

## *Ìkálè as a Melting Pot of Cultures: Evidences from Masking Traditions*

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Ìkálè traditions constitute a unique area of study, especially in the masking traditions and how the masks have been influenced by, or are related to, other cultures. The paper examines the symbolic nature of Ìkálè masquerades, the symbolic significance of some associated artifacts and the comparison between Umalè and Egúngún masquerades. The paper also identifies some material similarities between Ìkálè masquerades and those of their neighbours, and gives some historical explanations on the areas and how they blend with other cultures.

### **Introduction**

The Ìkálè, a Yorùbá subgroup, are found in the upland areas of the south-western part of Ondo State of Nigeria. They live in a number of communities such as Ìkòyà, Òde-Ìrèlè, Òde-Aye, Igbódìgò, Àyèkà, Erinje, Òmèn, Òsòrò, Ìdèpé (Òkìtìpupa) and Ìgbinsin-Òlótò. Others which were formerly grouped under Benin Confederation but are now with them are, Àjàgbà, Ìyànsàn, Àkótógbò and Ijù-Òsun.East. The four communities and Ìkálè areas in general are Edo. Traits of their language and culture even show clearly in the ways of life of these communities. In fact, when one enters into any of these four towns, one sees nothing but the Edo culture, be it in the modes of dressing and language of greetings. Àkótógbò town in particular, is in two sections: one that claims Benin origin and lives Benin lifestyle, and the other which claims Ìkálè origin. Despite the segregation however, the people inter-marry and share the same markets, churches and mosques, and their individual head chiefs are under a common rulership of the Lárògbò of Àkótógbò. The closest neighbours of the Ìkálè to the South are the Ìlájé, Ìjò Àpòì and Ìjò Àrògbò who are well known for their water spirit masquerades. Their Yorùbá neighbours to the North are the Ondo, and to the West are the Ìjè bú. Some of the neighbouring ways of life are closely related to theirs, especially, in belief systems, dialects, dressing, music, dance and masking. Despite the fact that most Ìkálè are Christians, a lot of them still embrace traditional religions. Some of their deities are Ayélála (the goddess of justice), Japénwà (the god of justice), Léròn (the god of palm-kernel), Èmìnalè (the god of paralysis), Lómo-òkúta (the god of the stone), Yewa meaning "our mother" and Olúwa-Mobi which translates into the name of a river and a community. (Olúwa is the name of the river that passes through the area; while Mobi is a community from where the river has its source). The common name for these deities in Ìkálè is Umalè which is also the name for a group of their masquerades.

## Early Types of Masquerades

The early masquerades among the Ìkálè are the Umalè types: These are Umalè-lílá (super masquerades) and the Umalè-kékeré (lesser masquerades). The super masquerades, Umalè-lílá are in pairs, male and female with vertical structures and tufts (òsùn-malè) shooting out from the top of the head of their masks (plate 1). There are some, however, without tufts in this category (plate 2). The super masquerades, Umalè-lílá have an average of six supporting masquerades out of which only Ògónìkókó (plate 3) joins the pair in performance. It can also perform before or after them. Others only perform before or after the performance of the super masquerades. Ògónìkókó is believed to be the smartest of all the dancing masquerades but belongs to the Umalè-lílá set (Umalè-kékeré are never accompanied by the Ògónìkókó). The fans of this supporting masquerade refer to it as, Ògónìkókó, apedìye lédìye je, meaning, "one who kills other people's fowls to eat." It has many followers. It is not vicious but kills any fowl that comes its way. When it kills fowls, nobody raises any eyebrow, and the fowls so killed in the process become booty for its followers. The reason for antagonizing the fowl is that the Ìkálè people believe, as in Yorùbá generally, that the fowl is an ingrate and unreliable. Yorùbá elders prefer the pigeon, eyelé, to the fowl, adiye. In discussions, they often say,

Bí ojú bá ye ojú  
Kí ohùn má ye ohùn.  
Eyelé ni kí o jé  
Mase jé adiye.  
Adìye ni í bá onílé je  
Tí í bá onílé mu,  
Tí í dojó ikú onílé  
Tí í yerí;  
Sùgbón eyelé kì í bá onílé je  
Kí ó bá onílé mu tán  
Kí ó dojó ikú onílé  
Kí ó yerí.

