
TEMPEST MASQUERADES

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Abstract: This study describes the unresearched phenomenon of tempest masquerade among the Kalabari and Ibani and is supported by original photographs from the author's field research. It deals with the representations of thunder and lightning – analysing the different ways of accessing a natural phenomenon.

Key words: tempest, lightning, thunder, river, snake, Yoruba, Ijaw (Kalabari, Ibani), environmental cognition

Sources

In this study, I will be using an ethnographic method which presents the exact records of conversations, including parts which might seem unimportant, off topic or even a refusal to answer a question. This way, everything that has been recorded may lend a hand to other researchers who would be needlessly limited by a pre-selection.

I also need to describe the circumstances of a conversation which could have only been carried out outside the masquerade. In addition, I cannot leave out the external stimuli for the conversation, such as photos from performances and informants' associations. From my experiences in the Niger Delta, I know that if a researcher does not enter into dialogues with active stimuli, he will find out very little. This is why I will present my own associations quoted from a conversation. This is primary material gained from field research and the goal herein is to trustfully record not only the outcome but also the journey toward it.

There are two sources that this study stems from. One of them is a collection of photos from the Kalabari festival Owu Aru Sun in the town of Buguma. The other one is the narration of an Ibani informant from Oloma, which is the insular settlement related to the town of Bonny. The Ibani and Kalabari inhabiting the Niger Delta belong to Ijaw ethnic group.

The frequency of masquerades is varied. Owu Aru Sun is the best known festival among the Kalabari and is held only once every forty years as a recollection of collective memory. I had photographs taken of this festival by a local photographer which included a picture taken of the house of masks, a place where, as a woman, I would not have been able to enter. This festival is somewhat of a summarisation of the collective consciousness – an event at which all Kalabari masks are present. However, not all of them could be presented fully, which made it necessary to find a secondary source of information.

This other source was a dialogue with a person from the adjacent Ibani tribe named Patrick Jumbo, who was over fifty years old in 1994, when our conversation took place. He was an agricultural entrepreneur in his native settlement, and offered



Patrick Jumbo on his farm, Oloma.

employment opportunities to the local people. He was quite well-educated self-made man and a Christian. His praise name was "Opu Owu", which means "big water spirit" – he was an appraised masquerade performer in Bonny. Both his natural intelligence and true helpfulness presented a great contribution to this work.

A dialogue about the masquerade

One time in the evening we were watching the silent electric discharges from some distant storms. The wind was strong and was rustling in the palm trees.

Me: "The tops of the palm trees remind me of the *Egbelegbe* mask."

Patrick: "That's an accurate association. Our knowledge is on the brink of extinction. There are things I want to say to someone. I will answer every question you ask me."

We hopped into a boat in Port Harcourt and started our way from the canals between the mangrove forests into the open sea. The silent voyage lasted about two hours. We arrived in the port in Bonny, where we had to switch to a canoe. After a short while, we got to Oloma.

There, my guide showed me the house which he was born in: "Until recently, my mother used to live here. She taught me everything." Women here usually know much more than we think they know, but they cannot present this knowledge in the public or perform a masquerade. Patrick's motivation to talk to me – a woman – needs to be understood in this light.

There were two old black-and-white photos hanging on the wall showing mas-



Bekinnaru Sibi masquerade (Kalabari).

querade he had participated in. These photographs were the most valuable thing in this simple hut. They depicted Aki, the wind spirit from the masquerade performed during the coronation of Ibani king (*Amanyano*) in Bonny. Patrick explained to me what is sung and performed at an event like this.

The masquerade is guided by some kind of a dithyrambic singing: "Where are you, Aki? Come, Aki. Where are you, Aki? Where are you, Aki of Oloma?" The main dancer carries a tall construction on his head made of long feathers and similar to those of his companions, although somewhat smaller. During the dance, they blow and breathe out in a loud way because it is the wind they are calling. Just a simple *odja* whistle is used and the whole act is accompanied by drums.

Me: "It seems that Aki is of more importance to you than to anyone else."

Patrick: "The Ibani and the Kalabari both worship him. However, we in the bight of Bonny are a settlement by the open ocean, which is why we are more dependent on wind than they are. That is why the Aki masquerade is so important to us. Be that as it may, the Kalabari people have their *Bekinnaru Sibi* masquerade depicting white people's steamer because one time a few steamboats found their way to them. We do not commemorate such ships because they have never actually left us – they're always here."

