

Performance Aesthetics and Functionalism: The Legacy of Atam Masquerade of The Bakor People of Ogoja Local Government Area

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ABSTRACT: *Societal cohesion is most vital for the continuous growth and development of any community particularly pre-literate or traditional societies that maintain their norms and values orally or through traditional institutions meant for the education of young ones. Through these traditional institutions governance, law and order and indeed socialization and entertainment are ensured. Through these same institutions authority is revolved according to the norms and cultural practices already laid down by the traditions of the community. Information or communication is achieved through this same medium. In this set up, masquerades have assumed paramount importance in the maintenance and transmission of cherished cultural values. Masquerading serves as a traditional means of re-affirmation of these values, the sustenance of authority as well as imposition of sanctions against deviant members of the community. Atam masquerade in Bakor society holds a revered position as a Royal masquerade which makes it feared and esteemed by every member of the community. Its authority is unparalleled in the history of masquerading in Bakor and its roles span social and spiritual facets of societal existence. The paramount importance of these institutions to traditional society and corresponding high degree of danger of extinction to which they are exposed has necessitated this paper on Atam masquerade among the Bakor in an attempt to capture not just its functional relevance but the artistry involved in its realization. Through it one is able to record and glimpse at the artistic and creative instinct of the Bakor people as they turn their natural endowments into functional use. This is evident in Atam mask which is made purely from the palm tree and other trees which are found in abundance in the traditional environment. Machine fabric is, infact, supposed to be forbidden in Atam masquerading, which calls to mind the need for reliance on and a look inwards for African traditional development.*

KEYWORDS: *Performance, Aesthetics, Symbolism, Atam and Cultural Identity*

I. INTRODUCTION

In his review of *The artist in Tribal Society* edited by Marian W. Smith, Dennis Young (2012) posits that the importance of the book

Lies in the light it attempts to shed on the fundamental impulse to create visual art: on whether there is some vital nourishment to be had from art activity and, if so, whether a look at the [tribal] artist can help us define such nourishment so that we can make it more available to western children.

There is no gainsaying the fact that there is nourishment in artistic creation but whether “tribal” artistic creations can be useful to western children may be a debatable postulation. Young further asserts that

If the book has one major lesson to teach, however, it is that the art of [tribal] societies is not one single entity. Motive and method vary not only from culture to culture but, even, within one village there may be different sorts of “artist[s]” whose ambits the ritual and the circular hardly overlap.

Working on this premise, this writer attempts to focus on the aesthetic and functional relevance of artistic creations like masquerading among the Bakor people of the upper Cross River Region of Nigeria especially on Atam masquerade which roles span both ritual and secular facets of Bakor cultural life. Artistic creation is a universal human pre-occupation and so one finds it hard to see reason why the lack of understanding or appreciation of an alien culture’s form of artistic expression should automatically ascribe

sophistication to one and primitiveness to the other which seems to be the debate that has engulfed Western art critics on African art for quite some time (Boas 1927, Leuzinger 1959, Bohannon 1961 and others). The result is the poor image associated with African art objects in the western world even when these objects are known to be of comparative high quality and sophistication. Also, form and content of artistic expression depend on the perception of the artist and the ecology of the environment which explains variations and differences in artistic products from culture to culture and sometimes even from community to community within the same culture. African art objects will thus necessarily be different from Western art objects even though they may be some points of convergence: therefore, African art should be viewed as unique to Africa and expressive of the African world view and experiences which, perhaps, explains why Philip Lewis (1968) re-affirms Leonhard Adam's (1940) assertion that

The mere foreignness of form and content of the various primitive arts serve to link them together in our [Western] mind for purposes of art criticism but that this linking is extraneous to the works themselves, being more a part of our attitudes toward them.

Since the environment dictates the degree of complexity of art objects such that they defy analysis based on precepts which we unconsciously impose on them but which may be alien to the consciousness of the creator of the art objects, what we should emphasize today is a more conscientious and in-depth study of African art forms for a better understanding of same for as Philip H. Lewis once again asserts

Unquestionably, the Western art world has focused great interest on "primitive" art and attracted the attention of scholars. However, these non-anthropologically oriented art commentators HAVE DONE LITTLE (emphasis mine) to increase understanding of "primitive" art. At the same time, unfortunately, the anthropologists have moved away from consideration of art, so that although there is some mention of art in ethnological monographs, it is rarely detailed enough to provide for significant analysis.----- the usual combination of library and museum research is simply not sufficient; what is needed [now] is art oriented ethnographic field research.

This writer observes that since very sparse records exist on masquerades or masquerading among the Bakor people of Cross River State, this write-up will serve to draw attention to such existing areas of research. It will also aid an understanding of specific cultural institutions or artistic objects like Atam masquerading which play a very vital role in the lives of the people. In this way, we attempt to "study a living people before their culture changes". The study will, as well, contribute to an explication of Atam masquerade in Alok village of Nnam clan which is recorded and kept in a museum in Europe without any description as to its relevance in the community from which it was recorded.

