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EMBODIED TRADITION; AN ETHNOCULTURAL STUDY OF DANCE, MUSIC, AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE AMONG THE AMO, NGAS, AND TAROK

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Abstract

This study examines the artistic performance traditions of the Amo, Ngas, and Tarok ethnic groups of Plateau State, Nigeria, with particular emphasis on their aesthetic structures, ritual functions, and cultural meanings. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study employed participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and audio-visual documentation to investigate three major performance traditions: Izara (Amo), Murghi (Ngas), and Ilum O'ga Gani (Tarok). The findings reveal that these artistic traditions function as indigenous forms of "total theatre," integrating music, dance, masquerade, costume, oral performance, symbolism, and spatial organisation into unified systems of cultural communication. The Amo Izara festival demonstrates a cyclical dramaturgy rooted in rites of passage and personal narrative expression. The Ngas Murghi festival is organised around an elaborate masquerade tradition that symbolically represents authority, fertility, communal purification, and ancestral presence. In contrast, the Tarok Ilum O'ga Gani festival emphasises martial aesthetics, heroic performance, and the public construction of communal identity and social recognition. Despite their distinctive cultural expressions, the three traditions share common functions as mechanisms for preserving indigenous knowledge, transmitting historical memory, reinforcing moral values, sustaining social cohesion, and mediating relationships between the human and spiritual worlds. The study concludes that these performance traditions remain significant repositories of cultural heritage and indigenous epistemologies despite increasing pressures from modernisation, urbanisation, and religious transformation. It recommends strengthened documentation, cultural preservation

initiatives, and greater scholarly engagement to ensure their continued relevance for future generations.

Keywords: Amo; Ngas; Tarok; indigenous; ritual; aesthetics; identity; performance; Plateau State.

Introduction

Performance has long been recognized as a vital medium through which societies encode, transmit, and negotiate cultural knowledge. In many African contexts, artistic performances, including festivals, ritual enactments, music, dance, and masquerade serve not merely as entertainment but as systems through which social, spiritual, and historical meanings are expressed and preserved. Richard Schechner conceptualizes performance as "restored behaviour," which he describes as "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first time; that are prepared or rehearsed" (Schechner, 2017, P. 28). This suggests that performance functions as a repeated cultural practice through which communal knowledge and traditions are continually re-enacted across generations. Similarly, Victor Turner argues that ritual performances create "liminal spaces where normal social structures are temporarily suspended, enabling participants to reaffirm collective values and social bonds" (Turner, 1969, P. 95). From these perspectives, performance emerges not simply as aesthetic display, but as a dynamic cultural process through which societies preserve memory, negotiate identity, and sustain communal continuity.

Within Nigeria, the ethnocultural diversity of Plateau State provides a fertile context for examining such performance systems. Among the many groups in the region, the Amo, Ngas, and Tarok maintain vibrant festival traditions that exemplify the integration of ritual, aesthetics, and communal participation. These performances bring together music, movement, costume, and spatial organization into coherent structures through which identity, morality, and cosmology are expressed and negotiated.

Ethnographic Backgrounds The Amo: Izara

According to Sofi, the Amo people came from an ancient settlement known as Aturu. Ancient Aturu was a settlement situated near a spring among huge granite rocks, some twenty kilometres to the north of present Jos town along Zaria Motor Park. The settlement found on the hill from a panoramic view of the country side possibly offered natural fortification to the Pengana highlands. The Amo are descendants of an indigenous population of great antiquity in the Pengana highlands, whose origin was from Aturu. The area once flourished as a big town called Apeh, where farming and hunting were the livelihood of its inhabitants. After the Ukara Gonchake war destroyed Aturu, its leader named Aturu escaped with his horse into a nearby cave which its inhabitants, the Amo, Buji and others dispersed and founded new settlements in the adjacent hills. With the dispersal of ancient Aturu, the Amo, on leaving Aturu with their leader, Kimap went further west: this time around as a result of the war with the Hausas of Zaria or Zazzau and the ones in Kano.

