



## Understanding Basic Design Principles of Art Beyond the Peripheral in Okun-Yoruba ÈpaMasquerades

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the principles and elements of art inherent in the design and structure of visual masterpiece that metamorphosed into Èpa masquerade. The study thus provides further understanding, appreciation for the organisation of the spectacle of Okun-Yoruba Èpa masquerade while it promotes the aesthetics. Most often, people tend to appreciate the aesthetic composition and other visual art components (such as sculpture, textile, ceramics and painting) of Èpa rooted in Okun-Yoruba Èpa masquerade but identification of graphics or visual design on or within traditional art objects or forms seem to be difficult. This study is to broadly examines and unfolds evidence(s) indicating the adaptability and usability of principles of design in the arts of Okun-Yoruba Èpa masquerade. However, this paper adopts analytic approach in achieving these goals. Relevant literature, internet and participatory observation processes were adequately used.

**Keywords** Peripheral, Design Principles, Arts, Okun-Yoruba, Èpa Masquerade

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## INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of different forms of visual evidence of a particular culture lies with individuals' ability to identify all narratives associated with the combination of diverse culturally defined and significant materials assemblage that portray a reliable form of historical and iconographical record of the Nigerian (especially that of Okun-Yoruba) culture. According to Abokede and Ayinmode (2018, p. 48), 'Okun-Yorubais a sub-ethnic group located in the northeast part of Yorubaland. This comprises the Ijumu, Abinu (Bunu), Iyagba, Oworo, Owe, Ikiri and Gbede people who are endowed with diverse cultural traditions. Among the diverse cultural endowment is *Epa* masquerade celebration which is annually performed with various types of masquerades characterized with highly adorned costumes (masks, gongs and bells, palm fronds, *Oja/Ifale, gheghe* and several others), art forms and art objects. The art forms in Okun-Yoruba *Epa* masquerade is basically a functional art that is multifaceted and subdivided into visual, performing and liberal art. These art forms are enhanced by creation of images from man-made perspective as against what permeates the nature. The arts require various human activities that usually involving technical or imaginative skills through exploration and manipulation of materials and non-materials to give enormous aesthetics pleasure and values.

In an attempt to explore all imaginative or technical skills acquired in group or individually over the time, definite principles are essentially utilized to establish the relationships between the elements of arts (size, line, shape, pattern, texture, colour and value) used in the design and structure of masterpiece (masks, costumes and other paraphernalia) that metamorphosed into *Epa masquerade*. Indeed, understanding and organizing content and visual elements of the arts of Okun-Yoruba *Epa* masquerade lies in the appreciation of the created or designed art forms or material objects that are purposeful and aesthetically pleasing. Clark & Lyons (2011), state that, the terms 'graphic design' and 'visual design' are often used interchangeably. Graphic design is an applied art, more of a profession or academic discipline that projects visual communication by transmitting specific objectives and messages to social groups or audience. Evans & Thomas (2013, p. 4) define graphic design as an 'art of arranging pictographic and typographic elements to create effective communication'. Alternatively, visual design deals with unified images crafted for a particular objective or purpose across communication platforms. It reveals the aesthetics of any works of art that tactically utilised images, colours, fonts, and other elements. Therefore, visual design principles (such as alignment, balance, contrast, emphasis, proximity and unity) persistently have cultural traditions that guide designers to meaningfully communicate better with target audiences. It coordinates the production of a visual composition that strongly

supports all the graphic elements within a sustainable artworks or artefacts.

## Problem Statement and Goal of the Study

Most often, it is difficult to distinguish and comprehend some of the graphical elements in any masquerade costumes or paraphernalia. People tend to appreciate the aesthetic composition and other visual art components (such as sculpture, textile, ceramics and painting) rooted in Okun-Yoruba *Epa* masquerade. The identification of graphics or visual design on or within traditional art objects or forms seem to be difficult. People incline to forget that graphics often combine text, illustration and colour on any surface, and help in producing any mental picture through manipulation of visual elements (such as *size, line, shape, pattern, texture, colour, and value*) for decorative or functional purposes. This eventually includes educating the people, illustrating the objective, informing about the reason and intertwining entertainment to disallow boredom. For a designer or creator to determine and emphasize value, adaptability, usability and desirability of any art forms or objects, certainly utilization and application of the principles of design becomes a mandatory obligation in the formation processing and finishing stages of such art forms or objects. Therefore, the crux and goal of this study is to broadly and properly examine the evidence(s) indicating the adaptability and usability of principles of design in the arts of Okun-Yoruba *Epa* masquerade.

