

## CHALLENGES OF ODO MASQUERADE CULT TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AKU TOWN: A SOCIO-THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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### Abstract

*Odo masquerade cult has remained an entrenched one over the years in Aku town located in South East of Nigeria. The cult is grounded on the belief that Odo as the policeman of the society, the avenger of all evil doers, the custodian of all aspects of culture as well as the giver of all good things and invariably demands to be worshipped by all. Unfortunately contrary to the vision of its founding fathers it has assumed a stubbornly defying force for peace, development and rapprochement among the Aku people in the Nsukka senatorial zone of Enugu State. This ugly trend has become a source of great shame for all right thinking Aku citizen in particular and of Nsukka in general as the modern day adherents of Odo cult have continued to use it to exert unimaginable damage to both corporate and individual good and well-being. Due to its dialectically opposed stance to fundamental developmental paradigm this work seeks to study the challenges of Odo masquerade cult to the entrenchment of sustainable development in Aku town. Literatures and relevant data were gathered to describe the existing problem. The methodology also involved primary data collection through oral interviews as well as the use of survey approach.*

**Keywords:** Challenges, Odo Masquerade Cult, Sustainable Development, Socio-Theological Inquiry, Aku Traditional Religion.

### Introduction

Odo masquerade is as old as Aku Diwea. It is believed to be spirit of the ancestors that died many years ago and they sometimes visit the living in the form of masquerade. The visit of Odo to their living family members lasts for a period of six to seven months and is repeated at interval of two years. Most of their worshippers believe that it visits the families to see the loved ones and settle some scores with their enemies. Every odd year is an Odo year in Aku. The masquerade cult is regarded as a secret cult as their rules and modus operandi are usually secretive and also involves initiation or recruitment of membership which are always done in

secret. The act of initiation is called “ifuama” and it is restricted only to males who are matured enough to keep secret.

The threat of Odo masquerade cult in South East of Nigeria has remained an entrenched one over the years. However the cult has according to Eze (n.d) assumed a stubbornly defying force for peace, development and rapprochement among the Aku people in the Nsukka senatorial zone of Enugu State. This ugly trend he posits has become a source of great shame for all right thinking Aku citizen in particular and of Nsukka in general. The stasis of culture has subsisted as the driving philosophy why the custodian and adherents of the above cult have continued to use it to exert unimaginable damage to both corporate and individual good and well-being. Their cast in steel beliefs and approach to Odo as the policeman of the society, the avenger of all evil doers, the custodian of all aspects of culture as well as the giver of all good things who invariably deserves all worship no doubt makes it dialectically opposed to the doctrines and missions of Christianity as well as the fundamental values of a free society which are rooted in fundamental human rights.

Odo commonly referred to as *Odomagala* in Aku which is one of the ‘Igbo- Odo’ communities in Nsukka Senatorial Local Government of Enugu State according to Itanyi (2011) relates basically to ancestral spirit of the their departed forefathers that usually visits them bi-annually. Furthermore he posits that it is a cultic body or institution which attracts such activities as worshipping, returning and going back to the land of the spirit. Moreover in recognizing Odo as object of worship he states that its followers confess their sins to it as they pray for forgiveness of same in addition to making request for longevity. What this means is that Odo cult is a religious platform through which its adherents seek to develop their faith in the divine realities through the ancestral intermediaries.

The ancestral cult religion of Odo masquerade is an integral part of African Traditional Religion which basically is a polytheistic religion that believes in the worship of many gods. It is against this backdrop that Odo appear in different types and ranks. For instance while we have *umu Odo* and *isi Odo* (small and powerful Odo deities). The above is corroborated by Itanyi (2011) when he posits that among the communities that celebrate the Odo masquerade such as Aku, Ukehe, Onyohor, Ochioma, Ikolo, Diogbe, Udume and Umunko Odo differ in their types both at the intra- community and inter community levels. And so while there are the following types of Odo in Aku namely *OvuruUzo*, *Odachi*, *Okikpe*, *Ogada*, *Ani Mpu*, *Uzu Ekwa*, *Ekwereke* and *Gberere* in Ukehe we have *Obodike*, *Ewuru*, *Odo Ukwueke* and *Mluamlu*. Furthermore Onyeneke (1987:77) submits that while some masquerades appear for entertainment at festivals others only show at night when they are deployed to enforce the traditional authority which the elders derive from their ancestors. They are therefore often engaged to execute judiciary authority over erring members of the community, No wonder this is why some of Odo masquerade reflect unusual feminine and artistic beauty for entertainment purposes while others appear in deadly and highly terrifying outlook as they societal symbol of juridical terror and impartiality.

