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Author(s): Chinyere Grace Okafor
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Behind the Inscrutable Wonder: The Dramaturgy of the Mask Performance in Traditional African Society

Chinyere Grace Okafor

Onyẹ Nwẹ ani. [Owner of land.]
Onyẹ nga-nga. [The proud one.]
AguỌcha! [White leopard!]
Ngbada! Ngbada!! [Deer! Deer!!]

These are some of the praise names used to greet the mask-performer among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. Similar praises are used for the same purpose in other African societies. Joel Adedeji talks about the “pledge” and “salute” in the Egungun performance among the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria (45), and A. P. Bourgeois refers to the anticipatory verses that herald the entry of the Mbala mask-performer among the Yaka of southeastern Zaire (47-50). In each case, the object of these glowing praise names is the mask-performer—a performance which constitutes the inscrutable wonder of the festival theater in traditional African society.

My paper examines the aesthetics that inform this “wonder.” G. T. Basden sees the mask-performance as a quaint apparition (124), and L. Havemeyer describes it as an undeveloped dramatic phenomenon (111). In reality, it is neither quaint nor undeveloped. When viewed from its social context, it is full-fledged drama. Misunderstandings about the nature of traditional drama arise when it is evaluated on the basis of Western critical criteria, as K. Uka
although can human's existence. categories means their performance is most information music, in terms of traditions. I (509). Different traditions obviously utilize different techniques to imitate action. It would therefore be misleading to review African mask-performance in terms of the dramatic techniques of another culture.

In traditional African society, the techniques, the extrinsic characteristics that combine to depict the form and mystical aura of the drama, include music, mask, costume, dance, movement, gestures, and metaphysical elements. In order to understand the aesthetics of the inscrutable wonder implicit in mask performance, one must regard it as a phenomenon that exists on four levels. In Figure 1, the outermost circle represents the social context of the drama (i.e., the society in which it occurs). The following circle represents the performance arena (the theater). The third circle represents the supernatural quality, and the fourth stands for the specific techniques employed. The innermost level embraces the performance itself.

Facts about traditional African societies are more readily accessible than information about African performance, but it is evident that African theater derives its nature and credibility from the world-view of the society in which it is performed. This world-view is invariably based on a spiritual pattern that is reflected in the social organization. It recognizes six basic categories: gods, spirits, humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects (Imasogie 16). All these categories share the same universe with human beings, and all are linked by their relationship with people, who are ontologically viewed as the center of existence. In attempting to maintain cosmic balance, humans become implicated with the other categories. For example, they invoke gods and spirits by means of rituals, myths, and performative enactments, all of which reflect humanity's dependence on the other categories and the possibility that people can harness other forces in the cosmos.

The centrality of the human is demonstrated in the masking theater. Although elements of this theater seem inexplicable, the performance itself
Fig. 1: The outermost circle represents the social context of the drama (i.e., the society in which it occurs). The following circle represents the performance arena (the theater). The third circle represents the supernatural quality, and the fourth stands for the specific techniques employed. The innermost level embraces the performance itself.

remains the handiwork of human beings and reflects their mastery over their environment. The Anakpe play of the Gbari of northern Nigeria illustrates this point. Anakpe is a performance that involves type characters such as hunters, animals, and hunters' wives (Zhiri 11). Hunters are distinguished by their costume of animal skin as well as by their hunting bags, bows, and arrows. The animal characters wear masks depicting animals. Through mime, dance, and
stylized movement, the characters portray the conflict between hunters and animals for the possession of the land. During the dramatic action, the chief hunter wounds an animal and is about to take possession of it when it injures him. Other hunters quickly run to his rescue. They kill the antagonist and through the use of incantations and herbal medicine restore the chief hunter’s health. At this point the chorus of hunters’ wives enters the arena to sing and celebrate the victory.