For the Kalabari, the *Bekinnaru Sibi* masquerade depicts contact with European civilisation. The main part of the performance involves a performer with a sincipital construction of a ship throwing sweets to the audience, while a supporting actor

weaves his way through the crowd with a paddle. The representation of a steamer evokes the encounter of European seafarers with the native people – in this sense *Odum* masquerade is a variation of the same archetypal situation. Patrick said: “In our settlement, in the shoal waters, an *Odum*, the python, used to be performed. You know, *Odum* represents high tide and also the cult of the python.”

Me: “How can just one word carry the meaning of such different things?”

Patrick: “When the Portuguese came and then Queen Britannica, there used to be a python masquerade performed during high tide. It looked like this: men formed a crowd, standing one after another, and when the crowd entered water, it looked like the body of a snake. In the front there was the structure of a big snake head which was the size of a raft and it would open its mouth. Seafarers would put gifts into the mouth to show their good intentions and then we would permit them to enter the bay.”

Me: “They told me the Okrika settlement takes pride in that masquerade.”

“At least someone’s still performing it,” says Patrick, having no sense of rivalry, which otherwise is always a part of these sorts of things. “We used to perform it too. However, Shell [the oil company] deepened the coastal waters so big ships could pass through. There are no shallows to perform it anymore. Even the character of the relationship with the white men has changed. With their tankers, they have cast their anchors here for good.”

Me: “With your status, it would be possible for you to join the oilmen. Why haven’t you done so yet?”

With pride, Patrick points to his great pineapple plantation: “I’ve decided to be a farmer. The oil industry leads nowhere.”

Thunder and lightning in the Ibani culture

We got into a boat. The ocean opened up before us near Bonny, but the waters got narrower on our way back to Port Harcourt. The river basin was still wide, but we were able to see the coastline. There was a burnt stump rising from some mangroves, which were not yet green. I knew that the traces of fire in this deceptive land had to be the doing of clandestine petrol refining, or of a tempest – in which case I wanted to know what word they had for lightning.

“What was that?” I asked.

Patrick corrects me: “You mean who.”

“Who?”

Patrick: “You mentioned *Egbelegbe*. But, you know, there are always two of them.”

Me: “And what do they call the other one?”

Patrick: “*Sibinagbila*, which means: ‘Head, listen to the question’. It’s *So Alagba*.”

Me: “‘So’ means ghost, right? Who is *So Alagba*?”

Patrick: “He should not be talked about. But he still is.”

Me: “What’s he like?”

Patrick: “We’re spoiling him even more.”

“Is that [the god] Shango of the Yorubas?” (The Nigerians put so much emphasis on the Yoruba culture that Shango plays a part in literary works and even the spelling books for all Nigerian children. Amadioha of the Igbo people is similarly well known.)



Egbelegbe, spirit of thunder (Kalabari).

However, Patrick adds: "You know, here in the delta, there are always two of them. The masquerade is a combination of fast running and symbolic actions. Everyone runs away from the main performer and his followers. The main performer holds two staffs turned upside-down: he catches the first person, being the nearest and least cautious, by both arms and shakes..."

However, there are not many of these performances because they have big requirements. Whereas *Sibingabila* is fast, *Egbelegbe* is mighty and has a pair of knives and a bloody apron, appearing dangerous and rough."¹

In Buguma they told me that the *Egbelegbe* is bloodthirsty and therefore not only requires an atoning animal sacrifice before the dance (the stains from which can be seen on the white apron), but also the human sacrifice of the dancer himself. From this discussion, I come up with another question which concerns me: "The *Egbelegbe* dancer is rumoured to be dancing from the land into the water, gradually submerging more and more until he disappears in his heavy costume with only his headdress being visible. How can that be?"

Patrick: "It is a tough fate. The costume weighs dozens of kilograms, has 4 sets of 12 mirrors on it and more than 350 eagle feathers, which stand for the days of the year. Only a 65- to 70-year-old man is deemed worthy of wearing it, and he considers it an honour to die this way."

Patrick was caught up in the thought of how to make the *Egbelegbe* costume a bit lighter. This was just another motivation that kept him going on in this conversation.

