



## COI QUERY

<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>NIGERIA</b>
<b>Title</b>	Information on masquerade groups referred to as ‘Odo’ in Enugu State, including activities and incidents of violence; consequences for refusal to join, including treatment of Christians; state protection
<b>Reference period</b>	January 2020 to 14 September 2023
<b>Topics</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="#">Overview</a></li><li><a href="#">Activities and incidents of violence, including treatment of Christians</a></li><li><a href="#">Consequences for refusal to join Odo</a></li><li><a href="#">State protection</a></li></ol>
<b>Date of completion</b>	19 September 2023
<b>Query Code</b>	Q38-2023
<b>Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)</b>	N/A



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All sources used are referenced and cited in the bibliography section. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned COI methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive or conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

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## COI QUERY RESPONSE – Nigeria

### Information on masquerade groups referred to as ‘Odo’ in Enugu State, including activities and incidents of violence; consequences for refusal to join, including treatment of Christians; state protection

#### 1. Overview

According to an article published in January 2021 by the Guardian News Nigeria, an independent Nigerian newspaper, there are several types of masquerades taking place in Igbo land<sup>1</sup>, including Adamma, Ijele, Mkpamkpanku, Izaga, and Ojionu, also known as the Odo, which is a type of masquerade typical for the Agbaja people.<sup>2</sup> Odo was reported as a common type of masquerade taking place in the town of Nsukka, Enugu State.<sup>3</sup>

A website on Igbo culture and language and an article published in 2023 by the Nigerian International Journal of Literature and Arts defined the Odo masquerade as ‘a cult practice, enthroned and celebrated by men, performed once in two years and sustained through a system of people’s belief and usually celebrated as a festival of community unification’.<sup>4</sup> Another author referred to in the same paper described Odo as ‘an oral tradition of the people of the South Eastern Nigeria’ or ‘a common cultural feature of the Igbo people’.<sup>5</sup> According to the tradition, the masquerades represent spirits of the dead relatives returning to the communities and providing security, protection, arbitration, entertainment, and sanctioning.<sup>6</sup>

A website on Igbo culture and language and a research paper on masquerades and tourism development in Igbo Land indicated that one of the original purposes of the masquerade festivals was to maintain peace and order in the communities, but this role has reportedly diminished after the arrival of Christianity to the region.<sup>7</sup> According to a research paper about the Odo ritual performance by the Umulumgbe people published in September 2020 by authors from the University of Nairobi, Kenya, ‘the Odo masquerade [...] functions as the final

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<sup>1</sup> Igbo land is referred to as Southeastern Nigeria, including the Enugu State. See: Igbo Cultural Organisation Rheinlandpfalz – Hessen e.V., Igbo Culture & Traditions, n.d., [url](#), and Encyclopaedia Britannica, Igbo, last updated 8 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>2</sup> Guardian News Nigeria (The), Masquerades in Igbo land, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> Oguamanam, C.C. et al., Odo Masquerade in Northern Igbo Land: A Cultural Resource in Demise, May 2018, [url](#), p. 79

<sup>4</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), p. 171

<sup>5</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), p. 171

<sup>6</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), pp. 170

<sup>7</sup> Igbo Guide, Masquerades and Festivals, n.d., [url](#); Uzoh, E. et al., Masquerades and Tourism Development in Igbo Land: Anambra State of Nigeria in Focus, in: Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 28 February 2022, [url](#), pp. 95, 96



judge in time of disputes and helps in taking crucial decisions that concerns the general welfare of the community'.<sup>8</sup>

An article by Within Nigeria, a local news provider, published in February 2023, describing the Odo festival in the Aku community in Enugu state, indicated that the three functions of the Odo festival are entertainment, preservation of common identity, and tourism revenue.<sup>9</sup> A 2023 article published by the Nigerian International Journal of Literature and Arts noted four functions of the Odo masquerade, namely as a masquerade, as a cult, as a culture, and as a religion.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding its role as a religion, the same source noted that while some members of the Odo are 'pagans', others identify as Christians, and there are communities where 'Christians and Odo supporters clash over conflict of interest and crossing of lines in their exercise of their faith'.<sup>11</sup> However, the source further notes that in other communities, that underwent some reforms, the clergy members reportedly even joined celebrations associated with Odo.<sup>12</sup> A research paper on masquerades and tourism in Igbo land published in February 2022 in the Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences noted masquerades are performed during holidays including Christmas, Easter, New Year, and New Yam.<sup>13</sup>