The hunters’ play dramatizes the mythical story of the origin of the Gbini people. It symbolizes man’s victory over the forces of the environment. Because the protagonists need animals for food and clothing, they must necessarily subdue them. The theatrical portrayal of the subjugation of the animals thus becomes a symbol for the people’s mastery of nature. It restores the confidence of the hunting community in its ability to control its affairs not just on the basis of its own strength but also thanks to the co-operation of other categories. Spirits are involved as the result of incantations, and the use of plants is suggested by the use of medicinal herbs. Yet the human remains at the center of the presentation.

Every category in the African ontology is invested with two sides—two aspects of the same being and two kinds of the same category. This idea is informed by the society’s notion of spirit and matter, destructive and useful, good and bad (Kalu 42). Such dualities exist side-by-side in life and also combine within a single object. Like classical Greek society, which accommodates the reality of Zeus and the transmigration of spirits from the Elysian Fields to the human world, traditional African society admits of a free movement of spirits and humans between their respective realms. For example, the pantheon of the Yoruba of Nigeria clearly illustrates the movement of the gods to and from the chthonic realm. Sango descended to earth and became a king in Oyo. In his moment of weakness, piqued by human frailty, he slew both friend and foe. He later transmigrated to the chthonic realm (Roscoe 185 and Beier 188).

The transcendental view of life also extends to human affairs, for people too can transcend the barriers of their own world and move into another one. Death, for example, constitutes a transitional phase in one form of this movement. Soyinka even refers to it as the “gulf of transition” (48). He contends that, according to the Yoruba world-view, this gulf exists between three areas of existence: past, present, and future. A link between the three areas exists in other African societies as well. This is the reason for rites of passage that separate the dead from the present and usher them into the world of spirits. At the same time, it is assumed that the dead can be reincarnated in human form, born again into the world of the living, the present.

This idea about the cyclic nature of life extends to other spheres of experience as well. The natural rhythm of the seasons—dryness and wetness, scarcity and abundance, planting and harvesting—also reflects the cyclic nature of life.
Although the year grows old and dies, it continually renews itself by shedding its old skin and taking on a new life. This conception lies behind the annual communal festivals that signal the rebirth of society. On a symbolic level, it reflects a never-ending conflict between the principles of goodness and evil. Through rituals and sacrifices, the ancestors and friendly spirits are invoked to ensure the successful transition from one year to the next.

The spirits may return to sojourn among people and to perform a role in the transition ritual before returning to the spirit world. Ogun in the Yoruba (Babalola 8-18), Ntoa in the Yam festival of the Aburi in Ghana (Opoku 28-32), and Obot Owo in the New Year festival of the Annang of Nigeria (Etim 5-6) illustrate this sort of divine intervention in human festivals. An ancestor can play a similar role, as shown by the example of Gbini during the festival of the Mende people of Liberia and Sierra Leone (Siegmann and Perani 43) or returning heroes such as Okotororojo during Epa festival of Iloro-Ekiti in Yorubaland (Heyden 20) and Nw'ekpe during the Ikeji festival of Arochukwu in Igbo-land. The myth of return can be performed as a festival without any drama, as in the case of Ntoa during the Yam festival of Aburi. Ntoa returns and ritualistically partakes of the new yam by means of the festival events, which include libations, sacrifices, feasting, songs, and dance. There is no dramatic representation of Ntoa. However, many African festivals (such as those that take place during the Nnang, Mende, Ilori-Ekiti and Arochukwu festivals) include drama in the program of events.

Traditional drama is, therefore, often part of a festival. Such festivals often embody sacrifices of propitiation, cleansing rituals, dances, and wrestling matches as well as drama. A dramatic representation might well echo the idea of the whole festival, but it remains an item in the whole festival, an event during which performers employ specific techniques that have particular relevance within the society where the performance is taking place. The dramatic representations might appear to be unrelated to each other, but they are generally connected in the sense that they may illustrate the theme of the festival. Such dramas often take place in an open-air arena which thereby becomes a place of interaction between humans, spirits, and other categories of being such as animals, which can be represented, and plants, which are in the costumes and masks.