Patrick: "There have to be suitable materials somewhere, maybe in Europe. Submerging into the water is supposed to conceal the dancer, not drown him. The aim is to make the community believe in his disappearance. But in reality, due to the actor being old, even if he does not die during the performance, he very often becomes so

¹ I was only able to find a reference in relevant literature stating that: *Egbelegbe* was originally owned by Okrika masquerade society. The mask had caused a lot of deaths there so the people left it behind and sent it floating out with the high tide. It was found by the Tombia people and after a consultation with the oracle, the *Egbelegbe* peacefully settled with them. (Iyala, B.: Concept and formation of masquerade Mgbula. in: The Masquerade in Nigerian History and Culture. Unipor, Port Harcourt. 1982, p. 78, unpublished).

tired that he succumbs to a minor injury and never recovers again. Here in the delta we have a saying: 'You cannot go through it twice.'"

From the description of the structure of the performance, it can be seen that the story performed by the masquerade screens the time difference between the speeds of sound and light. There are two of them and one arrives later. There are two aspects of the storm: thunder and lightning. "Egbelegbe" is an onomatopoeic cryptonym: in this way the masquerade society conceals important meanings.

In some parts of traditional Western Africa it is believed that repeatedly spelling the word "egbe" makes one invisible. Thunder is also invisible. This is why the name of its mask may be connected to a magic formula. The name also has a rhythmic pattern in the language of drums. However, these meanings are only available to male participants. For others, it is only fear and fascination that can keep things in order.

It seems that lightning is perceived as a warning before thunder (for a rational explanation, my guide Patrick used the English word "gun") and therefore people ask the lightning for kindness instead of thunder because it is considered weaker and less prudent. A similar situation can be found with the firstborn among twins.

The *Egbelegbe* dance repels storms which endanger settlements near the swamp waters; its main performer takes full responsibility for the whole settlement. The wooden construction of the mask is ornamented with feathers in the performance and presented as some kind of a dancing lightning rod.

Thunder and lightning in the Kalabari culture

Among the Ibani, a storm is represented by the *Sibinabila-Egbelegbe* pair. For the Kalabari, it is the *Abbi Alagba-Egbelegbe* pair. The invariant of both performances is identical. The actor playing the role of lightning is always the quick runner in the performance: among the Kalabari, this actor carries two long poles with a snaking ribbon on each of them. His Ibani counterpart carries two short walking sticks topped by a small iron ball. Although these props vary a little bit, the structure of the performances in both tribes is identical: the actor turns the sticks upside down as if he was shifting celestial fire to the ground. This shifting is also implied by a part of his costume being made from leopard skin which is flowing from head to toe. Leopard skin not only underlines the manhood of a hunter, but also substitutes for snake skin in terms of its pattern.

The last time *Sibinabila* and *Egbelegbe* appeared together was at the big Owu Aru Sun festival alongside all the other Kalabari masquerades. When examining photographs from the festival, the reciprocity of both the lightning and thunder masks is supported by costumes, props and headdresses placed side by side in one masquerade house. Admittedly, every community gets by with just one thunder-and-lightning pair. If the borders of two tribes become less obvious or merge, a certain duplicity occurs. The duty of the masquerade society is to give consent to make renewals or to reduce these renewals, preventing them from weakening the ritual function and significance of personifications. Places without such prevention tend to carnivalisation. This movement towards profanity is quite disseminated within the African masquerade phenomenon. Recently a conflict occurred among the Kalabari because the performer of *Alagba* showed up accompanied by shots from a cannon, and the thunder was personified by a mask of his mother *Alagba Yingi* instead of his



Egbelegbe masquerader with blood on apron (Kalabari).

brother *Egbelegbe*. Another *Alagba* is believed to have appeared in the company of his wife.

In both of the mentioned male-female pairs, a definite environmental observation is projected: thunder catches up to lightning, to calm it down and acts as a wife or mother trying to restrain her angered husband or son. The woman represented as thunder makes a lot of noise but is not altogether dangerous. Similar to an electric discharge, created by the clash of a positive and negative charge, the storm phenomenon is personified by a male-female dichotomy. The second alternative to this "two-in-one element" personification are twins. Aside from a mildly modified name, lightning invariably appears as a man, whereas thunder can appear as a brother, wife or mother (female characters invariably performed by male actors). If the duplicate personifications of lightning and thunder were integrated into one performance, there would be an increased tendency to have a more developed dramatic story. However, the ritual function is so far still dominant.

The Ekine masquerade society gave both of the new pairs of masks its consent under the condition that every imported personification of lightning will differ from the original by the cheetah skin which forms part of their costumes. While this difference might seem very subtle to outsiders, the locals are very touchy about such matters.

