West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals

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Bantu Migrations and Cultural Transnationalism in the Ancient Global Age, c. 2500 BCE–1400 CE

No discussion on landscapes and waterscapes as conduits of diffusion in global history would be comprehensive without due attention to the Bantu/Biafra hinterlands, a small corner of the world in West Africa. For several centuries, this region bordering southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon has served as an influential channel of cross-cultural fertilization on the global stage. Connecting the origin and global journey of the masquerade culture to the Bantu migrations offers two rare opportunities to test the processes of cultural globalization or diffusion evolving from the Igbo/Èfik/Ibibio/Ijí hinterlands and the formation of identities in Africa and the New World. From about 2500 BCE, the so-called proto-Bantu people began to leave the region in small numbers organized around family units.1 This migration appears to test the strength, so to speak, of their adaptability among the alien communities located along their chosen migratory routes. As they sojourned through West, Central, East, and Southern Africa, the Bantu exchanged some cultural ideas with their host communities, including religious and philosophical ideologies, family and kinship customs, age-grade and secret society associations, and the mask and masquerade art form.

The second opportunity that lends itself to this test on the export of cultures across regional lines is the processes of expansion of masquerade carnivals to the Americas. This dynamic came about in the second half of the fifteenth century following the European voyages of discovery and rise of the transatlantic slave trade. In this chapter, we make a full treatment of this history in light of the Bight of Biafra hinterland’s role in the mass transportation of millions of Africans to the New World and of how the victims of this trade injected elements of African-styled masquerade carnivals in the Americas.

In the meantime, the primary focus at hand is the historical forces related to the Bantu borderlands and how the proto-Bantu and succeeding generations
affected the African world’s culturescape, with a focus on the masquerade institution. No study has fully articulated this history of cultural diffusion with the seriousness it richly deserves, given what I have identified as the rise of the Ancient Global Age, c. 2500 BCE –1650 CE. Among other things, the Bantu migration and its continent-wide scope explain the harmonization of African cultures across all regions. As Yi Wang has argued, globalization enhances cultural identity: “At the source of culture, there is social agency: a group of people with freedom and creativity. Creative persons can contribute to the change and development of a culture. People are not mere objects of cultural influences, but subjects who can sift various influences and reject or integrate them. Sometimes, advocates of anti-globalization overlook the power of people’s subjectivity.”

Wang’s scholarship reinforces Ralph Linton’s threefold paradigm of the processes through which diffusion occurs: presentation of new cultural elements to the society, acceptance by society, and integration of the accepted elements into the preexisting culture. In other words, Linton sees diffusion as involving active subjects and not mere consumers of alien ideas as the early twentieth-century British and German-Austrian Diffusion Schools of cultural diffusion promoted.

Culture Diffusion Theories

Culture diffusion theory emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as a response to the theory of evolution of cultures, which proposed that human cultures are subject to similar changes to biological/genetic evolutionary processes. In advancing the argument that there are centers from which traits of culture disperse to other areas, exponents of cultural diffusion challenged the separate stages of sociocultural evolution outlined by the evolutionists. Though the various diffusionist schools are in consensus on the basic premise of diffusion as an explanation for the spread of cultural traits, they tend, however, to disagree on what explains similarities among cultures even when cultures may be separated by long distances.

For instance, the British School of Diffusion led by William Perry, W. H. R. Rivers, and others, hypothesizes with diverse shades of emphasis that cultures emanate from one point and then spread to other areas. In their extreme position, the British School believes that Egypt was the fountainhead of world cultures and that other regions were inhabited by mere “Natural Man,” incapable of cultural inventions and only consuming culture traits produced in Egypt. While the British School promotes the diffusion of culture traits in their singular capacity, the German-Austrian School of Diffusion led by Frederick Ratzel,
Leo Frobenius, Fritz Graebner, and others puts forward multiple centers of creativity and “culture complexes”—that is, a combination of traits such as beliefs and practices associated with a phenomenon. In other words, the German-Austrian School holds that culture complexes diffuse in their entirety through the migration of people. Along with this line, Wilhelm Schmidt points out that with migration, peoples and cultures came into contact and mutually influenced one another. According to Schmidt, “this mutual influence has been exercised to a greater extent than had hitherto been admitted,” which explains the dynamics of “new creations and modifications of culture, and wherever positively established it makes the assumption of independent origin untenable and superfluous.”

To their credit, the functionalist and methodological approach introduced by the German-Austrian School has been acknowledged by Hornayun Sidky, John V. Ferreira, and others who also named them variously the “Cultural Historical School,” the “Culture-Circle School,” or “historical ethnology.” However, one of the major criticisms leveled against the German-Austrian School of diffusion is its overemphasis on “trait complex.” It has not been fully explained how the fundamental complexes of diffusion are established as historical realities. Yet, proponents tend to exclude the possibility of independent origins of at least some elements of the complex whole. Rather, as Annemarie Malesijt has noted, the German-Austrian School has tried, although unsuccessfully, to accommodate the complications surrounding the theory with such categorization as primitive, secondary, and tertiary circles (kreis) of cultures; each of the three demarcated circles (kulturkreis) has subcircles. Those that did not fall within the categories were either a marginal, peripheral or an overlapping element.

Like the British School, the German-Austrian School did not offer much to desire in arguing that every cultural practice in human society today came either from one source or only a few centers. Both schools tend to be arbitrary in their association of certain elements of culture circles and deny agency to those receptive to alien cultural traits. This brings us to the alternative perspective the American School of Diffusion advanced by Franz Boas, the father of American ethnology, who although associated with the German-Austrian School insisted on the significance of cultural rudiments in the context of sequence of events and space.

