

The Aesthetics Of Performance In African Festivals: The Qmabe Masquerade Example

Francis U. Nnamani, Ph.D.^{1*}, Appolonia I. Amadi, Ph.D.¹, Dan C. Amadi, Ph.D.¹, Escor Efiog Udosen, Ph.D.², Nina F. Nwulu, Ph.D.¹, & Chinyere C. Igbonagwam, Ph.D.¹

Abstract

The cultural tradition of the Igbo heritage has been demonized and collectively labeled as a fetish or backward practice, allowing it to atrophy despite the rich artistic and aesthetic resources of the celebration, however, during all occasions when masquerades feature in Igbo land, whether ritual, religious, or ceremonial, they express the dominant aesthetic values of the entire community, which witnesses this most dramatic form of African artistic expression. This paper examines the dramatic, artistic, and dynamic aesthetic qualities recoverable in the context of the performance, not only of the masquerade displays, but also of other physical and symbolic actions and practices associated with the entire Qmabe Obollo festival celebration. The aim is to reveal the innate artistic imagination of the Obollo people and their aesthetic experiences and preferences. In doing so, the study acknowledges the dominant Eurocentric notion driven by a Western epistemic framework that ‘inferiorizes’ the dramatic and artistic qualities of most traditional African cultural productions in comparison to their Western counterparts. The study employs the analytic framework of traditional African aesthetics to demonstrate that the Omabe festival and masquerade tradition of the Obollo people embody rich artistic and aesthetic qualities shaped by the community’s traditional aesthetic parameters. Within the historical and cultural context of the Obollo people, the study shows that the Omabe festival and masquerade performance illustrate the creation and perpetuation of meaning in the material existence of the people.

Keywords: Traditional Aesthetics, Performance, Culture, Masquerade, Oral Literature

Introduction

African oral literature embodies what may be termed a composite performance aesthetics supplied by the people’s traditional evaluative aesthetic parameters or what Chukwuma Azuonye calls “ethno-aesthetic standards” (1994, p.137). In *Qmabe* masquerade, performance is realized as part of the total Igbo belief in the relationship between the living and the dead and, ultimately, in the oneness of the total cosmic experience. In Igbo cosmology, festivals are usually regarded as the occasion for transformation and purification of the soul of society in order to secure the assurances of a harmonious relationship with the spiritual world and thereby ensure the general well-being of society (Obiechina, 1990, p.186). This is exactly the vision and spirit that drive Qmabe Obollo. It has equally been argued that African dramatic practices are largely borne out of and dependent on the African body of belief and ritual practices (De Graft, 1976, p.11-2). Also,

^{1*}Directorate of General Studies, Federal University of Technology, Owerri. Nigeria.

²Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author: Francis U. Nnamani, Ph.D.

*E-mail- uche.nnamani@futo.edu.ng.

Robin Horton's study of Kalabari gods as guests has a close resemblance with that of *Omabe*, whose procedure involves the dramatization of the god's presence by human actors who behave as if the gods were human guests of an exalted kind (1981, p.82). The above views may provide possible explanations for the kind of deep-seated attachment the people of Obollo have in the ritual proceedings during *Odida Omabe* (announcement of Omabe's coming) and their level of participation at every stage of the celebration. The intense preparations for the ceremony and the expectation of the goodwill and munificence from the visiting ancestors, and of course, excitement during the entry flourish into the carnivalesque macro market arena all speak to the people's abiding religious faith in the performances.

However, in all the occasions that masquerades feature in Igbo land, whether ritual, religious, or ceremonial, they express dominant "aesthetic values of the entire community who witness this most dramatic of African artistic expression" (Ezechi, 2011, p.244). Thus, festivals and the masquerades that feature during their celebrations are cultural performances that provide an occasion for coordinated and heightened aesthetic expression conveyed through what Kristin Kuutma calls "semiotically complex performance events" (Stoeltje, 1992, p.261). In the case of the *Omabe* masquerade festival, the masquerade is synonymous with the festival itself to the extent that there is a correlation between the rituals associated with the festival and the masquerade performances in terms of their aesthetic conceptualization.

Obollo people commonly refer to the three autonomous but historically and culturally homogenous communities of Obollo-Afor, Obollo-Etiti, and Obollo-Eke in the present Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu state, Nigeria. These three original communities have now been further subdivided into eleven more autonomous communities of Ajorogwu, Amutenyi, Aroji (Ohulor), Ibenda, Iheakpu, Isienue, Obollo-Afor, Obollo-Etiti, Obollo-Nkwor, Obollo-Orie, and Umuekwenu; all collectively referred to, in this study, as Obollo people. Obollo people belong to what Adiele Afigbo (1981, p.69) calls "the *Elugu (Elugwu)* sub-cultural group of the Nsukka Northern Igbo and as such are frontier communities," straddling the regional boundary between the South-East and North-Central geographical zones of the country. Culturally, Obollo people are part of the Igbo-Omabe sub-cultural group where the Omabe festival and artistic tradition are dominant.

