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MASQUERADE AS BEING, NOT DRESSING: RE-THINKING "COSTUME" IN AFRICAN PERFORMANCE ONTOLOGIES

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Abstract

This article interrogates the category of "costume" in African performance traditions by arguing that masquerade ensembles function not as external dress but as ontological media through which other-than-human agencies are made present. Focusing on West African cases especially Yoruba Egungun and Epa, Igbo mmanwu, and Dan/Mau stilt spirits – the paper challenges the widely assumed semiotic model in which "costume" merely signifies a character or role. Instead, it proposes that the masquerade complex (mask, textiles, movement, sound, secrecy) effects an ontological shift in which the performer is not perceived as "wearing" a disguise but as becoming, or being displaced by, a spirit presence. Theoretically, the article combines Karin Barber's account of African popular arts and coalescing identities, John Picton's question "what's in a mask?", Victor Turner's social drama, Richard Schechner's restored behaviour, Achille Mbembe's reflections on corporeality and power, and Judith Butler's concept of performativity to analyse masquerade as a practice that exceeds Western costume theory. Methodologically, it reads ethnographic, historical and philosophical materials against performance studies debates on embodiment and representation. The article concludes that the term "costume" is conceptually inadequate for many African performance traditions because it presupposes a subject–object dualism that local ontologies explicitly suspend. It calls for a shift from costume-centred to ontology-centred vocabularies – for instance, from "dressing up" to "becoming otherwise" in order to take seriously African theories of personhood, spirit, and materiality embedded in masquerade practice.

Keywords: *African masquerade; costume; ontology; embodiment; performativity; spirit.*

Introduction

Across a range of African societies, masquerade is recognised as a privileged arena where visible and invisible worlds intersect, and where ancestors, deities, and other spirits appear among humans (Drewal, 1992, pp. 13–16). Among the Yoruba, Egungun performances are described as manifestations of the departed, who return to admonish and bless the living (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24). Among the Dan and Mau of Côte d'Ivoire, stilt figures are not ordinarily conceptualised as "men in costume" but as spirits whose human bearers become ontologically altered once they enter the ensemble (Reed, 2018, pp. 736–739). Such emic formulations sit uneasily with dominant Euro-American understandings of costume as detachable dress worn by a stable subject to represent a role (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998, pp.

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3–7). This paper addresses a specific critical problem: the conceptual mismatch between Western costume theory and African masquerade ontologies. In costume and performance studies, costume is generally theorised as a surface that signifies or communicates a role, identity or status whilst leaving intact the underlying subject (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998, pp. 3–11). By contrast, in many African masquerade traditions, the ensemble is not simply understood as external dress but as a material medium through which other-than-human agencies – ancestors, spirits, and hybrid beings – come into presence (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24; Reed, 2018, pp. 742–743).

The scholarly gap this paper targets is the relative absence of sustained, ontology-centred critiques of the "costume" category grounded in African performance traditions. Existing Africanist literature richly documents masquerade materials and functions, yet often reproduces costume terminology without scrutinising its metaphysical presuppositions (Drewal et al., 1994, pp. 115–120; Picton, 1990, pp. 188–190). Philosophical and anthropological work on "ontology" and the "ontological turn" has highlighted non-Western modes of worlding, but rarely engages directly with costume theory or fashion studies (Reed, 2018, pp. 734–736; Kanu, 2014, pp. 203–207). This paper, therefore, intervenes at the intersection of African performance studies, material culture, and critical theory by asking how masquerade might require a re-thinking of costume as such.

Scholarly writing on African masquerade is extensive and heterogeneous, encompassing art history, anthropology, religious studies, theatre studies and performance theory (Drewal et al., 1994; Okagbue, 2013). Early ethnographic and colonial accounts tended to treat masks and costumes as exotic artefacts that illustrated "tribal" beliefs or served as picturesque backdrops to ritual spectacle (Barber, 1987, pp. 3–5). Later Africanist scholarship has critically re-examined these materials, emphasising masquerade as a dynamic practice embedded in histories of power, gender, and social change rather than as a static heritage (Barber, 2018, pp. 1–4; Mbembe, 2001, pp. 1–7). Yet, despite these advances, the conceptual vocabulary of "costume" has often remained unquestioned, functioning as a descriptive convenience that smuggles in Western assumptions about body, dress and subjectivity (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998, pp. 3–11).

