

Art entrepreneurship possibilities inherent in *Omabe* masking traditions of Orba- Nsukka, Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

The Omabe masking tradition of Orba community in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria, is a quadrennial masquerade festival celebrated by the cult members and their adherents. It demands an utmost collaborative effort to produce overwhelming artistic engagements for the cultural, economic and educational development and sustenance of the community. This cultural heirloom has expanded beyond a mere fiesta to an entrepreneurship development practice for the participants through intensive impartation and learning of artistic entrepreneurial skills. Foreign and indigenous scholars have written profusely on the Omabe masquerade and masking, but have scarcely delved into its artistic entrepreneurship possibilities. The data analysed in this study were collected from mixed sources comprising three primary sources (namely survey, semi-structured interviews and photographs), and triangulated with insights from secondary sources (namely scholarly publications on the subject). The findings revealed that many of the Omabe masquerade enthusiasts have been inspired to become self-reliant through the establishment of profit-oriented art business centres for economic and human development. Though most of the custodians of Omabe's

adornment and costume art have died, there is hope for its sustenance, as young men are still interested in tapping into its artistic entrepreneurship potential.

Keywords: Omabe, quadrennial, Orba, Art entrepreneurship, festival.

Introduction

Among the Nsukka-Igbo of Nigeria, *Omabe* has been the central visual symbol upon which the people's philosophy and life forces are expressed. It is a culture centred on the belief in the physical presence of ancestral spirits, in the form of a deity. The *Omabe* deity is represented or given a visible form by special agents, such as masquerades, initiated persons and adopted plant and animal objects. As an art, it is characterized by periodic festive presentations and performances, for entertainment and chastisement of the people (Asogwa, 2021).

It is important to point out that, in line with the duality principle (flesh and spirit or physicality and concealment), the nature of the Nsukka tradition is that there is *Omabe* and there is Odo, which splits Nsukka communities into two groups: *Omabe*-operating communities (Igbo *Omabe*) and Odo-operating communities (Igbo Odo) (Asogwa, 2021). This cultural stance was buttressed by

Nzuteigbo (2009), who stated that the Odo tradition is performed in almost all the communities in Igbo-Etiti and Isi-uzo Local Government Areas, whereas the *Omabe* tradition is performed in communities in Uzo-uwani, Nsukka, Igbo-Eze South, Igbo-Eze North and Udenu Local Government Areas.

The *Omabe* masking traditions of Orba-Nsukka have engendered awe-inspiring art practices and motivated a great number of community members to open up new production enterprises capable of boosting cultural entrepreneurial development and building a robust economy. New knowledge opens up new production possibilities and gives rise to potential increases in technical know-how and business profits. Community elders and the youth are the main participants in the cultural practices of *Omabe*, and fortunately, the youth are motivated by the elders, who serve as symbols of continuity, as well as convenient vehicles of cultural preservation. Participants in cultural relationships, especially the youth, are

equipped with an entrepreneurial drive, innovative ideas and the impetus to delve into and manage the risks inherent in the profit-oriented art.

According to Lose (2023), community elders and leaders were found to be critical in influencing the psyche and entrepreneurial behavior of the youth. Echoing the same view, Simpeh (2011) revealed that community, family background, and upbringing tend to have an impact on entrepreneurial behavior. The tradition-and-modernity contrast presented in this paper makes it to partly appear like a comparative study while trying to centrally position art entrepreneurship within culture, despite all the challenges of modernity.

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, customs, values, and practices of a particular group of people. It includes various aspects of human life, such as language, religion, cuisine, art, music and social norms. Culture is dynamic and can evolve over time based on certain factors like globalization, migration and technological advancement (Igwilu & Ogbo, 2018). While stating that culture is always open to development and shaped by changes in the environment in which it exists, Baffoe (2018) affirmed that

culture is not static. This study aims to explore the boundless art entrepreneurship possibilities inherent in *Omabe* masking traditions and how they motivate participants to engage in cultural art entrepreneurship. Aspects of visual art explored include painting, sculpture, textiles and general adornment. Active participation in these cultural art engagements has influenced unemployed youth to become self-employed, as they recognize the potential of visual art making.

