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INDIGENOUS FESTIVAL ARTS AND (DIS)CONNECT WITH CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-CULTURAL REALITIES IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

Awareness of the extent to which our own visual behaviour is similar to or different from that of others can point us to other ways of interacting with art and the world around us, revealing new ways of seeing and therefore understanding art¹

¹ A. Pawłowska, I. Krejtz and K. Wisiecka. *Exhibition of Works by Grzegorz Sztabiński at the University of Łódź, Entitled Hommage à Grzegorz Sztabiński - „Continued...”, as a Contribution to the Analysis of Ways of Looking at a Work of Art.* “Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts” vol. XXV, 2023, pp. 207-227.

Abstract: Festival is the climax of African indigenous cultural institutions and artistic expressions handed down to a people by their forebears and maintained as such for generations to come. This is exactly the problem of this research. Several indigenous communities in southeastern Nigeria apparently live in dangerous times: environmental degradation, insurgence, exclusion from mainstream politics and resource distribution; moral breakdown and erosion of salient cultural and identity markers such as language. If festivals are maintained to address realities of primordial times, where or how then do emerging and prevailing realities find expression in these festivals? Relying on the Cultural Hybridity theory and deploying participant observation, case study analysis and focused group discussion, this study analyses cultural and artistic shifts in the Onwa-Oru Festival of the Uratta people in Southeastern Nigeria. It aims to examine the extent and impact of the performative detachments on the futures of indigenous peoples. The cultural arts in focus are indigenous dance and masquerade performances, while sociological assessment includes the environment, media, morality and pedagogy. The researchers observe that this disconnect from contemporary realities has given room to negative iconoclasms of the cosmic, cultural and artistic verve of the festival. Conclusively, creative reconnections of the festival and its arts to prevailing realities can help indigenous peoples navigate living in dangerous times. In line with the motto above, the paper suggests novel ways in which indigenous peoples can see their arts in new ways.

Keywords: hybridity theory, Onwa-Oru Festival, Nigeria, culture, arts, contemporary realities

Introduction

Art has made an unprecedented history in human endeavor to the point that Olatunji Idowu and Elizabeth Raji² explain that a society without art is a society of the living dead. A society made up of people in time exudes art forms that project their place in the world and their techniques for navigating existence and survival in the world. The arts and culture in several indigenous African communities, including Nigeria, are created to embody their religious and sociological realities. Facets of Nigerian life are inundated with several forms and ranges of art that concretize indigenous ideologies and philosophies in place for the general well-being of the society in time and space. It is along these thoughts that scholars like Geoffrey Gorer³ and Mabweazara Hayes⁴ agree that Africa is performing a race. They danced for everything, and a single theatrical piece can give a panoramic view of salient aspects of African life.

Festivals are the highest cultural and artistic institutions in Africa. This is because, in accordance with Oyin Ogunba, a festival is the “only institution

² K. O. Idowu, & E. M. Raji. *The Significance of Inter-Relationship of Textile, Fashion, and Costume Design in View of Nollywood Productions in Nigeria*. In JOTAMS: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies. 2.2 (2017), pp. 1-13.

³ G. Gorer, *Africa Dances*. W. W. Norton & Company Inc. 1962

⁴ Mabweazara Hayes. *Present day African Theatre Forms Have Filtered through from the Past*. African Postcolonial Literature in English. <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/Africa.mabweazara.html>

which has the framework which can coordinate virtually all the art forms of a community”⁵. Unlike other Nigerian scholars, Ogunba views traditional festivals as more than merely driven by religious motivation for indigenous peoples. Although it constitutes the chief physical and metaphysical representation of the African religion, its dominant impression is often found to be humanistic rather than religious⁶. Important festivals last for a considerable period of time, from three days to seven months, each festival having its own unique story or myth, and its own peculiar style in the realization of its story. In this process of realization, “the arts of costuming, masking, drumming, chanting, dancing and several others are utilized in a manner not totally dissimilar to their usage in other dramatic traditions”⁷.

The verve of these festivals has been structured to connect prevailing religious, cosmic and sociological realities of the time, as in 1978, when scholars like Oyin Ogunba and Joel Adedeji wrote their articles in a co-edited volume of *Theatre in Africa*⁸. At the time, the inhabitants of Nigeria were largely the Silent generation (those born between mid-1920s and early 1940s), Baby boomers (mid 1940s to mid-1960s) and Generation X (mid 1960s to early 1980s). It is important, as the society in that period, although battling colonial influences, was still somewhat gated in certain areas such as cosmic views, communality and morality. Indigenous orthodoxies and ethos in these areas still held sway in the delineation of individual and collective decisions and relationships. Most technological and media sophistications that characterized later generations were not in place. It was the period which spanned classicism to early postmodernism in Sardar’s assessment of the four phases of the contemporary period⁹.

However, those times have passed and societies have become more sophisticated. The bulk of the Silent and Baby boomers generation are either dead or too old to be actively involved in any activity. The Silent generation, Baby boomers and Generation X have largely given way to Millennials (those born between 1980 to 1994), Generation Z (1995-2012) and Generation Alpha (2013-2024). These are generations of people with internet and social media

⁵ O. Ogunba. *Traditional African Festival Drama*. Oyin Ogunba & Abiola Irele (Eds.). *Theatre In Africa*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978. p. 5

⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸ O. Ogunba & A. Irele (eds.). *Theatre In Africa*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978.