The Amo fought victoriously and even rescued their friends, the Rukuba among many others. It is a fact that during the war, the Hausas could not penetrate Plateau through the northern part where the Amo people were on guard. The renowned wariors of the Amo who spearheaded the attacks against the Hausas were Adanah and Katura. The Amo and Janji defeated Yero' forces that even Muhammed of Lere narrowly escaped being killed by Jere and Amo in 1987. This was one of the reasons why the Amo people came down from the hilltops and are now in Lere and parts of Kaduna and Kano states: while the majority of the people are in Kides and Kitara Districts. This has now become the abode of the Paramount Ruler and the domain of the District Heads. Also important is the fact that as the Amo people went through these experiences, they still maintained their traditional practices. They came down with these practices from the hill tops to continue with them till today, and the Izara initiation festival was among them (Sofi, 2019, P. 10).

The Amo Izara initiation festival is a significant traditional cultural event for the Amo people in North Central Nigeria, focusing on rites of passage (initiation), rich in indigenous African drama, music, dance, costumes, and community participation, studied for its unique performance elements distinct from Western theatre, revealing deep cultural identity and worldview through its theatrical aesthetics. It serves as a vital marker for the Amo people's identity and heritage. The festival is a form of indigenous drama, featuring music, dance, storytelling, and elaborate costumes, but viewed through an African lens rather than a Western dramatic structure. It marks the transition of individuals (often youth) into adulthood or new social roles within the community. The festival uses indigenous aesthetics like music, dance, audience involvement, and symbolic performances.

The Tarok: Ilum OGani

The Tarok, (who call themselves oTárók, their language iTárók, and their land ìTàrók) are primarily found in Langtang North, Langtang South, Wase, Mikang, and Kanke LGAs of Plateau State. They are also found in smaller numbers across Shendam, Qua'an Pan, Kanam, Pankshin LGAs and parts of Taraba, Nasarawa, and Bauchi states.

The Tarok is an amalgamation of various peoples who now form a more or less homogeneous group. The constituents were of Pe, Ngas, Jukun, Bogghom, Montol, and Tal origins, while others still remain obscure or unknown. During the colonial period (1914-1960), the Tarok were called *Yergam*. This name was given to them by the Hausa-Fulanis as a result of business transactions between the two groups. During haggling, the Tarok reject offers for the sale of commodities such as corn, firewood, beniseed, locust beans, etc. by saying *"yar-iga"*, which in iTárók mean "take it and let us go". This caused the Tarok to be known by the nickname "*Yergamawa*" among the Hausa-Fulanis and most of Northern Nigeria. The people rejected the nickname and resorted to "Tarok" in the late 1960s.

The Gani people are located in the Pil-Gani district of Langtang North Local Government of Plateau State. Gani district is one of the most populated and highest districts in Langtang North, with an estimated population of 38,560.75 according to the 2006 population census. The name came as a result of the Tarok people accommodating the Hausa people in their community. As time went by, the Hausa settlers succeeded in introducing their religion to

Tarok natives. While some of the natives resisted the new religion, Hausa Muslims described those who accepted their religion in Hausa as "*Ai waddai nan mutanen sun gane ne,*" which means that the people who accepted the religion understand more. The Tarok people in Gani town instituted the 'Ilum O'ga Gani,' a day set aside to celebrate the culture and tradition of the Gani people. The Ilum O'ga Gani is an annual festival and, according to oral accounts, the festival was first celebrated in 1923.

The Ngas: Morgi/Murghi

According to Samuel P. Danladi: The Ngas people, also known as the Angas or Kerang, are an ethnic group primarily inhabiting the central region of Nigeria, with their homeland, Yil Ngas, spanning parts of Plateau State and extending into Bauchi State. Numbering approximately 791,000 individuals (2020), they form one of the significant Chadic-speaking communities in the country, renowned for their agrarian economy centered on farming and livestock herding, as well as their rich cultural traditions that emphasize communal harmony and ancestral reverence. The Ngas speak the Ngas language (also called Angas), a member of the West Chadic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family, which is used by nearly all members of the group and features a written form with published Bible translations dating back to the early 20th century.