This, it is hoped, will satisfy the urge to study the form and content of art objects in the attempt to see them as part of a larger system i.e. an explication of the contexts or environmental and ecological makeup of the societies where the art objects are found since African artistic creations are often generally classified along with Oceanic, Asian and Indian American art as primitive and requiring more understanding through consistent and systematic research.

It is well known that the visual arts are a medium of communication, a kind of universal language that expresses the needs and impulses of a people in a way that verbal utterances cannot. Masquerading, in most African societies, therefore serves as the community's symbolic expression of their essence and dispositions to life experiences. Masquerades depict the aesthetic and creative qualities inherent in the African environment. Masquerading thus becomes a symbolic representation of ideas, events and persons especially ancestral personages whose lives have positively impacted on the community. In this parlance, some art objects assume personal or individualistic connotations which are difficult to interpret by those who have made only vicarious contact with the societies of production of these objects. Western art critics who have studied African art objects from museums therefore run into problems of interpretation of what they come in contact with because the objects were uprooted from their contexts of creation and domicile. Today, field researchers should emphasize African art studies within their context of creation where the purposes for their creation can be made more manifest and interpretable.

In Africa today, as in the past, there are several facets of cultural life which are gradually being eroded and fast going into extinction either because they are branded "primitive" by westerners due to lack of understanding or because they are simply abandoned for so called modern entertainment engagements like television, home video, discotheque or partying which our younger generations conceive of as more civilized.

The consequence is that many aspects of African cultural life which confer a distinct identity on tribal entities and enhance beauty in artistic development and creativity are fast disappearing. In Bakor community for instance, in the past few years, several elders who were acknowledged sculptors and carvers responsible for the creation of beautiful artefacts have passed on to the great beyond carrying along their skill and creativity. Their artistic styles, models and art objects are fast going into oblivion since younger generations have shown little or no interest in the acquisition or perpetuation of these creative capabilities. This dearth of creativity and declining cultural rejuvenation worried the new clan-head of Ekajuk clan, one of the clans that constitute the Bakor groups, Ntul-atul innocent Mahyim Nwake, who on the occasion of his coronation on the 7th of July 2012, in his acceptance speech, called for a cultural revival in the land. To this writer, this revival is long overdue, particularly when one observes that the glamour and artistic sophistry that in the past accompanied the clan-head's coronation ceremony are currently lost to posterity. This write-up, therefore, also attempts to capture the beauty of performance and the cultural significance of "Atam" masquerade, "elom-ntul" or the king's masquerade as it is fondly known in Bakor community. The aim is to afford us the opportunity to view and judge not only the artistic sophistication but also the functional significance of the masquerade in Bakor in particular and African cultural life in general.

II. GENERAL CONCEPT OF MASQUERADES AND MASQUERADING IN AFRICAN SOCIETY

Masquerading is a widespread indulgence of Africans and serves as expressions of the ideology and communal essence of ethnic groups who indulge in masking or masquerading. Masking is, therefore, a firm mode of artistic expression in Africa. Beyond the communal portrayal of the artistic and creative impulse of African communities, masquerades and masks have deep symbolic meaning which go beyond the surface beauty of the artistic creations. Among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, the Igbos of the South East, the Binis and Ibibios and Efiks of the South South Zones all in Nigeria, masks and masquerading are common features that represent several ideas and cultural beliefs of the people. The Yorubas, Ibibios and Binis, apart from masking for entertainment purposes, believe that the masquerade is a physical representation of ancestral spirits come to life. The masquerade is, therefore, believed to be endowed with spiritual or supernatural powers meant for the execution of certain communal duties for the enhancement of societal cohesion. The Igbo, on the other hand, believe, instead, that the masquerader, when he wears the mask, undergoes a transformation which gives him the power to have influence over spirits though he himself remains human. The mask becomes a physical mechanism which manifests the inner transformation of the wearer. The Ekpe or Mgbe masquerade among the Efiks and Ejagham is a physical representation of "Mgbe", the leopard from whom the masquerader derives strength and authority which serve for adjudication and maintenance of order and harmony in society. Masquerading is therefore, not just a common place activity in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular though there are several masquerades meant for pure entertainment and aesthetic achievement. Masquerades evoke deep emotions in the communities where they are found and serve several functions in the societies where they exist ranging from ritual to initiation, judicial and entertainment functions. They also serve as a unifying experience among the people.

Again in Igbo land, festivals exist that occasion the appearance of an array of masquerades of different kinds and shapes thus achieving both aesthetic and symbolic significance. The masks themselves are either beautifully sculptured or decorated to reflect different aspects or facets of communal life and experience best known and interpreted by the users of the masquerades.