Within art history and visual culture, Henry Drewal's work on Yoruba Egungun exemplifies a nuanced attention to both material form and social context (Drewal, 1992). Drewal analyses the layered lappets of Egungun ensembles as expressions of familial wealth and prestige and as materialisations of the ancestors' power, noting that the swirling cloth generates a "breeze of blessing" associated with deity and cosmological forces (Drewal, 1992, pp. 45–50). His treatment of cloth as an active, even agentive, element in performance gestures beyond a purely decorative understanding of costume, yet the term "costume" itself remains largely unproblematised in texts that build on this work (Drewal et al., 1994, pp. 115–120). Similarly, studies of Igbo masquerade costumes in museum and educational settings often focus on symbolic motifs, gender coding, and historical context, explaining, for instance, how an Igbo masquerade ensemble's colours and patterns index feminine ideals, water spirits such as Mami Wata, or translocal trade relations (NCMA, 2019). These accounts demonstrate how masquerade dress condenses cosmological and social meanings, but they seldom ask whether "costume" is the most appropriate analytic label for a medium that ritual specialists treat as a

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vehicle of spirit presence (Kanu, 2014, pp. 205–210).

Karin Barber's broad reflections on popular arts in Africa offer an alternative entry-point for rethinking masquerade and costume. Barber argues that African popular performance forms are neither mere reflections of social structures nor epiphenomena of "tradition" but are productive arenas in which actors negotiate authority, morality and identity (Barber, 1987, pp. 4–9; Barber, 2018, pp. 1–7). In work specifically touching on masquerade, Barber notes cases in which the identities of devotees and the spirits or objects of their devotion "coalesce," suggesting that performance can effect a partial fusion of human and other-than-human agencies (Barber, 1981, pp. 736–738). From this perspective, the masquerade ensemble is not merely a sign of a spirit but a medium through which a new, hybrid identity is enacted and experienced. Barber's insights, however, tend to appear in broader discussions of popular arts and are rarely taken up systematically to challenge the category of "costume" itself.

John Picton's influential essay "What's in a Mask?" explicitly questions reified notions of "the mask" in African art history, arguing that emphasis on sculptural face masks often obscures the wider ensemble of textiles, choreography, music and social relations that constitute masquerade (Picton, 1990, pp. 188–190). Picton suggests that the "embodiment as mask" has a temporal as well as material dimension, as individuals enter and exit masked identities whose permanence or ephemerality varies across traditions (Picton, 1990, pp. 191–192). In later work on cloth and the corpse among the Ebira, he describes how funerary cloths and masquerade ensembles mediate between worlds, as if people "entered the world of the dead and returned, re-embodied in masquerade" (Picton, 1996, pp. 28–30). Picton's analyses come close to treating masquerade as a site of ontological transformation, yet the term "costume" still appears as a generic descriptor for the garments involved, without systematic interrogation of its metaphysical presuppositions.

Anthropological and performance-oriented studies have gone further in emphasising the agency attributed to masquerade beings. Daniel B. Reed's work on Dan/Mau stilt mask performances explicitly frames masquerade as ontology, arguing that for many participants, masked dancers are manifestations of spirit beings rather than humans in disguise (Reed, 2018, pp. 734–738). Reed records practitioners stating that the "whole ensemble" mask, raffia, pants, shirt – is material and is worn by a human who, once dressed and properly disposed, "becomes spirit" (Reed, 2018, p. 743). Here, the act of dressing is inseparable from a radical shift in being recognised by the community; "costume" is not merely sign but the material condition for the emergence of a new ontological status. Reed's intervention directly challenges accounts that treat masquerade beings as metaphorical or "symbolic" of social roles, insisting instead on taking local theories of spirit seriously as ontological claims.

Within Yoruba studies, the gendered and political dimensions of Egungun and related masquerades have attracted substantial attention. Work on Egungun as a masculine performance space has at times portrayed masquerade as a mechanism through which men assert dominance over women, relying heavily on missionary and colonial sources that foreground prohibition and threat (Barber, 2018, pp. 120–124). More recent scholarship, however, has complicated this picture by highlighting women's roles in sponsoring,

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choreographing or narrating masquerade events, and by emphasising masquerade as a contested field where different factions vie for influence (Barber, 2018, pp. 124–129; Allison, 2019, pp. 20–23). While these debates enrich understanding of masquerade's social functions, they typically analyse costume as a resource in struggles over prestige, visibility or moral authority rather than as a medium of ontological transformation.

