

AFRICANS CONCEPT OF MASQUERADES AND THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETAL CONTROL AND STABILITY: SOME NOTES ON THE ESAN PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA

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In every culture there are certain ideas explicit in the interaction of different elements which in turn sometimes act as an instrument of social control with which different cultural segments are held together. Thus, prior to the spread of Islamic and Christian influences, most societies in Africa believed in a complex structure of spirits and ancestors who influenced the living. This was contained in the traditional belief which reflects the wholeness of the universe, i.e., the various elements of which constituted not only the living, but also the dead and spirits. Thus among the Esan, the Erinni (Elimin masquerades) are organic to their myth of creation. In this way, they function as the major stabiliser of the people's destiny. As far as the people are concerned, they are ancestral spirits who periodically visit their living forebears in masquerade forms. Their visits are regarded as spiritual interventions to the world of the living and as a result are highly venerated. They are a symbolic resurrection of the ancestors. To the Ifeku-Ibaji, Egwu (masquerade) symbolised both the ancestral shrine as well as represented the resurrected spirits of a dead elder, whose appearance and performance played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. Specifically, it governed the laws which were irrevocable and punishable by death. In the Ejagham society of Cross River, the task of detecting witches and wizards rested with the Echi-Obasi-njom (the masquerade), it usually carried out this function in a wheeling, gliding dance organised by the society. Echi-Obasi-njom was usually accompanied by attendants as it swiftly moved round the settlement in search of witches and wizards in their hide outs. All over Yoruba land, the Egungun represent 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. Data obtained from primary and secondary sources were deployed to carry out the study in an analytical and narrative historical method. Findings indicate that unlike, the neglect of this practice in most societies (especially while the advent of Christianity and Islam), has led to an alarming rise in crime, especially owing to the fact that the present agents of crime control in society have really failed. In most cases, where they acted as reconciliatory agencies, they have ended up creating more conflicts among the people unlike the situation under the traditional masquerade system.

Key words: Elimin, Masquerades, spirits, Esan

Introduction

Esan is the language and land (Oto) of the people (Ebholo) of the Edo, a group located North East of Benin City. They are in the forest region located at longitude 5° 30' 7° 30' and latitude 5° 30' N and 7° 30' E of Benin. The area has boundaries in the North East with Etsako, in the North West with Owan in the South West with Orhiomwon and Ika, and in the south and South East with Aniocha and Oshimili respectively. The River Niger terminates her Eastern boarders. Since the people refer to themselves as Esan, the words Isa, Esa and Ishan that were interchangeably used by European writers and colonial administrators were the corruption of the same word Esan. Esan generally with their family of chiefdoms speak a variant of this language which is Edo that language experts believe began to separate into various strands about 4,500 years ago.¹

Conceptual Clarification

Literally scholars have defined Masquerade as a covering, a concealment and a disguise device by an individual or group with the view to represent a spirit, an animal, philosophy or an idea; while they consider that costumes associated with masquerades as the physical representation of this disguise.² This definition contradicts completely the view of most African societies of masquerades and their costumes. In most African societies masquerades are associated with ancestors, good will and governance. They defended and safeguarded society and accordingly prevented all potent threats to their existence and that of related Institutions. Commenting on the importance of this in security and governance in the pre Christian and Islam Nigerian society, Abdukadir M. wrote:

“In every culture there are certain ideas explicit in the interaction of different elements which in turn sometimes act as an instrument of social control with which different cultural segments are held together. Prior to the spread of Islamic and Christian influences, the people believed in a complex structure of spirits and ancestors who influenced the living. Traditional beliefs reflect the wholeness of the universe. The various elements of which constituted not only the

¹ FLIGHT, C. Trees and Traps: Strategies for the Classification of African languages and their historical significance, p. 52; OKOJIE, C. G. Ishan Native Laws and Customs, p. 158.

