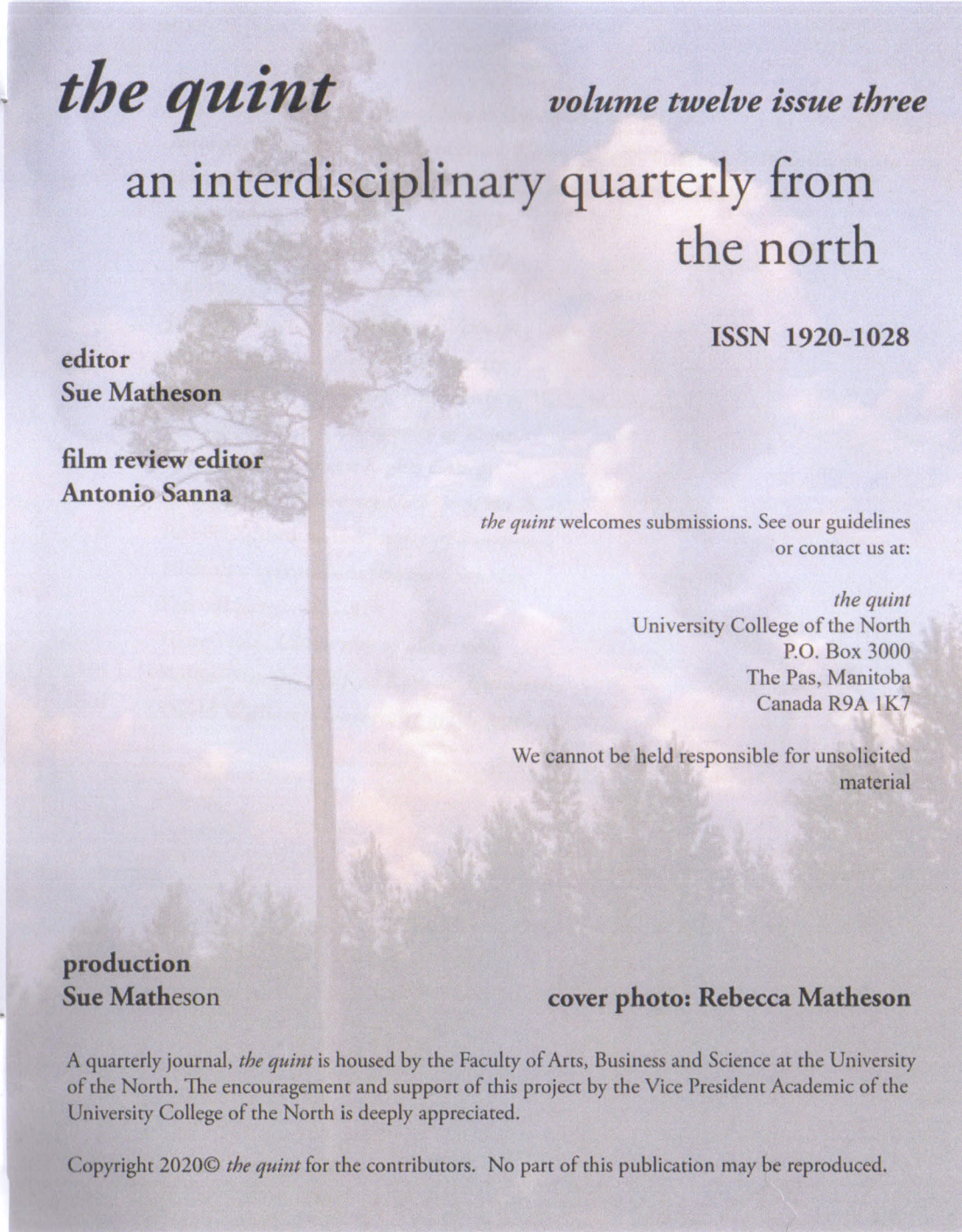




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Main Street USA



Sue Matheson

Feminist Dimensions and Masquerade Performances in Nigeria

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Abstract

Masquerade performances in Nigeria are rich cultural engagements are important means by which the traditions of indigenous Nigerian societies are measured and transmitted into the future. This study considers feminist dimensions and masquerade performances in Nigeria, with particular reference to masquerade engagements in Idoma land. Gender politics found in masquerade performances of ethnic groups situated in Yoruba, Efik, and Ibibio lands are not evident in the masquerade performances found in Idoma land in which women are prominent. Historically, the Idoma people have not displayed negative gender biases regarding women, and women have been an integral part of the propagation of the Idoma cultural heritage. Remarkably, the dynamism of the feminist dimensions of masquerade performances in which women participate in Idoma land has created new vistas for cultural revival and interdisciplinary discourse in the Performance Arts—in particular, another suitable terminology for the structure and performances of African masquerade.