Literature Review

David Binkley avers, "In western popular imagination, masks and masked dances are probably the single most representative symbol for art making and performance in Africa. The very nature of African masquerade- encompassing a disguise of the human face, elaborate costuming, choreography, and musical accompaniment- imbues masquerade performance with aesthetic power and mystery" (2004, p.241). A proper study or interpretation of the entire masquerade ensemble as enumerated above helps to give insight into the meanings and intents of the performance within a ritual or ceremonial context of the masquerade institution in Igbo land. Will Rea takes this effort further to include the analysis of the implications of the wider context of masquerade performance concerning a people's cosmology within the social formation of the group that performs and watches the masquerade (2019, p.17).

Although masquerade displays occur in nearly all cultures around the world, the Igbo masquerade appears to be more deeply entrenched in Igbo festivals, religious ceremonies, and cultural rituals. Accordingly, it has been argued that Igbo masquerade should not be conflated with masking traditions that exist in various parts of Western societies to avoid diminishing their indigenous meaning as conceived in Igbo cosmology, or imposing certain foreign equivalents on Igbo art and life (Ezechi, p.26). This is especially relevant when these masked entities are viewed as representations or manifestations of the diverse ancestral spirits and deities for which most Igbo festivals are held in their honor. Chielotam Akas asserts that African masquerade, unlike its Western counterpart, embodies a socio-mystic essence, and its "semiotic potency is highly communicative beyond aesthetic" (2015, p.71). Consequently, each festival or religious ceremony

features masquerades unique to its celebration, dramatizing and enlivening the spirits inhabiting the festival and its ritual components.

Although some scholars have attempted to categorize masquerades in Igbo land into sacred and secular traditions, Chike Aniakor warns that “while masks are central to the understanding of being and the process of being in the Igbo world, any attempt to classify them is indeed difficult. Their area of performance is fluid, and the masks themselves function within a web of social, cultural, and artistic (including spiritual) relationships that make any classification artificial if not unnecessary” (2002, p.320). Perhaps, it may be more prudent to identify two entities and realms that are often invoked in Igbo masquerade performances, whether sacred or secular. The first category pertains to the temporary return and celebration of the ancestral spirits who have chosen to visit the community, which is regarded as a significant honor. The second includes localized nature spirits, who, like ancestral spirits, demand respect, but also reward the community with good health, plentiful harvests, and many children (Binkley p.241).

The range and diversity of Igbo masquerades are so considerable that Aniakor advises that they can only be properly understood through their functional values to the community. He categorizes them into the benevolent and malevolent or the good and bad types and asserts that their functional dynamics transform masquerade performance in Igbo land into a festival theatre or event (200, p.319). These functional dynamics may also account for the various representations, especially of animal spirits, observed in Igbo masquerade displays, like leopard, porcupine, tiger, elephant, crocodile, eagle, fish, and monkey, among others. These representations embody huge aesthetic and artistic qualities, which not only provide entertainment to the people but also hold existential meanings for them. Again, Onuora Nzekwu argues that because these masquerades are representations of the spirits which incarnate them, “there is a myth behind each masquerade performance, a short story and simple story which is usually dramatized”, and provides a frame for other art forms such as music, dancing, and costumes (134).

On a general note, the main features of Igbo masquerade, apart from its spiritual and awe-inspiring attributes, are its entertainment and recreational values through such displays as dancing, drama, costume, and acrobatic agility (Akubor, 2016, p.36). Some masquerades appeal to the people through their graceful, multicolored appearances and enchanting poetic renditions. Some may even appeal to the people’s sensibilities through their ugly and dreadful appearance, which generates secret admiration and fear at the same time.

Theoretical framework

Despite what seems to be the extinction of the black aesthetic spirit and temper which inspired the Harlem Renaissance and the New Arts Movements in the United States, “aesthetic ideas as expressions of black life and creativity” (Dennis and Dennis, 2015, p.5) continue to thrive in its quest to unearth and re-analyze obscure African cultural heritage. African traditional aesthetics, which seems a variant of this literary quest, continues to emphasize the critical analysis of oral texts based on their ethno-historical significance and the people’s experience of life and ways of being in the world.

