

# Masquerading and Puppeteering: A Comparative Analysis

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## **Abstract**

*Indigenous African performances had existed on the African continent long before the advent of the colonizers and they are highly functional in nature. Though several attempts were made by the west to discredit these performances, they have persisted over the years and can withstand the western concept of drama. Prominent among these performances are the masquerade and puppet theatres widely practiced in many African societies today and have stood the test of time. Both are vibrant theatrical practices in the African dramatic space though their formations differ and so are their performance modes in motives and motifs. Using Richard Bauman's theory of performance as a framework, their performative modes are teased out. While masquerading is characterized by masked individuals who dance or perform energetically with delicate dance steps and symbolic body movements that include footwork and elaborate gesticulations, puppetry which comes in varied forms such as marionettes, rod puppets or hand puppets entails controlled manipulation to simulate real life events. The study concludes that though both art forms differ in presentational styles, they are like other performing art forms that are impossible without the involvement of the human content*

**Keywords:** *Masquerading, Puppeteering, Theatre, Performance, Comparative.*

## **1. Introduction**

Masquerade and puppet performances, anywhere in the world, are dramatic in nature because they are both mediums of storytelling by a people for a people. The origin of drama is difficult to trace and its development in human society is hard to describe on the basis of verifiable facts. However, it is believed that the ancient Greek word drama means "action". This term is said to be used for the first time, in connection with what we call drama, about 560 B.C. by a Greek called Thespis when he enriched his religious singing and dancing choirs with a costumed, masked person who expressed a part of the action in meaningful words and gestures. Since that time drama has been the indication of that art which represents a human event in the presence of a more or less involved audience and which is focused on Man.

Consequently, the origin of drama, can only assume that it developed from religious rites, because examples of such developments are found in different places of the world. As in classical Greek, drama in Africa started with ritual performances as Okotp'Bitek describes in *Horn of my Love* (1974). Dramatic ritual is functional in traditional society, because rites are efforts "to change the undesirable or to maintain the desirable" (Richards 1956: 113). Therefore, they must be performed impeccably because if something goes wrong or is omitted, the effect will be lost and it has to be done all over again. Dramatic elements cannot be ignored in magic rites, but one can only then speak of drama when a separation is effected between two groups, "where movement meets countermovement...where the leader of the

dance separates himself from the choir and places him in front of the others" (Van der Leeuw 1955: 86). Of course, it is difficult to mark a clear limit between dramatic ritual and drama.

Ruth Finnegan (1970: 2) has emphasized that in the study of African literature, its most basic characteristic has constantly been overlooked, which is the significance of the actual performance: "Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion - there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product". She says that the parallel is less to written literature than to music and dance, which also depend on repeated performances for their continued existence. Such is also the case of a play. The question whether in precolonial Africa "real drama" has existed is one of those typical examples of western ethnocentric thinking.

Several Europeans have denied the existence of African drama, before the arrival of the colonizer. Cornevin even dedicates his book on African drama to the father or the "bon oncle" of African drama, Charles Béart, director of the Ecole Supérieure of Bingerville in the thirties in colonial French West Africa. (Cornevin 1970: 52 ff.). It is of course not correct to use Western drama, in the way it has developed during the last centuries, as a criterion to decide whether drama exists in other cultures or not! If, for instance, language does not dominate over all the other elements in the performance of a community this does not mean that there exists no drama at all in this community, as it has sometimes been assumed in western countries. One should always take into account the norms of the society itself with respect to the forms of drama it appreciates and performs. The above definition (Van der Leeuw) makes it possible to prevent such useless discussions. However, it has the disadvantage of not stating exactly which kind of representation is meant, which is the usual problem with such general definitions. As we said, oral literature contains always at the same time elements of drama: the story-telling performance is a total happening, a total theatre in several ways: in the first place because the narrator is often also a poet, a singer, a musician and an actor.

