



Raphael Chijioke Njoku. *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals: History, Memory, and Transnationalism.* Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora Series. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020. Illustrations. 300 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-58046-984-5.

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Raphael Chijioke Njoku's study of West African masking forms and their impact in the Americas is a welcome exploration of the history and function of body-mask performances in the context of African initiation societies and their adaptation into Caribbean carnival events and initiation groups, like the Abakuá of Cuba. The author proclaims: "I bring an African voice" by "taking into account the unique roles masquerades played in the indigenous society" (p. xiii). In eight chapters, Njoku demonstrates this position by presenting the complex of actors involved in mask performances—the elder custodians, the mask carvers, the custom designers, the initiation specialist who consecrates the masks, the musicians, and the dancers—"as producers of *texts*" (p. 162). Yet grasping the meaning of such "texts" requires specialist knowledge, of local languages, codes, and worldviews, as Njoku implies by writing: "Many who write on African Diaspora history without a grounded knowledge of the African background often provide fragmented and disjointed stories" (p. 194).

After dismissing colonial scholarship that has focused on tribal boundaries, "in a field of history where the word of the colonial scholar often carries the same weight as a papal bull," Njoku moves

on to discuss shared regional traits, particularly among the "Cross River Igbo" and "their Efik, Ibibio, Ijo, and Ekoi neighbors" (p. xiv). He portrays African mask performances as a method for communities "to moderate human vices and uphold social control since the masquerades speak with the authority of the ancestors" (p. 38). "The mask, as a form of spirit-regarding art, is supposed to represent either the spirit of the ancestors or the gods of the land" (p. 53). The music used to entice mask performances "is never bereft of moral instructions" (p. 168). Finally, the ritual mask performances are a key link in the life cycle of members of participating communities: "the indigenous religious system was ... about promoting inter-human and intersocial relations.... The belief was that from the spirit world, ancestors watched their progenies and over time, enjoy the reward of reincarnation that allows them to reenter the human worlds as newborn babies.... Because of the importance placed on death and reincarnation, the rites of passage after death were important ceremonies observed with all the trappings of ritual, music, dance and masquerade festivities" (p. 169).

From his position as an Ìgbò-speaking scholar, Njoku sets out to illustrate how the masking practices of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern

Cameroon are the basis for a diverse array of masking practices across the African continent and then—through the transatlantic slave trade—into the Americas, where enslaved Africans adapted masking practices to new contexts, “to address the urgent social issues beleaguering their host societies” (p. 194). Njoku presents ritual masks as living “textual” references that offer counternarratives to European archives: “Europeans created the archives and Africans used the techniques of mimes and performative languages such as masks and masquerades to preserve, remember, and communicate their pasts for the present needs” (p. 195).

This panoramic view, wonderfully provocative, is commendable yet remains speculative for a lack of comparative research on masking in Africa itself, not to mention the diaspora in the Western Hemisphere, with the exception of Robert Nicholl’s important 2012 study of the Caribbean, *The Jumbies’ Playing Ground: Old World Influences on Afro-Creole Masquerades in the Eastern Caribbean*. A brief review of the literature on African masking in English reveals an absence of reference to earlier studies, specifically Herbert Cole’s *I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade* (1985), Ferdinand De Jong’s *Masquerades of Modernity: Power and Secrecy in Casamance, Senegal* (2007), John and Margaret Drewals’s *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (1983), Paolo Israel’s *In Step with the Times: Mapiko Masquerades of Mozambique* (2014), Nwanna Nzewunwa’s *The Masquerade in Nigerian History and Culture* (1983), and Zoë Strother’s *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende* (1998). While Njoku has participated in events with mask performances in Nigeria and views the diaspora masquerades through “African eyes,” this study is based on secondary data and presents a southeastern Nigerian perspective to the topic without introducing primary data. Nevertheless, Njoku’s audacious effort deserves consideration as a goal for future research, because while there exist several excellent studies of masking in specific

African regions, as of yet there exists no authoritative comparative study of masking practices across the continent.

