Ebonyi Journal of Language and Literary Studies 4 (1) January 2021
VOL 4
www.ejlls.com ISSN 9091 4582 7142

IRIA COSTUMES AS CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE PORT-HARCOURT CARNIVAL, RIVERS STATE

Rita Ine-Ere SANI

Department of Fine and Applied Arts
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract

Many cultures or people in the world have been able to express their cultural values by the use of dresses or costumes at one occasion or another. Most of the traditional dress patterns are held in very high esteem among various traditional societies. Africans use indigenous dress patterns and textiles as an expression of cultural heritage in many occasions to promote and preserve the traditional culture. Textiles serve as enabling materials in the hands of Textile and fashion designers who use them to create various dresses, costumes and ornamentals in the Port-Harcourt Carnival. The *Iria* cultural troupes display a lot of dress patterns with ornamentals in their performances with music and dance. The *Iria* dance serves as a cultural folklore with dignified steps that are breathtaking in any occasion. It is a special ceremony in womenfolk as it pertains to the rites of womanhood and cultural identity. However, there is no research that focused on the *Iria* costumes as cultural identity in the Port-Harcourt Carnival. The objectives in this study are to identify the symbolic importance of *Iria* costumes and to ascertain its essence as a social force and cultural identity. The methodology of this study is based on qualitative research procedures which draw on both the descriptive and illustrative approaches.

KEYWORDS: *Iria,* Costume, Identity, Carnival, Port-Harcourt

Introduction

The *Iria* also referred to as fattening room ceremonies and dance. It is a cultural dance and one of the famous dance troupes in the Port-Harcourt Carnival usually displayed by

the Okrika, Kalabari and Bonny or Opobo women. It is a cultural dance for both young and elderly females. Its costuming is basically with textile arts, large and small coral beads on the neck, arm, wrists and ankles. The *iria* dance and costume in the Port-Harcourt Carnival is one of the outstanding traditional dress patterns displayed by women to provide forum for entertainment and also to project the heritage.

Over the years, many cultures or people in the world have been able to express their cultural values by the use of traditional dresses or costumes at one occasion or another. Africa is made up of many ethnic nationalities with various festivals, and these are mainly cultural, social and religious festivals which are celebrated according to their worldview. Africans use indigenous dress patterns and textiles as an expression of cultural heritage in many occasions to promote and preserve the traditional culture.

As in other parts of Africa, Port-Harcourt Carnival serves as tourists' attraction and as a means of economic improvement with the cultural values inherent in festival costumes (Amaefulu and Eze-Orji 2016,125).[1] The examples of cultural values in different places such as the Rio, Notting Hill, Trinidad and Tobago and Caribbean Carnivals. Others include the Nigerian Eyo (Lagos) masquerade, Calabar Carnival, CARNIRIV, Abuja Carnival, among others, which serve as platforms to project the cultural values and as a source of income to their host states (Amaefulu and Eze-Orji 2016,125).[2] The Port-Harcourt Carnival is not only to project heritage and improve the economy but also serves as tourists' attraction in Rivers State. Many visitors or tourists and indigenes in the Diaspora love to see cultural identity in costumes and dress patterns used in festivals such as the Port-Harcourt Carnival.

Background of the Study

In Nigeria, there are a lot of festivals being celebrated in different communities and at state levels. Nigeria as a country has different ethnic groups that celebrate various cultural festivals where participants use traditional textiles and dress patterns as costumes to promote cultural heritage. Okachi mentions some of these prominent festivals include:

the *Eyo* festival in Lagos State, *Osun Oshogbo* yearly festival celebrated in the *Oshogbo* Sacred Grove at the banks of the river *Osun*, *Osun* State, the *Ofala* festival which is celebrated by the people in Anambra State and the *Argungu* fishing festival in Gurbin Kokuwa of Augie Local Government Areas in Kebbi State. The Rivers State Festival (RIVFEST) which was later rebranded as Rivers State Carnival (CARNIRIV) in 1988. The National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) which rotates amongst the 36 States in Nigeria are organized by the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) (Okachi 2015, 13(1).[3]

Okachi laments over the long period of waiting after the first edition of CARNIRIV in 1988 until its second edition in 2008. However, Rivers State government organized Rivifest during the interval. In 2008, the Executive Governor of Rivers State, His Excellency Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi reinvigorated the carnival. The 2008 CARNIRIV was tagged: "Our culture our pride" and it held from 5th to 6th December. In 2009 the carnival started on 14th through 20th December. The 2010 edition was hosted from 13th to 18th December while 2011 carnival held on the 10th to 17th December and the 2012 edition started on 9th through 14th December (Okachi 2015, 13(1).[4] The "CARNIRIV" each year had the 23 Local Government Areas as participants, including the National Youth Service Corps Members, children, corporate organizations and other participants such as tourists. However, the last edition of CARNIRIV was celebrated in 2014. The *Iria* cultural dance is attractive because of their powerful costumes and dance steps. The traditional costumes with heavy ornamentals, body paintings, music and drums make it outstanding among others.

