

Creativity in Traditional Masquerade Arts in Igala Society, Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Creativity in traditional masquerade arts in Igala society is an aesthetical demonstration of the Northern cultural heritage in Nigeria. Masquerades or spirit manifests are uniquely ritualistic in every ethnic group since people's cosmology is sine-qua non to their worldview. This paper focused on creativity in Ijele masquerade performances in African culture as symbol of identity of the work of arts in Igala ethnic group in Northern Nigeria. The paper examine creativity in the mask and mask designer, costume and costumier, traditional drum and drummers, melodious songs radiating from the local orator accompanied by Igala traditional flute. The aestheticism in the arts is also established in this paper, both in arts of building and designing the Ijele masquerades and performance; including invoking ancestral spirits through griot with the traditional chants of proverbs. The study unfolds the arts in local technology and commerce, mediate the ritual content of costume especially since carnival atmosphere and purpose require a large number of participants hence the need to build costumes for a large number of people. Finally, this paper draws largely from Barbas' creativity framework that demonstrates that much can be learned from analysing creative practices in the cultural and historical contexts. The objective of the study is to expose the creativity in the arts of masquerade and performance in Igala society in the North Central, Nigeria.

Keywords: Creativity, Tradition, Masquerade, Culture and Costume.

Introduction

Cultural practice is design for human society as there cannot be society without culture and culture can not operate outside society. The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of people are built in the culture. Therefore, creativity which is an effort of man to redesign his environment have been introduced into every aspect of human living which cultural practice will not be an exception. As efforts of human being to cope with his environment both physical and spiritual, creative enterprise have been introduced to improve on the way things are done in every aspect of life. Culture includes such thing as; food production, dressing and all aspect of technological knowledge and skills, including masquerading which is the focus of this study. According to Hesselgrave (as cited in Okworie, 2013), Political systems, kingship, masquerading, family organization as well as law are examples of social adaptation, a plan according to which one is to interact with his fellows in society.

Creativity pervades nearly all aspect of traditional masquerades in Igala society. Creativity in masquerading can be found in every aspect of Igala cultural performance. But this paper is focused on Ijele masquerade which is the center of aestheticism in Sub-Sahara Africa cultural performance. The creativity in traditional practice includes the mask and mask designer and every other aspect of creative arts in culture which create job opportunity for youth in the Arts industry.

Costume and costumier, traditional drum and drummer are all aspect of creativity in Igala masquerade arts. In Africa generally, aestheticism in masquerading is established in the arts of building and designing which Ijele masquerade stands out as good example of that arts. It is important to also note that song and dance are significant in Igala masquerade performance, of course it is another aspect of aestheticism in Ijele masquerade arts. According to Obaje, etal,(2024), songs and dance are integral aspects of transmitting and preserving the African cultural ethos. This is to establish here that apart from creativity in African cultural performance, it also help to preserve and retain culture. Dance and song in African performances delineate ethnic and cultural peculiarities (Obaje, etal 2024).

The name Ijele have its origin from Igbo word: “large masquerade or festival”. Ijele masquerade is one of the biggest masquerades in sub-Sahara African. The masquerades though have its root from some communities in the South East Nigeria, because of close boundary with North Central, the masquerade have been borrowed to some communities in the North Central Nigeria. Ijele has 45 other masquerade which represent 45 figurines seen on top of Ijele and other four family masquerade. It is celebrated mostly during annual festival in the dry season or burial of a noble traditional person etc. This paper therefore focuses on creativity in traditional masquerade dance using Ijele masquerade as subject of discussion in Igala cultural heritage.

The objective of this paper is to expose the creativity in the arts of masquerade performance in Igala society in the North Central Nigeria using the popular Ijele masquerade. The paper also aimed to create gap within African cultural performance through which other scholars can explore in other to acknowledge and understand the creativity in Igala traditional. To also ascertain cultural influence from the South East Nigeria to North Central as a result of close boundary.

