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# GÈLÈDÉ: METAPHYSICS AND GENDER IN AN AFRICAN RITUAL PLAY

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### Introduction:

There have been myriad studies on the art of Gèdè dance drama of the Yoruba among which are Beier (1958); Harper (1970); Olabimtan (1972); Drewal and Drewal (1983); Layiwola (1987); I (1993); Lawal (1996). All of these studies together have been able to document the content, style and folklore of a compelling masking tradition. This essay, therefore, does not intend to repeat things which have been done with creative as well as scholarly ability. Instead, it will dwell on metaphysical conceptualizations arising from material study and documentation. Since it is an attempt to capture those rather ethereal aspects, a lot of critical as well as speculative statements are likely to ensue. In all, the import will be to provoke thought and inquiry as well as to stimulate curiosity and attention.

Whilst in the field in 1991, I got into some discussion with field assistants on whether the carnivalesque carvings and the sculptural and kinetic celebrations of Gèdè or Epa masquerades could not be i

carvings and the sculptural and kinetic celebrations of *Gèdè* or *Epa* masquerades could not be i to amount to religious worship. Naturally it reverts to the familiar argument of whether the *Gè* masquerades constitute divinities both in their material, plastic manifestation or in the hopes and often evinced by them. One should also note that the feudatory relationship between the spirits o and their devotees call for a greater inquiry into the impact of these artistic forms on their suppos connoisseurs and neophytes. In Ijio where I first started the field work, the views of *Gèdè* artist devotees' reactions were in varying degrees, viz.: that *Gèdè* is both a festival as well as an aspe religion. It is interesting to note here that *Gèdè* festival in Ijio has come to be associated with t Christmas because all the youths and indigenes of the town would normally visit the town durin festive season. Hence *Gèdè* in Ijio had become an end-of-year festival.

In other parts of southwestern Yoruba land around Ketu, Imeko, Egbado and Dahomey where *G* also predominant, the celebrations come between June and September. But if we look at Ibitoku (1993) which would seem to be a reaction to earlier studies, he de-emphasizes entertainment and rather prefer the religious import of a female armament:

At this juncture, one can dismiss as inaccurate Olabimtan's contention that a *Gelede* mas not a god.

Playing down the ritual and the dramatic interestingly reflects Olabimtan's ethnic predile

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or preoccupations. Olabimtan hails from Ilaro and the IlarøOyo-Egbado *Gelede* from w he draws his material stresses the theatrical [1993: 42].

There is no doubting the fact that Ibitokun's salvo is a bit at a tangent since most aspects of dram inevitably reminds the critic of the religious origins of drama. But the point goes a little further, particular performative approach to ritual add or takes away from its nature depending on certai factors? I have to borrow an explanation from one whom had trodden these paths before; the du rituals as performances. I quote from S.J. Tambiah:

On the one hand there is a general sense in which it can be said that a public ritual reprod in its repeated enactments certain seemingly invariant and stereotyped sequences such as formulas chanted, rules of etiquette followed, and so on. On the other hand, every field anthropologist knows that no one performance of a rite, however rigidly prescribed, is ex the same as another performance because it is affected by processes peculiar to the oral specialist's mode of recitation, and by certain variable features.... [1979: 115].

The duality, even duplicity, of ritual cannot often be tackled all at once but we can at least transe Ibitokun's remonstrations with Olabimtan by agreeing that both the religious and theatrical aspe can be classified into one paradigmatic set. This would appear as two sides of the same coin mu and play can be opposing sides of the same phenomenon pandering to the variation of rules and

The import of focus on Ibitokun's comments on Olabimtan's 1972 paper is to highlight the mere of performance on the cultural subsoil. In this case, one point is made through another that is only visible. If, for instance, we take the symbology of the masks as presented in the shrines (Ashe) it is true that there is always a council of masks in the inner recesses of the *Ashe*. The mother mask Lawal rightly terms Abo igi, is always on a higher pedestal in relation to the other masks. My observation of the Gèlèdè mask; in particular, the mother mask is its unequalled serenity and inner peace in its latent kinesthetic potentials (1987, op.cit). This is the tendency which both the masker and his mask are supposed to impart at the end of the performance. Symbolically, a mask must be domesticated by the mother mask prior to a performance, as Ibitokun testifies:

The ritual aspects of **Gelede** start from the shrine in which the mask dancer would have deposited his mask a few days before the performance proper. Like all shrines, the **Gelede** shrine receives sacrifices: kola-nuts, palm-oil, hot drinks (gin), pigeons, hens, goats and so on (p. 41)

At Ijio the chief priest (or *Babalasho*) uses goats for his annual sacrifices to the council of mask. The mother mask is rarely moved and often deeply revered. It comes out only in deep darkness and its presence is often felt by all at the festival. In some other instances they descend like a hush on the play in the guise of birds to grant protection to all connected with the masks, in particular, the da Beier presents it thus:

The "mothers from the left and from the right, from the front and from the back" will not be asked to descend and join the group. Usually their answer can be heard coming from the sky in the form of birds' cries (1958: 10).

These 'mothers' symbolized by the mother mask bestows healing and blessing but, if abused, can cause the flow of life in humans and in nature; and cause a lot of hardships.

## The Medium or the Mask

In establishing connection across categories of being or performative states, a certain state of consciousness in the medium, must be at play. David Napier (1988) has problematised the phenomenon thus:

With respect to mask wearers, then, the first question to be asked is: can we even hope to

access to inner states? And second, if access is possible, can the ontological status of the wearer be translated into a vernacular that is readily understood? [p. 232]

On the African continent, the medium of the mask or the comprehensive costume of a masquerade is an invention of a spectral medium. A man, hitherto a young fledgling in the community, attains the

god or an ancestor under the mask. Women and children and households, including the peers of kneel before him for benediction and prayers -general or particular. He becomes a persona, a nu invocation with a transient personality. He lasts only for the duration of the enactment. At that i unknown is domesticated and brought within the realm of the living.

Undoubtedly, there is a profound level of ambiguity, even ambivalence in the personality of the more so in the context of *Ālèdè* performances. Both Beier and Ibitokun affirm, and rightly so, t mothers who are appeased by the maskers are 'witches' who can bring grievous harm, including their detractors, especially the daring male chauvinist. At the same time, these powers stabilize t when they are appeased and are happy. But the more intriguing aspect is that these masks are a most peaceful and the most serene of the array of carvings publicly available in West Africa. Per more intriguing is the notion of amorality. These are benevolent masks, but their attitude can be unpredictable as to be erratic, not devoid of violence. In fact, there is no omniscient concern for fundamental principles of justice as a system or as an institution in society. Their benevolence o appears to be so random as to be unpredictable. They can bypass a sufferer under oppression unl agrees to pay a ransom of a hen or goat, yet an overbearing witch or sorcerer can go unpunished. profound ambiguities aside, there are much to be said for the purgatorial nature of the performan lives of the individual each year.

The institution of the mask idiom in traditional or 'primitive' cultures subtends both the notion of homeopathic and contagious magic [Frazer, 1922]; but at the same time it transposes the person actor/dancer (*ajogi*) or if it is a night dancer (*ajoru*) [Lawal, 1996] into that of a ritual vessel. Th personality of the actor gives the mask its kinetic quality but that personality takes on an added metaphysical dimension. He dares in his role by playing the god, the deity or the daemon. The o unfortunate aspect is that in losing his/her own personality, the masked dancer surrenders his wi destiny to some other external force. Where that force is benevolent, it may bestow peace on the community, on a suppliant and on its host vessel. This is why, it seems to me, for every true perf a long night of dance and activity, the actor (as I witnessed in Ijio) though exhausted, radiates an peace, a serenity that is nonpareil.

In extreme cases of possession, as in the dances of Sango votaries and devotees, even the selfl and dismemberment, which takes place on the arena of dance, inflicts no consequential wound o subsequent to his performance. The same is visible, for instance in Beier (1959)*Tetede*, the bea prologue in *Ālèdè* dance dramas entertains the audience but the real participation and commun not come until *Tetede*, a younger mask, has summoned the greater mask *Efe* to the arena throug charmed archway, *enu ase*. From that moment forth, the emboldened and possessed performer s show and dictates the steps and direction of the community. Not minding the weight of his mask headdress, he dances relentlessly through the night declaiming tales of poetic significance and re the history of the community and the memory of the recently deceased.

