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### On Rationality and the Burden of the Ijele Masquerade: A Note on Emmanuel Eze's Work

**IFEANYI MENKITI**

Department of Philosophy  
Founders Hall 322  
Wellesley College  
106 Central Street  
Wellesley, MA 02481  
USA

In the beginning part of this important book with its telling title, *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism*, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze writes in defense of his chosen approach: "My methodology indeed provides proof of the truth of the statement Anaghi akwu ofu ebe enene manwu. Rationality like a work of art is best appreciated from multiple points of view" (Eze 2008, xi). What I would like to do in this commentary on Eze's work is pursue the significance of the Igbo expression encoded in the passage just cited. The passage not only hints at important connections between the aesthetic and the rational, but also cuts straight to the heart of how we get to know what we know. The cited passage can be translated thus: "One does not stand still, in one place, to witness the great masquerade." The great masquerade referred to here can be considered to stand for the great masquerade of life --life as people live it

the wide world over, whether alone or in groups, always with the citation of this or that reason for whatever it is that they do. Within the Igbo world, the Ijele masquerade is the biggest of them all. It is grand; it is complex; it is the bearer of ineffable mysteries. If one were to truly render a faithful account of what the Ijele stood for, one must first see right, and to first see right one must be prepared to move around with the moving spectacle.

And regarding this Ijele masquerade, imagine, if you will, a towering edifice representative of the sum of village knowledge. Imagine this edifice, afoot, in locomotion through the village square. And as it moves through the square, its unbearable majesty in full display, now proceeding north, then proceeding south, then east and west, there is this buzz and anticipation among the assembled crowd, even as the crowd holds its collective breath, mindful of the heaviness of the ancestral burden, the risks, being borne by the carrier on whose head the towering architecture of the Ijele rests. And in holding its collective breath, the crowd also holds back on any pre-emptive declarative judgment regarding the full meaning of what is being witnessed. That meaning is to be attested to by the villagers themselves who will render judgment after they have had chance, each by each, to move around with the moving spectacle, catching instructive glimpses of the Ijele's dazzling architecture and puzzling out whatever meanings the Ijele had succeeded in projecting during its outing. The point of the expression, then, is that the village can only come to an adequate knowledge of itself after each household, and its members, have had chance to move purposefully around a common object representative of the village's history.

In elaborating on the Ijele masquerade, I hope I have been able to clue in the reader as to why Eze's Igbo aphorism, drawn from the idiomatics of village life, is such an appropriate coda to his chosen task in this important book on rationality. The village may be small, but it is not small

minded. On the contrary, the village maintains a certain largeness of heart whenever the matter at hand is the issue of finding how best to deal with the exigencies of human experience. In the Ijele masquerade, we find before us an image of the world as moving spectacle. Nor Hume, nor Hegel, nor Kant, nor any other in the Western Canon can convince that it is not.

At various points in his book, Eze comes back repeatedly to the central insights guiding his undertaking. Noting that reason is “produced through difference and because of difference,” he goes on to urge that the question we then have to ask is this: “How do you articulate diverse historical forms of rationality?” (Eze 2008, 8). This is a question which it is both appropriate and urgent to ask, since, in his words, “there are many universal languages of reason” (Eze 2008, 9). As we read further, we begin to get a clear sense that Eze’s concern is not with the problem of mind and the world, but with the problem of mind in the world. For what is there in the world, and what is deemed to be a rational articulation of it is, generally speaking, a complex, elusive, and enigmatic thing, and not without its overlay of mystery. Often it is said that to be rational is to have a reason. But to have a reason for something, on the part of someone doing the having, is to be thrown into a complex life history the bases of which cannot be totally articulated. Rationality then emerges as a practical disposition, not abstract and exhaustive, but exploratory and circumscribed. And here the image of the Ijele masquerade, I believe, comes in handy, ready to instruct and to help organize the mind.