The *Omabe* masquerade performances and masquerading traditions generally are integral aspects of Orba-Nsukka cultures from prehistoric times. They form the central activity of the masquerade festival celebrated by the *Omabe* cult members, cultural art adepts and adherents every four years. This festival is a cultural observance primarily designed to mark and revere the reappearance of ancestral spirits (*Omabe*) in tangible forms. This epoch-making event, from the threshold, serves as a convenient umbrella that accommodates both the living and the dead, allowing them to communicate and celebrate in the same vicinity. The masqueraded ancestral spirits examine the lives of their followers, advocate for adjustment and

modifications, and explicitly symbolize the existence of the spirits at every visit. The periodic emergence of the ancestral spirits brings forth and rejuvenates hope by reassuring their adherents of maximum spiritual security and offering a complete panacea for the timeless vicissitudes of life. The *Omabe* masquerades arrive from the place of the dead to cleanse the living of evil (Okeke, 1978). *Omabe* cult members and adherents also claim that *Omabe* is a mythical being (spirit) in animal form - a leopard - which showers bountiful blessings and sometimes unleashes curses upon erring members of the community during every festive period. The extensive appropriation of leopard skins and dotted designs in all the costumes exemplify the symbolism of *Omabe* and the leopard.

The *Omabe* spirit of Nsukka is seen as a dramatic symbolic representation of a leopard (M. Onu, personal communication, February 6, 2015). To corroborate what other cultural custodians and scholars inferred above, T. C. Nwodo (personal communication, March 16, 2016) also asserted that *Omabe* is an ancestral spirit that renders political and social functions such as imposing fines and punishing those who violate socio-cultural ethics in the

community. *Omabe* was used as an integral symbol of law and authority.

Omabe masking tradition (*oriri/emume, Omabe*) has created elaborate and boundless interactive opportunities for cultural art engagements, and the cohesion of diverse Age grades and families of Orba at home and diaspora. There is evidence of multifarious and multifaceted artistic engagements involving in-depth teaching and learning of cultural arts, specifically aimed at fostering entrepreneurial skills, boosting the economy and propagating the cultural heritage of Orba people. The numerous and divergent artistic engagements inherent in *Omabe* masking tradition encapsulate almost all the aspects of art contents embedded in formal art curricula; and quite a lot of artistic knowledge is imparted and learned from this culturally organized drama. Painting, sculpture, ceramics, textile design, craft works, and so on are extensively practiced by the *Omabe* cult members. The cult is dominated by male youths who are presented with diverse creative opportunities to choose from. At the peak of the cultural festival, the entire community is heated up with different aspects of artistic activities geared towards fostering its cultural

heritage and creative abilities in a bid to blend the physical world with the spiritual world, and to propagate the masking culture through informal art education.

Omabe festivals usually present numerous engagements in the production of artistic cultural objects for a suitable and conducive *Omabe* celebratory atmosphere. Such art objects include musical pot-drum (*udu*), ritual pot (*Ite-maa*) and ritual bowl (*akere / oku*). It is worth noting that *akere / oku* is highly needed in *Omabe* ritual activities for it serves as a receptacle (vessel) for body adornment items. Those body adornment items in use include red cam wood (*ushuei*), *uli* plant pod or insect stains (*uri / uli*), yellow cam wood (*odo*) and white clay or chalk (*nzu*).

In the area of sculpture (carving and metal works), young initiates are taught wood and metal work productions with a demonstration pedagogy, and they produce abundant mask pieces, wooden gongs (*ekwe*), membranous wooden drums (*abia / igba*), traditional wooden xylophones (*mkporo*), horns (*opu*), rattle staffs (*oji*) to mention but a few. Research has established that entrepreneurial learning is most

productive when it includes "doing" and reflecting "on doing" in the concrete sectors and developing appropriate social and cultural capital (Raffo et al, 2000).

