

THE REALITY BEHIND THE MASK IN “EKPO IKPAISONG” IN ANNANG CULTURE OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

Dominic Umoh

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
E-mail: labbedominic2009@yahoo.co.uk*

ABSTRACT

The greatest success in modern scholarship came when man turned his curious intellectual searchlight away from the universe toward himself. Who/what is the human person? When Aristotle gave his simple answer to this question he only awoke scholars to the complexity, the multidimensionality and the incomprehensibility of the being in question and the elusiveness of his character and nature. On the one hand man parades outwardly what people are tempted to consider his characteristic excellence - his ontological essence. While on the other he proves beyond reasonable doubt by his surprising chameleon-like change of behaviour and attitude that the external does not even suffice as a glimpse of the beyond-the-empirical universe located beneath the 'surface'. Those are instances which confirm succinctly that man is a masquerade - a composite being. Christianity is at least aware of that much by maintaining that the human person is made of body and soul.

Keywords: *Man, culture, mask, christianity, crime, Ekpo ikpaisonng*

INTRODUCTION

The initial caption for this write-up was “Hiding behind the Mask”. However on a second thought, I came to realize that the term ‘Hiding’ may appear derogatory. That is, it may give the impression of insincerity, of a foul play or even of criminality - hiding behind the mask to commit crimes. But as it will become obvious soon, there is nothing unnatural, criminal or insincere about the issue at stake. Therefore the phenomenon or tendency we will be talking about in this article is quite natural to man and flows from his Real Self. Hence the topic: “The Reality behind the Mask” seems very apt.

In most of our traditional Nigerian societies if not in Africa at large, the task of enforcing the law was ensured by masquerades. They were the local police force, social critics, crime detectors/controllers and law enforcement agents. Unlike the present day Nigerian Police Force, which shamelessly indulges in open corrupt practices like bribery and extortion of money from helpless civilians, especially on our highways, the traditional law-enforcement agents were epitome of righteousness, because they were supposed to represent the ancestral spirits. Their operations therefore were meticulously and religiously carried out. They were not supposed to be human and thus

could not tolerate horrible criminal tendencies associated with humans - abominations by which the ancestors would be insulted. The very essence of 'hiding behind the mask' therefore was to portray the spiritual agency they stood for and to disabuse the minds of the ordinary citizens concerning the real identity of the masqueraders. In Annangland, masqueraders should never talk; but if they have to, as is the case in some localities, they could never use their 'natural' voices, as this could betray their human identity. Nevertheless, they could chant songs when they have been received into the house/Afe. The spirit should never fall. Should this happen by accident, as it sometimes did, the one wearing the mask was subjected to a heavy fine meant for atonement sacrifice to appease the spiritual world. At any rate if my readers are non-initiates they should not know this initiatory secret. For them, I want to repeat; please masquerades are spirits and not humans.

Why then the Mask?

Traditionally, the real essence of hiding behind the mask was to protect the 'men' wearing the mask from the wrath of criminals whose crimes had been divulged by masquerades. Apart from entertaining the public during their outings, masquerades were crime detectors whose main task was making public the identities of perpetrators of social ills. In a bit to sanitize the society and to ensure a crime-free neighbourhood, they could at least strike indirectly; that is from behind the mask. Even rulers indulging in criminal and obnoxious activities could not be spared the masquerades' 'chastising whips'. After all masquerades are ancestral spirits, the custodians of the society and therefore should fear nobody. Only masquerades could carry out such dangerous and delicate functions with impunity and without fear of molestations. They hid under the protection of the ancestors to perform their duties. Masquerades were therefore visible symbols of invisible mysteries.

In today's modernized mindset, it is only people from non-African background, mostly of the Western world, with their scientific approach to realities and their spirit of demystification who reveal the identities of masqueraders after their performances. I once participated at the Japanese annual festival re-enacting the traditional destruction of the dragon (the symbol of evil) by St. George. After the spectacle, all the actors had to unmask and thereby reveal their identities. They were congratulated by the spectators and hugged even by their wives and daughters. This is a typical demystifying attitude prevalent among people with experimental scientific background. For us Africans, masquerades are and remain spirits before, during and after their outings. This write-up should therefore be more appealing to and better understood by people with African background than those from the Western world.

We are all masquerades!