The American School of Diffusion holds the view that people tend to learn and acquire practices from cultures they encounter along the way. The reasoning is that the more the contact persists, the more chances both cultures in contact will lend and borrow from each other. For instance, Melville Herskovits, a student of Boas, argues that cultures in an area are inclined to creating clusters that
are “sufficiently homogenous that regions on which they occur can be delimited on a map.”11 In light of this, Nita Mathar defines culture area as “the geographical space in which similar cultures are found.”12 The American diffusionists believe that by drawing geographical spread of specific traits (i.e., culture areas) the chances exists to describe the parallels or divergences between cultures, including the culture of Native Americans. Meanwhile, the genesis of the idea of culture areas in American ethnography goes back to 1895, when Otis T. Mason first used the term “culture area.”13 Building on this, other scholars have since expanded the theory by correlating dominant cultural traits with geographical areas.14 Clark Wissler provides a conceptual and methodological approach to the study of culture areas when he stated that if “we take all traits into simultaneous consideration and shift our point of view to the social or tribal units, we are able to form fairly definite groups. This will give us culture areas, or a classification, of social groups according to their culture traits.”15

The following discussion is located within the American Diffusion School with emphasis on the dynamics of culture areas, which corresponds to the overall essence of the Bantu migrations. After laying out the geographical moorings of the historic population movements using the linguistic evidence provided by anthropologists and linguists, attention is shifted to the patterns of culture the Bantus fostered, with a focus on religion and its masquerade agency. The approach is to map out the locations of some of the known Bantu peoples on the continent and then discuss how some of their cultural traditions compare with those found among the Igbo/Ibibio/Èfik/Ijọ using the religion, age-grade, secret society, and masks and masquerade matrix.

**The Geographical Spread**

The Bantu expansions represent one of the greatest migrations in human history in terms of the huge number of people involved, and more important, its extensive, continent-wide impacts. Oral, linguistic, and archaeological sources show that the proto-Bantu group lived somewhere in Central Africa—precisely in the areas bordering parts of the Benue-Cross River Basin of southeastern Nigeria, and western Cameroon.16 It is believed that the first Bantu migrants left this area around 2500 BCE on what would become an endless and intermittent relay-journey involving hundreds of generations of descendants spreading across different regions of the African continent. There is no clear evidence that the movements involved a mass horde of people leaving simultaneously in the
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manner, for example, of the chaotic exodus of the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt (c. 1450 BCE) or the recent arrival of refugees in Europe or those illegally crossing the southern border of the United States. Besides, Bantu migrations and resettlements were not accomplished through wars and conquests.

In retrospect, it was mostly a willful and peaceful migration, and the population resettlements spanned over a long chunk of history. In the ancient era, much of the African continent was open to such massive demographic changes. The extensive spread of the migrants affected all regions of sub-Saharan Africa with the expansion and separation of Bantu cultural institutions, including the emergence of secondary languages from its parent stock. Today, most groups commonly identified as Bantu-speakers are found in modern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, and Malawi. It is not by coincidence that most of these

FIGURE 3.1. Bantu migrations
modern African countries harbor communities that share some profound cultural characteristics with groups inhabiting the Bantu ancestral homeland in eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon.

Roland Oliver, who rejected the early hypothesis that the Bantu subdued their host societies by force of arms, has asserted that the Bantu migrations commenced with neither a predetermined direction nor pattern. While a southward direction was often the case, the migration of people was in multiple directions—westward, eastward, southward, and even backward. In addition, incursions into the northern savannah have been underscored by a recent study by Thembi Russell and co-scientists using the modeling theory. It is estimated that those who took the eastward direction gradually established themselves north of the Congo River on the savannah fringe, circa 500 BCE. Perhaps we should pause briefly to ponder why it took the migrants such a long time to break into the Congo rainforest zone. Directly reflecting on this question, Rebecca Grollemuna and co-scientists argue that “habitat alters the route and pace of human dispersal.” The Bantu, the authors further noted, had swept out of West-Central Africa to resettle in a vast geographical area: “This expansion avoided unfamiliar rainforest habitats by following savannah corridors that emerged from the Congo rainforest, probably from climate change. When Bantu speakers did move into the rainforest, migration rates were delayed by on average 300 [years] compared with similar movements on the savannah. Despite unmatched abilities to produce innovations culturally, unfamiliar habitats significantly alter the route and pace of human dispersals.”

The Bantu entered the new areas with the accouterments of material and nonmaterial cultural hybridization, including language development and other new formations lasting several centuries. In both the savannah and the rainforest regions, the proto-Bantu or UrBantu language continued to acquire new dialects, splitting into several sub-Bantu languages in a process that could be qualified as split and compare. The most prominent of the new tongues became the proto-western and proto-eastern Bantus. The process of differentiation was more or less complete by the beginning of the fourth century CE. Afterward, the various subgroups began to migrate again in opposite directions. In the northern Congo, the proto-western Bantu settled the forest and swamp areas between Sangha and Ubangi (Oubangi) Rivers. From here they ascended the Congo-Lualaba River, settling the woodland area of southwestern Zaire, and then moved southward into the grasslands of Angola and Namibia. The proto-eastern Bantu expanded from their settlement in the equatorial rainforests to the Zambezi River. A northward advance from here saw the migrants passing...
slowly through Mozambique, to the Mount Kilimanjaro area of Tanzania. From there, they moved upward into the Great Lakes areas of Central Africa embracing modern Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda.

Meanwhile, Bantu expansions into the Central and Southern African regions are fresh in mind today because succeeding generations of the proto-Bantu and semi-Bantu-speakers began to move into them roughly between 500 and 1000 CE. It is believed that Bantu population movements were coming to an end by the mid-seventeenth century when the Ngoni and other sub-Bantu groups reached the Cape of Good Hope—that is, the southern tip of the continent. At the cape, the Bantu population movements involving the Ngoni, Sotho, Shona, Rozwi, and Zulu of the Southern Africa region came to a halt when in the 1650s Africans were confronted by the Dutch Frontier Boers near the Great Fish River. This contact would later precipitate a cycle of bloody wars between the Africans and the Europeans (Dutch and later British settlers) along the Eastern Cape, which did not end until the nineteenth century. By 1820, theoretically, the more than five millennia of Bantu population movements concluded.

