

MASKING YOUTH

TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSGRESSION IN ANNANG PERFORMANCE

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ALL PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Browse most museum or African art gallery catalogues and you would be forgiven for thinking that Annang and Ibibio wooden mask carving is not only buoyant but that it serves a thriving masking culture. The masks of initiatory societies sell for thousands of dollars on the international market, and seem to have become synonymous with, even iconic of Ibibio and Annang artistic and performative traditions. Annang and Ibibio masking is also a classic theme in ethnographic traditions that have similarly tended to fix or suspend masking in time. From Talbot (1926), Jeffreys (1931), Messenger (1957, 1971, 1973, 1984), Jones (1963, 1984, 1988, 1989), Nicklin (1982, 1989, 1999), Salmons (1985), Offiong (1984), and Akpan (1994) we have learned how Annang masks articulate with social structure and function, with cosmology and aesthetic, with initiation and generation, and with colonial state and the Christian missions.

However, we have yet to learn about the historical trajectory of Annang masking traditions, nor how these performative traditions are inflected and appropriated in a postcolonial setting. In the following I examine the question of what has happened to Annang masking traditions and trace a narrative of criminalization and diabolization during and after missionary and colonial encounters. Contemporary continuities are then traced through genealogical lines and to ways in which cultural performance has been captured by religious specialists. Turning to other instances of appropriation, I focus on the apparently contradictory ways in which Annang youth code themselves within and against masked identities. The conclusion that emerges is that we have yet to examine those features of Annang masquerade in spite, or perhaps because of which masking has proved such a persistent feature of social life (Figs. 1–2).

Indeed, to explain the effect and persistence of Annang masking we must return to the classic question of “what’s in a mask?” (Picton 1990). Here we need to move beyond structural-functionalist political interpretations which highlight the role of masking in cross-cutting otherwise fissiparous lineages (Horton 1967), and beyond the role of masks in life-cycle events (Turner 1967). More helpful to our task is the “paradox-making” role of masks. Here I attempt to historicize Elizabeth Tonkin’s (1979) insights into masking as an “embodied paradox” in which it is not disguise, but transformation that is key to understanding. Masking concerns transformations which mark a movement

(opposite)

1 Ekong, Ikot Akpa Nkuk, December 2007.





(this page)

2 Ekong, Ikot Akpa Nkuk, December 2007.

(opposite, l-r)

3 Ékpó performance, Ukanafun Local Government Area, 1997.

4 Ékpó performance, Ukanafun Local Government Area, 2001.

from one realm to another through processes of metamorphosis that negotiate humanity's relationship with the wild and the dead (Kasfir 1989, Fardon 1991). Mimetically drawing on the power and character of other realms of experience, the displacement of masking points above all to the possibility of other, impenetrable worlds of knowledge and power. The paradox is that masks might be seen, therefore, as revelatory practices which reveal an absence: the unknowable, uncontainable, hidden energies that lie beyond human agency and control. Masking is the "labour of the negative" *par excellence* (Taussig 1999).

Argenti (1997:376) has argued that masquerades should be seen in the light of a complex of revelatory practices that enable passages between both quotidian and spirit worlds and simultaneously signal the power to evade experiential worlds of subjugation. The argument in this paper, however, is that rather than evading subjugation, young people in Nigeria appropriate the contradictions of masking to contest their political marginality. In the postcolonial context of "metaphysical disorder" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006) and "radical uncertainty" (Mbembe 2004), the verification of knowledge by means that are beyond human agency, the reconfiguration of others as abject non-humans, and the re-making of selves out of the secrets of the supernatural are familiar and effective frameworks in the quest for order and certainty. It is within these cultural understandings that Annang masking practices retain their currency. And they do so in relation to and in transgression of a given, a normative historical landscape infused with Christian ethics and Pentecostalist imperatives to "break" with this past (Meyer 1998).

To address these points I am focusing on Annang communities

which lie in the palm-belt of southeastern Nigeria. Differentiated by gender and generation, season and event, and with considerable local variation and overlap, the Annang social landscape has been populated by a myriad of "plays" during its history. Indeed, the distinction between a song, theatre, masquerade, and secret society in Annang culture is ill-defined; generically they are known by a single term (*àbòdóm*—drumming). Hence, secret initiatory societies formed only one part of a range of instruments that were used to promote and defend community values, that demanded initiatory fees, that performed shaming and censoring activities against social infractions, and that disguised the identities of the performers. The most well-known examples of the initiatory societies of these communities are *ékpè*, the leopard society (Ruel 1969, Leib and Romano 1984, Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985; on the *ékpè* society's trans-Atlantic connections see Palmié 2006), *áwíè òwò*, the warrior society (Salmons 1985), the married women's society, *èbrè* or *nyàámà* (Jeffreys 1956), and the *èkón* masquerade, which comprises a number of dramatic performances, including puppetry, costumed acting, and acrobatics (Jeffreys 1951, Messenger 1962, Scheinberg 1977, Ebong Inih 1990).

