

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF IBONO CULTURAL FESTIVAL ON THE PEOPLE OF IWOLLO OGHE OF ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Ibono also known as mmamwu Ibono is a popular masquerade festival celebrated not only by the people of Iwollo but also by the entire Oghe clans, including communities such as Olo, Awha and Amagu-Umulokpa, all located in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State of South-eastern Nigeria. Among the communities that celebrate the festival, the Ibono Iwollo masquerade cultural festival however remains the most popular, widely celebrated, outstanding, entertaining, and revered. As one of the surviving cultural festivals and practices of the Iwollo people, the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival attracts large number of visitors and tourists from within and outside the community as well as neighboring villages, towns and communities. This paper examines the contributions of the festival to the socio-cultural and economic lives of the Iwollo people particularly in contemporary times and explores how it improves the public image of the community and its people. The study also investigates the challenges confronting the celebration of this festival, which have contributed to its gradual decline in quality, originality, and the preservation of associated customs and traditions. Furthermore, the paper also discusses the activities associated with the Ibono masquerade festival in Oghe and examines issues relating to masquerades and masquerading, particularly the exclusion of women from masquerade cult in Iwollo, Oghe and most parts of Igboland. Employing historical research methodology, the study utilized oral tradition and secondary sources of data, which provided the basis for the analysis and discussion of the subject. The study adopted both descriptive and analytical approaches, while the experiences and personal observations of the authors enriched the analysis. The paper recommends that the Ibono masquerade festival should be preserved and sustained to prevent it from going into extinction, as has been the case with many other cultural practices in Iwollo. Its preservation is important for posterity and for the continued promotion of the cultural heritage of the community despite criticisms and opposition from some adherents of certain Christian denominations, particularly those of Pentecostal extraction.

Key Words: Ibono/mmamwu or masquerade, Culture, Festival, Iwollo and Oghe

Introduction

In many African societies, culture represents a way of life (Ayo, Yusuf and Itopa, 2022:65). Culture according to Arreola et al., (2007:10), is therefore the totality of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours shared, and passed on by the members of a specific group. Scroll (2012:1-63) defined culture as basically the total way of life of a people, ranging from their languages, dressing, dance steps, the food they consume and even their traditional worships and festivals. It observes that it is culture that largely determines behavioural patterns and perception of a society; as it also distinguishes different societies and traditions. To Umar and Ahmad (2019:20-29), culture is a way people make a living. They noted that human beings are members of culture which involve behaviour, attitudes, languages, food, dress, festivals and religion. Cultural festivals according to Jatto (2022:11) are therefore important historical activity that involves various activities showcasing several aspects of people's living, as they are not only part of life, but also as they have fundamental impacts on the behaviour, traditions and histories of the people. Festivals on the other hand, are age long traditions and an integral aspect of cultural lives of society from the ancient time. Celebration of festival is meant to commemorate the ancestral spirits and also to herald the emergence of new epoch or harvest. It is usually colourful and very interesting and entertaining. It encompasses some high level of spirituality. While some of these practices could be shrouded in mysteries, others are exhibited in the glare. In Africa, traditional festivals form an essential part of the culture. From the birth of a child to adulthood he or she witnesses or are exposed to several rituals and festivals. These cultural practices vary from one society to another; as they take place at different seasons, times and periods of the year, depending on their significance. While some festivals mark the beginning of farming activities, others mark the end of the harvest

season (Ayo, Yusuf and Itopa 2022:65-66). Igbo festivals are therefore an integral part of Igbo culture and traditions. They are highly cherished by the Igbos irrespective of social, political, economic and religious status (Chukwu, 2025). At some point in history, Chukwu (2025) equally observed that some of these festivals were regarded as diabolical, paganism and satanic and are therefore not worthy of celebrating by the people. According to Dons Eze (2019:50), masquerade or mmamwu festival is an important part of Igbo culture and is found in various parts of Igbo land. Ozoeze (2023:137) observed the different kinds of masquerade cults which Igbo land is cultured with to include: Monwu, (mmanwu/mmonwu), Omaba, Egwugwu, Odo, Edpe, Akan, Okonko, Ijele, Ajibuzu, Enebechi, Ajofhia, Akatakpa, Inyiagbaoku, Mgbadike, Omambala and so on. Dons Eze (2019:50) noted “that these quintessential cultural festivals have graduated to a cultural carnival exhibited in Enugu State, every November of each year”. To Ckukwu (2025), Mmanwu (masquerade) festival just like Ekpe and Omabe festival as celebrated by the people of Anambra and Imo respectively, is a festival showcasing Igbo masquerade performances, music and dance. These festivals as he stated, also showcases Igbo cultural heritage, community spirit, and artistic expression which are essential part of Igbo identity and tradition. The masquerades are of varying sizes and colours and also include the singing and dancing type which forms the core part of the ceremony. As pointed out by Philips (2012:15), festivals are diverse and celebrated in many ways, and many scholars have thus attempted to study many of these festivals (as the case with the most of the articles in Oghe Writers Association Journals (OWAJ). He therefore opined that more work still needs to be done to explore the traditional significance of festivals and also examine the historical emergence of such festivals. This work is therefore an attempt to examine one of such cultural heritage among the Oghe people, particularly Iwollo community in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. Iwollo Community in particular and Oghe people in general, have some of the richest cultural heritage and festivals not just in Enugu State but in the entire Igbo land and these include Akani, Mbaze, Mgbaogwu to mention but a few. These rich cultural festivals are part of its heritages as an Igbo town and Ibono masquerade festival is just one of them and the focus of this study. Ibono festival is one of the major cultural celebrations in Iwollo which characteristically features the coming out of masquerade with its attendant rituals, sacrifices, artistic and aesthetic display, music, pump and pageantry. In Iwollo and by extension the entire Oghe land, festivals are not for fun only, but bear some deeply rooted social, spiritual or religious effect that usually have a boost on the lives of the people. The Ibono masquerade festival encourages cooperate involvement of the people of Iwollo/Oghe ethnic group and this is in terms of participation as well as presentation. Thus, the Ibono festival has a variety of significance among the Iwollo Oghe people. Firstly, the festival marks the end of the farming season (Ibono uwu) which signifies a period of scarcity, when all the crops have been planted and the people are managing to survive with the little foods crop left. Secondly, it also marks the period of harvest (Ibono udumii) meaning that there are abundance of food supply and that people have enough to eat. Thirdly, the festival equally signifies the return of the ancestors to the land of living and the celebrations of the departed/deceased old men of the communities who came back to life as masquerades. Through the Ibono festival, the lives of the community and social values are renewed. It is a thanksgiving feast for the co-existence of the people of Iwollo and Oghe in general and honours to the deities. The people of Iwollo also use the occasion to solicit blessing from God or the deceased. Again, the festival brings together the people of Iwollo as a group, thus strengthening their unity, cohesion and corporate existence in most instances. Before now, masquerade was fiercely made, as seeing in their physical appearances and the spiritualities accompanying the activities associated with their outings. Masquerades appears occasionally during festivals and Christmas carnivals as presently witnessed in many parts of Igbo land today. Masquerades dances to entertain people besides other parts of their societal functions. They scare children, uninitiated youngsters and even women away with their presence. Some of the dreaded masquerades sometimes challenge and intimidate one another with their charms, aura and mystical outlooks. They even go as far as killing the attendants of opposing masquerade groups and as well harm their innocuous and harmless onlookers/audience. Moreover, the coming out and at the same time, the exit of these masquerades during festivals were usually associated with the death of some members of the communities. This unfortunate development at some point in time, became a matter of concern for the people and the traditional institution that it was agreed that this kind of masquerades had to stop. That was how some of these gigantic, powerful, fierce, deadly and mystical masquerades disappeared and stopped existing. Thus, the ones that we have now are more peaceful and friendly masquerades without deadly charms. One major factor that also led to the disappearance of these dreaded masquerades were the deaths of virtually all the traditional medicine men and native doctors who prepares their various charms and amulets during any of the masquerade’s outings especially at the period of festival like Ibono (Uzoamaka,2025).