From the cradle to the grave, every individual (this time irrespective of race or culture) insofar as he/she is a human PERSON, is a masquerade. I mean that we all exhibit our existence from behind masks, consciously or unconsciously. And we are all, irrespective of race, the typical African type of masquerades that do not divulge their 'real' identity. Customarily women do not wear masks, at least in Nigeria. But in this very regard, even women and girls are all masquerades, their feminine gender notwithstanding. The implication of this is simple. As each human entity goes about his/her normal life business, I mean executing his/her existence daily, it rarely occurs to him/her that all his/her actions originate from, are prompted by, and engineered from an impenetrable "within". They are scarcely conscious of, let alone capable of piercing through the mysterious cloud of that beyond-the-empirical world. Yet this is one of the commonest things that we humans have or better still that we humans are. This really proves how complex banalities are.

Common things are never commonplace. Birth is covered with curtains precisely because it is a staggering and monstrous prodigy. Death and first love, though they happen to everybody, can stop one's heart with the very thought of them... In the last analysis most common things will be found to be highly complicated (Milward 1989).

Some positive scientists even persuade many to believe in the non-reality of such a 'within' carried about by everyone or better still, the 'within' that everyone is. Yet, with a bit of good sense, it does not take much to realize that we all operate behind screens or from behind "the mask". In effect this means that I am always sitting astride between two worlds. Or since there is no second interior world separate from the 'I' to which I belong, would it not even be more exact to say that the beyond-the-empirical-world is I, such that there is the 'I' within and the 'I' without? The external 'persons' we carry about, that we are, that we display to the public, are far from being all that we are. They do not tell the whole story about us. They do not and cannot portray everything of us. They do not exhaust 'us'. Very often they are everything short of our 'true and authentic' selves. Within or without, we are entities-with-others, though the mode of our existence in each case differs according to the two worlds.

True to its Etymology

This particular pattern of human existence is very faithful to the etymological derivation of the word 'person'. The term 'Person' comes from the Greek etymology *Persona*. As a term, it was in use in the 10th century BC denoting the Greek theatrical mask. Legend has it that the mask was employed as a means of concealing the bearer's squint. Already at this stage, one can notice the disparity between the 'true', the 'real' as opposed to the concealed self of the masquerader and the 'unreal' or 'falsified' self presented to the public. Later

on the term came to refer to the person wearing the mask: thus *Per-sonare*, meaning sounding through the mask (Umoh, 2009).

In most places in Nigeria, masquerades do not talk. But where this rule is a bit relaxed, they have to disfigure their voices. The means by which this thwarting of one's voice is achieved is beyond the scope of this write-up, as it is one of the initiatory secrets that cannot be divulged to non-initiates. What is important to us here is the fidelity of the term 'person' to its etymological root, because as we will see in a while, human beings - persons - do not only sound through the mask, they do everything behind the mask. This makes the reality behind the mask a very ambiguous one, a very complicated one, a very elusive one and the activities going on behind the mask incomprehensible. Hence the entity behind the mask is very difficult to grasp, to understand, to predict, to categorize. It is slippery.

...such a word like Person. Nothing could be more abstract. It is neither male nor female, neither young nor old. In French it may even come to mean nobody. For if we ask whether anybody has called. He will reply 'Personne Monsieur', which means, "Not a soul sir" (Allport, 1970).

Among the Annangs of the South-south geo-political zone of Nigeria the term person, is even more difficult to pin-point. For it is also used for corpses. This is because when one dies he/she automatically loses his/her gender, identity, and assumes a non-classifiable status of a 'person'. Expressions abound in this respect. For instance, "Has the person been buried?" Instead of "Has Alice or she been buried?" It is only with specifications that the identity (or the personal pronoun) of the deceased may be revealed.

