

JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH (JESBER)

2026, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 209–222

Published by Faculty of Environmental Sciences, University of Calabar, Nigeria

Print ISSN: 3141-5547 | OPEN ACCESS



Research article

PERFORMING EFIK IDENTITY IN THE CALABAR CARNIVAL: DIRECTORIAL COMPOSITION, ACTING AND SEMIOTIC NEGOTIATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Calabar Carnival as a large-scale performance text in which Efik identity is selected, directed, embodied and circulated through costume, music, choreography, acting, float design and audience participation. It interprets the field data through the combined perspectives of theatre directing, performance studies and social semiotics. A mixed-methods case-study and survey design was adopted. Through purposive sampling, 335 participants were selected from 12 Efik clans, and 293 usable responses were obtained. Data were generated through structured and open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and oral narratives, and analysed using descriptive statistics, correlations, analysis of variance, multiple regression and thematic interpretation. Carnival performance recorded a high mean score ($M = 3.40$) and was strongly associated with year-end celebration ($r = .80$), whereas its reported relationships with Efik melodies ($r = .10$), choreography ($r = -.20$) and attire ($r = -.50$) were weak or negative. Tinkoriko, Ekpe, Ekombi and Abang emerged as the most statistically salient cultural elements in the carnival float. The findings further show that the carnival amplifies nightlife, fast-food consumption and foreign clothing more strongly than Efik cuisine, dress and the fattening-room tradition. The study argues that the carnival operates as a distributed directorial system and a contested semiotic arena: it increases the visibility of selected cultural signs while also re-scripting them within commercial and global performance codes. Sustainable carnival practice therefore requires cultural dramaturgy, performer-centred rehearsal, semiotic auditing, community participation and stronger links between spectacle and the everyday life of Efik heritage.

KEYWORDS

acting; Calabar Carnival; carnival performance; directing; Efik identity; performance semiotics; spectacle; street theatre.

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Introduction

Festivals are not simply occasions for leisure or periodic displays of inherited custom. They are organised performances in which communities make identity visible through bodies, objects, sounds, spaces and repeated actions. A carnival route becomes a mobile stage; the city becomes a scenographic environment; costumes and floats operate as sign-bearing objects; and spectators participate in the production of meaning through attention, movement, response and consumption. Performance studies therefore approaches carnival not as a static container of culture but as an event in which culture is selected, rehearsed, embodied, contested and renewed (Turner, 1982; Schechner, 2013; Carlson, 2018).

From the perspective of theatre directing, a large carnival may be understood as a form of distributed public dramaturgy. Its artistic coherence is produced not by one director alone but through the intersecting decisions of government organisers, carnival-band leaders, choreographers, designers, musicians, cultural custodians, technical crews and performers. These agents determine the annual theme, visual emphasis, performance sequence, rhythm, spatial arrangement and relationship with the audience. In this sense, directing extends beyond the conventional proscenium stage to the coordination of multiple expressive systems across an urban environment. The carnival is simultaneously planned and unpredictable: its

broad score is designed, but its final meanings emerge through the live interaction of performers, spectators, media and the city (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; McAuley, 1999; Effiom, 2021a).

The Calabar Carnival provides a particularly rich context for examining these processes. Since its expansion as a major tourism and cultural project in the early 2000s, the event has brought together competitive carnival bands, street parades, music, dance, costume, themed floats and year-end entertainment. It has enhanced the visibility of Calabar and generated opportunities for tourism, hospitality, commerce and cultural exchange (Esu & Arrey, 2009; Andrew & Ekpenyong, 2012; Attah et al., 2013). At the same time, its large scale, media orientation and commercial appeal create a complex representational problem: the event must communicate local identity to heterogeneous audiences while operating within globally recognisable codes of spectacle, entertainment and tourism.

Efik culture is expressed through language, kinship, ceremonial institutions, food, dress, music, dance, oral tradition, masquerade and embodied forms of social memory. Within the carnival, however, these cultural resources do not enter public view in equal measure. Some are highly adaptable to street performance because they possess strong visual, musical or kinetic qualities; others are domestic, sacred, gendered, lengthy or dependent on specific ritual contexts. The act of presenting Efik culture in a competitive carnival therefore involves selection and transformation. It is a semiotic act because particular signs are foregrounded as representative of the culture, and a directorial act because those signs are arranged into a coherent public image (Agba et al., 2010; Hall, 1997; Elam, 2002).

Although previous studies have examined the Calabar Carnival in relation to tourism, destination image, visitor satisfaction, economic development and cultural change, comparatively limited attention has been given to the carnival as a directed performance system and a semiotic field. Questions of acting, embodiment, visual composition, sign selection, performance rhythm and audience reception remain underdeveloped in the literature. This study addresses that gap by re-reading empirical evidence on the relationship between the carnival and Efik cultural practices through the disciplinary lenses of theatre directing, acting, performance studies and semiotics.