The Ngas trace their origins through oral traditions to migrations from northeastern regions, including the Kanem-Borno area around the 11th to 14th centuries CE, with some accounts suggesting earlier movements from Egypt or Sudan via the Chad Basin. Their settlement in the hilly and plain terrains of present day Plateau State shaped their distinct social divisions into Hill Ngas (in elevated areas like Pankshin) and Plain Ngas (in lower valleys). The migratory path followed a route from the Lake Chad Basin through the Bauchi axis, passing through intermediate settlements like Koropan, Bornu, Yam (near Tafawa Balewa), Jaka, Baksala, and Suwa, before reaching the highlands of the Jos Plateau around the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. This movement was motivated by the search for defensible, agriculturally rich terrain amid regional instabilities, resulting in the establishment of core communities in areas now encompassing Pankshin, Mangu, Kanke, Bokkos, and Kanam in Plateau State. Some subgroups splintered during the journey, with remnants settling in Bauchi State, such as the Tapshin area, reflecting the dispersed nature of Chadic-speaking peoples from the Chad Basin. Their society is patrilineal and kinship-based, with community gatherings and rites of passage such as circumcision, marriage, and burial, reinforcing moral and social cohesion under ancestral practices known as Arkhem. Traditional beliefs center on a supreme deity called Nen, mediated by ancestors (*wong mwa*) and spirits (*zigol* or *kwi*). (Danladi, 2018, P. 2)

The Morgi/Murghi festival is usually celebrated in March. The importance of the festival is to package, anoint, and store the grain securely inside a sacred granary called *khir-bal,* meaning the granary for survival. It's called *khir-bal* because the crops stored in the *khir-bal* would be the last to be used in the community. It is also from the granary that the community would retrieve the first seed to start the farming season.

Problem

Despite their significance, existing scholarship on these traditions remains limited in scope and orientation. Much of the available literature adopts a single-community focus, offering detailed descriptions of individual festivals but lacking comparative analysis that can illuminate broader patterns and distinctions across related cultural groups.

A further problem lies in the insufficient analysis of symbolic and communicative processes within these performances. While scholars acknowledge their social and ritual functions, fewer studies systematically examine how specific theatrical elements operate as codes through which meaning is produced and transmitted. As a result, the underlying dramaturgical logic of these traditions remains under-theorized. These gaps are compounded by contemporary challenges. Processes of modernization, religious transformation, and shifting patterns of cultural participation are contributing to the gradual erosion of indigenous performance systems and the specialized knowledge they embody. Without sustained documentation and critical analysis, significant aspects of these traditions risk being diminished or lost.

This study addresses these problems by undertaking a comparative ethno-cultural analysis of the artistic performance traditions of the Amo, Ngas, and Tarok. It examines how theatrical elements function as integrated systems and how they operate as communicative media for expressing cultural values, social relations, and cosmological beliefs.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

i. What theatrical elements characterize the aesthetic performances of Amo, Ngas, and Tarok ethnic nationalities, and how do these elements integrate to form cohesive performance systems?
ii. How do these elements function communicatively within performances to encode and transmit cultural knowledge, and what symbolic systems operate within each element?

Literature Review

African Performance as "Total Theatre"

Scholarly discourse on African performance has consistently emphasized its resistance to dominant Western theatrical paradigms. Rather than conforming strictly to Aristotelian principles of plot, character, and dialogue, African performance traditions are better understood as integrated cultural systems in which ritual, music, dance, costume, storytelling, and spectacle function collectively. African performances therefore operate simultaneously as artistic, social, and spiritual experiences.

African theatre scholars further describe these traditions as forms of "total theatre," in which aesthetic expression cannot be separated from communal and metaphysical functions. John Mbiti observes that Africans are "notoriously religious" (Mbiti, 1975, P. 1), arguing that religion permeates every dimension of African life and cultural practice. Within this framework, performance serves as a medium through which communities interact with both

visible and invisible realities. Festivals and ritual enactments are therefore not peripheral artistic activities but central mechanisms for maintaining cosmological balance, social cohesion, and collective identity.

Theatrical Elements as Communicative Systems

A major concern in performance scholarship is the communicative function of aesthetic elements within African festivals and ritual performances. Scholars argue that costume, music, movement, masks, and spatial arrangements should not be viewed merely as decorative devices but as symbolic systems through which cultural meanings are encoded and transmitted.