Despite the undermining of the African ritualistic and traditional performances by the western world and terming it pagan and useless, the fact still remains that these so called ritual performances were, and still are as viable as drama found anywhere else in the world. These performances imbibe all the elements of drama found even in the western type of drama. The only difference being that while the western dramatic performances were written, the African traditional drama was not written before performance. That is why it is called oral literature. African indigenous performances have strived and metamorphosed over time into what they are today. The rituals have continued up till this day and there is nowhere in Africa, Nigeria inclusive where one will not find one or two ritual performances. These have become part of the folklore of these African communities and these performances come in many forms. Some of these include folktales, proverbs, riddles, songs and dance; and puppetry and masquerades. The latest example is our focus in this discourse. These indigenous performances have several functions they perform in the society, some of which this discourse discusses.

### **Performance Theory**

Richard Bauman, in his work, "Verbal Art as Performance" propounded the theory of performance which brings about several aspects of understanding the phenomena. The theory believes that each oral tradition has its own keys to performance and each performance utilizes special keys. The theory sees performance as an event that has keys and when the keys are evoked, the audience is alerted that they are observing a particular oral performance. Most of the keys are recognized only by those who are experienced in observing or performing the oral tradition. According to Bauman, the keys are:

*Special codes*

*Figurative language*

*Parallelism*

*Special paralinguistic features*

*Special formulae*

*Appeal to tradition and*

*Disclaimer of performance*

Bauman contends that the above keys guide the performer and the keys must be strictly adhered to by the performer to a large extent. If the performer breaks too many of the keys, the performance will lose its viability as example of the intended tradition. For example, in each and every masquerade and puppet performance found anywhere in the world, there are special codes that introduce them, without which, no one, even the indigenous performers, will understand what is going on. Through the special codes, the audience will be able to know which kind of performance they are about to watch. This is an example of the special codes advocated by Bauman in his theory.

### **Masquerade and Puppet Performances**

Both masquerading and puppetry are rich, traditional forms of performance art found in various cultures worldwide. Each has its unique characteristics, especially regarding dance patterns and dancing steps and the stimulating rhythm. While they share similarities in being deeply rooted in cultural expressions and storytelling, the manner in which these expressions are conveyed through dance and movement varies significantly.

According to Njoku (2020), Masquerading, or the art of performing in masks, is a practice seen in numerous cultures, especially in Africa, Asia, and indigenous communities around the world. It typically involves participants wearing elaborate masks and costumes to represent spirits, ancestors, or mythical beings. The dances performed during masquerading events are often deeply symbolic, representing religious rituals, social commentaries, or historical narratives.

Masquerading, a dynamic and intricate performance art, is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of many societies. It involves performers wearing elaborate masks and costumes to depict various spirits, ancestors, or mythical beings. Central to this art form are the dance steps, which are not just movements but are imbued with deep cultural, spiritual, and symbolic meanings. This article delves into the dance steps in masquerading, exploring their cultural significance, characteristics, and variations across different traditions (Benson, 2020).

On the other hand, Regling (2015) opines that Puppetry is an ancient and diverse art form that spans cultures and centuries, captivating audiences with its blend of storytelling, craftsmanship, and performance. While puppetry often relies on the manipulation of inanimate figures by the puppeteer, the dance steps and movements executed by these puppets are crucial to bringing them to life. Consequently, this article explores the intricate (movements) dance steps in puppetry, examining their techniques, cultural significance, and the skill required to create the illusion of life in these miniature performers.

Kruger (2020) avers that Puppetry involves manipulating inanimate objects, typically puppets, to tell stories or perform skits. It has a long history across various cultures, from Asian shadow puppetry to European marionettes. Unlike masquerading, puppetry focuses on the animation of puppets rather than the performers themselves.