⁹ Sardar (2022), in describing the artefacts of postnormal times, provides the time frame for the start and end of contemporary times: Classic: 1920-1950, Modern: 1950-1975, Postmodern: 1975-2005 and Postnormal: 2005 - present. In this differentiation, the term „classicism” refers to something that has enduring appeal and a lasting and timeless quality, both as an adjective (a classic car) and a noun (a classic of literature), and is not in any way intended to refer to the Hellenic or platonic period of Greek and Roman history.

experience and savviness, technologically adept, and racially diverse. In the realities of this time, orthodoxies are being confronted and there is a “paradigm shift in the world as it is known, and in the appearances, functionalities and interaction of certain phenomena hitherto viewed as normal”¹⁰. Kirsch¹¹, Abakporo and Ohenhen¹² maintain that industrialization and growing technological awareness have caused the world to shift or, perhaps, shrink in ways that little or nothing can be trusted nor give us confidence. Within these shifts, new realities have emerged alongside new forms of and views on aesthetics, which the arts and culture must address to stay relevant especially in this age of “big data”¹³.

As for indigenous festivals in recent times and various theatrical arts that they feature, researchers observe that there is a disconnection between the arts and the realities of the times in present Nigeria. Shifts and emergent sociological and aesthetic realities are yet to find expression in the festival arts of certain Nigerian communities, especially in the Southeast. While researchers agree that these festivals are mythological constructs handed down from generation to generation, they argue that their survival beyond the present times will depend on how much they are able to adopt and adapt to the realities of the present. In essence, if festivals are maintained to address the realities of primordial times, this study investigates where or how then emerging and prevailing realities find expression in the festivals. If culture is also in a state of flux or a continuum, why do we force these cultural arts to retain and project an aesthetic to an audience and society that no longer exists? What are the present myths, hopes, realities and aspirations that can be injected into festival arts, and what are their implications for sustainable futures of indigenous festival culture and arts?

The Uratta People and the Onwa-Oru Festival

Uratta residents live on a plateau bordered by Egbu, Mbieri, Ikeduru, Ihitta Ogada and Awaka in Imo State, southeastern Nigeria. The other area of Uratta

¹⁰ P. Abakporo. *Nigerian Drama and the Politics of Incarceration*. In: Education and the Challenges of the Multicultural World. E. Dąbrowa, A. Odrowąż-Coates (Eds.), UNESCO Commissioned Book Project. Poland: Maria Grzegorzewska University Press, 2021., p. 160

¹¹ S. Kirsch. *The Incredible Shrinking World? Technology and the Production of Space*. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 13 (5), 1995, pp. 529-555.

¹² P. C. Abakporo, & S. T. Ohenhen. *Complexities in Childhood Discourses on the 'Forced-to Ripen' Nigerian Child: Perspectives in Drama and Socio-Psychology*. In Anna Odrowąż-Coates (Ed.) *Social Pedagogy for Social Inclusion and Children's Rights Discourses*. UNESCO/Janusz Korczak Chair's Book Series. Warsaw, Poland: Maria Grzegorzewska University Press, 2022, pp. 43-53.

¹³ Z. Sardar. 'Postnormal Artefacts.' <https://ziauddinsardar.com/articles/postnormal-artefacts> (accessed: 4.03.24)

that rises to this plateau from its southern end is Owerre (also known as Owerri by British colonists, and the capital city of Imo State). Uratta does not have a river. The only stream that passes through its lower northern periphery is *Nwaokitankwo*, which only receives water during the rainy season. As a result, Uratta residents do not fish. Uratta has no forests, hence they do not indulge in lumbering. However, Uratta is blessed with arable land for subsistence farming, so the people are farmers¹⁴.

Ten villages make up the Uratta community: Umualum, Umunahu, Umuorrii, Umuobaa, Okwu, Owaala, Owaelu, Orji, Amakohia and Akwakuma. The Uratta people live in family groups united by a common ancestry called '*Nchi*'. Each Nchi "is encircled with a wall within which people live"¹⁵. This circular wall was built for security reasons. Linguistically, the people of Uratta speak a dialect of the Igbo language peculiar to them (the Uratta dialect). They believe in the existence of God as a supreme being and that all good things come from Him, including good harvest from their farm. Consequently, they instituted a festival to mark the end of one farming season and the beginning of a new one, called Onwa-Oru Uratta (a period of abundance).

This celebration is held to mark the conclusion of one planting season and to pray to the gods for a larger harvest in the following year. The festival's many events begin with blowing the trumpet and continue until the final celebration day, when the people are free to clear and cultivate their lands for farming. The festival, which takes place in February, lasts twenty-four days and includes many events such as a cock sacrifice, clearing routes leading to the festival area, fattening of Uratta maidens, traditional wrestling and the actual celebration including traditional songs, masquerade displays, indigenous dances and feasting at the *Orie Uratta* (the centre of the Uratta community).

Cultural Hybridity Theory

The fact that globalization and migration have triggered cross-cultural encounters is not new to cultural anthropology, politics, literary aesthetics, fashion and race discourses. Although there have been contacts between peoples, cultures, and civilizations for millennia, Marotta¹⁶ maintains that these encounters have frequently resulted in terrible outcomes. Historically, indigenous peoples have been subjected to cultural and economic exploitation alongside

¹⁴ A. E. Orji. *Onwaoru Uratta*. Port Harcourt: Juriscope Press, 2008. p. 2

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁶ V. Marotta. *Cultural Hybridity*. George Ritzer and Chris Rojek (Eds.). The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology. John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2020.

their eradication and marginalization as a result of colonialism. Contrarily, cross-cultural interaction has produced a great deal of intellectual, scientific, political, media, social and economic advancements within and between non-Western and Western cultures. The exchange of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors between different cultures is becoming more common in today's globalized society. Therefore, the notion of Cultural Hybridity emerges to underscore the ways in which many cultures interact, converge and develop. It proves how societies are dynamic and how cultural barriers can dissolve, resulting in the development of fresh and distinctive cultural forms¹⁷.

