

## **SYMBOLISM AND TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF CULTURAL PERFORMERS: PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS**

**Benjamin Efe Akpoyibo**

Department of Theatre and Film Studies,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Awka  
Email: benjaminefe818@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The theatre is a communal and ritualistic environment that encompasses different theatrical performances such as; dance, music and drama in a cultural festivity. In cultural festivity, the performer becomes a symbol of transmogrification in the realistic world by creating supernatural performer to communicate before an audience. The symbolic nature of realism that made Nigerian performance ritualistic has gone into extinction due to the Western influences. Thus, the transmogrification essence of cultural display in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is threatened; hence, there is a need, for a revival. This paper calls for revivalist strategy to give Nigerian performances strong identity that will not only represent just Nigerian culture, but also, return to what made culture relevant with its ritualistic essence, which play to interplay. In conclusion, there is a need to create identity for Nigerian cultural performances; to overcome the downslope or shortcoming on performers' transmogrification to achieve full immersive potentials in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The paper will therefore review symbolism in cultural performances, the transmogrification essence in performers' among others.

**Keyword: Symbolism, Transmogrification and Culture**

### **Introduction**

Culture is what distinguishes people from one another. In cultural celebration, one thing is symbolic, which is the transmogrification of characters in Nigerian cultural activities, these performers transformation from their normal selves into supernatural beings has been a core value and norms, custom and tradition that guides the people's celebration. However, culture consists of the beliefs, ideas, and symbolic attitudes of a society. Thus, culture is the way of life of a people living together, and sharing one goal and value in their activities. In view of this, Tyler as cited by Kevin Avruch affirms that, "Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (6). The interpretation of culture and its value in human society, there are symbolic elements of culture, which mainly include; values, norms, language, symbols and beliefs. When these elements are lost or go into extinction, culture however becomes 'dead' According to Eshoh and Oluwabamide explains that, "culture is the learned socially acquired traditions and life styles of the members of a society including their patterned repetitive way of thinking, feeling and acting" (9). The cultural activities of a people incorporated in their mood of dressing, eating, and occupations and among others. It is what the people believe in and stand for. Culture gives the people their identity. According to Van Thompson maintains that, "Culture is a broad collection of beliefs and traditions that affect behaviour, often without conscious awareness" (1). According to Spencer-Oatey holds that:

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour. (3)

The cultural celebration such as festival is a communal celebration hold annually in most societies; it is an event ordinarily celebrated by community and centering on some characteristic aspect of the community and its religion or culture. According to Quinn maintains that, "Festivals are formal periods or programs of pleasurable activities, entertainment, or events having a festive character and publicly celebrating some concept, happening or fact" (485). These events in Nigerian often serve to fulfill specific communal purposes, especially concerning commemoration or thanksgiving. The celebrations offer a sense of belonging for religious, social, or geographical groups, contributing to group cohesiveness. According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn as cited by Adler affirms that:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups. Including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action. (14)

However, in cultural performances in Nigerian, one thing is symbolic; the performer, who is a carrier of culture, the sacrificial lamp between the living and the ancestry world. For instance, the Nigerian masquerade become symbol of communication and the performances are very ritualistic in nature, and they depict the idea of realism since these masquerade are refers to by tradition as a channel of communication between two worlds. Once a masquerade wears that mask there is a transfiguration that distinct the common person who wears the mask and the symbol that emerges from the place of '*cookingpot*' (Shrine). The basis of culture is symbolic in performances. This symbolic element in cultural performance is the object, word, or action; there is a fact that, everything one does obviously it is organized through cultural symbolism. The masquerade or the use of accessories in cultural display becomes a symbol that represents abstract ideas. Thus, culture is the meaning that one shared to give guiding principles for personal meaning. Once these principles are lost, there is a wrong transformation of cultural activities by the people and its values therefore, seem dead. According to Victor Delaqua And Rory Stoott maintains that, "However, one of the most exceptional ways to experience the different roles of a city's urban space is through traditional festivals, rooted in local cultures presented through different clothing, culinary arts, dances and other arts" (1). According to T. Schwartz as cited by Kevin Avruch maintains that:

Culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or embodiments and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves. (17)

