



Research Paper

# A Cross-Cultural Artistic Analysis of Chinese Puppetry and the Traditional Masquerade of the Igbo People of Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT:** This study explores a cross-cultural artistic analysis of Chinese puppetry and the traditional masquerade of the Igbo people of Nigeria. Both are rich, ancient art forms with profound cultural connotations. This study aims to reveal similarities in their origins, functions, and aesthetic principles, while also exploring their unique developments within different cultural contexts. Despite regional differences, these two art forms play similar roles in cultural expression, religious ritual, and social commentary. This article also interprets the cultural connotations and artistic language of these two art forms and analyzes their functional status in traditional society and the challenges they face in modern society. Furthermore, it provides a cultural interpretation of the historical evolution of Igbo masquerade, the symbolic meaning of masks, dance language, ritual functions, and expressions of identity. By comparing the two art forms, this study not only deepens our understanding of traditional African and East Asian culture, but also provides inspiration and reference for the protection, dissemination and innovative development of traditional art in the context of globalization.

**Keywords:** Chinese Puppet Art, Igbo Traditional Masquerade, Cross-Cultural Analysis and Traditional Heritage.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade are rich forms of cultural expression deeply rooted in their respective societies, serving purposes far beyond entertainment and storytelling. These art forms are crucial manifestations of intangible cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation. Despite their distinct origins and practices, both art forms play a vital role in their respective societies, including entertainment, ritual, and the transmission of cultural values (History of Chinese Shadow Play Art - Google Arts & Culture, 2020).

This study aims to conduct a cross-cultural analysis of these two distinct art forms, exploring their historical evolution, artistic characteristics, cultural significance, and their role in contemporary society. By examining these traditions, this study will reveal how different cultures use performing arts to convey meaning, preserve cultural heritage, and deepen mutual understanding, thereby promoting cultural exchange and mutual learning between China and Africa and providing new perspectives and approaches for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage.

## 1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Our globalized world requires a deeper cross-cultural understanding of artistic expressions to preserve cultural heritage and promote cross-cultural dialogue. Traditional art forms, including Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade, are crucial components of intangible cultural heritage, reflecting complex belief systems, historical narratives, and social structures. However, comparative research on these unique cultural phenomena is limited. This deficiency hinders our comprehensive understanding of how diverse societies use performing arts to embody spirituality, governance, and community identity.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- (a) Explore the historical development and evolution of Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade.
- (b) Identify and analyze the artistic elements and craftsmanship of Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade.
- (c) Explore the cultural and spiritual significance of these two art forms within their respective social contexts.
- (d) Compare the performance environments and audience engagement strategies of Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade.
- (e) Discuss the challenges these two traditions face in the contemporary world and their adaptive strategies for cultural heritage.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study will address the following research questions:

- (a) What are the historical origins and evolutionary paths of Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade?
- (b) How do the artistic craftsmanship and visual aesthetics of Chinese puppetry differ from the costumes and masks of Igbo masquerade?
- (c) What are the primary cultural, social, and spiritual functions these art forms perform in their respective societies?
- (d) What are the similarities and differences in the performance settings, narratives, and audience interactions of Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade?
- (e) How do these traditional art forms adapt to modern influences? What efforts are being made to preserve them and make them relevant in the contemporary era?

### **1.5 RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE**

This study is significant because it offers a cross-cultural analysis of Chinese puppetry and the traditional masquerade of the Igbo people of Nigeria, providing insights into shared cultural expressions and narratives across diverse global traditions. By examining these two rich art forms, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how diverse societies convey cultural meaning, history, and spiritual beliefs through performance.

## **II. The Historical Evolution and Origins of Chinese Puppetry Art, and the Traditional Masquerade of the Igbo People of Nigeria**

### **2.1 The Historical Development of Chinese Puppet Art**

Chinese puppetry has a long and complex history, but documentary evidence on its origins is relatively scarce and fragmented (China | Encyclopedia of World Puppetry Art, 2016). The earliest records, such as Jia Yi's New Book (201-169 BC), mentioned puppets dancing to the sound of drums (China | Encyclopedia of World Puppetry Art, 2016). By the Han Dynasty, puppetry had become highly sophisticated, as exemplified by the story of Mao Dun using a puppet, resembling a prostitute to trick his wife into withdrawing her troops (History of Chinese Shadow Play - Google Arts & Culture, 2020). Some scholars trace the origins of shadow play back to Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, when mourning his deceased wife, he saw her shadow appear behind a curtain, an illusion created by an alchemist (History of Chinese Shadow Play - Google Arts & Culture, 2020). Later, Gao Cheng of the Song Dynasty considered this historical event the origin of shadow puppetry (History of Chinese Shadow Puppetry - Google Arts & Culture. 2020). The Tang Dynasty was significantly influenced by foreign cultures, particularly Indian culture, leading to a diversification of musical genres and styles, which in turn influenced puppetry (China | Encyclopedia of World Puppetry Art. 2016). During the Song Dynasty, urbanization led to a flourishing of puppetry, with the emergence of various types, including string

puppets, rod puppets, gunpowder puppets, water puppets, and others,(China | Encyclopedia of World Puppetry Art. 2016). During the Yuan Dynasty, folk shadow puppetry was restricted due to security concerns, but it served the military and helped spread Chinese stories to foreigners (History of Chinese Shadow Puppetry Art - Google Arts & Culture. 2020). By the Qing Dynasty, shadow puppetry had spread throughout China, variously known as "partition storytelling" and "shadow puppetry" (History of Chinese Shadow Puppetry Art - Google Arts & Culture. 2020). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese shadow puppetry also spread overseas, reaching Egypt in the 15th century, Turkey in the 17th century, and Europe in the 18th century (History of Chinese Shadow Puppetry Art - Google Arts & Culture.2016).

