

BELIEFS AND PERCEPTION OF MASQUERADES AND ANCESTRAL SCREENS OF RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

Communities based on ethnic decent abound in many African societies, underscoring their sense of communal belief systems and perceptions about their culture. These beliefs are kept alive through their art, myths, legends, folklores, rituals, prayers, proverbs, songs and especially masquerades and masquerade festivals. Inherent in all of these are the recording of historical events, cultural beliefs and social customs handed down from a generation unto another. This paper attempts to discuss the beliefs accorded the Duen Fubara Screens and Ekineba masquerade of the Kalabari, Okonko masquerade groups of Bonny in Rivers State and Uba- Kala clan of Umuahia in Abia State; the sword Fish masks of the Abua people in Abua/Odual Local Government of Rivers State. It concludes that most of these beliefs are still kept alive till date through the hosting of masquerade festivals in local communities which have recently taken the form of carnivals organized by state governments as an added impetus to keeping the culture of various communities out of extinction.

Keywords: Beliefs, Masquerade, Masquerade festivals, Local communities and customs

Introduction

For the traditional African, the community is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin or deep common interests of values. On this note African communities which he is a part of comprehends the totality of the physical environment or living on one hand, the world of ancestors, divinities and deities or spirit beings. These spirit beings, ancestors or deities are represented by different kinds of symbols like masks, screens and other carved objects housed in shrines and sacred altars. The community is adjudged sacred rather than secular, surrounded by various religious forms and symbols. Those in the cities return to their villages to be part of important traditional rituals and cultural events like, new yam festival of the Ikwerre and Ibo people of the South- South and South East, initiation and cleansing rites of the Nasarawa people of the North-Central and Osun people of the South West, title- taking, masquerade festivals of the South–West, South-South and South-East people. This is because in traditional Africa, the individual does not exist alone rather owes his existence to other members of the community, past generations and contemporaries (Mbiti, 1990) in Ejizu, 2011).

According to Ododo (2015), masquerades essentially connote disguise and impersonation through the use of mask. In Africa, masquerade performance, integrates flamboyant and expressive use of costumes, drumming, songs, acrobatic displays, dance and mime into some amount of dramatization that emphasizes a keen sense of artistry. It is in this sense that masquerades are perceived as an art (Ododo, 2015). In fact Okoye (1999) in exemplifying the Igbo masquerade art, argues that masquerade is a performance in its

own right that qualifies as an art and should not be appended to theater arts, while insisting that it is greater in scope than the occupational concept and practice of theater.

Traditionally, masquerade art is a very vital cultural event in Africa because of its ancestral manifestations. It is perceived as an embodiment that encapsulates the spirit of the ancestors. The Yoruba considers the ancestors as “departed spirit of their forebears”(Ogunyemi. 1997), for the Igbos according to Osadebe (1981), “the ancestors were the all important link between the material and spiritual worlds, while serving as the source for obtaining other worldly knowledge by the Igbo.” Ododo (2015) relying on authorities like Horton (1963), Segy (1975), Willet (1971) Ojo and Olajubu (1977), Okoye (1999) concludes that:

All African traditions recommend that masquerades be perceived as supernatural beings that are guests of the living from the extra-mundane universe. They discourage the perception of them as representations by actors wearing costumes and masks; rather, the costumed actors are regulated as the spirits themselves, respected by the community appropriately as befits their spiritual characters.

These assertions brings to bear the African philosophy of life in its entirety as a continuum or as Soyinka (1976) captures it as a “dome of continuity”, a state of transition. In the same vein, Sofola (1979) refers to it as a “state of perpetual transmutation” which makes unbroken continuity possible. This is why the annual ancestral visit to the land of the living in the form of masquerades is revered and respected. This is why within the Igbo traditional context according to Okoye (1999) masquerades are perceived as, incarnated ancestors who have been reverently dispatched to the general conflation of the ancestral spirit world. They manifest as guest of their living communities within which they must be treated with regulated awe, respect and other relevant attitudes. The general Igbo reverence for their ancestors as an essential and supernatural extension of the living human community ensures that this sanctified attitude carries over to the masquerades. Thus they are credited with the supernatural powers and supernal insights. They descend to their erstwhile communities, at the ordinance of its members, to celebrate or mourn with them, or dispatch some social actions of consequence.

