

## **AESTHETICS AND SEMIOTICS OF ADO EKITI MASQUERADE COSTUMES: FOCUS ON AGBO, EFON AND AGBE MASQUERADES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nigeria has a robust masquerade tradition which is a key aspect of the country's arts heritage. However, it is observed that this robust cultural product is not being deployed as a relevant commodity in the contemporary global tourism and entertainment market for purposes of boosting the nation's GDP. One of the reasons responsible for this is the limitations of the masquerade costumes which are perceived to be mythical, ritualistic, easily perishable and cumbersome to transport. Consequently, this study argues for a contemporary reproduction of these costumes through technology. It is however pertinent, that the background to, and the characterization of these masquerades must be understood for any relevant and meaningful technological reproduction to occur. To provide this background and the character portrayal, an Aesthetic and Semiotic Discourse is inevitable. This paper therefore offers the Aesthetic and Semiotic analysis of these masquerades costumes. It also assesses their weaknesses and strengths, using Ado-Ekiti – the capital town of Ekiti State as case study.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this paper is to offer an analysis of the designs of the various masquerade costumes in Ado-Ekiti zone of Ekiti State, Nigeria, with a view to bringing to the fore the strengths and weaknesses of the different concepts and materials. The overriding intention of the larger research project from where this paper was developed is to contribute to the development of the Masquerade Art as a viable product in the emergent Nigerian tourism and entertainment market through the technologization of the masquerade costumes beyond mythological and ritualist considerations.

It is therefore important to analyse the costumes from the perspective of the characterization that is culturally allocated to each masquerade and the limitations of its costume materials and designs. The instruments of analysis here are Aesthetics and Semiotics which also form the framework within which the paper is theoretically located.

### **Theories of Aesthetics and Semiotics**

The word Aesthetics is a highly expansive appellation which, even when it is streamlined to the aesthetics of art or more specifically the aesthetics of performative arts, encapsulates a wide array of thoughts, principles and features that have to do with the nature, meaning and impacts of beauty. Put in a concise way, aesthetics deals with the principles and evaluation of beauty.

However, art is a major organ of aesthetics, and when focusing on art-form, aesthetics then becomes the study of beauty in direct relation to the art-form and its principles. This link between aesthetics, beauty and art is one of Richard Courtney's focus when he states that

aesthetic thinkers study the nature of beauty, evaluate the many theories of it and try to account for art (31)

These numerous “aesthetic thinkers” and their array of views show how vast a field of study aesthetic is. From Immanuel Kant, for whom “the experience of beauty is a judgement of a subjective but similar human truth”(91), to Alex Gatheeb B. for whom “aesthetics is the science of sense experiences” to Fred Schiller, for whom “aesthetics is the most perfect reconciliation of the sensual and ration parts of human nature”(19) to the likes of St. Thomas Aquinas, Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Von Schlegel, Ashley-cooper and many others, varying views and positions on aesthetics have been formed. Of course among these views can be found similarities but each still holds a strong degree of individual perspectives.

It is evident that aesthetics is as broad a field of study as it is specific, possessing a highly malleable nature. It is this duality, the simultaneity of its objective and subjective states, that gives it a complex character.

Apart from beauty, other aspects (or sub-aspects, depending on nature of focus) can fall under aesthetics – meaning, taste, hugeness etc, however, beauty is inextricable to aesthetics as a study. The difference between aesthetics and beauty, however, is that the former is not only a state of being beautiful, it is an analytical and emotional examination of what beauty is in all possible and achievable levels of examination – its creation, impact and so on.

This inextricability between aesthetics and beauty is emphasized in definitions of aesthetics. Longman Dictionary defines aesthetics thus, “The study of beauty, especially, beauty in art”(23). Wikipedia online defines it as a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, arts and taste, and with the creation and appreciation of beauty. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online defines it as “the philosophical study of beauty and taste”(16) but also identifies it as being closely related to the philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art, and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated.

In further studies, we have discovered the emergence of a more graspable and functional understanding of aesthetics – as a study of beauty in art in relation to the creation, experience and evaluation of that beauty, within the context of whatever art form, in this case, performative arts.

Three areas come into focus here i.e. creation, experience and evaluation of beauty (viz-a-viz masquerade costumes).

