

INDIGENOUS DRESS AS A PREREQUISITE FOR CULTURAL
PRESERVATION IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN FESTIVAL: 2011
OZURUIMO IN FOCUS

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Abstract

The article is designed to investigate the place of indigenous dress in the preservation and propagation of Nigerian cultural heritage, using 2011 Ozuruimo as a case in point. People are known for their customs and traditions and one of the elements of cultural identity is the use of dress. It defines the status, origin, sex and cultural identity of the wearer. The method used for this paper is the analytical study whereby the dress patterns and make-up used in 2011 Ozuruimo were analysed in order to assess their cultural undertones and relevance. The study observes that a nation without a culture is aimed at extinction and that it is only through the celebration of festivals that the culture of the people are showcased through their body adornments which enables the world identify and place them in proper geo-cultural context. The study concludes that in this era of globalization where western influence seems to be the order of the day, there is need to preserve and propagate the culture of the people through the use of indigenous dress and body designs so that our cultural identity and heritage will not go into extinction.

Keywords: Indigenous dress, Culture, Ozuruimo, ISCAC, Preservation, Traditional African festival

Introduction

Throughout human's history, body adornments and facial decorations have always featured prominently in the identification and differentiation of one person from the other. According to Tracie Utch

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in Okeke "... these practices abound as part of the peoples cultural heritage thus body designing is one such arts, which consist an integral part of the traditional society" (14). As a matter of fact, they serve as clear cut demarcations between human beings and animals. They are one of the ingredients of a given culture, which helps to define the ethos, values and orientations of a particular people. People are known through their culture and a nation without a culture is bound for extinction. Regrettably, through acculturation and enculturation, the cultural values of the our people are gradually being eroded, thereby giving way to the assimilation of foreign cultures that are inimical to the growth and development of the indigenous culture, especially in the areas of body adornments and facial decorations. In the words of Stanis Iyorza:

Acculturation is not a crime, but the evil about the process is that it causes a people to abandon aspects of their cultures and embrace new ones which may be detrimental to the ideals of their cultures. (80)

This has adversely affected the mindset of our youths who ultimately are the leaders of tomorrow in terms of their dress code and facial decorations. This calls for a serious concern in view of the current trends in the society because traditionalism has been taken over by westernism where anything wearable holds sway for our youths with inherent implications for the cultural propagation and preservation of the people's heritage. Even in traditional festivals where traditional ethos are supposed to be maintained, western dress patterns continue to 'fight' for supremacy and, more often than not, appear to be in firm control.

Apart from the everyday use of clothing and facial decorations, indigenous dresses are usually conspicuous during festivals and ceremonies which are usually celebrated with pomp and ceremony; thereby creating an atmosphere of conviviality and merrymaking. This provides a meeting place for people from all walks of life to converge on a set venue and participate in the festival either as spectators or participants. In Nigeria in general and Imo State in particular, there are different kinds of festivals, each having a connection with the cultural heritage of the people from where it is drawn from. Apart from the

different festivals and celebrations that abound in all the local government areas (LGAs) of the state, there is a centralized one where all the different LGAs and communities participate. It is usually organized by the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture (ISCAC) in collaboration with the Imo State government, where all the cultural undertones and embellishments of the state are showcased. This festival is called Ozuruimo. As the name implies, it is all embracing and welcomes participants from all the 27 LGAs in Imo State. It is in this connection that we analyse the 2011 Ozuruimo with a view to appreciating the level of indigenous dress and body designs in the festival. In addition, the roles of indigenous dress patterns in propagating and preserving the cultural undercurrents of the people will be examined. This is against the backdrop of the fact that a people are known first of all through their belief system, dress or costumes and make-up and language. These make them an entity of their own with unique idiosyncrasy and behavioural traits.