This paper thus, examines the contributions of the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival to the socio-cultural and economic lives of the people. However, it observes that in the recent years, the usual glamour, rituals and sacrifices that accompanied the celebration of the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival have been beclouded with modernity.

The paper equally noted that the influence of Christianity has introduced some elements of changes in the festival as the people no longer accord it the desired respect and it pride of place as was the case in the time past, as the adherents of this religion particularly the Pentecostal churches are openly challenging the rituality associated with this festival. Things that were hitherto sacred about the festival have begun now to face imminent challenges, metamorphosing into rivalry and chaos between the indigenous people of the modern faiths and the custodians of the Ibono Iwollo masquerades festival. In spite of these challenges, this paper argues that the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival should be sustained for posterity's sake. While the good aspect of it should be retained, the other bad part should equally be discarded to carry everyone along irrespective of the religious faith and to avoid the conflict thereof.

Brief Background History of Iwollo Oghe-Omashi Okpuite

Iwollo is the seventh son of Oghe, a descendant of Ezeagu Igbudu. In order of seniority, Iwollo comes after Owe, Akama, Neke, Amankwo, Amansiodo and Oyofe Oghe respectively. On the other hand, Oghe the father of Iwollo, is the third son of Ezeagu, coming after Owah and Umana while Oghu is his younger brother. Iwollo is a member of Agbaja ancestry comprising of Udi and Ezeagu Local Government Areas in Enugu State. She is also part of the greater WAWA speaking people of Enugu State in the South-Eastern Igbo land of Nigeria. The mother of Iwollo Mgbolie came from a neighbouring community Okpogho, was the first wife of Oghe, the father of Iwollo. Historically, Mgbolie bore five children/sons (Owe, Akama, Neke, Oyofe and Iwollo her fifth child/son) who are collectively refers to as *Ikenga*, right hand side. Udenkwo the second wife of Oghe, the father of Iwollo came from a farther community Olo, equally had five sons namely; Amankwo, Amansiodo, Umunum, Obiagu and Akasa who are on the contrary are known as Ibite Oha, left hand side.

Altogether, Oghe had ten sons and Iwollo is the seventh of them and the fifth from the *Ikenga* which are the children of Mgbolie, the first wife of Oghe, the woman from Okpogho. Oral history has it that, at the period the society was barbaric, fuelled by slave raiding/trading, that it was characterized by fight or flight syndrome. During this period, it was told that powerful villages invaded and subdued the weaker ones and sold them out for wealth. Many races therefore vanished. As a result of this ugly development, Oghe reduced from ten to seven villages. Akasa, Umunum, Obuagu and even Umuhu which was another clan melted, absorbed or subsumed into brother villages of Amankwo and Amansiodo respectively. Owe, the first son of Oghe, on its own part could not stand the hostility and the pressure hence the few survivors ran into different parts of Iwollo. Thus, the descendants of Owe are still identified in a remote part of Iwollo where they ran for protection (Nechi Okachi, 1978 cited in Dons Eze, 2014: 1; Dons Eze, 2013:12). According to oral source, Neke would have vanished too, if it were not for the introduction of Odo cult which still thrives in Neke and Okpogho, thus providing security and protection for them hence they were able to withstand the hostility, defended and protected their wives, children and property, and especially maintain their geographical boundaries of today.

A popular version and perhaps the most acceptable account on the origin of Iwollo as shared by Nwakapa (2025) and widely circulated online or on the social media in Oghe/Ezeagu platforms such as Facebook and particularly Whatsapp titled "*The History of Ezeagu*," has it that the origin of Iwollo has it that Oghe the second son of Ezeagu settled at the Olie-Oghe across the Ajali River and married Mgbolie who came from Okpogho, a neighboring community. According to the legend, Mgbolie lived with Oghe for several years without a male child but later had three sons Owe, Akama and Neke. The story has it that Udenkwo the second wife of Oghe who came from Ibite-Olo, on seeing that Mgbolie her co-wife (Uyedi), has borne three sons, grew with envy and jealous towards her and thus procured a charm from a Dibia (Native Doctor) in Ibite Olo which she later administered to Mgbolie during a feast thereby causing her to be barren. At this time, the story has it that Udenkwo (Nwanya Olo) conceived and begot Amankwo and Amansiodo. While this was happening, it was said that Mgbolie consulted a powerful Dibia (Native Doctor) known as Ojenammuo in Okpogho her place of origin. It was noted by the story that the Dibia did not only reveal the cause of her barrenness but also neutralized the charm and freed her womb. Consequently, Mgbolie took-in and gave birth to Oyofe and later to another son Iwollo (Iwe-Nwanya-Olo) meaning the envy/jealousy of Olo woman.