From the above discussion, it is evident that the entire process of culture is an embodiment of creativity. Thinking and feelings, knowledge, skills, organizing and governing are all processes of creativity, as well as culture. What makes a nation healthy is the demonstration of vibrancy of its people marched by efficient quality of the network between them as individual, groups, institutions and the society which is the product of culture. (Okwori, 2013). In the word of Eagleton (2000), nature produces culture which changes nature; in the same vein, culture produces creativity, which improves cultural activities. Every single human action is an act of creativity and masquerade is an aspect of culture that this paper seeks to explore.

Brief Background of the Igala People

Igala is an ethnic group native to the region south of the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers in North Central Nigeria. The major occupation of the Igala people is farming and hunting. This could be as a result of the ecologically diverse region that is ideal for cultivation of crops. The Igala kingdom is ruled ceremonially and culturally by the Attah and has a long history of political warfare and campaigns with neighbouring groups along the Benue. Igala people traditionally worship the Supreme Being Ojo (gods), as well as their divine ancestral spirits. Masquerade is an important aspect of Igala arts and is prime example of the kingdom's cultural exchange with its neighbouring groups (Obaje etl, 2024).

The geographical location played an important role in the development of the Igala Kingdom because the kingdom is situated between the apex of the Niger and Benue rivers, with the seat of power located at Idah, which became the capital of the Igala people. There is no doubt that the location of Igala around the major river in Nigeria brought an abundance of cultural influence from various communities such as Igbo, Yoruba, Edo and Jukun. This fact can be connected to economic growth in trading Igala kingdom. The Igala kingdom is ruled by the "Attah", and the most notable attah that has ever ruled the Igala kingdom are Atta Ayegba Oma Idoko and Atta Ameh Oboni. Oma Idoko is said to have offered his beloved daughter by burying her alive to ensure that Igala won a war of liberation from Jukun dominance. That is why attah Ameh Oboni is known for his brevity and resolute because of his stiff resistance against the British and struggle to uphold the ancient traditions of Igala land (Egbunu, 2009).

The Igala people believe in three divine beings; gods, ancestors, and diviners. Igala ancestors are called Ibegwu. Ibegwu have a direct connection with Ojo (gods), serving as his representatives and messengers. Ibegwu have the power to protect the wellbeing of humans in agricultural fertility. If the ancestors are not properly honored, they also have the ability to punish humans. Every year, before the yam harvest, ancestors are honored at the Ibegwu festival. This is to praise them for their protection in the past year, in hopes for more blessings in the year to come.

The Igala people believe that there are three different realms the human spirit will occupy in their existence; life after birth, adult life, and life after death. The ancestral spirits are very important to the people of the mortal world. It is the goal of the Igala people to maintain a balanced relationship with their ancestors by honouring them through rituals and offerings. If properly honoured, the ancestors will offer blessings and protection to the living. Ancestral spirits interact with the living in various ways. The spirits can be reincarnated as babies, or be called upon through masquerade.

Mask is another important aspect of Igala arts. Masquerades are rituals that aimed at creating a balanced relationship between the world of the living and the ancestors in the spiritual realm. Igala masks feature symbolic masking that are meaningful in identifying political status and the cultural fashion. Because these masking are not strict for each culture, and fashion changes over time, it is difficult for historians to rely on them to identify their place of origin. Igala masks have influences from several bordering regions including Igbo, Edo and Idoma (Okwoli, 1973).

Methodology

A structured interview which is also known as standardized interview was used. The researcher adopted this method in order to ensure that each interview is presented with exactly the same questions in the same order. Structured interview helps the interviewer collect useful information from the interviewee. Therefore this method is appropriate for this study in order to collect accurate information of traditional Ijele masquerade performance in Igala tradition.

