



Received: 2025-07-30

Revised: 2025-09-07; 2025-10-13

Accepted: 2025-10-14

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'DÉ-COÏNCIDING' IGBO MASQUERADE AESTHETICS: RETHINKING ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

Abstract: The aesthetics of Indigenous Igbo masquerade are critically examined in this article using François Jullien's *dé-coïncidence* theoretical paradigm, which holds that when routine behaviours deviate from the normative or habitual, authenticity and renewal must take place. Masquerade in southeastern Nigeria has historically represented metaphysical presence and communal renewal, but its material practices today increasingly undermine this philosophical underpinning. There is growing conflict between spiritual symbolism and environmental cost due to high-level ecological extraction involved in costume creation, which includes animal species depletion and deforestation for raffia, bark and wood. Instead of being an agent of de-coïncidental innovation, masquerade in its current form looks more like extractive economies of unsustainable cultural reproduction. The argument proposed in this article is that Igbo masquerade must reconsider its ecologically exploitative material conditions and rethink its aesthetic and ritual frameworks in order to remain valid and relevant in the face of ecological disaster. Based on a transdisciplinary methodology that balances environmental field observation, Indigenous ecological morality and performance analysis, the work identifies important avenues for sustainable *dé-coïncidence*, including the use of biodegradable materials, regenerative costume making, the enforcement of environmental laws and community-based conservation strategies. Finally, Igbo performance art (especially the masquerade) must undergo de-coïncidental change that strikes balance between ecofriendliness in Southeast Nigeria and historical respect for ancestors. François Jullien's *dé-coïncidence* ideals provide a profound lens which indigenous Igbo performances could leverage on in the teeming search and yearning for post-humanist consciousness as planetary health assumes universal concern.

Keywords: dé-coïncidence, postnormal times, posthumanities, masquerade aesthetics, ecological sustainability.

Introduction

Growing, we don't see growing: neither the trees, nor the children. But one day, when we look at them again, we are surprised that the trunk is already thick or that the child already reaches our shoulders. Getting old: we don't see getting old. Not only because we age endlessly and aging is too progressive and continuous to be seen, but also because everything in us ages¹.

In last year's special issue of *Art Inquiry*, the editors proposed the theme *Art and Culture in times of danger*, which aimed at considering the role of cultural institutions in adapting to new sociocultural conditions and contemporary social challenges, such as pandemics, economic crises or global conflicts². In that issue, Ohenhen and the author³ dealt with disconnects between indigenous festival arts and contemporary realities in southeastern Nigeria. That study examined the ways in which our modelling of life and time, identity and achievement, as well as innovation, past, present and future are constructed by preconceived notions of ancestral fashion handed down from generations gone before. The most exciting revelation of that study for the author was the fact that even in these periods of contradictions, complexities and chaos⁴, indigenous arts continue to coincide with these (pre)existing canons despite the burgeoning ecological, technological and sociological crisis. This year's call to 'de-coincide' avails the author another opportunity to isolate and focally explore a specific form of indigenous arts in the light of how aligning their practices or coinciding them with preconceived notions and models of practice becomes (un)sustainable in the wake of technological advancements and planetary concerns. The author turns to the Igbo masquerade culture for this analysis. This choice is informed by the fact that Ohenhen and the author focused on it in their study on indigenous festival arts for *Art Inquiry* last year.

In addition to Jullien, perhaps the best way to begin is to also draw inspiration from Teresa Pękala's idea that philosophical research categories such as permanence and variability, integration and dispersion, continuity and discontinuity are frequently employed in the exact sciences that aim to explain the

¹ F. Jullien, *Las transformaciones silenciosas*. transl. J. M. Marcén, Bellaterra, Barcelona 2010.

² A. Pawłowska, P. Sztabińska-Kałowska, *Art and Culture in Times of Danger*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2024, vol. 26, pp. 1-2.

³ P. Abakporo, S. Ohenhen, *Indigenous Festival Arts and (Dis)connect with Contemporary Socio-Cultural Realities In Southeastern Nigeria*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2024, vol. 26, pp 287-310. <https://doi.org/10.26485/AI/2024/26/15>

⁴ Z. Sardar, "Welcome to Postnormal Times." *Futures*, vol. 42, no. 5, 2010, pp. 435-444. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2009.11.028>

progression of cultural processes, as well as in the philosophy of art history⁵. Indigenous African civilisations establish structures, produce artefacts and embody ethics and values that dictate how members of traditional communities should behave in an effort to survive. Africans have progressively evolved ways of expressing themselves, others and their surroundings as the intensity of these social interactions increased⁶. These techniques, which might be considered the first instances of theatrical and artistic communication, have included dance, music, proverbs, totems, rites, masquerade and festival ceremonies. These early theatrical expressions have grown into significant turning points in the history of communal identity.