² OBASEKI, J. Drama, Time and Space in African Experience, p. 44.

living, but also the dead and spirits;... Throughout history these village ancestors performed the rites of transference and played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. Specifically, it governed the laws which were irrevocable and punishable by death.”³

In a more specific term and sort of summarising the Nigerian example, Akubor E. O., writes:

“...among the Esan, the Erinna (Elimin masquerades) are organic to their myth of creation. In this way, they function as the major stabiliser of people’s destiny. As far as the people are concerned, they are ancestral spirits who periodically visit their living forebears in masquerade forms. Their visits are regarded as spiritual interventions to the world of the living and as a result are highly venerated. They are a symbolic resurrection of the ancestors. To the Ifeku-Ibaji, Egwu (masquerade) symbolised both the ancestral shrine as well as represented the resurrected spirits of a dead elder, whose appearance and performance played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. Specifically, it governed the laws which were irrevocable and punishable by death. In the Ejagham society of Cross River, the task of detecting witches and wizards rested with the Echi-Obasi-njom (the masquerade), it usually carried out this function in a wheeling, gliding dance organised by the society. Echi-Obasi-njom was usually accompanied by attendants as it swiftly moved round the settlement in search of witches and wizards in their hide outs. All over Yoruba land, the Egungun represent 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.”⁴

On the Yoruba, Akintayo A., wrote:

“Our folklore or read superstitious inclinations, consider masquerades heavenly beings, to be respected and revered, but they are never touched – their colourful garments sometimes identifying a clan of masquerade pedigree renowned for having powers that instil irrational fear in onlookers. Reading some research material, the masquerades known as Egungun in Yoruba are considered people risen from the dead – bones (skeleton) made alive, hence the assumption they are

³ ABDUKADIR, M. S. *An Economic History of Igalaland 1896 – 1939*, p. 113.

⁴ AKUBOR, E. O. *Africans Concept of Masquerades*, 2015, p. 1.

heavenly beings – benign as people would want this to be, we do in ways worship our ancestors and give the dead a lot more reverence than the living in Yorubaland.”⁵

From the above, it is clear that Africa and the Africans perception of the masquerades is completely different from the view of their European counterparts who limit the masquerade to objects of pleasure and entertainment. This because while to the western world, anything under a mask can pass for a masquerade, to Africa and the Africans, the masquerade are the dead ancestors among the living, which is hinged on the belief that human life does not end in physical death. It is their conception that life is made up of the body and soul; and the soul is conceived as the spirit; and the soul is also conceived. In this way, at the death of any man, the spirit continues its existence in some indescribable environment, where they also commune with the living. The spirit world is seen as a duplication of life here on earth and spirits transform into persons.⁶

Masquerades, (Ancestral Spirits) and Community Security: The Esan Perspective

Masquerades 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. As far as the people are concerned, they are ancestral spirits who periodically visit their living forebears in masquerade forms. Their visits are regarded as spiritual interventions to the world of the living and as a result are highly venerated. They are symbolic resurrections of the ancestors. 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. In line with J. Obaseki:

“The African understanding of space and time underscores the important position of the masquerade tradition in this universe. In this understanding, the invidious gradation between the physical and the spiritual have a mutual existence. This is the world of the living and that of the ancestors. The masquerade’s appearance is then an intervention process between the two worlds. It provides a link for the needed continuum between them. This is done in order to vitalise,

⁵ AKINTAYO, A. Nigeria: Our masquerades and culture, p. 3.

⁶ ATUEGBE, O. C. The Igbabonelimhin Dance, p. 5.

regenerate and value the essence of living and the issues of survival.”⁷

Generally speaking, in Oto Esan, it is very difficult to grasp in a single word or sentence what *Elimin* (spirit masquerade) is because of its metaphysics, which is highly secretive and never talked about even among the initiated male folks. Male parents must not freely discuss *Elimin* with their children; initiated members must only hierarchically advance to discover for themselves the aura and other rituals associated with *Elimin*. It is also a taboo to mention or discuss *Elimin* among women. This has to do with the fact that to Esan, *Elimin* is the spirits of the departed ancestors who partook in and controlled the life and destiny of the living. By their nature and connection with the ancestors and by their mystical and proven prophetic powers, they acted as constraints to acts that would otherwise be detrimental to security, stability and peace. These spirits (masquerades) therefore impacted greatly on traditional societies as they performed both legislative and executive functions in conjunction with members of specific Age grade groups. Working hand in hand and with the blessings of the *Edion* (elders), they execute administrative and judicial duties. It is for these especially the sensitivity of the role of the masquerade in society; admission into the *Iroghae* (the youth Age grade) is tied to very stringent measures (including initiation education and ceremony) which were only meant for those considered matured in mind and spirit.

