

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Socio-Cultural Sustainability and Language Use in Anaang Masquerade Festival, Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria

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## Abstract

Masquerade festival is an integral part of many Nigerian cultures, serving as a powerful medium for social commentary, spiritual expression, and cultural preservation. This study explores the intricate relationship between the socio-cultural significance of masquerades and the specialized languages employed in their narratives. It examines how these esoteric and coded languages integrate intricate linguistic elements to convey values integral to Anaang identity. This study adopts a qualitative approach of analysis through participant observation, interviews with some of the initiates and community members, and an examination of the transcribed incantatory texts. The theoretical framework incorporates a socio-linguistic perspective, cultural anthropology and semiotics to show the interplay between language and identity in the festival. Findings reveal that masquerades, through their coded language, educate audiences about cultural heritage, social norms, and collective histories. Furthermore, the study identifies the ways in which language is employed by masquerades to reinforce power dynamics and negotiate roles within society. The results suggest the need for greater appreciation of masquerade festivals as living cultural texts that deserve preservation and study. The conclusions advocate for the integration of masquerade studies into educational curricula to foster cultural awareness among younger generations. This study recommends the documentation and archiving of diverse Anaang masquerade activities and promotes collaborative efforts

between cultural practitioners and researchers to ensure the sustainability of these rich cultural expressions. Finally, it suggests avenues for future research, including the impact of globalization and modernization on masquerade language practices and the role of this art in preserving linguistic diversity.

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## Introduction

Masquerade art is a social practice deeply embedded in the fabric of community life. In many cultures, masquerades are intertwined with spiritual beliefs: they often represent ancestral spirits, deities, or powerful forces, and their roles with symbolic meaning. A crucial, yet often overlooked aspect of masquerade art is the specialized language employed. The language used in masquerade art is “an essential part of culture that educates and informs the indigenes on how to participate actively in the re-enactment of their socio-cultural arts and beliefs in their linguistic community”(Inegbe, 2024, p. 60 in *Integral Research*). This language, distinct from everyday speech, can range from archaic dialects and coded vocabularies to entirely constructed languages. The masquerade songs/chants feature distinctive forms of language that set them apart from ordinary communication. This specialized language distinguishes the masquerade from the human realm, enhances his mystique, and restricts access to his secrets. The aim of this study is to explore the socio-cultural significance of masquerades in Anaang culture, focusing specifically on the linguistic elements embedded within Anaang masquerade incantatory chants and songs. It seeks to understand how this language is utilized as both a cultural marker and as a tool for communal storytelling through a subtle distinction of the relationship between language and society. The research also seeks to underscore the critical role of masquerades in social communication, community bonding, and the transmission of values across generations.

The Anaang people are known for their vibrant culture, rich traditions, and unique customs. One of the captivating aspects of their culture is the annual masquerade festival, which is an integral part of their religious and cultural practices. Anaang masquerade culture, although notorious for its violent masquerading, still stands out among the indigenous art of masquerades in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. Masquerades occupy a significant place in the cultural landscape of many Anaang communities, serving as vital expressions of social, cultural, religious, and artistic values. The Anaang people are the second largest ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The population of Anaang language speakers is “2.6 million” (Wikipedia). They are mainly found in Abak, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Ika, Ikot Ekpene, Obot Akara, Oruk Anam and Ukanafun Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State. Anaang is one

of the minority political groups in Akwa Ibom State which situates within the Cross River Basin and is bounded in the North and West by Igbo, while the Ibibio constitutes its Eastern and Southern neighbours (Nyoyoko 1997, Inegbe, 2024). The Anaang festival of Arts and Culture that houses the Anaang annual masquerade festival, is a recent development and an innovation which was inaugurated in 2016 to showcase beautiful art works of the Anaang people and to honour the Anaang heritage. The festival takes place every December 12 to 19 at the Raffia City, Ikot Ekpene. The festival also serves as a reminder of the togetherness of the eight Local Government Areas that make up Anaang land.

### **Language Content In Masquerade Art**

Masquerade art is a rich and varied field that employs the symbolism, aesthetics, and practices associated with masks and disguise. This art form has historical roots in various cultures and serves as a medium for communication, identity exploration, and ritualistic expression. Masquerade art, through the use of language, offers profound insight into the complexities of human existence. Inegbe (2024), in *International Review of Humanities Studies*, argued that language is “employed in diverse ways to suit specific contexts and environment” (p 221). The language in masquerade art is a vivid tapestry woven from visual symbols, cultural context, and social dynamics. It serves as a powerful medium for exploring identity, critiquing societal norms, and connecting individuals with their cultural heritage. The visual language of masquerade art is characterized by key elements such as masks, traditional attires, incantatory language, ritualized movements and symbols which are integral to various African cultures and are steeped in history, tradition, and social values. Masquerades are cultural creative arts that often include several masked faces embodying various spirits. Masquerades are people whose bodies, particularly their faces and head are covered or adorned with symbolic objects for purposes of representation or imitation in the public arena. The mask is the important part of every masquerade, and since it is the masquerade’s most potent symbol, the mask serves at public functions, such as funerals of traditional monarchs, coronation ceremonies, initiation ceremonies, new yam harvest rites, and at private ceremonies of initiates. During service, according to one of the interviewed community members, unseen spirit powers are cast into the visible world, making tangible what can only be vaguely understood. Most importantly, by obliterating the individuality of its wearer, it reinforces the ‘communo-spiritual’ nature of the event. The masks serve multifunctional purposes in masquerade art. They can conceal identity, allowing individuals to explore alternative personas, challenge social norms, or convey specific meanings. For instance, the intricate designs of African masks, such as those from the Benin Kingdom of Nigeria (Odogbor, 1997) and from the Dogon people of Mali (DeMott, 2008), often represent spiritual beings and serve as a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds. A Dogon mask, adorned with geometric patterns transcends mere aesthetics. These patterns are representative and as such, can be viewed as visual language which symbolizes a connection to their ancestors, embodying the spirit of the figure it represents. The attires in masquerade

