

# Interrogating *Okoro* Masquerade: A Structuralists Reading of the Costumes

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## ABSTRACT

There is a gulf between the script and the artist's intention when analyzing indigenous festivals. The task confronting a critic is to isolate the artist's intention and navigate the sea of esoteric through the available tools. This difficulty specifically confronts the interpretation of indigenous masquerades. While deploying structuralism and aesthetics, the endeavor is to attempt an explication of the text through eclecticism. An honest critic will quickly resort to eclecticism-which is the deployment of tools depending on the capability of yielding meaning. This study does not find it out of place to dine with the structuralist model with special attention on the synchronic dimension of meaning while exploring aesthetics at the same time. With the help of eclecticism, the study situates masquerades within entertainment and concludes that indigenous attempts at providing pleasure must have informed the emergence of masquerades.

**Keywords:** Masquerades, Entertainment, Structuralism, Eclecticism, Indigenous

## Introduction

Critics are not at a loss in the search for terminologies for explicating any work of art. A while back, the preoccupation with the interrelatedness of words had toga of formalism- another model that emphasizes that the critic be structure-specific, and there is no difference between structuralism and formalism if structure is the main target of the quest for meaning. No sooner was the tool considered a phase than Saussure's structuralism came to dominate the critical

space. Regardless of the conflicts in the various schools' competition for relevance, this study shall attempt a visit to the different schools. In this regard, the costumes of masquerades at Ijebu Waterside and the physical equivalents namely: *Okoro*, *Alegbagba*, *Ogoni*, and *Ilebe* at Ijebu Waterside in Ogun State and *Irele* in Ondo State, Nigeria during the performance of *Eje* festival will be explicated and situated within aesthetic objects that they rightly belong. *Eje* is an annual Thanksgiving festival prelude to the end of the Gregorian calendar. Such masquerades include *Okoro*, *Ogoni*, and *Alegbagba*. These masquerades had their origin in the sea.

*Eje* festival amounts to the end of the season and the convergence of the town by women and all to felicitate the beginning of the harvest season. The festival serves as a means of monitoring the women who may be married to folks in the contiguous towns and cities. The stories surrounding the costumes as well as the masks are subsumed in myths and thus may be harnessed in the search for meaning. According to Moyers (1988), "Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story." (5). the costume of the comic counterpart known as *Okoro* exemplifies every man who has been battered to submission by the negative forces of life. Rather than bemoan his state, *Okoro* accepts it all with philosophical calmness. The wife of *Okoro* is reputed to have a big sore that is about the size of a bowl. *Okoro* goes about the comic endeavor to provide details about the state of the sore. Although everyone talks about the sore, no one has ever seen the wife or the sore. The audience delights in amusing one another at the expense of the fat of *Okoro* and his wife rather than showing them love. This is typical of human beings and what they consider to be comedy.

## Concepts and Definition

Costumes may both be sacred and artistic depending on the masquerade. Costumes are the attires consisting of different strands of clothes that decorate the masquerades. The masks equally constitute what is known as costumes especially when referring to the masquerades that are terrestrial and attendant on *Osanyin* cult when cleansing the land and the people. Sacred costumes are associated with the religious aspect of indigenous performances and special care is exercised in their treatment as they are not meant to satisfy the quest for entertainment. The term "unnatural" in this present study is a reference to the belief of folks that some metaphysical beings equally exhibit such a mode of dressing in their sacred world, and these designs inform their artistic equivalents. It is important to note that the masquerades are drawn from riverine areas. Such masquerades that adorn crocodiles in their masks have their

roots in the Ijaw world of South-South, Nigeria. Ijaw folks are quite familiar with tales of sea nymphs, particularly because of their proximity to rivers and seas. Tales must have been told of such unnatural masquerades that dwell in the sea. From such tales were attempts at fashioning a natural or physical parallel. Those who dwell in forest areas that are far removed from the seas have masquerades that resemble earthworms. They must build their myths around such phenomena. This further supports the fact that creative artists can hardly detach themselves from their immediate environments in projecting their creative capabilities. It would be foolhardy not to see the relationship between these masquerades and the flora and fauna subsisting in their contiguous environments where they are prevalent.

The artistic parallel of the costumes is fashioned after folkloric characters drawn from myths. According to Campbell (1988), "Myths are infinite in their revelation." (148). It is noteworthy that indigenous folks built their myths around objects and animals that exist within their nearest environments such that masquerades whose constructions were inspired by sea animals replicate such animals in their dance steps. It is not out of place either to see masquerades that dance like earthworms. Every perception of the aesthetic object, and costumes in this study, harbors the possibility of a realization: a fulfillment and the search for meaning.