The universality of the importance of the ancestral spirits and the common features associated with them in traditional African society is seen in the name it associated with the masquerade. While in Esan people call it *Elimin* (*erinmin*), among the Igbo, it is *Mmonwon*, Yoruba *Egungun*, Igala and *Igbira Egwu*, which literally means spirit. Specifically, *Egungun* (masquerades) in Yoruba are considered people risen from the dead – bones (skeleton) made alive, hence the assumption they are heavenly beings. The peculiarity of this to African society and the sacredness attached to this, is expressed by D. Duerdon thus:

“There is a particular kind of art in Africa, which is unique to the continent and can be found nowhere else in the world. It is an art, which is especially exemplified by the mask, and the masquerade in which the mask is used.”⁸

⁷ OBASEKI, J. Drama, Time and Space in African Experience, p. 44.

⁸ DUERDON, D. African Arts: An Introduction, p. 11.

Origin of its relevance in Esan Security System

Scholars have argued that an understanding of the importance of the masquerade in the people's traditional security system can be better understood when seen in the light of the origin and importance the people attach to the spirits of their ancestors, whom the spirit represents. As far as the groups understudy are concerned, the ancestors are disembodied spirits of people who lived upright lives here on earth, died 'good' and natural deaths, that is at a ripe old age, and received the acknowledged funerary rites. They could be men or women. Under this philosophy, not all who die become ancestors, but there are conditions which must be fulfilled while the person is alive. Pointing out both the origin and importance, A. Adebari, noted thus:

"Traditionally they hold the ancestors as the closest link between the physical and spirit worlds. 'The living-dead are bilingual; they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until 'recently', and they speak the language of the spirits and of God. They are the spirits with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them.' Africans believe that the ancestors are essentially benevolent spirits. They return to their human families from time to time and share meals with them, however, symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in their families. These ancestors are seen as guardians to the family often reincarnating through new born babies. So it is suffice to say that for the most part, African traditional religion depends very much on the spirit world."⁹

In a more stricter and specific sense, G. Azenabor, opined that:

"... in the Esan circle there are three forces that rule the universe, the power of man (which is physical), intellectual and spiritual, and that though man can change the world through his physical, rational or spiritual power for good or evil, he is however limited. On the other hand, Spirit and ancestors (*elinun*) also influence the world because they are nearer to God, and so, are less limited than man. These spirits are those whose lives were lived to an old age (Edion) with good knowledge of society and died. Thus when these die, their spirits continued to guide society in the right path of truth, security and

⁹ ADEBARI, A. African Traditional Religion: The People's Culture and the European Perception, pp. 1 – 3.

justice. He argues again that God supreme and his influence overtakes all other influence.”¹⁰

In the light of the above, A. Falaiye and Ebhomienlen T (2012:3), wrote:

“For the Esan ‘*edion are yu ebha yieho*’ (it is only the ancestral spirit’s eyes that die and not his ears). This implies that there is a level of knowledge an ancestral spirit will make known to the living within his family setting since they, ancestor, are believed to be around the living to protect them. So the Africans see God as all-knowing and who ultimately is the source of all knowledge and the ancestors as the watch of society.”¹¹

Hamminga (cited in Ade F., Ebhomienlen T.), confirms the above when he wrote that:

“... our community is a tree, (dead) ancestors are roots giving energy to the trunk, the adults, who in turn supply the branches, leaves and flowers, our children. The tree knows ‘we’ know. The tree is the knowing subject;... Knowledge in the African thought pattern is what is given. It flows from the spiritual to the physical. It is what is revealed to man by divine forces. Therefore proverbs flow from the divine to humans.”¹²

