

## **Costumes in Ekiti-West Masque Dramaturgy**

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### **Introduction**

Ekiti-West is one of the sixteen local government areas in Ekiti State, Nigeria. It is made of about seven major towns out of which five are very prominent. These five prominent ones are: Aramoko (the headquarters), Okemesi, Erijiyan, Ikogosi and Erio. This research was conducted in two of these prominent towns, namely: Aramoko and Erijiyan. We chose Aramoko and Erijiyan for this research because these are the two towns with robust masquerade traditions in the local government. This research is a continuation of our research efforts to unearth the different masquerade traditions in the different communities of Ekiti State, Nigeria with the argument that a technological reproduction of the masquerade costumes will make them relevant in the contemporary global Tourism and Entertainment market. Eliminating the limitations of the existing organic costume materials through technological reproduction will present the masquerades as attractive and acceptable commodity in the emergent tourism and entertainment market.

This research is theoretically located in technological determinism. Technological Determinism was coined by Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) an American Sociologist and Economist, to mean that the technology of a society determines the development of its social structure and cultural values. Expanding this theory, the German Philosopher and Economist, Karl Marx, posited that fast changing technologies alter human lives. Karl's position is foregrounded in his perspective that changes in technology are the primary influence on human and social relations and organizational structure, and those social relations and cultural practices ultimately revolve around the technological and economic base of a given society.

The connection between this theory and this study is in our argument that the primitive technology with which the Ekiti masquerade costumes were conceived and constructed is, in part, responsible for the dwindled fortune of the Ekiti masquerade theatre. An introduction of a new technology to power

this Art will positively impact the economy of that society. The new technology will determine the contemporary relevance of the masquerade Art to the contemporary Ekiti, Nigerian, African and the global society.

### **Masquerade Costumes in Ekiti West Zone**

Ekiti West zone is the smallest zone in the state as far as masquerade traditions and masquerade varieties are concerned. The major masquerade towns in this zone are Aramoko Ekiti and Erijiyan Ekiti while the third major town, Ikogosi Ekiti, is perhaps the only town in Ekiti state where the masquerade art is forbidden. It is a serious taboo for a masquerade to step on the soil of Ikogosi Ekiti.

In this zone we shall be discussing Eegun Ara masquerade, Eegun Ode and Urere Erijiyan. Our discussions on this zone begin with Eegun Ara masquerade of Aramoko Ekiti.

### **Eegun Ara Masquerade of Aramoko Ekiti**

Eegun Ara, which literally means the “masquerade of Ara” is a complex aesthetic phenomenon represented by a simple name. While “Ara” is the shortened form of Aramoko – the community where the masquerade is domiciled “eegun” is the common Yoruba word for “masquerade”, hence “Eegun Ara”. The traditional history of the Yoruba people could be found in material and aesthetic expressions around them such as their masquerades since the African culture was traditionally undocumented in Western literary terms.

The history of the masquerade’s advent in Aramoko community is aesthetically documented on the Eegun Ara masquerade. Hence, one would note, in the physical appearance and the performative tendencies of this masquerade the portrait of uncertain watchfulness of an agitated raider on a mission for survival.

The immense covering on the masquerade’s face refers to a deliberate intent to mask identity. This is because, according to legend prevailing in the community, the first masquerade garment in Aramoko was worn by a man who was on a mission to steal in the market in a desperate bid to survive. This is why today, Aramoko people hail or cheer their masquerade with the shout “olee ... olee ... olee” meaning “thief ... thief ... thief”. A full narrative

of this legend is necessary here for a full understanding of the discussions in this chapter.

### **OLEE: The legend of Eegun Ara**

Aramide, alias omo oko (meaning: Aramide the son of his father or Aramide who is not a bastard) led his younger siblings out of Ile-Ife and journeyed eastwards in search of self-determination. Some days into the journey, an argument ensued between Aramide and his younger brothers which led to a sharp disagreement. They then agreed to let Aramide go his separate way while the younger brothers, as a team, also followed another direction.

Several months after this separation, these younger brothers got to a point where they were seriously hungry and they had no food left with them. Their existence was genuinely threatened by hunger. As they sat and agonised, one of them sighted a pile of smoke rising from afar.

They became happy that somebody must be cooking at the place where the smoke was rising from. They first decided to trace the place and go there to beg for food, however, they later changed their strategy. Thinking that their potential benefactor might attack and enslave them, they decided they would rather scare him or her away and steal whatever is being cooked. They also decided to send just one of them first. Consequently, they heavily masked the identity of their youngest brother, making him to appear like a demon whose sight would scare people and make them run for their lives so that the masked youngest brother would carry any food in sight and return to meet his siblings in their hideout.

