West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals

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CHAPTER 8

Memory and Masquerade Narratives

The Art of Remembering

Although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative.
— Jean-Paul Sartre, What Is Literature?

This book has engaged with the history, religious idioms, symbols, and the music, dance, and drama that go with African masks and masquerade and African Diaspora carnivals. Throughout, the central argument remains that we better understand Africans enslaved in the New World as modelers of African culture and that the traits of traditions they brought with them need not be exact replicas of those found in Africa. The question arises about how to best describe the intricate ties between African and African American cultural artifacts and the modifications they have undergone across time and space without misplacing the inherent Pan-African spirit. This question has been addressed by situating this investigation within the Igbo masquerade culture, which brings us to the realization that African-styled masquerade is a device of representation using narrative to promote identity; propagate, defend or pursue a cause; and recover or reshape self-consciousness in a continually changing world. Constant changes marked masquerade displays in Africa, and its shifting nature continued in the American slaveholding society. In her study of the carnival culture in Cuba, Judith Bettelheim expressed a similar view: “Carnival has always been an expression of shifting power negotiations among aspects of Cuban Society.”

As an integral part of masquerading and power negotiations, memory needs more in-depth treatment. Emmanuel Obiechina’s pertinent definition of memory
as “the story of remembering” reminds us that there is a story behind every masquerade display; in the same manner, every work of literature carries a storyline. Elsewhere, I have defined narrative as “a storied approach to the unfolding of events,” which in poststructuralist thinking explains the world through collaborative story development. Both designations of narrative allow us to properly situate Africans’ perception and responses to everyday occasions, especially the critical challenges related to slavery and colonialism. Masquerading was one among other reactions to the European encounter. In the African culture, masquerading is not just a form of entertainment; it is primarily a performative story of collective remembering and an effective affirmative technique of narrative engaged. Jean-Paul Sartre may as well be speaking about masquerade narratives when he tells us that literature has no alternative function more important than to be engaged and committed to social issues, when he declared that “la literature engagée is worth a fortune in France.” According to Sartre, “although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative.” Writing to the Trinidad Chronicle in 1881, an old man who identified himself simply as “Censor” affirms that:

Canboulay was played (in the streets?) during slavery by many members of the middle and in some cases the upper class that it was intended to “take off” slave life on a plantation, and hence the driver with a whip pretending to drive the people before him to extinguish a night-fire in the cane piece, the slaves tramping in time and singing a rude refrain, to a small negro-drum and carrying torches to light their way along the road.

Hollis Liverpool, corroborating others such as Selwyn Cudjoe, further asserts that “Africans, the enslaved as well as the freed participated in Cannes Bruites as part of their masquerading activities on Carnival days; that Whites participated in the African form of masquerades as well and that African instruments were used to supply the music.” This assertion reinforces the point that despite the strong campaign by the White elite in the Caribbean to ban African-themed masquerades, the masquerade narrative engaged continued as an unswerving mode of dialogue through which the low and the high, the free and bonded, the rich and the poor fight for a common cause, promote social values, or denounce vexing sociopolitical issues. This truism is core to grasping the spirit behind the enslaved Africans’ masks and masquerade carnivals in the Americas. Masquerading gave the Africans a platform on which they registered their feelings on diverse sociopolitical issues affecting their lives.
To clarify, most stories are appropriated in written and oral accounts; others are encountered in nonverbal forms such as mimes, dramatizations, dances, drawings (other forms of artists’ designs included), cultural motifs, and artifacts. For the Africans without well-developed writing systems, traditionally memory took the place of archives. From the ellipsis of recollection, Africans created the oral and performative cultural artifacts and modeling skills they enacted on both sides of the Atlantic. On the continent, the Igbo, Èfik, Ibibio, Èkò, and the Ijọ masquerades combined both verbal and nonverbal modes of expressions in challenge of oppression, criminal and antisocial behaviors, and abuse of power and collective identity. Similarly, as the record of evidence from this and other studies have shown, Africans enslaved in the New World used masquerade carnivals as a forum to protest their plight, represent their African heritage, and request social reforms and freedom as everyday events unfolded. This practice continued long after the Emancipation.

