

JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

THE CONCEPT OF "ACTOR" IN AFRICAN MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE

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CITATION: Amali, A. A., & Badeji, A. J. (2025). The concept of "Actor" in African masquerade performance. *Journal of African Arts and Culture*, 8(4), 209-220.

Abstract

The concept of the "actor" in African masquerade performance fundamentally challenges Western theatrical definitions of acting, performance, and representation. In Eurocentric theatre traditions, the actor is understood as an individual performer who consciously impersonates a fictional character before an audience, maintaining a clear distinction between self and role. African masquerade performance, by contrast, operates within a cosmological, ritual, and communal framework in which the performer is not merely acting but is believed to undergo a process of spiritual and ontological transformation. This article interrogates the notion of the "actor" in African masquerade by examining its philosophical foundations, ritual logic, performance structures, and socio-cultural functions. Drawing on performance theory, ritual studies, and African aesthetics, the paper argues that the masquerade performer occupies a liminal position that transcends conventional actor-character binaries. Through a comparative theoretical analysis of the Yoruba Egungun masquerade tradition, the study demonstrates that African masquerade performance redefines acting as embodiment, possession, and mediation rather than representation. The article concludes that any serious theorisation of African drama and theatre must reconceptualise the "actor" to account for indigenous epistemologies, ritual authority, and communal

meaning-making.

Keywords: African masquerade, actor, performance, ritual theatre, embodiment, African drama, performance studies

1. Introduction

The study of acting and performance has long been dominated by Western theatrical paradigms that privilege individual authorship, psychological realism, and representational acting. Within these paradigms, the actor is conceived as a trained individual who consciously embodies a fictional role while remaining ontologically separate from the character portrayed. This conception, rooted in Aristotelian mimesis and later refined through Stanislavskian realism and modern acting theories, has significantly shaped global understandings of theatre and performance. Yet this dominant framework reveals a fundamental inadequacy when brought into contact with African masquerade performance, where the boundaries between performer, role, spirit, and community dissolve in ways that Western theatrical categories are ill-equipped to explain. At the heart of this inadequacy lies a deep epistemological tension. Eurocentric theatrical traditions assume a stable, autonomous self that temporarily adopts a fictional persona before an audience, always retaining the possibility of stepping outside the role. African performative cosmologies, by contrast, operate from an entirely different set of assumptions, ones in which performance is inseparable from ritual, religion, and communal life, and in which the masquerade performer is understood not as an actor impersonating a character but as a transformed being through whom ancestral or spiritual forces are made present. To apply Western definitions of acting to such performance traditions is not merely an analytical error; it is an act of epistemic erasure.

2. Literature Review

This article examines the concept of the "actor" in African masquerade performance, with particular focus on the Yoruba Egungun tradition, situating it within the broader historical and philosophical development of African drama and theatre. Its central argument is that the Egungun masquerade performer occupies a liminal, ontologically distinct position that fundamentally unsettles the actor-character binary foundational to Western performance theory, and that theorising this position requires a deliberate epistemological shift toward indigenous African frameworks of embodiment, cosmology, and communal meaning-making. To develop this argument, the article is guided by three core research questions: Who is the "actor" in African masquerade performance, and on what cultural and spiritual grounds is this identity constituted? Can the Western actor-character binary adequately account for the kind of embodiment enacted in Yoruba Egungun masquerade? And what epistemological reorientation is required for performance theory to engage African masquerade on its own terms? Given that this is a conceptual paper, the discussion proceeds topically rather than chronologically, moving from a critique of Western acting theories, through an examination of the philosophical and ritual logic of Egungun performance, to a reconceptualisation of the actor that centres African epistemologies, ritual authority, and communal aesthetics. By

addressing these questions, the article contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to decolonise theatre historiography and performance theory.

