West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals

Raphael Chijioke Njoku

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Igbo Masquerade Dances in the African Diasporas

Symbols and Meanings

In 1995, Colin A. Palmer produced a compelling piece on the bond among African-born slaves in Mexico, thereby triggering a rebirth in studies asserting one-to-one cultural connections between specific ethnic groups in Africa with their African Diaspora genres. Using a sample of the surviving marriage licenses issued to African-born slaves, Palmer showed how ethnicity informed the spousal choices by African-born slaves who were married in the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico City between 1590 and 1640. Over this period, the greatest proportions of the slaves, as the study reveals, were shipped from West-Central Africa, particularly Angola. Among the subsequent similar studies, of particular interest are Linda Heywood’s edited volume and Kwasi Konadu’s work. While Heywood and co-contributors highlight the Kongo-“Angola culture area” and their traits in the New World, Konadu focuses on the Akán in the African Diaspora.

In the area of masquerade studies, Ivor Miller—building on earlier works by Fernandez Ortiz, Melville J. Herskovits, and Rafael Núñez Cedeño (all of the Culture Transfer School)—remains one of the leading scholars in this field of Black Atlantic cultural history. Miller’s research has focused on the Abakuá of Cuba, modeled after the Èkpè secret/masquerade society of the Èfík, as Cedeño’s and Miller’s separate studies reveal, Abakuá, founded in Havana, Cuba, in 1836 by enslaved leaders of Cross River villages, started off as a multiethnic mutual aid society. Over time, it strengthened to become a distinguishing feature of the wider Cuban cultural identity. Abakuá ceremonies consist of drumming, dancing, and chanting activities using the esoteric Abakuá language. However, Ivor’s and other accounts either overlooked or omitted a crucial fact: the Èfík along with Ibibio, Arọ, and Ngwá communities of southeastern Nigeria; the Èkọ́ and
Úgbè societies of Ejághám of southwestern Cameroon; and others also have Êkpè masquerade lodges, and hundreds of enslaved Africans from these ethnic groups in Cuba also participated in the Abakuá. This reality problematizes the allure of assigning ethnic colors to African cultural artifacts in the Americas; hence the argument to better focus on Bantu Culture Area than forcing one-to-one culture transfers. Neither Robert W. Nicholls’s more nuanced work focusing on Igbo cultural traits (specifically masquerades, music, and dance) and their African Diaspora descendants in the U.S. Virgin Islands, nor that by Heywood and coauthors in the Congo-Angola region transcended the test of multivalent susceptibility. Multivalent or visually complex work, as invoked in this study, refers to a concept that is susceptible to many interpretations, applications, meanings, and values. Like in medicine where a multivalent antigen draws multiple sites through which attachment may occur, properly understanding the very complex nature of colonial American society in which enslaved Africans were inserted holds the key to a better grasp of the new cultural frontiers they produced in the New World.

This understanding begins with revisiting Lucie Pradel who studied African beliefs in the African Diaspora. Pradel reminds us that the Caribbean world is like a kaleidoscope that portrays the vibrant colors of its diversity. From four continents, diverse ethnic groups brought their customs and beliefs to the region. Much of the literature has not fully acknowledged the fact that prior to the transatlantic slave trade, African culture was not static; it was changing by incorporating regional varieties while adapting to Arab and European ones. In fact, it is crucial to remember that before slaves started arriving in the Americas, the mixing of European and African cultures following the Portuguese presence in Angola had started reshaping the contours of religious practices. Yet, no single African group operated in isolation, either on the continent or in the Americas. In the New World, enslaved Africans lived among host communities that harbored other ethnicities and races—among them Whites and Native Indians. These non-African groups in the Americas also had their own versions of the very customs and traditions (religion, music, masking, carnival dances, languages, and so on) the enslaved migrants shared.

In the British West Indies, the Afro-Creole model of masquerading, like the Creole language, emerged at the outset of the plantation economy. Corroborating this view, Cedeño reaffirms that “the slaves not only influenced each other interculturally but they transformed the culture and lifestyle of their masters as well.” Another complexity of one-on-one cultural connections is encountered in ethnic self-identification among the enslaved people. African slaves often
drew on multiple ethnic identities to suit certain circumstances. In a different but related study, I have shown how African elements in Cuba including the Igbo sometimes claimed Yoruba ancestry in order to partake in the Cuban Oríṣá religion and rituals. In Jamaica on February 5, 1816, a jailor noted that a runaway slave named Bessy first claimed to be Igbo and later changed her story. “BESESSY, formerly said she was an Eboe, but now found out to be a salt-water creole (in this context meaning someone born during the Middle Passage or someone who was an infant when enslaved) and that she belonged to a gentleman at Black Water, since dead, but does not know his name, marked with *WB* on left shoulder, she came in on her own and has no owner.” The inclination to claiming multiple identities makes it tricky to pinpoint who was truly Igbo and who was not. Added to this is the fact that the Igbo and È/Fik slaves were not even among the earliest groups of Africans in the New World. Although a sprinkling of them was found here and there, between 1526 and 1640 African slaves disembarking in the Caribbean came primarily from Senegambia, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Congo, and Angola. Then from 1655 to 1807, there was a steady inflow of slaves into the Caribbean from the Akán of the Gold Coast. But from 1776, when the Aruni-directed Bight of Biafra slave trade was in top gear, the Gold Coast slave supply line declined to a second position in terms of numbers.

With the eighteenth-century increase in demands, Crahan and Knight explain, the Caribbean experienced an influx of “ethnic and culturally cohesive cohorts and allowed for the establishment of certain societal norms to which later arrivals, regardless of their customs, would have to conform.” In other words, the early arrivals such as the Mandinka, Mende, and groups from Upper Guinea and Congo/Angola created the background on which the Bight of Biafra Igbo, Ibibio, È/Fik, and Ijọ slaves adapted to and ultimately tried to insert their own ethnic styles. Like the Igbo, all the early batches of African groups arriving in the Caribbean, with the exception of the Akán, are of Bantu ancestry. If we further consider the fact that the Bantu ancestors had left their West African cradle several millennia back, modeling and indigenizing cultures across sub-Saharan Africa, then we have rock-solid evidence of how not to see the African culture and traditions in the Americas from narrow ethnic lenses. Those traditions were well prepared in Pan-African garb for their global migration.

