West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals

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Chapter 1

On Origins of Masking

*History, Memory, and Ritual Observances*

The masquerade edifies my existence
I, arriving from the nether world
The drummers and flutists announce my arrival
I, the earth goddess who rides the heavenly galaxies
The music in the air honors my ancestry
I, whose offspring have crossed mighty seas to distant places
The dancers and onlookers acknowledge my motherhood
I, whose being twirls to the rhythms of memory.

— Ezeowu, Okoroshá masquerade dancer (2008)

Ozzu Ezeowu’s poetics (*ube*) associated with the Christmas and New Year Okoroshá masks and masquerade festivities in the Achi-Mbieri in Owerri-Igbo area of southeastern Nigeria mirrors the power of this African culture as a site of history, memory, ritual observances, self-reinvention, intellectual episteme, and cultural identity. The *mask*, for the purpose of clarity, is literally a camouflage, covering or disguise used to hide one’s physical appearance either wholly or partially during a public performance. Richard Woodward elucidates that the “full drama of a mask includes an entire custom and even more important, a human setting with music, dance, and song.”1 Thus, the *masquerade* is the theatrical or performing art form of the mask—that is, wearing the mask and its accessories and costumes—which electifies the participants into a festive spirit. The art of costuming—which usually makes use of fabrics and other items of clothing, ornaments, accessories, and colors adorned by actors and actresses for the purpose of defining and establishing the circumstances of the character’s existence in time and space—is the critical tool with
which the Igbo and their neighbors literally turned lifeless objects created by humans into mobile spirits and divinities.

In African precolonial society without a well-developed and widely shared writing culture, masquerade celebrations were constituted and observed in due times and seasons as living histories. For example, among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria (who are also found in the present-day Francophone Republic of Niger), the Gélédé masquerade purportedly honors the earth spirits and the ancestors, and celebrates “Mothers” (áwon iyá wa)—chief among them, the earth goddess, female spirits, and elderly women. The annual Gélédé (or Èfé) fiesta highlights the status of women and pacifies their hypothetically dangerous mystical powers. As performers ascribe honor to women in a male-controlled society, the Gélédé, “the festival of supplication,” effectively serves a purifying role in society. Of course, the purpose, utilities, or needs of masks and masquerades change as new ideas and other forces change society. In the context of transatlantic slavery (c. 1440–1880) for instance, the Gélédé was invoked by the Yoruba elders to soothe the colossal pains afflicted on mothers whose offspring were kidnapped by slavers and sold off to overseas destinations. During the course of the Gélédé fêtes, gender conflicts and other sociopolitical issues are considered in public. The preparation of Gélédé masks and masquerade runs for months, and celebrations usually commence at midnight when the big mask heralds start of the festivities. On the next day, the lesser masks take turns to entertain the audience, satirizing even the most vexing and daunting sociopolitical issues. Corroborating this idea, Sachin Dete adds that like the other Yoruba masquerades including the Egungun (a manifestation of Yoruba ancestors), the Gélédé uses “satirical devices as a means of enforcing conformity in society.”

Neither the functions ascribed to the Gélédé nor the specific value of finding balance in the midst of chaos that the masquerade festival represents is solely unique to the Yoruba. Across the continent in the precolonial era, diverse African communities deployed masks and masquerades for similar functions: they aided governments as an arm of law enforcement, supported justice administration, compelled social conformity, and fought crimes in order to maintain balance and a more peaceful order in a world fraught with disorder and chaos. While scholarly interest in masquerades and carnival jamborees has grown exponentially in the past four decades, the primary and perhaps most pertinent questions that have not been fully addressed in the copious literature remain when, why, and how the masquerade tradition came about.
In surveying these intriguing questions, the theory of nonlinear dynamics and chaos is adopted, albeit in a modified form, to explore an opportunity for scholars to test the processes of cultural emergence and expansion in a transregional/transnational context. Additionally, we interrogate the tie between memory and discourse embodied in this genre of African literal art form, using clearly identified specific regional case studies. Moreover, since masquerade displays are mass oriented, an attempt here is made to reorient social, economic, and intellectual endeavors toward the masses rather than the elite in contradistinction to what the theory of elitism often purports. In Gramscian theory, elite domination of the lower classes is called “the ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony,” and Gramsci sees hegemony to be the spontaneous acceptance of the moral and cultural values, as well as the general world outlook and its influence on various practical activities of the ruling class by the majority of the people of the subordinate classes.

But diverging from the idea that elite culture dominates popular ideologies, here the agency is accorded to the masses with the contention that cultural production and observances are a two-way dialogue, a collaborative project between the masses and the elite. Together, the low and the high in society contribute to the production of dominant cultures.

Ideology, Nonlinear Dynamics, Order, and Chaos

There have been mostly inconclusive and contrary views as to when and where the masquerade culture began, but hardly any discussion of how. One suggestion on origins emanating from Europe and by extension the colonial Caribbean and colonial South America purports that masking originated in Italy where the term *maschera* gained currency in the thirteenth century with the Carnival of Venice (Italian: *Carnevale di Venezia*). According to this view, masking evolved and expanded from Venice to France (French: *mascarade*) around 1393, and subsequently to other European countries, including Great Britain. Venetian masks are today recognized by their ornate design, with bright colors such as gold or silver and the adaption of intricate designs in the baroque style. The bulk of Venetian mask designs come from commedia dell’arte, either full-face masks (e.g., the *bauta*) or eye masks (e.g., the Columbina). The Italians wore their masks with decorative beads matching in color.

