

Visual Aesthetics and Clothing Signification in *Ukpalabor* Masquerade Performance of Ndokwa People

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Abstract

The masquerade is a spectacular indigenous theatrical form involving the impersonation of fictive and non-fictive characters by costumed performers that is both visually and conceptually characterised by its costume. These meaning-laden costumes are cultural icons that continue to play vital roles in the life of Ndokwa people as they “serve as the living testimony of the ancestors ... [and] ... their physical and spiritual identity” (Aremu, 1991, p. 11). This essay investigates the visual aesthetics and clothing signification of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade performance and the reasons why it has continued to be the centre of the cosmology of the Ndokwa people. The work focuses on the unique creative components of this masquerade (costumes, props, accessories, makeup, and colour) and how they visually enthrall the audience without necessarily compromising the symbolic, sacred, exclusive and secretive nature of *Ukpalabor* masquerade in performance. The essay concludes that the *Ukpalabor* masquerade performance tradition is deeply entrenched in/derives from the philosophy of the Ndokwa people to the extent that any modification to its ethos is highly frowned at, while its current aesthetic creativity, which is much appreciated, gives the people a sense of advancement, certainty and continuity as a cultural symbol.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Clothing, Signification, Visual, *Ukpalabor* Masquerade.

Introduction

The 20th and 21st centuries have continued to witness a growing desire and push for ethnic recognition by and in the lives of individuals and groups alike (Neville, *et al*, 2015; Schlemmer, 2017; Wi, 2019). The search for religious and cultural identity through traditional festivals, such as

masquerade performance, has been on the increase in African societies. Masquerade art is built into the life patterns of most ethnic communities as part of religious ceremonies meant to cement their communal beliefs and celebration, entertain the people, as well as expose their vices with ridicule and verbal castigation in public. This art form, according to Okoye:

subsuming dance, music, costume and other visual and aural arts [which] are unarguably the most popular forms of communal cultural expression... [these masquerades] are figured as ancestral characters who presumably take on physical forms on the invitation of the community to participate in important communal ceremonies or perform specific social or religious roles (2007, p. 60).

For him, the masquerades serve as expressions of the ideology and communal essence as well as artistic expression of different ethnic groups. This process is continuous because the costumes of these masquerades are upgraded constantly and the people are therefore conscious of it through their participation.

Beyond the communal portrayal of the artistic and creative impulse of African communities, masquerades and masks seem to be as old as humans and, according to traditional beliefs, personify spirits that are found in nature and animals with “facial disguise, which portray anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or even hydromorphic expression” (Mangiri & Kquofi, 2014, p. 270). They have deep symbolic meaning which go beyond the surface beauty of the artistic creations, as their appearance in ritual ceremonies and festivals is to enact specific roles characteristics of the occasion (Okpewho, 1992, p. 267). The masquerade performance provides an avenue for the manifestation of the peoples’ origin and cultural unity with the objective of producing and expressing a particular identity. It is as a result of these attributes that this work shall investigate the visual aesthetics and clothing signification of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade performance and the reasons why it has continued to be at the centre of the cosmology of the Ndokwa people. The work shall further focus on the unique creative components of this masquerade tradition/art (costumes, props, accessories, makeup, and colour) and how they visually enthrall the audience without necessarily compromising the symbolic, sacred, exclusive and secretive nature of *Ukpalabor* masquerade in performance. This essay shall conclude with the fact that the *Ukpalabor* masquerade performance tradition is deeply entrenched in and is derived from the philosophy of the Ndokwa people, particularly for current aesthetic creativity which is appreciated and gives the people a sense of advancement,

certainty and continuity as their cultural symbol. However, any modification to its ethos is highly frowned at because of its spirituality, which does not allow women to be a part of the masking or getting close to it during their menstrual cycle, for instance.

Clothing and Aesthetics: Forms and Values

Clothing is an integral part of life because it is closely connected to the human body; a “silent language” that uses visual and non-verbal symbols (Sue-Jenkyn, 2005, p. 56-58; Omatseye & Eneriewen, 2002, p. 58-60) as a device of social communication. Clothing reflects the historical past and present of an individual, a community or a nation, sending signals of all sorts. As a vital part of culture, clothing can be used as a mediator between a person and his/her environment as a transmission of information between the carrier and receiver through symbolic messages. As a cultural artefact embedded in current and historical sets of meanings, clothing shapes the social and economic forces of the people because most societies exploited native plants, animals and minerals to produce clothes for their people and export.

