



KEYWORDS

masquerade
West Africa
Igbo
Ekpe
Bantu
Bight of Biafra
Diaspora carnival

REVIEW

Njoku, Raphael Chijioke. *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals: History, Memory, and Transnationalism.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020. 281 pages, 13 b/w photographs, 3 tables, 1 map, endnotes, bibliography, index. Paperback, \$19.95 or free pdf online. ISBN 978-1-5804-6984-5; <https://doi.org/10.38051/9781787447202>.

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Raphael Chijioke Njoku spent eleven years conducting primary research during his ten trips to Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and Ghana between 2006 and 2017. This research has yielded an extensive text with detailed examples supporting his thesis. Anyone interested in masquerade and performance in the Black Atlantic will find this book informative.

While this study brings an African voice to performance and cultural studies examining the connections between Africa and the diaspora, it also includes the privileging of Njoku's Igbo ethnicity. The preface includes the author's background, having grown up during the Biafra-Nigeria Civil War in Nigeria from 1967 to 1970. The devastating war that resulted in the Biafra losing its struggle for independence from Nigeria had a lasting impact on its residents, including the Igbo people. Naturally, one might expect the author, as a child raised in this conflict, to focus on the cultural achievements of the area's ethnic groups.

This expectation is met in the introduction, where Njoku states that "this study probes the interconnections among masquerade narratives, memory, reinventions, and transnationalism.... The argument put forth is that enslaved Africans should be understood as Bantu-African culture modeling agents or culture carriers who tried to reenact vestiges of their inherited traditions in alien societies" (p. 1). Njoku describes the Bight of Biafra hinterland in areas of the Benue-Cross river basin of southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon as the "birthplace of the masquerade culture" (p. 11), and the precolonial Bantu groups emanating from there—largely consisting of the Igbo, Èfik, Ibibio, and Ijọ—as "culture modeling agents" (p. 9) who spread this culture across all of sub-Saharan Africa. His thesis, however, is gradually left behind as the author increasingly contradicts his main premise.

While on the surface, Njoku makes a convincing argument, I retain my doubts. First, no mention is made of the images on caves in Tassili-n-Ajjer in Algeria that depict at least two humanoid figures in a costume/scarification/body paint wearing an obvious mask. Dating to 6,000–4,000 BC, these provide evidence of potential masquerade performance taking place far earlier than the death-masking practices the author discusses for Egypt during the New Kingdom of King Tutankhamen, c. 1325 BC, and Ramses II, c. 1213 BC, or the Aztecs in Mesoamerica, c. 3,000 BC.

Second, his evidence for masquerade festivals across West Africa having been inspired by Igbo communities is scarce and unconvincing. He mentions the Bamana, Bozo, and Sòmònò groups and relates the commonalities between the youth puppet masquerade theater in Mali and similar ones found in Okoroshá and Kéléké stilt masquerades and Mbáitoli communities of Imo State,

Nigeria (p. 84). Similarities do not always exemplify direct appropriation or influence. After all, puppet theater also occurs in Japan as Bunraku (early seventeenth century) and is certainly not the influence of the Bantu Culture Area.

Third, what about masquerade practices in other areas of West Africa, like those of the Dan in Liberia, Dogon in Mali, Zaouli in Ivory Coast, or the Yoruba in Nigeria? These are not performed by Bantu-culture groups, and there is a long history of precolonial masquerading in these areas. Rather, I suggest that masquerading in Africa spread from the Saharan area south along the trade routes. And while this complicates Njoku's thesis, it does not detract from the importance of the Bantu cultural influence from southeastern Nigeria into Central Africa, or from its influence abroad in the Americas.

The text is well organized, with chapter summaries that help to consolidate the vast number of examples, literary sources, and information provided. While the introduction lays out Njoku's thesis, it fails to define carnivals as a voice for those in the lower classes and for this text, the important differentiation of Black carnivals, which largely challenge white hegemony and the lingering institutions that continue to oppress into the present. By chapter 1, a division appears between masquerades in Africa and carnivals in the Afro-Caribbean and New Orleans. No mention is given to other African-inspired masquerades in the Americas, such as the Egun masquerades of Bahia, Brazil. Perhaps because the Egun draws from Yoruba Egungun practices, these masquerades would not support Njoku's thesis. He finally defines carnivals in chapter 5: "Although the masquerading and Christmas songs were viewed simply as a spectacular form of entertainment, through parody and satire, they served as a vehicle for social commentary and protest" (p. 120). Rightly again in chapter 6, carnivals are described as "Caribbean versions [that] are products of a totally different sociopolitical and historical milieu ... a linkage between a particular cultural form with obvious African roots and an equally unique oppressive political community with a more Western foundation" (p. 138). Problematic is the preceding chapter 4 description of diaspora carnivals as "dilutions" of the originals, or African masquerades (p. 99). Diaspora carnivals are unique art forms that evince the bricolage of many performance forms in the Americas, Africa, and Europe. Never should these carnivals be understood as dilutions.

Chapter 2 examines Biafra, and especially Igbo, masquerading as responses to religion within the cultural and sociopolitical traditions. Most intriguing are his sections dealing with masking politics and those that sustain "life through interaction with the ancestors" (p. 43). The next chapter explores the forced migrations of Bantu cultures to the Americas through the slave trade. Of particular interest to me, as an art historian, was the section connecting iron working, agriculture, and pottery.