## **Other puppet forms**

### **(1) String puppets (also known as "Marionette")**

String puppets, also known as hanging puppets, are a traditional form of puppet performance in which the puppet's movements are controlled by a thin strings. The puppet's head, limbs, and body are connected by multiple strings, and the puppeteer manipulates these strings to make various movements. The puppet's head is usually carved from camphor wood, basswood, or willow wood, and has a delicate mechanism that gives its facial features rich and vivid expressions. The puppet's chest and torso are usually made of bamboo. The puppet's hands are divided into "civil puppets" and "martial puppets", which are suitable for different performance contents and have flexible and diverse movements (Encyclopedia of Chinese Puppet Art 2016).

In actual performances, the puppeteer controls the puppet's movements by manipulating the strings. Usually 16 strings are used, but the number can be increased or decreased depending on the complexity of the movement. The Quanzhou Puppetry Troupe is particularly renowned for its string puppetry. Their puppets are about six feet tall, and can perform life-like movements and emotions, displaying extraordinary expressiveness.

String puppetry is widely practiced throughout China, with Quanzhou, Fujian, being the most representative region. Shaanxi and Zhejiang also have their own unique string puppetry styles. Classic repertoires include "The Little Monk Descends the Mountain," "Zhong Kui Gets Drunken," "The Four Generals of the Chu State," "Dou Tao Weaving Brocade," and "Mulian Saves His Mother," showcasing the profound artistic charm of string puppetry.

### **(2) Rod Puppets**

Rod puppets are controlled by wooden sticks. The puppet's head is supported by the stick, while the body is controlled by the performer's hands or arms. The puppet's head is equipped with a complex mechanical device that allows the mouth and eyes to move flexibly, giving the puppet a vivid expression and flexible movements (Encyclopedia of Chinese Puppet Art, 2016). During the performance, the puppeteer stands at the back of the stage, controlling the puppet in accordance with the music and rhythm, using exaggerated and humorous movements and lines to create a highly dramatic and appealing performance effect. Rod puppets are widely spread throughout China, with Sichuan being the most representative region. Guangdong, Hunan and Shaanxi also have a long tradition. Representative works include "Long Silk Dance" and "The Peony Pavilion Dream". In Guangdong, "Sun Wukong Defeats the White Bone Demon Three Times", "The Legend of Nezha", "The Legend of the White Snake", "The Legend of Huangguoshu Waterfall", "The Return of the Zhou People", "Havoc in Heaven", "The Legend of Yue Fei", "The Princess daughter" and "Garbage Battle".

### **(3) Glove puppets (also known as "Hand puppets")**

Glove puppets or "hand puppets", consist of a carved wooden head and a cloth body. The puppet is usually more than a foot tall and consists of a head, torso, and costume. The head is usually carved from camphor wood and has devices that control facial expressions and "muscle" movements, making the puppet's movements flexible, precise, and expressive (China | Encyclopedia of World Puppetry Art, 2016). During the performance, the glove puppeteer inserts his index finger into the puppet's head and neck and uses his middle finger and thumb to control the puppet's hands. Sometimes small bamboo sticks are inserted into the sleeves to enhance the variety and flexibility of the arm movements. This technique can make the movements more vivid and the portrayal of emotions more delicate. Glove puppets are widely practiced in southeastern China, especially in Zhangzhou and Quanzhou in Fujian. Hunan also retains its own glove puppet tradition. Representative plays include "The Jade Bone Mandarin Duck Fan", "The Ming Dynasty", "Journey to the West", and "Romance of the Three Kingdoms". These works are rich in content and are deeply loved by the audience.

### **(4) Iron Rod puppets**

Iron rod puppets are mainly distributed in the eastern Guangdong and western Fujian regions. They are about one to one and a half feet tall, with a head made of painted clay, a torso made of paulownia wood, hands made of paper, and feet made of wood. The overall shape is exquisite. The rod that controls the puppet is called

an "iron rod", which usually consists of a main rod and two side rods, with iron wire and bamboo handles cleverly combined (China | World Puppet Art Encyclopedia, 2016). During the performance, the puppeteer either stands or sits behind the puppet to coordinate the movements, making them smooth and realistic. The iron rod puppet has a rigorous shape and structure and is a traditional craft with strong local characteristics. Representative production areas include Chaozhou and Shantou in Guangdong Province.

### **2.1.2 The integration of Chinese Puppet Culture and Activities**

Puppet art has a variety of performance forms. It is not only entertaining but also carries cultural, educational and communicative significance. For example:

(1) During festivals such as the Spring Festival, Lantern Festival and temple fairs, puppet shows are usually used to celebrate festivals, pray for blessings and ward off evil. In some folk religious ceremonies, puppetry may also be used as a "divine play" for worship and protection.(China | Encyclopedia of World Puppetry Art, 2016).