According to Nnamani et al., masquerade performances serve as "visible expressions of ancestral presence and spiritual embodiment within the community" (Nnamani et al., 2020, P. 112). The authors further explain that masks and costumes function as symbolic manifestations of supernatural entities, while drumming patterns, choreographic movements, and ritual gestures communicate communal history, identity, and cosmological beliefs. Through these performative elements, meaning is collectively constructed through sound, movement, spectacle, and ritual action.

Mythological and Metaphysical Dimensions of Performance

Recent scholarship increasingly foregrounds the metaphysical dimensions of African performance traditions by interpreting festivals not merely as symbolic representations but as enactments of cosmological realities. Ikpelemoh Sunday and Egwuda-Ugbeda Emmanuel, in their study of the Ògwù festival, describe such performances as "mythological-metaphysical theatres" that mediate interactions between human and spiritual realms (Ikpelemoh & Egwuda-Ugbeda, 2022, P. 74).

This perspective aligns with indigenous African epistemologies that do not rigidly separate material existence from spiritual reality. Within this worldview, masquerades are understood not simply as symbolic figures but as embodiments of ancestral presence, while ritual performances are perceived as effective engagements with metaphysical forces. Performance thus becomes an ontological activity that actively participates in the construction and maintenance of reality rather than merely representing it.

Research Theories

This study is anchored on Richard Schechner"s Performance Theory and Victor Turner"s Ritual Theory.

Performance Theory

Richard Schechner conceptualizes performance as a broad spectrum of human activities that includes ritual, theatre, play, and everyday social behavior. Central to his theory is the notion of "restored behavior," which he describes as "twice-behaved behavior," referring to actions that are learned, stored, repeated, and reactivated across generations and contexts (Schechner, 1985, p. 36). Schechner further explains that "restored behavior is living behavior treated as a

film director treats strips of film" (Schechner, 1985, P. 35).

This conception suggests that performance is composed of inherited cultural materials that are continually rearranged and re-enacted within specific social contexts. Performance therefore does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is culturally rehearsed behavior transmitted through memory, participation, and embodied practice.

Schechner also emphasizes the processual nature of performance, arguing that meaning is shaped by context, audience interaction, and environmental conditions rather than existing as a fixed dramatic text. In addition, he deliberately collapses rigid distinctions between ritual and theatre by viewing both as systems of symbolic and repeated action. Within the context of Amo, Ngas, and Tarok artistic traditions, Schechner‟s framework is particularly relevant in understanding festival dances as re-enactments of collective cultural memory, masquerade performances as embodied ancestral scripts, music, drumming, and choreography as encoded forms of transmissible cultural knowledge

Artistic performances within these communities can therefore be interpreted as continuously reconstructed cultural texts sustained through repetition, ritual participation, and communal interaction.

Ritual Theory

Victor Turner‟s Ritual Theory complements Schechner‟s framework by emphasizing the social, symbolic, and transformative dimensions of ritual performance. Turner defines ritual as a structured symbolic process through which societies negotiate transitions, reinforce values, and express collective meanings (Turner, 1969).

A key concept in Turner‟s theory is liminality, which he describes as "the state of being betwixt and between" established social positions (Turner, 1969, P. 95). Liminality represents a transitional phase during which ordinary social structures and hierarchies are temporarily suspended. Within such moments, participants experience what Turner terms communitas, which he defines as "an unstructured state in which all members of a community are equal" (Turner, 1969, P. 96).

In ethno-cultural performance contexts such as festivals, communal dances, and initiation ceremonies among the Amo, Ngas, and Tarok, liminal experiences create socially significant spaces in which social hierarchies become temporarily relaxed, collective identity and solidarity are intensified, moral and cultural values are publicly reaffirmed and communal cohesion is strengthened through shared participation. From Turner‟s perspective, ritual performance is not merely symbolic representation but a transformative social process capable of producing temporary states of unity and reinforcing long-term communal stability.

Methodology Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design. Ethnography is appropriate for examining ethno-cultural artistic performances because it allows for direct engagement with lived cultural practices, meanings, and contexts. The design enables an in-depth understanding of how the Amo, Ngas, and Tarok communities construct, experience, and transmit artistic performance traditions.