The focus of this historical narrative, however, is the ancestral masquerade, the *ékpó* society, which is indigenous to the Ibibio-speaking language cluster. *Ékpó's* laws (*níbét*) came into force after the rainy season at the time of the new yam festival and closed its performance four weeks later, when the ancestors were bid farewell in the frightening, noisy, nocturnal ceremony (*ndòk*) which marked both the year's end and the boundaries between living and dead (Leonard 1966:449). Several *ékpó* lodges formed a clus-

ter around a prominent market, where opening and closing performances were held. The annual performances of these lodges inscribed a set of inter-village allegiances onto the Annang political landscape as well as marking out male membership with prohibitions against non-initiates, women, and children. For most men who had reached social maturity, initiation into the ancestor society involved a simple presentation of food and money, but violence was also central. The wounds *ékpó* players inflicted on non-initiates, by knives, swords, or arrows, were injuries sent from the village of the dead (*óbìò ékpó*) and could be healed only on the payment of initiation fees. Since members shared the initiation fees there was, therefore, an incentive for and legitimization of violence, and the elders of the society (*èté ékpó*) distributed eagle feathers and the rights to carve new masks to players who had inflicted such wounds.

In its simulation of ancestral presence *ékpó* represents Annang cosmology writ large. Members of the society wear carved wooden masks which impersonate and become possessed by the spirits of the ancestors (Figs. 3–6). The distinction in the character of ancestors in Annang society was drawn between good spirits—those who were successful in life—and bad ones—those who were unsuccessful or notoriously malicious. These categories were also linked to forms of death; a normal death (*mkpá*)

from old age was contrasted with a sudden or violent one (*àfáí*).¹ The dead, especially the graves of a powerful person (a diviner, medicine-specialist, or a chief), or of those who had been killed violently (those who were murdered, executed, killed in battle, or who had died from the effects of false oath-swearing), were imbued with an order of power that could be conjured to kill through graveside libations or in the preparation of charms.²

The contrasting forms of ancestorhood are captured at their most figurative in *ékpó* performance and correspond to an aesthetic of beauty (*éti*) and ugliness (*idiók*) in their carved masks. These terms are ways of relating character (*éti iló*, 'good person', *idiók iló*, 'bad person') and behavior (*éti úsún*, 'good way', *idiók úsún*, 'bad way'). Beautiful masks representing good spirits (*m̃f̃n ékpó*) are worn on the opening and closing performances of the masquerade in the market, and portray the face in a human form which stresses fertility, often with a series of smaller, children's faces carved upon the forehead. Ugly masks, in contrast, contain exaggerated and distorted features representing malevolent, wandering spirits (*idiók ékpó*). They are usually smaller, with non-human features such as jagged teeth, and sometimes represent disfiguring diseases such as gangosa (Simmons 1957, Messenger 1973:121–23).

Fear of malevolent ancestral spirits was a palpable element of





5 Ékpó, Ikot Edem Ewa, 2001.

ékpó performance, and there is, consequently, a strong emphasis on the control of the fiercest spirits represented by the masks. These include categories of “nonsense” spirits (*ńtímé ńtímé ékpó*) such as the deaf spirit (*ínán ékpó*) who cannot hear the drum’s directions or onlookers’ pleas for mercy, and who delights in destroying farm crops (Umoren 1995:81). The most awesome and dangerous of the masks, however, is that of the spirit of the ghosts (*ékpó ńdèm*). Wearing this mask is a form of ordeal and only a descendant of the society’s founder can don it without suffering misfortune. Its highly ambiguous source of power contributes to *ékpó ńdèm*’s status. The initiate who wears the *ékpó ńdèm* mask sleeps in the forest (*ákáì*) for seven nights, where he must not eat food cooked by a woman. He will pour libations on the graves of seven “wicked” people (*ìdíók ìlò*, ‘ugly character’), and he will consume roots known as *ádún àbàsi* (‘root of god’) that make him feel like he is flying.³ His seclusion, invocations, and consumptions each contribute to a state of possession once masked as *ékpó ńdèm* that exceeds the usual sense of possession (*ńáám*, ‘not knowing oneself’ and having a ‘hot head’) expressed and represented by other *ékpó* players. *Ékpó ńdèm* is differentiated in other symbolic forms, including the way the masked per-

former is tied at the waist with palm-tapper rope to prevent him from attacking onlookers, the way he circulates around the performance space clockwise by the lefthand side, and the way that the masked performer cannot bend forward to resolve the familiar high-low opposition of Annang ritual. These transgressions of left-right and high-low are illustrative of the most malignant states of possession and malevolent ancestral forces.

