A Comparative Analysis of the Distinguishing Feature of the Sacred and Non-Sacred Masquerade Tradition

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Abstract
Masquerade traditions constitute important forms of cultural expression in Nigerian communities, communicating ideas about spirituality, identity, morality, communal relationships, and cultural continuity through costume, music, dance, dramatic action, and audience participation. However, the tendency to regard all masquerades as sacred has obscured the distinguishing features of non-sacred or social masquerades. This study comparatively analyses the Awankere sacred masquerade of the Okere Itsekiri community in Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State and the Oki social masquerade of Otuobhi in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Anchored in performance theory and the ritual–theatre distinction, the study adopts a qualitative comparative design based on field observation, personal interviews, photographic documentation, and relevant scholarly works. It examines the performance structure, costume, music, dance, and audience participation associated with both traditions. The findings indicate that Oki is primarily an entertainment-oriented and inclusive performance, characterized by dramatic storytelling, decorative costume, recreational music and dance, and open participation. Awankere, by contrast, is connected with spiritual beliefs, ritual obligations, purification, symbolic costume, ritual music and dance, and differentiated audience access, although its public phase permits broader communal participation. The study recommends systematic documentation, culturally sensitive preservation, community-based education, and respect for restricted ritual knowledge. It concludes that sacred and non-sacred masquerades are distinguished by the total organization and function of performance rather than by masking alone.

Keywords: *Awankere masquerade, Oki masquerade, sacred masquerade, social masquerade, performance, cultural preservation*.

Introduction

Masquerade is an important form of indigenous performance in Nigeria. It combines masking, costume, music, dance, dramatic movement, visual display, and audience participation to communicate cultural values and collective beliefs. Nigerian masquerade performances may function as religious rites, festival activities, social commentary, entertainment, or cultural education. Their theatrical qualities have also contributed to discussions of traditional African drama, particularly because they combine narrative, characterization, spectacle, music, dance,

and live audience interaction (Enekwe, 1981; Ogunba, 1978; Ogunbiyi, 1981).

Masquerade traditions, however, do not perform identical functions in every community. Some are sacred performances associated with spiritual beings, ritual obligations, purification, sacrifice, ancestral communication, or community protection. Others function primarily as social performances intended for entertainment, recreation, cultural education, and communal celebration (Ekweariri, 2006; Ukala, 1999). Recent studies reinforce this distinction while also showing that sacred and social elements may coexist. For example, Ajah (2021) describes the Okumkpo masquerade as a public theatre that combines drama, dance, rhetoric, gestures, humour, and songs with ritualized performance. Similarly, Epochi-Olise and Omoera (2022) show that Ndokwa masquerades may possess religious, symbolic, judicial, political, entertainment, and aesthetic functions. These studies suggest that masquerade should be examined as a complete performance system rather than through the mask alone.

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, masquerades serve as expressions of spirituality, repositories of cultural history, sources of entertainment, and instruments of communal identity and cultural continuity (Agoro, 2010; Ama-Ogbari, 2018; Epochi-Olise & Omoera, 2022). Their meanings are shaped by performance space, costume, music, dance, ritual obligations, and the categories of people permitted to participate.

This study focuses on the Oki social masquerade of Otuobhi in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State and the Awankere sacred masquerade of the Okere Itsekiri community in Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State. Oki is presented as a non-sacred or social masquerade performed mainly for entertainment and communal recreation. Its performance dramatizes the story of a predatory fish that is eventually hunted and killed. Singing, drumming, dancing, dramatic action, and masquerade movement combine to present the narrative. Its open setting and participation by men, women, and children distinguish it from restricted ritual masquerades. The Awankere masquerade, in contrast, is associated with sacred beliefs and ritual obligations. It forms part of a festival system involving purification, spiritual observance, symbolic costume, music, dance, and communal celebration. Although aspects of the festival are publicly performed, its masquerade tradition remains connected with spiritual representation, protection, fertility, and community renewal. This combination of restricted ritual practice and public celebration demonstrates that sacred masquerade may also possess theatrical and social dimensions. The study examines comparatively analyse the distinguishing features of the Awankere sacred masquerade and the Oki non-sacred or social masquerade tradition. Specifically, it:

1. Examines the performance structure, costume, music, dance, and audience participation associated with the Oki social masquerade.
2. Examines the performance structure, costume, music, dance, and audience participation associated with the Awankere sacred masquerade.
3. Comparatively analyses the distinguishing features of the Awankere sacred masquerade and the Oki non-sacred or social masquerade tradition.

Examining these traditions together contributes to the documentation of indigenous performance practices and demonstrates the continuing importance of masquerade to cultural identity and preservation in the Niger Delta.

