

IDENTITY SUSTAINABILITY AND CONNOTATIVE INTERPRETATION OF MASQUERADE SONGS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the connotative use of language in selected Nigerian masquerade songs, highlighting the interplay of words, symbols, and cultural meanings within this cultural art form. Masquerades serve as significant cultural expressions, embodying ancestral heritage, communal values, and social norms. Through a qualitative methodology, this study analyzes textual and visual elements of masquerade arts, focusing on the semantic layers of language presented through dialogue, songs, and narratives. The study draws from theoretical models of semiotics and cultural anthropology. Findings reveal that the connotative aspects of language does not only enhance the aesthetic experience but also communicate identity, spirituality, and social commentary. The concluding insights emphasize the importance of recognizing the multiple nature of language in masquerade art as a means of preserving cultural heritage and fostering cross-cultural understanding. This study recommends further research into the implications of language in indigenous art, suggesting a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates linguistics, cultural studies, and philosophy to enrich the discourse of Nigerian masquerade traditions.

Keywords: Connotative interpretation, Language, Masquerade art, Nigeria, Songs

Introduction

Masquerade songs, beyond their literal lyrics, carry rich connotative interpretations deeply embedded in the cultural context of the communities from where they originate. The interpretation of such songs often go beyond the surface meaning of the words, tapping into shared understandings, beliefs, and emotions. The songs can subtly or directly address societal issues, criticize wrong doings, and reinforce moral values. The connotative meaning lies in the implied messages about acceptable behaviour and the consequences of deviating from community norms. Some songs narrate historical events, migrations, or the origins of the community. The connotations here involve collective memory, shared identity, and the transmission of cultural heritage across generations.

Masquerade art is a thriving cultural phenomenon in various Nigerian communities. As a country, Nigeria is “composed of different indigenous cultures and languages. It is divided into geo-political zones, states, and ethnic groups” (Inegbe, 2011, p. 177). Masquerade, as one of the indigenous Nigerian cultures, serves as a dynamic medium through which communities express their identities, beliefs, and collective histories. Nigeria is one of the forefront nations in the globe with cultural diversity and creativity which reflect masquerade art among others. The sheer diversity of Nigerian cultures means a

vast array of masquerade traditions. From the elaborate *Ekpo masquerades* of the Ibibio and Anaang people (Akpaideh, 1982; Inegbe, 2023) to the intricate masks of *Ekpe* of the Efiks (Ebong, 1995), *Egungun* of Yorubas (Adepegba, 1984), *Ijele* of Igbos (Ugobude, 2021), the variations are stunning.

In a way, this cultural art may carve a niche for Nigeria in the global socioeconomic ranking from the point of tourism. In Africa, Nigeria holds a very prominent and deeply significant place in the indigenous art of masquerading in terms of spirituality and aesthetics. Masquerades in Nigeria are often integral to religious, social, and political life. These numerous Nigerian masquerades have a significant bearing with the cosmic reality of the people. The art of Masquerading offers a spiritual connection between the masquerade and the people. It serves as a means of communicating with ancestors, spirits, and deities. Each culture has its own unique symbolism, attires used for masking, and incantatory styles. In many Nigerian communities, the masking attires are believed to embody spirits. When anyone wears the mask of any masquerade, it is believed that the mask wearer has transformed into that spirit. This spiritual dimension is a defining characteristic of Nigerian masquerade art. This same spiritual inclination is seen in masquerade traditions in Japan. For instance, the Kagura dance tradition in Japan is performed by masked dancers who are believed to be possessed by spirits (Lancashire, 2001).