Rivers State Masquerades and Ancestral Screens

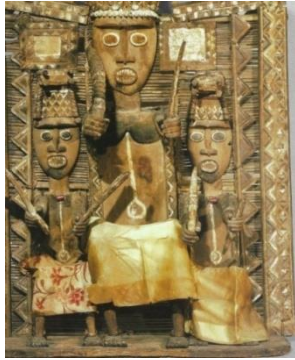


Plate I: Title: Screen for ancestors: *Duen fubara*, Origin: *Kalabari* group, Medium: Wood, cane, raffia, and natural pigment, Height: 127cm, Year: 19th century. Source: Eyo E. (2008:p245), From Shrines to Showcases: Masterpieces of Nigerian Art.



Plate II: Funerary Screen (*Duen Fubara*), Abonnema (Kalabari Ijaw), Nigeria.

Date: late 19th century, Medium: Wood. Source: <http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/259/funerary-screen>. retrieved on July 9, 2015, p.1



Plate III: Ancestral Screen (duen fubara), Kalabari Ijaw, Nigeria. Date: late 19th century, Medium: Wood, fiber, and cloth. Height: 3'x9.5'. Source: Kleiner S.F.(2009) Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Concise Global History, second edition, published by Clark Baxter, p.532

The *Duen* (the dead) ancestral screen as shown in Plates I and II according to Horton (1981) are the *teme* (the spiritual or immaterial) of human beings which escaped from their bodies at death and continued

existence on the immaterial plane. They are believed to retain the character and values they held while alive, and to participate in a society not unlike those of living *Kalabari*. Like village heroes and water people, the dead too are portrayed in a detailed mythology describing their life while on earth. Prominent heads of the *Kalabari* families may be commemorated with the wooden assemblage called *duen fubara*, a screen to which is attached a carved image symbolic of the head of the family along with his emblems of office and other trappings representative of his life and accomplishments (Eyo, 2008).

In the traditional *Kalabari* system, the living dead or ancestors are highly revered spirits who have a great influence over the daily lives of the living. The *Kalabari* attend to the needs of these ancestor spirit, known as *Duen*, in order to ensure that the spirits will continue to bring good to the family in particular and the community as a whole. Relatives therefore, commissioned an artist to produce an elaborate memorial screen in order to honour and provide *Duen* with a special and secure resting place. This memorial screen is produced only for an important member of a trading house called *Duen Fubara*, which connotes “forehead of the dead.” The *Kalabari* people believe that an individual’s immortal spirit or life force rests in the forehead or *Fubara*, during the person’s lifetime. When the person dies the spirit leaves the body in search of another resting place. Memorial screens therefore provide that place for the most important ancestor spirit, hence their name, “foreheads of the dead”. By giving the *duen* a place to rest, the members of a house are not only able to honour it, but also, to some extent, control it.

Traditionally, a screen was constructed from one to several years after the death of the person it represents. When completed the Screen was placed in an inner room of the trading house, behind an altar of three mud pillars where offering was generally made to the deceased spirit. Following elaborate consecration and installation rituals, the head of the deceased household brought food and drinks to the altar every eight days.

There are varieties of the *Duen Fubara* as shown in Plates I, II and III. This is due to either the artist that was commissioned to produce them or was produced to reflect a particular Trading House (family). The *Duen Fubara* shown in Plate III was produced during the 19th century. It is made of wood and raffia and depicts three figures in a seated position carved from the “Odumdum” wood (Funerary Screen, 2009). This wood was chosen because of its legendary association with orderly human social life. The constructive nature of the screen is typical of *Kalabari* art. The heads, hands, bodies, leg appendages, and other accessories are individually carved and assembled with nails, raffia, staples, and pegs in relief against the backdrop of a rigidly framed weaker screen. This type of assembled relief construction produces a visual effect that is quite different from a three dimensional sculpture. The central figure stands for the leader of the trading house to whom the screen pays homage. The large size of his body emphasises his importance in relation to the two figures that flank his sides, which probably represent his kinsmen or servants. The artist does not depict the leader through individualized features as in a portrait, instead, by the accessories