Theatrically, these performers played vital role in conflict resolution in the society, their presences becomes the hope of the society that holds it. Through representation of these performers, the culture of a people is preserved, and there is a symbol of identity among the

people in that society. Festival plays major role in interpreting a people's culture that is why festival and culture in Nigeria have a whole lot in common. Just as festival is an integral aspect of human life, culture becomes a totality of human life. According to Davies WKD, "Festivals are distinctive because they take people outside their normal behaviours in time and space. They provide unusual activities and evoke feelings and emotions that are very different to the regular and material routines of the workday" (535). From the beginning of cultural performances, performers become very realistic in nature, and the ideology behind performance becomes ritualistic. The advent of western culture in Nigeria, there is an existing threat on the development and preservation of culture and if care not taking newer generation to come, the Nigerian tradition will end being a folkloric dramatization by writers or storytellers in Nigeria. The symbols of presentation, promotion and the essence of these symbols has been lost and more important factors in Nigerian cultural celebration is also going into extinction in the face of western civilization. The Nigerian performers are now embracing the custom and tradition of western people, and this is threatening cultural identity, cultural value and norms of Nigeria people. However, this paper hereby breaks away from the western ideologies or conventions that have become hopes of the living dead (Western culture) threatening the hopes of the living (Nigerian culture).

### **Symbolism in Nigerian Performances**

From 17<sup>th</sup> century ago, Nigerian performances are symbolic and valued in its presentation of cultural activities. Symbols become a means of identity among every society in Nigeria, and the cultural symbol becomes the physical manifestation that signifies the ideology of any culture in Nigerian society within 17<sup>th</sup> century. In performances, there is what one could refer to as cultural symbols; this can represent any aspect of a culture, including their belief system, traditions, language and value and among others. Most of these symbols are found within the traditional performers who are the main objects of identity; however, there are areas in which this paper will focus on, which is; what is symbolic about the Nigeria cultural performance? What is the role of masquerade as a performer? How symbolic the presence of masquerade is in the general affair of culture during performance or within the community? Focus will direct to identify question, looking at the way Nigerian performance were before the "*White Coloured Birds*" swept its dying disease to the affair of the culture of Nigerian historic performances.

### **Costume and make-up**

In the Nigerian cultural celebration, costume and make-up are distinctive styles of communication among group of people to reflect their class, gender, profession, ethnicity, nationality, activity, or epoch. These reflections concerning the people's culture is what represents the symbolic nature of that culture. According to history, Costume is one of the vital elements of performance traced back to the early men, and the dramatic rituals that enact in the bid to survive. During the early man's stage, most of the people are hunters, after hunting they will wear the animal's skin to impersonate how they were able to kill animals, with these act of display the animals' skins serves as symbolic identity of their hunting; making performance realistic in communication among the people. According to Traice Utoh maintains that, "costumes and make-up has remained an integral part of characterization, so much, so that performances would decidedly be incomplete without them" (84). According to Duruaku Anthony holds that:

The objectives of costume design are to set the tone and style, indicate time, and place, characterize individuals and groups, underline personal relationships, create symbolic outfits when appropriate, meet the practical needs of performers and coordinate the entire performance. (307)

Additionally, costume and make-up presents a personal image serving as a reflection of current society, while also concealing body parts unacceptable to that society.



**Plate 1 and 2 costume and make-up illustration**

Costume and make-up provide sense of status and societal order by defining wealth, hierarchy, and in turn fashion and style. Costume and make-up in Nigeria society is a symbolic means of identity among the people. Once they appear, the audience gets a sense of belonging, interpreting performers by semiotic through presentation of costume and make-up worn by performers to identify personality and the people's culture. According to Mnena Abuku maintains that, "Costuming becomes the extension of the image of the human body. The position however is that costumes basically reflect characters in relation to the indigenous or traditional cultural dictates of a people which has implications for development" (189).

According to Ragina K and Albert Deniss maintains that:

Costumes in theatrical production communicate a lot of information about the wearer to audiences in a non-verbal form. Through the use of appropriate costumes, the time and place, the occupation and life style, the culture of a group of people, the economic and social status, the mood and atmosphere, as well as gender and age of performers are established. (84)

They send cultural messages across the people in a society and the creation of costume and make-up in 17<sup>th</sup> century is to serve as a ritualistic process, costumes and make-up are not worn only to entertain the people, but as a signal or a channel process of communication between the people and their gods. To this end, they provide traditional performers support by providing clarification about the characters personality and their association to families, groups and armies on stage. The Nigeria performer is essentially a product of his culture. This cultural practice beats and moulds a performer into a particular shape. Culture makes one think, speak, dance and behave in a particular manner that symbolize the people's way of life, and this people way of life becomes the symbol of that society. One thing is as well symbolic in performances, which is the use of colours by Nigerian people, once they appear in their looks there is a message convey immediately across to the people. For instance, in the Yorubas society, colours were utilized as symbols for gods and goddesses in representative form for their deities. In most Nigeria society the use of white by a performer such as a Chief Priest sometimes, symbolizes unity or purity