The dances are used to pray for good health, prosperity, and protection from evil. Masquerades often play vital roles in community events such as festivals, ritual cleansing, and ceremonies. They can be used to maintain social order, celebrate important occasions, and educate younger generations. Nigerian masquerades are not just for visual displays. Mr. Pilkings and his wife, Mrs. Pilkings, in Wole Soyinka's eponymous drama text, *Death and the King's Horseman*, were ignorant of the crucial place of masquerading in the life and affairs of the traditional Yoruba man. Consequently, they regale themselves in the resplendent costume of a masquerade while preparing to use it in a ball dance. Sergeant Amusa, one of their security details, refuses to behold their presence because their act in putting on the costume is considered as sacrilegious. Masquerading incorporates a wide range of artistic elements (Inegbe, 2020), including masks, attire, songs/music, dance, storytelling and so on. Masquerade traditions exist in other parts of Africa and outside Africa. However, their depth, diversity, and spiritual significance in Nigeria are particularly pronounced. For instance, the Xhosa people of South Africa have a tradition of mask-making known as isiXhosa (Kaschula, 1997; Van Wyk, 2003). These masks are used in ceremonies to celebrate life events, such as births, marriages, and funerals. In Mexico, people wear masks on Mexican holidays tagged "The Day of the Dead" (Lomnitz, 1971; Brandes, 1997; Roy, 1995), which is set aside for parades and other festivities. During the Day of the Dead, people wear masks of Calaveras (Cordova, 2005), or skulls, to represent the spirits of deceased loved ones. The masks are meant to be humorous and to remind people that death is a natural part of life.

This paper focuses on the connotative interpretation of masquerade songs in selected Nigerian communities, exploring how verbal and non-verbal communication intertwines to convey rich layers of meaning. By examining oral narratives such as songs and dialogues of these art forms, this study aims to uncover the intrinsic relationship between language and cultural representation in the context of masquerades.

Theoretical Clarifications

The theoretical framework for this paper combines concepts from semiotics and cultural anthropology. Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is created and communicated, not just through language, but also through images, objects, gestures, and any other element that can stand for something else. Semiotics examines how people make sense of the world around them by understanding the codes and conventions that govern the use of signs. Semiotics provides a lens through which the interplay between signifiers (words and symbols) and their connotations within the cultural context of masquerades can be analyzed. Inegbe (2025) specifies that semiotic analysis "focuses on the word choice and connotations, narratives and storytelling, subtle messages and symbolism, cultural references, and appeals, and on

visual elements, including images, colours...”(76). Inegbe's assertion, above, outlines the core elements that a semiotics analysis focuses on. The implications are significant and far-reaching on how one understands communication, culture, and meaning-making. It encourages a critical and an in-depth examination of the messages one encounters, moving beyond surface level interpretations to uncover the deeper layers of meaning and their potential implications.

Cultural anthropology is a major branch of anthropology that focuses on contemporary human societies and cultures. It seeks to understand the similarities and differences among living groups of people across the globe (Robert Layton, 1998). A key characteristic of cultural anthropology is its emphasis on holism, meaning that it seeks to understand all aspects of a culture as interconnected parts of a larger system (Murdock & White, 1969). It also strongly emphasizes cultural relativism (Melford Spiro, 1987) which is the idea that a culture should be understood on its own terms and not judged by the standards of another culture. Cultural anthropologists typically conduct fieldwork, immersing themselves in the daily lives of people they study for extended periods. Cultural anthropology aids in understanding the social functions and meanings embedded in masquerade art, highlighting how language reflects and shapes cultural identities and community values. This framework enables a comprehensive examination of how linguistic choices enhance the emotive and narrative depth of masquerade art.

Methodological Approach

This perspective paper adopts a qualitative approach, employing ethnographic methods to capture the intricate details of masquerade art. It focuses on selected Nigerian communities, such as E̐fik, and Igbo. Through thematic coding and semiotic analysis, this work elucidates the connotative dimensions of language and its role in shaping the audiences' perception and engagement with masquerade art.

Connotative Interpretation of Selected Masquerade Songs

Connotative use of language within masquerade art makes reference into how masquerades communicate meanings beyond literal usage, employing symbols, actions, and presentations that evoke deeper cultural understanding (see Inegbe, 2011, 2014 & 2021). Connotation is associated, emotional or cultural meaning. In essence, connotation is about what a symbol suggests rather than what it plainly states. Masquerade art, particularly in Nigerian cultures, is rich in connotative meaning. This is expressed through visual symbolism, performative language, and cultural context. Visual symbolisms carry significant connotations. For example, certain colours might represent specific deities, ancestors, or social statuses. The features of the mask—its shape, expression, and adornments convey powerful messages. A fearsome mask might symbolize authority or danger, while a serene mask could represent peace or wisdom. Objects carried by the masquerade, such as staff, weapons, or ritual items, also have symbolic meanings that add layers of connotation. The way a masquerade moves, dances, or gestures, communicates non-verbal messages. These movements can connote power, agility, grace, or even humour. The sounds produced by masquerades, whether through vocalizations, musical instruments, or other means, contribute to the overall connotative meaning. All these features act as “markers of identity, promoting cultural heritage and establishing a sense of belonging” (Inegbe, 2024, p.344 in *JINCES*). Rhythms, melodies, and vocal tones can evoke specific emotions or cultural associations.