The study therefore sought to: (i) examine the Calabar Carnival as a directed performance environment in which Efik identity is composed and communicated; (ii) analyse the reported relationships between carnival performance and selected sign systems, particularly music, choreography, attire and year-end celebration; (iii) identify the Efik cultural elements that contribute most strongly to the dramaturgy of the carnival float; and (iv) interpret perceived changes in food, dress, nightlife, cleanliness, security and traditional practice as dimensions of audience reception and cultural performance. By linking statistical findings to performance theory and social semiotics, the study contributes a theatre-centred account of how large-scale carnivals make culture visible while simultaneously transforming the signs through which that culture is recognised.

Literature review

Carnival as Performance and Public Dramaturgy

The concept of performance offers a productive way of understanding carnival because it directs attention to action, embodiment, repetition, framing and audience. Turner (1982) describes social and cultural performances as reflexive processes through which communities display and examine themselves. Schechner (2013) similarly argues that performance is composed of restored behaviours: actions that are rehearsed, repeated and recontextualised. Carnival draws upon such restored behaviours in the form of dances, songs, gestures, processions, costume conventions and ceremonial images, yet it relocates them within a temporary public frame. The result is not a simple reproduction of tradition but a re-composition of cultural materials for a new occasion and audience.

Carnival also possesses the liminal and dialogic qualities identified in classic festival scholarship. Bakhtin's (1984) account of the carnivalesque emphasises temporary inversion, collective participation, bodily display and the suspension of ordinary social boundaries. Falassi (1987) treats festival as a patterned sequence that marks a special time, while MacAloon (1984) locates festival and spectacle within the wider field of cultural performance. These perspectives reveal that the meaning of carnival lies not only in what is displayed but also in the temporary world created by the event. Routes, opening rituals, band sequences, judging points, crowd formations and night-time activities create a distinct performance order through which the city is re-imagined.

Public dramaturgy refers here to the organisation of that performance order. The term emphasises the relationship between theme, sequence, visual motif, sound, spatial movement and audience interpretation. A carnival theme may function like a dramatic premise, while individual bands produce variations through costume, choreography, music and float design.

The street route provides a changing scenography rather than a fixed stage, and the audience is distributed along the performance space rather than seated in a single viewing position. Consequently, meaning is produced through movement across locations and through repeated encounters between performers and spectators.

Directing the Street: Composition, Rhythm and Spatial Organisation

Theatre directing is fundamentally concerned with the arrangement of expressive materials in time and space. The director interprets a governing idea, selects and coordinates signs, shapes rhythm, organises attention and establishes relationships among performers, objects and spectators. In street carnival, these functions are dispersed across a large production network. Artistic directors, band leaders, choreographers, designers and cultural consultants collectively determine how a theme is translated into visible action. The resulting performance is therefore best described as distributed direction: authority is shared, yet the audience experiences the event as a sequence that either possesses or lacks coherence.

Pavis (1998) uses the concept of *mise-en-scène* to describe the concrete organisation of performance signs, while McAuley (1999) demonstrates that theatrical space is actively produced through the relations among bodies, objects and spectators. These ideas are applicable to carnival. The scale of a float, the density of costume colour, the spacing of performers, the alternation between energetic and restrained movement, the placement of drummers, and the transition from one segment to another all influence perception. Directing the street therefore requires both macro-composition and micro-detail. At the macro level, the event must sustain narrative or thematic continuity across a long route; at the micro level, each performance unit must remain legible to spectators who may see it only briefly (Effiom, 2020).

Rhythm is especially important. Carnival rhythm includes musical tempo, choreographic pacing, the rate of procession, pauses at judging points, the repetition of signature movements and the alternation of visual intensity. An overextended sequence may weaken attention, while excessive speed may reduce cultural signs to fleeting decoration. Effective carnival direction must therefore balance duration with clarity, repetition with variation, and spectacle with interpretation. This is one reason why rehearsals are not merely technical preparations: they are the process through which cultural materials are scored for public performance.

Acting, Embodiment and Collective Cultural Representation

Acting in carnival differs from character acting in a scripted realist drama, yet it still involves disciplined embodiment, role assumption, presence, responsiveness and the communication of meaning. Performers may enact historical identities, ancestral figures, social types, symbolic characters or thematic personae. Even where no named character exists, costume and choreography establish a performative role that shapes how the body is carried and interpreted. Stanislavski's emphasis on purposeful action remains useful at the level of performer intention, but carnival acting is often more presentational, rhythmic and collective than psychologically individualised (Stanislavski, 2008; Carlson, 2018; Effiom, 2021a; Hutchinson, 2021).

African performance traditions further challenge rigid separations between actor, dancer, musician, ritual participant and spectator. Soyinka (1976) stresses the integrated relationship among myth, music, movement and communal experience, while Drewal (1992) highlights the agency and improvisatory power of performers within ritual and cultural enactment. In carnival, the performing body is both an aesthetic instrument and a cultural sign. Gesture, posture, facial expression, vocalisation, dance quality and interaction with spectators contribute to the representation of identity. The performer does not merely wear culture as costume; culture is produced through the body's skilled activation of costume, sound and movement (Effiom, 2021b).