The anthropology of African religion has long recognised masquerades as technologies for interacting with ancestors and spirits, yet even here the vocabulary of "costume" is often taken for granted. Studies of Egungun position the masquerade as a visible manifestation of invisible ancestors, whose performances dramatise ethical norms and cleanse the community (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24). The elaborate textiles and masks are described as the "major medium for the maskers' transformation," and as embodiments of the power and wealth of families and lineages (Drewal, 1992, pp. 45–50; Drewal et al., 1994, pp. 115–120). At the same time, the language of "possession" and "embodiment" is frequently borrowed from Christian or biomedical discourses, which can reinforce a model where a pre-existing subject is temporarily occupied by a spirit, with costume functioning as a sign of that possession (Kanu, 2014, pp. 205–209). This leaves insufficient conceptual space for indigenous theories that may construe the masquerade entity as a distinct, emergent being that cannot be reduced either to the individual wearer or to a detachable outfit.

Performance studies and theatre theory offer conceptual tools that both support and problematise costume-centred readings. Richard Schechner's notion of "restored behaviour" understands performance as sequences of behaviour that can be "put on" like a mask or costume, repeatedly re-enacted across contexts (Schechner, 1985, pp. 35–38). This model highlights the citational and iterative structure of performance, inviting comparison with Judith Butler's influential account of gender as performative, constituted through repeated stylised acts that create the illusion of a stable identity (Butler, 1990, pp. 185–190). In this perspective, costume appears as a materialisation of such stylised acts, reinforcing or subverting social norms. Yet Schechner's and Butler's frameworks emerge from analyses of theatre and gender in Euro-American contexts, where costume is conventionally understood as that which a subject dons in order to represent a role (Schechner, 2003, pp. 28–32; Butler, 1990, pp. 190–193). When applied to African masquerades that claim to instantiate spirit beings, these theories risk being read in a purely metaphorical register unless they are critically re-worked in light of African ontologies.

More recent humanities scholarship has sought to move beyond semiotic models towards what has been called an "ontological turn," emphasising that different cultures do not merely represent the same world differently but may inhabit different worlds (Reed, 2018, pp. 734–736). Within African studies, this has entailed taking seriously claims about ancestors, deities and spirits as participants in social life rather than as symbolic projections (Kanu, 2014, pp. 201–210). Reed's framing of Dan/Mau stilt mask performance as ontology exemplifies this shift, as do philosophical reflections on African personhood that stress relationality, ancestral presence and the porousness of the human self (Kanu, 2014, pp. 203–207). Yet these approaches have not always been directly brought into dialogue with costume theory or fashion studies, which continues to rely on modern Western assumptions about the human body as a bounded

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individual dressed in detachable garments (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998, pp. 3–11).

There are thus several gaps in the existing scholarship. First, although scholars such as Drewal, Barber, Picton and Reed point towards the coalescence of human and other-than-human identities in masquerade, they rarely pause to interrogate the very term "costume" that structures many descriptive accounts (Drewal, 1992; Barber, 1987; Picton, 1990; Reed, 2018). Second, while performance theory has provided rich concepts for analysing embodiment and repetition, it has not always been adapted to honour African practitioners' ontological claims about spirits and ancestors (Schechner, 1985; Butler, 1990). Third, discussions of gender, power and social commentary in masquerade, while crucial, sometimes override or bracket the metaphysical dimension of masquerade beings in favour of a sociological reading of costume as instrument or symbol (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 103–107; Barber, 2018, pp. 120–129).