Cultural Hybridity, explored by researchers such as Homi K. Bhabha¹⁸ and Stuart Hall¹⁹, is a complex and varied phenomenon that shapes and emphasizes the complex interplay of civilizations in a globalized society. This challenges traditional ideals of cultural purity, while encouraging fresh and imaginative forms. Cultural hybridity also illustrates how a human society is dynamic and ever-changing. It highlights the diversity and energy that arise from cross-cultural interactions and teamwork. By extension, it validates the idea that our present identities are a complex mosaic of influences from all across the world rather than a singular cultural history and enables us to see the beauty in our differences. Hybrids are also able to consider and reconsider the customs and worldview of their own group as a result of this encounter²⁰.

The unequal and tense interaction between host and immigrant cultures is revealed via hybridity. Hybridity is more than just a union or blending of two civilizations. It illuminates the conflict that exists between both cultures and the emergence of a new dimension of such a culture that is a product of the negotiations, shifts, benefits and liabilities of the parties. In opposition to the prevailing portrayal of cultural, "ethnic," and racial identity, hybrid thought generates a new cultural "third space"²¹. A critical approach towards hybridity subverts, translates and alters the authority of the dominant western, white host self. It also reveals the unequal and conflictual relationship between the migrant and host²². A critical hybrid viewpoint acknowledges that hybrids are never just a combination of pre-existing identities and that cultures are not uniform essences. It implies that all cultures, both "minority" or "dominant", are

¹⁷ MediaTheory. Cultural Hybridity Intersecting Blended Narratives of Culture. October 3, 2023. *Cultural Hybridity | Intersecting Blended Narratives of Culture* (accessed: 01.04.24).

¹⁸ H. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge. 1994.

¹⁹ S. Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 222-237). Lawrence & Wishart, 1992.

²⁰ V. Marotta, *Cultural Hybridity...* 2020.

²¹ H. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture...* 1994.

²² V. Marotta. *Cultural Hybridity...* 2020.

inherently diverse, contradictory, mixed, porous and fluid, as well as highlights how brittle and malleable modern identities are.

Hybridity is just one metaphor among many used to try and explain processes of cultural change²³. This concept has been alluded to by certain academics in their examination and interpretation of modern society. It appears that the foundation of their interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary claims about societal changes is born from or influenced by cultural hybridity idioms. For example, Sardar²⁴ used the word “postnormal” to define the drivers (complexity, contradiction and chaos) of societal mutations resulting in the current porosity in the nature of societies. Zygmunt Bauman^{25,26,27} alluded to the same concept when he used the word “liquid” to describe societal transitions and changes from a solid to a liquid state, where nothing seems to hold its form or direction for an extended period of time and occurrences are prone to change. Bauman uses the word “liquid” as a metaphor “to describe the condition of constant mobility and change he sees in relationships, identities and global economics within contemporary society”²⁸ in all his sociological and political views. The terms “post-truth” and “Neo-truth”, which characterize a paradigm shift or, to put it more simply, a third place between our conceptions of truth and falsehood, which is also a result of hybridity, have also been favored by academics. Ralph Keyes²⁹ points out that there is now a third class of ambiguous assertions that are neither totally true nor a lie. We are close to the point when subjective opinions and feelings have taken the place of objective facts in determining and shaping public opinion.

In general, the cultural hybrid concept addresses the process of self- (and other) identification that results from negotiated and contested acquaintances implanted in societies, educational institutions, households and larger structural organizations like the government and international media³⁰. This theory

²³ A. Ackermann. *Cultural Hybridity: Between Metaphor and Empiricism*. Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer (Ed.). Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach. Springer Heidelberg Dordrecht, 2012, pp. 5-23.

²⁴ Z. Sardar. *Welcome to postnormal times*, in: *Futures*, vol. 42 (5), 2010, pp. 435-444. <https://iiit.org/wp-content/uploads/Postnormal-Times-Reader-Full.pdf> (accessed: 31.03.24).

²⁵ Z. Bauman. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2000.

²⁶ Z. Bauman. *Liquid Life*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2005.

²⁷ Z. Bauman. *Liquid Times*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2007.

²⁸ A. Mattiazzi & M. Vila-petroff. *Is Bauman's "liquid modernity" influencing the way we are doing science?* *Journal of General Physiology*, 153(5), 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1085/Jgp.202012803>, p. 1.

²⁹ R. Keyes. *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. USA: St. Martin's Press, 2004.

³⁰ E. C. Childs. *Critical Mixed Race in Global Perspective: An Introduction*. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39 (4), 2018, pp. 379-381.

serves researchers by equipping them with tools to identify the drivers of persistent societal mutations and emergent realities within the culture under study. In an age where the “juggernauts of modernity”³¹ are sweeping through geographical terrains, many cultures are hybrid in some ways. Therefore, the problem lies not in the fusion of these cultures, but rather in the inability of indigenous African communities to recognize and adapt to the enormous changes in society. The inability to utilize these changes for the betterment of their indigenous art forms leads to the indifference of the present generation to these cultures and their art forms.

The theory also provides critical lenses through which researchers identify shifts and disconnections from contemporary realities in performance techniques and ideologies of indigenous art forms in the Onwa-oru festival. This disconnect, as we argue, becomes the primary reason why these arts and the festival itself seem to be losing their appeal, especially among the present generations (Gen Z and Gen Alpha) who would rather enjoy digital content and games than their indigenous arts. This position emanates from the fact that the ideologies that carry these performatives are no longer in accordance with the emergent societal realities. There is a new world order. Values in society generally place artistes in a situation where their traditional art forms and values are no longer enough to support their work³². Because of this disconnect with present peoples and times, indigenous art forms have continued to lose their patronage to aesthetic and performative forms from migrant cultures orchestrated by digital media and migration.