Collective acting is particularly important in mass performance. Ensemble precision communicates unity, discipline and visual force, while variation can convey multiplicity and improvisational vitality. The quality of the performance depends on the relationship between individual presence and group composition. Where performers lack contextual knowledge, cultural signs may become superficial poses; where rehearsal combines technical skill with historical understanding, embodiment can function as a form of cultural transmission. The actor-performer is therefore not only an entertainer but also an interpreter of heritage.

Costume, Music and Movement as Semiotic Systems

Semiotics examines how meaning is produced through signs. Theatre is inherently multi-semiotic because words, bodies, movement, costume, sound, objects, light and space operate simultaneously (Eco, 1976; Elam, 2002). Carnival intensifies this condition. The spectator is confronted by a dense field of colours, fabrics, masks, emblems, rhythms, gestures, slogans, technologies and spatial formations. These sign systems do not function independently; they combine to create a performance text whose meaning may be immediate, ambiguous or contested.

Costume is one of the carnival's most visible sign systems. It can operate iconically by resembling a person, animal, object or historical figure; indexically by pointing to a place, status, occupation or cultural practice; and symbolically through colours, emblems and conventions learned within a community (Chandler, 2017). Yet the same costume may communicate differently to insiders and outsiders. A culturally specific motif may carry layered historical meaning for Efik spectators while appearing merely decorative to visitors. Semiotic effectiveness therefore depends not only on visual impact but also on cultural legibility and contextual support.

Music and movement are equally important. Musical rhythm organises bodily energy and creates collective affect, while choreography converts cultural knowledge into spatial and kinetic form. A dance step may signify gender, age, status, celebration, resistance or communal belonging. Movement also directs the spectator's gaze by creating lines, shapes, repetitions and moments of emphasis. In social semiotic terms, the meaning of these resources depends on how they are selected and combined within a specific context of use (van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). When traditional movement is accelerated, blended with contemporary dance or detached from its original musical structure, its signification may change even when its visual outline remains recognisable.

Barthes (1977) reminds us that cultural signs can acquire secondary meanings and become myths: simplified images through which complex identities are made to appear natural and complete. This is a central risk in festival representation. A few spectacular motifs may come to stand for the whole of Efik culture, while less visible practices disappear from public understanding. The task of performance semiotics is therefore not simply to identify signs but to ask who selects them, how they are arranged, which meanings are amplified, and which cultural realities are excluded.

The Calabar Carnival as Intercultural Performance

The Calabar Carnival is both a local cultural event and a globally oriented tourism spectacle. Its aesthetic vocabulary combines indigenous performance materials with Caribbean-inspired carnival forms, contemporary popular music, modern costume technology, competitive band structures and mass-media presentation. This combination has increased the event's attractiveness and helped position Calabar as a major leisure destination (Esu & Arrey, 2009; Andrew & Ekpenyong, 2012). It also creates an intercultural performance space in which local and global signs meet, overlap and compete (Effiom, 2014; Eneyo, 2025c, 2025e).

Studies of the carnival have identified substantial economic and social benefits, including destination promotion, employment, visitor expenditure and civic visibility (Attah et al., 2013; Effiom, 2014; Ohwo & Ndakara, 2023). Other scholars have drawn attention to questions of cultural authenticity, foreign influence and the selective presentation of indigenous heritage (Agba et al., 2010; Endong, 2017; Obijuru, 2023). These tensions are not unique to Calabar. Festival tourism often requires cultural forms to be shortened, spectacularised and made intelligible to audiences unfamiliar with their histories (Picard & Robinson, 2006; Quinn, 2005). The challenge is to achieve accessibility without reducing culture to surface imagery (Ajake, n.d.; Eneyo & Archibong, 2023, 2024; Eneyo, Uttah, et al., 2023; Eneyo, 2026b, 2026c; Obong, Effiom, & Okon, 2012).

The Efik cultural repertoire offers numerous possibilities for carnival performance, including distinctive dress, cuisine, music, dance, masquerade, social institutions, oral narratives and symbolic systems. Yet the translation of these materials into street spectacle is uneven. Some forms possess strong kinetic and visual qualities; others require explanation or are governed by restrictions that limit public display. Cultural sustainability therefore cannot be measured only by the number of indigenous motifs on a float. It must also consider the accuracy of representation, the authority of cultural custodians, the quality of performer knowledge, the circulation of benefits and the relationship between annual spectacle and everyday cultural practice (Eneyo et al., 2025; Eneyo, 2025d; Eneyo, Onnoghen, et al., 2026; Comfort et al., 2026; Obong, Aniah, et al., 2012).