This paper's contribution is primarily theoretical and conceptual rather than ethnographic. It does not present new field data, but re-reads well-known Yoruba, Igbo, and Dan/Mau cases through a comparative, ontology-centred lens. It advances three core claims. First, that "costume," as understood in dominant Euro-American theatre and fashion discourse, presupposes a subject–object dualism that is inappropriate for many African masquerade traditions. Second, that in these traditions masquerade ensembles operate as media of being constitutive of ancestral, reflective, and ambiguous agencies rather than as symbolic dress. Third, that attending to African masquerade ontologies can provincialise costume theory and contribute to wider debates on embodiment, personhood, and materiality.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative and interpretive research design. It is grounded in close reading and critical synthesis of existing ethnographic, historical and theoretical materials rather than in original fieldwork. The "study population" consists of well-documented masquerade traditions in West Africa Yoruba Egungun and Ẹpa, Igbo mmanwu, and Dan/Mau stilt masquerades as represented in canonical and recent scholarly texts (Drewal, 1992; Okagbue, 2013; Reed, 2018; Allison, 2019).

Sampling is purposive and theoretically driven. The three traditions were selected because they offer contrasting yet complementary configurations of masquerade ontology: ancestral embodiment (Egungun/Ẹpa), reflective social agency (mmanwu), and ambiguous spirit agency (Dan/Mau). Within each case, key texts by leading scholars (e.g., Drewal on Yoruba ritual, Okagbue on Igbo performance, Reed on Dan/Mau) form the primary corpus, supplemented by museum catalogues and philosophical commentary where necessary (Drewal et al., 1994; NCMA, 2019; Kanu, 2014). No claim is made to statistical representativeness; rather, the goal is analytical depth across strategically chosen examples.

The methodological approach is interpretive in two senses. First, it distinguishes carefully between emic and etic perspectives. Emic formulations for example, Yoruba ritual declarations that Egungun are "the ancestors" or Dan/Mau assertions that stilt figures "become spirit" are treated as theoretical statements about being, not merely as data to be explained away (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24; Reed, 2018, pp. 742–743). Etic conceptualisation occurs when these emic

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statements are set in dialogue with external theoretical vocabularies such as performativity or restored behaviour.

Second, the analysis is comparative and iterative. It moves back and forth between case-specific material and cross-cutting theoretical questions about costume, embodiment and ontology. The reading strategy is to identify how each text constructs the relation between wearer, ensemble and spirit, and then to juxtapose these constructions in order to draw out convergences and differences. Throughout, the emphasis falls on the logics of being and becoming implicit in the sources rather than on providing exhaustive ethnographic description.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework functions as an analytical toolkit rather than a secondary literature review. Three clusters of concepts structure the argument: (1) ontology and coalescing identities; (2) restored behaviour and performativity; and (3) power, embodiment and the body-as-medium.

First, "ontology" is used here not in a strictly metaphysical, philosophical-systematic sense, but to denote locally articulated understandings of what kinds of beings exist and how they come to presence. In the traditions examined, ontological claims are made when practitioners say that Egungun "are" ancestors, that mmanwu speak with spirit authority, or that Dan/Mau figures "become spirit" once dressed (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24; Okagbue, 2013, pp. 102–105; Reed, 2018, pp. 742–743). Following Barber, these claims are read through the notion of "coalescing identities," where the distinction between devotee and object of devotion, or between wearer and spirit, is temporarily blurred (Barber, 1981, pp. 736–738; Barber, 1987, pp. 4–6). "Being" thus refers to the status attributed to masquerade entities as more than representation; "becoming" marks the processual transformation through which this status is achieved.

Second, from performance studies, Schechner's concept of restored behaviour and Turner's liminality provide tools for analysing how masquerade performances are structured as repeatable sequences that nonetheless effect transformations (Schechner, 1985, pp. 35–40; Turner, 1969, pp. 94–97). Restored behaviour captures the citational aspect of masquerade – the fact that specific movements, sonic patterns and dressing techniques are inherited and re-enacted while liminality foregrounds the threshold character of the masquerade event. Butler's theory of performativity adds an emphasis on iteration and citationality in the constitution of identity, yet requires extension beyond gender to encompass non-human and more-than-human agencies (Butler, 1990, pp. 185–193; Reed, 2018, pp. 736–743). In This paper, performativity is therefore used to think about how repeated acts of dressing, masking and moving bring spirit-beings into presence rather than only consolidating human social roles.