Methodology

Study Design: The study deploys a multi-qualitative approach to investigate the dynamic interaction between indigenous festival arts and modern socio-cultural realities in Southeastern Nigeria, with the goal of providing thorough insights into the preservation, adaptation and relevance of traditional festivals. Four primary components are included in the research approach: participant observation, focused group discussions, in-depth interviews and case study analysis. A representative indigenous festival, the Onwa-Oru festival of the Uratta people in Southeast Nigeria, was selected for the case study analysis, based on its cultural significance and historical relevance. Ten selected key informants,

³¹ A. Giddens. *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

³² E. Apata. *Developing a Sustainable Dance Industry in an Economically Depressed Country: Nigeria in Focus*. In: *Quality Assurance: Theatre, Media and the Creative Enterprises*. Gowon Ama Doki and Ted Anyebe (Eds.). SONTA Benue: Trinity Media, 2013, pp. 257-261.

including organisers, artists, scholars and community members, who are involved in indigenous festival arts, were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. Two focus group discussions were held with seven key participants each, including individuals from diverse backgrounds, artists and cultural enthusiasts. As observer-participants, the researchers fully engaged in the festival to record direct encounters, exchanges and community dynamics. In-depth field notes were made to record observations on the atmosphere, audience participation and potential departures from custom. Developing a relationship with festival attendees gave the researchers access to opinions and experiences that went beyond those of formal interviews or talks.

Data Analysis: Data collected from the interviews, focus groups discussions and participant observation were subjected to thematic and content analysis. This process included transcription, thematic coding and interpretation in order to find recurrent motifs, emergent themes and subtle insights. Comprehensive knowledge of the relationship between indigenous festival arts and modern socio-cultural reality was constructed by integrating findings from various data sources.

Ethical Considerations: The study complies with ethical guidelines, which include securing voluntary participation, keeping information private and getting informed consent. Before beginning any study activity, permission was obtained from the appropriate authorities or community leaders in order to respect cultural norms and local customs. The responsible sharing of findings was governed by principles of transparency, integrity and respect for the privacy and dignity of the participants.

Time and Space Mutations (Dangerous Times) in the Uratta Community: Onwa-Oru Festival Arts and Sociological Disconnections

Traditional African societies place a very high premium on communities and communal living. Obligations to family and the wider community (clan or tribe) supersede personal needs. Major decisions are made communally and individualism is despised³³. Drastic interactions and interferences of capitalism, industrialism, surveillance and military power have influenced perceptions, quality, essence and the future of life, prompting Giddens'³⁴ assessment that life in the coming century will be characterized by precarious games of

³³ D. Burnett, *Unearthly Powers: A Christian Perspective on Primal Folk Religion*. Eastbourne: Marc, 1988, p. 3.

³⁴ A. Giddens. *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

risk management, which therefore entails that the profound changes and their effects will be more cultural than economical. An instance of such an interaction, perhaps, is Awuawuer's assessment of the dwindling nature and structures of indigenous festivals and other indigenous aesthetics in Nigeria, due to the advent of Christianity and western education³⁵. Before moving towards the arts in Onwa-oru, we need to explore the ways in which the Uratta community, like other southeastern Nigerian communities, has entered the hybrid or third place courtesy of vicissitudes occasioned by media, migration, technology and religious infusions. This will help understand shifts in indigenes' attitudes towards their art forms and the dwindling patronage of present generations to their cultural arts.

Cultural dynamism in the present world is becoming extremely intricate. Globalization is shrinking global boundaries so much that the world is gradually being reduced to a small global village³⁶. Touching the impacts of these juggernauts on religion, from where the very essence of African indigenous life emanates, Nwabueze³⁷ recounts that a major setback on African religion was the fact that revered deities worshipped by the people could neither protect themselves, nor the people from religious invasions by colonial masters, which led to questioning the potency of these deities and, consequently, further dwindling of people's faith in them. According to Nwaru³⁸, the dictates of the alien religion metamorphosed into a template for assessing cultural and value systems to the point that any practices that could not be found or validated in the scriptures were termed sinful, mundane and, in most cases, treasonable. The cumulative outcome of that encounter is the presence of over two thousand churches in the Uratta community and consequent Christianization of Uratta indigenes, which implies a demeaned perception of their culture and art.

Cultural consequences are seen in heightening confrontations between philosophies and values of the traditional community and the younger generation. This idea is supported by Iyamah's³⁹ view that what was once considered

³⁵ Awuawuer, J. Tijime. *Ivom Dance Festival and the Tiv Worldview*. In *Dance Journal of Nigeria*. Vol. 2 (2), 2015, pp. 51-67.

³⁶ M. N. Wanyama & I. W. Shitubi. *Emergent Issues Regarding 'African Traditional Dance' and 'African Contemporary Dance: A Discourse on the Current Theory and Practice of 'African Dance' Criticism and Choreography*. In: *International Journal of Current Research* Vol. 4 (3), 2012, pp. 225-228, 226.

³⁷ E. Nwabueze. *Visions and Revisions: Selected Discourses on Literary Criticism*. (2nd Ed.) Enugu: ABIC Books, 2011.

³⁸ C. Nwaru. "The Diachronic Development of Traditional Dance in Nigeria" *JOTAMS: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*. 2.2 (2017), pp. 38-49.

