



Anyone scrutinizing the seasonal catwalk parades in London, Paris and New York has been able to spot the enduring influence of tribal costumes on the world's most progressive fashion designers.

By Emma Reeves | Photographs by Phyllis Galembo

For fall 2008, Alexander McQueen made menswear out of vibrantly patterned blankets and voluminous vests thatched from wool; John Galliano trimmed a black coat in plantlike fringe, draped it in bright streamers of knotted fabric, then showed it with a bird mask. Even Gareth Pugh—architect of futuristic gowns that appear to be constructed from giant bubbles and stacked boxes — looked to the far past for the tribal makeup and warrior helmets that framed his stark *Blade Runner*-esque constructions. It's clear why indigenous fashion continues to inspire: created with few resources and fueled by complex ceremonies, it's inherently brilliant. For years, *Colors* magazine, established in 1990 under the aegis of design legend Tibor Kalman, featured this kind of native finery; it was collected in the classic 2000 volume *Unfashion*, a guide to “how real people dress.”

For New York photographer Phyllis Galembo, these costumes are a quasi-obsession. For the past 10 years she has traveled to the Caribbean and West Africa, areas she was initially drawn to in her early documentation of religious clothing and altars. Her peregrinations have led her from Nigeria to Burkina Faso and Benin, and the following images are just a sampling of the characters and guises she has encountered.

Galembo's focus for this series is the West African ritual of Masquerade, a type of performance meant to entertain but also to inspire fear by dictating correct conduct in society and reinforcing the laws that govern communal activities. It can also be celebratory: a Masquerade can thank ancestors for a good harvest or for numerous children. Masquerade can also mark the achievement of rank, the rites of passage in this world, or the final passage into the spirit world beyond.

Accompanied by a single local guide, Galembo works alone, favoring direct contact with her subjects. A photographic hunter-gatherer, she is often forced to make instant decisions about where to shoot her subjects; she has no pre-erected backdrop, and is challenged by the harshness of the equatorial sun and the limits of time. In this way, Galembo is the successor to a well-known photographic lineage. Her West African Masqueraders join the ranks of Native American Indians photographed by Edward S. Curtis, and the African people of Dahomey (now Benin), subjects of Irving Penn's impromptu traveling studio.

Galembo knows that what she is capturing is also evolving; occasionally in her work we see the appearance of modern objects, the glimpse of a pair of sneakers. Yet in all her time photographing Masquerade, she has never once photographed a female participant. These costumes—so redolent of the runway, a domain focused predominantly on women's fashion—are solely the domain of men.



Agot Dance Group

CROSS RIVER, NIGERIA

These costumes are created with a cross-knit looping technique, utilizing a wire, bicycle spoke or, traditionally, a bone shaped like a hook. This is repeated until the body of the costume, made to fit an average-sized man, is complete; arms and legs are made separately and fastened on. The patterns are secret society symbols.



Ekpe

CALABAR SOUTH, NIGERIA

Ekpe means "leopard." Over a full-body suit of crocheted rope, a colorful cloud of naturally dyed raffia hangs around the body. The wearer carries a bunch of "healing leaves" and a staff to connote authority. The feather above the eyes represents mystic vision; the feather at the back of the head symbolizes the ability to fly.



Okpo Masquerade

CALABAR SOUTH, NIGERIA

This towering headdress and bodysuit are woven from fresh palm leaves twisted into points, intertwined with strips of white and red linen, and then stuffed with dried grasses. The base is a green-and-yellow bodysuit woven from rope. Masquerades across Africa tend to utilize a mixture of cloth (representing civilization) and natural material (the bush). Materials from the bush embody the medicinal power or spirit forces of nature.



Affianwan

CALABAR SOUTH, NIGERIA

The name means "white woman cat," and the costume suggests a spirit of peace and transparency. The black-and-white-striped bodysuit is crocheted from rope; the architectural folds of white polished cotton are gathered from one continuous piece of fabric.



Ngar Ball

CROSS RIVER, NIGERIA

Entertainers are attention seekers in every culture: these vividly patterned bodysuits are the costumes of a traditional dance group that performs by hire at coronations or funerals. The tufted headdresses are pieces of goatskin topped with fur; the vivid graphics, woven from a rope of natural plant fibers, are symbols based on a secret society language. The faces are covered to hide the identity of the performer.



Egungun

BOHICAN, BENIN

Evocative of Western priestly garments, this robe is likewise intended to inspire ancestral veneration. (*Egungun* means "bones" or "ancestors.") Dating from the 1950s, it is pieced together from panels of cotton and burlap cut from wheat bags. The focal design element is an appliqué of a face giving birth to four more faces, and the brightly colored accents are packets stuffed with medicinal herbs, conveying strength and protection.



Ahora

TRADITIONAL MASQUERADE, CROSS RIVER, NIGERIA

The intimidating air of this costume is purely intentional: the skull headdress, carved from wood, is meant to frighten the gathered crowd with intimations of mortality and to remind them to respect the presence of the spirit. In fact, this type of Masquerade once incorporated the actual skulls of ancestors or defeated enemies. Woven of cream-hue local cotton and backed with a raw strip of animal skin, the cloak is worn for the traditional dance performed at coronations or initiations.



Egungun

DJIDJIMBO SAFOU OGNON WARRIOR, ADANDOKPODJI VILLAGE, BENIN

Not every costume is intended to strike fear: this represents a spirit named "apprentice tailor," who serves as comic relief in dances and ceremonies. The costume's shredded flaps of cowhide recall rags or imprecisely cut garments; the headdress is cow horn; the shoes are tailored cloth.



Ekpeyong Edet

DANCE GROUP, CALABAR, NIGERIA

The costumes for this dance group, which performs at festivals and weddings, are made from crocheted rope, strips of colored linen and gathered flaps of polished cotton. The sticks are carried to clear the way and demand attention. Red represents power (blood, the life force) and blue, calmness.



Minor Ekpe Masquerade

CALABAR SOUTH, NIGERIA

This unassuming piece of greenery is actually one of the earliest and most venerated Masquerade costumes. Assembled from fresh mango leaves, an undersuit of brown crocheted rope and tufts of raffia around the feet, it's often worn by boys during Christmas or New Year.