

Nnanyelugo, Emelda Chinasa,
Chinasa.nnanyelugo@unn.edu.ng

&

Eunice U. Ibekwe,
Eu.ibekwe@unizik.edu.ng

HARNESSING THE EMERGING ROLES OF WOMEN IN SPIRIT-MANIFESTING FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND INCLUSIVENESS: THE CASE OF EDEM-ANI IN NSUKKA, ENUGU STATE

Abstract

Women's roles in cultural activities have long been established but in the aspect of cult musical practices and masquerading/spirit-manifestation, which are long known to be masculine activity, seem to be deviating from the policy as far as spirit-manifesting is concerned. This paper established those emerging roles of women in today's spirit-manifesting and cult music practices of Edem-Ani people in Nsukka local government area of Enugu state, as a reference point and how it affects the preservation and idea of inclusiveness in their cultural musical practices. Data was collected from two spirit-manifest cult groups of this community by which it explored a descriptive research method through an ethno-musicological approach using indebt study and focused group discussion, to ascertain these emerging roles of women in spirit-manifesting. This was for proper articulation of the findings being analyzed and to aid the propagation of these roles which gear towards educating the younger generation and giving proper attention to the African customs and tradition especially in recent age of western colonization which appear in the name of digitalization and modernity.

Key Words: *Emerging Roles, Women, Masquerading, Cultural Preservation, and Inclusiveness.*

Introduction

Spirit-manifesting is one of the cult practices found among the African society. It is a general practice performed not only by Africans but westerners inclusive, in the name - masquerading. It is believed in Africa that the act of spirit-manifest spirit-manifesting is solely for the male gender Chukwu, (2016); Enekwe, (1987) and Nzewi in Amali (2020). This is not the case of masquerading in the western culture as it is seen as a universal acceptable aspect of fun creation and amusement where women are allowed to mask and display alongside the male. Prior to the

colonization of Africa, Nigeria to be precise sees it as a taboo for women to mask let alone join in the display. It is a common practice that women stand as spectators while the men mask and display. During cultural exhibitions and events in a typical African society, women are known for preparing and gathering the necessary items such as food, drinks, kola nuts, sacrificial items for the events and as well help to keep the event venue clean for the smooth run of the occasion or event. Sometimes items like kola-nuts and sacrificial items are provided or sourced by the men while the women carry out the cleaning and cooking of varieties of dishes depending on the community and the event.

Nevertheless, it has been a known culture that during spirit-manifest displays, women as seen to be very far from the performance in other not to get harmed. These spirit-manifests spirit-manifest are taken to represent spirits that come to reunite with their loved ones. In this reunion, it is believed that fortune would follow the people and mutual understanding would be built as the prayers of the people would also be interceded through these spirit beings. This is why items like goat, ram, yams, fowl, kegs of palm wine, dry gin, palm oil and kola nuts are used in the cleansing rituals during these cultural events to appease the gods.

During the display of these spirit-manifests there are various activities that take place which include dances of various types, depending on the cultural event by these spirit-manifest and their members, who also sing and play musical instruments. But recently women's involvement in spirit-manifesting is gradually taking a different level whereby they are seen in some parts of the Nigerian society partaking in the affairs of the spirit-manifest display, instead of performing their primary roles and duties of preparing the environment and foods for such events. This paper harnessed the level of women's involvement in the affairs of spirit-manifesting especially in Edem-Ani community and what effect it has on the African cultural environment and the women folks.

Edem-Ani community is one of the four communities that make up Edem in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State. The people of Edem-Ani community are known for their cultural exhibitions which features spirit-manifest of various types. These spirit-manifests showcase or perform according to the different events or activities of the Edem-Ani community. In this community, before western colonization, women had specific roles they perform during every event that warranted spirit-manifest display such as cultural/religious events. These events excluded women's participation that limited them from the secrecy of the mythology of spirit-manifests' activities. But in recent times, there is more to just the usual women roles of preparing varieties of food, cleaning of event arenas, helping with the ritual items, cheering the spirit-manifests where allowed, creating music, songs and dances sometimes for rituals, and spirit-manifests' performance purposes in honor of some deities. The recent events of the Edem-Ani community with reference to the "Edem Day" festival celebrated on the 28th December 2023, women were sighted putting on distractive attires with animal tusks and leaves tied around their waists singing and dancing as they take the lead to the display arena while the spirit-manifests follow in company of the male folks. This sent a message of inclusion and ease of strict measures which were initially attached to spirit-manifesting activities. There was another observation where women were seen taking lead in the dance of the spirit while the spirit-manifests followed behind; symbolizing their active involvement in the affairs of spirit-manifests, though with some level of restrictions. This is in line with Epochi-Olise's (2022) view that;