Culture constitutes the unique experiences of a people who exist within a particular geographical location. Masquerading thus becomes a unique means for the communal expression of culture. The masks and masquerades in their different designs, forms, patterns and colours represent the communal essence of the different peoples who occupy various regions of Africa, while at the same time reflecting their unity in diversity. A peculiar aspect of masquerading in Africa and particularly in Nigeria is that it is exclusive of womenfolk. Hardly does one see or hear that women are involved in Masquerading. There are, however, isolated cases of female dance groups that don-on masks during their dances. Among them are Agud and Moni-nkim dance groups among the Ekajuk and Ejagham communities of Northern Cross River State and abang dance groups among the Efiks of Calabar, in the Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State all in Nigeria.

Among the Bakor people, particularly the Ekajuk, mask making and masquerading are common features of cultural life and identity. Masks and masquerades abound which represent the presence of invisible beings in the form of symbols like carved masks or idols in shrines or other sacred grooves. Communal and Family ancestral spirits are also represented by masks kept in the communal shrines or in individual family

member's houses respectively. They could be evoked or displayed during communal festivals or family ceremonies like funerals of renowned family members. In Ekajuk, the Eshamjok family ward has a carved effigy of the elephant which is displayed during ward or funeral ceremonies. There is also a masquerade whose wooden head gear is designed in the form of the elephant's tusk and trunk. These symbolize the size and importance of the ward in Ekajuk community.

Generally in Africa, the identity of the masquerader is a closely guarded secret since the masquerade is essentially not regarded as a living being. Masquerades are believed to emerge from the ground or to come from unknown destinations. Masquerades of different kinds perform specific jobs for communal integration and it requires a keen observer with interest to decipher the role or function of specific masquerades. In several situations, it becomes difficult to establish the specific functions of some masks or masquerades particularly when the distinguishing features of the masquerade meant for certain purposes are not very evident or remarkable. An example is Atam masquerade in Ekajuk community which performs several functions of cleansing, adjudication, mourning of royal personages, and entertainment. Basically, the mask is the same but certain features are then added which serve to identify the purpose for which the masquerade is meant.

In Africa today, masks and masquerades have assumed very important places with the development of tourism which has suddenly elevated the status of mask carvers particularly in Cross River and neighboring Akwa Ibom states of Nigeria. With the development of the Calabar Carnival in Cross River State, certain components of the Carnival incorporate beautiful masks while many other festivals in different parts of the country are specifically designed for the display of masquerades especially in Igbo land of South Eastern Nigeria where "mmonwu" festival is specifically designated for the appearance of all kinds of masquerades who engage in colorful displays of acrobatic skills and dances.

In such Festivals, masquerades come out in numerous and very bright and colorful costumes and are usually led by traditional dance groups of drummers and dancers, all combining to create spectacle for entertainment. Also notable, are the Ekpo masquerade festivals of the Ibibio in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. These Ekpo masquerades display very ugly and fearful masks and the masquerader's entire body is smeared with black charcoal to intensify the frightful spectacle; the aim of which is to heighten their ethereal significance.

The periods for their appearances are determined by the traditional calendars of the communities where the masquerades are found. In Bakor society, the harvest season which commences from December to March and coincides with the period of rest is also the period for masquerade displays.

Masks and Masquerades portray the ecology of the environment within which they are produced and performed. Most masks in traditional societies derive materials for their production from the plants or animals in that vicinity. Atam masquerade of the Bakor for instance is produced exclusively from Palm leaves and other reeds found in the community. Tinkorikor or King Masquerade of the Efiks is produced from plantain leaves which abound in the environment, while among the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State, Ekpo and several other masks are made from wood and raffia which are also found in abundance in the community. The principal materials for mask making are trees from which wood is gotten for the masks. Skill in the carving of masks is also a highly prized skill in traditional society even though the artist does not primarily survive by his artistic productions. Also in Bakor society, as in French Guinea, the acquisition of artistic skills and techniques of artistic production involve not only training but spiritual and symbolic intervention through supernatural forces. Masks and Masquerades in Bakor community are often times created and donned-on to represent several functions and so are created in specific patterns or shapes that enhance the performance of these functions. Such functions include initiation, war, cleansing rites, fertility rites and so on. Most, if not all African communities have masks that depict the different aspects of their tribal lives. Initiation and war masquerades are often frightful and valorous while fertility masquerades are beautiful and alluring.

Most importantly, masquerade sessions constitute dance sessions in Bakor community. The masquerade sessions become dramatic activities which solicit total theatre as the entire community members become involved in the dance enactment. Every member of the community is usually enthralled by the performances and at some point in the performance several members who may be sufficiently aroused can move up to the masquerade, obtain permission through handshake, and indulge in acrobatic or measured dance steps which can last for two to three minutes to the applause of the audience. The play ground constitutes the stage or arena for masquerade displays and festival or ceremonial occasions could easily become competitive displays between masquerades that perform creative dance styles to the admiration of the audience. The audience

members themselves are ever active participants either providing the music or dictating the rhythmic patterns of the masquerade dances through instrumentation and hand clapping. Since masquerades do not utter any recognizable human languages, they communicate with the instrumentalist through gestures and signs. The instrumentalists in their turn dictate the dance pattern to the masquerades through the instruments. The end of each masquerade performance immediately solicits criticism and judgment of the performances appropriateness or in-appropriateness as depictions of cultural norms and values as well as artistic excellence or mediocrity of the mask makers. In modern African societies, masquerade festivals serve as centres of attraction in the traditional environments, and since they take place during traditional holiday periods like Christmas, they attract full participation by sons and daughters who work in cities or towns outside their traditional communities. The festivals are thus looked forward to with enthusiasm as periods of homecoming or re-unification with kindred families. The masquerade festivals provide opportunities for this re-unification.