The Italian masking and masquerade carnival has been cast as a purely secular rather than religious observance. But Samuel Glotz and Marguerite Qerlemans’s study of European masks reveals that “originally, the European masks assumed the same religious function as those of other continents and other civilizations.”
Linda Carroll adds that “the fundamental themes” of European masks “were rooted in the Indo-European belief that cosmological and vegetation cycles fostered the life of spring by eliminating the deadening influence of the old and by emphasizing the bodily functions that would generate and sustain the new.”

The ancient religious roots began to change with the emergence of urbanization, the Enlightenment movement, and spread of industrialization in the continent. Over the centuries, the masking celebrations that often came during the winter season assumed a more secular nature during which the participants tended to abandon decency for reverie and overindulgence in the fun, food, unconventional manners of dressing, noisemaking, erotic dances/parades, slothfulness, wastefulness, and antigovernment rhetoric. In her study of the Venetian masks, Carroll argues that angry young men like Angelo Beolco “used the tradition of anti-establishment criticism and obscenity associated with Carnival as a vehicle...
for protest against his exclusion and the greed and hypocrisy of the ruling class which he felt lay at its root. His espousal of the peasants, whom he portrayed as impoverished by the city people’s rapacious desire for money and food, was inspired not only by a concern for their plight but by their symbolization of his own.” As a result, by the eighteenth century, wearing masks in everyday life in Italy was considered by many religious and political groups as a public nuisance. The elite, therefore, limited the masked carnivals only to three months, from December 26 to the end of March—that is, the end of the Lenten period or Easter eve.

Implicit in the Venetian-origins hypothesis, encountered in the early literature on masquerade carnivals, is the suggestion that African slaves in the colonial Caribbean and Latin America were inspired by watching White planters indulge in masquerade plays. With regards to origins of the Trinidadian masquerade carnival, Michael Anthony reports that it all began when “the French settlers and their slaves from the Windward Islands began to crowd into Trinidad” following the “Cedula of Population for Trinidad,” a decree proclaimed by King Carlos IV of Spain in 1783 to allow immigrants into the island in the face of the imminent threat of British colonization. According to Anthony, the immigrants “were the people who brought the carnival to Trinidad. They came from Grenada, Guadeloupe, and Martinique.” As the “French Whites, who in the main owned the estates, celebrated the Roman Catholic feast of Carnival in their great houses,” the Africans, as some of the historical literature emphasizes, reportedly started mimicking and ridiculing the White elite as a mode of protest against the oppressive plantation culture in the Americas.

Errol Hill, in The Trinidad Carnival, acknowledges that during the period of British rule of this Caribbean island nation—that is prior to emancipation, from 1797 to 1834, “carnival was an important institution for Whites, and free coloreds, particularly in the towns.” Hill echoes previous studies such as those by Andrew Pearse, Andrew Carr, and Raphael DeLeon, who all claimed that masked carnivals originated from Europe. At best, these studies suggest that the elite White culture was in existence earlier than the emergence of the Negro-Creole-themed masquerade carnival dances in this American island nation. A similar potpourri assessment has been concluded by John Chasteen in regard to the pre-Lenten Samba carnival dancing in Rio de Janeiro. Chasteen underscores that the lundu carnival dance in Rio (Brazil) predated the subsequent Creole-led samba dances that began from late nineteenth century and grew in popularity in the twentieth century to become the part of national culture it
Figure 1.2. Masquerade dress, Europe, 1596–1635. Used with permission from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
has assumed today.\textsuperscript{18} It is useful to recall to memory an Igbo proverb: “He who joins a story midway runs the risk of a gross misunderstanding.”\textsuperscript{19} What these different but similar accounts that point to Europe as the birthplace of carnival tell us is \textit{when} the masquerade carnivals arrived in the Caribbean but not \textit{how} and \textit{where} they originated.

In line with the nonlinear approach in which this entire inquiry is situated, characteristics, forms, and rhythms in both artistic and performance art forms are perceived as growing from multilinear sources rather than from a single source or timeline. Within European agrarian communities in preindustrial times, masquerades operated as vehicles for social regulation much as they did in West Africa. Violet Alford maintains that the horned masquerade known as the Ooser of Melbury Osmond in Dorset, England, could be “brought out for the punishment of village wrongdoers in a Skimmington [a rowdy parade] or Rough Music.”\textsuperscript{20} Alford notes that in parts of Germany during yuletide, a mask portraying the kindhearted Saint Nicholas appeared accompanied by a grotesque figure (a Bad Santa) called Knecht Ruprecht, clad in skins, or straw, with a fierce deportment.\textsuperscript{21} The “good children get cakes for saying their prayers; the bad ones are beaten with ash-bags.”\textsuperscript{22} Robert Nicholls explains that those identified as “bad children” were hit with a bag full of ash until they are covered in dust. Nicholls further notes that ash is part of “funeral wake adornment in much of West Africa,” and that during Christmas and New Year festivities in Saint Thomas, participants going out without costumes were pestered with flour or confetti—obvious substitutes for ash.\textsuperscript{23} It is a fact that Christmas was adapted
from the ancient Germanic Yule celebration of the winter solstice observed in many parts of Europe featuring antlers, horns, and animal skin costumes to mark the onset of the sun’s rebirth; renewal rituals in most societies are deeply spiritual.\textsuperscript{24}