As a study, semiotics, also referred to as semiology, deals with the relationship and interaction between human beings and signs and symbols. As such, it is applicable to practically any conceivable field for, as Pierre Giraud puts it “if semiology is to be the science of signs, it encompasses all knowledge and all experience, for everything is a sign” (40). The entirety of human existence and functioning is a Conglomeration of signs and symbols defined and understood at numerous levels, both simple and complex, creating a constancy of signified and signifier in every instance of man’s daily living. This is so because for a sign/symbol to be expressed, there must be an emitter, signifier who makes the sign/symbol become the inevitable signified.

Saussure defines it as the study of “the life of signs within the society”(15) and other scholars have often used this definition in their works, Pierre further defines semiotics on two levels first as

the science which studies sign system: languages, codes, sets of signal etc”..... and as the study of non-linguistic sign system.

Wikipedia.com defines it as

the study of signs and sign processes (semiosis), indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification and communication.

While in the “semiotics of performance and drama” Hawkes (1) defined it as a “science dedicated to the study of production of meaning in society”.

Indeed, more definitions of semiotics abound but from what we have here, there are slight differences depending on the perspective it is viewed. Also, very importantly, the broader aspects of semiotics which are inextricable to any semiotic study are viewed and these are signs, symbols and their involvement in communication.

All of man’s interactions are some form or level of communication, either verbally or non-verbally, through animate or inanimate media, consciously or unconsciously. In the process of doing this, signs and symbols are naturally and inevitably created. Communication requires a source, message and receiver and then other factors also essential to the process (noise, feedback etc) come into interplay.

Semiotically, however, communication or expression is centred on “two principal modes”, the first is the “referential (objective, cognitive) function” and the second is the “emotive (subjective, expressive) function. Guiraud (9).

In other words, communication when studied through semiotics occurs at the objective and subjective levels or cognitive and expressive, or it can be said to aim at the intellect or the emotions. This is not to say that all semiotic expressions are either of one mode or the other for in some cases, for example, in the arts, they engage both the referential and emotive modes simultaneously; or in such a way that it is difficult and perhaps even impossible to indicate where one mode stands independently of another.

Signs and symbols can be visual, auditory, appeal to the sense of smell, tactile, audio-visual, kinetic or come in many other forms. For the purpose of this study which is on masquerade costumes, the visual dynamics of semiotics are what is taken into consideration but even this is still broad for there are many facets to visual dynamics – such as painting, road signs, literary works etc, are all visual semiotic signifiers, codes and what not. Therefore, the analysis of the selected masquerade costumes are done here, first to show the physical appearance of each masquerade for aesthetic appreciation and second, to show the meanings embedded in each element of design of each masquerade.

### **Masquerade costumes in Ado –Ekiti Zone**

Ado-Ekiti is the largest town in Ekiti State. It is the state capital, a status it assumed immediately the state was created in 1996. In spite of the seeming metropolitan outlook, Ado-Ekiti is a deeply traditional community. Just like Benin City which we are told it shares the same ancestry with, Ado-Ekiti is heavily steeped in culture and tradition both socially,