Clothing as costume is an important component of performance, the first visual cue used by an actor to disguise and enhance characterisation (Quizon, 2007, p. 280). As a tool of performance, costumes not only help actors to perform but also aid the aesthetics, as they convey meaning more than words can ever do, offering a visual, rhetorical space for expression in cultural practices through which the people make their history (Hall, 1980, p. 60). As a versatile cultural agent, the theatrical costume is an extract of the cultural environment in which it is made, so incorporates all the peculiarities derived from the society as meaning-oriented symbols that are temporally relevant to the immediate need of the performance while transmitting the values of the community across boundaries (Kwakye & Adinku, 2013, p. 1). So with costume, through the masquerade performances, a people can make and tell their stories from their perspective, while the use of aesthetically designed costume, which happens to be “both material object and sign” is one of the most important and obvious “... sign of a sign and not a sign of a material thing” (Bogatyrev, 1976, p. 33) that is used to pass across messages, whether connotatively or denotatively to the world.

The Umuseti and their Worldview

The Umuseti people are an Ukwuani speaking people of Ndokwa extraction in Delta State, Nigeria. The Umuseti people, in fact, the Ndokwa in

general, believe in the reality of God's existence. Though invisible, they know God is always close enough to assist in whatever situation they are faced with, and to share in their festivals as well. That God which is, and remains the centre of their cosmology, is evident in their names, proverbs and daily conversations, among others. They also believe in the indestructibility of life, that is, death is a transition through which a person joins another invisible community of departed ancestors. So to them, life is an unending cycle – “the world of the living, the dead and the unborn” (Soyinka, 1976, p. 154) all forming a continuum. It is for this reason that ancestral veneration is highly pronounced and acknowledged among the people. The Ndokwa people also believe in several gods and other superhuman agencies, such as the ancestors, spirits and *elishi* which, serve as channels through which they can send their petitions to the God of all creations as messengers between God and humans. Because of the various reasons that spurred their migration, the Ndokwa people are considered to be good-natured and accommodating but who frown against any anti-social behaviours. These beliefs and values spurred the evolution of festivals in the land, though these are embedded with elements of entertainment. The primal force of the Umuseti people is located in the ancestral celebration, which is rooted in the *Elishi* phenomenon (Izuegbu, 2003, p. 25), hence their religious belief is strikingly reflected in the attachment they have for their masquerade. The *Ukpalabor* masker, also called *Obu Okpo*, is seen as the mouthpiece of God on earth.

The *Ukpalabor* Festival: Origin

There are many versions of the origin of the Umu-Onicha, which comprises Isumpe, Umuseti-Ogbe and Uno, Emu, Ebedei, Onicha-Ukwuani clans, among others, one of which is the migration from Benin Kingdom. According to this version, the *Ukpalabor* festival celebrated by the Umuseti people today is said to be the *Igue* festival in Benin, which is meant to show gratitude to the gods for the successful end of year and to usher in a new one with renewed hope for good luck, peace and prosperity. The ceremony is also a period used to ward off evil spirits and bring blessings to the Oba (Omoera, 2008; Akoda, 2011). According to the oral account by Stanley Mba Olise, a special initiate of the creative arm of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade (called *Ndemka*), this festival started among the Umu-Onicha as a result of the covenant they entered into amongst themselves to stay united after their migration from Benin and to also ensure that they did not migrate to another place. This ‘bond of unity’ and continuation from the past was in a bid to forge unity in the land and with their neighbours. The celebration of the festival is such that Isumpe, the

eldest son of Onicha, must fix the dates and performs on the first day of the year's feast calendar, while Umuseti and others follow suit accordingly. This annual festival always takes place in March/April in the dry season after harvest, which gives the town a festive outlook, especially as it is close to the Christian Easter celebration. It is only male initiates that are fully involved in the preparations and presentation of the festival, but in terms of the building and dressing up of the masquerade, it is the *Ndemka* - those ancient founts/repositories of wisdom that are assigned the responsibility of building these aspects.

The traditional significance of this festival is to foster unity, good health and well-being as well as protect, heal and provide bountifully for the community. The festival also assists to spiritually link the living and the dead and teach interdependence between the environment and the community. This interdependence is between members with each other, the environment and the spirit of the ancestors.