Dons Eze (2015:15) equally noted that there was a suggestion that Iwollo was not part of Oghe. According to this view as he observes, since Iwollo answers "Iwollo Omasi Okpuite", that she may have been related to another town in the Anyamelum clan, now in Anambra state, which is known as "Omasi", whose mother was also known as "Okpuite" (The Potter). However, according to him, investigations have revealed that there are no real relationships between Iwollo Oghe in Ezeagu and Omasi in Anyamelum clan, only that Iwollo might have seen

Omasi Okpuite as a heroic name and decided to adopt the title. This he noted, was perhaps due to Iwollo's expertise in pot making, which Omasi in Anyamelum is equally known for.

History has it that Iwollo the last son of Oghe originally settled at a place called Imama where he had six sons in the following order: Ezeonyia, Ndibunagu, Amagu, Obunagu, Oweloti and Enugwu. With the exception of Enugwu which has only two settlements at Enugwu-Akwu-Osa and Enugwu-Ogba-Agana; the rest of the five villages have multiple settlements (villages and clans) such as Ugwuike, Obodongwu, Ogbugbuagu, Agueke, Oweloti, Enugwu Elim (Ugwuochie), Mbananba, Akpugor and the most outstanding Aguobu Iwollo (Ozoeze, 2023:29; Nwankpa, 2024). History also has it that many family kindred migrated to Iwollo especially from Ibibio known as (Ibi-Nato or Umu-Ibi) and also from Igala in the present day Kogi State of Nigeria. These emigrants as told by oral tradition introduced the Akpoko and Kwubelu masquerade cults and many forms of Dibia (Native Doctor), some of which were useful in wars, and in hunting for slaves.

According to Anidiobu (2013:42), when Oghe, the father of Iwollo was sharing his property to his sons, Iwollo was given a smaller hoe, meaning that Iwollo was a farmer but to a lesser degree when compare to Amansiodo that was given a big hoe indicating a big-time farmer. However, Anikwe (2023:58) noted that all Oghe communities irrespective of their various occupations/ professions as given by their father Oghe, were all farmers, hunters and herbalists. The emphasis he observed was a matter of degree and not the kind to which each of this community is identified with any of the occupation. Iwollo is bounded by towns or communities such as Oyofe, Neke, Amansiodo, Amankwo, Awha, Okpogho and Olo. Iwollo is no doubt the most popular and most populous town in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, perhaps because of its historical developmental pacesetting strides in Oghe and in the Ezeagu region in general. For instance, Iwollo is the first to have; a customary court at Ishiogo, and imposing Catholic Church building/parish known today as Sacred Heart Parish Iwollo, a Teacher Training College which has now metamorphosed into Enugu State University of Agriculture Iwollo, a pipe borne water scheme built in the early 60's, a market that served the entire Oghe and beyond. According to Dons Eze (2013:16), it was because of all these developmental indices that made Iwollo to declare itself a "Town", now known as autonomous community. It is because of the population of Iwollo that made her to be called *Otokono-Julu-Ofhia-Fuwa-Ehagu*.

Masquerade and Masquerading Activities in Iwollo Vis-à-vis Oghe

Masquerade in many parts of Igbo land is known with several names like "*Mmanwu*," "*Monwu*" or "*Mmuo*". In Oghe, in which Iwollo is part of, as in most of the places in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, masquerade is also refers to as "*Maa*", "*Nduma*" or "*Onyeweani*". The Mmanwu or masquerade cultural festival in Oghe and in most parts of the local government like Olo, Awha, Amagu Umulokpa and so on is known as Ibono or Mmonwu Ibono, while it is called Ogugochi in Owa-Imezi and Ani-Ugwu in Obinofhia. However, Enugu Neke is the only clan which celebrates and performs Odo masquerade cult (Ozoeze, 2023:152). This observation is equally affirmed by Dons Eze (2018:45) when he stated that monwu/masquerade is celebrated in almost every community in Ezeagu through the Ibono festival. As a result, he noted that "one cannot take away mmonwu/masquerade from the Ezeagu man, as that would amount to killing his culture". Meanwhile, the Arochukwu people living in Uje, Aguobu- Owa, and the capital of the local government do not participate in Ibono masquerade feast. In view of the above, Oghe is therefore notably identified by two different masquerade refers to as Monwu masquerade and Odo masquerade. Like all other Ezeagu people within the South-Eastern Igbos of Nigeria, Oghe people in which Iwollo is among, is noted by Okoloeke (2014:28) as "*ndi-mmomou-shinne*" which literally means the people of great masquerade. The assertion was also corroborated by Ozoeze (2023:154) when he averred that because of the numerous masquerades in Oghe and by extension in the local government Ezeagu, that every male child is called "*Mmonwu-shi-nne*". The Ibono masquerade festival is according to Anikwe (2023:36), is a full-fledged festival which lasts about one month ending in a grand finale called "*Nkwo and Eke Ibono*". The Okpoto music which is the music for the masquerades and able-bodied men, brings out the masquerade from the spirit world after the necessary worships at the shrines and prayers with kolanuts and other ritual items, sacrificial materials and the invocations of the minds of the spirit are done (Ozoeze, 2023: 148-152). To invoke the masquerades or the spirit of the masquerades, Okodo (2019:130) observes that it involves:

The convergence of men on a secret corner that is far removed from the attention and prying eyes of women. When they, the men are sure that their ancestors were attentive, they would bless the kolanuts, break it and drop a lobe or some lobes to the ground for their ancestors before they eat theirs. They would pour palm wine into an ant holes and appeal to their ancestors to visit them. As the invocations goes on with the accompaniment of the sounding of the metal, he noted that the masquerades would rise from the ground.

