VISUAL ART FORM IN MOTION: TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MASQUERADE AS THEATRICAL PHENOMENON

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Abstract
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. But oftentimes, when people think of the works of visual arts that have to do with theatre performance, what readily comes to their mind are the usual stage or scenic designs. In the usual theatre event, we think of the human actors and actresses. But that of the masquerade is peculiar for it is a work of visual art, in performance, before a human audience. We see nothing more than the artwork. This paper throws some light on the theoretical underpinnings of African masquerade with a view to portraying its age-old tradition as a performance art. The theatrical and stylistic analytic methods have been used in this paper. The paper reveals the creative strength of the African in masquerade art, the functions of masquerade as an acting visual art form with all the elements in dramatic art.

Introduction

Enekwe, after narrating his first masking experience as an African child in the 1950s, wondered why masking is so popular till today (9). He was simply told, masking among other things, is theatre. Theatre is drama. Drama, as rightly asserted by Anigala is an artistic recreation of life in the form of action. Dramatic action, he said, is systematically designed to convey human experiences in a graphic yet effective way. Historically, drama is reflective of man's attempt at human and social reformations, as it has been used in different forms and ways. On its purposes and functions, Anigala rightly pointed that these could vary based on the performer's intention and motive. Some of these are that drama gives psychological easement to the sick thereby facilitating the healing of patient. It helps to preserve and propagate cultural values. It can also serve as a reformative medium and a channel for societal regeneration, by providing vital information that brings about changes in the individual's mental attitude (3). Masquerade as a visual and performing art serves all these purposes and functions. Not only that, Anderson (134) added that masquerade performances also satisfy a need for aesthetic expression, provide a recreational outlet, and promote unity among various factions. They are also a means of enculturating youth. It must have been in recognition of the above that prompted Herold (5) to write that mostly in Africa, "the mask helps to realize religious ideas and uphold tradition of social norms. It is also entertaining.

Masking in Africa is indeed theatre. It truly embodies all of the above qualities and functions. When a masquerade is in motion, the spectators think mainly of the figure they see, that is, the masquerade itself. The mask and the costumes which make up the masquerade are the focus of attention. But one salient fact which is not strongly considered is that the mask and its accoutrements are all products of the visual artist. The masker is believed to be transformed into the figure he is representing. No one seems to bother about the man in the masquerade because his identity is hidden. Enekwe (57).

However, oftentimes when people think of works of visual art in a theatre performance, what readily comes to their mind are the usual stage or scenic designs like props. In a normal theatre event, when all has been set, the next thing is performance where we see real human beings with bare faces coming to act. So we think of the human actor or actress. Sometimes we even recognize them because their faces are seen, only costumes on their bodies according to the role each is assigned to play. But that of the masquerade is peculiar in that an encounter with an African masquerade on stage is a sight of visual art form in performance or action alongside human beings or artistes, e.g. drummers, singers, horn blowers and others. It is the art form that appears to be performing. It is the major character. This is because in an African masquerade, the human figure is insignificant in relation to the art form we see. People focus on the art form as earlier mentioned and think of the spirit force behind it. Rightly described by Getlein (440) as the great African art of spiritual agency and perhaps the greatest of traditional African art, masquerade is total art – involving sculpture, costume, music, movement, dance, miming, impersonation, poetry, dialogue and painting. In Western museums, African masks are commonly exhibited and admired as sculpture. But in Africa, a mask is never displayed in public as an isolated, inert object. It appears only in motion, only representative of a spirit being that has appeared in the human community (also see Enekwe, 56).

This paper emphasizes traditional African masquerade as theatrical phenomenon or drama, thereby asserting the fact of its antiquity as performance art in Africa (Cole and Aniakor, 111). Performance art as defined by Chambers Concise Dictionary (904) is a presentation in which several art forms are combined, such as acting, music, sculpture, photography etc. From this definition, it becomes obvious that performance art is traditional to Africa. The coinage of the term performance art originating from the West notwithstanding. In the West it was perhaps only a twentieth century phenomenon. But the traditional African masquerade as an art form had leaned towards theatre several centuries back. Here, it is the visual art form that does the acting, because it is what we look at and that which plays the major role.

