

The Symbolism of Egungun Mask Forms in Owo: A Glimpse into Yoruba Cosmology and Identity

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Abstract

This abstract explores the rich symbolism embedded within the Egungun mask forms of Owo, a Yoruba town in southwestern Nigeria. Egungun, a masquerade tradition, serves as a conduit between the living and the ancestral realm, embodying the spirits of the departed. The intricate designs and vibrant colors of the masks are not mere ornamentation, but rather a visual language that speaks to the complex cosmology and cultural identity of the Yoruba people. This research delves into the specific symbolism of various Egungun mask forms in Owo, analyzing their iconography, materials, and performance contexts. By examining the masks' representations of deities, ancestors, and societal roles, we gain insights into the Yoruba worldview, their understanding of life and death, and the intricate web of social relationships that govern their community. This study aims to demonstrate how the Egungun mask forms in Owo are not simply decorative objects, but powerful symbols that encapsulate the essence of Yoruba culture, history, and belief systems.

Keywords: Symbolism, Egungun Mask, Owo, Yoruba, Yoruba Cosmology

Introduction

The vibrant and intricate world of Yoruba art is a tapestry woven with deep cultural significance and the Egungun masks particularly those found in Owo, stand as powerful testaments to this rich heritage. These masks far from being mere decorative objects serve as conduits to the ancestral realm, embodying the spirits of the departed and acting as intermediaries between the living and the dead. Their forms meticulously crafted and imbued with symbolic meaning offer a window into the cosmology of the Yoruba people, revealing their beliefs about life, death and the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms. This exploration delves into the symbolic language of Egungun masks forms in Owo unrevealing the intricate web of meaning woven into their design. The study examines the significance of specific features. Such as the facial expressions, the adornments and the overall shape of the complex masks and how these elements reflect the Yoruba understanding of the ancestral realm and its influence on the lives of the living. By deciphering the symbolism embedded within these masks, we gain a deeper appreciation for the profound cultural and spiritual significance they hold for the Yoruba people.

There are very few societies, whether ancient or modern, primitive or civilized, in which masks are unknown. Their uses spring from the instinctive beliefs common to all mankind. It is better to understand the role of masks in art and their meanings and functions as well.

According to the Webster's dictionary "Mask" is... to take part in a masquerade or go about in a mask" while Phill & Endicett dictionary (1979) describes a mask as a small piece

of cloth used to cover the upper half of the face painted shade of an animals' face or strange human face used to hide one's real face". Mask can also be described as any covering or protection for the face. In this view Babalola (1993) asserts that Egungun (masquerade) is a "living dead" in Yoruba land. It is also believed that those who have departed from this world have only changed their earthly existence. Dead people are all the restraints imposed by earth and are possessors of limitless potentialities which they can exploit for the benefit of those who still live on earth. And that they come through Egungun in which the Yoruba call Ara Orun who disguised their faces with masks.

Objective

The objective of analyzing the Egungun mask from Owo is to understand and articulate its multifaceted symbolism and significance within Yoruba culture. This includes: Examining Ancestral Representation: To explore how the Egungun mask serves as a medium for connecting with ancestors and facilitating communication between the spiritual and physical realms. Identifying Spiritual Authority: To analyze how the mask's design and craftsmanship reflect the spiritual power and authority conferred upon the wearer. Understanding Cultural Identity: To investigate how the mask represents and reinforces the cultural and artistic traditions specific to Owo, contributing to a sense of cultural continuity. Assessing Ritual Significance: To evaluate the role of the mask in ceremonial contexts, including its impact on ritual effectiveness and community practices. By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Egungun mask's role in preserving and expressing Yoruba cultural values and spiritual beliefs.

The significance of Study

The Egungun mask in the context of Owo includes: Cultural Preservation: Understanding the mask's symbolism helps preserve the rich heritage and traditional practices of the Yoruba people, ensuring that knowledge of these cultural artifacts is passed down through generations.

Ancestral Connection: By exploring the mask's role in ancestral veneration, the study underscores the importance of ancestral spirits in Yoruba spirituality and how these traditions shape communal identity. Artistic Appreciation: Analyzing the mask's design and craftsmanship highlights the artistic skills and creativity inherent in Yoruba culture, contributing to a broader appreciation of African art forms .Ritual Understanding: The study provides insights into the mask's function within rituals and ceremonies, enhancing the understanding of its role in spiritual and social practices.

Cultural Continuity: By documenting and interpreting the mask's significance, the study supports efforts to maintain and revive traditional practices in a modern context, helping to ensure cultural continuity. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper appreciation of Yoruba traditions and offers valuable perspectives on the interplay between art, spirituality, and cultural identity.

Functions of the Mask

Apart from the meanings of the word 'mask', it is certain that all masks signify whatever they are designed to represent. These include ancestors, deities and other

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supernatural beings, the souls of the dead, good and evil spirits of nature, game, animals, rain, diseases; drought and fertility and abundance of life, among others.

Mask is used to criticise and control social wrongs in the society. As an example, in Owo when some witches create a lot of problems in some farms, a masquerade can be invited to such farms to put an end to such attitude by cursing them with their masks as the case among the Poro-Society (Liberia) where masks are displayed before the priest to give final judgments to offenders.

Mask is also used to evoke certain reactions in the beholder, for instance, awe of the god represented. It is used to impersonate and identify with certain supernatural being in order to affect some individual communal good. It also enhances the self as by wearing the mask of privileged secret societies. It serves as a source of income to the carver.