Literature Review

Masquerade Traditions

Masquerade tradition refers to a patterned form of cultural performance in which a masked or costumed performer embodies, represents, or dramatizes a person, spirit, ancestor, animal, social character, or cultural idea. In many African societies, masking is associated with transformation. The performer's ordinary identity is concealed, while the costume and performance create another identity that the community recognizes according to established cultural conventions. Enekwe (1981) explains that African performance traditions cannot always be divided neatly into ritual and theatre because both may involve symbolic action, role-playing, music, movement, and collective participation. His later study of Igbo masks similarly emphasizes the relationship between ritual practice and theatrical representation (Enekwe, 1982). This position challenges the tendency to treat theatre as merely secular and ritual as entirely separate from dramatic performance. Masquerade traditions in Nigeria are diverse in their meanings and functions. Among some communities, masquerades represent ancestors or spiritual powers and perform ritual duties associated with protection, justice, purification, fertility, burial, or social regulation. In other contexts, they appear primarily during festivals and public celebrations as entertainment, social commentary, cultural education, and aesthetic display. Asigbo (2012) therefore observes that, African masquerades may perform different functions, ranging from ritual activities to entertainment, war, and the enforcement of social order. The presence of a mask does not, by itself, determine the function of a particular masquerade. Theatricality is a significant feature of many masquerade traditions. Traditional masquerade performances often contain recognizable dramatic elements, including characters, conflict, suspense, movement, music, spectacle, and resolution. Ogunba (1978) identifies festival drama as an important form of African theatrical practice that integrates performance with communal life. Ogunbiyi (1981) similarly places indigenous performance traditions within the history of Nigerian drama and theatre. More recent work supports this view. Ajah (2021) describes the Okumkpo (Afikpo, Southeastern Nigeria) masquerade concert as traditional public theatre because it combines music, dance, rhetoric, gesture, dramatic action, and social commitment. The masquerade therefore functions simultaneously as cultural expression and public performance. In the Niger Delta region, the cultural diversity, riverine geography, and history of interaction among Ijaw, Itsekiri, Igbo, Ibibio, Kalabari, Nembe, and other communities have produced varied traditions of masking and festival performance. In these communities, rivers, creeks, waterfronts, streets, shrines, town squares, and community fields serve as performance spaces. The environment can influence the movement, timing, visual design, and dramatic organization of a masquerade. Research by Ama-Ogbari (2018) on Nembe masquerade culture, for example, describes masquerade as an important aspect of cultural heritage in the Niger Delta. Epochi-Olise & Omoera (2022) also explained that, masquerade also operates through religious, social, aesthetic, political, and entertainment dimensions. Masquerade traditions are not static. They are greatly affected by Christianity, Islam, modernization, migration, formal education, media, tourism, and changing community attitudes. Agoro (2010) discusses the decline of masquerade performance in Igbogene, Bayelsa State, and draws attention to the challenges confronting indigenous performance traditions. In another context, the study of the Ikeji masquerade festival shows how ritual performances undergo changes in which communal rituals gradually assumes aesthetic, commercial, and individualized forms (Onwuzolum, 2022). Such changes do not necessarily mean that masquerade traditions have lost all cultural value. Rather, they demonstrate the capacity of communities to adapt inherited forms to new social conditions.

Sacred Masquerade and Its Features

Sacred masquerade refers to a masquerade whose performance is connected with spiritual beings, religious beliefs, ritual obligations, or sacred community institutions. In this type of performance, the masquerade is not regarded merely as a costumed actor. It may be understood as the manifestation, representation, or temporary embodiment of an ancestor, deity, spirit, or supernatural force. The masquerade's significance is therefore established through community belief, ritual practice, and performance rules. The idea of spiritual representation is central to many Nigerian masquerade traditions. Olowu (2013) explain that, in Igala Oloja performance, for instance, the masquerade is connected with the transition of the deceased from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors. The Igala Oloja performance re-enacts aspects of the deceased person's life and forms part of the final rites of passage. Similarly, Eze (2014) research on the Ojionu masquerade describes it as a sacred and powerful presence understood as a spirit in physical manifestation. These examples show that sacred masquerades may mediate between the living and the dead and may perform functions that exceed entertainment.

Sacred masquerades are often distinguished by ritual obligation. Their performances may require purification, sacrifice, libation, divination, invocation, spiritual entry, protection, fertility rites, or the commemoration of the dead. Such actions are not optional additions to the performance; they constitute part of its cultural purpose. A sacred masquerade may therefore be performed at a prescribed time, in a prescribed place, and according to procedures controlled by priests/devotees, elders' diviners, initiates, or designated performers.

The relationship between sacred masquerade and performance space is also important. Sacred performances may take place at shrines, groves, ritual arenas, community boundaries, sacred compounds, rivers, or waterfronts. However, the presence of a river or forest does not automatically make a performance sacred. The cultural function of the space must be examined.

Costume is another central feature of sacred masquerade. Masks, robes, raffia, palm fronds, colours, hats, ornaments, animal forms, and ritual objects may communicate the identity and power of a sacred masquerade. Asigbo (2012) observes that, masquerade costumes may undergo changes as communities respond to modernization, public festivals, and new aesthetic expectations. Nevertheless, costume continues to function as a major signifying system to conceal the performer's identity, establish spiritual otherness, distinguish one masquerade from another, and communicate ideas about authority, fertility, protection, gender, age, ancestry, or purification. The costume of a sacred masquerade is therefore not simply decorative. Its meaning may depend on its materials, form, colour, movement, and relationship to ritual action.

Music and dance are equally important in sacred masquerade. In African performance traditions, dance function as a means of communication between the human and spiritual worlds. Kooshima (2023) explains that, dance in Nigerian traditional contexts may serve ritual functions such as invocation, cleansing, deification, and communication with supernatural powers. Dance also identifies masquerades, establishes their character, and organizes their relationship with followers and spectators. Music and dance may mark the stages of a ritual, accompany movement to a shrine, intensify spiritual experience, or express communal thanksgiving and renewal. Audience participation in sacred masquerade is often differentiated according to ritual status. Some activities may be accessible only to priests, diviners, elders, initiates, or designated performers, while other activities may be open to the wider community. Odo masquerade performance illustrates this complexity. Ozor, Chesaina, and Odari (2021) describe Odo as both a death ritual, and a social drama concerned with justice, peace, and conflict resolution. The example demonstrates that a masquerade may have a sacred foundation while also performing

civic and social functions.