(2) In school education activities, puppets can be used to teach students traditional culture. Some schools offer puppetry experience courses or organize intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection activities (Youngman, 2009).

(3) In international cultural exchanges or overseas performances, puppetry can showcase traditional Chinese art and enhance foreigners' understanding of Chinese culture (Cross-Cultural Understanding of Traditional Chinese Puppetry, 2019).

(4) In large-scale celebrations and cultural events, such as opening and closing ceremonies and celebrations, puppetry is often used to enrich the cultural atmosphere.

(5) In tourism promotion or trade activities, puppetry can be used to attract audiences and enhance the cultural connotation of the event ([PDF] Shadow Play Performance Model as a Tourism Supporting Activity, 2025).

### **2.1.3 Materials, Craftsmanship, Painting and Decoration of Chinese Puppet Masks**

Chinese puppet masks are made of a wide variety of materials, which vary according to their function, region and style.

#### **(1) Materials, Painting and Decoration**

**Wood:** The main material is light softwood, which is usually chosen for its fine texture and resistance to cracking, such as camphor, basswood or paulownia. Camphor wood has fragrant, insect-proof and moisture-proof properties, making it very suitable for preserving masks. Camphor wood is often used to carve cloth puppets and stick puppet masks (Camphor Wood | Wood Database, 2009).

**Pigments:** Used to color the masks. Traditional pigments include lead white (white) and cinnabar (red), which are bright in color and durable.

**Adhesives:** For example, gloss glue, which is used to stick and fix decorative elements to the mask, has good adhesion and flexibility.

**Paper materials:** Cardboard, paper pulp, etc., are used to make lightweight educational puppets or performance head-dresses, suitable for mass reproduction. Cotton paper is used for mounting, enhancing texture and layering.

**Fabrics and hemp fiber:** used for securing, filling, connecting the head and body, or covering the mask for painting.

**Cowhide or sheepskin:** is the primary material for shadow puppetry, with a tough, smooth, and translucent surface suitable for dyeing, carving, and paper cutting.

**Other auxiliary materials:** Beeswax for polishing and smoothing the surface; kaolin, yellow mud, or white mud for the base; tung oil, varnish, natural mineral pigments, gold powder, shells, copper wire, etc., for coloring, decoration, and protection.

## **(2) Craftsmanship Process**

The making process of Chinese puppet masks is complex and meticulous, reflecting the craftsman's exquisite skills and profound cultural heritage. This process integrates handicraft traditions, regional styles, aesthetic principles and cultural beliefs, and is an important medium connecting the past and the present, folk culture, drama, belief and art (Yan, et al. 2023).

**Rough carving:** Select suitable wood, cut it into a rectangular piece, determine the center point, outline the triangular outline, and finally shape it into a circle. Roughly carve the puppet head and estimate the size of the mask according to the type of character.

**Fine carving:** Finely carve the rough carving, accurately carving facial features, hair, expressions and outlines.

**Sanding and base coating:** Polish the carved puppet head to make it smooth and apply primer. The primer is usually made of clay materials such as kaolin, yellow mud or white mud mixed with glue. Apply three layers of base, mount cotton paper, and repeat the application of nine layers of base and three layers of cotton paper. Each base is polished with carving tools and water to prevent cracking.

**Painting and Facial Details:** Color is applied using the traditional pastel techniques over the prepared base. After coloring, smokey ink is used to outline the eyes and eyebrows, and fine brushes are used to create facial ornamentation, beards, and expressions. The artisan's skill is required to achieve a harmonious blend of form and spirit, bringing the eyes and expressions to life. Colors follow the conventions of traditional opera facial makeup, for example, red symbolizes loyalty and white symbolizes treachery.

**Assemblage:** The mask is attached to the puppet's body, costume, and mechanisms. Some masks can be animated during performances, such as opening the mouth or rolling the eyes.

## **2.2 Historical Evolution of Traditional Igbo Masquerade in Nigeria**

The Igbo traditional masquerade is a living cultural tradition. Evolving from ancient sacred rituals to contemporary performances in diverse contexts, it reflects how the Igbo people balance modernization and tradition while expressing their ethnic identity (Chimdindu, 2025).

Rooted in Igbo culture and spiritual beliefs, traditional Igbo masquerade dates back to the 13th century. These masquerade dances symbolize ancestral spirits, gods, and mythical figures, serving as a bridge between the living and the dead. Known as "Mmanwu," the Igbo masquerade is a deeply rooted cultural tradition that symbolizes ancestors, gods, or natural forces and plays a vital role in maintaining social order and celebrating community events (Chukwudebelu, 2024). The Igbo believe that masquerade represents the human embodiment of ancestors or gods. The word "Mmanwu" can be translated as "masquerade" or "spirit", emphasizing the sacredness of these performances (Obiọra.2021). Dancers wear masks and special costumes, symbolizing the manifestation of ancestral spirits in the world (Bentor.2008). Traditionally, such performances were held at funerals, harvest festivals, and other occasions. During the colonial period, the spread of Christianity challenged the traditional culture of the Igbo people. Masquerade was once banned or restricted and regarded as a "pagan" custom. Under these pressures, some masquerade went underground or adjusted its form to ensure its continuity. After Nigeria's independence, the revival of national culture provided new opportunities for the development of masquerade. They were gradually accepted and became active again during festivals, becoming an important way for the community to express cultural identity and national pride. With the development of society, Igbo masquerade has also undergone changes. They are no longer limited to religious ceremonies, but have entered modern stages, tourism activities and school education. They have become a multifaceted form of cultural display that retains traditional spiritual significance while being closely connected to contemporary society.

