

**Masks and Symbols in Masquerade Performances among the Tiv of
Central Nigeria**

Mnena Abuku

Department of Theatre Arts

Benue State University, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria

Abstract

Africa as a vast continent is made up of many countries whose arts come in different forms. These different arts include a theatre tradition which manifests itself in different parts of Africa through festivals, rituals, marriages, naming, initiation ceremonies, folklore and masquerade performances. These festive theatres represent the broad context of traditional African theatre. The African concept of theatre itself attracts and recognizes the function and boundary that separates the real and the imaginary. However, traditional African arts are used by communities and cultural groups to embellish their domestic and public (social life) and gatherings. For the Tiv, art is a way of life and is evident in social, political and religious spheres of life. Tiv art is mostly realised through the oral tradition. This paper establishes the meaning and links between masks and masquerade performances with emphasis on Tiv *mami wata* masquerade performance, while drawing attention to Tiv history, traditions, worldview, beliefs and creativity. A semiotics of the face masks would be explored to tease out the rationale and knowledge of the Tiv; the paper would also show what obtained in the past, and how masks are presently perceived by and in the lives of the people.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, African theatre and performance scholars have debated views, definitions and concepts of African theatre. Many of these scholars and critics in the past had accepted and in fact depended on Western theorizations of drama and theatre in their explorations of practices of theatre in Africa. But from the 1960s also, African theorizations of African performance and theatre began to wean itself from this dependence on Western theatrical frames by producing their own views, concepts and definitions of an African theatre whose nature weaves

around secular and religious art traditions. Scholars such as Nzekwu (1960), Ogunba (1966 and 1978), Soyinka (1981), Enekwe (1981), Enem (1980), Okagbue (2007) and Ukaegbu (2007), among others, have theorized and written on various aspects of African theatres and in particular the links between the masking art, festival drama, secular and religious art. Oyin Ogunba's theorization of theatre (1966, 1978), in particular, is finely expressed in the concept of 'festival drama' when he states that there are two types of theatre in Africa: one indigenous and deriving from local traditional festivals and another foreign and borrowed. Ogunba also believes that all traditional festivals are attached to supernatural beings or deified ancestors, and thus these festivals may be said to be religious at base and aspirations.

This concept of performance recognizes certain elements as constituting the aesthetic of this theatrical genre and using specific examples drawn from his Yoruba culture Ogunba (1966:7) finds that festivals are the main physical and metaphysical representation of African religion. He writes that:

...Festivals in a given African culture... are just a proliferation of a few archetypal ones, and that when enough work has been done in this field from culture to culture in Africa, it may yet be found that the same types of festivals occur all over Africa.

This statement gives a clear indication that there is a general perception of religion and festival tradition. The argument relies heavily on the idea of similar religious concepts of ancestors, deities and the supernatural which can be found across Africa. But do all Africans really have the same concept of God and the ancestors? This paper seeks to show the marked difference between Tiv religion and worldview and those from other African cultures. Tiv do not have festivals where the sacred and the profane meet, rather they have a different concept of the supernatural. For the Tiv, the supernatural is not the presence of spirits, but rather the circumference of their commonly held views about the composition of their world.

Tiv Origins, Religion and Worldview

The Tiv are an ethnic group found in Benue State in Central Nigeria. Said to be the descendants of Tiv and his two sons, Ipusu and Ichongo, the Tiv occupy a better part of Benue State, although large numbers of Tiv people are today found beyond their boundaries where many have migrated and are living among Ogoja people in Cross River State, and among other ethnic groups in Plateau and Taraba States. The Tiv are an egalitarian group whose relationship with one another is based on cooperation, trust, harmony and unity. All Tiv clans are believed to branch out from these two sons. This explains why any where the Tiv person is found within or outside Tiv territory, he or she looks at all other Tiv as 'brothers' or 'sisters', since their relationship with other Tiv is traced to the ancestral grandfather, Tiv, who has given the people both their ethnic and cultural identity.

Religion plays a central role in the life of the Tiv, therefore, understanding Tiv religion and worldview is important to the analysis of Tiv arts, including their theatre. The Tiv man remains continuous with his group, people and universe. He seeks to master, understand and control his environment by mastering the tangible and intangible forces on the land and sky in order to tame them. Tiv religion cannot be easily classified, but J.B Pratt (1973:72), writing on Tiv religion, underlines how the Tiv conception of religion differs from that of Western European. Pratt writes:

[Religion is the serious and social attitude of individuals or communities towards the powers which they conceive their interests and destinies]. The religious attitude towards the Determiner and Destiny must not be 'mechanical' or coldly intellectual. It must have some faint touch of that social quality which we feel in our relations towards anything that can make response to us.