Many influential sons and daughters of these traditional societies who have become wealthy through business or hold high government positions belong to age grade sects in their traditional communities and the age grades, in most cases, are known to be owners of masquerades. The wealthy members, therefore, sponsor these masquerades. In such cases, masking or masquerading easily becomes a competitive venture between the respective age grades which encourages the preponderance of masquerades in the rural communities. The competitive spirit also emphasizes the aesthetic content of the masquerades since sometimes, they are judged and prizes awarded to the best or more attractive ones. Furthermore, these wealthy sons and daughters may organize ceremonies like weddings of their children or thanksgiving services in cities where they live to which masquerade groups are invited and featured copiously as entertainment agents. In some cases, the sons and daughters from a particular traditional community living in the metropolis can decide to own a masquerades which they use for entertainment purposes during ceremonial occasions like title-taking or marriages. They could equally hire same to outsiders for a fee thus commercializing masquerade ventures. In such cases, the dance skills of the masqueraders determine their attractiveness and salability.

In Bakor community, masquerades could be roughly grouped into

- a) Entertainment or ceremonial masquerades which include Ayita, Mgbashi, ajobo, Akataka to mention just a few.
- b) Warrior masks or masquerades which include Agrinya, Akataka, Ebrambi, Alashi or Afvfv among others while
- c) Ritual or cleansing masquerades which include Atam, Obasi njom, Mgbe or Ekpe as it is generally known outside Bakor and Ejagham communities also exist and are feared or revered.

Ceremonial or entertainment masks and masquerades appear in festival situations where they dance and perform other acrobatic displays to the admiration of the audience. These masquerades can be invited to perform at ceremonies which include funerals, weddings, initiation to manhood, circumcision, coronations, and in recent times church ordinations. Warrior masks and masquerades usually appear only in celebration of brave exploits in inter tribal warfare or at the funerals of deceased members of the warrior groups. In Bakor, as in other Traditional African Societies, warriors are constituted into groups for the defense and protection of communal life and property. Ritual and cleansing masks and masquerades are more difficult to comprehend or interpret because of their composite functions in society. Here, the masquerades become symbolic of superior or supernatural powers or deities and perform several duties or functions such as prophesying and detection of evil persons such as witches and wizards which is carried out by obasi-njom. Mgbe and Atam perform traditional cleansing of society from defilement as well as sacred cleansing of sick persons in the society. It is in this category of masquerading that Atam belongs and plays prominent roles in Bakor community. The different kinds of Atam serve traditional Bakor society in many facets of their lives while maintaining the identity and uniqueness of the ethnic group. Atam stands for societal norms and values which it preserves and judiciously protects with other masquerade institutions. However, today, Atam is fast losing its sacred connotation while at the same time becoming more of a mere social and entertainment institution. Its usefulness can still be attested to in the various domains of its operation in modern society.

III. MASQUERADING AND ATAM MASQUERADE IN BAKOR SOCIETY

Masquerading or masquerade ceremonies or activities are rites or cultural events carried out in many parts of the world particularly in the Caribbean and most parts of Africa. It is generally known that almost all African cultures revolve around farm chores and entertainment and almost all forms of entertainment entail festivals, ceremonies or feasts where masquerades feature as a major form of entertainment. Masquerades of different types represent different functions e.g. honoring the dead, intercession to the ancestors or living-dead for well being and progress, cleansing to ensure peaceful living, good health and enhancement of bounteous

harvests in the land. In Bakor community, masquerades exist and are ranked according to their functions which include basically ritual or religious functions and social functions of entertainment and maintenance of law and order in the community. In this categorization, masquerades for social functions are of lesser significance while correspondingly those for ritual or religious purposes are ranked higher and hence either held in awe or in esteem. This ranking notwithstanding, whether in ritual or social situations, the mask, once donned on by a masquerader assumes a special significance in the eyes of the non-initiate and is thus held in awe. This is so because it is generally held and believed in that the mask is a physical manifestation of an inner transformation of the masquerader whereby he becomes or takes on a new identify. This transformation enables the masquerader to become a spirit or play the role of the community's ancestral spirits in the process of intercession for their collective needs. To this extent, the masquerades in Bakor community represent a unified experience i.e. they serve both religious and social or entertainment purposes. They as well embody the totality of the creative and artistic repertoire of the Bakor people and thus can be seen as a culmination of the highest form of performance art. Through them one can understand the culture and cosmic view of the Bakor as the masquerades are of both symbolic and aesthetic significance.

