

## Western Theatre and the Production Processes of *Ọkumkpọ* Masquerade Performance of Akpọha-Afikpo: A Study in Comparison

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### Abstract

*Masquerade performances transcend mere mask adornment. It involves preparations that take varying lengths of time and painstaking efforts. During the elaborate behind-the-scene pre-performance processes of mask and costume construction, musical and choreography practices, composition of new songs and tunes, making of props and floats; all participants showcase deep gestalt spirit and collaboration. Such energies are also found within the process of production in contemporary western theatre. Way beyond arguing whether masquerade performances qualify as theatre or not, this paper concerns itself with x-raying the procedures of staging *Ọkumkpọ* Masquerade of Akpọha, and determining how each of its segments (script consultation, audition, rehearsals, building and or hiring costumes, publicity, presentation) exhibit theatreness. The preferred tool for this enquiry is performance analysis because of its suitability for interrogating each individual aspect of a staged/live event. Interviews will also be employed as an auxiliary method for eliciting data from participants. This paper concludes that every aspect of the modern theatre directing reflects in *Ọkumkpọ* Masquerade theatre production processes.*

**Keywords:** Masquerade, *Ọkumkpọ*, Western theatre Directing, Production Process, Performance.

## Introduction

Theatre production though a collaborative art has the director as the ‘know-all’ and ‘see-all’ persona. He champions the leadership of every other arts of the theatre and commandeers them in pursuant to a unified theatre experience. He assumes the scriptwriter sometimes, the audience in other times and a master designer in yet many other times. He towers above the production and yet works closely with every artist to achieve the vision and concept of the production and the thematic preoccupation of the playwright. Downs, Wright and Ramsey corroborate this position in these words:

In order to turn these decisions into reality, the director must guide and persuade every member of the theatre ensemble and oversee all the artistic and technical aspects of the production. The director must synthesize the work of the playwright, the designers, and the performers into a unique theatrical event. This coordination allows a production to speak with the unique voice of an individual artist (172).

The performance, now so complete and effortless, took many weeks of planning, preparation and rehearsal by an elaborate organization of many workers with special skills, all brought into focus in one overall art of the theatre. Such is the case even in traditional African theatre. Hence, Masquerade performance in our traditional settings and more so in recent times, take more than just mask adornment but rather involves deeper preparations, taking days, weeks and even months of painstaking and total involvement and attachment to both content and context of the performance idioms. Through the elaborate pre-performance processes of building masks, costumes, and musical arrangements, choreography practices, composing new tunes, and sculpting masks, props, and floats, the actants and participants of this performance showcase deep gestalt spirit and collaboration. Ottenberg and Binkley validate this assertion when they reveal that “African children develop aesthetic sensibilities at an early age, roughly from four to fourteen years. By the time they become full-fledged adolescents they may have had up to ten years experience with various art forms – masking, music, costuming, dancing, and performance” (*Playful Performers*, blurb). It is around these various arts that emphases are placed to guide (direct) both child and adult maskers in their mastery, hence a reflection of western theatre in the production processes of the Okumkpò masquerade performance. Okagbue believes that most African cultures south of the Sahara have a masking theatre tradition of one kind or another. Looking at African masking theatre across this vast geographical landscape and its contextual application, the practices show very close similarities in terms of their stories of origin, organizational structure and support, actual performance process, and social and aesthetic functions (13). It is against this background that this paper has set out to compare western theatre directing and the production processes of Okumkpò Masquerade theatre of Akpoha. The occasion for the presentation of masquerade performance differs from one socio-cultural setting to another. They are seen mostly during festivals, either annuals or seasonal, such as new-yam festivals, cult or professional celebrations, etc. On the other hand, play production is part of the pedagogical experience of students of theatre which may be occasional like the Convocation Command Performance, Class Production in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a course of study, a theatre workshop (like the Play Participation) involving the whole student of the Department of Theatre, Dramatic and Performing Arts. However, the production

processes of Okumkpò masquerade performance show a significant procedural semblance with today's western theatre directing.