The Language Evidence

In the contemporary period, the word “Bantu” may resonate with the “Bantustans” or Black homelands officially passed into law in 1963 by the segregationist apartheid rulers of South Africa. But Bantu as a marker of identity does not denote a distinct ethnic group or a race, as some scholars like Harry H. Johnston had tried to assert in 1886. It denotes rather several linguistic groups in a culture zone as identified in this study, with a population estimated at 100–150 million. In this study, the term Bantu applies to the ancient people in motion and the culture they nurtured, modeled, and spread across the African continent. The Bantu-speakers represent a dominant part of the parent stock, the larger Niger-Congo language family, comprising around 450 African languages. The parent family accounts for nearly 85 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, thus constituting the largest language bloc among the continent’s four major language groups. The other three are Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan.

However, there are conflicting arguments as to whether the Niger-Congo family includes a subfamily called Benue-Congo. The Benue-Congo, as postulated by German linguist Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek (1827–1875) in 1862, are mostly identified as part of a common source in which, for example, the singular word *ntu* means “person,” and its plural usage with the prefix *Ba* as in
BaKongo or Baganda, means “persons” or “people.”24 A few examples of words and languages identified as part of the Bantu subdivision with similar or approximate syntax and words for “people” or “person” includes *watu* as in Swahili or Kiswahili (the lingua franca widely dominant on the east coast of the continent), and *vantu* as in Shona language found in South Africa. Early on, the Portuguese had, in the course of their initial contacts with the Africans beginning in the late fifteenth century, noticed this shared linguistic heritage among different ethnicities. But it was Martin Affonso (1500–1564), as recorded in the *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, who began to examine the unique syntax of the Bantu while residing for some time in the ancient Kingdom of Kongo.25 From this initial inquiry would develop the first publication of a few grammars in an African language. Later studies led to the idea of an African family of languages named the “Niger-Congo” by Joseph Greenberg in 1947.26

By the late 1800s, the curiosity of Europeans about African languages had expanded to include the languages spoken in the areas stretching from the old Kingdom of Kongo (modern Angola and some parts of Namibia) to the central, eastern, and southern parts of Africa including Mozambique in the southeastern part. The logical thought emerged that there must be an explanation as to why these speakers share certain words in common. Further investigations (although often considered insufficient) have now shown that what explains the puzzle is one of the results of a historical process of the Bantu migrations. While much remains unknown about Bantu movements, scholars investigating oral sources along with results of studies by archaeologists and linguists have unraveled some pieces of information on the Bantu and their influences on the development of African traditions.

While it is uncertain how many African languages belong to the original Bantu and its outliers, studies by Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston (1858–1927), Malcolm Guthrie, and others have identified scores of languages they think belong to the original Bantu and semi-Bantu family groups.27 They are: (1) the *Cameroon-Cross River* comprising Èkoi, Manyan, Bali-Bamum, Ndob, Nsom, and others; (2) the *Cross River-Calabar* comprising Olulomo, Èfik, Akunakuna, among others; (3) the *Benue* made up of Munshin, Boritsu, and Afudu; (4) the *Bauchi* found in Jarawa; (5) the *Central Nigeria* of the Kaduna Basin; (7) the *Togoland* including Lefana, Bale, and Kedea; and (8) the *Senegambia or Guinea*, comprising Temne and its dialects of Landoma and Baga, Bulom, Biafada, Pajade, Bola, Pepel, Sarar, Dyola, and Konyagi. If these are accepted as the core Bantu language speakers, then we can identify the semi-Bantu or variants of Bantu speakers, including: Ganda (or Luganda) speakers of Uganda; Tumbuka (or ChiTumbuka)
speakers of Malawi; Kako, Ngumba, and Basaa speakers of Cameroon; Kikuyu (or Gikuyu) speakers of Kenya; and Zulu, Shona, Sotho, Ndebele (Matabele), Xhosa, and Tswana (or Setswana) speakers of South Africa.\textsuperscript{28}

To proceed, it is crucial to note that there is at best skeletal evidence to help put all the pieces of the language puzzle together. This illuminates several lacunae surrounding Bantu studies. The linguistic evidence around which the bulk of Bantu migration history is built is prone to serious errors. For instance, in regard to the Igbo, the idiom \textit{madu bu nt\textsubscript{u}} (“We are nothing but ash”) is a common saying among the people, which the initial classification of African languages by Johnston, Malcolm Guthrie, and others did not take into proper account; hence the Igbo language was erroneously excluded from the Bantu subgroup and rather placed in the Kwa subgroup of the Niger-Congo family. It is also curious that the word \textit{Nj/uni1ECDku} or \textit{Ah/uni1ECBaj/uni1ECDku} connected with farming and agricultural festivals in Igboland of southeastern Nigeria is also found among the Mbere of the Embu District of Kenya dominated by the Kikuyu, a Bantu group.\textsuperscript{29} Yet, Guthrie and others separated the Igbo and the Kikuyu in their classifications of African languages. Discussions with the Kikuyus of Kenya have also led to the questions whether the Igbo word for “child,” \textit{nwá}, has a connection to the Tsonga and Venda word \textit{nwáná}, which also means “child.” In Igbo, \textit{nwáná} means literally “father’s child,” while the Zulu word for child is (\textit{um})\textsubscript{twáná}, literally “little person.” The use of the prefix \textit{umu} as in \textit{umu-ntu} (human beings) in Zulu is akin to the use of Igbo \textit{umu mmádu} (human beings). Add this to the Igbo word \textit{nkukú} (chicken), which is equivalent to the Bantu word \textit{nkukhu} (chicken) and \textit{ngunku} in Kikuyu, and one is left without doubt that these similarities are not just mere coincidences.\textsuperscript{30}