### **2.2.1 Types of Traditional Masquerade Dances among the Igbo People of Nigeria**

#### **1. Ritual or Sacred Masquerade**

##### **(a) Ancestral Spirit Masquerade (Spirit Masquerade)**

Also known as Mmanwu Nna, these represent ancestral spirits (Alokwu, 2025). Performers are believed to be "possessed by ancestral spirits" and must not be touched casually, to emphasize their sacredness. They often appear at funerals, ancestral worship ceremonies, and coming-of-age ceremonies. For example:

Mmanwu Okoroshi: Comes in black or white. White symbolizes blessing and purity, while black represents punishment and warning, playing a role in social norms (Mask - University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2003).

(b) Judicial or Disciplinary Masquerades

For example, Mmanwu Odo and Ekpo-type masquerade, maintain community order and symbolically punish or warn against wrongdoing. These masquerade dances have a strong social control function and are often conducted in secrecy (Anyebe, 2009).

**2. Entertainment or Festive Masquerades**

These masquerades are characterized by exaggeration, humor, and dance techniques. Lacking a religious function, they are primarily popular at festivals, cultural performances, and New Year celebrations (Masquerade Rituals - Wikipedia, 2007). For example:

Mmanwu Adamma and Agbogho Mmuo (female-inspired masquerades): These represent idealized female images (ORJI, 2019). Traditionally, male performers wear masks, but they embody beauty, grace, and societal expectations of female behavior.

Mmanwu Ijele: Large in scale and complex in structure, it is known as the "King of Masquerades." It appears only during major festivals or royal ceremonies, symbolizing honor and authority (Igbo Masquerade - Wikipedia, 2022).

Mmanwu Izaga: It is considered the tallest among the Igbo masquerades and is often seen as a flamboyant and dazzling masquerade (Igbo masquerade - Wikipedia.2022).

**3. Functional or Specialized Masquerades**

(a) Royal or Prestigious Masquerades, such as:

Mmanwu Ijele: The largest and most prestigious mask, approximately four meters tall, is made of a bamboo frame, cloth, and ornaments, topped with a small figurine (Obioma 2016). It symbolizes community prosperity and unity and often serves as the grand finale of a festival (Chimdindu 2025).

Mmanwu Ugo (Eagle Masquerade): "Ugo" means eagle, a revered animal in Igbo culture. This mask symbolizes elegance and dignity and is performed at important aristocratic or royal ceremonies. Performances feature graceful movements and the symbolic power associated with the eagle (Chimdindu 2025).

(b) Warrior Masquerades, such as:

Mmanwu Agaba: Represents courage and strength. While not exclusive to royalty, it also holds significance in funerals and other official functions (Chimdindu 2025).

(c) Satirical and Educational Masquerades

These masquerades criticize social ills, such as greed, laziness, or deceit, offering both entertainment and moral lessons (Ebeogu 2007). For example:

Ozo masquerade: often depict wealthy or influential men in society in a satirical manner, mocking those who hold titles but ignore their flaws (Chimdindu 2025). Ozo masquerade performers wear exaggerated figures, large hats, and elaborate costumes, highlighting the social, spiritual and cultural values of the Igbo community.

**4. Modern or Contemporary Forms**

With social changes, some masquerades have evolved into more contemporary artistic expressions, incorporating modern music and stage lighting, and appearing in cultural festivals, tourism promotions, and television performances. New characters are also emerging to reflect current social issues, such as education, elections, and environmental protection.

**2.2.2 The Integration of Masquerade and Festivals**

The masquerade performance held by the Igbo during festivals is not only a visual and auditory feast but also a crucial link in ethnic identity and inter-generational transmission (Chimdindu 2025). Masquerade dance is commonly performed during the following traditional festivals:

1. Iri Ji (New Yam Festival): This marks the beginning of the harvest season and is an important festival for honoring and thanking ancestral spirits.

2. Ofala Festival: This celebrates a bountiful harvest and abundance.
3. Arochukwu Festival: This festival commemorates ancestral spirits.
4. Coronation Ceremony: This is held during the coronation of a king.
5. Masquerade such as the Odo Festival: Held in the Nsukka region, this festival is primarily for welcoming and bidding farewell to ancestral spirits and is held every two years.
6. Ikeji Festival: This is a major festival in the Arochukwu region, centered around the Ijele masquerade.
7. Funerals, initiation ceremonies, and weddings: Masquerade participates in these rituals, symbolizing blessings and protection.

Furthermore, modern festivals such as Christmas sometimes feature masquerade performances (Okewande, 2023). Before the festival begins, villagers clean the community, prepare masks and offerings, and perform purification rituals.

At the official start of the festival, traditional priests or elders invoke the ancestral spirits. (Masquerade: Ancestral Spirits, a Dying Art, or Just Entertainment?, 2023). At the sound of drums, masqueraders appear wearing various masks in grand styles. These masks symbolize different ancestral spirits or moral characters, such as the Ijele (royal masquerade) and the Agboho Mmuo (maiden spirit masquerade).

