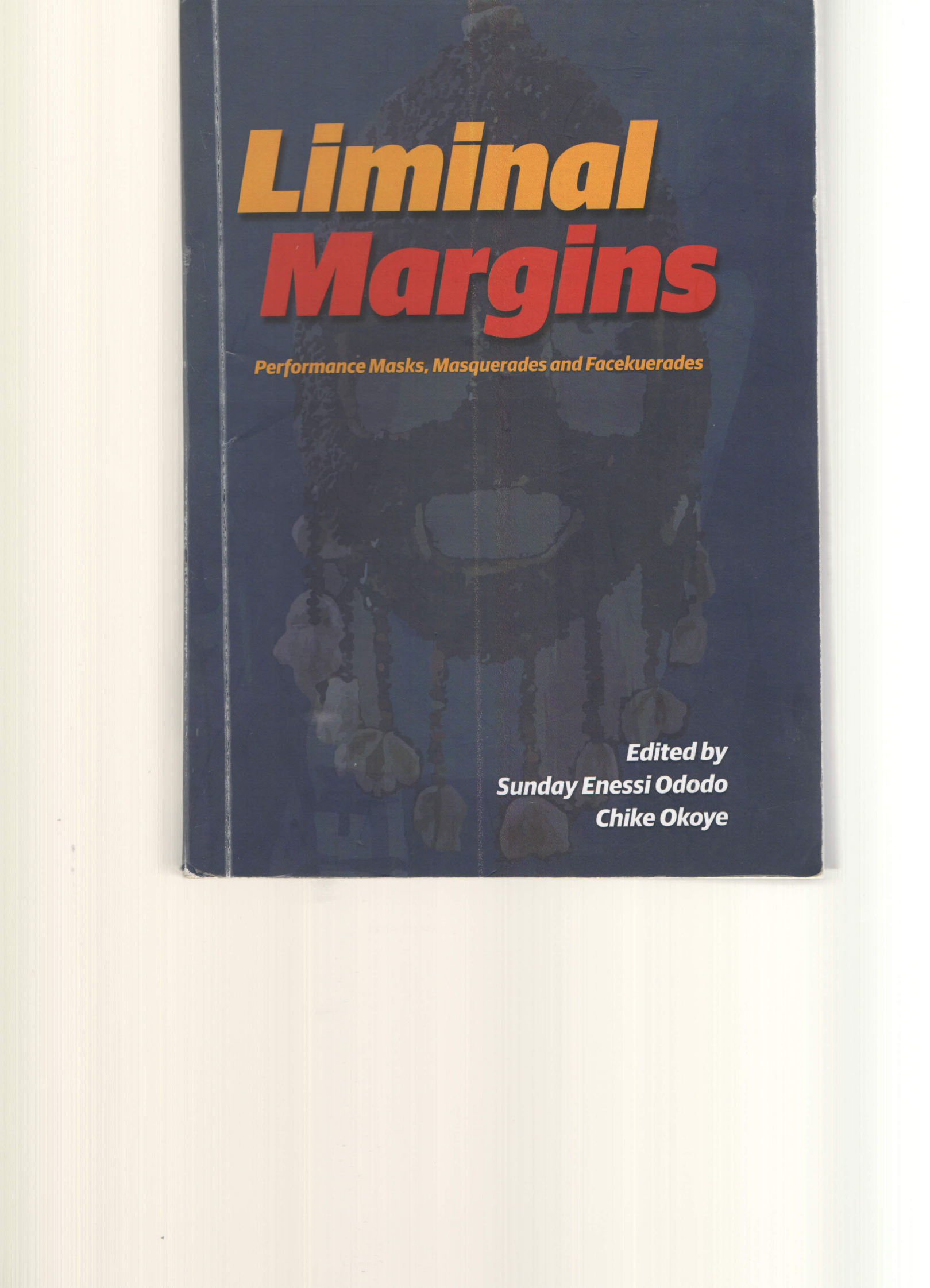




Liminal Margins

Performance Masks, Masquerades and Facekuerades

***Edited by
Sunday Enessi Ododo
Chike Okoye***

'Liminal Margins'

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and Chike Okoye (2019)

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First published in 2019 by the

Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA)

National Secretariat: Department of Theatre Arts & Film Studies,

Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

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Cover design and book layout by Tokunbo Esho

ISBN: 978-978-56454-2-2

Printed in Nigeria by Etchwise Consulting Ltd.

books.etchwiseltd.com

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DEDICATION

For

James Ndukaku Amankulor

Onuora Ossie Enekwe and

Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo

who all crossed the liminal margins –
into Heaven's Gate masked
and looked back *faceked*.