The Igbo people, one of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria, occupy the southeastern region. They mostly inhabit the Nigerian states of Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, Abia and Anambra, as well as parts of the Delta and Rivers states. Like other traditional African groups, they believe that every individual is part of a life cycle that is influenced by time and location. This circle is in three planes in the Igbo cosmos: the living, the dead and the unborn. They believe that through birth, the physical realm is populated and through death man transits to the metaphysical world (the world of the ancestors and deities). They also uphold that the dead can return to the human realm after a while either via birth or, as in the case of masquerades, by way of the embodied dead⁷. According to Igbo cosmology, Nwabueze⁸ and Nwankwo⁹ affirm that death is a necessary condition for joining the ancestors and birth is necessary for the population of the temporal segment of the lineage. It is within this cyclic transition across the planes of existence, the belief and worship of supernatural beings (gods, deities and ancestors) that the Igbo people carve their ethos and values for ideal living and loyalty. It is along this construct that they enshrine the necessity to summon worthy ancestors through ritual invocation to share moments with their living descendants. This act is believed to positively impact the community and allay their fears while carrying their prayers to other ancestral beings, which ultimately ensure communal renewal and survival. It is in this particular practice that the masquerade culture flourishes as the renowned Igbo ancestor invited to commune with the living descendants.

⁵ T. Pełkala, *Continuity, Discontinuity, Fulguration - Philosophical Contexts of Changes in Art*, "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2022, vol. 24, pp. 9-25.

⁶ O. Ogunba, I. Abiola, *Theatre in Africa*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan 1978.

⁷ W. Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Methuen, London 1978.

⁸ E. Nwabueze, *Visions and Revisions: Selected Discourses on Literary Criticism*. (2nd Ed.), ABIC Books, Enugu 2011.

⁹ I. U. Nwankwo, *Governance and Associated Social Roles of Masquerades among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria in an Era of Globalization: A Critical Appraisal*, "Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies" 2015, vol. 4, pp. 1-12.

In Nwankwo's¹⁰ opinion, Masquerades, or *Mmanwu* in the native tongue, there are ancestral spirits who visit the community during festivals, funerals and other events to preserve social, cultural and moral norms. Ancestor worship and masquerade are closely related concepts for the Igbo people, with a renowned Igbo ancestor invited back to life to interact with the living. According to Nwabueze¹¹, the type of masquerade is determined by the tasks it is supposed to accomplish, serving as a conduit for communication between the living and the dead. Heroes are sometimes called upon to communicate with the living as masked incarnates of the dead, symbolizing their heroic deeds. For the Igbo people, achievement is revered and the area in which they have demonstrated strength and achievement is followed as a revered title. For example, agricultural hero Di-Ji is invoked in farm-related festivals, while war (Di-Ogu), legal (Oka-Ikpe), wisdom and thought (Oka-Mmuta) and wrestling (Di-Mgba) heroes are invoked in the masquerade ritual depending on the sociological need of the community at the time.

Traditionally, through the masquerade culture, the Igbo embody a profound connection between the spiritual and the ecological, with its material culture drawn largely from the natural environment – raffia, bark, animal parts, wood and other organic resources. These materials, springing from the prevalent thought processes and technologies of the period, sustain the visual identity and symbolic potency of masquerade performance, as it is believed to reflect a cyclical relationship with nature. Over time, these conceived canons, notions and models of the structure, the identity, artistic and performative persona of the masquerade have driven masquerade culture in contemporary times. Masquerade semiotics and sociological functions in Igbo land are replete in scholarship, which the author reads as coincidental attempts to force practice and interpretations to align to the preconceived status-quo, discarding any form of re-interpretation and probing. This rigid attempt to align with these models in contemporary times constitutes the problem of this study for three reasons.

First, contemporary times are fraught with contradictions and interrelated complexities, which confronts and upturns the very core of traditional beliefs and epistemes¹². This reality poses identity and aesthetic threats to several indigenous knowledge systems and performances including the masked culture.

Secondly, the world (especially Africa) is currently witnessing some of the most horrific depletion of natural resources in history. Everywhere we turn, we

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ E. Nwabueze, *Visions and Revisions...*

¹² S. T. Ohenhen, P. C. Abakporo, *Resisting Eco-Colonial Ideologies through Indigenous Epistemologies and Performances*, "Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities" 2024, vol. 16, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.02>

see more proof of the social and political systems that are destroying humanity. The effects of unbalanced planetary systems and inadequate ecological practices have been brought to light by natural disasters¹³. In the face of modern cultural production, consumerist pressures and a waning of indigenous ecological morality (underlying several theorised concepts, such as anthropocene¹⁴, industrocentrism¹⁵, technocene¹⁶, capitalocene¹⁷, chthulucene¹⁸ and posthumanism¹⁹), the masquerade has increasingly become implicated in extractive and environmentally exploitative practices. This forces the author to ponder if the survival of living descendants must be sacrificed in the loyalty efforts to the ancestral world; does the livability and viability of earth as our home²⁰ no longer matter to the living descendants and/or the ancestor-deities?

Lastly, given the manner of changes in the environment and their implication for the generality of life, environmental justice and stewardship have become increasingly prominent in academic research, political debate and governance around the world. This prompts a holistic understanding of the precarious nature of human activities, including the arts in general, with the view to reopen possibilities to both areas of experience - the personal and the social²¹. Such attempts demands laying all forms of ecological violence on the table, as has been done in those concepts above, including 'slow violence²²,' that go unnoticed but are presently replete with great devastating effects on the livability and viability of our collective home - the Earth.