Further, it is neither clear why the Pigmies included as Bantu-speakers appear so physically different from their other Bantu neighbors, nor why the Igbo-speakers who share very close language and cultural characteristics with their Ibibio, Êfik, Êko, and Ijo neighbors (as elaborated in the preceding chapter) are classified separately in most of the Bantu language studies.\textsuperscript{31} Hence Joseph Greenberg warns, with the hindsight from his study on the influence of Kanuri on Hausa, that there are several “limitations of one particular type of historical influences that can be drawn from language, namely the study of words borrowed from one language into another.” More daunting is the length of time dating the beginning of the first Bantu population movements and, given the paucity of sources on African prehistory, what is known about the Bantu migrations is replete with some glaring factual disjunctures and inconsistencies. Generally, a historian of the African precolonial era is often confronted with
overwhelming challenges of authentic sourcing of information and therefore
must be very careful in order not to fall into wild idealism or erroneous specu-
lations. There are numerous subjects in Africa, such as disease, racial or ethnic
characteristics, medical knowledge, education, as well as migration about which
information is imperfect and opinion divided.

The point of departure for the present study is the corrective that the Cross
River Igbo and their southeastern Nigerian neighbors (Ibibio, Êfik, Èkòi, and
Ijo) belong to the same language family whatever this is called. This assertion is
based on the strong evidence of their close geographical, cultural, marital, and
linguistic linkages. In his ethnographic fieldwork, the current researcher visited
the separate Azumini, Áfikpo, Aròchukwu, and Unwáná Igbo-speaking com-
nunities bordering the Cross River confluence. Their brand of Igbo language is,
in fact, closer to the Êfik and Ibibio languages than to the Igbo dialect spoken in
central Igbo areas of Owerri, Mbáno, Orlu, and Mbieri. This implicates the de-fi-
nition of culture area by Ogba Kalu and Ogun U. Kalu, which bears a direct rel-
evance to this study: According to Kalu and Kalu, “A culture area is defined as a
geographical delimitation of an area that has the same dominant and signifi-
cant culture traits, complexes, and patterns.” The authors further provide a fuller
geographical spread of the communities that belong to the Cross River area:

Cross-River Igbo communities ranged along the left bank of the Cross
River constitute such an identifiable unit. In the north are communities
within the Ezza, Ikwo and Ezzikwo group; the middle section of the river
bank is inhibited by Áfikpo, Uburu, Okposi, Unwáná, Èdá, Nkporo,
Ábiribá, and Igberè. Further downstream are a number of communities
whose myths of origin are closely intertwined: the Ogháfiá, Abáam, and Ihe
who trace their origin to a common ancestry. The Ututu and Isu share
some traits with Ogháfiá but relate more to the Arọ who are at the boundary
of the Cross-River Igboland. Most of the Cross-River Igbo communities
(Ábiribá, Igberè, Èdá, Ihe, Ututu, and Arọ) allege non-Igbo origins or
admixtures of [the] non-Igbo group.”³³

The eminent Igbo historian Adiele E. Afigbo has made a similar point.
Among other things, of particular interest in Afigbo’s study is the observation
that some Igbo communities such as “the Ezza, Izzi, and the Ikwo have been
treated [in the previous studies] as a language different from Igbo” [sic].³⁴ The re-
nowned Ijo Niger Delta historian E. J. Alagoa has further observed that Green-
berg’s classifications with regard to the Benue-Congo and Kwa subfamilies were
seriously flawed.³⁵ More important, Greenberg himself has “raised several doubts
when he suggested that the affiliation of Kru and Ijo to the Kwa group should be considered tentative and that Kwa and Benue-Congo are quite close to each other. He even goes so far as to say that there is legitimate doubt as to whether or not the two should be separated at all.\textsuperscript{36} Guthrie has further warned about what he calls “speculative hypotheses,” which can lead to the danger of using language “material of this kind in such a way that the results cannot be verified.”\textsuperscript{37} Addressing this issue, Vansina highlights the complexities of internal relations in the Benue-Cross/Lower Niger, which poses a problem as to what precisely the term Bantu is. Jan Vansina has observed that Greenberg’s Bantu is more inclusive than Guthrie’s while others like Patrick Bennett and Jan Sterk have reorganized associations within Niger-Congo family. For Bennett and Sterk, Kwa and Benue-Cross form a single unit, within which some “Semi-Bantu” languages are grouped, as well as a few “Bantu” languages, while the bulk of Bantu joined by some “Semi-Bantu” languages form another subdivision. In light of these complexities, Vansina warns that “any historian using linguistic arguments would be wise to check them carefully before proceeding very far with his inferences.”\textsuperscript{38}

As if directly speaking to the concerns explicated by Greenberg, Guthrie, Afìgbo, Alagoa, and others, Grollemuna and coauthors captured the imperative of the present study in relation to the Bantu migrations when they stated that “humans are uniquely capable of using cultural innovations to occupy a range of environments, raising the intriguing question of whether historical human migrations have followed familiar habitats or moved relatively independently of them.”\textsuperscript{39} This highlights a couple of the basic flaws inherent in the earlier culture diffusion discourse—namely, the arbitrary demarcation of culture areas including language families and daughter-tongues. The other is the wrong notion that diffusion of culture traits—whether we are talking about agriculture, language, or masquerades—flows freely from one area to the other. These ideas do not properly take into consideration the symbiotic relationships among cultures in a common geographical zone. As Schmidt explains, “new creations and modifications of culture” occur within this symbiotic context and thus make “the assumption of independent origin untenable and superfluous.”\textsuperscript{40}