Study Area(s)

The research is conducted across various Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Plateau State, Nigeria**,** which are traditional homelands of the six selected ethnic groups:

Table 3.1: Geographic Distribution of Study Communities

Ethnic Group	Primary LGAs	Key Communities
Amo	Bassa, Jos North	Lishin, Kamari, Jengre, Kataku
Ngas	Pankshin, Kanke	Pankshin, Ner, Fwor, Vel
Tarok	Langtang North, Langtang South	Pil-Gani, Langtang

The research's focus on single geographic state simplifies logistics while providing rich comparative study of diverse but proximate cultural performance traditions, allowing examination of how different ethnic groups maintain distinctive identities within shared ecological and political contexts.

Population, sample size and technique

The study population consists of cultural practitioners, including performers, masquerade custodians, musicians, community elders, festival organizers, and knowledgeable spectators.

A total of 36 participants were involved in the study, distributed across the three ethnic groups as follows:

- Elders and cultural custodians (4 per group)
- Active performers (4 per group)
- Musicians and festival organizers (2 per group)
- Knowledgeable spectators/community members (2 per group)

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience in the performance traditions under study.

Methods of Data Collection

Data for the study are collected through participant observation, interviews, and audio-visual documentation

These methods allow for triangulation and enhance the reliability of the data.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected are analyzed using thematic analysis. Performance events, interview transcripts, and field notes are coded and organized into recurring themes. Interpretation is guided by the theoretical frameworks of Schechner‟s Performance Theory and Turner‟s Ritual Theory.

Ethical Considerations

The study ensures ethical compliance through informed consent from all participants. Cultural sensitivity is maintained, particularly in relation to sacred rituals and restricted performances. Anonymity is preserved where requested, and permission is sought before recording or documenting any cultural event

Results/Findings

The research findings presents the comprehensive ethnographic findings from the 18-month field study conducted across three ethnic nationalities in Plateau State: Amo (Izara), Ngas (Morgi Festival), Tarok (Ilum O'ga Gani). The findings are organized by ethnic group, emphasizing the theatrical elements that characterize each tradition, and subsequently analyzed comparatively to identify patterns in aesthetic performance traditions.

Ethnographic presentation of Findings The Amo: Izara

Theatrical & Aesthetic Elements

Plot Structure

The plot of Izara operates through exposition, progression, purgation, unfolding across several ritual stages (*uteru-kadun, Kubi, Naji, Abandai,* culminating in *Useru-Tikpuu*). The plot is stable, repetitive, and communally known, yet each edition generates unique subplots based on the performers‟ lived experiences. Interview data reveals that performers use Izara as a space for public narrative disclosure, recounting personal histories, marital struggles, ancestral blessings, or failures. A respondent in Kides explained:

“When we sing, we are telling the story of our life so the ancestors can hear.” (Izara performer, Kides; KII, Male, 58)

Flashbacks

Izara also incorporates flashback techniques, especially at Libari and during the cutting of *Fiqui*, where past wars and ancestral heroism are ritually reenacted. These repeated sequences serve as communal memory devices and dramatic climaxes.

Characters and Performative Roles

Characters in Izara are both human and metaphysical, reflecting the Amo belief system. They include *Anta-kune* (ancestors) – invoked throughout the performance, *Kutelle* (God) – ultimate cosmic authority, active performers – fathers of initiates in full costume (*kukii*, *tigalgaba*), members of the traditional council, including the District Head, the *kuzur* (royal initiate) – central symbolic character, and old women performers – custodians of tactile and protective aesthetics (*koya*, *nnung-nikpok)*.



Figure: A *kuzur* (painted) with parent and old women performers

Interviews confirm that performers function as medium personas, serving as conduits between the human community and cosmic forces. Abstinence rituals imposed on male performers reinforce this sacred intermediary role.

Language

Language in Izara is highly stylized and poetic. Dialogue is delivered primarily through song, except during procedural speeches by the Chief Priest or council members. The Amo performance language blends lamentation, praise, supplication, and narrative.