Representations of this initiatory and performative violence figured prominently in missionary and colonial encounters with *ékpó*. In 1887 an Irishman, Samuel Bill, arrived at the mouth of the Qua Iboe river and established in areas of the hinterland recently released from King Jaja’s blockade a nondenominational evangelical Protestant mission, the Qua Iboe Mission. The Mission’s perception of the secret societies was formative for the Annang communities of this region. Over several decades the secret societies would figure as the most serious obstacle to the spread of the Gospel and missionary representations would take contradictory paths. First, to missionary minds, the Annang political landscape was a blank canvas populated by diabolized monstrous forms. The early imaginings of the secret societies therefore imported stories from along the coast in Sierra Leone of human leopard societies. In October 1897 Archie Bailie, based at the Okat station wrote that:

The secret society of “Human Tigers,” which is prevalent in so many tribes on the West Coast, has come into existence among the Ibibios again, to the dismay of all the inhabitants.⁴

Not only were societies misrepresented in this way, but throughout this period the idiom of the secret society became a residual category into which unfamiliar social practices and forms were collapsed. Hence almost all elements of the Annang polity which were opaque to colonial authorities were thought to be shrouded in secrecy and hence labelled as a secret society, including divination orders, elders’ meetings and any performance. Covert mobilization in the Women’s War, the trafficking of prostitutes, and the organization of village night guards were all linked in official discourse to the workings of shadowy sodalities of initiates.

Second, the church, in its translation of the Bible, incorporated key features of the local cosmology to Christianity’s conceptions of God and Devil, Heaven and Hell. In translations of the Bible and in everyday speak, the remote, all-controlling beneficial sky god, *àbàsi ényòh*, became *Abassi*, and was translated for God. The ancestral spirits, *ékpó*, as represented in masquerade performances, became the Devil. In the process, as Meyer (1999) and others have shown, the missionaries implied and fuelled a belief in the very supernatural agencies that they declared imaginary. Hence, that which Christian futures stood against, “heathen” practice, masquerade, fetish, and occult powers was crystallized in one single term—*ékpó*—the name of the ancestral mask.

Furthermore, conversion interrupted the initiatory cycle by which men’s societies reproduced themselves. In *ékpó* it was customary to cajole and humiliate a non-initiate, but by the early 1900s those who converted to Christianity and resisted initiation into *ékpó* became the subject of concerted and violent coercion: “The heathen people made palaver, because Christian young men were growing up without joining Egbo, or rather without paying fees to be made members of that powerful society” (M’Keown

1912:73). There was, therefore, a significant economic dimension to elders' resentment of the Christian youth, because they were unable to recoup secret society initiation fees, and because, as Perham put it, "Christianity has knocked the bottom out of their investments" (Perham 1937:239).

Secret society resistance was not only directed at Christian converts. The imposition of the colonial judicial order in the Qua Iboe hinterland was met with overt and covert responses from the elders of the secret societies. The potential revival of "pre-government days" was a constant fear for the administration and so-called "revivals" were especially prevalent during the World War I years:

During the last few months, the secret societies have begun to wake up again. The reason for this is apparently the war at home. Some of the interior people say the day of the white man is over in this country; others, who do not go quite so far as this think that while our hands are full of graver business, we shall not trouble very much about them.⁵

In 1918, at Etaha Obong market, two miles from Uyo, for instance, *ékpó* meetings were held during which they resolved to restore their "ancient authority." Tired of the new Native Courts, *ékpó* had made arrangements to deal with anyone who sought to frustrate them and demanded "to rule the whole country again under the old ekpo law."⁶ As a result of successive acts of political subversion, discourse on the secret societies shifted to the point that in 1923 an influential commentator within the province wrote:

The Ekbo society is not a law-giving or law-making society as has wrongly in the past been considered its functions. Rather it was and

is a lawless band of brigands who backed their words with the edge of the matchet. ... as the ghostly Ekbo is malevolent so also is his corporeal representative who destroys property, robs, and plunders and matchets all strangers, non-members and women.⁷

Despite this, however, the relative absence of powerful rulers, the official relegation of clan heads, and the growing dissatisfaction with Warrant Chiefs "reinforced the practical need to tolerate secret societies" (Nwaka 1983:191; c.f. Afigbo 1972). Throughout the inter-war years, therefore, the government policy towards the secret societies was one of "tolerant forbearance" determined by an overriding priority to maintain cohesion and social integration. Colonial perspectives of the *ékpó* society placed it in an ambiguous space between being essential to the fabric of society, and being an "armed and lawless constabulary." Despite mounting petitions from the missions to outlaw the secret societies, administrators continued to be concerned about launching an assault on the traditional social order and what was conceived as "communal life." Only where the balance of power had shifted towards the Christian youth was it considered prudent for the administration to intervene and to act against the secret societies. Hence, while the prohibition of *ékpó* was discussed in Uyo District in 1924, it was rejected in the Annang Districts of Abak and Ikot Ekpenne for fear of causing a breakdown in the social order.⁸ Observations made by the Resident of Calabar Province, for instance, demonstrate a remarkable ambivalence towards a process colonialism itself had initiated:

The future ... lies with Christianity, and we can afford to let native

6 *Ékpó*, Ikot Edem Ewa, 2001.