Among other things, while the Bantu phenomenon explains the peopling of the continent, in addition it demonstrates how human interaction can facilitate the rise of cultures. It also highlights the mythological notion of a “pure” human race or an exclusive ethnic identity composed of a single bloodline or with one progenitor. This corroborates the theory of cultural divergence and the nonlinear theorem basis of this entire work. Cultural divergence points to the role of networks and the centrality of peoples and cultural productions at
different times. As evidence regarding the Bantu migrations, the period between 2500 BCE and 1650 CE witnessed one of the most extraordinary eras in human history, when people took the center stage in forging networks of exchanges and cultural connections in different parts of the African world. Again, it is reiterated that this challenges both imposition of chronological readings and the tyranny of language classification without incontrovertible supporting evidence. Scholars are therefore urged to think spatially instead—that is, in a pattern that points to position, the size of specific area, and other local and outside factors. More important, cultural imperialism or expansion does not follow one directional movement. There is also a backflow—which has the potency to contaminate the taste and color of the original. This corroborates the theoretical postulation by Clark Wissler with the hindsight of the Native American culture that caution should be applied in accepting the basic premise of culture traits or else categories may have misinterpretation repercussions.41

Indeed, no civilization has developed in isolation of others—hence racial and ethnic identities, as manifested today, are culturally constructed around commonly shared values, norms, and practices that might have been drawn from diverse racial and ethnic divides. Above all, the Bantu population movements explain an important connection between different regions of African societies as a “distinct” cultural zone. Movement in history means displacement, alterity of habitats, the influx of new ideas, and cultural reordering. And migration, a very important factor in precolonial Africa, brought about the spread of religions and ritual practices, family and kinship customs, development of vocabularies and new syntax that are found in different languages, political institutions, technology, agriculture and dietary habits, and so on.

The Bantu migrations further support the view that all human societies evolved in a process of continuous change by way of adaptation and hybridization between internal and external cultural dynamics. As a historical phenomenon, the migrations further debunk the formerly held idea that Africa was culturally and historically static before the arrival of the Europeans or even the Arabs. We now understand that there were several channels for the cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge several centuries before the first European visitors set foot on the continent in the fifteenth century. A detailed understanding of this will begin with identifying the reasons why the Bantu migrations occurred.

Several reasons have been advanced as to why some of the dwellers of the Benue-Cross River Valley decided to leave their original homeland. As in all migrations, people move for various reasons: population growth, search for new opportunities due to unavailability or lack of resources and fauna that support
populations in certain locations, changes in climatic conditions, and attempts to escape common threats to life. The results of Merrick Posnansky’s archaeological studies in Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana suggest that the proto-Bantu were undergoing a period of transformation from a precarious hunting and food gathering economy to a more settled life marked by improved agriculture. This, in turn, led to a significant increase in population, forcing some people to move outward in order to create living space for themselves and for those who remained behind. Posnansky corroborates the common view that the early population movement did not involve a mass emigration of people and that instead the Bantu population expansion was slow and involved small family and kinship groups covering only short distances over a period of time. One may understand the Bantu expansion as a process of “split and fusion”—meaning that the movement of a group of families or individuals into a new settlement was followed by a split that would see a part of them melt into the host society while the other part moved on to another settlement. Nita Mathur has argued “sometimes culture contact leads to the rise of compound cultures constituted of fusion of several cultures.” In other words, sometimes the migrants joined an existing community while at other times they founded an entirely new settlement within the larger host community.

Those who moved may have been forced to escape problems of drought and search for better farmlands. For populations that relied heavily on subsistence agriculture and livestock grazing (in this case, goat, sheep, and chickens), drought and famine apparently posed a serious threat to their survival. Perhaps this may partly explain why Bantu activities were not very pronounced in the northernmost parts of West Africa following the beginning of the desertification of the Sahara region beginning around 1000 BCE. Prior to this period, the Sahara region was marked by grasses and low shrubs as showed by fossilized pollen, and there is ample evidence supporting the fact that agricultural communities lived here. Between February 1350 and December 1351 when he visited Mali, Ibn Battuta observed that “The road has many trees which are tall and of great girth: a caravan can find shade in the shadow of one tree; . . . There are trees that bear fruits like cucumber. . . . The calabashes in the land of blacks become big and from them, they made wooden dishes.” What this eyewitness account tells us is that as of the fourteenth century—that is four millennia after the Bantu migration began—the Sahel region of West Africa was still capable of sustaining a viable agriculture. This may debunk the initial hypothesis that the Bantu migration and its impacts did not embrace northwest Africa. There has always been the tendency for people to move away from areas of drought and
famine to more arable lands with pasture for their livestock, but there also can
be other factors and considerations that come first before ecological reasons. For
instance, wars and epidemics also necessitate the emigration of people to areas
of peace and hospitable environment. The outbreak of diseases poses a threat to
both humans and livestock.47

In general, those who migrated considered their comfort and survival as par-
amount. Bantu migrants may have also thought about the challenges and risks
involved in venturing into unfamiliar territories and living among alien groups.
This has led to the speculation by scholars like Christopher Wrigley that the
proto-Bantu possessed iron-working ability, which enabled them to make better
tools with which they dominated the environment and peoples they came in
contact with in the areas where they chose to resettle.48 This assumption should
not be taken uncritically, for various Bantu families and groups may have been
forced to move in an attempt to evade harm from their opponents bearing supe-
rior weapons and implements.