A masquerade's behaviour, if it is seen as aggressive, or passive, or even comedic, gives connotative information. The connotations of masquerade art are deeply rooted in the cultural context in which they are performed. Meanings can vary significantly between different ethnic groups and communities. Masquerade art uses a visual and performative language that goes beyond literal representation. This declaration is in line with Inegbe's (2024) assertion in *International Review of Humanities Studies* that “language is employed in diverse ways to suit specific contexts and environment” (p 221). It is a language of symbols, actions, and sounds that evoke rich cultural connotations, allowing for communication of complex ideas, beliefs, and values. A very good example is observed in this Igbo masquerade incantatory chant:

Ibalu Mmonwu Mmonwuteleegwu kaanyi so
Agu Ibalimmonwu Ike Ipopoakalia
Iboboakalia

Translation:

The masquerade performance has begun! Let's invoke the spirit of courage!

The elders and the community are gathered to witness a great performance!

The language in this extract reveals the masquerade as a complex cultural phenomenon that embodies spiritual beliefs, social structures, and core values. It highlights the power of language to create and reinforce cultural meaning, ensuring the continuity of tradition and the strengthening of community bonds. The simple statement, *The masquerade performance has begun!*, acts as a declaration, signaling a shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary. It carries a sense of anticipation and excitement, marking the commencement of a culturally significant event. The exclamation mark amplifies this feeling. In the line that says, *Let's invoke the spirit of courage!*, the verb, *invoke*, signifies a deliberate and ritualistic act of calling upon a specific spiritual entity. It is not a casual request, but a powerful act of summoning. This indicates a belief in the ability to access and embody spiritual qualities through the masquerade. The act of invoking a spirit demonstrates a belief in the existence of a spiritual realm and the ability to interact with it.

The masquerade is seen as a conduit for spiritual energy, allowing the community to connect with and embody desired qualities. The phrase, *spirit of courage*, reveals a core cultural value placed on courage. The masquerade serves as a vehicle for celebrating and reinforcing this value. It suggests that courage is not just a personal trait, but a spiritual force that can be invoked and manifested through the masquerade. This highlights the masquerade's role in reinforcing and transmitting cultural values. The inclusion of, *let's*, shows the community participation in the ritual invocation. This shows that masquerading is a group effort, and not just a singular action of the masquerade itself. In *The elders and the community are gathered to witness a great performance!*, the *elders'* presence here signifies the importance of tradition and continuity. Elders are often seen as custodians of cultural knowledge and wisdom. Their presence lends authority and legitimacy to the masquerade. The *community* emphasizes the collective nature of the event. The masquerade is not just for individual entertainment, but a shared experience that strengthens community bonds. The mention of *elders* and *community* highlights the social structure and its role in cultural preservation.

The masquerade is a communal event that reinforces social hierarchy and cohesion. The word *witness* implies more than just observation. It suggests a deep engagement with the performance, a recognition of its spiritual and cultural significance. And *a great performance* indicates that the performance is not merely entertaining, but transformative. It suggests that the masquerade has the ability to evoke strong emotions, inspire awe, and even effect change within the community. The language suggests that the masquerade is not just a performance, but a ritual. It is a sacred act that has the power to invoke spirits, reinforce values, and strengthen community bonds. The language is simple, direct, and evocative, suggesting its suitability for oral transmission. This reinforces the role of language in preserving and passing down cultural traditions. This same connotative use of language is made evident in this second Igbo masquerade chant:

Ogbagidigi i so nammanwu Ogbagidigi o buzimmuo
Ogbagidigi o so nammanwu Aruo bun a Aguooo
Mmemunwaanabiam
Gba nu uruogbaraofiamnso
Ma nauguogalagidinamito Agbangidiagbawa

Translation:

The mighty spirit is dancing with the masquerade, invoking the power of the gods. The sound of the flute echoes through the forest, calling out to the spirits. Let the mighty thunderstorm blow, and the mighty thunder rumble.