## **2. Activities and incidents of violence, including treatment of Christians**

In a paper published in February 2022, Dr Esther Uzoh, a social worker and a lecturer at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, stated that the Odo is typical for the Agbaja people in the town of Ngwo, in Enugu state, and noted that '[t]he Ojionu [type of Odo masquerade] masquerade is a water spirits character represented by a head-dress of crocodiles, sharks and other water creatures. The major attribute of Ojionu is creative nonstop dancing'.<sup>14</sup>

Odo festivals take form of public performances held in public spaces such as squares and markets.<sup>15</sup> During the festival, sacrificial offerings in a form of food items or domestic animals are given to the shrines.<sup>16</sup> According by an article about the Odo festival in the town of Ngwo,

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<sup>8</sup> Ozor, G. N. et al., Umulumgbe ODO masquerade traditional ritual performance as a social drama, in: Discovery Publications, 56(297), September 2020, [url?](#), p. 2

<sup>9</sup> Within Nigeria, AKU: Inside Enugu community where men are prohibited from seeing masquerades, 10 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), pp. 172-173

<sup>11</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), p. 173

<sup>12</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), p. 174

<sup>13</sup> Esther, U. et al., Masquerades and Tourism Development in Igbo Land: Anambra State of Nigeria in Focus, in: Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 28 February 2022, [url](#), pp. 93, 95

<sup>14</sup> Uzoh, E. et al., Masquerades and Tourism Development in Igbo Land: Anambra State of Nigeria in Focus, in: Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 28 February 2022, [url](#), pp. 94

<sup>15</sup> Ozor, G. N. et al., Umulumgbe ODO masquerade traditional ritual performance as a social drama, in: Discovery Publications, 56(297), September 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>16</sup> Ozor, G. N. et al., Umulumgbe ODO masquerade traditional ritual performance as a social drama, in: Discovery Publications, 56(297), September 2020, [url](#), p. 2



published in 2020 by Goge Africa, a Nigerian news provider, the oldest man in the community performs traditional rites, and the spirits join the festival after the sacrificial animals get killed.<sup>17</sup> Masquerading includes singing and dancing, and the masquerades wear wooden masks believed to have mystical powers.<sup>18</sup>

In the town of Aku, the Odo masquerade was traditionally conceived as a cultural exhibition and used 'for entertainment and unification' of the community. However, researchers from the Nigerian University of Science and Technology of Agbani, Enugu state, found that the Odo masquerade has lost its original function, becoming an event where Odo members committed crimes and violence such as 'beating and extorting money from people who are going about their legitimate businesses'.<sup>19</sup> In this period, which the researchers from the University of Science and Technology of Agbani called 'period of Odo', citizens faced security concerns, restrictions to their freedom of movement and disruption of their social life.<sup>20</sup> In the Aku and Neke towns, Odo masquerade places curfews during their parades preventing functioning of churches and schools.<sup>21</sup> Corroborating information could not be found by EUAA within time constraints.

In an academic article published by the Irish International Journal of Law, Political Sciences, and Administration in 2022, Rev Fr Dr Christian O. Ele claimed that '[m]asquerade culture has recorded vast human rights violations across Igbo land'.<sup>22</sup> According to the same source, during the Odo festivals, 'Christians are specially targeted for torture. There are records of masquerades menaces across Nigeria, invading Churches and injuring members'.<sup>23</sup> The source reported that such incidents took place in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2019, without providing any more details.<sup>24</sup> Corroborating information could not be found by EUAA within time constraints.

According to an article by Within Nigeria, a local news provider, published in February 2023, 'many villages' have masquerades that cannot be seen by neither men nor women, where locals believe that those who would break this rule would face 'incurable sickness, bad luck and many a time, immediate death'.<sup>25</sup> The same source reported that 'some decades ago', several deaths were linked to the violation of the masquerade rules.<sup>26</sup> Corroborating information on these deaths could not be found by EUAA within time constraints.