Even without taking a final stance on the conflict, whether these renewals are acceptable in a particular situation and considered to be widening cultural heritage, or whether they present a disintegration of traditional structures, the obfuscation of the

Alagba, spirit of lightening (Kalabari).



system is caused by a kind of pleonasm penetrating into the presentation of a phenomenon. A certain chaotic tendency is understandable with the blending of ethnic borders and the weakening of traditional hierarchic structures in the masquerade society. However, the blending of areas of individual groups also homogenises cultures and results in the search for new religious identities. To clearly show these structures – to identify an invariant – means to spread peace in parts of the world endangered by tribalism and ethnic wars. This is where the role of an anthropologist comes to the fore. Unfortunately, the results of research projects rarely touch on the cultural contexts they concern the most. Currently they can only sharpen the cultural sensibility of our civilisation when entering these cultures and when intervening in armed conflicts in the area.

Myth and the ritual

The association of lightning with a snake has an archetypal character. We may also talk about archetypes in an associative binding: e.g. lightning – snake(dragon) – rainbow – river. This associative chain can be found also among the Ijaw. Among the Kalabari, such an association might be derived from a myth about a heroine of theirs, the white woman Akaso, who introduced overseas trade and captured seven man-eating pythons which resided in a well with drinking water. These retreating pythons – which, according to myth, had rained from the sky – created seven distributaries in



Abbi Alagba in action (Kalabari).

the delta. There are several alternatives to this event dating back to the roots of Portuguese colonisation, which confirms its contact with Christianity.

Even today, the python is still sacred to the Ijaw – if anyone kills one, they have to bury it as if it was a local king. Upon finding a python near people's homes, even a person who is already a Christian says to it: "Grandfather, we have already abandoned you for Jesus Christ. Please, stop visiting us." If a floating dinghy meets a floating python, the people in the boat have to strip off their clothes and lie down flat on the bottom of the boat. This stripping ritual originates from the process of the shedding of skin as observed when a python does it. This symbolic act is somewhat of an origin of camouflaging, disguising oneself as one of the *Owu* water spirits dwelling in the canals, where, according to myth, the banks were formed from the imprints of pythons' bodies.

In addition to pythons, amphibians are feared and represented in the Niger Delta masquerades. The reason for this is their dual housing – they live in the water and also on the nearby land. One can never know when an amphibian is about to attack, which is why the crocodile mask's name (*Egbepelebo Sibó*) has a certain similarity to the thunder mask.

The masquerades are based on a delimitation of space for those things which people fear: e.g. crocodiles or lightning. The tempest masquerades have their roots in the personification of abstract powers. In this way, actors help themselves by using concrete forms while materialising the intangible. The personified model of the tempest

Seki, crocodile masquerade (Kalabari).



shows an intellectual creation, without which the natural phenomenon of the tempest would seem to be too abstract and therefore ungraspable.

The morphology of the mask of a peacekeeper or policeman (*Sibinangolo*) carries the idea of a danger being diverted to the waters. In this case, this is not performed through any dramatic presentation but through sculpture. The mask has the shape of a fish's torso with a tail, and it looks as if half of the fish was immersed in water, with the surface of the water being portrayed by the costume.

Environmental varieties of attitudes towards tempest

Defining an area for lightning by consecrating a tall tree is a cultural archetype, or an invariant, such as when Prometheus made two piles to divide what belongs to man and what should be sacrificed to the gods. In the case of trees, separating between the sacral and the profane stands for designating a certain tree (or kind of tree) to the god of tempest while redeeming other trees for humans.

The masquerade is an attempt at prevention: a definition of space-time for lightning and a deception to the god (or gods) of tempest, accompanied by a dramatic story which concludes with the illusion of a victim. Metaphorically speaking, it is some kind of vaccination of culture by a natural element. This symbolic action expresses an ability to live with those elements which transcend human power. If a tree acts as a conductor, diverting electric discharges to the ground, its mobile alternative (vari-



Ekine society (Kalabari).

ant) is a dancing conductor, the masquerade performer, who diverts celestial fire to the waters. The dance does not eliminate lightning, and from a rational perspective the dance is ineffective in comparison with a tall tree. However, the dance is an expression of an active approach towards the phenomenon. A positive psychological aspect of this approach is that it reduces the degree of fear.

A tempest is a universal phenomenon. Approaches taken by specific ethnic groups depend on the areas they inhabit. This is the reason why situational behaviour patterns towards the same phenomena may differ significantly. Cultural variety is a manifestation of human intelligence and creativity and forms the basis for humanity to evolve its adaptations in various environments, even concerning an identical phenomenon.