art further enhance the visual spectacle and add layers of meaning to the art itself. Beyond the physical garments, masquerade art often employs symbolic elements to express complex themes, such as duality, transformation, or serves as societal critique. The colours, materials, and motifs used in masks can carry specific meanings which act as “marker of identity, promoting cultural heritage and establishing a sense of belonging”(Inegbe , 2024: 344).

In Nigerian societies, the roles of masquerades vary and include religious, moral, and judicial roles in addition to social entertainment. They are known to be ubiquitous and are prominent features in Nigerian societies. Spiritual archetypes of masquerades include those who embody deities or nature spirits and to whom sacrifices are made to assure the fertility of land and people (see Inegbe, 2023); those who embody the ancestral spirits; those who placate the spirits through their dance; and those who perform principally as entertainers. This communal and collective ritual display of masquerade art transmits the myths and ancestral wisdom with which a culture defines itself. In Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, masquerade is known as *Ekpo*. And it is premised on the belief in life after death. It is also regarded as the soul or ghost of ancestors that have returned to the land of the living in masquerade form to participate with their kinsmen in communal festivals such as farming, and rites of passage. *Ekpo* (masquerade) is a cultural practice that is found in numerous communities of Akwa Ibom State, permeating the Igbo society of the Eastern region of Nigeria. *Ekpo* masquerade art is not conceived as a mere spectacle. Edem (2012) affirms this assertion as he identifies *Ekpo* as “categories of spirits and cosmological forces in various existential planes that become ‘incarnated’...as masquerades ... in various forms and sizes, with background accompaniment of appropriate chant, rites and music”(p.46). And Ekanem (2016, pp. 38-39) argues that *Ekpo* masquerade should be better appreciated as the human representations of dead people from the clan, who must be revered in awe, fear, and trembling instead of appraising it as a component of the cosmos to contextualize the aphorism, “dual cosmos” which Anaang and Ibibio claim. There are different types of masquerades in Anaang society in particular, and in Akwa Ibom State in general. Inegbe (2023) identifies the following types of masquerades in Anaang; “*Akpan Ekpo, Afai Ekpo, Atitia Ekpo, Abaikpa Ekpo, Ajara-Ikpa Ekpo, Inyion Ekpo, Imum Ekpo, Eka Ekpo, Ete Ekpo*” (pp.102-103). There are also others like “*Ekpo Njogo, Ekpo Itak-Mbreinyon, Akpara Ekpo, Utu-ekpe, Ekpri Akata, Ataat, Obon, Ntok Odio-dio*” (Akpaideh, 1982, p.28). As a traditional cult, membership into an *ekpo* cult is strictly by initiation; hence, every aspect of the masquerade is designed to strike awe, fear, and caution among women, and non-initiates. Akpaideh (1982, p. 30) further explains that some of the masquerades in Akwa Ibom State were borrowed from the Efiks, some from the Igbos, while those mentioned by Inegbe (2023) are indigenous to the Akwa Ibom people. Examples of borrowed masquerade arts include: *Ekpo/Ekpe, Utu-ekpe, Ekpri Akata, Ataat, Obon* and *Ntok Odio-dio*. All these traditional cultural institutions were used to inject sanity into the society. In the pre-colonial era, *Ekpo* masquerade served as the government of the entire Akwa Ibom people performing such functions as judicial, administrative and religious duties. These traditional institutions stood out as the government of that time. The masquerade, *Ekpri Akata*, for instance, served as a powerful medium of disseminating information in the

communities. It had power to reveal and transmit to the populace secret deeds of men, women, and youth in the society. This helped in checking and curbing crimes as well as in promoting integrity. In the Northern Cross River State, *Echi-Obasi-Njom* masquerade just like *Ekpri Akata* was saddled with the task to detect witches and wizard in the Ejagham community (Tangban, 2008). In the same vein, the masquerade, *Obon*, is very popular among the riverine dwellers of Akwa Ibom State. This is probably due to its relationship with *Ndem*, a water-related spirit and its associated deities. This explains why *Obon* is an ensemble cult. The masquerade, *Ntok Odio-dio*, maintains the sacro-sanctity of the Ibom sacred order. Their masks and attires made of white and sparkling colours depict purity. In sum, Masquerade art is deeply embedded in cultural practices and can vary widely from community to community.

