

Unmasking the Masquerade

Counterideologies and Contemporary Practices

THE DYNAMIC SYMBOLS AND meanings of African masks and masquerades and their evolution from a transcendental undertone to a more secular and popular carnival of today deserve a detailed treatment. Since African masquerades were originally **embedded in indigenous religious ideology** and served as a tool of **sociopolitical control**, they have been a target of assaults by alien ideologies. Crossing the Arabian Sea into Sudan in the seventh century, the Arabs launched Islam's imperialistic push into the continent. Eleven centuries later, Europeans brought a new wave of Christian evangelism in sharp conflict with the indigenous African belief systems.¹ Soon, the late nineteenth-century missionary push, initially centered on African coastal cities, secured an alliance with colonial conquest, and the entire apparatus of indigenous traditions configured on religious idioms came under vicious attacks.

Three overlapping historical milestones are demarcated in the developments that unmasked the African masquerading traditions. The first is what may be called the Afro-Arab Muslim Cultural Interface, starting from about 642 CE and continuing to the present. Islam began its assault on African culture from the northeast as exemplified by the cultural transformations the religion brought upon the Berbers of North Africa, who also had a masking tradition. The Berber encounter with the Arabs and their religion was just the beginning of a long-lasting encounter involving nearly a half of the African societies in general and the inhabitants of the West and East Africa in particular. West Africa increasingly became more prominent as Islam and trade grew exponentially, drawing the region into a wider circuit of global commerce through the trans-Saharan trade networks.

The second stage of the process that has led to the demystification of the rituals, secrecy, and aura surrounding the spirit-regarding **African masquerade**

institution mirrors Africa's meeting with Western modernity. Specifically, this is connected with the **counterideologies** that came with the transatlantic slave trade, Christian evangelism, and colonialism proper. This stage of cultural subversion starting from about 1500s has two related dimensions. One aspect of it is centered on the **discovery of the New World and the transatlantic slave trade** that took African captives as laborers to the Americas. Under conditions of servitude and colonial oppression, **the enslaved Africans tried to reinvent their masquerade culture, with varied success**. However, given all the odds they had to contend with in the Americas, the chances of **re-creating authentic African** versions of their religious-sanctioned masquerade culture were imperiled on arrival. The other **dimension** of the African-European cultural confrontation took place on African soil with the rise of Christian evangelical missions in the nineteenth century. This development was also accompanied by colonial overtures. Christianity and colonialism, therefore, defined the contours of the unmasking processes that crisscrossed between Africa and the Atlantic world, as manifested in several steps: **the use of masks in Africa and the African Diaspora as an instrument of resistance and mobilization against slavery, colonialism, and oppression; and the resilience of masquerading in the face of a brutal campaign** waged by slave owners and colonial administrators on both sides of the Atlantic.

Emerging from these dialectics of control, conflict, and resistance was the eventual acceptance of—or should we say the triumph of—masquerade carnivals as a popular culture in the New World societies. On the African continent, masquerades fought through a sustained campaign by colonial administrators, and Christian evangelists and their new African converts, to break the power, secrecy, and ritual observances with which the masquerades were associated with in precolonial and colonial Africa. Coming out of these struggles, the brand of masquerade carnivals that survived on both sides of the Atlantic did not follow the original intents for which the **institution was invented among the Igbo, Ibibio, Èfik, Èkoi and Ijo peoples of the Bantu/Biafra homeland in southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon**. In other words, one of the important parts of this discussion is the long processes of Islamization and Christianization of the African masquerades both in Africa and in the African Diaspora. This is followed by the **(re)-secularization of the masquerade institutions in the post-colonial setting**.

In **precolonial and most of colonial Africa, memberships in the masquerade societies were exclusively reserved for the initiates in the various age-grade associations and secret societies that owned and operated the masquerade cults**. Since the alien religions permeated the African continent, particularly since the

postcolonial era, membership and participation in the masquerade plays have become flexible and in some places open to all and sundry. If one accepts modernity, as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, to connote the aspiration for cognitive rationality, moral autonomy, and sociopolitical self-determination, then we may begin to see the intrusion of Arab and Western ideas on Africa as part of the wider modernism project gone bad.²

Fred Dallmayr has noted correctly that one of the chief merits of Habermas's work remains "the treatment of modernity not as a platform or doctrine but as a discourse or conversation—a conversation made up of different protagonists or voices and stretching over successive historical periods."³ This observation is central in the unfolding discourse because the seventeenth-century roots of the Renaissance and Reformation movements in Europe coincided with the European voyages of discoveries that resulted in the **colonization of the "New World"**. The so-called Age of Enlightenment ushered in an implicit break from the classical and medieval past. As the discussion proceeds, one sees the intersections of modernity, globalization, and new cultural imputations unfolding on the global stage as technology and cross-cultural exchanges expand the horizons of cultures including the masquerade tradition. In other words, in the contemporary masquerade and carnival dances—from the Igboland rainforest village communities of the Bight of Biafra to the cosmopolitan cities of Bahia, Toronto, London, New York, New Orleans, Kingston, and Mona, Jamaica—one encounters the functions of masquerade carnivals as an instrument of mobilization, human rights campaign, **quest for freedom of expression**, and **identity formation** for diverse communities, not least the African communities.

Thus, O. P. Fingsi finds it critical to remind everyone that in the African (precolonial) world, ancestors had well-defined ideas of nature, human life, existence, social relations, as well as man himself.⁴ On the basis of these time-honored ideas, Africans developed meaning in their distinct civilization. Similarly, the Black West Indians in England, as Cohen noted, would quickly claim, "Carnival is our culture, our identity here in Britain.... It is our heritage.... It teaches our children who we are."⁵ While this idiom of identity compares favorably with its continental African connotations, the Caribbean versions are products of a totally different sociopolitical and historical milieu—an environment of a "two-dimensional ethnography"⁶—that is a linkage between a particular cultural form with obvious African roots and an equally unique oppressive political community with a more Western foundation. The nature of the relationship between the two unequal forces (the Western foundations and the African roots) explains the characteristics Black masquerade dances have assumed