Since the concept of Aesthetics is connected to the notion of the beautiful, it is necessary to examine the concept of beauty among Obollo people. In Obollo, there are words, phrases, sayings, and proverbs that are used to realize the notion of the beautiful. They include: *Emuru* or *Mma* (beautiful), *Emuruenya* (beautiful to the eyes or surface beauty, connoting beauty that lacks intrinsic value), *Omaramman’eseokwu* (her beauty causes a quarrel). While the first word embodies beauty in all its ramifications, the phrase *emuruenya* indicates that for something to be beautiful, it must be connected to perceptive and cognitive appeal, that is, pleasing to the senses. The opposite of *emuru* is *egbugba* (ugliness, not pleasing to the senses). The third statement: *mman’eseokwu* indicates that if beauty is complete in all its ramifications, then it becomes an object of intense contemplation to the point of competition and possible quarrel.

Since aesthetics is mainly concerned with the description, interpretation, and evaluation of the arts, it clarifies critical concepts and directs our attention to important features in the ritual announcement and macro-market performance of *Omabe Obollo* as an artistic event. In the course of our discussion, we reckon that, though there may not be a direct equivalent English word for aesthetics in many traditional African societies, there is no doubt that the value the people confer on artistic productions during performances of music, dance, songs and other performance elements share similar values that other societies place on similar art forms. It therefore stands to reason that traditional aesthetics exist in practice, in the context of performance.

The point is that, as Frida Mbunda opines, “Since culture differs, it is within the culture that an objective critical judgment can be derived. The validity of the aesthetic principle extracted from the criticism of a work depends on how far the critical statements and the work of art share a common cultural base” (2001, p.3). Thus, within *Obollo* cultural aesthetic, what may appear artistically satisfying in the performance of the songs and chants may not satisfy the requirements of the Western poetic performance paradigm. The study will therefore investigate the context, setting, and elements of *Omabe* performance as an artistic tradition with emphasis on aspects of beauty and pleasure in the performance, and how these experiences give meaning to the lives of the people.

Contextual Performance in *Omabe Obollo*

Odida Omabe period is an occasion for heavy celebration and immediately signals the in-dwelling period (*Ma ino n'al*). The appearance and performance of these masquerades combine and integrate various artistic expressions, particularly music and dance. Here, music is employed for the “projection and continuity of dramatic intention” and not “merely inserted into a dramatic proceeding” (Nzewi, 1981, p.433), and dance is highly stylized, all working towards the development of the plot of the festival. Different aspects of the life of the people are symbolically represented in the appearance and performance of the masquerades. There is, of course, the movement in scenic arrangement from the mountain to the marketplace, the village square, and then to the shrine, engulfing the entire pastoral life of the village, and this is different from the Western conception of dramatic setting.

On the first day of the festival, when *Omabe* is said to be about to ‘climb the mountain’, the atmosphere is charged with numerous festive activities. The *Echaricha Omabe* performance is dominant during this occasion. *Echaricha* or *Igele* is noted for intriguing and clever dance movements, unnerving spins and turns combined with bold foot stamps, high-rise springy jumps, and overall body dexterity, which unsettle the audience emotionally in the arena of its performance. During its movements around the market arena, it is given gifts of ram, goat, palm wine, coconut, etc., as a token of appreciation from the people for past favours. On *Oye* market day, following its first appearance, a number of them make an appearance in the marketplace, heralded by numerous gun shots and traditional music and dance.

This occasion is filled with many symbolic actions, one of which is the ‘purchase of palm wine’. The masquerades simply go about touching any keg of wine that attracts their spiritual taste while their attendants carry them. The tapers or sellers are however not expected to raise objections or protest as the ancestors are deemed not only to require the palm wine but also the giver of nature’s bounties; hence, the deep-seated reverential acquiescence. The action of the masquerades in this display is dictated by the rhythm of the accompanying music. While the music plays, the masquerades initiate frenzied movements this way and that, collecting different items in the market.

It is a most remarkable dramatic experience in which members of the audience (this time the tapers and sellers of other items which *Omabe* desires, as well as village spectators) come very close to a heightened spiritual and transactional relationship with the ancestors in a tense communal atmosphere of joy, thanksgiving, and fulfillment. The synthesis of this interchange with music and dance enhances effective communication with the audience and that is why it has been advised that the purpose of every masquerade performance should be taken into consideration to sufficiently

capture the ritual connections of the performance with the story of the people, their existential relationship with their ancestors and, therefore, our understanding of the Igbo concept of life, death, and regeneration, which most of these festivals and masquerade celebrations embody (Nwabueze, 2011, p.114).

The following day, there is the ritual of movement or visit to the mountain to formally accompany *Qmabe* down to the village. The entire community moves to the mountain with each individual carrying headloads of yam, goat, palm wine, and other items of eateries as contributions to the celebration of *Egbe-ochal'*, a period which marks the homecoming of *Qmabe* from the mountain. This home-coming is symbolic because it is believed that *Qmabe* abides in the mountain, but after the announcement of *Egbeochal'*, activities now move to the village square, signaling the indwelling of the masquerades among the people (*Odida Qmabe*), which is an activity-packed celebration of the appearance of *Echaricha*, a beautiful, zinc-like bodied and dramatic performer. The dexterous jumping up and down of *Echaricha* is a re-enactment of the potent forces that ensure the physical well-being of the people. So in the performance of *Echaricha*, the audiences are not only entertained but significant aspects of the people's story are also re-enacted, and their awareness of their ancestral connection is increased.