In conclusion, it has become very pungent to explore every aspect of environmental oppression and colonisation in order to determine the best way to evolve holistic regulations that would facilitate the transition, especially at

¹³ J. Andrzejewski, M. Baltodano, L. Symcox, eds., *Justice, Peace and Environmental Education: Transformative Standards*, Routledge, London 2009.

¹⁴ D. Kidner, *Why Anthropocentrism is not Anthropocentric*, "Dialectical Anthropology" 2014, vol. 38(4), pp. 465-480.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ O. López-Corona, G. Magallanes-Guijón, *It is not the Anthropocene; It is Really the Technocene: Names Matter in Decision Making Under Planetary Crisis*, "Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution" 2020, vol. 8, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2020.00214>.

¹⁷ J. Moore, *The Capitalocene Part I: On the Nature & Origins of Our Ecological Crisis*, "Journal of Peasant Studies" 2017, vol. 44 (3), pp. 594-630.

¹⁸ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham 2016.

¹⁹ R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013.

²⁰ W. Leiss, *Our Nature: The Earth as Home*, A Cangrande Little Book, 2020.

²¹ C. Enjalbert, *The Art of Method-less Action, with Francois Jullien: Can we live without a plan?*, "Philonomist" <https://www.philonomist.com/en/interview/art-method-less-action-francois-jullien>. Accessed: 28 August 2025.

²² R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts / London 2011.

a time when posthuman consciousness has preoccupied governmental policies. On the strength of this, the author torch-lights the aesthetic and performative dynamics of the contemporary Igbo masquerade in the light of unpacking its ‘ecooppressive’²³ consequences on southeast environments, which, according to Kalu and Zakirova, manifests in persistent flooding and habitat destruction²⁴. This attempt is in order to explore why and how Jullien’s ‘de-coincidence’ ideology becomes an inevitable construct in ‘making kin’²⁵ with the troubles of Southeastern environments. It is anticipated that this study will spark more debates about this emerging, distinct violence of ecological extraction in south-east Nigeria among scholars and policymakers.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Intersections of De-coincidence and Posthuman thought with Contemporary Igbo Masked tradition

Let's first try to move away from the modelisation/application or theory/practice relationship, or at least stop trusting that it's generally viable. Let's stop calling on sudden change, induced by such models, as if it were our salvation. Let's stop relying on revolution, which has long been the horizon of our modernity. Let's stop invoking innovation alone – the great mythology of the day. More modestly, let's instead try to “re-open possibilities”, by undoing our ideological coincidences²⁶.

François Jullien's concept of *dé-coïncidence*, as explored above, refers to the moment when practices, ideas or norms drift away from habitual alignment, leading to a point of renewal. This transition to what Jullien refers to as the third place²⁷ opens up previously undiscovered resources through a small lapse in history, not trying to break with it or herald in a new era. Particularly for Jullien, the artist de-coincides from the art of their time in order to reopen possibilities in art. Philosophy de-coincides with what has already been thought or what it has already thought in order to reopen possibility in thought. The idea of de-coinciding deeply aligns with the contemporary Igbo masked traditions, which are believed to be embodiments of ancestral traditions and communal

²³ P. Abakporo, A. Amali, F. Egbe, S. Ohenhen, *Water Fights Back in Lagos: A Performance Reading of Aqua-Terrestrial Futures in Ojo Bakare's "Ekun Omi"*, “eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics” 2025, vol. 24 (2), pp. 19-46.

²⁴ N. Kalu, Y. Zakirova, *A review in Southeastern Nigeria: environmental problems and management solutions*, “RUDN Journal of Ecology and Life Safety” 2019, vol. 27 (3), pp. 231-240.

²⁵ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble...*

²⁶ C. Enjalbert, *The Art of Method-less Action, with Francois Jullien...*

²⁷ Ibid.

values as well as a threshold of spiritual, human and ecological confluence. This is in the view of the fact that masquerade aesthetics, placed against planetary health and posthuman thought, are seemingly unsustainable in contemporary times.

The drastic changes of the contemporary world driven by the 'juggernauts of modernity'²⁸ pose threats to normative practices and obscure the ability to evolve concrete lasting solutions. In the same vein, the interactions of these juggernauts with indigenous ways of knowing and doing place the survival of indigenous epistemologies and morality in precarious situations²⁹. For instance, in a period where human chauvinistic and eco-extractive activities have awoken the beast in nature³⁰, resulting in conditions that seem like the earth is fighting back³¹ (global warming, erosion, high sea levels, etc.), contemporary masquerades increasingly lean on extractive material practices such as deforestation for raffia and depletion of animal species, which erode their ecological foundations signaling a disconnect them from their original relational ethos. Such extractive practices involved in the identity and agency of the contemporary Igbo masquerade become worthy of scholarly and governmental attention, as the world begins a shift towards posthumanist consciousness. According to Gladden, posthumanization refers to the processes via which a society incorporates individuals who are not natural biological humans but who still contribute in some manner to its dynamics, structures, or meaning³². For posthuman scholars like Braidotti,

...the point about posthuman relations, however, is to see the inter-relation human/animal as constitutive of the identity of each. It is a transformative or symbiotic relation that hybridizes and alters the 'nature' of each one and foregrounds the middle grounds of their interaction. This is the 'milieu' of the human/non-human continuum and it needs to be explored ... not as a foregone moral conclusion about allegedly universal values or qualities³³.