Keywords: masquerade, performance, feminism, cultural revival, Idoma land

Introduction

Masquerade performances in most Nigerian cultures are almost exclusively a male activity. In fact, performing arts scholars such as Enekwe (1987) and Nzewi (2009), among others, affirm that masquerading has been the exclusive affair of the male gender. Masquerades, such as the *Oro* masquerade of some spaces in Yoruba land, attest to this as it is believed that women who participate in this—the *Oro* performance—find it difficult to procreate. In the Omanuku masquerade performance of the Ughelli people in Southern Nigeria, the male participants assert their prowess by dominating the womenfolk, who, on the other hand, are not allowed visual accessibility to the performance. Hence, rape cases and molestation are not rarities during the festival.

While conservative gender politics are evident in masquerade performances in Nigeria in ethnic groups such as those in the Yoruba, Efik and Ibibio lands, they are not in Idoma land, an ethnic nationality in Benue state Nigeria, where women have been an integral and important part of the propagation of cultural heritage. This study employs the literary and descriptive methodologies to appraise feminist dimensions and masquerade performances in Nigeria, with particular reference to those engagements in Idoma land, in particular, the *Ichahoho* masquerade festival, the *Odumu* festival, and the *Ogliye* festival.

Perspectives to Masquerade Performances in Nigeria

The masquerade art in Africa is essentially ritualistic and culturally relevant to the
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worldview of the society in which it is located. Therefore, masquerade performances have continued to be assessed and re-assessed by scholars. Having investigated the likely origins of the masquerade art using the Power Balancing Theory and the Omnipresent Theory, Asigbo (2012) attests to the mystic nature of African masquerade performances within the nexus of ancestral worship. In his submission, he maintains that:

[t]he phenomenon of Masquerades, Spirit manifests or Ancestral masks in most places in Africa, has continued to be shrouded in mystery. This is more so in view of the fact that donning the ancestral mask is almost always, an exclusive act. Seen as symbolisation and manifestation of the continuing relationship between the living and the dead, masquerades continue to play a vital role in the life of many African societies. We thus have different types of masquerades for various purposes ranging from those that entertain to those that fulfill ritual functions and those that are used for war or for the enforcement of justice. Judging by the pivotal role masquerades play in African life, one must therefore of necessity investigate the origin(s) of that phenomenon (pp. 1-2).

Critical attention has also been focused on masquerade performances in Nigeria because of their multi-dimensional nature. For example, Adedeji (1978), Ogunba (1978), Echeruo (1981) and Ododo (2001) have contextualised masquerade performances, costumes, performance space, socio-cultural relevance, ritual essence and so on in Nigeria and indeed throughout Africa. In addition, the Egungun masquerade of the Yoruba people cannot be discountenanced in the discourse of masquerade performances

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in Nigeria. Willis' study of the Egungun within the wider frameworks of gender, power, and spaces in masquerade performances in Nigeria becomes germane here due to his insistence that:

Egungun is a Yoruba ancestral masquerade ritual that has been practiced for centuries. Shifting coalitions of individuals and factions have vied for social and political influence through this practice. In the nineteenth century, when western missionaries, explorers, and colonial officials first documented this phenomenon, any individual who could sponsor an Egungun performance was a force to be reckoned with in Yoruba society. To this day, Egungun masquerades are understood as vehicles through which individuals and groups can assert influence in their communities. (2012, p. 322)

Stanley-Niaah (2004) concurs with Willis, observing that:

Egungun masquerade performances are enacted in a number of public places – the town square, the market, the street, the war camp, and the war front – as well as in private places such as shrines and family compounds. Egungun performances are nomadic; performances move from space to space, and in the process, entertain, honour, and police all of the inhabitants of a community: men, women, and children, as well as the spirits believed to influence every aspect of human endeavour. (cited in Willis [2012, p. 327])

It should be stated, however, that the central theme of the critical submissions from Stanley-Niaah (2004) and Willis (2012) has been re-contextualised by Akubor: that “all

over Yoruba land, the Egungun represents the spirit of the ancestors who have descended from heaven/ mountains. It celebrates a period when the dead interact with the living, as it is their responsibility to compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of past generations" (2018, p. 32).

