

VISUAL INTERPRETATION OF FORMS AND ELEMENTS IN KWAGH-HIR ANIMAL MASQURADES

USMAN, Musiliat Ozavize/AVAV, Joshua Aondona

Department of Theatre and Media Studies/ Department of Visual and Creative Arts,
Federal University Lafia,

P.M.B 146, Lafia, Nassarawa State,

Nigeria.

ize4eva@gmail.com/joshuaavav@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper looks at the visual art forms and their elements on the figure of the masquerades and will as well illustrate imbibing the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades among the Tiv of Nigeria. Masquerade performances is an art form that represent the presence of ancestors. They exhibit the characteristics of specific ancestors and can foretell the future and perform other ritual functions in African culture. Masquerade plays very significant role in African festival. It is believed that indigenous communities in Africa, are closely associated with one form of masquerade or the other in relation to marriage, procreation, death, sacrifice, continuity, survival that span across the entire culture and religious beliefs of the people.

Key Words: Masquerades, Visual interpretation, Form, Kwagh-Hir

Introduction/Background

According to Emiemokumo (2012), masquerade is a moving art. When a masquerade performs on stage, the audience thinks mainly of the figure they see which is the visual art form. This figure is the focus of attention. Masquerade performance is attributed to our indigenous African society. They play an important role in influencing our belief system. Every community in Africa is associated with masquerade performance in relation to procreation, sacrifice, death, birth, war, and cleansing. Masquerade performance is an old-age practice that has gained popularity in the universe, it plays significant role in African society. This an inherited tradition that has gained continuity and can be identified as performing art that has dramatic elements, with its qualities of dance, songs, costume, drummers, mask, stage, impersonation, and spectators. Masquerades are categorized to suit a particular occasion. They represent spirit being that appears in the community and the masker's identity is hidden because he is transformed into that figure. Therefore, masquerade as a visual form looks at the art form we see, i.e. the costume and mask, which make up the masquerade and the focus of attention for spectators. Masquerading is constant feature in most African festival performances; there are performances in some societies that are particularly masks and masquerading. During such festivals, the attention is on the masks and masquerading and their impact/mission. Of course, we have mentioned that masquerades, in the African worldview, are supposed to be physical representations or apparitions of deities, gods/goddesses or ancestral spirits. Sometimes, they appear to cleanse the entire society, to feast with the human community or to be propitiated and worshiped.

According to Hagher (2003), the word "Kwagh-Hir" literally means "folktale" or a "Thing of Magic". He notes that "*Kwagh-Hir* is an all-night secular/sacred performance of the Tiv. The Tiv people according to Hagher (1990), Igirigi (2007), Dzurgba (2011), Dzurgba (2012) and Torkula (2004) are said to be found in Benue, Nassarawa, Taraba and Plateau State with the highest concentration in Benue State. He highlights that this theatre reflects many of the social qualities for which the Tiv are known which are hospitality, gracefulness sensuality, sense of justice, prosperity, physical strength and endurance. The origin of *Kwagh-Hir* according to Hagher (2014), started as a revolt in the early 1950s. He notes that it was in 1964, the year of the 'Atem-tyo', a Tiv revolt, the *Kwagh-Hir* spread like a wildfire through the Tiv land." Folktales are told in almost all societies with trickster characters like the rabbit, the tortoise or the cat dominating their plots, as a way to entertain young children at bedtime as well as to teach them morals on contemporary issues and tradition. He maintains that the *Kwagh-Hir* is therefore an enactment of Tiv folktales considering that they are hunters, their stories and imaginations are full of wild animals (Nyam). He reveals that some of the episodes of the *Kwagh-Hir* feature imaginative forms of wild beasts that dance to the melodious tunes of the humans. The author spells out that the Tiv folktales are not only told about animals, but spirits (*Azov*) and puppets (*Eev*) as well. He further states that the *Kwagh-Hir* comprises of many art forms which include, story-telling, poetry, puppetry, music, dance and dramatization.

The *Kwagh-Hir* masquerade is one of the cultural expressions of the Tiv people of Benue in central Nigeria. This paper looks at the creative strength of the *Kwagh-Hir* masquerade. *Kwagh-Hir* masquerade performance cuts across the entire Tiv community and draws on variety of dramatic device to show the masquerade. An example of this masquerade, is the *Fefa Nyam* in figure ii, the actor is completely covered by layers of raffia fibre, the masquerade dashes into the arena and dances vigorously to the music and songs rendered. The masquerade covers the whole arena with its presence; it vibrates the stage with short fast forward-backward movement. The costume and movement of this masquerade is the focus of attention for the audience (Hagher 2003). Another instance is *Nyamadudu* figure i, *Gaga Nyam* figure iv, *Adzenike* masquerade in figure iii. The masquerade takes turn to execute their performances by displaying different dance steps, and act to the direction of the drummers' music. They also relate with the spectators who applaud their performance. The masquerade action and dance on stage is controlled by the beating of the drum either at low or high tempo. They are richly dressed in costume from head to toe. The performance is usually staged in an open space in the village centre, arena where the human spirits and animals co-exists in harmony. This Trinitarian stage is what creates the magic called *Kwagh-Hir*.