The study can specifically claim that masquerades had their original roots in myths and peculiar renditions of strange encounters with sea nymphs. They began as fairy tales before they found their way into the concrete art of the people. The creative energy of the artists is evident in fashioning all terrestrial masquerades in Ijaw, a riverine area whose art might have influenced the performances of similar masquerades in the contiguous communities. Such masquerades adorn the effigy of crocodiles. *Okooro* is the only member of the family of masquerades that can communicate with members of the audience. The sea-associated masquerades hardly talk except the comic character named *Okooro* who is in fulfillment of the role as a comic personality and tool of entertainment. They had no religious foundations. However, in the course of time, the religious segment was added to the spectacle. However, Nupe/Tapa in Niger State, Nigeria may be credited with the foundation of those masquerades with croaky voices. The root of the religious aspect is not difficult to trace. With the beating of the drums, endless gyrations, and acrobatic displays of the masquerades, trance-like possession began to rear its head, as every human being, especially in Africa, is spiritual.

An individual's spirituality can be aroused through rhythmic drumbeats, repeated gyrations, and sonorous songs. Through the renditions of the appropriate songs and dance beats, dancers may begin to exhibit unusual behaviors reminiscent of someone who is torn between physical and spiritual

endowments and particularly tilting towards the spiritual. At that stage, the priests among the folks may reinvigorate the spiritual capability through necessary concoctions, and appeal to the spirit behind the mask. Most modern prophets in churches deploy these means to resuscitate their prophetic capabilities. Care must be exercised to ensure that the river-related masquerades do not step on a pond of water while the dance lasts. Otherwise, they may actually disappear from sight never seen again. This development confirms their original root as the river or the sea. One such masquerade disappeared long before the birth of the researcher during the *Eje* festival at the Lemikan family. The family was forbidden from ever mounting a big masquerade ever since.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework in this study shall be a combination of de Saussure's synchronic and diachronic dimensions of meaning and aesthetics. These models are suitable in the analysis in view of the fact that the costumes under examination fall within both artistic and mythical levels. In this case, the synchronic level of meaning will be applied to the artistic parallel just as the diachronic aspect will be brought to bear in the quest for meaning in the examination of the folkloric counterparts. Aesthetics will be employed through the descriptive, interpretative concepts of beauty and aesthetic objects. Apart from the preoccupation with aesthetics tailored toward the affective concerns of the audience to an aesthetic object, a new and far-reaching study has shown that aesthetics fulfills more than the quest for beauty. It, in fact, involves the need to fulfill social and economic needs. From the perspective of the Holarctic interpretation, "aesthetics are functional". They devised in order to meet the yearning of the people for whatever may be troubling them. According to Schiller, aesthetics is achievable when "will and desire are brought into harmony" (Wonderly, 1991: 236). This is where the need for satisfaction of the individuals comes to the fore. Onigbinde (2020) considers beauty natural and that it tilts toward the "arousal of aesthetic gratification in human consciousness." (167). The reality in the preceding claims may be fulfilled when boredom necessitates a thirst for entertainment and the fulfilment is attained through the deployment of carefully composed scripts that are drawn from the milieu but that may have the ingredients of satisfaction as a result of the removal of the scripts from the normal life arena.

### **Application/Analysis**

The diachronic costumes are believed to be associated with metaphysical beings just as the artistic parallels are fashioned for aesthetic purposes. The folkloric characters are hardly seen but remain in the realm of imagination.

Such costumes exist in the imagination of the people and are believed to be associated with supernatural elements. Explicating the texts through structuralism is not different from relying on formalism if the knowledge of the text is the preoccupation of the endeavor. Adapting Noel (2006), “formalism denotes position on the nature of art which has important implications for the limits of artistic appreciation.” (109). The masquerades have “significant form” which is a reference to the power of imagination latent in the works of art. Imputed to indigenous festivals where masquerades are indispensable to the performance, it strikes the imagination of the critic that a masquerade particularly strikes the chord of elaboration, excitement, something unusual, and particularly extraordinary.

Yoruba indigenous festivals employ costumes that may be limited to the body and exclude the facial aspect just as they may also include the dressing as well as the masks in order to achieve aesthetic appeal. The artistic import is to create an aura of the supernatural, especially as the costumes have each foot in religion and art respectively. The designs are artistic, and this could fascinate the audience at the arena. The spectacle of *Ogoni* (one of the vibrant sea-associated masquerades) impresses the audience as dramatic. With the shell on each foot clanging with rhythmic attention in accompaniment of the dance steps and the ensuing rhythm of the drums, the audience cannot deny the excitement or what Hanslick (1854) and Bell (1914) cited in Noel (2006) consider to be “significant form” in an aesthetic object (109). If the preoccupation of aesthetics is the search for “significant form” in any work of art, the designs of the masquerades, the costumes, the artistic works on the facial mask, as well as, the croaky voices are attempts at replicating reality with each foot on the pedestrian and the imaginative realm. The masquerades try as much as possible to be understood and equally try to hide their association with earthly beings by suggesting that they are far removed from the terrestrial realm.

