

## **Masking Art Tradition as a Cultural Manifestation of Olugbobiri People of Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper sets out to examine masks and masked dancers, to explore their meaning and significance to the Olugbobiri people of Nigeria. The precise form, the performance and the symbolic relationships implied in its structure have received little attention. Hence, this study focuses on the study of the subject for the needed information. The objective is to provide more detailed account on the origin, types of masks and the performance of the masquerades. Qualitative research methodology was used to achieve the desired objectives. The study reveals that devotees of Ungozi are blessed with a wealth of children and finance, which fosters unity amongst families and individuals. Also, the commitment of devotees of Ungozi is fast fading due to Christianity and other alien religions. The study leads to a better understanding of the relationship between the spirit world and the physical world.*

**Keywords:** Ijo, masking tradition, masquerade, sea-nymph, Ungozi

### **Introduction**

Masked figures, which are generally face coverings used largely in ritual activities, disguise the wearer and usually communicate an alternate identity that are believed to be spirit entities. Underwood (1964) observed an inherent characteristic of masks in West Africa as standing in its original right, as an individual expression of the likeness of the deity or spirit represented. The term *masking* refers to a masked figure, which has a facial disguise to portray an anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or even hydromorphic expression. From the world view of the people of Olugbobiri in Southern Ijaw local government area of Bayelsa State in Nigeria, masking is carried out when sea-nymphs go into mutual friendship with human beings and ask them to wear a mask or headgear (headpiece), which reflects their characteristic features. Some authorities also have similar views that corroborate this assertion. Simon Ottenberg in Aniakor (1980) asserts that masking is a spirit visitation event in which different types of masks are cast in roles that characterize certain social attributes, expectations and ideals. Similarly, Enekwe (1988) sees a mask as that which has force of an invocation and introduces extra-human forces into the human sphere, making possible the displacement of chronological time by primordial time in which mythical beings commune with the living and manifest their powers. Masking is the most popular, the most versatile, and the most entertaining public performance in most ethnic groups in Africa. This acceptability by the people and frequent display that unite and invigorate different groups weary of domestic activities in an area makes it a tradition.

Masking art tradition as a part of Olugbobiri's artistic heritage has scanty documented records. However, Alagoa (1967) discussed different types of masquerades and their performance from the Eastern Delta kingdoms of Nembe, Kalabarc, Ibani (Bonny) and Okirika, but did not mention the subject. Invariably, Anderson (2002) documented canoes being used by people watching masquerade displays to avoid being inquired by the masquerades. Also, she discussed fish as being used as mask in rich cultural detail but did not present the sequential stage performance.

Therefore, it becomes imperative to search and present this cultural environment and stress the cultural content of African arts as cultural manifestations, reflecting the culture that gave birth to them. The purpose of this paper is largely concentrated on the theme of religious orientation of African art; and the intrinsic relationship between African art and African culture. It becomes obvious that the functions of African art be clearly expressed with regards to the cultural dynamics and imperatives of each African society. Hence, the realization that Olugbobiri masks and masquerades is the product of African cultural.

This paper is a contribution to the growing literature on African art studies. It seeks to demonstrate that cultural standards exist among the Ijo of South-South Nigeria. Being an exploratory study, it is hoped that some of the observations made will shed some light generally on some aspects of African masks and masquerades and lead to the much needed comparative studies in African arts.

### **Origin**

The Ijo people believe that the universe was created by a creator, and think that this supernatural being looks after it and sustains it. They have the strong conviction because of their limitations and weaknesses particularly in the face of death, calamities and the forces of nature such as thunderstorms, earthquakes, mighty rivers and great forests which man cannot control or can only control in a very small way. This led possibly to thinking that people need the help of one who is greater than them and greater than the world. From the beginning, people marvelled at the powers of the weather, storms, thunder and lightning and the phenomenon of day and night. The sky with its sun, moon and stars was a mystery to them. They therefore, associated these heavenly forces or powers with the creator, God.