This is followed by the celebration of *Mgbeshi*, which signals the end of the *Qmabe* season. On the performance day, members of *Oyi Qmabe* assemble at the village square to stage the *Ngwerigwe* (traditional xylophone) music and dance, a complex music orchestra in which the story and genealogy of the people are re-enacted as different villages, as well as spectators take their turns in the dance. In the evening, the various forms of the masquerade appear to entertain the audience, thrilling them with miraculous and magical feats such as the release of gunshots into the masquerade's head and other acrobatic displays that take the breath away. Some members of the audience, who are first timers to this display, even take to their heels in anticipation of calamity.

These displays are meant to demonstrate the invisibility and spiritual potency of the ancestral forces inhabiting or possessing the masquerades. It is also a dramatization of the people's abiding confidence in the ability of the ancestral spirits to ensure their physical and spiritual well-being; hence, the actions of the masquerades during these performances are symbolic of the nature of the particular spirit or the ancestor they represent. This reveals the religious element in these displays and agrees with Abiola Irele's assertion that the: Artistic expression and religious feelings are inseparably linked, insofar as art is conceived primarily as an epiphany of the sacred, of the cosmic energy with which the visible world is permeated. Art is the imaginative restitution of the fundamental network of relationships that exist between the various manifestations of this cosmic energy. This is the foundation of the African's cosmic participation in the universe (2007, p.206).

This explains why, despite the pomp, pageantry, and general entertainment surrounding these performances or displays, the disciplinary element is not lost on the audience, as expressed in the awe with which the masquerades are regarded, especially by women and the uninitiated. From the foregoing, it is evident that the various symbolic human and masquerade displays during the *Qmabe* festival constitute or embody elements of Igbo aesthetics of performance. Most of the displays had ritual beginnings but are now enacted and appreciated as symbolic actions that satisfy the aesthetic needs of the community.

The Setting of the Performance

Qmabe Obollo's performance has a multifocal structure, the aesthetic of which allows the spectators to move from one spot to another depending on their aesthetic interest. This is in tandem with the Igbo proverb: "Anoghi ofu ebe ekili mmonwu or, in Obollo dialect: "Anog' mbena ekiri Ma" (A masquerade performance is not watched from a stationary spot or position). The performance environment may thus adopt various visual patterns usually determined by the performance space and cultural conventions controlling the performance; it could range from

central stage formation, as found in the marketplace or mountainside, to route stage formation, which depends on performance movements.

Again, the spaces for the performance of *Qmabe* masquerade and sundry ritual aesthetics are more than physical. It is a mental attitude translated into physical reality by performances, and performers can convert mundane places into spiritual realms by their presence. This mental attitude guides the aesthetic interests of the audience-spectators from the scene of Igbo Ekwe *Qmabe* in a section of Obollo-Afor market called *Ukwu Abosi* to *Qmabe* abode in the mountain and its return to *Onu Qmabe Ulo*. *Qmabe* performers move freely, converting symbols and spaces and flowing in and out of them. The dominant presence of symbols in performances explains why an *abosi* tree planted at the centre of Afor market or a young palm frond along a thoroughfare or at the village square can have the same ritual and spiritual significance as *Onu Qmabe* in the mountain or within the vicinity around the village. So, in the people's cosmology, spaces are designated by the purpose and performance.

The *Qmabe* setting can best be described as a composite form of staging, with the various scenes and pockets of dramatic actions going on at the same time. The effect of this is that it keeps the audience constantly on the move as their attention is assaulted and compelled from all points of performance within and sometimes outside the Afor market arena. Within this arena, the different masquerades of the various villages of Obollo come together in one elaborate carnivalesque display that yields dense aesthetic appreciation. In scale, it is grand with abundant participatory spectacle for its audience of members of the community and their guests.

On a general note, *Qmabe* settings, like most Igbo festivals/masks settings, can be highly symbolic in their appropriation of the entire physical and mental spaces to give expression to the people's desires and expectations. Ukaegbu (1996) further explains these symbolic operations, thus, "The world of animals, plants, and nature forces are recreated in an attempt to probe life and provide a physical parallel to it. Masks fill this role by combining the physical, the historical, the mythical, and mysterious in symbols that capture and designate infinite time and space into definite time and specific spots" (p.21). Also, *Qmabe*'s performance architecture deploys a sparse setting because it is characterized by symbolic staging and active communal participation. This is more so when there are other performances going on simultaneously with masked displays.