On the reason why they revere these spirits and entrust their entire welfare irrespective of their religious affiliation, they continued thus:

“Another important aspect of their traditional religion is the presence of spirits. In their world, spirits are everywhere in persons, trees, rivers, animals, rocks, mountains, and even in automobiles and other personal effects. The presence of these spirits in African society offers a serious challenge to the behaviour patterns of the people on the continent and elsewhere because traditional religious practices permeate every aspect of life on the continent. These spirits in many ways act as moral entrepreneurs of African society. They abhor crimes like adultery, stealing, cheating, and suicide. These spirits

¹⁰ AZENABOR, G. Understanding Problems in African Philosophy, p. 65.

¹¹ ADE, F., EBHOMIENLEN, T. The Teaching of African Proverbs a Panacea for Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria: the Esan Experience. In UKAOGO, V., AKUBOR, E. O. (ed.). *A Diminishing Past – a Rescued Future: Essays on the Peoples, Traditions and Culture of the Esan of Southern Nigeria*.

¹² Ibid., p. 55.

communicate their wishes, demands and prescriptions to the larger society through traditional priests. These traditional priests are able to satisfy their clients through the performance of rituals. On the African continent, every major event has its own ritual, a ritual that may never be overlooked for any reason. The rituals are often performed through a dance, music, libation or art. In the presence of other religious practices on the continent, these rituals have survived in one form or another.”¹³

Generally, the above outlook occupies an important place in the understanding of the role of these spirits and their masked representatives in the peoples traditional security and welfare system in inculcating the ideals of culture and religion.

Modus Operandi of the System: Age grade, Circumcision and Initiation into the Spirit World

As noted above, although the spirit masquerade is charged with the responsibility of enforcing legislative and executive functions/decisions, however, this is done in conjunction with members of specific Age grade groups, the *Edion* (elders), the *Ohen* (priest). In this way, for the proper functioning of the system, a sort of cult of adherents is formed and this is found in the initiated young adults of the community. This process is known as *Ilo-bherinni* (initiation in the world and workings of the spirits). In most communities this is done simultaneously with the initiation into the first Age group (*Egbonughele*). In others, the initiates are made members of the *Egbonughele* once they are considered old enough to engage into menial and sanitary works for the community.

From the above, the paper opines that the Age grade organisation forms an important institution in most of the polities under examination. This is because the individual at every stage of life has a series of duties and obligations to others in society as well as a set of rights: namely, things that he or she could expect or demand from other individuals as well as welfare and security issues, it is in line with this that entry into these grade were meant for “men”. Age is a most important factor determining the extent of rights and obligations. The oldest members of society were highly respected and usually in authority; and the idea of seniority through age was reflected in the presence of age-grades and age-sets in a great many African societies. Circumcision meant initiation into society and into adulthood. From that moment, a man was placed with others in

¹³ Ibid.

his own age-group. Usually, there were at least three age-grades, corresponding roughly to the young, the middle-aged and the old. Thus in the area and surrounding territories the following corresponding grades exists. The three tiers of Esan pattern of *Egbonughele* (the Youth), *Iroghae* (the Adult) and *Edion* (Elders), seems to agree with the *Ogbaru Ibo Otu-Uku* (elders), *Otu-agbabo* (adults), *Otu Uwai* (Youth) and southwestern Ibaji *abogijo* (elders), *Abogijo egin* (adults) and *abokolobia* (the Youth).¹⁴ Each grade controlled its own masquerades and had specific functions and ritual duties as well as security and intelligence gathering.