The Theatricality of African Masquerade

As theatre, Cole and Aniakor describe their experience with some masquerade characters, thus:

> when many masked characters appear together, we are in the presence of complex phenomena. Masking has been developing over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, and new mask types are being created today. Some maskers are focal dramatic characters, others clowns or police or supporting actors. Some appear alone or only at night, others are accompanied by a hundred or more "brothers and sisters". Many are beautiful dancers, some stomp heavily, others seem to float across the ground (111).

As a tremendous spectacle, performers draw on a variety of dramatic devices to portray the masquerades as beings under the control of drummers, dance demonstrators, and attendants. Each performance incorporates certain songs, dance steps, and tableaux, but allows for a great deal of improvisation. As Anderson (137) asserted, masquerades must not only execute the set dance sequences, but exploit the element of surprise in order to add interest to, or 'sweeten' the event. In Anderson's further description of the Izon masquerade performances, we find more of its theatricality. She describes the excitement that builds when the giant shark masquerade at Ondeware appears on a raft pulled toward town by a canoe loaded with musicians. In Olugbobiri, she also describes three masquerades in the Ungozu group that tease the audience by appearing to come out of their shrine, then retreating, before their priest finally pulls them out one at a time. In many cases, the actual performance begins when the masquerades dramatically slash through a palm frond fence (*fanu*) and enter the arena. Fences of this type once kept evil forces from entering Izon villages, so this device reinforces the idea that wild spirits

sometimes invade the communities. Once the masquerades have come out, they take turns executing the steps indicated by a dance demonstrator and chasing spectators through town (137-8).

Izon masquerades do not speak or talk. They display, dance and act to the direction of the drummers' music. The drummers make the music that often stimulates the masquerades and the dancers. But the performance, tempo and body movement of the masquerades are dependent on the drummers, flute or horn blower (Emiemokumo, 3). They tell the masquerades what to do. Drummers alternatively call on masquerades to dance, incite them to chase people with machetes, and pet them to cool their tempers, dismisses them, and in most cases put tempo into the masquerades and the performance. They sometimes deliberately provoke the masquerades by insulting them in drum language. In some cases, the musicians sit behind a pole fence designed to protect them from attacks, but masquerades can still slash at them through the openings or dart around to the other side. The possibility of being cut adds excitement to the performance, and some spectators – especially young boys – invite the masquerades to attack by taunting them, then run away or plunge into the water to avoid being cut (Anderson, 138-9).

The drum or flute/horn language in the masquerade performance is not peculiar to the Izon. It is broadly or widely African. Enekwe also describes that of his Igbo experience. He tells us that when musicians communicate with a masquerade, there is a tendency for the action to slow down or quicken. In other words, there is a change in the pacing of the performance. When a masquerade slows down, it is perhaps listening to the message coming from the instruments. When it quickens, it means that the signal has indicated a need for a quickened action. Thus, the gigantic *Ijele* masquerade which moves with great energy with dipping, whirling, shaking and turning are all not without the direction of such instruments. What about the dramatic dance steps of the Izon masquerades which seem as if their toes do not touch the ground. They all yield to the direction of the musicians' instruments. Musical instruments are, therefore, integral to masquerade performances (91-2).

Mimicry and Skills Display of the Masquerade

Enekwe discusses three different but interrelated modes of activity in masquerading that emphasize the role in a mask as (1) a supernatural being or force; (2) an impersonator imitating activities from myth or life; (3) a performer demonstrating a skill or skills, ranging from dancing to magic demonstrations. According to him, the combination of these modes of activity in varying degrees in different performances, is not accidental. It is integral to the phenomenon of masking (87-8). In masquerade performance, there are mime elements which carry with it a narrative or plot content that make it more of a drama (Echeruo, 12). The mimetic aspect involves an imitation of life or an imagined activity, just as when the Igbo *Agaba* masquerade demonstrates how *ngwu* (the tiny bird) departs unnoticed. This aspect of masking is often made possible through the third aspect, which involves the display of overt aesthetic skills. The third aspect, the display of overt aesthetic skills, usually comprises dancing, singing, acrobatics, magic, etc. Similarly, when "*Wonder*", another masquerade in Igbo land which transforms itself endlessly, deflates and slithers like a cobra, it is involved both in a display of skills and a dramatization of the movement of a snake (Enekwe, 88).