The art of puppetry includes the making and manipulation of puppets for use in some kind of theatrical performance, for stage, television, or film. A puppet is a figure-human, animal, or

abstract in form that is moved by human effort, which can be mechanical giant puppets. Based on tradition, the study may include shadow theatre, mask theatre, hand puppetry, rod puppetry, and marionettes, in reference to historical precedents and contemporary usage. There is a constant creative interest in future applications of puppetry as well. The nature of the work depends entirely on the artistic area that is chosen. It is always creative and requires constant energy and determination. Employers of Puppetry majors will be puppetry production companies, both in theatre and film. These companies are national and international. An interest in puppetry could also be applied to events such as festivals and teaching the artistic tradition.

### **Dance Patterns in Masquerading**

Ejiogu (2023) has enumerated some dance patterns that are peculiar to masquerade performance. This includes but not limited to the following:

#### **Symbolic Movements**

The dance movements in masquerading are highly symbolic and ritualistic. Each step, gesture, and posture has a specific meaning, often linked to spiritual or cultural beliefs. For example, the movements may symbolize agricultural cycles, spiritual journeys, or moral lessons.

#### **Community Participation**

Masquerading often involves the entire community, either as participants or as an audience. The dance patterns may include communal rhythms where the community claps, sings, or plays instruments, enhancing the performance's ritualistic nature.

#### **Improvisation and Tradition**

While there are traditional steps and sequences, masqueraders often improvise to bring a personal touch to their performance. This blend of structured patterns and improvisation makes each performance unique.

#### **Vigorous Movements**

The dance steps are typically energetic and vigorous, involving jumps, spins, and expressive arm movements. The physicality of the dance is designed to convey the presence and power of the spirits or characters being portrayed.

The dance steps masquerade performances are usually characterized by their complexity, symbolism, and physicality. They require skill, agility, and a deep understanding of the cultural context and drum calls in the culture which they are performed. These dance steps are often complex, involving intricate footwork, body movements, and coordination with other performers. These steps are usually taught through rigorous training and rehearsals, often beginning at a young age. The complexity of the movements reflects the richness of the cultural narratives they represent. Every step, gesture, and posture in masquerade performance is symbolic. For example, a particular foot movement might symbolize the planting of crops, while a hand gesture could represent the invocation of a spirit. Understanding the symbolism behind the movements is crucial for both performers and audiences to fully appreciate the performance. Masquerading dances are highly physical, requiring strength, endurance, and flexibility. Performers often engage in energetic movements, including jumps, spins, and acrobatics. The physicality of the dance not only adds to the visual spectacle but also enhances the spiritual and emotional impact of the performance (Ejiogu, 2023).

While masquerading is a global phenomenon, the dance steps vary significantly across different cultures. In many African cultures, masquerading is a vital part of religious and

social ceremonies. The dance steps are often rhythmic and energetic, accompanied by drumming and chanting. For instance, in the Yoruba tradition of Nigeria, Egungun masquerades involve rapid, spinning movements that symbolize the presence of ancestral spirits. The dancers wear elaborate costumes and masks that completely cover their bodies, enhancing the mystical experience (Oluwaseun, 2023).

### **Analysis of Dance Steps in Masquerading**

To understand the dance steps in masquerading more deeply, let's look at the specific movements and their execution.

#### **Footwork**

Footwork is the foundation of masquerading dance. It involves various techniques such as stamping, shuffling, and intricate step patterns. The complexity of the footwork often depends on the specific masquerade and its cultural context. These are all inherent in the Yoruba *Egungun* masquerades.

#### **Stamping**

Stamping is a common technique where the dancer forcefully brings their foot down on the ground. This movement can symbolize power, authority, or a connection to the earth.

#### **Shuffling**

Shuffling involves quick, sliding steps that create a continuous, flowing movement. This technique is often used to depict characters that are agile or elusive.

#### **Intricate Step Patterns**

These patterns involve a combination of steps that create a specific rhythm or sequence. Learning these patterns requires practice and precision.

#### **Body Movements**

In addition to footwork, masquerading dances involve elaborate body movements. These are also found in many masquerade performances in Nigeria including the famous *Egugun* masquerade in Yoruba land. They include:

#### **Gestures**

Hand and arm movements that convey specific meanings or actions. For example, raising the arms might symbolize invocation, while crossing the arms could signify protection.

