

INVENTING ANIMATE FLOATS: TRANSFORMATION AND INTERPRETATION IN NIGERIA'S ABUJA CARNIVAL

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Abstract

This study focuses on the technical process through which available materials and space are transformed into motif-based animate floats and desired landscapes for carnival performances. Carnival performances are often guided by underlying conceptual scripts which basically depend on the technical processes of theatre design as a major requirement in connecting the carnival performance with its audience and which has not received adequate attention from existing theatre scholarship. The study adopts Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, Intertextuality as the framework for analysing the interplay of carnival performances, material objects, technical process of theatre design and the carnival audience. The research design combined case study and survey. Data were collected using in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and participant observation. Ahmed Yerima, whose works in carnival productions informed this study, was selected as a case study. The study concludes that the technical process of theatre design is central to carnival performances because it catalyses the underlying imaginative dramatic scripts into visual pictures and animate carnival floats, thereby eliciting meaning from the conceptual dramatic scripts to the carnival audience. Adequate attention should therefore be paid to theatre design as the process of transforming imaginative scripts into visible pictorial carnival floats.

Keywords: Materials, Animate objects, Theatre design, Carnival performance, Transformation

Introduction: The Essence of Nigeria's Abuja Carnival

Nigeria's Abuja Carnival was established in 2005, probably as an offshoot of the all-Nigerian Festival of Arts and Culture of 1970 and the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture

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(FESTAC) of 1977. The identity of the states in Nigeria, with festivals, as a tool:

For social engineering goes back to the post-civil war reconciliation efforts of the Gowon administration which hosted the All-Nigeria Festival of Arts in 1970 as a reunification/reintegration project on the platform of the people's cultural expressions. The 2nd Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in 1977 further pushed the envelope and the ideological imperatives of a festival as an instrument for the celebration of African identity and renaissance. (Ben-Iheanacho 20)

The view above also suggests that Africans, particularly Nigerians, appreciate and appropriate spectacle as a veritable social organ and inevitable tool of public enlightenment and social engineering. Africans have often interacted and communicated with the public space in many creative ways that sometimes signal the avant-garde extensions of theatre and performance beyond the formalised proscenium. The appropriation of the public space as being integral to performance, especially in African tradition, also suggests that theatre extends beyond the proscenium to include modes such as carnival performances. It has been observed that Nigerians have a deep-rooted attachment to their various communal philosophies and cultural expressions especially as manifested in the numerous festivals of the diverse ethnic groups that make-up the nation (Oklobia 108).

The cardinal objectives of the Abuja carnival also reflect the deep-rooted tenacity of Nigerians towards a national culture. The cardinal objectives of the Abuja Carnival at its inception in 2005 included "to educate and inform the world of the rich culture and history of Nigeria" (Yerima 6). This clearly shows that the Abuja carnival of Nigeria set out with a mandate to educate its audience about "the rich culture and history of Nigeria," in addition to the following objectives:

- To showcase traditional Nigerian carnival of music, dance and arts,
- To celebrate the individuality and unity of the State Governments and people of Nigeria,
- To celebrate the role of the city of Abuja as the unifier or the Centre of Unity of Nigeria,
- To highlight Nigeria as a country steeped in nature, history and modernity,

- To be the vehicle of active promotion of tourist attractions in Nigeria,
- To be the vehicle for the promotion and encouragement of domestic, interstate and international tourism in Nigeria,
- To market Nigeria as a safe and secure destination for both domestic and international tourism,
- To activate a domestic and international publicity plan,
- To develop and execute operations strategies for the carnival,
- To deepen international participation and consumption of Nigeria's arts and crafts through Abuja carnival,
- To create opportunities and optimum environment for the integration of Nigeria's arts, crafts and cultural manifestations into the nation's social and economic growth,
- To develop, articulate and implement the packaging of Nigeria's traditional arts forms and practices in a non-offensive manner acceptable to all irrespective of creed and inclination (and)
- Source for improved private/public partnership (Yerima 6-7) (parenthesised conjunction, my emphasis).

The objectives stated above reflect the social, economic and political policies of Nigeria, which set the tone for the underlying conceptual social scripts, upon which carnival performances are based. However, in order to achieve these objectives, theatre has become necessary. Performance as a major tool of theatrical expression would also function as the connecting factor for other theatrical elements. Therefore, material elements are often engaged in order to interpret the social script. This is because most cultural expressions often emanate from the traditional "shared script," without which "every social act would need negotiating afresh" (Nelson 109). Nelson's allusion to the "shared script" suggests that theatre is a product of the conceptual imaginative dramatic text (or social script).