Third, Mbembe's analysis of corporeality and the aesthetics of power grounds the framework in a critical attention to the body as site of inscription and contestation (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 103–107). In many masquerade traditions, ensembles materialise both spiritual and political authority; the ability to sponsor a particular masquerade, or to control its appearance, is a form of power (Barber, 2018, pp. 120–129). This perspective ensures that "ontology" is not separated from gender, class and political economy.

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Taken together, these conceptual resources support this paper's central move: from costume as representational surface to masquerade as ontological medium. They guide the subsequent readings by directing attention to how ensembles participate in being and becoming, how embodied performance repeats and transforms inherited patterns, and how power is exercised through claims about spirit presence.

African Masquerade, Material Culture, and Social Meaning

Africanist scholarship has richly documented masquerade as a nexus of material culture, social hierarchy and cosmological meaning. In Yoruba contexts, detailed analyses of Egungun ensembles show how textile layering, pattern and provenance encode lineage prestige, trading histories and gendered aesthetics (Drewal, 1992, pp. 45–50; Drewal et al., 1994, pp. 115–120). In Igbo settings, museum catalogues and performance studies highlight how colours, mask forms and attached accessories signal feminine ideals, water spirits such as Mami Wata, and long-distance trade connections (NCMA, 2019; Okagbue, 2013, pp. 102–110). Picton's work on cloth and the corpse among the Ebira similarly shows how funerary textiles and masquerade ensembles mediate social memory and transitions between worlds (Picton, 1996, pp. 28–30).

This body of work establishes two crucial points for the present argument. First, masquerade ensembles are deeply embedded in social and economic networks: they display wealth, index relations and materialise social obligations. Second, they are saturated with cosmological references: patterns, colours and forms are read in relation to deities, spirits and histories. What is often left untheorised, however, is the ontological status of the masquerade beings themselves. The language of "costume" tends to frame ensembles as surfaces that signify these social and cosmological meanings, rather than as constitutive of distinct beings (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998, pp. 3–11).

Performance, Embodiment, and the Limits of Costume-Centred Readings

Performance-theoretical approaches have problematised simple expressivist models but often retain costume as a stable unit. Schechner's notion that performance sequences can be "put on" like a mask or costume captures the citational structure of masquerade yet implicitly assumes an underlying actor who remains ontologically unchanged (Schechner, 1985, pp. 35–40; Schechner, 2003, pp. 28–32). Butler's performativity similarly emphasises that identities are constituted through repeated acts, but her paradigmatic cases concern human gender subjects (Butler, 1990, pp. 185–193).

When such frameworks are applied to African masquerade without modification, they encourage readings in which Egungun, mmanwu or Dan/Mau spirits are treated as roles successfully performed by human actors in costume. This approach has generated valuable insights into how masquerade reflects and negotiates power, gender and morality (Barber, 2018, pp. 120–129; Okagbue, 2013, pp. 102–110). Yet it risks reducing assertions that masquerades "are" spirits or ancestors to metaphors for social forces. The ontological dimension the claim that other-than-human beings are present and materially acting is thereby muted.

The central methodological wager of this paper is that taking emic ontological claims seriously

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requires a critical re-examination of costume-centred readings. Costume, as ordinarily theorised, presupposes a distinction between an unchanged subject and a changeable surface. The African masquerade traditions examined here repeatedly complicate or deny this distinction.

Ontology, Spirit Presence, and Emerging Critical Gaps

Recent work associated with the "ontological turn" in anthropology has argued that different collectives inhabit different worlds, not merely hold different beliefs about a shared world (Reed, 2018, pp. 734–736). Within African studies, Kanu's philosophical reflections on masquerades and personhood stress relationality, ancestral presence and the porousness of the human self (Kanu, 2014, pp. 203–210). Reed's account of Dan/Mau stilt spirits explicitly frames masquerade as ontology, not merely symbolism, insisting that interlocutors' statements about "becoming spirit" be read as claims about being (Reed, 2018, pp. 742–743).

Yet these ontologically attuned analyses have rarely been brought into sustained dialogue with costume theory and performance studies. The result is a set of critical gaps. First, costume scholarship still tends to take "the body in costume" as a self-evident unit, rarely considering cases where dress co-constitutes other-than-human agencies (Warwick & Cavallaro, 1998, pp. 3–11). Second, Africanist case studies that do take spirit presence seriously often stop short of re-conceptualising "costume" itself, leaving intact a vocabulary that undercuts their strongest insights. Third, comparative work that would systematically juxtapose different ontological configurations of masquerade – ancestral, reflective, ambiguous remains limited.