The earth, the seas and all that are in them are believed to be creations of God. Man sees himself as one who is between heaven and earth, who attempts to understand and explain the visible and the invisible universe. Like other indigenous African ethnic groups, the Ijo also think that there are different spirits governing the universe because of the manifestation of those powers in the world. These spirits are thought of by the Ijo people as powers which are almost abstract, which take on human form. They are immaterial and incorporeal beings. They assume various dimensions whenever they wish to be seen. It is these spirits or natural beings that influence men and appear as water and bush spirits.

Though, there are water and bush spirits, this paper focuses on the water spirits from which the masking tradition evolves. Water spirits are the “lords of the creeks” who are thought to live in fabulous villages under the water, decked out in coral and gold and fine cloth. They manifest in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic shapes or a mixture of either of the two-natural forces, human characters, rainbows, python and fish. This is evident in the honour and regard given to the water spirits before, during and after the Ungozi performance (Brain, 1980). The Ijo, as stated earlier, believe that the rivers are populated by water spirits. They also believe that *water people*, as they are sometimes called, have their own communities in the rivers. Many people have sighted them on sandbanks. All the small estuaries and creeks are designated as places where water spirits live and farm. It is these water spirits that are represented in different mask forms. When masks represent idols or deities, they become really very powerful and are, therefore, worshipped and consulted as oracles (Enekwe, 1988). In that case, they have shrines, which are serviced by priests on a regular basis. This is the fortune of Ungozi masquerade of Olugbobiri that is being housed in a shrine. The name “Ungozi” therefore implies “bringing or discharging” wealth.

These water spirits are believed to appear to people they intend to possess on the bank of the river when spirits are performing rites either to cleanse the society of epidemic or of unusual deaths or for entertainment. An account of Chief Fred E. Isaiah of Ondewari, corroborates the above information. He said:

Dēintēi of Asiko compound of the same town saw a mask (Ibozo-own) on the river during one of his fishing expeditions. He said, any time Dēintēi went fishing, he heard a sound by his canoe as if something was rolling over a rough ground. He prayed that if this was something for him to take home, it should show itself. One day, a small-carved wooden mask appeared to him on top of the river by his canoe. On reaching home, he called his family members and told them about his experience and showed them the mask. They discussed, and thought of where they could keep it but finally decided that it should be reproduced. Nanaghen, a traditional sculptor, was asked to carve it.

Chief Isaiah said, the origin of Ungozu was similar to that of Ibozo-mask of Ondewari. Chief Isaiah who is so knowledgeable in traditional history was consulted because the priest of Ungozu was not available for comment at the time of this research.

***Classification of Ungozu Masks (Water Spirits Masks)***

The commonest constructed or carved representations of the water spirits are the masks. Ordinarily, wooden masks portray the water spirits and can be classified according to their forms into two distinct types. The first group is the horizontal wooden headdress often illustrated in textbooks and magazines, worn with the face pointing skyward (Plate 1a & 1b). Such masks range from semi-naturalistic representations of fish to highly stylized zoomorphic creatures, which mix human and animal features. Water spirit masks such as Ungozu and many others fall within the category.



**Plate 1a: Ugonzu – The Father Mask**



**Plate 1b: The Son Mask**

The second category of water spirits masks consists of a figure or headdress mounted upright on a base facing the front (Plate 2). In some cases it has face on both sides (front and back), like that of Usere, the female mask of Ungozu of Olugbobiri.