The spiritual powers of *Kwagh-Hir* are embedded in the visual form of the masquerade. These masquerades are sculptures that are made to agitate during performances which the raffia attached to the body of these masquerades swings to create visual forms that can be used as a source of inspiration for artists. Hagher (2003) believes the *Kwagh-Hir* masquerades are sacred figures whose costumes are made by specialized trained traditional sculptors who are commissioned by *Kwagh-Hir* groups. He further notes that "usually, before any *Kwagh-Hir* group is constituted, it is believed that the village or community who desires to form the group must first of all acquire the right paraphernalia, costumes, props and most especially new masks and puppets. Masks are produced by trained carvers who dexterously use a limited range of simple tools. Uzo (1997) in Saleh (2010) reveals that these carvers have been described by art historians as sensitive African and dynamic innovators whose art is a continuous process of creative evolution. Art is a certain kind of cultural calling that has its own legitimacy as a sensible, crafted, allusively symbolic action and movements. The *Kwagh-Hir* theatre according Hagher (2003) and (2014) provides secular entertainments that seek to address political, economic, religious issues, education and socialization through the enactment of the past and contemporary events by humans using masks, puppets and masquerades.

Objectives of this Paper

The objectives of this paper are to:

1. identify the visual elements and forms found and the *Kwagh-Hir* animal masquerades
2. project the aesthetics of the *Kwagh-Hir* animal masquerades.
3. document the *Kwagh-Hir* animal masquerades

Masks and Costumes

A Mask is a form of disguise or concealment, usually worn over or in front of the face to hide the identity of a person and by its own features to establish another being. This essential characteristic of hiding and revealing personalities or moods is common to all masks (Winget 2014). As cultural objects, they have been used throughout the world in all periods since the Stone Age and have been as varied in appearance as in their use and symbolism. According to Winget (2014) and Brandon (2014) since at least Paleolithic times people have used masks made of wood, basketry, bark, corn husks, cloth, leather, skulls, papier-mâché, and other materials. Masks may cover the face, the entire head, or the head and shoulders, and they are sometimes considered part of an accompanying costume. Masks vary widely in their realism or abstraction, their use of symbols, and their ornamentation. According Winget (2014), masks are worn during festivals, celebrations, and ceremonies whose purposes are to cleanse, honor, entertain, initiate, or bless. A mask serves both to disguise and to protect the wearer, who is most often male, as he performs in dances or theatrical skits. Most masks are carved of wood, although some are made of cloth and other materials. They may be decorated with paint, beads, cloth, or raffia.

Masquerade costumes are made up of different materials depending on culture. For the *Kwagh-Hir* animal masquerades, their masks and costumes are made by highly commissioned artists within the communities and the *Kwagh-Hir* group. Their masks are made up of wood mostly depending on the type of masquerades. The masks are designed in such a way that they look to stand the beauty in the competition. These animal masquerades costumes are made of raffia and pieces of fabrics therefore enhancing their aesthetics.

Composite Land and Water Monsters.

The *Kwagh-Hir* animal masquerades are of different types. The animals are made of both land and water monsters. For the land figurines, animal masquerades like *Nyamadudu*, *Fefa Nyam*, *Adzenike* and *Ajikoko* animal masquerades are land based animal masquerades. *Gaga Nyam* also known as the hippopotamus are classified under water monsters because they live mostly in deep waters and at times partly on lands.

Colour

The Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades are colourful in their outlook ranging from their mask and the colour found on their costumes. Their mask and costumes are sometimes painted with colour pigments to enhance their outlook and add to the beauty of the masquerades and sometimes they are allowed to maintain their natural colour of the material used. Colours play an important role when it comes to art. Colour is a physical phenomenon of light or visual perception associated with the various wavelengths in the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum according to an unknown source. Colour is also seen as the aspect of object that may be described in terms of hue, lightness and saturation. Colour according to Ocvirk, et al (2006) is the most universally appreciated element that appeals to children and adults instantly. Colour is one of the most expressive elements because it affects our emotions directly. When one views a work of art, one does not have to rationalize what we are supposed to feel about its colour, instead, we have an immediate emotional reaction to it. The beauty of Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades also lies on the colours found on them.