The spirited dance we witness every year in *Ālèdè* performance is informed by its sense of bot contact as well as homeopathy in the train of imitation of the agile and disembodied aura suffusi persona of the mask. If we agree that the medium of the mask is that liminal boundary traversin of the living and of the dead, then we understand why the masker can bring blessing and welfare human realm. It is also discernible why he can bring untold calamity or imprecations from the el even more significant is that he qualifies, through the medium of poetic chants and rendition, to the gains as well as the various human losses of that season and the lessons the living can learn f In some instances the masker not only sees the spirit of the dead, he recounts messages across th

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transition and evokes sympathy and remorse from the land of the living. Here are two stereotypical renditions from Ibitokun:

It is because Omulege has died that I'm called upon  
to dance at Obada.

When I was going on in the heart of Lagos  
Omulege and I ran into one another at the  
motor park (2ce)

Abeni Olupeekan, let's go back home.

Mama replied that she would not return (2ce)

Olupeekan, Mother, you'll have to follow me home.

She said she couldn't go....

Replying that it's strictly forbidden for a departed soul to  
to the  
earth.

And then she asked me

'How are Modupe and Gbadebo

Hope Mosunmola is feeling fine?'

And then she asked about her children....[p.135]

In the above chant, the mask is the link between the world of the present and world that is to come as that which has only just passed. The dead uses the mask to reach the living. Where the principal Gèlèdè society have become archetypal custodians. Here is another example:

I'm parting ways with you.

The mask, the modular transforming power, helps the actor to get into an inner state that ensures dialogue and correspondences with the dead and the intangible. This is why, according to Cazeneuve (1978: 84), Lévy-Bruhl chose the word "represent" for the phenomenon of masked transformations:

To make present again, or make reappear what has disappeared...To wear a mask, therefore, is something very different from a game. It is among the most serious and weighty acts in the world: a direct and immediate contact, and even an intimate participation, with the beings of the invisible world, from whom one expects vital favors. The individuality of the actor gives place momentarily to that of the "spirit" which he represents; or rather they are fused together.

It is well to note at this point that there is room for critical differentiation in that skeptics may affirm that the whole process of impersonation is a facade. It may be at best, a notional departure, a false consciousness by which the advocacy of Gèlèdè believes itself to have seized spiritual power in lieu of political power [Layiwola, 1987, 2000]. But this is a legitimate accusation, and a matter of opinion. It actually depends on what side of the performance spectrum one has chosen to pitch one's tent.

## Whither Gender Kinaesthesia?

The notion of gender in the context of metaphysics invariably unearths other paradigms of performance which should be influential in conceptualizing society as an organic whole. We may ask ourselves to what extent Gèlèdè conceptualization will purify society in as much as it empowers the weaker gender with certain genuine or pseudo- institutions in society. For instance, do the custodians of Gèlèdè, in empowering women and making men to serve and respect them in performance, envisage a balance of justice by this contemporary reversal of roles? If that is the case, will the concept of gender or womanism itself humanize the polity and change our orientation of equity and justice in society? But can we really represent affective states in masking as a surrogate of the life we expect to find in everyday circumstances? There, certainly, is a whole area of metaphysical interpretation for which we may have to invent a new methodology if we are to cope with its analysis. It is clear, for instance, that much of the activities of the Gèlèdè society and its functionaries are of occult or mystical provenance. That leaves us with very little in terms of the empirical outlay of latter-day societies in terms of human relations as overseen by the mundane logics of law, humanity and good neighborliness. The vast powers often conferred on the unseen mothers and their masks outstrip those of political and legal institutions in society. At what point, therefore, does one institution encroach on the jurisdiction of the other? Even more pertinent is the point I broached earlier on the fact that the logic and the *modus operandi* of the powers wielded by Gèlèdè subscribe to esoteric, inscrutable 'constitutions', if we may call it that. The question is germane if we reckon that Gèlèdè society emerged as a functionary of justice, equity and gender-conscious initiative. The survival potential and initiative of Gèlèdè performances and institution, in the long term, will depend on whether it can systematically articulate the enormous powers at its disposal, which are ostensibly deployed on account of the well being of every citizen in society. After all, we can safely surmise that it was because of the imbalance of powers in traditional performance media that the old male dominance and macho regime gave way to a new balance of powers. Its new methodology, therefore, will seek to broaden the confines of gender responsibility and create a newfangled network for power relations, power initiative, and general accountability in society at