Kalango and Agary provides a useful insight on CARNIRIV which gives a great opportunity for tourists to see the cultural display of the people of Rivers State and the acclaimed famous Boat Regatta of the Kalabari people during the carnival (Kalango and Agary 2014, 156-158).[5]The Port-Harcourt Carnival is the display of various dress patterns, creatively designed attires and costumes worn by participants, dancers and

masquerades which makes it interesting. Particularly, the fascinating *iria* costumes are to express an idea, identity, aesthetic or symbolic importance of the people's culture.

Research Objectives

The Objectives of this Study are:

1. To identify the typology of *iria* costumes used in the Port-Harcourt Carnival.
2. To interpret some of the names of costumes and their symbolic importance.
3. To ascertain its essence as a social force and cultural identity to promote and preserve the heritage of the people of Rivers State.

Methodology

In this study the researcher used a camera to capture some photographs of *Iria* costumes or dress patterns used in the Port-Harcourt Carnival. It utilized qualitative research methods, which draws on both the descriptive and illustrative approaches, in that it focused on primary and secondary data collections to analyze and interpret the *iria* costumes in the Port-Harcourt Carnival. The researcher used a tape recorder, notebook and camera, and many culture activists interviewed in an oral interview. The researcher also visited members and staff of Agbani Darego Cultural Center and the Rivers State Culture and Tourism Agency. Other secondary sources included: text books, journals, festival catalogues, public library, private collections and documents from electronic media and archival materials to examine this cultural dance and its symbolic importance in their social context.

Typology of *Iria* Costumes

It is important to have an overview of the word "costume" before discussing the *Iria* cultural dance costumes. Egwuda rightly notes that costume is anything or material worn

by performers in a particular performance which is used to enhance beauty and delineate character of the performer (Egwuda-Ugbeda 2014, 12).[6] Considering one of the most favored posits of semiotic forms, costume or dress can be translated into a language of non-verbal communication code. The semiotics and reception theory emphasize that through experiences, values, historical and cultural awareness of viewers, the meaning of a message is made clear. Panofsky's treaties on iconography and iconology lay emphasis on visual spectacle that conveys a clear message to the viewers with significant form.[7]

. As in other parts of the world, the Port-Harcourt Carnival had periods of fanfare for indigenes and tourists in different styles of fashion or costumes. The *iria* costumes were used by participants from few Local Government Areas who performed with traditional cloths and attires in the cultural dance alongside the Caribbean or free style where participants used modern fabrics and fashion styles. But, this study focuses on the traditional dress patterns or costumes used in *iria* cultural dance.

There are different types of *iria* costumes such as the *Opu-Kilali Iria, Injiri Iria, Ikuta-de Iria* and *Buruma iria.* It must be noted that any female wearer in *iria* costume is referred to as *iriabo* in Rivers State. As earlier mentioned in this study, the *iria* cultural dance is displayed by women from Okrika, Kalabari, Bonny and Opobo. Each of these people has distinct costumes to perform in the Port-Harcourt Carnival.

The Okrika women displayed *Buruma Iria,* which incorporated intricate linear designs painted on the body of the female wearers with cloths called *feni-bite* tied short with coral beads on necks, wrists and as ear-rings which is their costuming style. The cloths are tied short with supporting cloths underneath to make them full and round. They wore slippers on their feet and their heads have special packed hair styles with orange dyes applied on them (Figs. 1 and 2) in Appendix 1.