3. Method

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Performance, Ritual, and Ontology

The analysis of African masquerade performance requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from performance studies, ritual theory, and African philosophy. The concept of performance as "restored behaviour" by Schechner (2006) provides a useful starting point, emphasising that performance is not limited to theatre but includes ritual, play, and everyday actions. However, while this framework acknowledges ritual performance, it does not fully account for indigenous ontologies that collapse the distinction between performance and reality. The theory of ritual and liminality by Turner (1969) is particularly relevant to masquerade performance. Turner identifies ritual participants as occupying a liminal space between ordinary social structures and sacred transformation. In the African masquerade, the performer exists in this liminal zone, neither fully human nor entirely spirit, but a convergence of both. African philosophical perspectives further complicate Western notions of acting. African cosmologies often emphasise relational being, ancestral continuity, and spiritual presence. Within such worldviews, masquerade performance is not symbolic imitation but a real manifestation of metaphysical forces (Soyinka, 1976). Mbiti (2020) reinforces this understanding that African cosmologies do not separate the spiritual from the material, making masquerade a lived metaphysical reality rather than aesthetic illusion. Consequently, the masquerade performer's role cannot be adequately described as acting in the representational sense.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Masquerade in the Historical Development of African Drama and Theatre

African masquerade occupies a foundational position in the historical evolution of African drama and theatre. Long before the introduction of Western theatre forms through colonialism and missionary education, the masquerade functioned as a sophisticated performance system encompassing dramaturgy, aesthetics, and social regulation. Masquerade constitutes one of Africa's earliest and most sophisticated dramatic systems. Prior to colonial contact, masquerade performance integrated dramaturgy, music, costume, movement, and audience participation within ritual contexts (Barber, 2000; Finnegan, 2012). Masquerade traditions developed in response to communal needs: ancestral veneration, moral enforcement, seasonal cycles, political legitimacy, and social cohesion. These performances were governed by strict conventions regarding costume, movement, music, and participation, indicating a highly developed theatrical consciousness.

Within this historical context, masquerade represents a proto-theatrical form that predates literary drama. Its influence can be traced in later African theatrical expressions, including ritual drama, nationalist theatre, and contemporary experimental performance. Recent African theatre scholarship continues to recognise masquerade as a foundational theatrical form rather than a pre-theatrical curiosity (Drewal, 2019; Kerr, 2021). This shift in critical perspective

challenges earlier Eurocentric frameworks that relegated African performance traditions to the margins of "primitive ritual" or anthropological spectacle. Instead, masquerade is now understood as a sophisticated dramatic system with its own internal logic, aesthetics, and performance conventions. Its dramaturgical structure reveals clearly articulated conflicts, often between moral order and social transgression, the human and the supernatural, or tradition and change, which are resolved through symbolic action rather than linear plot development. Spectacle, achieved through elaborate masks, costumes, music, and choreographed movement, functions not merely as visual ornamentation but as a narrative and ideological device that communicates meaning to the community.

Masquerade also demonstrates narrative progression through episodic sequences, ritual climaxes, and performative transitions that guide audience interpretation and emotional response. Characters in masquerade performances are carefully positioned within cosmological hierarchies, social roles, and spiritual significance, thereby establishing a coherent dramatic universe. Within this framework, the performer does not "act" in the Western representational sense but becomes a conduit for ancestral or metaphysical presence. Understanding the concept of the actor in masquerade, where embodiment replaces imitation and ritual authority supersedes individual expression, is therefore crucial to comprehending African theatre history as a whole, as it reveals the philosophical foundations upon which modern African dramatic practices are built.

4.2 The Western and African Masquerade Concept of the Actor

Western acting theory presupposes a separation between actor and character, reinforced by techniques such as emotional memory and psychological identification (Carlson, 2021; Stanislavski, 1989). The audience's engagement depends on the suspension of disbelief. In African masquerade, belief is not suspended but activated. The masquerade is not perceived as performing "as if" it were a spirit; it is understood to be the spirit (Drewal, 2019; Soyinka, 1976). This distinction fundamentally destabilises representational acting models.