CONTENTS

Dedication	iii
Introduction	1
Liminality and the Margins of Mask and <i>facek</i> Performances – Sunday E. Ododo and Chike Okoye	
 MASK AND MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA	
1. Creative Expressions in The Art and Act of Mask, Masquerade and Masking/Masquerading – Uche Nnadozie	13
2. African Masquerade Tradition and the Colonial Framing: A Postscript – Anyebe Ted Anyebe	44
3. “The Body of my Friend”: Liminal Presence in Igbo Masquerade Theatre – Chukwuma Okoye	69
4. The Igbo Mask and the Elements of Sound and Darkness in the Night Mask Phenomenon – Chike Okoye	93
5. The Visual and Performance Aesthetics of <i>Ijele</i> Masquerade Theatre – Ephraim Ugochukwu and Cornelius Eze Onyekaba	115
6. More than Meets the Eye: Analysing the Mask Characters of <i>Oghu</i> Ensemble Theatre – Chisimdi Udoka Ihentuge	136
7. Beyond the Weird and the Opulent: Costume as Carriers of Act in the Art of Okumkpo Masquerade Theatre of Akpoha-Afikpo – Bernard Eze Orji	159

8. Eku Performance: The Reflexive Nature of Ethnographic Gaze – Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo	178
9. Eggon Occupational Masquerades: A Case Study of <i>Ashum Agulu-Egbo and Orumu</i> – Reuben Embu	197
10. Interrogating the Ritual Essence and Performance Aesthetics of <i>Eyo Adamu Orisa</i> – Olusola Fosudo & Babafemi Babatope	222
11. The Essence of Dance in Eyo Masquerade Festival – Yeside Dosunmu-Lawal	245
12. Cultural Perspectives: The Role of Idoma Masquerades in Upholding Law, Cultural and Societal Values – Abdulmalik Adakole Amali	266
13. Masquerade Theatre amongst the Tiv of Central Nigeria: The <i>Mammywata</i> in Perspective – Shadrach Teryila Ukuma	277
14. Masquerades as Agents of Community Development in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria – Ofonime Inyang	298
15. Beyond Aesthetics: <i>Oguamalam</i> Masquerade Performance – Nicholas Chielotam Akas	320
16. <i>Okumkpo</i> Masquerade Concert: Traditional Public Theatre and Social Commitment in Afikpo, South-Eastern Nigeria – Richard Oko Ajah	336
17. Masquerade and Women Spectatorship in Akpoha-Afikpo: The Demystified Affront – Bernard Eze Orji	361
18. Performance Masks in Africa: An Analytical Overview of <i>Nchil</i> of the <i>Amoh</i> in Kitara District of Jengre in Bassa Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria – Christopher Y. Mtaku and Adiwu Talatu Onkala	386

TWELVE

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES: THE ROLE OF IDOMA MASQUERADES IN UPHOLDING LAW, CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL VALUES

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Abdulmalik Adakole Amali

Abstract

African masquerade culture is galvanized by the quest to establish relationships between the living, the dead and then finding solutions to the unknown. Masquerades are held in high esteem because they are believed to be the physical representation of the gods, dead ancestors and spirits in the human world having all-knowing knowledge of both worlds and the ability to solve problems and intercede favourably on behalf of humans. This attracts all manner of adoration and sacrifice in a bid to please the masquerades and gain their favour. This study uses the analytical methodology to research into the cultural perspectives of the role of masquerades in Idoma society in upholding the law, cultural and societal values. This study highlights the important roles masquerades and their societies play in sustaining our society lawfully and morally and the powers bestowed on the masquerades that give them the necessary impetus to perform their functions effectively. The study concludes that the masquerade system which controls and maintains law and order in the society is based on the beliefs and culture of the people. This makes the masquerade well accepted and effective; having followers who believe

and work hard to uphold the tenets and principles of its law. Therefore, the chapter recommends that there should be a merger of the masquerade laws and cultural principles with the modern institutions of authority in order to instil the required rule of law and order that would be most effective in an African setting.

Keywords: Idoma, Masquerade, Law, Culture, Order

Introduction

Africa's traditional religious heritage traces its origins to the human quest for meaning and self-understanding. The masquerades form one of the core components of this practice and belief system. They are believed to be spirit beings or reincarnated ancestors with special powers. Masquerades and their societies are greatly respected in Africa. They are given rare attributes and are seen to supersede humans in handling the affairs of humans and the spirit world. The African world is anchored around superstitious beliefs in the spirit and human world and masquerades are seen as major mediators between the two worlds. They serve as the symbiosis between the living and the dead; helping to bring the two worlds together.

