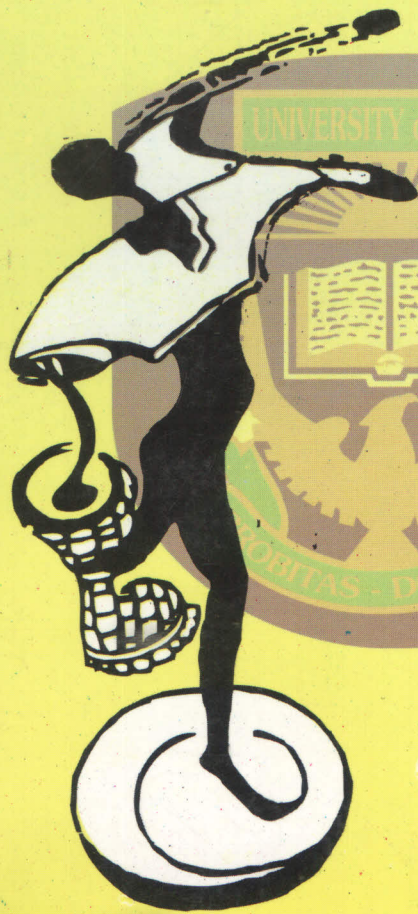


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Aesthetics of Costume and Colour in Idoma Masquerade Performance

By

Adakole Abdulmalik Amali *

Abstract

The culture of a people emanates from the belief in their world which is woven round the natural factors and the imaginary make believe to form the basis of their existence. In most African societies, these beliefs are accompanied by catharsis, be it religious, social or political to serve the need of the people or to achieve societal goals. Hence, cultural performances provide core explanations for man/spirit relationships. This principle also applies to Idoma people of Benue State, Nigeria. Through artisanal means, in the words of Anyebe (2012, p. 453), the physical and the metaphysical componential parts of Idoma universe mesh together and the reasonable definiteness sought after in the pantheon is the fulfillment of man's wellbeing. These performances involve the people to invoke and achieve believability through the use of elements such as music, dance, drama, makeup, costumes, colours and props. This in turn gives the Idoma masquerade performance a total perception on how it is aesthetically seen, interpreted and understood. In this discourse, we examine the functions that costumes and colours play; its meaning and how it has been used to enhance Idoma masquerade performance as it gives identity and better understanding to the people.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Masquerade, Costume, Colour.

Introduction

Among the Idoma people, masquerades are made for specific purposes with emphasis on the use of costumes materials embellished with traditional colours to establish a chosen identity. This is done with underline meaning in the choice of colours and materials. It is important to note that designs and colours are done with precise specification. The

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designer is trammled by tradition according to the masquerade type and design. Obadiogwu (2003, p. 40) reiterates this that:

The incongruous nature of the costumes and make up and mask of the performer are the performative means by which social order or disorder are coded and decoded for the socio-political, religious and the economic structure of the society.

Importantly, this paper discusses the essence of costumes and colour in relation to their meaning and significance as applicable in the masquerade performances of Idoma-Otukpo society of Benue State of Nigeria.

Idoma Wordview in Relation to Masquerade

African performances are inspired by their life styles and the ways it affects their lives.. Metuh in Obeta (2003, p. 39) observes that a people's worldview includes "the complex of their beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, nature and structure of the universe, the interaction of its beings. This is very true among the Idomas because they believe that the past and the present, the spirit and human world are interwoven. The people see masquerades as the root of their existence and the medium interwoven that breaks that barrier between the ancestral world and the interpretation of the world of the spirit, bringing together man spirit relationship in physical form. Adeoye (2012, p. 47) could not have agreed more when he said that this advance the people's way of life and bring back lost glories.