Kwagh-Hir Animal Masquerades

Nyamadudu in figure i is a name derived from a bear by the Tiv. According to Seidensticker & Lumpkin. (2009), a bear is any of a group of mammals distinguished by a large, stocky body; powerful limbs; dense fur; and a short, stumpy tail. They noted that bears live in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia, where they occupy a wide range of habitats, including mountain, forest, and Arctic wilderness. This animal is almost 5ft high with two elongated horns with a triangular head. The body of this masquerade is covered with very thick layers of raffia and fabrics. This is seen in figure I below.

Fefa Nyam Figure ii is an animal masquerade that is described as a fast animal. This animal moves fast as the name implies which causes the animal to vibrate with shot fast forward-backward movements, that throws the raffia fibre into such disorder that all the layers of the colours are seen at once. The costume colour and movement seem to be its prime attraction. This animal has two long horns painted with white and black hues in eight segments on each of the horns similar to Ajikoko figure v and Adzenike (figure iii). The head of this animal is rendered in white paint with a patch of black. The entire body is covered with raffia similar to the masquerades in (figure i-v). This animal dances according to the tune of the song played during the performance as seen in figure ii below.

Adzenike (figure iii) is another masquerade noted by Hagher (2003) which is a resplendent in the majesty of the animal kingdom in its paradise where it exudes happiness and contentment in its harmonious world. The animal masquerade continues the opening glee by establishing like the lighting man and the orpasen (narrator) before the sacredness of the space as the place for communion of man, animal, and spirit. It is significant that all the men including the hunter now occupy this space without any seeking to remove the other. These animals possess two long horns painted with white and black in three segments just like the Ajikoko masquerade in figure i and is covered with raffia with some patches of black on the neck as seen in Figure iii.

Gaga Nyam (figure iv) also known as hippopotamus is an animal masquerade that is described as a monster that swallows lazy children who refuse to go to work. This animal has two strings tied to the eyes, two to the ears, one on either side of the jaws, and one tied to the tail. The entire body of this animal is covered with dark raffia similar to Nyamadudu in figure i. The flat bucket-like cover as the head has raffia around the sides. On this animal's head are roles of zigzag lines running from the forehead down to the mouth which is of importance to this study in terms of creating lines as part of the element of design as seen in Figure iv.

Hagher (2003) noted that Ajikoko (figure v) is the oldest of the Tiv collection. It has always been introduced as a huge deer and a woman-hating monster that seeks out bad girls for attack. This masquerade has two long horns each painted in black and white hues with three segments with a flat rectangular head and grasses coming out of the mouth. The entire body of this masquerade is covered with raffia as seen in (figure i). The review of Ajikoko masquerade (figure v) have the horns painted in black and white hues segments similar to Fefa Nyam (figure ii), Adzenike (figure iii) and also the presence of the raffia is similar to all the animal masquerades reviewed.



Figure i: Nyamadudu animal masquerade
Source: Avav, J. A (2015). MFA Dissertation ABU Zaria



Figure ii. Fefa Nyam (Nyor Nyam masquerade)
Source: Hagher (1980), Ph.D Dissertation, Department of English, ABU Zaria



Figure iii. Adzenike (Nyor Nyam masquerade)
Source: Hagher (2003), The Kwagh-Hir Theatre "A Metaphor of Resistance"



Figure iv. Gaga Nyam: (Nor Mnger) (hippopotamus) (Puppet Masquerades)
Source: Hagher (1980), Ph.D Dissertation Department of English, ABU Zaria



Figure v: Ajikoko animal masquerade
Source: Avav, J. A (2015). MFA Dissertation ABU Zaria

Conclusion

Masks and masquerades used offer a visually appeal for their shapes and forms. When a masquerade performs on stage, the audience thinks mainly of the figure they see which is the visual art form. A traditional African masquerade reveals the creative strength of the African in masquerade art, and the functions of masquerade as an acting visual art form. In addition, African traditional masquerades have continued to inspire both African and European artists in the creation of works of arts because of their visual forms in terms of craft, mask, costumes and beautiful colours embedded on them.

On the basis of present knowledge, it would appear that there is not or has not been any set response or reaction by any one of the three groups involved with the mask: the artist, the wearer, the spectator. There is, however, a reaction of a particular kind common to every culture, a response such as awe, delight and pleasure, fear and even terror. These are as traditionally determined as the forms and costumes of the masks themselves. This is a learned and inherent pattern of conduct for each culture. Masks, therefore, that have a closely comparable appearance in several unrelated groups in quite different parts of the world often have totally dissimilar meanings and functions. It is thus practically impossible to determine either the meaning or use of a mask by its appearance alone. The significance of masks can be determined only by reference to accounts or personal observations of the masks in the setting of their own culture.

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