#### **Postures**

The stance of the dancer is crucial in masquerading. Different postures can represent different characters or emotions. For example, a hunched posture might depict an old person, while a straight, upright posture could signify nobility.

#### **Spins and Twirls**

Rapid spinning movements are often used to create a sense of dynamism and energy. These movements require balance and control.

### **Cultural Significance of Masquerading Dance Steps**

The dance steps in masquerading serve multiple purposes. They are a means of storytelling, a way to convey spiritual messages, and a method to preserve and transmit cultural heritage.

#### **Storytelling**

In many cultures, masquerading is a form of storytelling. The dance steps, combined with the masks and costumes, bring ancient myths, historical events, and moral tales to life. Each movement can represent a different aspect of a story, from the birth of a hero to the triumph over evil. The performers use their bodies to narrate these tales, engaging the audience in a visual and emotional journey.

### **Spiritual Communication**

Masquerading often has a spiritual dimension, where the performers embody deities, spirits, or ancestors. The dance steps are designed to invoke these spiritual beings, creating a bridge between the physical and the spiritual worlds. The movements can be seen as a form of prayer or ritual, asking for blessings, protection, or guidance.

### **Preservation of Cultural Heritage**

The dance steps in masquerading are passed down through generations, preserving the cultural heritage of a community. These movements are a repository of knowledge, containing elements of traditional beliefs, social norms, and historical events. By learning and performing these dances, younger generations maintain a connection with their cultural roots.

### **Entertainment**

Masquerades in Nigeria have long been used for entertainment purposes within and outside the African continent. These performances provide humour, satire and exaggerated scenes which cause people laugh and enjoy themselves. Many people come out at their leisure to watch the theatres in question and amuse themselves while at the same time reaping the other benefits attached to them. In some cultures, and in permissible situations, visitors are entertained with certain indigenous performances whenever they visit.

### **Dance Patterns in Puppetry**

#### **Controlled Movements**

The dance patterns in puppetry are highly controlled and precise. The puppeteer manipulates the puppet's movements using strings, rods, or hands, ensuring each action is deliberate and meaningful.

#### **Choreographed Sequences**

Puppetry often involves meticulously choreographed sequences that align with the narrative. The movements are synchronized with dialogue, music, or narration to create a cohesive performance.

#### **Illusion of Life**

The primary goal is to give the illusion that the puppet is alive. This involves smooth, flowing movements that mimic human or animal behaviors. The dance patterns often include subtle gestures, such as nodding, waving, or intricate finger movements.

#### **Visual Focus**

The visual aspect is crucial in puppetry. The dance patterns emphasize the visual appeal, ensuring that the puppet's movements are clearly visible and engaging to the audience.

### **The Mechanics of Puppetry Dance Steps**

Odeh (2020) believes that the dance steps in puppetry differ significantly from those in human dance, as they are executed through the puppeteer's control rather than direct physical movement. The primary types of puppets—marionettes, hand puppets, rod puppets, and shadow puppets—each have unique methods of movement. Some puppet performances encompass all these types in a single performance as can be encountered in the *TivKwagh-Hir* puppet performance (Hagher, (1981).

### **Marionettes**

Marionettes, or string puppets, are controlled by strings attached to a crossbar held by the puppeteer. Each string manipulates a specific part of the puppet's body, allowing for detailed and complex movements.

### **Footwork**

The footwork of marionettes involves precise control of the strings attached to the legs. By varying the tension and movement of these strings, the puppeteer can simulate walking, running, and intricate dance steps. This requires significant skill to ensure smooth and lifelike movements.

### **Body Movements**

The entire body of a marionette can be animated to perform dance steps. This includes coordinating the arms, head, and torso with the leg movements to create fluid and expressive dances. For example, a marionette might perform a graceful bow or a lively jig, depending on the puppet's character and the performance's narrative.