The African arena theater is therefore a theater that houses and represents the various categories of existence in a spatial environment. It can be regarded as a microcosm of the cosmic ontology, what Soyinka calls a “cosmic envelope” that illustrates “man’s adventure into his metaphysical self” (40-41). Thus, the traditional theater does not refer only to the physical arena in which the simulated action takes place but also to the cosmic dimension of the environment. The theater is therefore a center where the metaphysical action of spirits can be represented through masking. Against this multi-dimensional
background, the entire village becomes the acting terrain where players as well as spectators define their spaces. In fact, once players encounter a willing audience, a performance can take place anywhere within the village. The commonest places for such encounters are the foot-paths, motor-roads, compounds, village squares, and town centers—spaces that are also used for other cultural purposes. Because they too become invested with the multidimensional reality, they are suitable sites for a drama that aims at the depiction of the interaction between humans and spirits.

The implication of spirits in the drama necessitates the existence of the supernatural quality represented in the third level of Figure 1. This important element widens the imagery of the play and endows it with mythic dimensions. As an instrument of disguise, the mask serves as the principal device for the invocation of the supernatural. Spirits are believed to reside in masks, and special sacrifices are made to them, as can be seen among the Dan of Liberia and the Ivory Coast (Fischer 19), the Ejagham of Cameroon (Nichlin 22), and the Kalabari of southeastern Nigeria (Horton 179).

As soon as an actor dons a mask, he is transformed on physical and spiritual levels. On the physical level, the mask conceals the identity of the wearer. The audience may guess or know the actor but such knowledge is not discussed in public (Amankolor 54). A taboo protects the actor and aids the depiction of the supernatural quality with which the mask invests the character. In Nmonwu theater among the Igbo, for example, the mask signals the "mystic emanation of the spirit" (Ugonna 34). Among the Dan, spirits are believed to reside in the mask so that the performers who wear the masks actually become the spirits, "not merely their impersonators" (Fischer 18). The mask is necessary for such role-changes since it imbues the wearer with a supernatural quality. For example, the legendary personage depicted in the Arochukwu ensemble’s Nwerekpe is already invested with a mythical grandeur. Nwerekpe is the returning spirit of a warrior hero who had sacrificed himself for the continuity of the community (Okafor 126-31). There is a spontaneous jubilation on the part of the community when Nwerekpe returns. Shouts, gun shots, and chants in praise of the hero are heard in all parts of the town. This jubilation results partly from the people's knowledge of the stories about the character. These stories refer to his nature as a benevolent spirit and to the heroic qualities that place him above the level of ordinary men.

Similar stories are told about the Okotorojo mask-character, who represents a returning warrior hero among the Ekiti (Heyden 14-21), and the Gbini mask-character among the Mende (Siegman and Perani 42-47). Such stories include myths, histories, and poems, all of which enhance the supernatural aura of the mask-character. The representation of mythical and legendary characters is also an aspect of traditional theater in non-African cultures. One example is the Calako "Coming of the Gods" festival among the Zuni in New Mexico. During this festival, the dead symbolically visit the living in what Paul
Radin describes as "a series of dramatic episodes combined with a number of ritualistic pageants" (292).

The fourth level in Figure 1 represents the techniques. They include mask, costume, gestures, movement, dance, music, metaphysics, and the interaction of characters. Character delineation on this level can clearly be seen in the female-spirit mask-character which exists in many traditional African theater representations. This character can be a maiden, such as the agbogho-mmmonwu among the Igbo (Cole and Aniakor 121) and the Dona in Malawi (Blackman and Schoffeleers 38-39), or she can be a wife, such as the ldan iyawo among the Yoruba (Drewal and Drewal 35). She can even be portrayed negatively, as she is in the Akpara figure represented by the Eka Ekong ensemble of the Annang in Nigeria (Etim 3).