Analysis

Yoruba Egungun and Ẹpa: Cloth as Ancestral Being

Yoruba Egungun practice offers an especially clear instance of masquerade as ontological rather than merely representational performance. Egungun is not spoken of as a man in costume, but as the collective ancestor returning among the living; ritual language and spectator address name the appearing entity as "our fathers" or "the spirits of our forebears," not as the individual who wears the ensemble (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24). This naming is not incidental: it signals that, for the duration of performance, the ordinary person is suspended and a different kind of being is recognised as present. The material logic of Egungun reinforces this ontological reconfiguration. The masquerade body is produced by cascades of layered cloth that envelop the human frame entirely, erasing familiar contours and rendering the figure a mobile column of textiles, sound and motion (Drewal, 1992, pp. 45–50). The elaborate lappets, collected over years from diverse sources, condense relations of exchange, obligation and prestige; they are signs of wealth and connection, but also treated as repositories of ancestral power (Drewal et al., 1994, pp. 115–120). When the Egungun spins, these layers flare out to generate what Drewal terms a "breeze of blessing," a literal wind understood as the sensible trace of spiritual force (Drewal, 1992, p. 48). The cloth, in motion, is not simply decorative; it is the mode through which ancestral efficacy is felt.

Egungun dressing and undressing practices underscore the ontological threshold marked by the ensemble. Only initiated attendants may handle the garments; the transition from ordinary person to Egungun is ritually controlled, and the exposure of the unmasked body to non-initiates is carefully avoided because it would disjoin the being from its material form and collapse the

ontological distinction on which the practice depends (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24). The ensemble is thus not a costume that a subject might casually "try on," but part of a specific ritual technology by which ancestors become present in a form that can be seen, heard and felt.



Fig. 1 Egungun masquerade with their colourful costume

Ẹpa masquerades, while structurally distinct from Egungun, develop a related ontology in a different key. In Ekiti, towering helmet masks surmount elaborately robed bodies that move along prescribed routes choreographed to map what Allison calls a "rich cosmological space" (Allison, 2019, p. 20). The sculpted superstructures depict deities, historical scenes and social roles, while the textiles and accessories below form a dense, layered surface that integrates the masked figure into the wider environment (Allison, 2019, pp. 18–23). Here too, the human bearer disappears into a composite being whose identity is anchored in the mask–cloth–movement complex rather than in the individual.



Fig. 2 , Ẹpa masquerades with their towering helmet masks

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The ontological force of Ẹpa lies in its capacity to gather a plurality of temporalities and agencies into a single, moving figure. The choreographic pathways, often associated with shrines or sites of historical significance, materialise relations between the masquerade being, the land and the community; to follow the path is to enact the cosmology inscribed in the landscape (Allison, 2019, pp. 20–23). The ensemble mediates these relations by occupying and, in a sense, embodying them. As with Egungun, the protocols around dressing and the anonymity of the bearer affect a displacement of agency: what acts in performance is not the individual but the Ẹpa being whose authority derives from cosmological position rather than personal identity (Allison, 2019, pp. 18–23). Taken together, the Yoruba cases show that the cloth-and-mask assemblage does not remain external to a pre-given subject. Instead, it is constitutive of an ancestral or divine subject that exists only in and through this assemblage. To describe such ensembles as "costumes" is to flatten the ontological claims at stake, reinscribing a body–dress dualism that these practices are organised precisely to suspend.