The Mask Types in Owo

In Owo, the major, recognised masks used are the face masks, helmet and head dress. They can be categorised into five types:

- (a) Ijamuja,
- (b) Ede,
- (c) Adeboyinbo mask,
- (d) Agbodogi and Eton masks,
- (e) Efon Masks.

The Ijamuja: are those that cane people. They can be sub-divided into Agbojulowo (head dress) Pokitoro and Oliwu masks. The last two are face masks.

The origin of the mask is not known. Adanigbo and Akerele (95 years old) in personal communication believed that the masks must have been brought from Ife and Benin because of their related culture. Those who are involved in such traditional practice cannot say specifically the story of the origin of the mask, but they believe that it has been in their family lineage which is transmitted from generation to generation. Some people who are interested in it learnt it from other powerful masquerades known to them.

This masquerade usually come out in the month of March every year and perform their ceremonies for twenty one days within the town. Some come out around September and performed for, just for seven days at Ora Street during Igogo festival in Owo.

These are the types made with textiles and fibers to cover the face while palm fronds and cloth are used to cover the body of the wearer. The masquerade holds cane to scare the younger ones who are interested in calling him names. In some cases they stop at some houses to dance and collect money from people. The masquerade then prays for them.

Egungun Mask Forms

Agbodogi Mask: It is a facial mask. It is usually about 30-45cm in height and painted with colour, the head has six dotted marks in the face while in some cases, brass is attached to the top of the mask with some fiber The masquerade uses fine cloth with small mirrors arranged to it. He uses pairs of shoes with stockings during the ceremony. In some case palm fronds are used spirally to add to its aesthetics. The masquerade performed gynamstic exercises to stimulate people for entertainment and they show appreciation to those people who give them money.

The Loge Mask

It is a helmet mask and the facial expression show the mood as if it is appealing for mercy. The eye is pierced while the traditional hair style is related to Owo culture. This mask is also painted with black or brown colour while the eye is painted with white and the pupil of the eyes is painted black. In some cases, the masquerade sings few songs with no drum to accompany it. The group of people following him claps their hands when the masquerade permits such. The masquerade holds traditional bell and beats it to make sonorous sound to respond to the song. It is interested in incantations to bless those who give him money during the ceremony while in some cases some barren women make pledges with it that if they are lucky to bear children before the year runs out, that they would fulfill their pledges.

Adeboyinbo or Tangala Mask

The mask has series of figurines displayed on its head of helmet attached with a singlet to cover the face of the masquerade. The figurines may be five to seven centimeters high, painted with orange and black paints. Some of the carvings look like people inside a canoe. The masquerade uses multi-colour clothes, mirrors and weaves whisk fans to demonstrate when dancing. The masquerade is for entertainment. The ceremony is accustomed with drums and groups of women singing different songs to honour him while in some cases when the masquerade sees other powerful masquerades like Ede mask group, they put off their light if it is during the night and runs for safety until such masquerade goes away.

Ede Mask

This is the most powerful masquerade in Owo. It has power to curse and pray for good luck as well as for riches. It is used in some cases to terrorize the wicked in society as well as in the farm to increase their declivities. Cowries and other powerluas in the farm to increased to the mask. The Ede mask is made up of woven cap. It contains colorful feathers of different birds which adds to its aesthetics and creativity.

The Materials Used

In carving the masks in Owo, there are prescribed wood that are used by the carvers. These include Omo (*cordiamillennii*), Iroko (*chlorophoraexcelsa*). aberinberin (*Riconidendron Africanum*). These are also used for verandah posts, doors, mortars, bowls, Ifa trays and for masks. The carvers like to work on them when it is still fresh and relatively soft. Colours are used at the finishing stages of the carving. Clothes, cowries and feathers are sometimes fixed to the masks. The tools that are being used by the carvers include osese carving tools, knives, axe and improvised chisels to fashion out the shapes of the masks.

Methods Used in Carving the Masks

The wood is cut into bits while tools like knives, chisels and axe are used to scoop the inner parts of the wood systematically. The knife is used for the finishing to carve out the intricate lines on the masks. Sand paper is also used to smoothen the body of the mask before colour is applied on it for aesthetics This idea is common to helmet and face mask types. In

the case of Ijamuja and Ede masks some are made of baggy textiles and fibres which are usually with sculptured head pieces for entertainment.

The Ede mask is particularly fixed with multi-colour feathers which adds to its beauty.

Influence of Modernization on the Masks

In the past, local colours were used on the masks. These were derived from leaves or earth colours. Nowadays already-made paints are used which adds to their beauty.

Most of the masks in the past were kept near the fire where smoke would dry it and protect it against termites. Also, in the traditional past, some of the masks were carved in secrecy as dictated by the purchaser, unlike now when varieties of masks are used openly and some of the masks are now used for decoration in the homes.

One can rightly say that Owo mask provided a background of cultural reservoir of materials out of which the artist could fashion out a unique and effective display in their art works. The forms of the mask have influenced the works of great artists and generations who might be interested in working on masks and many others which show their variation in many media

Conclusion

This paper explains the aesthetic expressions in Owo mask with due allusions to the numerable types existing within the community. This is viewed in two different perspectives such as its objective or physical properties, that is, the proportion, relationships and qualities of the component parts as well as the significant forms and meanings of each mask within the community. Owo mask forms should be a source of interest to researcher who are researching into their indigenous cultures.

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