In 2001, the Facekuerade Theorist and Technical Theatre Expert, Sunnie Ododo brought to the fore, a critical introspection into the Ekuechi masquerade ensemble of the Ebira people of Nigeria within the purviews of the theatrical aesthetics and functional values of the masquerade. Ododo remarks that:

[a]s a popular festival, Ekuechi is full of pomp and pageantry, with a dynamic integration of poetry, chants, mimicry, mime, dance, song, music, drumming, mask, make-up, costume and significant cultural symbols. All these cohere vibrantly to attest to Ehusani (1991: 181)'s claim that "it is in Eku that the vitality and vivacity, and also the artistic genius of Ebiras find the highest expression." Eku is ancestral masquerade. Eku, which represents the ancestors, is believed to 'descend' (Chi) from the world beyond during Ekuechi festival. Eku and Chi thus respectively form the prefix and suffix in Eku e Chi. Literally translated, it means, "the ancestors are descending."

This partly explains how the name of the festival is derived. (2001, p. 3)

In their review of the mask, masking, and curtailment of domestic terrorism in Ika through Akakum performance of Nto Usuh people in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, Akpan and Udofia also provide critical perspectives on the historiography and performance

dynamics of the Akakum masquerade performance by observing that

traditional performances maintain in-built principles that prevent members from transgressing . . . Akakum is also called Asakum but following the nature of its performance, it is traditionally addressed as afum (wind). Akakum and Asakum are onomatopoeic, conveying two sounds: aka which suggests the breaking off of a tree branch while kum suggests a hit. Both asa and aka before kum are descriptive sound conveying the process and the result. Akakum and Asakum mean the same thing. The performance gains the nomenclature from its performances activities not by myth, deity, or spiritual label. The origin of this performance in Nto Usuh is conflicting. In an interview with Essien (2010), Akakum was formed in 1472. It was introduced as an entertainment to mark the fullness of harvest time. During this period, Nto Usuh sons and daughters wherever they stay would come home and celebrate Uchoro Ilok (harvest celebration). The most significant of the season was in addressing all offences, granting offenders pardon, and making general reconciliation. The emergence of Akakum will mark a total sanctification of the land. Akakum used to be played once in seven years and it was highly ritualised. (2019, pp. 14-17)

Accordingly, that masquerade performances cannot be disconnected from societal functions cannot be overemphasised. On one hand, this accounts for the constantly growing perspectives from scholars of the masquerade art and tradition in Africa and indeed, across the globe. On the other hand, these functionalities vary according to the

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perspectives from which human societies view the masquerade art.

Masquerade performances are therefore used to achieve a remarkable number of goals in the societies that own them. A typical example is found in the theoretical summation from Amaechi (2018) who examines critically, how masquerade performances especially, the Umu-Ada fraternity (Igbo Daughters) can be a veritable option for the attainment of peace and conflict resolution in Eastern Nigeria (Igbo Land). In the case of land disputes or communal clashes for example, Amaechi (2018, p. 87) reveals that the masquerade

...will surround the disputable environment, bound people not to cross nor penetrate into the environment for some period. Sometimes, palm front will be tied at the disputable environment, warning people not to make use of the place. The masquerades will later invite the people concerned who are involved in the matter, listen to their various grievances after interviewing or questioning them as mediator. Whoever that is at fault will pay penalty for defaulting or punished accordingly to restore peace.

Another critical work from Akubor (2016) investigates masquerade performances and their roles in societal control and stability using the masquerade performances of the Esan people of Southern Nigeria as paradigm. The hallmark of Akubor's (2016) postulation is that:

[m]asquerades occupy a central position in the mythogonic structure of Esan pantheon. They are organic to their myth of creation. In this way, they function as the major stabiliser of people's destiny. Thus, the masquerade

in Esan society (just like in other African communities) is the process of man's attempt to give being to those very significant aspects in the depth of thought in his universe. For this reason, *elimin* appears as a robed figure who is designed specially to give the impression that the deceased is making a temporary reappearance on earth. This impression is enhanced by the complete coverage of the individual. It is absolutely essential that not a single particle of the human form should be visible; for, if this rule is broken, the man wearing the dress must die (*elimin ki khue lo*). It is therefore not surprising that they are considered as having power over life and death and people who have committed the most evil crimes against society were summoned before the masquerade and could expect the most severe punishments. Thus, an appeal to this masquerade was the highest appeal a group or an individual could make. Thus, the *elimin* indeed provided a certain amount of stability and control on Esan people and their society (p. 47).