At the sociological space Odo has been adduced a unifying force in communities where it is celebrated. This view is captured by Ezike and Ochiaka (2009) when they averred that Aku people see Odo as a link between the living and the dead. They therefore serve as a bridge

that binds the people horizontally together as a community of Odo worshippers and vertically with the gods or Odo deities. From the foregoing the above cult were established to serve sociological, spiritual, religious, economic and political functions. However it is in the context of achieving some of the above roles that it runs at cross road with the basic values or the ideology that are indispensable for evolving societies that can compete globally with modern or advanced nations. It is against this backdrop that this work seeks to study the challenges of Odo masquerade cult to evolution of sustainable development in Aku, Igbo Etit Local Government Area of Enugu State.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

In this section we shall examine the conceptual clarification of some key terms relevant to this study. This no doubt would help to provide the background understanding needed for better appreciation of the subject matter.

#### **Odo**

According to Richard Okafor as cited in Chukwuma (2008) masquerades or *mmonwu* in Igbo cosmology relates to spirit manifest or the manifestation of a spirit of some sort in bodily form in the course of carrying out one or more cultural roles in the society which cut across any of the following religious, economic, ritual, political and social. Odo as used in this context therefore refers to ancestral personalities that are clothed in masked human agents or forms with a view to furthering cultural, religious, political, juridical or any other function prescribed to by a community. They are therefore agent of social control or change which derive their authority from ancestral powers of the living dead.

#### **Masquerade**

According to Chambers Dictionary (New Edition) the word masquerade refers to an assembly of people wearing mask, costume as an instrument of disguise. Onyeneke as cited in Chukwuma (2008) describes the masquerade as a public display and performance of a masked or veiled actor as he seeks to present in his action the artificial identity which is created and expressed in the fashion of the mask dress adopted. Therefore it refers to any covering for the eyes, nose, mouth, or the whole face and body, usually worn for purposes of disguising, amusement or protection. Masquerade are therefore partially or totally veiled or masked personalities used to advance social, religious, political, entertainment, cultural or economic functions.

#### **Cult**

The word cult is defined by Wikitionary online dictionary as a group or sect of people with a deviant religious, philosophical or cultural identity often existing on the margins of society or exploitative towards its members. Meriam Webster online dictionary on its own defined the word as a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious. Okafor (2017:209) states that the word cult relates to groups that engage in secret societies whose activities are anti- social and most of the time criminal. They are defined as groups of people whose identity are not only shrouded in secrecy but also engage in activities that are inimical to the collective good of the society.

## **Development**

The term development as cited Inmpey (2018) is defined by Nnamani (2009) as an organic general change which he equally refers to as an intentional imperative that results in improved quality of life that is beneficial to all races. Furthermore Streeten (1994) states that the above word relates to an attack on the chief evils of the world today which according to him translates to reduction of poverty, unemployment, injustice, inequality and illiteracy as well as growth in employment, justice, economic, political and social rights. It is therefore relates to the reduction of the indices of deprivation such as hunger, disease, insecurity, marginalization and lack of access to basic infrastructure as well as the expansion of access to the various components of quality life.