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7 Ékpó intimidating children into eating, Ikot Edem Ewa, October 2001.

(opposite)

8 Cross-Country, Ikot Udo Obobo, December 1997.

customs repugnant to our own ideas die a natural death. Those moribund customs, alas, form the only cement which binds together the communities of this Province at the present day. Christianity means uncontrolled individualism, and chaos in communal life in these parts ...⁹

World War II was a key turning point in the criminalization of the secret societies, and for *ékpó* in particular. Reports of the number of people being assaulted during *ékpó* performances was a key index, and was itself a marker of the confidence of converts and “A-lights” (mission-educated, self-styled elites with a “progressive” outlook) to implicate the secret societies with the authorities. In making markets insecure, in discouraging “stranger” traders and in delaying shipments of palm produce

to the coast, progressive letter-writers framed their objections in economic terms and accused the masked *ékpó* players of being enemies of the Empire and of being “devilishly spirited Hitlers hitting down our War Effort” (*Nigerian Eastern Mail*, September 4, 1943). Masquerades themselves were also changing during the war, with cities and Christmas time providing new spatial and temporal logics for performance. Across the continent from the 1920s onwards, most notably during the war years, youth gangs including Cowboy cults were reported as a “menace” to law and order during festive periods (La Hausse 1990, Burton 2001). “Cowboy” gangs emerged in Calabar during the 1946 Christmas celebrations, for instance, and “So far as we can make out they seem to be organised on the lines of the juvenile and adolescent gangs that disturb the peace of the slums of Ameri-



can cities" (*Nigerian Eastern Mail*, January 18, 1947). Traditional masquerade performances in the growing towns of Uyo, Eket, and Calabar were also notorious and secret society members found themselves being charged with the new offence of "masquerade hooliganism."

The apparent deterioration in the conduct of *ékpó* and other societies forced the colonial authorities to reconsider their previously ambivalent stance towards them. In Uyo in 1944 the district officer threatened that any *ékpó* men found in their masks would be arrested and charged for conducting themselves in a way likely to cause a breach of the peace (*Nigerian Eastern Mail*, August 19, 1944). There was, however, no general proscription of secret societies. After World War II, however, the secret societies came under increasing official purview. The Uyo Divisional Advisory Committee had recommended that the *ékpó* society be declared illegal in 1947, though the first bye-laws restraining *ékpó's* activities were enacted later in 1952. In Ikot Ekpene the plays were not banned but their activities were restricted. Otoro Rural District Council instituted regulations, for example, which applied to *ékpó*, *èkón* and *ékpè*, and which demanded that the societies were registered with District Councils (including the names of the members), that registration fees were paid, that permits were arranged before any procession, and that no society carried a weapon.¹⁰ In this context, the District Officer in Uyo, reported of *ékpó* that:

Its continuance is certainly not in any way essential to the people, except to those individuals who use it as a protection racket for extorting money. In these days its proper place is in museums and history books.¹¹

TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSGRESSION

In missionary and colonial rhetoric, *ékpó* had become a transgressive domain; it was a dangerous place, a treacherous time of year, it was an anti-progressive sphere of subversion. Contemporary discourse regularly revisits this theme that *ékpó* is an unwelcome, anachronistic negative space. Chiefs, who once led the societies and whose power was intertwined with them, are now called upon to condemn the *ékpó* play. Traditional rulers in Annang Local Governments decried the *ékpó* masquerades in 1997, for instance, pointing to its association with armed robbery, rape, and hooliganism, and called for the excesses of the "cult" to be curbed in the interest of peace (*The Pioneer*, December 15–21, 1997). These chiefs noted with dismay that the prestige and dignity the traditional forefathers formerly enjoyed during public outings of *ékpó* masquerades had been eroded by the operators of the "new generation" of the masquerade. The use of the word "cult" here carries a range of criminal connotations associated with varsity gangs, so-called secret cults whose vendetta killings brought many university campuses to a halt during the late 1990s (Offiong 2003, Gore and Pratten 2003). Indeed, it points to a



9 Cross-Country, Ikot Udo Obobo, December 1997.

politics of labelling applied to cults, secret societies, and cultural plays that are relevant both to the history of cultural traditions and to the politics of youth in contemporary Nigeria.