Non-Sacred Masquerade and Its Features

Non-sacred or social masquerade refers to a masquerade whose dominant purpose is entertainment, recreation, cultural education, social interaction, public spectacle, or dramatic representation rather than worship or spiritual mediation. The term "non-sacred" does not mean that the performance lacks cultural meaning. A social masquerade may preserve history, communicate moral values, express environmental concerns, strengthen community identity, and transmit knowledge across generations. Its distinction from a sacred masquerade lies primarily in its ritual status and dominant performance function. Social masquerades are generally presented in public spaces. These may include community fields, streets, playgrounds, town squares, waterfronts, boats, or other open areas. Such locations allow a broad audience to observe and participate in the performance. The open setting also encourages interaction among performers, followers, musicians, dancers, and spectators. Ajah (2021) describes the Okumkpo masquerade as a form of social masquerade because its performance engages the community through dramatic action and social commentary. Dramatic narrative is a major feature of social masquerade. Unlike ritual performances whose primary purpose may be spiritual communication, social masquerades often organize their actions around a story, conflict, character, or event. The performance may include an opening, development, crisis, climax, and resolution. Music and dance contribute to the progression of the narrative, while costumes help establish characters and create visual spectacle. Costume in a social masquerade is often decorative, theatrical, and character-forming. It may conceal identity, enlarge bodily movement, create visual excitement, distinguish the principal masquerade from accompanying figures, and intensify the dramatic effect of the performance. The absence of ritual objects does not mean that social costumes are meaningless. Colours, raffia, ornaments, and other materials may identify the masquerade, indicate its central role, or communicate aspects of the narrative. Their dominant function, however, is aesthetic, dramatic, and performative rather than spiritual. Music and dance in social masquerades are generally oriented toward entertainment, narrative support, cultural expression, and audience engagement. Drumming may regulate the movement of the masquerade, while songs may narrate events, praise performers, comment on social behaviour, or encourage participation. Dance creates visual energy and helps the audience understand the character and action of the masquerade. Kooshima (2023) notes that dance is central to masquerade performance because distinct movement patterns may identify particular masquerades and organize the relationship between the masquerade and its followers. Social masquerade dance may include circular movement, procession, pursuit, hiding, display, rhythmic stepping, clapping, and interaction with spectators. These movements may be dramatic rather than ritualistic. They create suspense, excitement, humour, and spectacle.

Audience participation is one of the most important features of social masquerade. Social masquerades often accommodate a wide range of participants, including men, women, children, youths, elders, initiates, non-initiates, and visitors. Participation may include watching, singing, dancing, following the procession, responding to chants, joining the dramatic action, or supporting the performers. Such openness strengthens communal interaction and facilitates the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. Social masquerades may also contribute to cultural tourism and local economic activity. Public performances can attract visitors, generate community pride, and present local culture to wider audiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in performance theory and the ritual–theatre distinction. Performance theory views performance as an embodied and communicative cultural process Performance theory developed as an interdisciplinary approach to the study of theatre, ritual, festivals, dance, music, ceremony, and other organized cultural behaviours. Richard Schechner is one of its principal scholars, while Victor Turner significantly expanded its anthropological application through his concepts of ritual, social drama, liminality, and communitas (Schechner, 1985, 2002, 2020; Turner, 1969, 1982). Schechner's concept of restored behaviour refers to culturally recognized sequences of action that are repeated, transmitted, and adapted in performance.

Performance theory focuses on embodiment, repetition, transformation, space, sound, movement, symbolism, and audience interaction. It treats performance as an event whose meaning emerges through the relationship among performer, costume, music, dance, narrative, space, and audience. Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas are also useful because masquerade temporarily transforms ordinary identities and creates opportunities for collective participation. The theory therefore provides a basis for examining both Oki and Awankere through performance structure, costume, music, dance, and audience participation.

The ritual–theatre distinction examines the relationship between sacred ritual and theatrical performance. Ritual is generally associated with spiritual beliefs, prescribed procedures, sacred spaces, symbolic action, and religious obligations, whereas theatre emphasizes representation, dramatic action, spectacle, entertainment, and public audience engagement. Turner (1982) and Schechner (1985) argue that ritual and theatre are related rather than completely separate forms of performance. Enekwe (1981, 1982) makes a similar argument in relation to African masking traditions, showing that masquerades may be simultaneously spiritual, symbolic, theatrical, aesthetic, and communal. The framework distinguishes sacred and social masquerades according to dominant function rather than physical appearance. Sacred masquerades may involve spiritual representation, purification, sacrifice, protection, fertility, ritual music, symbolic costume, and restricted access. Social masquerades may emphasize dramatic storytelling, entertainment, recreation, cultural education, decorative costume, public music and dance, and broad participation. However, sacred festivals may include public theatrical elements, while social masquerades may still communicate moral and cultural values.

The two theories are applied together to compare the Oki social masquerade and the Awankere sacred masquerade. Performance theory guides the analysis of their structure, costumes, music, dance, movement, space, and audiences. The ritual–theatre distinction helps determine how these elements function within each tradition. Together, the theories support the argument that sacred and non-sacred masquerades are distinguished by the total organization and function of performance, rather than by the use of masks alone.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design. The study involved 10 purposively selected participants, comprising seven participants from the Oki masquerade tradition of Otuobhi in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State and three participants from the Awankere Festival of the Okere Itsekiri community in Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State. The participants were selected purposively because they possess direct and relevant knowledge of the selected masquerade traditions. The Oki participants were selected from among performers, participants, community elders, and community leadership because of their knowledge of the masquerade. The three Awankere participants were selected because of their

knowledge of the festival's history, sacred and public phases, ritual procedures, masquerade roles, costume symbolism, music, dance, purification practices, and community participation. The selection was therefore based on experience, cultural knowledge, direct involvement, and the ability to provide reliable information relevant to the objectives of the study.

Data were collected through personal interviews, field observation, and photographic documentation. The interview and observation data were organized and analysed thematically.

Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Oki Social Masquerade of Otuobhi

The Oki masquerade is performed by the Ogbia people of Otuobhi community in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. According to Otunu and Amaranya (2024), the masquerade was adapted from a tradition associated with Nembe-Bassambiri and introduced into Otuobhi in 1988. Unlike a ritual masquerade, Oki is regarded locally as a play masquerade, or Ipo do lo , performed for entertainment and leisure during the festive period. It is performed annually on 26 December. Amaranya (2024) explains that the central narrative of Oki concerns a predatory fish that terrorizes the river by preventing smaller fish from surviving. A fisherman observes the disorder created by Oki and decides to hunt it. The performance therefore presents a conflict between destructive dominance and the survival of the wider river community. Through singing, drumming, dancing, dramatic movement, and masquerade figures, the action develops toward the capture and death of Oki. The killing of the predatory fish provides the climax and is followed by communal celebration.

Performance Structure and Space of Oki Social Masquerade of Otuobhi

The Oki performance begins at Obio Creek, located at the left end of the community. Louise and Amaranye (2024) report that men, women, boys, and girls gather at the creek while a floating platform is constructed. The platform transports Oki and the accompanying masquerades from the creek to the Otuobhi waterfront and subsequently to the community performance ground. The floating stage is constructed with light soft logs known as oboya in Ogbia, over which soft plank wood is placed to provide a stable surface for the masqueraders. Raffia leaves are tied around the platform to distinguish Oki from the smaller accompanying masquerades. As Louise and Amaranye (2024) explain, the float is guided by pilots and supporting boats, and its movement follows the ebb of the tide, enabling it to travel from Obio Creek toward the Otuobhi waterfront without unnecessary resistance or damage. The aquatic movement is a major structural feature of Oki. The river functions as a route of movement, a visual setting, and a means of presenting the masquerade to the community. However, the available account indicates that the river is not treated as a sacred site during the Oki performance. Louise and Amaranye (2024) state that no libation, offering, or worship of a river deity is performed. The aquatic environment therefore functions primarily as a performative and logistical space.



Plate 1: Oki masquerade during the aquatic performance.

Plate 1 presents Oki on the floating stage during the aquatic procession. The image shows the relationship among the masquerade, water, float, and accompanying participants. The arrangement demonstrates that, the performance is designed as a public spectacle in which the movement of the masquerade across the creek forms part of the dramatic experience (Field observation, 2024).



Plate 2: Oki masquerade being floated to the community.

Plate 2 shows the movement of the floating stage from Obio Creek toward the community. The pilot's attachment to another boat assists the movement of the platform. The logs, planks, raffia leaves, and boats are not merely practical materials; together, they create the visual identity of the performance and distinguish Oki as the principal masquerade (Field observation, 2024).



Plate 3: Procession boat of Oki masquerade.

Plate 3 shows the procession boat carrying participants to the community performance area. Men, women, boys, and girls appear within the procession, illustrating the broad social base of the performance. Unlike performances that begin from shrines, groves, or restricted ritual spaces, Oki begins from the river and moves toward a public community arena (Field observation, 2024). The movement of the float is coordinated with the river tide. This practice demonstrates the performers' knowledge of the local environment and the integration of riverine experience into the organization of the festival.

Narrative, Music, and Dance

After the aquatic procession, the performance develops into a dramatic enactment of the predatory-fish narrative. Amaranya (2024) explains that the performance begins with a circle dance accompanied by singing, drumming, and clapping. Other masquerade figures participate before the appearance of Oki. When Oki enters, the smaller fish masquerades hide because of the threat posed by the dominant fish. Oki moves around the performance arena, attacking and killing the smaller fish figures. The fisherman then pursues and captures Oki with a drag or throw net. In this sequence, the capture and killing of Oki represent the climax of the performance. As Amaranya (2024) observes, the event concludes with singing, celebration, and communal satisfaction over the defeat of the destructive force.



Plate 4: Dramatization of a fisherman killing the wild fish.

Plate 4 presents the dramatic action involving the fisherman, Oki, and the smaller fish figures.

The visual arrangement shows how the masquerade combines characterization, conflict, movement, music, and dramatic resolution. The story is not presented through spoken narration alone; it is communicated through bodily action, pursuit, hiding, dancing, and the use of the net (Field observation, 2024). The music and dance serve both aesthetic and dramatic purposes. Drumming establishes rhythm and supports the movement of the performers, while singing and clapping create audience involvement and intensify the action. The circle dance establishes the performance space, and the movement of Oki and the fleeing fish figures creates suspense. The final capture releases the tension and produces the celebratory conclusion (Amaranya, 2024).

Costume and Audience Participation The costume of Oki is primarily decorative and theatrical. Louise and Amaranye (2024) explain that raffia leaves are attached to the floating stage and used to distinguish the principal masquerade from the accompanying figures. These visual materials enlarge the appearance of the performance, attract attention, and support the dramatic identity of Oki. The available community account does not associate the costume with deity worship, spiritual possession, libation, sacrifice, or ritual protection. Audience participation is broad and inclusive. Men, women, and children participate in the procession and gather within the performance space. According to Louise and Amaranye (2024), the participation of women and children is particularly significant because it distinguishes Oki from masquerades whose performances are restricted to initiates or selected categories of participants. Plate 4 shows men, women, and children within the performance environment. This composition demonstrates the social character of Oki and shows that participation is not limited to ritual specialists. The performance creates opportunities for intergenerational interaction, communal recreation, and the transmission of cultural knowledge (Field observation, 2024).

The data also indicate that Oki was defended by community elders when a Christian revivalist attempted to have it abolished in the early 2000s. Ekinani and Wilberforce (2024) explain that the elders argued that Oki was not a fetish practice but a children's cultural celebration that provided entertainment during the Christmas period. Its continued performance demonstrates how the community distinguishes between religious worship and cultural recreation. It also shows how the masquerade has survived by being interpreted as socially useful, entertaining, and compatible with contemporary community life.