which he wears or holds because each trading house owns the right to certain masquerade performances or headpieces. This is why the masquerade performance was an important means of identity for an individual or a trading house (Funerary Screen, 2009). This important personality wears an *Ekine* Society headdress of the *Alagba* masquerade which projects above the screen frame, which symbolizes prestige and his stature within his society. Some of the objects he and his attendants once held, though missing in this frame, are shown in Plates I and II as ivory tusks (sign of authority) intricately designed with motifs and staff of office. All the figures in these Plates wear cloth skirts around their waist as compared to Plate III whose skirt is conspicuously absent. There are pegs above the frame which supports a group of small heads that symbolized the number of dependents this leader had.

The figures are abstract in representation, symmetrical and are frontally posed. The artist reduces the various anatomical features to stylized geometric components of large oval heads, eyes and mouths, flat rectangular torsos rigid outstretched arms and bent legs. The tongue-shaped flat forms may represent their chest or shoulder blades. Running from their chest region down to their navel is a body scarification used to identify a particular trading house as reflected on the figures in Plates I, II and III. There are triangular motifs which run from the top to the bottom on either side of the figures. The colours used to partinate the screen are essentially derived from the natural colours of the wood, earth colour of brown with black and white. The symbolic use of these colours may be known. They serve as decorative additions to this all important art of the *Kalabari* people.



Plate IV: *Ekineba* Masquerade

Source: Objects of Power (PDF)-ACTLab, www.actlab.utexas.edu/-princess/Vision/objects. retrieved May 30, 2013

Represented by means of masquerade in *Kalabari* are the village heroes, water people (water spirit) and the dead. Responsibility for these masquerades in all *Kalabari* villages is vested in *Ekine* an association containing most of the adult members of the community named after the hero-goddess who is supposed to have been shown the secret of their dancing by the water people (Horton, 2009). According to the *Kalabari* legend, a beautiful woman named *Ekineba* was abducted by the water spirits. On her return to the human world, she taught people how to perform the masquerades, which she learnt from the spirits. Presently, *Ekineba* is the patroness of the masquerade society named after her, but only men can belong to

the *Ekine* society, wear masks or perform in masquerades (Vajda ,nd). Entry into this association is secured by finding oneself a member who has been impressed with one's dancing prowess, and who will sponsor one before the association. A small payment and seven bottles of palm gin must then be given. One of these bottles is taken to the priest of *Ekine Ba*, who invokes her on the new member's behalf after the priest pours a glass of gin to her and smears kaolin on the candidate's forehead. This symbol of association with the gods signifies entry into the association.

Ekine masquerade festival heralds activities for those who have to sew together the cloths and decorate the wooden headdresses which cover the dancer as symbols of the gods. Horton opines that in the evening before the masquerade performs those responsible for the cult assemble in the shrine where the headdresses are painted and purified. This is done by the killing of a cock or sometimes a goat before the headdresses with a prayer that the *owu* should spare the dancer from any accident and that peace and prosperity should come to the owners of the cult. After dawn, the *Ekine* drummer calls the masker to the dancing field. Male helpers crowd into the shrine, sewing and strapping the dancer into the many cloths they must be dressed with. The author states that as each vanishes slowly into his cloths and the headdresses are secured, the *owu*'s people take the dancer to the square amidst shouts of praise. He takes the field to perform after he must have visited the shrine of *Ekine Ba*, patroness of the masquerade. What is principally displayed by the masquerade is special knowledge of instructions from the drums. As he makes his way through the town the drum tells him to point at the thirty three (33) shrines of state heroes and royal ancestors. Vajda reveals that, should the masquerade fail's to understand the instructions or falter in the performance, he may be disgraced by the crowd, by revealing his human face.



