ARTISTIC ELEMENTS IN THE RIVERS STATE CARNIVAL: AN EMBLEMATIC ATTRACTION FOR TOURISM PROMOTION

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Abstract
Many State Governments in Nigeria have taken to the hosting of carnivals as a means of encouraging tourism promotion, job and wealth creation, provision of social amenities and infrastructural development. In hosting these events various groups and troupes are invited to participate. Amongst these groups are various masquerade groups, dance troupes, comedians and local government areas floats. These floats host sculptures and other artistic elements. This paper is a documentation and analysis of the artistic elements in the carnival of the Rivers State of Nigeria.

Keywords: Arts, artistic, elements, carnival

Introduction
Rivers State Carnival is visibly enriched with numerous unique masquerades all of which are analysed below. However, there are still many other art elements prevalent in the event. These include, the magnificent and ostentatious carnival floats, theatrical elements such as dance, music and drama. Others include, sculpture, comedy and graphic design. Each of these elements is illustrated and discussed below.

Gokana local government area masquerades

Barimabari (2012) was the coordinator, Gokana Local Governemnt Area at the CARNIRIV 2012. The Local Government Area showcased the Zimko and Koromu masquerade groups respectively. He stated that these masquerades (Plates: I and II) perform based on the history and tradition of Gokana people, thereby showcasing the community’s cultural values to the world. He opined that, the Zimko masquerade group is made up of fifteen masquerades. The masquerade festival, he asserted, is celebrated yearly in Biera community in Gokana Local Government Area.
The Zimko masquerade of the Gokana from Ogoni ethnic group in Rivers State comes in a group of fifteen. As mentioned earlier by the informant, five were represented here due to logistic problem associated with the carnival. Each of the five masquerades chosen epitomizes the major groups of the masquerades. This is enounced in features and diversity of the mask won. The Zimko masquerades represent the animistic forces of nature, thus are made to have grotesque forms. Since they were meant for entertainment, these forms were to elicit various forms of responses from the viewer.

The masks won to elicit humour are three and have exaggerated forms. They have no jaw and their red painted mouths stretch from one ear to the other; which give the impression of a smiling face that resembles a mickey-mouse cartoon. They have shortened fore heads, and rounded eyes which give a wide- awake expression. They have exaggerated cheek bones which makes it difficult to see when viewed from below, their nose is disproportionately shortened which imbues it with a conical disposition. On the top of its head is a bird-like form which rests on the lower margin of the forehead. Just below it is a diadem painted in white.

Four out of the five masquerades are painted in black, with bright white eyes and white diadem. The three conical masks have diadems which vary in size. The mask on the left hand side of the picture in plate II is wide and rounded, while the others have dot-like diadems. No reason was given for this difference, but it may appear that since it is the first in the row of masquerades, it could be a distinguishing quality of a group leader. It dances with short staggered steps, and teasing demeanor which elicits laughter from the spectators.

The Zimko masquerade which evokes fear, is the grotesque one. It does not have exaggerated forms like the conical, but a stylized and slightly distorted form which gives it a weird appearance. It has slightly closed and swollen eyelid, a short nose that seems to start and end on the bridge of the nose. The mouth which projects frontally also stretches wide to the end of the back jaw and separates into two halves. The two halves are held together by loose strings which make the mouth flap. Perhaps this flappy motion is provoked through the facial gestures of the wearer. This is done intentionally especially when it gets close to the spectators for the purpose of frightening them. Besides the machete held by all the masks, this particular mask also carries an abstract object in its left hand which appears to be an ancestral totem.

The third group of mask is the one which evokes awe. Unlike its counterpart described above, it has a benign look and takes the form of an antelope. It has a light brown colour with dark brown stripes which runs from the top of the head straight down to the snout and it stands out from the group. It has an open mouth which flaps like a lapping dog. The eyes like its counterparts are bulgy and painted white which gives it a seemingly horrified expression. The horns are carved in naturalistic style and are darker than the rest of the head. This particular mask evokes a faint reflection of a chiwara mask. The gestures and movements of this particular masquerade with a sword is that of dignity and panache.