Awankere Sacred Masquerade of Okere

The Awankere Festival, also known as the Okere Juju Festival, is performed by the Itsekiri people of Okere in Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State. Okotie and Erikowa (2024) describe the festival as a period of spiritual observance, purification, fertility, communal renewal, and cultural continuity associated with Okiroro. The festival's identification as the Okere Juju Festival is also supported by published and community-based descriptions of the tradition (Edegware, 1990; Warri Kingdom, n.d.-a). Community accounts connect the festival's origins with the early history of Okere and traditions brought from Benin. Erikowa (2024) also relates its origin to the discovery of a mysterious object in a fishing basket and its subsequent identification through divination. The existence of more than one origin account indicates that the festival's history is preserved through oral tradition and community memory.

Awankere is organized through sacred and public phases. The sacred phase is associated with ritual procedures and restricted participation, while the public phase includes music, dance, masquerade display, fertility symbolism, communal interaction, and feasting. According to Okotie and Erikowa (2024), this twofold organization demonstrates how a sacred masquerade tradition may include both private ritual practices and public theatrical performance. It is worthy

to state that, some of the ritual practices of the masquerade are done behind close door and witnessed by initiates only.

Ritual Structure

The ritual phase includes activities identified as Ajafifa, Ibiribi, Ode' gbigba, and Awerewere. Erikowa (2024) explains that Ajafifa is associated with community purification; Ibiribi represents the spiritual entry or welcoming of Okiroro; Ode' gbigba involves sweeping the festival arena; and Awerewere involves cleansing, appeasement, thanksgiving, sacrifice, and libation. These activities provide the spiritual foundation for the public festival. They prepare the community for the appearance of the masquerades and establish the relationship between the performance and the sacred power associated with Okiroro. The data further indicate that priests, diviners, elders, and designated persons are involved in the private phase. This restricted access distinguishes the ritual phase of Awankere from the open participation associated with Oki (Erikowa, 2024). A further purification practice involves sweeping the community streets over an extended period before the public celebrations. Okotie and Chibuogu (2024) explain that traditional priests and diviners consult spiritual authorities to determine whether the festival will produce blessings or misfortune. These practices establish the festival as a sacred process concerned with the spiritual condition of the community.

Public Celebration

Following the ritual phase, the festival enters a public stage characterized by music, dance, masquerade display, fertility symbolism, communal meals, and social interaction. Erikowa (2024) explains that the streets and public spaces of Okere become performance areas. The public phase allows the wider community to observe and participate in cultural activities. Music and dance are central to this phase. Drummers and singers create the rhythmic environment for masquerade movement and public celebration. Dance expresses joy, fertility, communal unity, and spiritual renewal. Okotie and Erikowa (2024) explain that some movements and symbolic actions are understood as expressions of fertility and abundance rather than vulgar actions. The public performance therefore combines spectacle, social interaction, symbolic action, and sacred meaning. The festival is reported to continue through repeated performances over several weeks or market days. Its duration allows the community to prepare, participate, observe the masquerades, and complete the transition from ritual cleansing to public celebration. According to Chibuogu (2024), the performances culminate in a ritual race connected with the removal of disease, misfortune, and evil forces.

Masquerade Roles and Costumes

The principal masquerades embody different family and social roles. Erikowa (2024) explains that Oshogw'umale represents the father figure and is associated with authority, leadership, protection, and guidance. It is dressed in white. Okpoye represents the mother figure and is associated with care, fertility, sustenance, and maternal strength. It is dressed in sackcloth. Other masquerades represent the children and appear in colourful costumes suggesting vitality, continuity, and the future of the community. The masquerades also use ukpasha, specially designed whips that produce loud sounds when struck against the ground. Erikowa (2024) states that the sound is believed to drive away evil forces and diseases. The use of the whips combines auditory spectacle with spiritual function. The rainy-season setting is similarly interpreted as significant because water and rain are associated with cleansing and the removal of misfortune.



Plate 5: Awankere masquerades wearing imerigo.

The palm-frond anklets, known as imerigo, are tied around the ankles of the masquerades. According to Erikowa (2024), the palm fronds symbolize connection with the land and purification. Their movement produces sound and enhances the visual effect of the dance. As the masquerades move, the fronds brush against the ground and contribute to the symbolic cleansing of the performance space.



Plate 6: Okere Masquerade on flowing agbada-style robe for cleansing of the community

The flowing robe enlarges the body of the performer and creates an impression of transformation. Okotie and Erikowa (2024) explain that the robe and associated ornaments contribute to the cleansing of the community and the strengthening of its relationship with ancestral powers. The movement of the fabric also adds to the theatrical quality of the performance.



Plate 7: Awankere masquerades in costume.

Plate 7 shows the masquerades in their performance costumes. The combination of colour, fabric, masks, raffia, robes, and ornaments creates a visual distinction between the masquerades and ordinary participants. These materials are both aesthetic and symbolic. They produce spectacle while expressing ideas about family, authority, fertility, spiritual protection, and communal continuity (Erikowa, 2024). The Ebo hat is decorated with long raffia threads that conceal the performer's face and reinforce the mystery of the masquerade. Erikowa (2024) explains that as the performer dances, the raffia sways and enlarges the movement of the body. The costume therefore operates simultaneously as a means of concealment, a sign of transformation, and a device for producing visual drama.

Community Participation

On the final day of the public performance, the masquerades remove some aspects of their costumes and retain items such as loin cloths, imerigo, and ukpasha. Chibuogu (2024) explains that Oshogw'umale enters the arena and chants a farewell litany, introducing the ritual race. The masquerades run toward the shrine while the community chants "Gbare, gbaaree, gbare," interpreted as carrying away diseases and evil forces. Coins and cowries are thrown along the path of the masquerades. These objects symbolize blessings, prosperity, and good fortune. According to Chibuogu (2024), the first masquerade to return receives a prize, and the victory is interpreted as a sign of triumph over adversity and the successful removal of misfortune. The masquerades later gather at the Ogwa, or town hall, for a communal feast before the festival concludes. Audience participation in Awankere varies according to the phase of the festival. The private ritual phase is restricted to designated persons, including priests, diviners, elders, and other authorized participants. The public phase is more inclusive and allows community members to watch, sing, dance, seek blessings, join the celebration, share food, and respond to the masquerades. Okotie and Erikowa (2024) report that women appeal to the masquerades for children, prosperity, protection, health, and long life.