Food and dress are useful indicators of this relationship because they operate both inside and outside the performance route. Efik cuisine and clothing communicate identity through everyday practice, but they are also susceptible to commercial competition and changing urban preferences (Mensah & Eni, 2019; Eneyo et al., 2022; Eneyo, Ajake, et al., 2023). The carnival may therefore celebrate Efik identity on the street while simultaneously encouraging consumption patterns shaped by fast-food branding and global fashion. This apparent contradiction is best understood as part of the wider performance ecology of the event (Eneyo et al., 2018; Eneyo, 2025a; Eneyo, 2026d).

Theoretical Framework: Performance, Social Semiotics and Cultural Hybridity

The study combines three complementary perspectives. First, performance theory provides the concepts of restored behaviour, framing, embodiment, rehearsal, liminality and audience interaction (Turner, 1982; Schechner, 2013). It enables

the carnival to be analysed as an event that reactivates cultural materials in a new public context. It also foregrounds the actor-performer and the live relationship through which meaning is generated rather than treating cultural symbols as static objects.

Second, social semiotics examines the selection and orchestration of sign resources. Meaning is understood as socially made rather than permanently contained in a costume, dance or song (Hall, 1997; van Leeuwen, 2005). The concept of the performance text is used to describe the total arrangement of bodies, music, costume, float design, spatial movement and spectator response. Directing is therefore understood as a semiotic practice: it chooses which signs will be foregrounded, how they will be combined and the interpretive path offered to the audience.

Third, cultural hybridity and commodification explain the pressures under which this semiotic work occurs. Bhabha (1994) and Garcia Canclini (1995) show that cultural encounters generate new, hybrid forms rather than preserving fixed boundaries between the local and the global. Hybridity may foster innovation and wider participation, but commercialisation can also privilege signs that are visually spectacular, easily branded and quickly consumed. The analytical question is therefore not whether the carnival is purely traditional or foreign; it is whether hybrid performance expands community agency and cultural understanding or displaces local meanings through unequal forms of selection and market value.

Together, these perspectives frame the Calabar Carnival as a negotiated performance environment. Efik cultural resources are restored and transformed through embodied performance; selected signs are composed into a public text; and that text circulates within tourism, media and commercial systems. This framework guides the interpretation of the quantitative patterns and qualitative accounts presented in the study.

Empirical Gap and Study Contribution

Existing research has established the importance of the Calabar Carnival to tourism and socio-economic development, but fewer studies have examined its directorial logic, acting practices and semiotic organisation within a single empirical framework. The present study contributes by interpreting performance, music, choreography, attire, cultural elements, food, dress, nightlife, cleanliness and security as interconnected parts of a carnival performance ecology. It moves beyond the binary question of whether the carnival preserves or destroys culture and instead asks how cultural signs are selected, embodied, made visible, re-scripted and received (Eneyo & Archibong, 2024; Eneyo, 2026b, 2026c).

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods case-study and survey design. The quantitative component measured participants' perceptions of carnival performance and selected Efik cultural practices, while the qualitative component drew on open-ended questionnaire responses, semi-structured interviews and oral narratives. The design was appropriate because the statistical relationships required interpretation within the cultural and performative contexts in which respondents experienced the carnival. Mixed-methods research enables numerical trends and situated meanings to be integrated rather than treated as separate forms of evidence (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Study Context and Participants

The research was conducted among Efik communities associated with Calabar, Cross River State, southern Nigeria. Participants were drawn from 12 prominent Efik clans and included clan elders, deputies, household heads and other long-standing residents with knowledge of cultural practices and the development of the carnival. This participant profile was intended to capture institutional memory, lived cultural experience and informed perceptions of how Efik identity is represented within the contemporary event.

Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to select 335 participants who reflected the demographic and cultural diversity of the study area. Of these, 293 provided usable responses, giving a response rate of 87.5%. Structured questionnaires contained closed and open-ended items on carnival performance, year-end festivities, music, choreography, attire, food, dress, nightlife, cleanliness, security and selected cultural institutions. Semi-structured interviews and oral narratives were used to obtain contextual accounts from clan leaders and community members. Questionnaires were administered during clan meetings and other agreed community settings. The use of purposive sampling was consistent with the need to obtain culturally informed responses, although it limits statistical generalisation beyond the participating communities.

Performance-Semiotic Analytical Framework

The existing variables were interpreted through a performance-semiotic matrix developed for this study. Carnival performance and year-end celebration were treated as indicators of event framing and temporal dramaturgy. Efik melodies, choreography and attire were treated as interrelated aural, kinetic and visual sign systems. The listed cultural elements in the carnival float were interpreted in relation to semiotic salience, embodied performability and compatibility with street spectacle. Qualitative responses were coded around five themes: directorial selection and emphasis; performer embodiment and collective acting; costume, music and movement as sign resources; audience reception and participation; and the tension between cultural continuity, hybridity and commodification. This interpretive procedure does not claim to be a frame-by-frame semiotic analysis of recorded performances; rather, it provides a theatre-centred reading of participants' reported experiences and the statistical patterns in the survey data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations. Analysis of variance and multiple regression were used in the source analysis to assess the collective and individual contributions of selected Efik cultural elements to the carnival float. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$. Qualitative responses were interpreted thematically through an iterative process of familiarisation, coding, comparison and synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated at the discussion stage, where numerical findings were interpreted through the concepts of performance composition, embodiment, signification, hybridity and audience reception.