Personality according to its etymological conception has something very pertinent to our topic. It portrays the individual in his concealed as opposed to his divulged nature; the individual in his appearance as opposed to his 'reality'. This is the human entity as he shows himself/herself to be not as he/she 'really is'. If we may borrow a lift from Immanuel Kant here this would be a distinction between the phenomenon and the noumenon - appearance and reality. The latter according to Kant, may represent the essential and the real but it remains unknowable. The etymological conception of the person is well grounded in the English word 'impersonate' which means to 'act the part of another', to pretend to be another'. Unconsciously in our day to day dealings, we all carry about or wear this 'conventional mask' and thereby sheltering ourselves from the critical world by hiding from the public 'our true selves' or our proper identity, especially whatever in our behavior would not win the approval of the community. We go about parading other selves than our 'true selves'. This is what Carl Jung the psychologist would call "the mask of collective minds" or "the mask of disguised individuals." One can therefore distinguish here with Henri Bergson between "*Le Moi superficiel*" and "*Le Moi Profond*" - the

'superficial I' and the 'essential I'. Which of these is my true self, the real self that represents my proper identity? That also remains an enigma. I know people would certainly and spontaneously opt for 'the "I" within' as an answer. But why choose and embrace the incomprehensible, the inaccessible, the mysterious and the elusive as the true world? Why can we not firmly maintain with justifiable reasons as scientists do that the perceptible portrays the true, the real and the authentic self? After all this is a scientific and technological age, which has no business with the non-perceptible. The above is a problem that scarcely crosses people's minds, though its magnitude is overwhelmingly enormous.

There is a prejudice in play here; a sort of bias that dates back to Plato and his portrayal of the world of idea as the only true and real world. According to Plato what 'appears' is the shadow, the unreal, the fake and flirting copy of the Form of the One. Aristotle's various degrees of abstraction betray this trend as well, such that the farther away our knowledge is from the material, the purer. Christianity in the past adopted this tendency of distaste for or looking down on what is material, physical and bodily - 'things of the flesh'. The material was placed in opposition to the divine and the spiritual. Such that the things of the flesh and the whole world were rivals of God and allies of the devil. This attitude is portrayed in the following verses of the First Letter of St. Peter

*You should not use outward aids to make yourselves beautiful....
Instead, your beauty should consist of your true inner self, the
ageless beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of greatest value
in God's sight (1Peter 3: 3-4).*

Benedict XVI (2006) admits of this mistaken evaluation of the things of the flesh in the following lines: "Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed."

A Dualism is inevitable

The obvious consequence of the above set-up is an undeniable dualism which in some cases transforms into a dichotomy. However, as no effort is required on our part in order that things would function the way they do, then it is not of our making. Therefore this arrangement of things is absolutely normal, spontaneous, involves no pretext or concealment. This means that there is nothing to be ashamed of. We are not by this set-up of things pretenders or inauthentic but are simply 'playing our cards' naturally. The only issue that pins us down here is that our attention is scarcely, if at all, drawn to this phenomenon so basic and so important to our moment to moment existence as persons. Scrutinizing the complexity or unraveling the mystery of the make-up of that 'internal I' is beyond the scope of this write-up. Fortunately the disciplines such as the Philosophy of the Mind, psychology and anthropology

etc. are gradually digging deep into the reality of the human great within. They take a look at the cognitive, volitional, affective and the entire existential spectra of that great within.

The natural complexity of Homo sapiens as the highest species in the animal kingdom does not allow for a simple answer to the age-long question "who" or "What" is man?" Over the years, philosophers and scientists in different fields such as physiology, psychology, anthropology, sociology and other related disciplines have tried in different capacities to explain the mystery and complexity of the nature of man (Udoekpo, 1999).

The human person is a creature of at least two worlds. That alone cannot be contested. The world within with its windowless pattern is completely screened and shielded from outsiders. The 'owner' of this interior world is not an entity different from that world. In fact, it is not even proper to call him an owner. He is that world as well. The reality of that world within as opposed to the external is often rendered obvious when an individual manifests the type of attitude we sometimes wrongly call his/her "true colour." At such moments onlookers are shocked, bewildered, taken aback or sometimes disappointed by such an 'abnormal' comportment. We call such 'abnormal' quite oblivious of the fact that the human entity is a being of endless possibilities and even at times a bundle of contradictions that can even embarrass even himself. According to Udoekpo (1999):

Quite a lot has been discovered about man, but the sum of all that has been discovered could be considered a tip of an iceberg compared to the immensity of what has not yet been known about him. Paradoxically, man has always remained a mystery unto himself, to the extent that, on a daily basis, he constitutes a serious surprise to himself.

It is our strong conviction in this paper that such abnormalities are quite normal because it is absolutely impossible for any person to lay himself bare to the public thereby permitting unlimited access to outsiders without any reservation. To understand the other wholly and entirely without any restriction, then we must become that other. However according to the principle of self identity, there can be no two of the same individual in the world, so any attempt to understand the other completely is a futile impossibility.

