

**DANCE PERFORMANCE AND INTERCULTURAL
DIALOGUE IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE:
OKOROSHA MASQUERADE DANCE OF OHII
COMMUNITY IN FOCUS.**

By

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Abstract:

In an era defined by globalization and digital innovation, traditional dance practices face numerous challenges, including cultural homogenization, reduced intergenerational transmission, and limited access to diverse cultural expressions. These issues hinder meaningful cultural exchange and threaten

the preservation of dance as a living cultural form. However, traditional performance practices like the Okorosha masquerade dance of the Ohii community in southeastern Nigeria are undergoing significant transformation. Once confined to local ritual and seasonal celebration, the Okorosha is increasingly visible on digital platforms, reaching new audiences and sparking intercultural engagement. This study explores how the Okorosha masquerade, with its deep roots in community, spirituality, and identity, functions as a medium for intercultural dialogue in a technologically connected world. Focusing on the Ohii community, the research adopts a qualitative approach combining ethnographic survey, digital performance analysis, and interviews with performers, choreographers, and cultural custodians. It examines how the dance is performed, transmitted, and interpreted within both local settings and global digital environments. Particular attention is given to how livestreaming, online archives, and social media shape contemporary understandings of Okorosha, influencing both its preservation and evolution. Findings reveal that while technology can lead to cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, distortion, or cultural meanings, it also creates opportunities for cultural preservation, diaspora engagement, and global appreciation of indigenous traditions. When thoughtfully applied, digital tools can amplify the voices of communities like Ohii and support respectful cultural exchange. The study calls for digital strategies that centre local agency, prioritize cultural context, and foster inclusive participation. In doing so, it positions Okorosha not only as a traditional ritual but as a living art form capable of bridging cultural divides and sparking dialogue across borders.

KeyWords: Okorosha Masquerade, Ohii Community,
Intercultural Dialogue, Digital Technology,
Traditional Dance

Introduction:

Dance has long been a universal language transcending borders, cultures, and spoken words. Dance, as a cultural expression rooted in history, ritual celebration, storytelling, community values and identity, serves not only as an art form but also as a means of cultural expression and preservation, and occupies a particularly important role in fostering intercultural understanding. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement, traditional performance arts face both unprecedented opportunities and critical challenges. Umeh opines that, “within the Igbo-speaking regions of southeastern Nigeria, the Okorosha masquerade dance of the Ohii community stands out as a vibrant and complex performance that blends ritual, spirituality, entertainment, and social commentary” (). Traditionally held during specific festivals and rites of passage, the dance represents ancestral connection and serves as a channel for communal dialogue.

Many traditional custodians of African culture express concerns about the ways in which digital platforms sometimes displace the original cultural narratives of performances. The intersection of indigenous dance performance and digital technology raises complex questions about representation, ownership, and authenticity. The widespread sharing of traditional dances online is often hailed as a democratization of cultural heritage. Yet, beneath the surface lies a deeper concern: Can intercultural dialogue truly occur if cultural expressions like the Okorosha dance are presented out of context, reduced to mere entertainment, or appropriated without understanding or respect? However, the advent of the digital technologies, particularly social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, has created new modes of cultural dissemination. These platforms have transformed the way cultural artifacts are experienced and interpreted, often by audiences far removed from their origins.

For the Ohii community, the Okorosha masquerade is not merely a visual spectacle but a deeply spiritual and moral institution. Okeke and Nwosu posits that, “its appearance on digital platforms without adequate cultural framing risks turning a sacred ritual into mere “content”, potentially undermining its spiritual potency and sociocultural relevance” (55). As these performances become more visible online, there is growing concern about how their meanings are preserved, altered, or misinterpreted. This essay examines the dual role of technology in either deepening or distorting intercultural dialogue through the lens of the Okorosha masquerade dance, asking how such indigenous performance practices can survive and thrive in the digital age without compromising their cultural authenticity and how it can promote meaningful and respectful intercultural exchange in a digital context.