It is traditional therefore that people follow masquerades about. According to Okodo (2019:130), this attendance to masquerade is strictly left for men. He thus observes that:

The whipping or flogging masquerade has men of different ages, preferably lads that accompany them. In the case of the whipping type, the attendants follow the masquerades with bundle or bunch of canes. Dangerous masquerades like Akpoko, Kwubelu, Ojiekpe and so on that are feared of charms and ritual fortifications have attendants too who are usually strong medicine men. Their attendants bear more dreadful charms than the masquerades themselves. Attendants normally sing chants and sound musical instruments like the wooden gongs, metal gongs or ring bells. They do this to warn on-coming people particularly the women folk and the likes of their approaches and the need to give way. They expect people to clear from the road and whoever fails would have the cause to blame him or herself.

While most of the other communities across Igbo lands brings their masquerades on certain occasions like New Yam Festivals, Christmas, New Year, installation ceremonies or burials, the Oghe people as averred by Okoloekwe (2014:28) set aside two periods in a year for celebrating the mmanwu festival. These are called the “Ibono uwu” (rainy season masquerade) and “Ibono udumii” (dry season masquerades). However, Akama Oghe for inexplicable reasons celebrates only the Ibono udumii. Meanwhile, Enugu Neke Oghe is the only part of Oghe community that practices the dreaded Odo masquerade cult which runs a calendar different from the mmonwu masquerade. That is to say, while mmonwu is brought out and celebrated twice in a year, the Odo is brought out and celebrated once in two years. The Ibono uwu is observed by Okwesili (2016:31-32), is celebrated about the middle of the year between June and July, while the Ibono Okochi or Ibono udumii (dry season masquerade) which is the biggest of the two holds in the individual communities at the last quarter of the year between November and December. Ibono is usually celebrated across all the communities in Oghe in order of seniority starting from Owe, Akama, Neke, Amankwo, Amansiodo and down to Oyofe and eventually Iwollo the last son. As indicated by Ozoeze (2023:153), Ibono festival is the highest feast performed by able-bodied men of Oghe land as in other places in Ezeagu. It showcases the different kinds of masquerades that operates in Oghe communities. Masquerades in Oghe as in most parts of Ezeagu and Igbo societies in general, are issues of men as women are forbidden to identify with masquerades even as female researchers (Okodo, 2019:128). The adolescent boys can be initiated into the institution and are expected to guard the secrets of the masquerades jealously (Emejulu, 2003:59). In his article titled Mbali Dance performance in Oghe, Okoloekwe (2021:31) opined that “mbali dance” performance is usually associated with cultural festivals or other celebratory events involving masquerades like the Ibono festivals... He further noted that:

The dance is performed at a time in which he, or a masquerade takes the stage. The performance may be triggered by a flutist, using animal horn “opu-anu-ike” a wooden flute, or by a vocalist with very good voice. In either case, the flutist or the singer would call and invite any of the young men or masquerades in the group to take the stage. The flutist or the singer would go down the memory lane to remind the performer of his roots, his father, his grandfather, his ancestors, their admirable qualities, and invaluable services they rendered to the community when they were active in life or alive. With the skillful blowing of the flute, he would ask the young man to prove to Oghe people that are present, that he was a true son of his family lineage. This would continue until the young man eventually take the stage perhaps with a machet/knife known as Obajili to perform the mbali dance until some able-bodied men would rush to restrain him not to destroy things/properties/farmyards or even injure someone among the onlookers in the process.

Ibono as a festival of masquerades among the Oghe people is the time community members mingle with their dead relatives whom they believe resurrect in form of masquerade. The masquerades parades and visit families of loved ones. They interact with the people for three native weeks. Izu n’ ito and they interact with only males (Ibekwe, 2014:72). Commenting on this, Dons Eze (2016:83) stated that:

From time to time, the dead like to return to the earth, to have communion with their descendants and share in their joys and tribulations. They will bring to them good wishes from the spirit world and carry back their request to the land of the spirits. On their part, the living will approach the masked spirit; the spirits of their ancestors, friends and relations, with love and respect, they will offer them gifts and solicit for assistance to intercede on their behalf for good health, long life as well as for material benefits.

At the D'Days of Ibono masquerade festival which are known as Nkwo and Ekeh Ibono, named after the two of Igbo native market days, the Okpoto which had earlier announced the commencement of Ibono season masquerade festival would also summon all male adults and the initiated to the market square to assemble and watch various types of masquerades on display (Dons Eze, 2016:84). During this period, people travel far and near to watch the masquerades. These masquerades are of different types and perform different activities like singing, dancing, chasing, and whipping-flogging and show of charms or mystical powers. People gather to watch and listen to masquerades like Oganigwe, Atunga, Isi-igidi, Obute, Okwuna-Okpali, Adanma, Igbohunanya, etc and even other lesser ones like Aguani-ojii, Utobo, Ochiriup, uvu, Ugocha to name but a few. Some of these masquerades are dreadful and must be viewed with reverence. In some cases, it is only the strong medicine men (dibia/native doctors) that dares to see some of these masquerades as others hide their faces while using one of their palms to pack some soil/sand which they eventually poured back gradually on the same ground while muttering some traditional words in recognition and obeisance to the powers of such masquerade (s). There are also those who prefer not to set their eyes on these masquerades at all as they would even run away or moves far away when they hear or see these masquerades approaching to their directions. Some of these masquerades like Akpoko, Kwubelu and others don't come out often. It is therefore believed that any of the Ibono festival period, any of these masquerades decides to come out; human life must go with it. This also includes their exit that is at the end of the festival. The end of the Ibono masquerade festival which originally was Ekeh Ibono but which has in the recent time extended to Orieh market day called Orieh Ibono, usually saw the returns of the masquerades to the spiritual world after some spiritual rites have been performed by those responsible for all the activities associated with their emergence and exit in the communities across Oghe and other parts of Ezeagu. The Ibono masquerade festival is usually a delight to watch as each community as observed by Dons Eze (2016:84) will fall back on its rich cultural possession, reservoir/arsenal to produce masquerades of various types, shapes, and sizes. According to Ozoeze (2023:154), it is important to note that Oghe people as an extension of Ezeagu are still in the lead in the masquerade and masquerading in the entire Igbo land. Thus, they are the only Igbo monwu people who use masquerade or the slang "monwu n' dee" – meaning "masquerade how are you"? as their password greeting all over the world.