Every Nigerian society has a culture with shared ideas that help bind it together as one. The Masquerade culture cuts across many Nigerian societies, acting, most times, as a form of social control. For instance, the *Elimhin* masquerades among the Esan of Edo State (the Edo people are situated in Mid-western Nigeria) are believed to be ancestral spirits who periodically visit the living by appearing in the form of masquerades. Their visits are regarded as spiritual interventions to the world of the living. For this reason, the *Elimhin* masquerades are highly venerated (Borgatti, 1982; Bradbury, 1957). Among the Ifeku-Ibaji, *Egwu* masquerades represent both the ancestral shrine and the resurrected spirits of dead elders who, the people believe, protect, and govern the laws of the land. Those laws were held sacrosanct and any breach of the law attracted dire consequences, sometimes capital punishments like death ([www.ekwendigbo.com](http://www.ekwendigbo.com)). Among the Yoruba, the *Egungun* masquerades represent the spirit of the ancestors who have descended from the mountains. This masquerade is also known as *Ará Òrun* (Adepegba, 1984; Drewal, 1978). The various illustrations above are to show that the Masquerade culture cuts across many Nigerian ethnic groups. The masquerade itself is symbolic within many cultures; it often represents the blending of the sacred and the profane, the living and the dead, or the past and the present. This study as stated earlier probes into the language used in Anaang masquerade incantatory chants and songs, examines the diverse linguistic strategies employed and their functions within these performative contexts.

## Methods

### **Research Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to capture the complex dynamics of language use in Anaang masquerade festival. Participant observation was conducted across several Anaang communities known for their rich masquerade traditions, including festival and ceremonial events. Semi-structured oral interviews were carried out with masquerade performers, cultural custodians, and community members to gain insights into the significance of language in these artistic expressions. Cultural expressions which comprise of

incantatory chants, songs, and spoken narratives were transcribed and analyzed to identify key linguistic features, including vocabulary, grammar, structures, themes and discourse patterns. Data were triangulated to enhance the study's reliability, focusing on both the content and context of the narratives.

### ***Theoretical Framings***

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in sociolinguistic, cultural anthropology and semiotics. This is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of language in Anaang masquerade traditions. Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. It studies how social factors like class, gender, ethnicity, age, and location influence language use, and how language use in turn, can shape social identities and relationships. Prominent figures who have contributed to the field's development include William Labov, who is often considered as the 'father' of sociolinguistics, Dell Hymes, Joshua Fishman, and John Gumperz. Sociolinguistics emerged as a distinct field in the 1960s. It grew out of earlier works in dialectology and linguistic anthropology, with a growing recognition that language variation was not random but patterned according to social factors. Sociolinguistics was founded to understand the intricate connections between language and society. It challenges the idea of language as a uniform system, highlighting its dynamic and variable nature. The field sought to explain how language reflects and reinforces social structures, power dynamics, and cultural identities. By employing a sociolinguistic lens, this paper examines language as a means of negotiating identity and performing culture within the context of masquerade.

Cultural anthropology is a branch of anthropology that focuses on the study of human cultures and societies. It studies the diversity of human beliefs, practices, values, and social structures across different groups and communities. Cultural anthropology emerged as a formal discipline in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It stemmed from earlier interest in "primitive" societies and the desire to understand cultural differences in a more systematic and scientific way. Notable figures in cultural anthropology include Franz Boas, who emphasized cultural relativism and fieldwork; Bronislaw Malinowski, who developed participant observation as a research method; Margaret Mead, known for her studies of gender and adolescence in different cultures; and Claude Lévi-Strauss, a major proponent of structuralism in anthropology. Cultural anthropology was founded to document and understand the vast diversity of human cultures. It was also to challenge ethnocentric views and promote cultural relativism. It explores also the underlying patterns and structures that shape human behaviour and social life, and to provide insights into the human condition and complexities of cultural interaction. Thus, cultural anthropology will provide a broader understanding of the social functions of masquerades, linking them to community values, rituals, and historical narratives.

Semiotics is the study of signs, symbols, and their interpretation. It studies how meaning is created and communicated through various forms, including language, images, gestures, and cultural practices. Semiotics examines the relationship between the form of a sign (signifiers) and the concept it represents (signified), focusing on how meaning arises in various contexts. Semiotics began to take shape in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly influenced by the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Its foundation is often traced to early 1900s, with Saussure's ideas emerging in "Course in General Linguistics", published posthumously in 1916, and Peirce's work on signs and semiotics occurring around the same time. Other influential figures in semiotics include Roland Barthes, a French literary critic and semiotician who applied semiotic principles to the analysis of popular culture and everyday life; Umberto Eco, an Italian novelist and semiotician who explored the role of interpretation and interaction between the reader and the text; and Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher, psychoanalyst and feminist who has contributed to semiotics by examining the relationship between language, meaning, and subjectivity. The purpose of founding semiotics was to provide a systematic framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated. Inegbe (2025) specifies that semiotic analysis "focuses on the word choice and connotations, narratives and storytelling, subtle messages and symbolism, cultural references, and appeals, and on visual elements, including images, colours..."(76). Thus, semiotics is particularly significant in the context of languages and other forms of expression, allowing scholars to analyze cultural artifacts, literature, communication, and social practices in a more structured manner. However, semiotics as a discipline has evolved and expanded over time, influencing various fields such as linguistics, anthropology, literary theory, media studies, and more. It serves as pertinent tool for deciphering the complex ways in which signs and symbols shape human understanding and social interactions.

Both sociolinguistics and cultural anthropology are interdisciplinary fields drawing on insights from linguistics, sociology, history, and other disciplines. They continue to evolve and address contemporary issues related to language, culture, and society. This interdisciplinary approach allows for comprehensive analysis of how language shapes and reflects the socio-cultural significance of Anaang masquerade art.

