ECONOMIC RELEVANCE OF TEXTILE AND SCULPTURE MATERIALS IN MASQUERADE FESTIVALS: A CRITICAL READING OF IKEJI MASQUERADE FESTIVAL IN IMO STATE

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Abstract

Masquerade festival is an important aspect of African culture and it plays fundamental role in the culture of the Igbos. Textiles and three dimensional sculptural objects serve as instruments for identification as well as means of visual communication. They have a lot of value to social and spiritual events in the society. Though, they are some people who seem to be ignorant of the importance and significance of festivals in general and masquerade in particular in African society and the role of textile and sculpture materials to any festival in a given society is indispensable. It is in view of the aforesaid that this paper seeks to address the problem of ignorance by revealing the economic relevance of textile and sculpture materials in Imo State with specific emphasis on Ikeji Masquerade festival. The objective of this study is to reveal the economic relevance of sculpture and textile materials in Masquerade festivals. It is evident that textile and sculpture arts as decorative and aesthetic objects give dignity to the masquerades and value to the humanity as well as making any festival colourful. The paper concludes that if Nigeria is to attain rapid economic development the role of textile, sculpture and artists must be recognized and supported.

Key words: economic relevance, textile, sculpture, Festival and Ikeji masquerade,

Introduction

Textile and sculpture materials are indispensable elements for the success of any masquerade festivals in Igbo Land and beyond. The mask of any form and size are sculptural in nature while the costumes are made from several textile materials that play very important roles in masquerade festivals and the society. Textiles and three dimensional sculptural objects serve as instruments for identification as well as means of visual communication. In this regard, the culture of a people can be portrayed through the clothing or textiles as well as their carved images and accessories they wear in their daily lives and during festivals. Textile and sculpture materials play vital role in the development and transmission of any culture in Imo State where there are also various cultural festivals as well as in other part of the world. The use and application of textile and sculpture materials in cultural displays such as masquerade festivals are very important because they help in enhancing the performance purpose.

However, there are some people who seem to be ignorant of the importance and significance of festivals in general and masquerade in particular in African society and the role of textile and sculpture materials to any festival in a given society is indispensable. It is in view of the aforesaid that this paper seeks to address the problem of ignorance by revealing the economic relevance of textile and sculpture materials in Imo State with specific emphasis on Ikeji Masquerade festival. The objective of this study is to reveal the economic relevance of sculpture and textile materials in Masquerade festivals. Specifically, this paper seeks to show how Ikeji Masquerade festival could create good market for textile and sculpture materials and to show how these visual aspects of art could enhance unity, identity and promotion of culture during masquerade festival. The
study uses secondary sources for data collection and the study adopts desk review methodology of literature collected to arrive at the findings.

Masquerade Festivals

In discussing masquerade festival, it is pertinent to first and foremost shed light on what festival is all about. Festival could be viewed as social, religious or cultural events organized by a community centering on celebrating some unique aspect of that community and its traditions, often marked as a local or national holiday or time of religious or other celebration, marked by feasting, ceremonies, or other observances. Festival could be seen as a season of commemoration, anniversary, or celebration which is often served to meet specific purposes, especially with regards to commemoration and/or thanksgiving. They are associated with celebration and may also provide entertainment, which was particularly important to local communities before the advent of mass-produced entertainment. It is a period of time set aside to commemorate, ritually celebrate or reenact, or anticipate events or seasons-agricultural, religious, or socio-cultural that gives meaning and cohesiveness to an individual and to the religious, political, or socioeconomic community. Egwuda-Ugbeda (2014) is of the view that festival is a moment of joy, celebration, worship, entertainment, visitation, fanfare, exchange of pleasantries, friendship, re-union, and social intercourse. Such days or periods generally originated in religious celebrations or ritual commemorations which usually include sacred community meal (feasts). These celebrations offered a sense of belonging for religious, social, or geographical groups. Masquerade festivals among the Igbo people of the south-eastern part of Nigeria are important festivals.