The data for this paper was collected from members of Ijele masquerade dance: Augustine Ottah and Alfred Eneanya both are members of Ijele masquerade dance and traditionalist respectively and both are from Ayah in Ibaji Local Government Area of Kogi State. Structured interview was used to collect the data and to achieve that, audio tape recorder

was used to collect the oral information about the arts of making/designing the masquerade and the act of performance and economic/tourist aspect of the masquerade. The oral information and picture of the creativity in the design and performance were subjected to content analysis to enhance the understanding of Ijele masquerade dance a crucial relevance elements in the aesthetic appreciation of Igala cultural heritage.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopt Barbas creative framework and new frameworks of cultural creativity using the version of Zarlenga (2016). Barbas' creativity frame work demonstrates that much can be learned from analysing creative practices in the cultural and historical contexts. This framework is related to the study since the present study concentrate on creativity in masquerade which is an aspect of culture that Barbas has established. The new framework of cultural creativity considered two basic factors; the first point looked at cultural creativity which focus on economics paradigm. The second one explore narrative and policies of cultural creativity beyond economics paradigm, highlighting challenges, future scenarios, key areas of change and possible ways forward Zarlenga (2016)

The first aspect of this framework is focus on developing economic sectors, such as; production of cultural goods by encouraging activities related to creative economy. This simply means, developing cultural and creative industries such as film, radio, television; web, textile, graphic and industrial design; fashion, advertising, photography and architecture etc. The second aspect is aimed at generating cultural services to attract tourism and business by recovering the heritage that already exists in towns and cities that is, urban regeneration, creating cultural institutions and facilities like museums and cultural centres, organizing events, etc. All these are under the umbrella of creativity in cultural heritage.

This framework have been adopted to form background for this paper because of its relevance, since the focus of this paper is to ex-ray the economics and social aspect of Ijele masquerade dance which is the tenet of the framework above.

The present paper present the creativity in Ijele masquerade arts into the present discussion of economics and cultural creative industries such as film, radio, television; web, textile, graphic and industrial design; fashion, advertising, photography and sculpture etc. The second aspect explores cultural services in the Ijele masquerades arts to attract tourism by creating cultural institutions and facilities such as museums and cultural events like carnival etc.

The Concept of Creativity and Culture

Creativity is a variable in this paper that needs brief discussion. According to Okworie (2013), creativity can be seen as both a noun to describe the recreational quality of person or things that can be used to mean the actions of a person or an object. Hemlin et al (2004), define creativity as generation or production of ideas or materials that are not only novel and imaginative but also useful and of good quality. It mean that creativity is not only about something new from imaginative ability, the new idea must be useful and of good quality.

Cultural diversity and creativity can hardly be discussed independently as creativity has been described as the product of culture itself. The cultural influences on the lives of people

ultimately determine their level of creative mind, this is because culture has been partly defined as a cognitive process, which structures the thinking and the mindsets of the people, it is hard to separate creativity from the daily interactions of people in the society since its also an aspect of culture. That is why Runco (2007) argues that the ability to identify a problem, think through the processes of solving the problem and eventually arriving at a plausible solution can be said to be a creative process. This is to simply put therefore that, culture can be expressed creatively depending on the way people make use of what is available to improve their culture and their daily activities.

Okworie (2013) expresses further that; creativity has diverse expression and plays a critical role in various spheres of life. We see evidence of creativity from technical innovations to teaching, from business to the arts, sciences and engineering, and all fields and aspects of humanity. Runco (2007) also states that even children too are creative even when they may not be experts or even productive, but they are original and effective in the expression of their arts, their dancing and singing, their imaginative play, and their perceptive questioning are all creative in nature. It is even possible that children are more creative than adults, as a result of their spontaneity and lack of inhibitions.

Creativity in the context of this paper is to use traditional ideology to design or create something beautifully new but not deviating from the custom and believe of the people or ability to create something new out of critical thinking ability or from the combination of thought patterns and processes informed by experiences, events and expectations to improve humanity. Creativity is always associated with intelligence abilities of a creative mind that give birth to new idea or that improve on the existing idea to better human society.

