt that *Onyekulufa* and *Atu-mma* masquerades of Umuoji are imbued with great potentials for effective dissemination of health information but there is need for fresh and innovative approaches to achieve a more conducive development-oriented cultural atmosphere around the performances to make them more effective for targeted health communication, hence the recommendation of this paper for a culture-centred approach. This will entail focused intervention and engagement. Therefore, Government and Non-Government agencies with responsibility or obligation for health care delivery in Nigeria should recognise the need to sustain the efforts of masquerades that possess health information value. This is very imperative since every media of information is needed in the fight against deadly diseases in Nigeria.

The government should make policies that will encourage the expansion of spaces for dialogue within cultures to ensure that harmful myths and practices are not allowed to impede development and that gender based discrimination is abolished at all levels of the society. There should be freedom of movement during traditional performances and local courts should be empowered to prosecute anybody or group that perpetrates physical or psychological harm on women as a result of their participation. Masquerade groups like *Atu-mma* and *Onyekulufa* should be encouraged to change and adapt with the times to encourage grass root development.

CONCLUSION:

The need for change in the way we live is very pertinent if that way becomes inimical to desirable development. This paper does not in any way advocate for abolishing of beneficial codes and traditions of masquerade cults. It does not call for any abuse of sacred offices, rites and other institutions that indigenous communities hold sacred. It advocates for a change in cultural attitude as a pragmatic strategy to engender a process that will assist health communication as a significant factor of development in Nigeria. *Onyekulufa* should attempt to break the barriers of gender based cults exclusion and embrace change and development as *Atu-mma* has attempted to.

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