among the people. The red sometimes become a symbol of strength and creating a supernatural being beyond the imagination of the common people in the society. According to Max Weber, “symbols are important aspects of culture: people use symbols to express their spirituality and the spiritual side of real events, and ideal interests are derived from symbols” (2). Culturally, each time one sees someone wearing red and white, with the application of native chalk on his body, it therefore symbolizes a chief priest among the people, and this has been the tradition guiding the people, using costume and make-up as symbolic element of character identity. The cultural activities of the people are symbolic due to presentation of certain performers in the event, such performer is the masquerade. The symbol associated with masquerade is beyond the imagination of people in community, they serve as communal means of communication between the people.



**Plate 3 and 4 Masquerade as symbolic**

The traditional masquerades are very symbolic and most times splay major roles in their community. They are like the western police and lawyers solving critical societal ills around the people. Their performances are accordance with the community during celebrations, such as festivals, burial rites, rituals and other social gathering in any society in Nigeria before the arrival of western culture. They serve as modern mobile phone that is use by society to communicate with their gods. Most cultural festival has survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and still maintaining its essence in the culture of its people. Such as the Eyo festival, according to Alade Aromashodu maintains that, “the distinctive symbolic festival and the heart of traditionalism in Lagos” (1).



**Plate 5 Masquerades on performance**

The wonderful symbol that made Eyo festival distinctive is still intact, the essence of using white without exposing the wearers to the audience, there is this natural purity of their actions blend

with performers' rhythmic movement to entertain, enlighten and solve societal issues. There is an ideal of what one will refer to as preserved culture, culture still have identity in the face of western culture. According to Jona Obaseki holds that:

The African understanding of space and time underscores the important position of the masquerade tradition in this universe. In this understanding, the invidious gradation between the physical and the spiritual have a mutual existence. This is the world of the living and that of the ancestors. The masquerade's appearance is then an intervention process between the two worlds. It provides a link for the needed continuum between them. This is done in order to vitalize, regenerate and value the essence of living and the issues of survival. (30)

The symbolic of masquerade in Nigeria before the arrival of the western culture cannot be overlooked, because masquerades are symbols of identity and once the character wears the costume he becomes an object of respect among the people. They are giants of culture, and a symbol of peace among the people. This is the true nature of cultural practices before the arrival of western culture. Creeping and modifying the culture of the people giving it a new shape that one might consider either as wrong or right. The ideology of this study is against the new presentation of Nigeria culture due to influence of "White Coloured Birds".

#### **Comparative analysis between 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Traditional Festivals**

There is a distinction between cultural celebration of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century performances of Nigeria culture. According to Otite and Oginwo maintains that, "Culture is the complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs and technology, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation" (86). There is a transmogrification in performances; this is due to western influence that has eating deeply into the bone marrow in every aspect of Nigeria culture. The Nigeria culture is fading out because of the acceptance and adaptation of this strange culture in our society. For instance, in the past, masquerades become symbols in maintaining peace and order and used as law enforcement agents in the society. Their judgement is concrete and present the true ideology of the situation been handled. Transforming character into a masquerade becomes an object of attraction for the people, a means of sociology, a strong means for political structure among the people. The performer becomes a storyteller among the people, he becomes the central ideal of attraction.



**Plate 6 and 7 masquerades at the arena**

The pictorial presentation shows how symbolic the culture of a people is value by all. The presence of masquerade becomes a living hope for entire society. The whole village would come out for the ceremony of the colourful masquerades. This will include solving issues in the community and as well entertaining through dances and exhibiting extra-human feats. They are keys of preservation of the cultural value of the people, their costumes are symbolic, and there is this feeling of trust to present real fact happening in the society. That is why, a masquerade can easily walk up to certain individuals to expose their bad habits, and the secret hidden within individuals are exposed by masquerade who tradition believes to be trustworthy of judgement. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is imperialism on the culture of the people, an imposition of western culture on a people's culture. According to Chrisantus Oden, "Cultural imperialism is a term used to describe the imposition of western culture on the culture of people in developing countries. Cultural imperialism often refers to America's cultural influence on other countries, for better or worse" (3). According Chrisantus Oden holds that:

Nigeria which is made up of rich and diverse cultural values is beginning to lose most its cultural ideals especially through the adoption of foreign culture showcased through the mass media. Nowadays, it is observed that our youth have abandoned our local attires such as the 'Adire' and 'Ankara' for alien attires. (4)