²⁸ A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 1991.

²⁹ E. B. Gebremariam, *Restoring Africa's Knowledge systems is key to sustainable development*, "United Nations: Africa Renewal", <https://www.un.org/osaa/news/restoring-africa%E2%80%99s-knowledge-sovereignty-key-sustainable-development>. Accessed: 17 June 2025.

³⁰ C. Hamilton, *Forget about saving the Earth: It's an Angry Beast that we have Awoken*, "The Conversation", <https://theconversation.com/forget-saving-the-earth-its-an-angry-beast-that-weve-awoken-27156>. Accessed: 17 June 2025.

³¹ B. McGuire, *The Earth Fights Back*, "The Guardian", 7 August 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2007/aug/07/disasters>. Accessed: 17 June 2025.

³² M. Gladden, *Sapient Circuits and Digitalized Flesh: The Organization as Locus of Technological Posthumanization*, 2nd ed., Defragmenter Media, Indianapolis, IN 2018.

³³ R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman...*

By ‘challenging anthropogenic activities’ as Badminton³⁴ states, posthumanist ideals fuels Jullien’s de-coincidental ideology as it prompts a shift from the hitherto normative exclusion of nature to a thought that acknowledges nature’s agency. In the same vein, the hitherto eco-oppressive coinciding in Igbo masquerade aesthetics fuel my thoughts toward the ‘what ifs’ and ‘if nots’ of contemporary indigenous performative cultures. This shift to this third position as Jullien advocates becomes deeply generative by decoupling the masquerade from extractive material norms, allowing the tradition to reimagine its aesthetics and ecological standpoints in relation to changes, needs and concerns of the present. This break is not about rejecting the past but about cultivating creative options that allows for authentic renewal that are sustainably progressive to masked traditions while not sacrificing the livability and viability of life in Southeastern Nigeria.

Contemporary Igbo Masquerades and Eco-oppressive Nuances in Southeast Nigeria

Though couched in cultural ideals and beliefs, the ways that masquerade culture, performance identities affect the Southeast environment have not been acknowledged up to this point (perhaps because they are not everyday practices). Several ecosystems in southeast Nigeria are essential to the survival of the different habitats and living species that call the area home³⁵. Ancestral summons into the masked tradition are not everyday practice in Igbo land, but when they do occur, specific symbols, legends, and totems taken from other environmental stakeholders give them life and define their identity and mission. Igbo masquerades’ representation and utilisation of animal and plant resources, is believed to serve as a reminder of the good relationship that exists between the people and the natural world. Beyond merely being decorative, Odike³⁶ asserts that these representations have deeper meanings. The masked culture adopts the traits and abilities of the plants and animal being depicted which might represent courage, agility, or defense.

³⁴ N. Badminton, *Posthumanism (Readers in Cultural Criticism)*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2000.

³⁵ A. A. Ikhumetse, O. P. Abioye, U. J. J. Ijah, M. T. Bankole, *A critical review of oil spills in the Niger Delta aquatic environment: causes, impacts, and bioremediation assessment*, “Environmental Monitoring and Assessment” 2022, vol. 194 (816), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-022-10424-x>

³⁶ C. Odike, *The Cultural and Symbolic Significance of Igbo Masquerades* Masquerades are a cornerstone of Igbos, “Ozi Ikoru”, <https://ozikoro.com/the-cultural-and-symbolic-significance-of-igbo-masquerades-masquerades-are-a-cornerstone-of-igbos/> Accessed 17 June 2025.

To proceed further, and in an attempt to make this section clear as possible without complexities, I will segment the discussion into exploring specific masquerades in Igbo lands and how they become ecologically unsustainable given the present and future ecological concerns in Southeast. I proceed quickly with reference to the masquerading impact on the plant bodies. Hardly are there any masquerade in Igbo land that do not rely on the plant bodies for their props and costumes. For this study, the Obianwishi, Ekpo and Ajofia masquerades come to mind due to their seeming worrisome extractive utilities of the plant bodies.



Fig. 1. Obianwishi Masquerade



Fig. 2. Ajofia Masquerade

In order to create masks and other decorative items, plant bodies have been looted, especially for the masquerades listed above. Traditional masquerade costumes are made from natural materials, such as raffia palms, fresh leaves and tree bark that are gathered in large quantities during festival seasons. This overharvesting might lead to the extinction of some plant species, which would reduce biodiversity and damage local ecosystems. Given the global concerns of posthumanism, the plundering, which dates back to the pre-colonial era, raises serious questions about the future viability and liveability of indigenous cultures in the southeast. On the shoulder of cultural hybridity and postnormal interactions with societies around the world, the cultic and religious foundations of the masquerade culture have been usurped, demeaned and upturned.