In Western theatre traditions, the actor is typically defined by several key characteristics:

- i. Conscious impersonation of a character
- ii. Psychological and emotional identification with a role
- iii. Clear separation between performer and character
- iv. Performance for an audience that understands the fictional nature of the act

This model assumes that acting is an art of illusion, in which the audience willingly suspends disbelief. The actor's skill lies in convincing the audience of the character's reality while remaining personally unaffected by the role. When this model is applied to African masquerade, it fails to capture the cultural logic of performance. In masquerade contexts, the audience does not suspend disbelief; rather, belief is a prerequisite for the performance's efficacy. The masquerade is not "as if" but "as is." In African masquerade performances, the actor's identity is deliberately obscured and symbolically erased. The performer's personal identity is concealed through masks, elaborate costumes, and ritual preparation. In many

traditions, including the Yoruba Egungun, revealing the identity of the masquerade performer is taboo and may carry severe social or spiritual consequences.

The actor, in this context, is:

- i. An initiated community member
- ii. A ritual specialist or custodian of tradition
- iii. A vessel for ancestral or spiritual presence

The masquerade performer does not claim authorship or individuality; instead, agency is attributed to the spirit or ancestor embodied. This fundamentally alters the concept of acting, shifting emphasis from individual performance skill to communal legitimacy and ritual authority.

4.3 Transformation as Aesthetic Strategy

One of the most significant distinctions between African masquerade performance and Western acting lies in the notion of transformation. In the Yoruba Egungun tradition, as in other masquerade traditions across Africa, the performer is believed to undergo a genuine transformation during performance.

This transformation is facilitated through:

- i. Ritual preparation and purification
- ii. Invocation of ancestral or spiritual forces
- iii. Sacred costume and masking
- iv. Music, drumming, and chant

The masquerade is thus not a representation of a spirit but its manifestation. From the community's perspective, the Egungun masquerade is not a performer pretending to be an ancestor; it is the ancestor present in corporeal form. Acting, in this sense, becomes an ontological process rather than an aesthetic one. This transformation is facilitated through a complex network of ritual practices that precede and accompany the public appearance of the masquerade. Ritual preparation and purification rites symbolically and spiritually strip the performer of ordinary human identity, preparing the body as a vessel capable of hosting spiritual presence (Drewal & Drewal, 1983). Through invocation, prayers, and sacrificial acts, ancestral or metaphysical forces are summoned and ritually installed within the masquerade form. The costume and mask function not as theatrical props but as sacred instruments endowed with spiritual potency. Once worn, they negate personal identity and authorise a new, non-human presence sanctioned by communal belief and tradition (Barber, 2000).

In the Yoruba Egungun tradition, the masquerade is therefore understood not as a symbolic representation of a spirit but as its actual manifestation within the human and material world. This distinction is crucial to appreciating the ontological foundations of masquerade performance. From the community's perspective, the masked figure does not signify an ancestor through theatrical illusion or mimetic skill; rather, it is the ancestor made visible and

tangible through ritualised embodiment. The performer's individual identity is deliberately effaced through layers of sacred costuming, anonymity, and ritual prohibition, ensuring that the human body functions solely as a vessel for spiritual presence. This belief system fundamentally reconfigures the concept of acting. In Western theatrical traditions, acting is typically grounded in representational aesthetics, where performers consciously adopt roles through techniques of imitation, characterisation, and psychological realism. In Egungun performance, however, acting is not concerned with the convincing portrayal of a character but with the successful invocation and containment of metaphysical power. The efficacy of the performance is judged not by artistic expressiveness but by spiritual authenticity, ritual correctness, and communal recognition.

Consequently, acting in masquerade becomes an ontological process, one that involves a transformation of being rather than the execution of a craft. The performer does not "act" the ancestor; he is temporarily subsumed by ancestral agency. Voice distortion, choreographed movement, and coded gestures are not expressive tools but outward signs of an inner spiritual displacement. The authority of the Egungun derives from its perceived non-human status, allowing it to mediate between the living and the dead, enforce moral order, and reaffirm communal cosmology. Within this framework, performance collapses the boundary between ritual and theatre, aesthetics and belief. Masquerade thus challenges dominant Western theories of acting by foregrounding embodiment as a site of spiritual becoming rather than representational play.