Izara language operates at two levels:

1. Horizontal dialogue – between performer and family (often wife or mother-in-law)
2. Vertical dialogue – between performer, *Kutelle*, and the ancestors (*anta-kune)*

Spectators detect linguistic "impurity" when Hausa terms intrude into Amo lyrics viewed as evidence of cultural erosion. Highly proficient performers draw larger crowds, as witnessed in

Kawan-Kides, where a notable singer reportedly attracted a woman who later married him due to the allure of his Izara poetry.

Spectacle and Visual Theatricality

The Izara festival is visually spectacular, combining costume aesthetics, dance formations, ritual actions, special effects (e.g., K*izing-zing* drum "crying"), choreographed processions, props and symbolic objects

Spectacle begins with the circumcision ritual at Kamari, followed by the shaking of the gourd seven times a symbolic activation of the dramatic universe. The *Kizing-zing* drum adds supernatural spectacle, its rumored behaviours (moving itself, rejecting certain players) intensifying audience fascination.

Music

Music is the emotional and structural backbone of Izara. The performance uses *Kizing-zing* (central ritual drum), supporting small/big drums across stages, *Kulangtung* (horn) announces the royal council‟s arrival, *Akayau* (anklets), *Abbo* (gourds) with seven stones for rhythm.



Figure: The kizing-zing ritual drum

Izara music is operatic, continuous, and emotionally charged. Songs are mostly lamentations (*Ugozu-nawui*, *Utuzu-nawui*), punctuated by the Ukwa chorus.

Movement

The Amo term *Avuu* captures dance, song, and play three inseparable aesthetic components. Izara dance is cyclical (performer and audience form moving circles), polycentric (all body parts active), symbolic (war-like strides, bamboo-stick waving), and expressive (courage, thanksgiving, struggle)

The waving of *likpuu* (bamboo stick) *Uzarnu* symbolizes gratitude to *Kutelle*. Movement motifs imitate warriors, farmers, hunters, and ancestral heroes. The tactile aesthetic women rubbing koya and nnuŋ-nikpok, adds protective symbolism.

Dramatic Conflict

Izara‟s dramaturgy contains three levels of conflict:

1. Cosmic conflict: Between benevolent *anta-kune* and malevolent spirits (witchcraft, barrenness, misfortune).
2. Inter-community conflict: At Libari, Kides and Kitara warriors compete symbolically by cutting *Fiqui*. Cutting the plant is heroic but fatal, a sacrifice accepted in Amo cosmology.
3. Intra-personal and interpersonal conflicts: Performers narrate past quarrels, marital tensions, or personal failures. Izara serves as public catharsis, a purging of emotional burdens.

Suspense

Suspense arises from anticipating *Fiqui* cutting, eagerly seeking lyrical revelations, watching for cosmic signs, possession, or unexpected events, which is why spectators arrive early at *Useru-Tikpuu*, hoping to witness dramatic highlights.

Costumes, Make-Up, and Props

Costumes are sacred and identity-bearing: *Kukii* (tanned skin), *Tigalgaba* (decorated upper skin with cowries), *Agbaw* (fresh leaves), *Imon-toh* (beads), and *Litapa* (head bands) Properties include *Likpuu* (bamboo sticks), *Abbo* (gourd rattles), *Nyasa* (cow brushes), spears, axes, and bows (Libari)



Figure: Izara participants at Krosha village

Make-up (*koya*, *nnung-nikpok*) is protective and spiritual.

Space/Arena



Figure: Izara performance showing expansive arena

Izara takes place in physical arenas at Lishin, Kamari, Likwu, Kawam, Katako, Etc.

The select spaces are usually expansive, containing all performers (including audience). But the arena is also metaphysical, believed to be a meeting point of *Kutelle*, *anta-kune*, and living

performers. Rocky platforms signify ancestral presence and cosmic authority.

Audience Participation

Audience participation is highly interactive, involving dancing, chanting choruses, dialogic exchanges, entering/removing themselves from the arena, and emotional responses to performers‟ narratives.



Figure: Audience participation in Izara

Despite the protected and sacred nature of some aspects of Izara, the boundary between audience and performer dissolves. At times, costumes become the only distinction.