³⁹ C. Y. Iyamah. *Social Reconstruction in Nigeria through the Performing Arts*. In *Abraka Humanities Review: A Journal of the Faculty of Arts Delta State University, Abraka*. Vol. 6 (3), 2014, pp. 103-108, 104.

forbidden is now regarded moral and of no concern. More than religion, the transition to the big data age and digital media is a stronger influence on indigenous communities. The borderless nature of contemporary times is majorly orchestrated by digital media and big data, which has made it possible for indigenous communities to experience, imbibe and be transformed by digital images. This factor has made it almost impossible to refer to any community in these times as traditional or local, as it would sound derogatory. The impact of the media has also made it possible to migrate without flights to any region of the world, explore content from these regions and be influenced by their cultures. The resultant effect is the breakdown of the walls of traditional or indigenous morality, questioning of long-held beliefs, confronting myths and alignment of aesthetic values to media opinions. Hence, anything on screen becomes the ideal, while some practitioners of traditional performances like masquerading still feel that media presence will demystify the core thrust and potency of such practices.

The result is third place (hybrid) indigenes of Uratta. Although indigenous by birth, they see indigenous arts as mundane, fetish and old-fashioned. This is because whatever is not in the media is not worth paying attention to for them. Folarin clarifies this thought when he writes: "It is the media which create opinion [...] occurrences and persons exist in public awareness practically only if they are lent sufficient publicity by the mass media, and only in the shapes that the mass media ascribe to them"⁴⁰ and "though we cannot always see media effects, they do occur and eventually will change the culture in possible profound ways"⁴¹. It is this position, placed side-by-side the future of the race, that Isidienu⁴² laments, since children are mostly hit by these trends and they are supposed to be the future of the clan. According to Obi, our children today "have no serious hobbies except video games, watching television or listening to music that has little or nothing positive to offer"⁴³, which further reinforces Giddens' assertion that we are in a 'runaway world'⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ B. Folarin. *Theories of Mass Communication: An Introductory Text*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers, 1998, p. 71.

⁴¹ S. Anaeto, O. Onabanjo & J. Osifeso. *Models and Theories of Communication. (4th Ed.)*. USA: African Renaissance Books Inc, 2012, p. 104.

⁴² I. C. Isidienu. *Managing Change in Child Upbringing in a Globalized World: The Igbo Cultural Heritage Experience*. In: *The Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*. Vol. 13 (2), 2017, pp. 229-241.

⁴³ Z. Obi. *Parenting for a Purpose: Skills for Educating Children of Today*. Enugu: New Generation Books, 2009, p. 57.

⁴⁴ A. Giddens. *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

The communal ideologies that held sway in precolonial and early modern periods have been shattered by the digital media. In the past, “a man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so”⁴⁵. Today, we have seen how satellite television, telephone communications and the internet contest and alter the coming together of brothers and sisters with the internet providing the virtual third place. These days, the moon seems to rise more on various social media networks, while comments, likes and shares represent the third place of communal presence among families, community members and the larger society.

The digitalization of indigenes also moves individual audiences farther away from their communal artistic and cultural ways of life. Other aspects of communal practices like marriage are being forced into these digital spaces. Being an indigene of the study community, the lead author witnessed the traditional marriage rites of one of his aunts done via the zoom network. Now, this used to be an utmost sacred aspect of the Uratta community that demands both families’ presence. Failing in this is believed to have negative repercussions on both parties. But like a post-truth assumption, it is not true that the families met physically, neither was it a lie that they did not meet at all because of the third place or alternative presence: the zoom network. Again, this daring feat courtesy of technological advancements questions the myth around traditional marriage. Hence, the hybrid presents precarious times for indigenous cultures. It also confirms Aleksandra Uzelac and Cvjerticanin Biserka’s position that digital trends are progressively infiltrating the world of culture and the arts, involving many aspects of the convergence of cultures, media and information technology, and shaping new modes of communication. The new possibilities generated by ICT – worldwide connectedness and the emergence of networks – challenge our traditional ways of interpreting culture⁴⁶.

The environment and politics pose great threats to the sustenance of Onwa-oru festival arts. Ideals handed down for generations as cultural templates have constituted realities of a particular societal epoch technologically, politically and environmentally. The move from thatch and mud structures to brick and other green energy structures contests the environmental protection impetus of the Onwa-oru festival and its arts. The hike in food prices as a result of

⁴⁵ C. Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958.

⁴⁶ A. Uzelac & B. Cvjerticanin. (Eds) *Digital Culture: The Changing Dynamics*. Zagreb: Institute for International Relations, 2008, p. 3

pillaging and land shortage due to urbanization and oil spills, as well as metal, lead and plastic waste, contest its fertility impetus, which is supposed to be its core thrust. The enshrinement of responsible consumption into the Sustainable Development Goals also contests the festival's thrust. The outcome of this is the extinction of the fattening ritual for young maidens due to the shortage of food. Since farmlands in the community have been traded for real-estate profits and the bulk of the remaining land polluted by the aforementioned elements, where will the food to fatten the Uratta maidens come from? If we then insist on fattening the maidens, what will become of the families and entire community after the festival? The burning concern of the world population in relation to earth's resources and the consequent encouragement of birth control measures also contest the fertility import of the festival, especially in relation to harsh economic realities. Again, these indices plunge the festival and what it hitherto represented into precarious times.

The corrupt state of Nigeria's governance with its attendant high unemployment and poverty rates as well as its negative impacts on the survival instincts of the average Nigerian has become another factor that compels the persistent shifts away from patronage of the Onwa-oru festival. A high cost of transportation, macadamized roads and high rates of insecurity in the nation impact attendance to festivals, which puts the performer-audience interaction of the indigenous arts at risk. People would rather remain in the comfort of their homes, enjoy other media outlets than risk being maimed or kidnapped while either at the festival venues or travelling to patronize the event. This puts the survival of these festivals in danger, as society itself is battling precarious times.

Evolving philosophies and social situations are at the core of various emerging threats to all elements of life in indigenous societies⁴⁷. Given these mutations in humans and their indigenous landscapes, various festival arts have disconnected from the fleeting realities of the Uratta region. For logical convenience and peculiar intricacies, the authors isolate two dominant festival performance forms for the examination of their mutations and disconnections with emergent realities of the Uratta people, focusing on masquerade and dance arts at the Onwa-oru festival.