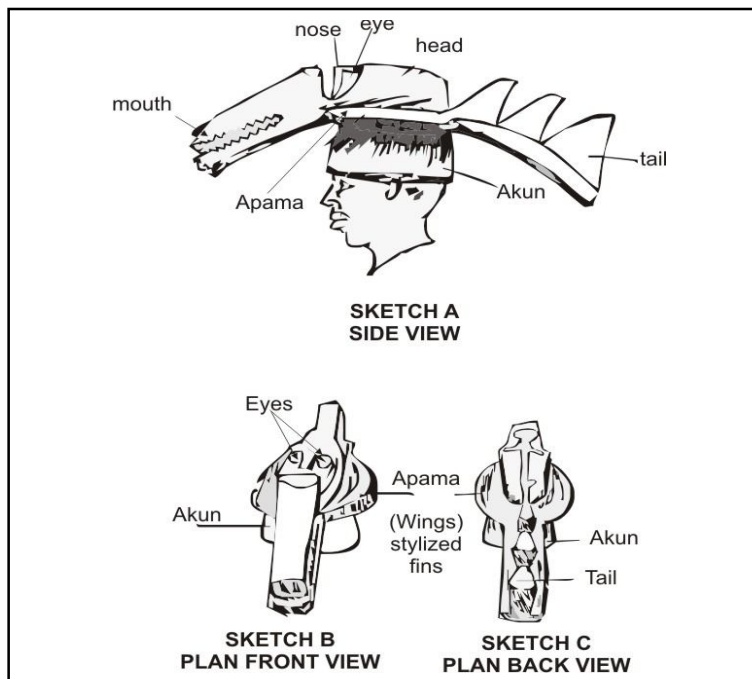


**Plate 2: Useré – The Mother Mask**

Ungozi masks are represented as a family i.e. the father, mother and child. The mask with the three stylized tails is the father, the one with two tails is the child while the one worn upright is the mother.

These water spirits masks are further classified as spiritual (sacred) and non-spiritual (secular). The spiritual or sacred ones are those revered and honoured as power masks. Ungozi and some others fall within this class. They instill fear in those against whom they are invoked, because they are believed to possess power to kill people and have been given *Peri*. *Peri* is the act of giving an eagle feather to the mask by the Olodiamá Egbesú, the priest.

The second group masks are carved for entertainment. These have no spirit in them to kill. Everybody, including Christians, can wear the mask during funeral ceremonies and/or for entertainment because there are no traditional religious overtones. Both categories of horizontal masks have *Akun* - a cap like design (Figure 1, Sketch A), carved, hollowed under the head and the stylized fins of the masks to be worn over the head of the masker.



**Fig: 1 A Sketch of Horizontal Mask and how it is Worn**

### ***Mode of Production of Ungozu Masks***

One way of producing water spirits masks was through dreams. The form or style of the mask is shown in dream to a person or priest of a shrine ordered by some spirits to have their image carved and worn. This was narrated by City Tingiwei, the priest of Kigighebuboghe shrine and owner of *Opuro* (shrimp) mask. He said the production of the shrimp mask was shown to him in dreams. He was instructed to carve and stage dance performance with it during special occasions as directed by the spirits. Laude (1971) refers to a similar circumstance among the Dogon. Their first mask was shown in a dream to a man who was instructed by a spirit that needed his image to be carved and worn. Another form was the case of Ibozo mask as earlier narrated. This is a bit different. Instead of the spirits revealing themselves through a dream, they revealed themselves physically through the already carved mask.

In some other cases, according to oral history, the water spirits revealed themselves to people they intended to possess on the bank of the river when the spirits are performing rites either to cleanse the society of epidemics or of unusual deaths or for entertainment. This was observed also by Brain (1980) in connection with the Urhobo water spirit masquerade, which appeared on the surface of the creeks and banks of the river to a fisherman who was taught the dances and music. Wewe (1986) also recorded similar experiences by people who had received children, good fortune and protection, from the water spirits who had seen them dancing on the top of floating mud who had ordered them to make carvings and dance with them in the way they had been seen. It is the traditional sculptors (carvers) that are mostly consulted for the production of these masks.

### ***Materials and Tools used in Making Ungozu Masks***

Ungozu mask is carved predominantly in wood. There are certain trees that are used for specific masks. Such trees, either hard or soft, are chosen for their durability and to withstand the assault of termites. That is why “*Ukpakara*” (similar to the oil bean tree - *pentaclethra macrophylla*), which is hard, durable and can withstand harsh climatic conditions, is used mainly for water spirit masks. Also, “*Kugbo*”, a soft, lightwood is used for non-spiritual (secular or ceremonial) masks. When not in use the soft wood masks are kept on top of the rafters near the kitchen where smoke touches them, to prevent termites attack. Those made of hard wood are kept on an altar in the shrine. They are not allowed to touch the ground, thus protecting them from termites and water.