Comparative Analysis of the Distinguishing Features of Sacred and Non-Sacred Masquerades

This section comparatively examines the Awankere sacred masquerade of Okere and the Oki non-sacred or social masquerade of Otuobhi. Scholars have shown that Nigerian masquerades may operate as ritual institutions, theatrical performances, social regulators, aesthetic displays, or cultural heritage practices. Enekwe (1981, 1982) emphasizes the relationship between ritual and

theatre in African masking, while Emiemokumo (2012) describes masquerade as a visual art form in motion. Ajah (2021) similarly characterizes Okumkpo as traditional public theatre because it combines costume, music, dance, dramatic action, and social commitment. In contrast, some masquerades are connected with ancestral or spiritual forces and are performed within ritual systems. The central analytical issue is therefore not whether a performance contains music, dance, or spectacle, but the dominant purpose and cultural meaning attached to those elements.

Performance Structure and Purpose

Performance structure refers to the organization, sequence, setting, movement, dramatic action, and conclusion of a masquerade event. It is one of the most important ways of distinguishing sacred from non-sacred masquerades. Sacred masquerades are generally organized around ritual procedures, spiritual obligations, and prescribed actions, whereas non-sacred masquerades are more commonly organized around narrative, public spectacle, entertainment, and communal participation. This distinction is not absolute, since sacred festivals may contain public theatrical elements and social performances may retain cultural and moral significance (Enekwe, 1981; Turner, 1982). The Awankere masquerade follows a structure that begins with sacred preparation and proceeds toward public celebration. Its ritual phase includes Ajafifa, Ibiribi, Ode' gbigba, and Awerewere. Ajafifa is associated with community purification; Ibiribi with the spiritual entry of Okiroro; Ode' gbigba with sweeping and sanctifying the festival arena; and Awerewere with cleansing, sacrifice, libation, thanksgiving, and appeasement (Erikowa, 2024). These activities establish that Awankere is embedded in a ritual process rather than being merely a public display of masks and costumes. The sacred phase prepares the community for the appearance of the masquerades and establishes the spiritual foundation of the festival. It also differentiates participants according to ritual knowledge and authority. Priests, diviners, elders, and designated persons are associated with the restricted ritual activities, while the wider community participates more fully during the public phase. Edegware (1990) describes Okere Juju as a festival in which ritual and art express the community's values, traditions, and worldview. This combination of sacred procedure and public performance is central to the identity of Awankere. The public phase of Awankere includes music, dance, masquerade display, fertility symbolism, communal interaction, feasting, and public appeals. The streets and public spaces of Okere become performance areas. The public phase does not erase the sacred character of the festival; rather, it extends sacred meanings into a communal setting. The masquerades remain connected with spiritual protection, purification, fertility, prosperity, and community renewal even when their appearance is accompanied by entertainment and social interaction.

The Oki masquerade has a different performance structure. According to Otunu and Amaranya (2024), it begins at Obio Creek, where a floating stage is constructed to transport Oki and accompanying masquerades toward the Otuobhi waterfront and community performance ground. The aquatic procession forms the opening movement of the performance. It is followed by a circle dance, singing, drumming, dramatic action, the appearance of Oki, the hiding and destruction of the smaller fish figures, the fisherman's pursuit, and the capture of Oki with a net.

Oki therefore resembles a theatrical narrative. It contains characters, conflict, suspense, climax, and resolution. The predatory fish creates disorder in the river ecosystem, the fisherman responds to the crisis, and the capture of Oki restores the possibility of survival for the smaller fish. The structure can be interpreted through Turner's (1982) concept of social drama because it represents breach, crisis, redress, and restoration. However, its dominant purpose is

entertainment, cultural education, and communal recreation rather than spiritual mediation.
The difference between the two masquerades is therefore evident in their organization. Awankere moves from sacred preparation to public celebration, whereas Oki moves from aquatic procession to dramatic enactment. Awankere is governed by ritual sequence and spiritual obligations, while Oki is governed by narrative development and public spectacle. Both are organized performances, but they organize cultural experience differently.

Performance Space and Environment

Performance space contributes significantly to the meaning of masquerade. In sacred traditions, space may be associated with shrines, groves, ritual arenas, sacred compounds, community boundaries, rivers, or other locations believed to possess religious significance. In non-sacred performances, space is generally more public and accessible, although it may still possess cultural and environmental meaning. Awankere uses spaces with different levels of ritual significance. The shrine and ritual arena are associated with purification, spiritual entry, ritual action, and appeals for protection. Streets and public areas are used for masquerade display, music, dance, procession, communal interaction, and celebration. The movement between these spaces reflects the festival's dual structure: restricted spaces preserve sacred authority, while public spaces allow wider community participation. The Oki masquerade is strongly oriented toward the riverine environment, but the river has a different function in Oki. Obio Creek is used as the site of preparation and departure. The floating stage, boats, logs, planks, and river tide determine how the performance moves. Louise and Amaranye (2024) explain that the float follows the ebb of the tide from the creek toward the Otuobhi waterfront. The river consequently shapes the performance's logistics, visual form, and dramatic movement. The available Oki data do not indicate that the creek is worshipped during the performance. No libation, sacrifice, or offering to a river deity is reported. The river functions as a performance route and environmental setting rather than as a sacred ritual site (Louise & Amaranye, 2024). This distinction is important because the presence of water does not automatically make an aquatic masquerade sacred. Emiemokumo (2012) describes masquerade as a visual art in motion, and this description is especially applicable to Oki's movement across the water. The floating stage creates a mobile performance area, while the river extends the theatrical space beyond a fixed arena. The audience observes the masquerade, the movement of the stage, the boats, the water, and the participants as parts of one visual event. Both Awankere and Oki demonstrate that the environment is not merely a background. In Awankere, water, rain, shrine, street, and arena participate in ritual and symbolic processes. In Oki, the creek, tide, boats, and waterfront organize movement and spectacle. The dominant difference lies in function: ritual mediation in Awankere and aquatic theatrical organization in Oki.