If at the same time, the details surrounding their artistic presence are to be avoided as Flaubert (1965) declares in view of their being works of art, and like the structuralists, being structure-specific, there is no denying the aesthetic qualities exhibited by the mere spectacle, and the affective qualities inherently tied to the display of the masquerades. Costumes, for instance, consist of both fabrics and masks. The masks equally treated as constituting parts of the costumes and they may be anthropomorphic and zoomorphic from the peculiarity of each design. It is apparent, therefore, that the meanings of the costumes and masks must transcend the visual aspects as much may be hidden beyond the physicality, and any investigation must be extended beyond the synchronic dimension of meaning. Further investigations in the field of language, would issue syntagmatic and pragmatic levels of meanings that would make a diachronic exploration of meanings more significant.

According to Northrop Frye (1968), “the informing structures of literature are myths, that is, fictions and metaphors that identify aspects of human personality with the natural environment, such as stories about sun-gods or tree-gods” (4). Found interspersed in the costumes of *Ogoni* (another sea nymph that goes about with a decrepit cutlass) is the metaphor of agility and freedom. The performer could kill fowls with impunity and the symbol of the decrepit cutlass is representative of this license. The milieu and the people included enjoying unfettered freedom during such festivals. At Igbobini and Igbotu both in Ese Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State during *Boabo* and *Iweh* festivals, sex is hawked without any fear of restraint. This is what cleansing is all about. Any form of moderation becomes outlandish as the people go about their festivals.

The wooden mask of *Ogoni* in relation to that of *Ilebe* (a masquerade that mimics women with big buttocks) tied to the symbolic, metaphorical parallel that is rarely seen. Mabawonku *et al* (2020), for instance, situate the signs within the search for the explication of the “womanist’s modules enmeshed in oral arts.” (518). It is no wonder then that indigenous people found myths as the bedrock of their performative scripts. Northrop Frye (1968) provides a demagogic sanction thus: “The metaphorical nature of the god who is both a person and a class of natural objects makes myth, rather than folktale or legend, the direct ancestor of literature” (4). It was natural that indigenous people found expression through art, subsumed in myths at a time when writing from the Western point of view was alien to them. The costumes, masks, dance, and songs were potent linguistic icons that served the needs of the people through the ages for documentation of landmarks, challenges, and history of origin. The power of myths was given authorial sanctification as Frye (1968) situates them within the search of the folk for their essence through art.

There is an obvious disconnect especially where aesthetics is the tool of analysis. At whatever level of meaning whether descriptive or interpretative, aesthetics seems to be in the mud of confusion. What is the task before the aesthetician? Is it geared towards interpreting the critical claim or the aesthetic object itself? If the goal of aesthetics is the meta-critical posture it ascribes to itself, what is the business of the aesthetician with description and interpretation? Beyond the seeming contradictions are some salient cul-de-sacs as the quest for meaning is taken to the level of philosophical aesthetics as it searches for the intentions of the artist. Is this not another preoccupation with the diachronic dimension of meaning? It is significant that aesthetics shows an obvious revulsion for sociological criticism as the environment is denounced and the sociologist too is castigated as incapable of sieving meaning from the script or object without recourse to the environment.

This paper situates costumes and the accompanying performances within the sensibilities of the people. Therefore, the costumes are reflections of the realities of the environment as well as the psychological antecedents of the artists. The artists in indigenous societies rarely detach themselves from the realities of their environments. Atkinson Aladeyelu, who designed the portraits on the Malokun Shrine at Ode Irele meant to show the monarch and his children as well as the representation of a warrior. However, his imagination could not propel him further than the objectives for which he was contracted. The images today are awe-inspiring to the audience who could not distinguish the total essence of the shrine from the images adorning the walls of the shrine.

Therefore, it is expected that the costumes that are prevalent in the milieu must be representative of the beliefs as well as the artistic aura subsisting in the environments. The costumes employed during indigenous performances are categorized under sacred and secular dimensions and they reflect the intellectual values of the folks. Each foot of the concept of duality lies within the physical as well as the preternatural. An explication of the art must transcend the level of physicality to encompass the unnatural. Eliot (1965) considers aesthetic objects tied to the emotions of the artists and the aesthetic objects are meant to preserve such emotions in order to confer a degree of permanence on the mood whether it is that of pleasure or sadness.