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<sup>17</sup> Goge Africa, Ngwo Celebrates Odo Masquerade Festival, 2020, [url](#)

<sup>18</sup> Uzoh, E. et al., Masquerades and Tourism Development in Igbo Land: Anambra State of Nigeria in Focus, in: Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 28 February 2022, [url](#), pp. 95

<sup>19</sup> Amunnadi, C. A., Challenges of Odo Masquerade Cult to Sustainable Development in Aku Town: A Socio Theological Inquiry, September 2021, [url](#), p. 169

<sup>20</sup> Amunnadi, C. A., Challenges of Odo Masquerade Cult to Sustainable Development in Aku Town: A Socio Theological Inquiry, September 2021, [url](#), pp.169, 170

<sup>21</sup> Ele C.O., Masquerade Culture in Igbo Religion: Theory and Practice, July-August 2022, [url](#), p. 100

<sup>22</sup> Ele C.O., Masquerade Culture in Igbo Religion: Theory and Practice, July-August 2022, [url](#), p. 99

<sup>23</sup> Ele C.O., Masquerade Culture in Igbo Religion: Theory and Practice, July-August 2022, [url](#), p. 99

<sup>24</sup> Ele C.O., Masquerade Culture in Igbo Religion: Theory and Practice, July-August 2022, [url](#), p. 99

<sup>25</sup> Within Nigeria, AKU: Inside Enugu community where men are prohibited from seeing masquerades, 10 February 2023, [url](#)

<sup>26</sup> Within Nigeria, AKU: Inside Enugu community where men are prohibited from seeing masquerades, 10 February 2023, [url](#)



While a 2020 paper by the Discovery Publications about the Odo festival by the Umulumgbe people reported on restrictions imposed on women, such as staying indoors during certain times or announcing their presence by singing when going out<sup>27</sup>, an article by Goge Africa about the Odo festival in the town of Ngwo, published in 2020, stated that '[u]nlike other masquerade festivals which restrict the participation of women, the Odo masquerade festival binds all'.<sup>28</sup>

According to a study on Odo masquerade in the northern Igbo land published in 2018 by the Department of Archaeology and Tourism University of Nsukka, during the Odo festivals the devotees walk naked around the town of Neke, and 'in case of any breach, there is no fine, the punishment is death'.<sup>29</sup> The same source stated that during *Mgbamike*, a special feast honouring Odo lasting three days, 'hordes of young Odo adherents and devotees put on hastily made Odo masks known as "Ujeme" and go about to assault Christians found outside their premises and often loot their property'.<sup>30</sup> Corroborating information could not be found by EUAA within time constraints.

An article on crime and violence in Nsukka published by the South Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities in April 2021 indicated that masquerade activities in Nsukka have taken on 'an alarming dimension, creating an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, insecurity, chaos and unrest in the area'.<sup>31</sup> The same source described the impact of the masquerade activities in Nsukka as 'disturbing and tremendous'. For instance, the source described that 'some youth in Nsukka will cover their faces and block roads, beat, steal, rob, snatch and rape innocent citizens of the town'.<sup>32</sup> Corroborating information on violent events in Nsukka related to the Odo masquerade could not be found by EUAA within time constraints.

Information on incidents of violence, particularly towards Christians, during the Odo masquerade festival in the reference period was scarce among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

Some of the incidents of violence involving different groups of masquerades as reported by sources, include:

- On 10 March 2018, in Ugwuaji, a young man returned late home from work without knowing that the masquerade started their celebrations. The masquerade 'beat him with every object available to them,' and asked for the payment of a fee. On the same day, a young man who accidentally ran into a masquerade group was

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<sup>27</sup> Ozor, G. N. et al., Umulumgbe ODO masquerade traditional ritual performance as a social drama, in: Discovery Publications, 56(297), September 2020, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>28</sup> Goge Africa, Ngwo Celebrates Odo Masquerade Festival, 2020, [url](#)

<sup>29</sup> Oguamanam, C.C. et al., Odo Masquerade in Northern Igbo Land: A Cultural Resource in Demise, May 2018, [url](#), p. 91

<sup>30</sup> Oguamanam, C.C. et al., Odo Masquerade in Northern Igbo Land: A Cultural Resource in Demise, May 2018, [url](#), p. 91

<sup>31</sup> Egbuniwe O., et al., Culture, Criminality and Violence in the Nsukka Area of Enugu State, in 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 10 April 2021, [url](#), pp. 69, 72

<sup>32</sup> Egbuniwe O., et al., Culture, Criminality and Violence in the Nsukka Area of Enugu State, in 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 10 April 2021, [url](#), p. 75, 76



attacked and beaten with whips for staying out late. Other citizens were harassed and beaten with sticks and a machete.<sup>33</sup>