The Ngas: Morgi/Murghi Theatrical and Aesthetic Elements Space

The Murghi festival takes place across domestic spaces, shrines, open compounds, and community squares. The arena is both physical and symbolic. On the first day, rituals occur around the *Khir-bal* and within the shrines at *Ner*, reinforcing a sense of sacred enclosure. On the second day, the arena becomes more expansive: compounds, open spaces, and village paths become processional stages on which masquerades perform.



Figure: First picture taken around the *khir-bal* and second shows the *Nefur*

The final arena at the Galadima‟s compound transforms into a public theatre, where performers, masquerades, and audience share spatial proximity.

Characters

Morgi is fundamentally a masquerade theatre, with each *wong* type functioning as a dramatic character. The masquerades operate as spirit-personas and embody ancestral authority. Their presence dictates audience behavior, spatial arrangement, and visual aesthetics.

- *Dak-lim* (Father Masquerade): Wears a Babban Riga, asserts authority and stabilizes movement during procession
- *Nin-wong* (Mother Masquerades): Wear glossy leaves and *shan-nyi-nyi* head herb, horse-tail, walking sticks. Lead dances, supervise sacred songs, maintain order; visually striking feminine movement
- *Naru*: Woven cotton cloth, *Yim-mess, Yim-tapip* grass garment, old calabash. Comic-relief, beggar motif, entertains crowd and balances tension
- *Wong-as*/*Njet-leng*: White-black cloth, locust bean leaves, twin sticks. Dramatic soldiers; chase sequences create suspense, crowd interaction
- *Wong-wus*: Fire flame on head, leaf-wrapped spear (Kop), black horse-tail.Rare appearance; builds festival suspense; symbol of purification and cosmic presence



Figure: Daklim(first picture) and Nin-wong masquerades

Each masquerade type brings a distinct choreographic vocabulary, narrative function, and visual presence.

Costume

Costuming is central to Murghi‟s theatrical identity. Masquerades wear *leng-tin* (mahogany leaves) a seasonal symbol associated with the end of the agricultural year. The leaves‟ freshness signals renewal, fertility, and ancestral blessing. The *Dak-lim* and *Njet-leng* display clothing aesthetics rooted in Ngas visual culture, while worshippers wear animal skins that reinforce identity and status. The use of leaves rather than cloth expresses natural aesthetics, embedding performance within the ecology.

The costumes also communicate dramatic hierarchy: the mother masquerades‟ glittering leaves differentiate them from soldiers and entertainers. Interviewees pointed out that the falling or shaking of leaves during dancing is interpreted as a sign of ancestral movement and presence.

Dance

Dance is the core of Murghi‟s dramatic expression. The *Chir* dance, performed during the climax, involves a chase where worshippers run defensively while masquerades attempt to “strike” them. This creates a dynamic kinetic drama that blends danger, humor, and communal bonding. The chase evokes past battles, hunting traditions, and ancestral heroism. Dance formations are circular, emphasizing inclusion and reinforcing African performance spatiality, where audience and performers merge seamlessly.



Figure: The *Chir* dance showing audience and masquerades

Movements vary by character type *Dak-lim* uses large, sweeping motions with sticks, Nin-wong dances gently, emphasizing grace and femininity, the *Naru* dances with exaggerated comedic gestures and Wong-as/Njet-leng perform aggressive, energetic movements, dramatizing warfare.

Music

Music drives the dramatic flow of Murghi. The shoulder-hung drum provides a consistent rhythmic base, while singing by worshippers and spectators colors the atmosphere. Chanting, clapping, and stick-beating create a polyrhythmic soundscape. Songs range from praise chants to ancestral invocations. The festival rhythm changes from slow and solemn during rituals to energetic and fast during the Chir dance, reflecting shifts in dramatic tension.

Audience Participation

Audience participation is integral. People accompany masquerades, join dances, sing choruses, and respond to masquerade movements. Youths particularly engage enthusiastically with Wong-as and *Njet-leng*, creating interactive drama. The chase scenes evoke excitement, suspense, and communal laughter.



Figure: A masquerade chase during *Chir*

As one FGD respondent noted: "Nobody comes to Murghi just to watch; you must feel it, dance it, or run from the wong." This aligns with African participatory theatre, where spectators function as co-creators of performance.