There is no overriding need to dismiss the European influences on masquerade carnivals in the New World. It is worth mentioning though that John Picton has noted that the term \textit{masquerade} entered into the European lexicon from the Arabic verb \textit{sakhira} meaning “to laugh, scoff, jeer, ridicule, mock, deride, and make fun.”\textsuperscript{25} This means that the Arab masking practices may have predated the European genre; while Caribbean or Latin American antecedents may have provided factual social milieus in which the African players would rediscover their rich repertoire of inherited masquerade dances, the fact of the matter is that masking is as old as human civilization, which started in Africa. Murals and other paintings by artists of ancient Egypt reveal that masks and their imageries were present in the social and political traditions of ancient people. As early as the 3000 BCE, Egyptians produced masks and invoked them in their religious observances as “death masks” and “ritual masks.” The Egyptians believed that it was important to preserve the dead body as a dwelling place for the soul or spirit that lives on; hence the science of mumification was widely practiced as part of the unending interchange between the dead and the living.\textsuperscript{26} For the departed soul to be able to identify the lifeless physical body to which it would return, the Egyptians considered it a necessity to design their death masks (often made from wood and papyrus) in the likeness of the deceased. Some of the most famous funerary masks left behind by these ancient people are the masks of the eighteenth-dynasty pharaoh Tutankhamen, who reigned 1332–1324 BCE and Ramses II (r. 1279–1213 BCE), the third king of the nineteenth dynasty.\textsuperscript{27} Usually, royal death masks were made from precious metals, such as gold (or gold leaf) and bronze.

Like the Egyptians, the Aztecs of pre-Columbian Mexico followed the tradition of many ancient peoples: they used death masks in celebration of the “Day of the Dead,” Dia de los Muertos.\textsuperscript{28} In other words, the early Aztec arts also reveal religious themes such as ancestor worship, a practice that goes with music and dancing dating back to about 3000 BCE. One of the notable aspects of Aztec culture and mask designs is that they were primarily for display, not to be worn as apparel or gear as in performance art. This explains why there are masks with no eye-holes, or masks placed on stone or on skulls. With certain exceptions, the eyes are closed as one in a state of death.\textsuperscript{29} In contrast, all death masks of ancient Egypt were made after the likeness of the deceased but with slightly enlarged
eyes and a faint smile. The depictions of earliest masks of Egypt also revealed the fashion of their times with painted jewelry and makeup. Painted ritual masks, made from cartonnage (layers of papyrus covered with plaster) in the likeness of animal heads and heads of gods of Egypt (such as Anubis, god of death), were worn by priests during funeral ceremonies such as the “Opening of the Mouth,” which was a symbolic animation of a mummy. At these occasions, the priest, the privileged interpreter between the worlds of the dead and the living, would wear a head mask that concealed his head and shoulders so that he was constrained to peep through a couple of tiny holes cut on the neck of the mask.  

In Asia, masks featured in highly archetypal religious and profane dramas of China, Sanskrit Ramlila in India, and in Korean, Tibetan, and Mongolian shamanism. For several millennia, masks featured in the Indian tradition as
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a vehicle to express belief systems, dance, and festival moods. Writing in The Tribune in 2006, K. D. L. Khan recalls that the ancient people of India treated religious-themed masks as sacred cult objects: "Each mask seems to be unique. But after viewing many, we begin to see that they fall into iconographic groups. Most strong masks, such as tribal masks, Sikkim lama masks, masks of demonic characters (devils and evil spirits), and masks used in sacrificial rites and cult initiation, reflect integral relationships of icon, mask, and movement."32 The stylized Noh drama masking tradition of Japan that features in the popular theater goes back to the thirteenth century as the oldest surviving performing art form.33

The ancient Egyptian, Asian, American, and European genres show that it is difficult to conclude categorically when and where the masking tradition was first observed. In other words, it is also anecdotal to suggest that the Egyptian tradition predated the Igbo observances or even insinuate that Asians borrowed their masking tradition from the ancient Egyptians or vice versa. The overriding point is that religion is used by these ancient societies as a baseline in a nonlinear impulse-response and multistep phenomenon with a leverage effect. One vital fact offered by Herodotus on the origin of carnival as a public parade is found when he described the ancient Egyptians as “the first who introduced public festivals, processions, and solemn supplications.” Herodotus further concluded that “the Greek learned from them [Egyptians] for these rites appear to have been lately introduced” in Greece.34 If we accept Herodotus literally, the Greeks borrowed religious-themed public processions from Egypt, but the exact time this took place is not clear.

In a complex historical work of this nature with confusing timelines, the relevance of thinking spatially and reasoning in line with the science of nonlinear dynamics, order, and chaos becomes crucial. Nonlinear dynamics, according to its proponents, arise whenever multifarious entities of a system cooperate, compete, or interfere.35 One is not by any means implying that ancient peoples were in competition among themselves or that specifically Egyptians were competing with Europeans, Asians, or Aztecs. Rather, the symbolism and fascination each of these cultures found with dead masks were part of the quest to resolve the conflict and chaos associated with the mysteries of life and death. The ancient peoples, through their paintings, took the first courageous steps to ascribe to the gods and spirits some form of physical features that aligned with the fashion and artistic traditions of their times, as revealed in the ancient Egyptian dead masks. But the ancients came short of providing the spirits and divinities with unique costumes—that is, the out-of-this-world attire, mobility, and mannerisms that
have come to be uniquely associated with Igbo/Èfik/Ibibio/Kálábári or Ijọ masquerades in particular and African masquerades in general.