Masquerade dances are also a form of dramatic representation as the masquerade movements are a symbolic re-enactment of the people's collective experiences. In Bakor community, therefore, masquerades appear in almost all ceremonial occasions including.

- a) Chieftaincy coronation or installation
- b) Funeral obsequies
- c) Traditional marriages and even
- d) Christian ordinations of priests and elders in the churches.

Though masquerades and masquerading exist in all facets of Bakor cultural life, of particular significance is the Atam masquerade society which masquerade exists **only** in Bakor community, an Ejagham speaking sub-group of Ekoid Bantu origin and among their Boki neighbors who agree totally that they learnt the art of Atam production from their Bakor neighbors. Although the Bakor are of Ejagham stock, no other Ejagham group has Atam masquerade among them. The Bakor, therefore, claim that the spirit-founder of the Chieftaincy institution in the land is also responsible for instituting Atam as a guardian masquerade and principal executor of the orders of the Chief. Before Atam assumed prominence as a Royal masquerade, the Bakor relied on Mgbe the leopard secret society as the Chief organ of governance in tribal life. Mgbe or its adulterated counterpart Ekpe originated among the Ejagham as a symbol of authority in governance using Nsibidi as the sign language. Today, these two institutions, Atam and Mgbe, exist as the sources of authority in Bakor community though Atam is more prominent in Bakor while Mgbe still holds sway in other Ejagham groups like Etung in Northern and Oban and Akamkpa in Southern Cross River communities.

IV. THE RELIGIOUS OR RITUALISTIC FUNCTION OF ATAM MASQUERADE

To understand the role or significance of masquerades to Bakor in particular and African societies in general perhaps it is necessary to comment on the Bakor world view on masquerades and life. To the Bakor man, the society is a unity of both the visible and the invisible worlds. In this scheme, man and all concrete objects he creates or lives with are inextricably linked to a spirit world. Masquerades, in their semi-divine state therefore serve as the link between the world of the physically living and the world of the ancestors. Every African society comprehends and acknowledges this experience which explains why tribal heroes and leaders are deified after their death. These deified personages continue to exert tremendous influence on the lives of the living and are represented by the masquerades. Human society, therefore, only has meaning and significance in relation to the invisible or transcendental world. This helps people to order their lives in the physical world. To the Bakor, the masquerade becomes a powerful physical representation of the ancestors who guarantee and legitimize the ethical code of the community. From this perspective, masquerading constitutes a major component of Bakor cultural life that has not been entirely eroded by western influence. This is because of the powerful religious significance as well as the fact that the masquerades satisfy many social and aesthetic demands in the community. Atam satisfies the ritual or religious ramification of Bakor life as a representative of ancestral spirits or deified personalities come to life as mediators between the physical and the supernatural worlds of the Bakor. Their role as cleansing agents and guardians of a sacred moral code for sanctity and societal cohesion is sacrosanct and unrivaled. Despite this importance, their continuous existence as powerful forces of social integration is not guaranteed in the face of incessant globalization and the insurgence of Christian Pentecostal movements.

V. THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ATAM MASQUERADE

Like most other African societies, there are several masquerades in Bakor community but Atam is considered the highest in rank as it serves both religious and social functions. It is regarded as a royal masquerade, “elom-ntul”, and guardian of the sacred and corporate existence of the people. Generally in traditional African society, the mask is worn during festival celebrations or other ritual performances as the mask is of spiritual significance, and among the Bakor, there is always a mystical dimension to masking or masquerading. Today, with the insurgence of western Christianity and the corresponding diminution of traditional religion with its attendant values, the place of masquerades as agents for the inculcation and promotion of harmony and cordial interaction has become ephemeral. Despite this phenomenon, atam still maintains a pride of place in Bakor community and among their neighbors, the Boki people, who copied it from the Bakors. Atam still generates a profound sense of the sacred and a deep feeling of awe which is lacking in every other masquerade group in the community. The atam masquerade still radiates authority particularly in respect to governance and law enforcement as well as ritual cleansing of the community. Perhaps the reason is that atam is a royal masquerade but the run of authority is vice versa. It is atam that endows chieftaincy or kingship with authority not kingship that lends force to atam. What explains the authority of atam is its ritual connotation which other traditional masquerades lack. Therefore, atam as a royal masquerade, bestows ritual or semi-divine authority on the king or ruler and acts as the most powerful instrument of traditional adjudication in the land. The initiates are invoked for settlement of disputes or collection of debts, though here the masquerade itself is not donned on by the initiates. Every male free born of the community is eligible for membership of atam cult. However membership is according to cadres like Ekpe or Nyangbe in Efik and Ejagham communities respectively. The highest cadre belongs to those who have symbolically bought a palm tree. In cases of adjudication, one or more members of this cadre who have been invoked simply appear in the culprit’s or offender’s compound very early at dawn and intone the atam call “ule le lele lele”, to which other members quickly assemble and the culprit’s family is automatically barred from coming out of their rooms particularly the women. Until the debtor or culprit abides by their demands, the members start and continue destruction of public property like killing of domestic animals at sight, cutting down economic trees etc which would later be paid for by the culprit who ends up spending more than he bargained for. As a result no one wants to have atam invoked before settlement of his debt or any dispute he or she is involved in. Anyone who disobeys any decision reached by a royal personage has atam to contend with and so allegiance to the rulers authority is enhanced. The Bakor believe that once invoked, the masquerade appearance represents ancestral spirits come to life thus guaranteeing and legitimizing the ethical code. Atam can also carry out the destruction of the homestead of an individual who is ostracized from society. Ostracism of a deviant or one who disobeys community sanctions or norms is the most severe punishment to anyone in Bakor society. Such a person becomes an outcast and is not allowed in any community function or to share basic necessities of life like fire, water etc with any other member of the community, not even his relations. In case of abomination or defilement, only atam can cleanse the individual so involved. In this case, the ethical or moral pollution has to be cleansed at the approach to the community i.e. at the outskirts of the town. Atam takes the individual and all the sacrificial items to the designated area and performs the cleansing rites. The cleansing rites serve as an appeasement of the spirits and ancestors to avert disaster and death in the community. Only atam masquerade possesses the supernatural authority to deal with other invisible beings in the community. The masquerade is thus an agent of divinities and traditional priests. As a special masquerade, it represents individual deities and ancestral spirits of the Bakor people and so is actively involved in the execution of communal law and ethics in the community.