Mythological overview of the Okorosha Festival in Ohii: Okorosha dance festival according to myth, is an African traditional performance that holds in Ohii Community between November and December every year. No one can claim exact the historical knowledge of how and when “Okorosha” festival began in Ohii community. The information available to the present generation of Ohii people on Okorosha festival was handed over from generation to generation through oral history.

According to this history as gathered from the chief priest of Okorosha, Nze Igbo Arinna (oral interview, 2024); a certain man in the distant past, whose full identity was not known once, lived among the people. He was light hearted, jovial and a cheerful-giver. He was in the habit of sharing what he had with the less privilege. He was an advocate of peace, his love for peace always ignited his desire to visit home or individuals who had one form of misunderstanding or the other with their neighbours. During one of such occasions, he mediated and restored peace through songs and rhythmic pattern of movements, meant to amuse the people. This manner of

demonstration in restoring peace earned him a name as “Okoezi” one (who teaches and demonstrates). Years after, his name was translated to “Okorosha.” Throughout his life time in the community, Okorosha did not quarrel or had misunderstanding with any member of the community. Rather, he ensured that love, peace, unity and social justice were the guiding principles of life and existence in the community. On the night before his departure from the community, Okorosha gathered all the members of the community at the village square under the moonlight and entertained them with stories, from which the people learnt the virtues of oneness, love, peace and justice. Nobody could say or state precisely what became of “Okorosha” after that night’s encounter with the community members. Speculations were that he died after that encounter with the community. But since there was no trace of his decomposed body, others believed that he disappeared into the thin air. Whichever is the case, Okorosha left a legacy in that last encounter with his people because it later served as a model of peace and unity in Ohii community. This “Okoezi” method of conflict resolution was modified and developed into the Okorosha festival with the passage of time, the nomenclature of Okorosha which is what is being performed annually in Ohii today has continued to change.

Performance Guidelines in Okorosha:

The Okorosha festival is a festival that is being performed annually in Ohii community and there are guiding principles during this period. In Ohii community, the Okorosha do not perform on Nkwo market day, children, women and pregnant women as well are not flogged by the Okorosha. During this festival, the community will be at peace with oneself and another. The people do not fight in order not to distract the spirit of the Okorosha. During the period, people are advised not to play any kind of musical instrument in other not to invite the spirit at the wrong time (Ohii community Elders, 2024).

Traditional Significance of Okorosha:

The Okorosha masquerade is a multifaceted performance with roots in ancestral worship, moral instruction, and community entertainment. The masquerade dance, has the dual functional role as both a spiritual rite and a social performance that communicates ethical values. The masquerades often dressed in elaborately crafted costumes and accompanied by rhythmic drumming and chanting, represent ancestral spirits believed to return during festivals to bless the community. Amadi emphasizes that, “the dance serves a regulatory function by publicly condemning social deviance, thereby reinforcing community norms” (). Okorosha is also a generational performance, younger men undergo initiation rites and apprenticeship under elder masquerade performers. This process ensures continuity and communal involvement, tying the performance deeply to the social fabric of the Ohii people.

Digitalization of Performing Arts:

Digital technology has significantly altered the landscape of performance arts globally. Taylor and Marcus argue that, “social media has created “hyper-visibility” for traditional dances, allowing cultural performances from previously inaccessible communities to reach global audiences” (45). However, Pérez warns that,

... digital formats often lack the depth necessary to convey the layered meanings embedded in traditional performances. The shift from “communal participation” to “virtual consumption” often reduces nuanced cultural practices to aesthetic or exotic experiences (10).

In Africa, this concern is amplified by a history of colonial misrepresentation and exoticization. The risk of misinterpretation increases when performances are divorced from their linguistic, historical, and spiritual contexts (Chen, 150).