Tiv religion is diverse in expression like its art forms. Central to Tiv religion are the concepts of *Tsav*, *Azov* and *Akombo*.

Tsav means life and energy and the power that exists in nature; it is an unforeseen force for the good and development of living things and also for any interference with life and ordinary function of nature. To the Tiv, it is a complex factor because it has political, religious and psychological dimensions. Those who possess it have power beyond normal faculties. *Tsav* influences the physical force and kind of power or excellence a man possesses, e.g. talent, leadership etc. *Azov* are believed to be unseen creatures (spirits) who live and share the environment with the Tiv. They also engage in normal chores and activities and cultural practices as the Tiv, even though they cannot be seen with the naked eyes. They are the counterparts of the Tiv. *Azov* are believed to hold meetings, hunt, dance, farm and play and commune with the Tiv. They are believed to occupy river banks, streams and tree trunks. Their role is to control those who possess *tsav*. They are considered supernatural but integrated in Tiv thought as natural phenomenon. *Akombo* are emblems central to Tiv religio-medical belief. These emblems possess no residing spirits but are non-human forces that form a natural part of the Tiv environment. *Akombo* can be violated if a person fails to observe taboos and laws surrounding it, it then inflicts punishment on violators.

Evolution of Masquerade in Tiv Land

Masquerade traditions in Tiv land are linked to one another. Generally speaking, it is believed that Tiv masquerade evolved with *Akume*, a highly religious masquerade, *Ajigbe*, *Ijov-Mbakuv* and *Mami Wata*. Tiv masquerade performances became established among the Tiv in 1920, after the *Akume* revolution in Tiv land. The masquerades have since become secular.

Akume Masquerade

Akume means 'revolt' among the Tiv. *Akume* was mainly a ritual associated with the death of aged men who were initiated into the *Akombo* rites of the land. *Akume* is said to be the mother of all masquerade performances in Tiv land, since all other performances have inherited one attribute or the other from this masquerade. *Akume* served as a police force among the Tiv, or as the body guard of old titled people vested with the positive *tsav* to set the land right. The masquerade appeared only when needed, to repair or fix death when a member died; the *Akombo* ritual was performed by these old men who had the right to land.

To perform the *Akume*, initiated members wore masks which covered every part of the body. The mask was made of a woven trouser and shirt sewn together. The shirt was also extended to cover the head and the face allowing only two holes for the eyes. This was part of the inner mask while the outer part covered the whole frame. It was made from raffia and painted in black, blue and white. The facemask was woven in such a way that it induced fear. On the appointed day of performance, only the men in the village or community were allowed to attend the ceremony. The performance of *Akume* involved a lot of drumming and dancing. Once the *Akume* masquerade appeared, only those initiated into the rites could dress up and perform in the arena.

Akume masquerade is characterized by wild and vigorous performance. The dancing was equally wild, beginning with a different step variation which would start from one end of the arena to the other and back, and the distance is covered with tremendous speed and energetic body movement. Only a wooden gong provided music for the performance and the dance steps matched the music. *Akume* always carried a whip in his hand, which was a symbol of order and authority. With the advent of Christianity and colonial administration, *Akume* was considered idol worship and, therefore, prohibited. By 1930, the effects of prohibition came to be felt as performance rites of *Akume* were greatly reduced. After this period, *Akume* rites and taboos were no longer respected as its cosmic order had been disturbed, and hence it gradually disappeared.

Ajigbe Masquerade

This is the indigenous masquerade performance which replaced *Akume*. Unlike its successor, the *Ajigbe* is devoid of all religious connotations and context. Its purpose was to entertain and earn money for performers. The performers wore costumes made of raffia as in *Akume*. The raffia was also painted in different colours but not like *Akume* who had three colours. The *Ajigbe* masquerade wore face masks made from wood and two types of face masks were used: one was small and carved out of wood with a rough finishing. The face of this first mask was not adorned with any painting. The second face mask was made from broken calabash with three holes for the eyes and nose.

Ajigbe masquerade was performed by young men below the age of thirty. The dance, accompanied by music made by different musical instruments including empty bottles and Tiv drums, was jumpy and characterized by leaps. Performance basically commenced after midnight.

Ijov-Mbakuv

In Tiv language, this means the abode of the spirits. It is more or less a metaphysical creation of Tiv people to explain the link which exists in the world of man, spirit and land. It is believed that *mbakuv* is the place where natural spirits and sometimes the spirit of the dead meet freely and carry out their nightly duties. Atem Ikye of the Mbakuv kindred, a prolific dancer, singer and sculptor, started *Ijov-mbakuv* in 1960. During this time *Ajigbe* had gained popularity in secular entertainment, therefore, it was possible he picked some ideas from it. He further appropriated the Tiv concept of the spirit world to create a performance that was not only awe inspiring but also immensely entertaining.