However, the idea of masquerade festival is surrounded by the concept of ancestral worship. Nwabueze (2011: 105) asserts that what is being personified in a masquerade is revered Igbo ancestor invested back to life to commune with the living. This kind of masquerade being presented depends on the function that masquerade is expected to perform. Hence, the masquerade is a medium through which the living Igbos communicates with the living dead. According to Kanu (2011) among the Igbos therefore, the masquerade is a cultural matrix, a way of life, phenomenal, highly valued and held in deference. Masquerades are of different types. Some are known as lampooning masks which operate at night. They identify, publicize and ridicule criminals, witches and wizards and other evil people who constitute a threat to the community. If such people persist in wrong doing, they are mysteriously eliminated by night masquerades employing mystical and esoteric processes which contribute to the mysticism of the masquerade institution. Where some masquerades are fierce looking, others simulate feminine beauty. Some are made to look like white men for instance The agboghomuo masquerade is a replica of a beautiful female who displays the gesture of well groomed and expert dancer. Also some masquerades play the part of the colonial administrative officers. The presence of masquerade or incarnate beings is sought due to their numerous performances such as singing, dancing, entertaining, performance of all forms (Onyeneke, 1987; Egwuda-Ugbeda, 2014). In relation to the above argument Egwuda-Ugbeda (2014) affirms that in traditional African society, a masquerade (incarnate being) phenomenon stands supreme among all other inherent activities. At the birth of a child, at the initiation ceremonies, at the rite of passage, during rituals during festivals, at death, during the burial, at political rally, at installation of a king, and indeed, at every notable occasion in Africa. In fact no great occasion is complete without (incarnate beings) masquerade. The present of masquerade brings any occasion to a lofty oomph in African societies.

Furthermore, there are masquerades which appear during New Yam Festivals, others at the veneration of local deities, for instance, during Owu festival, these appear seasonally, but the rather enormously unwieldy Ijele masquerade of some parts of Anambra State is displayed once in two or three years. Usually, masquerade outing is characterized with celebrations, festivals, and sumptuous feasting. Notably, traditional musical instruments are used to accompany the masquerades; such include the wooden slit drum of various sizes, metal gongs, bells, maracas and wooden flutes. The flutist is a very important element in masquerading. Chiefest among his functions is that he deftly communicates with
the masquerades, weaving soulful melodies and blending esoteric messages into the intoxicating rhythm of the drums and gongs.

Also the Odo Masquerade festival of Aku people of Enugu State is another important festival among the Igbos. It is highly respected and revered. It can be referred to as the symbols of the “dead come back to earth” (Itanyi, n.d.). The Odo Masquerade festival is believed to have been handed down from generation to generation from inception. This they have to learn and practice and later pass it on to another generation or their offsprings. Ezike and Ochiaka (2009) contend that Aku people see Odo as a link between the dead and the living. The mask is a representation of the spirit deity. The spirits refer to the ancestors and the deity refers to the gods.
Odo Masquerades during Odo Festival

In the view of Okezie (2007) masquerades are regarded as spirits, hence the enormity of the power is the wield. They are the community conscience, playing the role of the village police. They are used to enforce the controlling traditional authority which the community elders derived from their ancestors.

In furtherance, Nwabueze (2011) observes that in the ancient Igbo society, “the masquerade performances were intended to accomplish results. The intention of the natives was to communicate their wishes to the ancestors in order to change the state of things”. According to author, the Igbos believed in the efficacy and impartiality of the masquerade. By invoking the masquerade as a final judge, the Igbos believed that they were invoking the ancestor who was symbolized in the masquerade. Nnamele (2015) opines that the exploration of raffia fibre extracted from raffia-palm leaves as a sculpture material is not new in art practice both in traditional and contemporary era and it is a common material for weaving masquerade costumes. Hence, the demands of the living were clearly communicated to the supernatural forces through the ancestral spirit who in this case were masquerades. Kanu (2011) submits that the exhibition of expertise in carving and representation of intended motifs on wood, dyeing, weaving with rope or raffia, intricate dance steps, elaborate drumming and the use of other musical instruments and ultimately shows of spectacle in masquerade festival.