Adéoyè, 1985:8-9.

When we do not see one another again  
We should not forget our agreement.  
Behave like the pigeon, eyelé  
And not the fowl, adiye.  
The fowl dines with the owner,  
And drinks with the owner  
But at the owner's death  
It escapes.  
Conversely the pigeon dines  
And drinks with its owner and  
At the owner's death  
It still remains in the house.

It is the people's belief that if the house of its owner is on fire, the pigeon prefers to die inside

it rather than escape. Conversely, if the house of the owner of the fowl is on fire, the fowl escapes immediately. It is this supposed behaviour of the fowl that angers Ògónìkókó masquerade who will never spare any fowl that comes its way. The lesser masquerades, Umalè-kékeré are in triplets (plate 4) with horizontal structures but without tufts. They are similar to the riverine or Kalabari Ijo masks that are cubist in tendency and are of Ijo in origin (Adépegba, 1995:54). The lesser masquerades also have three other supporting masquerades that only perform before or after the performance of the set. Umalè maskers are usually men. Although one of the two super masquerades wears female appearance, the device, according to Ògunbà (1980:6), is a male artistic disguise to achieve verisimilitude. The idea might also be to institute a gender balance in Ìkálè masking traditions. Spectacular about Ìkálè masking traditions are the symbolic names given to their masquerades. In the Umalè types, certain names based on behaviour (ùwà) and ornamentation (àrà) feature prominently. Some of such names on "Ùwà" are Ùwàlòkun (behaviour is like the ocean), Ùwáhàn (good manners show), Ùwàlèré (good behaviour is friendship), Manùwà (the child has good manners), Ìyélùwà (the mother of good manners). It then means that members of the cult of Umalè are conscious that there is need for good behaviour in the society. Those names on "àrà" are Àráwà (ornamentation exists), Àráwáyé (designs have come into existence), Àwòdarà (to study and design), Àrájù (ornamentation is more important), Òkunàrà (the ocean [abundance] of ornamentation), Àráhàn (designs are prominent), Àráwomo (the child likes ornamentation). All these are epitomes of the creative ingenuity of the carvers of the masks and the designers of the costumes of Umalè masquerades. In most Ìkálè communities, Umalè masquerades perform during èje festivals, but in Òsòrò, Igbódigò, Ìdèpé and Àyèkà, they perform during èhándón festival. Èje festivals are yam harvests celebrated annually. Èje in Yorùbá numerical order is "seven", and so, èje festivals are held in the seventh month of the Ìkálè Yorùbá calendar. Èjèdón falls to October. The Ìkálè year starts from April, the beginning of the Ìkálè agricultural year known as inédón, the first month. May is èjìdón, the second month, while June is ètádón, the third month. July is èrendón, the fourth month, August is èròndón, the fifth month and September, èfádón the sixth month. October is èjèdón, the seventh month. November is thus èjòdón, the eighth month while December is èhándón, the ninth month which marks the end of the agricultural year. The months of January, February and March known as Òrìtá are not counted as they fall to the period of annual rest for farmers.

### **The Alien Type of Masquerades**

The Ìkálè believe that Egúngún are from heaven but are never associated with their own ancestors as among other Yorùbá sub-groups. The reason might be because Egúngún masquerade is alien to their land. Egúngún type is said to have been brought to Ìkálèland by a Nupe woman from Òyó (a town in Oyo State of Nigeria) and had since been adopted. There are claims and counter claims of the origin of Egúngún. Some claim it is Nupe in origin; while others claim it originated from Òyó. However, Nadel (1970:192) has earlier refuted the claim that Egúngún is of Nupe origin. According to him, the Nupe regard Egúngún as foreign to their land. Adépegba (1998:28) too is of the view that Egúngún might be Òyó in origin. According to him, what makes Òyó playing a leading role is that Egúngún has gone beyond ancestral rituals to branch out into different kinds of entertainment performances. Olájubù (1972:1-2) observes that the origin of Egúngún is difficult to trace, as different Yorùbá subgroups claim that it originated in their places. What was common with the elders he interviewed was that Ológbojò or Ológbiín originated Egúngún cult. However, Ìkálè Egúngún masquerades do not wear wooden or metal masks. Their costume ensemble consists