The masked brother followed the direction of the smoke, screaming in guttural voice to complete the demon character. However, before getting to the smoke, he started hearing voices of a multitude of people. He sensed that could be a market place where assorted food items would even be available; he then abandoned the direction of the smoke and followed the direction of the market.

On getting to the market, the traders and buyers left their wares and fled because they hadn't seen anything like that before. The masked youngest brother then settled down to eat first so as to have enough strength for the rest of his assignment. As he sat to eat, the people watching from afar noticed that although the legs were white, the soles of the feet were not white. They looked like the soles of normal human beings. Also, the way he was eating was not spirit-like. These raised curiosity and they decided to

challenge the masked man. Some of the brave men around summoned courage and launched an attack and captured the masked man. They then discovered it is a man heavily masked with many layers of dry plantain leaves, palm fronds and the traditional white chalk-osun-which is used traditionally for decoration. They unmasked him, beat him severely and dragged him to the king's palace for judgement while shouting olee, olee, olee (meaning: thief, thief, thief).

Coming face-to-face with the king, the thief discovered he is his elder brother who had left them earlier on the journey. The king also recognised the "thief" as his youngest brother who had journeyed in another direction with his other siblings.

However, the king couldn't openly identify with the 'thief because of shame'. To deceive the people, he feigned anger and began to rain curses on the thief. The thief, who understood his brother, also heightened the deceit by hurling curses and abuses back at the king. The king ordered that the thief be locked up in the palace cell and thereafter dispersed the crowd.

At night, the king brought his younger brother out of the cell, embraced him and sought to know why he decided to steal. After listening to his younger brother's story the king also told his younger brother, how he arrived this strange land, led them to winning a protracted war and not only became the king but the land is now named after him. Hence, Aramoko, the name of the community is from the phrase "Aramide omo oko". The following day, the community noticed an unprecedented boost in their economy. They sold as never before at the market. The king attributed this sudden economic success to the activities of the masked thief who he now openly admitted to be his brother. The "thief" led a search for the other siblings. They were brought to the warm embrace of their elder brother in the palace.

In excitement and believing that of the truth, there must be a link between what happened in the market and the sudden economic buoyancy of his people, the king decreed that henceforth, an annual event to commemorate this masking incident will be celebrated in order to sustain the prosperity and economic success that was experienced. That marked the beginning of masquerade art and performance in Aramoko-Ekiti. Up till now, this entire legend is enacted by the market women, the masquerades and the king at the annual Isejana and Ogun festivals in Aramoko Ekiti.

### **Egun Ara: The physical features**

When Eegun Ara's costume is worn, the masquerade then appears conical in shape; a perfect triangle with the components of the costume which includes:

- (i) A network of light metal constructions that hold colourful feathers firmly to the head of the masquerade;
- (ii) An Igbaja (a wide hand woven traditional belt, usually colourful). It holds the hood and the base of the feather holder firmly to the head of the wearer.
- (iii) The mask/hood (a fabric material, usually between one or two yards in size with a small netted area for sight). It covers the masked performer right from the head to the entire trunk region down to the waist.
- (iv) The palm frond skirt which actually begins just below the chest and ends at the knees. It is suspended on the shoulders with two ropes. It is designed and arranged in such a way that it swirls and flares when the masquerade spins. The details of how this skirt is suspended are usually concealed by the fabric mask/hood we already described above. The palm fronds skirt begins to be visible from the point where the mask/hood terminates between the navel region and the waist.
- (v) The traditional white chalk (efun), with which the arms and legs are painted. In contemporary times, some masked performers prefer to sew long sleeves, gloves and trousers to conceal the arms and legs instead of being painted with the traditional white chalk.

It is important to reinstate here, that in the original Eegun Ara legend, the



Eegun Ara used dry plantain leaves, palm fronds and the traditional white chalk as costume. The plantain leaves were later replaced by woven fabrics at the advent of weaving technology, but the conical design and arrangements remain.

**Plate 1: A Long Shot of *Eegun Ara*. Note the Palmfronds Skirt.**

### **Eegun Ode Masquerade of Erijiyan Ekiti**

Erijiyan Ekiti is the second research location in Ekiti West zone. The main masquerade here is the Eegun Ode, meaning; hunter's masquerade. Erijiyan is the home of prominent warriors, hunters and blacksmiths; three professions, that make use of iron and metal objects as tools and three professions whose patron god is Ogun. The guardian spirit of these three professions is then represented by the hunters' masquerade – Eegun Ode – whose physical and behavioural capture the brave and bold dispositions of iron and metal workers.