The Opobo women has the wearer in a cloth know as Damask which is tied as one long piece to the ankles with a lace blouse to match. She wore heavy coral beads on neck,

smaller beads on wrists with a beaded cap as head cover. The female wearer sat on a constructed chair with a base and four handles which are held by four men as means of carrying the *iriabo*. There are supporting women in Native *Popo* or Accra cloths with white handkerchiefs in their hands as they danced along with music. Appendix ii is Opobo female *iria* in (Fig. 3)

The Kalabari women displayed four types of *iria* with different styles and methods used on costumes such as the *Opu Kilali Iria, Injiri Iria, Ikuta-de Iria* and *Buruma Iria*. The *Opu-Kilali* in Kalabari dialect means big and *Kilali* is coral beads. The female wearer in *Opu-Kilali* is seen as the big *iriabo* and adorned with a specific type of traditional cloth called India, which is tied either long or short around the waist line with heavy coral beads on the neck, smaller beads on arms, wrists and knees. They cover their heads with caps made of textile materials and beads with walking sticks decorated with tiny coral beads on the right hand and small flat plates on the left hand sides. Appendix iii is the Kalabari *Opu-Kilali Iria* in (Figs. 4 and 5).

The *Injiri* in Kalabari and Okrika dialects means George cloth and any female in this type of costume are referred to as *injiri iriabo* with a piece of George wrapper tied into full gathers around the waist line and another piece placed under one armhole across the bust and tied on one shoulder. The female puts on smaller coral beads on the neck, arms, wrists and knees. The female in this *iria* costume has a bowler hat as head cover with walking stick and flat plate as well. Appendix iii is the Kalabari *Injirii Iria* in (Fig. 6).

The *Ikuta-de Iria* is the type that used a lot of native beads in varieties of colours instead of the big red coral beads. The type of wrapper used is called *Gom Lorco* in Kalabari dialect which means a soft wrapper. The female tied a short single *lorco* soft wrapper that is above knee level with stripes of dark red and navy blue colours as design. This is enhanced with rows of brown and white combination of native beads on the waist that covered the back completely and ended on the two sides before the stomach without

covering the front part. She used a silky piece of cloth in gold background colour with floral patterns in red, turquoise blue and cream colours to cover from the bust to waist level while the shoulder parts are left uncovered. The female used four steps of the same native beads round the neck, a pair of native beads as ear-ring, a single row of beads with circle design at the centre is tied on both arms, four rows of beads on both wrists and beaded rings on fingers. There is also a single row of beads below each knee caps of the legs and four rows of beads on each ankle.

The *Iria* costuming that used (native beads) is referred to as *Ikuta-de Iria* in Kalabari dialect because these native beads are called *Ikuta* in Kalabari. There are various kinds of accessories used as decorations on the head such as different sizes and colours of beads and small combs among others. This type of *Iria* costuming consist mainly of special hair-dresses that are carved with the aid of razor blades into geometric shapes such as circle, triangle and square or pleated into small buns and decorated with small combs of various sizes in gold colours and a bunch of round ball-like beads in gold and turquoise blue colours dangling at the forehead. This particular *Iria* outfit used styled hair without covering the head with cap or hat as required by other *Iria* costuming. The wearer held a walking stick in black colour on the right hand and a small flat plate with folded handkerchief on the left hand. The wearer can do with or without a blouse and with bare foot. Appendix iii is the Kalabari *Ikuta-de Iria* in (Fig. 7).

The female in *buruma iria* is with a painted body. There are three different costumes here such as the *buruma iria* with *Gom lorco* cloth, coral beads, painted body and a special hair style with decorations but without head cover. There are *opu* (big) *iria* with India wrappers, three or two heavy layers of red coral beads on necks with beaded caps on their heads. There is also the *iria* costumed in *injiri* (George) wrapper behind and other supporting women. Appendix iii is the Kalabari troupe with different styles of *Iria* costumes in (Fig. 8).

The costumes in *iria* can go with short and long cloths; single piece of wrapper and two wrappers tied. The short cloths dress patterns are with single cloth which is enhanced by two or three more cloths underneath and tied around the waist line. The top cloth covers the down one completely and are tied above the knees, which are always tied with sequential pleats in the front to add fullness around the waist line and the female either wears a lace blouse to cover the body, or use folded cloth or scarf to cover the bust only and uncovers the shoulder and belly parts of the body. The covering of the body or wearing of specific type of head covers and headgears are determined by the type of cloth used for the *iria* costuming. For instance there are various costuming materials or textile arts in *iria* outing such as the India, *feni, Injiri , lorco, Damask* and some others. Aside from displaying in local festivals, *iria* has become one of the national acclaimed female cultural dances in Nigeria.