Earlier in his book Eze notes how he prefers to talk about the problems of thought as if they were “problems of diversity in thought” and talk of the problem of diversity in the world as “also a problem in the thought of diversity” (Eze 2008, 8). Once he does this he is able to conclude that “To talk this way is already to speak in the language of history and of the everyday” (Eze 2008, 8). In thus insisting, as he again puts it,

on “the vernacular language of the ordinary in experience,” Eze wants to avoid the top-down approach to discourses on rationality, where the big R out there is extracted from on high and then applied in blind fashion inwards to the everyday. Instead one starts inwards from the everyday and then moves outwards towards the big R, with all of the tentativeness that is involved in that motion outwards. As he writes, and I quote again:

It is because language is thus thoroughly historical that thinking, too, is historically fated. And in as much as thinking is both worldly and historically fated, there cannot be just one way or one kind of expression of thought. There are many forms of expression of thought. There are many universal languages of reason. (Eze 2008, 9)

The phrase “many universal languages of reason” catches; it rings a bell and brings us back once more to another one of Eze’s insightful observations: “Experience is the openness of the particular to the diversely universal” (Eze 2008, 13). Experience, he further notes, is what informs all talk of rationality and it is not to be separated from history. Between this experience and history we have all that we need in the matter of the pursuit of rationality beyond the immediacy of the particular judgment. “Experience and history,” he notes, “are our only reliable indices of the universal” (Eze 2008, 23).

And so we return once more to the instructive example of the Ijele masquerade. For the masquerade, its outing being first and foremost an occasion of public knowledge, is philosophically provocative, and Eze’s choice to deploy its imagery in the service of his intellectual goals in this important book is most commendable. Although the Ijele’s outing may be considered also to be an occasion of public entertainment, entertainment does not capture its primary function. It cannot, for the simple reason that the masquerade represents ancestral presences; and ancestors, by their very nature, have a more serious business to do than that of

entertaining an eager and expectant public. Ancestors exist to instruct, to inform, to elevate, and, if need be, to reprimand.

The dynamism that the Ijele represents in terms of the symbolism of the knowledge situation therefore gives the lie to the usual contrasting schemas offered by those who assume the binaries, viz. the rationality of the text vs. the non-rationality of the oral; the dynamism and openness to the change of modern industrial society, versus the stagnancy and closed-mindedness of ancient village society, steeped in unthinking tradition and bound to the dead hand of custom. Not so fast, one wants to say to the text bound modernist claiming these binaries.

There is a saying that the eye cannot see what the mind does not already know. Here, Eze is surely right in reminding us that the mind's knowing, and consequently its seeing, is anchored in an irreducible way in the specificities of circumstance, the exigencies of experience in history. There can be no one fell swoop global perceptual act that anchors all our knowledge, or anchors all our rationality conceived with a capital R.

There is an illustrative item which I would now like to bring up before drawing this discussion to a close. This example pertains to the question that often arises regarding the rationality, or lack thereof, of the African cultural practice of second burial ceremonies, and the huge expenses associated with them. Given the poverty of African villagers, why, the Western observer/visitor asks, do these villagers show a willingness to shoulder the expenses that come with these ceremonies? Why do they not invest their scarce resources in setting up a fish farm, or fruit stand, or other income generating activity, instead of on ceremonies geared towards the departed? For this observer/visitor, surely, this is an example of an irrational cultural practice, since it should be clear to one and to all that food comes before ceremony.

But, surely, the villagers see what they are doing in a totally different light. If we asked them, we will find that they comprehend their practice as a necessary practice designed to enable departed kinsfolk to make successful entry to the ancestral ranks, with ancestorhood understood as a phase in the ontological journey of personhood. The dead are not dead but alive in an ancestor phase of existence. The second burial ceremonies are part of the dead's process of purification prior to joining the ancestral ranks. In this sort of debate where it is clear that we are dealing with a conflict of two rationalities, one having to do with economic efficacy, the other with the parameters of personal obligation in a world of strongly held values, the question naturally arises: which rationality should prevail? And what about the question of trade-offs between rationalities? For example, should an Englishman in London really consider it irrational if he spent funds (which he could have saved to grow his portfolio) on funeral arrangements for a dead uncle? Should this Englishman reason that he should consign his dead uncle, in a bare bones manner, to his final resting place, in unshod feet and raggedy underwear, so as to squeeze additional savings for his bank account in Lloyd's of London? I doubt that he will so reason. If it is not irrational in the English case to not let economic efficacy trump everything in the matter of the burial of the dead, then surely in the African case we should not consider it irrational that economic efficacy has not been allowed to prevail, village poverty notwithstanding.

#### References:

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