To the idoma people, masquerades performances can be categorised in to two. These are the socio-cultural and religious. The socio-cultural performances are those which define their existence and the way they are seen and perceived by neighbours and the larger world. These performances give the people their chasm and it is completely *idoma* and as chattel to them. In the Idoma world, masquerades are never seen as human. No matter the category of the masquerade, it is believed that once the abdomen of costume is realised, the individual is automatically transformed and the human identity of the performer ceases to exist. He becomes a spirit being among humans. It is on this ground that a masquerade cannot be addressed individually or in any case be dealt with without the involvement of a recognised human mediator, which is usually an appointed or inherited spiritual leader for the masquerade. This is because masquerades are placed above human realm. It is important to

also know that because of the value attached to masquerades; their appearance must be heralded.

To the Idoma people, masquerades cannot be individually owned in the society but are owned by the community and are treated as avatars and as communal guests. While females may belong as members of the socio-cultural type of masquerades known as the *Enekwu* (the mother of the masquerade) who is a strong female member and ushers in the masquerade to the performance arena, it is however a great taboo for women to wear a masquerade costume or partake in the process of making a masquerade. It is believed that the Idoma female has no idea whom the performer (masquerade) is once they are in their costumes. The *Enekwu* who forms part of the team, is disallowed by tradition from entering into the *Iga*, a place where the masquerades are transformed to spiritual beings. In Idoma, masquerading and its secrets are considered and taken as men's business as mirrored by Nzekwe (1981, p. 132) that masquerading and its secrets are the prerogatives of the men.

The masquerade system in Idoma land has an organised performance system and is accompanied by music and dance in conjuncture with costumes, use of colours and other related elements, with the aim and objectives to serve the people in meeting their religion and entertainment needs. This has helped to form the integral part of the cultural heritage of the people and to control their environment in achieving their goals of bringing about social order and rule of law.

The Relationship between Colours and Costumes in Idoma Masquerade Performance

Colour plays a very significant role in our daily lives. It contributes to giving final judgment of how we see a work of art. This is because it also helps in the recognition, understanding, importance and value of the work of art. Colour serves as the major source of identity as the texture and style of material used for costume may change with time according to dictates of technology. Though, sometimes, colours and the material texture must be harmonised to give the art work the needed meaning, identity and significance.

In Yoruba land, for instance, blue, red, green, white and black colours represent a variety of symbols and are used for different purposes at any given point in time. An Igbo man may see the same colour differently and use them for purposes that are also different. This perception varies from culture to culture. Likewise, to an Idoma man, red

and yellow symbolise royalty; white for peace, black for solemnity, uncertainty, evil. In as much as colours have their defined general meanings, these meanings can also be circumstantial depending on the occasion and the message intended to be passed across. White in some instance can stand for evil. This therefore means that colours can be codify to send the desired message. It however, suffices to say, in agreement with Lawal, (2012, p. 528) that proper application of colours according to their connotation communicates. This further gives physical and visual meaning to our creativity as Adegbite (2002, p.106) concludes that, creative application of colour to our lives, craft and design works adds value to our existence.

On the other hand, costumes are the major transformative medium of giving new identities to the character on how he or she should be perceived. This could be with physical or make believe which transforms that character into a new role. Therefore it is the causation which gives the audience believability in the enacted make believe world. This is very correct in the African masquerade performance as costumes are usually what transform the masquerade or the physical bridge between human and spirit. Nevertheless, colours and costumes enhance and give new meanings to the concept of masquerading and how it is viewed.

A man becomes a spiritual entity immediately he adorns a masquerade costume. This can come in different ways or styles depending on the culture. In most instances, costume makes a masquerade in Idoma culture. The costume of each masquerade in Idoma land is designed with specific materials and colours in mind. The colour varies according to the masquerade. Certain colours and materials which form the basic elements of the costume cannot be used indiscriminately for other masquerades.

When we talk of costume and colours, these two are inseparable as there cannot be a costume without its own colours. It is colour that becomes the trade mark of the given costume. Some of these colours are natural to the material used for the production of the costume. This therefore, becomes its traditional colours and is permanently patented to it while others can be generated with available materials to give its meaning. These colours become rooted to the people with its meaning and name as part of the life of the people. Traditional colours are usually generated from materials within the environment from substances like trees, clay, animal and burnt substances and as a result of this, they directly have traditional names. For example, colours like red (onowa), yellow (odo), green (uwoho), black (onobi) and white (enehe) have customary names.