only of colourful strips of fabric, appliquéd with pieces of leather or patchwork of fabric in different shapes and colours (plate 5). The body of the masker is concealed completely from head to toes with soft-padded head-top to create an elegant but terrifying appearance to the beholders. The masker only sees through a thick closely woven net fringed round the face with chains of cowries. Egúngún masquerades perform annually. They also perform during the burial rites of important members of their cult and they can be invited to perform at state or national cultural programmes. They are also used for removing the corpses of people believed to have been killed by Ayélála, Léròn or by any other deity among the Ìkálè. The corpses of people so killed are regarded as ikú Umalè, meaning death by spirits. They are neither buried in the house, nor in the town. Rather, they are carried with accompanying esoteric rites and abandoned in the bush reserved for such burials. In other words, judgment is based upon the deeds of individuals while here on earth (Awólàlú, 1979:58). The property of the person so killed by any of these deities, are taken to the shrine of the deity responsible for his or her death. Should anybody, either intentionally or un-intentionally, hold back any of the person's property, the deity, as believed, will deal with such person or his or her entire household. Materials available in the shrine of Egúngún masquerades are the long metal staff (òsùn or òpá-òrèrè) known to the Ìkálè as òsò, feathers of the parrot (ìkóóde). The òsò staff of the Ìkálè is identical with the òsùn of the Yorùbá (Abímbólá, 1975:19) and that of Benin (Ben-Amos, 1995:74). The long metal staff is surmounted with birds in some cases or with both birds and chameleon in others. The birds here refer to witches (Ben-Amos, 1995:74). They also symbolize buoyancy or motion for the owner of the staff. Where chameleon is used, it represents the power of transformation (Ben-Amos, 1995:74).

### **Comparison Between Umalè and Egúngún Masquerades**

Despite the co-existence of both Umalè and Egúngún masquerades in Ìkálè, there is no marked similarity between them except that only men are the maskers of both types of masquerades. For the contrast, it has been observed that Umalè, either super or lesser masquerades only carry wooden masks (either vertical or horizontal); but Egúngún masquerades only carry soft-padded head-tops. In their outings, Umalè masquerades are bare-footed, but Egúngún masquerades are completely costumed. It has also been noted that Umalè masquerades have several supporting masquerades, whereas the Egúngún type has none but whip carriers or guides known as atókùn or amúsàn-án. Apart from Òkóòrò, a supporting Umalè masquerade which talks to people, Umalè masquerades do not talk at all, whereas Egúngún masquerades do converse with people. Furthermore, some Umalè masquerades carry long tufts, a kind of flexible attachment, which are not found on Egúngún masquerades, to the top of their masks. Umalè masquerades are also known to be elegantly dressed with ankle rattlers, which the Egúngún masquerades that wear fearful appearances do not wear. Umalè masquerades also attract more audience when performing than Egúngún, probably because Umalè masquerades are not vicious. Egúngún masquerades have spiteful behaviour making many to detest them. Lastly, it is the belief of the Ìkálè that Egúngún masquerades are from heaven while Umalè masquerades are said to be water-spirits.

### **Material Similarities Between Ìkálè Masquerades and Those of Their Neighbours**

Undoubtedly, Ìkálè masking traditions have revealed a lot of cultural blends within and outside Yorùbáland. A brief comparison of Ìkálè Umalè and Kalabari Ekine masking relationship has revealed some interesting parallels. The similarity in Òyó and Ìkálè Egúngún

masquerade costumes authenticates a tradition that Egúngún masquerade was imported to Ìkálèland by a Nupe woman from Òyó town. The imbibing of Òyó facial marks on Ìkálè Umalè masks (plate 6) reveals a cultural blend with both cultures. The historical connection of Ugbò/Ìkálè groups with the early idea of masquerading in Ilé-Ifè during Morèmi era, and the yearly exhibition of the raffia-robed masquerades or elúyarè (Johnson, 1973:147) during Edì festival in Ilé-Ifè suggest a historical evidence.