4.4 Masquerade and Modern African Theatre

Modern African theatre has developed through a sustained dialogue with indigenous performance traditions, particularly masquerade, which continues to shape its aesthetics, philosophy, and theories of acting. Rather than rejecting traditional forms in favour of Western dramaturgy, many African playwrights and theatre practitioners have consciously drawn upon masquerade as a living cultural and performative resource. This engagement reflects an effort to articulate theatrical practices that are culturally grounded while remaining responsive to contemporary social realities (Kerr, 1995). One of the most influential figures in this regard is Wole Soyinka, whose dramatic works and theoretical writings foreground masquerade as a central aesthetic and metaphysical principle. In plays such as *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Road*, Soyinka draws on Yoruba cosmology and Egungun masquerade traditions to challenge Western notions of character, linear narrative, and psychological realism. For Soyinka, masquerade represents a liminal space where the living, the dead, and the unborn intersect, and this cosmological framework reshapes dramatic action into a ritual process rather than a purely representational event (Soyinka, 1976). Acting within this paradigm emphasises spiritual embodiment and communal symbolism over individual characterisation.

Beyond Soyinka, contemporary African theatre broadly incorporates masquerade principles in its performance vocabulary. Ensemble performance, for instance, reflects the communal orientation of masquerade traditions, where meaning is produced collectively rather than through a singular heroic protagonist. The actor functions within an interconnected performative system that includes music, dance, costume, and audience participation (Drewal, 1992). This collective approach undermines Western actor-centred models and aligns

performance with indigenous modes of social organisation. Ritualised movement and symbolic costuming also remain central to modern African theatre practice. Gestures, choreography, and spatial patterns often derive from masquerade dance vocabularies, carrying encoded meanings that extend beyond aesthetic display. Costumes, like masks, operate as transformative devices that shift the actor's identity and signal metaphysical or social status rather than personal psychology (Kerr, 1995). These elements reinforce the idea that performance is an act of becoming rather than imitation.

Furthermore, the principle of collective authorship in African theatre mirrors masquerade's resistance to individual ownership. Plays often emerge through collaborative processes involving directors, performers, musicians, and communities, echoing the communal authorship of masquerade performances passed down through generations (Schechner, 2006). This continuity between masquerade and modern African theatre underscores the enduring relevance of indigenous performance philosophies in contemporary practice. By integrating masquerade aesthetics, African theatre asserts alternative theories of acting and dramaturgy that privilege ritual, embodiment, and communal meaning-making. In doing so, it challenges Eurocentric theatrical paradigms and affirms masquerade as a foundational framework for African performance theory rather than a residual or archaic form.

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What grounds this continuity most profoundly, however, is not merely aesthetic borrowing but a shared epistemological foundation rooted in African cosmological thought. Across diverse masquerade traditions, including the Yoruba Egungun, the Dogon Kanaga mask performance, the Bamana Chi Wara, and the masquerade practices of the Takoradi and Winneba communities in Ghana, performance is not conceived as fiction but as ritual event. In each of these traditions, the masquerade performer does not pretend to be an ancestor, spirit, or metaphysical force. The performer becomes the conduit through which such forces enter the material world and act upon it. The mask, in this context, is not a costume worn to create theatrical illusion; it is a sacred object that carries spiritual potency, authorises the presence of non-humans, and effects a genuine ontological transition in the one who wears it. Community members do not receive the masquerade as an artistic performance to be evaluated on the basis of mimetic skill; they receive it as a living presence whose authority derives from ancestral sanction, ritual correctness, and communal validation. Performance, in this epistemological framework, is inseparable from ancestral presence, spirit embodiment, sacred authority, and ontological transformation. It is precisely this understanding that modern African theatre inherits and perpetuates, and it is what distinguishes African theatrical thought most fundamentally from Eurocentric dramatic paradigms.