The most crucial and pertinent question, then, is to show the impact of the
Bantu population movements on the evolution of new cultural ideas in the re-
gions they settled. How do we know whether these cultural institutions were
indeed invented by the Bantu or the migrants were instead assimilated into them
by their host communities? What specific cultural ideas are we looking at to
help us assert this claim of Bantu culture modeling in Africa, and how do we
connect them to the other locations they settled in, not least in Central Africa?
The approach is to seek evidence of cultural institutions associated with the
Bantu homeland in eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon that are also found
in those separate locations the Bantu settled. It is difficult to make these con-
nections without errors, as scholars have pointed out in the past. To control the
variables and thus limit the probability of errors, the areas of focus are limited
to those institutions that helped define and enabled the operationalization of
masks and masquerade custom as encountered in the indigenous religion that
recognizes the role of ancestors and spirits in human affairs. As fully explained
in the preceding chapter, the masquerade culture was legitimized within the
realms of the indigenous cosmology, religious philosophy, and the sacralization
of familial agents of socialization—the age-grade associations, secret societies,
and of course political institutions.
Religion, Indigenous Politics, and the Masquerade Culture

The task now is to systematically link items of culture highlighted in the Bantu homeland with those found in Bantu satellite communities scattered across the continent. This is examined through the prism of indigenous religion, politics, and the accouterments of indigenous civil society institutions—age-grades, secret societies, and masquerade cults. The most identifiable Bantu-speakers are found in about twenty-seven African countries today: Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Comoros, Congo, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mayotte, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The culture and traditions of some of the Bantu groups found in these countries are highlighted in a comparative context, starting with the religion question.

Starting with worldview matters because it falls into the heart of what Colin A. Palmer has described as “the core beliefs and practices at the heart of a people’s consciousness and identity.” According to Palmer, people do not easily discard those cultural ideas that are at the heart of their very existence, and “this must be distinguished from others that are secondary and can be changed without considerable consequences for their cosmologies, behavior, and self-definition.”

The mask and masquerade traditions and political cultures of the Igbo, Ibibio, Èfik, and Ijo peoples were deeply rooted in an indigenous cosmology that recognized the Supreme God (Chukwu) as the Creator God (Chinéké), while the lesser divinities were conceived as intermediaries in a universe in which humans, deities, and ancestral spirits share the earthly space. As resonating in the concepts of Katonda (among the Buganda of Uganda), Bumba (Bushoong of Central Africa), Imana (Banyarwanda, Rwanda), Ngai (Kenya), Ukulunkulu (Zulu, South Africa), Mwari (Zimbabwe), and so on, the belief in a Supreme God who is also the Creator God remains central in the indigenous religions of the various Bantu groups found across the continent. For example, the Abaluhya, a Bantu people of modern western Kenya, believe that the earth was created by Wele Xakaba (Creator God), who is also described as the granter and giver of all things. As the Ijo of southeastern Nigeria believe that Woyengi, a female deity, descended from heaven to physically create humans, so do the various Bantu groups—the Efe of Central Africa, and the Zulu of South Africa—respectively believe that Muungu or Ukulunkulu was the creator and provider of all things. At the same time, notions of the existence of ancestral spirits, smaller divinities, water spirits,
and deities are strong and used as tools in the ordering of the socioeconomic and political practices. For instance, in the traditional Luhya religion that featured animism and spirits, funeral rites are held in high regard as a custom to please and honor ancestral spirits.51

Thus, through the course of their migration, marriage connections, and trading contacts, the Bantu and their various host communities fashioned out diverse but similar belief systems commonly identified today as African traditional religions. Though there are a variety of mythologies peculiar to every community, African traditional religions resemble one another in the basic beliefs in a Supreme Being, the existence of ancestral spirits, and the dualism of worlds inhabited by man and ancestors. It is believed that the ancestors and other deities control the human world and often impose their wills when things are not going well. This entrenched belief system left a lasting impact on the various African societies, and its effects are still strong even though alien religions like Islam and Christianity have infiltrated and brought about some far-reaching changes to the resilient indigenous order.

Among the Bantu groups, the pervading belief in God Almighty, deities, and ancestral spirits brought the need for the sacralization of all rites of passage, including marriage, birth, coming of manhood or womanhood, memberships in age-grades, secret societies, social clubs, and end of life as a transition into the world of the spirits. This ideology necessitated the elaborate religious idioms that mark every stage in life starting from birth. Among the initiation ceremonies associated with the Kuria found in the Nyanza Province of Kenya is circumcision, which, as practiced among the Igbo, Êfik, Ijo, and Ibibio people, marks the identity of an individual within the community and defines a person in relation to the extended family, lineage, descent group, and ethnic group. A day before a female child undergoes circumcision rites, relatives are invited to the public square (okorea obosamba) to sing praises and provide support to the girl who should not demonstrate fear or weep during the ceremony.52

Also outstanding is the marriage tradition of the Kuria, which has a striking relationship with the customs associated with the people who inhabit the original Bantu homelands today. Like the Cross River Igbo, Ibibio, Êkoi, Êfik, and Ijo of eastern Nigeria, the Kuria girls and their chaperones are involved in elaborate marriage arrangements that may last for months from the moment a go-between, a friend of the groom, introduces the couple to each other. The Bantu tradition dictates that a man is to marry a woman in his ethnic group but not from his village or clan, a transgression of which is considered a serious taboo and sanctioned with serious punishment. After the introduction, bride
price negotiations begin between the families of the groom and the bride until they come to an agreeable settlement. Once the bride price is paid, the groom takes the bride home. The same marriage protocols are observed among the Igbo, Ibibio, Èfik, and Ijọ. Writing on bridewealth in among the Igbo, Uche Isiugo-Abanihe stated that it “was a symbolic token in form of services, goods or money, given to bride’s parents by the prospective groom.”

In the sphere of political culture, it has been further noted that across the continent, Bantu expansions gave rise to mixed political systems. These are the brand of indigenous, village-based republicanism found among the Igbo and Ibibio peoples of southeastern Nigeria, as well as the development of states with centralized forms of authority as encountered among the Èfik and Ijọ. In both the decentralized and centralized systems, it has been revealed that the idea of ancestors as political actors remained strong and masquerade cults functioned as ancestral spirits, occasionally visiting the human world for various purposes. Most of the Bantu people of northern Tanganyika, Uganda, and Ruanda-Urundi by tradition had political systems of the centralized state form. State formation in Africa (and elsewhere in the world)—whether in the stateless or centralized societies—could not have been easy without some measure of a shared religious ideology among the constituent units. Shared religious symbolisms provide legitimacy for political power and exercise of authority.