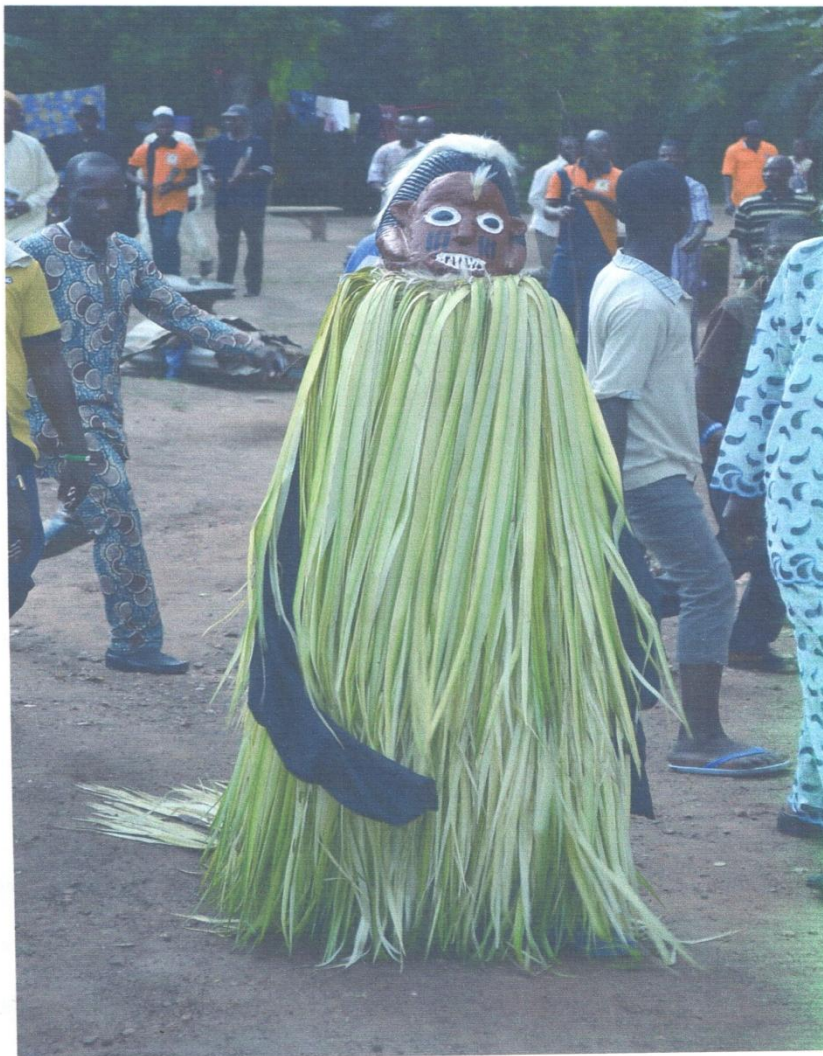
politically, economically and religiously. There are many Masquerades in Ado-Ekiti, but we are focusing on three of them in this Paper.

### **Agbo Masquerade of Ado-Ekiti Background**

Agbo is the Yoruba, and indeed, the Ekiti word for ram. The Agbo masquerade is named after the “ram”, an animal considered sacred by Ekiti especially in the traditional religious circles. While the “ram” may have different colours in the mental-ochre temperament vis-a-vis white, black or earth-brown, the Agbo masquerade is made to resemble the white ram because of the sacredness of the colour white.

In the traditional script which primarily informs the social models supposed to have been adopted by the Ado-Ekiti people, the victims of sacrificial rituals are said to be compensated

### **Agbo Masquerade**





in the form of social elevation. Since the “ram” has been the major sacrificial animal, it inevitably became elevated as the chief of all masquerades.

### **Aesthetics**

The Agbo masquerade is divided into two major parts, physically. The mask which constitutes the head and the body mainly made of a combination of palmfronds and clothes.  
The Mask

The head is carved in intricate designs, and stained to create expression. The carving style is similar to the traditional style usually found around Ekiti-Yoruba areas especially in the works of re-knowned masters like Fakeye, Bamidele and Olowe of Ise, the difference being the stains in black, white and red.

The Mask is an anthromorphic representation of the animal, “ram” while it aims to portray the animal, the carver (probably unconscious) looks at the animal from a human perspective. This results in the simplification of all the elements on a ram’s head as one helmet to be worn by a man.

**Close-up shot of Agbo Mask  
Note the Horn and White Fur on the head**



## **The elements of the Agbo mask and their technical implication**

### **The White Fur**

The white fur on the head and chin (as mustachio) of the masquerade is the highest source of light, complementing the paint stains on the eyes and mouth. Another logical explanation available for the presence of the white furry material is that it is positioned next to the black horns to generate contrast of colour. However, while Agbo is considered as symbol of physical strength because of the presence of the horns, it is also considered a sage because the fur represent white or grey hair, meaning intelligence, maturity and wisdom.

### **The Horn**

The Horn is technically positioned around the head as a single entity with the head. This helps to reduce fragility as horns normally branch out and could easily break off and damage the physical appearance of the mask. To avoid this, the carvers simply carved the horns in high relief out of the head in the background.

### **The Mouth as Ventilation**

The interiors of the mask is hollowed since it is meant to be worn as a helmet. It naturally follows that ventilation is required which the artist has provided for by technically leaving enough holes between the teeth.