There are general qualities which run through the three major categories of the Zimko masquerades at the carnival. All the five masks are bedecked with raffia, hanging loosely to the shoulders of the wearers and appear nude right down to the waist. The nudity represents strength, courage and manly valour, and gives insight to the age and nature of the wearer. The well built muscular bodies of the wearers of the Zimko masquerades show that they are worn by the youth who by their nature must show strength and dynamism. The entire masquerades also wear an identical blue and white George fabric. The George fabric is one of the highly valued cloths worn by the south- south and south eastern ethnic groups in Nigeria, especially the Ogoni, Kalabari, Ijaw, Ikwerre and Ibibio. While they perform bare-footed, on their waist are also belts which carry the sheats or pouch of their swords. The cloth worn starts from the waist down to the knee, and is tied loosely to the side to give room for movement when dancing, jumping or running.

The masquerades have attendants who are also dressed in George wrapper with matching white singlets and dangling stripped head warmers worn by the dignitaries or title holders in some of the ethnic groups in the south —south and south eastern states. The attendants regulate the activities and excesses of these masquerades.
Barimabari (2012) and Barikpowa (2012) the coordinator and leader of Koromu masquerade respectively were in agreement that the masquerade group is of the Yege community in ward fourteen (14) of Gokana Local Government Area. Barikpowa (2012) emphasized that the Koromu masquerade group is owned by an elderly man who is too old to attend the event. He stated that the group performs during chieftaincy coronations, burials and cultural festivals. There are back home chiefs and elders that guide and head this group who could not make it to this event due to their age, he stressed. The informant claimed that the group is gender friendly as women are admitted as members, hence are allowed to attend the group’s meetings. He opined that the membership of the group are much more in number, but due to the capacity of the vehicle sent to the group by the Local Government Area to contain or convey them to the venue of the event, few numbers were present.

The Koromu masquerade of Yege people are fifteen in number and are divided into three major groups, the Anganaga, the Yaakooko and a third unnamed group. The symbolic significance of the entire Koromu masquerade to the Yege people is that, they represent the earthly benefactors of the spirit of their ancestors, the reminders of their heroic deeds, the subtle custodians and promoters of the people’s culture (Barikpowa, 2012). Each of these fifteen masquerades was made to symbolize one form of an animal or the other, the cow, crocodile, fish, hen, antelope, etcetera: the form may not exactly resemble these animals, but their dance steps mimic the behaviour of the particular animal they represent.

The general characteristics of these masquerades are their small white and black faces covered with cap raffia and mufflers which drop right down to the shoulders, transforming them into neckless and grotesque forms. All of them except three are adorned with white singlets, shorts and raffia which come down to the thigh and knee. All koromu masquerades wear long multicoloured sox which stretch up to the knee. The three that are not adorned with white shorts are the Aganaga. They are the elders, and wrapped around them are george wrappers which flow down to the ankle. Like their Zimko counterpart, the Yege highly regard the “George” wrappers, and see them as an adornment of nobility and wealth. They wear coloured long sleeve shirts or sweaters of black, yellow, striped black and red. Since the Aganaga are elderly masquerades, their dance steps are calm, graceful, studied and dignified. The group that is adorned with the yellow and striped black and red, performs during marriage and chieftaincy coronation, while the one that wears black performs during burial of a prominent individual, royal or title holders in the community.

The Yaakooko masquerade group represents the youth. The masks worn by them are white in colour with black marks, representing the cornea of the eye, the eyebrow, mustache and beard. Unlike the Aganaga, the Yaakooko masquerade’s dance steps are dynamic, aggressive and athletic. It is interesting to note that their look and facial marks represent the age and category of the masks. The ones that are small and are devoid of mustache and facial marks, are perhaps the youth Yaakooko while the mature and nameless group look mature in appearance, have mustache. The Aganaga that represent the elderly

Plate III: Koromu Masquerade Group, 2012, Photograph by Emmanuel Wesley Okachi.
look aged, have beards and facial marks. They look grotesque and their masks carry dolls on their heads which signifies their position as leaders and the revered custodians of the people’s culture and traditions. They also have those who wear white singlets and multicoloured George materials. They play significant roles in checking the excesses of violent masquerades.

The symbolic significance of the stripped red, black and white head warmers is nobility and sacredness. Blue represents royalty, red and yellow represent danger, sacrifice, dynamism and strength, while the white colour represents purity and peace, and the black worn by the elderly represents mortality.

Float
The name “float” is derived from the first floats which were decorated barges, and were towed along canals with ropes held by parade marchers on the shore. They were first introduced by the churches in the middle ages as mobile stages for religious plays where pageant wagons were used as movable scenery for passion plays (CarnivalArts.org.uk). Built and decorated by artists, the wagons were most noticeable during Corpus Christi (Festival) established in 1264 by Pope Urban IV where 48 wagons would be pulled through the town with each one representing a play in the Corpus Christi cycle (CarnivalArts.org.uk).

