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## DRUM AND MASK: INTERROGATING SYMBOLS OF DIALOGUE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN THÉÂTRE

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### **Abstract**

Much work has been done in the research of elements of traditional theatrical forms often with unitary analyses of the multi-channeled codes of the drum, mask, songs, and costume. This disintegrative analytic method often adopted by the culturally distanced scholar pose a problem of translation and understanding for phenomena that are experienced as interrelated, fused forms. Hence, this paper examines the interplay of masks and drums as icons of visual and "vocal" dialogue in traditional drama among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples of West Africa. The research aims to highlight the inclusion of drumming into African Pentecostal Christianity. Relevant commentaries from other cultures will be employed to highlight the points of the research where necessary. The rich store of existing data on traditional Yoruba and Igbo festivals provides the model for this discussion. Saunders Peirce's Semiotic theory is adopted as a theoretical tool while library and Internet resources provide commentaries for the work. The research is expected to

make a contribution to knowledge on the nature of symbolic communication in traditional theatre.

**Keyword:** Drumming, Masking, Dance, Christianity, Symbolism

## Introduction

**T**he world view of any given people is reflected in their songs, dances, music, philosophy and lifestyle; and these are directly dictated by their religious philosophy. Religion is in itself defined largely by the myths and legends of a culture which in turn play a significant role in structuring the moral guidelines by which the society sustains itself. Religion is a medium of communication between Man on the one hand, and the spiritual phenomena, forces, or gods on the other hand; while the perceived symbols of communication define the imageries which reflect the rhythm and dialogue with these higher forces (Mbiti 1974). The elements of traditional religious practice have a great influence on Christianity in contemporary religious practice. The introduction of these elements has redefined the form and practice of Christianity and produced a uniquely African hybrid of Christian values and thereby created an appeal to the adherents. The understanding of the interplay of communication and interpretive codes of such percussive media as drumming and dancing lends much fervor and zest to spiritual experience. We aim to explore the use of masks and drums as icons of visual and "vocal" identification of spiritual presence in sacred ceremonies and how these have been transferred to Christian worship experience among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples of West Africa, as a model. The understanding of the interdependence of masking and drumming as agents of communication within a consumer culture is fundamental to the understanding of traditional theatre.

Many African cultures engaged animist traditional religious practices, which featured the symbolic representation of deities and gods preceding western missionary and colonial incursion into African societies. With the adoption of Christianity, there occurred a transfer of traditional symbolism such as drumming into the modus of praise worship. It is important to situate the role of music as a medium of communication with God among African worshipers and the effect of on the worshipers. The

magnitude of social vices expressed in delinquent behaviour among our youth is traceable to this separation of man from his spiritual identity and roots. Within traditional African cultures, their fears and joys; losses and achievements; and ultimately birth and death are celebrated in religious media because all circumstances are duly attributed to the design of spiritual forces. In many situations, the drum serves as a medium of communication in sacred ceremonies between the congregation and God. In traditional society, the masked masquerade is representative of the spiritual dwellers of the world of the dead and the gods. Thus great reverence is given to the masker, who speaks and acts in the guise of the spirits. Unfortunately, this waning of interest in the practice of the religions is not as important as the knowledge system which is portrayed in the dramatic theatre employed by the adherents. It becomes important then that attention be given to this source of information on traditional religious theatre to aid understanding of the bridge between form and content in Christian spiritual worship experience in African societies.

Much work has been done in the research of elements of traditional theatre, with analyses of the drum, mask, songs costume and other props as unitary agents of symbolism. This approach poses a challenge for the modern scholar who adopts a discipline based approach, thereby studying entities of performance as autonomous units, rather than as the interrelated components of a common form. The tendency to dissect a form, as Art Historians, Social Anthropologists, Dance Ethnologists and Ethnomusicologists often do, and extract only that which is relevant to their discipline leads to a fragmentation of naturally fused genres. For instance, a musical recording, a mask in a museum or a photograph may pose special interest in their own right but these individual units cannot be compared with the holistic experience from which they were extracted. An example is the symbiotic interaction and function of Masking and Drumming in traditional theatre.