To the Bakor every masquerade emanates from the soil and the spiritual connotations of Atam imbue it with further mystical attributes which further strengthens its authority as an agent for the maintenance of law and order in the community. In Bakor community, atam masquerade primarily serves as the highest form of initiation into manhood or adulthood. Symbolic purchase of Atam palm tree equally signifies wealth, affluence and social status.

VI. TYPES AND ROLES OF ATAM MASQUERADE

Above recognized functions notwithstanding, the highest contributions of all masquerades and Atam in particular and which are very manifest even to this day are in the areas of entertainment and artistic creativity. Among the Ekajuk, one of the Bakor clan that constitute the Ejagham nation four types of Atam masquerade are recognized, each with specific functions, though these functions sometimes overlap. The two generally recognized and accepted functions of Atam masquerade and cult include purification to enhance cordial and crisis free communal existence and adjudication for maintenance of law and order in the community. However in all these functions there is style and a creative instinct which comes into play during the performance of these assigned duties. The final outcome is performance and entertainment of the audience. This explains why only powerful and accomplished dancers are chosen to don the Atam masquerade so as to sufficiently arouse the aesthetic appeal on the part of the audience. The four types of Atam include

- a) **Abilshi or red hair Atam:** As the name implies, the head gear of this atam is adorned with cowries and red seeds of a plant called “acrobi” and “atern” respectively. Abilshi atam never appears and never performs in public glare. Its function is strictly restricted to announcement of the demise of a royalty. At the death of a king or chief, the masquerade appears at dusk and quietly moves through all the villages that constitute the community. Its mere sight communicates the dreadful message of the death of a royal personage or a serious mishap in the land.
- b) **Erim-Atam or mourning Atam:** This is almost the opposite of Abilshi Atam in that its entire upper dress and head gear are severely blackened leaving only the palm leaf skirt. Erim-atam appears when the corpse of the royal personage is laid-in-state in the forest. Its function is to mourn the deceased in grunts and guttural tone since spirits do not wail or shout. It moves slowly round the corpse displaying signs of regret and deep sorrow. Even here, performance is practiced as the movement is deliberate and in pauses while the body, and in particular, the skirt or waist gear sways from side to side in a rhythmic manner. Both Abilshi and Erim-Atam are the most fearful types of Atam yet even in this state, their sight is esthetically pleasant to behold. Women and children are however forbidden to see these masquerades.
- c) **Atam Njom:** The third type of Atam is less fearful and more ordinary. It appears when there is strife, chaos or an epidemic or threat of war in the community. Its main function is purification and cures to avert unpleasant situations and enhance cordiality and peaceful co-existence in the land. Appearances of these three types of Atam are very rare and far between, unless occasion calls for them.
- d) The fourth type is **Atam-mbene** or the entertainment Atam. This is the most common type and appears in nearly all ceremonial occasions that call for it especially new yam festivals, coronations of chiefs, ordinations of Christian priests and elders and at certain seasons of the year when farm work is less and the spirit of entertainment blossoms. The main function of atam-mbene is therefore entertainment. However, once the mask is donned on by the masquerader, he is believed to have been transformed and thus becomes efficacious for the performance of all other functions associated with the masquerade. This atam can, therefore, perform cleansing rites and cures if the need arises even when it is meant for entertainment. Infact, atam-mbene mostly performs individual cleansing during entertainment while Atam-njom performs both individual and collective community cleansing. Since atam-njom rarely appears except in times of severe strife and or pending disaster, atam-mbene sometimes plays the role of community cleansing.