Thus, after Sartre, the language of masquerade, as a genre of narrative engagée, is equated with a literary commitment to a moral cause. It is well known that none of the thousands of African tongues (Igbo, Èfik, Ibibio, Kálábári, and so on) survived in the Americas. For instance, Rafael Cedeño’s study of the Carabali (Kálábári) and Abákuá in Cuba reveals that “the Calabali, like other slaves brought forcefully to strange lands, were in the beginning unable to communicate among themselves.” Yet, “the slaves not only influenced each other interculturally but they transformed the culture and lifestyle of their masters as well.” Along with music and dance, a few of the African languages transmogrified into diverse shades of Creole patois. Gwendolyn Hall reminds us that “the most precise definition of Creole is a person of non-American ancestry,” though the term sometimes applies to Native Indians who were born into slavery. According to Hall, “Louisiana creole language was created by the African slaves brought to Louisiana and their creole children.” Some other features of African languages fused with ritual art forms, voodoo practices, and the aesthetics that masquerades communicate. For instance, in their separate studies, Harold Courlander and Douglas Chambers have identified Igbo syntax in Haitian voodoo (vodun) culture including Igbo spirits such as “Ibo Foula, Ibo Jérouge, Ibo Mariant or Mariané, Ibo Héquoiké, Ibo Lazile, Ibo lélé, Un Pied Un Main Un Je (One Hand, One Foot, One Eye), Ibo Takwa (who was said to speak an unknown language), and Ibo Ianman, among others.” A closer look at these words reveals a hybrid of words from different languages, including French, English, corrupted Yoruba, Ijọ, Ibibio, Rastafarian slang, and Creole Ebonics. The only
recognizable Igbo word on the list is “lélé,” (as in “look at”) which reminds one about Owerri-Igbo common phrase “Àkágbò lélé.”

The relevance of any language (written or otherwise) is to communicate meanings within a social group. In the New World, African languages ultimately became irrelevant primarily because prior African group affiliations along language lines changed radically and instead, music and dance became more effective as a mode of communication. Akin Euba has noted that musical instruments that “talk” serve as an area of cooperation between speech and music. “In a song, the pattern of speech tones of the text would normally be maintained in the melodic line in order that the correct meanings of the words may be indicated.”12 This is the reason Obiechina sees the “use of the journey as a creative metaphor within the narrative mode.” Obiechina perceptively contends that as far as the journey exposes individuals to fresh experiences transpiring over space and time, it pragmatically “spans the realm of history and geography, environment and society.”13 In other words, the migration of African music and dance that go along with masquerade displays altered as major parts of the enslaved people’s repertoires of memory, remembering, and narrative engagée. In this light, one would better understand why the Congo Society championed by its trustee Joseph Allen, as reported in the Port of Spain Gazette of September 12, 1853, “associated themselves together” to purchase “certain premises in Charlotte Street, known as the Congo yard, where three or four nights every week they had public dances, to the music of the banjee drum and shack-shack until the hour of 10 p.m.—and often much later.”14

As obtained in Africa, the diaspora Africans and their progenies used performative languages and kinesics (the science of body movement as a form of nonverbal communication) to mobilize for cooperative endeavors and narrate those vexing issues pertaining to them as both individuals and groups. Whether displayed as a ritual art form or in a more secular theatrical art form, masquerade narrative, like la littérateur engagée, makes use of a plot or a storyline to represent a message or a cause the performers wanted to bring to the attention of their audience as everyday events unfold. Robert W. Nicholls has noted in his study of masquerade carnivals in the Virgin Islands that in fact, throughout the era of slavery and some part of the postabolition era, the Caribbean African-styled masquerade performers had to guard against negative repercussions from planters and administrators.15 Rather than name persons, messages were usually encoded in metaphors. Using similes and codes, masquerades indirectly poked fun at the establishment and lampooned figures of authority.
Once the critical point is acknowledged that masquerades were a committed form of narrative expression, students of Africana Studies will be better informed and subsequently avoid the pitfalls of reifying masquerading as a stagnant tradition that was either wholly or partially transferred to the New World. Such ways of thinking in Africana Studies pose a serious problem of anachronism—the tendency to use historical actors who lived in the past to judge those in a different era. As Pieter Van Hensbroek explains, the “historian, in such cases, enters the field with a prior substantial theory of history. Having some a priori knowledge about what this period in history ‘really’ is about. The historian does not have to ask the historical actors what is at issues. The historian pretends to know beforehand the drama that they were enacting.”