### **The Palm Fronds**

Apart from the sacred importance of the palm fronds, they have an attractive lemon colour which could constitute enough reason for its usage. However, one technical disadvantage is noticed; the palm fronds could not be worn on ordinary human skin because it itches. This has also been taken care of by covering the wearer of the masquerade with a big piece of indigo-coloured cloth after which the fronds are worn. The fronds are usually woven into four different pieces. First is the skirt which is wrapped around the waist of the masked performer so as to cover him from the waist to his feet. The second piece covers half of the right side of the body of the masked performer from the chest and overlaps the skirt while the third piece covers half of the left side of the body of the masked performer and also overlaps the skirt. These two pieces are oppositely hung across the neck and they rest on the few inches below the armpits because the masked performer must raise his two hands up while wearing these two pieces.

The fourth piece is fixed around the neck bases of the mask. When it is worn, it forms the final outer layer of fronds which covers the details (secrets) of the aforementioned inner pieces.

### Prepared Palm Fronds



#### Semiotic Analysis

In the pantheon of Ado-Ekiti masquerades, Agbo is regarded as a sage. It is attributed to the characteristics of the wise, the matured, the experienced and the elderly. It represents the pure, innocent and divinely strong ram which atones for the sins of the community. Therefore, a performance of Agbo masquerade round the community is symbolic of the slaughtering of a sacrificial ram for the atonement of the sins of the community. The two horns on the mask are iconic of the horns of a ram while the white beards attached to the mask and the white fur at the back of the head symbolise age, maturity and advancement.

#### Efon Masquerade

The Efon is the Ekiti word for the bull. The appearance of the Efon is not anthropomorphic like the Agbo mask. A fair resemblance of the animal (a bull) after which the Efon masquerade takes its name is achieved by the carver. Few external assessorial elements are used. Apart from fresh grasses which are packed and loaded on the Efon's head, the mask is usually carved in wood and stained like most of the other masquerades. Unlike the Agbo mask whose horns are made to stick to the mask, the Efon horns protrude out of the mask in a more realistic fashion.

The Efon, unlike the Agbo, is carved without a hollow inside it. This way it is not possible to wear it as a helmet. Instead it is carried on the head like a load. To make this convenient, the



carrier is assisted by two short dangling ropes, the length of about two palms, which the carrier could hold from both sides to pin the masquerade on his head.

While the bearer of the Agbo mask could see through the teeth of hollowed mask, the Agbo carrier could see amidst the network of palm fronds just below the base of the mask. Apart from the mask, the upper part of the lower half to the feet is made of palm fronds like the rest of the masquerades. The protruding mouth and the protruding horns help in achieving a realistic animal face.

Apart from the wooden mask, the body of Efon from the neck to the feet is made of palm fronds. Just like Agbo, the palm fronds component of Efon's costume is also made into four pieces. They are also designed, treated and worn like those of Agbo which we have already described. The only difference is that Efon's palm fronds are always not as full as that of Agbo.

### Efon Masquerade





### Efon Masquerade Mask



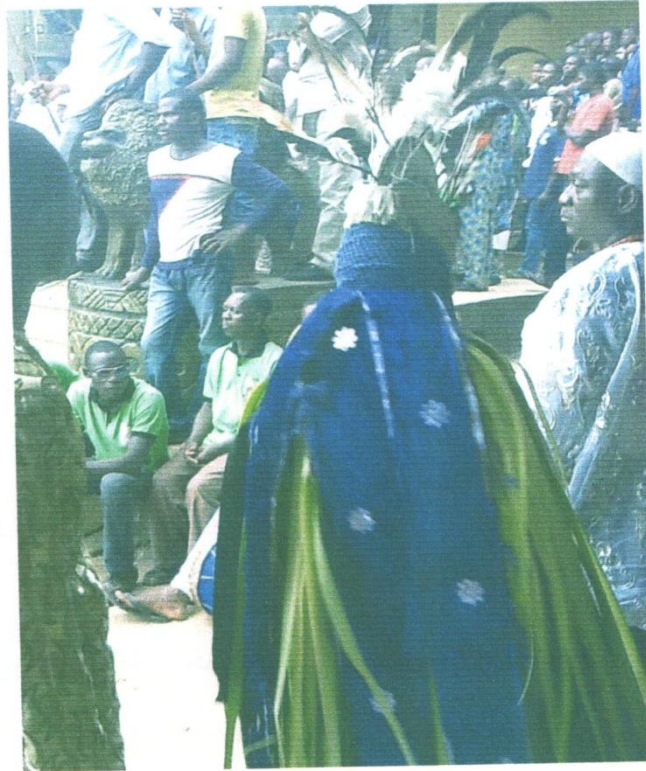
#### Semiotic Analysis

Efon is the most violent, bullish and dreaded masquerade in Ado-Ekiti. In the traditional oral script of the community, Efon represents the wild and the unruly. This explains why it is named after the animal called the bull. One element of its costumes which explains the high capacity of Efon masquerade for violence is the very long chain (or tough heavy rope) that is tied around his waist with the other end being held fifty metres away by his acolytes. His acolytes use this device to control him from a far as much as possible in order to minimise the damages and havocs the masquerade causes.

