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CULTURAL HERITAGE

## The Ngbagba Ikoro Masquerade: *Celebrating the Igbo Heritage of Abiriba*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE  
IMAGE

### Otiri Ngbagba Ikoro mask from Abiriba.

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**THE NGBAGBA IKORO MASQUERADE**

# The Ngbagba Ikoro Masquerade: Celebrating the Igbo Heritage of Abiriba

By Idenze Ezeme · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

**T**he Ngbagba Ikoro masquerade is a thrilling cultural performance from the Igbo town of Abiriba in Abia State, Nigeria. It showcases the region's rich art and culture. The Masquerade, with the prominent character Otiri, gives insight into the social life, skills, and creativity of the Abiriba people.

## *Abiriba's Craftsmanship and Creativity*

Abiriba is deeply rooted in Igbo Ancestry and, in the past, was noted for its able traders, craftsmen, and professionals. Its people excelled in healing and spiritual guidance, blacksmithing, and carving masks and sculptures.



Boys' Masquerade with an Ibibio-style mask from Abiriba. Photo: Jones Archive

The artists have combined local styles with Ibibio -inspired styles in their works, which is proof of cultural exchange with neighbouring groups. They made not only masks but decorative bowls, drums, and other intricate crafts. Abiriba is famous for its Ukara, a unique dyed cloth produced using a resist-dyeing technique highly prized locally and elsewhere.

Note: A resist-dyeing technique is a method of dyeing fabric where parts of the cloth are covered to prevent them from absorbing colour.

In the 1930s, the Ngbagba Ikoro masquerade was very famous in Abiriba. It included more than 20 boys and men who danced with masks on their heads, creating a joyful atmosphere with clappers and metal gongs. The main dancer was Otiri, who wore a special costume that was a masterpiece of symbolism and artistry.



An older woman touching the Otiri Ngbagba Ikoro mask in Abiriba. Photo: Jones Archive

Otiri wore a mask with long feathers on his head and covered his face with a raffia bag. He also wore a raffia shirt and a grass skirt. His body was painted in different colours: white chalk ( Nzu) on his right arm and left leg and yellow (Odo) on his left arm and right leg. His energetic movements and eye-catching look made him the star of the show.



Young girls touching Otiri during the Ngbagba Ikoro in Abiriba. Photo: Jones Archive

### *The Community and Intellectual Property*

The Ngbagba Ikoro masquerade was deeply engraved in the communal traditions of the Abiriba people. A specific family of carvers made the masks, keeping both the art and the ideas behind the tradition safe. If a Mask was sold, the money was shared among the family, ensuring the craft's benefits remained in the community.

### *Masquerades in the Abam/Ohafia Region*

Abiriba's cultural practices were part of a broader network of masquerade traditions in the Abam and Ohafia regions. Several neighbouring communities featured Ekpe (Egbo) masquerades with masks styled after the Cross River traditions, often called Ajonku.



A young boy with the Ajonku Ngbagba Ikoro mask in Abiriba. Photo: Jones Archive

The Ngbagba Ikoro masquerade was unique, with its head masks carved in the Lower Niger style, blending local innovation with broader artistic influences. While some masks were designed to be worn over the face, many, like those in Ngbagba Ikoro, were crafted to be displayed on top of the performer's head, adding a distinct visual dimension to the performance.

The Ngbagba Ikoro masquerade, as described by G.I. Jones in his ethnographic studies, is a brilliant example of the creativity and communal spirit of the Abiriba people. The performance was not merely entertainment but a celebration of Igbo Identity, cultural continuity, and artistic expression. Presently, artefacts such as the Otiri mask, preserved in museums like Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, serve as enduring reminders of Igbo heritage and resilience.



Young girls participating in the Ngbagba Ikoro parade in Abiriba. Photo: Jones Archive

This rich legacy of Abiriba, with its emphasis on community, craftsmanship, and cultural pride, continues to inspire and inform our understanding of the beauty and depth of Igbo traditions.

- Jones, G. I. (1984). *The Art of Eastern Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, G. I. (1988). *The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Collection Catalogue: The Art of Eastern Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, UK. (n.d.). *Jones Collection: Ngbagba Ikoro masquerade of Abiriba*.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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