At the time of research, floats in the Rivers State carnival had become essential artistic adornments with characteristics like reliability and functionality. The floats took a lot of effort and time to build, because they also served as performance space for carnival artistes. The floats themselves, played an important role in supporting the troupes, who took part in the procession by providing them well decorated mobile platforms in conformity with the theme of the year’s event, and accompanying music played by a disc jockey or a live band. Participating Local Government Areas (LGAs) were mandated to build and parade with their respective floats, as exemplified below.

Plate IV: Title: Obio/ Akpor LGA Float, Front View, 2012. Photograph by Emmanuel Wesley Okachi.
Floats in the Carnival Rivers are therefore, a distinct and unavoidable feature. They represent the dynamism, gaiety and lively people of the state. Carnivals without floats will be dull and bereft of the pump and peagentry which characterize such events. They manifest in all shades and manner of vehicular decorations which take the form of portraiture, installations, and animal life such as crocodiles, shark, whale, lion and peacock, as exemplified in the Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. These animals are perhaps never randomly chosen, as perhaps they are of great symbolic importance to the particular ethnic group within the state that displays them. They are either representative of the occupation, bravery totems or life style of the people.

The Obio/Akpor Local Government Area float captured in plates IV, V, VI and VII is a vehicular truck decoration which takes the form of a bird. At first glance, the eye confronts a colourful mysterious peacock gliding towards the beholder. On close examination the distinguishing features of a peacock make itself evident on the body of the truck. The small head, long neck and upper wings of the bird covered in blue silk fabric, is mounted on the front roof of the driver and passengers seat. The blue lower torso of the peacock is decorated with a gold plated fabric helm which ends in pleats of green silk fabric, which hangs loosely on the rim of the upper windscreen. The windscreen is left bare to give an uninterrupted view to the driver of the float. The bunnet, headlights, chassis, down to the front tyres are covered in jade green fabrics decorated with various colours and motifs. Between the two headlights is a circular yellow and blue form which represents the logo of the Local Government Area. On the circular logo is a blue half circular form with jagged edges which represent industry. In the middle of this form is a structure like an off shore rig, which represents oil and gas industries within the Local Government Area. Below it, is a hoe and cutlass depicted in alternate diagonal position representing farming. Bordering this logo are spiral motifs painted in orange and dark green hues.

The sides of the float have masks forms and motifs depicted on them. Perhaps the masks are stylized representation of a major component of the logo of the Rivers State Tourism Development Agency (RSTDA). The other
stylized floral motifs are used purely for their aesthetic purposes. The striking features of the float are the mask forms which are represented in low relief and painted with various shades of blue, purple, pink, orange, green and brown. These masks are framed on the lower part, with rhythmic relief form painted in brown and highlighted with gold. Attached to these are multicoloured silk fabric pleats of blue, green, yellow, pink and brown stretching round the float. On the upper sides of the masks to the upper part of the truck, is covered a viridian green cloth with a repeated pattern of fish motif. Above this covering is a model house which perhaps gives further insight into the educational institutions located in the Local Government Area.

Inside the float are huge loud speakers with music playing in high pitch, expressing the mood of the fiesta. Also sighted are human occupants partially seen engaging in one activity or the other. On the left hand side of the float are graphic depictions of a semblance of female figures carrying basins full of various wares and commodities which give vivid insight into commercial activities inherent within the Local Government Area.

Music and dance

Plate VIII: Emuoha LGA Dance Troupe, 2012, Photograph by Emmanuel Wesley Okachi.

Theatrical elements such as music and dance play important roles in cultural festivals. The close relationship between dance and music is based on the fact that both are organized in rhythmic patterns, thus the rhythm of the accompanying music of respective Local Government Area troupes in the Rivers State Carnival, determined the rhythm of the dance which gave emphasis, or helped the respective performers, revelers, tourists and dancers maintain the same beat. The rhythmic pattern of music determines the style of the dramatic quality of dance as inherent in its tempo, beat and dynamics in the Rivers State Carnival as epitomized in the Emohua LGA troupe performance shown in plate VIII above.