### **Origin of Masking**

Across time and culture, masks have served to imbue power, transform identity, and connect people with each other and with their sense of the divine and the spiritual. The shaman uses a

mask to communicate with or take on the identity of an animal spirit or helping spirit. During a performance, a shaman would seek the help of or take the identity of the spirit -- sometimes changing identities several times throughout by changing masks. In communal ritual, masks are used as part of a broader social function to achieve a benefit for the group. Masks are also an important aspect of storytelling, whether an oral tradition or a theatrical performance. For many cultures, these uses are fluid and intermingled.

The term in Ancient for a mask is *prosopon* and it was an important part of the worship of Dionysus, and often used in rites and celebrations. Much of the evidence is derived from just a few paintings of vases of the 5th century BC. One of such is one showing a mask of Dionysus suspended from a tree wearing a richly decorated robe. Unfortunately no physical evidence is available, as the masks were made of organic materials and easily degradable. The mask has been used since the time of Aeschylus and known to be one of the significant conventions of classical Greek theatre. Members of the chorus also wore masks because they played some part in the action and provided a commentary on the events in which they were caught up. The twelve or fifteen members of the tragic chorus all wear the same mask because they are considered to be representing one character.

### **Masking and Drumming in Yoruba culture**

The standard terminology for masking or any covering of the face is 'egungun', in colloquial and formal contexts. However, the term is specifically located in the religious terrain of Yoruba spiritual ideology. According to Adedeji, the Yoruba Egungun is a hybrid and diverse mode of ritual performance characteristic of ancestral worship. Egungun is believed to date back to the 14th century B.C.E. when Sango, as alafin or king of the Oyo Empire, introduced the ancestral worship of baba (father) which later came to be known as egungun, meaning masquerade (Adedeji 255). The term Egungun, means "powers concealed" or "masquerade" (Drewal and Pemberton 1989: 177) and is strictly related to ancestral worship rites practiced among the Oyo Yoruba of West Africa (Olajubu & Ojo 253), though over the course of their long history, these practices diffused through the

other twenty five subgroups that make up the Yoruba ethnic group (Cole 60, M. Drewal 1992: 12). Although the Egungun is features in all Yoruba cultures, it has continued to maintain a great degree of regional autonomy and innovation. In fact there is a great variety of performance modes throughout Yorubaland. Drewal (1989: 179) notes that

The visual and verbal artistry for Egungun is so rich and varied that attempts at typological analysis prove to be difficult in the extreme

Adedeji, however, argues that such a typological, chronologic, and progressivist approach misses the point entirely and is not a useful methodology for exploring the Egungun. In general, the Egungun is performed in specific public spaces set apart for such use. The ritual performance is a highly corporate event that engages all members of the community. As “total theatre” Egungun masquerade incorporates dance, singing, drumming, chanting, masking, costumes, and both set and improvised recitation.

Accompanied by elaborate drumming and the singing and chanting of community members, the masqueraders are completely covered by elaborate costumes made of richly brocaded and highly symbolic tapestry-like fabrics. Cordwell describes these elaborate costumes as “mobile sculpture with visual and sound effects” (56). Many Egungun costumes utilize a mask as well, carved by experienced Yoruba artisans who themselves rely on a rich legacy to inform their work. Egungun are considered to be heavenly beings, the embodied spirits of ancestors come to earth to restore balance, receive praise, and grant blessings. The performer “portraying” these ancestors experiences a double effacement in Egungun ritual. On one level their identities and bodies are literally effaced by the heavy, sculptural costumes. In another spiritual sense, the performers are effaced in that they become empty vessel for the spirit of the ancestors. Egungun performance, then, is characterized by possession and mediumship. The process of concealing the

human body paradoxically reveals the presence of the ancestor's spirit.