The excitement generated by the female mask-character results largely from her sublime beauty and sacred aura. These qualities are suggested by the dramatic design of the mask's physical features as well as by the actions of the character herself. For example, the facial masks of the Igbo agbogho-mmmonwu is usually white, pink, or yellow. It is also static. The light color and the immobility of the face reflect her other-worldly, awe-inspiring nature. Yet she is recognizable because her beautiful, stately figure reflects the model of an ideal Igbo maiden. An elaborate hairstyle is depicted by a crest, which compels her neck to be straight like a maiden carrying a water pot on her head. This position in turn contributes to the figure's elegance and to her steady, unnatural poise. This elegance and poise are also emphasized by her tight-fitting appliqué costume, the nature of which has been derived in part from uli (indigo) designs and mgbaji (waist beads) used by women for body decoration. This costume accentuates the curves of her body, making her look like what the Igbo would call agbala nwanyi, connoting a stately, strong, and agile woman. Although she is recognizable as female, she seems mysterious because these various devices have been carefully manipulated to make her so.

Gestures are also important techniques for depicting the enigmatic quality of the mask-performer in traditional African societies. Like costume, they are drawn from the conventions of the society in which the performance is taking place. For example, the socio-philosophical assumptions about positive and negative forces influence the way many performers stand. Male bravado is suggested by an upright body position with hands akimbo and legs spread apart like those of a soldier at ease. Such a stance connotes vigilance, because it is associated with a positive force. According to Mali oral tradition, a similar stance restored power to the limbs of Sundiata (Thompson 49). Some mask-characters, by virtue of their dignified position and countenance, refrain from making quick and vigorous gestures. For example, slight shifts of the head by Obot Owo, the creator mask-character among the Annang of Nigeria, are enough to suggest that he is observing the arena. His exalted position in the hierarchy of the masks would not allow him to engage in vigorous movements.
Spectators who understand the value of such subtle gestures by important and dignified persons have no difficulty in understanding their use as techniques in the drama.

The movement and dance of a character are also important conventions of performance because they suggest ideas about the nature of the character and help to define his role in space. For example, the agbogho-mmonwu walks slowly and gently, swaying her buttocks and swinging her arms to the rhythm of her body in a characteristically female manner. When dancing, she also simulates the real-life dances of women. However, the constraints and advantages of her mask and costume give her dance a quality that is different from the dance of real-life women. Like her personality, her dance is majestic, mysterious, and gentle. In contrast, most of the youthful male-spirit characters make vigorous movements and daring charges which suggest their vigorous nature. Like their movements, their dances reflect their vigor and their mystic nature. The dance of the Ojionu mask among the Ajalli (Igbo) depicts a vibrating body. With feet astride and torso pushed forward, the mask-character embarks on a rapid vibration of his waist. The huge snake-like mbu n'ukwu (a python-like structure that curls around the performer's waist and is believed to be the storehouse of its mystic powers) vibrates with the colorful cloth panels hanging on the waist, producing an awe-inspiring spectacle of vibrating colors.

Movements and other actions enhance the supernatural quality of the performer, especially when they seem inexplicable. The staging of the metaphysical essence of performance, therefore, is an important concern in traditional African theater. The Igbo call it ikpa ike, the conscious display of superhuman power. Toughness is the special prerogative of some performance groups, such as the Jobai among the Mende and Sherbro (Sierra Leone) and the Abba among the Arochukwu. The Abba is based on a mystic show of power. In the 1981 Ikeji festival, for example, one performer carried water in a basket and another passed a metal spike through his lips without drawing blood (Okafor 172). Siegman and Perani record the spectacular actions of the Jobai mask-character, who lies flattened on the ground while his attendants dance on top of his costume. He then magically arises out of the flattened costume (46). Sometimes the display of superhuman power is demonstrated by the spectacular encounter of two or more characters or groups. Setting a tree ablaze by gazing at it or producing a swarm of bees with the wave of an arm are often the prelude to an actual encounter in which the characters fight with potent charms. The victors usually conclude the performance with a victory dance.

The techniques used in achieving the superhuman actions that occur in traditional African theaters often seem incomprehensible to the ordinary observer. It is usually believed to derive from the meta-science of the traditional society. However, my research among the Aro-Isiokpo (Igbo) shows that it can also be the product of a complex stage design. The ability of the man who performs the Eru-wa-Mgbede mask-character among the Aro-Isiokpo
reflects the fact that a talented acrobat has been chosen to perform the role. This actor undergoes weeks of physical discipline before the performance. He abstains from sexual intercourse and eats only light meals of foods such as plantain. Just before the performance he chews an herb which energizes him. During the dramatic action, he performs seemingly supernatural “flying feats” such as dashing from the ground to a roof-top and skipping from tree to tree. The spectators overlook his physical preparations for the performance and sincerely believe that his flying feats result from the meta-science of the performer and his group.