The language in this extract is not just descriptive, it is performative. It actively creates and reinforces the cultural meaning of the masquerade, revealing the intricate relationship between language, spirituality, and cultural representation. In the first line of the extract *The mighty spirit is dancing with the masquerade, invoking the power of the gods*, the phrase *mighty spirit* immediately establishes a sense of awe and reverence. The word, *mighty*, suggests immense power and authority, not just physical strength, but also spiritual dominance. This conveys the belief that masquerading is not merely a display, but a vessel for powerful spiritual being. The *dancing with the masquerade* implies a fusion, a merging of human performer and the spiritual entity. It is not just the masquerade dancing, but the spirit itself manifesting through it. This highlights the transformative nature of the masquerade ritual. In the second line which reads, *The sound of the flute echoes through the forest, calling out to the spirits, invoking the power of the gods* signifies a direct connection to the divine. This suggests that the masquerade is a conduit for divine energy, a means of communicating with and accessing the power of the gods. This reinforces the sacred and ritualistic nature of the event. The expression, *echoes through the forest*, creates a sense of vastness and mystery.

The forest, often seen as a liminal space between the human and the spiritual worlds, becomes a resonant chamber for the spiritual call. The *calling out to the spirits* emphasizes the communicative function of the music. The flute is not for entertainment, but a ritual instrument used to summon and engage with the spirit world. This underlines the belief in a tangible, interactive relationship with spirits. In the last two lines, *Let the mighty thunderstorm blow, and the mighty thunder rumble*, these natural phenomena are imbued with powerful symbolism. They represent divine power, an awe-inspiring force, and even potential danger. In the context of masquerading, they can signify the manifestation of gods' presence, the cleansing of the space, or the reinforcement of the power of rituals.

This demonstrates how language is used to create and reinforce cultural symbols. The imperative language, *let's... blow/rumble*, suggests a command or an invocation. It implies that the participants are actively calling upon these forces, demonstrating their control over or connection to the natural and spiritual realms. The language used reflects the culture's deeply held beliefs about totems, spirits, gods, and the supernatural. The use of words like *mighty*, *invoking*, and *calling* reveals a worldview where the spiritual realm is active and influential. The language emphasizes the ritualistic nature of the masquerade. The evocation and rhythmic language suggests an oral tradition, where these phrases would be chanted or recited during the masquerade performance. This reinforces the importance of language in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. The setting of the forest and the invocation of natural elements highlight the culture's connection to nature and the belief in its spiritual significance.

The Efiks are a large ethnic sub-set found in the South-South part of Nigeria. Traces of oral tradition observed among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria are also present in Efik masquerade chant. These chants weave together the emotional and cultural narrative of what it means to 'live' and the significant role that a mother plays in this process, both as a source of life and as a participant in the transformative experiences of struggle and sacrifice. The first chant to be analyzed is presented below:

Yak Nneedi no mbenduuwem
Nne di no mbe Efikeburutuewaidiongeyom eyen
Nne di no mbe
NneEka mmi awakesieatata
Anamk'idoekpe

Translation:

Let mother give the needed so I can live Mother, give the needed Efik Eburutu offers sacrifices to bear children Mother, give the needed My own mother tears and eats hers Just like the lion does

The *Ekpe* masquerade lyrics, above, evokes deep themes tied to motherhood, sacrifice, and cultural identity. From the lyrics in lines 1 and 2, 'mother' transcends the literal biological parent. Connotatively, in many African traditions, the community acts as a collective mother, nurturing and providing for its members. The masquerade itself is a product of the community. Mothers are often linked to the ancestors and the spiritual world, the source of life, fertility, and blessings. Mother Earth is a common archetype, providing sustenance and life. The 'needed' could be spiritual sustenance or ancestral favour. The 'needed' could as well refer to the resources necessary for survival and well-being. In some cultures, specific female deities or spirits are associated with fertility, life, and provision. The 'needed' is deliberately vague, adding to the connotative richness.