During these events, masked performers interact with the audience, inviting them to dance, posing riddles, symbolically blessing or punishing those who misbehave, and conveying moral lessons. The audience often offers offerings, which the performers symbolically accept (Picton, 1990). Festivals are not only highly entertaining and artistic, but also educational and spiritual. They help younger generations learn about traditional culture and strengthen community unity and foster a sense of belonging. At the end of the event, performers bid farewell, and community members pray to the spirits, praying for peace and a good harvest in the coming year.

### **2.2.3 Materials, craftsmanship, Painting and Decoration of Igbo Masquerade Masks**

#### **(1) Mask Materials, craftsmanship, and painting**

These masks are usually carved by skilled artisans, mainly using woods such as Mahogany, Iroko, Obeche, African blackwood and African rosewood (Traditional African masks - Wikipedia, 2006). Masks are decorated with materials such as rattan, palm fiber, feathers, shells and pigments (a mixture of natural pigments and modern pigments).

Natural pigments are commonly used to make masks, such as: Uli (red), nsí (white) and edo edo (yellow), each color has symbolic meaning - white represents spirituality and purity, red symbolizes strength and courage, and black symbolizes authority or death. Some masks also contain movable parts, such as a mouth that opens and closes, which enhances the performer's mystery and the dynamic expression during the performance.

#### **(2) Costumes and body Decorations**

Masquerade participants are covered in costumes and accessories to conceal their true identity (Asigbo, 2012). Costumes are made of coarse cloth, plant fibers, and brightly colored textiles. Common attire includes long robes and layered skirts, creating a sense of rhythm and movement during the dance. Masks and head-dresses are often molded as a single piece and tightly attached to prevent them from falling off during performance.

Performers often wear brass bells on their hands and feet, producing a distinctive rhythmic sound that complements the drumming. Some dancers also apply white powder, plant dyes, or symbolic body markings to enhance the ritual atmosphere and mystique.

## **III. Artistic Characteristics of Chinese Puppetry and Traditional Nigerian Igbo Masquerade**

### **3.1 Forms of Expression**

#### **(1) Chinese puppetry**

**Operation method:** Chinese puppetry is a narrative performance in which the operator controls the puppet's movements and presents the plot with music and lines, emphasizing the character's emotions and the development of the story.

Chinese puppetry relies on actors to manipulate puppets to interpret stories. Common types of puppets include string puppets (marionettes), rod puppets, and glove puppets. String puppets are connected at all joints by thin

strings. The puppeteer controls the puppet's movements by pulling the strings, thereby making complex and delicate movements such as finger movements or head rotation. Rod puppets are manipulated by a main stick and several thin sticks: the main stick supports the puppet's body, and the thin sticks control the puppet's arms and head, making them suitable for large sweeping movements. Glove puppet performers insert their hands between the puppet's head and body and use their fingers and palms to manipulate the puppet. The performance is flexible and vivid, suitable for close viewing.

The artistic style of puppetry combines both realistic and exaggerated techniques. Realistic puppets focus on reproducing the image of characters, making them come alive through detailed carving and painting. Exaggerated techniques enhance the artistic effect and expressiveness by enlarging or reducing certain features, such as enlarging the eyes or mouth to highlight the characteristics or emotional state of the character.

**Performance content:** Puppet performances are usually based on dramatic narratives, and the plot is conveyed through the movements and expressions of the puppets. During the performance, the puppeteers use manipulation techniques to make the puppets show various postures and emotions, including joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness. The performance content is rich and varied, covering myths, historical legends, and folk tales, and these stories are vividly presented to the audience through the movements of the puppets.

## (2) Traditional Masquerade of the Igbo People in Nigeria

**Dance movements:** The Nigerian masquerade performance focuses on the dancers' body language and on-site interaction. Performers wear masks and dance to the accompaniment of music, expressing emotions and telling stories through body movements such as swaying and spinning. The audience can watch and interact with the performers up close, creating a lively and festive atmosphere. Dancers convey specific cultural connotations through body movements, steps, and coordination with the music. The dance is rhythmic and expressive, using twists, leaps, and spins to convey emotions and storytelling. The steps and rhythm of the dance are closely integrated with the music, and the changing rhythm of the music guides the dancers' movements, making the performance lively and engaging.

### 3.2 Artistic Style

#### (1) Chinese puppets

**Shape and Color:** Chinese puppets focus on combining realism with exaggeration, and are designed according to different characters and story lines. The characters are vivid and life-like, and the costumes are luxurious and exquisite, reflecting the traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts (Heng, 2023).

Chinese puppets are mainly made of traditional materials such as wood, clay, cloth and metal, each of which has its own unique characteristics (Long & Fan, 2023). The head of the puppet is usually carved from hard and durable wood, while the body and limbs are usually made of cloth, bamboo or other lightweight materials for easy operation.

The shape of the puppet is meticulously carved, and the details of the head, body and limbs are meticulously portrayed, striving to show the character's personality traits. The costume design is also based on the characteristics of each character, integrating traditional embroidery, painting and other techniques, giving the puppet a strong national style. The use of colors is vivid, often cleverly blending bright colors such as red, yellow, blue and green (Long & Fan, 2023). These colors not only have a decorative function, but also highlight the character and emotional state of the characters through contrast and combination.