Indigenous Dress or Costume and Body Designs in Historical Perspective

The origin of dress or costume is traceable to humanity's desire to cover its nakedness; when Adam and Eve found out that they were naked in the Garden of Eden. This gave rise to the use of different materials including leaves, animal skin and raffia as forms of clothing materials and protection. According to Affiong Okon:

The art of costume and make-up dates back to man's existence. In the days of Adam and Eve, leaves, animal skins, furs and feathers were used as covering. It later metamorphosed as an essential aspect of the traditional ritual ceremonies into traditional displays. (394)

However, costume in a more secular sense is associated with all the units of items on the body of the performer including layers of cloth to nudity. In traditional African festivals, it is an important attribute and one of the aesthetic elements that help to heighten the appreciation of the performance. Apart from the everyday use of dress/costume and make-up for concealment, comfort and other symbolic meanings (Edwin Wilson 354), they also feature prominently in traditional festivals. Utoh argues that before costume and make-up were recognised, they existed in traditional society ... and were essential part of the people's way of life such that there was an elaborate artistic display during festivals, wrestling matches, as well as in displays,

dances and historical enactments (410). Furthermore, during these historical enactments, according to Bakary Traore:

The people know how to disguise themselves, either with make-up or masks or strange garments depending on the effect they wish to achieve with their audience, or by painting their bodies with designs representing the hides of the animals whose movements they execute in the dance form.
(12)

All these form part of the indigenous dress/costume and make-up for the celebration; and at the same time constitute an integral part of the cultural essences of the people. In other words, part of the culture of the people is located in the nature of the dress/costume and make-up on display. This is partly what Ngugi wa Thiongo meant when he asserts that: African culture is the sum total of their art, their science and all their social institutions, including their system of belief and rituals ... such values are often expressed through the peoples songs, dances, folklores, drawing, sculpture, rites and ceremonies (103). In all the numerous festivals that abound in Nigeria and indeed the world, the place of indigenous dress or costume and make-up cannot be underestimated. This is because one of the underlying intentions of the audience for attending such festivals and ceremonies is to see and feed the sensibilities of their eyes. Indigenous dress/costume and make-up form part of these viewing intentions. Therefore, in whatever festival, be it for Africans or other parts of the world, including Europe, America, Asia, indigenous dress/costume and make-up are used as a form of cultural identity and renewal.

Festivals and Cultural Undertones

Festivals are rooted in the culture of the people and Nigerians are known for one form of festival or the other. There are annual celebrations of African heritage and culture which serve as the perfect backdrop for family and class reunions, church, corporate, or group outings. People usually travel from far and wide to attend such festivals that have the potentials for public display and merrymaking. This is usually celebrated with pomp and pageantry. History has it that since the beginning of time, festivals have been accompanied by parades, masquerades, pageants, and other forms of revelry that have their origins in pre-Christian rites, particularly, fertility rites that were connected with the coming of spring festival and the rebirth of vegetation. Furthermore, history has it that festivals have always been

part of people's way of life, and that some were performed in commemoration of the renewal of life brought about by the yearly flooding of the Nile, especially in Egypt. Others were performed in honour of the god Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine in Greece; and in commemoration of victory in war as it is obtainable in the historical carnival of Ivrea in Italy, otherwise called the 'battle of the oranges' (Festival 1).

Indeed, festivals are woven around diverse beings and physical phenomena ranging from powerful gods and goddesses to hills and water spirits and the generality of illustrious ancestors. In the words of Robert Gills, festivals are mostly religious events that are observed with meditations and incantations. These acts bring about repetition of actions which give rise to rituals. Rituals are important part of the festival especially when it is meant for gods and myths (67). Because of the reference of some deity and gods during some of these festivals, the periods during which they last, are usually seen as a peace period or week where any form of disturbance and quarrels are forbidden. However, it has to be stated that folk festivals, popular celebrations and carnivalesque rituals are not simply expressions of religious sentiments and supernatural ideas; they are also very often key sites in which social issues and political conflicts are expressed, mediated and challenged. Oyin and Irele affirm that:

It is true that every..festival is attached to a supernatural being or deified ancestor and to that extent may be said to be religious at base and inspiration. But in its realization, a festival's religious origin or foundation is too often and too easily superseded, the festival thereby becoming a veritable carnival, dance drama or ritual drama (emphasis mine). (5)

The festival is the prime artistic institution of traditional Africa because it is the only institution that has the framework which can coordinate virtually all other art forms of a community. Each of the festivals tends to have a story or myth to perform and each makes use of its own peculiar style in the dramatic realization of the story. In the process, the arts of costuming, masking, drumming, chanting, dancing and several others are utilized in a manner not totally different from their usage in other dramatic traditions. When one watches a festival, however, one is immediately struck by the fact that one has been exposed to a dramatic experience. The question that has to be settled, therefore, is whether this experience is merely one of dramatic elements or particles in a performance or whether the sum total of the

experience constitutes a drama in whatever sense of the word (Oyin and Irele 9). Traore also believes that:

Insofar as most myths and legends were acted, we can deduce that the seeds of theatre were present in African festival as in ancient Greece. The Africans' sacrifices to their gods-'Sango' or 'Ogun'-resemble those of the Greeks on the altars or shrines of Apollo. And was not tragedy born among the ancient Greeks by the coming together of the fury of the Bacchantes and the ecstatic dance of the daughters of God? (21)

This is factual given the fact that most festivals are attached to one deity or the other. Even in Greek festival, the story is not different. In the account given by Oscar Brockett, festivals in Greek are basically to the honour of their gods. Subsequently, Greek drama was presented exclusively at the honouring of Dionysus, one of the many gods worshiped by Greek. The dramatic art theatre in the western world can be traced back to ancient Greece especially Athens, usually considered the cradle of western civilization. Dionysus, the god in whose honour, plays were presented was the god of wine (one of the principal products of Greece) and fertility. In all these festivals, indigenous dress/costume and make-up play significant roles. As a matter of fact, the spectacle in the festival and celebration can be attributed to the variety of costume and make-up on display. Most spectators and fashion designers usually come to the festival to feed their eyes and watch the arrival of new designs in the market. During these festivals, the nature of the costume and make-up on display tell more of the people participating in the festival. These festivals are "usually held, when public, in an open area where all the people and whoever else may wish to attend, gather" (Andrew Horn 189).

Most festivals are communal based and in whatever way one looks at it, it incorporates elements of theatre; from the theme, to characters, spectacle, audience, space, costume and make-up to design elements, acting, singing and dancing. Ekweariri and Ojonna summarized it thus: ... festivals and indeed theatre are interrelated in view of their similar modes of operation. If that is so, carnivals and festivals are arts because the final product is geared towards the edification of the human spirit and the satisfaction of the audience. All the theatrical elements are usually present (15). In the same vein, Pierce and Merger in Horn opine that these festivals give the impression of a theatrical performance or even an operetta. Their

cast, costume, orchestral accompaniment, solo and chorus differ little in spirit from the mystery and passion plays enacted in medieval Europe in the forecasts of the cathedrals (192).

Here in Nigeria, many festivals abound ranging from the Muslim, traditional African religion to Christian festivals, including durbars, Argungun, Eyo, yam (Iri), among others. Indeed, there are many festivals in Nigeria some of which date to the period before the arrival of the major religions in the ethnically and culturally diverse society. The main Muslim and Christian festivals are often celebrated in ways that are unique to Nigeria or unique to the people of the locality. The Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation has been working with the states to upgrade the traditional festivals which may become important source of tourism revenue (Festival 1).

Ozuruimo Carnival

The Ozuruimo was established in 1989 as an annual cultural carnival and a serious cultural mobilization of the Igbo people. The festival was first called Ozurumba according to the 1989 festival Brochure, but was later changed to Ozuruimo by the consensus desire of the representatives of the LGAs in Imo State. The Ozuruimo is a rallying point for all the LGAs to bring out their diverse cultural 'strengths' and showcase them off at the state capital.