In terms of performance, the first three types of atam involve solo performances where the masquerader performs singly and is, infact, not supposed to be watched except by the highest cadre of initiates. In the past, these were the only members permitted to don-on the mask. Today, however, young and vibrant men who don't have the means to buy the symbolic atam palm tree are permitted to wear the mask particularly if their fathers or a male member of the family to which they belong had once bought the symbolic atam palm tree in the past. Generally children, women and uninitiated men, particularly those who belong to families from which no one has bought the atam palm tree were forbidden to appear in public when atam masquerade is performing. Even initiates were forbidden to wear shirts or upper clothing or shoes. They only had to cover their nudity.

Today, however, atam-mbene is open to all and sundry though even here women are excluded for reasons of defilement. Atam thus becomes a male affair or occupation. One reason why women fear atam is the masquerade dress which is rather frightful; though the other reason for the exclusion of women is that atam masquerade is made exclusively from and connected with the palm tree and women are forbidden to climb palm trees in Bakor community. To climb a palm tree is a sign of manhood. A man's dangling scrotum can be seen by anyone who so desired but a woman's private parts are forbidden in public.

As a social function, atam masquerade also plays a satirical role in the community. Here deviant behaviour is ridiculed and corrected in atam songs. This happens when a thief or morally bankrupt person wears the mask. He is not prevented, but the song composers are immediately constrained to compose an atam song that exposes the masker's crime to which he is forced to dance in full glare of the public since he cannot abandon the mask and walk away or expose the secrets of the masquerade. Some common songs of ridicule encompass deviant behavior, stealing, sexual immorality, greed and even intolerance. Achievement and high morality are equally praised. Some Atam songs include;

Song 1 Stealing

nkom shole ba ba eh	a sheep carried quickly
nkom shole ba ba eh	a sheep carried quickly
nkom shole ba ba	a sheep carried quickly by
Ekam Adi	Ekam Adi
Nkom shole ba ba	a sheep carried quickly

Song II Stealing

edama gbudu nkpakna	nkpakna cattle
ka mpong era ewo	you pay three pounds for
Edama gbudu nkpakna	nkpakna cattle
ka mpong era ewo	you pay three pounds for
akoo amarr amarr nyin	even when you only saw
ka mpony era ewo	you pay three pounds for.

Song III Excess Sexuality

tube el.kong	Pierced with spear
gbarr na gbarr na	She only wriggles
tube elkong	Pierced with spear
gbarr na gbarr na	She only wriggles

Song IV Achievement

tok ba ebanshare	Let me go to Bansara
ba wuk eh	And hear
tok ba ebanshare	Let me go to Bansara
ba wuk eh	And hear
tok ba ebanshare	Let me go to Bansara
ba wuk eh	And hear
Ejum ji banshare	Things that happen in Bansara
atam nya kpi eh	Only atam has them
tok ba ebanshare	Let me go to Bansara
ba wuk eh	And hear.

Song four is a song of achievement which connotes wonder. The achievement is beyond imagination and is only comparable to the mystery of atam so let me go and see or hear for myself.

Song three emphasizes the woman's relish of the sexual act. Even when she is pierced with the symbolic spear, the male sexual organ, she only wriggles in ecstasy. She doesn't complain. The song talks of the organ which is as long as a spear, a war weapon in Bakor community but the woman is not afraid of it.

Song two tells the story of a village that stole cattle and were caught and made to pay for it. Every member of the village community paid whether or not he partook of the meat there from. This, therefore, serves as a deterrent to others who may contemplate same.

Song one also on stealing is rather funny. The culprit on wearing the atam mask was rather sluggish. He was known to have stolen a ram and ran very quickly through the night but was eventually apprehended by younger fleet-footed lads. He is, therefore, mocked that if it was a ram, he would have been fast and agile. This is because the atam mask, particularly the waist skirt is heavy and requires very powerful young men to wear and perform creditably. Again performance is paramount.

The cult of abuse and high jokes is also given free expression in Atam songs which allow the song composers to take expensive jibes at people with peculiar deformities or ailments. A fat-headed, fat-eyed, crooked-legged individual is easy target for atam song composers. A man with hydrocele or extended scrutum provided the song

Iranda bang bang bang	scrutum big big big
Iranda bang	scrutum big
Iranda bang bang bang	scrutum big big big
Iranda bang	scrutum big.

He himself danced to the excitement of everyone. Atam performances, therefore, provide avenues for psychological release of tension which enhance relaxation from individual strains and bothers.

VII. PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS IN ATAM MASQUARADE

Atam masquerade is a very beautiful masquerade. Its entire mask is made from palm leaves with some other leaves from a particular or special tree to add to the back cover. The mask itself is in three segments namely (1) Efor-atam or atam skirt, (2) nshak-atam or atam dress and (3) elake-atam or the atam back cover.

Efor-atam is made entirely from palm leaves woven unto very strong ropes that can be tied to the waist like a skirt. Like a skirt, the palm leaves are loose and can swing from side to side when properly manipulated. It however requires skill of movement to achieve the sideways swing of the skirt admirably since it is rather heavy. Nshak-atam is in the form of a T-shirt but woven to cover the head leaving only the eye-holes which are painted black for atam-ebene but red for abilshi and atam-njom. Nshak-atam is woven from braided ropes gotten from the bark of a reed known as mkpafa. It is usually brownish but could be dyed black if so desired. Elake-atam is a back gear which towers above the head of the masquerader and is made of leaves tied unto palm fronds shaped for that purpose (see photographs). Efor-atam or the skirt also has yellow palm leaves to decorate it in front, behind and to left and right. Usually the facial mask of atam-ebene is black with a short rope tied to it which the masquerader manipulates to enhance extended vision. The legs from the knee to the ankle also have palm leaves woven into sock-like leggings and decorated with the same yellow leaves like the skirt. Atam waves a short palm frond staff, the symbol of authority. These make atam a unique masquerade among the Bakor as it is the only masquerade made entirely from locally sourced materials. Its appeal derives from both fright and beauty. To women and children it is frightful but to men, it is artistic and attractive.

As a royal masquerade, atam is colourful, graceful and moves majestically. In dance performance the masquerader's dance skills come to play. His ability to swing the skirt to the rhythm of the music supplied by the cult members through hand clapping and the use of calabashes and sticks adds beauty to the movement. Also the masker occasionally breaks into short runs and slaps the skirt with his hands symbolic of putting off dust or defilement from its dress. In a cleansing run, atam makes a circle on the ground into which a sick or defiled individual is placed. Atam then runs both hands three times over the patient from head to foot and symbolically throws away the defilement. He then jumps over the patient seven times, all the while dancing or swaying to the rhythm of music. No drums are allowed in atam masquerade dance. Percussion implements are simple hand claps and the use of sticks and calabashes. Atam dance steps are mostly dictated by the rhythm of the music; some are fast, some slow and in some cases it requires just a walk in style or a bluff with the back gear. Because almost every male member of the community comes out to atam play, the songs come off like a huge choral group or orchestra and are very attractive. In festival situations, there could be between one to seven atam masquerades in the play ground. Atam does not appear in any funeral situation except a royalty who is to be mourned by erim-atam. Also, Atam is not an aggressive masquerade like "agrinya". It instead represents peace and tranquility and often carries out cleansing ceremonies to avert war and violence in the community.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As is often observed, communities that are still vastly illiterate emphasize orality as their major means of maintaining their norms and cultural practices. To the Bakor people, cultural practices like masquerading generally and atam in particular remain the paramount means for interaction and expression of individuality and collective integration. Religious and cultural practices serve as a means of reconciliation of individuals, groups and indeed the entire community, to their universe or the external world and the world beyond. Atam masquerade becomes a physical representation of this attempt at reconciliation as it is believed to be the link and mediator between the physical world and the supernatural or transcendental world. Today its continued existence is highly threatened thus making way for chaos, insubordination and general moral laxity in the community.

As a royal masquerade, its function in the coronation of chiefs and the clan head is fast going into extinction, yet like other social institutions meant for integration, Atam remains a vital force in the education of young ones and the maintenance of social cohesion in the community. Its extinction could spell doom for the community. If this happens and Atam masquerading gets subsumed in the guise of modernism or religious verve, one will be inclined to think that it is in keeping with recent theorizations of globalization. But as Nana Wilson-Tago (2006) rightly observes, this culturalist view of globalization will

... Create "third cultures" autonomous of national
Communities [and] may distort the nature of cultural
Production in African worlds that still struggle with the
after effects of an older modernity (p. 94)

The big question that arises is what will be the place of African cultures in the global scheme if they are already threatened with so called modernist sophistication since the cultures in the past were seen within the confines of

... the Nation as a geographic and culturally integrated space. (p.96)

The only hope of keeping Atam alive is to encourage elders to teach and inculcate in the younger generations the values which atam stands for and to sensitize younger generations to indicate interest in these age old traditions that confer identify on the Bakor community.

Also, other masquerades like Obasi-njom that serve for the maintenance of peace and cohesion have already been completely obliterated within Bakor community in the verve of Christian Pentecostalism. The fright of exposure by Obasi-njom was enough deterrent to evil doers in the community and the physical or tangible presence of the masquerade cowered everyone into proper behavior as dictated by communal ethics. Today, however, individuals find solace in Christian churches where forgiveness is unlimited, no matter the extent or gravity of the calamities one has perpetrated. A look back and proper integration of these masquerade institutions will therefore serve a useful developmental purpose in modern society.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2 Initiates Escort Atam Masquerades Into The Playground For Chieftaincy Coronation.



Fig. 3 Atam Masquerades During A Christian Ordination Ceremony In Bakor Community. Notice The Swinging Skirt Which H Is The Mark Of A Good Performer.