### **Brief Components of Play Production Processes in Western theatre Directing**

Play production processes according to Effiong Johnson “is meant the marriage of all theatrical activities by cast and crewmembers, towards realizing a show...the synergy of these blended parts into a wholesome piece is what is called production” (35). As a comparative study, it is also expedient to reveal that the definition above captures what goes on in Okumkpò masquerade performance production. According to Chief William Obasei an elder statesman from Akpòha, during an interview with this researcher, he revealed that Okumkpò masquerade tradition is deep in communal gestalt spirit enlivened by participation and commitment to successfully host its performance.<sup>1</sup> Ottenberg who had studied into the sociological aspect of Okumkpò masquerade had this to say:

The older adult Okumkpò players – the play leaders (Nade Okumkpò) and the ori – represent the highest development of aesthetic expertise in masquerades. There is a continuity here of creativity and artistic development from childhood to at least middle age, after which time direct participation in this play and in other masquerades usually ceases (although some older males play advisory roles (*Masked Rituals...*136).

It is against this backdrop that this paper shall delve into the stages involved in a play production bearing in mind those components that make up and reflect the Okumkpò masquerade production processes.

#### **a. Script Selection**

Every director who is worth his onions knows that he or she does not need to plunge into any kind of play. A lot of things are considered before a choice is made of a play to direct by the director. Amongst these considerations include; the relevance of the play to the society, the human resources (availability of actors), the finance, the play's stageability, the stage demands, the audience appeal, and even the political environment of the time. Ideally, it is the duty of the director to choose which play he wants to direct. But Effiong Johnson identifies a caveat, a situation where “a community, an institution or government can want a particular play produced to meet a given yearning. A director would have to respect the choice of the sponsoring body and bring his profession to bear in the production of the chosen play.” (37).

#### **b. Audition**

Play production activities or generally speaking, play directing processes start with making a choice of a play to be staged. When a director finds a play worthy and stageable, within the resources available; including finance and human resources, he calls for audition. Effiong Johnson defines audition as “arrangee market for the director to shop for his cast” (60). As a director, you must have read the play many times and made a mental picture of the kind of cast that you would want for the production. And so, calling for audition becomes easier as you direct your attention to those actors and actresses that will help you actualize the vision and concept of the play. With these people in mind a general audition will definitely be to fill

up other roles and or as understudy acts. Through the media, posters, or letters of invitation, audition is fixed and the selection process is finalized.

The emphasis in this paper is to identify and do an in depth analysis of those aspects of the production processes in Ọkumkpọ masquerade which play production entails, hence the paper may not give profound analysis of the stages identified in play production since the objective of the paper is to establish that even our indigenous performance forms undergo a production process as involved in western theatre directing.

### c. Rehearsal

Rehearsal involves the coming together at one locale of all the chosen members of cast for the practical demonstration of the roles allocated to them in the script. This brief and layman's definition accentuates Derek Bowskill's advice to every actor after the audition, as part of the pre-rehearsal work of the actor; "to read the play a number of times for overall impact and assessment of rhythm and style...to research and study the play for its detailed structure and inner meaning" (272). Every performance undergoes a form of tearing out, sewing up, patching up, adding and removing the superfluous and unwanted elements in a bid to perfect its overall performance aesthetic value. This is what rehearsal entails. According to Effiong, "the rehearsal period is the most crucial in the construct of a performance. It is the precious moment of taking the script and its contents off the pages of paper to the real floor of the stage. The quality of most performances is not without spending quality time on the rehearsal venue, trying to flesh out the scripts." (72)

### d. Audience

The audience in the performance chain is the last man standing. Every production process is geared toward his satisfaction. In conventional stage play, especially the proscenium seating arrangement, the audience who pays an entrance fees is boxed in a corner in the auditorium and peeps at the performance. In traditional theatre where the audiences surround the performers, the immediacy is over powering and the audience participation is more visible, since the performers can actually feel and see their approval or rejection in clear terms through jeers or boos or through claps and occasional monetary appreciations at the heat of the performance. Ottenberg captures the role of the audience in traditional African theatre especially the case study of this paper, Ọkumkpọ masquerade thus:

The play is performed before almost the entire community: the audience is not determined by ability to pay an entrance fee; the players are not restricted by the expenses of the masks or costumes. It is a popular drama for everyone, concerned with people and events of which the audience already have some knowledge...the audience especially the male members, shout approval and disapproval at will and with gusto...the audience members move about a great deal and talk to one another. There is an easy, jovial air, with frequent interaction between audience and players as individuals come out and give "dashes" to the players. The audience is very much a part of the play (*Masked Rituals*, 139 – 140).

However, while there are philosophical arguments which support the view that art can exist in vacuum, for most artists the audience is an integral part of an artistic experience. Only

when the public experiences what the artist wishes to communicate is the creative process complete. For artistic, social and economic reasons, the audience is therefore a vital element in a theatrical production, and hardly can any theatre organization survive if it cannot attract an audience. Even the traditional performers play to the admiration of the audience who doubles as critics and pass judgments on the performance. Peter Brook in a passing comment that has continued to reverberate the significance of the audience asserts that if someone called an actor crosses the stage and another called the audience watches him, a theatre event has taken place.

### **Components of Western theatre Directing found in Ọkụmkpọ Masquerade Production Processes**

Literatures abound about the ubiquity of African cultures south of the Sahara having a masking theatre tradition of one kind or another. Looking at these traditions across this vast geographical landscape and its contextual application, the practices show very close similarities in terms of their stories of origin, organizational structure and support, actual performance process, and social and aesthetic functions. The occasion of its presentation differs from one socio-cultural group to another. They are seen mostly during festivals, either annuals or seasonal, such as new-yam festivals, initiation rites of members, cult or professional celebrations, etc. Okagbue maintains our position on the ubiquitous nature of the masquerade in Africa. He explores it inter alia:

The masquerade theatre is the form most likely to be found all over the African continent. The major extant masking traditions in Africa today are: in Nigeria, the mmonwu of the Igbo; the Egungun and the Gelede masquerades of the Yoruba; the Ekine of the Kalabari; the Okumkpo of the Afikpo; the Okonko and the Ekpe of Ngwa, Ohafia, Arochukwu and Arondizuogu, and the Ekpo of the Ibibio; in Sierra Leone, the Ode-lay and Mammiwata in Freetown; the Dana of Dogon, the Do and Koteba of the Bamana and the Bozo, all found in Mali; further afield in Eastern and Southern Africa, the Gule Wa Mkulu of the Chewa of Malawi and Zambia; the Makisi of Angola and Zimbabwe; the Nkonde of Mozambique and Tanzania (2007:13).

It is against this backdrop that this paper finds it worthy to investigate Ọkụmkpọ Masquerade Performance of Akpọha in Afikpo North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State within the stages involved in its production processes and in comparison to the conventional stages of western theatre directing. This masquerade performance has been studied by scholars like Simon Ottenberg (1975) within its sociological underpinnings, Okoye in its forms and processes (1999), Ossie Enekwe (2007), Okagbue (2007), and by the present researcher within its intercultural and hybrid paradigms (2012). Attention therefore, has shifted to investigate its production processes vis-à-vis the production processes involved in western theatre.

### **Ọkụmkpọ Masquerade Performance at a Glance**

The Ọkụmkpọ masquerade performance in Akpọha is a seasonal performance that takes place in dry season usually in November through to January, depending on when it is billed to perform and the readiness of the organizers. This is usually when all harvests from farm work