Costume and Masking

Costume conceals the performer's identity, transforms the body, establishes character, and communicates cultural meaning. It may also distinguish the principal masquerade from accompanying figures. Asigbo (2012) observes that masquerade costumes may change according to performance context, public festivals, technology, commerce, and changing aesthetic expectations. Costume must therefore be interpreted in relation to the function of the masquerade. In Awankere, costume is connected with spiritual identity and ritual symbolism. The principal masquerades embody family and social roles. Oshogw'umale represents the father figure and is associated with authority, leadership, protection, and guidance. It wears white.

Okpoye represents the mother figure and is associated with care, fertility, sustenance, and maternal strength. It wears sackcloth. Other masquerades represent children and wear colourful costumes that suggest vitality, continuity, and the future of the community (Erikowa, 2024).

The Ebo hat is decorated with long raffia threads that conceal the performer's face. The concealment supports anonymity and the transformation of the performer into a spiritual or symbolic figure. The raffia also enlarges bodily movement and gives the masquerade an otherworldly appearance. As the performer dances, the raffia sways and flutters, turning movement into visual spectacle while reinforcing the mystery of the masquerade. The imerigo, or palm-frond anklets, are tied around the ankles of the Awankere masquerades. Erikowa (2024) explains that the palm fronds symbolize connection with the land and purification. Their movement produces sound and contributes to the atmosphere of the performance. When the fronds touch the ground, their movement is interpreted as symbolically cleansing the performance space. The ukpasha also combines visual, auditory, and spiritual meaning. The whips produce loud sounds when struck against the ground and are believed to drive away evil forces and diseases. Their use is therefore not merely decorative. It contributes to the soundscape and expresses the protective function of the masquerades. The flowing agbada-style robes create a transformed body and enlarge the presence of the masquerades. According to Okotie and Erikowa (2024), the robes and associated ornaments contribute to community cleansing and strengthen the relationship between the community and ancestral powers. Costume in Awankere thus communicates authority, fertility, protection, purification, family relationships, and spiritual presence. The costume of Oki performs a different dominant function. It is primarily decorative, theatrical, and spectacular. Raffia leaves are attached to the floating stage to distinguish Oki from the smaller accompanying masquerades. The materials enlarge the principal figure and make it visually recognizable as the central character. The community account does not associate Oki's costume with deity worship, spiritual possession, libation, sacrifice, or ritual protection (Louise & Amaranye, 2024). Oki's costume is not culturally meaningless. It identifies the principal character, supports the narrative, creates visual excitement, and strengthens the theatrical effect of the aquatic procession. Its non-sacred character lies in its lack of ritual obligation and spiritual representation, not in the absence of cultural significance. The comparison supports Asigbo's (2012) argument that costume is shaped by performance context and purpose. In Awankere, costume is connected with sacred roles and purification. In Oki, costume is connected with narrative identity and public spectacle. Both costumes transform the performer, but they do so within different cultural frameworks.

Music and Sound

Music is central to both masquerades, but its dominant functions differ. In sacred performance, music may invoke spiritual beings, mark ritual stages, accompany purification, create sacred atmosphere, communicate communal appeals, or intensify spiritual experience. In social performance, music may support dramatic action, regulate movement, build suspense, entertain the audience, and encourage participation. The Awankere Festival uses drumming, singing, chants, and other sounds to organize sacred and public action. Music accompanies the appearance of the masquerades, public dances, ritual race, and communal celebration. The chant associated with the ritual race—"Gbare, gbaaree, gbare"—is interpreted as carrying away diseases and evil forces (Chibuogu, 2024). The chant therefore has a protective and spiritual meaning rather than functioning merely as entertainment.

The sound of the ukpasha is also important. Its sharp impact against the ground produces a

dramatic auditory effect, but the community interprets the sound as protective. It is believed to drive away evil forces and diseases (Erikowa, 2024). Sacred music and sound can therefore be aesthetically striking while retaining ritual purpose. In Oki, music supports dramatic storytelling and entertainment. The performance uses singing, drumming, clapping, and dance to introduce the narrative and intensify its development. The circle dance establishes the beginning of the action. The music continues as Oki enters, the smaller fish figures hide, the pursuit develops, and the fisherman captures the predatory fish. The concluding songs and celebration signal the resolution (Amaranya, 2024). The difference is functional rather than formal. Both masquerades use drums, songs, rhythm, and sound. In Awankere, the dominant function is ritual communication, purification, protection, and spiritual celebration. In Oki, the dominant function is dramatic support, entertainment, narrative development, and communal enjoyment.

This finding agrees with Ajah's (2021) observation that music and song are important to the public theatricality of Okumkpo. Epochi-Olise and Omoera (2022) similarly show that sound contributes to the aesthetic and cultural dynamics of Ndokwa masquerade. Music is therefore not an accessory; it helps determine how the masquerade is experienced and interpreted.

Dance and Bodily Movement

Dance makes the masquerade's transformed body visible. It establishes character, responds to music, communicates with the audience, and creates dramatic or ritual effects. Dance may express spiritual transformation, fertility, protection, conflict, fear, celebration, or social unity. In Awankere, dance is embedded in sacred and fertility-related meanings. The movements of the masquerades, the sound of the imerigo, the use of the ukpasha, and movement through rain and puddles are interpreted as part of the cleansing and renewal of the community. Erikowa (2024) explains that the rainy-season performance contributes to the symbolic washing away of misfortune. Dance therefore functions as ritual action as well as entertainment.