In the case of the *Oki* masquerade which is typical of other Izon masquerades of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, we also find elements of miming or mimicry and skills display. *Oki* is shark fish in Izon language. Named after the mask, the Izon people regard *Oki* masquerade as a great spirit living in the sea. In the mimetic aspect, we are shown the character or nature of this great fish and how fishermen or the people relate with it. Anderson (138-9) again describes this aspect of the performance. According to her, when struggling with one which has been caught on their line, canoe loads of supporters may try to convince Oki masquerade to come out by pouring libations, beating drums, blowing horns, and calling, "*Oki*, come up. Let us play. The tide has already ebbed". When he co-operates, they try to kill him. The masquerade capitalizes on the comic aspect of the situation by staging the hunt on land. *Oki's* canoe parades along the waterfront while songs and drums repeat the fishermen's invitation of *Oki* to come out

to play at ebb tide. When he comes ashore, he alternately chases after spectators with his cutlass and dances in the arena. Finally, a fisherman appears there with his canoe and begins stalking the *Oki* masquerade with his net. After many comic mishaps, the masquerade's headpiece becomes entangled in a fishing line. Assistants help haul the captured masquerade into the canoe, where the fisherman pretends to slit its throat, but the *Oki* masquerade stages a triumphant comeback to conclude the performance. In all cases, the audience is, to a greater extent, interested in the skill of the masquerade in making the role believable. Oftentimes, the mimetic aspect is subordinated to the display of skill (Enekwe, 91).

The Masquerade as Visual Art Form

Traditional African masquerade art comes in various forms and media (Foss, 4). Headpieces often take the form of abstract human heads, figurines, menacing reptiles, predatory fish or composite land or water monsters. Some of these mediums include metal, raffia, feathers, cloth, glass, beads, wood etc. The full regalia of a masquerade is even richer in local arts and craft materials. These are not only for aesthetic pleasure, but also to suit the role the masquerade is expected to play. Two masquerade types are discussed here: the Izon and that of the Igbo to give some idea of what is involved in the construction of traditional African masquerade. The Izon traditional masquerade, just as other traditional African masquerades, is richly dressed. He is covered from the headpiece to the toes. The costumes consist mainly of head ties, wrappers and trousers. The face-cloth is always transparent so as to enable the wearer of the mask see clearly through it. There is also a semi-circular cane which hangs forward, from the forehead just within face-cover cloth. It is mostly attached to the mask pedestal on the head of the wearer. This prevents the wrapper from resting on the face of the wearer of the mask. Long sleeved shirts or sweaters are worn on the body. A spoon-like shape construction with cane is fastened to the waist, protruding or projecting backwards. It is covered with the cloth tied from the waist. This tends to exaggerate the buttocks region of the masquerade. Despite the fact that this covering with wrapper dramatically exaggerates the stature of the wearer, its basic function is to free the legs of the masquerade from the waist wrapper.

On the masquerade's feet are leg-rattles tied around them. Their jingling sound adds rhythm to the dance-steps. The leg-rattles are mostly tied over the trousers which in most cases is the elastic type. Stockings or socks are sometimes worn on the feet, but the feet and toes are mostly painted with native chalk as in most other traditional masquerade in Africa. The senior masquerades usually have bells and fibres on the masks to distinguish them from others. In essence, what everybody sees during the performance is just the masquerade art piece. All these are to mask the identity of the wearer to women, non-initiates and foreigners (Emiemokumo, 38-9).