### **Hand Puppets**

Hand puppets are directly manipulated by the puppeteer's hands inside the puppet's body, providing a different set of movement possibilities.

### **Gestural Dance**

The dance steps of hand puppets are often more gestural than those of marionettes. Puppeteers use their fingers and wrist movements to create expressive gestures that can mimic dance steps. This includes waving arms, nodding heads, and other dynamic movements.

### **Synchronization**

For more elaborate performances, puppeteers must synchronize their hand movements with other puppeteers if multiple puppets are dancing together. This coordination is crucial for maintaining the illusion of interaction and rhythm.

### **Rod Puppets**

Rod puppets are controlled using rods attached to the puppet's limbs, providing more direct control over movements.

### **Articulated Movements**

The rods allow for more precise and controlled dance steps. Puppeteers can perform articulated movements such as bending knees, rotating joints, and other detailed actions that simulate dancing.

### **Complex Choreography**

Rod puppets can perform more complex choreography due to the increased control over individual limbs. This includes coordinated group dances where each puppet moves in harmony with others.

### **Shadow Puppets**

Shadow puppets are flat figures controlled by rods, performing behind a translucent screen illuminated from behind.

### **Silhouette Dance**

The dance steps of shadow puppets are conveyed through their silhouettes. Puppeteers create the illusion of dancing by manipulating the rods to move the puppet's limbs and body. The movements are often smooth and flowing to enhance the visual impact.

### **Depth and Perspective**

Puppeteers can play with depth and perspective by moving the puppets closer to or further from the screen. This adds a dynamic element to the dance, creating a sense of motion and depth.

### **Cultural Significance of Puppetry Dance Steps**

Puppetry dance steps are not merely technical feats; they are deeply embedded in the cultural contexts from which they originate. They serve as a medium for storytelling, ritual, and entertainment, reflecting the values and traditions of their respective cultures. Indigenous puppetry often incorporates dance as a means of cultural expression and ritual. In various African cultures, puppetry is used in rituals and storytelling. The dance steps performed by rod and hand puppets often mimic traditional dance movements, symbolizing aspects of nature, spirituality, and community life. Puppetry dances are used in ceremonial contexts. The puppets' movements are carefully choreographed to align with the rhythms of traditional music and chants, creating a powerful cultural and spiritual experience ([www.tme.uconn.edu/explore-majors/puppet](http://www.tme.uconn.edu/explore-majors/puppet)).

### **The Skill of the Puppeteer**

Executing dance steps in puppetry requires exceptional skill and artistry. Puppeteers must master the technical aspects of their craft while also conveying emotion and narrative through their puppet's movements.

#### **Technical Proficiency**

##### **Control and Precision**

Puppeteers need precise control over their puppet's movements to create believable dance steps. This involves understanding the mechanics of the puppet and the best techniques for manipulating it.

##### **Coordination**

Puppeteers often work in teams, especially with larger or more complex puppets. Coordination between multiple puppeteers is essential to ensure smooth and synchronized movements.

##### **Artistic Expression**

##### **Emotional Conveyance**

Beyond technical skill, puppeteers must convey emotions and character through their puppet's dance steps. This requires an understanding of body language and how subtle movements can express different feelings and intentions.

##### **Storytelling**

Effective puppetry dance steps are those that advance the story and engage the audience. Puppeteers must choreograph movements that not only look impressive but also contribute to the narrative being told.

### **Innovations in Puppetry Dance**

While traditional puppetry remains a vital and respected art form, Lavender (2020) says that contemporary puppeteers are pushing the boundaries with innovative approaches to dance steps.

These include the following:

#### **Technological Integration**

##### **Digital Puppetry**

Advances in technology have led to the development of digital puppetry, where virtual puppets are controlled using motion capture technology. This allows for highly intricate and dynamic dance steps that can be easily altered and refined.