Critical Reading of Ikeji Masquerade Festival

In attempt in tracing the origin of Ikeji festival in Imo State, scholars have made frantic effort by asserting that Ikeji festival is one of the most popular festivals in Imo state and has four versions of its historical background. Firstly, it is argued that Diikeji a warrior from Arochukwu went to war to recover some occupied places in Ujalli. There he conquered the people and instead of loosing/ looting the place, his captive Eze Nwaka (also referred to as Ike) vouched for an annual celebration of his defeat in the presence of the gods of ujali annually with fifty men and women. But later he stopped the celebration and refused to continue with the tribute, this angered Dikeji who came and cut off his head and took it to Arochukwu where the event was been celebrated as Ikeji Ugwo, (the straight that owes a debt) the celebration started in Ujalli from where it is now shifted to Arochukwu and gradually to all the rest of Aro colonies including Arondizuogu with time the name Ikeji Ugwo became shortened to Ikeji festival ( Babatunde, 2014).
According to online version of Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture (2013), the second, version has it that, Izuogu the founder of Arondizuogu on one of his commercial trips from Arochukwu was kidnapped and he left home without his traditional *Omu* which is (palm frond) because he was to visit his woman lover, the *Omu* is the symbol of protection for any Aro man (in order not to incur the wrath of Ibim-Ukpabi the Long juju of Arochukwu every Aro man travels with his Omu), when they kidnapped Izuogu and interrogated him, he told them that he was from Aro, when queried further on the source of his power and wisdom, he told them that *Ike-jim-Aga Mba* which means the power that leads me through towns and villages unharmed. While still their hostage, one Afor market day, there appeared three masked figure which were believed to have come from Abam. They liberated Izuogu and after the liberation they started the celebration as “Ike Jim Aga” which was later called Ikeji festival.

The third version according to Okoli (2011) has it that the festival was derived from slave trade. The Aros were popular then because of their wisdom and might with the traditional *Omu* (palm frond). Any Aro man is free to go to anywhere during the slave trade period but without Omu he could incur the danger of being sold into slavery. Any Aro man sold to slavery was identified by the secret word *Aka Ike Jim* meaning strong hands are holding me, on hearing that the merchants would immediately release the victim or else they will incur the wrath of Ibini Ukpabi the long juju of Arochukwu. Aros who were slaughtered during slave trade where remembered in the occasion as *Aka Ike Jim* a feast like the Passover feast of the Israelites that was later called Ikeji. Fourthly, it also debated that Ikeji festival is consonance with New Yam Festival celebration. This account of the origin of Ikeji is widely accepted as it is connected with New Yam festival celebration. Since yam is the main celebration of Ikeji, it cannot be unconnected with Yam.

*Ikeji Masquerade*

However, Ohia (2007) opines that, in traditional Arondizuogu society only men plant yam. In fact, the Aros take some of their names and titles after yam, such names are as follows:

*Ugoji*- the eagle yam
Ezeji – the king yam

Ikeji – the strength yam

Umeji – the loveth yam

Okparaji – the son of yam

The feast was derived from Ji Isi which is the uprooting of the first tubers in the soil during the second harvesting season. Ikeji also mean the method of preserving yam by tying it on the stakes in the barn. With also these, they believe that Ikeji has its root and origin in yam. Ikeji festival could not have been celebrated today if it were not a practical handover pattern. Aro man is a strong believer and worshipper of God-chukwu. They depict it by their respect to Ndichies and elders as people close to chukwu. Aro man believes and is convinced in all knowing, seeing, loving care and guidance of his ancestors (Ndichies). This respect for chukwu through Ndichies resulted in a ritual like form called Ikeji festival (Ohia, 2008; Okoli, 2011; http://logbaby.com/encyclopedia/ikeji-festival-of-ar_12624.html#.VE2wkmddUb)

Ikeji festival is an annual festival of all Aro kingdom spread alongside the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Arondizougu autonomous community as it is called has the largest concentration of Aron settlers/elements which makes her the preferred hub for propagating Aron culture and tradition. Ikeji festival is however an annual home coming ceremony and gathering of the Aron descendants from home and abroad to give thanks to God for making them see a New Year, Ikeji.

