

African Immigrant Folklife

maintain this form of veneration of the Prophet, but the tradition is frowned upon by members of the Wahabi sect from Saudi Arabia because it is seen as an innovation. During the celebrations, congregations sing poems known as *qasidas*, composed and written down long ago by African and Arab poets like Shaykh Alhaji Malick Sy of Senegal and other Muslim poets from Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, and Harar in Ethiopia.

Sulayman S. Nyang, a tenured professor at Howard University's African Studies Department, was the founding editor of the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences. Dr. Nyang has served as Ambassador of the Republic of the Gambia throughout the Middle East and northeast African countries. He is also the author and editor of works such as Islam, Christianity, and African Identity (1984) and Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John Mbiti (1993), which was co-authored with Jacob Olupona.

Nature & Significance of Durbar in Ghanaian Societies

Kwaku Ofori-Ansa & Peter Pipim

Ghanaian traditional rulers sit in state and meet their people at events called *durbars* (an Indo-Persian term for "ruler's court"). To the accompaniment of music and dance, ceremonies honor their ancestors, rekindle their bond to the people, revive unity, cleanse the society, and pray for the fruitfulness of the land and the welfare of the people. Beautifully adorned kings, queens, chiefs, and their elders appear in public procession amidst intensive drumming, singing, and dancing. At their destination king and queen sit in state flanked by chiefs and elders, as sound and motion continue around them: drum languages articulate praises; special guests extend greetings and pay homage; gifts are presented.

The Akan people of Ghana organize *durbars* for the installation of chiefs, kings and queens, and their elders, a tradition that has been carried over to the United States. This year the Asanteman Kuo, an association organized by the Asante, one of the Akan groups in the United States, will hold the third installation of its leadership, an event which happens every three years. During a *durbar*, the Asanteman Kuohene (chief of the Asanteman association) of the Washington metropolitan area will host members of Asanteman Kuo from Atlanta, Toronto, New York, New England, Montreal, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Dallas. The chiefs and the queen mothers of these Asante associations will appear in traditional ceremonial clothing of hand-woven, hand-stamped, hand-embroidered, and hand-appliquéd cloths accentuated with glittering gold,



silver jewelry, and precious beads. Accompanied by drumming, singing, and dancing, they will process under ceremonial umbrellas of brilliant colors.

Symbols of status and authority, the royal paraphernalia reflect a complex array of philosophical, religious, and political concepts, which inform ideals and codes of conduct. The large, colorful umbrellas (*akatamanso*) represent the protective role and the authority of chiefs and queens. Gold-plated staffs (*akyeamepoma*) of the chief's spokesmen, or linguists, symbolically depict political ideals. Ceremonial chief stools (*ahenkongua*) — carried by stool bearers and placed in front of the chiefs — are symbols of spiritual and political unity. Their carved images refer to certain philosophical, religious, and political concepts. Gold-plated ceremonial swords carried by the Council of Elders are traditionally borne by royal messengers and are used in swearing oaths of allegiance during installations of rulers and elders.

Traditional *durbars* can last a whole day until sunset. Sharing special drinks at these occasions symbolizes hospitality and community spirit. The *durbar* ends with a

Officials of the Washington, D.C., Ghanaian community organization Asanteman Kuo were attired in regalia for an inaugural event in 1994 at a local gym in Langley Park, Maryland. Photo courtesy Peter Pipim, Asanteman Kuo organization

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procession from the public grounds to the chief's palace, where a libation is poured to honor the ancestors and thank the Supreme Creator. More than just a social gathering, a durbar revives and reinforces loyalty and strengthens the ties and the sense of belonging that bind a people together.

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studies. He is also a cultural activist and has been an integral part of the group of community scholar/advisors to the African Immigrant Folklife Project since 1994.

Peter Pipim, an Education Specialist at the National Museum of African Art, is also active in Ghanaian-American cultural affairs as an officer of the Akan organization Asanteman Kuo and of the Council of Ghanaian Organizations in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area.

Ikeji Masquerade in New York City & Ofirima Masquerade in Washington, D.C.: Research Reports on Two Cultural Adaptations

The term masquerade can refer to a masking performance, a masked performer, or the character embodied by the mask itself. Masquerade is an important mode of cultural expression for several groups from Nigeria. Molly Egond Uzo researched Ikeji masquerade as it is now performed in the New York City area. Tonye Victor Erekosima researched the Ofirima masquerade as it is performed by the Rivers State Forum in Washington, D.C. The following are excerpts from their research reports.

Ikeji Masquerade

Molly Egond Uzo

In Umuchu in Nigeria, as in most of Africa, "masquerade is exclusively for men. It's a macho thing," said Mr. Victor Emenuga, a member of the Umuchu cultural troupe, based in New Jersey. Mr. Emenuga was addressing an audience at the 1996 Hudson River Arts Festival in Poughkeepsie, New York. The purpose of masquerade can be to entertain, to commend achievers, to chastise evil-doers, to bring messages of hope, peace, or



impending disaster, to mourn the dead or to receive a special newborn, or to grace a ceremonial occasion like a festival. To these ends, its elaborately created physical presence evokes a great range of feelings, from approbation and appreciation to fear and awe. A good masquerade has admirable human or animal features and is a great dancer, too. Men use masquerade as an outlet for their macho energy. They are strong enough to invoke and mingle with the spirits of the dead, but women are not. Of course, it makes them feel good about themselves, and life goes on. Traditionally, masquerades have the highest level of freedom in a village. You cannot fight a masquerade. You cannot unmask it. And you have no right to say the name of the person under the mask, even if you know who it is. Once under the mask, he becomes sacred, a person used to embody the spirit.

As more Africans make the United States their permanent residence, some adapt their traditional festivals to their new

Members of Akwa Ibom, a Nigerian regional organization in the Washington, D.C., area, re-enact a masquerade procession at the 1995 Festival of American Folklife.

Photo by Jeff Tinsley, courtesy Smithsonian Institution