As a result of this demonization and criminalization, most Local Government Areas either have banned *ékpó* or the Divisional Police Officers demand the approval of chiefs, a police permit, and a register of the names of the players to be masked before any traditional play performs. In some of the villages that I work in, *ékpó* will be stoned and chased away if they emerge on a main road or market. In others, the play is performed in a doubly secret manner. Not only are the identities of the masqueraders disguised and audience prohibitions upheld, but the masqueraders rarely gain official permits to perform and therefore play clandestinely. Hence, when the masked dancer stepped out of *afe ékpó* during a performance in Ikot Akpa Nkuk in September 1997, the *ékpó* drum determining the player's dance (fast, slow, left, and right) sang that the dancer should run inside the village, away from the road and the government buildings, that he should not cause trouble and that if he did he would face it alone. Hence, the state (the local government and police) had been added to the categories of those who should not see the masquerade.

I am not aware of any new (formal) initiations into *ékpó* in the twelve years of my fieldwork. Nor are the famed mask carvers like the Chukwu lineage in Utu Etim Ekpo working on commission for *ékpó* leaders—though they do supply the craft stalls in Ikot Ekpene. Nevertheless, *ékpó* performances in villages and market squares are still held each October and are sometimes hired for burials. There are spiritual, ancestral imperatives to retain the play since many players recount that illness or other signs compel them to perform. One key factor explaining the continuity of these criminalized performances, however, is that many of the heads of the *ékpó* society today are also healers and diviners known as *ídíṣh*. As Tonkin (1979:243) reminds us, power also resides in the mask itself, and in the case of *ékpó* most masks are kept at and enhance the power of a diviner's shrine. In the highly competitive market that is prognostication, healing, and the manufacture of medicinal charms, it is possible that contemporary *ékpó* may be read as a spectacle to “magnify” and advertise *ídíṣh*. This was confirmed to me in an incident in 2001 when the *ídíṣh* coordinating *ékpó* proceedings in Ikot Edem Ewa tested the bullet-proof medicine (*átá áfìòndò*) for which he was renowned by firing a hunter's rifle at the chest of an *ékpó* masquerader who emerged unscathed. Using masking to legitimate customary, spiritual forms of authority in this way, *ídíṣh* draw members of their own families into contemporary *ékpó* as well as using its frightening form to discipline errant children (Fig. 7).

While *ékpó*'s persistence is linked to the way it has become concentrated among families of *ídíṣh* diviners, it is also necessary to outline some of the ways in which *ékpó*, and Annang masquerade performance more generally, appears in other aspects of contemporary society. Three aspects are highlighted here: end of year parades, vigilante punishment, and a new youth gang.

Just as *ékpó* emerged to announce the end of the agricultural cycle, so masquerades, especially in the cities, continue to perform at the end of the calendar year at Christmas. These parades have more recently been appropriated in villages too, and form

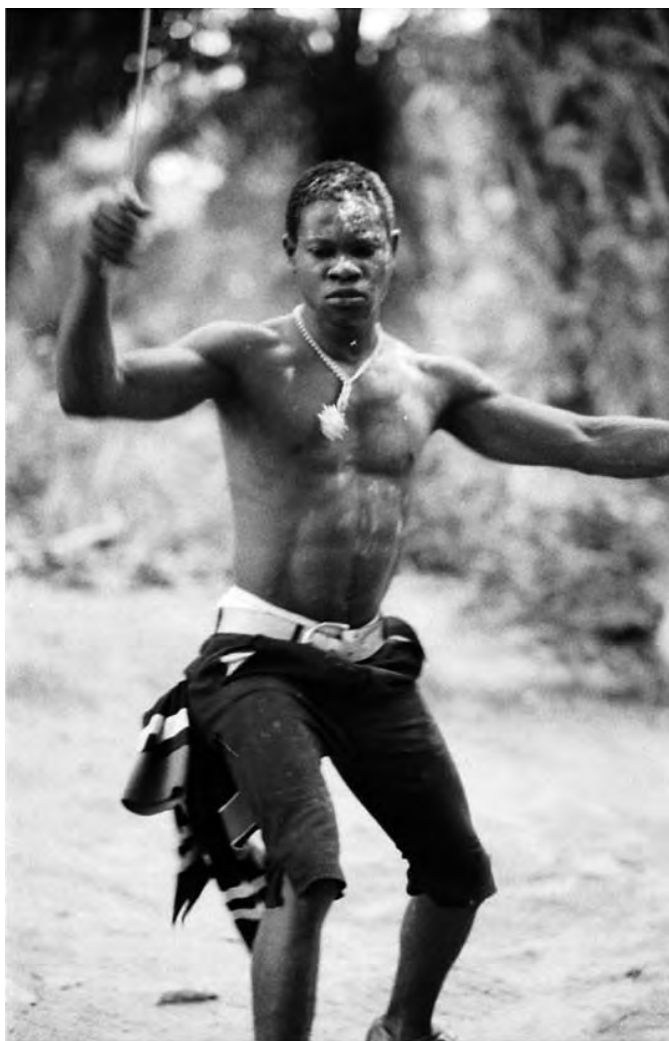
part of Christmas festivities, which include a day of renewal, *úkàpá-ísúá* or “community day,” when hometown associations return to the village to launch development plans, and church services are held known as *ésáná ékányá* (‘to clean promise’)—which are thanksgiving services for having lived through the year safely and which echo the celebration held for surviving an ordeal. As part of these celebrations, masquerade parades known as “cross-country runs” or *mbré úkàpá-ísúá* (‘plays for the changing year’) are staged over the Christmas and New Year period (Figs. 8–9).