For any male member of the society to be initiated into this, there are laid down procedures. In every Esan society, there are special shrines dedicated for the initiation ceremonies. The shrines are always located in a hidden groove. It is here that the paraphernalia are kept. This groove was not accessible to non-initiates "*Ogbodu elimhin*". They are also barred from partaking in any sacrifice offered to the Masquerade. The shrine is presided over by a priest in charge of such ceremony, who administers the affairs of the cult. The age for those considered ripe enough for such are pegged at about twelve years and above. At initiation, the aspirant is asked to present specified items as a token of commitment and readiness to assume responsibility in the cult. He also provides some kola-nuts, cowries and some gin for the ceremony. This is followed by the rituals and thereafter, the initiate is introduced to the rules governing the cult which is to keep secret from non initiates. From this point the new comer begins to see himself as a responsible agent to the ancestors on behalf of the entire community. He is not unaware of the grievous consequences of violating the rules and regulations guiding the cult. Since almost consciously violated the taboos of the community were either banished by *Elimin* or at times eliminated. This inculcate in the individual sense of being law abiding and total commitment to the security and welfare of the society.

The above can be fully grasped when seen in the light of Rodney's view of the pre-colonial African education which in his view was many-sidedness especially as it concerned the emotional and mental development of the child. For example W. Rodney opined thus:

"Indeed, the most crucial aspect of pre-colonial African education was its relevance to Africans, in sharp contrast with what was later introduced. The following features of indigenous African education can be considered outstanding: its close links with social life, both in a

¹⁴ BRADBURY, R. E. The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria, p. 50; OKOJIE, C. G. Ishan Native Laws and Customs, p. 50; UKWEDEH, J. N. A History of Settlement Southwestern Ibaji District to 1900 A. D., p. 65; OKODUWA, A. I. Time and Space in Esan History, pp. 1 – 13.

material and spiritual sense; its collective nature; its many-sidedness; and its progressive development in conformity with the successive stages of the physical, emotional and mental development of the child. There was no separation of education and productive activity or any division between manual and intellectual education. Altogether, mainly through informal means it matched the realities of pre-colonial African society and produced well-rounded personalities to fit into that society. Some aspects of African education were formal: that is to say, there was a specific programme and a conscious division between teachers and pupils. Formal education in pre-colonial Africa was also directly connected with the purposes of society, just like informal education.”¹⁵

In a more specific term, W. Rodney opined thus:

“The programmes of teaching were restricted to certain periods in the life of every individual, notably the period of initiation or ‘coming of age’. Many African societies had circumcision ceremonies for males or for both sexes, and for some time before the ceremonies a teaching programme was arranged. The length of time (in the initiation school) involved could vary from a few weeks to several years. Formal education was also available at later stages in life, such as on the occasion of passing from one age-grade to another or of joining a new brotherhood. Specialised functions such as hunting, organising religious ritual and the practice of medicine definitely involved formal education within the family or clan. Such educational practices all dated back to communal times in Africa, but they persisted in the more developed African feudal and pre-feudal societies, and they were to be found on the eve of colonialism.”¹⁶

In the case of *Egbonughele* and some members of *Iroghae* age grade, the process is known as *Ilo-bhelimin*. This represented a sort of critical traditional teaching programme of passing from childhood to another age-grade and of joining a new brotherhood, in which the candidate pledge total allegiance to the security and safety of the community as well as to keep secret all that is involved in the security system especially as it relates to the spirit masquerade. This exercise was restricted to only male members of the society, as they are considered to have a higher stake in society and as such may not betray such. Only female members who are of age and are

¹⁵ RODNEY, W. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p. 377.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

considered closer to the ancestors as a result of their age and life experience, have the privilege of been initiated into such a group. This process seems to be general among most Nigerian societies as posited by Borok, M., Akubor E. O. and Mohammed, B. work on the Berom area. The scholars opined thus:

“Initiation to manhood can also be considered as a security measure. This was a situation where boys about reaching puberty age (from 15 years) were taken to a sacred place where women do not visit. In this place these boys undergo an induction course to manhood. It was during this time that the boys were circumcised and taught the norms and values of society. It was during this period boys were introduced to the masquerade cult and chief (Saf Ma Nyorong as it is called among the Ron). Among the Ron, it was during such occasions concoctions that were believed could make one brave were administered to the boys.”¹⁷

The above practice and all other measures taken to make sure this worked in favour of the society, especially as it concerns organised recreation, executed administrative, agents of socialisation and judicial responsibilities made some scholars to mistake it for Secret societies.¹⁸