Whether the exhibition of superhuman action is the product of theatrical design or part of the traditional meta-science, its purpose is theatrical and mystical. It aims to induce the awe and wonder that are essential to a theater that depicts the supernatural and emphasizes visual satisfaction or what the Igbo would call ihg nkiri (a thing to behold, a spectacle). The technique is similar to the Zulu display known as Ukugiya (Larlam 6). Ukugiya is a spectacular performance in which young men, though unmasked, demonstrate their valor and skill as warriors armed with sticks and shields. The purpose is theatrical, and its effect is awe-inspiring. However, the spectacular display of traditional African drama is not ritual in the sense of being efficacious. If it has any efficacy at all, it resides in imparting the aesthetic, educational, and emotional values that underlie the society’s understanding of the cosmos. The creation of the spectacular and seemingly inexplicable action functions primarily as entertainment, although it does have the added value of reinforcing the idea of the supernatural in traditional ontology.

Anthony Graham-White’s criticism of an American avant-garde theater group for adapting their plays to the ritualistic while ignoring the efficacy associated with performances in Africa (“Ritual” 318-24) thus reveals a profound misconception of the connection between ritual and drama in traditional African society. The performance of a traditional drama is not a sacred ritual. It does not have the efficacy of ritual simply because it has ritual context and supernatural qualities. These qualities reflect a dimension of the performance that has been achieved by means of techniques aimed at entertainment, although they have other added values as well.

Music is another dramatic technique that derives from the society in which the performance is taking place. It too aids in the depiction of inscrutable wonder. Music creates mood, communicates information, and directs the action of the performance. In the Ekwe performance of Uvuru-Nsukka, which I recorded in 1985, the mask-character, Ekwe, who represents the traditional cosmos, seems larger than life. The music that accompanies her appearances is produced by an orchestra and accompanied by the choral song and dance of women. This music explicates the mystery of her mask and emphasizes her importance in society. It also evokes the collective spirit of the people and their anticipation of the communal mask-performer’s appearance. Ekwe’s mask is
showered with praises by the flutist and by the chorus. They allude to its beauty, its mystery, and its supernatural qualities. The following phrase is repeated several times as a tribute to the inscrutable nature of the mask:

Anụ ka.udene
Bia kpa igwê aka

[The animal that is greater than the vulture, Come and touch the sky.]

In Igbo folklore, the vulture belongs to the world of humans as well as to that of the spirits. Its relation to the spirit world places it in a special position and marks its greatness as a symbolic animal. It is therefore a fitting metaphor for the status of Ekwe, who is portrayed as elusive and enigmatic. Although the appearance of the mask is brief, its mystic quality continues to grow as the music is carried around the village and eventually concludes the performance. The special sound effects (e.g., gun shots and ululation) that herald the entrance and exit of a performer also emphasize the grandeur of the performance and create the theatrical atmosphere necessary for the understanding of a great mask.

Music can also be used for mystical communication when members of a performing group use it to pass information among themselves. The following musical interchange was recorded in the Ikeji festival theater of Arondizogu (Igbo) and it illustrates the role of music in this respect:

**Voice:** Lotę kwa
Onye gbuka ute ya,
O dinara n’ala nkiti

[Remember, He who tears his mat Sleeps on the bare ground]

**Flutist:** Anụ wäre ọkpa
taa ji na ubieats yams
I gbachié mgbana

When the animal that walks eats yams in the farm You fence it.

Anụ na ịgwe ịgwe bia

When the animal that flies comes

I ga ọmeh gini?

What will you do?]