Masquerade Performance

Masquerades or *Mmanwu* (in the Uratta dialect) are conceived as ancestral spirits whose interests in the affairs of their living descendants compel them to

⁴⁷ O. Olokodana & S. J. Itsewah. *Nigerian Dance in the Face of Modernity*. In *Dance Journal of Nigeria*. Vol 2 (2), 2015, pp. 82-91.

visit the community during festivals, funerals and when things are not normal in the community⁴⁸. To put it simply, masquerades are renowned Igbo ancestors invited back to life to interact with the living. The type of masquerade that is being presented is determined by the tasks that the masquerade is supposed to accomplish. Therefore, the masquerade serves as a conduit for communication between the living and the dead among the Igbo people⁴⁹. Several masquerades are performed at the Onwa-oru festival but *Nwa-Alice*, *Ojionu*, and *Agaba* are predominant. These masquerades have their salient features of helping people to carry the burdens and prayers of the community back to the ancestors or cosmic hosts of the Uratta people for an improved harvest in the coming year. Their nature is depicted through their songs, rhythmic movements, costumes and props. These masquerades would wield canes, machetes and, most of the time, the masqueraders would wield Dane guns. Earlier, these props were thought to ward off evil and administer justice, depending on the context in which the masquerades were performed. Recently, however, these ideologies do not seem to be the overriding factor governing the masquerades.

The abstractness of these ideologies to the present generation has led to the abuse and demystification of the ideals of the masquerades. The abuse is so serious that rather than saving humans and carrying their prayers to their ancestors, the living need to be saved from their ancestor-incarnates. The media are replete with societal menace caused by masquerades. Several youths have used the masquerade culture as a cover to perpetrate evil. The masquerade performance has also been industrialized in the manner that masqueraders initiate roadblocks to extort indigenes and strangers. There is also news that the masquerades, rather than carry out their cosmic function, desecrate land by being used as a cover for cult and immoral activities. In most cases around the neighboring communities, news is heard of masquerades opening gun-fire on the indigenes who are gathered to celebrate⁵⁰. Summarizing, Ele puts it in the perspective that the masquerade institution today is suffering from internal infractions of its sanctity, and the results are evident in negative social ideals and vices that it represents⁵¹. Several incidences have also occurred in which indigenes and strangers to the community engaged in open fights in response to intimidation during masquerades. These are in addition to the fact that the

⁴⁸ I. U. Nwankwo. *Governance and Associated Social Roles of Masquerades among The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria in an Era of Globalization: A Critical Appraisal*. In: Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies. Vol. (4), 2015, pp. 1-12, 2.

⁴⁹ E. Nwabueze. *Visions and Revisions...*, p. 105.

⁵⁰ C. Okeoma, *Violence!!!! Masquerade kill two persons at festival*. *Punch Online*. *Two killed as masquerader, team attack festival - Punch Newspapers (punchng.com)* (accessed: 12.03.24).

⁵¹ C. Ele. *Human Rights Violations in African Traditional Religion: The Masquerade Example*. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*. Vol. 8(4), 2018, pp. 86-91, 86.

ancestor invited through the masquerade appears to outdo their living successors in immoral activities such as intoxication, flirting and smoking in front of onlookers. These problems raise questions about the identities behind these masquerades in current times.

Indigenous Dance

Indigenous dance is a gateway into the life of a people, originating from its cultural patterns. It remains an integral part of performative cultures around the globe⁵². For the Onwa-oru festival, indigenous dances are aesthetic reflections of beauty and peaceful coexistence among indigenes and non-indigenes. Women perform the *Kelekedima Dance*, which explores the beauty and pride of womanhood, while young maidens perform the *Alija dance*, which is a dance of welcome and good tidings. This disconnect with the reality of the contemporary Uratta society becomes worrisome when the future of these dances comes to mind. In precarious times like these, the Uratta clan is laden with burning survival issues that go deeper than just mere exploration of beauty and welcome. For instance, how are these dances going to join in conversations to avert apocalyptic futures envisioned by anthropologists, based on the present anthropogenic activities in the region? These are issues that humanity is facing and they cannot be left in the hands of governments and scientists alone. The arts must become involved at least in the advocacy for environmental stewardship.

Navigating Dangerous Times: Reconnecting Indigenous Festival Arts

Presently, nothing seems consistently true in and of itself. Everything that we have known or think we know is consistently challenged and changes are rapid and simultaneous. Little changes can have enormous consequences and solutions can breed new problems for the individual, systems, and society at large. These are dangerous times, indeed. However, the progress of humanity and its systems will depend on how they are able to navigate these times through creativity that “allows the past, as the people’s cultural frame of reference, to stay compatible with the demands of the present, and possibly the future”⁵³. Creativity is a vital resource to envision and develop alternatives⁵⁴. The rate

⁵² C. Nwaru. & P. C. Abakporo. *Securing the Future of Indigenous Dance in Nigeria*. In *Creative Artist: Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*. Vol. 16 (2), 2022, pp. 84-98, 84.

⁵³ K. Chinyowa. *Emerging paradigms for applied drama and Theatre Practice in African Contexts*. In *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*. Vol. 14, 2009, pp. 329-346, 285.

⁵⁴ A. Montuori and D. Gabrielle. *Creativity and Leadership in Postnormal Times*. In Ziauddin Sardar (Ed.) *The Postnormal Times Reader*. International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2019, pp. 355-376, 358.

of change itself shapes our perception of time and, hence, our notion of the future⁵⁵. One approaches or reflects on a sense of time whenever they calculate the possible effect of connected processes of change⁵⁶.