#### (2) Traditional masquerade of the Igbo people in Nigeria

**Masks and Costumes:** The materials for the Igbo masquerade mainly come from local natural resources, including wood, bamboo, clay, feathers and shells. These materials are easy to obtain and full of natural flavor and regional characteristics. Through exquisite production and combination, they create works with strong artistic impact. Performers wear masks and special costumes. Masks are the most important element of the masquerade (Chimdindu, 2025). Igbo masks are diverse in form, often exaggerated and with unique patterns. These patterns have symbolic meanings, representing ancestors, gods or natural forces. The costumes are well-made, colorful and gorgeously decorated, complementing the masks and creating a mysterious and solemn atmosphere.

**Abstraction and Symbolism:** The artistic style of the Igbo traditional masquerade is mainly abstract and symbolic. Mask designs often combine animal, plant and human forms, using exaggerated shapes and unique patterns. These designs are not intended to replicate reality, but to convey specific cultural meanings and symbolic meanings. For example, certain patterns may symbolize the wisdom of ancestors, divine power or the mysteries of nature.

**Use of color:** Colors in Igbo masquerade have important symbolic meanings. Masks and costumes usually use bright, high-contrast colors such as red, yellow, blue and white (Chimdindu.2025). These colors are not only used for decoration, but also to convey specific emotions and cultural messages. For example, red symbolizes passion and power, yellow represents harvest and prosperity, and blue conveys mystery and tranquility.

#### **IV. Cultural connotations of Chinese puppetry and Igbo traditional masquerade**

##### **(1) Chinese puppetry**

###### **4.1 Carrier of historical and cultural heritage**

Chinese puppetry carries rich historical and cultural connotations. Many puppet shows are based on ancient Chinese myths, historical stories and folk tales. Through puppetry, these stories are vividly presented to audiences, thus preserving and promoting ancient Chinese cultural traditions and values. For example, classic stories such as "Journey to the West" and "The Legend of the White Snake" have been widely disseminated through puppetry, allowing audiences to enjoy the performances while also learning about ancient Chinese culture and history.

Chinese puppetry is one of the most representative traditional art forms of the Chinese nation, with its origins dating back to the Han Dynasty and particularly flourishing during the Tang and Song dynasties. Through puppetry, audiences can not only appreciate the performance techniques but also gain historical knowledge and cultural education. For example, traditional plays such as "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" and "Journey to the West" are often presented in the form of glove puppetry, depicting the loyalty, wisdom, and sacrifice of historical figures. Thus, glove puppetry has become a "living history book," reinforcing historical memory through both visual and auditory experiences.

###### **4.1.1 Functions of Moral and Etiquette Education**

Puppetry often uses entertainment to promote Confucian ethics. For example, the play " Judge Bao" emphasizes the contrast between good and evil, guiding audiences to develop a sense of justice and moral standards. These plays often connect to real-world social issues, becoming an important means of educating children and encouraging the virtue of filial piety. Therefore, puppetry has a significant educational function, conveying moral values and ethical norms through performance. Many puppetry plays emphasize moral qualities such as loyalty, courage, kindness, and righteousness. Puppetry conveys correct moral values and behavioral norms through the depiction of character behavior and the development of story lines, thus achieving both educational and entertaining effects.

###### **4.1.2 Role in Folk Beliefs and Ritual Worship**

In folk beliefs and temple fairs, puppets are viewed as a medium connecting humans and the gods. In some southern regions, puppetry is used in religious activities such as prayers, exorcism, and sacrifices, often referred to as "divine play" or "puppet divine play." In Fujian, Guangdong, Taiwan, and neighboring regions, puppetry is often used to express gratitude and worship, pray for good weather, ward off evil spirits, and protect the family. This type of ritual puppetry performance combines art and religion, reflecting the reverence for gods and ancestors and the reliance on cultural traditions.

##### **(2) Traditional Masquerade of the Igbo People in Nigeria**

###### **4.2 Historical Inheritance and Oral Tradition**

Masquerade is an important platform for the oral transmission of tribal history and myths. Mask performances are often accompanied by storytelling or chanting, telling the origins of the tribe, heroic battles, and moral stories, so that the younger generations can understand their cultural heritage and traditional wisdom through entertainment (Johnson. 2014).

###### **4.2.1 Ancestral Worship and Spiritual Beliefs**

The Igbo masked dance is not only an artistic performance but also a ritual imbued with religious significance. Performers wear masks representing ancestors or deities and, through dance and drumming, enter a "sacred state" (Emmanuel 2006). It is believed that during this time, dancers communicate with the spirits of their ancestors, embodying their will in the human world. Especially at funerals or coming-of-age ceremonies, masked dancers symbolize the ancestors' welcome or blessing of new members.

Religious beliefs are closely linked to cultural traditions. In religious rituals, masks and dances are imbued with profound symbolic meaning, used to honor ancestors, pray for good harvests, and ward off bad luck. Through

masked dance, the Igbo express reverence for ancestors and deities, seeking divine protection and blessings, while also strengthening community cohesion and a sense of belonging.