The Great divide

Through the ages there have been various attitudes towards the existence and the functioning of these two worlds - the world without and that within. René Descartes took great pains to adumbrate and spell out the distinctions between the two when he divided the entire reality into *Thought* and *Extension*. This is his famous divide between the *Res cogitans* and the *Res extensa* - the 'thinking thing' and the 'extended thing.' Here there is not only a distinction but a real

opposition. The greatest problem for Descartes was how to bridge the great chasm between body and soul thereby explaining how an individual would operate as a single entity.

Monistic tendencies towards this phenomenon consist in denying the reality of one while affirming the other. Naturalists and materialists uphold the physical which swallows up the mental. Whereas 'spiritualists' and idealists as George Berkeley, with his famous '*esse est percepti*' 'to be is being perceived' aspire to the mental denying the physical. A story is told in this regard of the epicure Gassendi who used to tease Descartes with this humorous greeting "O Soul [good morning]!" To this Descartes would reply "[Good morning] O Flesh!" But the truth in this respect is that man is not a divided entity, but a unity made up of body and soul. Any monistic and one-sided consideration of the human species lets go the essentials about the reality of his personhood.

Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united; ... Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness (Benedict XVI, 2006).

The position of this write-up is simple: in the human organism everything is well integrated and well coordinated such that he is neither only material nor only spiritual, but both, irrespective of the predominance of his physical aspect which remains the only part of his personhood accessible to the public. It was this imposing external that gave rise to the topic: "The Reality behind the Mask". Thus denying the reality of the human body is not being realistic because the physical is even more convincingly present to the public. Debasing the flesh in favour of the spirit is no longer integrating it into our overall existential freedom. It would cease to be that vital expression of our whole being, because it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere. On the other hand ignoring the spiritual because inaccessible to others results in pure materialism with no structuring that normally comes from the human spirit. Therefore, Christian faith ... has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter compenetrates, and in which each is brought to a new nobility (Benedict XVI, 2006). This same idea is given a strict philosophical slant in the following lines:

Philosophy is a product of the humanity of each philosopher and each philosopher is a man of flesh and bone who addresses himself to other men of flesh and bone like himself. And let him do what he wills, he philosophizes not with reason only, but with the will, with the feelings, with the flesh and with the bone, with whole soul and with the whole body. It is the man that philosophizes [Emphasis ours] (De Unamund, 2000).

CONCLUSION

This study, the Reality Behind the Mask in “Ekpo Ikpaisong” in Annang Culture of Akwa Ibom State is entrenched from Annang cosmology and routing through Christian belief as we all exhibit our existence from behind the masks, consciously or unconsciously. We have come this far to the realization that all that glitters is not gold. This means that man in his externality, appearance and a manifestation (man as a masquerade) is not covered in his entirety. However, taking the masked dimension of this entity as ignoble and hence ignorable because it is the unreal equally amounts to missing the mark. Unmasking him entirely is impossible, because even the masquerade cannot unmask himself. Succinctly put, any form of disguise depicts the reality behind the mask. The mask has its indispensable role to play, the greatest of which being allowing the individual a little space to be himself away from the critical public eyes. To crown it all, none of all these is of his making. In this sense, life is therefore actualizing the potentials put in place by the Creator.

REFERENCES

- Allport G. W.** (1970). *Pattern and Growth in Personality*. New York: Rinehart and Winston.
- Benedict XVI** (2006). *Deus Caritas Est - God is Love* . Rome: Catholic Truth Society.
- Descartes, R.** (1824). *Uvres, ed. V. Cousin, vol. 12*, Paris pp 95ff. In Benedict XI (2006). *Deus Caritas Est - God is Love* . Rome: Catholic Truth Society.
- De Unamund M.** (2000). *The Tragic Sense of Life*. New York: Tr. J. E. C. Fitch.
- Milward, P.** (1989). *Sense and Nonsense: Anthology of G. K. Chesterton*. Tokyo: Takumi Press.
- Udoekpo, M. U.** (1999). *The Limits of a Divided Nation*. Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd.
- Umoh, D.** (2009). *A Philosopher looks at The Annang Personality, its characterizing traits, development and features*. Enugu: Snaap.