The use of the term Bantu, as in relation to Cross River Igbo, needs a little more clarification here in relation to other Africans. René A. Bravmann has argued that the Akán contributed meaningfully to the evolution of Caribbean Creole culture but not much to masquerading because “masquerades are not now, and probably were never, products of Akán societies.” However, Douglas...
Fraser, who studied the symbols of Ashanti kingship, reminds us that the Akán have a rich tradition of artistic artworks in diverse media, and Bravmann adds that the Akán was further subject to diffusions from the Ashanti imperial authority. In contrast, the Igbo, Ibibio, Èfik, Èkòi, and Ijà migrants inherited a flourishing masquerade tradition from their ancestral homelands in southeastern Nigeria, and their subsequent entrance in the New World culturescape reinvigorated preexisting dance and masquerade styles there. Hans Sloane, who visited the Caribbean in the 1680s, observed masquerading in Jamaica, and African-styled masking conceivably goes back to the beginning of slavery in Antigua, Barbados, Montserrat, and Saint Kitts-Nevis, from where the first batch of European planters and African slaves were transferred to Jamaica. Procurement, reselling, and relocation of slaves from one region in the Americas to another lend credence to the culture modeling and reinvention argument rather than the culture transfer paradigm often encountered in the previous studies.

In light of the foregoing, the plan here is to combine both the big picture (Pan-African/Pan-Bantu) and case study (Igbo) approach to demonstrate the inherent difficulty in pushing the specific ethnic culture transfer monologue when the bulk of evidence points to a multicultural diaspora dialogue that resulted in the rise of new cultures in the Americas. Collections of American colonial-era primary sources preserved in forms of newspaper articles, personal memoirs, travel journals, and ethnographic and anthropological writings have not only privileged the Igbo activities in the wider resonance of masquerade discourses but also suggest one-on-one African and African Diaspora linkages. Some of these sources are hard to refute or ignore. The point is not to merely dispute the credibility of some pointers to specific Igbo or Èfik ideas or those from the other thousands of ethnicities found in Africa. However, taking the accounts on face value accentuates the tendency to promote a single story in a globalizing world of culture and metanarratives. It is, therefore, incumbent to explore the Igbo-centric perspectives along with their southeastern Nigeria neighbors (Èfik, Ibibio, and Ijà) within the wider resonance of Bantu/African connections. We thus reiterate that the notion of Igbo/African identities in New World societies crisscrossed multiple cultural, ethnic, geographical, and even racial boundaries.

On the strength of their sheer numbers, the enslaved Igbo indeed played a significant role in the flowering of the New World music, dance, and masquerading in those places where they were concentrated in huge numbers. But we are not dealing with a mathematical question in which elements in a range of functions correspond to exactly one element of the domain. Crahan and Knight have made a relevant point that although new arrivals usually identified with members of
their ethnic group, a wholesale cultural transfer of any specific ethnic group in the New World slaveholding societies was practically impossible because the Africans involved were not “free individuals in families, but with slaves in slavery.” This is why the concept of modeling—both in its sociocultural and natural science interpretations—is apt in a study of this nature. Perhaps by putting the family in purview, Crahan and Knight want to remind us about the central role of kinship in socialization and sociocultural mobilization.

However, the African family institution and the values it inculcates were seriously fractured in the Americas. Again the risk of forgetting this is high if scholars fall victim to sterile romanticism in a field of inquiry where the bulk of available evidence points to cultural hybridity rather than to wholesale transference of traditions and practices. It is more rewarding, therefore, to emphasize congenital forms of life in specific culture areas as templates from which the enslaved Africans drew in an attempt to cope with their conditions of servitude in the Americas. Along with this line, a Bantu Culture Area is invoked as already delineated in the previous chapters, and the term is employed as more descriptive of the wider African culture milieu reflecting the centuries of cross-cultural fertilization involving all the Bantus and their host societies across the continent. This approach allows for a fuller exploration of the role of diffusion in the development of New World masks and masquerading performances. The Afro-Caribbean examples are analyzed in the light of possible precedents in West and Central Africa, along with possible Western European and Native American practices. How then do we know who was Igbo and who was not? Or which masquerade traditions were Igbo and which were not?

The Burden of Evidence

Ivor Miller made a pertinent point that because most of what we have as sources were created by White planters and administrators, “A great obstacle to our understanding of the cultural dimensions of the African diaspora in the Americas is the paucity of written documentation left by those who were sold and transported as slaves, that is, by those who experienced the worst forms of oppression.” The available sources indicate that toward the end of the nineteenth century, noisy Christmastime and New Year masquerade celebrations in the former Dutch Virgin Islands (now U.S. owned) were common among African slaves, for whom the festivities provided some respite from relentless and oppressive plantation servitude. It is therefore no surprise that the celebrations were sometimes elevated to a point where they constituted a social nuisance in the opinion
of the island’s established elite, who blamed it on the “Eboe [Igbo] of Dinka or Corromantee [Ashanti/Akán] of West Africa.” The complaint published in Danish in *The St. Croix Avis* of January 3, 1901, expressed frustration with what the author described as “the noisy rites of human sacrifice and cannibal feasts to the fetish of Eboe.”

While one must be wise enough not to take the words of an angry letter writer on face value, the allegations reveal a number of ideas that may illuminate the character of Igbo presence in the New World in general. That the Igbo were singled out as culprits tells us that they were numerically visible as an African ethnic bloc: 18,692 Igbo slaves landed on Saint Croix Island alone. Standing on their own, however, numerical indices do not always translate to action or active participation in a sociocultural movement. Rather, something unique pushed the Igbo to the center stage of the Caribbean culturescape. In the canon of anthropological and social science literature, the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, among other things, have been described as receptive, democratically minded, clannish, daring, ambitious, intelligent, colonialist, and sometimes uppity. Among their Ijọ neighbors, the Igbo personality appeared in the late nineteenth-century masquerade satires as “impulsive” and “mischievous.” In a Kalabari song invoked during its annual Ekine masquerade festival: “His mother sent him to buy red dye; He went and bought yellow. O, Igbo, son of a chief! O, Igbo, son of a chief! His mother sent him to buy red dye; He went and bought a woman’s vagina. O, Igbo, son of a chief! O, Igbo, son of a chief!” In this song, the Igbo is portrayed as a willful, lustful young man, whose craving for women has reached the point of obsession if not madness.