## The Meaning and Significance of Basic Principle of Visual Design

Generally, principles oversee the connections between the elements used in the designing and organising the composition of any creation or representation. The ways that artists, creators or performers of a work of art utilised elements of art are determined by their understanding of the principles of design such as alignment, balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, proximity, repetition, rhythm, space (white), typography and unity. For the reason of finding meaning and significance of the design principle, the discussion here shall veer into looking at alignment, balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, proximity, repetition and rhythm so as to settle the confusion that might arise. For all decorative or functional purposes, aforementioned principles can only be applied on manipulated visual elements in the likes of *size, line, shape, pattern, texture, colour, and value*. According to Lidwell, Holden & Butler (2003), every element is adjoined to an invisible line or a common imaginary line which is known as 'alignment'. Alignment therefore, refers to lining up of other design elements in an orderly and more organized manner to create visual connections and more improved readable design(s). Alignment is of three types of lines in a design such as

vertical, horizontal and diagonal and the trio make different effects when they are properly and proportionally utilised to achieve an objective. Hence, the principle of alignment states that nothing should be placed on a surface randomly. Even if elements are extremely apart from one another on an object, there must be a visual connection between them.

Besides, the distribution of the visual weight of objects, colours, texture, and space in an artwork is referred to as 'balance'. Balance is of three types, that is symmetrical (two sides are the same), asymmetrical (two sides are different but visually weighted equally) and radial (design emerges from centre point). Symmetrical balance is an arrangement of elements that are evenly distributed from the left and to the right, or top and bottom of centre of an object or surface. It simply means the elements used on one side of the design are similar to those on the other side. It connotes having the same amount of objects on both sides of a piece of art. On the contrary, the arrangement of different objects of equal physical property on each side a surface or object in a more visual sense is referred to as asymmetrical balance. Balance is mostly used throughout in most pieces of art. In asymmetrical balance, different elements of equal irregular physical property appear balanced in spite of being aligned together. But in radial balance, similar elements may be arranged around a central point of attraction of an object. Therefore, balance is a concept of visual equilibrium indicating stability in each physical property element on a layout by its size or thickness of lines and darkness or lightness.

Contrast is another design principle that aimed at creating a visual difference by opposing different elements such as colour, shape, size and texture. It is the most potent design concepts of all principles of design that indicate the difference between a varieties of elements in a composition. For instance, the selection of colours or fonts and the manipulation of space by positioning of elements signify the effective and strength of a good design as a clear focal point among visual elements. The principle of contrast states that if two elements are not exactly the same, there will be a variance in their outlook. Emphasis is another important element that contributes to the effectiveness of a design. However, it draws attention and becomes a focal point of any artworks. It is the part of the design that is conspicuously attractive. Stereo typically, the creator or designer makes a particular part (either in colour, shape, size, texture, etc.) stands out by contrasting it with other parts. There are two techniques to create emphasis, the first according to Gatto, Porter & Selleck (2011), is by placing definite elements together as a group to stand out from other elements. And the second technique is by segregating a particular element from others.

However, the word "proximity" refers to closeness or relationship. The principle of proximity suggests the achievement of a more organized appearance or expression through objects formation in terms of their closeness or relationship. It has to do with position and space of visual elements by grouping similar or related elements into one unit in order to create a composition. The Gestalt principle of proximity states that related items should be grouped together in a physical manner as one cohesive group rather than a cluster of unrelated morsels elements (Rutledge, 2024). Hence, it is the process of ensuring that related design elements are placed together to show a better arrangement of art work. The reprocessing of the same or similar elements throughout a design connotes the principle of repetition. Repetition is a design principle that emphasizes unity, recognition, cohesiveness and consistency through persistent application of similar pattern and objects. Most often, contrast shows differences in positioning of visual elements and while repetition finely utilized all elements as being part of a larger whole. The principle of repetition states that repeating same, similar or identical elements throughout a design must be in a cohesive whole to create continuity and show close relationships between the elements. For example, some of the repetitive elements may show spatial relationship in terms of particular format, colour, and boldness in typography or line thickness. In short, repetition is a purposive effort to integrate all parts of a design.