The Esan Erinni System and Socio-Political Control

Scholars have argued that one major characteristic of traditional African society was the ability to devise an indigenous means of resolving socio-political control including conflicts amongst the traditional Nigerian groups. This indigenous method combines negotiation, arbitration, adjudication and other methods put together. In this way, the issue at stake is usually open to every male adult member of the community and the focus is usually the community rather than individual disputants unlike Western methods that have elements of confidentiality the right and freedom to disagree with mediators and the laying of emphasis on a win-win outcome. This in the view of O. B. C Nwolise, upheld the supremacy of the community on the people over individual in any disputes,

¹⁷ BOROK, A. M., AKUBOR, E. O., MOHAMMED, B. Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution: Revisiting Indigenous/Traditional Security Method among the Berom, Ron and Tarok people of Plateau, Nigeria. In *The International Journal Of Humanities & Social Studies*, 2015, Vol. 3, Issue 7 July, p. 54.

¹⁸ ALVIN, M. Political Traditionalism in Nigeria: A case study of Secret Society and Dance groups. In *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 1972, Vol. 42, No. 4, p. 294.

thus affirming that in indigenous societies, each person, family head, and community or kingdom leaders were held responsible for the maintenance of peace with the assistance of the diety.¹⁹ Any breach of peace by an individual or collectivity was punished through ritual, (deities), legal (use of authority), and moral sanctions (public disgrace). This position has been summarised thus:

“The essences of dispute settlement and conflict resolution in indigenous societies were to remove the root causes of conflict; reconcile the conflicting parties genuinely; preserve and ensure enduring peace in society; restore peace, remove fear, restore social harmony, and make everybody involved in the resolved conflict happy and be at peace with each other again, and required getting at the truth; set the right milieu for social production and development; as well as promote good governance, law and order, security of lives and property, collective well being and happiness, etc.”²⁰

The above was therefore not different from the Esan people, which in line with the above developed traditional social system/machinery of taming social vices. These are the masquerade, the age-grade, the elders, and *oro* (Godparent). Specifically, a deviant could be taken care of by the masquerade.²¹ Thus moral sanction was imposed on actions which were contrary to the conventions and set-values of society and were consequently likely to lead to social disorder. With this and in this way, the people guarded their communities laws and customs jealously and applied appropriate sanctions against any breach. A breach of conventions was regarded as “a crime against the ancestral spirits and as a disturbance of individual or communal equilibrium”. Imposition of sanctions on individuals or a group of deviants was a justifiable means of restoring the pre-existing balance in society and traditional device for crime prevention or deterrence of deviant behaviour. In this the *Elimin* played a very prominent role especially in the administration of appropriate sanctions on deviants. Although it was not all cases of deviancy that the masquerade spirit was invited to act, especially within the family. However, when such continued unabated, the spirit masquerades were invited to assist in restoring normalcy. In minor family and communal cases, the compound head, the village head, elders and/or the chief-priest may express this type of sanction verbally. In a more

¹⁹ NWOLISE, O. B. C. Traditional Models of Bargaining and Conflict Resolution in Africa. In ALBERT, I. O. (ed.). *Perspectives on Peace and Conflict in Africa Essays in Honour of General Abdulsalami A. Abubakar*, p. 50.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ ADEBARI, A. African Traditional Religion: The People's Culture and the European Perception, pp. 1 – 3.

serious way and in consonant with the severity of the offence, moral sanctions were mostly expressed in mass action achieved through public disgrace under the supervision of the Chief Priest and Masquerade spirit. Some of these included adultery, *Ughelemi*, rape, *Obhigedu* witchcraft confession, *Okahi*, incest and others; they may incur the wrought of the ancestors. These cases attracted punishments ranging from ostracism (*Amuolen*, *Obiro*), banishment, (*Anolen ubikua*), purification of the earth, *Ikpotoa* and absolute banishment, *Isunfia*, which will be administered in the presence of the *Elimin*.