Igbo Mmanwu: Reflective Agency and Social Commentary

Igbo mmanwu traditions further complicate the relationship between dress, spirit and social agency by foregrounding masquerade as a "reflective mirror" in which communities observe and judge themselves (Okagbue, 2013, pp. 102–105). An educational account of an Igbo masquerade ensemble consisting of a white face mask with feminine features, a blouse and trousers, a fan and patterned cloth notes that its iconography references ideals of female beauty, the water spirit Mami Wata and symbols derived from Jewish religious texts, likely introduced through trade (NCMA, 2019). Even at this level, dress operates as an archive of local and translocal histories, gendered values and spiritual associations. Yet mmanwu's power is not exhausted by symbolic reference. Okagbue characterises masquerades as mirrors through which Igbo communities examine both themselves and their neighbours, particularly in moments of crisis such as the Nigerian Civil War (Okagbue, 2013, pp. 102–110). Masquerade performances provide a stage on which grievances can be aired, leadership criticised and communal norms reaffirmed. Crucially, however, the criticism is voiced by a being whose identity is ontologically marked as other-than-ordinary: the mmanwu. The ensemble, by concealing the wearer and substituting a stylised, otherworldly visage, enables speech acts that are received as coming from a spirit-linked figure rather than from a known individual.



Fig. 3 Mmanwu masquerade

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This redistribution of agency depends on the material completeness of the masquerade ensemble. Total bodily covering, the distinctive mask, and choreographed movements all work to displace attention from the human bearer to the mmanwu being. Restrictions on who may see the masker undressed – and sanctions against such exposure – protect the integrity of this displacement (Kanu, 2014, pp. 205–210). The ontology of mmanwu is thus double: the being is both a spirit-figure whose pronouncements carry weight and a socially embedded apparatus for critique and discipline. The "reflective mirror" metaphor captures this duality: what is reflected is simultaneously the community's own behaviour and the judgement of a higher, extra-human instance. In this light, costume language again proves inadequate. To call the ensemble a costume suggests a neutral instrument put to various uses by social actors. Igbo practices instead construe the clothed, masked figure as a distinct agent whose being is irreducible to the wearer. The ensemble is not merely what enables anonymity; it is the form in which the mmanwu exists. Spirit embodiment and social commentary are not separate functions attached to a costume, but mutually dependent dimensions of the being that emerges when mask, cloth, movement and voice converge.

Dan/Mau Stilt Spirits: Ambiguous Agency and Becoming

Dan and Mau stilt masquerades, as analysed by Reed, push the question of being even more forcefully by thematising transformation explicitly. Reed's interlocutors do not describe themselves as "acting" spirits; rather, they insist that when the ensemble is complete and ritual conditions are met, the masquerader "becomes spirit" (Reed, 2018, pp. 742–743). The crucial phrase, "that whole ensemble," indicates that for them, mask, raffia, trousers and shirt together constitute the material condition of this becoming (Reed, 2018, p. 743). The point is not that any garment might suffice, but that a specific, ritually authorised assemblage enables a specific mode of being. Reed conceptualises this as "ambiguous agency": the stilt spirit is a hybrid being whose agency is distributed across human body, material ensemble, ritual choreography and community recognition (Reed, 2018, pp. 734–738). The human bearer's athletic skill is indispensable without it the towering figure could not balance or move yet this skill is not understood as purely personal. It is reframed as a capacity granted and governed by the spirit once the transformation has occurred. The raffia strands and mask, by concealing the human form and exaggerating scale, produce a silhouette that exceeds ordinary proportions, aligning the figure visually with the non-human. The drum patterns and songs that accompany the performance further situate the being within a spirit ecology, naming and hailing it as such.

The process of dressing is here a ritual of ontological transition rather than a backstage preparation for representation. Only certain people, in certain states of ritual readiness, may assist; specific sequences of actions and utterances must be followed (Reed, 2018, pp. 742–746). Once completed, the new being is addressed and treated as a spirit: spectators petition it for assistance, fear its potential for harm, and observe behavioural codes in its presence. The ontological status of the stilt figure is thus negotiated but real in the social world; its being is not a private feeling of the wearer but a publicly recognised mode of existence.

Reed's analysis shows that a costume-centred vocabulary cannot account for this configuration. To speak of "a person in a stilt costume" is to disaggregate what local theory and practice insist must be held together. The stilt figure is not a human subject plus costume plus role; it is a

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composite entity whose existence depends on the co-presence of body, ensemble and ritual environment. The ambiguity lies not in confusion about "who is really under there" but in the refusal of a neat separation between human and spirit agency. Masquerade here is overtly a practice of becoming otherwise.