Symbolic Importance of *Iria*

On the historical point of view, it serves as cultural heritage of the people of Rivers State, and symbolizes dignity and pride of a woman. Adegbe notes that culture involves all human endeavors including the material and non-material things (Adegbe 2008, 4).[8] Adegbe states that culture is symbolic and could be passed on from one generation to another such that festivals, arts, crafts, customs, religious beliefs, historical relics, monuments, artifacts, and knowledge are transferred to younger generation.[9] The *iria* costumes or dress patterns are visually impressive, rich in accessories, costly in outlook with breathtaking dance steps portraying identity and ways of mature women in most communities. They are used either as ceremonial costumes for the rite of passage in Bonny and Opobo. In Kalabari, they are used as ceremonial attires in traditional marriage, childbirth and funeral rites. In Okrika, the costumes are used in pre-marriage ceremonies as preparation for females who have come to the age of marrying.

It is required that any female for *iria* "fattening room" ceremonies must stay in doors for weeks or months. The costuming is carried out by any experienced woman in *iria* outfits and it must be costumed on another female. Its costuming involves the use of many types of coral beads and accessories to enhance the traditional outfits with small, big and large coral beads mainly in white and red colours among other colours.

Tolofari notes that originally, the ceremonies are to mark the rite of passage from one socio-cultural status to another. For instance, the *iria* ceremonies are performed when a girl is up to the age of marriage, also the matured women marks it as a passage to another level in the society, or after giving birth women enters the "fattening room" for about one month before the ceremonies are performed. Finally, it can be used as funeral rites for the deceased of well aged people as a mark of respect. All the stages require staying in "fattening room" either for a period of one or two weeks or a month. The girls who are preparing for marriage also are given instructions by experience women of the community on issues of socio-cultural setting, marriage, child bearing and parenthood. At the completion of the set timing for the "fattening room" the skin or bodies of the girls or women are painted with "*Idala* or *Buruma*" as it is called in Ibani and Kalabari dialects (Tolofari 2004, 1-4).[10]

However, there are no "fattening room" processes or various stages of *iria* ceremonial rites are involved or observed in the outing for the Port-Harcourt Carnival as in the case of other ceremonial rites associated with *iria* at the original communal locus. The reason perhaps, was that the *iria* display in the carnival was presented only for entertainment purposes. Despite these facts about the absence of preparation for female wearers of *iria*, the costuming with different types of traditional cloths was used in the Port-Harcourt Carnival. Most females attired in *iria* dress patterns are held in high esteem and also appreciated by people with gifts in the form of money, cloths and other items during special occasions such as festivals, traditional marriages, child birth and funeral ceremonies.

The Essence of *Iria* Costumes as a Force of Cultural Identity

Through festival and costumes, a people can reflect on their past to understand how far and good it has been and how it can be preserved. Obafemi notes that "cloth only wears, it does not die" (Obafemi 2011, 11-13).[11] In Nigeria, each major ethnic group is noticed and best preserved through the uses it makes of clothes and the meaning it invests in clothes and its cultural products such as traditional cloths and dress patterns. Obafemi in an instance of asking these questions state that, "how do dress codes, dress cultures and dress phenomenon help define us – our character, our essence, particularities and disparities? How does the dress culture of a Yoruba distinguish him from a Fulani? Can we still recognize a monk outside his hood? To what extent does his appearance define and reflect our personality, our character, abilities or competences?" (Obafemi 2011, 11-13).[12] It is from a costume or dress and adornment that a person puts on, that makes the first impression of the wearer's personality. Obviously, traditional costumes in festival provide signs and symbols with meanings as an information service for observers.

Utoh-Ezeajugh posits that over the years, many cultures have used dress to express their world view. As cultures vary from one to another, so are the colours of traditional costumes and its significant or symbolic values (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2011, 22-44).[13] Textiles such as cloths and dresses patterns are to transmit messages by the use of signs, symbols, and motifs to represent fundamental principles or ideas with symbolic values through a carnival that serves as a great platform. Their costumes possess the essence as a force that carry peculiar identities with names for different costumes that were made out of traditional cloths and dress patterns akin to the people of Rivers State.