Participation by the youth in the production of the aforementioned art products has improved the entrepreneurial drive, skills and economy of the people, thereby motivating the unemployed youth to become engaged. From the same perspective, the study by Oji et al. (2024) asserts that the increased participation in *Omabe* masking festival by many youth has invigorated focus on related activities. Undoubtedly, the quest to satisfy the social needs of the community in *Omabe* masking traditions is central to the motivation of the youths and other participants to engage in entrepreneurship. The study by Gray and Crofts (2002) also established that the need to satisfy social values can function as a motivator for engaging in entrepreneurship. All the aspects of *Omabe* masking festival that reflect art entrepreneurship constitute cultural entrepreneurship. When masquerades are hired or invited to perform from other villages during a festival, cultural entrepreneurship opportunity is created, because, apart from the visual art ventures involved in staging such a

festival, young people are encouraged to interface creatively after showing off their festival of arts in a competitive manner.

Methods

Study design

This study adopted the survey design using open-ended questions aimed at revealing respondents' opinions, experiences, or encounters. Hence, structured interviews are utilised extensively, especially when ethnographic issues are under scrutiny. The selected informants are individuals who are well-versed in the tenets of the culture under study, not necessarily those from the older generation. Check and Schutt (2012) defined the survey design as the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions. Because survey research permits the use of different methods to recruit participants, and to generate and analyze data, it can employ either quantitative or qualitative analytical designs. This study, however, specifically adopted the qualitative design to facilitate interviews and personal contacts with resource persons, as well as the recording of physically observable phenomena.

Study instruments

The sources of data and instruments for data collection used in the current study were journal articles, book publications, in-depth interviews, checklists and photography. Though each of these has their limitations with regard to the investigation of metaphysically involving phenomena, such as masks and masquerades, care was taken not to violate any rules that could lead to repulsion from the custodians of the *Omabe* masquerade cult and relevant cultural authorities. Kvale (2007) stated that in many cultures, interviews are ubiquitous, making the question-and-answer format a well-known way of gleaning and presenting information about people's opinions or experiences. Indeed, the use of interviews as a source of gathering knowledge can be traced back to the ancient Greece.

Braun and Clarke (2013) affirmed that interviews are particularly appropriate for studies investigating individual experiences, beliefs, or constructions of a particular phenomenon. Additionally, Kvale (2007) emphasized that interviews are also used to explore self-reports of behaviours, including language practices, or to produce conversational data as evidence of linguistic patterns. Depending

on the researcher's epistemological stance, the interview method may be viewed as a tool to gather facts that would help to construct knowledge socially. Specifically, the semi-structured interview pattern was used for this study. For clarity, a fully structured interview consists of pre-determined questions and answers, either written or recorded on a device, to be asked to the interviewees. In contrast, the semi-structured interview allows both parties in an interview to generate further discussions or questions beyond those outlined. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), semi-structured interviews are the most common; the researcher refers to an interview guide with pre-planned questions but leaves room to explore topics raised by participants.

The preliminary guide for this study was a checklist. A checklist is a list of all the things you want to do; in this case, the information you want to explore when encountering the custodians of *Omabe* culture or family heads. A checklist serves as a timetable or list of areas to be covered, along with the tools required (see Appendix 1). The interview questions were structured based on the scope of the areas identified within the checklist,

then typed and printed for easy application (see Appendix 2).

However, follow-up questions had no strict number or pattern of as these were determined by the traditional role of each interviewee. In most cases, during semi-structured interviews, one question leads to another or more.

Participants

A total number of 50 informants were designed to be reached and interviewed within a space of one month, using the semi-structured interview. However, at the expiration of the one-month timeframe, only 15 informants were interviewed. All the interviews were electronically recorded for further reference. Each of the 15 informants had 10 questions, which were printed but delivered orally. Other questions or follow-up discussions that emerged from the interview with each informant were classified as 'varied' because their numbers vary with each informant. The reason for printing out the questions was to ensure that the entire 15 participants responded to the same set of major questions, as they were read out one after another. All the 15 informants interviewed are male; 4 of them were within the age bracket of 30-50 years; 6

were within 51–60 years; and 7 were within 61 years and above. Table 1 below captures the interview participants' demography graphically.