If we were to wonder about the scale of the validity of this way of accessing the phenomenon of the tempest as mentioned above, saying it is an "African" practice would seem too general given that the climate zones and natural ecosystems of the African continent extend from rainforests to deserts. However, the places where there are masquerades almost certainly include a certain variant of a tempest masquerade.

Nomads (even those living in Africa) do not have masquerade. Their necessity for moving has diminished their material culture, and their tactic is not to build fortresses but rather to escape from danger. If they attack, they usually use raiding tactics against moving opponents. An interesting stance is assumed towards tempests by the nomads in the Kalahari Desert. (Not to be mistaken for the *Kalabari* of the Niger Delta!) Because of the lack of drinking water, these nomads do not run away from lightning. On the contrary, when they see lightning on the skyline, they go in its direction. From their own experience, they know that thirsty herds of antelopes head in the direction of lightning because their survival instinct is stronger than fear. Even

if one of the antelopes is struck by lightning, the herd will still pull through: Just like antelopes, people also know as much: water, greenery and animals for hunting can be found where lightning occurs.²

However, the approach of all Ijaw communities to the tempest phenomenon indicates that they live in Nigeria's River State, where 80 % of the surface area is covered in water. There is no lack of water in these parts and, of course, the occurrence of strong evaporations in hot air also causes cloud formations, rain and storms.

The complexity of the phenomenon

For natural religions, the symmetry of a tree is sacred: the tree-top shape has its analogy underneath the ground in the tree's roots. It is from this symmetry that ritual representations are derived. A variant of the archetypal roots-tree-top symmetry can be found in mangroves. In the Niger Delta, mangrove roots are revealed by the low tide, which is why water spirits are viewed as being of an empire of doubles and of a different world. Unlike the world's reflection on a water surface, this symmetry is not illusory. This is why mangroves present themselves as a natural condition for tempest masquerade in which an electric discharge is "diverted" into the waters.

I did not come across any specific tree being reserved for the sacred celestial fire – something similar to the oak tree in pre-Christian Europe – among the Ijaw. A sacred tree placed in the middle of an Ijaw courtyard serves several functions: if lightning strikes, it can take over as a tree confined to the god of tempest. These sacred trees cannot be touched by earthly fire, and therefore they grow into larger sizes. The greatest gods have the greatest trees reserved for them: they protect people and their residences with their size. There is a high probability during a storm that lightning will actually strike the tallest tree. This fact represents a rational core for the phenomenon of reserving a sacred tree for the god of tempest. The phenomenon described is widespread worldwide and can easily be considered as archetypal, at least for those parts of the *Ecumene* where human and tree cultures are adjacent.

When lightning branches out onto the sky, its shape shows the structure of a tree turned upside down. If this sky-born tree meets a tree-top on the ground, the brilliant light expands from the sky to the tree. Lightning takes travels in a structured way of sky-to-ground or sky-to-water surface. Lightning inland is attracted to objects that are tall; on the coast – or, more precisely, in the swamps – it is attracted to things which are conductive. Mangroves are not that tall, but are immersed in water. Based on environmental observation, it is somehow possible to offer such trees to the tempest phenomenon and hence save lives and residences. The probability of lightning "choosing" them or – as a traditionally believing African would say – "that the gods would like a sacrifice like this" is great.

If a tree and lightning conductor are considered to be stable architectural or urban features, the tempest masquerade presents a dynamic and mobile alternative, which "explains" to the trees what their duty is during a tempest and to people that they should protect tall trees.

Even though the archetypes may be identified, it is hard to isolate them into a text-

² Paraphrased from Chatwin, B.: *Anatomy of Restlessness*. Uncollected Writings. Jonathan Cape, London, 1996, p. 248.

book style. Their strength derives from being a part of very complex structures. A tree with its roots buried deep beneath the ground and its branches reaching the high point in the sky is an image of the forefathers' participation on the cosmic oneness. They were of a smaller physical height, but we can also imagine them as giants with their heads reaching the clouds and senses spreading wide and far.

Certain aspects of the tree archetype in Europe have walked the path from the status of being a myth or ritual to becoming a tale: they have moved from adult culture to children's culture. However, the symmetry of root and tree-top frameworks leaves one with an irreplaceable image of symmetry between the upper and lower limbs. Through this a tree becomes the image of a person with their body "rooted in the ground" and their soul rising to the sky.

Translated by Dávid Maťo

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