During the 2005 attempt at interpreting the objectives of the Abuja carnival, material resources were translated into relevant environments for international carnival audiences to see and understand as "the rich culture and history" of participant states who fully demonstrated the objectives of the carnival. The Abuja carnival has been justified as having "been conceptualized to make symbolic and expressive statements about the interactive and cordial relationships existing within the people of diverse cultural identity, in a multi-ethnic context called Nigeria" (Obasanjo 128). While the content of the carnival mainly relates to the Nigerian people and their history, cuisine, arts, crafts, fashion and other forms of culture, it engages a creative process of self-definition in which these common experiences, sentiments, realities

and heritage are re-enacted and further shared using visual images and metaphors.

The participating states were expected to occupy the available space with their unique stories narrated via the use of motorized floats, masquerade fiesta, durbar (Fig. 4), boat regatta and storytelling, into which mainly simple inanimate material resources have been invested. For instance, Oyo State, depicted a prominent character in African folkloric narratives, the tortoise (Fig. 1), and Kaduna State patterned their entry after one of the oldest art traditions in sub-Saharan Africa, the famous Nok mud sculpture (Fig. 2), respectively to portray the positive attributes of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Intertextuality

Roland Barthes' theory of intertextuality has been adopted to explore the interpretational relevance of the technical process of theatre design to the meaning-making process in carnival performances. This theory proposes that the transformation of the text- available materials and space, into consciously constructed, robust, three-dimensional and animate carnival performance floats, does not depend on one single artistic entity. Rather it relies on the collective ensemble of creative artists in the theatre. Ighorodje notes that "theatre is a creative ensemble where theory and practice are interdependent." (117). This suggests that the carnival performance, as an essential theatrical art, largely requires the technical connection of carnival performers the performance space created for them to occupy and the audience. However, the creation of the performance space demands the creative efforts of a large ensemble of artists, whose inputs constitute a part of the signification and codification eventually deciphered by the audience. Floyd observes that nothing is a sign merely of and by itself. In the first place, to be a sign in the context of human understanding it needs an *interpretant* in addition in the *representamen* and the *object* of which it is a sign. But all signs are interpreted only in terms of others (5).

Floyd's argument has a structuralist colouration since he suggests here that a sign cannot elicit meaning on its own without considerable reliance on other variable elements. Its applicability to carnival performances is clear in the sense that a sign, in the context of carnival, requires a material source and a creative interpreter and audience in addition to the sign itself. Further, the "text," as the underlying phenomenon or conceptual script of the carnival, traditionally originates from a sole authorial source, but it is recreated, remade or reprocessed before it gets to the final carnival audience. Therefore, the meaning deduced from the underlying carnival text,

especially at the point of interpretation, is considered “intertextual.” This has been made clearer, by Ubersfeld, that the task of semiotics of theatre is “not so much to isolate the signs as to construct signifying ensembles (from) them and show how they are organised” (21). There is great reliance on the various external fragments of theatre to reconstruct meaning in carnival performances. This is because the text cannot constitute meaning unless it relates to other texts. Corroborating this position, while also reviewing and restating Charles S. Peirce’s notion of semiotics, Merrell Floyd insists that a sign is “something that stands for something to someone in some respect or capacity” (5). Consequently, the theory of intertextuality presupposes that a carnival text is not isolated from other artistic texts because it has to be intertextual before meaning can be elicited for the ultimate benefit of the carnival audience. In the words of Auslander, Barthes “argues that texts can only be understood in relation to other texts.” This means that performance, as the focus of carnival, is achieved by the collaboration of all artistic forms (27).

Challenges of Inventing Motif-Based Motorized Floats in Abuja Carnival

Motif-based motorized carnival floats are mobile stage spaces created in order to facilitate, enhance or complement street performances. While carnival floats are patterned after different motifs, ranging from animals, plants or crops to masks, puppets, emblems or other objects, their mobility is often achieved by actually building them on vehicular machines or hoisting them behind vehicles, which would pull them around. Floats have constituted important parts of carnivals since the middle ages when churches used pageant wagons as movable scenery for passion plays. Designers and artisans were responsible for building the pageant wagons for their specified craft. The name is derived from the first floats which were decorated barges that were towed along canals with ropes held by parade marchers on the shore (Oklobia 143).