4.6 Beyond Actor-Character Dualism

The limitations of Western theatrical theory become most apparent when one examines closely the ritual conditions under which masquerade performance is constituted. In the Yoruba Egungun tradition, as in the Igbo Mmanwu and the Dogon Kanaga performance, the process of becoming the masquerade begins long before the public appearance of the masked figure. Ritual preparation is a structured and carefully supervised process governed by secrecy, initiation, and strict cosmological protocols. The performer must undergo initiatory rites that mark a symbolic separation from ordinary human identity and signal entry into a sacred order. This is not preparatory rehearsal in the theatrical sense; it is an ontological conditioning of the body, a process by which the individual self is progressively dissolved so that a supra-personal, spiritually authorised presence may inhabit the human form. Secrecy is not incidental to this process but constitutive of it. The masquerade's power depends on the community's acceptance of its non-human status, and this acceptance is safeguarded by strict prohibitions against revealing the identity of the performer. To expose the human being beneath the mask

is not merely to break a social taboo; it is to destroy the metaphysical condition upon which the entire performance event rests.

The loss of personal identity that occurs through masking is therefore not a theatrical convention but an epistemological and ontological fact within the cultural logic of masquerade. The performer ceases, for the duration of the performance, to exist as a private individual with personal history, social relationships, and psychological interiority. In their place stands a figure constituted entirely by communal belief, ancestral authority, and sacred costume. This transition from human individual to ritualised presence is what may be understood as ontological transition, a movement across thresholds of being that Western acting theory, with its insistence on the retained selfhood of the actor, is structurally incapable of theorising.

The masquerade performer therefore occupies what may be described as a liminal body, a human form that has been ritually prepared to exist at the threshold between the world of the living and the realm of the ancestors. This body is also a mediatory identity, positioned neither entirely within the human community nor entirely within the spirit world, but functioning precisely at their intersection as the point through which ancestral will and communal life are brought into meaningful contact. Beyond this, the masquerade performer carries a cosmological function, serving as a living mechanism through which the community's relationship with its metaphysical foundations is renewed, affirmed, and made materially present. To speak of such a figure as an "actor" in the Western sense is not merely inadequate; it fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the practice and the cultural epistemology that sustains it. The Western actor-character binary, premised on the stable coexistence of a conscious performing self and a temporarily adopted fictional role, does not survive contact with masquerade's cosmological logic. In masquerade, there is no binary because there is no fictional character to be distinguished from a performing self. There is only the presence, the community, and the ritual event that brings them together.

4.7 Towards a Conceptual Reconstruction

If the Western actor-character binary is inadequate to the demands of masquerade performance, the question that follows is not merely critical but generative: what conceptual vocabulary is required to theorise masquerade performance on its own terms? The first and most fundamental interrogation concerns whether masquerade is "acting" at all. If acting is understood as the conscious, skilled, and individually authored simulation of a character before an audience that understands the fictional nature of the event, then masquerade is not acting. The performer does not simulate; the community does not receive the performance as fiction; and authorship is not individual but ancestral, cosmological, and communal. To describe masquerade as acting in this sense is to distort it beyond recognition.

Yet masquerade is clearly a performance event of considerable sophistication, one that involves prepared movement, codified gesture, structured encounter with an audience, and culturally governed aesthetic conventions. What is required, therefore, is not the wholesale rejection of the category of performance but its radical expansion through the development of new conceptual terms adequate to the specificity of masquerade practice. The concept of

ontological performance offers one such term, designating a mode of performance in which what is at stake is not the aesthetic representation of a reality but the actual transformation of ontological status, the movement from one mode of being to another, enacted through ritual, costume, and communal belief. Ritual embodiment offers a further conceptual resource, describing the process by which a prepared human body becomes the site of spiritual indwelling, functioning not as an expressive instrument under the control of an individual performer but as a consecrated vessel whose movements and utterances are understood as manifestations of non-human agency.