In light of the above, the perspectives about masquerade performances in Nigeria remain elastic due to the dynamic nature of the masquerade art in Nigeria. Masquerade performances, however, are struggling to maintain their core values in the face of religion, modernisation, and technology to mention but three pivotal factors. In view of this,

chaos [is] developing in communities as sub-cultures like traditional performances which were viable tools for curtailing antisocial manners have been relegated to the background because of the constant absorption

of foreign cultures that do not fit into the context of Nigeria's perception of social manners (Akpan and Udofia, 2019, p. 14).

Despite the truth of the submission of Akpan and Udofia (2019), it is worthy to mention that masquerade performances are still being celebrated in some part of the country irrespective of the constant torrents of the above-mentioned factors.

Feminist Dimensions of Idoma Masquerade

In Idoma culture, women play significant roles and are part of the masquerade culture. Though they are not allowed to take part in the actual masquerading, they historically play important roles in masquerade institution. The prominence of women is reflected in the oral historical chant of Alekwu masquerade of Odegwu, who is a woman. This myth was converted to a drama created by S.O.O. Amali in 1985 entitled, *Odegwu*. Its story recounts the misadventures of an elderly woman, Odegwu, who breaks a taboo on her way in hurrying to take medicine to her sick children by seeing the nakedness of the ancestral spirit masks which is forbidden for women to see and her punishment is to be buried alive. Because of this taboo, the chief arranged an inquest for her in seven days' time. The punishment for breaking this taboo ensures that when Odegwu is buried alive, according to the age long tradition that the entire community, can be cleansed. When she was about to be buried, her children who are also major components of the ancestral spirit masquerade (without them the masquerade cannot exist) come to the square and insist to be buried with their mother. As it is forbidden in Idoma culture for children to be buried with their mother,

the situation compels the elders rethink, and after consultation with the ancestors, they instruct mankind not to bury any woman in the kingdom alive anymore, but instead order that they should be cleansed by paying fines and losing livestock.

Women play important roles in the origin of masquerades in Idoma culture. A typical example is Ekwootokpa masquerade which, according to an oral history in an interview with Ismail Amali (2018), is believed to have been founded by women and this is why it has hatred for them. The Ekwootokpa masquerade was founded by women but controlled by men. This is the core reason why it goes round to destroy women's pounding mortar with its spear whenever it comes out to perform.

Women perform pivotal functions in the creation of the Alekwu masquerade. If a man does not have a female child while alive, he cannot be re-incarnated into the Alekwu masquerade. The last child of the man to be re-incarnated into the Alekwu masquerade spirit is used in the final ushering of the masquerade into the human world in order to give voice to the masquerade to speak. This important and final spiritual role can also be played by women.

Women are also prominent in the creation of new Alekwu masquerades. They must be the ones to perform the final rituals called *Okpa Ochoje* (Owu Obiyinla), a night before the Ikwu festival. This ritual ushers in new sets of Alekwu masquerades from the spirit world to the human world.

Another major ritual role played by women is called *Ikpa okwo okwu*. During this ritual, a woman and Alekwu masquerade pair together to perform a compulsory ritual

called *Ikpa okwo okwu* which is a major ritual for a departed person. This particular woman must have passed her menopause stage and does not have any form of sexual contact.

In Idoma culture, some masquerades appear the performance arena in pairs of a male and female. However, "men always perform the masquerade, while female characters are portrayed" (Spring, 2009, p. 26). In other words, while the male which is the principal masquerade performs, the female character is merely symbolic. This is similar to the masquerade of Abeokuta people in Yorùbá culture in which it is believed that *Gèlèdè* masks represent Yorùbá women, but are actually danced by men who dress like women and employ movements that mimic feminine attributes" (Scruggs and Fellow, 2011, p. 1).