Masquerading in most African societies is usually an all-male affair with women sometimes playing peripheral roles as happens with the Afikpo people of south-eastern Nigeria where females according to Ottenberg, (117) "do not wear mask, though they might be involved in the masquerades in other ways". The roles they play are believed to be dictated by the spirits and have the total followership of their human hosts. Masquerades are seen to be beyond reproach and are not capable of being wrong. This is why

most communities and especially the Idoma people entrust them to mediate and help to maintain /enforce law and order and also mete out punishment to offenders. The Idoma just like the Noh, according to Griffiths (3) present the Masquerade as both a community religion and as a theatrical event that has a familiar historical and social reference. It functions as an instructional instrument for a cultural philosophy, and is interpreted by artists both within and without the community as a means of preserving a strong belief in the philosophy for the benefit of that community.

It is not all masquerades in Idoma land that are the reincarnated spirits of dead ancestors. It is however believed that all masquerades are the embodiment of spirit beings with esoteric powers and because of this, the Idoma have special masquerades designated for entertainment, worship, burial, the maintenance of social order and the meting out of punishment.

Masquerade Perception

The Idoma of Benue State live in North Central Nigeria, the area known as the Middle Belt, and situated between the north and south-eastern parts. They are renowned farmers with yam and corn being their main crop. The Idoma believe in the same perspective with Harding (665) that Masquerades represent nonhuman beings in visible form... masquerades have spiritual associations and are sacred... designed to be efficacious—that is, to have “power” and be able to affect humans, not simply to entertain—certain masquerades are much more powerful or efficacious than others. It can be said that there are “sacred” masks and “secular” or “entertainment” masks.

The affiliation and belief in masquerades has strong footholds on the background that masquerading is beyond the actor as Harding in reasoning in the same perspective continues:

When the mask is worn, the identity of the wearer is officially kept secret, and the masked figure assumes a sacred status. This is because when a masked figure appears in public it is no longer a human being disguised as a spirit, but has taken on the attributes and power of what it represents, and thus it has become the spirit, deity, or ancestor. This transition from human to something “other” is one reason that masquerades are regarded with awe and respect and are often a central form of articulation in systems of belief. (665)

Masquerades have their roles and ethics clearly spelt out with each masquerade knowing its function and the part to play in the cultural structure. There is never any form of interference or duplication of duties within the masquerade organization. They have their unique performances which Drewal (672) attests is a means by which people reflect on their current condition, define or reinvent themselves and their social world, and either re-enforce, resist, or subvert the prevailing social order.

These masquerades came into existence because of the need for the society to have control over the people in order to maintain peace, law and order. It also made it easy for the actors enforcing the law to be concealed under the code of the mask and to be strengthened by the belief in masquerades. Dovlo (3) agrees:

The ancestral roles have an ethical basis. The ancestors are regarded as the guides and guards of

the moral conduct of their descendants. Although they reward the good with boons, they punish or ignore belligerent and negligent descendants. They are also believed to provide spiritual sanctions to various traditional taboos...taboos which when broken destroy the moral fabric of the communities that they helped to establish.

The filial bonds with their descendants also oblige the latter to act in a manner that does not tarnish their ancestral name. Often the ethical role of the ancestors takes on a judicial aspect. This is implied in the belief that they reward or punish good and bad descendants respectively.

Types of Masquerades and their functions

In Idoma society, there are various types of masquerades like *Oyonkpo*, *Ogbulo*, *Ibo*, *Alinga*, *Ichahoho*, etc. These masquerades perform various functions like cleansing of people and the community, burials, spiritual and physical battles, entertainment, and a host of others. Some are seen by the general public while others are restricted to only males or initiates. They are entrusted and given support to carry out activities on behalf of the people.

While all the masquerades have their designates, there are two whose main duties are to effectively administer punishment, uphold the law, cultural and societal values in Idoma land. They are:

1. *Ikpokwu*
2. *Ikpokwachi*.

1. *Ikpokwu* serves as the community police. It helps the community

in terms of tax collection, the disciplining of erring children, adulterous or stubborn house wives, monitoring farms against theft, maintaining order and controlling crowds during any public or social gathering, and other related tasks.

The *Ikpokwu* masquerade accompanies the *Odumu* masquerade whenever it comes out to perform. The *Odumu* is more of the social aspect of the *Ikpokwu* masquerade. The *Ikpokwu* masquerade operates with the *Odumu* masquerades and society but it is also independent; and sometimes functions on its own. The *Odumu* is headed by the *Agabaalewu* while the *Ikpokwu* is communally owned. When *Ikpokwu* carries out an operation, the action is communally decided and cannot be traced to a particular leader. These also help to solidify the actions of the masquerade as being ordained by the people as their representatives endorse any such action taken. It is believed that the action of the masquerade is the action of the people.