Table 1: *Demographic Information of Participants Interviewed*

Gender	Questions	30-50 years	51-60 years	61 years & above
Male: 17	Normal: 10	4 respondents	6 respondents	7 respondents
Female: 0	Emergent: varied			

Objectives of the study

Features of the semi-structured interview, as well as the demographic information of the participants shape the objectives of this study. The aspects of *Omabe* masquerade tradition covered in the interview discussions were variants of *Omabe* masquerade, tradition and modernity in masking, art entrepreneurship in contemporary masking, creativity and entrepreneurial skills in *Omabe* masquerade art, tools and materials for *Omabe* masquerade art, and ornamentation in *Omabe* costuming. Consequently, the specific objectives of the study were: (a) to ascertain the prevalent types of the *Omabe* masquerade, (b) to compare their traditional and modern characteristics, (c) to examine the

elements of *Omabe* culture that foster entrepreneurship and artistic skills, (d) to account for the tools and materials that enhance the adornment of the *Omabe* masquerade.

Discussion of findings

The discussion of findings as presented from this point onward is patterned after the objectives above but supplemented with associated photographs for emphasis. In other words, all the interview discussions are supported with related literature and photographs for clarification. In presenting the findings, historical, technical and aesthetic approaches were combined. The historical approach helped to reveal the history behind the production and usage of a created

mask, costume or instrument. The technical approach explained the *Omabe* mask and costume production processes, while the aesthetic approach was essential for assessing the adornment of an *Omabe* art.

***Omabe* variants and their limitations**

Igbo masquerades are known and identified by the nature of the designs that characterize their masks, headdresses, costumes and other properties. In other words, despite the fact that they are generally called *Mmuo* or *Mmonwu*, each masquerade is characterized by the peculiarity of its mask or headdress. Yet, within their general classification further specific identifications are made through the specificities of the respective masks or headdresses (Okeke, 2020).

It was gathered that the name *Omabe* is all-embracing and incorporates different masquerade types that share, to some extent, the same artistic nuance, symbolism, spiritual role, structural or production elements and cultural purposes (G. C. Ogbodo, personal communication, July 6, 2023). By extension, *Omabe* provides the focus and impetus for different artistic expressions. *Omabe* variants, according

to the affirmations of the informants include *igele / echaricha*, *egbe-ocheala / ogbuokwuru*, *edi-ogbene*, *obianwaishi*, *eze bu n'obodo* and *agbaeji* (G.

Nwadima, S. Ogbonna & F. C. Ugwuona, personal communications, July 6, 2023).

It is pertinent to note that due to cultural prohibitions and restrictions on some *Omabe* images, only three out of the six listed masquerade types above were discussed extensively in this study.. Hence, the in-depth interviews were limited to *igele*, *egbe-ocheala* and *edi-ogbene*, while the rest received only peripheral discussions. As acknowledged by S. Omeye (personal communication, June 13, 2022), M. C. Arua (personal communication, June 13, 2022) and T. Solomon (personal communication, September 16, 2022), in their separate interviews, this research should not be expected to report everything because the researcher and his assistants were not going to be told everything. This is understandable for the reasons already explained above, which is why only three *Omabe* variants were discussed. The established timeframe of this ethnographic investigation is one year, during which the community engages deeply in intensified, unparalleled art entrepreneurship skill acquisition and enthusiastically produces an abundance

of cultural creative works of art for social and economic purposes.

Regarding the need to sustain the *Omabe* art culture, S. Ero, C. John, S. P. Nnamdi and O. Ugwoke (personal communications, August 8, 2023), in a joint interview, affirmed that they were learning the rafter, fabric and masking aspects of the culture due to the need to preserve the tradition. They also stated various reasons why young boys should look up to older men for the custodianship of the *Omabe* tradition. However, at certain age brackets, there is a limit to what should be discussed, even for the sake of interviews. G. C. Ogbodo (personal communication, July 6, 2023) reinforced the limitations of the interviews by stating that the researcher may not be allowed to capture certain things with a camera beyond the threshold of the *Omabe* shrine.

Masking as a metaphor for traditional and contemporary art entrepreneurial education

Through the association of masquerade designs with the functions of each masquerade, Okeke (2020) states that the performance of the masquerades is usually coherent with their traditional

design. This means that masquerade designs help to situate the Igbo *Mmonwu* phenomenon within the confines of what McDermott (2007) describes as "folk art." Okeke (2020) buttresses this point by explaining that, in addition to the aesthetic appreciation of masks as artistic creations, the designs bear cultural evidence of the people's past and present realities, particularly concerning their worldview.