In traditional Esan society, crimes against individuals and society was not treated with levity, as it was considered capable of invoking the wrought of the ancestors/gods on the people. Thus immediately such was identified (especially when the culprits have not been identified), *Elimin-Oto* (Earth Masquerade/spirit), would go round the community at night warning the individuals involved as well as remind them of the consequence of their actions. *Elimin oto* makes its approach known by a strange, whirring, roaring noise. As soon as this is heard, all women must shut themselves up in their houses, and refrain from looking out on the pain of death (Akin 2008). When at the end of the day, the culprit refuses to own up, curses are placed. Also, when abomination is committed in the community, it is also the *Elimin oto* that goes to those affected to announce the process and requirement for the purification. Studies have established such practice among other groups in Nigeria as established by O. E. Uya, specifically of the Oron People, when he wrote:

“Similarly, Anwan–idit was a male society intimately concerned with the moral fibre of society. Members of the Akata were regarded as “spirits” and therefore, ubiquitous and thus capable of knowing all scandals committed in society. The main function of the Akata was therefore the detection of anti-social behavior, the popularisation of the crimes and the ridiculing of the culprits into correction. Typically, Akata members made their outings at night when they used their special instrument, Okokpok, to warn non-initiates off the streets. The Akata was a mouth piece of society in informing the public of secret happenings in the village. It exposed criminals, acted as a social cleaner and by so doing encouraged moral rectitude.”²²

When public works were to be carried out, the *Elimin* and *Okpodu* (whip carrying masquerade) were also involved making sure there was a high representation of those involved in the job. In case there was any defaulter who refused to heed to the call of the group. It was the *elimin* that was involved in either ensuring that those concerned got involved or collected the fined items. In

²² UYA, O. E. A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin, p. 64.

the case of dwindling economic activities especially when it concerned the low patronage of the local community market (which was held every four days), the *elimin* was invited to make sure the women folks attended and traded in the market. In this way, they worked in conjunction with the elders and *egbonughele* to ensure the economic prosperity of the community.

Amongst the indigenous Nigerian societies, oath talking was and still remains a strong veritable tool of conflict resolution. At individual level, oath is employed as a means of identifying the evil one who inflicts suffering and misfortune on others; during disputes arising from infidelity, adultery and land ownership as a means of truth determination; and even at death, to determine who caused it. At group level, oath taking is employed in discovering the causes of collective misfortune and in choosing a priest and other holders. It should be noted that oath taking in Nigerian traditional societies is not an all comer's affair and cannot be administered by any person except the accredited representative (chief priest and masquerade) of the said deity in question. And it is before this deity that parties in dispute may swear for the other on the emblem of a particular deity.²³

In Esan, cases of terrible crime against the community especially the case of witchcraft, which required the sasswood ordeal on those that were accused, the spirit masquerade played importance especially in making sure the accused took the portion. In most cases the sasswood concoction *Ohankin* is administered on individuals who were made to drink the liquid and run round the village, under the supervision of the masquerade. In bouts of vomiting the individual could collapse while running round to prove his innocence.²⁴ This was also practiced among the Ibibio society where a similar substance administered by the spirit was used for judicial practice. A. Otoabasi, in what seems a comparative analysis wrote:

“The Ibibio judicial procedure was direct. There was no need for an interpreter, and in this way, the evils of misinterpretation whether deliberate or otherwise were known. In difficult cases like murder or adultery, the jury system was often employed where both the complaint and the defendant had a chance of selecting their own jury. There was an almost universal belief in the potency of the mbiam on

²³ TASIE, G. I. K. Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Indigenous Africa. In *Aworom Annang: African Journal of Culture, Philosophy and Society*, 2011, September, Vol. 1, p. 6.