Ozuruimo is believed to form a key vehicle for the realization of the objectives of the National Cultural Policy which was promulgated in August 1988; and the concept of Ozuruimo is, therefore, to incorporate the theme of the National Festival of Arts and Culture. The display is usually in the form of floats along some marked areas in Owerri, the state capital. Some of the events of the festival include Archery (Igbo Uta), traditional wrestling, occupational dances, folk music/chants, ritual dances, masquerade displays, exhibitions (i.e., traditional fashion parade, traditional beauty contest and traditional food show/traditional food exhibition), music competition, carnival floats and Ozuruimo drum. Every year's festival has a central theme that binds the events together. The 2011 edition was tagged a festival of peace and sustainability and it took place from 15th to 22nd December, 2011.

Planning and Execution of the Festival

The establishment of Imo State Council for Arts and Culture (ISCAC) by late Chief Sam Onunaka Mbakwe, the former governor of old Imo State (comprising the present-day Imo, Abia and Ebonyi States), gave them the powers to oversee issues relating to cultural matters. In view of the above, the planning and execution of Ozuruimo rest squarely

with the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture (ISCAC) in collaboration with the state government. It is usually celebrated at the end of November or first to second week of December every year.

Funding

There is usually a budget during every Ozuruimo. The funding of the festival is between the LGAs that make up the state and the state government. Corporate bodies and well meaning individuals also contribute by way of sponsorship but the bulk of the money comes from the LGAs and the state government. From the local government allocation, the local government chairmen decide how much they are contributing which will be deducted from the source while the remaining amount for the successful execution of the festival will be augmented by the state government.

Indigenous Dress/Costume and Make-up in the Festival

As a cultural festival, indigenous dress/costume and make-up featured prominently in the overall understanding and appreciation of the festival. The governor of the state, Owelle Anayo Rochas Okorocha, a doyen of culture puts on a George wrapper with traditional beads hung round his neck and ankles. He wore a red titled chief's cap with an eagle feather on top and a special hand fan. Across his shoulder is hung a climbing rope with a gourd attached to it. The same thing applies to the dress/costume of the deputy governor, Jude Agbaso. The traditional rulers appeared in their magnificent costumes, each showing a distinct but similar attributes in their dress patterns. Prominent amongst them is that of Eze Samuel Ohiri, the chairman Imo State council of traditional rulers. Apart from his cap and staff of office, his Ezeship dress/costume leaves no one in doubt as to his position. The dress left one side of his shoulder open to the admiration of the spectators. Amongst all the traditional rulers that graced the occasion, it was only Eze Samuel Ohiri that came with a float. As expected, the float was decorated with eye-catching indigenous costumes that show masculinity, assertiveness and ferocity.

Ozuruimo is a festival that aims to bring together all the 27 LGAs of the state under one artistic umbrella. In the edition under investigation, almost all the 27 LGAs graced the occasion; each appearing with one indigenous costume or the other. These costumes are depicted by the traditional and cultural dance troupes that come with participating LGAs. For instance, Oporuiche Cultural Dance and Dibuugwu Nwanyi Cultural groups, amongst others, appeared in different costumes that were quite scintillating. Some of them appeared in costumes that depict occupations such as palm wine tapping, climbing and hunting.

The presence of other communities and states in Nigeria were also felt. Representatives from Awka, Bayelsa and prominent emirs from the north also graced the ceremony with their cultural costumes. Masquerades of different types and sizes were on ground to thrill the audience. Of course, masquerades are known for heavy costumes with symbolic undertones. Some were costumed like fowl, ram and monkey. There were also creative paintings and decorations on the body of some of the entertainers, with bare bodied and traditional omu (fresh palm frond) to match. This omu, in Igboland, signifies apartness and /or sacredness (Wachuku and Ugiri 9). Jell-Bahlsen affirms that it is a symbol of "spiritual involvement, ritual powers and danger." Even the costumes of maidens and beauty queens were no exception because they were meant to serve traditional purposes. For instance, the young maidens were garlanded at the waist, head, neck and ankle with traditional beads. Apart from this, there were also paintings on the body of the maidens which helped to complement the costumes. This is in line with the opinion of Ogunmola as he opines that:

People in all cultures adorn their bodies in some ways, typically with jewellery, hairstyles or clothing. In Nigeria, people also adorn their bodies with tattoos, scarifications and other body arts. They may also reshape their ear lobes or lips. Adornment can serve as an expression of beauty and also as an indication of a person's title, age, social status or membership of an exclusive group. It may also protect against danger or assures health or success in war. (73)

Of course, men and women are not left out because they also showcased their traditional costumes, including wrappers of all sizes and shapes at the festival.

Indigenous Dress/Costume and Make-up as Elements of Cultural Preservation and Propagation

From the inception of Ozuruimo, the need to preserve and propagate the cultural heritage of the Imo people and indeed the entire Southeast Nigeria has always been at the forefront. This is captured in the objectives of the festival, which partly reads thus:

The objectives of Ozurumba festival, among other things, is (i) to mobilise and motivate the Imo people by disseminating and

propagating ideas which promote Igbo culture as part of the plural Nigerian culture; (ii) to make the Igbo people of Imo state be proud of their culture and exhibit solidarity and consciousness through their cultural heritage; (iii) to provide the people from the rural communities the opportunity to participate at the local government and state levels in a cultural entertainment and relaxation programmes, in which they show their culture to people from other local government areas, other states in the country and the outside world at large, etc. (Ozurumba 1989 Festival Brochure 4)

One of the things to be used in the preservation and propagation of this cultural heritage is the use of indigenous dress/costume and make-up. In every culture and institution, costume and make-up remain one of the indices of knowing where a particular person comes from. During the cultural fiesta, the dress culture of the people of Imo State and indeed, the entire Southeast is showcased to the world. This goes to validate Obaferi's argument that "... our culture influences the type and pattern of dressing we do and wear ...and that all of that forms a critical part of our make-up ..." (19).

An average Igbo man is known for his dress culture of *Isi Agu* and red cap with George wrapper to match. Women tie *buba* or wrapper round their waists while the maiden have decorative designs on their bodies. To buttress the importance of cultural preservation and propagation during the festival, the governor of the state, in his speech stated that "our culture is at the verge of extinction and that if nothing is done, we may end up losing it." He further says that "today we are showcasing our culture to the world and we are happy for it." (Extract of the speech delivered by the governor of Imo State during the 2011 Ozuruimo festival). To him and the people, it is a way of telling the world what Imo State is known for dress-wise. It is also an opportunity to exhibit our cultural norms and values. It also afforded the Imolites an opportunity to remember their heroes past and the legacies they left behind.

During the festival which was basically a traditional affair, the 'who and who in Imo State' and indeed other Igbo-speaking states converged in Owerri for the celebration of culture and cultural heritage. Although western clothes were seen around the festival, but those who know the import and importance of the festival showcased their traditional attires. Through this means, the cultures of the people are

preserved and propagated, and identities maintained. In fact, during the festival, the best dressed female person is given an award of Ada Imo to show the importance attached to cultural dressing. In Igbo culture, the way the people dress is determined by the occasion or circumstance; that is during festivals, burials, naming ceremonies and other engagements of social gathering. But in a typical Igbo society, gender is noted with a particular form of clothing which is not so different from one community to another. Hence, this festival aids in the constant remembrance of our cultural heritage and serves as a means of making the younger generations appreciate and understand our culture very well. However, it should be stated that the nature of these traditional costumes could be modified to reflect contemporary demands, but certain specific features must remain to enable people to identify the culture of the persons wearing them.

