

African Immigrant Folklife

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

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homes. New Yam and New Year festivals are now common. In addition to dance, food, and pageantry, some festivals feature masquerades. For instance, the Ikeji festival of the Arondizuogu community (one of the Igbo clans in Nigeria) in New York cannot be complete without the Ikeji masquerades.

Sometimes adaptation seems the only alternative for surviving. In Igboland there is no one-man masquerade, but we have it here in the United States, thanks to the use of audio cassettes for background music. The Ikeji festival masquerades are among the few that still try to preserve their tradition. But they come out only once a year, in summer. They still uphold their myths. They have only a few hours of Ikeji masquerade in New York, as opposed to four days in Arondizuogu. They don't have enough skilled drummers to back up their performances, so they occasionally resort to taped music. To avoid lawsuits, they limit open interaction with the audience.

"Masquerades with controversial attributes, like Ogaranya Afo Toro, known for his excesses including oversized private parts, are cautiously avoided," says Chris Awam, originally from Arondizuogu. "But we will still perform the most authentic masquerade in the United States. At least our masquerades don't wear socks." Awam is making fun of some groups whose masquerades are so human that they wear socks. Spirits don't even have feet. They can float in the air. Socks are very human; they are foreign goods as well. Traditional masquerades would never wear them.

Mary "Molly" Uzo is a Nigerian-born community cultural activist who has researched and presented programs in upstate New York on African masquerade traditions including those of her own Igbo ethnic group from southeastern Nigeria.

Ofirima Masquerade

Tonye Victor Erekosima

The Ofirima (Shark) masquerade is generally staged by men only. The headpiece that is worn indicates the kind of masquerade being presented. Members of the Rivers State Forum, an organization named after a province in southeastern Nigeria, staged the Ofirima during their annual outing in Washington, D.C. In the traditional outfit of an appropriately dressed masquerade, the headpiece is a faithful model of the ferocious fish. It was carved by a local resident. The many male dancers who accompany him were also in their proper traditional attire, because every Rivers man living here has at least one such outfit in his possession.

The distinctive style of this dance is a leisurely cadence with broad sweeps of the arms and slow pacing of the feet; this shows opulence, casualness, and a dignified bearing. It is very different from much of the dancing done by the Rivers people's neighbors. Some say it reflects the slow ebb and flow of water in their geographical setting; others, their history as traders who have trafficked with the outside world for centuries with relative ease.

Audience members in Washington retain the Nigerian practice of informal concourse through the arena where the masquerade was being played, but only an entertainment mask like Ofirima could be performed. The shark is

ferocious, so an attendant — dabbed with white chalk or kaolin to dispel negative forces — follows it and checks its aggressiveness. As a lead dancer, he wears an eagle feather, the badge of an accomplished member of the Ekine men's dancing society. He precedes the masquerade, pouring a libation and invoking the ancestors to provide a safe and nimble performance. That day, rich attire and collective spontaneity were shared

between the dancers and the audience of Rivers women who enthusiastically joined them. Everyone on the scene left feeling they had participated in a memorable event.



This Ibibio masquerade was danced at the 1995 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife by members of Akwa Ibom, an organization of area residents with origins in the Cross Rivers State in Nigeria.

Photo by Jeff Tinsley, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

Dr. Tonye Victor Erekosima was born in the Rivers State region of Nigeria and has done extensive research on the Kalabari ethnic group, of which he is a member. He is a scholar and a religious minister and divides his professional time between Washington, D.C., and Nigeria.