Also, there is no intent here to use the ancient Egyptian practices to either degenerate or privilege the North American (Aztec) or Asian (Indian, Chinese) cultures. In his *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (1377), Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), the eminent medieval Arabic philosopher-historian, declared: “History is an art of valuable doctrine, numerous in advantages and honorable in purpose; it informs us about bygone nations in the context of their habits, the prophets in the context of their lives and kings in the context of their states and politics, so those who seek the guidance of the past in either worldly or religious matter may have that advantage.” With those words, Ibn Khaldun stated the obvious: nonlinear dynamical systems defy understanding based on the traditional reductionist approach, in which one attempts to understand a system’s behavior by combining all constituent parts that have been analyzed separately. Available techniques on nonlinear dynamics are either not concerned with historical analytical objectives or fail to closely look at the big picture (baseline) along with the case study (or small picture) with the potential to extract useful information for improving understanding of multiplier ideas. While taking advantage of both the big picture and small picture approaches, the obvious challenges of cultural complexity in historical analysis involving multilinear/multivariate dimensions are tackled using two new approaches. As encountered in the natural and applied sciences where multilead electrocardiogram (ECG) signals are generated through orchestrated depolarization and repolarization of cells and manifest significant nonlinear dynamics, here, we harness an understanding of the origins of the masquerade culture within depolarized and repolarized interfaces of religion.

To proceed, depolarization and repolarization, as relating to the origin of masking, reminds us that religion, in its diverse and time-honored forms, has always provided the incubator in which humanity’s proclivity for answers to life challenges have been sought. The fact allows one to assert the obvious—that cultural inventiveness associated with masks and masquerades were hatched in the ancient times within the incubator of religion. In the past three decades following Steven Strogatz’s work, the ideas and techniques of nonlinear dynamics and chaos have found resonance in new fields such as systems biology, evolutionary game theory, and sociophysics. Extending this to the field of religion as a universal practice makes sense in the context of cultural contact or cultures in opposition, chaos, adaptation, and order.
Religion in human society came about to bring order to a world in which humans encounter chaos in every event, especially in those natural phenomena and mysteries associated with death, darkness, processes of birth, natural disasters, and so on. In light of this, we impose a theory of first-order differential equation and bifurcation in nonlinear dynamics with the assertion that religion-borne masking was not solely African/Egyptian, Asian/Indian, or Aztec/American. It was a natural response to life mysteries as detected by mortal humanity’s powerlessness within the natural environment. To further explore this idea, using African cosmology, what follows is a culture’s reinterpretation of Strogatz’s configuration of phase plane analysis, limit cycles, and their bifurcations, based largely on the “Lorenz equations” characterized by “chaos, iterated maps, period doubling, renormalization, fractals, and strange attractors.”

African Cosmology and Religion

Like in all cosmologies, the indigenous African belief system is shrouded in mystery, and the existentialism of masquerades emerged as part of the indigenous belief in the pantheon of gods and spirits that have been roaming the African universe. This is a world in which the belief is strongly held that the living and the dead share a continuing relationship. Africans transplanted to the New World during the era of transatlantic slavery did not copy the masquerade tradition both as a religious entity and an art form from their host societies. Rather, the captives learned about masks and masquerades back in Africa where it served, not only as an embodiment of the indigenous religion, but also an important arm of the political administration, civil society mobilization, and identity expression. Masquerading was more pronounced in those communities such as the Igbo and Ibibio with decentralized political systems. Chike Aniakor’s study of Igbo social space through analysis of household objects and architecture identifies the principles of dualism and complementarity as profound in the sociocultural and political domains. The pairing of concepts such as human and spirit, men and women, old and young, Black and White, and a cyclical relationship between paired beings or objects, underlies the shaping of Igbo material culture and space. The Igbo ascription to the bifurcation ideology is encountered in the everyday saying: *Ife kwụlu, ife ọkwudobé yá, ife dị, ife ọdịdobe yá* (Where one thing stands, something else stands beside it. Or where one thing exists, something else exists besides). Chidi G. Osuagwu has distilled this concept in *Truth and Chaos: Dynamics of Truth within Igbo Cosmology* with the explanation that
the pairing of visible and invisible objects and things in the Igbo world could variously manifest as an alter ego, a protagonist, or a complementarity.\textsuperscript{41}