²⁴ OKODUWA, A. I. Time and Space in Esan History: The Concept and Values of a People Examined. In UKAOGO, V., AKUBOR, E. O. (ed.). *Vanishing Past, Rescued Future: Essays on the Peoples, Traditions and Cultures of the Esan People of Southern Nigeria*, p. 12.

which the people swore. It was a decoction which was believed to have the power of detecting culprits and punishing them accordingly unless the curse was removed. In very serious cases, the accused was often asked to swear by the Mbiam in such a way that the curse would be extended to his family. And unless members of his family were completely convinced of his innocence, they old object to the accused taking the oath in such a way that it would embarrass them.”²⁵

Hostility among Communities

There is no culture in the world which does not have the idea of peace and its content. Scholars have observed that in traditional Esan society, cases of hostility leading to war over land or boundary were recorded. When peacemaking was considered, the communities led by the elders often entered into a truce which was done at the *Okoven* in the presence of the *elimin* Spirit Masquerade. F. Samson specifically noted that arrangements leading to the settlement and preventing issues that led to wars in Esanland were handled by elders in council through the use of an *okoven*, Oath, the use of negotiations and the signing of peace treaties.²⁶ G. C. Okojie argued that the pact, treaties, sanctions in pre-colonial times were instrumental in the cohesion and of peacemaking processes in Esanland. Once this was entered into the *Okoven* (boundary of the land under dispute) all parties involved in this pact strived to maintain peace especially with the involvement of the Spirit masquerades.²⁷ The involvement of the spirit masquerade made such a pact more effective since the Esan people were closely tied to the spirits and therefore strove not to provoke the anger of the ancestors as represented spirit masquerades and elders on earth in the administration and places where the oath were taken. This particular spot was normally marked “*Ukhinmin*” (Neubodia leavis) also representing the spirit. Emphasising this, C. Ukhun and N. Inegbedion, opined thus:

“Boundaries were established or/and demarcated by the *okoven* which is a “common oath”. The oath inaugurated a non-aggression pact between neighbouring villages or “adjacent villages”. The oath took place on the spot or the path connecting two villages. It was marked by “*ukhinmin tree* (Neubodia leavis)”. The spot constitutes *alu okoven*

²⁵ OTOABASI, A. Conflict Resolution and Management in Ibibioland. In AFAHA, P. (ed.). *Witness to History: In Honour of Sir Sebastian Umoren*, p. 43.

²⁶ SAMSON, F. W. Peace Making and Conflict Management in Pre-colonial Ekpoma, p. 36.

²⁷ OKOJIE, C. G. *Ishan Native Laws and Customs*, p. 51.

(place where the oath was taken). Two villages could be said to own it given that it was a spot the covenant of peace was “signed, sealed and delivered”. Beyond the Alu Okoven, it “was no man’s land” or property.”²⁸

It is important to note that the Ukhinmin tree (*Neubodia leavis*), is also a symbol of the *elimin* (spirit) among the Esan People and in most communities it is venerated, while in others it is a major component of the community shrine. However, it is not alone in this category as the palm frond is also symbolic and referred to as *eni-elimin*, where it is used to represent the spirit. It was used for a number of traditional rituals and ceremonies representing the spirits (masquerades). Whenever it was hoisted it acted as command for cessation or dedication to the spirit for protection and safe keeping. In civil matters like land disputes, it was used to send a message of “no trespassing” to parties. In most Esan communities (till date), farm products and wares kept in public were laced with the palm frond signifying the owners guarding such product with the spirit. In this case, such product or ware is said to be under the watchful custody of *eni elimin* (the name of the spirit). Even fruit trees to which these palm fronds were tied were avoided by people as an unpermitted incursion could attract the wrought of the ancestors. Such trees and its fruits can only be harvested with the permission of the owner, who must first remove this *eni-elimin* or give permission through incantations.

Conclusion

From the discourse it is clear that masquerade in Esan society as in most African societies is far more beyond the mask. 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

²⁸ UKHUN, C. E., INEGBEDION, N. A. Ontological Validation of Land Tenureship in Esan Tradition, pp. 15 – 20.

of stability and control on Esan people and their society. In the entire Oto-Esan, (irrespective of religious affiliation) *Elimin* remains the major means of authority in settling local disputes, and their divined knowledge is often consulted in times of trouble. There is also a certain amount of societal control that comes with the belief that the spirits of the *elimin* can influence the community from above, especially if they are not happy with the behaviour of community members.

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