Piercy states that from earliest civilizations, human being have been able to create signs and symbols to convey specific meaning and communicate ideas which has placed it in that realm of the symbolic. There is clear evidence of the primitive man's attempt to represent that period with cave paintings and rock art inscriptions. The Egyptians'

hieroglyphics use alphabets and pictograms to convey their messages. The medieval heraldry is an ideographic system with its primary aim as a means of constructing symbolic identities by transposing human characteristics onto animals (Piercy 2013, 21).[14]

Nevertheless, if the costumes and dresses used are bastardized, it shows that the culture has no identity and it is devalued by its own people and cannot be sustained. The costumes used by most participants in some Nigerian Carnivals are unethical of the African Carnival Culture, which was celebrated and projected by Africans in Trinidad in 1838 and other places. Nigeria is rich in cultural diversity and there are different ethnic groups, each one with its own identity, particularly, in the use of cloths and dress patterns in festival to express their identities. Ikwuemesi defines cultural sustainability in line with the claims of Roseland et al in (2005: 154) as "the ability to retain cultural identity; and to allow change to be guided in ways that are consistent with the cultural values of a people" (Ikwuemesi 2015, 10).[15]

In conclusion, carnivals display various textiles, costumes or attires by participants but the iria dancers' costumes were colorful and outstanding, which make the celebration more interesting. Their costumes possess that force of ethnic group identification that can become a most valuable resource to promote, express an idea, identity and preserve the people's culture. The fact is that most festivals are associated with clothes or dresses, either for commemoration, reenactment or rituals for the land and people. However, it is paramount to preserve one's cultural heritage. After all, there is no place in the world without cultural identity by the use of cloths and dresses and some of these costumes have symbolic importance. Moreover, Rivers State is an aquatic environment; these aquatic forms such as fish, crayfish, scale like curves and others are incorporated to enrich some *pelete-bite* also known as cut thread George cloths. They used linear and geometrical forms as decoration on the body of the female, particularly, the type called *buruma iria*. Obviously, the carnival is aimed towards tourism and economic

improvement of the state. In the eyes of foreigners, carnival is like a social process where people assemble, interact, communicate and interpret experiences, it is a mirror to view the culture and its symbolic past as well as to serve in the present as a reference point to the world. These will also be indicators to the people, and sustain the heritage in traditional cloths and dress patterns in Africa, particularly, the people of Rivers State and by extension Nigeria.

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Appendix 1

Fig. 1: The Okrika female *Iria* dancers in street parade, CARNIRIV, 2014 @ De ArtLord gallery, Port-Harcourt, 2020

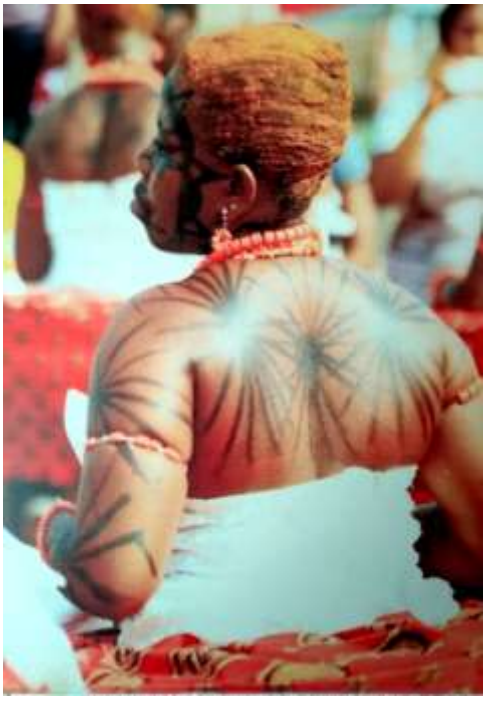

Fig. 2: The Okrika female *Iria*, CARNIRIV, 2014
@ Rivers State Culture and Tourism Office, Port-Harcourt, 2018

Appendix ii

Fig. 3: The Opobo female *Iria*, CARNIRIV, 2014
@ Rivers State Ministry of Culture and Tourism Office, Port-Harcourt, 2018

Appendix iii

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Figs.4 and 5: The Kalabari *Opu-Kilali Iria*, CARNIRIV, 2014
@ Rivers State Ministry of Culture and Tourism Office, Port-Harcourt, 2018

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Figs. 6: The *Iria* with *Injiri* (George) cloth @ Best Shot Studio, Port-Harcourt, 2015

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Figs. 7: The *Ikuta-de Iria* with *Lorco* (soft) cloth @ Best Shot Studio, Port-Harcourt, 2015

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Fig. 8: A troupe female *Iria* from Kalabari, CARNIRIV, 2014
@ Rivers State Ministry of Culture and Tourism Office, Port-Harcourt, 2018