Over the years, carnival processions in Nigeria have benefited from motorized floats in a variety of ways including the use of sophisticated design materials and accessories such as colours, sound, lighting, smoke effects and fireworks. Sometimes floats are imbued with functional installations such as rotors, which may help to rotate aspects of some of the floats. Piping and plumbing works have been introduced to power water fountains or aquariums on some of the floats. This way, carnival floats have helped millions of audience members to come to grips with the themes, meanings and messages of the carnivals, which the floats illustrate alongside other aesthetic

theatrical elements such as dance, music and other festive mimetic street performances.

Abuja carnival has come a long way to be associated with motorized floats just like in most places around the world where carnivals are performed, such as the Sao Paulo and Rio carnivals in Brazil and Notting Hill carnival in London, United Kingdom. This is because floats have often constituted the illustrative elements as well as three-dimensional translations of the underlying contents of these carnivals so that if the floats are removed from the carnival packages, spectators would probably find it difficult to visualize the functions of the carnivals. Like stage plays, carnivals are also guided by dramatic texts or scripts and their meanings are enriched by aesthetic and technical accompaniments such as costumes, props and make-up, which play accessories to the carnival characters.

With the use of different design skills, techniques and tools, craftsmen and other members of the crew have imbued ordinary materials with the transformative ingenuity of art and performance. Such materials include wood, grass, wire nets, fabrics, iron rods, mats, polymers, glass fibres, plaster, beads and paper. Consequently, they have become transformed to the intended motifs attendant to the cultural contexts of the states that have created them. Hence, Oni asserts that,

For the carnival parade, each participating state is expected to design a float on a motorized flatbed truck. Over the years, most of the floats by the states have exhibited better concepts and become more creatively engaging. A general survey of the materials used included the following: digitally printed banners, plywood, fabrics, mats, polystyrene, beads, papier-mâché, and photographs. Others included masks, grass, branches of trees, cut outs, pumping and motorized machines and balloons. It has been observed that the materials used in the floats have expanded beyond the traditional materials to include pre-cast moulds. (72)

In addition to the accounts given above, the specifications of the flatbed trucks are as follows: 40 ft. (Length) x 8 ft. (Width) x 4.5 ft. (Height). Provided for the participating states every year to use for the construction of their floats, the flatbed trucks are to signify the essence of space in theatre and performance. In an interview, Yerima,

in an interview on the 26th of January, 2016, noted that “stories are invented in space and space creates room for imagination.” In this consideration that space is the link between the text, the director, the designer and the stage in the attempt to create theatre, Yerima also implies that directors as well as design crews usually base the calculations of their creative contributions to theatre on the availability of space. This has been further strengthened by the theoretical opinion, in Lefebvre’s “*Perceived Space, Conceived Space and Lived Space*”(Auslander 124), given the theoretical insistence that space influences human experiences.

Dramatic and theatrical expressions are created in tandem with space, which may be perceptual, conceptual or physical. Though the space occupied by imaginative dramatic text is often considered as perception, Baudrillard regards it as substantially imagistic, with particular reference the terms “simulacra” and “simulation” (1). Aronson also asserts that “the stage can be understood only if it relates to the spatial and imagistic codes of its society” (15). For example, (Fig. 5), the image of a shark was created by the design contingent representing Rivers State in 2006, as a known code among the people of Rivers State as a community. The contemporary society cannot be separated from the use of images because “our experiences of the world are mediated through the many images that confront us every day and that frame how we see the world and what we see” (Auslander 57). Carnival floats and performance constitute pictorial evaluation of the mood of the nation at a given point in time.

In 2005, 2006 and 2007, bearing in mind the artistic requirements of the carnival, Ahmed Yerima initiated a number of special workshops as special interactive facilities on design and construction. These workshops have been incorporated into the sensitization programme for the state Directors of Culture and Heads of their design teams. Through sensitization meetings such as these, artistic directors and artists have come together to interpret the concept of the carnival. Oni (72), who has also served as the Director (Technical) of Abuja Carnival (2005-2008) recalls that as the collaborative sensitizations between directors and design ensembles “become more sophisticated and advanced, the carnival is witnessing more creativity in the float designs and construction.” Further, the float builders “have been introduced to more modern computer and design programmes and new construction models, which continue to emphasise the necessity to take safety considerations as a sine qua non” (Oni 72). Therefore, the technical process of transforming ordinary materials in these carnivals into appropriate motifs and performance spaces attracted challenges relating to technical preparation such as sourcing and selection of suitable motorized flatbed trucks, sourcing and selecting

materials for life stages with lighting and sound, fireworks as well as general difficulties of funding.