Usually organised by youth associations, whose branch members return from the cities during the holiday, cross-country runs are a recent innovation. In Ikot Akpa Nkuk, for example, the cross-country was initiated by students and returning migrants who had witnessed parades in town. Early one morning between Christmas and New Year, parades of young people from individual villages march behind masked figures. These are noisy, chaotic events. Motorbike riders accompanying the parade speed ahead, performing dare-devil stunts decked out in palm fronds while carrying swords, bells, and bottles of schnapps. It is at once intimidatory, with players demanding money from onlookers, and celebratory, pronouncing community identity and generational solidarity. The sense of indisciplined license is reminiscent of “first fruit” plays (*ndòhò*) and burial plays (*àkò*) in which players are at liberty to seize food and drink. The use of masquerade figures is similarly ambivalent. The tall spike mask (*àkòkòt*) is popular since it is colorful, visible, and harmless, but *ékpó* and more recently *agaba* also perform (Fig. 10). Those who join the parade claim that there is no “medicine inside” the various masked players, and hence that they are stripped of their “other worldliness.” As a result, ritual prohibitions are suspended and women and children parade with the masked figures and run from house to house to ask for donations. Many Pentecostal churches discourage their members from running with the parades, however, and may admonish those they witness participating. In one village the appropriation of masquerade displays during Christmas cross-country runs was stopped in 1997. This was not the result of pressure from churches or Christian members, however, but rather from the *été ékpó* (leader of the society), who refused to sanction the masquerade display because of fears that the society was being disgraced.

There is inevitable contestation of meaning where the paradoxical forms of masking are invoked, and these cross-country plays represent a curious juxtaposition of entertainment and transgression, of harmless fun and ritual subversion. Perhaps where the boundaries of initiatory membership are dissolved and where ritual taboos of witnessing the mask are subverted, it is possible to read the annual cross-country as an act of defacement in Taussig's sense. In my own lines of questioning I was at first especially concerned with the transgressive aspects of the performance. Here the act of desecration and demasking might be seen to serve to increase the reality of the spirit world:

It is precisely at this point of revelation of artifice and make-believe that the reality of the spirit world, far from being destroyed is deepened and achieves full force (Taussig 1998:233).

Yet, on reflection, it strikes me that the key message, manifest in



10 "Warrior" playing *agaba*, Ikot Akpa Nkuk, 2001.

those moments when "cross-country" plays from different villages confront one another along the road, is of intersecting generational and community identities. Village youth are mobilized independent of their elders and appropriate those aspects of the cultural repertoire which enable them to remake community identity and legitimate their political autonomy.

While these forms of contemporary masking are sometimes read locally as undermining the meaning of masquerade, other instances speak to its persistence and potency as a powerful social idiom. Registers of personhood derived from ancestral masquerade performance, for instance, are inflected in vigilante practice in order to construct categories of difference based on a division between good and evil/bad which not only constructs the category of the thief but also offers clues to the legitimacy of vigilante violence against criminals. Annang night-guards and vigilante groups have a long history during which the punishment of thieves has taken a consistently similar form (Pratten 2006, 2007c, 2008). Once apprehended or found guilty by an ordeal or by the vigilante's tribunal, a thief is stripped and rubbed with a mixture of charcoal and palm oil (the oil being a common

signifier of transforming the self, especially in rites of initiation, Pratten 2007a). Thieves are then tied at the waist with the rope of a palm-wine tapper and paraded around the village, usually to the market and the village head's compound. The gathered crowd will sing, "*wooo ino adia nnok*" ('the thief is eating shame').

These aesthetics of alterity captured in vigilante performance exaggerate difference on the basis of symbolic oppositions—thief/vigilante; dirty/clean; ugly/beautiful—and hence code the thief as an anti-social, non-human force like the malevolent spirits represented in *ékpó*, especially the *ékpó ñdèm* masked player as outlined above. In this way a divide is constructed between bodies that matter and other, abjected, bodies who are, as Butler (1993) argues, less intelligible to the symbolic order and threaten a return of havoc and discord to the symbolic and economic orders. It is in this sense, therefore, that the symbolism of masquerade furnishes an idiom of interpretation and produces a legitimization, an imperative in fact, for actual violence against thieves.

While these practices inscribe signs of power and deviance on the body, the link with masquerade performance is both embodied and discursive. In 2004, members of the vigilante group in Ikot Akpa Nkuk said that "*Ékpó* are the ones to use [charcoal] ashes—they mix it with oil. ... it is somehow playful ... If you happen to paint [a] criminal now it is a masquerade, it means we are playing masquerade." Vigilantes, therefore, recognize that their coding of a thief is like "playing masquerade," and the practice continues despite those critical voices who think it undermines their standing because it associates the forces of law and order with something playful that is banned by the authorities.