have been concluded and the people are at rest. Historically, it has been known to involve young agile men and the middle aged. It is an ensemble performance with several players costumed differently to represent their different acts; including the white couple, police or traffic warden, girls, newly wed, nursing mothers, little girl child, and most importantly the four main characters commonly known as (nnade Ọkumkpọ) as well as the chorus members. Ottenberg observed the importance of this masquerade and its place of pride among the people of Akpọha-Afikpo when he remarked that “there is a rich and exciting variety of masquerades at Afikpo. The most popular one, and the best known to outsiders, is the Ọkumkpọ” (*Masked Rituals*, 13). Ọkumkpọ masquerade production process involves well-orchestrated planning and execution in its performance hence it usually involves the whole community and more so in its bid to not only succeed but also to create an impression. This is because the concept of performance in traditional Africa goes beyond the surface name but demands a communal collaborative spirit and unity of purpose geared towards perfection as each performance is measured in time and space of the performers and their aggregate performance. Okoye reveals that, “performances themselves attest to a governing aesthetic framework which strives to make every performance a refreshing experience for the audience” (64).

In its preparation towards performance, the main four characters of Ọkumkpọ (nnade Ọkumkpọ) made up of the four actors and singers and the rest of the members of the inner circle who have at one time or another had the opportunity of wearing the sacred mask of the Ọkumkpọ will usually start early in the year to gather up pieces of ideas, through listening to gossips among families, quarrels at home-stead, along the way to the stream among girls, from the market or farm among the women or the village rest house among the men, anything picked up will present beats and scenarios that will be developed into a drama sketch, songs, mimes for ribald comedy, caricature, burlesque, buffoonery and satire for the Ọkumkpọ masquerade performance.

Since Ọkumkpọ masquerade revels in mimicry and lampooning of the members of the society who are found wanting in the ideal society, care is taken to save the main Ọkumkpọ (the four characters) from the evil machinations of those it has brought to public ridicule. Ọkumkpọ masquerades are therefore, activated and protected by supernaturally charged “medicines,” substances made from sacred materials that are placed on the masks or the bodies of the maskers. The medicine dispels and protects the maskers to avoid evil plans orchestrated against them by those to whom the songs and dramatic impersonations, scenarios and or caricatures are composed for. These medicines are the province of the men who care for the lives of the masquerades even when masquerades are spirits of ancestors.

### **Production Processes of Okumkpo Masquerade Performance**

Theatrically, Ọkumkpọ masquerade employs different stages in its performance. Just like in the theatre, the playwright gathers his ideas from so many sources and happenings around him in his environment which serves as his themes and help shape the aggregate thoughts which he articulates and conveys to his audience. In likewise manner, the Ọkumkpọ maskers though in performance are regarded as the spirits of the ancestors who have come with message from the great beyond, practically and in the physical they assume human figures and reside among the people to be able to elicit the tiniest of facts and the happenings around

them in the society for that is how they weave up all the scenarios, songs, dances, mimes, that now turn to buffoonery, satire, jokes, caricature and drama in performance. Among the many stages of the Okumkpọ masquerade production process include:

1. Gathering of bits or general workshop theatre or scripting
2. Call for participation by age grades in the community (audition)
3. Onya-edu (Night Rehearsal)
4. Oozu Abali (Presentation before the Okumkpọ Elders for adjustments or try-outs)
5. Costuming and Performance (Orji, 63 – 72).

### 1. Gathering of Bits And Pieces:

The gathering of bits and pieces of ideas, information or scenario for the Okumkpọ masquerade performance comes as the first test of readiness for the performance. This as earlier pointed out involves sneaking in on the people, stalking, spying on some of their actions and inactions, quarrels, gossips without their knowledge of such motives. This stage provides the stingers, scouts and the other members of the main Okumkpọ on what should form the themes of the performance since it (performance) involves such major divisions such as; dramatic scenario or improvisation, dance, songs, question and answer sessions. These men are so gifted that they turn a simple remark to a story and weave songs around it to the consternation of everybody. They go from house to house and from one spot of the community to another, piecing information or ideas together to form scenarios for dramatization.

