

## Teacher Notes for use by KS3, KS4 and KS5 teachers and FE institutions

### *UNMASKED Spirit in the City*



#### Introduction

Masquerade is a public spectacle based on disguise. It conceals and resists knowledge. In many ways it is unknowable. Masking has always been current, reflecting the times in which it is performed, and the landscapes - including cities - that masked spirits encounter. This is what *UNMASKED: Spirit in the City* investigates.

*UNMASKED: Spirit in the City* is a collaboration between Port Harcourt-born British-Nigerian artist Zina Saro-Wiwa and

Oxford anthropologist David Pratten, who tell a very different story about the meaning of the cultural practice known as masquerade.

This show combines anthropology and contemporary art to capture the complex emotional stories behind a modern urban masquerade called Agaba. The Agaba is one of the enduring masquerades of the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

It is outdoor theatre: loud, rambunctious and urgent. On the surface, Agaba masking enables the men that comprise the group to perform a tough, masculine identity that is physically, politically and spiritually 'rugged'.

But *UNMASKED* shows that behind the mask, in the songs they sing and in the bedrooms where they dream, these men reflect on their fate in intimate and ironic ways. This story of masquerade finds tenderness and everyday tragedy in the personal and the political. This is told through the songs, the carving and performance, and is captured in Zina Saro-Wiwa's installation *Bad Boys & Broken Hearts*.

#### Agabe History

Agaba is sometimes known as Mgbedike: time of the brave. Before colonialism and its economies of extraction, the mask was part of the fabric of a rural world where the supernatural reinforced the structures of village authority.



In colonial propaganda films, like the Oscar-winning *Daybreak in Udi* (1949), Agaba masqueraders represented the forces of tradition. The coal and later oil producing city of Port Harcourt is the heart of Agaba masking tradition.

As it traced the violent historical contours of the Nigerian oil state, the mask slipped from an ethnic designation to a generational one and became a play of and for the youth of the Niger Delta. Performing the masquerade has always been a test, a way of proving manhood and masculinity.

Agaba is a spirit in the city of Port Harcourt, which has borne the violent legacy of oil since its discovery in the late 1950s and the arrival of the multi-national companies headquartered there. The city's history, and that of the oil producing Niger Delta, is often presented as an intergenerational crisis. Youth are painted either as victims who are excluded from the profits of the oil economy by powerful patrons,

or vanguards of sometimes violent claims for oil revenue based on Indigenous rights.

The Agaba masquerade offers the potential for protection and profit in this patrimonial political economy. It often performs to celebrate 'big men' in the city. Before becoming a traditional ruler, Agaba's 'grand patron' Chief Ateke Tom was leader of the Niger Delta Vigilante, an armed militia group that came to the fore in a violent insurgency in the early 2000s. This political order is never far from the surface of the Agaba song repertoire, and folk heroes including the murdered rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (father of Zina Sara-Wiwa) and journalist Dele Giwa feature in praise songs and laments.

### **Agaba History Questions:**

Q 1. What does the text about the film 'The Time of the Brave' tell us about the how the masquerade was used before colonialism?

A 1. The mask was part of a rural world where the supernatural reinforced the structures of village authority.

Q 2. What is performing the masquerade a test of? What is it a way of proving?

A 2. It is a way of proving manhood and masculinity.

Q 3. What important resource is the Niger Delta rich in and who arrived there in the late 1950s?

A 3. Oil was discovered there in the 1950s and since then multi-national companies colonised the area and moved their headquarters to Port Harcourt.

Q 4. Name one of the key figures who serve as folk heroes in the Agaba song repertoire. Use your phone or computer to find out more about one of these figures and their histories.

A 4. Ken Saro-Wiwa or Dele Giwa

### **Present Day Performance**

Today Agaba is performed across the Niger Delta where it adapts to different local aesthetics. The group performing in Port Harcourt is called Area United. The carnivalesque atmosphere is a hyper-masculine space

of conviviality and camaraderie. Members whip each other without flinching to demonstrate their courage. The mask must be protected by eggs which are smashed into its face. The red flag signals danger; the black flag indicates remembrance. Carrying the heavy mask demands skill and strength. Masking is an ordeal, a test of power and authority. Those who succeed are 'rugged' men.

### **Performance Questions:**

Q 5. What is the atmosphere around the masquerade performance like?

A 5. It is hypermasculine, carnivalesque and full of camaraderie with an emphasis on demonstrating courage. Flags are used to signify danger or remembrance. It is a test of power, physical strength and authority.