The male dancers dress in an orange george wrapper striped with brown, with milk coloured Etibo shirts, and each holding a white handkerchief in each hand. They were supported behind by their female counterparts who dress in striped blue wrapper and a brown blouse also with a handkerchief in each hand. At the background are the drummers all male seated, and dress like the male dancers, while the singers are standing behind the drummers on the same constructed elevated platform.
According to Iheanyichukwu (2012), the masquerade group as shown in (plate IX) above known as the, “Action Boys Masquerade group” were from the Ndele community of Rivers State. He asserted that, the masquerade group came into being over twenty-seven years ago. According to him, there were more than sixteen masquerades within this group, some of which are ‘Ogu’ (Tiger), ‘Wokom’ (Cat), ‘Eshi’ (Pig), and others whose names he could not remember.

The informant was of the view that, the masquerades’ display symbolized what could be likened to the wild animals’ threat to the community and their eventual elimination by the community hunters. In its theatrical performance, the group imitated hunters shooting and eventually eliminating the carnivorous animals that endangered the lives of domestic animals and humans in the community. The eventual victory of the hunters in doing away with the wild animals was accompanied with a wild jubilation in the community. The lessons to be drawn from this performance were those on love, unity, and care for one another within the community, resilience, victory and bravery of the ethnic groups within the community.

**Graphic Design**

Plate X: “CARNIRIV 2012, International Aquatic Fiesta Poster”, 2012
Photograph by Emmanuel Wesley Okachi.

Photograph: Emmanuel Wesley Okachi.
Graphic design is a creative process that combines art and technology to communicate ideas. Designers can develop their concepts through the combination of image-based and type-based designs (American Institute of Graphic Art, 2014). Images can be incredibly powerful and compelling as a tool of communication. An image conveys not only information but also moods and emotions that represent ideas a client wants communicated. Therefore, visual forms, whether typography or handmade lettering when well crafted on a poster, can arrest the attention of the public.

The poster shown in plate X above advertised the Rivers State International Aquatic Fiesta or Boat Regatta, held annually at the Rivers State Tourist Beach, Borikiri. It captures the essence of the message, by the use of relevant dominant images of men paddlers in a canoe at sea. The entire poster, which is about 120 cm by 240 cm, is dominated by white and blue hue with an appropriate use of letters of varying sizes to communicate the essence of the poster. The CARNIRIV poster shown in plate XI is dominated by an imposing image of a colourful Pioru masquerade of the Ogu/Bolo Local Government Area. Boldly written in white at the top of the poster is the word CARNIRIV. This was complimented with different sizes of letters used underneath in good proportion. The use of images and typography on both posters are successful as they encapsulate the intended message on the designed posters.

Comedy

Plate XII: Oyibo I, 2012, Photograph by Emmanuel Wesley Okachi.

Comedy as an art makes use of humour as a driving force. The aim therefore is to elicit laughter from the audience through entertainment when properly delivered. Oyibo I, shown in Plate L, is one of such comedians. From the street parade to the carnival venue, Oyibo amused his audience with his unusual dance steps and gestures that kept his viewers glued and in expectation. His dress sense shown in plates XII and XIII attracted comments and attention from tourists, revelers and passersby. Oyibo, who was dark in complexion, was clad with a multi

coloured (yellow, red and blue) trouser, with a black pair of canvas to match. In his grasp are two white handkerchiefs which complement his white and red coloured cap, an oversized pair of sunglasses that equally compliment his painted moustache and side beards. Coming in contact with Oyibo the first time, gives one the impression of sighting a clown.

Plate XIII portrays Oyibo II on stage at the main bowl of the Liberation Stadium, Elekahia. He was geared up in a three-quarter-sized pair of trousers, waist coat, striped sucks, hand gloves, cap and his usual sunglass of white in colour, which are in contrast with a brown long sleeve shirt, black pair of shoes and an orange coloured rope for a neck tie.

Sculptures
Sculpture, as a predominant form of art among the Africans, functioned in a social and religious context. Due to globalization however, African sculptures have begun to be used as avenues to elucidate contemporary statements. This is what Appadurai (2000) terms as “Movement of Techniques in social Rupture”. In the same vein, Ajibade et al (2011) lay credence to the above assertion when they note that “for as Africa changed or ruptured into cash economies driven by western ideals, previous self-contained cultural patterns and commodities acculturated to fit the new frames dictated by the imperatives of globalisation”.

The floats in the Rivers State Carnival were used to advertise products, project cultural images like sculpture and activities akin to some Local Government Areas. These sculptures were predominantly mounted on mobile floats of Local Government Areas or were incorporated as part of the sculptures. These included, Omuma, (plates XIV a and b and Okirika Local Government Areas (Plates XIXa and b).