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Other colours not in this category do not have customary names even though they may be used as a latter introduction to make it more appealing and attractive to the eyes.

Costumes and Colours in Idoma Masquerade Performance

The appearance of a masquerade is the affirmation of the dead among the living. This establishes the way of life that maintains the people's culture and the communal life style typical to the African setting. In Idoma, masquerade serves more than one function while it is a representation of the spirit world, it also serves as an interpreter of messages between the living and the spirit world. This invariably helps to sustain people's culture. For better understanding of how colours and costume are generally used on masquerades in Idoma, we shall group them in to three categories. They are:

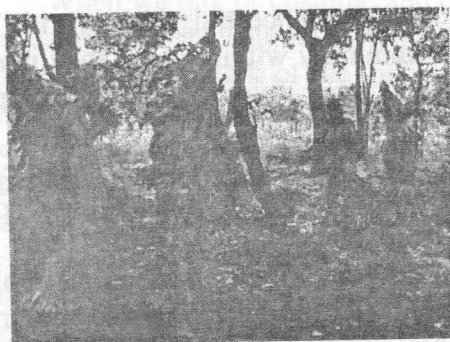
- The Religious masquerades
- The Law Enforcers/Security Masquerades
- The Social/Entertaining Masquerades

The Religious Masquerades are regarded as major masquerades that come out on special occasions such as the installation or burial of a king and death of elderly people of the land whom a masquerade is to be buried along with. Their appearances may also be at the special approval of the elders of the land; and on fixed annual festivals. They also appear on '*Ikwu*' periods when new masquerades are to be introduced into the human world. They are specifically male oriented and do not have female initiates. Thus, some of these masquerades cannot be watched by women; and the few that could, are seen from a distance. They come out as a mark of honour and, are perceived as incarnated ancestors who have been dispatched to the general conflation of the ancestral spirit world. They manifest as a guest to their living community within which they must be treated with regulated awe, respect and other reverent attitude, as opined from Okoye (2000, p. 74) perspective.

As earlier stated, colours and costumes are used for specification of identity and communicative purposes. These masquerades, who are held with great respect are considered to be highly spiritual and very important are adorned in '*Oppa*', a cotton cambric made in an appliqué form dyed in traditional cerulean or black. These materials and colours are only used for burial of kings and elders, who in most cases are expected to transit and come back in masquerade/spirit form. This blue-black material

which symbolises transformation; that is from the state of 'physicality' to the 'esoteric'. It is also sometimes known as the 'cloth of the dead'. In this contest, black symbolises solemnity and sobriety. Examples of such masquerades are *Alekwu* and *Achukwu*. It of importance to note here that the Idoma king has the same attributes as a masquerade as he is assume to have been dead on the day he is installed with all the right of the dead performed for him. He therefore becomes a being with the attributes of religious masquerades as he has the same powers of invocation.

The Law Enforcers/Security Masquerades category is also a male oriented masquerade which has no female member. They serve as the traditional police by maintaining law and order, settling disputes, imposing sanctions on defaulters as well as punishing offenders. These masquerades serve as the check and balance of the society and equally help to protect the community from external aggressions. Its members are usually active youths of the community, while its spiritual head must be a man who has shown his warrior prowess on the battle field. They are usually 'no-nonsense' in approach whenever they appear they are usually associated with their strict way of handling issues in the community. Examples of this type of masquerades are *Ikpokwu* and *Ikpokwuachi*. For instance, the *Ikpokwu* is costumed in hand-woven banana stem fibres, dyed in bright multi-coloured camouflage style with long strand of white hair covering their heads to the neck region, as well as on the ankles. The essence of this costume coupled with their aggressive actions is to instill fear in the on-lookers, while *Ikpokwuachi*, (*achi*: meaning grass) got its name from it abode and the costume which is primary made of grass straws enables it to blend with the grass where it stays.