### **Music and Instruments**

The improvised and subversive qualities of the mask are best demonstrated in its music. The common vernacular for Agaba songs is pidgin English – a lingua franca that accommodates urban youth of varied local languages. The masquerade is accompanied by the Ogele (metal gong), which gives its name to the music, and the soaring spirit voice of the Oja (wooden flute). Lyrics are drawn from a range of sources: palm-wine drinking clubs, church hymns, the highlife of Rex Lawson, and prison work songs. Agaba has produced gyration (a musical genre), full of its own jarassis (slang).

### **Music and Instruments questions:**

Q 6. What language is used for Agaba song words?

A 6. Pidgin English – a language that incorporates different local languages into English

Q 7. Which instruments are used in Agaba songs?

A 7. Ogele (metal gong) and Oja (wooden flute)

Q 8. What different aspects of life in Nigeria are the lyrics of the songs drawn from?

A 8. Palm-wine drinking clubs, church hymns, the highlife music of Rex Lawson (highlife is a genre of music originating in Ghana and popular in Nigeria), and prison work songs

### **Song Lyrics - Introduction**

Despite the vigorous, noisy and powerful context of the songs' performance, the lyrics are of mutual solidarity and forbearance, of love and loss, of hope and desire, and of humour and satire. Songs about police intimidation, lost girlfriends, thwarted ambitions, and the resilience to keep trying reveal a critical awareness about their personal insecurities. 'I want to be a student' they sing, 'but I no get biro'. 'I want to marry one girl' they demand, but 'mi mama no gree'. In the face of the precarity of life in Port Harcourt, Agaba boys implore one another to stay strong and to identify themselves as 'rugged to the core'.

### **Agaba Song Lyrics and Explanations**

#### **Polly Picture**

*I want to marry one girl*

*Mi Mama no gree me oh*

*A beg am, a beg am, I tire*

*De girl turn to ashawo for Abonnema*

*If you see Polly, If you see Polly*

*If you see Polly, tell her say I de look for her*

*Polly write a letter, Polly put her picture*

*Polly picture do whatever she for do for me*

*Polly picture romance me, Polly picture kiss me*

*Polly picture do whatever she for do for me*

Recorded by Parachi (Ikot Akpa Nkuk, 2004)

Many Agaba songs lament the loves and losses of young men in the city. These are the lyrics of bad boys with broken hearts. This Agaba boy regrets that Polly, his girlfriend, became an *ashawo* (sex worker) in Abonnema, a town just outside Port Harcourt. *Ashawo* is derived from a Yoruba word: other terms, *ukpeke* and *okpongidi*, also feature in the songs in reference to women engaged in transactional relationships. Agaba songs often reflect on the inability of poor young men to impress girls and celebrate their ruse of claiming to work for Shell Oil. In some performances Agaba boys dance as *ashawo*, twisting their hips to assume female form in a hyper-masculine moment.

#### Dis Rugged Life

*O Dis rugged life, I wan fash e ami*

*Some people rugged, sute kill their life – eh*

*Notorious BIG follow kill Tupac - oh*

*Tupac boys dem still dey sail – oh*

*Some people rugged sute buy Mercedes - oh*

*As for me I must buy Pafinda*

*If no Pafinda na warrant I go face – oh*

*Tupac boys still de sail – oh*

‘Dis rugged life’ refers to the tough and uncertain world of city life. It takes a strong young man to survive and thrive. These rugged men are associated with gangs or cults, the Buccaneers and the Vikings, who employ nautical metaphors in their slang: to ‘sail’ is to persevere.

The rugged life in this song is compared to the lyrical world of American gangster rap and its icons, Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. Yet, this is not a song of bravado; it anticipates failure and a run-in with the police. Instead of driving a Mercedes Benz - associated with old time politicians - this Agaba boy has his own dream of a ‘pafinda’ (Nissan Pathfinder jeep) but the song fears that realistically this Agaba boy will end up on a police charge: na warrant I go face.

Recorded by ‘MegaLord’ and the Base Boys (28 July 2012)

#### Judgement Day

*Judgement Day is coming*

*All men will stand before the rule of God*

*And give account of their lives You will stand,*

*I will stand All men will stand,*

*I will stand Before the truth of God*

*And make account of their lives*

*I tell you, oh my brother, excellent,*

*Oh my sister, excellent,*

*The time I dey for prison*

*Who dey give me rice oh?*

*Who dey give me beans oh?*

*Chop, I chop, chop alone no good oh*

*Chop alone, its judgement day!*

Agaba songs are led by gifted 'choirmasters' and sometimes imitate and subvert church hymns. While initiation into the spiritual secrets of Agaba is rejected by churches, Agaba members themselves often attend one of the many denominations where the preaching of deliverance dominates. 'My Lord who deliver Paul and Silas' they sing, 'He will surely deliver me'.