In some parts of East Africa, the Bantu presence influenced political organizations incorporating age-grades or age-set associations. For instance, Getahun Benti reminds us that among the highly democratic people of Oromo (Galla) of southern Ethiopia, before their conquest under the Amharic imperial expansions, the Oromo societies of the South had fashioned a democratic political economy undergirded by the gada system. The gada system was based on a rotational eight-year cycle in which age-grades took control of the economic, social, and political life of the community as a corporate entity. Ceremonies that marked the end of a gada cycle were conducted at elaborate gada centers that evolved into towns. Remnants of a similar sociopolitical organization based on the age-grade systems still exist today among the Ibibio, Èfik, and some Igbo communities of eastern Nigeria. The age-grade system, synonymous with the so-called stateless societies of Africa, defined the social organization of the Cushitic and Nilotic speakers of central Sudan and Great Lakes areas like the Konjo, Amba, Kiga, and Gishu. In these Bantu communities that had no centralized system of authority before the colonial order, secret societies and guilds permeated the entire fabric of village life. The process of decision making followed the principles of democratic procedures. Decisions reached by the village
councils comprising all adult males and elders of the land were enforced by the appropriate age-grades and secret societies as endorsed by the elders.55

With regard to masquerade culture within African cross-migrations, ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork associated with this study indicates that the Ágábá and Okoroshá masquerade festivals of the various Igbo communities like Abágáná, Ifákálá, Umunneohá, Mbieri, Qgwá, and Ubomiri are similar to the masks and masquerade dances of the Bamanan, Bozo, and Sòmonò groups of Mali.56 For example, Sogo Bo or youth association puppet masquerade theater found among the three communities of south-central Mali reminds one of similar age-grade associations’ operating the Okoroshá and Kéléké stilt masquerades among the Mbáitoli communities of Imo State, Nigeria.57 Again this goes back to the imperfect state of Bantu studies.

Meanwhile, among the Luvale, Chokwe, Luchazi, and Mbunda of the Vaka Chiyama Cha Mukwamayi peoples of Zambia, the Makishi masquerade is performed at the end of an annual initiation ritual known as mukándá. This initiation is for boys between eight and twelve years old. The ritual starts from the onset of the dry season with the young boys leaving their homes to take up temporary residence in an isolated bush camp. The temporary separation from the outside world, which may last from one to three months, “marks their symbolic death as children.”58 The mukándá observance, which reminds one of the Ègbélé societies of the Á/fikpo and Unwáná and the Erusi-Èddá of the Èddá communities of Igboland, involves the circumcision of the initiates. As with the Ègbélé, mukándá is also invoked as a test of courage and manhood. Therefore, it is a period when the young males are schooled on their future role as men and husbands.

During the period that the mukándá ceremony lasted, each initiate is assigned a specific masked character that remains with him the entire duration of the process. Among the various characters that the masquerades portray are Chisaluke, a powerful and wealthy man with spiritual influence; Mupala, presented as the “lord” of the mukándá and protective spirit with supernatural abilities; Pwevo, a female character (played by a masked male performer) representing the ideal woman and account for the music and dances that go with the rituals. Another masked character is Makishi, portraying the essence of a late forebear who comes back to the community to support the young boys. Like the Erusi-Èddá of Igboland, by the time the mukándá observances had run its course, the initiate had undergone a life-changing experience with the people’s most powerful gods.

After the mukándá rituals, a graduation ceremony, is held in honor of the initiates. It was necessary that everyone in the village attend the Makishi dance and
satirical performance that follow, until the graduates reemerge from the camp to reinteegrate with their communities as adult men. As a means of socialization and societal belongingness, the mukándá festival helps in “transmitting practical survival-skills as well as knowledge about nature, sexuality, religious beliefs, and the social values of the community.” Initially, the entire festival and the masquerade appearance lasted for several months and represented the raison d’être of the Makishi masquerade. In contemporary times, many changes have come to the tradition in accordance with modernity. In relation to the school calendar, for instance, the festival is now condensed to one to three months to put up with the Western educational calendar. As the Makishi masquerade dance maintains its popularity at social gatherings and party rallies, the original purpose of its ritual observance might be compromised.

Iron Working, Agriculture, Pottery, and Rituals

It will be proper to end this section with a short discussion on iron working, agriculture, and pottery in relation to the Bantu migration and cultural diffusion in Africa. In addition to food cultivation and the spread of many cultural practices, iron smelting and pottery are linked with Bantus in several studies. For instance, Russell et al. have applied the modeling theory in a recent study of the Bantu, whom they describe as modeling agents of agriculture and horticulture in sub-Saharan Africa. The connection among metallurgy, agriculture, and pottery is that tools and implements fashioned from iron enhance the ability of farmers in tilling the soil as well as in fitting and beautifying pottery objects employed in precolonial times for various uses. While scholars like Wrigley postulate that the Bantu migrants must have learned the skills of iron working before they left their original homeland in the Benue-Cross River Basin, others hypothesize that this skill was not acquired until about 600 BCE when some Bantu groups began to make their way across the Central African region into the Upper Nile from the ancient Kingdom of Meroe located in the area now known as Sudan. From here it is held that with their acquisition of iron technology the Bantu moved southward, and those early Iron Age settlements of Bantu speakers were dotted across much of Africa south of the Sahara.

