

The Semiotics, Icons, and Indices of the Opobo Nwaotam Masquerade Costume

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Abstract

This study examines the semiotics, icons, and indices of the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade costume, a significant cultural tradition in the Opobo Kingdom of Nigeria. The Nwaotam masquerade, with its captivating visual elements and deep-rooted symbolism, serves as a reflection of the Opobo people's beliefs, values, and identity. The research delves into the various components of the costume, including the mask, headgear, attire, accessories, and body paintings, to uncover the intricate layers of meaning and cultural significance embedded within them. By exploring the semiotic elements, iconic representations, and indexical relationships present in the Nwaotam masquerade costume, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the cultural ambiance and perspectives associated with this living tradition in southeastern Nigeria. The findings of this research provide insights into the historical evolution, spiritual connections, and sociocultural relevance of the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade, illuminating its pivotal role in preserving and transmitting the rich cultural heritage of the Opobo people.

Keywords: *Opobo Nwaotam, Masquerade, Semiotics, Costume and Symbols*

Introduction

The Opobo Nwaotam masquerade is a captivating cultural tradition that has been an integral part of the Opobo Kingdom in Nigeria for generations. This vibrant and visually striking performance art holds deep significance for the Opobo people, serving as a tangible expression of their beliefs, values, and collective identity. At the heart of the Nwaotam masquerade lies the intricate costume worn by the masquerader, which functions as a canvas for the embodiment of cultural symbolism and spiritual connections. The costume, with its carefully curated components, including the mask, headgear, attire, accessories, and body paintings, collectively weaves a rich tapestry of meaning that reflects the Opobo people's worldview and their enduring relationship with their ancestral heritage.

This study delves into the semiotics, icons, and indices that are embedded within the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade costume, offering an in-depth exploration of the cultural significance, symbolic resonance, and historical evolution of this captivating performance tradition. By examining the intricate layers of meaning that underlie the various elements of the costume, this research aims to shed light on the deeper cultural ambiance and perspectives that have shaped and

sustained the Nwaotam masquerade over time. Through a meticulous analysis of the semiotic elements, iconic representations, and indexical relationships present in the masquerade costume, this study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of the Opobo people's cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and artistic expressions. The findings of this research will not only illuminate the unique qualities of the Nwaotam masquerade but also provide valuable insights into the rich tapestry of cultural traditions that continue to thrive in southeastern Nigeria.

Concept of Costume

The concept of costume extends beyond mere clothing; it encompasses the identity, culture, and context within which it is presented. A costume can serve as a reflection of societal norms, historical periods, and individual personalities. Scholars have extensively analyzed the multifaceted nature of costume, emphasizing its roles in performance, social interaction, and personal expression. One significant aspect of costume is its role in performance art. In her work, *The Costume in Performance*, costume designer and scholar Judith Dolan states:

Costume is not merely a representation of a character but a vital component in the storytelling process. It transforms an actor's physicality, enhances the audience's perception, and serves as a visual cue that informs the narrative's tone and setting. A well-designed costume connects the actor to the character, creating a bridge of understanding that enriches the performance. (45)

This highlights the transformative power of costume in performance, illustrating how it can shape both the actor's portrayal and the audience's experience. The cultural significance of costume is another area of interest among scholars. In *Costume: A Cultural History*, Christopher Breward asserts:

Costume is a powerful signifier of identity, operating on multiple levels from the personal to the societal. It is a means of communication that conveys messages about class, gender, ethnicity, and even political affiliation. Understanding costume requires an appreciation of the context in which it exists, as it is deeply intertwined with cultural narratives and historical events. (78)

Breward's insights underline the idea that costumes are not static but rather dynamic representations of evolving cultural landscapes. Moreover, the psychological impact of costume on individual identity is explored by Elizabeth Wilson in her book *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, she writes:

Costume can act as an extension of the self, a way for individuals to express their inner thoughts, desires, and social affiliations. Through the act of dressing, people negotiate their identities, whether they are conforming to societal expectations or rebelling against them. This dialogue between self and society is a fundamental

aspect of human experience, and costume plays a crucial role in this interaction. (102)