While the performative ritual of Egungun has a long history it is certainly not a static art form. Rather it is a dynamic and intensely divergent socio-cultural practice always subject to the innovative, transformational forces of its skilled performers and active spectators. The origins of Egungun performance are difficult to ascertain. Olajubu and Ojo observe, "when informants are pressed for such information [the origins of Egungun], some profess ignorance, other narrate 'stories of origin', others, especially cult members, refuse to divulge what they regard as cult secrets...Other informants say: 'It is our fathers' tradition, we inherited it, no one knows how it began'" (255). In his essay "The Origin and Form of the Yoruba Masque Theatre" Joel Adedeji begins with a short summary of Egungun's origins, which elaborates on Olajubu and Ojo's comments above. This is cited from page 225 of Adedeji's article:

From this history we can gather that the origin of Egungun ritual was partly political, and tied to a desire by Yoruba leaders to deify past leaders, and in so doing solidify histories of power that would help legitimize kingly authority. The origins of Egungun are also spiritual, occurring as they did in sacred spaces, and evolving into "a permanent feature of Yoruba funeral ceremony" (255). The remainder of Adedeji's article is an interesting and in-depth look at the rise and fall of another important Yoruba performing tradition: masque theatre. You can read the rest of the article [here](#). A final thought on trying to discover the origins of the Egungun:

Our desire as western researchers to seek out the origin of Egungun masquerades betrays a general progressivist desire to chart the development of a cultural artifact from "simplicity" to "complexity," from "chaos" to "order." As Drewal has pointed out, however, Yoruba ritual in general, and Egungun performance in particular, is generative and interactive, and draws its power from moment-to-moment enactment by knowledgeable agents. Yes, Egungun performance is based on the past, but it finds its meaning in the repetition of this past within present moments of performance. Egungun performance is fluid,



decentered, and hybrid - qualities that often resist categorization along a progressivist chronology.

### **Festivals**

For a concise summary of the process of the festivals of the Oyo Yoruba see pages 263-268 of Olajubu and Ojo's article "Some Aspects of Oyo Yoruba Masquerades," attached here. The structure and frequency of festivals is highly divergent, and depends upon region. Some festivals are annual, some occur every other year. Some regions hold their festivals as early as March, while other regions conduct their festivals in July or September. The date for these festivals is often arrived at through divination. Once a date has been set, the information is passed to the members of the town hosting the festival and the people of neighboring communities.

Ritual preparations for the theatre festival also differ from region to region, town to town. These preparatory rituals often involve a vigil to welcome the ancestral spirits, conducted within the egungun grove (Olajubu and Ojo 264). This vigil lasts all night and includes feasting, drinking, and sacrifice. Generally, the Egungun festival begins with masked performance in the sacred grove for important political and cult leaders. The egungun maskers then venture into town, followed by a large group made up of drummers, chanting women, relatives of the various departed ancestors, children, cult leaders, and political dignitaries. Egungun festivals can last up to three months, with a whole cadre of varying performances in spaces throughout the village and sacred grove.

Egungun masquerades not only vary from region to region in terms of structure and frequency, but also in content. One source of this diversity is the subject of the spectacle itself, since Egungun ritual honors specific family ancestors. Drewal writes that "Egungun masked performances transform and re-present myth through the fragmentation of its narrative structure..." (Drewal 90). She goes on to say, "The performances are paratactical--made up of equal, but thematically and stylistically disconnected, segments strung together temporarily" (Drewal 91). Thus, the content of Egungun masked performance is highly dependent on the repertoire of myths and performative segments the performer is able to conjure up through gesture,

song, dance, and speech in the improvisational moment of performance. Indeed, Drewal writes, "In Yoruba ritual, materials received from the past can be repeated--either elaborated, condensed, extended and expanded--or deleted entirely, all at the performers' whims" (Drewal 102).

### **Music: Drumming and singing**

In "Drumming for the Egungun: The Poet-Musician in Yoruba Masquerade Theater," included in *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts*, author Akin Euba writes that "Yoruba traditional music--vocal and instrumental--is synonymous with musical-theater. It is seldom realized as a distinctive art form, for it is performed and heard in the context of other artistic and ritual performances that entail poetry, dance, mime, costume, and sculpted forms...their ultimate function lies in their integration with religion and other aspects of Yoruba life-style" (161).

The Yoruba ritual drummer is not a specialist, but rather is trained to be able to play at any ceremony, festival, or performance where drumming is a main component of the action. Some important families and Egungun use specific "personal drummers," a practice that displays the wealth, prestige, and piousness of the family. The art of drumming is an essential component of the complex tapestry that is dance performance. Much like the masker's costume its self, drumming makes the Egungun. There are two types of drumming ensembles that play the Egungun: dundun and bata.