Women and masquerading in Iwollo Oghe

Masquerades can be defined as spirits manifested in a masked human form to have a reunion with human community who might be family members, relatives and friends, interacting with them and bringing them blessings while also listening to their problems and carrying them to the spirit world for solution and interventions. Mmonwu according to Dons Eze (2018:45) symbolizes the dynamic relationship between the living and the dead. In other words, he also views it as the symbolic return to the earth of the spirit of the departed ancestors to commune with their descendants. To Don Eze and Ochinanwata (2023:44):

Masking is therefore the externalization of that intimate relationship between the living and the dead, where the living conceives of the dead as existing in body and soul in the other world and constantly interacting with the living, albeit in a masked form.

Okwesili (2014:21) see masquerade; mmanwu or monwu as an invincibility being that represent the spirit of the dead on the surface of the earth. Okodo (2019:130), see masquerade as human beings that are masked. He further describes the masquerade as the masked personality of a being that is removed from the knowledge of man. In the word of Dons Eze (2014:3), the Oghe man does not believe that his great ancestors have suddenly grown wings and flown into the sky upon departing the universe, he maintained that:

The Oghe man however sees his ancestors as comfortably seated, body, soul or spirit in their beautiful homes in the underworld while actively participating in the affairs of their offsprings here on earth which sometimes comes in form of masquerades.

It is this believe that perhaps prompted Okafor (1995:39) to state that the masquerade "originate from ant hills, from holes, or from somewhere in the bush".

Masquerading according to Okodo (2019:129) refers to the activities of people concerning masquerade. Masquerading in other words, involves the full participation of the men while the women are prohibited from getting involved. Masquerading in Oghe as in most Igbo societies are issues of men, as women are not identified with masquerades even as researchers on masquerades, they are never allowed to move close enough to observe the secrecy of this aspect of culture (Okodo, 2019:128). Masquerades institution in Oghe as in other places in Igbo land are therefore exclusive preserve for the men with fewer stakes for the women folk. It takes serious traditional process including invocations for masquerade/mmanwu to manifest in Oghe especially during Ibono festival (masquerade festival), and these masquerades comes in form of masculine spirits. So, the dead women do not visit the land of the living in forms of masquerades. In this view, masquerades are issues of men while women are not

identified with the process and do not visit the land of living in forms of masquerades. Sharing the same thought, Okodo (2019:128), observed that “the ancestors of the Igbo people of which Oghe belongs, are personified in masquerades and that these ancestors are dead men that lived in the time past”. As a male affair, the masquerade institutions are for able-bodied young men, the adults and the elderly. However, Emejulu (2003:59) stated that the adolescent boys can be initiated into the institution, but are expected to guard the secrets of the masquerade jealously, as it is considered a sacrilege against the cult if its secrets are disclosed to the women or the uninitiated person(s). Initiation into the masquerade institution is the exclusive preserve of the men. Women are barred from the initiation premises or activities since they are not involved in anything that has to do with masquerade and masquerading. Dons Eze (2024:112) reminded us that “it is a taboo for a woman to participate in masquerade display or to reveal the identity of a masquerade”. Okodo (2019:129-130) corroborated this assertion when he opined that “generally in Igbo land which Oghe is a major part and parcel of, that women do not come into picture wherever masquerades or anything that has to do with it is mentioned or being discussed, irrespective of their status”. Emejulu (2003:59-60) rightly averred that in Igbo setting, women are expected to respect and revere masquerades, their status, education and wealth notwithstanding do not guarantee them the privilege of being allowed into the mystery of the cult. She further noted that:

When masquerades are parading the streets of the town for one reason or the other, women ran away from them to avoid being flogged or harassed. A woman is therefore not expected to be walking on a road when a masquerade is passing through the same road. Instead, she runs to a near-by bush/farm or residence or even to a matured male around. She equally maintained that women are not even allowed to discuss or talk about the masquerades in public, as this is one institution which men guard jealously and are not ready to neither entertain any intrusion from women nor share it with them.

It is on this note that Okodo (2019:131) stated that “even on the point of death, women are still removed from masquerades, as masquerades do not attend the funeral ceremonies of women. It is thus only, the funeral ceremonies of men that masquerades attend, and these masquerades that attend can be those of the organization to which they belong or those brought by their friends, and family members, relations including inlaws. Ozoeze (2023:53) also concurred with the submission above when he stated as thus:

In Oghe and in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State in general, women are restricted from partaking in any form of masquerade performance nor masquerading activities as the majority of women enjoys watching the maiden masquerade referred as “Agbogho monwu” or Adanma from a far distance.

However, in spite of the restrictions forbidding women the entry into the masquerade secrets, certain women are initiated into this male cult. According to Ifezue (2017:25), There were and still are women known amongst the Igbo people as ‘Nne Mmanwu’. This was corroborated by Emejulu (2003:61) when she informed us as thus: *The women who are given this rare honour into the masquerade cult are known as Nnemmuo or Nne-mmuo- or Nne-mmanwu- meaning, mother of masquerade. These women as she observed, must first of all, be old and must have passed their reproductive age and must have again passed the age of their menstrual cycle/flow to ensure they are mature and capable of keeping the masquerade secret as well as not to contaminate the sacred rituals involves in the masquerading. Secondly, she equally noted that the women must be those who are capable of influencing the other women in the town. Then thirdly, before these women are initiated, they must show interest in becoming initiates/members of the masquerade cult and must as a matter of fact, must be traditionalists.*

Okodo (2019:131) shared this observation when he stated that:

There are exceptions to the rule of masquerades matters excluding women. According to her, women take part in matters pertaining to masquerades in special cases. Certain women popularly known as Ogama used to accompany the masquerade called Oduni... in Ezimuku Agbaja, Abatete of Anambra State of Nigeria in the 1960s. The masquerade was thus the entertaining type. Ayo, Yusuf and Ilopa (2022:67) as cited in Enesi (2004:122) also confirm this to be true when they stated in their article that “very few supernaturally gifted women called Onoku participate in masquerades which in this case involve the night masquerade”.