Transformation of culture has become an abuse to the face of Nigeria cultural practice; the ritualistic essence of presentation is lost. Culture, which includes the total repertoire of human action, which are socially transmitted from generation to generation. The value of Nigerian performances and the performer itself the western culture has devalued its essence. The masquerade is an agent of change, a symbol of identity and a crime fighter of the people as been transformed by western culture as a mere entertainer among the people. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, masquerades were effective in keeping up with traditional norms and values in the communities. The respect once accord cultural performance as become means of disregarding what such performer symbolizes in the Nigeria culture. For instance,



**Plate 9 and 10**

The above situation presents the level of the bastardization, imperialism and the loss of value in Nigeria culture, it is a crying moment for Nigeria culture that has been influence by the western culture. The lion of culture, the protector of the people's hopes, and the law enforcement has been reduced to nothing in the hands of the western culture conventions. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there

is a transmogrification in the culture of the people, the masquerade has become an institution for a mere cultural entertainment and a commercial venture, a misconception in representation. One cannot trace the identity of most masquerade, those who are not qualify now wear mask for their selfish ambition.



**Plate 11**

The value of wearing mask is lost; the nature of costume has been influenced by western ideologies. There is a need for a weep for freedom of identity. They are used as public mockery and object of attraction for tourist. The performance, which is one of a beauty and peacefulness, has become a slave in the hands of western culture. The western culture has done more harms to the value placed on the people's culture, the youths hardly greet their elders due to their exposure to western culture and they copy the way and manner the western people dresses, the way they speak and the local language is going into extinction; however, this is cultural imperialism. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, culture of Nigerian people has been greatly eroded due to western influence. Another transmogrification in the traditional setting of Nigeria performance is the transformation of traditional drum. Traditional drums that make the music of the people very significant, symbolic and meaningful has been replaced English songs; masquerades no longer understand the essence of their performances, there is a weep in the face of Nigeria culture. The norms, value and strong belief of worship, which is ritualistic, is lost. There is an urgent call of weeping for Nigerians to return to their heritage to plot a revivalist strategy to revive the way of life of the people. Hence, this study is not against the western culture but there should be a level of acceptance and limitations to what to be accepted.

### **Conclusion**

Culture is the way of life of the people, in the society that is transfer from one generation to the other. According to Hofstede affirms that, "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (5). Matsumoto states that, '... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next' (16). Culture is simply the way of life of any given people that is transmittable from one generation to another. It incorporates issues that bother on technological development, language, marriage, mode of dressing, arts and craft, food, festivity, religion, social life, education and the political system of the people. Now if it is true that culture of the people is transfer from one generation to the other, then the question is, the present culture is it still regarded as the people's culture that could be transfer to next generation? Hence, it seems that Nigeria no longer have the culture of theirs, and the newer generation will therefore embrace the western culture and then read up the



Nigeria culture as historical overview of once existed culture. Therefore, there is a tremendously impact of western culture on the culture of Nigeria society in a very negative dimension which gave rise to acculturation.

### Works Cited

Avruch, K. *Culture and Conflict Resolution*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998.

Davies, WKD (ed). *Multi-dimensional perspectives. Theme cities; solutions for Urban Problems*, Springer: Chaam, 2015

Delaqua, Victor, and Stoott, Rory. *10 Traditional Festivals Around the World: A good Excuse to See New Architecture*. accessed 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2018. <https://www.archdaily.com/10-traditional-festivals-around-the-world>

Hofstede, G. *Culture's Consequences. Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*. 2nd ed. London: Sage, 2001

Klockhohn, C. and Kelly, W. *The concept of culture*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988

Matsumoto, D. *Culture and Psychology*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1996.

Obaseki, Jona. Drama, Time and Space in African Experience. In *Journal of Black and African Studies*, 1993, Vol. 23, No. 9, pp. 30 – 38.

Oden, Chrisantus. The Influence of western Culture on the Nigerian Youth. <https://www.projecttopics.org> accessed 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019

Otite, A. and Ogionwo, P. *Problems of culture in Africa*. Ibadan: Opex, 2016

Quinn B: Festivals, Events and Tourism. In: Jamal T, Robinson M (eds) *The SAGE handbook of Tourism Studies*. Sage publications Ltd., London, 2009

Spencer-Oatey, H. *Culturally Speaking. Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. 2nd edition. London: Continuum, 2008

Thompson, Van. How Does Culture Impact HR Policies? accessed September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019 <https://employment.blurtit.com> or <https://yourbusiness.azcentral.com>