### **Dundun**

"The Dundun ensemble consists of tension drums of various sizes together with a small kettle drum...The lead tension drum, *iyaaalu*, is used for talking" (Euba 162-164). The 'talking drum' is so named because "the patterns played by the lead drum...are a blend of music and poetry, for the patterns are analogous to a text spoken by the human voice" (Euba 161). The Dundun ensemble is used most regularly by the ancestral masquerades. Egungun music is not limited to these two drumming ensembles. Most notably, women from the Egungun compounds chant poetry in praise of the masquerades as they make their way into the township.

### **Mask details**

Mask dating from the 4th/3rd century BC, Stoa of Attalos. Illustrations of theatrical masks from 5th century display helmet-like masks, covering the entire face and head, with holes for the eyes and a small aperture for the mouth, as well as an integrated wig. These paintings never show actual masks on the actors in performance; they are most often shown being handled by the actors before or after a performance, that liminal space between the audience and the stage, between myth and reality. This demonstrates the way in which the mask was to 'melt' into the face and allow the actor to vanish into the role. Effectively, the mask transformed the actor as much as memorization of the text. Therefore, performance in ancient Greece did not distinguish the masked actor from the theatrical character.

The mask-makers were called *skeupoios* or "maker of the properties," thus suggesting that their role encompassed multiple duties and tasks. The masks were most likely made out of light weight, organic materials like stiffened linen, leather, wood, or cork, with the wig consisting of human or animal hair. Due to the visual restrictions imposed by these masks, it was imperative that the actors hear in order to orient and balance themselves. Thus, it is believed that the ears were covered by substantial amounts of hair and not the helmet-mask itself. The mouth opening was relatively small, preventing the mouth to be seen during performances. Vervain and Wiles posit that this small size discourages the idea that the mask functioned as a megaphone, as originally presented in the 1960s. Greek mask-maker, Thanos Vovolis, suggests that the mask serves as a resonator for the head, thus enhancing vocal acoustics and altering its quality. This leads to increased energy and presence, allowing for the more complete metamorphosis of the actor into his character.

### **Mask and Drum functions**

In a large open-air theatre, like the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens, the classical masks were able to create a sense of dread in the audience creating large scale panic, especially since they had intensely exaggerated facial features and expressions. They enabled an actor to appear and reappear in several different roles, thus preventing the audience from identifying the actor to one specific character. Their variations help the audience to

distinguish sex, age, and social status, in addition to revealing a change in a particular character's appearance, e.g. Oedipus after blinding himself. Unique masks were also created for specific characters and events in a play, such as The Furies in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Pentheus and Cadmus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Worn by the chorus, the masks created a sense of unity and uniformity, while representing a multi-voiced persona or single organism and simultaneously encouraged interdependency and a heightened sensitivity between each individual of the group. Only 2-3 actors were allowed on the stage at one time, and masks permitted quick transitions from one character to another. There were only male actors, but masks allowed them to play female characters. (Begho, 1996)

Masking originated from ancient Greek drama which was a theatrical culture that flourished from c. 700 BC. The city-state of Athens, which became a significant cultural, political, and military power during this period, was its center, where it was institutionalised as part of a festival called the Dionysia, which honoured the god Dionysus. Tragedy (late 500 BC), comedy (490 BC), and the satyr play were the three dramatic genres to emerge there. Athens exported the festival to its numerous colonies and allies in order to promote a common cultural identity.

Masking was used as a means of projecting the emotions of stage characters as they said their lines, because the classical Greeks valued the power of spoken word, and it was their main method of communication and storytelling. However, the theatre was so large that the audience could not see the facial expressions of the actors on stage. According to Bahn and Bahn, the Greeks perceived the spoken word was a living thing preferred to written language which they called "the dead symbols." Socrates himself believed that once something was written down, it lost its ability for change and growth. For these reasons, among many others, oral storytelling flourished in Greece. Greek tragedy as we know it was created in Athens around the time of 532 BC, when Thespis was the earliest recorded actor. Being a winner of the first theatrical contest held in Athens, he was the *exarchon*, or leader of the dithyrambs performed in and around Attica, especially at the rural Dionysia. By Thespis' time, the dithyramb had evolved far away from its