Clothing Signification in the *Ukpalabor* Masquerade

Fundamentally, the costume completes the new identity represented by the mask, which is worn with the clothes, and usually tradition prescribes its appearance and construction. Like the masks, costumes are made of a great variety of materials, all of which have a symbolic connection with the mask's total imagery, which gives it a casing and aesthetic covering that elicits respect and veneration (Umukoro, 2015, p. 47 & 49; Aremu, 1991, p. 7). The visual representation of the colorful costume and mask worn by the *Ukpalabor* masquerade for the annual festival, amongst some medicinal and ritual emblems, contribute to the overall visual aesthetics of the masquerade. The costume in this case is seen with the mask as one entity while the wearer/performer is in action. It is a living thing in continual motion during the period of the performance. There are some identified participants, like the flutist (*Ologba*) and security man (*Iswe*), who wear costumes which serve as identity markers for them during this festival. The flutist dresses in any attire, basically a pair of trousers and bright coloured top, while the security man who acts as guide to the masquerade wears a green khaki uniform. The *Ukpalabor* masquerade costumes are quite spectacular although made from local fabric and referred to as *ukonmo/ata elishi*: a blue cloth designed with white and hemmed with a red piece of cloth. However, with technological and cultural interactions, the people now make use of the Yoruba *adire* cloth (Fig 1), which to them has the same symbolic and spiritual relevance. As a creatively patterned cloth, *adire* is quite significant both as process and object of communication, so functions as visual language.

The repertoire of designs and motifs is in the form of stylised representation of plants, animals, everyday objects and abstract patterns, and a significant part of the everyday life of the people; the designs are classified into five types: geometric, figural, letters, skewmorphic and celestiomorphic patterns (Wolff 2001). Pythagoras, a 6th century BCE Greek philosopher and mathematician, believed that geometry was the rational understanding of God, man, and nature (Kahn, 2001; McKirahan, 2011). This study believes that this philosophy is a guiding principle of the motive behind the geometric designs on the *adire*. Geometric motifs are dots, lines and shapes that are symmetrical and instantly recognisable, but they also convey silent messages. The figural motifs represent things we know about nature and life around us. They are either zoomorphic motifs that are basically animals of different species or floral motifs that are plant-based, like flowers and leaves. These designs are mostly asymmetric and their kinds of lines vary. The letter designs are the alphabets of their local language. Then the skewomorphic are representations of human-made objects, which are diverse allusions to socio-environmental experiences of the people, while the celestiomorphic motifs (Kalilu, 1996) are based on celestial bodies or planets. Looking at the *adire* cloth, one would see that some of these motifs are pictorial and discernible, while others have but slight pictorial resemblance to what is represented (Areo & Kalilu, 2013).

This piece of costume, therefore, signifies a whole lot of things in the context of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade of Utagba Uno people. The circular designs found in the skirt are varied, ranging from the limitless and boundless nature of the sun with its completeness and eternity that encompasses the human soul. The world is in constant movement with humans at the centre, a cyclical movement from birth to adulthood to death. The horizontal motif, just like the circular design, represents life on earth as a binary linear process; the path from birth to death, beginning to end, left and right, male and female, good and evil. The vertical motifs, on the other hand, represent human, the body, and our upright posture as well as the path from earth to heaven and the realm of spirit. It is also likened to the human spine and to the tree of life; the cross roads of life, difficult though but success comes at the end, while the triangle represents the union of body, mind, and spirit, stability and power, which according to Soyinka (1976) is the trinity of the world of the ancestral, living and unborn (p.149) that stand in for the traditional African person. The triangle represents humanity's aspiration, our rising force in our continuous movement in life, while the leaf motifs, on the other hand represent life. Drewal & Mason (1998) have rightly observed that the dot is a kind of sanctifying and sacred pointillism that conveys transformation and transcendence of worldly entities united with other worldly forces.



Figure 1: The *Ukpalabor* Masquerade of Umuseti People of Utagba Uno.

These dots are points of light and blessing as they create brilliance on the *indigo*/bluish colour of the fabric. They represent the spiritual position of brightness and symbols of the renaissance and conversion of the human soul (See Fig 1).