A third instance of twenty-first century masquerade traditions concerns the emergence across southeastern Nigeria over the past five years of a new masquerade society or cult known as *agaba* (Pratten 2007b). As with most similar youth cults and gangs across southern Nigeria, the public discourse on *agaba* associates its members with wanton violence and sees it as a threat to the moral fabric of communities that is imagined in predominantly Christian idioms. The various labels applied to *agaba* include "area boys" (urban street gangs), secret cults (often associated with university campus life), and local militia (promoting ethnic agendas). Furthermore, observers note a link between these forms of street gangs and the insurgent militia of the Niger Delta (Wellington 2007).

The historical template for contemporary *agaba* masking most likely derives from Igbo traditions and masks called *agaba* or *agaba-idu* (meaning 'lion') which comprised composite, often horned head dresses which celebrated and were performed by young men (Boston 1960:59). The groups referred to here, however, do not recall this historical connection but trace their origins rather to the industrial sprawl of Bonny's oil depots where a female water spirit, *agaba*, presented herself to cult's founder, a young man called Papa Lucky. From Bonny *agaba* extended through the rivers of the Niger Delta to the major cities of the region where, for instance, the groups are known as the Bayside Boys and the School Boys in Calabar, and the Millennium Boys, 007, and Diobu United in Port Harcourt. From these centers the groups have spread to Annang, Ibibio, Ogoni, and Igbo villages across the hinterland, including Akwa Ibom State, which is home

to the group upon whom this study is based, the Ukanafun Base Boys. This regional, cross-ethnic dispersal of a society based on generation is important when set against a context of the discourses of autochthony and the apparently ever-deepening ethnic cleavages wrought by the politics of identity and belonging in post-1999 democratic Nigeria.

The dominant idioms that *agaba* plays on are those related to masquerade and cult performances, which are ambiguously sited, and in terms of styles, language, performance, and action construct and represent particular ideas of masculinity. In addition to the maritime and mafia slang and symbolism of the varsity cults, *agaba* also finds purchase and meaning in an Annang context because of the register of local secret societies, *ékpó* in particular. It was actually at *ékpó* performances in 2001 that I first met some of the *agaba* members “wanting to get ideas” as they put it. Many of the current *agaba* players were initiated and played *ékpó* and other societies when they were younger—before the local government bans of the mid 1990s were introduced. The careers of *agaba* boys are linked to these plays then, and the idea of a “traditional masquerade” is regularly invoked in discourse on the legitimacy of the *agaba* cult.

Unlike traditional initiatory societies like *ékpó*, *agaba* is a society without elders, where initiation is divorced from the passing of ancestral knowledge. Yet, like *ékpó*, *agaba* initiation defines personhood in terms of the membership of a translocal network of young men you have graduated from small boys (*áyín*) to

youth (*ínkpàráwà*). *Agaba* members make a connection in the way the *ékpó* players represent their bodies between the charcoal and palm oil that is smeared onto the *ékpó*’s body, and the fact that *agaba* wears “black on black”—black shirts, trousers, and caps (Figs. 11–12). As with *ékpó* (and indeed like *odelay* in Sierra Leone), *agaba* performance is a test, and like the aesthetic distinction Nunley (1981, 1987) identifies between fierce and fancy costumes, so the *agaba* uniforms—mufti for peace, black for an outing, and red for violence—represents intention in aesthetic. By wearing black on black, by assuming the garb associated with banned cults and armed robbers, the *agaba* boys are being deliberately confrontational (c.f. Argenti 1998). These aesthetic distinctions of peace and violence, offence and defense, aggression and protection are further rehearsed in *agaba*’s songs and in a repertoire that combines calls to arms along with laconic sketches of misfortune and helplessness.

The plastic, protean qualities of this contemporary mask are also demonstrated in the origins and ownership of the *agaba* mask itself, the carved wooden face (Fig. 13). For outings it is “hired” from the headquarters of *agaba* in Port Harcourt, and hence shared across the region. Despite the famous local carving traditions, the origin of this mask is not known. The *agaba* players do not profess to know what the various characters depicted on it are supposed to represent. This is an important feature which enables groups across the Delta region to re-configure locally appropriate meanings associated with the mask, and

11 *Agaba*, Ikot Akpa Nkuk, 2004.





(both pages)
12–13 *Agaba*, Ikot Akpa Nkuk,
 2004.

hence Annang groups connect the figures depicted on the mask with the portrayal and projection of power through the figures of a soldier, a *mami wata* spirit, and bush animals like leopards and snakes.