## **Theology**

Theology refers to the science of God. It is the branch of social science that is concerned with the study of the transcendental reality called God and the relationship that binds man to this divine personality. The word also relates to religion which according to Ibenwa (2014:50) refers to belief in the supernatural being called God who as creator and controller of the universe man owes Him worship and obedience to His laws. Theological investigation in this context is restricted to Christian theology that emphasize the primacy of the Christian doctrines and practice as a hallmark of Christian identity and fruitfulness. Gwamma (2008) captures above view when he states that it is a concept that emphasizes the manifestation of the fundamental Christian experience of new birth and the inducement of the power of the Holy Spirit. From the foregoing, it refers to the brand of Christianity that gives great emphasis on biblical faith that derives its authority from the divine *logos*, the written Word of God. This work therefore seeks to examine the threats of Odo masquerade cult in the light of the divine logic as revealed in the Christian Bible.

## **Odo in history**

The historical origin of Odo Aku was not documented and as such scholars rely heavily on oral tradition which is often fraught with distortion as one generation transmits the story to another. However one common thread on the above subject matter is that Odo Aku is as old as Aku. Amuka (2020) states that from history *Odoachi* and *Ojiyi* deities rule Aku as they began when Aku began. *Odoachi* appears to be abridged name for *Odonachi* which means the Odo that rules. According to him both of them are Ozo titled holders and while the title name of *Odoachi* is *Igwe ne/dweruohambu di na AKU* that of *Ojiyi* is *Agabambu di na Aku*. Each of them have their insignia of office which consists of the following: *Okpu Ugo*, *Awu* (Red feather), *Arua* (Staff) and *Opu* (Ivory). Before any one becomes an Ozo title holder he must pay for an *Opu* both to *Odachi* and *Ojiyi* as well as make payment to the above deities for other instruments of office namely *Okpu Ugo*, *Awu*, *Arua* and *Opu*. Furthermore such persons are expected to make some stipulated monetary cost which may range from twenty to forty thousand naira in addition to making provision for lavish entertainment of Ozo title holders before they are given the title name as well as their instruments. *Odoachi* controls all the odo in Aku and therefore serves as the custodian of Odo cult.

Aku is noted for its culture of Odo masquerades a town which according to Ocho in Okikpe may have existed before the birth of Christ based on archeological evidence made by Professor Hartle at the University of Nigeria farm.

However in his contribution Itanyi (2011:153) states that the origin of Odo masquerade is anchored on oral traditions of the Igbo Odo communities. However he notes that one common thread in the traditions regarding the origin of Odo is that it is shrouded in obscurity and so while some believe that they came from the back yard as implied the saying of some elders that states *inter alia: Chukwusili n' mmanwusili Owellebi* (The Chukwu oracle said that the masquerade came through the back yard). For the Aku people the celebration of ula Odo (the return of Odo) to the spirit world underscores their cosmological perspective that upholds the view that Odo are deities or spirits that manifest their link with the living in body forms from time to time.

The perpetuity of the masquerade cult has remained an entrenched part and parcel of the Aku people because of the belief that it is *ihentigha* (instrument for fostering play, relaxation and entertainment). Amankulor (1985) captures the above view when he states the festive days designated for certain groups of Odo has remained a driving force for mobilizing a great number of people from far and near engage themselves in lavish entertainments of all kinds. For instance he notes that a number of days are set apart community by community for the outings of certain groups of Odo Aku such as *Ovuruzo, Odo Ogwugwu, Idvu Ishiach, Ejegoshigo*. While the above social function of Odo culture is highly commendable as instrument of social integration and promotion of economic strength through the attraction of tourist interest this work is however concerned on the fundamental values of Odo cult that is inimical to the promotion of Pentecostal Christianity in Aku.

### **Developmental Challenges of Odo masquerade**

There are many challenges to the entrenchment of all round development in Aku by the above masquerade cult.

Odo as a cultural and traditional exhibition in Aku has become a horrible nightmare to the people as they have eluded the originality of its institution which was for entertainment and unification of Aku community. It becomes crime and violence in the name of culture, they now block the roads, beating and extorting money from people who are going about their legitimate businesses. In this work however we shall be limiting ourselves to five of them namely the economical, theological, agricultural, gender and political. For the purpose of the study, let's look at the challenges that Odo pose to the community in the present time.

