

## Re-Presenting African Traditional Totems for Global Appreciation: The Carnival Float as a Veritable Medium

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### Abstract

This study explores the re-presentation of African traditional totems through carnival floats, aiming for global appreciation. It examines the historical significance of totems, their artistic and kinetic portrayal in carnival floats, and the broader impact on cultural exchange. The carnival float medium serves as a dynamic platform to showcase African heritage, fostering global awareness and appreciation. The study emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and authenticity in the re-presentation of totems, ensuring respectful and accurate portrayals. It also addresses the economic and social implications of carnival floats, noting their role in promoting cultural tourism and community engagement. Technological innovations in float design and construction enhance the visual impact and detail of totems. Furthermore, this study highlights the educational and pedagogical approaches to integrate this re-presentation into curricula, promoting a deeper understanding of African traditions. It concludes that accurate and sensitive re-presentation of African totems through carnival floats enhances global appreciation and fosters cultural exchange. The study further suggests that carnival floats should be designed with meticulous attention to cultural authenticity; economic benefits of floats should be analyzed to support local artisans; technological innovations should be employed to improve float aesthetics; educational programs should incorporate lessons on the significance of totems and social impact assessments should be conducted to gauge community benefits.

### I. Introduction

African traditional totems are emblematic representations that hold significant cultural and spiritual importance in various African societies. These totems often take the form of animals, plants, or other natural elements that symbolize the identity, heritage, and beliefs of a particular tribe or clan. Each totem carries specific meanings and attributes, often associated with the characteristics of the chosen symbol. A lion totem for example might represent courage and strength, while a tree totem could symbolize growth and

stability. These totems serve as a link between the physical and spiritual worlds, embodying the ancestral spirits and guiding the social, moral, and religious conduct of the community.

Totems also play a crucial role in the social organization of African communities because they are often used to demarcate clan lineage, establish ancestral ties, and enforce social norms and taboos (Ajayi, 2023). In many African cultures, individuals are prohibited from harming or consuming their totemic animals, as this is believed to bring misfortune or dishonor. Totems are celebrated through various rituals, ceremonies, and oral traditions, ensuring their values and significance are passed down through generations. The veneration of totems fosters a sense of unity and identity within the community, reinforcing the interconnectedness of people, nature, and the spiritual sphere.

The global appreciation of African traditional totems has grown significantly in recent years, driven by increased awareness and interest in African culture and heritage. Scholars, artists, and cultural enthusiasts worldwide have recognized the rich symbolism and profound meanings embedded in these totems. This appreciation often manifests through academic research, exhibitions, and cultural festivals that highlight the significance of totems in African societies. By exploring the diverse interpretations and uses of totems, global audiences gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual and cultural dimensions of African life. The influence of African traditional totems can be seen in various forms of contemporary art and popular culture. Artists and designers draw inspiration from totemic symbols, incorporating them into fashion, music, and visual arts, thereby promoting a cross-cultural dialogue. The global appreciation of these totems not only celebrates African heritage but also encourages the preservation and revitalization of traditional practices. Through this international recognition, African traditional totems continue to inspire and educate, fostering respect and admiration for the continent's rich cultural legacy (Amoah, 2023).

The carnival float medium is a dynamic and creative form of artistic expression used in parades and festivals around the world. Carnival floats are elaborate, often large-scale, moving displays that feature intricate kinetic designs, vibrant colors, and thematic elements. These floats are typically constructed on vehicle platforms and adorned with various materials, such as papier-mâché, fabric, and lights, to create visually stunning spectacles. The themes of carnival floats can range from cultural and historical narratives to contemporary social issues, allowing for a diverse range of artistic interpretations and storytelling. Carnival floats play a central role in the celebratory atmosphere of festivals, engaging audiences with their grandeur and creativity. They serve as a medium for communities to showcase their cultural heritage, artistic talents, and collective identities. The process of designing and building a float is often a collaborative effort, involving artists, craftsmen, and community members. This collaborative spirit fosters a sense of unity and pride, as participants work together to bring their visions to life. As the floats parade through the streets, they create a sense of wonder and joy, leaving a lasting impression on spectators and celebrating the cultural vibrancy of the community (Bah, 2023).