These performances range from prayers and ritual sessions of *Attama Qmabe* to those of *Oyi Qmabe*, and the carrying of *Odu*, each with its aesthetic parameters and valuations. But in the marketplace proper, the spatial fluidity enables performers and participants to move in and out of space and position in frequent ruptures of space. These frequent ruptures of the performance space do not, however, indicate a disorder in the performance or a loose, unmanageable crowd but simply, in keeping with the Igbo belief, as stated earlier, that the full range of aesthetic input of a masquerade display cannot be assessed from a fixed position.

Elements and Techniques of the Performance

Apart from the "performative realities of space" (Ododo, 2001, p.1), songs, music/dance, dialogue, costume/ spectacle, and performers all contribute to and shape the aesthetic priorities of the people during *Qmabe* performance.

Songs/Music

As the study has shown, songs, music, and dance feature very prominently in the various performance skits of *Qmabe* celebrations and masquerade displays. Apart from their entertainment content, they convey messages and meanings that permeate the soul of society and are deeper than mere spectators can comprehend. Obollo people habitually accompany their every life's activities with songs and music. Songs and music are deployed to unlock all the elements and aesthetics, such as dialogue, rhythm, tempo, and the character's thematic preoccupation during the performance. The song pattern employs the antiphonal structure between the lead singer or chanter and the chorus (members of *Oyi Qmabe* and sometimes the audience participants). Sometimes there are

alternations of this pattern. The songs are composed according to the character, temper, and functional aesthetic of a particular mask type.

The song, “Ije Jengele, Ọmabe Okweka, ije jengele,” depicts the delicate and proud gait of the *Echaricha* masquerade, and its performance during the singing reflects this attribute. There is no permanent singer. Any member of the performing group of any masquerade can interrupt a song by launching into ululations of praises of Obollo attributes: “Koru koru koru, eleleleeeee ooooo!!! Obollo kpoo nd’ole buru” (ululations with Obollo can’t be extinguished from this earth), affirming the existential imperative of the people. These ululations are sporadically taken up from all corners by the spectators/follower-audiences, and thereafter, the lead singer continues with either the ongoing song or changes to another song.

The music is an integral part of the songs, and the rhythms usually go with thematic changes in the songs. In the songs, identical themes are repeated with different turns of phrases to achieve a great effect, and this is realized with accompanying musical productions. Music is an activity with theatrical orientations and augments the beauty of most performances. Aristotle’s identification of the three human instincts of imitation, harmony, and rhythm (Quoted in Yamma, 2016, p.95) applies to the various musical productions of Ọmabe Performance. Ọmabe music thrives on harmony, rhythm, and the performer’s ability to accurately draw the appropriate lyrics from his/her pool of memory.

Music in Ọmabe is supported by other tonal instruments like metal and wooden gongs, wooden flutes, and wooden drums, all of different sizes. The instrumentalists in the performance could be drawn from members of *Oyi Ọmabe*, the youths, and or elders of the community. Drum messages are marked by the frequent use of repetition, both to rub in the point and to enhance the rhythmic texture of the text. The flute, usually used to call the masquerade, produces a melodious tone which in turn triggers the other instrumentalists, as the masquerade gets engulfed in dance. Again, the artful utilization of the flute in Ọmabe celebration arouses minds and attunes the disposition of its audience-listeners to the mood of the festivity. The combination of the sounds of the flute and metal gong produces chilling and captivating sounds capable of ‘arresting’ the audience listeners on the stage and compels them to join in the dance.

Songs and music of Ọmabe performance are intensive and pull together the communal spirit and philosophy of Obollo people. Unlike the concept of music in Western performance, Ọmabe musical productions are phenomenal, purifying, and reaffirming fundamental components of the life of the people. Wole Soyinka makes this point about the Yoruba music when he posits, “The European concept of music does not fully illuminate the relationship of music to ritual and drama among the Yoruba. We are inhibited even by recognition of a universality of concepts in the European initiative grasp of the emotions of the will” (2007, p.366). So, like that of the Yoruba, Ọmabe music stakes to the world of Obollo people the invisible ladder to the lofty abode of the ancestors. This cosmic interaction is achieved through the performer’s myth-poetic and experiential stanzas of the music.

Dance

Dancing is a universal social activity that is natural to all cultures of the world. Walter Sorell (1967) posits that dance is “as old as man and his desire to express himself, to communicate his joys and sorrows, to celebrate and mourn with the most immediate instrument: his body” (p.9). Again, Segun Adejemiua observes:

Dance is an integral index of human culture, a communicative art, and an art of motion of which the basic material is the movement of the human body in space and time. Dance is a form of metalanguage and one of the most revealing universal forms of expression by which a lot can be said with the gestures of the arm and/or body. (1994, p.117)

Akporobaro (2012) contends that “songs, dance and drumming are the purest and commonest forms of emotional and psychological and social entertainment in the African world and indeed in all cultures” (p.310). Songs, dance, and some forms of drumming, which generate rhythmic movement, often go hand in hand, in a complex mutual enhancement and aesthetic communication. Obollo is

home to several dance forms and types, usually staged in and out of season. Dancing is one of the major aesthetic components and elements of Ọmabe performance because, along with song and music, it embodies dramatic activities in form and content.