'Judgement Day' reminds Agaba members of the importance of solidarity and support. This is a common refrain, a moral code rehearsed in song. It stresses the moral imperative to share and the immorality of selfishness. The expression 'chop alone, die alone' means that if you eat alone, without sharing, no one will help in your hour of need, or attend your burial. It reminds the Agaba boy that the group is a social network of friendship as well as material support.

Recorded by Obony and the Base Boys (Ikot Akpa Nkuk, December 2007)

#### No Cocktail

*No cocktail, no cocktail oh*

*No cocktail, Na bad drug oh*

*Na for Issaka somebody tell me say*

*Make I no dey like cocktail oh*

*After dem tell me*

*I still go buy gold line am*

*I tink say na heaven I dey oh*

*A me no know say na my money dey burn so*

*I tink say na heaven I dey*

*Abonnema Wharf boys na dem be my drug pushers*

*Anywhere dey must find and reach oh*

*Elechi boys oh na dem be my drug pushers*

*Anywhere dey must find and reach*

*Fit na to swear, me I go swear say - eh*

*Dat cocktail for stress my life oh*

*Babo cocktail!*

The cocktail of this song is a reference to drugs, especially cocaine. In some Nigerian cities the drugs' trade has been run by Agaba groups. The popular neighbourhood of Colombia in Port Harcourt, where many Agaba members live, is named after its association with drug dealing. In recent years the non-medical use of tramadol has risen across West Africa. Use of this opioid painkiller has been most prevalent amongst young men in cities pursuing precarious livelihoods. The locations in Port Harcourt named in this song, Abonnema Wharf and Elechi, refer to so-called "waterside" informal settlements. Built on land reclaimed from the creeks surrounding the city, the watersides are busy thriving communities. But they lack basic amenities and security.

Recorded by Parachi (Ikot Akpa Nkuk, 2004)



### **Bad Boys & Broken Hearts**

Zina Saro-Wiwa is a British-Nigerian environmental artist whose practice explores the spiritual ecologies of the oil-cursed Niger Delta of her birth. Saro-Wiwa's family's ancestral home is Ogoniland, a rural kingdom outside Port Harcourt, which was at the centre of terrifying and destructive struggles with Shell Oil and the Nigerian military government during the 1980s and early 1990s.

*Bad Boys & Broken Hearts* is a new installation by Saro-Wiwa that subverts the use of the glass cases which display museum collections - to explore the dreams of two Port Harcourt-based Agaba masqueraders in their bedrooms. In the museum viewers gaze onto apparently inanimate masks, but in *Bad Boys & Broken Hearts* intimate portraits of masqueraders and their worlds gaze back.

Though the men are middle-aged, the moniker 'bad boys' is local parlance alluding to how local people view the youth gangs, cults and masquerade groups of the Niger Delta. Both men, whose bedrooms are reconstructed in this installation, are happily married and live with their families in the Ibadan Waterside of Port Harcourt. Their stories capture universal emotions of love, joy and hope combined with tales of loss, fear and heartbreak along with a profoundly permanent sense of socio-political heartbreak lie at the heart of lives in the Niger Delta.

## The Gallery Installations

The gallery conjures up the bedrooms of two masqueraders in an encounter with their inner worlds. One bedroom belongs to veteran urban masquerader Neenuku Kpogah (green room) and one to Nicholas Kuapie (blue room). Both live in the slum community of Ibadan Waterside in Port Harcourt. Neenuku is a drummer, dancer and youth leader, and works as a security guard. Nicholas, a tall, slim and well-dressed 44-year-old, works as a driver for a wealthy Port Harcourt entrepreneur. Both are members of a Port Harcourt troupe named Gwara Cultural Dance Group. Their motto is the cry 'One Love!' to which the group responds 'Keep Us Together'.

Each room is a near replica of their bedrooms. The sheets, shirts, shoes and artefacts that appear in the videos were gifted to the artist to furnish the installation. But these are not just bedrooms, they are 'heartscapes', a reflection on power, poverty, strength and vulnerability.

The larger screens show the men in repose against the sounds of their breath and their heartbeats. The smaller screens depict the interaction between landscape, dreams and desires as the men move through their slum to the waterfront.