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, we have the *Ijele* masquerade. It is one of the most honoured masquerades in Igbo land. Getlein points to its towering nature, likening *Ijele* to an anthill – structures that in Africa may reach a height of 8ft and the Igbo regard such as porches to the spirit world. *Ijele* is also seen as a venerable tree, the symbol of life beneath whose branches wise elders meet to discuss weighty matters. Amid the tassels, mirrors, and flowers on *Ijele's* "branches" are numerous sculpted figures of humans, animals and other masks – a virtual catalogue of the Igbo and their world (441). However, the picture of an *Ijele* is better appreciated in Cole and Aniakor's (139) description of the masquerade. They describe *Ijele* as:

> …. probably the largest masquerade of tropical Africa, about five and a half meters high when dancing and two and a half meters wide. It is the apotheosis of Igbo display masks, the elephant among spirit-creatures, and overwhelmingly the most expensive to commission and dance…. *Ijele* artists are tailors and appliqué costume makers from the Anambra Valley communities of Aguleri, Achalla, and Umeleri (and a few other towns) where the great mask originated. A large *Ijele* will occupy four skilled workers at least six weeks, working an eight-

> to-ten hour day, seven days a week. Well over one thousand parts must be individually crafted, sewn, tied and/or glued, then assembled on a large framework springing from a wooden disc 1.8 meters in diameter. This part rests on the carrier's head. A mast-like construction of palm midrib is lashed to the center of the disc, forming an armature onto which further structural elements are affixed. Prominent among these are two intersecting arches made of bent liana with ladder-like spacers.

They went further, stating that:

> All visible parts of the framework are labouriously covered with cloth strips, creating in the finished mask a kaleidoscopic rainbow effect (the arcs in fact look like rainbows but are not so named). Further dazzle and glitter are achieved by hundreds of tassels sticking out of the arches and hanging around the disc base. Many mirrors and dozens of human and animal figures are spaced densely throughout the whole structure, as well as streamers and flowers projecting outward from the core. The assemblage is completed by a long python encircling the base and by twelve two-meter long, bright appliqué panels which hang from it to obscure the carrier. The panels and many of the straw-filled (or more recently, foam) figures and animals are multicolored appliqués recalling the body-suits of maiden and mother-spirits. Indeed these and many other masquerades are actually present in the complex tableau, thus including the "incarnate dead" in a mask which is their crowning achievement. The great expense of materials, labour, feeding of artists and sacrifices has, until quite recently, meant that *Ijele* had to be a communal undertaking (139).

It is this fact that probably made Enekwe (102) to describe *Ijele* as a mobile art gallery that shows the life of the Igbo in all its complexities. The dual aesthetics of the African masquerade in its visual and skillful performances cannot be overemphasized. No wonder Herold (12) marvelled at the African mask forms, stating that "nowhere do masks seem to have spread so far or to have achieved such wealth of form as in Africa. The mask reveals the artistic and creative strength of the African".

Conclusion

It has been said that art for the African is a field, which offers great latitude for the celebration of ideas. It entails the simulation of experiences through well-organized ideas, for the self and others (Egonwa, 4). Generally, what we find in this article about the masquerade is an affirmation of the above. In the masquerade performance, we also find that all the elements of drama as enunciated by Aristotle: Plot, Character, Theme, Dialogue/Diction, Music/Rhythm and Spectacle. As for the plot, Echeruo (13) has rightly equated the myth in masquerades with linear plot. According to him, myth gives a clear outline to dramatic actions and makes possible a pattern of ordered events which we usually call plot (cited in Enekwe, 12). Because the mask is a communal symbol, masquerade performances are taken very seriously by the African. When a performance is successful, the community would feel proud and fulfilled. This is because a successful masquerade performance is an index of the solidarity and moral health of its people (Enekwe, 81). A traditional African masquerade performance is like a festival of the arts – for it speaks of a total art environment (Egonwa, 1). It is a visual art that performs.

An Izon Traditional Masquerade Performing: Courtesy: A.A. Emiemokumo, 1991.

Ijele Masquerade of the Igbo Performing. Courtesy: Mark Getlein, *Gilbert's Living With Art,* 2002.

Igbo Maiden Masquerades, *Agbogho mmuo* Performing. Photograph by G.I. Jones, 1930s. Courtesy: Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos.* 1984.

Some Masquerades of the Bwa People of West Africa Performing. An example of other African Masquerades. Courtesy: Mark Getlein, *Gilbert's Living With Art,* 2002.

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