Examining gender divisions in the Egungun masquerade, Willis also asserts that:

Western scholars have portrayed Egungun as a hegemonic masculine performance space through which men assert their dominance over women. In privileging the writings of English missionaries, explorers, and colonial officials, we have tended to neglect the oral traditions and histories of specific Egungun masquerades in which women feature prominently . . . scholars have oversimplified and misrepresented the complex ways in which these performances are gendered as well as the ways in which they offer women opportunities to shape the identities of the places they inhabit. (2012, p. 322)

To this end, tenet of the Greek theatre tradition, Roman theatre culture, and the Elizabethan theatre in which female roles were performed by male characters, also holds sway in the traditional masquerade performance art. It should be remembered, as Shapiro points out that, "[a]cting was an all-male activity in ancient Greece and Rome. The same was true in medieval Europe" (1994, p. 31). At that period, the great women characters which include *Clytemnestra* in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, *Jocasta* in Sophocles's *King Oedipus*, the eponymous character of *Medea* in Euripides' *Medea*, *Juliet* in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Reagan* and *Cordelia* in *King Lear* and the all powerful character of *Lady Macbeth* in *Macbeth*, were played by male actors in female togas and/or garbs. Levine (1994, p. 1) agrees that the "theatre effeminized the boy actors who played women's parts by dressing them in women's costumes." These skillful young actors were highly trained to bring out the best of the female characteristics.

However, Lawal is of the opinion that, women cannot be associated with *Gèlèdè* masking, "because of its male association; can metaphysically interfere with the innate reproductive powers of a woman" (1996, p. 79). This fully captures the spiritual potency of masquerades. The actual masquerading is completely men's affairs which is also identical to that of the Igbo people who have a contemporary maiden spirit masquerade called *Adanma* which, according to Ezeliora is "literally translated respectively as 'the princess or beautiful daughter' and 'the lady/queen of dance'" (2014, p. 46). They are costumed in female attire with female nuances, but "generally, women and girls were excluded from participating in masquerading in Igbo society. In the same vein, Chukwu agrees that, "masquerade and masquerading are exclusively men's affair" (2016, p. 64). Despite

the submissions from Ezeliara (2014) and Chukwu (2016), it should be mentioned that women are still recognised in masquerading culture among the Igbos. Afigbo (1972), Nwabueze (2003) remark that

masquerades symbolise societal conception of certain qualities, for instance, while the "agaba" symbolises strength and masculine vigor, the aggboghommanwu (the maiden masquerade) that usually depicts feminine beauty portrays acceptable qualities of maidens as exemplified in their beautiful outlook, careful gait and dancing ability. (cited in Amaechi [2018, p. 85])

Flowing from the above, masquerading among men is more visible than masquerading among women in Nigeria and most parts of Africa. It is worthy of note, however, that masquerading among women is practised in places like the Sande Society of the Mende people in Sierra Leone, which is responsible for teaching young girls the skills and knowledge to become a woman. Kleiner acknowledges that, "the Mende and neighbouring peoples of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea are distinctive in Africa because the women perform masquerades. The masks and costumes they wear conceal the women's bodies from the audience attending their performance" (2013, p. 1075). Joyce also notes that female masquerading can also be found among the women of Ejagham society of Cross River, Nigeria who, "have two different types of women's masquerades; *Ekpá* masquerades reveal the dancer's identity, and *Agot* masquerades conceal it" (2004, p. 487).

Rare situations like these, however, are very different from others found in the Idoma

culture, where masquerade and masquerading is exclusively a man's affair. Masquerade beliefs are enveloped in myth, having only male initiates and generally members of the community understand the mysteries behind it. Women are usually kept away from the affairs of masquerade which are referred to in the Idoma culture as a terrain exclusively for men. On the whole, masquerades have a secluded environment created for them with restrictive access to non-initiates and members.

Conclusion

The dynamism of women's roles in masquerade performances in Idoma land has produced new vistas for cultural revival and discourse in the Arts. Indeed, the feminist dimensions of these masquerades offer a new appreciation of masquerade itself, new and suitable terminology for the description of the African masquerade cultures, and an understanding of female roles which make women integral to the African cultural system. These feminist dimensions have also created a festival theatre discourse which is an omnibus. If masquerading is to continue to thrive in Idoma land, the role of the woman in the masquerading process should not be disregarded, and it certainly should not be jettisoned.

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