Ethical Considerations

Community engagement was conducted through established clan structures and with attention to voluntary participation, confidentiality, cultural respect and the responsible use of participants' accounts. Sensitive cultural knowledge was not treated as automatically available for public performance. Before final submission, the authors should insert the name of the approving ethics committee, approval number and the specific consent procedure applicable to the original fieldwork.

Results and discussion

Respondent Characteristics

The demographic profile provides important context for the interpretation of performance and cultural change. As shown in Table 1, participants aged 58 years and above constituted 35.5% of the sample, followed by those aged 48-57 years (27.3%) and 38-47 years (24.9%). The strong representation of older adults is valuable because these respondents are more likely to possess long-term knowledge of Efik cultural practices and the evolution of the carnival. However, the limited representation of younger adults means that the findings may understate youth-centred interpretations of creativity, popular culture and hybrid performance.

The sample was predominantly male (64.2%), while 35.8% were female. Participants from the private sector and non-governmental organisations formed the largest occupational group (31.7%), followed by the self-employed (27.6%) and public or civil servants (25.6%). The occupational spread suggests that the cultural effects of the carnival are experienced across public, commercial and community settings. Nevertheless, the age and gender profile should be considered when interpreting the findings, especially in relation to costume, food, gendered cultural institutions and youth participation.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 293)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Age (years)	18-27	7	2.4
	28-37	29	9.9
	38-47	73	24.9
	48-57	80	27.3
	58 and above	104	35.5
	Total	293	100.0
Sex/Gender	Male	188	64.2

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
	Female	105	35.8
	Total	293	100.0
Occupation	Public/civil servant	75	25.6
	Private sector/NGO	93	31.7
	Self-employed	81	27.6
	Apprenticeship	12	4.1
	Students/applicants	32	10.9
	Total	293	100.0

Source: Field survey. Percentages are based on the analytic sample of 293 respondents.

Carnival as Directed Performance and Temporal Dramaturgy

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and reported inter-correlations among carnival performance and selected Efik cultural domains. Carnival performance recorded a high mean score ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.60$), indicating that respondents regarded the event as a prominent feature of the contemporary cultural landscape. Year-end celebration also recorded a high mean ($M = 3.20$) and the strongest relationship with carnival performance ($r = .80$). The result confirms that the carnival derives much of its identity from a powerful temporal frame: Christmas, homecoming, reunion, public entertainment and intensified social activity. In dramaturgical terms, the end-of-year season supplies the event with an overarching situation, expectation and emotional climate.

This strong relationship is important for directing because audiences do not encounter the carnival as an isolated sequence of performances. They arrive with expectations already shaped by holiday travel, family reunion, celebration, consumption and leisure. The annual calendar functions like a pre-performance text that prepares the audience to read the city as festive space. The carnival's directorial system therefore extends beyond the parade itself to lighting, hospitality, media publicity, transport, night-time events and the broader visual transformation of Calabar. The performance begins before the bands enter the route and continues after the formal parade has ended.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations for carnival performance and selected sign systems

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Carnival performance	3.40	0.60	1.00				
2. Efik melodies	0.40	0.70	0.10	1.00			
3. Year-end celebrations	3.20	1.20	0.80	0.40	1.00		
4. Efik choreography	0.80	2.50	-0.20	0.40	0.30	1.00	
5. Efik attire	0.30	1.80	-0.50	0.40	0.40	0.10	1.00

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Values are reproduced from the source statistical output. The comparatively large reported SD s for choreography and attire should be checked against the raw dataset before final publication.

Semiotics of Music, Choreography and Costume

The relationship between carnival performance and Efik melodies was weak ($r = .10$), while the reported relationships with Efik choreography ($r = -.20$) and attire ($r = -.50$) were negative. These patterns suggest that the growth and visibility of the contemporary carnival do not automatically produce stronger representation of every indigenous performance code. The event may become larger, more spectacular and more economically important while local music, movement and dress occupy a less central position within its dominant aesthetic. This is a semiotic issue because the public image of Efik identity depends on which sign systems are made most visible and how they are combined.

A weak or negative relationship should not be interpreted as proof that Efik cultural signs are absent. Rather, it may indicate that those signs are being transformed, diluted, relocated or subordinated within hybrid performance arrangements. A traditional movement phrase may be incorporated into contemporary choreography but lose its original rhythm or social context. An Efik costume motif may appear within an elaborate fantasy design without retaining its established meanings of status, gender or occasion. Similarly, local melodies may be sampled or blended with popular music in ways that increase energy but reduce recognisability. The sign remains present at the level of form while its cultural signification becomes unstable.