Wilson's perspective emphasizes the personal agency involved in the act of costuming, suggesting that individuals use clothing as a means of self-expression. Costume has historically been a reflection of social stratification and cultural values. From the elaborate garments of the aristocracy to the functional attire of the working class, clothing choices have been dictated by economic status, gender roles, and cultural heritage. Analyzing costume through historical lenses reveals the complexities of societal structures and the ways in which clothing both reflects and challenges these systems. Furthermore, the role of costume in social rituals and ceremonies cannot be overlooked. In his essay "The Significance of Costume in Rituals," anthropologist Victor Turner writes:

Costumes in ritual contexts serve as markers of identity and community. They signify belonging, transition, and transformation. In many cultures, the donning of specific costumes is integral to the performance of rituals, as they embody the values and beliefs of the community. Through costume, individuals connect with their heritage and reinforce social bonds. (190)

Turner's perspective emphasizes the communal aspect of costume, positioning it as a vital element in the construction of social identity through shared practices. The interplay between costume and gender is another critical area of scholarship. Costume plays a pivotal role in the representation of gender, often dictating the ways in which individuals are perceived and treated in society. The choices made in costume can reinforce or subvert gender norms, making it a powerful tool in the ongoing dialogue about gender identity and expression. Understanding the implications of costume choices is essential for grasping the complexities of gender dynamics in contemporary culture. In essence, the concept of costume is a rich and multifaceted area of study that encompasses performance, culture, identity, history, and social interaction. Through the insights of various scholars, it becomes clear that costumes are not mere garments but powerful symbols that reflect and shape the human experience. As society continues to evolve, the significance of costume will undoubtedly remain a critical topic for exploration and analysis.

A Brief Concept of Culture and Festival: Interrelationships

The concept of culture is an idea that permeates different disciplines especially when treating society. This is because the society produces the culture and in turn the culture guides the people. According to Larson and Keane (2013, p. 3), culture can be defined as "the learned and shared

patterns of behavior, beliefs, and values that characterize a group or society." Similarly, festivals are events that are typically held to celebrate a particular cultural or religious tradition (Bruner, 2016, pp. 2-3). In addition to the above, Krama in his book, *Sociology of Drama*, opines that;

Culture implies the cumulative experience of the people and the various strategies put in place to enable the survival of the people in a specific environment at a particular period (2016, p. 10).

From the foregoing, it becomes pivotal to note that culture is part of the society and culture is developed overtime to guide society. Therefore, culture acts a preservation of a particular society. It also serves as a means of identification. Since culture is a way of life of a particular people; it is sage to say that festivals and masquerade performances and other sort of activities for communal purposes and consumption that has been collectively accepted and practiced over time, forms part of the culture of the people. Therefore, Ekpeyong observes that;

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, values, morals, habits, customs and any other capability acquired by man as a member of society (qtd. in Krama, 2016, p. 9).

One important aspect of culture is the idea of cultural relativism, which recognizes that different societies and groups have their own unique cultural norms and values (Larson & Keane, 2013, p. 23). This means that what might be considered acceptable or appropriate behavior in one culture might not be viewed in the same way in another culture. For example, in some cultures, it is common to eat certain types of animals that are not typically consumed in other parts of the world. Another important concept in the study of culture and festivals is the idea of cultural appropriation. This refers to the act of taking elements from one culture and using them in a different context without proper understanding or respect for their original meaning (Beyer, 2017, p. 56). This can be a controversial issue, as it can be seen as disrespectful to the original culture and could perpetuate harmful stereotypes. According to *African Traditional Theatre and Drama: Themes and Perspectives (n.d)*, "festivals may be formalized or unformalized rituals that aid the cultural expression of a people in attempt to maintain a balanced environment" (Krama, p. 32). In collaboration to the above, he goes further to explain that;

Festivals are powerful transformers of every day life into something beautiful, strange and rich... Festivals are preserve of total theatre as they show case the historic wind, traditional technology, occupation, and other creative expressions. Festivals are periods of heavy human movement both for recreation and spiritual purposes (p. 33).

When it comes to festivals, there are a wide variety of different types that are celebrated. Some festivals are religious in nature, while others are more secular or tied to historical events. Regardless of specific type of festival, they often serve as important cultural events that allow people to come together and celebrate their shared traditions and values (Bruner, 2016, p. 10). In addition to celebrating culture, festivals can also play an important role in the tourism industry. Many festivals attract large numbers of visitors from around the world, which can have significant economic benefits for the local community (Richards & Palmer, 2010, p. 21). However, there are also concerns that festivals that have become overly commercialized could lose some of their cultural significance and authenticity. Overall, it is clear that culture and festivals are complex concepts that are deeply intertwined. By studying these concepts, we can gain a greater understanding of the ways in which people learn, share, and celebrate their cultural traditions and values.