Impact of Ibono Iwollo Masquerade Festivals

The Ibono Iwollo masquerade festivals have impacted so much on the cultural and masquerading people of Iwollo Oghe in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. These impacts come in diverse dimensions which ranges from social, cultural, economic, moral and popularity/fame of the community as we shall examine below.

Social Impact

The Ibono Iwollo masquerade festivals just like in every Oghe community in Ezeagu local government of the state is celebrated twice a year, that is during the rainy season which is known as Ibono Uwu and during dry season refers to Ibono Udumii or Okochi. These festival celebrations have always attracted visitors, guests or tourist from within and outside the communities. These celebrations have equally seen many indigenes, descendants and other relations of Iwollo people tramping home from both near and far to witness and participate in the celebrations (Okolo, 2025). According to him, some of the benefits of the Ibono masquerade festival apart from showcasing the rich masquerade culture of the people of Iwollo and Oghe in general are to promote unity, peace and progress among the people. It is in view of this that Katie et al (2017:2) state that “community festivals can strengthen the social fabric of the communities in which they take place. And that community festivals represent an opportunity for individual members of a community to come together to celebrate, socialize and be entertained.” During the Ibono masquerades festival, people usually gather along the roads, streets and the market squares to watch the masquerades as they entertain the people or the on-lookers through their songs, music and the popular Mbali Dance performance even as some of them whips and chases people around particularly the male folks. Men also cluster at the drinking joints during the evening just to watch these masquerades. During the time of the Ibono masquerade festivals, families, friends, relatives and so on also visits each other. According to Pa Ndukwe (2025), these social interactions help to rekindle the spirit of friendships and reunion among the people and their friends as well as foster social networking. In other words, the people use the avenue to make and establish contacts and connections that could be useful to them and the community in the nearest future.

Cultural Impact

Apart from the promotion of unity among the people as observed by Jatto (2022:203) as a popular impact of cultural festivals, the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festivals no doubt rekindles the consciousness of the people of Iwollo of their historical cultural heritage of masquerade. The Ibono, thus becomes a festival to showcase the culture of the Iwollo people with a particular reference to masquerade and as well helps to drive her developmental agenda. Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival like every other Ibono festival across Oghe land is associated with a number of traditions, cultural practices, customs, ritual sacrifice and so on. For instance, during the Ibono Iwollo festival, women are not permitted to sell in the market or along it on ordinary days except only on market days which come every 4 days according to Igbo tradition. At this period, the market women can only send their male children particularly the initiated and the matured ones to go and sell their goods for them. This and many other practices such as the foods associated with the festival are part of the traditions of the people of Iwollo which have always impacted on the mammoth of visitors that usually grace the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival. It also affords the people of Iwollo the opportunity to showcase a good number of their traditional delicacies which are mostly prepared at this period of the year to commemorate the event. It is therefore a common knowledge that most people will want a change of diet different from their everyday meal especially those visiting from the cities and whom perhaps have not visited home for a long time. More so, the period of Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival helps to promote the cross-fertilization of ideas and exchange of information/cultural values between the people of Iwollo and their teeming guests. These exchanges also assist the people of Iwollo to learn from their visitors who may have similar cultural practices especially as it has to do with masquerade.

Economic Impact

The Ibono Iwollo masquerade festivals as noted by Ibekwe (2025) also has its economic impacts both on the general population of Iwollo people as well as on the business owners/community like the food sellers/vendors, palmwine tappers/traders, hotels managers, artists (musicians/folklorists) and to those selling all manner of items. The researchers' eyes witness experiences and observations on this also support the above submission. Sellers of cultural or traditional items and fabrics which are used in the masquerading activities are always smiling to the banks at this period. Apart from the indigenes of Iwollo and those from the neighbouring Oghe's extraction, the visitors and the attendees of the festival also help to boost economic activities in Iwollo through the patronage of the foods, drinks, snacks, and other items that forms part of the festivities. The thriving of these businesses as observed by Chiakwa (2025) has increased the income of some families and has thus improved their standard of living. Again, this twice in a year festival has led to the development and building of some new structures of cultural significance, one of which is known in Oghe dialect as *Ebete*, which aside being a place where the men converge to discuss important issues concerning the kindred, also happens to be a place where the masquerades are invoked and consequently emanates or emerges during the Ibono masquerade festivals.

Moral and Religious Impact

Ejioogu (2025) observed that during Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival, women are expected dress decently and modestly and avoid provocative wears while going about their daily and lawful activities. Any provocative dressing that reveals the sensitive parts of their body is considered anomaly and this attracts severe reprimand by both the ordinary citizens and the custodians of the masquerade cults or the traditionalists. Such dressing he noted compels the whipping masquerades to start chasing, harassing or molesting these ladies as they move around the village. Vices, one of which is fighting is equally abhorred and a taboo at the period of the Ibono. It is a serious offence for people to engage in such animalistic act. It therefore attracts several penalties as well as levies for those involve. Ejioogu (2025) further noted that at the period of this festival, that every bonafide indigene of Iwollo or those living in the community is prohibited from engaging in any court litigation and also from engaging the service of the police in any case nor even locking up a fellow indigene or those living in the community whom he or she is involve in a conflict situation with. Such case is usually set aside until the festival is over before it can be looked into and addressed.

Popularity Impact

According to Odunwankpa (2025), one of the aspects of the impact of Ibono Iwollo masquerade festivals is that it has no doubt increased the popularity and fame of Iwollo and her people, thereby leading to awareness of people outside the community about the Ibono Iwollo masquerade cum cultural festival/tradition. Thus, the popularity the Ibono Iwollo has gained over the years has contributed to a very large extent in attracting more tourists from far and near during each of the celebration and this is because the people of Iwollo have made it a point of duty to showcase their rich masquerade culture at every period of the Ibono festival thereby making it the most popular, the most revered, the most celebrated and the most entertaining across Oghe and Ezeagu local government of Enugu state in general. Owing to this, the people of Iwollo always comes up with all manner of masquerades in their possessions which are hardly seen on a regular basis in other communities around Oghe and Ezeagu during any of their Ibono masquerade/cultural celebrations.