At this juncture, the question as to how and why the masquerade performances came to be in Africa is addressed, using relevant legends and traditions found in the continent as specific examples. Guest-historian Richard Igwebe is perhaps the first to attempt an explanation of the origin of masquerades in his native town of Arondizuogu. The legend tells us that one Okoye Nwaobi, aka Okoye Mm\texton{\textemdash}nwu (“Okoye the Masquerade”) “introduced masquerade in Arondizuogu.”\textsuperscript{42} According to the story, Nwaobi was involved in a land dispute with a formidable opponent with whom he could not match. After the usurper had forcefully taken over Nwaobi’s family inheritance, he proceeded to hire laborers to start cultivating on the farm. But Nwaobi had a plan that involved frightening his opponent with masquerades he had hidden in the farm. Pretending that these masked beings were the ghostly manifestation of his late father, Nwaobi screamed “My father! My father! Wherever you are; come and save your only son.” While repeating these words in a more desperate tone, “one of the masquerades jumped [out of his hiding place] to the farm; both the workers and their leaders started to run home. This served as the introduction of masquerade.”\textsuperscript{43} Like most legends, the story is contextualized in the contemporary era and it is bereft of exact timelines. Also, the narrative neither provides the name of Nwaobi’s opponent nor from where the protagonist brought the masked beings. Thus, this is only an explanatory myth rather than a valid historical fact. William Bascom has noted, “Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote when the world was much as it is today.” Bascom further explains that “legends are more often secular than sacred and their principal characters are human.”\textsuperscript{44} Among other things, legends offer accounts of deeds of past heroes, migrations, wars and victories, and succession in ruling dynasties. While they are usually the verbal equivalent of written history, they also involve local tales of ghosts, saints, buried treasure, and fairies.

In a more nuanced and paradigmatic context, Alex Asigbo has offered some theories on the origin of the masquerade art in Africa. One of these has been branded the \textit{power-balancing theory}, which vindicates Michel Foucault’s notion of dispersed centers of power.\textsuperscript{45} In many African communities, the practice of witchcraft (i.e., sorcery or invocation of malicious spirits for selfish and often harmful purposes) is used to punish and/or intimidate rivals and critics. This ancient form of science is dominated by women, who supposedly execute it under the cover of darkness. To counter this problem, considered potent enough
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to cause disorder and chaos in society, the power-balancing theory says that the male elders came together to institute the exclusive male masquerade cult. Whenever witches attacked at night and something strange occurred, masquerades were beckoned to unravel the mystery and expose the perpetrators behind the mischief. In the awareness that there is an extraordinary power coming to expose them, naturally, witches and similar mischief-makers tended to observe more caution. The similar ideology of social control has been linked to the Gelédé and Egungun masquerades among the Yoruba. Olakumbi Olasope argues that the tremendous power women appropriate and their dreadful capacity as witches have therefore been offered as the primary cause patriarchal elders instituted the masquerade art and excluded female involvement in the night activities of Eku rahu (masquerade).

Standing alone, the power-balancing theory does not provide a convincing explanation for the masquerade origin; at best, it is a part of the story within a broader narrative centered on religion, politics, and social control. For instance, while the theory recognized women as having the upper hand in the practice of sorcery, it says nothing about the equally destructive role of wizards in the exercise of intimidation and injustice in the indigenous society. In African culture, notions of witchcraft include a view of extremely rich people whose size of wealth was considered abnormal—and these individuals were often men. Perhaps more noticeably absent in power-balancing theory is its silence on how women acquire the powers that enable them to fly about at night punishing their enemies. Is this power specifically reserved for women, and by whom? Additionally, the theory tends to suggest that witchcraft was the sole source of social problems and that religious decadence stemmed solely from sorcery. Implicit in this line of reasoning is the idea that the only duty assigned to the masquerades was combating the menace of witches in society or social control in general. The truth of the matter is that there are other potent threats to society, and masquerades served a broader purpose, including addressing spiritual and secular afflictions encountered in everyday life such as theft, murder, incest, adultery, arson, spiritual madness, and other related problems threatening individuals, households, and society with chaos and social disorder, inhibiting natural laws, and rule of justice.

Echoing the influence of geography in shaping human cultures, Ogbu Kalu argues in specific reference to the use of masquerades in Igbo, “it would be useful to examine the impact of ecology and cultural differentiation in Igboland on modes of social control.” The pertinent question arises as to whether societies design control techniques suitable to the imperatives of their culture theatres.
The present study agrees with Kalu to affirm that social control or coercion alone as the primary role of the precolonial masquerade societies in Africa is not enough to fully appreciate the multifaceted roles the masquerades played. In other words, the study of an element of custom like the masquerade institution cannot be reduced to a single story. A society controls the behavior of its members in four different but related ways that are relevant to this study. First, every society enunciates and inculcates acceptable values in its members through the approved processes of socialization/enculturation: family, school, marriage, peer influence, sports, and so on. Second, the society takes appropriate steps to restrain members from breaking those values. In this regard, prescription of punishment and threats alone are not enough to deter offenders. Rather, modeling and encouraging individuals to identify with civil society engagements are crucial. Third, on the side of negative reinforcement, the society punishes those who break its norms and values, and the punishment is tailored to effectively convey the message that consequences abound for those who violate the law. Fourth, there is the advantage of rewards or what psychologists call “positive reinforcement” in human behavior conditioning. Society rewards those who respect and uphold social norms and values in order to emphasize that the community appreciated those virtues. It is the totality of these four processes that constitute “social control,” which denotes the means by which a society preserves itself from social and moral chaos and extinction.