#### **1. Social Challenges**

- **Restriction of the right of movement:** During the period of Odo, it limits all women and young ladies from coming out of their houses in the night. For a woman to freely move out in the night, she needs to seek for the help from an initiated native male who would be shouting as they move, "Odo Arioo". This will signal all the Odo on the way to clear for a woman is passing the way. This single action is trampling on the peoples' constitutional right to movement. The worst situation is during the *nkwooduodo* (Nkwo market day of Odo departure), no woman or uninitiated male child will be allowed to come throughout the day.
- **Disruption of Social life:** During the ngbali Odo, women are not required to be in their homes. This gives room for boys to loot and steal some people's valuable properties in the names of culture. Many activities of Odo disrupts social activities like preventing

students from going to school, Christian from going to church service, market and travelling all because of *nhuruanya*, *ibuiguuhamu* and so on. It is believed among the odo worshippers that if a woman sees Odo in its naked form, she is liable to certain punishment, such as, premature delivery, sickness, even death. Due to this reasons women and young male who have not been initiated into odo cult does not come out during this period.

- **Insecurity:** Due to the fear associated to Odo menace many of the Corp members would rather prefer to work outside Aku than to be humiliated by the odo masquerade. Female teachers as well reject their posting because of Odo menace and even when is inevitable, would rather request the indigenes to stand for them rather than being subjected to persistent insecurity of life and property. Recently, Odo masquerade were parading the town with dangerous weapons and consequently pose security threats to life as some often operates under the influence of alcohol and hard drugs.
- **Intimidation of women:** Many Odo worshippers especially the youth hide under the cloak of Odo to intimidate girls and uninitiated males, extort money and other valuables from them. According to Vanguard Newspaper, March 18, 2011, Odo violently stripped two women in broad day-light for wearing trousers. The scourge of the latest masquerade scare, which had raised security concern in parts of the state, has become worse in Ugwunani Village in Aku community, where a very dreaded *ochooku* deity linked to odo masquerade has been making life unbearable for residence especially women. No lady in Aku should even pretend to know that Odo Masquerade is human beings. An Ejuona girl alleged in 1971 that Odo burnt down her house for disregarding them.
- **The use of charms:** The evil men among the Odo worshippers use dangerous charms to inflict sickness and even death on their enemies. Some Odo like *Ebi*, *Ocho Oku*, *Udele Oji*, *Anumkpu* etc claimed to have visual and lethal powers are believed to inflict some injury ranging from temporal physical impediment to a more permanent evil such as death even of the people who practice it.

There is therefore no doubt that as long as Aku continues to promote a social environment that restricts freedom of movement of certain category of her citizenry in this highly mobile age she cannot expect compete at the same level in all frontiers of development with those societies that promotes the fundamental rights of freedom of movement. What this means is that any culture that makes people to be scared to come and reside in Aku to do business because their right to freedom of movement can be infringed upon does not give a plus mark to the town.

### ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

- **Building of Odo house:** Odo house is a sacred building where Odo goes to rest and/or put on their regalias. The building of the modern houses for Odo poses economic challenges for the Odo worshippers. Many of them are farmers and find it difficult to eat and cater for their children in school but rather than paying school fees for their children will first of all pay huge amount of money for the building of the Odo houses.
- **Killing of pig:** During the departure of Odo, the worshipper mostly farmers bring out their savings from their produce and use it to by pig to be killed in commemoration of Odo departure. Most of these farmers could not register their wards for senior

secondary certificate examination (SSCE/WAEC) but accord more importance to the ceremony of the pig than the future of their children.