The study traces meaning embedded in the shared codes, symbols, and nuances that are particularly significant to intra-group reciprocation subsisting in language. There is an apparent disconnect when “representational content” and “significant form” are considered. It becomes contradictory to deny “representational content” in any discussion of “significant form” (Noel, 110). A masquerade may not be equated with an existing aesthetic object that the critic can situate within any known environment. This does not, however, preclude it from any “representational content.” The imaginative obsession from where the aesthetic object is ruptured which is a synonym for creativity surely has a “representational content” that the artist cannot deny.

The study is at a polar end with Bell (1914) and considers any aesthetic object, as the “expression theory of art” and indispensably tied to the emotions of the artists” (Noel, 110). The fact that the spectacles of the masquerades befuddle the audience means that it is extraordinary, capable of arousing the affective feelings of the audience, and perhaps represent something similar in space or dream making the masquerade artistic. A masquerade may not be equated with an existing aesthetic object that the critic can situate within any known environment. This does not preclude it from any “representational content.” The imaginative obsession from where the aesthetic object is ruptured which is a synonym for creativity surely has a “representational content” that the artist cannot deny.

The Ketu-Yoruba version of festival costumes is associated with females. The degree of ownership may be summed up through the ritual necessity of borrowing costumes from the opposite sex. Costumes are associated with specific objectives, and they enhance the colorful spectacles prevalent during indigenous performances. If the environment is considered an indivisible component of creativity and taking cognizance of Taine's (1965) reference to the milieu, and the psychological sophistication of the artists, the masquerades will retain their artistic and "significant forms" but quite noticeable in replicating the flora and fauna of the environments that informed their existence. It is undeniable that the masquerades imitate nature in elaborate, exaggerated forms.

The hallmark of verbal scripts is the inherent capability of transforming individuals, potent in entrenching cultures and human traits and thus capable of different appeal to different people as may be informed by native intelligence and the societies that individuals may keep. Aesthetics provides the possibility of a script being significantly meaningful through the emotional sophistication of members of the society. It remains debatable if such a script presents a reality of equal length to members of the audience and may not elicit diverse reactions from individuals. This is because the capacity for interpretation may vary and the aesthetic taste too may elicit different reactions. In other words, the reality to an individual may depend, to a very large extent, on aesthetic discernment which critics may term taste. Again, the deployment of language is considered fundamental in the achievement of co-referentiality. The arts and their conceptions are products of the environment even when nature seems to be cleverly hidden behind the imaginative excesses of the artists. This is where the concept of representation comes to the fore.

## Conclusion

This paper reveals the interrelatedness of the different models especially structuralism and archetypal criticism through their reliance on both synchronic and diachronic dimensions of meanings. Within structuralism is an apparent presence of sociological and archetypal ethos, especially when diachronism is involved. This amounts to a subtle presence of history and the myths subsisting in the environments of the artists. The environment is, therefore, significant to meaning and recourse to the psychological sophistication of the artists, as well as the milieu that engendered the aesthetic objects, is fundamental to the explication of the costumes. This is because costumes are potent linguistic representations, a form of secret ideograms, iconic, and symbolic. They are easily deconstructed at the arena during every performance. This is because the audience is familiar with the wisdom behind their compositions.



They embody the values of the milieu that are represented through art. Also within the costumes are the artistic and religious sensibilities of the milieu that are preserved and periodically deployed through art. The costumes subsisting among phenomenal beings are the language just as individual utilizations are the parole. They reflect the sense of color, values, and artistic goals of the folks within a particular environment.

The employment of costumes in the Yoruba world is not done arbitrarily as the intention is to achieve the affective import behind the performance, as well as an attempt at depicting the cultural synthesis of the milieu. Attention is paid to the overall relevance of the effects of the costumes to the totality of the spectacle even when some hard and fast rules characterize the costumes of different performances. The myths and rituals are “mythologically grounded and have to do with the infantile ego and bringing forth an adult” and “a ritualized occasion of the greatest social necessity” (Campbell, 1988: 138). The costumes tell a story of the visitation of the heavenly being to the world of the living. The masquerade, in its totality, points at the concept of the interpenetrating link between the father in the mythical heaven or the world of the ancestors and the siblings on earth. The visitation of the Father is to entertain the people and reassure them of the need to jettison fear and apprehension and equally reinforce the claim that what exists on earth equally exists in heaven. In succinct terms, it is meant to affirm the fact that as it is heaven, so it is on earth. The claim further buttresses the fact that the heavenly beings are capable of both good and bad just like the folks on earth.

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