The *Ikpokwu* masquerade is very swift and agile. Its costume is made up of mainly the shredded bark of the banana tree. This is a material that is light and enables the actor to be flexible and active in action. This shredded banana is also used to form long fluffy strands that are used to adorn the head, wrist and ankles of the masquerade. It wears a gown of sack on its body and is painted in appropriate camouflage. The styles and choice of colours on an *Ikpokwu* masquerade depends on the creative and artistic skills of the designer. It also wears the same sack around the legs, tied with banana ropes. It moves about with a banana stem which it uses to push back the crowd from coming too close to the performance arena or in the flogging of offenders of the law in public gatherings.

During the appearance of *Ikpokwu* in a performance or on an assignment, its entourage is led by a leading *Ikpokwu* called the *Agadagba*. The *Agadagba* gives instructions to the rest of the team on what actions to take. This is obviously displayed as they are seen clustering around him from time to time for instructions and changes in plans and actions. The *Agadagba* is the only one who wears a bell and this is worn round the waist.

The *Ikpokwu* masquerade is also used as a messenger to deliver important messages or the news of the death of a prominent member of the community. The *Ikpokwu* masquerade does not inflict injury on those it chastises in such a way that it can kill. It is not allowed to carry any dangerous weapon in its social functions. Its punishment is only made to deter erring members of the community. It is also a taboo for any member of the community to retaliate when being flogged by an *Ikpokwu* masquerade no matter the status of the individual. It is feared and respected by all members of the community.



Fig.1 A cluster of *Ikpokwu* masquerades (photograph taken by the researcher)



Fig.2 An *Ikpokwu* masquerade (photograph taken by the researcher)

2. *Ikpokwachi* on the other hand is the deadly arm that enforces the law. Unlike *Ikpokwu*, *Ikpokwachi* does not appear in any social function. It comes out only on special assignments to carry out deadly strikes on (an) offender(s) that the community has passed judgment on. A masquerade like *Ikpokwachi* is not associated with a leader. Its actions are also communally decided. Its main actions are to “carry away” a child that is considered to be evil, extricate a member of the community from the community or eliminate one who is found to be a threat to the community. *Ikpokwachi* also comes out on special occasions when there is the need to provide security for the community in terms of riots or political tension and to assure the people of orderly conduct.

Ikpokwachi never socialises with the people. It operates mainly in the bush and enters a compound only to carry out designated assignments and retreats immediately back to the bush. Its

operations are to guard the people by securing the surroundings, making sure no threat comes within, hence its name *Ikpokwachi* meaning “*Ikpokwu* of the bush”.

It is costumed from head to toe in body armour made of thick banana bark; shielding the actor from the bushy environment it operates in and giving it the camouflage that enables him to blend effectively with the surrounding bushes. It carries cutlasses and other dangerous weapons which it uses to carry out its deadly actions. The identity of its members is kept secret from the general public. Its appearance creates tense moments for both males and females because of its coded missions. It is swift in movement and action. It makes fearful battle cries and noises whenever it comes out. It does not communicate or associate with anyone whenever it comes out. Like *Ikpokwu*, there is a coordinated leader who is in charge of all their affairs when on an assignment but it does not wear any bell because its movement is meant to be silent and coded. As a matter of ritual, whenever it comes out it for any purpose they are licensed to kill any goat or chicken they see in the surrounding bush or around the compound they are to protect as a mark of appreciation for their tough role.



Fig.3 A group of *Ikpokwachi* masquerades (photograph taken by the researcher)



Fig.4 *Ikpokwachi* masquerades with cutlasses (photograph taken by the researcher)

Conclusion

The masquerade system in the African society gives Africans the opportunity to formulate unique control systems that are in line with their beliefs and practices. It helps to create a structure of respect for, and hope in structured indigenous solutions for resolving individual and societal issues. This serves as a good recipe for checkmating and providing traditional wisdom to guide the people's past, present or future; and having coordinated and trusted elders, priests or diviners as the case may be, contributing to make major changes in the society. Masquerades are seen as non-

partial and representative of all. This makes it convenient for the people to cohabit under one umbrella and have masquerades as their totem, unique cultural identity, and symbols and custodians of law and order.

These laws are not repugnant to the people because they are made with the understanding of all the natural factors that make up the people, their laws and culture in conjunction with the principles and ideals of the generality of the people's experience. It is therefore of essence to conclude that, African masquerade laws which have sustained and maintained the culture, identity and the generality of the people, be infused with modern laws and be taught to the younger generation to have a wider and better knowledge in handling conventional and contemporary challenges.

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