Hence it is often said in Akpọha that the walls have ears because the Okumkpọ is always eavesdropping (acting undercover) and nobody knows when it has come so close as to be an unseen guest at one's home. According to Ottenberg, "the content of the play falls into three broad categories: (1) the ridicule of persons who acted foolishly, (2) the criticism of leaders who do not lead properly, and (3) the maintenance of the relative roles of males and females." He went further to list out themes from which these categorizations were based and from where the Okumkpọ masquerade bases its performance. A few examples will suffice; "Henpecked husbands, man who becomes drunk at a title ceremony and defecates in his pants, man who returns home poor and sells his father's land, man who is stingy in marriage and with his mother-in-law and men who die young because they bring in foreign medicines and do not control them properly" (*Masked Rituals...*129). All these themes and sub-themes permeate the scenarios and songs of the Okumkpọ masquerade performance even to the present times.

According to Omezue Oka Agha<sup>2</sup> Okumkpọ masquerade evolved as a retaliatory measure against the women whose folk-songs were satiric and critical of the men. Therefore, such themes and sub-themes about women traverse the performance; women who dominate henpecked men, women who are interested in the secret society even when it is a taboo, beautiful girls who reject suitors and wait for Mr.-right who never come, women who fail to get pregnant because they have had a close shave with the secret society. The main themes which are later developed in the performance are that women should behave like females, following the traditional sexual dichotomy, and that men should not behave like women or let females dominate them. These positions are captured by Ottenberg inter-alia:

The whole performance outwardly symbolizes the division of the sexes at Akpọha-Afikpo. Females are excluded from participation,

they do not contribute to the production of the play except for lending costume parts and serving as source material for songs and skits (*Masked Rituals*...132).

It is at this stage that every piece of the action is strung together for a unified whole sequel to the performance. These actions replicate a playwright's effort when trying his hands on the best theme to capture the needs of the society through his creativity. And when the play is ready, he shifts it to the director who calls for an audition to select a cast that will launch the vision of the playwright and that of the director.

## **2. Call for participation by age grades in the community (audition)**

The next stage in the production process of Ọkụmkpọ masquerade performance is the call for participation by various age grades identified by the elders as ripe for the performance. In an interview held by this researcher with <sup>3</sup>Omezue Oka Agha (a retired member of the Ọkụmkpọ characters), he revealed that during their time, it was competitive amongst age grades, which one would be chosen by the elders to present the Ọkụmkpọ in a particular year. At the village square before the general assembly of elders, the four main characters who must of necessity be among the chosen age grade will present before them, the bits and pieces of scenarios gathered in the course of their two to three months scouting, stalking, stinging and sniffing around, among the village people. The elders will listen to the songs, drama sketches, character delineation among the main four characters and other improvising acts. When satisfied that they have enough that will last a full day's performance, they will select from three to four different age grades capable hands; who can sing, dance, mimic, drum as well as act and set them out on a one month's seclusion where they will fine tune all the pieces of bits and scenarios already in their kitty. This is the journey into the rehearsal stage. The Ọkụmkpọ masquerade performance is a massive outing of a large retinue of maskers numbering well over fifty performers supporting the main four characters in all acts in the art of the performance.

## **3. Ọnya-Edu (Rehearsal)**

This stage is very crucial among the other stages in the Ọkụmkpọ masquerade performance. The location for the piecing together of these bits are usually an area secluded and an exclusive preserve for the main Ọkụmkpọ masquerade members involving the old members (nnade Ọkụmkpọ) and the new ones. They gather here, all the old hands in the masking art of Ọkụmkpọ to create the sketches, bits and songs for the performance. This is a process of trial and error. It is the Ọkụmkpọ performance rehearsal period as all the requirements that will make it pass for a theatrical rehearsal are imbued in the process. From staying away from the prying eyes and itching ears of the general public to accepting some pieces of the bits and discarding some as well as the involvement of the old hands in the process all give clue to what theatre director does.

Just like in the theatre where rehearsals are exclusives of the cast and crew, in the same vein, Ọkụmkpọ masquerade during this period requires absolute freedom from interference to create its scenarios. They go into the bush tracks located within the precincts of the village at the dead of the night and away from people's attention. This will be their rehearsal venue till when they think it is ready for a preview and invite the older men in their secret society of Ọkụmkpọ main. It is from this point in their rehearsal that they will introduce drums (nkwa),



xylophone (ekwe), rattle gourd (ohia or shekere), metal gong (ogele) and any other percussive that will aid the performance values and aesthetics.