Appraising these collections of stereotypes known in Nigeria political discourses as “the Igbo Problem,” Chinua Achebe admits that Igbo proclivity for adaptation under European colonial oppression and their record of success in postcolonial Nigeria has engendered a general dislike of them among their fellow Nigerians. According to Achebe, “Nigerians of all other ethnic groups will probably reach consensus on no other matter than their common resentment of the Igbo. They would describe them as aggressive, arrogant, and clannish. Most would add grasping and greedy.” Ultimately, it was colonial scholar Robin Horton who noted that the familial basis of decentralized and segmentary societies like the Igbo and Ibibio often produce individuals with a great deal of personal autonomy. Drawing from a contemporary reality, we have seen to what degree democracy and freedom have elevated the American citizen of today into near Igbo-like being: outspoken, fearless, self-opinioned, if not loud and arrogant.
In the Americas during the period of slavery (c. 1500s–1888), the Igbo village personality manifested in certain ways they responded to slavery and oppression. The enslaved Igbo were stereotyped in the Americas as “bad” slaves. Sometimes they resorted to rebellion, poisoning, or exit by way of either suicide or running away to join the so-called Maroons in isolated locations. At other times, the Igbo engaged in satires and raucous activities like the Bamboula fiesta characterized by loud drumming, singing, and dancing. In South Carolina, other slaves saw the Igbo as “rascals” and “rogues.” They would tease about one another’s African ethnicities, especially the “Guli (Gullah, i.e., Angolans) and Iba (Igbo).” James Barclay recorded that “the one will say to the other, ‘You are Gulli Niga [Gullah Nigger], what be the use of you, you be good for nothing.’ The other will reply, ‘You be Iba Niga [Igbo Nigger]; Iba Niga great ‘askal [rascal].’” Carefully interpreted, one can surmise by this that on occasions where the “good” slaves would normally exercise caution and discretion, the “bad” slaves comprising Igbo (and non-Igbo) individuals targeted the calamity of bondage and human carnage that New World plantation slavery perpetrated. The average Igbo, like every other enslaved person, seemed to have no aspiration to be seen as the “good slave,” for there was nothing good in a life of servitude.

Having explained the context in which the Igbo became agent provocateurs, it is now time to closely examine examples of masquerade/dance festivities often associated with them. Among these are the Bamboula, Jonkunnu, and Mocko Jumbies. It has been established in the historical literature that the Bamboula was a popular ritual dance linked to the ancestor spirits native to the Kongo of Central Africa. There are thousands of sacred cults that used music as a mode of religious worship in Africa. The Bamboula in the Americas, with its accompaniment of music and dance, was first adopted in Louisiana and is marked by a special drumming at which the Igbo and other Bantu groups such as those in Central Africa are adept. R. J. Damm reminds us that the Bamboula drum, rhythm, and dance is central to the story of African slaves and their descendants in Louisiana and New Orleans who gathered in a place called Congo Square (now Louis Armstrong Park) during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to partake in their traditional music on Sunday afternoons.

Some of the enslaved Africans for whom this dance served as a form of coping strategy arrived in Louisiana directly from Africa; others were resold from Haiti and Cuba in the Caribbean. Narrating his experience with the dance celebrations, Midge Burnett—from Raleigh, North Carolina, who was under ownership of one “Master Williams”—recalled that “We had square dances dat last all
night on holidays an’ we had a Christmas tree and an Easter egg hunt an’ all dat, case Marse William intended ter make us a civilized bunch of blacks.” Many slaves like Burnett saw Congo Square as a “home,” a meeting place, and a place where identity expression meant taking a short reprieve from the drudgery of slavery. Hence, Ted Widmer emblematically describes Congo Square “as a place of the mind as much as it was a real location.” In the context of this pattern of culture modeling and cross-breeding in the New World, Bamboula, from which ballet evolved, connotes a metaphor for racial solidarity and survival, a genre of African (rather than a Kongo or Igbo) dance and its associated rhythms. The particular drum on which it is played, thus, became the objectified emblem for those who partook in the dance.

Contrary to what the early records left by White planters often claim, neither in Africa nor in the Americas were the Igbo originators of the Bamboula; rather, they identified with and adapted to the dance, in which dancers established circle formations and an additional ring of onlookers is formed around the dancers. The adaptation occurred in two meaningful ways (among others). At the level of material culture, the adaptation occurred through the use of the transverse “Ebo [Igbo] drum.” At the philosophical level, it was related to the Igbo through the adaptive *eze* title culture in which, for a citizen to attain the status of ancestors, a transparent life as implied in the moral code (*ofo ná ogu*) was mandatory. In traditional Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, Ekoi, and Ijo societies, one of the methods of social control was to call out the individual who defiled the moral laws of the land in public squares where the offenders are shamed in satires. In his *Igbo Philosophy of Law*, F. U. Okafor explains that once a decision has been acclaimed, “it is given a ritual binder” and propitiation was observed.

Putting the place of African drum in context, Roberto Nadal reminds us:

It is well known that Africans have drum languages, by which news is transmitted to great distances. These languages were used by the slaves in Cuba from earliest times. The restless workers on coffee and sugar plantations kept in contact that way, to such an extent that the authorities had to forbid it. In Cuba, blacks who are acquainted with the music and liturgy of their African religions say that certain drums “speak” on given occasions, even though they are played without any vocal accompaniment.”

How much the Europeans understood the widespread use of drums and its rituals, whether as sacred or profane symbols, is open to speculations. In 1896, Michael Scott observed a procession of “a negro funeral” along a street in Kingston, Jamaica, and left us with a description of the African drums as “made out of
pieces of hollow trees, about six feet long, with skins braced over them, each carried by a man, while another beats it with open hands. The drum so described is common in the Igbo/Bight of Biafra Culture Area. The same source from 1836 observed a typical Bamboula Negro carnival in Kingston: “This day was the first of the Negro Carnival, or Christmas holidays, at the distance of two miles from Kingston, the sound of the negro drums and horns, the barbarous music, and yelling of the different African tribes, and the more mellow singing of the Set Girls, came off upon the breeze loud and strong.”

The opponents of the Bamboula and similar wild African-themed Christmas merrymaking in Jamaica, the Virgin Islands, Louisiana, or elsewhere in the Americas were particularly irked not just by the boisterous drumming, singing, and dancing; the part that got to their heads most was the effrontery with which the African performers called out oppressive plantation owners and corrupt administrators in songs throughout the Christmas and New Year festivities. As if to emphasize that the Christmas festivities were simply a temporary inversion of social distinctions, Joseph Tuckerman in a letter of 1837 addressed to Dr. John C.
Warren of Boston somberly described the Christmas observances in Saint Croix: “The noise of the music, which was of drums and kettle drums, made it quite impossible that the voice should be heard. But their liberty expired with the day. They slept, and were again slaves.” Additionally, Dirks maintains that the annual revelry constituted “a symbolic representation of the slaves’ worldview . . . [which] gave voice to an illiterate and therefore historically mute folk.”