Metaphysical dramaturgy names the structuring principle through which masquerade performances are organised, not according to the logic of plot, conflict, and resolution derived from Aristotelian poetics, but according to the logic of cosmological necessity, ancestral protocol, and ritual efficacy. And the concept of sacralised corporeality describes the condition of the masquerade performer's body, a body that has been ritually transformed into a sacred object, stripped of personal identity, and invested with spiritual and communal authority. Together, these conceptual terms constitute the beginnings of a theoretical vocabulary adequate to masquerade performance, one that does not merely adapt Western performance theory to accommodate African traditions but builds from indigenous epistemologies outward toward a genuinely alternative performance philosophy. This is where the original theoretical contribution of masquerade studies lies, not in its capacity to be explained by existing frameworks, but in its power to generate new ones. By integrating masquerade aesthetics, African theatre asserts alternative theories of acting and dramaturgy that privilege ritual, embodiment, and communal meaning-making. In doing so, it challenges Eurocentric theatrical paradigms and affirms masquerade as a foundational framework for African performance theory rather than a residual or archaic form.

5. Conclusion

The concept of the "actor" in African masquerade performance fundamentally redefines dominant assumptions about acting, performance, and theatre. This article has argued that the prevailing Western theatrical category of the actor, premised on conscious impersonation, psychological identification, and the stable separation of self from role, is theoretically insufficient when applied to the Yoruba Egungun masquerade tradition. What masquerade demands, and what this article has sought to demonstrate, is nothing less than a reconceptualised theory of the actor, one that foregrounds embodiment, ritual authority, ontological transformation, and communal legitimacy as its constitutive principles rather than individual skill or representational artifice. Unlike Western theatrical traditions that prioritise representation, mimesis, and psychological characterisation, African masquerade collapses the distinction between actor and role, positioning performance as an event of ontological transformation rather than aesthetic simulation. In this framework, the performer does not interpret or imitate a character; instead, the human body becomes a consecrated medium through which ancestral, spiritual, or metaphysical forces are made present within the social world. Acting, therefore, transcends technique and enters the realm of ritualised becoming.

By dissolving the boundaries between actor and character, performance and reality, African masquerade establishes an alternative theatrical ontology rooted in spirituality, cosmology,

and communal belief systems. The masquerade's authority does not derive from individual skill or artistic virtuosity but from collective recognition and ritual legitimacy. The performer's anonymity, the sacredness of the costume and mask, and the codified movement vocabulary all work to efface personal identity, allowing the masquerade to function as a communal and spiritual agent. In this sense, performance is inseparable from social regulation, moral instruction, historical memory, and cosmological continuity. The implications of this reconceptualisation are far-reaching. For African theatre studies, it affirms that masquerade is not a "pre-theatrical" or primitive precursor to drama but a fully developed performative system with its own dramaturgy, aesthetics, and philosophy of embodiment, one that occupies a foundational rather than peripheral position in African theatre historiography. For performance theory more broadly, it exposes the parochialism of actor-centred, representational frameworks and calls for theoretical models capacious enough to account for traditions in which belief, ritual efficacy, and communal ontology are constitutive of performance itself. For actor training, it raises urgent questions about whether existing training methodologies, largely derived from European traditions, can adequately prepare practitioners to engage with African performance forms, and whether indigenous modes of bodily preparation, ritual conditioning, and communal accountability might offer alternative or supplementary pedagogical frameworks. For intercultural theatre discourse, it cautions against the uncritical transplantation of Western theatrical vocabulary onto non-Western performance traditions, insisting instead on epistemological reciprocity and cultural specificity as conditions for genuine intercultural exchange.

Ultimately, African masquerade compels scholars and practitioners to rethink acting not merely as an art of illusion or representation but as a profound mode of being and becoming. It challenges global theatre discourse to expand its theoretical frameworks to include performance traditions in which acting is inseparable from belief, ritual efficacy, and communal ontology. In doing so, African masquerade affirms alternative ways of knowing, performing, and understanding theatre in ways that remain vital to both historical scholarship and contemporary performance practice.

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