Beginning with the arrival of missionaries and sustained expansion of Christian ideals to the geographical ‘gatelessness’ occasioned by media advancements, these core traditional values contend with sustainability. Such intersections with traditionality further compound the issue of ecological extraction, as beliefs in the masquerade cultures are waning with disturbing emergent issues about proliferation and commercialization of the masquerade³⁷. These demystifications and proliferations are further credited with the present utilization of the masquerades for several amoral and anti-social activities such as killings³⁸, whipping, robberies and extortion, especially by present generations (Millennials and GenZs). Proliferation and commercialization imply more extraction of plants and trees, which further impacts climate change and soil erosion that currently threaten southeastern environments.

The lavish use of ecological resources, as presented in the above figures, can only sustain thoughts on the future of southeastern environments. In southeast Nigeria, contemporary masquerade practice is comparable to other deforestation agents like urbanisation, due to enormous trees that are used to manufacture and maintain light and heavy masks. For instance, there is no way that trees utilized in the production of Obianwishi and Ekpo masquerades, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 above, can be growing currently.

The unrestrained exploitation of animals for aesthetic purposes is another perplexing aspect of the modern Igbo masquerade tradition in contemporary times. Skins and other animal parts continue to be a popular choice for certain Igbo masquerade costumes and accessories. The hyena and African civet hide, for instance, immediately evoke the Ediogbene Masquerade. According to

³⁷ *Masquerade and its owner fight over money in Anambra State*, “DNB Stories Africa”, 26 August 2018, <https://dnbstories.com/2018/08/masquerade-and-owner-fight-over-money-in-anambra-state.html>. Accessed: 17 June 2025.

³⁸ D. Ogbeche, *Masquerades who steal, assault students, residents arrested in Nsukka*, “Daily Post Nigeria”, 15 September 2015, <https://dailypost.ng/2015/09/10/masquerades-who-steal-assault-students-residents-arrested-in-nsukka/>. Accessed: 17 June 2025.

Asogwa³⁹ and Okoro⁴⁰, the Ediogbene masquerade carrier is violent and extremely flamboyant, which explains why it must move with other masquerades and have a rope fastened to its waist to prevent it from hurting onlookers physically. One is further compelled to consider the long-term sustainability of south-eastern ecologies when this plunder, affecting not only the civet and hyena, continues unchecked.



Fig. 3. Ekpo Masquerade



Fig. 4. Mgbadike Masquerade

³⁹ O. Asogwa, *Social Dynamics and Resilience in the Northern Igbo Masking Traditions*, "Cultural Arts Research and Development" 2022, vol. 2 (2), pp. 39-49.

⁴⁰ M. Okoro, *Reappraising the Nsukka Qmabe festival through the lens of ethno-aesthetics, therapy and healing*, "HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies" 2022, vol. 78(1), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7930>.



Fig. 5. Ediogbene Masquerade

Hyenas are considered nature's cleanup crew because they are the best scavengers and are able to detect dead animals at a great distance due to their keen sense of smell. By consuming the carcasses of dead animals, hyenas help to keep the environment healthy and prevent the spread of disease. As skilled hunters, hyenas play a crucial role in controlling the number of herbivores, such as antelopes and grass cutters⁴¹, in southeast Nigeria. By reducing these numbers, hyenas help prevent overgrazing, which can harm other species and vegetation. As apex scavengers, hyenas effectively remove animal remains that could otherwise attract pests and spread diseases, safeguarding the environment, people and animals.

Similarly, the civet, as a predator and seed disperser, helps to maintain ecological balance by regulating prey populations and supporting plant reproduction. Because of its environmental adaptability, it can thrive in both natural and human-modified environments⁴². Due to hunting, rapid urbanisation and other ecological threats, several animal species are either extinct or at the verge

⁴¹ A. Abraham; A. Webster, J. Jordaan; et al. *Hyaenas play unique ecosystem role by recycling key nutrients in bones* "African Journal of Ecology" 2021, 00(4), pp. 1-6.

⁴² D. Mulu, M. Balakrishnan, *Ecology of African Civet (Civettictis civetta) in Arba Minch Forest, Arba Minch, Ethiopia*, "Science, Technology and Arts Research Journal" 2014, vol. 3(3), pp. 99-102.

of extinction in Southeast Nigeria, including the civet and hyena. These threats have been named and discussed in a number of academic discussions and species conservation efforts, but it is clear that these discussions have not included these "visibly unseen" cultural practices in the Igbo environments. The quantity of civet and hyena skins on the two plates above raises issues about the survival of the Igbo ancestral descendants who still inhabit the earth.

Finally, the author would like to point out that even birds are not left out of the human-ecological extraction. This is reinforced by the thoughts of the Ezenwudele masquerade, which is predominantly identified with its outfit made of typical vulture feathers. With 'Eze' meaning 'King' and 'Udele' being the name for vultures, the masquerade is translated to mean 'King of Vultures' – hence the elaborate use of vulture feathers in the making of the costumes. The vulture holds a spiritual place in Igbo cosmology. Killing a vulture is culturally abominable and it would be worrisome if sacrifices requiring carcasses were offered to deities and the vulture was absent. It is an indication that the god or deity in question has not accepted the sacrifice⁴³.