However, culture is an expression of the social construction of the life models adopted by the peoples over time occurs through a permanent movement of change. Meanwhile, since cultural diversity is a fundamental component of the history of Nigeria, submitting them to an intensive exchange of life perspective will involves a constant process of building and rebuilding their identities. This is a reference to the conditions of the possibility that self-recognition and creativity of the peoples offer alternative life style.

According to Nkom (2008), the colonial mentality left in the mind of the Nigerian elites has caused a desire to acquire all things Western but without the cultural indices of productivity and efficiency. While the attainment of the Western way of doing things is hardly a wrong idea, the mode of achieving it can be said to be faulty as the infrastructure and facilities that will bring about creative expression of cultural industries are severely lacking. There have been varying suffocating institutions and policies from faulty educational systems that do not encourage creative thinking on the part of the students, especially cultural creativity which this study advocate. Therefore, efforts should be put in place to encourage cultural creativity in our institution to preserve and retain our culture.

Aestheticism in Igala Traditional Masquerade

The people's tradition (culture) is sine qua non to their overall live style in a given community. In other words, the people's way of life is connected to their overall spiritual and secular lives. However, every ethnic group have their own peculiar guiding principles, and eth-no-cultural philosophy that distinguish them from another. This study is focused on establishing creativity

in Igala traditional masquerade performance as an integral aspect of culture. The Igala believe in two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the spirit. The world of the spirits is said to take precedence over the world of the living as it is believed that the world of the spirits guides, guards and control the affairs of men in the mortal world (Ugbeda, 2011). Masquerading is a way of celebrating the spirit of the dead which takes a lots of traditional processes. There are several masquerades in igala tradition but this paper is focused on Ijele masquerade performance.

Ijele masquerade performance is celebrated mostly during dry season to evoke fertility and beautiful harvest or during the burial of a noble traditional person who is a traditionalist and very influential. According to Ajibola (2008), the Ijele masquerade is about four metre tall and very large that can take a hundred men six months work to prepare the costume and build an outdoor to hold it before the actual date of performance. Song and dance are very integral aesthetic part of the performance, featuring other aspect of the performances such as; drum and drummers, melodious songs radiating from the local orator accompanied by Igala traditional flute etc.

The aestheticism in the arts is also established in the arts of building and designing; including invoking ancestral spirits through griot with the traditional chants of proverbs. The music which is the local drum and other local instrument engages the audience with emotion of admiration through which the themes and the dynamic message will be conveyed. The aestheticism is also seen in the systematic dance of the (Iyomu), other masquerades and the king of the dance which shows the value and joy of songs and music in Igala tradition.

The Ijele Masquerade Performance



Ijele masquerade is a famous and special masquerade which have its origin from Anambra State. Ijele is an adorable masquerade which hold a special place in Igala tradition. The aestheticism in the work of arts attracts audience with its majestic and elegant presence laced with adorable performances. From the origin, Ijele masquerade is the symbol of culture which reflects the beliefs, and spirituality of the people. According to history, ijele masquerade has its origins from Umueri community in Anambra State. It was the Umueri community that introduced the first “izi egwu ijele” (mask ceremony) to neighboring communities such as Aguleri, Nsugbe, Ogbunike, Nando, Awkuzu, and part of Igala that share boundary with Anambra West such as: Ayah, Odeke, Echono, Ika just to mention but a few. The creativity in the arts is seen in its remarkable size and amazing design, which outstanding is up to 15 feet in height. It is divided into two parts: the upper and lower segments, with a remarkable python serving as the dividing point at the center.

The upper section of Ijele is referred to as Mkpui Ijele, while the lower section is known as Akpakwuru Ijele or Ogbanibe. The central part is called Eke-Ogba, symbolizing the Python. The masquerade is designed with attractive and beautiful costumes, featuring an array of feathers, beads, fabrics, and masks that represent different deities, historical figures, and ancestral spirits.