Plate V: *Okonko* Masquerade group of Bonny in Rivers State

Source: Rainbow on the River, Opobo International Boat Regatta Festival Magazine, 2009

The origin of *Okonko* masquerade is highly contentious. In Bonny town in Rivers State, Warisenibo Levi Allison (Obinukwu), Wariopusenibo Blesbee Fapu Jumbo (Ekereme) and Warisenibo Fubara Juwosomie Jumbo(Ekereme) from the Jumbo Ishileogono *Okonko*, put the origin of *Okonko* cultural club in Grand Bonny as 1949. They said it started from Ishileogono Jumbo. Tracing the origin of *Okonko* in Bonny, however, Warisenibo Abel Banigo (Ohungbokwu) and Mr. Felix Tamunonengiyeofori Allison

(Obinukwu) of Ibanise *Okonko* Nwaprabetogha cultural club of Bonny Island, said that the late Kiepirima Willam Jumbo brought the masquerade into Grand Bonny. They claimed that their own club was the first to perform in Bonny Kingdom (Grain Consulting, 2009).



Plate V: *Okonko* Masquerade group of Abia State, Nigeria

Source: Rainbow on the River, Opobo International Boat Regatta Festival Magazine, 2009

The chairman of *Okonko* in Uba-Kala Clan of Umuahia in Abia State in 2009, Elder Anawnti Nwankwo laughed off any suggestion that *Okonko* could have originated from anywhere else. He said it was a cultural dance that is as old as Umuahia land because his forefathers saw *Okonko*, and therefore nobody would be able to give an account of when it started. Elder Nwankwo saw *Okonko* as a powerful cultural society that was not only used for entertainment during annual festivals but also served to maintain peace and order in the past. He regretted that the combined assault by state and religion, had assigned *Okonko* and other traditional institutions a bleak future. He further revealed that in his youthful days it was easy to identify the nine types of mask for *Okonko* in Ubakala clan, which is not the case presently. The nine types of *Okonko* masquerade include, *Akpa-rakpa-oji*, *Ogbarebe*, *Egede*, *NwaUdeghinbe*, *Nwa Ndanala*, *Ubu Ugwu 1-3* and *Ati*. (Grain Consulting, 2009).



Plate VI: Title: Swordfish Headdress (Saw Fish). Medium: Wood, Paint and Mirror, Origin: Abua group, Length: 203.2cm, Year: 20th Century. Source: Eyo E. (2008), from shrines to showcases: Masterpieces of Nigerian Art

Though the *Oki* (Swordfish or Saw fish) masquerade is a common feature of the Rivers people the headdress depicted in Plate VI above is from Abua community. The headdress is usually worn at the *Oki* festival held during the Christmas period. It is performed to cleanse the community of evil and to usher in a season of abundance of fish for the people in the coming year. During the ceremony, dancers portray a

family of fish with the head of the family represented as *Oki* a sea creature resembling a sword shark. In the course of the celebration, each fish family takes turn to display their fish-like dance (Jones, 1930 and Eyo, 2008).

The mask is placed on the wearer's head as captured in Plate VII as captured in page 12 consists of a large horizontal wooden structure with coloured edges around the lower part of the mask. In the central part are numerous curved triangular shapes and designs on either sides, amongst which five prominent fins are seen, four at the sides and one at the top of the fish. There are also other smaller and medium sized fins carved like the claws of a crab. The frontal part of this horizontally carved fish has jagged edges which represent the sharp teeth while the two bow-like structures on the top of the head stand for the whiskers. At the top end of these teeth-like forms are two bold shapes representing the eyes. The impression the whole headdress elicits is that of a skeleton of a fish, a stylized abstraction of a sword shark. Bones as in the case of this headdress represented in a skeletal form symbolize immortality or the spirit of the sword fish. The Abua people, like most communities in Rivers State venerate water spirits and are represented in sea creatures like the sword fish. The colours of the headdress are derived from the natural colours of the wood and earth colours of brown, red with black and white,. The meaning of these colours may be for aesthetic reasons.

Plate VII: *Oki* (Saw fish) Masquerade of Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State, Rivers State



Carnival 2012, Photograph by: Emmanuel Wesley Okachi

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