Symbolism

The ritual grain, *ka"tem*, spears, fire, leaf costumes, calabash, and movement patterns create a rich system of imagery. The grain stored in Khir-bal symbolizes hope for the next farming season. Fire on the *Wong-wus*" head signifies purification and spiritual illumination. Sticks used by masquerades represent authority and cosmic discipline. These symbolic forms contribute to Murghi"s multi-layered aesthetic system where spiritual, social, and theatrical meanings coexist.

The Tarok: Ilum O'ga Gani Theatrical & Aesthetic Elements Performance Arena

Ilum O'Gani is performed at the Gani Development College, Pil-Gani, a space large enough to accommodate hundreds of dancers, hunters, masquerades, and spectators. The arena is multi-functional, featuring central dance ring, peripheral musician zones, designated masquerade paths and audience walls form a natural boundary.



Figure: Ilum O'Gani festival arena

The arena accommodates processions, sudden sprinting sequences, and dramatic collective displays. Spatially, Gani resembles a war theatre, where movement conveys power and identity.

Costume and visual spectacle

Tarok performance is visually striking. Costumes and props include animal skins, hunter regalia, spears, bows, and symbolic knives.

Ilum O'ga Gani‟s costuming produces a spectacle of aestheticized warfare, transforming the arena into a living tableau of Tarok history. Performers often display hunting trophies such as skins, horns, or skulls, reinforcing narrative meaning.



Figure: Tarok warriors procession during Ilum O'ga Gani

Masquerade

Masquerades are central to Ilum o'ga Gani, operating both as spectacle agents, spiritual police, rhythmic enhancers, and symbols of ancestral authority.



Figure: Sarauniya masquerade during Ilum o'ga Gani

Their movement is characterized by dramatic stamping, lunging, unpredictable turns, and intimidating forward charges. Audience members react viscerally, sometimes retreating playfully when masquerades rush toward them.

Dance

Gani dance theatre features powerful, grounded movementsshort, forceful steps, shoulder-led gestures, forward rushes, and rhythmic stamping. Dancers often form circles or long lines that move in serpentine formation, imitating hunting strategy.



Figure: A Tarok male-only dance during Ilum o'ga Gani

Youths use the performance to demonstrate strength and agility, which elders evaluate for maturity and social placement.

Respondent testimony confirms the performative dimension:

“In Gani, a young man shows if he is ready for life. We watch their steps to know.” (Tarok FGD, Pishe)

Music

The Tarok soundscape is dominated by war drums, wooden slit drums (log drum), lamellophones, l*akaji* (shakers), beaded maracas (*Cha), c*all-and-response songs.



Figure: Some Tarok musical instruments

These create an escalating rhythm, building tension and climaxing with masquerade sequences or communal dancing. The music serves as the dramaturgical backbone regulating pace, signaling transitions, and amplifying emotion.

Audience Participation

Audience members surround the arena in thick layers, cheer, chant, whistle, and praise hunters, join processions briefly, engage in comic exchanges with masquerades, and perform symbolic gestures (e.g., presenting drinks to hunters)

The performance becomes a communal theatre where boundaries between performer and spectator dissolve.

Discussion and Conclusion

Across the three groups, performance operates as an integrated system in which music, dance, costume, spatial organization, and ritual action function interdependently. These traditions exemplify forms of "total theatre," where aesthetic expression is inseparable from social and spiritual processes. Meaning is generated through embodied and symbolic communication, with movement, rhythm, and visual forms encoding cultural values and cosmological beliefs.

All three traditions are fundamentally participatory, dissolving rigid boundaries between performers and audiences. Whether as witnesses (Izara), active participants (Murghi), or evaluators (Ilum O‟ga Gani), audiences contribute directly to meaning production. In addition, performance functions as a mechanism of social regulation, reinforcing moral order through reconciliation (Izara), symbolic discipline (Murghi), and public evaluation (Ilum O‟ga Gani).

A shared cosmological dimension further underpins these systems, as performance mediates relationships between human and spiritual realms through ritual enactment, masquerade embodiment, or symbolic affirmation of continuity.

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