High level of creativity also became necessary at this point. For instance, the Ekiti State float (2007) dubbed “the Academician” by Yerima and Ben-Iheanacho (43) (Fig. 3), was 43 feet in length, 15 feet in height and about 5 feet in width, was made from a variety of materials to speak to the social contents of the carnival. It was made up of two huge sculptural forms, simulated with plaster of Paris (POP), glue and pigments, to symbolise the mountainous terrains for which Ekiti is known. The valley between these two forms housed an 11-foot sculpture of a man (sculpted by Michael A. Adeoye in 2007), clad in academic gown, holding a hoe and standing in front of a huge open book depicting education and agriculture for which Ekiti State is also known. The sculpture was made from pre-cast fibre glass and resin in a process lasting about three days. The hollowed image of the head was simply hoisted on a wooden armature built, in the form of a giant body, in the desired pose to facilitate holding of additional objects. While the shoulders, hands and legs were padded with common foam and stained with colour pigments, a huge covering was fashioned in the likeness of an academic gown and placed around the sculpture, which was thoroughly nailed to the foundational wooden elements on the bed of the truck.

Adapting Materials to Space and Motifs: Interpretation and Transformation Process in Abuja Carnival

The flatbed trucks, covered with comprehensive woodwork using 2x3 planks and plywood as foundation to the designs of each state, were provided with metal scaffolds for the safety of the participants especially that they might not fall off, while the trucks moved. Made of 3 inch-galvanized metal poles, clamped together in tight grips around the flatbed trucks, the scaffolds were in the form of a 4 ft. high fence around the vehicle. There were production and rehearsal details guiding the participants on the time frame for float construction and completion as well as parade rehearsals. Instructions were also provided to enable prompt striking of the constructions so that enough time would be allowed for the return of the flatbed trucks to their respective owners from whom the trucks had been acquired on lease. All these instructions, given at the beginning, on arrival before constructions were carried out, formed aspects of the creative process of transforming available spaces into appropriate three-dimensional landscapes and motifs.

Aesthetics and Semiotics of the Carnival

The aesthetics of the entire carnival production has been such that often capitalises on the regional uniqueness of the participating states thereby showcasing the diverse cultures that define the differences of the regions as the same unifying forces that also connects them together, in a single yearly national carnival. In a show of positive contradiction, to the entertainment of an international audience, based on this essential uniqueness, the floats are often designed by fine artists, architects and highly skilled craftsmen. Oni states that the unique features in the States, regions or at the national level are explored in terms of establishing a conceptual framework for designs. After the first two editions and realizing the limitations of the State Councils for Arts and Culture in terms of design, they were advised to utilize available facilities in their respective States. These were to involve Departments of Theatre Arts, Architecture, Fine Arts and so on in universities and polytechnics. States were also advised to utilize resources available to them for computer aided designs, using the dimensions of the flatbed trucks. Where the expertise was available, they were also to build models of their designs to scale to ensure that their designs fit the dimensions of the truck (75).

In spite of the limitations of the State Councils for Arts and Culture in terms of design, as contained in Oni's observation, the early editions of the carnival, exhibited some levels of technical expertise, which are noticeable in the exploration of art forms such as the mask (see Fig. 2) as a symbol and expression of identity. Some floats from Kaduna, Akwa Ibom, Abia and Benue States have exemplified this expertise. A large mask covering the front of the truck has two large perforations corresponding with the position of the windshield of the truck, deliberately fashioned to allow the driver of the truck to see. While one perforation at the driver's side would have sufficed, artists who have created it deliberately extended the perforation to the passenger's side and covered it with dark coloured net to create a symmetrical balance. On the Akwa Ibom mask, a ventilation space has been technically left at the lower part of the vehicle which the audience would be expected to interpret as the mouth of the mask. While this was designed in the position of the mouth, the technical intent was to make it serve the engine of the truck with enough ventilation to avoid internal overheating of the engine. In-between the four teeth of the mask, three large holes were left to allow the passage of fresh air. In order to conceal this technicality, the painters stained the teeth with white pigment, the lips with red, slightly brightened to suggest the tonal influence of the white teeth and a tongue was also introduced.