**Plate 2: A Frontal Full View of *Eegun Ode*. Note the Animal Motifs. *Eegun Ode* is a Hunter Masquerade.**

### **Aesthetics**

There are four material elements in the physical appearance of Eegun Ode. First is the carved wooden head, second is the heavy presence of skin

coverings, third are the cloth coverings and fourth is the presence of few strands of palm fronds.

Eegun Ode masquerade is a synthesis of two basic motifs. The head reveals a horned animal with a bestial facial countenance carved in wood and stained in red, black and white colours while strands of palm fronds cover the body but are boldly punctuated with the presence of a large leopard's skin. The back of the masquerade is covered by an antelope's skin.

While the masquerade reveals sufficient beauty given the bold combination of forms, the audience is left to conclude on the motif that underlies the aesthetics of this masquerade.

Although the head and rear views locate the masquerade with the herbivorous family, the motif on its bosom represents a carnivore. However, the presence of an axe in the left hand of the masquerade and a gun in the right hand complement the bestial approach of the fiery eyes of the masquerade.

**Urere Masquerade of Erijiyan Ekiti**The Urere masquerade of Erijiyan directly contrasts the Urere masquerade of Ado-Ekiti . The two masquerades derive their name – Urere – from the Ekiti word for gourds. However, while the Urere of Ado-Ekiti is a celebration of the potency of charms, the Urere of Erijiyan in its own case, degrades reliance on charms.



Therefore, while the Urere of Ado-Ekiti is an elders' masquerade with plenty of painted Urere's (gourds) on the head and full rings of bodily palm fronds with hands and legs fully covered, the Urere of Erijiyan is a masquerade for adolescent boys.

**Plate 3:** *Urere Erijiyan. Note the Scanty Palmfronds, the Scanty Brown Gourds and the Mix-Match Modern Underwear and Footwear. Urere Erijiyan Characterises Youthful Exuberance.*

### **Aesthetics**

The Urere masquerade of Erijiyan is made up of a woven head cover, cloth materials and palm fronds. The headdress also has about two small gourds attached to it with red strings made from torn cloths. The headdress is well ventilated given the spacious weaving technique. This appears sufficient to allow ventilation. It is important to note that the palm fronds are scanty but the underlying material worn by the masquerade builds enough support for the masquerade. While the hands are bare, the legs of the masquerade are covered with contemporary canvass shoes which are an element of western influences.

### **Limitations of the Masquerade Costumes in Ekiti West Zone**

From the analysis given, it is obvious that the materials and accessories used in the building of masquerade costumes in Ekiti West are:

#### **Palm Fronds**

This, like other vegetables, is in the natural organic state, this makes it highly perishable. A palm frond cannot last for more than four (4) hours of a masquerade performance before becoming completely withered. Apart from this, the use of organic palm fronds encourages deforestation because a multiple of palm trees need to be cut down in order to harvest enough palm fronds enough to costume just one masquerade.

#### **The White Chalk (Efun/Osun)**

The white chalk is a rear-clay substance extracted from the earth in areas that are naturally blessed with deposits of this substance. It is usually soaked in water after which it is ground into powder form and then used to stain the desired part of the body. The white chalk has two major limitations. First is



the fact that it causes skin reactions like rashes and blisters depending on the type of skin possessed by the user.

Secondly, the white chalk does not last long on the skin of the masked performer because of the hyperactivity of the masquerade which forces excessive sweat out of the masked performer. When the sweat mixes with the chalk, it either wipes it off completely or it blots and blurs the painted or tainted parts of the body destroying the aesthetics of the overall costume in the process.

### **Animal Skin/Leather**

The animal skin used by the Eegun ode of Erijiyan Ekiti oozes with bad odour. This is because it is naturally skin and as such difficult to preserve properly. The skin is usually attacked by rodents and insects, and when in contact with any form of water or sweat, it begins to rot and smell. This, apart from being repulsive to the audience can also cause itching and skin irritation for the wearer.

In this segment, we have discussed the Eegun Ara of Aramoko Ekiti, the Eegun Ode of Erijiyan as well as Urere also of Erijiyan Ekiti. The suggested methods for the technological reproduction as well as commodification of their costumes are discussed in the chapter five of this work.

### **Semiotic Analysis of Masquerade Costumes in Ekiti West Zone Eegun Ara**

The aesthetic appearance and the symbolic meanings of the different elements of the masquerade's costumes reveal a strong link with the historical legend that informed its evolution as a technically clever tool for intrusion and aggression as conceived in the people's mythological imagination.