The narratives during rituals are therefore usually gender biased. Notably, women's domestic duties have kept them from witnessing certain aspects of rituals performed

during most African festivals. In their temporal form, these rituals ensure cultural regeneration, communal cleansing, bumper harvests, and propitiation. As in other traditional, ritualistic activities, there exists in spirit-manifest traditions a symbiotic relationship between the ancestors and the living. Because of hybridization and urbanization, women now see themselves as active agents capable of initiating change in the cultural representation of spirit-manifest festivals—for a more functional society/community and to ensure a cosmic relationship between their community and their ancestors (P, 14).

This form of participation and inclusiveness is a recent trend in the cultural practices of the Africans especially with respects to spirit-manifest. During an interview with one of the spirit-manifest cult groups in Edem-Ani by the researcher, it was gathered that, the women were allowed to take part in the display activity in order to appraise and cheer their village spirit-manifest during a competitive display as a form of support which, gives energy and push to their spirit-manifests' performance in agreement with Adimora-Ezeigbo (1996), Nnanyelugo, (2023) Awe, (2001) and Asigbo (2012). Spirit-manifest performances are seen to be prerogative of men, not minding that women are always the pillars of support to men folks. Sometimes they are seen as the saviors in the community. They also help in the sustainability of our cultural heritage.

Inclusiveness and Establishment of women's roles in spirit-manifesting

Local history has it that women's involvement in spirit-manifesting previously was mainly an indoor affair instead of taking to the public space no matter the function or role they seem to be performing. According to Amali, (2020), the Idoma women perform unimaginable role in spirit-manifesting and even up to creating spirit-manifests' cult groups and also the songs they use. They are usually a part of performing the final ritual for the cult music they created or formed together with the males during each performance and then allow the men to manage the performances of these cult groups. Such spirit-manifest cult groups like 'Ekwootokpa' and 'Alekwu' spirit-manifests.

This is also evident in the religious performances of the 'Ofashi-Ada' (Umu-Ada) of the Ndokwa community in Delta State, whereby these women's role is to perform the rituals and implant some charms into the legs and bodies of these spirit-manifests in preparation for their performances and display while they await the return of the spirit-manifests in the shrine with the mentality and culture of women not being allowed to take part in the affairs of masking and display in the public space. But this have been overtaken by events whereby women are seen singing and dancing alongside the spirit-manifest's display as in the 'Ukpalabor' spirit-manifest performances of the Ndokwa people, the 'Akirinti' and 'Ebule Umuchioke' of the Edem-Ani Ogwugwu people of Nsukka in Enugu State.

According to Kleiner, (2013) in Amali (2020), women's involvement in spirit-manifesting has reached a point of not only merely getting into creating and partaking in the rituals of spirit-manifest display but also have their spirit-manifest which they mask, themselves. This is mostly found amongst the "Sande society of the Mende people of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea"(Pg.178). Also Joyce, (2004) in Amali buttresses it in her submissions that, women in some Nigerian community such as the Ejagham in Delta State, create and form spirit-manifest music cult groups which they mask and display in the public space. Some of which its' costumes help to reveal their identity while dancing such as the 'Ekpa' women spirit-manifest and some which its costumes conceal their identity, regardless of the dance, such example is the 'Agot'

women spirit-manifest. This point a great deal to highlighting the various vital roles of women in spirit-manifesting in our African society, especially in our communities, looking at ‘Akirinti’ and ‘Ebule Umuchioko’ spirit-manifests and their ideologies regarding women’s involvement, one begins to understand better why the levels of development in the transition above.

Women’s spirit-manifesting and cultural preservation

‘Akirinti’ spirit-manifest group is one of the spirit-manifests found in Edem-Ani Ogwugwu ancient kingdom. This spirit-manifest is owned and performed by the Ubogidi people, one of the villages that make up Edem-Ani Ogwugwu Ancient kingdom. This spirit-manifest comes out only on ceremonial occasions and with his wife ‘Adanma’. This spirit-manifest has a feminine attribute which is why it must and always display with his wife ‘Adanma’. This is believed that there is no success without a woman figure which goes to explain the role of women in the building of not just our homes but also the community and society at large. It also shows a mark of fertility and beauty that radiates whenever women are involved, and been a strong pillar that holds and unites the entire community, women’s involvement in spirit-manifest activities remains an aspect of exploit. It is with this ideology that allows the women folk to dance and take part in some of the spirit-manifest performances of the Edem-Ani people of Nsukka in Enugu State.