- **Presentation of food (Nriodo):** This is the practice of donating cooked food to those who are performer of the music of Odo. All the villages have periods when Odo used to perform the music which last three days in the native week (Afo, Nkwo and Eke) and it's rotational. At this period Odo music women will be cooking for the men who are the custodian of Odo masquerade. Once the food presented is small or not garnished well, the woman that owns the food will be punished and the food will be rejected.
- **Waste of Economic Trees and Land:** The above cult operates in *uhamu* which refers to a large portion of land that are used to house the spirit manifest. Unfortunately these appears to be virgin land that have been left uncultivated for centuries and as such have been overgrown with thick forest thereby providing a very safe have for the hideous activities of Odo cult. However the irony is that while each village has such large portion of very fertile land marked out for housing the Odo gods majority of the farming population of Aku indigenes continue to drift to Opanda in Uzo- Uwani in search of land for farming. The result is akin to what a song writer once said 'my name is Obiageli but am dying of hunger' which means my parents said I was born into wealth but I am wasting in hunger. The paradox is that Aku with a massive population has no land when compared to her neighbouring communities but the little it has instead of using it to build schools, markets, industries, residential houses, or engage it for farming it rather prefer to turn them into the land for the housing of dead deities while her living waste.
- **Waste of Man Hours:** The culture of economic waste of the above cult is most pronounced in the waste of man-hours. Most of the South East Igbo cultural festivities relating to masquerades are usually celebrated within a week or two. Unfortunately Aku youths and adherents of Odo cult engage themselves for six to seven months at the expense of economic activities. While some claim that as a tourism component of our culture it is an agent of wealth creation as it attracts people from far and near to invest their money in Aku during those periods. In divine economy God our creator worked for six days and rested for one day. As long as the town continues to patronize the culture of man hours waste by our young population in the art of allocating more than fifty percent of their economic time to eating, drinking, dancing and masquerading it will remain an impoverished society in spite of the fact that she commands an increasing high population of Ph.D holders and professors. If economic power is a measure of how long a society spends on engaging in masquerade activities then Aku should have been a world power economically as she invests so much of her economic and human resources to foster leisure that does not attract growth in industries, employment, national and international institutions.

## 2. POLITICAL CHALLENGES

- **Decision making:** Odo shapes the policy of Aku especially during the odo year. *Odoachi*, the highest Odo in Aku makes decisions for Aku women (*ndiomu Aku*) who constantly hold meeting at the house and presided by *odoachi* and whatever it says stands. On the particular day of its return Aku people will converge at the *uhamu* to hear the forecast for the future and decision of some burning issues concerning the

community. Such decisions in some cases may infringe on the political rights of both non-indigenes of Aku as well as non-adherents of the cult. This is because while organization makes rules for her members it becomes a leadership problem when such rules are made obligatory to none members. The case of Hisbah police enforcing Sharia laws on non-Muslim in Northern Nigeria has remained a thorny political issue in Nigeria.

- **Mediation process:** Any conflict that arises between two families during the period of odo cannot be dialogued amicably. Once the youth heard about it, they will immediately bring odo into the matter with a jungle justice which must be accepted by the party or receive a severe punishment from the odo.

### 3. Religious Challenges

- **Belief/Worshipping:** The belief of Odo is at variance with Christian teaching. The odo worshipers believe that it is a spirit and has turned into an object of worship and rituals. "During one catechism class, the teacher taught that a spirit is a being which has no flesh, and cannot be seen, touch nor heard. Then a boy asked the teacher whether Odo masquerades were spirits or not. The teacher answered that they were not. The information spread like wild fire in the town. The young men demanded that disciplinary measures should be taking against the catechist for revealing the secret of odo. Masked odo assembled at the market square in preparation for looting and burning the catechist's house. Fear of the consequences of such an action forced the people to agree to the immediate transfer of the teacher who left the town within 48 hours".
- From the perspective of Christian theology anything that takes the place of the worship of the almighty God who has revealed Himself in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ relates to idol worship. Unfortunately the adherents of Odo cult do not see the worship they give to the above deity as an affront against the worship of the Almighty God. They would rather insist that it is a feast that is called *ihentiya* (object of play or mere celebration). The above argument appears to conflict with their practice which involves blood sacrifice in the form of killing of pigs and fowls to appease the Odo deities to attract their blessings as well as shield them from evil. Their cast in steel beliefs and approach to Odo as the policeman of the society, the avenger of all evil doers, the custodian of all aspects of culture as well as the giver of all good things who invariably deserves all worship no doubt makes it dialectically opposed to the doctrines and missions of Christianity. It is in this context of ideological divide that it poses threat to evangelistic Christianity in its mandate of teaching the Biblical truths to all nations most especially when some people who have attempted to expose some unhealthy theological views of Odo in their public evangelistic crusades have suffered some form of physical abuse from some die-hard Odo adherents who do not have respect for freedom of opinion in a secularistic nation like ours.