Although the masquerading and Christmas songs were often viewed simply as a spectacular form of entertainment, through parody and satire, they served as a vehicle for social commentary and protest.

It was particularly the dire consequences of exposing the transgressions of the elite that drove their strong objection to the Bamboula. An editorial published in the semiweekly Saint Thomas Tidende Danish newspaper on December 28, 1872, strongly repudiated the Bamboula dance as a “remnant of barbarism” that should only be practiced in Africa. In a similar tone, the same newspaper in another editorial of November 22, 1890, kicked against the Bamboula as a detestable form of amusement. It advocated that the music and dance that accompany it should be completely censored because it is “used mainly as a channel of open lampoonery.” These and similar complaints predictably led to the Bamboula’s loss of attractiveness early in the twentieth century. The less confrontational African cultural exhibitions with purported Igbo influences received lesser negative reaction in a White-controlled multiethnic/multiracial Caribbean society.

A genre of Caribbean masquerade plays often associated with Igbo slaves is the Jonkunnu. Indeed, whether we are looking at masquerading or music, cultural trends in Caribbean society as we see it today emerged from colonial times as a hybrid of styles. Some early nineteenth-century writers observed striking features between African-style masquerading and European-themed masquerades. The evolution of Jamaica’s Jonkunnu provides a compelling illustration of how the “Western” and the “African” merged into a unique art form in a colonial/slaveholding American setting. The origin of the word Jonkunnu has remained a contested subject. The exponents of its “European” connotations claim that it represents the name of a folk hero named John Canoe, a supposedly British figure. A related European-based account has it that Jonkunnu is derived from the French phrase gens inconnus or “unknown people,” as carousers use masks to hide their identities. Other competing views suggest that Jonkunnu is either connected to the Yoruba Egungun masquerade festival or the Igbo A’hajok’o or Njoku Ji (New Yam) festival. Along with this line, Douglas B. Chambers suggests that Jonkunnu may be a corrupted version of Oko’nkọ masquerade, which appears during the New Yam festival among the Ngwá people of Igboland.
However, a more plausible explanation is that it is linked to the Akán people of Gold Coast (modern Ghana). A number of indicators may support the fact: First, the Jonkunnu dance first took root in the Bahamas, where many Akán people were enslaved prior to the Igbo arrivals in that island. More important, Edward Long, a planter historian who watched the masquerade in 1774, informs us that “Jolm Conny [possibly John Canoe or “Kenu”] was a celebrated Cabacero at Tres Puntas, in Axim, on the Guiney [Guinea] coast, who flourished about the year 1720. He bore great authority among the Negroes of the district.” The true identity of the king and hero that once ruled Axim in the Gold Coast or modern Ghana from 1683 to 1720 is still shrouded in mystery; incidentally, this was the same period that the Jonkunnu festival, also observed in South Carolina, was established in the Caribbean. Jonkunnu is prominent in the Bahamas, from where it possibly entered Jamaica. It is also popular in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

It is not the intent here to resolve the question of the origins of Jonkunnu in the Caribbean or in America. In broad terms, what is more pertinent is that the debate reflects the multiple ethnocultural matrixes in which the Jonkunnu festival was established. On a more specific level, the closer association of Jonkunnu with the Igbo once again mirrors the Bight of Biafra slaves’ active participation in and adaptation of the culture they met on arrival. The Igbo and their Calabar River Valley neighbors (Èfik, Ibibio, Èkò, and Ijọ) brought new vigor and style to the Jonkunnu festivities. This is what Palmer has described as “cultural accretion”: “practices or ideas borrowed from other people that elaborate but do not alter or modify the existing core beliefs in any significant way.” Long, alluded to this dynamic in 1769 when he observed that “several new masks appeared, the Ebos [Igbos], the Pawpaws [one of the Ewe group in Ghana] & co having their respective Connus, male and female, who were dressed in a very laughable style.”

A historian cannot ignore the word “new” or the costumes associated with the popular masked characters that featured in the Jonkunnu plays of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a site of cultural syncretism. While the “new” here connotes injection of new features, the masks are drawn from a variety of racial and ethnic divides. In his resourceful journal kept during his period of residence in the island of Jamaica (1816–1818), Matthew Gregory Lewis, the English novelist and dramatist (who died at sea on the voyage back to England in 1818), wrote on January 1, 1816: “The John-Canoe is a Merry-Andrew dressed in a striped doublet, and bearing upon his head a kind of pasteboard house-boat, filled with puppets, representing, some sailors, others soldiers, others again slaves at work.
on a plantation. The negroes are allowed three days for holidays at Christmas, and also New-year’s day.”

Corroborating Lewis, Michael Scott in his 1836 *Tom Cringle’s Log* gave an even more elaborate eye-witness account of what he described as the “Butcher’s John Canoe Party” by a band of Negro performers in Kingston, Jamaica. According to Scott, different streets were crowded with blackmoors, men, women, and children, dancing, singing and shouting, and all rigged out in their best [dresses]. . . . The Butcher John canoe party [was] a curious exhibition, it unquestionably was. The prominent character was, as usual the John Canoe or Jack Pudding. He was a light, active, clean-made young creole negro [sic] without shoes or stockings; he wore a pair of light jean, small clothes, all too wide, but confined to the knee, elbow and above, by bands of red tape, after the manner that Malvalio would have called cross-gartering . . . he had an enormous cocked-hat on, to which appended in front a white false-face or mask, of a most methodistical [sic] expression, while Janus-like, there was another face behind, of the most quizzical description, a sort of living Antithesis, both being garnished and overtopped with one coarse wig, made of hairs of bullocks’ tils on which the *Chapeau* was stripped down with a broad band of gold lace.

The emerging picturesque reveals juxtapositions of African and European costuming traditions and other paraphernalia of carnival dances/plays in the Caribbean slave-holding society. For instance, because it was difficult to re-create the traditional British greenery in Jamaica at this time, Isaac Belisario noted in an illustration drawn in 1836 that the “Jack-in-the-Green performance impoverished the British greenery with palm fronds.” A similar admixture of Afro-European traits was observed during Christmas in 1839 by Joseph Gurney who reported witnessing “a merry-andrew” during a “negro Saturnalia” in Saint Thomas. These corroborate Robert W. Nicholls’s summation that cultural evolution in the Caribbean is a sort of “sliding scale between African and European poles, with Quadrille gravitating towards the European end while the Mocko Jumbie [stilt masquerade dancing] is closer to the African end of the continuum.” The European tradition, Nicholls continues, is also associated with the folk play “Maypole and in hero-combat Mummer’s plays such as King George and the Dragon, or David and Goliath . . . where European influences have been incorporated, African aesthetic sensibilities have been applied.”

