



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cultural Continuities: *The Igbo Origins and Global Legacy of Masking in the Caribbean and Americas*

By Chuka Odike

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 3 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

**Photo by @rootinnajumieka on
Instagram**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò
CULTURAL CONTINUITIES

Cultural Continuities: The Igbo Origins and Global Legacy of Masking in the Caribbean and Americas

By Chuka Odike · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Introduction The Caribbean and Americas are cultural mosaics where traditions from Africa have been preserved, adapted, and disseminated through centuries of displacement and cultural exchange. Among these traditions, masking holds a significant place. This article explores the detailed links between the masking traditions of the Bight of Biafra, specifically Igboland, and the vibrant masquerade practices...

01

Introduction

The Caribbean and Americas are cultural mosaics where traditions from Africa have been preserved, adapted, and disseminated through centuries of displacement and cultural exchange. Among these traditions, masking holds a significant place. This article explores the detailed links between the masking traditions of the Bight of Biafra, specifically Igboland, and the vibrant masquerade practices of the Caribbean and Americas. The legacy of the Igbo Agaba and Mgbedike masks is traced through Jamaican Jonkonnu, Bahamian Junkanoo, and related traditions across North Carolina, Belize, St. Kitts, Bermuda, and the Dominican Republic.

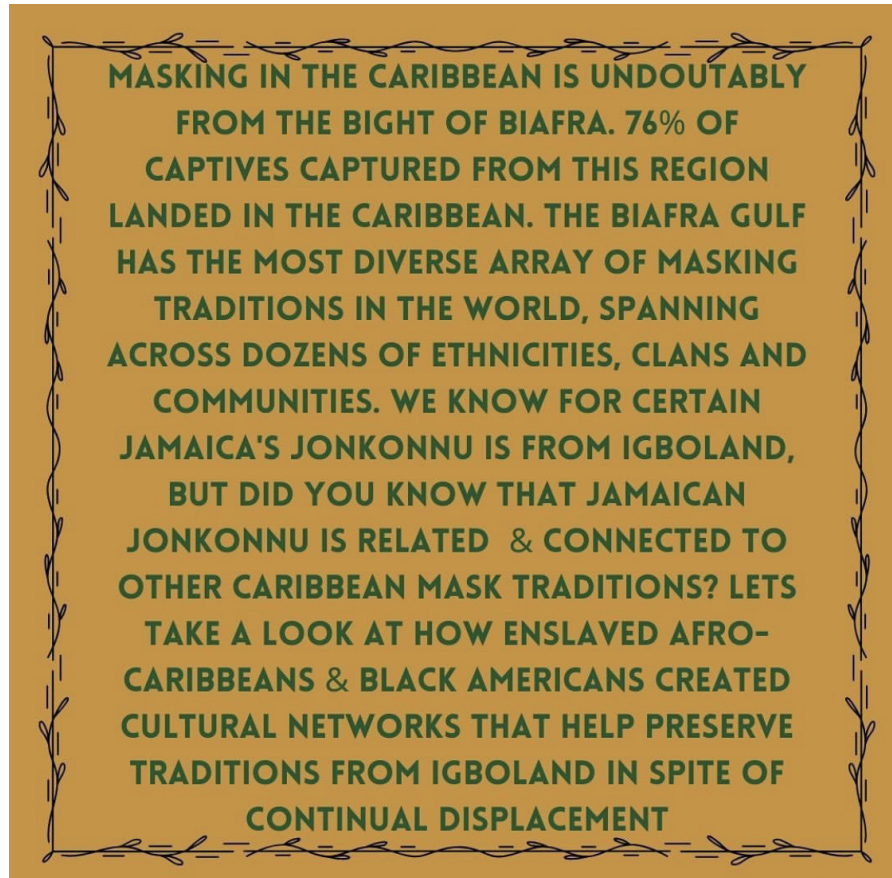


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

02

Igbo Masking Traditions: The Root of Cultural Heritage

The Bight of Biafra is recognized as the most diverse masking region globally, with a wide array of traditions spanning dozens of ethnic groups, clans, and communities. Igbo masking traditions, especially from the Nri Kingdom, represent strength, bravery, and spirituality. The Mgbedike, Agu Neche Enyi, and Agaba masks are notable for their symbolic elements, sharp teeth symbolizing leopards or crocodiles, horns from antelope or buffalo, and tusks from warthogs. These masks played pivotal roles in festivals and spiritual events, such as the New Yam Festival, symbolizing renewal and celebration.

The 1st reference to a jonkonnu mask was in the 1760s in Jamaica. (although masking have been observed on the island before this) Edward Long describes:

"several new mask appeared, the igbo, with (its) connus man & woman...In the towns, during Christmas holidays, they have several, tall robust fellows dressed up in grotesque habits, and a pair of ox-horns on their head, prouting from the top of a horrid sort of vizor, or mask, which about the mouth is rendered very terrific with large boar-tusk. The masquerader, carrying a wooden sword in his hand, is followed with a numerous croud of women, who refresh him frequently with a cup of aniseed water, whilst he dances at every door, bellowing out John Connu! with great veherence; so that, what with the liquor & the exercise, most of them are thrown into dangerous fevers"

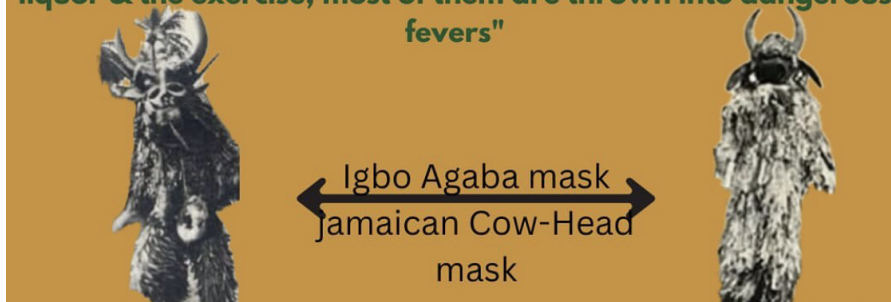


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

03

The Journey of Mgbedike: From Igboland to the Caribbean

The transatlantic slave trade forcibly relocated millions of Africans, and 76% of captives from the Bight of Biafra were transported to the Caribbean. Among them were the Igbo, whose cultural practices, including masking, persisted despite displacement. Jamaican Jonkonnu, first recorded in the 1760s, is directly linked to Igbo traditions. Edward Long's accounts describe masqueraders adorned with horns, tusks, and sharp-toothed masks, characteristics reminiscent of the Mgbedike. The masquerades carried swords, danced energetically, and were followed by supportive crowds, a scene mirroring Igbo masking festivals.

The Spread of Jonkonnu Across the Caribbean and Americas

Jamaican Jonkonnu evolved into various forms across the Caribbean and Americas due to intra-American trade. From Jamaica, enslaved Africans exported to Belize brought Jonkonnu, where it became Wanaragua among the Garifuna people. This version incorporated warrior elements, satire, and gender fluidity, reflecting both African traditions and resistance to colonial oppression.



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

In the Bahamas, Jonkonnu transformed into Junkanoo, one of the region's largest cultural festivals. By the early 19th century, Junkanoo featured vibrant costumes, pointed masks, and music, closely tied to traditional Igbo box drums (gumba or goombay).

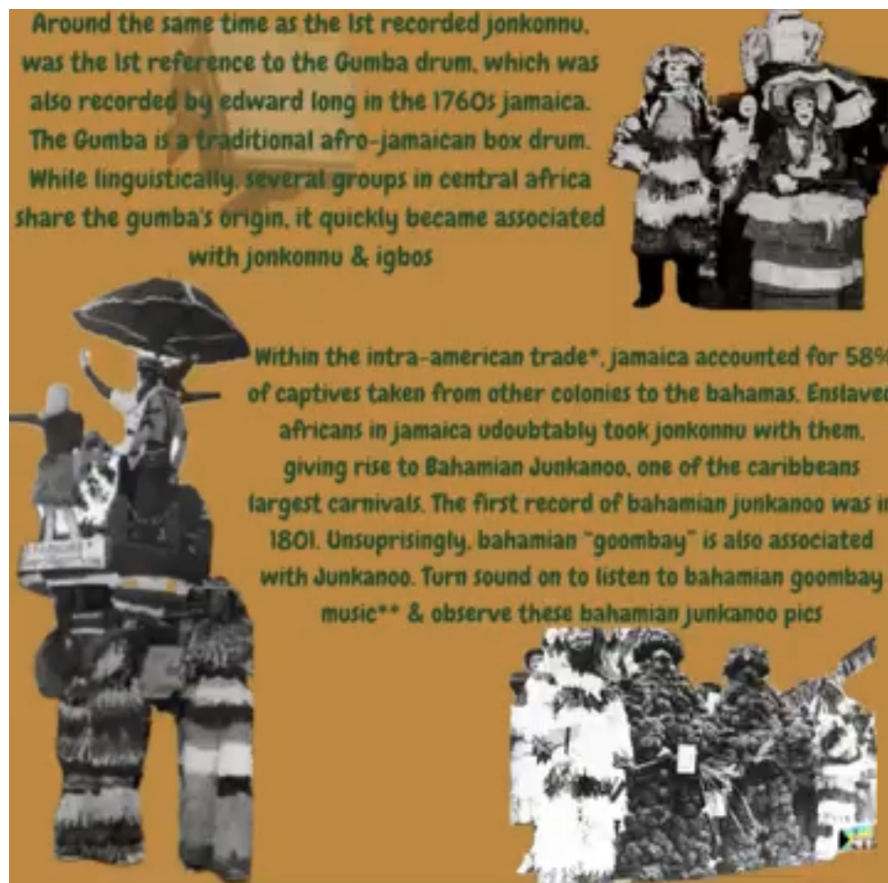


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

In North Carolina, enslaved communities retained Jonkonnu, as oral traditions affirm its Jamaican origins. Similarities between North Carolina Jonkonnu and Jamaican practices, such as the use of box drums covered with sheepskin, underscore their shared Igbo roots.



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

05

Masking Traditions in St. Kitts, Bermuda, and the Dominican Republic

St. Kitts, where 48% of enslaved people were of Igbo origin, adapted masking traditions into cultural expressions that influenced nearby islands. The Dominican Republic’s Guloyas and Bermuda’s Gombey are direct descendants of these traditions. The Guloyas feature pointed masks resembling Igbo designs, accompanied by flutes and drums reminiscent of Igbo musical styles. Bermuda’s Gombey integrates the goombay drum and Jamaican Jonkonnu influences, illustrating the continuity of Igbo-inspired traditions in diaspora communities.

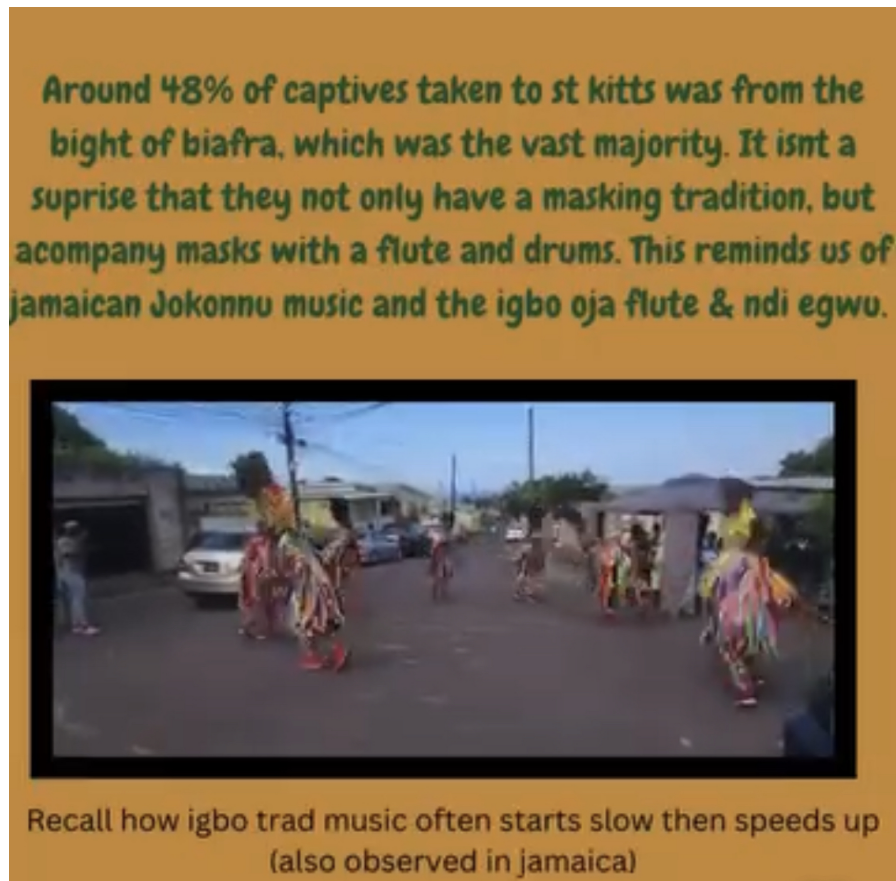


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

06

Conclusion

The journey of Igbo masking traditions from the Bight of Biafra to the Caribbean and Americas is a testament to the resilience of cultural heritage in the face of displacement. Through Jonkonnu, Junkanoo, Wanaragua, Guloyas, and Gombey, enslaved Africans preserved and transformed their ancestral practices, creating vibrant cultural networks. These traditions not only celebrate African identity but also underscore the profound impact of Igbo culture on the global cultural landscape.

To bring this full circle, the mask of bermuda is called Gombey. St kitts is responsible for the dominican republic's Gulozas. St kitts is also responsible for bermuda's Gombey. While records from slavevoyages.org are few, what we do see is that 32% of people taken to bermuda came from st kitts in the intra-american trade (which accounted for the majority) while jamaica accounted for 26%. Gombey is undoutably related to gumbe, the traditional jamaican box drum & music that has historically been related to igbo people. The name Gombey in bermuda likely came from jamaica while the mask came from st kitts. This is truly a story of an igbo-derived traditions that created a social network among enslaved folk that has defined the cultural landscape of much of the caribbean. Bermuda Gombey below:



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

Long, E. (1774). The History of Jamaica. London: T. Lowndes.

Slave Voyages Database. Retrieved from <https://slavevoyages.org>

Godfrey, E., & Jones, G. I. (2023). Igbo Masking Traditions and Their Diasporic Legacy.

National Archives of Jamaica. (1760s). Jonkonnu and Afro-Jamaican Traditions.

Garifuna Heritage Foundation. (2023). Wanaragua and Garifuna Masking Practices.

Bahamas Historical Society. (2023). Junkanoo: The Evolution of Bahamian Masking.

North Carolina Folklife Institute. (2023). Jonkonnu and African American Masking Traditions.

St. Kitts National Archives. (2023). Masking Traditions of St. Kitts and Their Diasporic Influence.

Bermuda Cultural Authority. (2023). Gombey: A Legacy of African Masking Traditions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