Based on the limited evidence available to historians, it is tricky to assert a definite conclusion in regard to the origins and points of dispersal of iron technology in Africa. Again this implicates the problem with seeking an exact chronological order in a period when we should instead think thematically. Archaeological research in a new region or in a new time span inevitably poses
more questions than answers. Therefore, it is difficult for anyone to be entirely objective in making archaeological interpretations. For instance, archaeological studies by D. D. Hartle and others have proved that knowledge of iron working was known to the Igbo-Ukwu culture earlier than 500 BCE and that this culture may or may not have any link with the Meroitic civilization. Adiele E. Afigbo, an authority on Igbo history, citing archaeological excavations carried out by Thurstan Shaw, suggests that the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria may have entered their present homeland from somewhere around the Jos Plateau close to where the first evidence of iron metallurgy, the Nok culture (c. 500 BCE), is recorded. If this is confirmed, it will be hard to sustain the notion that the Bantu migrants acquired their knowledge of iron from the Nile Valley region of Meroe and from there carried this knowledge southwards. What is true, however, is that different societies transited from Stone Age to Iron Age culture at different times and places and applied their knowledge of the new technology to practical tasks in industry, study, mastery, and using agricultural and artistic traditions, and mechanical and industrial materials. Ironworkers produced tools and weapons far superior to those made of copper and bronze. Iron tools and weapons facilitated the Bantu expansion by enabling them to master diverse ecological zones. The waste products of smelting like slag (from ore) and charcoal used in making furnaces constitute some of the most useful materials for dating the earliest sites of human settlement.

Pottery is another form of evidence that has helped archaeologists and historians determine aspects of precolonial African history with the used of radiocarbon dating and other scientific methods. Both agricultural and pastoral communities use pots for preparing food, and carrying and storing farm harvests, water, milk, and other liquids. Iron Age cultivators became skilled makers of baked-clay pottery. Their craftsmanship was so much esteemed that they adorned their pots with carefully shaped grooves and regular stamped patterns. While motivated by aesthetics, the intricate patterns and designs they made were dictated by local customs and symbols drawn from religious and ritual practices, architecture, art, music and dance, and technology. In the sphere of music and dance, iron gongs, horns, rattles, and other musical instruments were fashioned. These musical instruments have been used in the Bantu cradle for several millennia in religious worship and the music and dances that accompany masquerade festivities. As a result, groups who shared similar cultural institutions used identical patterns and methods of pottery decoration. Potsherds found in different locations have, to a great extent, helped archeologists and historians differentiate the Bantu
Culture Area from those of their neighbors. The pieces of evidence have also helped us gain some insight on the antiquity of the Neolithic (or Agricultural) Revolution in Africa. While the most recognized Neolithic sites are found in Egypt and the Middle East, it is ahistorical to assume that the various African peoples who lived in prehistoric times did not consider putting back seedlings and fruits into the earth.

As the Bantu expanded in different directions, it is not clear either how those they encountered reacted toward them or how they reacted toward their host communities. The mere possession of iron weapons may not necessarily mean having the capability and logistics to fight and subdue the numerous autochthonous societies they came in contact with in diverse locations. This is especially true in consideration of the fact that the population movements were sporadic and small scale. Undoubtedly, if the Bantu expanded to other territories as colonizers, it is most improbable this was displayed in the same asymmetric might-is-right approach with which the Europeans colonized the world. It is, therefore, reasonable to assert that there was extensive absorption, assimilation, and displacement of other peoples during the long period of migrations. There were also significant social interactions through trade and intermarriage. In the indigenous system, marriage served as a diplomatic strategy for initiating and cementing social relationships across cultures.

So far, Bantu population movements have been used to demonstrate the connection between different regions of sub-Saharan Africa with regards to human settlements, the evolution and modeling of cultural practices, statehood and political organization, ritual and family practices, technology, linguistic traditions, and more. This history, among other things, teaches how the cultures in Africa can be similar even though they appear somehow different. Across the centuries, the Bantu, it seems, proved themselves successful at adaptation to their new environments. In a sense, we may see the Bantu population movements as a process that involved individuals and groups in the choice of habitats most suitable to their lifestyles and temperaments. Through this process, the Bantu migrations helped in facilitating the creation of human settlements across the sub-Saharan African region and they facilitated and modeled the evolution and development of what we commonly refer to today as “African culture.” Marching across diverse cultural terrains, the Bantu offered to and borrowed from their host communities some elements of rituals and religious ideas, patrimonial kingship and political organizations, and masquerade cults. Considering the several millennia of human activities involved, the Bantu migration is not by any means a story
about a group’s adventure or heroism. It is rather about the peopling of Africa and the establishment of culturescapes and the linkages that have come to define the totality of African heritage. The intricacies and implications of the movements are extensive and far-reaching. No one can claim absolute knowledge of all strands of the history in all its ramifications and the complexities that surround the various lacunae highlighted in this chapter. But for sure, we can conclude that there is a bit of Bantu blood in every person of African descent. At least, a preliminary scientific study based on mitochondrial (mtDNA) has recently confirmed the genetic legacy of the western direction of Bantu migrations.64

By the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade in the late fifteenth century, the culture of masking (like the spread of agricultural cultivation, pottery, family traditions, age-grade associations, secret societies, social institutions, and metallurgy) had completed its Africa-wide journey, thus making it one of the most important forms of social control, religious expression, and identity formation, as well as a mode of artistic/intellectual tradition that the African victims of the transatlantic human cargo trade carried with them across the Atlantic. The centuries of the transatlantic slavery (c. 1480–1840s) provided the impetus for the overseas expansion of the African masking tradition, the modeling trajectories it imposed, and the specific forms it assumed in the African Diaspora. Taking into consideration the totality of this history and the implications of cultural inventions, including arts and mode of expressions, the argument is reiterated that the African cultural artifacts that were transferred to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade are not Igbo, Èfìk, Ibibio, or Ijọ. They were all of these and more. They must be seen as a conglomerate of Bantu-African ethnic cultures in motion. This corroborates the position of the American School of thought on cultural diffusion, which posits that over time, the cultures found in an area tended to form clusters that are “sufficiently homogenous in that region on which they occur can be delimited on a map.”65