The sacredness of the trees and their associated worship in Africa is not disputed. Kingsley Adikoko, a traditional carver revealed that Olugbobiri people do not engage in tree worship. According to him, what he would only offer his usual prayer, fell the tree and start carving. However, he does not dispute the idea that a tree has a spirit because, in some other societies, the woodcarver would offer a sacrifice to the tree before felling it. Then the chunk of wood is carried to an isolated hut where it is carved.

The basic implements used by the traditional carver according to Kingsley Adikoko, a traditional carver of Olugbobiri, are various adzes, hand axes, flat chisels of various widths, big nails flattened and sharpened at one end (improvised gouges for intricate places), matchets and knives. The finished works are smoothed with rough-surface leaves. “*Angila*” (charcoal) and “*tori*” (native chalk) among other substances are used for painting the *Owu* (mask). In recent times chemical colours are used for non-spiritual (secular) *Owumo* (masks).

### ***Who the Ungozu Artist is***

The sculptor is seen as a craftsman in Olodiana Ijo community. His occupation is regarded as an ordinary one and he has personality traits that are not different from the range found in the community. He is someone taken to be talented and is only esteemed by the family, group (club) or community who commissions him to carve a particular image or mask. This traditional sculptor does not have enough patronage because, the request for images and masks is sometimes once or twice in three or four years, so he combines this with the carving of canoes, paddles and kitchen utensils. Also, due to low patronage the artist engages in other economic activities such as farming, fishing and local gin distilling.

### ***Preparing Masquerade for Stage Performance***

The Ungozu mask is performed on stage when the spirit requests to be honoured. Sometimes it is staged when family members encounter undue hardship such as experiencing failure and poverty. This is because they believe that “Ungozu” is responsible for “bringing or discharging” wealth on them as the name implies. There is no specific period of the year to perform its ceremony.

It is organised when the elders of the family and some devotees that make the caucus meet and the need arises for its outing, they immediately fix a day for this cultural performance. The date chosen is then communicated to the clans, whole community and neighbouring communities in order to adequately prepare for an effective performance.

The devotees believe that the spirit is domiciled inside the river but its physical form, the “*Ungozu*” mask, is kept in the shrine. When it is performed on stage, the people refer to it as “outing” because it has come out from the river and the shrine.

A day to the public display and performance, the initiates go with the masks to a specific spot in the river where they believe is the abode of the spirit and offer sacrifices with special traditional songs and drumming. This is believed to be a cleansing exercise of the masks, because the masks have been in the shrine with imperfect human beings. This new bathe purifies the masks and therefore, become clean enough to embody the spirit after a successful exercise. Also, they believe that their sacrifices would be accepted and request granted. That same night they would organize rehearsals in the dance arena near the shrine.

In the early morning of the day of the display, “the Mother Mask” (*Usere*), – the last one dressed in elegant costume (“*Tuwe*”) –, announces its presence and readiness for the day’s performance. Men and boys, both initiate and non-initiate, walk and run with the “*Usere*”, singing and praising her round the town (Plate 3).



**Plate 3: Usere and the Youth Announcing their Readiness, and Preparedness for the Performance**

This is done three times. The second and the third appearance announces the readiness of the *Beleuwei* – the first one who stays in front – the *Father* or *Husband* as he is usually called and the *Okolowei* – the middle one who stays in the middle between the Father and the Mother is considered to be the child. They are so named because the three spirit creatures are said to be moving together in the river, one in the front, followed by the second one and the woman at the back.