In the wake of globalization, it is difficult for one culture to separate itself from another. Human migration, advancements in communication technologies, spread of scientific knowledge and other factors have contributed to the globalization of the world. People and ideas are moving at a faster pace than ever before. This trend brings several civilizations together and influences one another. People's values are strongly being contested as a result of these contacts, and indigenous ways of knowing and acting have also been affected⁵⁷. The festival arts' future will be defined by their ability to reconnect the realities of their time and location. Their current nature of only reflecting pre-colonial ideals and realities does not contribute to the arts' long-term viability. Reconnecting indigenous arts to the reality of a hybrid society restores creativity and imagination to indigenous art forms, while also addressing the ephemeral nature of our environment. This is implied in Pawloska et al⁵⁸ when they talk about inventing alternative ways of interacting with art and the environment around us, discovering new ways of viewing and comprehending art. At this point, the authors, within the limits of their creativity, will offer possible alternatives to reconnect indigenous arts (dance and masquerade performances) to contemporary realities, while retaining their form and structure as indigenous property for the community.

First, society is dealing with pressing concerns such as climate change, gender equality, care, food scarcity, corruption, survival and insecurity. Festival theatres might be restructured to make remarks about these issues. By addressing these shifting beliefs and emergent realities, the Onwa-oru festival meets people in their current sociological conditions, prompting them to see the festival in new ways. The festival organizers can receive training in contemporary event management and packaging techniques which they can adopt in the planning of the festival celebration. In this context, introducing annual thematic focuses into the festival, based on emerging realities, is vital. For instance, the 2025 edition of the festival may be dedicated to rebuilding Earth's resilience through indigenous arts in Onwa-oru. This thematic injection in the festival will

⁵⁵ Z. Sardar. 'On the Nature of Time in Postnormal Times.' ..., p. 19

⁵⁶ F. Fernandez-Armesto. *Out of Our Minds: What We Think and How We Came to Think It*. London: OneWorld, 2019, p. 65.

⁵⁷ M. O. Ikeke & G. Ogelenya. *Western Influence and African Values: An Ethical Evaluation*. In *Abraka Humanities Review: A Journal of the Faculty of Arts Delta State University, Abraka*. Vol. 7 (1), 2016, pp. 1250-134, p. 125.

⁵⁸ A. Pawłowska, I. Krejtz and K. Wisiecka. *Exhibition of Works by Grzegorz Sztabiński at the University of Łódź...*

streamline all elements of the arts towards addressing environmental issues. The chosen theme then becomes the prayer of humanity to their cosmic hosts for that year. This does not take away the fertility concerns of the festival, but rather embellishes it in the sense that a resilient earth guarantees increased food production for the survival of people as well as an improved ecosystem for the survival of the human race.

The organizers can use numerous media outlets to promote the festival by adopting a rebranding approach. As part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), brands within indigenous communities may also be approached for sponsorship. These funds would be utilized to support the festival, enhance its administration, accentuate the artistic elements and guarantee the safety and comfort of the audience. Spectacular ensembles might receive awards and prizes for their artistry in these indigenous art forms, which will encourage more indigenous people to participate in performance arts in different villages. Through their involvement, younger indigenes can get even more familiar with the cultural foundations of these performance arts and learn how to reinterpret them without compromising the performance's prominent identities that remain relevant to the times, such as the moral of the piece.

Masquerade arts can be re-modelled to suit the demands of the present. It would be an error in these times to think of masquerades as ancestors whose roles are primordial and static. This implies that the ancestors are blind to these changes or not concerned about the well-being of their living successors. In these hybrid times and states, the authors believe the time has come to adjust the roles of these ancestor-deities in the festival for sustainability. Therefore, re-imagining masquerade art in contemporary sociological and aesthetic terms is healthy if any meaningful headway is made in sustaining its practice. Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative to 'invite' more benevolent ancestors who would wield hand fans instead of canes and interact decently among indigenes. In line with the current realities, these invited ancestors can embody the environmental realities of their living descendants through their performances. For instance, rather than wield guns, machetes and canes to intimidate and inflict bodily harm on indigenes, they could wield brooms and pretend to or actually sweep dirty environments through their performances. They could even plant a tree during or after the performance to contribute towards improving climate conditions in the community. Community heads could also take the masqueraders through cultural orientation to bring them up to speed with character demands of the masquerade. Intimidation and infringements on human rights by these masqueraders will need to be addressed by implementing strict security measures for the festival. This will deter masqueraders from unlawful roadblocks and incessant fights with indigenes, restore sanity to the festival and assure indigenes of their safety when they participate.

Especially today, indigenous dances must become a product that adequately represents the fleeting nature of the indigenous people of Uratta. When dance travels across space and time, the aesthetics change to reflect the realities of the new location while retaining elements of the old time and place⁵⁹. The problem with indigenous dance in contemporary times has always been its content reflecting the realities of the contemporary times and space. Indigenous dances can become potent tools in advocacy for sustainable development goals within indigenous communities⁶⁰. In this sense, the *Kelekedimma* and *Alija dances* can be expanded to address gender inequality rather than be merely performed for hospitality and female beauty. Other indigenous dance forms can be created to address other prevailing issues like environmental degradation, morality and care. Should focal themes be introduced into the festival, there will be adequate room to create, recreate and modify dance movements to suit the thematic focus. Capitalizing on the malleability of the art of movement, indigenous dances can review and upgrade its aesthetic values that can compete favorably with migrant dance forms in an indigenous space. These touches will revamp the sociological and aesthetic appeal of indigenous dance to the present society, boost patronage and involvement as well as ensure its sustainability.