The preceding account implicates one of the several strands of academic debates converging on the interface between African and African Diaspora culture.
Igbo Masquerade Dances in the African Diasporas

Traits. Richard Burton contends that the early Jonkunnu with bullhorns “is clearly a neo-African or indigenized, rather than creolized, cultural form.” But Kenneth Bilby counters with the view that within the initial process of creolization, “blending occurred not only between European and African traditions, but also within the varied traditions of a multitude of African ethnic groups.” Illustrating his position, with the call-and-response singing genre, polymeter, and other African musical complexes in the Caribbean, Bilby notes that while these neo-African traditions remain “essentially African in every respect,” they are at the same time mixed. The African models in the New World are “hardly traceable to any specific region or ethnic group in Africa,” in whole, except for a few exemptions. Nothing could be closer to the truth. A deeper treatment of the Caribbean masquerade societies at the level of costuming and symbols will help deepen insights about how they portray multiple ethnic and racial hybridized colors.

Symbols, Costumes, and African Masquerade Dances

The Jonkunnu is perhaps the most popular masquerade dance in the Caribbean. It is noteworthy that the Jonkunnu mask usually had two prominent adornments, a spreading ox horn headdress and boar tusks around the mouth. Masks with real or carved animal horns are common in traditional African masks/performance art forms. In connection with masquerade dancing (which is the theatrical performance of the mask art form), real animal horns are less frequent and carved wooden horns are more common. In other words, the use of headdresses with a pair of real horns is generally limited to some groups but common among the Igbo, as illustrated by G. I. Jones in a 1939 study in Bende Division entitled “Ifogu Nkporo.” For instance, cattle horns feature in the masked initiation rituals of various Mande people in the Upper Guinea region, including the Bámáná of Mali and the Mandinka and Jola of Senegambia. The Toussian, a small group found in the southwestern area of Burkina Faso, has a genre of masks with horns used in initiation ceremonies. The Toussian masks, made by blacksmiths, have two diagonals indicated with incrusted red seeds. On top of the mask is “the head of a big bird (the calao) or horns that symbolize the spirit of the clan/totem of the initiated boy.”

Some of the Bantu West and Central African groups arrived in the Caribbean early in the slavery era. In the literature, the horns appended to the masks are often emphasized more than the tusks. Elliot Picket’s study reveals that the use of actual horns is the prerogative of hunter societies such as found in Sudan,
Bambara, and other parts of the savannah where animal husbandry is predominant. Carved horns are also encountered in the various Bambara headdresses known as the Chi-Wara or Tji Wara. In Bambara tradition, the horn and the curved motif depict a source of artistic inspiration: a symbol of a magical being often visualized as part man, part antelope, who brought to man the concept of soil cultivation. This is part of the cosmology that dwells on increase—whether it is an increase in agricultural productivity or childbirth and children. A rather interesting substyle of the Tji Wara masks is found in the rare headdresses primarily from the Bámáná and Bambara of Mali. In the modern Congo, the Tsonga are among the most noted users of animal horns. Among the Luba of the Congo, the animal horn was often attached to a carved figure as in the Bwoom headdresses, which are one of the royal masquerades in the Kuba Kingdom of Zaire: “They are regarded as ‘friends of the king’ in the dual sense that they are actually worn by the ruler and they represent a spirit or ngesh. Used in festivals and initiations, the dance of bwoom conveys qualities of youthful vigor and pride.” Some of the Tusyà masks, called Lonaike, found in Upper Guinea, are surmounted by an animal head or horns, which symbolize the totem of the clan.

Elsewhere, a particularly interesting use of animal horns in Yoruba ritual material is connected with the Alagida doll, related to the cult of Eshu and to an increase in childbirth and children. Among the Igbo, horns are emblematic of aggression as associated with hunting guilds or warrior groups. For instance, the Oñáfía, Òddá, and Ábám military allies of the Òró blow the horns to herald the alliance’s historic war-themed dances. Within other masking genres in Igboland, there are several types of masks with specific appearance, costume, dance, drum rhythms, music, and rules of behavior. Carved or real horns are sometimes used to decorate certain kinds of Igbo masks such as the Okoroshá and Ojonu. The Okoroshá masquerades from Mbáitoli sometimes hold real animal horns in their hands, which they use to collect gifts from their accolades. In Arondizuogu, the Mgbérédike masquerade, described by Richard Igwebe as aggressive and fearless, wear the skull and horns of a bull instead of a face mask when they appear during the New Yam festivities. The Ogáráchi masquerade of the Unmuezearoli of Onitsha has a pair of animal horns. In Umuezukwe, Umuowá of Orlu, and Isu Njáá communities of Igboland, during the Œkọŋko masquerade (which has Ngbará as its secret symbol festivals), the accompanying procession of musicians includes a group thumping horns with sticks as percussion instruments. Nicholls has concluded, however, that unlike with the horned masks of the Jola of Gambia and Mande of West Africa, there is no
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historical evidence indicating the antiquity of the Igbo horned masks. While further research is required on this, what is pertinent is that one cannot make any valid claim that horned masquerades were introduced into the New World by the enslaved Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijo, Luba, Bamaná, and so on during the eighteenth century. All these groups contributed to shaping the Caribbean Bull. Once again the record of evidence indicates adaptive Caribbean genre with the Igbo elements involved in an existing cultural trend.

Beside horns, there are other features, styles, and paraphernalia associated with African masks and masquerade performances. A description of the Jonkunnu in Jamaica in 1797 by an anonymous observer is pertinent: “The Negroes have their droll, which, however it may be dressed is always called a John Canoe; a whimsical character. . . . Sometimes they wear two faces . . . usually they have but one, which is often rendered hideous by beards and boar’s tusks.” A related description in 1836 by Scott described the Jonkunnu as having “Janus-like” features: “there was another face, behind, of the most quizzical description.” These accounts suggest Janus masks and a description of a bearded mouth embellished, yet again, with boar’s tusks. The tusks may or not indicate an Igbo influence as already underscored. However, certain kinds of Igbo masks, such as the Okoroshá of the Ummunehá, Isuámá, and Mbieri areas come with double faces. Also, specific categories of Ibibio and Boki masks are decked with double faces, as with the Dan of Liberia and Ivory Coast that feature tumors and other disfigurements; masks rendered hideous by tusks are unusual in West Africa.