Contemporary Challenges of Ibono Iwollo Masquerade Festival

In the recent years, the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival which is unarguably the biggest and most popular masquerade festival among the masquerade and masquerading people of Oghe and Ezeagu in general, have been confronted in no small measure with a number of challenges which have led to its present decline in quality and originalities with regards to its associated cultural practices. In the course of this study, Ozoeze (2025) in a telephone interview session with the authors/researchers, reveal some of the possible challenges facing Ibono Iwollo masquerades festivals in the recent times.

According to Ozoeze (2025), developmental factors or appears to be one of the challenges constituting a potential threat to the Ibono masquerade festival in Iwollo. As the most popular community/village in the local government, having been transformed from a village status to what you may call township, as she currently bears, Iwollo appears to be a melting point in the region, where people go to unwind, relax and to have fun and enjoy themselves. Iwollo has the most popular market in Oghe known as "Afor Oghe". Moreover, there has been a long-time government presence in the community/town. These have led to the emergence of a number of social amenities that have existed for long before their emergence in other communities within the region. The Iwollo post office, the Iwollo maternity, a branch of the catholic missionary church, Iwollo water supply/borehole system at Obodongwu, the Iwollo electricity system or supply, the Lourdes Training College (LTC), which has now metamorphosed from Iwollo Polytechnic to Enugu State University of Agriculture, Iwollo. These and the rest are all first of their kinds in the region. Today, Iwollo also have a police station and a local government development centre. The impact of the presence of all these developmental indices/infrastructures is that they have led to the influx of people from far and near into Iwollo town and this has tampered and has continued to tamper with the activities and the original practices of Ibono Iwollo masquerade festivals. The hard drug sellers/dealers and their associated marketers of hot drinks/spirits have taking over all the nooks and crannies of the villages, selling drugs/spirits to the youths whom after consuming them start going against the norms, traditions and cultural practices guiding the conduct of Ibono during the festivals. For instance, it has become a recurring decimal seeing many of the masquerading youths blocking the major roads connecting Iwollo with other neighbouring villages with their masquerades while begging for money from motorists and travelers and sometimes intimidating them to do so against their wish. At times, they go as far as flogging the innocent women and even disturbing/obstructing those of the Christian faith from going about their religious obligation and functions particularly on Sundays.

Before now, no woman is expected to be seen nor live within Oghe markets or the market squares while the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival is in progress. The women were however only expected to sale and live around the main road areas to avoid encroaching into the privacy of the masquerades and its attendant consequences. Today, the reverse is now the case as women are seeing living and selling within the market at the period of the Ibono festival instead of the outskirts or in buildings that are closer to the main roads and are far from the main market square where the Ibono masquerade and masquerading activities takes place. Again, the infiltrations of nonindigenes into the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival seems to be negatively affecting the festival as they have brought in and added some alien practices that are not in tandem with the customs, traditions as well as the ways and manner the Ibono masquerade and masquerading activities were performed. Even the Mbali masquerade dancing steps have equally being affected in a way. Fighting which were previously abhorred and which constitute a serious breach of the rules guiding the Ibono Iwollo masquerade festival has become the order of the day between and among the masquerading youth groups.

Economic factor is yet another challenge combating the Ibono masquerade festivals in Iwollo today. Many able-bodied youths are no longer around as they have left the villages in their search for greener pastures thereby leaving the grater majority of the elderly behind to continue to perform during the Ibono masquerade festivals. This has no doubt affected the glamour and the vivacity that goes with the festival. Moreover, due to the excruciating and biting economic hardships in the country, many indigenes of Iwollo and lovers of this masquerade festival cannot in most cases afford to travel home due to the astronomical hike in the cost of transport fare. Furthermore, on this, the Ibono masquerade in Oghe is generally associated with a lot of merriment. Different local delicacies are usually bought, prepared and served to family members and as well to both invited and uninvited guests. The same goes with drinks particularly the traditional palm wine which are usually served at this time. These palm wines as well as other brands of drinks particularly alcoholic drinks associated with these celebrations are now very expensive that not many people can afford them. So, the economic situation of the country in the recent years in addition to heavy financial obligations associated with the festival have thus led to poor attendance and have made it difficult for many who would have loved to be part of the event not to be traveling home during the festive periods.

Influence of Pentecostal Christianity will also not be overlooked as a major challenge of the Ibono masquerade festival. The various festivals celebrated in Iwollo and by extension Oghe are on the eclipse. Majority of them have equally gone into extinction because of the western religious influence. The Ibono masquerade festival as one of these cultural practices has equally been affected in many ways. According to Maha (2013:85), many traditional African festivals have lost their social relevance due to the influence of western religion and this has affected the rate at which people attend to these festivals. Like in many parts of Igbo land, the advent of Christianity in Oghe and in Iwollo in particular has come with some negative consequences. One of such is the decline in the Ibono masquerade festival as well as in the total abandonment or perhaps gradual extinction and disappearance of a good number of the cultural practices that the people are known for and that once bonded them in peace, love and unity. To the Christians particularly the Pentecostal pastors/religious leaders, Ibono masquerade is considered as satanic, barbaric, cruel and as unholy gathering of pagans or the adherents of African Traditional Religion (ATR) because of the masquerades involve in it. These Christian propagators of this falsehood have failed to see masquerade celebration as a cultural thing. To them, everything about masquerades is bad, fetish, barbaric, unholy and against God. It is therefore in this regard that Egbunu cited in Miachi (2012) stated that "to give regard and respect to cultural values does not connote primitivity, backwardness, brute-likeness, irrationality, sophistication or belonging to the indigenous religious sphere". It is no doubt that there are traditions, rites and spiritual activities that are associated with the periodic emergence of Ibono masquerade festival, but the focus should be more on the good aspect than all the negativities that are purportedly attributed to it. The idea of throwing away the baby with the bathwater should be jettisoned. The future generations of the town should have some worthwhile cultural practices bequeathed to them to preserve their unique identity.

The Ibono masquerade festival has equally being affected in the contemporary time by the emergence of information communication technology (ICT) or better still social media platforms. This as a matter of fact is a direct impact of globalization which has led to easy, quick and seamless passage of information across the world. Modernization has made it possible for people to stay in the comfort of their home and get entertained by seeing and watching many events or things going on or happening in different parts of the world through the YouTube, Whatsapp, Facebooks, Televisions, Reels and so on. This has automatically reduced the rate of the indigenes of

Iwollo, Oghe and others who would have wished to travel and participate in the Ibono masquerade festivals. It is in the light of this that Nyager (2010:18-24) as cited in Maha (2013:85) writes as thus:

If western mass media is dominated by Hollywood products and values and western media also has control in local media in African and other third world communities the eroding of local values and culture would be the end result if the trend is not countered.