After the third time of announcing, the arena becomes filled with spectators to witness the “outing” or “pulling out” ritual of all the masquerades from the shrine. The priest pleads them to come out while the drums – particularly the master drummer praises them with a special drum language and the initiates sing praise songs, giving them the impression the atmosphere is bright and beautiful. At this point, only the initiates are allowed to enter the shrine. There is usually a loud ovation (shout of joy) as they are pulled out by the priest. Immediately they come to see the light of the day, the elegantly dressed masquerades are led by the priest to the waterfront to welcome other spirits that have come for the performance (Plate 4). From the waterfront, they are led by the priest to go round the town paying homage to great initiates and revered ancestors, spirits and gods. This ceremony is referred to as *bebepri*. This exercise is seen as seeking approval, more power and strength from the water spirits and other spirits. The whole performance begins in the morning at about 8.00am and closes in the evening at about 9.00pm.



**Plate 4: The Priest and the Two Horizontal Masks and Masquerades Welcoming and Taking Permission, Strength and Power from Other Spirits**

After the *bebepri* ceremony, the three masquerades come out to dance at intervals during the performance according to their drum call and songs (Plate 5). They dance according to the rhythm of the drums. As the masquerades dance, the audience whether sitting or standing around the arena sing and clap hands in tone with the form of drumming and dancing. Their performance helps to stir up the spirit of the masquerades and keep the play exciting.



**Plate 5: The Father Masquerade Called to Dance While the Priest and Other Initiates Watch**



**Plate 6: The Youth on their “Ogbogide Paan” Shouts with Excitement and incitement**

There are obvious segments in the *Ungozi* public display. They are the morning, afternoon and evening segments. At the end of each segment, new set of initiates and dancers are masked. The three segments are saddled with different functions. The maskers of the morning segment are more matured and experienced. Their function is to perform the rituals and sacrifices involved in the cult. The afternoon segment engages more radical and vibrant maskers. This is the segment young boys and girls preferred, because they pursue or chase them, which makes the play exciting. The maskers of the evening segment are also more experienced members, who carry out the rituals and rites of the cult for the spirits towards the close of the display in the night to plead and send the water spirits to their abode. At this time in the night most spectators have gone home for fear of being injured (cut) by the masquerades. Three days before the day chosen for the performance, the classified maskers do not mix freely and share in cultural practices. They abstain from sex and even food. They are separated from among the members of their families and friends to go through a purification exercise to enable them fraternize and be used by the water spirits.

As earlier stated, the morning segment is filled with more activities. After some special dance steps by all the masquerades, the first – “the Father” is called out to perform his first ritual (*peripele*) of sacrificing to the Mother Spirits that came for the celebration. Before the sacrifice, the priest and the Father Masquerade goes to take permission from the Water Spirits of its kind through the wharf constructed with sticks, bamboo and palm fronds for that purpose. During the climax of the performance in the morning segment, a dog whose neck is supposed to be cut with one strike is used for a sacrifice (Plate 8). After cutting the dog’s neck, young energetic men pursue the priest with sticks in their hands to prevent the sharp machete of the priest from harming innocent spectators because it is believed that, after cutting the dog, he is possessed by the spirits and could cut anyone close to him as he runs about.



**Plate 8: The “Beleuwei” Watching as the Priest (In Red Apparel) Performs the Ritual – Sacrificing the Dog to the Spirits**

*Peripele* is followed by a special dance of the priest and the *Beleuwei* – the first – the Father. As the spectators watch in admiration, the other masquerades pursue and scatter the spectators. Boys and girls, who cannot run long distance, run to the river, because the masquerade would not enter deep into the river (Plate 9). Plate 10 shows people are in readiness to run into the water in case they are pursued by the “possessed” priest. Though, there are stories of some spectators who run into the river and come out with machete wounds, it is believed they are cut by the spirit “Ungozi” in the river. The devotees believe that as they perform, the spirits also perform in the river.