Lines, according to Thompson (1973), impose human order onto the disorder of nature. The designs signify different things through their different shapes. The costume on the trunk of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade is a short, free and wide-shouldered design with open sides worn on a short dance skirt (*nbenuku*) of the same color. While an inner short red-colored cloth is worn under the free-flowing outer costume under which certain charms and amulets are sewn or worn to seek spiritual aid and fortify the masker against any spiritual attack. The *agbada* refers to the flowing wide-sleeved attire that symbolises more than just wealth and status, but also a representation of robust social heritage. This design both conceals and expresses the masquerade's spiritual and physical state that looks like a flying bird, portraying the majesty, grace, speed and strength of the deity while sweeping off evil from the community. There are various utterances and praise names that are chanted during the dressing and display of the *Ukpalabor* masquerades, such chants are: *ugboko oji ne du enwulu bu oku ada; ejemeje; ogbu madu no gen du na so enine*; this means: the dark forest that emits smoke when there is no fire; he who goes around to his children, no matter the distance; he who kills when life is sweetest respectively (Chief Stephen Akpe, Personal Communication, 2009). The costume plays an important ritual role, as it acquires supernatural aura which "conceals the unknowable and yet reveals man's infinite potential for spiritual transformation" (Lawal 1977, p. 59).

The concept and/or meaning of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade is centred on its masks, a crest mask largely built with feathers of known birds that have not possibly gone into extinction. This is called *ókpaekilika*. The special part designed like a hand fan, is called the *elue*. It is the most important part of the mask, built with the feathers of the flamingo (*áfálúché*), parrot (*ókue*) and emu (*ókpó*). This part of the mask must never touch the earth, hence it is held cautiously and it is believed that anyone, whether the dressers or the masker, who drops it on the ground would not survive it. The bridge between the *elue*, *ókpaekilika* and the roundish woolen object wrapped with red cloth is called the '*ukwummo*', from which hangs a net-like piece of cloth that covers the masker's face. This is where the 'secret powers' of *Ukpalabor* masquerade lie. The Umuseti-Uno masquerade, unlike the Utagba-Ogbe version, is so beautifully well designed with the same colours of red, white and blue, which shows that they are artistically resourceful. Also, the *adire*-design type cloth cannot be worn by an ordinary, uninitiated Umuseti person. Strangers are also not allowed to

wear it into the community, but with modernisation and cultural infiltration, strangers now wear it into the community but not on the day of performance. Indigenes that disobey are afflicted with strange ailments which eventually lead to their deaths. The motifs on the cloth generally signify humans as an embodiment of the spiritual and temporal who in their circle of life, go through a form of rebirth of the spirit-human; a renewal of the divine energy among the living in manifesting calmness and quiet. The celebration of the festival brings comfort, peace and stability to the people.

Visual Aesthetics of *Ukpalabor* Masquerade

The uniqueness of the African masquerade tradition is presented in the functional aesthetic form that portrays the confinement of the Supreme Being, spirits of nature and ancestors, in socially assembled roles to perform social and religious responsibilities for the human community. Their diversity is seen in their medium of performance, refined performance styles and forms, distinctive qualities of their costumes, the relationship with spectators and even their body structures, among others. Talking about the *Ukpalabor* masquerade "... is not [only] to decode it ... [but] it is an attempt to relate oneself to it and to the sight it represents" (Leppert, 1996, p. 8) that is the essence of the visual aesthetics of the masquerade to this researcher. In discussing the aesthetic qualities of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade, many things are looked at holistically. This masquerade is pleasing to the eyes of spectators, especially because of the build, and its carriage and crest mask, which shows elegance as the display elicits positive pleasurable aesthetic experience because of its beauty, elegance and gracefulness. The image of the mask, made of feathers, quills and cowry shells becomes a spectacle of its own in spite of the religious circumstances; this is indicative of McLuhan's oracular maxim "the medium is the message" (1964, p. 23).

There are certain accessories that go with the costumes of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade. These are palm frond tied around the wrists and the ankles, small clinking bells (*ukolo*) around the waist, and cowries sewn on the cloth worn by the masquerade (Fig 2). There are other unseen accessories – such as the tusks of the wart hog/bush pig - worn, tied or sewn on the costumes of the masquerade which are in the form of amulets and charms. All these are called the *agbene*, which Wittgenstein says are "the aspect of things that are most important to us [and] are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity". *Ukolo* (small bells), *iba* (rattles), *ego ayaka* or *ego osiso* (cowrie shells), and even *mkpishi* (cane) possess outstanding aesthetic values apart from their symbolic functions and operate within



Figure 2: Tied palm fronds, cowries and bells on the waist of the *Ukpalabor* Masquerade.



