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Dancing with History: *Exploring the Nkporo Cultural Heritage through G. I. Jones' Lens*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

“Ogu wooden face mask,” part of the Nkporo people’s Ifogu masquerade at Elugu Nkporo in p.d. Abia State, photographed by G. I. Jones in the 1930s.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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DANCING WITH HISTORY

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Young male Nkporo initiates dancing masks with tall fibre extensions, Eastern Igbo area (p.d. Abia State), 1930s. Photo: G.I. Jones.

The 1930s witnessed a remarkable documentation of the vibrant cultural practices of the Nkporo people, located in the eastern Igbo area of what is today Abia State, Nigeria. Through the lens of G. I. Jones, a British colonial administrator and ethnographer, we catch a glimpse of traditions that weave together artistry, spirituality, and social structure. These photographs, now housed in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge (MAA), preserve the essence of Nkporo's Ifogu masquerade and the Egbela warrior society.

01

The Nkporo Ifogu Masquerade

Central to Nkporo's cultural expressions is the Ifogu masquerade, a spectacle of artistry and ritual significance. One of the iconic elements captured by Jones is the Ogu wooden face mask, an essential feature of the Ifogu masquerade. These masks, often adorned with tall fiber extensions, represent ancestral spirits or deities and serve as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms. The dancers, young male initiates, don these elaborate masks while enacting stories of the community's history, spirituality, and social values.

The tall fiber extensions and intricate carvings of the masks demonstrate the artistic ingenuity of Nkporo artisans. These masquerades are more than entertainment; they are a form of storytelling, teaching younger generations the values and beliefs of their ancestors.

02

The Isiji Trainees of the Egbela Warrior Society

The Egbela warrior society plays a pivotal role in Nkporo's communal life. Boys are gradually initiated into the society through an age-grade system, a structured progression that instills discipline, bravery, and social responsibility.



Isiji trainees of Nkporo's Egbela warrior society undergo initiation through a structured age-grade system over several years. Their masks, crafted from raffia and calabash, are complemented by sacred tender palm fronds, known as òmụ, which drape the junior members. Photograph by G. I. Jones, 1930s. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

G. I. Jones' photographs reveal the unique regalia of the Isiji trainees. These young initiates are adorned with òmụ, sacred tender palm fronds, symbolizing purity and spiritual protection. Their masks, crafted from raffia and calabash, are simple yet imbued with profound cultural meaning. The training and ceremonies of the Egbela society reinforce the communal values of courage and unity, essential for the

survival and growth of the Nkporo community.

03

The Artistic and Cultural Legacy

These practices underscore the rich tapestry of Nkporo's heritage, where art, ritual, and community converge. The masquerades and warrior societies are not merely relics of the past but are reflections of a dynamic culture that adapts and evolves while retaining its core values.

04

The Contributions of G. I. Jones

G. I. Jones' work is invaluable for its detailed visual and written documentation of Igbo cultural practices. His photographs have become essential resources for scholars and cultural enthusiasts, offering a rare window into a world that has undergone significant change due to colonialism and modernization.

Jones, G. I. (1930s). Photographs of the Nkporo people [Photographic collection]. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

Cole, H. M., & Aniakor, C. C. (1984). Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Ottenberg, S. (1975). Masked Rituals of Afikpo: The Context of an African Art. University of Washington Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR**Chuka Odi**

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 explores 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.



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