The dance movements, actions, and styles of the various Ọmabe masquerades convey both overt and covert messages and meanings. This dance is not merely a display of physical power and alertness, but an expression of the community's repertoire of knowledge and experience about operative forces in their environment. Therefore, man, as Enekwe explains, "dances to express himself – even to show off and to identify with his people. Males usually dance to express their manhood, while women perform to exhibit their beauty. In general, all express the life force" (1987, p.6). The dance movement of the different Ọmabe mask types is replete with symbolism and images. *Echaricha* or *Igele* cuts the image of a leopard, and its movement depicts not only the agility and alertness of the animal spirit but also a reference to and appreciation of Obollo warriors of yore. To this end, there is a lot of foot dancing, jumping up high in the air, and other body movements that are warlike. Also, *Igele's* or *Echaricha's* three-dimensional stamping of its feet that follows the high jump may equally symbolize the tripartite concept of human life: the living, the dead, and the unborn. The majestic and proud hue and gait of *Agbeji* Ọmabe speak of the beauty and rich accomplishment of Obollo ancestors. These movements are uniquely scintillating to the men and other members of the audience-spectators who also instinctively dance to the rhythm of drums and music. The dimensional and polycentric nature of Ọmabe engages all parts of the body expressively.

Daniel Avorgbedor states that "man is ontologically an expressive being, and both actions and reactions consequently permeate our modes of life and living" (2003, p.208). Ọmabe dance thrives on visible and spectacular actions that are comprehensive and have causality, establishing a rapport between rhythm and movement, and manifesting a state of the mind. These movements also express tensions, struggles, aspirations, and victory. Yerima Bakare (2003) states that dance is "a language which encompasses geographical locations, biological temperament, religious beliefs, political and historical experience, social practice and economic peculiarities of people" (p.64). Therefore, Ọmabe embodies both ritual and social significations. Though borne out of the ritual and religious practices of the people, their performances are filled with much funfair, interaction, and community participation by almost all segments of the population.

On a general note, dance is an integral part of Ọmabe performance and serves not only as a means of entertainment and enjoyment but a vehicle for communicating with both humans and the ancestors or gods. Again, the performance of music and dance gives insight into the Obollo people's culture and tradition. All the forms and styles of Ọmabe songs and dance are believed to help the people make spiritual connections with their ancestors as well as give expression to their emotional states and desires. Above all, Ọmabe dance movements and expressions are highly stylized, theatrical, and thrive on imitation. However, their appreciation depends on the Obollo people's culturally conditioned aesthetic parameters during the context of performance. This is in tandem with Emeka Nwabueze's view that:

African dancing is varied and intricate, and therefore cannot be fully understood without considering both the text and the context of the dance. It is through the text and the context of dance that its function is discerned, since music and dance in Africa play a more vital role than mere entertainment. (2011, p.121)

Even though women (with the possible exception of members of *Inyama Ogbanje*) do not participate in Ọmabe dance, they are part and parcel of the ceremony on the day Ọmabe make a general outing to the marketplace. A revered women's group known as *Umuakpu Obollo*, though not initiates of Ọmabe, as a group, usually positions itself at the foot of *Isisikebere*, a sacred tree in a portion of the market. The tree has a spiritual connection with the founding of the women's group. They come with their musical instruments, singers, and chanters. Here, different Ọmabe mask types take turns to visit and perform different dance styles before their presence. The women show their appreciation and joy with loud ululations and presentation of different gift items like live ram,

earthen pots of different sizes, and sundry ritual items usually treasured by the particular visiting mask type.

Of particular aesthetic interest during this session are the *Echaricha* or *Igele* dance movements, which involve high, stylized leaps, dodges, and poses with the waving or throwing of shiny, long cutlasses into the air and catching them midair with athletic precision. This is performed with much breathtaking excitement among audience-spectators and the women's group who ululate thunderously in encouragement. This way, the *Umuakpu* audience and the performing masquerade become co-creators of a kind during the performance, in terms of dialogic collaborations, and consonant with culturally ascribed aesthetics.