The repetition of 'mother, give the needed' emphasizes the urgency and fundamental nature of the request. It is a persistent plea, almost a primal yearning. The line that says 'Efik Eburutu offers sacrifices to bear children' grounds the song in a specific cultural context, the Efik Eburutu people. This immediately tells us that the masquerade has roots in this Nigerian ethnic group. The 'sacrifice' implies that an offering is made to a higher power or entity in exchange for something desired, in this case, children. This also reveals a belief of the people of Efik Eburutu in the efficacy of ritual and the power of the spiritual realm to influence fertility and lineage. Sacrifices are often communal acts, highlighting the importance of family and the continuation of the group. The repetitious phrase in line four, 'mother, give the needed', connects the universal plea of the first two lines with the specific cultural practice mentioned in the third line. This suggests that 'the needed' might link to the blessings sought through the Efik Eburutu sacrificial traditions of fertility.

The last two lines, 5 and 6, introduce a terrifying anomaly- a mother figure who embodies destruction rather than nurture: 'My own mother tears and eats hers/Just like the lion does'. This declaration creates a stark and disturbing contrast with the previous lines. This line is particularly striking and visceral. The imagery of a mother tearing and consuming her offspring suggests a harsh survival instinct. In this song, the nurturing and life-giving image of 'mother' is violently subverted. The phrase, 'my own mother ...' personalizes the horror, making it more immediate and impactful. It suggests a deviation from the expected nurturing role of a mother. And, 'tears and eats hers', evokes the most literal and shocking interpretation, suggesting a monstrous act. Figuratively, it could mean the mother utterly destroys or consumes her own offspring through neglect, abuse, or harmful actions. It might also symbolize a mother-figure who is self-destructive, and her actions harm those dependent on her. On a broader level, it could represent a community or system that devours its own members, particularly the vulnerable (symbolized by 'hers'). The simile, 'just like the lion does', adds another layer of meaning. Lions are apex predators, and their actions, while natural, can be seen as brutal from a human perspective. While lions sometimes kill cubs, the act of a mother eating her own offspring is highly unusual and often indicative of extreme stress or abnormality. The lion is a symbol of power. This comparison might suggest a mother-figure who wields power and employs it ruthlessly and destructively against her own. The comparison with a lion conveys notions of primal behaviour and signifies the raw, almost ruthless nature of survival where the mother must do whatever is necessary to protect or nurture her young. The act of consumption signifies not just sustenance, but also the idea of transformation, where sacrifices made are internalized to sustain life. The lion metaphor illustrates a fierce, instinctual protection of offspring, indicating the power and ferocity of maternal love.

However, this contrast could also be interpreted as a metaphorical commentary on societal ills, where those who should be nurturing are instead causing harm and destruction. The masquerade might be conveying a warning about the potential for even the most fundamental sources of life and support

(mother, community) to become destructive. The song might be exploring the duality of creation and destruction, the potential for life-givers to also be life-takers. On a more personal level, it could express the pain and bewilderment of experiencing betrayal or harm from a maternal figure. The ambiguity of 'mother' and 'the needed' allows for these multiple interpretations, making the song resonate on different levels. The cultural specificity of the Efik Eburutu reference adds a layer of context, possibly highlighting a deviation from expected cultural norms or a disruption of the traditional life-giving forces within that society. This masquerade song evokes strong emotions and provokes thought about the complexities of life, nurture, and destruction.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that connotative use of language in masquerade song is a vital component of its expressive power. Such songs act as a powerful medium for transmitting cultural values, and go beyond the literal meaning of the words and mere communication to encapsulate complex cultural meanings, reflecting the socio-political realities, spiritual beliefs, social messages, historical and communal narratives of the communities involved. Understanding the linguistic dimensions of masquerade songs offers valuable insights into the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

To further explore the significance of language in masquerade art, future research should consider a broader geographic scope and incorporate interdisciplinary methods. Engaging with linguists, social scientists, and cultural theorists can facilitate a deeper understanding of the significance of language in masquerade art. Additionally, workshops and educational programmes highlighting the interplay of language and art may foster awareness and appreciation of these rich cultural practices among diverse audiences.

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