The sculpture represented by the Omuma Local Government Area derives from its rich masquerade and wrestling traditions. It is a huge mask which derives its forms from the structure of the truck used for the Local Government Area float. The float mask is made of stuffed silk and dyed fabrics of orange, sap green, purple, pink and lavender colours. The mask appears to be a royal type whose headdress is a crown of orange and green colour. The entire face is covered with a spotted purple and white cloth. The eye is represented as yellow ochre and encircled with white rope. The cornea of the eye is depicted as small black dot, painted directly. The eye brow is
made of a purple velvet material stained with faint white spots. The mask has a long prominent nose which stretches from the upper windscreen of the truck to the front of the bonnet. The two mud guards of the Mac-truck used act as its well developed jaws. The stuffed deep-pink mouth is seen in the area between the head lights, while the chin is shaped with a green, orange and yellow stuffed fabric. The tooth is a plain white cardboard paper which also doubles as a poster of the Local Government Area.

Another sculpture showcased by the Local Government Area is a composition of two elongated figures engaged in a wrestling contest as represented in plate XIVb. Wrestling is an age long tradition of most of the ethnic groups in the State, especially the Omuma, Etche, Iwerre and Ahoada Local Government Areas. These ethnic groups place high premium on physical strength, valour, heroism, courage and fearlessness. The Omuma people are of the belief that, for a man to be successful and respected amongst his peers and society, he must not be effeminate but physically strong and brave. Such a man is tested in a wrestling contest with one of his peers or kins men.

The heads of these figures are modeled in a naturalistic manner. The armatures are made of mild steel rods and rapped in brown silk cloth to give the feeling of a human skin. The skin is further partinated with white paint to give the impression of a real wrestler whose body is embellished with white chalk before the wrestling bout. They are dressed in short George wrappers tied loosely around the waist. As in a real contest, they are watched by spectators who are real human beings, dressed in a sleeveless Tee-shirts and wrappers, as they form a ring round these sculptures that are on the Local Government Area float.

Photograph by Emmanuel Wesley Okachi.

Though the Okirika float in Plate XVa is devoid of decoration frontally, it possesses a feature of interest. It is the one of the Local Government floats that a gun boat is built on (XVb). It is covered with a white fabric, which derived its shape from armatures of mild steel rods. There are three sails and masts of pink, blue and green colours. The masts have ridges as if in a turbulent storm.

On one of the mast’, projects a triangular British flag, perhaps depicting the British Union Jack which gives a sense of history and the experience of the Okirika people. As a coastal community, it may be a reminder of the interaction of the people with the erstwhile colonial masters. An individual can be sighted standing at the extreme left of the gunboat dressed in pirate attire. The imagery of a pirate may not put across a positive message, it could perhaps give a hint of the deceit and unscrupulous exploits of the colonialist. Such exploits can still be seen and felt in the crude oil exploration and seismic activities of some multinational companies in the entire Niger Delta region of the south – south in Nigeria.

The gun boat has six guns conspicuously projecting from the front sides which make a clear statement of the nature of crude oil exploration and exploitation in the region. There are other prominent sculptural forms which
include crude oil well heads and pipelines painted in black, silver and red. Other features that can be seen are protective helmets hanging on the constructed well-heads and pipelines made of mild steel pipes. The rigs and well-heads is a bold statement of the rich reserve of oil and gas in Okirika Local Government Area in particular and Rivers State in general.

Conclusion

This paper have been able to analyse and document some artistic elements such as, floats, sculptures, posters, comedy dance, drama and masquerades in the Rivers State Carnival. It is recommended that researchers or authors should investigate carnival costumes in carnivals.

References


Interviewed Persons

Hon. Iheanyichukwu Egwu is the Adviser on Culture and Tourism to the Emohua Local Government Chairman. The interview by the Researcher was conducted at the Elekahia Stadium, venue of Carnival Rivers 2012 on December 11, 2012.

Mr. Barima Bari Coordinator Gokana LGA being interviewed by the Researcher at the Carnival Rivers conducted at the Elekahia Stadium, venue of Carnival Rivers on December 11, 2012.

Mr. Bari Kpow Leader Koromu masquerade group of Gokana Local Government Area interviewed by the Researcher at the Carnival Rivers, conducted at the Elekahia Stadium, venue of Carnival Rivers on December 11, 2012.