Awankere dance also represents social and family relationships. Oshogw'umale expresses authority and leadership, while Okpoye expresses maternal care and fertility. The other masquerades represent children and continuity. The relationships among the masquerades reproduce a social structure in embodied form. Dance thus communicates ideas about family, gender, age, authority, reproduction, and communal continuity. The ritual race is the most dramatic movement sequence in Awankere. The masquerades run toward the shrine while the community chants and throws coins and cowries along the path. The race is interpreted as carrying away disease, evil, and misfortune. Its direction, destination, chant, speed, and audience response all contribute to its ritual significance. It is simultaneously dramatic spectacle and sacred action. Oki dance is organized around dramatic movement and narrative action. The opening circle dance establishes the performance community. When Oki appears, the smaller fish figures hide, creating suspense. Oki moves around the arena and attacks the smaller fish figures. The fisherman's pursuit and use of the drag net provide the climactic action. Dance in Oki therefore constructs character and conflict. The movement of Oki is also shaped by the aquatic procession. The floating stage, boats, tide, and waterfront create a distinctive choreography before the performance reaches the community arena. Oki is therefore riverine in both subject matter and form. Its story concerns fish and the river ecosystem, while its performance physically moves through the aquatic environment. Awankere and Oki use dance differently. Awankere dance is connected with spiritual cleansing, fertility, protection, family symbolism, and ritual transition. Oki dance is connected with dramatic characterization, conflict, pursuit, spectacle, and entertainment. Both forms are culturally meaningful, but their dominant

functions are different.

Audience Participation

Audience participation provides one of the clearest distinctions between Awankere and Oki. In sacred masquerades, access may vary according to initiation, gender, age, ritual status, social role, or the phase of the performance. In non-sacred masquerades, participation is usually more open, although particular performance roles may still be assigned to specific individuals. Awankere has differentiated participation. The ritual phase is associated with priests, diviners, elders, and designated participants. The wider community does not have unrestricted access to all ritual knowledge or activities. This restriction protects the sacred character of the festival and preserves the authority of those responsible for ritual procedures. The public phase is more inclusive. Community members gather to watch the masquerades, sing, dance, share meals, respond to the performance, and seek blessings. Okotie and Erikowa (2024) report that women appeal to the masquerades for children, prosperity, protection, health, and long life. The audience is therefore not merely a group of spectators; it participates in the production of the festival's social and spiritual meaning. This combination of restriction and openness demonstrates why sacred and public performance should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Awankere's public dimension does not make it secular. Its sacred identity remains visible in its ritual procedures, spiritual symbols, restricted phase, and community expectations.

Oki is more inclusive in both preparation and performance. Men, women, boys, and girls gather at Obio Creek, participate in the procession, accompany the floating stage, and occupy the performance environment. Louise and Amaranye (2024) describe the participation of women and children as a major feature distinguishing Oki from more restricted masquerades. The Oki audience also responds actively. Participants sing, clap, dance, follow the procession, observe the dramatic action, and celebrate the defeat of Oki. The audience's response forms part of the performance's energy and transforms the event from a private enactment into a communal theatrical experience.

Recommendations

Based on the three objectives and findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Otuobhi community leaders, performers, cultural organizations, and relevant government institutions should document the Oki masquerade's performance structure, aquatic procession, floating stage, costumes, music, dance, dramatic narrative, and inclusive audience participation. Cultural education and intergenerational performance should be encouraged so that its recreational, moral, environmental, and communal functions are transmitted to younger generations.
2. The Okere community and cultural institutions should document the publicly accessible aspects of Awankere, including its masquerade roles, costumes, music, dance, ritual race, and public celebration, while protecting restricted ritual knowledge. The distinction between the private sacred phase and the public festival phase should be maintained, and no sacred practice should be commercialized or published without the consent of recognized cultural custodians.
3. Universities, cultural agencies, museums, schools, and community organizations should support ethical research, audio-visual documentation, local archives, cultural education, and responsible cultural tourism relating to Oki and Awankere. Such programmes should preserve the distinct identity of each tradition rather than treating all masquerades as uniformly sacred or

secular. Community members should remain central to decisions concerning research, interpretation, performance, documentation, and public presentation.

Conclusion

This study comparatively examined the distinguishing features of the Awankere sacred masquerade of Okere and the Oki non-sacred or social masquerade of Otuobhi. The analysis focused on performance structure, costume, music, dance, and audience participation. Although both traditions use masquerade figures, costumes, music, dance, movement, procession, and communal performance, they differ in purpose, ritual status, symbolic meaning, performance organization, and audience access. The study concludes that sacredness and non-sacredness are not determined by masking alone. They are produced through the total organization of performance, including ritual obligation, performance space, costume, music, dance, narrative, movement, and audience participation. Awankere and Oki share important performance features, but they occupy different positions within the relationship between ritual and theatre.

The study also establishes that non-sacred does not mean culturally insignificant. Oki contributes to communal identity, intergenerational interaction, environmental awareness, moral instruction, recreation, and cultural continuity. Similarly, the sacred character of Awankere does not prevent it from functioning as public theatre, social celebration, cultural education, and communal bonding. Both traditions are therefore significant cultural resources that require careful documentation, community-based preservation, and ethical scholarly interpretation.

Ultimately, preserving Oki and Awankere should not mean transforming them into identical public spectacles. Oki's inclusive social character should be maintained, while Awankere's sacred obligations and restricted ritual dimensions should be respected. Their continued survival depends on responsible intergenerational transmission, community ownership, ethical research, and preservation strategies that recognize the distinct cultural meanings of each masquerade tradition.

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