Lastly among these principles of design is 'rhythm though not the least. It is a principle of design that is created by positive shapes separated by negative spaces at an interval between the visual elements which often similar in size and length. It gives a sense of movement or a sequential show of forms through a progression of steps or just a regular rhythm. Rhythm is the regular repetition of elements such as line, shape and forms to create interest, consistency and visual tempo in a work of art. Rhythm is created when one or more elements of design are used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement or a mood especially in performance (music or dancing).

#### **The Adaptability and Usability of Design Principles in Arts of Okun-Yoruba *Ẹpa* Masquerade**

*In general context, 'Ẹpa masquerades are numerous but the Okun people grouped them into Akorowo, Aṭẹ and Origi (iriṣọṣọ) based on forms, contents and classifications and these vary from one community to another in Okunland' (Abokede and Ayinmode, 2018, p.49). The Ẹpa masquerades culture encompass different art elements such as costumes, designs, patterns, dance, music, decoration, acrobatic displays and consecrated objects. However, this paper attempts to examine the adaptability and usability of visual design principles as discussed above on Okun-Yoruba Ẹpa masquerades' costumes and art objects. Visual elements are at ease,*

attractive, and possessing visual energy when there is a feeling of equilibrium in a balanced composition. A good example of symmetry balance is seen on *Apamask* (Fig. 1), 'a female masquerade type reflecting stereotypical portrayal of priesthood; 23 inches (58.42 Centimeters) in height, made up of the superstructure of two human figures (male and female) at the upper region'. Each side of the figure is a mirror image of the other, with visual elements centred on top of the vertical axis that divides the space in two (Ayinmode, 2022, p. 69). The visual weight of the top and bottom halves of the main panel which indicates visual elements is sufficiently spread across the red background space. The black holed rectangle centred within other visual elements on the same vertical axis juxtaposed the visual weights and masses of mask type.

Fig. 1 – *Apamask*



Source: Ayinmode, Stephen Ayodele (2004).

The male figure at the top right side of *Apamask* possessed 'a black elongated cap and bead necklace signifying royalty, and black spheres at its chest indicating breasts; and the female counterpart at the left side with a black bead necklace, black bulged hair-like shape and an exaggerated hanging breasts are located at the chest region' are carefully depicted asymmetrically (Ayinmode, 2022, p. 69). Asymmetrical balance arrangement of the equal weight figure on each side is different but still looks balanced. The carver of this mask type has employed a concept of visual equilibrium in determining each element depicted on the mask by its size, thickness of lines and darkness or lightness of colour and other components.

Fig. 2: *Eye Mask*



Source: Ayinmode, Stephen Ayodele (2004).

Further study on the difference between varieties of elements (colour, shape, size and texture) reveals that practically all *Epa* art forms and art objects possessed contrast. In the size of the *Origi's (oriopon)* headdress superstructures (both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic carved figures), feathery basket-like headdress, wooden mask, contrast helps to establish clarity, connexion and conceptual link between two or more visual images. Obviously, in almost all categories of *Epa* wooden masks and headdresses, colours and shapes are most visible elements used as contrast. Different types of conventional shapes like circle, triangle and rectangle are mostly used by the carvers to represent some physical features like eye, ear, and mouth. Colours of different shades of blue, black, red, white and yellow were used to enhance the surface quality or visual appearance of the masks; and to differentiate masquerades type from one another. For example, colour background is used to differentiate *Eyemask from another* (see Fig. 2).

Similarly, emphasis draws attention of onlookers to visual elements on an object. Lohr (2008) mentions the arrangement of elements in hierarchical order which often determine the dominance and emphasis over other visual elements. In the design of *Arọ mask* (Fig 3) for example, leaf-like pattern design is used to highlight and dominate head-trunk part of the mask. Perhaps, the dominance of the pattern may suggest terrestrial connect attributed to any masquerades

**Fig. 3: Aro Mask**



**Source: Ayinmode, Stephen Ayodele (2004).**

Generally, looking at the formation of a fully robed *Epa* masquerade especially *Ate* and *Origi (iri opon)*, one could deduce the dominance of palm fronds (*Moriwo Ope* or *Imo Ope*), a branch of palm tree with no mass of wide leaves. Other functional objects regarded as consecrated are derived from palm frond. Such objects are *Ikan*, an end part of palm frond twisted to form a long rope; *Ikowo*, a twisted circular handle-like form used for chasing viewers away, and *Imo-ara*, palm fronds used to cover the body of the masquerade. All these components of palm fronds stand out by contrasting other inherent costumes found on these masquerades in terms of size, colour, texture and shape.

