

# Yorùbá Masquerade Dancers Sing Oríkì and Dance Bàtá

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The first frame is steady: smoke  
in the distance; a montage of bodies—

singers and drummers, acrobats,  
names forfeited momentarily to their craft.

Drumbeats for a cue, almost an epiphany,  
and you pan for signs in a portion of the square

alien to gardening. It is a given:  
the bātá rhythm heralding the masquerades

now will shed its subtle beginnings.  
At once gods and men, masked beings,

the guttural notes ferry their agon.  
Pliable legs dangle on, unmoored

like a wanderer's intent, their tentative force  
mirroring the strength of an alder.

For the uninitiated, the masquerades' dance,  
it would seem, doubles the masks,

such things that must remain as puzzles:  
the artisanal details of their garbs,

their woven pouches, and polished  
stones. The birds lifting here know.

But they alone can reveal  
what they carry beyond.

\*The title is borrowed from a video by Debbie Klein

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### Invocation

Here, river bird,  
take the burdens and the joys,  
carry what you can; help  
solve the puzzle of distance and fog.

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### Doppelganger

They had gathered all evening  
for one moment, Pentecost  
again, their fingers stalled on  
one verse and the promise,  
till the choristers tuned the milieu  
to a refrain—seraphic heads  
bobbed in the pews. A minder  
yet to shed his pagan name  
struck me in that frenzy,  
and my eyes dimmed. I began  
to see men and women as trees.

In search of my mother, I went  
to the left side of the hall,  
where she would sit. A woman  
there looked at me with a knowing,  
pointed elsewhere. I turned  
and faded into that smoke.

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**'Gbenga Adeoba** was born in Akure, Nigeria. He is the author of *Exodus* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020) and a chapbook *Here is Water* (APBF/Akashic books, 2019).

# OLONGO AFRICA