The preoccupation with the similarities and differences in African cultural artifacts in the Americas that characterizes the bulk of literature on masquerade carnivals on both sides of the Atlantic is understandable. Bettelheim has noted: “Based on a Herskovitsian retention model, a \textit{retardataire} analysis might stress a continuous historical connection with Africa.” Julian Gerstin adds that this approach is a product of the anxiety associated with the search for a lost African ancestry. According to Gerstin: “More recent Caribbean writers—political, literary, scholarly, and popular—tracing their own roots, have often sought the specific African provenance of one or another custom, or have attempted to designate a single neo-African dance as the source of today’s welter of styles. This is understandable: the search for origins can easily become a search for a singular, definite beginning; a desire to say, ‘this is my ancestry.’” It is therefore incumbent on scholars not to completely ignore the essence of a deeper and more forceful interrogation of memory as a site of remembering for the historical actors and the form of narratology they generated for their specific needs. The prerogative then is to further our appreciation of the effectiveness of masquerade carnivals in structuring narratives that have, across the centuries, attended to and continue to attend to the needs of those groups who fashioned them. Masquerade narratology is not cast in stone. The emphasis or storyline changes as the society transforms. A proper recognition of this dynamism holds the key to savoring the central argument of this study—that African masks and masquerades may be prototypes of the African Diaspora carnivals, but the diasporic antecedents need not be judged as a replica or one-on-one retentions of those found in Africa. This is in the respect that the sociopolitical and economic milieu that shaped the New World masquerades were quite dissimilar to the African ones.
Like all narratives, when the cause or initial target of engagement changes or becomes irrelevant, the focus of masquerade narratives also shifts. The only thing that remains constant with all techniques of narrative engagée is the use of memory or the act of remembering to serve a purpose in the present. The phrase “present” in this context is a present that is in constant mutability. The fluid nature and ability to masquerade in response to the needs of the changing times are in tune with the modernization discourse—assuming that the term is conceived as a process of adapting habits, ideas, institutions, and material cultures to more pressing needs of the today. Along this line of reasoning, Joseph LaPalombra has rejected the strict and controversial econometric definition of modernization as “counterproductive”—that is “the ubiquitous urge to industrialization,” which hardly resonates with the realities in non-Western societies.19

Narratology, Authenticity, and Modernity

Tradition, adaptation, and continuity are synonymous with narratology, authenticity, and modernity. At every epoch in history, a people’s traditions or customs are narrated as authentic, but the reality is that every “authentic” culture is an adaptation from something from the past or that already existing somewhere. Adaptations, therefore, are natural responses to needs of the present. To proceed, it is well known in the masquerade studies literature that memory is the key to a group’s relationship with their pasts and their consciousness. What is often overlooked is that a people can selectively reinvent who they are by cherry-picking only those symbols and myths supporting the intended goals. The ways in which the past and the present are conceived and repackaged in a narrative, therefore, constitutes the notion of “authenticity” on which identity is supported. This study of African masquerades and carnivals of the African Diaspora vindicates Benedict Anderson’s conclusion that identities are imagined, mythologized, and appropriated with inclusive and exclusive ideologies.20

As identity constructions are dynamic, so are masquerade arts, which have multiple lives and appropriate the language of socioeconomic and political modernities to reinvent and mutate their consummate nature of the struggle for space and empowerment. This explains why Brian Schiff proposes, “one of the primary functions of narrating is to ‘make present’ life experience and interpretations of life in a particular time and space.”21 Schiff further contends, “the most salient aspect of narrative is not the arrangement of speech elements into a particular order but the kinds of actions that can be accomplished with narratives. It is an expressive action, something that persons do. Narrating brings
experience and interpretations into play, into a field of action, in a specific here and now.  

To further illustrate the fact, we may find the Sòmonò masquerade in the riverine areas of Kirango, Mali, a classic story of the “authentic” in a slowly changing society. In 1986, Susan Vogel observed the Sòmonò puppet masquerade festival organized by fishermen in the area.  