Symbols and Meanings of Traditional Costume in the Festival

Most of the costumes worn during the festival have significant elements or symbols embedded in them. A proper understanding of these symbols helps us in the appreciation of the cultural festival. For instance, the white-horned elephant tusks signify authority. These were carried by the traditional rulers as part of their costume. Their traditional regalia also carry symbolic messages that tended to differentiate them from the rest of the crowd. These symbols imbue the traditional rulers with power and authority and place them at the higher echelons of society. Julie Unukoro argues that cultural symbolism is the hallmark of the Nigerian traditional dress. It is consciously or unconsciously evolved to bear emblems unique to its owners. Such emblems may be derived from common features in the environment. It may also, by persistent contact of an ethnic group with some other, be a feature borrowed, appropriated and seemingly endorsed by its widespread acceptance and used as one of its ethnic symbols (50). The same thing also applies to the chieftaincy cap and specially designed hand fan wielded by respected citizens of the state during the ceremony. Although it appears to have been abused the appearance of and the use of chieftaincy cap with an eagle feather attached to it during Ozuruimo portrays affluence on one hand and dignity and authority on the other hand.

Furthermore, this symbolism is also seen in the costumes of human animals such as fowls, rams and monkeys. For instance, rams are known for ferocity, especially during the heat of mating. It can, therefore, be said that those costumes symbolize strength and agility while that of the monkey symbolizes strength in climbing. On the other hand, the costume of the fowl symbolizes graceful movement. Even

the costumes of the palm wine tappers signify their occupation and means of livelihood. In all, these symbolic messages helped in authenticating the cultural elements in the festival and its impacts on the viewing sensibility of those who graced the occasion.

Observations

In the course of carrying out this research, we found out that in every culture and institution, indigenous dress/costume and make-up has always been one of the indices to understand people's way of life. It tells of their ethnic group, class/status and belief systems and enables people to place them appropriately in both historical and geo-cultural contexts.

The researchers also observed that during the Ozuruimo, one of the aesthetic elements of the celebration is the use of dress/costume and make-up. In other words, the visual essence of the celebration is heightened through the nature of costumes and make-up on parade. As earlier stated, there is usually a riotous display of costumes during this celebration which appeals first to our aesthetic sense of sight and mind. At any rate, it was found out that costumes are indispensable elements of festival celebrations. The 2011 edition of Ozuruimo provided the people with the opportunity to exhibit their new acquisitions. Often, local fabrics are masterfully and creatively designed to appeal and entertain. Even the use of human robots with colour variations on their bodies is usually an enduring delight to watch. Because of the importance attached to costume and make-up during such celebrations, most spectators interest lie in savouring the different costumes and make-up on display.

The researchers' investigation also revealed that the Ozuruimo, in all ages has served as an avenue of bringing the people of Imo State together in an atmosphere of conviviality and merrymaking which helps to forge social cohesion and brotherliness. During such periods, official matters are kept aside while the bond of unity and mutual coexistence are watered to germinate. The designated streets are agog with people accompanied with drumming, singing and dancing.

Conclusion

This study has underscored the importance of cultural preservation in view of the raging globalization which appears to have eroded some of our belief systems. It argued that through the use of indigenous dress/costumes and make-up in festivals such as Ozuruimo, our cultural heritages can be preserved and propagated and projected in contemporary society. Communities and LGAs in Imo State should be encouraged to innovatively key into this annual

programme (Ozuruimo) that ultimately aim at showcasing the cultural potential of the people of Imo State

Recommendations

This cultural preservation and propagation should not only be restricted to Ozuruimo, but should also cut across other festivals in Imo State, including Imo Carnival, Ahiajoku Lecture, Oru Owerri, among others. Organization is one of the successes of any activity. It is, therefore, recommended that the festival should be properly organized and coordinated in subsequent celebrations so as to achieve the desired result. A situation where there are no clear-cut direction on what to do and where to go to should not be allowed to arise. Those whose responsibility it is to organize it should be allowed to do so, so as to avoid unnecessary bickering, disagreement and acrimony. Finally, during the festival celebration, each LGA must be made to dance or exhibit any kind of display synonymous with it or the state generally. This is because, it is through such efforts that their costumes and make-up will be properly highlighted and the messages properly understood.

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