Spectacle/Costume

The aesthetics of Qmabe performances are conditioned by scenic and visual appeals and theatrical effects. These scenic and visual appeals are supplied by the costumes and the spectator's responses to them. Tracie Uto-Ezeajugh describes costumes and make-ups as:

...the visual elements in any traditional African performance. They are the effects used to transform a dancer, singer, drummer, bride, groom, and any other performer or participant in any of the numerous festivals, into the image or character they are to portray. Before costumes and makeup developed into specialized arts in the theatre, they existed in African society and played similar roles in the life of the people as they do in the theatre. They constitute an essential part of the people's heritage. (2006, p.83)

During performance, there is an aesthetic correspondence and coherence between human and natural milieus and objects. Obollo culture, like many African cultures, has what Mudimbe has described as "aesthetically domesticated natural milieu, coherently integrating into it a spatial organization of compounds and the human activities of daily life" (1994, p.170). In Qmabe, costumes define not just the physical characteristics and attributes of the performances but also embody deep symbolic significations. Ukaegbu posits that:

The celebratory nature of theatrical performances and their being special events distinct from normal engagements confer 'non-ordinary status' on normal clothes worn by performers. The clothes worn by participants acquire significance and assume the quality of costumes for the particular occasion. In addition to everyday clothes are special costumes designed specifically for theatrical displays. These could exist as a uniform costume for performers and participants, or as separate sets for performers and participants. (1996, p.161)

Thus, Obollo's natural environment supplies the symbolic materials for aesthetic valuations of the masquerades and sundry ritual practices during Qmabe performances. The colour symbols, the woolen spread, shiny disks, and other embroidery materials draw their meaning and functions from the Obollo environment and inform the perceptive parameters of spectators during performances. Therefore, the aesthetics of these costumes are drawn from the patterns of Obollo culture and depict their life and suit the purpose of the performances. Qmabe performances parade an array of costumes and diverse colour combinations to underscore the community's aesthetic yearnings and preferences. These colour combinations have, over the years, reflected the changes that have taken place from ritual to entertainment. Thus, it is not uncommon to find a reflection of modernity in the colour combinations of the *Ngwujim* mask type, known for multicoloured corduroy and elaborate drawing patterns, indicating cultural contacts with either the Igala people or technological symbols. The same goes for the massive, heavily feathered headgear and beautifully designed body of the *Agbeji* mask type. They all work towards the idealization of the masquerades' performance.

But the most significant function of Qmabe costumes depends on their impact on the perceiving audience-spectators. The *Echaricha* or *Igele* Qmabe, apart from its dexterous and cat-like agility, is a spectacle to behold in terms of costume. Its tight appliqué costume studded with metal discs and which glint in the sun, its face of linear thread weaving radiating from the nose and eye areas to the side of the face clearly expresses a spirit image most pleasing to Obollo people and their village activities. Spectacle elevates the performing arts above all other human activity because it can elicit

the immediate confirmation of approval or disapproval from the audience during performance. There is a preponderance of spectacle in the form of eye-catching aspects, and objects curiosity or contempt in Qmabe performances. It confirms other nonverbal elements such as gestures and facial expressions, which adumbrate the dramatic nuances of Qmabe performances.

Thus, the spectacle of *Egbeochal'*, with a blazing cutlass in hand, takes off from *Onu Qmabe ulo* in a flashing speed to the palace of *Onyishi* to inform him that Qmabe is about to 'come home', and then goes to the marketplace to collect various ritual items for Qmabe's use, draws a message. Consequently, the spectator can now confirm that the community has been taken out of ordinary time. These are not regular, everyday occurrences, and so the actions are baffling to the spectators. Therefore, spectacle in Qmabe performances does not only consist in the assemblage of costumes and colour combinations but also of the pulsating music, punctuated by sporadic gunshots, and roaring ovations and cheers from the spectators. It can best be described as cutting the image of scenic conflagrations.

Symbolism and Imagery

Performances in traditional African societies are evaluated and construed as not mere appearances or illusory play but constructions of social and political realities and therefore an essential signifying practice (Fiebach, 2004, p.29). For Obollo people, objects, signs, and words are imbued with power and potent forces during Qmabe celebration. Edwin Nwanchor states, "The Igbo deities are not only associated with nature and natural objects but are also depicted with material objects from nature....The Igbo believe that the spiritual world can assume physicality just as the physical can shade its materiality" (2021, p.97). Victor Turner, while trying to situate the power and meaning of symbols within the cultural frame of a particular culture, posits:

Each culture, each person within it, uses the entire sensory repertoire to convey messages...manual gesticulations, facial expressions, bodily gestures, rapid, heavy, or light breathing, tears, at the individual level; stylized gestures, dance patterns, prescribed silences, synchronized movements such as marching, the moves and 'plays' of games, sports, and rituals at the cultural level. (1983, p.9)

Similarly, imagery may refer to those descriptive languages that appeal to all human senses, as well as objects and properties, and how they are deployed during performance (Yamma, 2016, p.107). Apart from adding layers of deeper symbolic meaning to the performances, these objects, properties, and language give signification to the lives of the people and those of the performers-participants in the celebration. Qmabe is a dominant aesthetic process and takes on visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, and organic form.