From a directorial perspective, the findings point to the need for deliberate orchestration. Spectacle should not be treated as the enemy of heritage; the question is how spectacle is composed. The director or creative team can use repetition, visual framing, musical transitions, narration, projected text, programme notes and performance sequencing to preserve legibility. A culturally specific motif needs time and emphasis if it is to function as more than decoration. Semiotic clarity is therefore a practical responsibility of direction, design and choreography.

Cultural Elements and the Dramaturgy of the Carnival Float

The inferential analysis examined whether selected Efik cultural elements contributed to variation in the year-end carnival float. The source analysis reported a strong multiple relationship ($R = .80$), an R-squared value of .70 and a statistically significant overall model ($F = 301.20$, $p < .001$). Although the original coefficient table contained internal inconsistencies, the reported significance decisions indicate that Tinkoriko, Ekpe, Ekombi and Abang made statistically significant contributions, whereas Efik songs, Nnabo, Agaba, Edem Akata, Edem Obon, Offiom Inyang, Ekpo and Ikut did not reach the .05 threshold in the supplied output.

The prominence of Tinkoriko, Ekpe, Ekombi and Abang can be interpreted in relation to performability and semiotic salience. These forms possess recognisable visual, kinetic or symbolic features that can be translated into costume, movement, spatial pattern and group display. Their signs are comparatively portable: they can be detached from a longer cultural setting and reorganised into a competitive street sequence without becoming entirely unreadable. This compatibility with spectacle gives them directorial value because they provide strong images, rhythmic possibilities and opportunities for ensemble embodiment.

However, statistical significance should not be confused with cultural importance. Elements that did not emerge as significant may be less visible in the carnival model, more dependent on context, less frequently represented or less suited to the survey measure. Some may also contain sacred, restricted or community-specific meanings that should not be converted into open spectacle. A responsible directorial approach must therefore resist the assumption that the most spectacular signs are the most representative. Cultural dramaturgy should include processes for selecting, contextualising and, where necessary, protecting cultural material.

Table 3. Reported semiotic salience of Efik cultural elements in the year-end carnival float

Cultural element	Reported p-value	Decision at $p < .05$
Efik songs	.10	Not significant
Nnabo	.90	Not significant
Agaba	.50	Not significant
Tinkoriko	< .001	Significant
Ekpe	< .001	Significant
Edem Akata	.60	Not significant
Edem Obon	.70	Not significant
Offiom Inyang	.10	Not significant
Ekpo	.50	Not significant
Ekombi	< .001	Significant
Abang	< .001	Significant
Ikut	.20	Not significant

Note. The table retains the significance decisions reported in the source analysis. The original regression coefficients should be re-exported from the verified dataset before publication.

Acting, Embodiment and Cultural Memory

Although the questionnaire did not contain a separate acting scale, the significance of movement-based cultural elements and the qualitative accounts permit a performance-centred reading of embodiment. Carnival performers activate cultural signs through posture, gesture, facial expression, rhythmic precision, vocalisation and interaction. A costume displayed on a mannequin communicates differently from the same costume animated by a knowledgeable performer. Acting is the process through which the sign becomes event: the body gives it direction, energy, intention and social presence.

This is particularly evident in collective forms such as Ekombi and in the public representation of Ekpe. Their meanings depend not only on visual appearance but also on movement quality, spacing, musical relationship, behavioural code and the authority with which performers inhabit the form. When these embodied conventions are reduced to generic dancing, the audience may receive an attractive image without access to its cultural grammar. Performer training should therefore include cultural history, the meaning of gestures, the social context of costume, the relationship between movement and music, and the ethical limits of adaptation.

Taylor's (2003) distinction between the archive and the repertoire is useful here. Written descriptions, photographs and museum displays preserve important records, but embodied knowledge is transmitted through doing, watching, correcting and repeating. Carnival can strengthen the repertoire by creating opportunities for intergenerational rehearsal and public enactment. Yet it can also produce a simplified repertoire if younger performers learn only the spectacular surface required for competition. The quality of acting and rehearsal therefore has direct implications for cultural memory.

Audience Reception and the Semiotics of Everyday Practice

The audience does not remain outside the carnival performance. Spectators also perform the event through dress, movement, food choices, nightlife, photography, social-media circulation and the occupation of public space. Table 4 shows that fast-food patronage recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.30$), with 85.0% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the carnival promotes it. Nightlife followed closely ($M = 3.20$), with 91.1% agreement, while the preference for trousers and other foreign clothing styles recorded $M = 3.00$ and 75.8% agreement. These practices form part of the event's received script: they indicate how people understand the behaviours appropriate to carnival time.