#### **4. Oozu-Abali (Presentation before the Ọkụmkpọ Elders for adjustments or Try-Outs)**

After the bits and pieces have been put together, and it has come up to the point of polishing, it is taken to the older and elderly members of the inner secret society in the masking art of Ọkụmkpọ, who consider the progress and work load remaining in order to announce to the community the day for the performance. Though still under the rehearsal period but this time it is with deftness and mastery of the integral make-up of the performance that is required. Elders, middle aged, young men, who are initiates into the Ogo cult, are now eligible to participate in this stage of fine-tuning the performance since they will form the bulk of the chorus like in the Greek drama. The rest of the dancers, vocalists and all the characters in the performance now form part of this rehearsal in order to align with the overall performance requirements as is the case in African total theatre concept. Music, dance and dramatization form the major performance.

During this preview, the Ọkụmkpọ elders or old members of the main (Nnade Ọkụmkpọ), make suggestions and useful comments on the songs, dances, the drama sketches and the general formation of the chorus. Remarks on who should be the lead vocalist and dancer, which song should come first, at what point is the riotous interlude (chorus) expected in the performance as is always the case, are considered, decided and concluded after many trials with the maskers involved in the performance. This is usually before the general assembly of all initiates. This pre-performance arrangement helps to enhance co-ordination, orderliness and good picturization in the general performance. At no point in the performance can any masker decide to thwart what has already been decided and arranged in the house (Ulo-Evo) as defaulters are heavily penalized and may not be involved in subsequent performances.

#### **5. Characterization and Costuming (Technical or Dress Rehearsal)**

The characters in the Ọkụmkpọ masquerade are varied just like their roles in the play and significantly costumed to reflect their acts. From the main Ọkụmkpọ characters who double as the lead vocalists, characters and impersonators in the improvised scenarios, they are costumed like the Greek actors of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, with padded jackets stuffed to give them larger than life frame, around them is a heavy blanket, their head-gear holding their mask is a wonder to behold as there is virtually nothing under the sun that is not represented on this head-gear; from cowries, snail shell, snake skin, dry agama lizard, dry rat and fresh leaves. Anything to show awe and ugliness, and with a long ugly mask, in the hand of their leader (nnade Ọkụmkpọ) is a small hand rattle conically shaped out of basket-ware with tiny raffia grass hanging from it and filled with pebbles. This serves as percussive instrument which is used to coordinate the songs among the four. On the leader's neck also is hung a live rooster for strength and protection of their outing as it is believed that people use all sorts of evil machination to stop them from ridiculing them before the community members. Ottenberg (172), captured it succinctly when he pointed out that, "some of the dancers had protective charms tied around their upper arms, this is prepared by a diviner from magical substances, wrapped up in leaves, and tied on with still more leaves." It is to avoid ugly incidences like collapsing in the market, forgetting of lines, songs or scenarios, defecating as a masker or the voices of the main Ọkụmkpọ characters becoming hoarse and out of tunes that warranted

going to Igwe, a very revered deity that is famous for its protective charms. Each of the four main characters have in their right hands a locally made hand-fan to reduce perspiration emanating from the over-padded costumes. There are the dramatizers who impersonate the different villagers whom they have brought to the market to ridicule.

Another set of characters in the *Ọkumkpọ* performance are the four middle-aged dancers called (*Nchatancha*). These dancers have a story line in their dance steps; the first starts with “*ejem je akuja nja*, (I will break this earthen-ware pot), the second will respond with steps “*biko akuja kwa*” (please don’t break it), the third will follow up with a question in his steps, “*ogini la eseri unu?*, (what is the problem with you two?), and the last of the four will answer the question still with his own dance steps thus, “*o bu nja!, o bu nja!!*” (It is the earthen-ware pot!). When these steps are consistently followed, it produces good rhythm in time and space (dance) that is pleasant to hear and see. Their costumes are usually white shorts (pants), raffia rolled waist pieces stringed together, a waistcoat over a shirt, ankle rattles for both hand and leg made of smaller-sized seeds, and their masks are either of carved variety or the skull variety following the head-gear made of hat-feather (*okpu-eba*).