Origin of the Opobo Nwaotam Masquerade

The Nwaotam masquerade is based on the story of a celebrated warrior, who according to legend, fought a fierce battle that led to the victory of his people over neighboring communities. The masquerade is usually performed during traditional festivals such as the New Yam Festival or Iri Ji Ndi Igbo. The costume worn by the masquerade is made up of different materials, including raffia, cloth, and colorful beads. The head of the masquerade is usually styled with finely woven raffia, cowries, and beads, while the body is dressed in colorful raffia that hides the masquerade's identity. The Nwaotam masquerade is believed to be a manifestation of ancestral spirits and, therefore, is responsible for blessing, protection, and fertility in the community. The Opobo Nwaotam masquerade has its roots in the Opobo Kingdom's history, which was established in the 19th century by King Jaja of Opobo. King Jaja, a renowned merchant and statesman, formed Opobo as a prominent trading center, attracting people from various ethnic groups across the Niger Delta region. With the population's diverse backgrounds and cultures, a fusion of traditions and customs occurred, influencing the development of the Nwaotam masquerade. The exact origins of the Nwaotam masquerade are embedded in oral history and have been passed down through generations. According to local narratives, the masquerade is believed to have been introduced to the Opobo people by migrants from the ancient Benin Kingdom. These migrants brought their cultural practices, including masquerade traditions, which then merged with the existing Opobo culture, giving birth to the unique Nwaotam masquerade as it is known today.

The early development of the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade coincided with the consolidation of the Opobo Kingdom under King Jaja's rule. King Jaja, recognizing the importance of cultural traditions in fostering unity and identity, encouraged the growth and refinement of the Nwaotam masquerade. He actively supported and protected its practice and provided resources for its sustenance. Over time, the Nwaotam masquerade became deeply integrated into the fabric of Opobo society. It took on various roles and significance, serving as a symbol of communal unity, power, and spiritual connections. It was believed that the masquerade had the ability to communicate with ancestral spirits and deities, and its performances were considered sacred and awe-inspiring.

The Opobo Nwaotam masquerade's aesthetics and components evolved throughout history, influenced by both indigenous and external cultures. The masquerade's costume, including the mask, headgear, attire, and accessories, underwent changes, incorporating elements from neighboring communities and trade partners. The acquisition of new materials such as cowries, beads, and fabrics from trading activities enhanced the costume's richness and symbolic value. The Nwaotam masquerade is not static but adapts to both societal and cultural changes. It has weathered different political and religious climates, evolving to maintain its relevance and cultural significance. Despite facing challenges under colonial rule, where masquerade activities were often discouraged, the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade managed to survive and continue to be a celebrated cultural tradition. Today, the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade remains a vibrant and cherished part of Opobo culture. It is performed on various occasions, including annual festivals, coronations, funerals, and cultural celebrations. The masquerade performances continue to captivate both local and international audiences, providing a glimpse into the rich heritage and artistic traditions of the Opobo Kingdom.

The Semiotics, Icons, and Indices of the Opobo Nwaotam Masquerade Costume

Every society has a peculiarity and certain codes that guides or explain certain phenomenon and only a member of such society can decipher or decode the embedded meanings of such codes. This provokes the purposes the semiotics. Semiotics align itself with significancation: meanings assign to signs, symbols and codes. Accordingly, Julie Umukoro asserts that;

Semiotics is a science that studies micro and macro signs against a given social or cultural milieu, with the ultimate intention of establishing their relative significance in the meaning-making process of that society (p. 5).

To buttress further, she goes on to quote Danesi that “the primary task if semiotics is to identify, document and classify the main types of signs and how they are used in representational activities” (Umukoro, n.d., p. 5). Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation. In the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade costume, every element plays a significant role in conveying meaning and preserving the cultural identity. The ensemble incorporates vibrant colors, intricate adornments, and carefully curated fabrics that combine to create a visual language that reflects the values and beliefs of the community. Masquerades are an integral part of cultural celebrations in many African societies, acting as carriers of ancient traditions and symbols. In the Opobo Kingdom of Nigeria, the Nwaotam masquerade holds particular significance. Its mesmerizing costume showcases a rich assortment of semiotic elements, icons, and indices that represent the cultural heritage and belief system and perspectives of the Opobo people.

