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# Artwork Information Sheet **21**

## NDIDI DIKE'S AFIKPO MASKS



*The Afikpo Mask*, 1996, Wood Panels, 56 x 110cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

## INTRODUCTION

**I**fikpo (The Ehugbo) is a predominantly agrarian society located south of Abakaliki, Ebonyi State's capital. It is the second largest town in Ebonyi, with a population of nearly 160,000 people (2016 census). The Afikpos are an Igbo group with a rich cultural heritage that holds strong influences from the Efik and Ibibio people—their neighbors from the other side of Cross River State.

Afikpo masks are an aesthetic fusion of spirituality, patriarchy, and community life. The elaborate mask and masquerading tradition of Afikpo, which Ottenberg (1967) extensively recorded, is a treasured part of Igbo art and has long been considered as a model of African theatre.

## MASKS AND MASQUERADING IN AFIKPO

In Afikpo, as with many Nigerian cultures, masks are the shroud of secrecy that enable incarnated spirits to walk among mortals. The four villages of Afikpo—Itim, Nkpogoro, Oha Isu and Oziza— within which its 29 communities thrive, are home to unique secret societies or cults. Membership to these cults is restricted to initiated males. This initiation is a festive rite of passage as Ikeagwu et al. (2017) note that "Igwugwu festival is celebrated once in ten years (a decade), specifically in November. It marks a religious festival that celebrates the maturation of young boys into manhood. Hence it orchestrates the rights of initiation into childhood".

Aside from the initiation festival, the public manifestation of these societies is tied to two other masquerading parades—*Iri Iko* and *Okumkpo*— which are an essential aspect of the various rites and celebrations that occur during the harvest period of the year (usually between late August and February). Masks are important in these events because they describe the masquerade and, by extension, the kind/identity of the spirit that graces the occasion.

Pure masked theatrics, devoid of any spiritual/religious connotations, is traditionally reserved for uninitiated youngsters.

According to Ottenberg (1975), the deity of the secret society though residing permanently in the sacred bush rather than the mask would only permit masked expressions from members who are on good terms with it. As a result, every masquerade and its mask has a spiritual component.

Afikpo masks are of three types: wood, calabash, and net. The most popular of these is the wooden mask. Calabash masks are the rarest of the three and are only guaranteed an appearance during the initiation rites for the *Omume* title—which a man who wishes to take for himself must take for his first son as well. Net masks reveal the influence of Cross River ethnic groups (strong fishing culture) and are seen in full glory at *Oje Ogwu*. (Ottenberg, 1975)

There are 12 kinds of wooden masks: *Bekee*, *Ibibio*, *Igri*, *Mba*, *Mkpe*, *Mmaji*, *Nnade Okumkpa*, *Nne mgbo*, *Okpesu umuruma*, *Opa nwa*, *Otogho*, and *Acali*. Some of them are related in cultural connotation, but each has a distinct conceptual background and signature appearance.

A general rule of thumb when it comes to Afikpo masks is that masks with more feminine qualities are reserved for younger men—especially those who have recently been initiated. Qualities considered feminine include combinations of bright colors (especially around the mouth area). The Ibibio mask, for instance, with its bright yellow and red paint, is considered female. Thus, when a female spirit/character is to be embodied in a performance, this mask can serve the purpose. On the other hand, ugly and grotesque features often serve as the incarnation pieces for characters who are old, greedy but always male. Other masks that fall between these two extremes are male masks with their specific functions and embodiments.

The wooden masks are typically carved from a single piece of wood, and feature eyebrows, foreheads, and

eye slits/holes for facial distinction. Other markings which may be present on a mask include prominent streaks flowing from the eye area, sharp vertical line representing a nose, linear and distorted shapes, etc.

Although masks are a major sculptural form in Afikpo, Ottenberg (1975) notes that they are mostly nonmythic. They are not used as symbols for legends, myths, or historical events.

The political status of cult members who wear masks is determined by their age and life as men than by their cult membership. Despite Ottenberg's (1975) theory that masked traditions are ceremonial relics of an older, much more politically powerful mask culture, this is unlikely given that Igbo societies are historically egalitarian in their politics, and masked festivals like the Okumkpo can be traced back to 1942, as Ikegwu et al. (2017) point out.

## THE AFIKPO MASKS



**Fig 1.1 The Afikpo Masks (close up)**, 1996, Wood Panels, 56 x 110cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

This piece is a union of 11 individual wooden masks in the *mba* style. All *mba* masks have a flat rectangular board as an inseparable part of the 'head' of the mask. The face of an *mba* mask traditionally incorporates other styles like *bekee*, but some variants incorporate features from other mask styles like *acali*.

Three of the eleven masks are from the *mkpere* variant of *mba* masks. These have prominent tear streaks that are connected to the eyes and are typical of an *acali* mask. Although the faces are not the traditional *nzu* (native chalk) white, the hair and tears are dark blue, reminiscent of the traditional black. All *mba* masks are typically masculine (though can be used to portray feminine characters when worn with certain costumes and headdresses), and Ms. Dike emphasizes this with carved beards adorning the spherical mouth of the *bekee* mask.

*Mba* masks such as these are typically found during the elaborate *Okumkpo* ritual. This is a public festival that involves several skits, songs, and dances presented by masked society members—masquerades. It began in the 1940s as a form of ritual cleansing from abominations that had occurred in the land, to avert dangerous repercussions.

"The *Okumkpo* masquerade sings, dances and dramatizes to conscientize and sanitize the society, its essence is to search out transgressors and admonish members of the society to be decorous" (Orji 2015).

The name 'Okumkpo' means 'bad omen', and always begins with the appearance of the chief masquerades (*Nnade and Ologo*), who carry different objects on their backs to signify the bad omens which are to be cleansed; it ends with the lifting of the ritual pot that symbolizes good tidings. (Ikegwu, et al. 2017)

At the *Okumkpo*, the *Mba* mask is worn by younger boys—*akparakpa* dancers—together with a costume (also called *mba*) consisting of khaki/white shorts, white singlets, short raffia waistbands, ankle rattles, and a colored chest harness. The *akparakpa* dancers accompany the events at the *Okumkpo* with choruses and chants which are an example of Igbo poetry; at set intervals, they render dances to complement plays (Ottenberg, 1975).

These performances serve as a method for the embodiment and transmission of the values and stories of the community while correcting the prevalent ills.



The *mkpere* variant of the Mba mask (with strong tear streaks), however, is not as common as the rest. It doesn't appear at the *Okumkpo* but it is worn when the highest title in Afikpo is to be taken--the *Omume*.

Three of Dike's masks feature motifs of lizards and tortoise. In Igbo folktales, the tortoise (*mbe*) and lizard (*ngwere*) are often portrayed as cunning, self-aware characters who may stray often but always have their errors corrected by life events. As a result, these motifs can be seen as encapsulating the *Okumkpo*'s essence; as Orji (2015) points out:

*"Okumkpo will normally begin gathering pieces of ideas and bits early in the year by listening to family gossips and quarrels at home-stead. Along the stream among girls, from the market or farm among the women or the village rest house among the men, anything picked up will present scenarios that will be developed into a drama sketch song, mimes for ribald comedy, caricature, burlesque, buffoonery, and satirical content".*

Hence, most community members will have their excesses, and cunning episodes checked at this yearly festival.

## CONCLUSION

The Ehugbo's masks and masked rituals demonstrate how art has long been used to restore social order. The ideals and spirits embodied by mask wearers, especially at the *Okumkpo*, are not specifically a means of exclusion of females, but rather serve to unite people from all walks of life.

## REFERENCES

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