To further illustrate the point, a quick look at a recent event in Yemen allows us to better understand the tenor of justice administration served by masquerades societies in indigenous African society. In the incident that occurred in July 2017, Mohammed Saad Mujahid al-Maghrabi, a forty-one-year-old man, was found guilty in Sanaa (the Yemeni capital) by a Houthi-run court of the attack on Rana al-Matan, a three-year-old girl whom he raped and killed. His public execution with bullet shots at point blank was in response to the societal outrage that condemned this act of spiritual madness. In the precolonial Igbo, Èfìk, Ijọ, or Ibìbìo society, the appropriate punishment for acts similar to Mujahid al-Maghrabi’s misdeeds would have been carried at the late hours of the night by an equally vicious Èkpè, Èkpọ Ọnyoọ, Egungun, Egwurugwu, or Ágbálá masquerades. Eyewitness accounts from the medieval period have revealed that among other things, masquerades were employed by the Africans to perform crucial social control functions by enforcing discipline and upholding natural laws. Speaking of the rule of justice in the ancient Mali Empire, Ibn Battuta, the medieval Arab traveler and jurist who visited West Africa in 1352, observed that
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of “the small number of sets of injustice that there [in Mali] for of all peoples, the Negroes abhor it [injustice] the most” [sic]. Battuta further noted that the ruler of Mali, whom he referred to as “the sultan,” “never pardons anyone guilty of injustice.” This shows that the utilitarian role of religion in the adjudication of justice in society and the powers appropriated by the masquerade cults in precolonial Africa were such that even kings were under their authority, as they were believed to be agents of supernatural wisdom.

The second paradigm on masquerade origin, offering a stronger conceptual and rounded explanation is the omnipresent theory. It posits that masquerades are ancestors in a momentary visit to the world of the living. This idea emanates from the conception of the African world as cyclical and interdependent. In this order as typified by the various seasons of the year, the sun, the moon, the stars, and natural events, in general, repeat themselves in an interminable way. Mircea Eliade described this repetitive order in nature as the “myth of eternal return.” In the indigenous philosophy, the orderly succession of times and seasons symbolized harmony, persistence, and dynamism and must not be disrupted in the universe in which the different levels of space as perceived are inhabited. This corroborates the psychological and sociological approaches to the study of religion, which argue that religion is a response to strain or deprivation caused by events in society. Accordingly, when stability and peace are in society, its members deploy their efforts and energy to those pursuits that promote human well-being and happiness. These together sustain social equilibrium. However, when the peace of the society is threatened by internal conflict, selfish and mischievous people, or by outside forces, society may seek to renew itself by various means, not least through a new cult, sect, or denomination, or a brand new religion. David Aberle has maintained that relative deprivation, whether economic or social, is the cause of the stress that generates new religious movements. A. E. C. Wallace suggested that the threat of societal breakdown forces people to examine new ways to survive. This led Émile Durkheim to assert one of his most audacious analytical leaps—that religion is transcendental, in fact, not only a social creation but “society divinized.” In a method evocative of Ludwig Feuerbach’s Essence of Christianity, Durkheim asserts that the deities that people worship are only projections of the power of society. Religion is eminently communal: it occurs in a social context and, more important, when men celebrate sacred things, they unwittingly celebrate the power of their society. This power so transcends their own existence that they have to give it sacred meaning in order to visualize it. In other words, the preservation of a
religious moral order is the central intent of social control techniques, while the religious ritual is used to reinforce the basic tenets of the religion and the values it promotes in society.\textsuperscript{62}

The omnipresent theory resonates in the dead masks of ancient Egypt linked with the belief that the departed soul must return to a recognizable body, hence mumification became a preparation for life after death. In the Igbo system, Asigbo asserts, “the ancestors overcome by a perplexing nostalgia and yearning for the company of man, manifest as masquerades to commune with the living.”\textsuperscript{63} As the dead masks in ancient Egypt were modeled after the image of the dead, so did the Igbo design their masquerades to precisely mimic the character of known individuals who were deceased and now considered ancestors. The ancestral spirits and divinities “can, as the occasion demands, foretell the future and perform other ritual functions.”\textsuperscript{64}

At the level of abstraction, it is immediately obvious that while the omnipresent theory is holistic in its treatment of masquerade origins; however, its proponents did not offer an explanation as to when and how the physical creation of a mobile masquerade was accomplished. To drive the point home, an analogy from the Bible is in order. After his resurrection, Jesus Christ appeared to the ten Apostles while apostle Thomas was away.\textsuperscript{65} At his return, Thomas found it hard to believe that his master Jesus had returned to them in his physical body after death. Thomas’s demonstration of unbelief prompted Jesus Christ to reappear to his disciples a second time, during which he asked Thomas to put his hand on his side so Thomas could feel where Jesus had been stabbed on the cross with the spear by the Roman centurion guard (John 20:19–29). In light of this allegory, the Africans in essence realized that without concretizing the belief in the existence of spirits with its physical manifestations in bodily forms, the burden of proving the abstract belief in continuous presence and interest of the gods and departed ancestors in the everyday affairs of the living would have remained elusive if not utopian.