The next set of characters are the youthful dancers or satirical scene of mock dancers costumed as; ladies (*nchekwa lugulu*), dressed like society ladies with wrapper or skate and blouse carrying umbrellas. Girls (*agboghọ lugulu*), with umbrella, high-heeled shoes and well formed breasts which occasionally attracts the four main *Ọkumkpọ* characters as they dash out to squeeze them while the girl masquerades bolt away, the audience would usually applaud this action. The nursing mothers (*nne omogho lugulu* or *nne omogho njagidi*), christened so because of the way ‘her’ breasts are left to dangle freely carrying her daughter around while dancing, others are costumed as the callous policemen, military officers, traffic warders, white men and their wives with their long noses represented on their masks, as well as fools and buffoons. Each of these characters is costumed to represent its role. In all, it can be safely said, that these costumes are carriers of acts in the art of the *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade performance ensemble.

The next group is the chorus and drummers who make up the line around the four main *Ọkumkpọ* masquerades at the centre. All of them have poles of palm-fronds with feathered masks and clothes of their choices and sing the chorus at signal of the main *Ọkumkpọ* characters or during interludes when the audience roars with laughter during any dramatization or impersonation of any person. They are ready to present their acts before the community audience on *ahor* (*afor*) day when every group of maskers has been properly costumed. The performance is after all, a guided painstaking collaboration where elders, the middle aged and youths exhibit commitment, dexterity and artistic prowess in a bid for the performance to succeed. It is a communal theatre whose performance is integrated through its organization into a pattern of standardized stages (as discussed already) whose general order and style are known to the community that represents the masquerade’s audience. Furthermore, it is held together through its close relationship to the people of the community, whose foibles and inactions it explores and exposes. *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade is entertaining, critical as it is satiric and topical in its treatment of societal issues.

### **Conclusions and Observations**

This paper undertook to investigate the production processes involved in western theatre and how these same processes reflect in the production processes of an African indigenous performance form like the *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade theatre of Akpoha in Afikpo North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Some of the play production components investigated included; scripting, auditioning, rehearsal, technical and dress rehearsal. At the end, it was obvious that the *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade production processes truly reflects and are comparable to any western theatre production. Generally speaking, indigenous performance forms especially the masquerades have come under serious critical attacks by scholars both of African descent and beyond about their place in critical discourses. This study therefore, is an attempt to bury some of the views expressed about their viability and potency to attract diverse scholarly critical investigations. Hence this effort to investigate the production processes of the *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade within directorial stages often seen in western theatre.

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>In an interview held with an elderly man Chief William U. D. Obasi at his residence at Akpoha Central School Road, Akpoha on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2016 with the researcher, he revealed amongst other things the different stages involved in *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade production, why it has become difficult to embark on the performance in recent times, why women are usually excluded from Akpoha masking tradition even when their clothing form part of the costumes.

<sup>2</sup>Omezue Oka Agha is a core member of the *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade elders. His remarks during the interview held in his residence at his Drinking Joint, Old Market Road, Ohanwogu, Akpoha, on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2016, revealed significantly why *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade theatre needs more scholarly investigations about its performances.

<sup>3</sup>In another revelation by Omezue Oka Agha who is also a member of the inner circle of the *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade, he averred that women were the major reason why men undertook the art of *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade performance. The reason being that women had in the past used their moonlight night folk-song (*egwu ome*) to cast aspersions and ridicule the men. In retaliation, *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade performance was introduced to take a swipe on the women.

I thank these men for clearing some doubts I had before now about *Ọkumkpọ* masquerade performance and lately its production processes that are comparable to any western theatre production. Their contributions and suggestions during my visits for the interview gave this paper the needed depth.

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