cult roots. Under the influence of heroic epic, Doric choral lyric and the innovations of the poet Arion, it had become a narrative, ballad-like genre. Because of these, Thespis is often called the "Father of Tragedy"; however, his importance is disputed, and Thespis is sometimes listed as late as 16th in the chronological order of Greek tragedians; the statesman Solon, for example, is credited with creating poems in which characters speak with their own voice, and spoken performances of Homer's epics by rhapsodes were popular in festivals prior to 534 BC (Best 1976). Thus, Thespis's true contribution to drama is unclear at best, but his name has been given a longer life, in English, as a common term for performer – i.e., a "thespian."

The dramatic performances were important to the Athenians - this is made clear by the creation of a tragedy competition and festival in the City Dionysia. This was organized possibly to foster loyalty among the tribes of Attica (recently created by Cleisthenes). The festival was created roughly around 508 BC. While no drama texts exist from the sixth century BC, we do know the names of three competitors besides Thespis: Choerilus, Pratinas, and Phrynichus. Each is credited with different innovations in the field (Blacking, J. 1977)

More is known about Phrynichus. He won his first competition between 511 BC and 508 BC. He produced tragedies on themes and subjects later exploited in the golden age such as the Danaids, Phoenician Women and Alcestis. He was the first poet we know of to use a historical subject - his *Fall of Miletus*, produced in 493-2, chronicled the fate of the town of Miletus after it was conquered by the Persians. Herodotus reports that "the Athenians made clear their deep grief for the taking of Miletus in many ways, but especially in this: when Phrynichus wrote a play entitled "The Fall of Miletus" and produced it, the whole theatre fell to weeping; they fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally and forbade the performance of that play forever. He is also thought to be the first to use female characters (though not female performers). (Benthall, J. & Polhemus)

Until the Hellenistic period, all tragedies were unique pieces written in honour of Dionysus and played only once, so that today we primarily have the pieces that were still remembered well enough to have been repeated when the repetition of old

tragedies became fashionable (the accidents of survival, as well as the subjective tastes of the Hellenistic librarians later in Greek history, also played a role in what survived from this period).

We now explore the ways identity and religious dialogue constructed via the medium of drum. Drumming provides an avenue of heightened emotional connection and simultaneously provides a melodic rhythm within which spiritual ecstasy is achieved. This is particularly applicable in the churches which feature a relatively high degree of working class population, also known as "white garment churches". The drumming delineates the geographical and cultural space as every worshiper responds to the spiritual melodies of the beats. The language barrier is dissolved as the congregation is embraced in the communal fold of unified communion. Among other ethnic groups of Nigeria such as the Igbo speaking group of South Eastern Nigeria, masking is a central element of traditional religion which has found new definitions in Christianity among the Igbo people. While masks represented the spirits of the Ancestors in traditional religion, today, masking is simply a form of entertainment during Easter and Christmas celebrations.

In the two cultures discussed here, we find that drumming becomes a medium of communicating with the higher spiritual power, while the mask represents the visually assessed, symbolic presence of the same spiritual presence or God Almighty. Hence the symbols become metaphors of dialogue within the religious atmosphere.

### **Conclusion**

The main thrust of this paper has been to explore the influence of the Non-Verbal media of drumming and masking in contemporary Christian religious experience, especially in the "white garment churches". Using the Yoruba and Igbo as cultural models, the paper demonstrates that the use of drumming in particular provide a heightened medium of spiritual union with Go during praise worship. Drumming lends special interest and is often appreciated both as an art and as a celebration of social values in Africa. Masking is more popular among the Igbo people whose dance dynamics is more energetic and theatrical. Using the semiotic approach of analytical philosophy with its relevant

focus on the production of meaning in society, the work attempts the decodification of drumming kinesics ostended in communication. By so doing, the relevance of praise worship is demonstrated as indispensable in spiritual experience. Dance kinesics, occurring in association with other drumming motifs is able to reveal a rich store of meaning encoded in the complementary channels. The communication approach adopted has proved particularly useful in helping to distinguish situations of verbalized utterance in communication from that of body language. In particular, the density of symbolism is easily untangled with the accessibility to de-codification available in such effective methods as the perspective of semiotics.

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