**Plate 9: After the Sacrifice, the Priest Having a Special *Peripele* Dance with the *Beleuwei* – The Father Masquerade**



**Plate 10: *Usere*- The Mother Masquerade and a Woman (An Initiate) Praising Her**

The other masquerades are intermittently called by the drums to dance. The drums beat different rhythms for different masquerades at different times during the performance and it is significant for the maskers (masquerades) to interpret the drum language. Bunches of rattles are tied to their legs above the ankle give similar tone of the drum beat as they dance. These are practised steps, done by controlling their feet as they raise their body and feet lightly off the ground and putting down the feet, following the rhythm and language of the drums.

Another significant and interesting celebrative dance is the *fanutebeghesei* – dancing on the top of the constructed fence. The first or Father Masquerade climbs the fence and dances according to the call from the spirits. After a successful performance of this ordeal and having shown his adeptness for understanding the drum language, the Father Masquerade is surrounded by jubilant men and youth praising him – “*Ogbogide Paan*”. “*Ogbogide Paan*” is a shout of joy organized by men and the youth for this ceremony. They run around prominent men in the community at the play ground and the masquerades occasionally.

The master drummer calls each masquerade by his or her name for a final dance after the *Beleuwei* has completed his ritual dances.

The Mother Masquerade is first called to show her last spectacular dance steps, which is also followed by the Son Masquerade, - *Okolowei* – the middle one, to demonstrate his final skills. After their dance, they all leave the arena which is followed by a call on the Father Masquerade to perform his peculiar dance and bid the appreciative audience goodbye as he goes into the shrine. He is dignified with loud shouts of happiness. During this last phase of the dance all the masquerades have their different and specific drum call and messages from the spirits which they interpret to the audience.

The master drummer is someone who is very knowledgeable in the language of the *spirits* as revealed to him by the spirits through a dream or a priest or priestess. He therefore, sometimes tends to abuse or confuse the masquerades. In such cases, he runs for his dear life because he may be pursued by the masquerade who understands the drum language for being insulted. Plate 11 below shows children, men and women who cannot run with the masquerades on the road or to the river, are in the canoe (boats) to watch the performance for the fear of being wounded by the masquerades with their sharp machetes.



**Plate 11: Old Women and Children Who Cannot Run Watching the Performance in a Canoe in the River**

### ***Significance***

Azeez (1983) noted that masks represent gods, spirits, village heroes and the dead who serve as a link between the dead and the living as well as the gods and the people. Stevens (1965) highlighted idea that, similar to masks, the Esie stone images were believed to have powers to do evil, which, if appeased, could be turned to good. Hence, festival is enacted each year to thank the images for their protection during the past year and to pray for prosperity for the coming year.

According to Ojo (1988), masks representing water spirits give health, wealth and protection from other powers. They prevent misfortune such as barrenness, illness and premature death. Masks in initiation and circumcision ceremonies, educate young boys and girls on the virtues needed in later life. The worshippers of Ungozu mask believed that it gives wealth, i.e. financial wealth and wealth of children. Ungozu performance ceremony unites families and individuals who had misunderstandings. During the performance, such people share food and drinks together resulting in the amicable resolution of their differences. But this belief is gradually fading away because many people are embracing Christianity and other paths that teach self-actualization. Therefore, the once respected and feared ritual display is turning to be a mere festival – secular ceremony for entertainment.

### ***Conclusion***

The Ijo people believe that God who created the world and sustains it is interested in the affairs of men and sometimes intervenes to maintain justice, for He sees what goes on in the corporeal world. His intervention is not always direct but through intermediaries – the spirits (the unseen entities). The spirits need more recognition from their messengers and a dwelling place close to them.

They appear to them in dreams and sometimes in physical form. The spirits instruct, teach or describe how they want to be represented (carved) in wood. By so doing, the spirit comes to the level of ordinary man. Horton (1965) purported that:

Sculpture is as a vehicle for bringing down the spirits to the level of the worshippers. Sculpture is regarded as the forehead of the spirit. Before blessings are asked, the spirits must be invoked to take their dwelling in the sculpture. Once these spirits are localised, communication becomes possible.

These spirits are presented in the form of masks bearing semi-abstract, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features. Then these masks (sculpture) are being worn (masked) to demonstrate the celebrative and or entertaining style of the spirits.

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