The long metal staff, òsò of the Ìkálè is similar to the Yorùbá òsùn or the Benin òsùn and signifies a cultural link between Ìkálè Yorùbá and other Yorùbá subgroups as well as Benin culture. Among the Ìkálè, òsò is held by the members of Egúngún and Ògbóni cuts and the guild of Ìjámà (Ìkálè Council of Elders), during important traditional engagements. To the Yorùbá generally, the òsùn is held by experienced Ifá priests and members of the ògbóni cult. It has also been observed that the òsùn staff must not be allowed to fall down on its sides (Abímbólá, 1975:19); hence the saying: Òrò gangan là á bósùn, meaning, the òsùn staff is always found standing upright (Abímbólá, 1975:19). For it to fall down is a bad omen for the owner. Common to the guild of Ìjámà and individual rulers of Ìkálè communities are the adá and abènren (scepters of authority) similar to the Benin adá and ébèn and these suggest Benin connection. There are also some paintings on the wall of the central shrine in Òde-Ìrèlè (plate 7) which make a great attestation to the relationship between Ìkálè and Benin cultures. All these masking traditions place Ìkálè as a melting pot of cultures.

### **Some Historical Explanations**

Some Ìkálè communities claim direct descent from Ilé-Ifè, Benin City or Ugbò (an Ìlàje town). Oral traditions confirm that there were migrations from Ifè Oòyè before the Benin contact with the area in the 16th century. The earliest Benin contact has linked Ìkálè dynasty to Oba Esigie of Benin (Bájòwà, 1992:3). As Ugbò oral tradition puts it, an important migration of theirs took place in Ilé-Ifè, and the Ìkálè were part of it. The migration is said to have been led out of Ilé-Ifè by Òrúnmákin. The Ugbò group is said to have moved from Ilé-Ifè as a result of a rift on who should be the next Oòni, the king of Ifè and they initially settled at a place called Òkè-Máfuràngan. According to the tradition, it was from this settlement that the Ugbò people made series of attacks in form of raffia masquerades on the Ifè as upheld in Ife Moremi tradition. Their warfare camouflag seems to be the earliest record of Yorùbá masquerading. Tradition has it that during one of such raids on Ifè, Morèmí, a beautiful woman was captured and taken as wife to the Ugbò leader. She is said to have stayed long enough to know their tricks and later sneaked out to reveal their secrets to the Ifè who set the Ugbò on fire to drive them back in their subsequent raids. At present, Morèmi is honoured for her patriotism in the annual Edì festival in Ilé-Ifè. It is now customary for principal characters in Edì festival to use raffia as camouflag (Bájòwà, 1992:103). How the Ìkálè shared in the Ugbò migration was borne out of the fact that the founders of Òde-Ìrèlè, an important Ìkálè community were originally Ugbò who migrated from Ugbò to the present Òde-Ìrèlè. They carried along with them some traditions and artifacts which include masking tradition, a long brass drum known as àgbá-Malòkun, a beaded crown, a carved wooden staff (Òpá-orò or òpá-ìdìkòbà), iron rattle (àjà) and some other artifacts. More importantly, most of the other Ìkálè communities had once settled at Òde-Ìrèlè before they finally migrated to where they are today (Bájòwà, 1992:3). The migrations to Òde-Ìrèlè and later to their present communities most likely made the influence of Ugbò traditions, including masking, to spread over Ìkálèland.

## **Conclusion**

Ìkálè masking traditions have caused a reasonable cultural bond between Ìkálè and other notable areas such as Ilé-Ifè, Ugbò, Benin, Òyó, the Kalabari Ijo and other coastal regions of the Bight of Benin. This phenomenon has made possible the intermixing of several cultures. Evidences abound right from the migration of the Ugbò people from Ilé-Ifè (which included the Ìkálè) to the earliest Benin contact that linked Ìkálè dynasty to Oba Esigie of Benin. The Kalabari-Ijo connection is another strong proof taken from the costuming, performance, forms and structures of Ìkálè Umalè masquerades. Considering all these therefore, and other material similarities between Ìkálè masking traditions and those of their neighbouring regions, it is glaring that Ìkálè is a melting-pot of cultures.

## **P.S.**

*At the discretion of the editor certain images referred to in this article were omitted.*

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