The stage is set for chapter 4, where Njoku asserts that enslaved people from the Bantu Culture Area, primarily Igbo, brought their cultural practices, political organization, ritual and family practices, technology including iron working, and language to the Americas and had a profound influence there. He brings strong evidence to support his claim, yet he also contradicts himself. For example, Njoku uses population numbers from www.slaveryvoyages.org to support his theory that Bantu peoples were the majority of peoples transported to the Americas, and therefore were the primary influencers. Those from the Bight of Biafra constituted 13.7 percent and those from West Central Africa 42.8 percent. While those numbers together are a majority,

1. Eli Bantor, "Masquerade Politics in Contemporary Southeastern Nigeria," *African Arts* 41, no. 4 (December 2008): 32–43, "Spatial Continuities: Masks and Cultural Interactions between the Delta and Southeastern Nigeria," *African Arts* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 26–41; 93, "Warrior Masking, Youth Culture, and Gender Roles: Masks and History in Aro Ikeji Festival," *African Arts* 52, no. 1 (February 2019): 34–45, and "Aro Ikeji Festival: Toward a Historical Interpretation of a Masquerade Festival" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1995); Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984); Herbert M. Cole, *I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, 1985), and *Igbo, Visions of Africa* (Milan: 5 Continents, 2013).

56.5 percent is not enough of a majority to suggest domination, except perhaps in certain locations. Njoku tries to claim other areas tallied as part of the Bantu Culture Area; however, as I expressed earlier, I have doubts. He is more convincing in his evidence for Jonkonnu in Jamaica, with 218,007 of the enslaved hailing from the Biafra; Bamoula in St. Thomas and the Virgin Islands, with 13,167 from the Biafra; and Abakuá in Cuba, with 35,552 having Biafra origins.

Njoku notes that previous studies by Robert Nicholls and others have already established the links between Bantu/Igbo practices in Jamaica, the United States, Cuba, and the Virgin Islands. He states that Bamoula has already been associated with the Kongo of Central Africa and that Cuban Abakuá is a reinvention of the Èkpé masquerade of several Biafra groups. Evidence of Igbo masquerade practices in the diaspora are furthered supported in chapter 5. While Njoku draws from a variety of sources, including Judith Bettelheim in art history, conspicuously absent are the seminal works on Biafra-area masquerading by Eli Bantor (Èkpé) and Herbert M. Cole (Igbo).¹

Njoku explores the influences of Afro-Arab culture and Western modernity (the slave trade, Christian evangelism, and colonialism) on diaspora carnivals in chapter 6, diminishing the strength of the thesis that he tried to support in the previous two chapters. At one point, Njoku states that due to the struggles with Western modernity, "the brand of masquerade carnivals that survived on both sides of the Atlantic did not follow the original intents" of Biafra masquerades (p. 137). While I am happy to see the reference to African carnivals, those in Guinea and Ghana (Fancy Dress) have little or nothing to do with a Biafra influence.

Njoku utilizes writings from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century, especially the memoir written by Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo who was sold as a child into slavery and brought to the Caribbean in the eighteenth century. He was later freed and worked as an abolitionist. Njoku draws from Equiano's descriptions of Igbo identity and his culture's fascination with music and dance. Equiano also provided a description of an early Jamaican event and noted the similarities between African and Jamaica dance. Although Equiano's work has been criticized for some literary construction, Njoku's use of his memoir seems appropriate for providing a much-needed historical source. Njoku also draws from the work of Plato and Aristotle, particularly their understanding of music in chapter 7. He effectively utilizes Aristotle's three models of music—education, purgation, and enjoyment—to organize the functions and importance of music in Biafra and diaspora carnival masquerading. He notes that music and dance provided a cathartic voice for the oppressed and elaborates how music fosters "solidarity and social protest" (p. 177).

The final chapter provides a conclusion that wraps Njoku's thesis and research in a cloth comprised of memory and masquerade narratives. The enslaved as "modelers of African culture" used diaspora carnivals as a "device of representation using narrative to promote identity" (p. 185). Music and dance are tools of effective communication in the "story of remembering" (p. 186). In what are perhaps the most eloquent and effective pages in the book, Njoku organizes his philosophy into Narratology, Authenticity, and Modernity. Noting that masquerade arts continually "reinvent and mutate their consummate nature of the struggle for space and empowerment," this definition suits masquerades in every part of the Black Atlantic and Africa (p. 190). Utilizing "selective amnesia," Trinidadians establish a more acceptable one that suits the community, and I would add that this is often the case, with Black Atlantic carnivals serving as a healing

tonic for the cultural trauma suffered during the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism (p. 192). Njoku concludes: "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, Èfik, Ibibio and Ijo or derived from some other African group or regional culture" (p. 198). Thus, Njoku arrives at a conclusion that should have been his thesis all along.

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HOW TO CITE

Micots, Courtney. Review of *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals: History, Memory, and Transnationalism*, by Raphael Chijioke Njoku. *Journal of Festive Studies* 3 (2021): 267–270. <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2021.3.1.96>

The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from [H-Celebration](https://www.h-net.org/), a network of [H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online](https://www.h-net.org/), and is the inaugural journal published through the [H-Net Journals](https://www.h-net.org/) initiative. It can be found online at <https://journals.h-net.org/jfs>.