Although *Ijov-mbakuv* masquerade eventually became a communally popular and fascinating phenomenon, Atem-Ikye had in fact started the performance in his compound to frighten stubborn children into good behaviour by making them believe they would be captured by *Ijov-mbakuv* if they did not change. Atem-Ikye had tapped into the fact that Tiv people live in awe of the spirit world, and the idea of spirits was used to keep unwanted behaviour in check. Atem Ikye made grotesque face masks intended to cause fear and he also designed a new costume for the performer. The mask, a massive human face exaggerated out of proportion, was originally carved out of a broken calabash but this was later changed to wood. The nostrils were very wide, with a human head implanted in them. The eyes were also very big and bold and the forehead protruded. The mask had a rough finishing and was not painted.

When Hagher (1990:12) describes *Ajigbe* mask it is evident that the description is more applicable to *Ijov-mbakuv* mask. He writes:

...It has an impish and cheeky face with the nose and mouth pointed outward into a perpetual *ponto*. This mask is linked to the torso with raffia of the mask and the rest the rest of the body. The eyes are bold and there is a slit behind the eyeballs through which the dancer's vision is ensured.

The emphasized scary nature of *Ijov-mbakuv* is meant to instill fear in the spectator just like *Akume* masquerade. The masquerade was conceived as a device for maintaining law and order and as previously pointed out to keep children in check, but it soon attracted the attention of other sculptors who later introduced various motifs on the masks depending on their artistic skills and perception of the *Ijov-mbakuv*.

Mami Wata

The *Mami Wata* masquerade came after *Ijov-mbakuv*; it was introduced by the Igbo who came in from the Eastern part of the country to trade. *Mami Wata* is represented in the Igbo world view as a water spirit known as queen of the sea or water. She is seen as an elegant and very beautiful woman, with very long hair with serenity in her expression, who could choose to give wealth and benevolence abundantly to devotees. The spirit is also notoriously demanding in attention and could demand or make favoured persons pay back dearly when offended. *Mami Wata* is a wild spirit with no feelings, but is concerned about the health and material well being of devotees. This spirit has a dual nature as afflicter and healer, bringer of both fortune and misfortune. It is from this philosophy of a beautiful and graceful nature of this water spirit that this masquerade was introduced into Tiv arts. Although new and distinct from the normal understanding of Tiv art, people observed the similarities between the Tiv *Ijov-mbakuv* mask and masked performances and the Ibibio and Ikine *Mami Wata* performances from the Eastern part of the country. The *Mami Wata* introduced the Tiv to new face masks that fitted perfectly into the new *Ijov-mbakuv* performance. Still using the concept of *Azov* (spirits of the world or land), the Tiv now had *Mami Wata*, the *Azov* of the water, that is, spirits that dwell in the water, even though the new face mask did not fit the belief system of the Tiv, since they did not know much about water spirits.

The concept of *Mami Wata*, the new spirit, was illustrated and explained by a picture of a beautiful woman with snakes coiled around her body. Possible explanations for this representation are that it arose from the belief that early European sailors who landed in Calabar and Bonny (the two Eastern Nigerian coastal towns from which the *Mama Wata* masquerades originated) in the sixteenth century brought ships that had figure heads of mermaids which in turn had influenced local beliefs. It is also noted that River Benue and Katsina-Ala have a large number of manatee. The manatee, described as a woman with beautiful features and long hair, was also present in Tiv legends. These mermaids are more commonly known in Tiv as *Ayu*. This connection with legends made it easy for the *Mami Wata* mask to become accepted and incorporated into Tiv arts. This mask was more beautiful than *Ijov-Mbakuv* and it made a great impact on the Tiv. Representing the face of a beautiful woman, this mask was smooth, had long hair and was painted in bright colours. Her two hands were supported by two large snakes.

Tiv people quickly adopted this new form and created an opportunity to increase the beauty of the mask and its performance. They incorporated many indigenous ideas and in addition to the woman and the snakes, the masks carried animals such as lions and leopards which were abundant in the region. However, they did not abandon the original *Ijov-mbakuv* which has survived along side the *Mami Wata* and both masquerades are occasionally performed together as a group. The difference between *Ijov-mbakuv* and *Mami Wata* face masks is that the

latter carries a woman, snakes, wild animals, birds and mirrors, while the former carries either a woman or man carved sitting on the face mask with stiff arms.