Because of the power of symbolism as a potent medium of artistic production, expression, and appreciation (Gyekye, 1996, p.127), an analysis of the different symbolic structures and imagery that underpin Qmabe celebration is necessary to establish the basis of their aesthetic appeal among the people. The operation of symbolisms in Qmabe celebration seems to agree with the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product (Achebe, 1975, p.64). Hence, the dreaded *Onu Qmabe* instituted in the centre of Obollo market on the day of *Igbu Ekwe Qmabe* is soon forgotten and submerged or engulfed by business activities after the celebration until the next cycle when fresh institution of the space is reenacted. What is important is that while the performances are ongoing, the spiritual forces in the various ritual spaces and art objects have been transformed into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of those forces behind the celebration.

Obollo society, like most Igbo societies, interrogates life's circumstances through art objects and artistic productions which emanate during festival celebrations in the form of song, music, dance, rituals, painting, carving, drama, pottery, among others. Thus, the various *Onu Qmabe* are heavily adorned with collections of different sizes of pottery, an *Abosi* tree freshly planted at *Onu Qmabe*, *Okwo Qmabe*, a long cutlass beside the *Abosi* tree, *Ngwujim* and *Agbeji* costumes, all achieve more concrete efficacy and appeal in their prominence in rituals and religion, where they invite the

presence of the otherworldly entities in the communion of the living with the dead. The various texts of Omabe represent the existential struggles of the people in history. The myths, legends, and stories that recount different kinds and levels of interaction between material and spirit forces, the differing individual and collective expressions of these relationships, and their artistic interpretations provide a rich source of material for Omabe performances.

Thus, the *Igele* or *Echaricha* masquerade is a symbol of power, strength, and agility, but also delightful in appearance. It cuts the image of Agu, the leopard, and reenacts the catlike movement in gesture and dance. It should be recalled that Obollo people address themselves as “Obollo ag’ ag’”, and the response would be “Nwa ag’ (Sons of Leopard). Agu was originally believed to be the king of the jungle, contrary to the later imperial narrative that sought to install the lion as the king of the jungle, and therefore, the symbol of might, resilience, and pride. The Igbo, being quite receptive to foreign ideas and practices, allowed the lion-headed emblem to hold sway as their animal totem. (Awambu,2020, p.1). It should also be pointed out that the Zulu people of South Africa regard the leopard as their animal totem to date.

So, for Obollo people, the aesthetic appeal of *Echaricha* or *Igele* underscores their rejection and suppression of external force or power in the course of their existential quests and challenges. The abode of Omabe in the mountain echoes Michel Foucault’s panoptic position of power used to monitor the adversaries or the undesirables in society (Bertens, 2001, p.149). In the course of a recent Omabe festival, one of the researchers’ interviewees volunteered another reason that may account for the image of the leopard in Omabe, given that the totem is not connected with the origin theory of Obollo people. He said that *Echaricha* dramatizes the menace of the beast among Obollo people in primordial times and how the people were able to overcome it. This agrees with Ukaegbu’s view that “Because of the importance of symbolism in Igbo art and life, a mask representing a wild beast is more than an artistic endeavour. It may, as well, convey in movement, dance, music, gesture, costume, and appearance, the story of the terror posed by the beast before it was overcome” (1996, p.9).

The *Egbeochal’* or *Oriokpa* masquerade takes on aggressive displays to reenact the presence of malevolent forces in the community. The escaping audience-spectators, on the other hand, employ various symbolic acts and dialogue to reaffirm the individual’s escape and containment of such forces. Such chases may sometimes be elicited from the spectators/participants through taunts and dialogues to reenact man’s primordial fascination with danger and the desire to engage the unknown.

Conclusion

The study has amply demonstrated that the Omabe festival and masquerade performance of Obollo people, Southeast Nigeria, embodies rich dramatic, artistic, and aesthetic qualities comparable to any other cultural productions in the world. The conceptualization of the dramatic aesthetics of the festival therefore emanate from their cosmology, aesthetics and myths of the people, and find expression and concretization in rituals, sacrifice, prayers, chants, songs, music and dance. Regrettably, these literary and artistic qualities are yet to be fully understudied and analyzed because of the mainstream, dominant episteme which demonizes most traditional African cultural productions as fetish, retrogressive and incapable of giving life to serious artistic productions. The theoretical insights of traditional African aesthetics, with its ethno-methodological weaponry, provided the necessary guide into Obollo people’s aesthetic evaluative parameters in assessing the various sites of the performance. The investigation into the aesthetics of performance in Omabe Obollo reveals that the texture, structure, and content of the festival embody dense dramatic elements that are of high aesthetic and artistic value among Obollo people.

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