Ijele: The Gentle giant

I was four years old when I saw Ijele for the first time in my village. A far cry from the smaller African face masks which conceal only one’s face or entire head, this particular mask covers one’s entire body. Only a pair of feet is visible beneath the huge skirt-like bottom. I would claim that this mask creates an overwhelming first impression which intimidates the most uncaring observer. The Ijele mask is huge; the enormity of the mask draws everyone’s attention. When the men bring Ijele into the village, all other activity ceases; time seems to stand still. Even many years later, I can still feel the awe of that initial experience; seeing Ijele always leaves me speechless. Given the size, I am not surprised looking back how intimidated I was. I tried to shrink behind my mother and cling to her for dear life as I continued to stare in wide-eyed fascination at the thing I dubbed “the gentle Giant” as it slowly and majestically made its way out to the village square.

Despite my intimidation, I anticipated the special time in our village greatly for two reasons. First, such a spectacle was rare. Even though harvest time occurred annually, my village tradition held that Ijele would only appear once every four years to commemorate the harvest. Besides those regular appearances, Ijele could also be counted on to be present to recognize the death of a chief. The other reason I looked forward to Ijele’s visit was that my extended family would all be present. Having so many cousins in such close proximity gave me many extra playmates. The time seemed like a little slice of heaven to me.
The mask of Ijele makes an unforgettable impression for several reasons. First, the structural characteristics are distinctive. The physical enormity (approximately 7 feet tall and 7 feet wide) is impossible to miss. If one were encouraged to minimize the impact of size alone however, the mask presents sufficient visual difficulty to capture any viewer. The mask itself is comprised of two segments. The top cylinder is adorned with doll-sized detailed effigies of various characters, such as little children. There are also figures of what appears to be a chief, a man, woman and a bird in a tree. The figures are arranged next to one another, with small spaces between each one, in two rows which appear to wrap around the upper level of the mask. The heads of the figures are attached to a slender stick running above the row, while the figures’ legs are held in place by a rope running below the row. Trees fashioned from ropes also adorn the shorter sides of the top cylinder.

At the very top of the mask is a white man sitting on top of a horse wearing a hat and smoking a cigar. Right next to him is a figure of a black man holding a long flag pole. There are also two very long hands, possibly made out of cloth, sticking out from both sides of the mask. The form of a very large snake is coiled around the circumference of the top cylinder near the place where the larger bottom cylindrical skirt begins. The lower cylinder is just like the top, vibrantly colored. Long beautiful cloths are hung horizontally on the mask, and the cloths overlap each other. The detailed geometric patterns seem to be abstractions of natural objects. Stars made from tessellated triangles are present. Swirls loosely suggesting spirals could represent natural forces such as water or wind. Attached to the lowest part of the skirt-like bottom are ribbons of different colors adding to the overall impression of movement and rhythm, even when Ijele is stationary. As the mask made it majestic moves, small round mirrors attached
to the fabric often catch the rays of the sun, and shine those rays back into the eyes of the observer.

The mask I choose for this paper is mostly associated from the Northern Igbo side in Nigeria. This mask is called Ijele and it is very similar to the mask we discussed in class under the Odo festival. Besides the physical characteristics and the visual complexity, Ijele makes a lasting impression because of the cultural and religious significance he holds. To understand precisely why and how this is so, one must first understand a little about the significance of masks in African culture in general and several aspects of Igbo culture in particular. “To an African, a mask is more than merely a facial covering. It includes the costume and adornment worn on the body, and represent the embodiment of a tradition and guarantee for continuity” (Lommel 9). Masks serve an important function in affirming the continuity of life and reinforcing the African worldview. Unlike Americans and Europeans whose views tend to be focused on the individual, the African worldview is centered on the group, usually the village or larger community. When one put on a mask, one is actually putting on a spirit.

Logically then, the spirits of the dead would be especially interested and involved in the pivotal moments and events in society. For the Igbo, many of these events are agricultural, since the majority of the Igbo are farmers. Among the important crops raised is the yam. Ijele comes out during the yam festival to ensure good crops, and bring prosperity and happiness to the community. Ijele reaffirms and helps the villagers celebrate their connection to the land, and reminds them of their dependence on natural phenomena and the flow of life.

Masquerades and the initiation rites surrounding them serve complex functions in Igbo society, both social and religious. In my village everything about the masquerade and initiation are done in secret, in fact days that lead up the festival women are not allowed anywhere near the
men while they are involved in this ritual. They are not even to eat a meal cooked by a woman during the initiation rites and days to the yam festival. Each component of the mask speaks in a symbolic way to the viewer, reminding, expanding and explaining one’s relationship to self and the larger world. The doll-sized effigies on the upper section of the mask symbolize different aspects important to the local community. First, the human-like figures are depicted as engaged in everyday tasks; “Some of the figures are arranged in scenes showing such incidents as a woman in labor, a man climbing a palm tree to cut fruits or the eze (chief) making his annual appearance in the company of a band of musicians” (Aniakor 44). Thus, Ijele is tied to the everyday life of the community and ensures that life continues as it should. Ijele upholds the social order. Second the mask like figures illustrated the “spirit world” while the different animals portrayed the “animal world” (Aniakor 44). This represents the Igbo worldview, one that is in harmony with the natural world and other men, and is also united with the world beyond.

The motifs which comprise Ijele not only affirm the connection members of the Igbo community have to one another but also to their history and to forces larger than themselves which have made them the people they are and continue to shape them into the people they will become. When Ijele appears at the celebration of the yam festival, the villagers are entertained, and everyone is happy. The village is cohesive and everyone looks forward to an even better harvest next year. On the other hand, when Ijele appears on a sad occasion such as the death of a chief, the social as well as the religious functions of the masquerade can be seen. In this case, the villagers have an outlet for their anger and sorrow over the loss of a great leader.

The importance of voluntary sacrifice and shared suffering should not be overlooked in an attempt to understand the importance of Ijele to the Igbo. Huge amounts of time, money and materials are needed to construct the Ijele mask properly. The materials include “bamboo poles,
palm midribs, and grass used for stuffing the figures” (Aniako 46). All the mentioned materials can be found in Nigeria but that is not the case when it comes to thread and the cloth materials that are used in the making of the mask, supporting Ottenberg’s assertion that, “In the last decades of the 20th century, more imported materials have been used in African masks” (Ottenberg 121).

Villagers sacrifice huge amounts of money and resources as the purchase of the Ijele mask. The mask is made by men who have been trained by another member of the family. It is passed down from one generation to the other. They are paid by the members of the village. It is stated that not very many villages can afford to raise the money needed to have this majestic mask. To give an example, one of the overlapping cloths at the lower part of the mask is estimated to cost four hundred dollars and on the front of the lower section of the mask, I counted seven of them. This brings the estimated cost for the cloth alone to $5,600, a huge amount for the inhabitants of a small and poor village.

Ijele, a dominant cultural symbol of the Igbo is a towering presence not only literally but figuratively as well. The imposing size of his frame and the vibrant, eye-catching motifs which cover every inch are animated to multicolored proportions by the dancer underneath. It is only now that I am older and through my research for this paper do I come to understand and appreciate the rich symbolism of the mask and the larger role the mask played in the ceremonies rituals and in my everyday life.
Works Cited

Published by: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center


(DT515.42089)