Mami Wata performance, as with all Tiv arts is rooted in the oral tradition – this is also true of most indigenous arts practices in Africa. Being an oral performance form and practice therefore makes *Mami Wata* to be always flexible and open to improvisation depending on the performer's artistic creativity which enables him to incorporate new ideas. *Mami Wata* draws on costume, musical, verbal, mimetic, sculptural or decorative arts which are thematically organized and exhibited in a public performance. The success of the performance is dependent on the use of metaphors of performance as well as effective characterization through dance, songs, costumes and the understanding of the social context of the performance.

The Face Mask

Tiv masquerade performances, as with other African arts, belong to the popular traditional arts whose roots go down deep into the soil of each culture, hence these art forms very often identify with the sentiments, aspirations and interests of their respective communities. In order to appreciate the face mask it would be important to look at the social organization of the people which is marked by continuity and the cyclic relationship that links human beings, land and the universe. To the Tiv, the concept of land is very important, since it refers to a space in which a people are bound together by kingship. The Tiv believe that humans, the earth, the ancestors and other spirits join in the sacred rite of the tribe as a way of maintaining cosmic order and the face of the *Mami Wata* is carved in circular manner to graphically and in performance depict this continuity.

The Tiv people also conceive of themselves as belonging or existing in a series of concentric circles arranged with the smallest circles in the middle and the larger ones surrounding it. The individual is the smallest and the progenitor the largest. The small circle represents the individuality of members of the group which can not be dangerous as it is surrounded by the larger circles which represent forces far more superior than humans. The idea of the circle is meant to represent continuity, continuity between the different levels of existence and this also explains why the Tiv live in round huts and homesteads organized in circles. This is also the reason why *Mami Wata* is given the human shape, as she is perceived to be as important as man within the cosmic arrangement.

The face carries animals, birds, snakes and mirrors. These represent animals which abound in the land; the snake represents a legend in Tiv history, based on a belief that once, while running away from their enemies, the people were saved by a snake (Fig 1). Sometimes the animals, birds and snakes are painted black and white in the symbolic colour of the Tiv. The colours black and white in Tiv semiology represent the ashes from the cremated bones of their forefathers. It also symbolizes the rich fertile soil of the land and the kind, warmth hearted nature of the people.



Fig 1: *Mami Wata* dressed as a woman holding a snake or snakes, some masks carry the images of eagles or animals and mirrors; she has a round girdle worn around the waist. *Mami Wata's* dance is soft, gentle and subtle.

The Significance of the Face Masks

For many African peoples, the face has a function well beyond its aesthetics qualities. For instance, among the Kota in the Republic of Congo, the Tsogo to the West of Ofoue River and the Kuyu on the Upper Congo River, mask making is a common occupation; but these masks vary from tribe to tribe. The masks are used for multi-purposes such as guardian angels, effigies of ancestors whom they

worship, but they also serve as representations or symbols of ancestral primal age. In Gabon masks are used during ancestral celebrations to remind the people of their past heroes, while the Bakuba of Congo also use masks made from tall stones for protection against evil forces and for communication with the dead. In the Cameroon masks are basically used for festival celebrations and other activities, such as during the initiation of young boys into manhood. This ritual is specifically controlled and organized by the elders in the land. And in Angola, the *Makishi* masks reveal the serenity of their culture and tribe through decorative designs. However, for the Tiv the mask is not a ritual symbol but a form of disguise, an essence and sometimes a marker of cultural identity. The masks do not always fulfill any religious functions, but rather act as guides to communal rites and customs.

An important significance of face masks in the Tiv arts is their ability to humanize the weird elements of the Tiv universe, especially those mysterious aspects which are then, through the performance, brought to earth and their modes of being and operation are simplified for the community, through removing the mysteries surrounding them. Through this demystification these otherworldly elements are made more visible to the people as they become socialized into the human world. This is achieved through deep psychological study and understanding of the spirit world by the performers and theatre makers and actively capturing and translating this world into performances. This activity serves the purpose of reducing tension in the community arising from fears about spirits by restoring psychological balance in members of the community.

Conclusion

The performances encourage members of the society to think of their history and experience in a creative way. The masquerade performances depict the community's beliefs, history and experience, by creatively reinterpreting them in order to bring newness to them. Since *Mami Wata* is a mixture of many art forms, its preponderance among the Tiv has encouraged the growth of these art forms in the society where many sculptors have emerged.

In the light of the above, it is pertinent to say that African art forms are dynamic and have a lot of contributions to make to the knowledge of African cultures and societies. Knowledge of African arts and performance forms would also enrich our understanding of world theatre because of the diversity and the peculiarity of these indigenous theatre forms which exist on the continent.

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