This elegant masquerade is usually celebrate during an August occasion such as: annual festival, some important religious ceremonies, burial ceremony of a member or a powerful king or the death of the oldest man in the community and other important ceremonies. The performance is usually during dry season to mark fertility and annual bountiful harvest as edited by (Inland Town, 2023).

The preparation of Ijele costumes and the construction of its house require the dedicated efforts of approximately 100 men working for six months prior to the performance. Ijele masquerade used to have 45 different other masquerades performed on top of it, but in the recent time, there is innovation, the 45 masquerades have been replaced by the 45 figurines seen on top of it, beautifully and colorfully designed.

Ijele masquerade has four families, made up of the mother, father, police, and palm wine tapper. Nne Ijele meaning “Mother of Ijele” popularly known as (Iyomu) is a beautiful lady masquerade that holds a big ox tail with a carved enamel plate. It performs dances to flute and soft music. Ijele’s Father called “Onuku” has a big face and dresses in chieftaincy regalia. The Police are usually six. Their duties are to ensure that the spectators do not encroach on Ijele’s father or mother.

The Ijele is accompanied by the Ijele palm tapper for the sole purpose of picking its rear as it performs. Another significant personality is the Ijele fan carrier or Akupe carrier which very significant in the entire performance. Once the Ijele loses sight of the fan and its carrier, it gets lost and it signifies danger. Ijele moves when the fan carrier moves and also stops when it stops. The mask carriers, is usually chosen by balloting, once you are chosen, you will have to seclude yourself for three months, during which you live on a special diet to acquire the strength necessary for the task (Ottah et al, 2024).

Ijele masquerade is accompanied by a unique band group that adds to the grandeur of the spectacle. This band, known as “Igba-eze” or the Royal Band group, plays a vital role in entertaining and enhancing the overall experience. The Igba-eze band also referred to as the “Akunechenyi” in Igbo language, which translates to “drums of the Kings,” showcases a variety of musical instruments that contribute to the enchanting atmosphere. The band comprises several traditional musical instruments, including four drums, ogene (a metal gong), ubom (a wooden slit drum), uyo (a small drum), Ekwe (a wooden instrument), flute (known as Oja flute), and wooden clappers called aja-oja.

Each instrument serves a distinct purpose, creating a harmonious blend of captivating rhythms radiating from melodious band group. The drums, with their deep and resonant beats, provide the foundation of the music, infusing it with powerful and rhythmic energy. The ogene, a large metal gong, adds a distinct metallic sound that cuts through the air, contributing to the overall intensity of the performance. The ubom, uyo, and Ekwe each have their unique tonal qualities, creating a rich and diverse sonic tapestry. Accompanying the percussive instruments, the flute (Oja-ufele) lends a melodic aspect to the music, enchanting listeners with its soothing and lyrical notes. The wooden clappers (aja-oja) provide a rhythmic accent, adding texture and complexity to the overall sound.

Conclusion

In this 21st century, innovation and creativity has taken over the entire atmosphere including the cultural industries. Nation that believe in development must align with change in the society which include culture. The creativity in masquerading does not only focuses on economic potentials but also to retain the rich values that is inter-wine with culture, maintain the sense of nationhood, preserve the pride of being and belonging, retain the identity and national ethos that help to teach and nurture peace and national development which is part of Igala tradition, including masquerading. Therefore, assessing creativity in Igala masquerade performance is a necessary effort to evaluate the rich Igala tradition using Ijele masquerade performance as point of reference.

The following are some suggestions:

- 1) There should be innovation in culture to explore the area of opportunities for economic and social development
- 2) There should be a tourist centre where masquerade such as Ijele and other traditional masquerade will be displayed in other to attract attention for international recognition
- 3) Tradition should not be seen as barbaric rather efforts should be put in place to retain them in other to retain our identity
- 4) Conscious attention be given to creativity in cultural practice in Africa for the sake of the next generation.

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