

## Teacher's Information File

*This file provides background information on some of the cultural practices referred to in Chicken in the Kitchen and is designed to aid teachers in using this book in the classroom.*

### **The Nigerian Masquerade**

Within the cultural practices of many traditional West African religions, the barrier between life and death is not as rigid as it is in many religions. One of the central beliefs of many of these West African religions is that the spirits of the deceased can still influence the living.

The term 'masquerade' refers to the practice by which a masked performer takes part in a festival, with the purpose of entertaining an audience or rewarding achievement, chastising those who have done wrong or bringing messages of hope or impending doom. Not just anybody can take part in a masquerade, as often the performance of the masquerade character is an attempt to contact the gods and spirits of the ancestors of a village. The sacred and powerful rituals involved in performing in a masquerade mean that these parts are normally only played by a chosen few from a community, normally men, who are members of special 'secret societies'.

Masquerade characters wear masks and colourful costumes. These elaborate costumes are more than simple disguises, for when a masquerade costume is worn, the person beneath it ceases to exist and the character represented by the mask comes alive to the audience. Anybody watching the masquerade has no right to say the name of the person performing, even if they know who this is!

The masks worn in different masquerades can represent different spiritual characters but also differ between the various areas and cultural groups within West Africa. Each masquerade character also has its own musical rhythm and dance. Iga (an Igbo masquerade character), for example, is a character whose role it is to keep order. Ojionu is Iga's opposite and represents chaos and misrule. Some masquerade characters play a more lighthearted role in festivals, such as the police masquerade, who traditionally indulges in slapstick routines to make the watching audience laugh.

### **New Yam Festival**

The New Yam festival is an annual celebration of the Igbo people of West Africa held at the end of the rainy season in early August. Traditionally, Igbo communities have been essentially agrarian in nature and dependent on yam, which is both the first crop to be harvested and the most important crop of these regions. On the day of the New Yam festival, only yams are eaten to symbolize the abundance of produce in the local area.

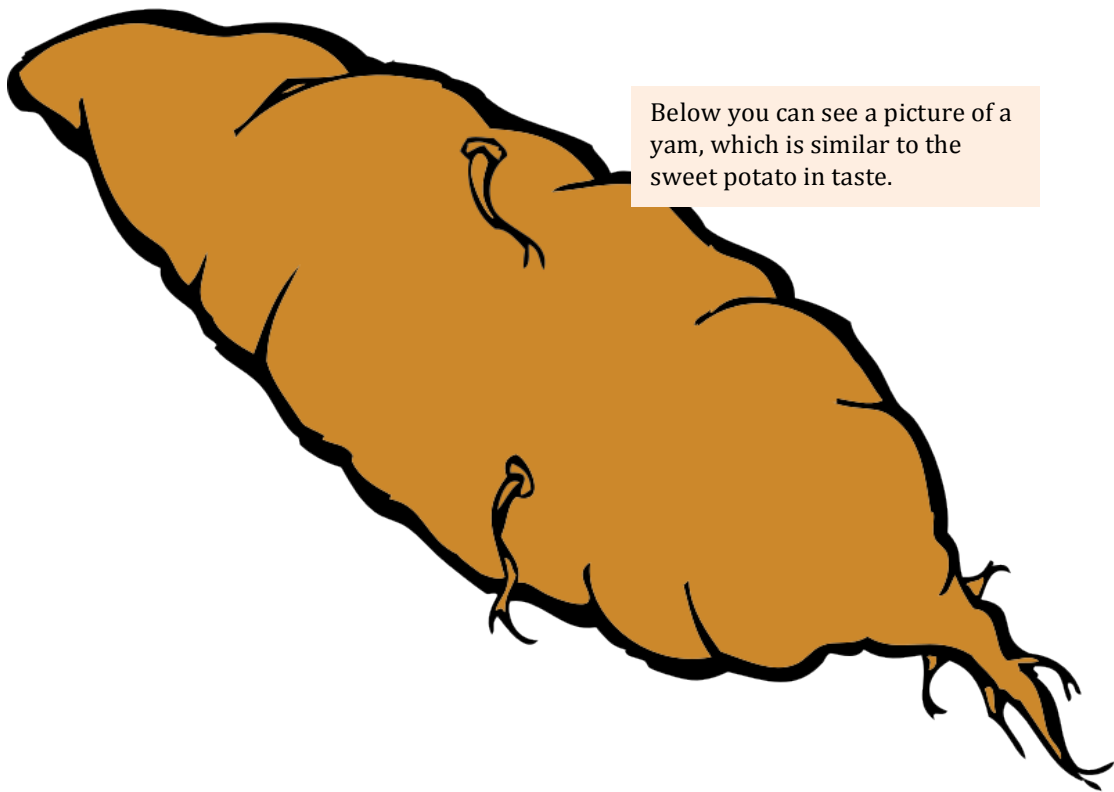
A variety of celebrations mark the New Yam festival. Folk dances, masquerades, parades and parties are common on these occasions and offer people an opportunity to enjoy themselves and give thanks after the season of cultivation.

**Further reading on the Nigerian Masquerade:**

Information from the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford that exhibits many masquerade masks: <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/maskscarvings.html>

A BBC News slideshow, showing examples of many different masquerade characters: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_pictures/8078727.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/8078727.stm)

A more academic article about the masquerade and its cultural significance: <http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/Festival1997/masquera.htm>



Below you can see a picture of a yam, which is similar to the sweet potato in taste.