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Costumes, ornaments, regalia and dance display of the Nembe *Sekiapu* Masquerade Society

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Abstract

The Nembe *sekiapu* masquerade society is the prime masquerade society in the Nembe kingdom. It is the repository of all masquerade dance history and tradition. The continuity of masquerade dance tradition from generation to generation is ensured and enshrined in the practices of the society. An exposition of the *sekiapu* masquerade society shows a culture that is rich in its regalia and dress mode. The Society possess exquisite costumes, ornaments and a dance style that is both stylistic and unique

to the Niger Delta. There is a plethora of masquerade or masquerade types each representing a purpose or cultural ideal. These masquerades have different faces (mask), representing either an aquatic creature or depicting a deity. Sadly, the documentation and archiving of this rich masquerade society and culture is hardly taken seriously. This is therefore an expose for veneration of the *sekiapu* masquerade society.

Keywords: Costume, Ornaments, Nembe, *Sekiapu*, Masquerade, Society, Niger Delta, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Masquerades are human disguises or false impersonation of objects, spirits, deities or celestial bodies. They represent the belief systems of the people and are used to entertain, interact with spirits or maintain socio-political stability or control over people's behaviours and conducts. They are also reputed to provide spiritual cleansing and cure for diseases and unexplained affliction ^[1]. Anderson ^[2] opines that the *Sekiapu* masquerade is credited with preventing barrenness, bringing children, preventing infant death, averting epidemics, and assuring posterity. They have continued to remain relevant even in this present era at least as a means of entertainment, comic relief or in some cases as a symbol of cultural continuity. Masquerade performances also create mediums for individual social accomplishments through art which are viewed as purely aesthetic ^[3].

In Nembe, the *Sekiapu* masquerade society parades a plethora of masquerade types with a plurality of purposes and multiplicity in the dance performance times. Some of the *Sekiapu* masquerades are known to perform their dance rituals to usher in a new year or entertain the community, others are known to perform dances to cleanse the community from evil or appease some purported aggrieved spirits. These masquerades and their executors are usually adorned with special regalia, ornaments and costumes consisting of simple fabrics to complex wooden or metal carvings (masks) that depict spirits or deities that add colour and mystique to these dance performances. Although the Nembe *Sekiapu* society has existed for a very long time, little has been done to document this aspect of its culture and stress its uniqueness.

Therefore, this is a cursory look into the costumes, ornaments, regalia and dance performances of the *Sekiapu* masquerade society of Nembe. It will expose the great cultural endowment of the Nembe people and demystify the myth behind such cultural practices.

2. Methodology

2.1 Area of the study

Nembe is a sub-Ijaw tribe in Eastern Niger Delta, Bayelsa State. Nembe is one of the culturally endowed ethnic groups in the Niger Delta. It includes the Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State. The paramount head of the Kingdom is known as "*Amanyabobo*." Today, leadership is split between the *Amanyabobo* of Nembe (*Obolomabiri*), and *Amanyabobo* of Bassambiri and Twon Brass.

2.2 Study Design

The study adopted the participant observation technique. The use of unstructured interviews and the reliance of ancient documents and materials guided this study.

3. History of the Nembe Sekiapu Masquerade Society

The History of the Sekiapu masquerade society just like the History of the Nembe people is fluid. Different scholars and historians seem to differ in their accounts and perspective of how the society was started or indeed conceived. The historical origin of Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade society is similar to that of Kalabari. Legend says it can be traced to a man known as *kperighada*, who was fishing in the Cameroons, and he wasn't seen for seven days. His people searched all around for him, but couldn't find him. When he reappeared days later, he told the people who had been looking for him that he was abducted by water spirits who taught him to dance a masquerade dance (Nembe *Sekiapu* masquerade).

In another account Nabena ^[4] opines that the ancestors of the Nembe people who observed the water spirit performance from river banks stole their masks and drums, and then returned to the village to stage the plays there. Amongst the Nembe people, were women who got instructions from water spirits to introduce dance societies and masquerades. This may have led to the similarities in the tales with the Kalabari situation where *Ekine* (The mother goddess gave them the *Sekiapu* Masquerade). However, there is another account in history that a man was taken by water spirits, who taught him how to dance a masquerade dance. He returned to *Ondewari*, where he called the elders together to inform them of the water people's ultimatum that he must perform the masquerade dance or he would die. They carved the masks out of wood and he performed the (*Ofurumo* or Shark) dance (play) as it is being performed now. Although, there are other contrary views, the above account may have formed the genesis of the society.

4. Regalia of the Nembe Sekiapu Masquerade Society

Members of the Nembe Sekiapu Masquerade society are distinguished in hierarchy according to the type of attire or regalia they adorn. Whereas ordinary members of the society and known to dress in simple white native shirts called *etibo* and wrappers, the senior members and Head of the society put on colourful shirts and adorn themselves with expensive coral hand and neck beads and carry walking stick and a scepter of office or authority. (Fig 1 and 2).



Source: *Sekiapu* House Nembe

Fig 1: Dressing of an Ordinary member of Nembe Sekiapu Masquerade Society

However, ordinary members of the society are also permitted to carry walking stick which adds colour to their dancing during ceremonies. The mode of dressing of the head of the Nembe *Sekiapu* Masquerade Society is distinct. The head dresses with two feathers on his cap, with a don cloth and with a walking stick. While an ordinary member of the society dresses with a single feather on the top of his cap ^[5].



Source: *Sekiapu* House Nembe

Fig 2: Dressing of the Head of the Nembe *Sekiapu* Masquerade Society

5. Costumes/Mask Types of the Nembe Sekiapu Masquerade Society

There are a plethora of different mask types and shapes used by the Nembe Sekiapu Masquerade Society. Some of these masks are representative of either marine object such as fishes, Crocodile and other organisms. Other mask types are personification of deities and gods/idols which are symbolic of the peoples believes.

Some of the masks used by the Sekiapu masquerade society of Nembe are listed below:

1. Ereti-Igbo Masquerade Head
2. Otopo (Otopa in Nembe)
3. *Oku* (African Buffalo) Head
4. *Bile Na Agiri*
5. *Ebe* Masquerade Head
6. Ingbila Masquerade Head



Fig 3: Ereti-Igbo Masquerade Head (Source: *Sekiapu* House Nembe)

5.1 Ereti-Igbo Masquerade Head

This is usually the first masquerade to display during *Sekiapu* masquerade display. It is usually called *Ereti-Igbo* (Dog! Igbo In Kalabari). This particular masquerade

personifies a male spirit that is looking for a wife in the spirit world. The skills or art of courtship is highly demonstrated during this masquerade display and the song usually sung is *ere ti, ere ti, igbo hei yo-o-o ere ti*. Interpreted in English language, the song goes thus: Play with women, play with women Igbo who plays with women.

5.2 Otobo (Otoba in Nembe)

Otobo (*Otoba* in Nembe language) is the seventh masquerade *Owu-Ayah* saw according to the legend behind the masquerade story. *Otobo* is the epitome of a Hippopotamus, a large heavy African animal with very short legs and thick dark skin that lives in Rivers, Seas, lakes and land. *Otobo* masquerade is the symbol of the *Bekinam Sihi* (the ship carrier-*Aru Sara* in Nembe) and his colony with their doctor called *Otobo Diripilama*.

During the masquerade display, the following song goes thus:

*Igbori-Gbo-Bere-o-Oh!, Ain Ye Owu Otobobiri
Warimube
Igbori Gbo Namao-0-O-Onama 0-0-0, Kilesibi-A
Nama 0-0-0.
Nama 0-0-0*

To join either of the two above

*Ama 0 Na-O-G; Ama Dna E-E-E
Igbori Gbo Bei Nama Be!
Ba 30: Ba 80, Owu Be! Per! Nama, Per) Nama*

Interpreted in English language, the song and wordings go thus: *Otobo* masquerade went to a witch doctor's house *e-elgbori gbo* animal o-o-o animal o-o-o
Head of skeptical animal o-o-o Animal Let the town hear-o-o-oh (x2) *Igbori gbo*, this animal.

The Head of the masquerade is shown below:



Source: Sekiapu House Nembe

Fig 4: Otobo (Otoba in Nembe)

5.3 Oku (African Buffalo)

The fourth masquerade that *Owu-Ayah* saw in her canoe according to legend was the *Oku*, African Buffalo (Male) with his family.



Fig 5: QKU (African Buffalo) Head (Source: Sekiapu House Nembe)

5.4 Bile Na Agiri Masquerade Head

After *Otobo*, the next masquerade on the sequence is *Bile Na Agiri* masquerade. *Agiri* is a fierce-looking masquerade of the *Ekine Sekiapu* institution. In a sister community Buguma, it is usually the *Dodo wari* (*Dodo house*) in *Elebike Polo* (*Elebike compound*) that usually present this masquerade [5]. This masquerade evokes fear and excitement in the people during festive periods.



Fig 6: Bile Na Agiri Masquerade (Source: Sekiapu House Nembe)

5.5 Ebe Masquerade

Ebe is a senior masquerade in the *Sekiapu* kingdom. It is the highest masquerade that all other masquerades accompany. About eleven masquerades accompany it. *Ebe* has a native (witch) doctor that follows it as part of its entourage.



Fig 7: Ebe Masquerade Head (Source: Sekiapu House Nembe)

5.6 Ingbila Masquerade

Legend says that *Ingbila* was a male water god that was operating in the creeks of the Niger Delta. The story further states that if a normal human being meets the masquerade accidentally in the creeks, the masquerade will force him/her to escape by flogging.

The masquerade Song goes thus:

Ingbilabeisirila Tie-e
Inengiowu-E-E; Ye-Ye-Ye(X2)

Translated in English: **Ingbila Masquerade is on the Stage or Playground; Deaf Masquerade e-e-e; Ye, Ye, Ye-Eh**

OwuIngbila e-e-e
Owuingbila Eke Re Ph Yai Ingbila Ain Yo-O-O
Iogu Gho Bo Mo? Iomu Gho Bo Mqj
Owu Ingbila Ekere Peiyai Ingbila
A-I-N Yo-O-O



Fig 8: Ingbila Masquerade Head (Source: *Sekiapu* House Nembe)



Fig 9: A fully dressed *Sekiapu* masquerade (Source: *Sekiapu* House Nembe)

6. Conclusion

The Nembe masquerade society has several masquerades in their possession that display periodically to entertain spectators as a way of also promoting the rich cultural tradition and heritage of their people. The society and its dance tradition display a plethora of costumes, regalia and ornaments that add colour and awe to it.

Until now, little is available in published literature as regards these rich cultural activities of the society. This is therefore an effort in documenting, promoting, sustaining and preserving the tradition and culture of the Nembe people and their dance traditions.

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