By contrast, Efik food patronage recorded a low mean ($M = 1.40$), with only 4.0% agreement, while Efik dressing recorded $M = 1.50$ and 5.8% agreement. The fattening-room tradition received the lowest mean ($M = 1.20$), with 87.0% strongly disagreeing that the carnival promotes it. The contrast is revealing. The carnival may display selected cultural motifs in the parade while its wider consumption environment privileges globally familiar food and fashion. In semiotic terms, commercial visibility creates a hierarchy of signs: what is prominently branded, conveniently located and repeatedly circulated becomes associated with the event, while less visible local practices remain outside the dominant image.

These findings should not be read as evidence of total cultural loss. Contemporary clothing, fast food and nightlife may coexist with indigenous practices, and hybrid participation can create economic and social opportunities. The concern is the imbalance between the visibility of global commercial codes and the limited reinforcement of everyday Efik cultural practices. If local food vendors, designers and cultural practitioners are marginal to the event route, the carnival risks separating the spectacle of heritage from the economic life that sustains it.

Cleanliness recorded a moderately positive mean ($M = 2.80$), with 61.4% agreement, suggesting that the carnival can encourage urban presentation and collective responsibility. However, convenience theft recorded $M = 2.50$, with 52.4% agreement. These competing perceptions illustrate the instability of live public performance. The carnival produces celebratory *communitas*, but large crowds and intensified nightlife also create opportunities for disorder and insecurity. Lighting, sanitation, crowd movement, transport and emergency response are therefore not merely logistical matters; they are part of the scenography and ethics of the event.

Table 4. Perceived influence of carnival spectatorship on selected cultural practices

Practice promoted by the carnival	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Mean
Nightlife	26.3	64.8	6.1	2.7	3.20
Fast-food patronage	52.6	32.4	5.8	9.2	3.30
Efik food patronage	2.0	2.0	30.7	65.2	1.40
Efik dressing	2.4	3.4	37.5	56.7	1.50
Trousers/foreign wear	44.4	31.4	6.8	17.4	3.00
Cleanliness	22.2	39.2	31.4	7.2	2.80
Fattening-room tradition	0.0	4.1	8.9	87.0	1.20
Convenience theft	21.2	31.2	27.0	20.5	2.50

Note. $n = 293$. Percentages may vary slightly from 100 because of rounding.

Hybrid Spectacle, Commodification and Semiotic Displacement

Taken together, the findings portray the Calabar Carnival as a hybrid performance in which local cultural repertoires, tourism objectives, popular entertainment and commercial consumption are continuously negotiated. The event is neither a transparent mirror of Efik culture nor a wholly foreign spectacle. It is a productive but unequal space of translation. Some indigenous signs acquire new visibility and creative energy; others are altered, marginalised or displaced by performance codes that are easier to market and more familiar to global audiences.

Hybridity can be artistically valuable. New costume technologies, contemporary music, digital media and intercultural choreography can expand the expressive possibilities of carnival and attract younger participants. The problem arises when innovation becomes detached from cultural knowledge or when commercial visibility is mistaken for cultural representation. A costume may be visually impressive but semantically empty; a dance may be technically energetic but historically ungrounded. The measure of successful adaptation is therefore not purity but accountable creativity: the capacity to innovate while preserving community agency, contextual meaning and opportunities for cultural transmission.

Commodification also has contradictory effects. By giving cultural signs exchange value, the carnival can create employment for performers, designers, musicians, food vendors and craftspeople. Yet the market tends to reward signs that are portable, repeatable, spectacular and easily branded. This can narrow the range of culture presented to the public. The statistical prominence of selected elements and the weak reinforcement of Efik food and dress illustrate this selective economy of attention. The task for cultural policy is not to remove commerce from carnival but to direct commercial opportunity towards the living practices and local producers that sustain the culture represented on the street.

The findings also show that the carnival's performance text extends beyond the parade. The signs generated by food outlets, fashion, nightlife, media images, cleanliness, security and urban infrastructure influence how the event is remembered. A coherent cultural strategy must therefore connect artistic direction with tourism planning, spatial design, vendor policy, public communication and community participation. The public meaning of the carnival is produced by the entire environment through which performers and audiences move (Eneyo, 2026b, 2026c; Eneyo & Ekpenyong, 2018).

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The study has several limitations. Purposive sampling restricts statistical generalisation beyond the participating clans, while the concentration of older and male respondents may shape perceptions of authenticity, youth culture and gendered practice. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time and cannot establish long-term causal change. In addition, the source statistical output contains values that should be verified against the raw dataset before publication, particularly the reported standard deviations and regression coefficients. Future studies should combine surveys with performance ethnography, rehearsal observation, video-based semiotic analysis, audience tracking and interviews with artistic directors, band leaders, choreographers, designers and performers. Longitudinal research could also examine how annual themes reshape the representation of particular cultural signs over time.

Implications for directing, performance practice and carnival governance

The findings have direct implications for theatre practice and festival governance. First, the carnival should formalise a distributed artistic leadership structure that includes an artistic director, cultural dramaturg, lead choreographers, designers, music directors, technical coordinators and representatives of Efik cultural institutions. The purpose would not be to centralise all creative decisions in one individual, but to establish a coherent process through which cultural accuracy, artistic innovation and public communication are negotiated. A cultural advisory panel should have a clearly defined role in identifying restricted materials, approving contextual adaptations and preventing the casual use of sacred or misleading symbols.