## Results and Discussion

### ***Socio-Cultural Significance and Language Use in Anaang Masquerade Festival***

The language of masquerades varies significantly across different cultures and even within specific masquerade traditions. It may involve archaic forms of the community's language, specialized vocabularies related to ritual practices or the spirit world, coded or secret languages understood only by initiates, or even glossolalia, a form of unintelligible speech

often interpreted as the voice of spirits. These linguistic variations contribute to the mysticism that surrounds masquerades, reinforcing the belief that the initiates are imbued with supernatural powers to act as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms. Beyond its role in creating an aura of mystery, masquerade language also serves a range of other important social and cultural functions. It can be used to reinforce social hierarchies, with different linguistic registers assigned to specific masquerade figures based on their status or role within the community. For instance, among the Anaang masquerade cult, there are social hierarchies like *Akpan Ekpo*, *Afai Ekpo*, *Atitia Ekpo*, *Abaikpa Ekpo*, *Ajara-lkpa Ekpo*, *Inyion Ekpo*, *Imum Ekpo*, *Eka Ekpo*, *Ete Ekpo*. These masquerades signify and represent different traditions. They also have specific traditional Anaang market days when they come out. This is done to enable women go to their farmlands to harvest their crops or go to the market to sell their farm produce. For instance, *Akpan Ekpo*, who is regarded as the first son of the masquerades, parades on *Uruabom* day, a market day which ushers in the masquerade season signifying that the season has officially begun in various Anaang communities. *Eka Ekpo* is considered as the mother of all masquerades. She comes out on *Affiong Etor* market day; *Inyion Ekpo*, the crippled masquerade comes out on *Edere-Edagha*, etc. The Anaang masquerade art is characterized by intricate masks, elaborate attires and synchronized movements that are meant to tell stories. The masks are usually made of wool, and are adorned with colourful beads, feathers, and other decorative elements. The masks and attires used by various Anaang masquerades carry specific names and meanings that reflect the identity and values of the Anaang community. The mask may symbolize an ancestral spirit, a historical figure, or certain cultural ideals. Also, the names associated with them can evoke a sense of belonging and cultural pride. This explanation agrees with Inegbe (2021, in AGORA) on names given in African society that such names reflect "the cultural heritage of the society from which these names come" She explains further that "people's names are of central importance in their genealogy"(p. 2). For instance, in the *Ekpo* troupe, the different names mentioned above are symbolically captured in language, and are allegorical to human designation. In the regular society, there is the mother, the father, the first son, the wild, the maiden, the beautiful, the dumb, the prudent, the lame—all these are represented, and are simulated in their dispositions. This representation is symbolic as it gives people the opportunity to reassess and see themselves in the display of the alleged way of the represented being. This identification reflects a dimension of calling out to people to behold their behavioral re-enactment by each of the *Ekpo* masquerades. Their name-tags are steeped in symbolism, and the masks and attires are designed to represent different aspects of Anaang culture, such as fertility, warfare, and spirituality. The *Akpan Ekpo* symbolizes youth, vibrancy, energy and beauty. The *Inyion Ekpo* limps during cultural parade and this signifies suffering in the society. *Afai Ekpo*, the wild masquerade symbolizes wild, intemperate temper, insanity and madness. *Abaikpa Ekpo*, the maiden or girl masquerade symbolizes beauty, youth and innocence. *Imum Ekpo*, the dumb masquerade represents the voiceless in the society. *Ajara-lkpa Ekpo*, the dressed in leather masquerade represents the beautiful Anaang crafts, gorgeous and beautiful people in the society. Each masquerade has a distinct

identity and meaning, and is associated with a particular deity or spirit. The people whose faces and heads are covered with masks are believed to be possessed by the spirits or deities that the masquerades represent, and are therefore treated with great respect and reverence by the community. It is believed that the spirits can bring blessings or curses, and so the masquerades are seen as a way to communicate with the spiritual world. Aside this religious significance, masquerades also serve as a form of entertainment for the community. These masquerades do not come out arbitrarily; each of them is led by a man called *Akwa Ekpo*, who carries along a traditional rattle called *ekpood*. It is the sole responsibility of the *Akwa Ekpo* to make incantatory chants and usher in the masquerades. According to Abong Ayiedi Akpabio (one of the elders interviewed), the *Akwa Ekpo* carries with him a local gin known as *akai-kai*; he spills some quantity of this gin on the ground (earth), makes some exhortations and then invokes the deities in the following words:

Ajen udung ase anyong ki iso anye tuak isong

Awasi –Anyong! Awasi-Isong!

Akai-kai ansiduo isong ade

Ákéáyìñ ade ade

Ukan ajid ewo:

Ekpukho se kpukho, agwo ikpukho ke mfi

Uked-uked agwo ade Ekpo

Adia ano isong

Isong ade idung uked agwo

Ebo ewongho edibere ne

Yak isañ ade emem-

ajid  
emem

Translation:

A pestle goes up before it hits the mortar

God above, gods beneath

The local gin poured on the earth is yours

Our people say:

Change whatever you want to change, no one can change

periwinkle

We are all masquerades

Whatever you eat, give some to the earth

Earth is the home of us all

Take from us, drink and come and

support us

Let this outing be peaceful

In the above incantatory chant, language is masterfully employed to navigate the space between the spiritual and the physical, serving as a bridge for communal connection and continuity in cultural narratives. The imagery of a pestle going up before hitting the mortar symbolizes the harmonious relationship between action and consequences, grounding the

incantation in physicality. The pestle and mortar function as symbols of labour, preparation, and the physical and spiritual blending of communal ingredients. The line, *God above, gods beneath*, evokes a duality of divine presence, acknowledging both a higher power and ancestral spirits. It shows the interconnectedness of the community with the spiritual world. It also implies that their actions are in harmony with a larger cosmic order. The pouring of local gin on earth is a libation and it serves as an offering, a common practice in traditional rituals. It reflects communal traditions and the significance of sharing resources with the earth, an aspect that underlines the community's respect for nature and the spiritual world. The reference to *periwinkle*, a seemingly unchangeable entity, symbolizes resilience and the idea that while change is inevitable in various aspects of life, certain traditions and cultural identities remain constant. It implies that, despite the impermanence of certain things, the essence of community represented by the masquerade is unchangeable. This is also a call and an invitation to community members to reflect on their agency within the communal narrative. The phrase, *give some to the earth*, reinforces the idea of reciprocity and generosity within the community. This phrase emphasizes the importance of sharing and nurturing the earth on the one hand, and encouraging a sense of solidarity among community members on the other. The sentence, *We are all masquerades*, acts as a powerful collective identity marker, implying that every member of the community plays a role in the larger narrative. The masquerade serves as a metaphor for the complexity of social roles and identities, reinforcing the idea that everyone contributes to communal progressiveness. The sentence, *Earth is the home of all of us* emphasizes inclusivity and shared belonging, essential components of communal storytelling. It frames the earth not just as a physical space, but as a nurturing ground for cultural identity and collective memory. Using the earth as a shared entity signifies the bond between the spiritual and the physical, showcasing how language captures complex relationships and experiences within the community. The incantation concludes with a call for peace: *Let the outing be peaceful*. This is vital in communal gatherings. This sentence acts both as a blessing and as communal hope, underscoring the desire for harmony during rituals. The incantatory chant could also be seen as a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge, including historical narratives, moral codes, and traditional beliefs. Furthermore, language use among masquerades often plays a vital role in ritual communication, invoking deities, appeasing ancestors, or warding off evil spirits.

Sometimes, *Akwa Ekpo* sings songs to direct other masquerades. These songs are repeated continuously as a source of reminder to other masquerades not to harm anyone, in the course of their parade to the market square. One of such songs is:

Inyion Ekpo ku top irang ku ura ooo!  
Kwok kwok-kwok! Kwok kwok!

Translation:

Crippled masquerades do not throw your arrows in the market.  
Kwok kwok-kwok! Kwok kwok!

Through this linguistic exploration, one observes how songs can serve to educate, remind, preserve tradition and encourage social cohesion. The excerpt above exemplifies how language in folk traditions is vital in maintaining a community's values and norms. The sentence is structured simply; yet, it effectively conveys a strong message. The use of the imperative, *do not throw*, creates an authoritative tone. It also emphasizes the importance of the rule being conveyed which is common in proverbs or cultural admonitions. The sentence, *do not throw arrows in the market*, employs metaphorical language. Arrows could symbolize hostility, suggesting that market is a shared social environment that is central to a community's daily life. This pragmatically reflects cultural values surrounding peace, cooperation, and the importance of harmony in community interactions. It serves as a reminder or warning to the participants about appropriate behaviour in communal spaces. The use of masquerade imagery suggests a deeper cultural narrative that ties the community to its heritage. The repetition of the word, *Kwok kwok-kwok! Kwok kwok!*, can be viewed from two perspectives. First, it creates a rhythmic structure for the song. In a way, it reinforces memory and engagement. It gives the song a musical quality and this is an essential guard for masquerade movement and display. The rhythm can enhance the communal experience, making it easier to remember and sing along. The song obviously is drawn from an oral tradition that binds the community together. It, therefore, reflects shared stories, historical events, and cultural beliefs. Secondly, the word is used as onomatopoeia to capture the crooked and mechanical movement of the "crippled masquerade" whom the song directly alludes to in the first instance. The direct reference to the Crippled Masquerade may also be suggestive of the fact that as crooked as his movements are, so are his actions, thus making the Crippled Masquerade a very violent masquerade. Of course, there are very violent people in the society as well. It is to such that the song symbolically and directly refers; they should know how to throw arrows because they may end up harming their own relations in the process. In this sense, language as employed in the song does not only serve as a means of communication but as a living archive of community values and collective identity.

The numerous masquerades of the Anaang people have a significant bearing with the cosmic reality and belief system of the land. Some of these masquerades maintain a deep rooted divine precedence which, if secularized, today's society would have been very peaceful and harmonious. For instance, some masquerades in Anaang land are deployed for the maintenance of orderliness and to curtail domestic violence. According to Abong Edeghe-Udim (in an interview), on the list of such masquerades are *Ekpo-nka-agwo*, *Nyamma*, *Mkpokporo*, *Nsikute*, *Nkoro*, *Ekpanjogo-anyen*, *Asakum*, *Ekoong*, *Ewa-Ekoong*, *Nnabo*, *Atamma*, *Utuekpe*, *Abia-akpo*, *Ekpe-mkpatak*, *Akpakpom*, *Nwa-mbede*, *Enang*, *Ekpe*, *Abon*, *Ikpa*, *Uke-kpe*.