The 1986 Sòmonò parade, as Vogel noted, echoed a similar event recorded over a century ago by Paul Soleillet, a French geographer, who was in a village south of Segou city in December 1885.  

I stopped there... to see Guignol! A square tent of white and blue striped fabric is installed in a boat with two paddlers, an ostrich head fixed upon a long neck extends from the front... then two marionettes appear suddenly out of the middle of the tent, one clothed in red, the other in blue, and they abandon themselves to some grotesque pantomimes. The drums, placed in a second boat, accompany the spectacle with deafening music.

Along with other masquerades found in Mali, Guinea, and adjacent areas, the Sòmonò masquerade puppet characters remind the communities about the importance of the Niger River as a source of life; hence, the fishermen who own the masquerade are narrated as the originators. At first glance it may appear that this centuries-old tradition is unchanging. It is revealing, however, that even the most seemingly static tradition is strategically revised and adapted to the needs of the time. In realization of the importance of an inclusive culture, the Sòmonò fishermen changed the narrative to accept Bamana blacksmiths (numu) as stakeholders who also created the popular wooden masks and rod puppets that feature in the annual festivals.

With the Sòmonò, we see a masquerade narratology that was open to revision, adaptation, and modernization with blacksmiths, hunters, and farmers merged as stakeholders. To further ascribe legitimacy to the masquerade, the timing of the masquerade festival was changed so that all three troupes in Kirango performed their masquerades at the beginning of the dry season in October, which coincides with the harvest and hunting seasons for both fishermen and farmers. By recognizing the most important local professions (fishermen, farmers, hunters, blacksmiths), the masquerade became an inclusive ethnic marker that celebrates the people’s history. Vogel and Arnoldi further observe that the greater majority of the young generation in Kirango today “have no memory of the [Boso] Jara [men’s] association, but the appearance of the jarawara masquerades in the annual Sòmonò theater may indeed create a special resonance for older fishermen who still attend its public performance.”
mirrors Chinua Achebe’s emphasis on the centrality of the story to mind: “It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters.... The story is our escort: without it we are blind.”

In Trinidad and Tobago, the use of masquerade narrative to “make present” is worthy of deeper exploration. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed a fierce anticarnival campaign from the popular press, apparently because of the confrontationist stance of these maskers toward unpopular government policies. However, from the late 1850s, following lesser antigovernment campaigns, there was a change in attitude by the press. For instance, the Trinidad Sentinel of February 23, 1860, argued that “the people have a prescriptive right to mask” but at the same time emphasized that it was time to modernize the festival with the inspiration of “civilization.” Philip W. Scher’s inquiry on carnival, memory, and national culture in this island nation reveals that the way we choose to remember the past and the manner in which it is narrated shapes the nation rather than the other way round. Using the lens of masquerade carnival preservation, Scher elucidates the process of reconstructing a postcolonial Trinidadian national memory. The process sees the Trinidadian state jealously playing a central role in the erection of “authentic Carnival” forms. In this plot, the “Devil,” a popular masquerade carnival among enslaved Africans, is embraced as an embodiment of the spirit of resistance and rebellion against oppression, inequality, and human rights abuses. This is, of course, a saleable choice of narrative engagée that enhances the image of Trinidad’s national culture and at the same time strikes harmonious chords among the domestic and international communities of political watchdogs, human rights activists, Western donor nations, and prodemocracy campaigners and other stakeholders.

The new focus of the masquerade narrative engagée in Trinidad and Tobago reminds us the “unauthentic” masquerades, as defined and remembered by the nation’s authorities, are such obsolete characters as upissenlit or bed-wetter. The point should not be lost in thinking that the “Devil” and its past resilient fight against slavery was okay with the White planters and slave owners while the “unrefined” narratives associated with the bed-wetter were unwelcome by the elite in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The pertinent point is that the times and needs have changed. Today, this story of remembering appropriated with “selective amnesia” has helped Trinidadians establish a solid “national memory that is acceptable, proud, and in keeping with the current agenda of the state and affiliated social classes”—Whites, Creoles, Native Americans, Asians, and other stakeholders. Scher’s study allows us to see the bond between the state, masquerade carnival, and a postcolonial consciousness that is alive to the ideals
of the global neoliberal economic agenda. In the new self, culture in Trinidad has come to represent notions of state sovereignty (as a basic collective right of a national citizenry), in dialogue with the ideology of freedom, free market, and human rights protection. In this way, “the selection and preservation of culture is a process jealously guarded by local structures of power.” But the discourse is carefully recontextualized and prioritized as modernization agenda for the survival of Trinidad’s marginal economy within the larger world system.32