It is in the task of equipping “spirits” with masks and cladding them in unique attire that the African genius is revealed in the act of masquerading. The Africans perfected the phenotypical efficacy of masquerades as sacred entities across time and space through stretches of the imagination, philosophical thoughts, artistic designs, intricate costuming laced with awe and absurdity, secrecy, humor, and ritual observances. As Mircea Eliade summed up in his authoritative studies of the sacred and the profane, “When the sacred manifests itself, man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly
different from the profane—[that is] a hierophant.”66 In fashioning bodily forms to invisible spirits and gods, Africans demonstrated a level of ingenuity that did not hitherto exist elsewhere.67 They successfully created an archetypical being, a product Ola Rotimi described as “through whom the spirits breathe.”68

At what specific point or the date the Africans of Bantu extraction mastered this aspect of masquerade is not clear, but it is safe to say that it is likely before 3000–2500 BCE—that is, prior to the first waves of Bantu population movements. This assertion is supported by the fact that the migrants could not have been able to propagate the idea outside their original homeland if they were not already well acquainted with the diverse ramifications of its practice. Between the ancient Egyptian dead masks and similar elements of belief systems found in other parts of the world, the African spirit-regarding masquerade is unique because of its ability to walk, talk, and dance; express emotions and drama or create humor; fight, carry out justice, and even predict the future in language forms the audience and onlookers could understand. Driving this point home, René A. Bravmann aptly noted that throughout the Islamic world, among the clerical elite, theologians, jurists, and the mass of believers, the concept of *djinn* (spirits) is an ever-present feature. In everyday language, folklore, and literature such as the *Thousand and One Nights*, descriptions of djinns abound in their perhaps vividly engaging and widely shared forms. But, it was in the Islamized Zara Bobo-Dyula of southwest Upper Volta that the ambiguous world of the djinn was better defined: “In a totally unique way through the agency of mask and its surrounding artistry and ritual, the Zara gave form and body to the ephemeral spirit, thereby enabling members of their society to comprehend and relate more fully to this important element within Islam.”69

In the great majority of African folklores, masquerades are said to emerge from the earth below, from ant holes or groves hidden from inquisitive eyes of humans. The timelessness of these mythologies signifies that the origin of masquerades is buried in antiquity. The connection to Mother Earth is not by accident. The earth divinities are those no one wants to offend in the Igbo cosmos. This notion is embodied in the ritual with such songs as:

Oh! Please, Mother Earth!!
The land of my sojourn!
Come and lead us.
Famous Arusi of all lands.
Haste and lead us.70
As all lives, at death, return to Mother Earth, the powers associated with this divinity are second to none other but the Creator God. Confirming the usual visits of the ancestors to the world of the living, John Illah notes, “the ancestors are believed to travel back to the living, through the mediant persona [represented by the masquerades] to partake and celebrate with their living offspring, in a re-in-vigoration of their relationship.” Masquerades are thus believed to be divinities, sons of the heavenly realm who get involved in the affairs of men through engagements that balance religious, social, and individual emotions. Through this device, communities are able to moderate human vices and uphold social control since the masquerades speak with the authority of the ancestors. To make the essence and functions of African masquerades more intelligible in the mutually reinforcing worlds of religion and politics—that is, the nether world and the physical world—it is crucial to examine, in detail, how the political administrations of the precolonial African societies functioned in the absence of a standing police, army, or other modern apparatuses of government and law enforcement.

Religion, Masquerades, and Politics of Control

African societies are marked by different patterns of cultural dynamics evolving over several centuries. The heart of these cultural patterns has endured with some modifications despite the exertions brought about by both internal and external forces of change. Africanus Beale Horton (1835–1883), the African émigré and a pioneer West African nationalist of Igbo parentage, was one of the first modern scholars to study West African indigenous political systems. Writing in 1868, Horton broadly identified two principal forms of the government in the region, which also applies to most parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the precolonial era. In the first category are political systems in which power is vested in a single individual called basileus—a Greek word for “king” or “sovereign.” Horton explains that such a kingly figure, as found among the precolonial Ashanti (Asante) and Dahomey kingdoms, for example, enjoyed implicit power over life and property and were as such held in awe by their subjects. The kings were surrounded by a number of headmen, who had pledged their loyalty to his power. Horton identified the second category of governmental system as a limited monarchical system, while the third category was the village democracies. According to Horton, in the limited monarchical systems, just like in the village democracies, democracy was the modus operandi.

As if furthering Horton’s pioneering work, in a 1951 study Paula Brown identified four systems of political organizations indigenous to Africans: (i)
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kinship-based authority; (2) kinship and associations-based authority; (3) kingship, associations, and centralized authority state; and (4) consolidated centralized state authority. Brown’s study was motivated by a similar study in 1940 by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who distinguished two major categories of African political organizations. In the “A” group are the centralized systems, and in the “B” group are the decentralized groups or what the authors labeled “stateless societies.” Among those included in the latter are the Igbo, Angas, Birom, Idoma, and Ibibio of modern Nigeria, Tallensi of Ghana, Tonga of Zambia, Langi of Uganda, the Western Dinka and the Nuer of Sudan, and the pre-nineteenth-century Nguni of South Africa. A more nuanced division would be one that transcends the temptation of categorizing cultures into the “stateless” and “centralized.” None of these ideas accurately represents the indigenous political structures or the premises of cultural values on which they were operated. As a matter of rule, government in both governmental systems not only made use of the sublineage, lineage, and village-level government structures involving direct or representative decision-making processes, but also all the various forms of government were anchored on religious ideologies and symbols.

As the most crucial foundation of the sociopolitical organization, religion was intricately interwoven with the government, authority figures, and exercise of power. Religious symbols reflected the civic and political culture, and masks and masquerades featured in both the centralized and decentralized societies enforcing discipline, upholding natural laws, and reinforcing political legitimacy as mediated through the ideology of ancestral spirits. Among the centralized political systems, the notion held about divine kingship implies that the human and natural worlds are interdependent for their continued existence on the person and ritual activities of the king. From ancient Egypt to the forest kingdoms of Dahomey and Oyo in the nineteenth century, religion remained a powerful tool for political legitimacy. According to Michael Kenny, who has studied the kinship system of precolonial Buganda, the position of the king in this type of political system is cast in doubt when through personal illness or natural or political disaster the continuance of his tenure in office is threatened by rising pressure in favor of his replacement. Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, for example, while the Alaafin (king) of the Old Oyo Empire enjoyed absolute powers, he was at the same time vulnerable to the Oyomesi (a council of senior hereditary chiefs), who adjudicated suicide for the king should he breach the laws of the gods of the land.