Intercultural Dialogue in the Digital Era:

Intercultural dialogue refers to the open and respectful exchange between people from different cultural backgrounds. Hall notes that, “digital platforms offer immense potential for fostering such dialogue, especially by making lesser-known cultures accessible to a broader audience” (80). For example, the fusion of Indian classical dance with hip-hop exemplifies how collaboration can symbolize mutual respect and creative evolution. Alexandra Card, highlights how intercultural performances like Chi Uduka blends traditional drumming and dance from Japan and India, fostering "a shared artistic vocabulary that transcends cultural boundaries" (2). Similarly, the Okorosha masquerade of southeastern Nigeria, when shared through digital platforms, introduces global audiences to Igbo spirituality and communal identity, illustrating how technology according to Resario, can "serve as a vessel for cultural preservation and exchange" (67). However, access does not automatically equate to understanding. Without appropriate context and representation, cultural exchange can devolve into voyeurism or appropriation. Mensah and Darlington (2023) contend that, “sustainable intercultural dialogue in the digital era requires intentional frameworks of storytelling, cultural translation, and local agency.”

Increased Visibility and Fragmented Context:

The digital dissemination of Okorosha has led to increased visibility, particularly among diaspora audiences and global cultural enthusiasts. However, interviews with non-local viewers revealed that while the visual elements of the dance (costumes, music, choreography) were appreciated, the symbolic and spiritual dimensions were often lost. A viewer commented, “I loved the rhythm, but I couldn’t tell what the masks meant.” This indicates a gap in cultural translation that weakens the potential for genuine intercultural understanding (Mensah & Darlington, 205).

Commodification, Ethical and Cultural Considerations: The increasing visibility of Okorosha carries ethical responsibilities. Extracting performance from context, risks commodifying or misrepresenting rituals that remain sacred locally. Many of the online videos, especially those produced by third-party media houses, framed the Okorosha dance in touristic or entertainment terms. Thumbnail images emphasized the "mystery" or "freakishness" of the masquerades, often with clickbait titles. This style of presentation commodifies the performance, stripping it of its ritual and community relevance (Okeke & Nwosu, 55). So, ensuring that performers and communities retain control over digital representation is very essential in preserving authenticity and preventing appropriation. It is advisable at this juncture, to adapt the Cultural Voice and Agency approach, where videos produced by members of the community, particularly youth-led initiatives, is more likely to include explanatory captions, subtitled interviews, or even behind-the-scenes commentary of the performance. These community-authored narratives provide richer context, thereby enabling more respectful and informed engagement from global audiences. The empowerment of cultural insiders to frame their own narratives is thus crucial to meaningful intercultural dialogue. Moreover, the tension between Christian religious norms and masquerade tradition persists, while cultural syncretism allows participation across belief systems, disputes occasionally arise when masquerades continue to be associated with violence or sorcery in some narratives. In this situation, dialogue between elders, religious leaders, and cultural advocates is key to mediating these tensions.

Potential Challenges of Digital Platforms in the Technological Age:

While digital technology has opened new platforms for cultural sharing, it has also introduced risks of misrepresentation, intellectual property theft, and loss of spiritual authenticity.

Several community members expressed concern that masquerade videos were being reused in decontextualized memes or remixed with inappropriate soundtracks, leading to spiritual dissonance and disrespect. Despite its transformative potential, dance used for intercultural dialogue in a technological context brings several challenges.

Firstly, cultural appropriation and misrepresentation remain critical concerns. Traditional dances often have sacred or historical contexts that risk dilution or disrespect when performed outside their original settings, particularly online. Zubovic warns that, "when traditional dance forms enter the digital realm without contextual framing, they risk becoming superficial commodities stripped of their epistemological depth" (243). For instance, Indigenous dances are frequently copied without proper cultural understanding or acknowledgment, leading to misrepresentation.

Secondly, the loss of authenticity occurs as traditional dances are shortened or stylized to suit online audiences, potentially stripping their original significance. Thomson notes that, "Digital mediation tends to fragment traditional dance forms, resulting in performances that lack the ritual or communal essence vital to their meaning" (12).

Thirdly, digital inequality restricts participation for communities lacking adequate access to technology, limiting intercultural exchange opportunities. Pataranutaporn et al., emphasize the digital divide as, "a significant barrier preventing equitable participation in AI-mediated cultural projects, particularly for marginalized groups" (7). Finally, commercialization can exploit dance forms popularized on social media without compensating or respecting the original cultures. Vechtomova and Bos caution that "algorithm-driven platforms prioritize viral content over cultural nuance, commodifying traditional forms for mass consumption" (5).