Much of the activities of masquerades across Anaang communities take place towards the end of August through the end of the year. However, with modernity, much of this arrangement has been modified. For instance, the original *Asakum* masquerade used to emerge once in seven years while *Abia-akpo* masquerade used to parade in the company of other masquerades at Essien Udim usually on the *Ndok-Ekpo* display. However, many of these

masquerades no longer adhere strictly to the restrictions and to their season of performance. These days, some of them are seen to be comfortable in performing for any fee-paying audience, anytime of the year. However, the normal *Ekpo* masquerade delimits its fun to older men and initiates. For instance, the *Ekpo* masquerade at Ikpe Anaang creates a moment outside the set season for the aged initiates to come out and re-enact heroic steps of their youthful days. This re-enactment is done without putting on any form of masks. This particular re-enactment does not really project the innate *Ekpo* in-display; it is rather a mere cultural display meant for only the younger male initiates to learn from. During this period, a song like this is chanted:

ljooo ooo! ljooo ooo!  
Tikké duk  
Agwo anwan isikuté ifed Ekpo ooo!  
Ku jejep tikké duk  
Nte Ekpo ototop irang átia agwo  
Ku jejep tikké duk  
Ekpo akpetop irang ku urok, urok asiakha  
Akpara iban tikké duk

**Translation:**

No ooo! No ooo!  
Get inside! A  
woman does not behold a masquerade's nakedness  
Don't try to peep  
Anywhere a masquerade games its arrows, the target is in trouble  
Don't try to peep  
Whenever the masquerade directs its arrows at the door, it must give way  
A mere woman get inside

The masquerade song above, captures the interface between tradition and contemporary experience, illustrating how language can both reflect and shape cultural values within the community. This song is rich in linguistic elements. The employment of the words, *No ooo! No ooo!*, at the beginning of the song sets an emphatic tone. Repetition is a common feature in oral folklore and it can create a rhythm that enhances memorability. The repetition, *Don't try to peep*, serves both to underscore the warning and to build anticipation. This device captures attention and emphasizes significant cultural norms regarding privacy and respect in the context of masquerade. Phrases like, *Get inside*, *Don't try to peep* and, *A mere woman get inside*, all employ the imperative mood, conveying direct commands or requests. This does not only enforce the rules surrounding the masquerade but also illustrates a patriarchal structure where certain behaviours are detected, potentially signifying societal expectations of women. The phrase, *A mere woman...*, also carries an undertone of diminishment, suggesting social hierarchies and power dynamics where women are seen as subordinate

within this cultural context. Sentences such as, *Anywhere a masquerade games its arrows, the target is in trouble*, and, *Whenever the masquerade directs its arrows at the door, it must give way*, are metaphorical language used to illustrate the masquerade's power and authority. The imagery of arrows evokes the idea of danger and potential harm associated with intruding on the masquerade's sacred space. It is also reinforcing the notion of respect and fear associated with the masquerade figure. The mention of, *a masquerade*, refers to a significant cultural symbol often linked to ancestral spirits or communal identity. By referencing a masquerade, the song draws upon deep cultural meanings embedded in the community, linking contemporary listeners to their cultural heritage. This highlights the cultural importance of masquerades within the community, functioning as markers of identity. The masquerade is portrayed almost as a living entity capable of directing arrows, giving it an ominous, sentient quality. Language, here, imbues the masquerade with agency, making it a central figure in both danger and cultural heritage. The song encapsulates and reinforces specific cultural values and social norms. It serves as a narrative mechanism that tells a story, likely passed down through generations. The prohibitions against peeping into the masquerade are indicative of larger societal values surrounding respect for the sacred and the unseen.

The practice of masquerading, in many Nigerian societies, especially among the people of Akwa Ibom State, is usually viewed and referred to as idol-worshipping. Therefore, it is considered as a barbaric culture and this often discourages people from getting to know about the art. This ideological perception of masquerade art is what the Ika Anaang people have concerning the *Asakum* masquerade. *Asakum* masquerade, according to Asigbo (2013), embodies a "force" (7). This is because the masquerade, *Asakum* can kill. One factor that remains a mystery in this masquerade is the suspension of spiritual procedures that used to centralize its outings. The head of *Asakum* is a death snare. If a nail or a piece of its wood scratches someone's skin, maggots would fraught the spot. With regards to this spiritual dimension, Akpaideh (1982, p.27) explains that the masquerade, *Asakum*, has two outfits: a red tunic with a white cross that patterns both front and back from the head to the base; and a white tunic with a red cross symbol designed to run from the base of the top to the heel. When the masquerade's outing is a ritualized one in which blood is needed to appease *Nnem* (the potent deity), the red tunic would be worn, but when the outing is for mere display without the intent to hit and spill blood, it is the white tunic that would be worn. *Asakum* carries an *afuud* (a mysterious traditional wand), and an *ajei* (palm frond). The *afuud* is the custodian of the *Nnem* force or the potent deity. The *afuud* regulates the masquerade's run, stride or any other activity. If it points the *afuud* at a stubborn spectator, no matter how smart or sharp the person may be in trying to run away, the force will tangle the culprit's feet, and make him fall. This is because of the supernatural force at the masquerade's disposal ensconced in the *afuud*. At some point too, the custodian deity may get infuriated and decide to chase away the orchestra only to be appeased with a bottle of *akai-kai* (local gin). This very ritual to appease the custodian deity is done using specific phrases, chants and incantations in Anaang dialect. The act of masquerading fundamentally alters social dynamics

by providing a mechanism through which individuals can express or critique hidden aspects of their societies.

