

The Ode-Lay and Jolly Society Masquerades in Freetown, Sierra Leone



The earliest British settlement in Sierra Leone dates from 1787, when about 350 poor black people were brought from London. The population increased in 1792 with the arrival in Freetown of about 1000 Nova Scotia ex-slaves, black Loyalists who had fought with the British during the American Revolution. More than 500 Jamaican Maroons were transported to Freetown in 1800. In the succeeding decades, following the abolition of slavery by Britain in the early nineteenth century, Freetown became the site for the liberation of many thousands of Africans found aboard slave ships captured by the British navy. Many of the freed Nupe, Ibo, Ibibio, Igbo, and Yoruba slaves, who originated in Nigeria, revived their religious traditions in Sierra Leone. The most influential Yoruba secret societies included the following: Egungun, dedicated to the worship of ancestors; Hunting, dedicated to Ogun, the god of iron and fire, associated with hunting and war; Shango, dedicated to the god of thunder; and Gelede, dedicated to maintaining prosperity and celebrating the role of women.

Masquerades organized by these societies, drawing upon forms remembered from Nigeria, appeared by the 1830s as parades in which members displayed their idols or "devils" to the accompaniment of dance and music, especially drumming. These processions became rallying points for the societies, serving to promote the health, welfare, and success of their members. Hunting Societies carried their "devils" in masquerades before and after a hunt or to honor a dead member. Masquerade processions of Gelede, Egungun, Shango, and other Societies were

dedicated to curing illness, maintaining the health and prosperity of society members, and relationships with ancestors.

Illness was attributed to witchcraft that could be confronted through the application and display of "medicines." In Nigeria, goats and sheep had been sacrificed as part of masquerades to cure illness, and the heads of sacrificed animals became medicine when worn on the heads of masqueraders. In Sierra Leone, these animal heads were replaced by carved wooden replicas. Over the succeeding decades, the Yoruba-based masquerade societies evolved in response to various influences including the rise of a Creole middle class, exposure to Western, Islamic, Hindu, and Oriental culture, and styles introduced by other immigrants as well as economic growth during and after the World Wars.

The influx into Freetown of new immigrants from the countryside, especially after World War II, led to the formation of numerous Ode-Lay and Jolly (pronounced like the French word, "joli") Societies composed largely of unemployed, uneducated young men who were not eligible to become members of the traditional societies because of their low economic status. Cloth, an important aesthetic and prestige commodity became a fundamental component of Ode-Lay and Jolly Society masquerades. The costumes and masks created for Ode-lay and Jolly Society masquerades were inspired by the fancy aesthetic of Gelede and Egungun Society masquerades and the fierce aesthetic of the Hunting Societies. These

masquerades were performed at Christmas time, Boxing Day, and New Years Day as well as at other celebrations.

In contrast to Ode-Lay Societies that were organized by descendants of the Yoruba, Igbo, and other predominantly Nigerian ethnic groups, Jolly Societies that arose in the same era were dominated by Temne people who were native to the Sierra Leone countryside. Nonetheless, Jolly Society masquerades derived their aesthetics from sources similar to those that gave rise to Ode-Lay Society masquerades. Fierce elements are typically absent from Jolly Society masquerades, whereas Ode-Lay Society masquerades often combine fancy and fierce aesthetics. Fancy refers to the use of brightly colored cloth, lace, Christmas tree ornaments, beads, feathers, trinkets of various sorts, mirrors, and sparkling objects such as aluminum foil. The headdress of a fancy costume may be constructed around a wire or wood board armature or it may consist of a wooden carving attached to an armature. In the context of the Ode-Lay Society masquerade, fierce is interpreted as meaning powerful and frightening as well as visually striking. The fierce aesthetic is expressed in a carved headpiece, or *erie*, representing the head of a leopard, antelope, goat, sheep, or a composite head with elements of two or more of the foregoing animals. Various medicine objects are attached to the vest-like cloak, or *hampa*, that covers the torso of the "devil" including porcupine quills embedded in small gourds, bullet casings, animal skins, snail shells dipped in poisons, and antelope horns filled with medicine powder. Sometimes, wooden replicas of gourds with porcupine quills appear as part of a masquerade headpiece. John Nunley, the foremost expert on Ode-Lay and Jolly Society masquerades, has noted that "the quills are likened to endless rounds of bullets, they just keep coming, and as well like showers of arrows." Horns protruding from the headpiece are thought to have the capacity to mediate between man and the world of spirits. The horns transmit messages from the spirits that inform man of his destiny. The emblems of fierceness are intended protect against the malevolent effects of witchcraft.

Various aspects of Mami Wata (Pidgen English for "mother of water"), a seductive, and dangerous female water spirit of foreign origin, are represented in Ode-Lay and Jolly Society masquerade headpieces. Venerated in much of Africa, especially in countries bordering on the African Atlantic, and the Atlantic rim of the Americas affected by the African diaspora, she promotes fertility, wealth, and abundance. Important features of Mami

Wata are her association with water and with snakes. She is a jealous spirit who demands that her followers be faithful to her at the of risk dire consequences. Painted images and sculptures of Mami Wata appear to derive from several sources. One is the European image of the seductive siren or mermaid with a fishtail who rises from the water that appeared as a figurehead on some of the European ships that transported luxury goods to West African ports. Some representations of Mami Wata have wings that may be derived from images widely circulated in Muslim communities of al-Buraq, the mythical winged half-horse, half-human, Centaur-like creature that carried the prophet Mohamed to heaven. Involvement of snakes in Mami Wata reflects the long-standing association of snakes with water spirits in West Africa. In addition, recent investigations have traced a connection between Mami Wata and a European printed portrait of an exotic circus snake charmer with a snake draped over her shoulders. This image was reproduced in India where motifs related to Hindu gods and goddesses were introduced before the picture was widely distributed in West Africa.

Hindu people from the Indian sub-continent have been major retailers and shopkeepers in Sierra Leone since the nineteenth century, selling a variety of goods including photolithographs of Hindu deities that may have inspired aspects of many of the Temne head crest sculptures illustrated in this book. Representations of Mami Wata often display the Hindu forehead dot (*bindi*) that protects against the "evil eye" and other decorative motifs of Hindu origin such as a forehead pendant and curls hanging on the side of the head. *Bindi* means a "drop or dot." It is traditionally a spot of red pigment applied low on the center of the forehead between the eyebrows. This position is considered to be the locus of hidden wisdom, concentration, and the site of the "third eye." The *bindi* protects against evil spirits and bad luck.

Most of the Temne helmet and head crest masks illustrated and described in this volume have smooth surfaces on which the effects of the passage of years are clearly evident in the form of discolored paint, layered paint, wear and tear, and oxidation of unpainted wood. These masks were most likely made for use in traditional masquerades. A small number of the head crest masks that we describe as "recently carved" have relatively rough surfaces covered with a single layer of bright, fresh paint, and exposed wood with minimal evidence of oxidation. The latter new sculptures may have been made for traditional use or for export and sale on the art market.