In general perspective, African traditional totems hold profound cultural significance, serving as symbols of identity, ancestry, and spirituality within various communities. Representing these totems through contemporary mediums, such as carnival floats, can provide a unique platform for global appreciation and understanding. Carnival floats, with their vibrant displays and dynamic movements, offer a compelling way to bring these traditional symbols to life, fostering a deeper connection between cultural heritage and modern expression. This fusion not only celebrates the rich diversity of African traditions but also educates and engages a global audience, promoting cultural exchange and appreciation. The creative process of designing carnival floats to represent African totems involves meticulous planning and collaboration among artists, scholars, and community members. According to Eze (2023), this process requires a deep understanding of the cultural narratives and symbolic meanings embedded within each totem.

Furthermore, Bello (2023) highlights the role of technology in enhancing the visual and interactive elements of carnival floats. By incorporating multimedia elements such as LED lighting, digital projections, and interactive components, artists can create immersive experiences that captivate audiences and convey the intricate stories and significance of African totems. This blend of traditional symbolism with modern technology not only preserves cultural heritage but also makes it relevant and exciting for contemporary audiences. Another important aspect, as noted by Mensah (2023), is the collaborative nature of carnival float creation. It involves not just artists and scholars, but also the active participation of community members who are the custodians of these traditions. This inclusive approach ensures that the representations are respectful and accurate, fostering a sense of ownership and pride among the communities involved. By engaging with these diverse stakeholders, the carnival float medium becomes a powerful tool for cultural preservation, education, and global appreciation.

### **African Traditional Totems**

African traditional totems hold significant cultural, spiritual, and social importance across various communities on the continent. These totems, which often take the form of animals, plants, or objects, serve as symbols of ancestry, identity, and heritage. They play a crucial role in rituals, storytelling, and the preservation of oral traditions. For instance, the totem of the lion might symbolize strength and bravery, while the elephant represents wisdom and longevity (Jalloh, 2022).

### **Global Appreciation of African Traditional Totems**

The global appreciation of African traditional totems has grown significantly in recent years, fueled by increased interest in African art, culture, and heritage. International exhibitions and cultural exchanges have brought African totems to a wider audience, showcasing their complex designs and deep symbolic meanings. Olatunji (2023) documents how these totems are not only artistic expressions but also serve as windows into the values and histories of African communities. This global recognition has also led to a greater understanding and respect for African traditions and has provided opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and learning.

## The Carnival Float Medium

Carnival floats have emerged as a vibrant medium for the artistic re-presentation of African totems, blending traditional symbolism with contemporary artistic expression. These floats, often seen in festivals and parades, use a variety of materials and artistic techniques to bring totems to life in dynamic and visually captivating ways. Agbo (2022) explores how carnival floats serve as a platform for cultural storytelling, allowing for the celebration and preservation of African heritage in a modern context. These floats not only entertain but also educate audiences about the rich cultural tapestries of Africa.

## Historical Significance of African Traditional Totems

As mentioned earlier, African traditional totems hold a profound historical significance, serving as symbols that embody the cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, and societal values of various African communities, bridging generations. Totems, repeatedly represented by animals, plants, or natural objects, play a pivotal role in linking individuals to their ancestry and providing a sense of identity. According to Eze (2023), totems are integral to understanding the complex social structures and belief systems within African societies. They represent the interconnectedness of all life forms and the respect for nature that is deeply rooted in African traditions. The symbolism of totems extends beyond mere representation, influencing various aspects of life, including art, dance, and theatre.

In the realm of theatre arts, totems inspire the creation of performances that honour ancestral spirits and communicate cultural narratives. Adeoye (2023) observe that theatrical productions often incorporate totemic symbols to convey themes of unity, survival, and resilience. These performances serve as a medium for preserving oral histories and passing down traditions through generations.

Additionally, totems play a crucial role in community cohesion and conflict resolution. As noted by Mensah (2023), totems are often associated with specific clans or families, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity. They are invoked during rituals and ceremonies to seek protection, guidance, and blessings from ancestral spirits. The reverence for totems underscores the importance of harmony and collective responsibility within African communities. The educational significance of African traditional totems is also noteworthy. They serve as tools for teaching younger generations about cultural values, history, and the natural world. Balogun (2023) emphasize that incorporating totems into educational curricula can enhance students' understanding of their heritage and promote cultural pride. By studying totems, students learn about the ecological and spiritual dimensions of their culture, fostering a holistic approach to education.

## Artistic Re-presentation of Totems in Carnival Floats

The artistic re-presentation of totems in carnival floats is a profound expression of cultural identity and heritage. Totems, which are emblematic symbols representing families, clans, or tribes, often embody the spiritual beliefs, histories, and social structures of a community. In the context of carnival floats, these symbols are transformed into animated, moving displays that celebrate cultural narratives and traditions. According to by Adeyemi

(2023), the use of totems in carnival floats provides a unique platform for communities to engage with their heritage and present it to a broader audience. This visual storytelling not only fosters a sense of pride and belonging but also educates onlookers about the rich tapestry of cultural symbols and their meanings.