Reviving the Ibono Iwollo Masquerade Festival: The Way Forward

Ibono masquerade festival is undoubtedly one of the major surviving cultural festivals that are celebrated today in Iwollo aside *Iha-ji-oku* (New yam festival) which is not only celebrated in Oghe and in Ezeagu local government of the state but all over Igbo land. Many others like Ndihi, Mbazi, Itonri, Akanu, Mgba-Ogo, Ugwu, MgbaOgwu, Edemani, Ugwu-Omala and so on as were celebrated in Oghe in the past as observed by Dons Eze (2014:45), Ibekwe (2014:72-73) and Anikwe (2021:11-14) have gradually disappeared. Ibono is perhaps now the only festival that unites and brings the people together. In view of this, there is therefore every need to revive the Ibono and sustain the practices in order to prevent it from going into extinction like others and to bring back its originality and the traditions and norms associated with it which have been abused in the contemporary time. To address these challenges, the following measures were recommended by Ozoeze (2025) in an oral telephone interview session with the authors.

One of the measures that must be taking to bring back the originality and old glory of Ibono Iwollo festival is to have a standing committee that would see to the organization, planning, coordination and implementation of the customs, and traditions associated with the festival. The committee should include ndi naka Ibono (the people that initiates the Ibono and performs the initial ritual rites that ensures the manifestation of the Ibono masquerades) and the Ozo traditional title holders across the villages. The Ozos in Igbo land, Oghe and Iwollo inclusive are acclaimed men of integrity, honesty and incorruptible. And so, would always stand on the path of the truth with regards to issues emanating from the conduct of Ibono masquerade festival. In the same manner, the committee should include a selected number of elderly men endowed with wisdom and knowledge of the customs, norms, traditions as well as the dos and don'ts associated with the Ibono festival. Each of the six clans that make up Iwollo should therefore have a representative to this effect. The responsibilities of this committee are to ensure that the customs, traditions and the rules and regulations (code of conduct) governing the Ibono masquerade festival in Iwollo are respected, obeyed and observed to the latter. The committee should also be saddled with the responsibility of making sure that those that go contrary to these rules are not allowed to go scot free but are punished in line with the stipulations of the traditions. Pertinent issues like fighting, wanton or deliberate destructions of property or people's belongings, flogging of innocent women, blocking of the major roads, obstructions of the religious activities of the Christian faithful and so on in the name of celebrations are expected to be treated and dealt with.

There should also be a crackdown on those selling all manner of hard drugs in Iwollo, particularly during the period of Ibono masquerade festivals. The same also is applicable to those marketing all sorts of spirits/liquor alias *kaikai* or sachet hot drinks of different brands which have flooded every nook and cranny of Iwollo in the recent time. Iwollo people should therefore set up a monitoring group that would track those people involved. This is important because it has been observed that the youths after indulging in these illegal drugs and taking of spirits starts to misbehave as they go against the expected standard guiding the conduct of the Ibono masquerade festivals. As a result, they engage in fighting and other unwholesome practices that does not speak well of the festivals nor the people of Iwollo.

The infiltrations of non-indigenes of Iwollo into the Ibono masquerade festival should not be the order of the day henceforth. This is particularly of those who are not from Oghe and Ezeagu respectively. Ozoeze (2025) noted that in the recent years, that the practice of Ibono masquerade festival has been corrupted by outsiders who have been taking part in it but knows next to nothing about the festival. Thus, bringing in alien culture that have been constituting some sort of challenges as well as declining the quality and the originality of the practices of Ibono masquerade festival in Iwollo.

Another measure that can help to revive the perceived decline in the quality of the Ibono masquerade festival in Iwollo is for the people to renew their interest in the festival. In places such as Arondizogu, Abiriba, Owerre and so on, the people have come to embrace their cultural festivals irrespective of their faith in the new found Christian religion. Eyes witness account of the authors have shown that many indigenes of the above-mentioned places from

all over the world travel home during their cultural festivals such as Ikeji, Mbom-uzo, Ukazi-Emii and so on. The people of Iwollo should emulate this and do the same. They should be re-oriented to the fact that not everything about the Ibono masquerade festival in Iwollo is fetish, evil, satanic or associated with charms or barbaric powers or killings of human beings always alleged by the Pentecostal Christians. They should rather be informed that the masquerade of today is no longer of the masquerade of old where charms and other practices considered as obnoxious were invoked. The people of Iwollo should be made to realize that the Ibono cultural practices could be sustained and retained while at the same time still practicing their Christian religious faith.

Conclusion

Culture is a way of life. It shapes how people perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. As the heritage of a people, culture provides meaning, identity, and sense of belonging. The history of a people is deeply embedded in their culture, which serves a repository of their values, traditions, and collective experiences. A people without a culture risk losing a vital source of recognition, identity, and continuity within the broader human community. Consequently, any society that loses touch with its culture may gradually lose connection with its historical roots and cultural heritage. Culture is transmitted from one generation to another and remains a fundamental element in the survival and development of every society.

It is, however, unfortunate that many societies across Africa, particularly among the Igbo people of Nigeria, including the communities of Oghe and Iwollo, have experienced significant cultural change due to the influence of Western culture and Christianity. As a result, many indigenous cultural practices have been abandoned because they are often perceived as incompatible with contemporary religious beliefs. Today, several traditional cultural practices in Iwollo and, by extension, Oghe have gradually declined or disappeared. The Ibono Iwollo Masquerade Festival remains one of the few surviving cultural traditions in the community. Therefore, the people of Iwollo should make concerted efforts to preserve and sustain the festival while restoring its original features and essential cultural elements for the benefits of future generations. Furthermore, the *Ivuji* tradition, which was formerly associated with the Ibono Masquerades Festival and served to strengthen relationships among families, extended families, and in-laws, should be revitalized to enhance the cultural significance and appeal of the festival.

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