#### **4.2.2 Symbols of Cultural Education, Identity, Hierarchy, and Tribal Authority**

Igbo society emphasizes the status of elders and religious leaders. Some masquerades can only be performed by certain tribes or individuals with priestly authority. For example, the "Okoroshi" masquerade is limited to men who have undergone initiation rites. The more mysterious and awe-inspiring the dancer's performance, the more it highlights his high status. The patterns and colors of the masks also convey ethnic symbolism, power hierarchy, and social roles. Masks and dances forms are an important part of ethnic culture (Chimdindu. 2025). Elders pass these skills to the younger generations so that they can learn about tribal history, ancestral traditions, and religious beliefs. In this way, masquerades enhance the collective consciousness and cultural pride of the Igbo people.

### **V. Functions and Uses of Chinese Puppetry and Traditional Igbo Masquerades**

#### **(1) Chinese Puppetry**

##### **5.1 Educational Enlightenment Function**

Chinese puppetry conveys moral values to the audience through vivid characters and plots. Puppetry scripts often contain rich educational significance. For example, many traditional puppet shows use the method of "teaching through entertainment" to pass on traditional virtues such as respecting the elderly and loving the young, being honest and trustworthy.

During performances, puppet characters demonstrate good moral codes and standards through their words and actions, guiding the audience, especially children and teenagers, to establish correct values. For example, in some puppet shows, kind and honest characters are ultimately rewarded, while greedy and deceitful characters are punished. This plot arrangement allows the audience to subtly absorb moral teachings while enjoying the performance.

##### **5.1.1 Entertainment and Aesthetic Functions**

Puppetry has been one of the most important forms of entertainment for both urban and rural residents in ancient and modern China. Its vivid character models, musical accompaniment, dialogue, and props not only allow audiences to appreciate the beauty of art, but also satisfy their spiritual needs in daily life. With its unique performance style and rich repertoire, puppetry offers audiences an ultimate viewing experience. Through exquisite manipulation, puppets are able to create lifelike performances.

Since ancient times, puppetry has encompassed a wide range of genres, including mythological stories, historical legends, and folk tales, with dramatic plot twists and turns, rich in dramatic tension. For example, some plays use nimble puppet movements and ingenious mechanisms to create thrilling martial arts scenes, creating gripping combat effects, while love stories, through delicate puppetry, convey tender emotions. These diverse performance forms and themes captivate audiences, allowing them to relax and enjoy life, thus enriching cultural life.

##### **5.1.2 Rituals and Celebrations**

Puppetry is also used in certain rituals and celebrations. In some sacrificial rituals, puppets are used to portray deities or ancestors, expressing reverence and prayers. Puppetry is also often used to entertain guests at weddings, birthday banquets, and other festive occasions, adding to the joy and excitement.

##### **5.1.3 Social Cohesion Function**

Puppetry is often performed during traditional festivals, temple fairs, and other collective gatherings, attracting large audiences. In these settings, puppetry becomes an important cultural bond connecting people. It provides a shared cultural experience, allowing participants to experience the warmth and strength of the community while enjoying the performance, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships. For example, during the Spring Festival temple fairs, puppetry performances attract audiences from different families and communities. People gather together to share in the joy. Such community activities enhance communication and interaction, strengthening social cohesion. Through puppetry performances, people not only experience the charm of traditional culture but also deepen their sense of community identity, contributing to social harmony and stability.

## **(2) Traditional Masquerade of the Igbo People in Nigeria**

### **5.2 Religious and Ritual Functions**

For the Igbo people, masquerade is the core of religious and spiritual life, especially in ancestor worship, funerals and coming-of-age ceremonies. Masquerade dancers wear masks and play the role of gods, and their costumes are closely related to spiritual elements (Opata.2021). In Igbo culture, ancestors and gods are regarded as beings with supernatural powers. People believe that through masquerade performances, people can communicate with these ancestors and gods.

Masquerade dancers express respect on behalf of the ethnic group and pray for blessings. For example, during major festivals or ceremonies, participants in masquerade will seek the protection of ancestors and gods through dance and performance, praying for health, peace, good weather and good harvests. This ritual function reflects people's reverence and reliance on supernatural powers and is an important expression of the Igbo people's religious beliefs.

#### **5.2.1 Entertainment Function**

Masquerade balls, with their dazzling costumes, mysterious masks, cheerful dances, and music, offer participants and spectators a visual and auditory feast, possessing a high level of entertainment value. At masquerade balls, performers, clad in ornate costumes and mysterious masks, dance gracefully to the rhythm of lively music. These masks and costumes are often distinctive, with vibrant colors and exaggerated patterns, creating a striking and eye-catching atmosphere.

The energetic and lively dances fill the audience with joy and excitement. The music, played on traditional instruments, is equally powerful and creates a festive atmosphere. At masquerade balls, people sing, dance, laugh and express their emotions, temporarily escaping the burdens of daily life and enjoying a joyful moment. Masquerade balls enrich people's cultural life and satisfy their spiritual needs.

Masquerade balls are a highlight of festive occasions such as New Year's Day, harvest celebrations, and weddings. Accompanied by drums and singing, the performers' spectacular performances not only delight the audience but also provide an important opportunity for community members to share joy and strengthen social bonds.

#### **5.2.2 Social Integration Function**

Masquerade is a vital social activity in Igbo society, providing a platform for self-expression and interaction.