Some of the artists, as can be seen from the floats fashioned after some masks, masquerades or locales, mostly attempted to give these materials (foam, adhesives, fabrics, straws, colour and gum) which have made up the float, somewhat human facial expressions, except the Kwaghir, which carried an animal face. Some of the floats were also transformed into complete masquerades such as the *Ijele* masquerade as found in the 2007 entry of Abia State. In some other instances, entire environments were replicated completely on the carnival trucks. For example, the palace of the Oba of Benin was replicated on one of the floats in 2006. The truck, initially a virgin space, has been entirely transformed into the walls of the palace of the Oba of Benin. Improvements have been substantially achieved, as observable in the comparison of some of the floats, in the maiden edition of the Abuja carnival, in 2005, which featured many entries in which the trucks were only partially covered, and some of the more recent entries. However, as more and more professional fine artists such as sculptors, painters and architects were consulted from the corresponding university departments and art councils, the subsequent editions particularly in 2006 and 2007 showed tremendous improvements owing more to the exploration of more sophisticated approaches by these professional artists.

Conclusion

The technical process of theatre design is fundamental to carnival performances particularly in the Abuja carnival of Nigeria. This is because theatre design has been the change agent transforming the underlying conceptual dramatic scripts of the carnival- a conscious reflection of the socio-economic, political and cultural policies, circumstances and history of Nigeria- into visual pictures and animate carnival floats, thereby eliciting meaning from the said conceptual dramatic script for the ultimate benefit of the carnival audience. This technical process, upon which carnival performances are based, has been mainly successful, especially in the Nigerian context, through the collaborative and creative skills of the visual artists, craftsmen and designers in the theatre. The overall aesthetics of Abuja carnival capitalises on the cultural uniqueness of the participating Nigerian states with a conscious drive towards showcasing the nation's cultural diversity as the same central pivot, which also tends to unify them together against the diversity. The semiotic process of the carnival has largely rested on the technical transformation of available spaces and ordinary materials into carnival landscapes and animate objects such as carnival float. Since the inception of the carnival, there has been a substantial comparative improvement in successive years

because of increased involvement of professional fine artists, craftsmen and theatre designers.

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Figure 1

The entry of Oyo State of Nigeria, The Tortoise, 2007, Mixed Media, 40ftx15ft, Abuja, Nigeria, Courtesy, Yerima and Ben-Iheanacho (2007). A float, depicting a prominent character in African folkloric narratives, the tortoise

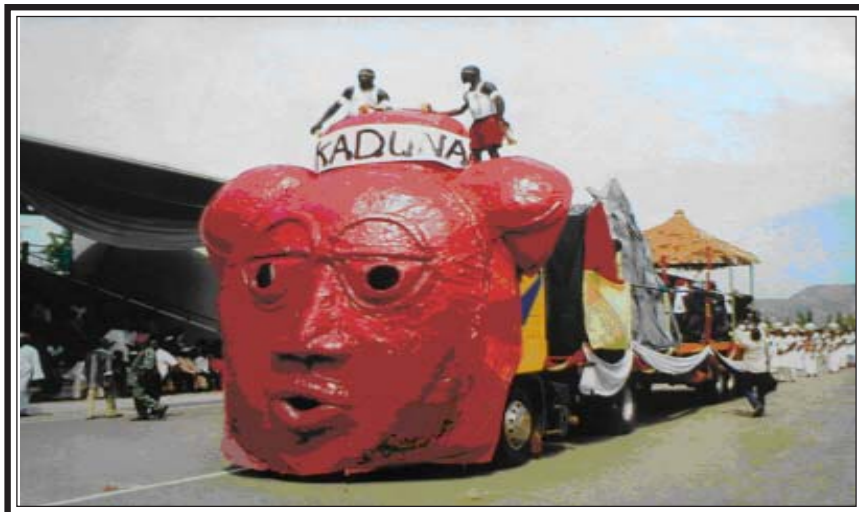


Figure 2

Kaduna State entry (2007)



Figure 3

Ekiti State float, "The Academician" (sculpted by Michael A. Adeoye (2007). Photo: Courtesy, Yerima and Ben-Iheanacho (2007)



Figure 4

A Durbar performance at the carnival. Photo: Courtesy, Ahmed Yerima.



Figure 5

An artificial shark, created by the crew. Photo: Courtesy, Ahmed Yerima.