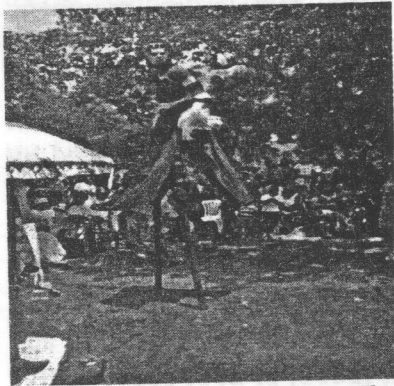


Ikpokwachi masquerades



Ikpokwu masquerades

The Social/Entertaining Masquerades have female as members, although not in the inner caucus, as it is generally forbidden for a woman to know the identity of the masquerader, no matter how social the masquerade may be. These masquerades are basically for entertainment purposes and their appearance is not restrictive but must be permitted by the leaders/elders in charge of the masquerades. They usually appear in flamboyant, bright-coloured costumes for beauty and attraction. These costumes comprise of clothing materials, mask, horse tail and other props as Jonathan and Shaddrack (2002, p. 637) agree that they "have different forms and use materials based on the imaginations of their creators and their beliefs that necessitated them". Ododo, (2008, p. 208) supports this by concluding that most of the costumes are "very colourful, vibrant, full of pomp and pageantry, vigorous, invigorating, and has great capacity to induce audience participation. Their masks and headgears are painted in attractive red or white; and they usually appear in pairs of a male and a female". The colour of the mask differentiates the sex of each one. Materials of various bright colours called *ajanja* are tightened into a ring around the waists of the masquerades for aesthetic purpose. This in turn enhances the waist region by providing a kind of robustness with gives a majestic movement around the waist during performances. This combination of colourful materials attracts the onlookers to the performing masquerade. These masquerades can be invited to perform at the death of a prominent person/member or a celebration of success by a member within and outside the community. Most Idoma masquerades are made of beautiful traditional fabrics usually hand woven, this could be with cotton tread or they are made with straw or spear grasses or a combination of the both. The social masquerades are mainly for entertainment and are usually believed to be a means of showcasing creativity through the overall appearance in the way the costumes are made. This masquerade are adorn with materials of malty colours with elaborate makeup on the mask of the masquerade. Be it Ibo (the stilt stick masquerade), Odumu or Ichahoho, the masquerades are adorn with beautiful material that gives a wholistic pleasant colourful picture when view from all angles. The artistic creator adds designs that suits the groups since the masquerade varies from clan to clan with the drumming been the same and the overall appearance similar, each group trying to make its own masquerade more attractive to enhance performance.



Ibo stilt Masquerades



Ichahoho masquerades

Odumu masquerades

Conclusion

Although settlement may be close and activities similar, every society produces its own culture no matter the influence. The idoma people are not different. Having been fringed by major tribes and cultures; that is the Igala, Igbo and Tiv people, it still has its own unique culture and performances which is rooted to its people.

The environment, believe, perception, functions and the availability of raw materials help in a long way on how the costumes and colours of masquerades are achieved. It is, therefore, important that aesthetic elements are considered in costuming masquerade performance. Costumes and colours also help in giving visual appeal to the audience. The combination of the two phenomena helps to bring out symbolism in the masquerades. Therefore, it can be said that costumes and colours are the vehicles through which the aesthetics of masquerading is brought to life. This is because both add more meanings to the performance as lots of artistry are put in place to help generate new concepts, perceptions and enhancement.

Masquerade performances in Idoma are not done for catching attention but basically observed in commemoration of the bonds between the living and the ancestors on the one hand, and between the divinities and the people on the other. This helps them to achieve self-actualisation and also as an identity of a people using their culture as a voice to prevent them from marginalisation and oppression from their neighbours.

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