Another masquerade performance in Anaang land that is viewed as a barbaric culture is the ritualized *Abia-akpo* masquerade from Akon-Ikot Essien in Essien Udim. *Abia-akpo* masquerade features prominently among the Anaang people. Historically, the *Abia-akpo* of Essien Udim is "dated back to 1820" (Ekanem 2006, p. 27). The composition of *Abia-akpo* masquerade mask is basically two equal long wooden poles on which the masquerade mounts and leaps without falling. He is often adorned in a properly woven mask as a cover on the face. This masquerade carries a horsetail which he swings in unison with his long stride to evoke an aesthetic appeal. Some of the *Abia-akpo* masquerades are ritualized while some are de-ritualized. The ritualized *Abia-akpo* can perform many aerial feats, while the de-ritualized ones are usually very moderate in gestures, vulnerable, and above all, very cautious. Their leaps are usually decisive, and the leaping keeps the emotions of audience members in nervousness. Meanwhile, the *Abia-akpo* masquerade from Akon-Ikot Essien in Essien Udim operates like a ritualized masquerade from the experience of many years of practice. It can traverse many locations unperturbed unlike the ones from other Anaang communities. This is because some incantations have been made to fortify the *Abia-akpo* initiate, who is mounting on the wooden poles. There is also a kind of call and respond song which is called *Ikwo-Abia-akpo* (*Abia-akpo's* folktale/song). This song embodies some inbuilt repetitions, as prompt signals for the masquerade steps during performance. This interactive song nurtures a sense of community, allowing audience members to participate in the narrative and reinforcing social bonds. This linguistic element is deeply rooted in the Anaang worldview and it helps to reinforce cultural knowledge and collective memory. This ritual display, as stated somewhere in this study, transmits the myths and ancestral wisdom with which a culture defines itself. However, *Abia-akpo* masquerade art requires some good level of concentration and focus, aside determination. Perhaps, this is why one of the outing songs is on drinking with moderation as seen in this Anaang masquerade chant:

Eho oooo! Eho oooo!

St. Peter awo ewon etok etok

Ewon etok etok oooo

Isideghe eman ke ura ete fud ukod

Mkpatat ideghe ikong ekpo

Akai-kai ke ewon esin ntimme

Akai-kai ke ewon ebire ikpe mkpa eno andidue mkpo

Akai-kai ke ikamma ijem ujo nkong ekpo

Akai-kai ke ewon

Mbup anyen nkud ekpo

Akai-kai ke ewon

Ntad anyen nkud ekpo

Akai-kai ke ajid ikamma idanṅa isañ ukwo ekpo

Ekpo udak isong iwoṅo idieghe ooo!  
Ito iso; Ito edem  
Ete-ete ajid; Uko-Iberedem ajid  
Isañ usuk-usuk  
Udo-Uko ada nung itie danja ase tie  
Inyiṅ inoho isañ asuk ajem udi  
Yak ikwo dañna ajid ise ikwo ku  
Ikwo anem ku udim  
ujo ked

Translation:

Eho oooo! Eho oooo!  
St. Peter has said drink in small quantity  
A woman cannot deliver in the market, they say cover yourself  
Mkpatat is not marijuana  
It is local gin you drink and cause trouble  
It is local gin one drinks to be able to sentence the  
wrong doer to death. s It is local gin we use to do incantations  
to our ancestors. It is local gin one drinks  
masquerade When you close your eyes you see  
It is local gin one drinks  
masquerade When you open your eyes you see  
for masquerade We have started the journey of singing  
Masquerades beneath the earth arise!  
Come forth in front; Come forth from behind  
Our ancestors; Our ancient-pillars  
Arise peacefully! Arise!  
Udo-Uko will still sit back as  
A cripple that cannot even walk  
Let us all go and sing our  
Singing is sweet in  
usual  
wants to see the grave  
masquerade in one voice  
unison.

The above chant or song, as the case may be, showcases a rich blend of cultural significance, moral teachings, and communal identity, using language that is evocative and rhythmic, suggesting deep ties to tradition and social cohesion. The implications of moderation, the importance of rituals, and the call for collective action seen in this masquerade chant all resonate with themes found throughout many cultures. This masquerade chant is in a way like a poem. Thus, all the linguistic resources which belong to linguistic categories must be taken into consideration in this chant to "deduce the chain of linguistic elements embellished in poems for better comprehension and for meaning conveying purposes" (Inegbe, 2018, 205). The phrase, *It is local gin one drinks...*, is repeated several times. This repetition emphasizes