Second, each annual theme should be developed through a written performance bible or directorial score. This document should define the central idea, narrative progression, key images, colour logic, musical architecture, movement vocabulary, float relationships, audience interaction and safety requirements. It should also identify the cultural sources from which signs are drawn and explain the intended meanings of those signs. Such a document would improve coherence across the multiple creative teams involved in the event and reduce the possibility that visual spectacle becomes disconnected from thematic content.

Third, performer training should move beyond the memorisation of dance routines. Rehearsal modules should include ensemble awareness, spatial precision, rhythmic discipline, character or role intention, expressive presence, interaction with

spectators, costume handling, stamina, safety and the cultural meaning of performance material. Cultural practitioners and elders should participate in selected training sessions so that performers understand not only how a movement looks but also what it communicates, when it is appropriate and how it may be adapted without distortion. This would strengthen acting as embodied interpretation rather than decorative display.

Fourth, organisers should adopt a semiotic audit before final performance. Costume, music, choreography, props, slogans, float images and media graphics should be reviewed as a connected system. The audit should ask whether key signs are legible, culturally grounded, proportionately represented and compatible with the annual theme. It should also consider likely readings by local residents, national visitors and international audiences. Where a sign requires context, interpretation can be provided through announcers, digital screens, programme notes, QR-linked micro-documentaries, multilingual captions or curated exhibition spaces along the route.

Fifth, the event should strengthen the relationship between spectacle and the everyday cultural economy. Efik cuisine, dress, crafts and performance training should not appear only as symbolic references on a float. Designated indigenous-food zones, affordable vendor spaces, local procurement, costume markets, craft demonstrations and youth apprenticeships can ensure that cultural visibility generates material benefits within the host community. The carnival should be evaluated not only by visitor numbers and media reach but also by the participation of local producers, the diversity of cultural forms represented and the extent to which young people gain transferable performance and creative-industry skills (Eneyo & Archibong, 2023; Eneyo, Uttah, et al., 2023; Eneyo, Onnoghen, et al., 2026; Comfort et al., 2026).

Sixth, documentation should treat the carnival as both archive and repertoire. High-quality recordings, design sketches, costume catalogues, music tracks, choreographic notes, oral histories and interviews should be preserved in a searchable digital repository. At the same time, annual workshops and community rehearsals should sustain embodied transmission. Documentation cannot replace living performance, but it can provide context, support research and prevent the disappearance of less visible forms. Partnerships among the carnival commission, the University of Calabar, cultural associations and media organisations would provide an institutional basis for this work.

Finally, public-space planning should be integrated with artistic direction. Lighting, sound distribution, viewing areas, accessibility, sanitation, pedestrian flow, transport, crowd control and emergency response affect both performance quality and audience meaning. A poorly lit or congested route weakens visual composition and creates safety risks; inadequate waste management contradicts the aesthetic image promoted by the event. The city is the carnival's stage, and its infrastructure must therefore be treated as part of the performance design rather than as a separate administrative concern (Eneyo et al., 2018; Eneyo, 2025a, 2025b, 2026a; Eyo et al., 2026; Ochiche et al., 2021; Eneyo & Ekpenyong, 2018).

Conclusion

The Calabar Carnival is a major site for the public performance of Efik identity, but its cultural work is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. The study shows that the event is strongly embedded in the dramaturgy of year-end celebration and that selected Efik forms, particularly Tinkoriko, Ekpe, Ekombi and Abang, possess significant visibility within the carnival float. At the same time, the weak or negative relationships between carnival performance and Efik melodies, choreography and attire indicate that the expansion of spectacle does not necessarily strengthen every indigenous sign system.

Viewed through theatre directing, the carnival operates as a distributed system of composition. Themes, performers, music, movement, costume, floats, urban space and audience behaviour are organised into a large public performance text. Viewed through acting, cultural meaning depends on the knowledgeable body that activates signs through gesture, rhythm, presence and ensemble action. Viewed through semiotics, the carnival is a contested arena in which some cultural signs are foregrounded, others are transformed, and commercial codes shape what audiences come to associate with carnival time.

The findings therefore call for accountable creativity rather than a simple return to cultural purity. The future of the carnival lies in combining artistic innovation with cultural dramaturgy, performer-centred rehearsal, semiotic clarity, community authority and inclusive economic participation. By treating the city as a stage, the performer as an interpreter of heritage and the carnival as a living text, organisers can sustain global appeal while deepening the cultural knowledge, ownership and everyday practices that give the event its distinctive identity.

Declarations

Funding

No external funding was reported for this study.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Author contribution

The author was responsible for the conceptualisation, study design, data interpretation, theatre-centred theoretical reframing, drafting, critical revision and approval of the final manuscript.

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