One of the iconic elements of the Nwaotam masquerade costume is the headpiece. It usually features an elaborate arrangement of feathers, representing the avian world and symbolizing the connection between the spirit realm and the physical world. The feathers are meticulously selected for their color and type, with each carrying its own symbolic significance. Vibrant and striking feathers are chosen to imbue the masquerade with vibrant energy, power, and elevated spirits. The headpiece also incorporates masks, often carved with meticulous detail and representing a distinct, ancestral face at the center of the masquerade's spiritual essence and existence. Another prominent icon in the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade costume is the garb worn by the masquerader. The attire encompasses layers of brilliantly colored fabrics and textiles, symbolizing Opobo's rich history and heritage. These fabrics are often chosen for their intricate motifs and patterns, which signify important cultural or historical events. The garments may also include textile fragments from significant events or even ancestral cloths, embodying the continuity of tradition from one generation to the next. Additionally, the use of accessories, such as beaded necklaces, anklets, and bracelets, helps to enhance the symbolism of the masquerade costume. Beads hold significant importance in African cultures, often representing wealth, status, spirituality, and protection. The intricate patterns and color combinations of the beads worn by the masquerader communicate specific messages, such as the lineage of the wearer, their social status, or even the intended message of the masquerade itself.

In the realm of semiotics, icons and indices are crucial components. Icons are signs that bear a visual resemblance to the thing they represent, while indices are signs that suggest a causal or

contingent relationship. In the case of the Nwaotam masquerade costume, icons and indices are present in various forms. For example, the feathers evoke the image and spirit of birds, indexing the masquerader's connection with the divine. The masks, with their resemblance to ancestral faces, represent an iconic link to the spirits of Opobo's ancestors. The Opobo Nwaotam masquerade costume serves as a powerful embodiment of the cultural identity and belief system of the Opobo people. Through semiotic symbols, iconic representations, and indexical connections, the costume communicates deep layers of meaning, tradition, and spirituality. It represents not only a historical artifact but a living testament to the Opobo people's values, worldview, and their unwavering commitment to preserving their cultural heritage.

The cultural symbolism of Nwaotam masquerade costume is deep and varies from one community to another. For example, the raffia skirt found on the masquerade's lower part represents strength and vitality, while the red cloth on the masquerade's head symbolizes blood, courage, bravery, and sacrifice. The cowries, beads, and other accessories have a significant historical background in Igbo society. During the 19th century, cowries were used as the chief currency for trade transactions and were also exchanged by Igbo women as a means of gathering social prestige. The significance of the cowries is evident in the Nwaotam masquerade costume, where they symbolize wealth, power, and authority. Furthermore, the Nwaotam masquerade costume also signifies a community's identity and its socio-economic status. For instance, the masquerade's costume is usually adorned with expensive beads, cowries, and silk cloth, which reveal a community's financial strength and prosperity. Also, the Nwaotam masquerade is a significant source of income for masquerade performers and costume makers during traditional festivals. Despite the cultural relevance of the Nwaotam masquerade costume, its perspectives and significance have continued to evolve with modernity and globalization. The emergence of new technologies has impacted the production of the costume, resulting in the use of synthetic materials in place of raffia fibers, cowries, and other natural materials. Additionally, socio-economic factors such as urbanization have created a shift in the cultural ambiance of the masquerade, as younger generations no longer hold the same level of reverence for traditional cultures as older generations.