the central role of the gin in the described activities and creates a rhythmic, almost incantatory effect. In the chants are vivid imagery, particularly related to the effects of the gin. For example: *When you close your eyes you see masquerade*, and *When you open your eyes you see masquerade* suggest hallucinations or altered perceptions caused by excessive drinking of local gin. These lines also use parallel structure to convey a sense of continuity and duality in perception. The local gin symbolizes both social bonding and cultural practices, such as incantations to ancestors, reflecting its importance in the Anaang masquerade rituals. The imagery of “masquerades”, “ancestors”, “ancient-pillars”, and “the grave” creates a mystical and spiritual atmosphere. The imagery of the ancestors arising from beneath the earth invokes a sense of awe and reverence. The phrase, *sing our masquerade in one voice*, is a figurative expression. It suggests a collective identity and unity within the community. The sentence, *A cripple that cannot even walk wants to see the grave*, is also a figurative expression. It suggests someone who is already in a precarious or hopeless situation, tempting fate. It is a proverb-like statement. There is the employment of proverbs and proverbial sayings in the extract. The expression, *Mkpatat is not marijuana*, is structured like a proverb, establishing a comparison and conveying a cultural understanding about the relative effect or social acceptance of different substances. Also, the sentence, *A woman cannot deliver in the market, they say cover yourself*, is a clear reference to a cultural taboo or social norm expressed in a proverbial way. It speaks of the importance of modesty and appropriate behaviour in public spaces. This proverb hints at cultural norms relating to propriety and privacy. It suggests that certain actions should be reserved for appropriate contexts. Also, the statement, *St. Peter has said, drink in small quantity*, is exhortatory in nature. This expression is a moral lesson against excessive action or behaviour, indicative of traditional wisdom that values moderation in social practices. The extract has a somewhat loose, associative structure. It has a strophic structure reminiscent of a song or chant, where lines are grouped thematically. It moves between descriptions of the effects and uses of local gin (Akai-kai), exhortations or invocations to ancestors and masquerades creating a rhythmic progression, and social commentary. There is a sense of ritualistic progression, building towards the final collective call to sing for the masquerades. The extract implicitly contains stanzas, separating thoughts about local gin, the masquerades, and cultural beliefs. The grammar is generally informal and uses simple sentence structures. Many lines are sentence fragments, often lacking a subject or verb and this reflects “the conversational style of oral tradition” (Inegbe, 2024).

The use of singular ‘you’, ‘one’, and conversational phrases lends a causal and engaging quality to the text, which is common in oral storytelling. The style is conversational and evocative. It blends elements of storytelling, ritualistic chant, and social commentary. The use of repetition, imagery, and proverbs gives the extract a distinct oral flavour, suggesting that it might be part of a song, poem, or spoken-word chant. The shift between descriptions of the gin’s effects, (a cultural context where local gin plays a significant role, not just as a gin but also in rituals), and social interactions, the invocation of ancestors and social observations create a dynamic and engaging style. These aspects indicate deep cultural roots, reflecting

the values and the practices of the Anaang masquerade cult. The extracts promote a sense of togetherness, evident in sentences like, *Let us all go and sing our masquerade in one voice*, and *Singing is sweet in unison*, which calls for unity and collective identity. It encapsulates the Anaang history, values, and identity, while also fostering a shared experience through interactive and narrative elements. By weaving together verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, this masquerade chant creates a rich tapestry of meanings that celebrate and perpetuate the unique cultural heritages of Anaang communities.

## Conclusion and Implications

Masquerade art is one of Africa's traditional essences. It has been in existence since the inception of African societies. It must be submitted that every society gives birth to its own activities be they social, economic, religious political and all other forms of cultural considerations within a period in their history. African tradition is rooted in secular and sacred rites that exist as festivals, myths/legends, short stories and other artistic practices which Africans created for themselves. These activities are the live wire of the Africa people. It is the struggle for existence that enabled the traditional people to create institutions and values that regulate conducts. As the level of social interaction increases, man communicated and expressed himself through movement, perception, songs and ceremonies. These early forms of expressions evolved into rituals, festivals, myths, and general culture of the communal society.

African traditional religion has come a long way. Right from ancient times, the traditional African has been practicing the ritual rite in accordance with his culture. (Liking, 1983). Culture contact, however, has led to cultural development through borrowing and adaptation of new ideas. A culture must exist for it to have contact with another. For an existing culture to be self-sustaining, it must have had the socio-cultural mechanism of coping with its peculiarities characterized by its inherent means of self-development. This is/ or may be relative, but then, there is hardly a living culture that is not open to cross-cultural influences and such consequential developments. Traditional practices of the African people is, thus, a way of life in which their ancestors are part of every major event such as births, deaths, traditional marriages, coronations, etc. During these events, verbal incantations are usually rendered to honour, extol, please and thank the ancestors. A cow, sheep, goat or chicken is slaughtered and the ancestors are called upon through incantatory rites to receive the offering and bless their descendants and the gathering.

This study has demonstrated that masquerade language in Anaang culture is not merely ornamental but serves vital socio-cultural functions. The findings of this study illuminate the profound socio-cultural significance of masquerade festivals as dynamic forms of expression that encapsulate community values, histories, and identities. Language emerges as a pivotal component, not only enriching the aesthetic experience but also facilitating social cohesion and continuity of cultural heritage. Masquerades serve as vital educational tools,

imparting knowledge and wisdom to audiences while fostering a sense of belonging and community identity. The masquerade festivals of the Anaang people of Akwa Ibom State are a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the community. They serve as a way to preserve and pass down traditional customs and beliefs from one generation to the next, while also providing a source of entertainment and community cohesion.

To promote the sustainability of masquerade arts and their socio-cultural significance, it is recommended that educational institutions incorporate masquerade studies into their curricula to enhance cultural literacy among youths. Additionally, the documentation and archiving of masquerade activities should be prioritized to ensure the preservation of these valuable cultural expressions. Collaborative projects between cultural practitioners and researchers are also essential to facilitate ongoing dialogue and innovation within the fields, fostering a deeper appreciation for the artistic and linguistic richness of Anaang masquerade art.

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