Masks with tumors are encountered among the Efik and Ibibio, as studies by Donald Simmons reveal:

Masks of Efik and Ibibio, and some I[g]bo, groups in Calabar Province, Nigeria, frequently portray a noseless human face either in realistic representation or stylized form. Natives assert that these masks depict a disease which ulcerates the soft parts of the nasal membranes, eventually resulting in complete extirpation of the nose, and aver that the disease is portrayed on the masks to inspire fear in the beholder. Oron and some Ibibio denominate this disease odok, while Efik name it onok; English-speaking natives usually translate the term as no-nose.

Other Igbo examples of masks and masquerades with ugly and terrifying facial appearance include the Ágábá masks of the Mbáise, Owerri, and Umuáhiá communities. These masks are designed with warped human teeth and animal tusks with the intent to invoke fear to the onlookers. Some categories of Okoroshá called oriukporo, akárikposha, and nwánekoroshe are found among
FIGURE 5.2. Ágábá masquerade of Umunneôhá Mbáitoli
the various communities in Mbaitoli and Ikeduru. In connection with the Jonkunnu embellished with tusks and other features, what the record of evidence reveals is that the African-styled Caribbean masquerades emerged out of an ensemble of ideas and material cultures put together by people of African descent in the American cultural theater.

Worthy of some attention here is the timing of the Caribbean and African masquerade festivals. The Caribbean Jonkunnu, Bamboula, and other masquerade celebrations like the Mocko Jumbie, which will be further explored, are usually observed during the Christmas and New Year celebrations. But in precolonial Africa, most of the masquerade celebrations were held during the harvest season. For example, the New Yam festival among the Igbo comes in August during the time of harvest. It is the equivalence of U.S. Thanksgiving celebrations. During the festivals, the Igbo thank the Ñ∫àjòkù or Ñìjùkù deities for blessing their agricultural harvests. The Igbo, like their Ibibio, Ijọ, Ètim, Ìgèdè, and other neighbors in southern Nigeria, customarily celebrate the annual agro-cultural festivals with music, dance, food, and masquerading. These are enacted to “foster productivity of both fields and women.” The village communities such as Ómmune that perform the Òkoroshá masquerades, for instance, believe that the spirits that dwell in the masks purify the community and remove all evil and negativity from the village so that the next year begins fresh and clean. The Okoroshá masquerades, just like some genres of Ibibio and Ogoni masquerades of the Niger Delta, featured both sexes and dark and white colors. Although the masquerades are performed by men only, the white or light-colored Ekpo, Mmụọ, and Okoroshá masks represent female spirits, while the dark masks embody the male spirits. With these, a parity of obligation is accorded to both sexes of spirits. This is in line with the Igbo understanding of the world as a function of dualism, or what Chike Aniakor identifies as “the inseparable unities of Igbo cosmology (Ihe kwọrụ, ihe ọkwụdebe yà)—that is ‘when something stands, the opposite joins it.’”

In his study of northern Igbo masquerades, J. S. Boston explains that Mmụọ masquerades of the Nri-Àkwá with female counterparts “represent traditional Igbo ideas of beauty and feminine character.” Nicholls adds that these classes of “white face masks” or “maiden spirit masks,” are known in Onitsha and Okwée Uwáni Ngwo of Udi Division as ágbogho mmwánu (young or unmarried maiden spirits). However, the light-colored masks also have an extra historical symbolism: they tell of the African people’s encounter with the Europeans. Artistic representation of white or light-faced masks did not enter into the Igbo pantheon of spirits until between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when the
first modern Europeans began to appear in the coastal enclaves of Africa, including the Niger Delta and the Bight of Biafra. Besides their appearance during the New Yam festivals, this genre of African masks can also perform at funerals of members of the masquerade cults or in connection with male initiation. Nicholls has observed that almost all the Igbo neighbors—Èfik, Ibibio, Ijọ, and so on—have their own versions of the light/dark, beauty/beast masks.88

To an extent, the dark beast masks of the Bight of Biafra area could be compared with the tusked Jonkunnu mask in the New World, while the light Igbo masks can be compared to the wire mesh masks, which are painted in light colors and are ubiquitous throughout the Caribbean. Within the Poro society in West Africa, some artistic representations of masked spirits are further conceived in
white colors. This is seen among the Dan in Liberia and Ivory Coast and Temne of Sierra Leone, who paint the initiates with white clay to symbolize that they are temporarily dead. Modeled along with this pattern, it is fascinating to observe that in the Virgin Islands, some of the Creole masks were purposely painted pink with blue eyes as a means of subtly satirizing the White population. The crucial lesson is that the Caribbean art forms are eclectic—they represent derivations of ideas from various Bantu Culture Areas.

Another New World masquerade dance that reflects some degree of similarities with the Bantu Culture Area precedents is the Mocko Jumbie stilt-dancing masquerades. In West Africa, several stilt walking/dancing masquerades are common. Among the Igbo, the Kéléké (or Èkéléké) masquerade of the Ubomiri...
community is a spectacle in stilt-dancing/walking as with the Chákábá found in Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea. Kariamu Welsh Asante, who personally observed Chákábá in Guinea in the 1950s and 1960s, noted, “These towering figures were called gods of the sacred forest and actually frightened some of the younger people in the audience.” Asante explains that the Guinea Ballet and their cohorts found in West Africa perform a special function in African folklore: “Because of their heights, they act as mediators between the living and the spiritual world of the ancestors and are able to ask for special favors such as rain to save their crops from the drought. It is also said that they mediate disputes among the living when all else have failed.” The tallness and costumes of the stilt-masquerades include items like fauna (animal), flora (plant), mineral (earth), water (fresh water, the sea), and gendered attire such as men’s trousers and women’s wrappers and skirts. Together, these items remind the community that a healthy world must strive to be in balance with nature for peace, continuity, and order.