A similar reconfiguration has been witnessed in Nigeria where the “authentic” masquerade carnivals have been redefined and deployed to address the economic needs of today. Like in Trinidad where the state seized the initiative, in 2004, the then state governor of Cross River State, Donald Duke, leveraged masquerade carnivals to market his state as a hub for tourism and hospitality in Nigeria. Articulated in the context of “modernity” rather than another cultural nationalist scheme that often misses the target, the governor and his planning committee distanced themselves from the old narratives propagated by the Èkpè, Èkpo Ònyo-ôh, Ogbon, and other assortments of precolonial masquerade cults found in this region.33 Rather, the governor introduced new ideas along with modern Caribbean forms by promoting carnival bands like Seagull, Passion, Masta Blasta, Bayside, and Freedom. This pattern of backflow in cultural diffusion between Africa and the African Diaspora is, to borrow an analogy from Michael Gomez, a “reversing sail” in the history of the African Diaspora complex.34 Now held annually, the highpoint of the 2009 carnival was the “Carnival Cup 2009,” a football competition among the carnival bands.35

Since 2004, the Calabar carnival has emerged as the fastest growing industry in Cross River State, celebrating Calabar culture as modern. This is what Will Rea has described in relation to his own study of masquerades in Ikoli Ekiti, Yorubaland, as the “penetration of and persistence of cultural and artistic forms into a present defined as ‘modern’ or modernity.”36 In this framework, through the instrument of modern masquerade carnivals, the state redefines itself as a parsimonious neoliberal entity open to the ideals of liberty, democracy, and inclusiveness. Thus, instead of reifying the masquerade tradition as a static institution that must be harnessed in its “original” forms, the recent trends in Mali, Trinidad, and Nigeria affirm that mask and masquerade carnivals have always served the needs of the present and adapted to the needs of those who created them as the times changed.

In light of the “Tabula Rasa” versus the “Retention” Schools in African and African American culture debates, the emergence of masquerade carnivals today as the cornerstone of Trinidad’s and Calabar’s modern economies predicated on
tourism and heritage could be captured with the biological theory of translocation, in which nutrients manufactured on leaves of a plant through the process of photosynthesis move to other tissues of the plant. Here, the masquerade genres invented in precolonial Africa represent the leaves of a plant. And the process of photosynthesis in translocation represents the enslaved Africans’ migration to the Americas where they injected and adapted semblances of African-styled masquerades to address the urgent social issues beleaguering their host societies. While the nutrients of the culture have, in due time, permeated all fabrics of Caribbean life to the point where it is now both the motif and emblem of identity, one must not lose sight of the critical fact that the African-themed masquerades responded to the New World realities the way plants respond to the stimuli of light in phototropism. As the roots of a plant give life to the entire system, so the American soil gave life and form to the entire edifice of multiculturalism in existence in the Americas.

Thus, whether we are looking at masquerade performances in precolonial Africa, colonial America, or in the antebellum/postcolonial state, the narrative of identity and remembering that masquerades espoused has always been a contested arena of space, politics, social change, and mythmaking. Stanley Elkins and others who forcefully push the view that enslaved Africans who survived the perilous Middle Passage suffered memory blackout tend to forget that ellipsis of memory and remembering are not unique to enslaved Africans. Memory loss and remembering are constants in history. As the saying goes, “He who arrives at the middle of a story leaves with a disjointed narrative.” Many who write on African Diaspora history without a grounded knowledge of the African background often provide fragmented and disjointed stories. The critical issue is not essentially that amnesia or forgetfulness might occur; what matters most is what realities gave the individual or group a full sense of identity or relevance and making the memory or what we remember to respond to the challenges of life experiences.

Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* remains an exemplar in the narrative art of remembering given its strategic response to the needs of his time. In this literary engagée, Equiano consciously resisted focusing solely on himself as a former slave. Rather, he confronted the more crucial cause of abolition, using his Igbo/African heritage to narrate Europe as a “primitive” slaveholding culture in a global context. Comparing slavery in Igboland and in the Western world, Equiano wrote: “I must acknowledge in honor of those sable destroyers of human rights, that I never met with any ill-treatment, or saw any offered to their slaves, except tying them, when necessary, to keep them from running
The most critical message of Equiano’s narrative is not whether he remembered correctly the nature of slavery and other subjects of interest in his account of Igboland or if actually he was born in Africa, as Vincent Carretta has questioned. The fact is that he used what he committed to memory, or rather what he chose to remember, to advocate change in his eighteenth-century world. This was the prerogative need of “the present” in his time. Equiano’s narrative engagée was a powerful modernist dialogue, which is often lost in the search for his true nativity.

In relation to the history of slavery in African American culture, it must be reiterated that memory and forgetfulness are constant parts of the history. One need not cross the Sahara Desert, the Pacific Ocean, or the Atlantic Ocean before amnesia sets in. Because the human mind is susceptible to forgetfulness, Europeans created the archives and Africans used the techniques of mimes and performative languages such as masks and masquerades to preserve, remember, and communicate their pasts for the present needs. Irobi uses the concept “phenomenology” to emphasize, “the engagement in lived experience between the individual consciousness and reality as sensory and mental phenomena.”

Long before the African encounter with Europeans, it must be appreciated that the entire purpose of African festival and ritual theater—with all its spectacles, costuming, spatial configurations, architecture, music, drum language, dance, songs, choreography, and masking—has always been passed from generation to generation. The mode of passage made use of phenomenological channels and senses through the aptitude of the human body. The discourse of phenomenology provides scholars with space to further explain the somatogenic abilities—the conscious and unconscious capacities of the human body as a site of narrative.

But a useful discussion in this direction must begin with a caveat that, despite the progress recorded so far in the field of kinesics (including sign language and lip reading), it is difficult to interpret the precise meanings of bodily movements to musical notes. A look at modern choreography shows that dancers are trained to move in unison without much attachment to or coherent understanding of the unspoken words. In 2008, I asked the Achi-Mbieri Nkwá Love chief dancer and choreographer, Akugbo Oguzie (whose uncle Athanasius Oguzie once occupied the same position), about the meaning of the group’s dancing moves. The chief dancer started off with the comment that “every bird speaks the language of the audience.” With those proverbial words, she emphasized the central determinant of language and cultural competence in music appreciation. This assertion corroborates the position held by some scholars that “musical meaning
is determined exclusively by cultural convention. Having demarcated the basis for discerning the message hidden in a dance style, Akugbo Oguzie continued with a few examples from her Nkwá Love dance group’s presentations during the 2008 Christmas festivities: “Every year, we train secretly for months prior to Christmas, and it is during this period of training that members learn, rehearse, and internalize the songs and choreographs. Waist wriggling in the Love dance represents communal unity and love. When we jump up and make an about turn following a song in progress, it signifies that there should be a turnaround from a social ill under focus in the song to a more acceptable societal behavior.” Nkwá Love reminds us of the Abigbo dance of Mbáise people of Igbo. Abigbo dancers also recount social ills and call out wrongdoers as enemies of society while challenging them to turn from their old way for good. Like the Nkwá Love, the Abigbo is both a dance style and a musical ensemble.

The insights provided above affirm the role of cultural competence in dance interpretation. This corroborates Irobi’s observation that in Africa and many parts of the African Diaspora, “dance, accompanied by music, represents the supreme art, the art par excellence. This is because dance, as a form of kinesthetic literacy, is the primary medium for coding the perception of our outer and inner worlds, our transcendent worlds, our spiritual history, and the memory of that complex history. The body is the major conduit of artistic expression, whether it is a painting, a dance, a book.” The meanings associated with Nkwá Love is different from the Oháfiá-Éddá-Ábám-Aró Ipirikpi-ogù (War Dance), which uses aggressive thumping and a shaking of the chest to narrate valor and celebrate accomplishments of the warrior group in local wars. Similarly, an outsider to the Okoroshá masquerade dance of Achi-Mbieri, Umunneóhá, and Umunnáá Ámáúbúrú Ubomiri will not recognize why the performers usually dance to the music with their thighs flapping in open-and-close movement while surging forward across the open square in the direction of the drummers. That dance style represents the phenomenon of increase and reproduction as in harvest and childbearing. The Oµµuru-onwá and Ágbáchá-Èkuru ńwá dances for married ladies are a forum for womenfolk, especially new mothers, to exercise their bodies, shed baby fat, and stay healthy through weekly rehearsals. The dancers cuddle a wooden effigy of a baby and move their bodies in different directions such as holding it close to the chest, throwing it up, bathing positions, and so on, as a mother would with a new baby.