Njoku’s approach is to use linguistic categories to link the Ìgbò language to the alleged “Bantu language family”: “I reiterate here that the Igbo language, particularly the various dialects spoken among the Cross River Igbo, align more to the Bantu subfamily than the Kwa subgroup” (p. xiv). Because the “Bantu” region is imagined to cover most of sub-Saharan East, Central, and West Central Africa, and the “Bantu migrations” thought to have commenced from somewhere along the present border between Nigeria and Cameroon, Njoku establishes the masks of Cross River Ìgbòs and their neighbors as the model for the “Bantus” across Africa: “the ‘Bantu/Biafra hinterland’ refers to the areas inhabited by the Igbo and their neighboring borderland communities of southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon identified by scholars as the Bantu cradle” (p. 44). Even further, Bantu and Ìgbò become interchangeable: “the proto-Bantu people comprising the Igbo and their Ibibio, Efik, and Ijo neighbors constructed their masks and masquerade institution” (p. 64). In addition to “comparative languages,” Njoku compares marriage customs and age-grade systems from Kenya and southeastern Nigeria to argue for historic links (pp. 82-83). The discussion of the masks themselves, their materials, the meaning of their visual symbols, is not profound: Ìgbò masks “are similar to the masks and masquerade dances of ... Mali” (p. 84). In which ways? Several interesting archival photographs of masking in Ìgbò-speaking communities are presented but not discussed in detail. The problem of historical data looms large in any study of West African mask traditions, which is not resolved here. Njoku does not present evidence to back up historical claims, like: “Artistic representation of white or light-faced masks did not enter into the Igbo pantheon of spirits until between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when the first modern

Europeans began to appear in the coastal enclaves of Africa” (pp. 127-28).

After arguing for a southeastern Nigerian basis to the “Bantu,” Njoku lays out demographic lists that show “Bantus” to have been a majority in the transatlantic trade and, hence, the basis for masking practices of the Western Hemisphere. In the discussion of the sources for Western Hemisphere masks we learn that some West African civilizations, like the Akan, do not use masks in performance. On the other hand, Brian Willson’s study of Egúngún masks in Brazil, *In Search of Ancient Kings: Egúngún in Brazil* (2021), highlights a clear Yorùbá transmission to the Americas, which is outside Njoku’s framework. But even if Ìgbò masking traditions were not historically the source for Caribbean carnival masks, Njoku has a backup approach: the claim that Ìgbòs brought an attitude of “adaptation” and applied it to any mask tradition they met in the Caribbean. Thus, he asks: “How can one ... rationalize the overemphasis on the Igbo connection with the various masquerade dances encountered in the colonial and antebellum Americas...?” He notes that “the Igbo partook in established masquerades they met in the Americas and injected into them some doses of their Igbo village characters” (p. 132).

The vast geographical scope of Njoku’s discussion asserts some general truths, for example: “What has emerged from the ruins of crisis associated with the African masquerades’ encounters with Islam, Christianity, and colonialism on both side of the Atlantic is a mutated and more secular masquerade carnivals of African and the African Diaspora” (p. 157). But there are exceptions to this rule, including the Brazilian Egúngún and Cuban Abakuá performances, which clearly have deep spiritual functions and represent a fierce attitude of resistance to assimilation into modern western European cultural norms that has persisted since the colonial period.

Disappointingly, the author provides no evidence to justify lumping Ìgbò into the loosely

defined, traditional colonial grouping of “Bantu” languages of southern, central, and eastern Africa. Such a claim would, of course, be handy to buttress an Ìgbò-centric analysis of masking across the African rainforest zone, but as far as the reader can discern, it is based on nothing but wishful thinking, perhaps induced by misinterpretation of unfamiliar publications in the technical discipline of comparative linguistics. Njoku declares: “The linguistic evidence around which the bulk of Bantu migration history is built is prone to serious errors.... The Igbo language was erroneously excluded from the Bantu subgroup and rather placed in the Kwa subgroup of the Niger-Congo family” (p. 75). Minimally, anyone launching such a sweeping indictment bears the intellectual responsibility either to cite some support from secondary literature (none is given) or to directly name these “serious errors” and explain why they have been overlooked by the entire field of African studies for more than a century. Application of historical labels to particular languages depends on specific observations ranging from generic resemblances of word forms to substantial lists of cognate roots and paradigms of inflection too minutely similar to have been borrowed, to regular consonant mutations that separated archaic speech communities centuries ago to statistical trends in the conservation of inherited vocabulary.[1] Admittedly, none of these scholars use such terms as “Kwa” and “Benue-Congo” to refer to the same precise sets of languages but all discrepancies are argued with citation of relevant data. By contrast, the inclusion of Ìgbò in “Bantu” has never been contemplated in this field, so if Njoku has found some reason to do so (apart from the circular logic to assume what is to be proved), the reader deserves to know what he is talking about. While the participation of “African voices” into African cultural heritage is fundamental, a method of comparative data from across the continent is required for progress. Such a project will require teamwork between documentary histori-

ans, cultural anthropologists, and specialists in oral tradition.

Note

[1]. Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963); Joseph Greenberg, "Linguistic Evidence regarding Bantu Origins," *Journal of African History* 13 (1972): 189-216; John M. Stewart, "The Second Tano Con-

sonant Shift and Its Likeness to Grimm's Law," *Journal of West African Languages* 23 (1993): 3-39; Diedrich Westermann, *Die westlichen Sudansprachen und ihre Beziehungen zum Bantu* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1927); and Kay Williamson and Roger Blench, "Niger-Congo," in *African Languages: An Introduction*, ed. Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11-42.

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