Agaba, therefore captures the quest for power and protection among young men, and ideas of masculinity based on being tested and proving oneself. It is here that the secret cult provides an appropriate idiom for the organization and protection of marginalized young men from the inequities of what they call to in their songs the “rugged life” of violence associated with militant groups in the Niger Delta, the gangs in Port Harcourt, the cults on university campuses, and the state’s security forces. Hence *agaba* defines itself in opposition to community, Christianity, and law and order. Within the village of Ikot Akpa Nkuk, the location of *agaba*’s Sunday performances (which were originally outside the church) has been a particular cause of tension, with unmistakable echoes of disputes from the 1920s and 1930s. *Agaba*’s relations with the police have been even more fraught. Following the shooting of one of their members, *agaba* led an assault on the Ukanafun Divisional Police Station in November 2005 which led to considerable street violence and the kidnap

and ransom of two police officers. A subsequent independent commission of enquiry sought to ensure that *agaba* had been banned in all the surrounding villages. A final illustration of the paradox and persistence of this group is that despite the recent violence, *agaba* continues to perform. During the Christmas festivities in 2007, for example, they dressed not in black outfits with the mask, but as elders with cloth wrappers, white singlets, and the black, red, and white knitted hats characteristic of *ékpó* society elders (Fig. 14). And while some groups performed independently, others led and had been incorporated into the community “cross-country” plays.

CONCLUSION

From these brief sketches we arrive at a set of related paradoxes. First, Annang youth appropriate masquerade performance at Christmas and New Year and yet in doing so apparently devalue its meaning and message. Second, Annang youth code themselves as vigilantes in opposition to the most thoroughly abject category of person, the thief, who is configured within the semiotics of the *ékpó* masquerade. And third, yet other Annang youth who join *agaba* embrace and actively code themselves



within precisely this marginalized and abjected category. How then do we confront these paradoxes in which the criminalized and diabolized *ékpó* and Annang masquerade traditions are appropriated in contemporary but contradictory ways?

Perhaps the key here is to point to the transformative and transgressive aspects of masking. Masculinities and youth in West Africa are configured through an aesthetic of violence and through quests for selfhood shaped by the creative ambiguities of indigenous notions of power—of toughness and testing—that are central to masquerade performance. Here, the continued salience of the use of the secret society in Annang practice lies not in the mere invocation of “tradition” but in the manipulation of the ambiguous, unknown properties of power with which it is linked. The stress here is on historical trajectories and contingencies as opposed to reductionist explanations of “re-traditionalization” (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Like other forms through which youth have expressed violence along the West African coast, the modes of collective mobilization among Nigerian youth (vigilantes and gangs) can be seen as “a logical extension of longstanding ethics and practices concerned with the protection of their communities” (Leach 2004:ix).

This “labour of the negative,” in which concealed forms of

power are portrayed and projected, also links directly into the ways in which contemporary masquerade, as demonstrated in the *agaba* example, concerns the coding of youth as a political category. Young men are actively manipulating the categories of cult and cultural play that are so fiercely contested in popular discourse, and how better to express the latent hostility of a marginalized group than in the form of cult groups that are criminalized and diabolized. *Agaba* performance points to a specific self-realization of marginalization, and it is important to recognize that their critical and violent potentiality is configured in precisely the creative forms by which they represent themselves as marginal. The critique of the Nigerian social fabric which *agaba* presents is powerful precisely because the transformation and transgression youth enact enables them to project an epistemological advantage onto disadvantage itself.

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14 *Agaba*, Ikot Akpa Nkuk, December 2007.



Notes

1 Goldie (1862) defines *áfáí* as “violently and outrageously” and as an executioner, a cruel, bloody man, and a murderer.

2 Those who suffered a violent death, especially those who were killed by an oath (*mbiám*), would not be buried at all, but their bodies would be deposited in a wooded grove outside the village (*ájòr*).

3 The consumption of these roots differs from the contemporary smoking of cannabis (known as *íkòṣí ékpó*) by the general parade of masked *ékpó* performers.

4 QIM Occasional Paper, January 1898, (18), D/3301/EA/1.

5 Revival of Secret Societies in Igbo country, (J. N. Cheetham), 1915, NAE: RIVPROF 8/3/261.

6 J.W. Westgarth, Qua Iboe Mission to Provincial Commissioner, Calabar, 15 January 1918, NAE: CALPROF 5/8/71.

7 Annual Report, Abak Division, 1923, NAE: CALPROF 5/14/50.

8 DO Ikot Ekpen to Resident, Calabar, 15 February 1924, NAE: CALPROF 5/1/156.

9 Resident, Calabar Province to The Secretary, Southern Provinces, 14 June 1927, NAE: CALPROF 5/1/156.

10 District Council (Control of Traditional Societies) Bye Laws, 1952, NAE: CALPROF 7/1/380.

11 DO Uyo to Senior Resident, Calabar Province, 1 March 1952, NAE: CALPROF 7/1/380.

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