Figure 3: The Ukpabor Masquerade holding a cane (*mkipishi*)

the cultural environment as they regard them as emblems of departed ancestors who manifest as guests to the living communities seasonally or occasionally and must be treated with awe, respect and other reverential attributes (Okoye, 1999, p. 74). The aesthetic qualities of these costumes substantiate the changing patterns of indigenous art forms, especially as they accommodate diverse, cultural sensibilities. The earliest creative efforts of the artists suggest their creative ingenuity in the accomplishment and portraiture of entertainment and spiritual need of the people.

Colour symbolism in African culture has deep significance in religious ceremonies and festivals, hence colours seen on costumes are said to carry ample meanings, which speak of the community's aesthetic, psychological and biological attributes. These colours embody complex and significant connotations not only from the aesthetic to the psychological, but also from the biological and spiritual with different people attaching particular meanings to colours (Holzchue, 2002, p. 11; Anderson & Anderson, 1999, p. 45). The aesthetic appeal of any festival's spectacular display owes a great deal to the usage of colours. The interplay of very bright, neutral and cool colours in any festival heightens and increases the interest of the spectators. The costume's colour plays an essential role in the non-verbal code as it creates another subtext to be decoded by the spectator while acting as cultural signifier, which reflects the subtext.

Three major colours that are associated with the *Ukpalabor* masquerade are red, white and blue, which stand for the love the gods have for their children, white stands for the gods guiding their children, while red denotes the power to fight against any evil force on behalf of the children. The tint of gold on the mask stands for royalty. The presence of the masquerade in the world of humans is aesthetic enough as they come with splendour, grandeur and heavenly bliss. All these colours that make up the costumes of the masker connote the spiritual well-being of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade as perceived by Okoye (1999, p. 74). The *Ukpalabor* masquerade has an active role to play in the peoples' lives, not just because some see it as beautiful and good, but even in its sublime and grotesque nature that the aesthetic feeling elicits. This feeling of delight is derived from the satisfaction of the problem-solving process as well as the respect of the overall performance by the *Ukpalabor* masquerade. The glossy blue with the crimson red, black, white, grey and dazzling white feathers of most African birds are used to create all the pattern, content and sequencing of the designs and motifs of the headdress, which gives the *Ukpalabor* masquerade its aesthetical beauty. Through (Fig 1), we can see that there are traditional improvements on the costumes, mask and make-up of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade from the Umuseti Uno and Umuseti Ogbe versions. While the Uno version still retains its original concepts, the Ogbe

version has modified its mask, costume, makeup as a result of influences from neighboring communities, cultures and technology and the need to satisfy the heightened demand for spectacle by the people even when it still retains its spiritual relevance.

The Essence and Spirituality of the *Ukpalabor* Masquerade.

Every culture has a set of symbolic systems embedded within it, which Geertz (1985) sees as “vehicles of culture” because they can reveal as well as shape the ways that people feel, think and see individual culture as well as the world in general, in other to accord meanings to actions and objects. These cultural practices should be read like “texts”, (Geertz 1993; Okoye 2006), hence the reading of the cultural symbols found in *Ukpalabor* masquerade costumes, which have remained the most essential and significant element in the masquerade tradition. However, the culture, occasioned by migration/interaction, contacts with different cultures and religious borrowings and influence, has become a conglomerate, an amalgam of different cultures (Schechner 1991, p. 308). The spiritual concern of the masquerade tradition is to help bond groups, promote social unity, confirm cultural values, morals and worldview, as well as enhance ethnic pride and identity. According to Cole (1975), the occasion reaffirms and reinforces community values and mores on a broad scale not possible with other means of creative expressions.

The *Ukpalabor* masquerade costumes are heavy with significance and symbolism, hence they satisfy not only the material human needs, but the spiritual, social and ceremonial functions also. This tradition has continued to play a vital role in the life of the Umuseti people because of the symbolisation and manifestations of the existing relationship between the living, the dead and the unborn. They are often symbols and visible expressions of the spiritual authority that validate the acts and fundamental beliefs of the Umuseti people, as well as reinforcing acceptable social modes of conduct, which help to eradicate social ills among them. The *Ukpalabor* masquerade remains the most decorated deity in Umuseti community; made up as it is of a distinctive flat-bottom flask-shaped feathered crest mask that rides on top of the masquerade’s head with cloth panel attached to cover the face of the masker. The props like the cane (*mkipishi*) indicate power, which is used as corrective weapon and also a medium by which *Ukpalabor* symbolically delivers the community from danger or control of nefarious forces. It is also used by the followers of the masquerade to demonstrate comradeship, courage, endurance, and perseverance, which are the qualities of good character aside from adding beauty to the costume as well as to the overall performance. The small