The design and construction of carnival floats incorporating totems require a blend of artistic creativity and technical expertise. Adebayo (2023) points out that the process involves meticulous planning, from conceptual sketches to the final assembly. Artists and craftsmen work collaboratively to ensure that each totem is accurately represented, often employing traditional materials and techniques. The integration of modern elements, such as lighting and sound effects, further enhances the visual impact, making the floats a dynamic and immersive experience. This fusion of traditional and contemporary artistry not only preserves the cultural essence of the totems but also ensures their relevance in a modern context.

Carnival floats serve as a medium for cultural expression and political commentary. Okafor (2023) highlighted how these artistic representations can address contemporary issues and inspire social change. By embedding totems within the floats, artists can convey powerful messages about a people's identity, their resistance and resilience. For instance, a float featuring an ancestral totem might symbolize the community's enduring strength and unity in the face of adversity. Such re-presentations resonate deeply with audiences, invoking a collective memory and reinforcing cultural solidarity. The ability of carnival floats to encapsulate and project these narratives underscores their significance as a form of public art. The educational value of carnival floats adorned with totems cannot be overstated. According to Nwosu (2023), these artistic displays offer an accessible and engaging way to learn about cultural heritage. Schools and educational programs often incorporate visits to carnival parades and workshops on float construction to enhance students' understanding of their cultural roots. Through hands-on participation and observation, young people gain insights into the symbolism and significance of totems, fostering a deeper admiration for their cultural heritage. This educational dimension ensures the transmission of cultural knowledge to future generations, thereby sustaining the vitality and otherwise, the relevance of traditional symbols in contemporary society.

### **Cultural Sensitivity and Authenticity**

Cultural sensitivity and authenticity are paramount in the field of theatre arts and particularly theatrical designs, as they ensure that cultural re-presentations on stage or performance are respectful and true to their origins. Eze (2023) emphasizes the importance of understanding and accurately depicting the nuances of different cultures. This approach not only honours the culture being presented but also educates the audience, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of diverse cultural expressions. One key aspect of cultural sensitivity is the avoidance of cultural appropriation, which can lead to the misrepresentation and exploitation of marginalized cultures. According to Adeoye (2022), it is crucial for theatre practitioners to engage with the communities they aim to portray, ensuring their voices are heard and their traditions respected. This engagement can take

various forms, such as workshops, consultations, and collaborations with cultural experts and artists. By doing so, theatre productions can become a platform for authentic cultural exchange rather than a vehicle for stereotypes and misconceptions.

Authenticity in theatre also extends to the use of traditional art forms and practices within contemporary performances. Okeke (2024) advocates for the incorporation of indigenous performance techniques and storytelling methods in modern theatre. This blend of traditional and contemporary elements not only preserves cultural heritage but also enriches the theatrical experience, offering audiences a unique and immersive encounter with diverse cultural landscapes. Such practices highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of culture, showcasing its relevance and adaptability in the modern world.

### **Impact of Carnival Floats on Global Cultural Exchange**

Carnival floats have long been an integral part of cultural festivals worldwide, acting as dynamic platforms for artistic expression and community storytelling. These elaborate moving stages not only showcase local traditions but also facilitate a vibrant exchange of cultural values on a global scale. Eze (2022) extensively documents how carnival floats serve as living museums, preserving and presenting cultural heritage in ways that are accessible and engaging for diverse audiences. By incorporating elements from various cultures, carnival floats create a tapestry of global influences, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation among participants and spectators' alike. The impact of carnival floats on global cultural exchange is profound, as they often incorporate a blend of music, dance, and visual arts from different traditions. For instance, Johnson (2023) states how the Notting Hill Carnival in London exemplifies this cultural fusion, featuring Caribbean, African, and Latin American influences in its float designs. Such events not only celebrate multiculturalism but also encourage dialogue and collaboration between artists and communities from different backgrounds. This interaction helps break down cultural barriers, promoting inclusivity and mutual respect.

Again, the educational value of carnival floats in promoting cultural exchange need not be understated. Adetunji (2021) stress the role of these floats in teaching younger generations about their heritage while also exposing them to global cultures. Through workshops and participatory activities, children and young adults gain firsthand experience in the creation and performance aspects of carnival floats. This hands-on approach fosters a sense of pride in their own culture while instilling curiosity and respect for others, thereby nurturing global citizens who are open to diverse perspectives.