The two dangling horns and the exaggerated protruding mouth communicate the animal motif. The fresh itching grasses which are packed and loaded on the head are symbols of the thick forest which is the natural habitat of the bull. Another important feature is the two sticks usually held by Efon. These two sticks are the weapons with which the masquerade attacks people and destroys objects.

#### The Agbe Masquerade

Agbe is the Ekiti word for Bluebird. The Agbe is an attractive masquerade dominated by its traditional indigo colour and believed to be an imitation of a bird with dominant blue



### **Agbe Masquerade**

(Note the Indigo Colour)

plumages such as the genus *sialia* like robin, nightingale and so on. Though such birds are commonly called blue birds, they usually combine their bluish attractive colour with singing abilities.

The Agbe masquerade, literally meaning a bluebird, a nightingale or robin is a careful invention, made up of the similar singing skills, and light avian carriage, plenty of feathers on the head to represent the plumage and an overall indigo colour dominating the entire image. A close observation of the costume reveals intricate patterns and accessorial attachments like flowers or petals to further depict the bird as attractive. The mask of Agbe masquerade is not a carved wooden mask like those of Agbo and Efon. The mask of Agbe masquerade is a woven, well knitted wool fabric. The aforementioned intricate patterns and accessorial attachments like flowers and petals on indigo background are then attached firmly to this woven fabric mask both for aesthetic and semiotic reasons. Usually, a variety of colourful feathers, which stick out vertically, adorn the head of the masquerade. It should be mentioned however, that in modern times different participants now adorn their Agbe masks as they prefer and as it is accepted by the cultural code but the colour of the mask must be blue indigo.

The body of this masquerade is also covered with palm fronds the same way and style as Agbo and Efon.

## Semiotic Analysis

Agbe represents the bluebird which is attributed with beauty and singing prowess. The predominance of blue indigo colour on the mask and its decorations symbolize the colour of the bird-Agbe. The feathers on its head also depict a physical feature of a bird.

The fact that Agbe masquerade is conceptualized after a bird is the reason why its mask is not a carved wooden substance but a woven wool fabric. A bird is expected to be light since it flies. Agbe masquerade performs by flying and climbing on top high objects like electric poles, roofs of house, tree tops and so on.

This would not have been possible in a heavy wooden mask. This also explains why the palm fronds section of the costume is of very few light layers. The fronds are not as many and multi-layered as those of other masquerades so as not to create weight problem for this 'flying bluebird'.

## The Limitations Of The Materials Used In Costuming Agbo, Efon and Agbe Maquerades

The materials used in costuming these three Masquerades can be categorized as follows:

1. Wooden Masks
2. Vegetables (Palm fronds and leaves)
3. Animal fur.

### Wooden Mask

Although wood is a solid and strong material, however, it has serious limitations in situations like this. First, the weight is usually too heavy and discomforting for the wearer. Secondly, the wood in its original state cannot withstand the vicissitudeness of the weather in storage. This makes it ready meals for termites and weevils. It is also cumbersome to pack in case of performance tours and can easily get broken if minor accidents occur during performances

### Vegetables

These are highly perishable. The material grouped under category – Palmfronds and Leaves – can only survive four hours of performance. Beyond four hours, they become withered and the masquerade becomes unattractive.

### Animal Fur

These are used as accessories on masks and other Costume elements. Animal fur, if not well treated, easily gets rotten to the extent that maggots infest the Costumes. These materials also in their natural states evoke ritual feelings and aura that make the masquerades unacceptable as a sellable commodity in the contemporary tourism market.

## CONCLUSION

From our analysis and the discussions on the materials used for the costumes of the discussed masquerades, it is evident that in spite of the huge potentials that the Masquerade Art has in becoming a major commodity in the emerging global tourism market, Ado-Ekiti masquerades will not benefit from this market except their costumes are improved upon through modern plastic and textile technologies.

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