People of all ages, genders, and social statuses participate. Young people showcase their dancing skills and artistic talent through masquerade, while older people reminisce about the past and pass on traditions. Men and women collaborate in performances, fostering mutual understanding and respect.

Even people from different social classes can interact on equal terms during masquerade performances. Through shared participation, social barriers are broken down. Masquerade strengthens interpersonal connections and communication, promoting social harmony and stability. It allows community members to experience the warmth and strength of the collective, enhancing a sense of belonging and identity. Therefore, masquerade is crucial to maintaining the unity of Igbo society.

## **VI. Chinese Puppetry and Traditional Igbo Masquerades Cultural Significance: Similarities and Differences**

Both Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade are deeply rooted forms of cultural expression used for storytelling ([PDF] Masquerade and Puppetry: A Comparative Analysis, 2024). Both incorporate music, song, and dialogue into their performances (Chinese Shadow Play - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2021). Both traditions also serve to educate and entertain audiences (China | Encyclopedia of World Puppetry Arts, 2016). A notable similarity is their connection to religious and ritual practices. Chinese puppetry is often used in religious ceremonies and to honor deities, while Igbo masquerade embodies ancestral spirits and is central to their traditional belief systems (Chinese Shadow Play - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2021). Both art forms have adapted and evolved over the centuries, demonstrating resilience in the face of social change and new media (A History of Chinese Shadow Play Art - Google Arts & Culture, 2020). They also contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural history, social beliefs, and local customs ("Chinese Shadow Puppetry" - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2021). While specific materials and operational techniques vary, the core function of using non-human figures to convey narratives and cultural values is strongly shared.

In terms of artistic characteristics, Chinese puppetry combines realism with exaggeration, focusing on detailed depictions. Its materials are diverse, its manipulation techniques are complex, and its performances often take place behind the scenes, creating a sense of mystery. In contrast, the masquerade of the Nigerian Igbo is more exaggerated and abstract, incorporating a variety of elements. Its materials are primarily sourced from natural resources, and its performances emphasize the dancers' body language and on-stage interaction, creating a lively atmosphere.

In terms of cultural connotations, Chinese puppetry is deeply influenced by religious stories and folk tales from Buddhism, Taoism, and other traditions. While conveying ethical and religious concepts, it also serves to preserve historical culture and education. The Igbo masquerade, on the other hand, is closely tied to religious beliefs and tribal rituals. It is an essential component of sacrificial ceremonies, carrying tribal myths, legends, and cultural traditions, thereby strengthening members' sense of identity and belonging.

Functionally, both have educational purposes. Chinese puppetry imparts knowledge through lively performances, while Igbo masquerade preserves tribal culture through participation in mask-making and performance.

In terms of entertainment, Chinese puppetry delights audiences with captivating stories and exquisite artistry, while Igbo masquerade captivates audiences with cheerful music and striking masks. Furthermore, Chinese puppetry is a cultural symbol that showcases the charm of Chinese culture, while Igbo masquerade is a core element of tribal culture. Both embody cultural identity and play a role in promoting social cohesion.

### **Implications in the Context of Globalization**

Studying traditional art forms such as Chinese puppetry and Igbo masquerade in a globalized world reveals both challenges and opportunities. Globalization, characterized by the widespread exchange of ideas and goods, profoundly influences cultural expression worldwide.

**Challenges:** Globalization poses significant challenges to the survival of traditional art forms, including mass production and cultural dilution. As traditional arts integrate into the global market, they may struggle to maintain their cultural significance and the artists' connection to their craft. The rapid development of information and communication technologies may lead to the erosion or alteration of customs and traditions as foreign cultures become more readily available. With the prevalence of digital media, traditional art forms such as Chinese shadow puppetry may face the risk of extinction (Chen, 2018).

**Opportunities:** Globalization also presents opportunities for traditional art forms, such as gaining international recognition and bringing economic benefits to artisans. Digital tools and social media can help preserve and share these crafts. Technology can foster innovative artistic creation and broaden channels for diverse cultural expression. For example, cloud-based virtual reality systems are being developed to preserve and promote traditional Chinese glove puppetry, providing unique entertainment experiences and helping to safeguard this intangible cultural heritage. New media channels can also be used to enhance the visibility of performances like the Ndokwa Masquerade in Nigeria, making them more culturally vibrant and economically attractive. Studying traditional arts can reveal an identity that adapts to modern urban life and is closely tied to the vividness of performance.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

Chinese puppetry and the traditional masquerade of the Igbo people of Nigeria, as two distinct traditional cultural art forms, exhibit many similar characteristics and values throughout their development, despite significant differences in geographical context, historical background, and cultural traditions. Puppetry constructs a theatrical space of "human-object-divine" through puppets, staging, and language, while masquerade integrates "human-divine-community" through masks, body language, and music. Both possess rich historical and cultural connotations, unique artistic forms of expression, and important social functions. The Chinese puppetry and the Igbo masquerade, in their various forms, express the relationships between people, gods, history, and society, and serve as important vehicles for the preservation of national spirit and cultural heritage. However, faced with the rapid changes of modern society, both face challenges in their inheritance and development. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen the research and protection of these two art forms, promote their innovative development in the new era, and enable them to continue to shine on the global cultural stage and contribute to the diversity of human civilization.

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