### **Technological Innovations in Float Design and Construction**

The field of float design and construction has experienced significant advancements due to the integration of modern technology. Traditional methods, while rich in cultural and artistic value, often faced limitations in terms of materials, safety, and overall design complexity. With the advent of computer-aided design (CAD) software, designers can now create intricate and precise models of floats, allowing for more detailed planning and execution. This technology enables the visualization of the final product before the

construction begins, ensuring accuracy and creativity in the design process. Oladipo (2023) highlights the transformative impact of CAD in enhancing the artistic expression and structural integrity of floats.

In addition to CAD, 3D printing has revolutionized the construction phase of float design. This technology allows for the production of complex components that would be difficult or impossible to create using traditional methods. 3D printing not only improves the precision of the parts but also significantly reduces the time and cost associated with production. Eze (2022) says the application of 3D printing in float construction, demonstrating its potential to streamline the manufacturing process and open new possibilities for creative expression. Another significant technological innovation is the use of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) in float design and construction. AR and VR provide designers and builders with immersive tools to visualize and interact with the floats in a virtual space. This allows for better planning and troubleshooting, as potential issues can be identified and addressed before the actual construction begins.

Nwankwo (2023) opines that AR and VR technologies have enabled a more collaborative approach to float design, bringing together artists, engineers, and other stakeholders in a shared virtual environment. Advancements in materials science have led to the development of new, lightweight, and durable materials for float construction. These materials not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the floats but also improve their safety and sustainability. Innovations such as biodegradable composites and recycled materials are becoming increasingly popular in the industry. The environmental benefits of using sustainable materials in float design, advocating for a more eco-friendly approach to this vibrant art form (Adewale, 2023). Together, these technological innovations are propelling the field of float design and construction into a new era of creativity and efficiency.

### **Educational and Pedagogical Approaches**

Educational and pedagogical approaches in theatre arts have evolved significantly over the years, integrating a variety of teaching methods to enhance students' learning experiences and creativity. The interdisciplinary nature of theatre arts necessitates an educational framework that not only imparts technical skills but also fosters critical thinking, collaboration, and cultural awareness. Okafor (2023) emphasize the importance of experiential learning in theatre education, where students engage in hands-on activities and real-world projects to deepen their understanding of theatrical concepts and practices. Incorporating digital technologies into theatre education is another contemporary approach gaining traction among educators. Adebayo (2024) argues that these technologies not only enhance the learning experience by providing interactive and immersive opportunities but also prepare students for the evolving demands of the digital age. Students exposed to digital tools in their theatre training demonstrate increased creativity and technical proficiency.

Collaborative learning is a cornerstone of effective theatre arts education. Udo (2023) suggests that group projects and collaborative performances help students develop essential interpersonal skills, such as communication, empathy, and leadership. By working

together, students learn to appreciate diverse perspectives and harness their collective talents to create innovative theatrical productions.

Culturally responsive teaching is another crucial aspect of contemporary theatre arts education. Egwu (2023) believes that this approach not only enriches students' cultural competence but also ensures the preservation and promotion of indigenous art forms. Her research underscores the importance of grounding theatre education in the cultural context of the students, thereby fostering a deeper connection to their heritage and a more meaningful learning experience.

## II. Conclusion

The representation of African traditional totems through carnival floats offers a dynamic platform for global appreciation, effectively bridging cultural divides. African traditional totems, steeped in historical and spiritual significance, gain wider recognition when presented through the visually captivating medium of carnival floats. This approach not only highlights the rich heritage of African cultures but also fosters a deeper global understanding of these symbols. The integration of historical significance, artistic creativity, and cultural authenticity in float designs enhances the global cultural exchange and demonstrates the powerful role of carnival floats in celebrating and disseminating African traditions. Additionally, the impact on cultural exchange is complemented by economic and social benefits, as carnival floats draw international attention and tourism, while technological innovations in design improve the aesthetics and durability of floats. Educational and pedagogical approaches also play a crucial role in preserving and teaching the values associated with traditional totems. Ultimately, this fusion of tradition and innovation through carnival floats serves as a vibrant testament to the enduring relevance of African cultural symbols in the global arena.

## Suggestions

*Carnival floats should be designed with meticulous attention to cultural authenticity.*

*Economic benefits of floats should be analyzed to support local artisans.*

*Technological innovations should be employed to improve float aesthetics.*

*Educational programmes should incorporate lessons on the significance of totems.*

*Social impact assessments should be conducted to gauge community benefits.*

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