The arrangement and mutual relation of all *visible elements (colour, line, pattern, shape, size, texture, and value)* components formed the physical qualities and morphological presence in all *Epa* art forms and art objects most especially the mask or headdress and costumes (Ayinmode, 2022).

**Fig. 4: Origi (iri opon), Ate and Akorowo Masquerades**



Source: Ayinmode, Stephen Ayodele (2004).

For instance, the classification of masquerade types into *Origi (Ori opon)*, *Ate* and *Akorowo* (Fig. 4) indicates the use of principle of proximity. Related elements are grouped together in a physical manner as one cohesive group. The closeness and the relationship of each masquerade group has re-emphasised the importance of structural organization in terms of their visual appearance and expression. Apparently, the reflection of the principle of proximity has shown in the manner of arrangement of the related elements like palm fronds, *Oja/Ifale*, *Asoofi*, Ankara or cottons fabrics, and sound objects such as gongs and bells, *Gheghe* that constitute the highly adorned costumes worn by *Epa* masquerades most especially *Origi (iri-ophon)*. Lohr (2008) supports that there is a better organization and improvement in the analysis or descriptions of those materials utilised when people perceive elements close to each other as related.

**Fig. 5: Complex Oja/Ifale**



**Source: Ayinmode, Stephen Ayodele (2004).**

Conversely, repetition of visual elements of design or patterns, signs and symbols create unity and strengthens an artworks or objects. Most often, repetition is a common

phenomenon in the arts attributes of *Ẹpa* masquerades especially masks or headdress and *Ọja/Ifalẹ*. For instance, *Ọja/Ifalẹ*, looks like 'a red carpet-like textile material that is used for *Egungun* masquerade costume, burials and funeral rites in the Niger-Benue confluence area' (Akinwumi, 1995, p.80). In accordance to the principle of repetition, geometric shapes and vertical zigzag lines are repeatedly juxtaposed on the strip. Although, the design in *Ọja/Ifalẹ*(Fig. 5) is a complex type but principle of repetition was highly employed. It consists of series of white and yellow dots and zigzag lines imposed on the black and red background with vertical greenish colour embellishment with repeated interplay on the strip.

As a final point, the creation of visual element(s) of design that are repeatedly display to create an intuition of coordinated movement or illusion is regarded as rhythm. It is a principle that shared common characteristics with repetition. Rhythm is perfectly illustrated in the simple *Ọja/Ifalẹ* in Fig. 6. The weaver carefully mirrored zigzag lines to create rhythm which gives a sense of movement or a sequential appearance of forms. This is a regular rhythm that allows lines to be repeated in an evenly spaced arrangement. The combination of two jointed strips consist of brown and white colour stripes interplayed at horizontal axis; while the tail end has repeated diagonal patterns.

*which are guided by certain ideologies, philosophies or principles. Hence, design principles are guidelines used at peoples' discretion. They are fundamental rules required of a creator, artist or designer to ensure an improved aesthetics values, good delivery of visual experience and exhibition of professionalism.*

*This paper has endeavoured in stating and discussing some of the principles of some of the principle of design predominantly used in the creation of any art form and art object. It also gives analytical interpretation of the adaptability and usability of basic design principles in the arts of Okun-Yoruba *Ẹpa* masquerade tradition. In recent times, some of the design principles may not be thoroughly utilized due to lack of exposure on the part of the creator. Perhaps, some of the identified *Ẹpa* masquerades lack proper application of the basic principles of design. Although, most visual elements of design are visible in the arts of Okun-Yoruba *Ẹpa* masquerade tradition. But *understanding* and organizing content and visual elements is paramount creative processes and production.*

**Fig. 6: Simple *Ọja/Ifalẹ***



**Source: Ayinmode, Stephen Ayodele (2004).**

### Conclusion

*There is no doubt that the progenitors, inventors and designers of Okun-Yoruba *Ẹpa* masquerades' costume have been influenced by their history, myths, traditions, and philosophical interpretations of their natural environment. This is evidently seen in their masquerading practice, arts and other diverse artistic traditions in wood carving, pottery, cloth weaving and other art forms used as costumes on or for *Ẹpa* masquerades. But a large instinct of design, production and creativity hinge on manipulation of visual elements*

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