Picture I: Akirinti and his wife Adanma spirit-manifests in display (source Nnanyelugo, 2023)

Ebule Umuchioko on the other hand is one of the ceremonial as well as cultural spirit-manifest. This spirit-manifest permits the women folk to participate in its display in the public space not just for the entertainment purpose but also to serve as a moral support to the spirit-manifest by cheering and praising it. Making it feel that there is no other spirit-manifest greater and with greater strength than their spirit-manifest. With these songs by these women and cheerers, the spirit-manifest determines to succeed. This ideally, cements the synergy between the male and female folks. It gives the women a sense of belonging and as well provide a means of continuity as women who are initiated will always make reference to its’ activities. Children of these women will not be left out in the change.



Picture II: Women performing rituals (Source: Nnanyelugo 2023)

This goes to buttress the assertion of Amali (2019) in his dramatic story titled “Odegwudegwu” which expressed women’s involvement in spirit-manifesting that cannot be overlooked as he narrates the story of a woman who’s age is no longer at child bearing, that was in a hurry to get medication for her sick child unintentionally saw a spirit-manifest unmask, that is the nakedness of the spirit-manifest which was a taboo in the land and she was ordered to be buried alive on the ninth day of the event. But on that day, her children who were amongst the strong pillars of most spirit-manifest cult groups in that village decided they also be buried alongside their mother. And after various consultations and meetings by the elders and the king and custodians of the culture in that village, that decreed the death sentence on the poor woman, decided to let the woman go unharmed and rather fined her heavily including losing her livestock. From that day the culture of burring women due to such mistakes as punishment was abolished and replaced with heavy fines and livestock. With this, one need not to be told the numerous roles women perform in our cultural practices. If not for her motherly role of bearing children she would have been condemned.



Summary and conclusion

Women’s involvement in spirit-manifesting has become a point of discourse in the field of ethnomusicology. This is because the act of spirit-manifesting has long ago been attributed to male folk. It was seen as solely men affairs. Women were only found in the background as spectators not even in every occasion such as cultural occasions but in ceremonial occasions where less harmful spirit-manifests display. The women are seen cheering, singing and dancing but at a far distance. Recently the narrative is changing as we now see women getting involved in the cultural masquerading affairs in some communities, whereas some have moved beyond mere involvement but creating cultural spirit-manifests and as well mask them. From the findings, these female spirit-manifests were formed to teach the young girls the skills and knowledge to become a woman.

In conclusion, this research found out that there are numerous established roles of women regarding spirit-manifesting in Africa ab initio. This ranged from preparing food items, ritual item, cleaning the environment for the occasion, cheering the spirit-manifests, and viewing from a distance. But recently, they are found in the shrine in the company of the men performing rituals especially last rituals on the spirit-manifests before embarking on a display while they await in the shrine for their return. They also involve in the creation of spirit-manifests and spirit-manifest groups and as well masking and performing in the public space unlike before as

stated in the previous page. This emerging trend suggest the purpose of inclusiveness that will help in the preservation of our African cultural heritage with regards to educating the younger generation and drawing their attention to the African customs and tradition especially in the recent age of western colonization in the name of digitalization and modernity.

References

- Adimora-Ezeigbo, A. (1996). *Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective*. Lagos: Vista Book
- Amali, A. A. (2020). Feminist Dimensions and Masquerade Performances. *The quint, An Interdisciplinary Quarterly from the North*. Vol.12(3). ISSN 1920-1028.
- Asigbo, A. C. (2012). Transmutations in Masquerade Costumes and Performances: An Examination of Abuja Carnival 2010. *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 13(1): 1-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v13i1>
- Awe, B. (Ed., 2001). *Nigerian Women: A Historical Perspective*. Ibadan: Bookcraft
- Chukwu, G. (2016). Gender relation on nineteenth and early twentieth -century Igbo society in: Falola T. and Njoku, R. C. (Eds). *Igbo in the Atlantic world: African origins and Diasporic destinations*, pp 60-72. USA. Indiana University Press .
- Ezeliora O. (2014). Colonial discourse, poetic language, and igbo masquerading culture in ezenwa ohaeto's the voice of the night masquerade. *Journal of African studies*. Retrieved april 2024 <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjac20>
- Nnanyelugo, E. C. (2023). Socio-cultural role of women in masquerade musical display at Edem Day festival. A seminar presented at the Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. On the 27th of September 2023.
- Epochi-Olise, R. E.(2022). A womanist Appraisal of the representation of women in the Ndokwa Masquerade Tradition.*The quint An Interdisciplinary Quarterly from the North*. Vol.14(2). ISSN 1920-1028.