As a character costumed to raid or steal, the identity of Eegun Ara is covered from head to toe, making it difficult for the audience to recognise the bearer. Semiotically, the multi-layered masking design is in agreement with the character of a well masked thief who is on a mission to raid.

Though colourful cloths are now directly visible on the masquerade, they have come as a logical replacement for the banana leaves that the legend pointed out as the original coverings.

The palm fronds that are also visible on the body of the masquerade have traces of wilful distortions; the fronds worn as skirt have been pruned, technically receding away from the feet towards the knees of the masquerade. The legend also has a link with this because a man with the intention to raid, but who wears palm fronds as skirt to appear sacred should also be considered wise for keeping the skirt at the knee level so as to avoid inhibitions when the time comes to flee.

Furthermore, the masquerade costume gives room for circumferential movements in dance. This is because the masquerade according to the legend became an object of annual celebration with performance inherent. Therefore, circumferential designs and an ambience of light weight must be implied. This goes further to validate the presence of feathers on the head and the chest of the masquerade. The colourful feathers on the head are to enhance beauty while the white feathers on the chest are ritual paraphernalia which represent ability to disappear and appear at will. In fact this kind of feather is ubiquitous in all Ekiti masquerades because of the belief that the masquerades, like birds, can appear and disappear at will.

The head of the masquerade has a unique appearance probably because attention might have been paid to it at the expense of other parts of the masquerade. While the decoration of the head goes higher above the head of the bearer of the masquerade, the face of the bearer, just above the neck of the masquerade is covered with a net to aid sight. Deeply ornamental and beaded accessories are technically thrown to the back of the masquerade to allow free movement as well as to avoid visual obstruction.

The contemporary mode of the Eegun Ara masquerade comes in different colours, sizes and shapes. The clothing materials also appear in different variations. However, the cardinal features still point to the original template of the masquerade with its primary features intact. For instance, the sword is still held by the masquerade as it was during the raiding mission, purported by the peoples' legend. Though the masquerade wears a pair of canvass shoes, this may come as an addition necessitated by contemporary developments.

Some of the masquerades reveal the naked legs and hands of the bearer painted in white dots. The dots are to give the masquerade a spirit-like appearance. This refers to the original body dress of the masked figure that went out to raid long before the introduction of the woven clothes. These

dots of white paint on the body suffice also to mask the body and hide identity. The introduction of various types of clothing material has completely covered the traces of the dots. However, a few of the masked performers still prefer to use the dots.

### **Eegun Ode**

The physical outlook of the Eegun Ode masquerade communicates the totality of what the masquerade represents in the Erijiyan cosmology. For instance, being the hunter's masquerade, there is a dominance of animal motifs. The horned head represents an animal, the animal skins on the body reinforced the symbolic, iconic representation of the animal. Furthermore, in presenting the hunters in the land as professionally fit, complete and efficient, the two existing families of animals are represented by the skins. The antelope skin at the back represents the herbivorous family while the leopard's skin in front represents the carnivores family. As already mentioned, Eegun Ode also iconises the guardian spirit of warriors and metal workers; this is why the masquerade holds an axe and a gun. Although, to curb accidental discharges and tragedy, the masquerade carries a pestle as a symbolic representation of a gun. The intense and fiery nature of the carved face also signifies war and terror.

### **Urere Erijiyan**

The Erijiyan people believe more in physical attack for self protection or as a means of carrying out revenge than a surreptitious, subtle and clandestine diabolical harming of the enemy. They believe it is cowards and weak people that fight with charms. This is why they reduce the Urere masquerade to an adolescent masquerade. As already stated in the case of the Urere of Ado-Ekiti, the gourds (Urere) in Ekiti represent charms. The scanty presence of the gourds on the Urere of Erijiyan masquerades show the lack of dominance of the use of charms in the people's consciousness. It is a symbol of the level of contempt they have for the use of charms.

The Urere Erijiyan is a prank – playing youthful masquerade. He chases young people and flogs them. This is why the palm fronds are very scanty. It is to give room for the masquerade to run in pursuing his target. The uncovered hands are also to reduce weight because of the enormous physical activities of this youthful masquerade. The whips in his hands also are a symbol of his exuberant disposition.

### **Conclusion: Methods of Technological Reproduction**

For these masquerades to adapt to contemporary realities for economic relevance, the materials used to build their costumes must change from organic to mechanical. In doing this, we suggest that polymer technology; textile technology and plastic technology should be explored.

Our preliminary findings show that all the elements of the costumes aforementioned and their accessories can be reproduced through the three technologies mentioned. A detailed study of these possibilities will form the focus of our later research.

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