Fig. 6. Ezenwudele Masquerade

⁴³ O. Asogwa, *Social Dynamics and Resilience...*, pp. 39-49.

As vultures are culturally and spiritually crucial to the Igbo society, it is expected that the Igbo culture erects structures that preserve these creatures. On the material scale, vultures play a crucial ecological role as “nature’s cleanup crew”⁴⁴ (Vulture Conservative Foundation, 2022). Vultures are of critical importance in ecosystem services, facilitating the efficient disposal of organic waste. Their presence reduces disease spread among wildlife and livestock and prevents pathogen spillover to humans. Without vultures, carcasses can accumulate harmful diseases and bacteria⁴⁵. In the ecological matrix, vultures manage the production of greenhouse gases like methane from organic waste during decomposition, which may lead to air pollution and climate change. Unfortunately, notwithstanding these admirable cultural values, the Vulture Conservative Foundation maintains that, twenty years ago, Africa was considered the continent of vultures but today several of the vulture species have become extinct⁴⁶.

More intricate is the attempt to align this philosophy to the logic of its actual practice of utilizing vulture feathers as costumes for the Ezenwudele masquerade. The Igbo culture abhors the killing of the Vulture, which begs the question of how vulture feathers were conceived and gathered as the costume identity for the invited ancestor/deity. On the other hand, is the ecological sustainability of the descendants not of concern to the invited ancestor who makes such ecologically-impacting demands? One can only imagine the number of vultures that would be sufficient to make a masquerade costume for an adult carrier of the Ezenwudele masquerade. Today, there are hardly any vultures hovering and perching around environments in southeast Nigeria, even when there are carcasses. Perhaps also, in a couple of years, the present Gen Alpha in Southeast Nigeria may get to know about vultures in drawings and paintings in the same manner that the Millennials and Gen Z ponder what a dinosaur would look like in reality, apart from generated images in Hollywood films like *Jurassic Park*. As other factors, such as poisoned carcasses, cultural persecution, changes in the farming season and habitat loss continue to deplete these unique eco-collaborators in southeast Nigeria, masked cultures like the Ezenwudele also need to be named among all the other oppressive practices in vulture preservation.

The scope and severity of these environmental effects have grown as current masquerade festivities have become more commercialised and

⁴⁴ *Vulture Conservative Foundation. Why we need to protect Vultures*, <https://4vultures.org/blog/why-we-need-to-protect-vultures/>. Accessed: 19 April 2025.

⁴⁵ *Wildlife Act Focused Conservation. Why are Vultures so Important to Humans and the Environment?* <https://www.wildlifeact.com/blog/why-are-vultures-so-important-to-humans-and-the-environment>. Accessed: 20 February 2025.

⁴⁶ *Vulture Conservative Foundation. Why we need to protect Vultures...*

modernised. Modern masquerades are frequently larger and more ornate than their historical counterparts, drawing larger audiences and necessitating greater resources, logistics and space. Plant life is also impacted by the physical area needed for masquerade performances, which causes soil erosion and land removal. Plant bodies may suffer from foot traffic and crowd movement that masquerade events bring about. Huge crowds have the power to harm crops, crush tiny plants and compress the soil, all of which reduce soil fertility and plant growth.

De-coincidence Ideals as Sustainable Futures for Igbo Masquerade Arts and Ecologies

Contemporary art, we have come to expect, must be absolutely new, a continual break with any and all artistic conventions, and an absolute rupture with the values of a given time. When art fails in this task, mourning commences. One of the goals of art theory should be to diagnose and defuse obstacles to creativity. It should help artists identify notions that impede their practices, and work with them to fashion new concepts capable of sustaining experimentation⁴⁷.

As has been established earlier, the cost of producing masquerade costumes and paraphernalia often involves unsustainable harvesting of flora and fauna, deforestation and the depletion of animal species – all of which contradict the masquerade's historic function as a force of communal renewal and balance. Rather than representing an agent of creative and ecological innovation, masquerade aesthetics in their present form mirror exploitative economic models that threaten the ecological integrity of the southeastern Nigerian landscape. In these times, especially in southeastern Nigeria, it has become pungent – not only will it be critical to curb human-induced climate change but also to enhance the regenerative capacity of the biosphere and its diversity, to support and sustain societal development, to collaborate with the planet that is our home and collaborate in a socially just and sustainable manner⁴⁸. Based on these indices and their sustainability impact at present and on the future southeast ecologies, it becomes necessary to de-coincide.

Given also the contradictions, complexities and chaos that characterize contemporary times, where ideals can dissolve in a twinkle of an eye and more questions than answers arise, creativity and imagination become necessary in

⁴⁷ J. Tanke, *This Strange Idea of Art*, "Philosophy East and West" 2019, vol. 69 (2), pp. 484-494.