Comparative Discussion and Synthesis

Read together, the Yoruba, Igbo and Dan/Mau cases reveal a spectrum of ontological configurations that cannot be adequately captured by costume-centred vocabularies. In Yoruba Egungun and Ẹpa, cloth is foregrounded as ancestral body; the ensemble does not merely signify lineage and prestige, but is treated as the very mode of ancestral presence, with ritual prohibitions reinforcing this status (Drewal, 1992, pp. 21–24; Allison, 2019, pp. 18–23). In Igbo mmanwu, the masquerade functions as a "reflective mirror" whose authority is simultaneously spiritual and social; here ontology and critique are intertwined, as the being who speaks is both spirit figure and instrument of public commentary (Okagbue, 2013, pp. 102–110; NCMA, 2019). In Dan/Mau stilt performances, Reed's category of "ambiguous agency" captures a situation in which human, cloth and spirit are inseparably entangled, and where the community explicitly theorises the ensemble as the condition of becoming spirit (Reed, 2018, pp. 734–743). These differences matter for performance and costume theory. Ancestral embodiment (Yoruba) foregrounds continuity with a lineage of the dead; reflective social agency (Igbo) highlights masquerade as site of critique and negotiation; ambiguous spirit agency (Dan/Mau) presses most strongly on the limits of the human/non-human divide. Across all three, however, the notion of a pre-existing subject simply "putting on" a costume proves inadequate. Subjectivity and agency are distributed across bodies, materials and ritual acts, and what appears in performance is a being whose status cannot be reduced either to the wearer or to the garments. Comparatively, these traditions suggest that "costume" must be reconceived not as surface but as node within a relational ontology. To theorise masquerade ensembles as media of being is to acknowledge that, in these worlds, cloth, masks and movement are not merely expressive but constitutive. For costume studies, this implies that any general theory of dress must be responsive to such ontological configurations rather than assuming the modern, secular subject as universal baseline.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the concept of "costume," as inherited from European theatre and fashion studies, is conceptually insufficient for understanding many African masquerade traditions that explicitly claim to instantiate other-than-human beings rather than merely represent them. By examining Yoruba Egungun and Ẹpa, Igbo mmanwu and Dan/Mau stilt spirits, the discussion has shown that masquerade ensembles function as material media of ontological transformation, in which cloth, mask, movement and sound together produce beings recognised as ancestors or spirits. In these contexts, to speak of "a person in a costume" is to misdescribe what is at stake; the performer is not simply dressed up but is regarded, for the duration of performance, as having become otherwise.

Drawing on Barber's notion of coalescing identities, Picton's reflections on embodiment and cloth, Turner and Schechner's theories of ritual and restored behaviour, Butler's account of performativity and Mbembe's analysis of corporeality and power, the article has proposed an

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ontology-centred perspective on masquerade. This perspective does not deny that masquerades operate as theatres of social commentary, gender politics or prestige, but insists that these functions are grounded in and inflected by local theories of spirit and personhood embedded in performance practice. The masquerade ensemble is not a neutral surface on which meanings are projected; it is a constitutive element in the emergence of hybrid human–spirit beings whose authority and efficacy depend on being treated as real.

Re-thinking masquerade as being rather than dressing has several implications for humanities scholarship. For African studies, it underscores the importance of taking seriously practitioners' own ontological claims, rather than translating them too quickly into symbolic or sociological terms. For performance studies and costume theory, it invites a re-examination of core categories such as actor, costume and role, opening them to insights from African ontologies that conceive of bodies and dress as relational and porous rather than as discrete entities. More broadly, it contributes to ongoing debates in the "ontological turn" by showing how attention to specific practices of dressing and masking can illuminate plural ways of inhabiting the world.

Future research could extend this inquiry in several directions. Comparative studies might explore how other regional masquerade traditions in Africa – such as those in Central or Southern Africa – articulate relations between dress and being, and how these compare to Afro-diasporic masquerades in the Caribbean and Americas. Interdisciplinary collaborations between scholars of performance, fashion, religious studies and philosophy could develop new vocabularies for describing dress practices that are ontologically charged, whether in African contexts or elsewhere. Finally, attention to contemporary transformations – including urban re-contextualisations of masquerade, museum display and digital circulation – may reveal how the ontology of masquerade beings is being renegotiated in the twenty-first century, and how the language of "costume" continues to both illuminate and obscure what African performers and audiences understand themselves to be doing.

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