bells (*ukolo*) are tied around the waist and the neck of the masker. These bells suggest power and invulnerability, so are used as signals to tell where the masquerade is at any particular time, warning the people of unseen fearsome evil agent and also to protect them. The rattles (*iba*) are tied around both ankles of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade; ordinarily, it is one of the instruments used to give rhythm to the dance of the masquerade. But for the Ndokwa people and the *Ukpalabor* masquerade, it symbolises strength and swiftness and the ability to overcome difficulty, as well as a testament that the offspring of the Umuseti people cannot be born crippled. The cowrie shells (*ego ayaka/ego osiso*), which are tied to both the hands and legs of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade, are also tied to the skirt. The shape of the cowrie is simple but with enormous symbolism. So to the Ndokwa, it connotes prosperity, peace and the strength of the ocean with the powerful protectiveness of the goddess. The spectacular designs of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade costumes are deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of the community, hence they have both spiritual and aesthetic significance. They are not based on any known prototype, but are dependent on imaginations which exist in the spiritual realm. These accessories are necessary for the protection of the masker in case of any attack from any evil person. The major prop of the *Ukpalabor* masquerade is the *mkipishi* - cane (Fig 3), which has dual functions. It is used to either bless the people or discipline perceived evil doers. Going further into what makes the *Ukpalabor* beautiful is the makeup, used to completely disguise and decorate the human features of the masker, though it does not conform to any defined pattern. *Nzú ocha*, a local powdery white native chalk, mixed with little water is used to rob on the feet and draw lines on both hands from the wrists to the third fingers of the masker is also meant to elevate the masker from the ordinary plane to the supernatural realm, where he is vested with extraordinary powers to cleanse the land and proclaim blessings on the community (Fig 2).

The masquerade's costume physically makes the wearer become another entity, and his body thus becomes a vehicle, a home in which the spirit will reside while on earth. The *Ukpalabor* masquerade's fluttering movements reveal the cleansing undertone of its costumes, while the inner cloth is synonymous with secrecy, occult knowledge and the sacred making the masquerade a bridge between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The various colours and types of cloths indicate the divers roles the ancestors play in the lives of their people, hence the *Ukpalabor*'s praise names such as: *ugboko oji ne du enwulu bu oku ada; ejemeje; ogbu madu ni oge ndu na soe enine* - translated as: The dark forest that emits smoke when there is no fire; He who goes around to his children, no matter the distance; He who kills a person when life is sweetest

(Stanley Olise, Personal Communication, 2010).

The mask demonstrates the centrality and dominance of the *elishi* in the life and thought of the Umuseti community. The materials used for the construction of the mask are derived from living things which reside in the forests, like plant herbs, cowries from the river and birds of the air; these show the transcendental nature of this masquerade, which has foresight to see far into the future, enhancing sincerity among the people and recognised authority, proclaiming prayers for longevity and success, afflicting sickness and slow death on the evil doers in the community. The clothes worn by *Ukpalabor* masquerade are sacred, hence used to commemorate the people's religious festival. In other words, these "active bearers of tradition" (Sydov, 1948, p. 12) cannot be used for other social engagements. This buttresses Mbiti's view that "ritual dresses, masks, staffs, and other insignia are often considered sacred; hence people may not touch them under normal circumstance" (1991, p. 143). They are not kept among other clothes because it is believed they can destroy other clothes but remain intact, as these other clothes will be mysteriously burnt to ashes without any physical fire; neither are similar designs/colours of such clothes worn by ordinary members of the community.

Conclusion

The artistic, aesthetic and spiritual essence of the masquerade tradition as well as the makeup, costumes, props, accessories, and masks remain relevant to the people in spite of modern trends and changes in culture. These distinguish it from other forms of artistic expressive genres and make the *Ukpalabor* become the live nerve of the masquerade tradition. They represent the community which performs this tradition. In other words, they become the identity of the community as well as the vehicle through which they communicate their worldview. These masquerade costumes conceal the masker and at the same time reveal the ancestral presence, which is physically not observable.

The *Ukpalabor* masquerade costume, therefore, is a sacred symbol with a rich religious significance vital for the maintenance of binding-ties by humans with the supernatural, and for enhancing, sustaining and fostering the people's sense of communality and interdependence. Thus, they serve as the visible expression of the spiritual force and authority believed to authenticate the fundamental philosophy and ideals of the people.

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