The context of this exchange is a dramatic conflict involving two mask-characters, one of whom, Akataka, is being warned against prematurely attacking his opponent, Ojionu. Through a special mechanical device, the voice sounds eerie and fills listeners with dread, suggesting the uncanny nature of the performance. Although the exchange appears obscure to the uninitiated, the musicians are actually engaged in a meaningful communication that is clearly understood by adepts of the masking society. Their understanding of the esoteric musical communication indicates their extraordinary nature.

In the inevitable climax of the action, the musicians show their support for Ojionu through music:

**Drum:** Qa ọkwê kwê nta kê?
Nwokê têghêtê?

[Can it be cracked? Man who is as powerful as nine men?]
The rhythm of the music is fast, and the sound is heavy. Its beat contrasts with the one that accompanies slow movements such as those of the Thanu-thanu mask-performer who represents the drunk in the Maravi society of Malawi (Blackman and Schoffeleers 41). As the Thanu-thanu mimes his condition through slow and uneven movement, the slow beat of the drum accentuates his effort to control his legs. The Igbo and Maravi examples demonstrate the inevitable link between music and mystical action of dramatic characters. The use of music in this way clearly reflects the place of music in traditional life, for as Emmanuel Obiechina points out, music is used “to forge a social aesthetic or mystical link” among members of the society and “to unite emotional responses around definite rhythmic waves and melodies” (58).

There is no doubt that music, whether instrumental or vocal or a combination of the two, is significant in the portrayal of the inscrutable. It directs, supports, controls, and accompanies the mystical action. The combination of sound and visual techniques to convey meaning reveals how traditional performances rely mostly on para-linguistic features of language for dramatic communication. Their language conventions are syncretistic and aim at appealing to all the senses—sight, smell, feeling, and hearing. These conventions are familiar to the theatrical sensibilities of the spectators, who understand the use of techniques drawn from their own societal conventions.

The innermost circle of the model in Figure 1 is the performer-spectator interaction. The spectators contribute significantly in the portrayal of the extraordinary aura of the mask-performance. They are often specially dressed for the performance. Their various attires and their cheerful faces reflect the mood and color of the festivity. Framed against a background of colorful spectators, houses, and trees, the mask-character looks like a deity. The spectators also contribute to the action through their active participation (see Graham-White, Drama 36). Members of the audience do not react uniformly to the experience, for there are divisions among them according to age, status, and relationship with the masking group. The reaction and participation of a performer depends on the degree of rapport accorded him in the theater as a result of his position and status. This division helps create a sense of aesthetic awe because it not only signals the special place of the performer as the object of the division but also because it emphasizes his exalted status. The initiated members of the masking group enjoy a degree of familiarity that is denied the uninitiated. They have the privilege of saluting the performer in the acceptable manner—a manner that is only known to them. Nevertheless, the uninitiated also dance and join the singing in accordance with the conventions of the particular mask.

The spectators’ presence, interjections, shouts, choruses, and mood heighten the importance of the performer and influence him in a way that is
alien to the Western stage. Whereas Euro-American actors might be disturbed by slight noises made by the audience, traditional performers welcome ululations, clapping, singing, and other signs of appreciation and encouragement. Impressed by the closeness of the traditional performer with his spectators, R. Schechner tried to make his Western-oriented actors interact with the audience, but his experiment was not well received because some members of the audience felt affronted (vii). The idea that actors could legitimately interact with the audience had not yet become an acceptable convention of American theater.

The core of African drama is the performer-spectator interaction. The influence of the cultural environment on this interaction can be observed in the dramatic techniques that have been derived from the society in which the performance occurs. In mask performances, each contributes to the evocation of the aesthetic awe that is inspired by the totality of the performance as perceived by traditional spectators. They do not appreciate it in segments, and my own dissection of the whole performance into levels was undertaken merely as a means of enabling us to appreciate the various items that combine to create the sense of wonder that fascinates tradition-oriented peoples. Within the traditional setting of the village arena peopled by humans and spirits, the performers’ synthesis of these techniques gives rise to the totality of an inscrutable dramatic experience.

NOTE

Ogu and Ofo are wooden staffs which symbolize “justice” in Igbo religion and ethics. The expression “I have ogu and ofo” therefore means “I am justified.”

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