The Odo masquerade cult poses serious threat to authentic Christianity by encouraging the compromising of fundamental doctrinal values of the Christian faith. This view is put pointedly by Okoro (2018) when he states that the lack of authentic Christian followership and the accompanying watering down of Christian values are true indicators there is an increasing number of Igbo people who now live in a grave state of dismay and



disillusionment which are now expressed in hypocritical spiritual lives. Against this backdrop he submits that while many profess faith and avowed allegiance to the Christian faith, they have as well secretly refused to disconnect from practices of their primal religions. The Odo cult is grounded on the belief that Odo as the policeman of the society, the avenger of all evil doers, the custodian of all aspects of culture as well as the giver of all good things and invariably demands to be worshipped by all. It is in the context of the above submission that it becomes a fundamental threat to the central teaching of Christian faith which demands that the worship of the only one God, the Almighty cannot be compromised with any other. (Matthew 4:10, Deut.6:14, Jer 35:15). Pauline theology captures the above truth when he states that: "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist (1 Cor. 8:6). In other words, by asserting that there is one God, one Lord, he is re-echoing the Old Testament Theology that to arrogate to any other deity or being the finality of worship and power to save outside the one God and Lord is to stand worship or religion on its head.

### **Conclusion**

This work has attempted to examine the various challenges that Odo masquerade pose to development in Aku. They were identified as embracing the social, political, economic and religious dimensions. It noted that though the cult has been adjudged as a cultural instrument used for entertainment in practice it is a religion that promotes extremists views that are hostile to the entrenchment of social, religious and political harmony in the town.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made as an attempt at bridging the gaps of the above threats to development in Aku.

- 1) Restriction of freedom of movement of certain categories people on certain days by Odo adherents should be abolished as it infringes on the fundamental rights of such people as well as entrenches unnecessary fear on them.
- 2) The town should ban them from using dangerous weapons as instrument of displaying the cultural heritage of Odo both in their private and public functions as this has led to maiming and killing of innocent citizens.
- 3) Those that use Odo masquerade to harm people for no just cause should be made liable by the law. The town should promote the security of her citizenry by providing enforceable legislation that ensures that those who use masquerade to unleash physical, economic, mental or social assault on innocent citizens are made to bear their consequences.
- 4) The masquerade should be expunged from every form of cultic or secretive undertones so as to free it from being an instrument of promoting acts and intentions that are inimical to Aku people in general. The word *cult* comes from the word *occult* meaning relating to blood. It is no wonder that the ritual of Odo masquerade cult goes with massive killing of pigs during the ceremony marking the exiting of the spirit manifest back to the spirit world. These blood sacrifice is the key that sustains the link between the evil forces that operate in the dark to unleash unending harm to the citizenry. What we are saying here is there is the need to rid Odo of the diabolical ritual of blood sacrifice which has the cloak of demon worship. Pauline

theology captures the truth when he states *inter alia* "Do not participate in the worthless and unproductive deeds of darkness, but instead expose them; for it is disgraceful even to mention the things that are done in such people practice in secret.(Eph. 5:11-12)

5) The use of Odoachi as an instrument of divination or seeking guidance should be banned by the town as it open the doors to occultism, magic, witchcraft and satanism to her citizenry. This instrument of seeking guidance underscores the fact that our people still prefers primitive approach to modern and scientific method. Christian theology condemns the use of dead ancestors in seeking guidance as it connects people to demon worship. (Deut.18:10, 14). Aku people must shed off from their culture anything that entangle her people with worshipping the dead if she must connect with societies that are aligned with modern and Christological trend of development and discovering the truth.

6) The town should restrict the cultural practice to entertainment that should be reduced to few days or a week in a year to free it from being an economic and manpower waste that deploys six precious months for chasing leisure and fanfare.

7)The massive land being designated as *uhamu* in every Aku village should be redeployed for more economic and development purposes with a few portion being left as a museum center for tourist purpose.

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