The Nwaotam masquerade costume is a prominent aspect of cultural heritage and tradition in southeastern Nigeria. It holds significant cultural, historical, and artistic value, playing a crucial role in the community's social, religious, and festive events. This article aims to explore the cultural ambiance and perspectives associated with the Nwaotam masquerade costume, providing

an in-depth study of its components, symbolism, and significance. The Nwaotam masquerade costume is an intricate ensemble comprising various elements, each with specific meanings and symbolism. The costume typically includes a mask, elaborate headgear, a colorful attire, accessories, and intricate body paintings. These components combine to create a visually captivating and culturally significant representation of the masquerade. One crucial aspect of the masquerade costume is the mask. Masks are traditionally handcrafted by skilled artisans using wood, coral beads, ivory, and other local materials. Each mask design has distinct features, representing different mythological or ancestral characters. These masks often feature bold and exaggerated facial expressions, combining human and animal traits to convey a diverse range of emotions and characters. They serve as a medium for communication between spirits, ancestors, and the living, enabling a spiritual connection and interaction during masquerade performances. The headgear is another essential part of the Nwaotam masquerade costume, contributing to its visual grandeur. The headgear is typically made of feathers, beads, and fabrics intricately woven together. It often takes the shape of a towering crown or headdress, symbolizing the masquerade's status and spiritual significance. The choice of feathers and beads used in the headgear holds cultural and spiritual connotations, representing qualities such as hierarchy, fertility, power, and protection.

The attire worn by the masquerade dancer is equally important. It is usually made from bright and colorful fabrics, reflecting the vibrancy of the culture and festivities. The patterns and motifs adorning the attire are often symbolic, representing ancestral spirits, natural elements, or historical events. Each design holds profound cultural significance, sometimes conveying messages or stories that have been passed down through generations. Accessories complete the overall appearance of the Nwaotam masquerade costume. These may include jewelry, anklets, wristbands, and armbands. These decorative elements are often made of precious metals, beads, or shells and are worn to accentuate the costume's significance and aesthetic appeal. The choice of accessories may vary depending on the masquerade character and the occasion. Body paintings are the final touch that brings the Nwaotam masquerade costume to life. Elders or skilled artists meticulously paint intricate designs on the masquerade dancer's body using natural pigments. These paintings often draw inspiration from nature, animals, or significant cultural symbols. The body paintings not only enhance the visual impact but also convey spiritual and ceremonial meanings associated with the masquerade's role and purpose. The Nwaotam masquerade costume embodies deep-rooted cultural

and religious beliefs, reflecting the community's history, values, and spirituality. It serves as a link between the physical and spiritual realms, connecting the living with their ancestors and deities. The masquerade performances take place during various occasions, including harvest festivals, initiation ceremonies, and important community celebrations.

At these events, the masquerade dancer assumes the role of an ancestral or mythological figure, embodying their characteristics and channeling their powers. The masquerade is believed to possess otherworldly abilities, healing powers, and the ability to bring good fortune. By wearing the costume, the masquerade dancer becomes a vessel for the ancestral spirits, allowing them to communicate with the living, bless the community, and ensure the continuity of cultural values and traditions. The Nwaotam masquerade costume, with its rich symbolism, intricate craftsmanship, and spiritual significance, represents the collective consciousness of the community. It is a source of pride, identity, and cultural preservation. The costume's ambiance is deeply rooted in historical narratives, mythologies, and religious beliefs, allowing the people to connect with their ancestors and maintain a strong cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The Opobo Nwaotam masquerade has a deep history and cultural significance within the Opobo Kingdom. Its origin can be traced back to the intermingling of cultures and traditions during the establishment of the Opobo Kingdom. Over time, the masquerade became an integral part of the community's identity, evolving and adapting to the changing times while preserving its core values and symbolism. Understanding the history and origin of the Opobo Nwaotam masquerade is essential for appreciating its cultural significance and its contribution to the Opobo people's cultural heritage. The Nwaotam masquerade costume embodies the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people and serves as a manifestation of ancestral spirits. The costume's symbolism and significance have deep roots in Igbo culture, representing strength, wealth, power, and authority. However, the perspectives and cultural practices of the Nwaotam masquerade costume have continued to evolve with changing times, and have been impacted by modernity and globalization. As such, there is a need to preserve and protect traditional cultural practices like the Nwaotam masquerade costume to ensure they are not wiped out by rapidly changing social and cultural realities. In conclusion, the Nwaotam masquerade costume holds a pivotal role in Nigerian culture, representing a convergence of artistic, spiritual, and traditional values. Its components, including the mask, headgear, attire, accessories, and body paintings, work together to create a visually

captivating and spiritually charged cultural emblem. Understanding the cultural ambiance and perspectives associated with the Nwaotam masquerade costume is crucial for appreciating the significance of this living tradition and its contribution to the cultural identity of southeastern Nigeria.

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