Randall Packard’s study of chiefly power among the Bashu people of Eastern Zaire further reveals that precolonial African politics is only comprehensible
when basic constitutional and cosmological ideas that motivate and legitimate power and exercise of authority are also understood. Packard asserts that “African kinships have shown that kings were frequently defined by members of society as ritual mediators between society and the forces of nature... they were closely associated with well-being of the land and society.” This tells us that royal power, though substantial, was still subject to limitation. The indigenous belief system played a crucial role in the unity of a polity, whether decentralized or centralized. It also provided legitimacy to the position of the ruler and the citizens while serving as a mechanism for checks and balances. This structure of authority and power was not cast on a rigid and unchanging context. In peculiar circumstances, there might be disagreement among the priests, the people, the elders (in case of the decentralized systems), kings (in the centralized systems), and so on. Such disagreements usually led to changes in the existing structures of authority, as well as to reinvention and reinterpretation of relationships between the deities and humanity, the ruled and the ruler.

Additionally, religion figured prominently in gender ideologies, notions of power, and exercise of authority. As in all patriarchal societies, including Igbo- land, women depended on their men for guidance in certain decisions, roles, and tasks, but they did not depend on men to the degree of dependence the early missionaries and colonial anthropologists had believed. Originally, African women, particularly those who served as priestesses, agents of deities, or oracular authorities, enjoyed unhindered powers and authority, and their roles were central to the smooth functioning of the social order. Women appropriated separately controlled social and political spheres of power, and through their organizations handled legal and other matters specifically reserved for them. Women also participated in issues that affected both genders, and in some communities, elderly women and priestesses wielded more influence and respect than most men in indigenous politics.

To recap, questions about when, why, and how masks and masquerade carnivals came into existence have been surveyed. These critical questions were tackled in light of the principles of the nonlinear approach using the occurrences of order, chaos, and bifurcation as constant realities of society and existentialism. As the evidence reveals across all regions of the world, masking has been with humanity for thousands of years, and its journey began as an offshoot of religion. Judging solely by evidence of recorded history, ancient Egyptians, Asians, Europeans, and Native Americans of the Aztec Empire should all be credited with the initial attempts to objectify the link between the souls of the dead and the
gods with a myriad of celebrations, rituals, and artistic representations of dead masks. In other words, there is no suggestion here that perhaps similar forms of religious objects were not created elsewhere prior to 2500 BCE. However, the breakthrough with costumed masquerades as an advanced form of spirit objectification resulted when the elders in sub-Saharan Africa found a way to combine human performances with a ritual art form into a single entity in the form of masquerades. Packaged with the ability to walk, jump, run, dance, talk, express anger, engage in dramatics or humorous displays, execute justice, and even predict the future in language forms the audience and onlookers could understand, masks and masquerades acquired a wholly different utilitarian existentialism or manifestation that the people in the communities in which they were fashioned could relate with in more meaningful ways. Shrouded in secrecy, mythologies, legends, and ritual observances and initiation rites, African masquerades retained and bolstered their “godly” images in attire made of different physical media found within their local environments.

Through the appearance of the masquerades, disputes are reconciled through the use of judicial sanctions, punishment in forms of fines, physical threats, clandestine and nocturnal killings, and mediated settlements. When the occasion demands, the masquerades also settled sensitive conflicts without any individual involved in the conflict having to admit guilt or blame. In his informative work on Ibibioland where the dreaded Èkpo Ònyohò reigned as the most powerful spirit-regarding masquerade, Edet A. Udo provides an insight into what happens when the masquerade delivers a wrong punishment or miscarried justice. The first step was to keep the problem secret from noninitiates. This means that the matter will be deliberated upon at the Èkpo Ònyohò village square. This is an arena exclusively reserved for the cult members. At the trial, the offending Èkpo Ònyohò member was branded Okpokko Ibit Èkpo (Èkpo drummer). He was then indicted for stirring the Èkpo Ònyohò to act wrongly through his untimely drumming and singing. Meanwhile, the guilty Èkpo Ònyohò members that performed at the occasion were believed to have disappeared to the land of the ancestors soon after the incident, and “the Èkpo drummer was held responsible for the crime and was charged accordingly, and if found guilty, was punished by the Èkpo Ònyohò. The public was informed that the Èkpo drummer had been found guilty and punished.”

The Europeans arriving in Africa in the late nineteenth century tended to misunderstand many elements of the indigenous practices, including the use of masquerades as a mechanism of political control and conflict resolution. Next,
we explore the society and culture in the Bantu/Biafra hinterland in order to fully treat the mechanisms and sociopolitical milieu in which the mask and masquerade culture developed and gained popular appeal among Africans. Using the Igbo as a precise example, it is shown that the environment of the people structured the indigenous religion. The cosmology, in turn, determined the cultural ideas that gave birth to the masquerade tradition in this region.