Prospects and Opportunities:

Conversely, the technological age presents exciting opportunities and offers unprecedented tools for sharing and preserving dances. Digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, enable dancers worldwide to collaborate in real time, blending styles and stories from various cultures. Card, illustrates this through the example of intercultural festivals where artists use digital tools to create “a polyphonic dialogue of movement and sound” that transcends geographical limits (4). Virtual Reality (VR) and Motion Capture Technology (MCT) help archive and recreate traditional dances for educational or immersive experiences. Resario however states that, “these Virtual archives and digital recordings aid preservation efforts for traditional dances vulnerable to fading due to urbanization or generational shifts” (69). However, online classes and performances raise awareness and promote respectful learning about diverse cultures, with Aksoy and Ling stating that, “digital dance education offers an accessible, interactive medium to foster empathy and intercultural competence among learners” (351). For diasporic communities, Thomson opines that, “digital dance performances facilitate cultural reconnection and identity reinforcement across borders” (15). In addition, institutions like the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture can support its preservation by funding performances and promoting cultural education. Just as the Ekumeku Movement represented armed resistance, the Okorosha represents cultural resistance, a fight to maintain the soul of the people.

Toward Authentic Intercultural Dialogue:

In furtherance to the response of the challenges identified, the findings suggest that for intercultural dialogue to be meaningful in a technological age, cultural performances must be accompanied by proper context and community input. This requires moving beyond the passive consumption of digital

content to active engagement with its cultural backstory. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok should support this by integrating cultural tagging, metadata, and educational overlays. Hall (2018) emphasizes that, “intercultural understanding is cultivated, not assumed.” To harness technology’s benefits responsibly, this study proposes three key strategies:

i) **Digital Storytelling Workshops:** Invest in inclusive digital infrastructure to enable underrepresented communities’ participation (Pataranutaporn et al., 9), and support community-based digital archiving to maintain authenticity and cultural ownership. Collaborating with local cultural custodians to train them in video production, cultural annotation, and digital distribution techniques, breeds respect and promote cultural depth. Resario stresses that “community-led documentation ensures that cultural narratives remain anchored in local voices” (72).

ii) **Esoteric Tagging Systems:** Introduce metadata protocols and cultural disclaimers that explain the context and sacred significance of performances. This helps protect content from misuse and provides viewers with cultural cues. Also, promote cultural sensitivity and ethical sharing, ensuring that collaborations honor context, consent, and credit. Zubovic argues that “digital intercultural collaborations must foreground epistemological humility to avoid epistemic injustice” (247).

iii) **Educational Collaborations:** Partner with universities, cultural institutions, and NGOs, to integrate diverse dance forms into educational curricula to foster intercultural understanding and create multimedia content that includes community-driven explanations of traditional performances. There is also the need to encourage creative innovation grants for cross-cultural digital dance projects, facilitating projects that “... respect tradition while embracing emergent forms” (Vechtomova and Bos, 8).

Conclusion:

The Okorosha masquerade dance, as performed in the Ohii community, represents a living heritage that bridges generations, beliefs, and communal values. In the technological age, this heritage faces the dual challenge of remaining visible while maintaining cultural authenticity. Digital technologies, while offering unprecedented visibility, also bring the risk of distortion, commodification, and cultural appropriation. For intercultural dialogue to be truly effective, it must be rooted in respect, community agency, and contextual framing. The future of cultural performance in the digital era depends on collaborative efforts to ensure that traditions like the Okorosha are not only seen, but truly understood. Preserving and revitalizing it is not just about holding on to the past, it is about securing a meaningful, authentic future. The Igbos have resisted conquest and colonization, they must now resist cultural amnesia. To archive this tradition, is to reaffirm the values, stories, and beliefs that define the Igbo people. A collective effort involving scholars, communities, and cultural institutions is required to preserve and pass on this heritage. As the Igbo proverb says, *onye n'amaghi uru ihe o ji n'aka, nwere ike itufu ha niile*, (he who does not value what he has, may lose everything).

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