- On 12 July 2018, two Catholic priests were dragged out of their car and were beaten by a group of masquerades in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State.<sup>34</sup>
- In April 2020, a seminarian working in a parish church in Nsukka was severely beaten by a group of masquerades.<sup>35</sup>
- In September 2020, the Nsukka area experienced an upsurge in robberies, with masquerades snatching smartphones, laptops, and motorbikes. A pregnant woman was on her way to a maternity home when a group of masquerades stopped her and beat her. She eventually died due to excess bleeding. A trader man who was going from Nsukka to Obollo-Afor was beaten and robbed by the masquerades.<sup>36</sup>
- In August 2023, a person was killed and 100 others were injured in Aku, in the Igbo-Etiti local government area of Enugu state, during a clash between Odo masquerade groups.<sup>37</sup>

In a paper published in February 2022, Dr Esther Uzoh indicated that some masquerade festivals were linked to deaths as a result of a competition between various youth groups using *juju* (charms), without providing any more details. This information could not be corroborated by EUAA in time constraints.<sup>38</sup>

### 3. Consequences for refusal to join Odo

Information on consequences for refusal to join the Odo masquerade was scarce among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query. However, the following information may be relevant.

A 2023 article published by the Nigerian International Journal of Literature and Arts stated on a participation in the Odo masquerade that '[m]embership usually was open to male citizens, and no age limit, as low as two-year old male child can be initiated'.<sup>39</sup> According to the same source, before the initiation into Odo, new prospective members undergo a period of

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<sup>33</sup> Sun (The), Enugu community where masquerades rule the night, 15 April 2018, [url](#); Blueprint Newspaper, Uguwaji: Enugu community where tradition clashes with modern practices, 9 April 2018, [url](#)

<sup>34</sup> Vanguard, Bizarre: Villagers hail as masquerades beat, seriously injure two Catholic priests in Enugu, 19 July 2018, [url](#); Tori.ng, Two Catholic Priests Beaten Mercilessly By Masquerades In Enugu, 19 July 2018, [url](#)

<sup>35</sup> Within Nigeria, Special Report: How Masquerades unleash terror, mayhem on people in Nsukka zone, 19 May 2022, [url](#); Record (The), Oriokpa Masquerades In Nsukka: Why They Should Moderate Their Activities, 9 June 2023, [url](#)

<sup>36</sup> Within Nigeria, Special Report: How Masquerades unleash terror, mayhem on people in Nsukka zone, 19 May 2022, [url](#)

<sup>37</sup> Sahara Reporters, One Killed, Many Injured as Groups Clash Over Masquerade Festival In Enugu Community, 29 August 2023, [url](#); Nation (The), Man killed, 100 injured as rival masqueraders clash in Enugu, 30 August 2023, [url](#); Peoples Gazette, Several casualties recorded in Enugu violent clash, 29 August 2023, [url](#)

<sup>38</sup> Uzoh, E. et al., Masquerades and Tourism Development in Igbo Land: Anambra State of Nigeria in Focus, in: Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 28 February 2022, [url](#), p. 95

<sup>39</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), pp. 170-171



preparation and are 'often' sworn to secrecy, which is also known as '*Igba-ama*'. The initiation process, which can last several days, includes the men wishing to join bringing some food offerings and having their hair shaved.<sup>40</sup> According to a paper on Odo published by the Enugu State University of Science and Technology in 2021, the initiation into Odo, also known as '*ifuama*', as well as general rules and recruitment methods are kept secret and are available only to 'males who are matured enough to keep secret'.<sup>41</sup> According to an article published in 2019 by EkweNdigbo, 'the identities of the masquerade are well-kept secret from children, women and the uninitiated men of society. Only strong, exclusive and trusted men of society are allowed to perform any Masquerade with a high reputation'.<sup>42</sup>

#### **4. State protection**

Information on state protection was not found among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

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<sup>40</sup> Ukwu, F. et al., The Institutionalism of Odo Masquerade and Sustainable Development in Igbo Land, 2023, [url](#), pp. 171-173

<sup>41</sup> Amunnadi, C. A., Challenges of Odo Masquerade Cult to Sustainable Development in Aku Town: A Socio Theological Inquiry, September 2021, [url](#), pp. 165-166

<sup>42</sup> EkweNdigbo, Igbo Masquerades And Their Importance To Society, 2019, [url](#)



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## **ADDITIONAL SOURCES CONSULTED**

ECOI.net; Freedom House; Minority Rights Group International; United Nations – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Refworld; United States – Department of Defense, Department of State, USCIRF – US Commission on International Religious Freedom, CSW - Christian Solidarity Worldwide, ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation