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Ifogu Masquerade in Igbo Culture: *A Historical Glimpse*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

“Ifogu masquerade depicting the band seated on the ground and two masqueraders wearing Mba masks in the background. The band members are playing slit wooden slit drums and some are holding clappers.”
G. I. Jones, 1930s.



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The Ifogu masquerade Originating from the southeastern axis of the Igbo cultural area of Afikpo (Ehugbo) holds a cultural and historical significance in Igbo traditions, showcasing complicated artistry and symbolic representations of societal values. In the 1930s, G. I. Jones captured a striking image of the Ifogu masquerade, which features a seated band and two performers donning Mba masks in the background.

In the 1930s, anthropologist G. I. Jones captured a vivid portrayal of an Ifogu masquerade, showcasing the seated band and two performers wearing Mba masks. The band members, playing slit wooden drums and using clappers, provided the rhythmic backbone for the masquerade's performance. These instruments not only enhance the theatrical display but also hold symbolic significance, representing the heartbeat of the community and its unity.

The Mba masks worn by the masqueraders represent specific ancestral spirits or deities, reflecting the deep spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people. Each mask carries distinct features, often narrating stories of lineage, bravery, or moral teachings. The choreography of the masqueraders complements the music, creating a mesmerizing spectacle that embodies both entertainment and cultural instruction.

The band members in the photograph are depicted playing slit wooden drums, a central element in traditional Igbo music, and some hold clappers to provide rhythmic accompaniment. The Mba masks, worn by the masqueraders, are symbolic in Igbo culture, representing ancestral spirits, societal order, or spiritual guardianship. This image reflects the vibrant fusion of performance, music, and spirituality in

Igbo cultural heritage.

The Ifogu masquerade exemplifies the Igbo emphasis on oral history and communal participation. Its performance often occurs during significant festivals like the New Yam Festival or during rites of passage, symbolizing renewal, protection, and gratitude to the gods. The blending of music, dance, and masquerade artistry makes it an enduring tradition, linking past generations with the present and preserving Igbo identity in an ever-changing world.

Jones, G. I. (1930s). Ifogu masquerade depicting the band seated on the ground and two masqueraders wearing Mba masks in the background.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

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.



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