##### **Mechanized Puppets**

Some modern puppetry incorporates mechanized elements, where parts of the puppet are controlled by motors or robotics. This enables more complex and precise dance movements that would be difficult to achieve manually.



### **Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration**

Collaborations exist between puppetry and other disciplines. According to Dasyuva (2005), Collaborations between puppeteers and professional dancers or choreographers have led to innovative performances that blend human dance with puppetry. This fusion creates unique visual spectacles and expands the possibilities of dance in puppetry. Puppetry is increasingly used in film and animation, where dance steps are choreographed and filmed to create lifelike animated characters. This intersection of puppetry and digital media brings a new dimension to the art form.

### **2. Conclusion**

The masquerader and puppeteer are both actors in the performing, arts industry. They both exhibit their arts disguised in ways peculiar to their medium and they both perform for audience of varying demography or blend of both. Consequently, you will find a masquerader perform his masquerade for a specific reason; ritual, community festival, chieftaincy coronation, passage of rite etc., while the puppeteer also performs his puppet show for his target audience; children, young adults or as may be required.

Dance steps in masquerading are a complex and vital aspect of this rich performance art. They serve as a means of storytelling, spiritual communication, and cultural preservation, bottom line is that they entertain their audiences. The characteristics of the dance steps complex, symbolic, and physical reflecting the depth and richness of the traditions they represent. Variations across different cultures highlight the global diversity of masquerading practices so understanding and appreciating these dance steps allows us to gain a deeper insight into the cultural and artistic significance of masquerading worldwide

Dance steps in puppetry are a testament to the skill, creativity, and cultural richness of this ancient art form. From the precise footwork of marionettes to the expressive gestures of hand puppets, each movement is a carefully crafted piece of a larger narrative. The cultural significance of these dance steps reflects the diverse traditions and stories from which they originate, while innovations in technology and collaboration continue to push the boundaries of what puppetry can achieve.

While both masquerading and puppetry are vibrant modes of performance, these arts are rooted in cultural and traditional norms and they differ significantly in their performance patterns. Masquerading is characterized by energetic, symbolic movements performed by masked individuals, emphasizing physicality and community participation. In contrast, puppetry focuses on the controlled and precise manipulation of puppets, emphasizing smooth, fluid motions to create the illusion of life. There are however, glaring points of convergence between both art forms. Such that there is always an actor (performer) behind the act who in the case of masquerade is the masquerader who must adorn the masquerade's costume and accessories and other paraphernalia of the art in order to appear before a given audience for the presentation of art otherwise, the masquerade from the headpiece to the costume and other appendages that makes it a masquerade in the context of performance is just a lifeless piece of art work that can be on exhibition in any art gallery for the appreciation of yet another group of arts consumers.

In like manner, the puppet is just an art work without relevance except the puppeteer takes it up and breathes life into it by manipulating the limbs and other parts that needs movements corresponding to the desired expression. It is arguable therefore, that without the human factor; the masquerader in the case of masquerade performance and the puppeteer in puppetry, both art forms will not be functional and cannot be termed performing arts. It can also be argued that some kinds of puppets are like masquerades were the puppeteer operates

the puppet from inside the puppet as it is with some category of puppets like the giant puppet as accounted by McCaslin (1996) some puppeteers use puppets as tall as they are or even taller. These giant puppets must be made of lightweight material so they can be pushed from behind or inside or carried (119). Furthermore, like other performing art forms; drama, dance, music, circus etc., there must be an audience to witness the performance otherwise, both are mere visual arts.

In both masquerade and puppetry, performance occur within a given space; the stage which differ significantly depending on the type of masquerade or puppet. The take home here therefore is that there is usually a place where these performances are given which may be indoors or outdoors and as observed by McCaslin (1996) some of their puppets are eighteen to twenty feet tall. . . giant puppets can perform only outdoors or in areas like a church or loft that offers sufficient height and space for them to be handled with ease (119) Understanding these differences enriches our appreciation of these art forms and their roles in cultural expression.

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