⁴⁸ C. Folke et al., *Our Future in the Anthropocene Biosphere*, "Ambio" 2021, vol. 50, pp. 834-869.

navigating these postnormalities⁴⁹. Corroborating this idea from the arts and aesthetic premise, it is Groys who maintains that modern and contemporary art have made form more fluid in order to reconnect art to the world more generally. Specifically, he states: “the fluidization of the artistic form is the means by which modern and contemporary art tries to gain access to the totality of the world”⁵⁰. For the de-coincidental Jullien⁵¹, it has to do with reopening possibilities wherein art and the aesthetic can be reinterpreted towards beings alive to new aspects of existence.

Attempts at engaging de-coincidental ideals into the Igbo masked culture should begin with a conscious psychological shift from its extractive material culture towards re-opening possibilities that realign its identity and aesthetic nuances with its ecological roots. The psychological shift enables humans to view non-human worlds as collaborators of life rather than a means to human ends. This stand, applied to masked cultures in southeast Nigeria, makes it possible to open art up to thinking towards the ‘what ifs’ and ‘if nots’ of the practice. In this consciousness, the aesthetic aspects can begin to tilt towards other options of becoming yet meeting the aesthetic and performative demands of the ancestral culture as well as guaranteeing the continuity of life on the planet. It also avails the contemporary Igbo masquerade latitude towards being alive to emerging realities and new aspects of existence. This psychological turn entails a return to the roots of the masquerade culture and exploring (through deconstructive and reconstructive consciousness) its present and long-term cost. The fact remains that ‘becoming’ another creature (in this stance, the masquerade) began with the idea of using a ‘creature’ to develop and understand aspects of oneself: specifically, one’s relationship with the environment. The dialectic between a human and a creature has its basis in the human psychological self⁵². In addition, the modes and aesthetics of the masquerade culture were carved out of the psychological and technological realities of the period. Hence, the culture could be reconstructed along these lines in contemporary times while retaining its sociological functions. This position holds positive prospects for the masquerade culture in contemporary times, especially for the Millennials, GenZ and Gen Alpha as it would resonate their aesthetic and sociological realities.

⁴⁹ A. Montuori, D. Gabrielle, *Creativity and Leadership in Postnormal Times*, in: *The Postnormal Times Reader*, ed. Z. Sardar, International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, VA 2019, pp. 355-376.

⁵⁰ B. Groys, *In the Flow*, Verso, New York 2016.

⁵¹ F. Jullien, *Dé-coïncidence: Where Art and Existence Come From*, National Taiwan University of the Arts, Taipei 2017.

⁵² C. Bagnall, *Explorations into Creaturely Sensations and Traplines*, “The Senses and Society” 2016, vol. 11 (2), pp. 199-205.

On the shoulder of this psychological shift, one key strategy involves the substitution of ecologically destructive materials with biodegradable and renewable alternatives. Historically, the masquerade relied on non-human communities with an understanding of seasonal regeneration and communal stewardship. Today, indiscriminate harvesting and commercialization have turned these once-sustainable resources into depleted commodities. A *dé-coïncidental* intervention would encourage community-regulated harvesting, the cultivation of raffia and dye plants in managed groves, and the integration of fast-renewing vegetal fibres or agricultural byproducts as replacements for endangered materials. Such practices would reduce deforestation and resource exhaustion while maintaining the tactile and visual integrity of masquerade costumes.

Another method involves the adoption of regenerative costume-making techniques that prioritize reusability and modularity over single-use consumption. Many contemporary masquerades discard costumes after one season, increasing ecological waste and driving fresh extraction for each performance cycle. Through *decoïncidence*, these traditions can embrace repair, refurbishing and ceremonial re-consecration of costumes rather than disposal. This aligns with the posthumanist ethos of prolonging material life and acknowledging the agency of things⁵³. It also resonates with indigenous Igbo concepts of *izọ ndu* (preserving life force) that extend beyond the human to include the vitality of objects and environments, which is the supposed ideal behind the masquerade culture in the first place. In this context, technological sophistications could be leveraged to create archetypes of masks and other paraphernalia that could be preserved without disrupting nonhuman collaborators. In this sense, the masquerade aligns with its ecological responsibilities. This allows the preservation and conservation of depleting species, which in turn improves ecosystems in the southeast.

In addition, community-based conservation initiatives form another pillar of *dé-coïncidental* renewal. Masquerade societies traditionally held authority over forest groves and sacred spaces, which served as both spiritual sanctuaries and ecological buffers⁵⁴. Restoring this custodianship in collaboration with modern environmental agencies could establish protected zones for the flora and fauna integral to masquerade practice. This model does not romanticize pre-colonial authority but channels its ritual legitimacy into contemporary ecological governance, ensuring that the masquerade becomes a stakeholder in environmental preservation rather than an agent of depletion.

⁵³ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press. Durham 2010, p. 37

⁵⁴ H. M. Cole, Ch. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles 1984, p. 56.