In the New World in general and the Caribbean in particular, one of the most popular stilt-dancing masquerades remains the Mocko Jumbie, which appeared in the Caribbean as early as the 1770s. Widely celebrated in Trinidad and Tobago, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (including Saint Croix, Saint Vincent, and Saint Thomas), the term Mocko Jumbie is believed to be a combination of “Moko” (also Moco or Mocho), which some believe is of Malian Mandinka derivation; and “Jumbi,” a West Indian word for spirits or ghosts. Robert Nicholls asserts that while “Jumbie” is commonly understood by Virgin Islanders to refer to a ghost or spirit, it is probably coined from the term “Ekpo” (ghost) associated with the Ibibio of Nigeria and/or “zumbi” (departed spirit) linked with the Kimbundu people of the Congo. “Mocko,” on the other hand, appears to be a compound term with multiple meanings, including its reference to Ibibio slaves. However, the first appearance of the word in the Americas was in 1627 when Alonso de Sandoval referred to the “Moco” as a group of Calabarians (Calabar people), thereby linking the Mocko to the Old Calabar country. In 1777, C. G. A. Oldendorp, a missionary in Sierra Leone, identified the location of the “Moko” (Ibibio) near the Ijo of New Calabar and differentiated them from both the Igbo and Èfik. The truth of the matter is that the etymology of the word Moko is from the Ibibio words Mokop (I hear) and Omokop (Do you hear?). According to Edet Udo, during the early period of the transatlantic slave trade in the Bight, “Slaves were asked if they heard what white slave traders were saying (“Do you hear?”). In reply, they said Mokop (“I hear”). From these words, the Europeans who obviously could not comprehend the Èfik language took Mokop
(variously Moco, Mocko, or Moko in Diaspora literature) to mean an ethnic affirmation.

What all of these sources reveal is that the Caribbean Mocko Jumbie was constructed from different ethnic and racial lines. What it looked like in the early days of slavery is not clear. The play has, over the years, passed through different stages, including the idea of the masquerade as a “sham jumbie” and “derider of jumbies” as encountered in most of the Virgin Islands. Also, such idioms as the Jumbie as “sorcerer” and “bogey man” are commonplace. A couple of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century records on stilt masquerades in the Caribbean focus on Saint Vincent, in the Windward Islands. While the first report by William Young informs us that the “Moco-Jumbo” is of Mandinka heritage, the second identifies the performer as an Igbo who is assisted by some of the Igbo soldiers of a “negro regiment.”

Again, we see a combination of cultural ideas and imageries drawn from Western and Central Africa giving birth to a new tradition in Caribbean society.

A character of the Mocko Jumbie masquerade portrayed in the Young report, which was related to the 1791 Christmas festivities, stated that a stilt dancer called “Moco-Jumbo” wore a “false head” [mask] and, accompanied by musicians and swordsmen, roaming the streets assuming the “antic terrible” and entertaining passersby. Another account by Edwards the planter identifies the masquerade with the “Mumbo Jumbo of the Mendengoes [Mandinkas].” He is probably correct in this assumption because Young concluded the Christmas season with a feast and was entertained by visiting slaves who danced to the music of a “balafo [sic].” A *balafo* is a wooden xylophone used by Mandinka and neighboring people. Dirks also saw the Mocko Jumbie as “a Mandingo import.” Additionally, Charles Williams Day’s report published in 1852 describes an Igbo stilt dancer whose costume was a mixture of African and European features (i.e., cowrie shells and a grenadier’s cap). The stilt dancer was referred to as a “De Jumpsa-man brought out of a negro hut on the shoulders of the soldiers and being upon stilts six feet high.” However, Day does explain that “‘De jumbee’ was of course an imitation of the genuine.” Nonetheless, Day included in his report a story of an African who expressed serious fear of the Jumbies: “I feared of the Jumbee in the crane sar [sir] (The African devil and evil spirit).”

Although there are many different stilt masquerades in the Caribbean, the U.S. Virgin Islands has two potential, disparate prototypes of the Mocko Jumbie. These are the Laniboy masquerade play among the Toma, Guerzé, and Kissien communities of Guinea and the similar Dan of Liberia masquerade; versus the Ébili (a type of animal masquerade from Ihiálà division) and Kéléké masquerade
of the Mbáitoli of the central Igbo, the Urhobo of Niger Delta, and the Kwale of western Nigeria. Thus, Nicholls suggests that a provenance for the Mocko Jumbie in the Upper Guinea region seems more plausible than an origin in southeastern Nigeria. This conclusion appears to be drawn based on Day’s 1852 report that describes the Virgin Island Jumbie masquerade he witnessed as wearing striped trousers, as was common among the stilt masquerades of the Upper Guinea region. In Upper Guinea, this genre of masquerades is believed to expel sorcery and witchcraft. Similarly, it is believed among the Creoles in the Caribbean that the Mocko Jumbie combats wicked spirits and is associated with good luck or divine blessings. The Upper Guinea origin hypothesis might as well be the case, but on the strength of available evidence, it is evident that the Mocko Jumbie masquerade emerged as a collection of Bantu-wide /Pan-African culture (Ibibio, Igbo, Upper Guinea, and so on).

How can one, then, rationalize the overemphasis on the Igbo connection with the various masquerade dances encountered in the colonial and antebellum Americas as alluded to by the bulk of early European planters, administrators, and travelers? One explanation remains that the Igbo readiness to adopt and adapt a tradition, culture, skill set, or institution and attempt to dominate it by turning it into an Igbo village affair is a crucial factor. Thus, culture, adaptation, and continuity seem to be the practice as the record of evidence indicates. The enslaved Igbo habitually combined their inherited knowledge of the Kélélé masquerade stilt-dancing with the Mandinka style, in a similar way they adapted to the Jonkunnu of the Upper Guinea region and Bamboula of the Kongo. In other words, the Igbo partook in established masquerades they met in the Americas and injected into them some doses of their Igbo village characters. How much their contributions made them owners of these cultural artifacts is not clear. What emerged as the New World masquerade culturescape is not and should not be seen as either Igbo or Guinean or Èfik or Kongo or Mande or Akán or any one ethnic group’s culture. They were all these and more in the context of Bantu culture in transition in a new sociopolitical milieu.

While the tone and visual presentations of African Diaspora cultural inventions and ethnic identifications may suggest close linkages with those found in Africa, the American progenies are products of totally different sociopolitical and historical milieus. In Africa, the triad of music, dance, and masquerading serves a central role in the indigenous politics, including social control functions. In Igbo and Ibibio segmentary societies where political decisions were attained by consensus, masquerades such as the Ulágá, Okoroshá, and Ojionu among the Igbo and Ekpo among the Ibibio were famous for their fearless commentaries on
social ills that affected everyone in their communities. That is why the Igbo often assert that “if a king refuses to behave like a king the ordinary man will talk to him adorned in the Ulágá mask.” In Achi Mbieri, the Nkwá Love group appropriates this form of powers in a forum for social criticism as performers’ satire observed antisocial behaviors while drumming and dancing to the entertainment of the onlookers. This corroborates Visona et al.’s observation that the regulatory roles of masquerades include providing “models of ideals” and “satirizing unacceptable behavior.”