Indigenous performing art forms must find their way into these third spaces of presence – the digital media. Excerpts of the topical aspects of rebranded festivals and arts could be uploaded online where Millennials, Gen Z and Alpha congregate and spend more time. Rebranded indigenous performances meeting these generations in these third spaces could spark conversations on new sociological and aesthetic implications of these performances, which could in turn rewrite their hitherto negative perception. Contemporary media have a role to play in the sustainability of indigenous performative forms. While they could be used to reach diverse members of the indigenous community and beyond, they could also serve as a document which future generations could fall back on in respect to the evolutionary trajectories of these art forms.

Lastly, theories about indigenous performance forms have to be revisited. Indigenous dance theorists must go a step further beyond mere exploration of the semiotic elements of indigenous dance forms. They must conceive ways in which these art forms can be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed to address the realities of the changing world. An analysis of indigenous performance forms should not just stop at their meaning, history and icons but

⁵⁹ G. Adeoti. *The Dance Art in a Forest of a Thousand Troubles*. Dance Journal of Nigeria. Vol. 1(1), 2014, pp. 1-23.

⁶⁰ P. C. Abakporo & S. T. Ohenhen. *Indigenous Environmentalism through Dance: The Ohaji-Egbema Experiment*. Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2024, Doi: <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.06>.

should be extended to explore other sociological issues that the art forms can reach. Studies should not stop at validating indigenous art forms as dynamic ones but must also address those areas of the performative that can be harnessed to reach certain goals in contemporary society. The teaching of these indigenous art forms must come from a constructive mindset which makes students appreciate their potential. In practice, the educational approach should explore the beauty of indigenous art forms, showing their potential to exist side-by-side and even collaborate with migrant and hybrid forms.

Conclusion

The culture of technology and science, rapid communication and the global village, is upon us, whether we want them or not. We cannot keep looking back too often without either being left behind or falling out of step with everyone else⁶¹. It is now clear that as long as humanity confronts new realities, certain existing cultural ideas will eventually fade away and be replaced by new ones. Indigenous arts must start expressing our ever-changing current conditions, desires and goals. When art is unable to adapt, react and identify with the times, it fails or becomes dated. To ensure better living conditions for the current and future generations, indigenous places must begin to use indigenous arts as a means of navigating their path to political, economic, environmental and social autonomy. To do this, indigenous arts must be modified to reflect modern society's perspective, develop a connection to the present and supply the creative tools needed to traverse current times.

As they encompass, express and define a civilization's spirit, the arts are important. Without the arts, a country would lose its ability to imagine and to think about the past, it would cease talking to itself and being curious about the future⁶². Therefore, for Nigerian indigenous dance theatre to survive in hybrid terrains, regain and sustain societal patronage, and break out of its relegation by modernist influence, theorists and practitioners of indigenous dance should work to break through the layers of inflexible traditional dance forms by allowing new ideas, reformations and innovations to enter the forms, theorising them, implementing innovative and responsive pedagogical strategies, and providing a more secular platform for them to flourish in both live and recorded media. This means that in order to remain relevant, we need to start writing our performance cultures and indigenous identities in new ways and in new venues.

⁶¹ U. Etuk. *Religion and Cultural Identity*. Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002, p. 25.

⁶² J. Tusa. *Art Matters: Reflecting on Culture*. United Kingdom: Methuen, 2000.

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FESTIWAL SZTUKI RDZENNEJ LUDNOŚCI I (OD)ŁĄCZENIE SIĘ Z WSPÓŁCZESNYMI RZECZYWISTOŚCIAMI SPOŁECZNO-KULTUROWYMI W POŁUDNIOWO-WSCHODNIEJ NIGERII

(streszczenie)

Festiwal jest punktem kulminacyjnym rdzennych instytucji kulturalnych w Afryce oraz ekspresji artystycznej przekazanej mieszkańcom przez ich przodków i kultywowanych przez pokolenia. Artykuł poprzez przeprowadzone badania, odnosi się do niemniejszej problematyki. Kilka społeczności rdzennych w południowo-wschodniej Nigerii żyje pod silną presją niebezpiecznych wydarzeń: degradacji środowiska, powstań, wykluczenia z głównego nurtu polityki i dystrybucji zasobów; kryzysu moralnego i erozji kulturowych i tożsamościowych elementów, takich jak język. Jeśli festiwale są utrzymywane w celu odniesienia się do realiów czasów pierwotnych, gdzie oraz w jaki sposób pojawiające się nowe realia znajdują wyraz w tych festiwalach? Oporując się na teorii hybrydowości kulturowej i wykorzystując obserwację uczestniczącą, analizę studium przypadku oraz dyskusję w grupie fokusowej. Badanie prezentuje zmiany kulturowe i artystyczne na Festiwalu Onwa-Oru ludu Uratta w południowo-wschodniej Nigerii. Ma ono na celu zbadanie zakresu i wpływu zaniku kontekstu do działań performatywnych na przyszłość rdzennych ludów. Badanymi komponentami kultury są rdzenne tańce i występy maskaradowe, podczas gdy główne strefy oceny socjologicznej to środowisko, media, moralność i pedagogika. Badacze zauważają, że to oderwanie od współczesnych realiów dało przestrzeń negatywnym ikonoklazmom kulturalnej i artystycznej werwy festiwalu. Podsumowując, nowe kreatywne ponowne połączenie festiwalu i jego sztuk z panującymi realiami mogłoby pomóc rdzennym ludom poruszać się po życiu w niebezpiecznych czasach. Zgodnie z powyższym mottem, sugeruje ono nowe sposoby, dzięki którym ludność miejscowa mogłaby postrzegać swoją sztukę w nowy sposób.

Słowa kluczowe: Teoria hybrydowości, Festiwal Onwa-Oru, Nigeria, Kultura, Sztuka, Współczesne realia

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