Combined together, the waist wriggling and about-turn jumps associated with the Nkwá Love, the lap flapping and surge through the dance arena noted with the Okoroshá masquerade, and the cuddling of wooden effigies and other
bodily movements identified with the Ōmuru-ônwá and Àgbáchá-Èkuru ìwá dances all describe several aspects of the Kalenda dance of the African Diaspora as observed by Jean-Baptiste Labat in 1722: “What pleases them most and is their most common dance is the calenda, which comes from the Guinea coast and, from all appearances, from the kingdom of Ardá [in Dahomey]. The Spanish have taken it from the blacks, and dance it in all America in the same manner as the blacks.” Labat goes on to provide a vivid account of the dance formations, spectators, singers, and even bodily movements:

The dancers are arranged in two lines, the one before the other, the men to one side, the women to the other. Those are the ones who dance, and the spectators make a circle around the dancers and drums. The most skilled sings a song that he composes on the spot, on such a subject as he judges appropriate, and the refrain, which is sung by all the spectators, is accompanied by a great beating of hands. As regards the dancers, they hold up their arms a little like those who dance while playing castanets. They jump, they spin, they approach to within three feet of each other, they leap back on the beat, until the sound of the drum tells them to join and they strike their thighs, [the thighs of] some beating against the others, that is, the men’s against the women’s. To see this, it seems that they beat their bellies together, while it is however only their thighs that support the blows. As the picturesque reveals, there is no gainsaying that the so-called Kalenda could best be defined as a conglomeration of diverse African dancing styles appropriated in a new culture. It was more a metaphor that embraced everything genre of African-styled dance from the Belair, Bomba, and Bamboula to Okoroshá, Djourba (djuba, juba, Yuba), and guiouba (ghoba), found in different regions of the Americas including Saint Thomas, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Martinique, Louisiana, and so on.

While the meaning of dance is harnessed in specific cultural context, what distinguishes mass popular culture from indigenous culture are the context and the range of the message it communicates. This insight explains the power of African-themed popular music in the diffusion of global cultures. Blues, for instance, is better understood in light of its historical and transnational development as an offshoot of West African traditional labor or work songs. In Africa, labor songs are not danced like in other songs but harnessed in the manner with which laborers respond to the task before them. The version that would metamorphose into blues was first rendered by enslaved Africans on the American plantations in forms of lamentations, call-and-response, and shouts and hollers.
After the Emancipation, blues was quickly transformed into “classical” or “city blues.” The tunes captured widespread emotions and moods of loneliness, confusion, and hardship among the Black population. Today, the sentiments that informed this unique musical genre have been repackaged and commercialized as a force in popular entertainment.

In sum, this study of African masks and masquerade carnivals in transnational context has shown that while the African tradition influenced the African Diaspora masquerade art forms, the proper way to approach their transatlantic journey is within the narrative context. The spectacles associated with African masquerades are both contagious and entertaining; but they are more than fun theater. They combine drama, dance, and music to engage with pressing social issues. Once this lesson is understood, we begin to see the proper historical links between African and African Diaspora masquerade carnivals across time and space. Thus, rather than focusing on the ethnic dimensions that often underestimate the more auspicious purposes masquerades provided enslaved people in the Americas, this work combined the broader African approach with the Igbo case study, in a metanarrative that underscores how tricky it is to assert with certainty which tradition is Igbo, Èfìk, Ibibio, Ijọ or derived from some other African group or regional culture. Just as in the African context, African diaspora masquerades were transnational, bridging the divide between memory and history.