Finally, the education of present and younger generations will play a crucial role in the normalization of de-coincidental thoughts and approaches to the masquerade culture. Teaching and practice that incorporate ecological consciousness and ethics can help younger generations acquire consciousness that masquerade performance and all indigenous performative arts are a negotiation with, rather than a domination of nature. This re-echoes Jullien's insistence that *dé-coïncidence* does not signal a break that impairs continuity but a necessary deviation that revitalizes⁵⁵ tradition from within and authenticates experience of art and art processes within the fleetingness of time and space.

In the long term, these methods collectively reframe the masquerade as a cultural technology of sustainability. By shifting its material base to renewable sources, extending the life cycle of its costumes, reclaiming its role in ecological guardianship and educating future custodians, the Igbo masquerade can align with sustainable development goals without relinquishing its ancestral core. This *dé-coïncidental* evolution would allow southeastern Nigeria's forests, animal species and sacred landscapes to recover from overuse while ensuring that masquerade performance retains its philosophical stance and artistic vitality. Thus, the ecological future of the Igbo masquerade is not predicated on abandoning tradition but on strategically deviating from destructive habits. In doing so, it can become both a custodian of the land and a living archive of Igbo cosmological values embodying the posthumanist condition in which art, nature and community are co-agents of planetary health.

Conclusion

Relying on Jullien Francois theory of de-coincidence, this study has examined the Igbo masquerade aesthetics in the light of showing how a deliberate shift from its hitherto ecooppressive practice can contribute to ensuring ecological and cultural renewal amidst complex societal advancements. The tradition, which is believed to be rooted in ecological and spiritual balance, currently proves unsustainable given the very many interactions of complex systems such as urbanization and capitalist ideals. The ecological demands of the masquerade culture, amidst the sustained backlash of capitalism and un-governed urbanization as well as hybridization of cultural ideals, becomes unsustainable in contemporary times. The current practice of the Igbo masquerade presently compounds ecological issues in southeastern Nigeria as it becomes akin to extractive economies couched in species depletion, deforestation and wasteful material use. Through de-coincidental consciousness,

⁵⁵ F. Jullien, *Dé-coïncidence...*

Jullien provides the framework to redirect the material utilities of the masquerade towards biodegradable resources, regenerative costumes and props, and community-based conservation. These measures will not only curb ecological devastation for masquerade practice but will also make sense of the ecological responsibilities of the Igbo masquerade in contemporary times and in alignment with posthumanist realities. Thus, the masquerade becomes a site of sustainable creativity rather than exploitation.

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ESTETYKA MASKARADY IGBO W ZAKRESIE “DÉ-COÏNCIDENCJI”: PRZEMYŚLENIE EKOLOGICZNEJ ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO ROZWOJU W POŁUDNIOWO- -WSCHODNIEJ NIGERII (streszczenie)

W niniejszym artykule krytycznie analizowana jest estetyka maskarady rdzennych plemion Igbo, z wykorzystaniem teoretycznego paradygmatu *dé-coïncidence* François Julliena, który zakłada, że gdy rutynowe zachowania odbiegają od normatywnych lub nawykowych, musi nastąpić autentyczność i odnowa. Maskarady w południowo-wschodniej Nigerii historycznie symbolizowały metafizyczną obecność i odnowę wspólnoty, ale obecnie ich materialne praktyki coraz bardziej podważają te filozoficzne podstawy. Narasta konflikt między symboliką duchową a kosztami środowiskowymi ze względu na wysoki poziom eksploatacji ekologicznej związanej z tworzeniem kostiumów, co obejmuje uszczuplanie gatunków zwierząt i wylesianie w celu pozyskania rafii, kory i drewna. Zamiast być czynnikiem *de-coïncidentalnej* innowacji, maskarada w obecnej formie przypomina raczej wyciskające gospodarki nierównoważonej reprodukcji kulturowej. Argument przedstawiony w tym artykule jest taki, że maskarada Igbo musi na nowo rozważyć swoje ekologicznie wyciskające warunki materialne oraz przemyśleć na nowo swoje ramy estetyczne i rytualne, aby zachować ważność i znaczenie w obliczu katastrofy ekologicznej. Opierając się na transdyscyplinarnej metodologii, która równoważy obserwację środowiska w terenie, rdzenną moralność ekologiczną i analizę performansu, praca identyfikuje ważne drogi do zrównoważonego *dé-coïncidence*, w tym wykorzystanie materiałów biodegradowalnych, regeneracyjne tworzenie kostiumów, egzekwowanie przepisów ochrony środowiska oraz strategie ochrony środowiska oparte na społecznościach. Wreszcie, sztuka performatywna Igbo (a zwłaszcza maskarada) musi przejść *de-coïncidentalną* zmianę, która zapewni równowagę między ekologią w południowo-wschodniej Nigerii a historycznym szacunkiem dla przodków. Ideały *dé-coïncidence* François Julliena stanowią głęboką perspektywę, z której rdzenni artyści Igbo mogliby korzystać w obliczu intensywnych poszukiwań i tęsknot za świadomością posthumanistyczną, w obliczu powszechnego zainteresowania zdrowiem planety.

Słowa kluczowe: *dé-coïncidence*, czasy postnormalne, posthumanistyka, estetyka maskarady, zrównoważony rozwój ekologiczny,

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