It is a long held tradition passed down through the ancestry of the Arondizougu clan emanating from Arochukwu in Abia State. It is an eight-day-festival of merriment and spectacular display of masquerades coming out in their glamour to thrill the ever teeming crowd that converges in the village to witness the occasion (Babatunde, 2014). One of the masquerades is the ‘pericoma’, a masquerade known for its acrobatic displays and prowess. It is multi-cultural, multi-racial and cuts across all gender. Ikeji festival literally transforms the serene scene of village life to a commercial hub driving a swamp of tourists, researchers, fun seekers, businesses and brands display on different locations for eight days. The first four days of the festival, the eke, orie, afor, and nkwo are also named after the four native market days of Igbo culture. On the eke day, everybody turns up in the market to buy and stock up their homes in preparation for the next day; orie in which all the livestock bought on the eke are killed and made ready for merriment and feasting on the afor and nkwo respectively. The merriment and feasting spans the remaining four days as visitors and dwellers alike go about from home to home participating in the feast. On each of the eight days, the masquerades come out and tour the village in a long procession of enthusiasts singing their praises as they thrill and put on spectacular displays (Babatunde, 2014). The author further maintained that the people usually converge on the market square before calling it a day but the merriment proceeds into the wee hours of the day. Ikeji festival is a big time festival which is now gaining international attention and repute, which has adequate security in place for lives and properties, and could also be a huge source of income from tourism if managed well. Textile and sculpture materials are indispensible media in Ikeji masquerade festival. Textile and sculpture arts have great significance to the promotion of the people’s culture. This is characterized in the use of textile and sculpture arts for the promotion and contribution to the economic development of a given society especially during Ikeji masquerade festival in Imo State.

Textiles and sculpture arts are used for different cultural events in different localities, and these cultures are the outstanding hallmark of each ethnic group. These materials are of different types used to distinguish participants during the festival. Textile and sculpture materials include raffia, palm frond, lengthy and pieces of textile (wrappers), mask heads, rattle, sticks, etc. These Materials have greater
significance in masquerade festivals where they serve as instruments of non-verbal communication as well as for identification, perseveration and the promotion of the people’s culture.

**Economic Relevance of Textile and Sculpture Art in Ikeji Masquerade Festival**

Textile and sculpture arts have a lot of value to social and spiritual events in the society. This is associated with any socio-cultural event spanning from religious, political, tourism, economic and education of the people. Hence, Ikeji masquerade festival is the period where textile and sculpture arts business could gain unprecedented patronage. The textile artist and sculptor are not only creators of artworks that could be use for Ikeji masquerade festival such as costumes, accessories, masks and properties (props) but also as consumers of goods and services of others especially the raw materials from various sources. This enhances the synergy in the aesthetic, cultural, economic and artistic relationship involved in the success of any event such as Ikeji festival which helps to improve the people’s living condition as well as contributing to the economic development of the society leading to national development.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

From this paper, it has become clear that textile and sculpture arts as decorative and aesthetic objects give dignity to the masquerades and value to the humanity as well as making any festival colourful. Textile artists and sculptors are indispensible individuals in the creation and preservation of images and events. The paper has come to the conclusion that, textile and sculpture arts being multi-disciplinary sectors have enormous socio-economic relevance both on textile artist, sculptors, Ikeji Masquerade of Arondizuogu and the society at large. Beyond the income that comes to the artists in terms of sponsorship and sales, a lot of foreign exchange could be earned from the collection of textile and sculpture artworks by tourists, art collectors and other art enthusiasts.

However, a lot of challenges, such as poor documentation and inadequate government concern and commitment, economic relevance of textile and sculpture materials in Ikeji masquerade festival have not been given full acknowledgement. Meanwhile, if Nigeria is to attain rapid economic development the role of textile, sculpture and artists must be recognized and supported.
References