In the New World, African masquerades tried to re-create similar sociopolitical roles but with minimal success because of the colonial sociopolitical structure. It must be added that through the device of satire and shaming, enslaved Africans aimed to instigate change. Michael Scott noted in 1836: “The John Canoe, who was the workhouse driver, was dressed up in lawyer’s cast-off gown and bands, black silk breeches, no stockings or shoes, but with sandals of bull-ock’s hide strapped on his . . . feet, a small cocked hat on his head, to which was appended a large califlower wig, and the usual white false face, bearing a very laughable resemblance to Chief-Justice S______, with whom I happened to be personally acquainted.” It is evident that the intent may have been the same but the Caribbean model was dissimilar to the African homeland. While the African genre was empowered to the point that no individual could transcend its authority and tongue lashing, the Caribbean progeny did not enjoy the benefit of such empowerment. The Caribbean masquerades had to guard against negative repercussions from Caribbean planters and administrators. Thus, rather than name specific persons, messages were usually encoded in metaphor; using such codes, masquerades indirectly poked fun at the establishment and lampooned figures of authority.

It is essential to add that it was not only the African traditions that the Caribbean masquerades imitated. In Antigua, at Christmas, the John Bull masquerade modeled the Old World European regulatory functions when he would visit various houses and be told to “run” any child who had been naughty, a bed-wetter being a prime target. William Richardson says that when he performed as a Mocko Jumbie in Saint Kitts-Nevis, parents would sometimes ask him to chase a naughty child, and often adults would run as well as children. Visby-Petersen in her report of a Mocko Jumbie in Saint Thomas in 1892 describes the masquerade as a “bogeyman” who performed “an insane dance on tall stilts.” Her use of the word “bogeyman” is significant because, unlike its mysterious function of fighting off evil spirits and attracting good ones, bogeyman refers to the more pragmatic function of social control. This reminds us about the masked
Krampus of Styria, in Eastern Austria, which goes around the village at Christmas with the legendary Saint Nicholas. He has been described in the literature as “shaggy, has a goat mask and horns, cloven hooves and a long tail, rattles his chains, and brandishes a bundle of birch twigs . . . to punish naughty children.”114 In Malmö, Sweden, a decree of 1695 banned the “Julbuck,” the Christmas buck, from performing because it “frightened children and caused pregnant women to lose their babies.”115

The fierceness of some Caribbean masquerades is also implied in Thora Visby-Petersen’s description of horned masquerades in a Saint Thomas Christmas parade in 1892. Of particular relevance is the extra effort made by the performers to restrain the masquerades from attacking people. “A strong rope, held by a muscular negro, is fastened to the waist of each devil so that he will not endanger the crowd.”116 Yet, no matter how one reads this piece of information, the fact is that the New World African masquerades had no actual authority to discipline social miscreants. But among the precolonial Igbo, Èk/uni1ECDi, È/f_ik, Ij/uni1ECD, and Ibibio, the spirit-regarding classes of masquerades performed sociopolitical functions.117

It must be reiterated that the African Diaspora masquerade genres evolved out of what some scholars have identified as a two-dimensional ethnography—that is, a linkage between a particular cultural form with obvious African roots and an equally unique political community with a more Western foundation. The nature of the relationship between the two forces explains the characteristics African-themed masquerades have assumed in the African Diaspora.118 Joyce Jackson and Fehintola Mosadomi have pinpointed the origins of the Black Mardi Gras Indian carnival tradition from the colonial encounters “between black and red men, the Afro-Caribbean ties to Trinidad, Cuba, and Haiti, the links to West African dance and musical forms, the social hypothesis stressing fraternal African-American bonds in the face of oppression.”119 L. M. Fraser, a colonial anthropologist, has provided an instructive illustration of this ethnographic dualism and the history surrounding it. Writing in a memo in 1881, Fraser captured the dynamism of the slave status of the enslaved Africans and the origin of Trinidad masquerade carnivals: “In the days of slavery, wherever fire broke out upon an estate, the slaves on the surrounding properties were immediately required to actively put the fire out. They were summoned by the sounds of horns and shells and marched to the spot, their drivers cracking their whips and urging them on. After emancipation, the Negroes began to represent this scene as a kind of commemoration of the change in their condition.”120 Thus, every year in commemoration of the day of emancipation, on August 1, ex-slaves
remembered their history with a carnival procession as a vehicle of political mobilization under communal leadership.

Altogether, the majority of incidents of masks and carnival performances in the African Diaspora were generally conceived and deployed as a model of marital or ceremonial protestation against the exploitative nature of master/slave, elite/subaltern relationships characterized by systemic corruption, racial discrimination, and economic marginalization in a White-dominated society. While masquerading is reminiscent of the communal sociopolitical structures in precolonial Africa, the African Diaspora masked carnivals challenged the political powers and interests of the dominant White elite. In this regard, performance arts were intended to function as an alternative medium of social control—this time an agitation by the downtrodden for a new social order of equal rights, social justice, fair redistribution of national resources, minority empowerment, and the preservation of historical memory especially in the post-abolition Americas. Jackson and Mosadomi have further noted: “The Mardi Gras Indian tradition is a way for blacks to come together without being exploited by the white community. It is a refusal to conform to the white carnival and it is very important to the Indians and it is a characteristic that they are very proud of.” Carol Flake adds, “In a sense, the history of carnival in New Orleans can be viewed as an evolving pattern of order and disorder, of exclusion and expansion—of drawing circles and dancing around the limit.” At times Black carnival performances have involved some erotic or obscene displays, as often seen with the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians and Jamaican dancehalls and soca music. Yet, this form of carnival display, which is also expressive of resentment of conditions of sociopolitical and economic domination, has today become perhaps one of the most dominant attractions of the carnival festivities.

It is clear that the mask and masquerades of Africa are a continuing art form that is original and peculiar to all people of African descent. The original concept is spirit bound, but as the art tradition traveled around the globe it has adapted to other purposes without a total loss of its African ancestry. While diverse manners of African-themed masquerades are found in the New World, the relationship between these and the African prototypes are striking: what transpired in the New World is a conglomeration of Bantu/African genres fusing into a unique Caribbean style with some European flavor. As European colonists held political power, Jonkunnu became a generic name for a widely dispersed assortment of masquerades in Jamaica, Tortola, Belize, Bahamas, and even North Carolina during the antebellum era.