All the visual artistic implications of the above statement present both Okeke and McDermott as recognizing that the tangibility of visual art is what presents and preserves the intangible artistic nature of performing art. The dance and performance of every masquerade would not convey its cultural bearings as effectively as the visual art and design aspects of the masquerade.

The processes involved in initiation into the *Omabe* masking cult have engendered tremendous implications for art learning and entrepreneurship development. This is evident, in that the initiation process, which comes with unforeseen art learning and empowerment opportunities, marks a transition from the status of young

non-initiates to that of accredited initiates. However, very few young initiates, between the ages of two and five years, were found at Orba and elsewhere within the Nsukka cultural domain. According to T. Ugwuona (personal communication, December 4, 2023), those initiated very early in life automatically become registered *Omabe* cult members; hence, such infant initiates are given names like Odo, Odoja, Ogbodo, Nwodo, Ugwodo, Ezodo, Odontikiri and Odoshiire. Fortunately, such names give them the impetus to remain within the cult assembly until they are old enough to participate actively in *Omabe* masking and productions. The nomenclatures mentioned above corroborate what Arua (2018) asserted in a study on *Omabe* Nsukka, that there is a significant relationship between Odo and *Omabe* masquerades and their masking cultures. Hence, some persons in the Igbo *Omabe* area bear names such as Odo, Odoja, Ugwodo, Nwodo, Ezodo, Ogbodo, Odontikiri and Odoshiire. Their similarities and relationship extend beyond names to the rudiments of production, nuances, symbolism, metaphor, instruments, purpose, costume, materials and tools.

Masking serves as a vehicle for initiation and celebration and provides a convenient umbrella for recreation and the release of great artistic and creative impulses (Ukaegbu, 1996). In alignment with Ukaegbu's assertion, the initiation processes into the *Omabe* cult in Orba have provoked the artistic impulses of participants and include various art educational configurations such as drawing, painting, sculpture, body adornment, and textile design (weaving, embroidery, stitching, knitting). The impartation and acquisition of artistic knowledge involve both typical and atypical initiates. Normal (typical) and special-needs (atypical) youths who are initiated receive intensive training in different aspects of visual arts. They learn the art of making masks and displaying masquerades, producing costumes, musical instruments, and ritual paraphernalia. They also learn history, dance, ululations, songs, esoteric speeches/voices, moral values, symbols, body adornment and so on. They weave masquerade costumes such as netting (*anyaka*), locally woven strip-cloth (*ugere-ekwa*), thread (*owu*), traditional ankle rattles (*odeshe*), animal skin elbow bands (*ozoebule*), and grass-woven mats (*azana*), among

others. The latter is used by maskers to prevent non-initiates from gazing at them.

Men primarily produce sacral masquerade objects such as headpieces and dominate the collection and weaving of palm fronds/yellow palm leaves for masquerade productions or installations, whether for religious or secular purposes. These art forms are practiced mostly by men, just as pottery is traditionally dominated by women in most ethnic societies (Okeke, 1978). The researchers were reliably informed by C. Edwin and B. Ogbu (personal communication, March 22, 2024) that the production of some of these art

objects and the number of active artists involved have drastically declined due to the widespread influence of modern/western religion and the increasing pursuit of white-collar jobs across communities. However, G. Odo and M. Ejike (personal communication, September 2, 2018) jointly stated that those who remained steadfast in these artistic engagements have become strongly empowered and successful entrepreneurs by improving upon antiquated rudiments and styles. According to Lan et al. (2014), entrepreneurs are regarded as innovators who create something new to boost economic output.

Figure 1: *Children practicing mask making in Orba*



Note. Reproduced from Arua (2014).

Entrepreneurial skills and nonpareil procedures for *Omabe* mask productions

This subsection presents the operational artistic rudiments, paradigm, materials, tools, stylization and finishing processes involved in *Omabe* mask production. It also extends its scope to analyze the individual and collective creative activities undertaken by the participants, which have helped them become established entrepreneurs after conscious and active participation in

Omabe mask training. The discussions and analysis are limited to aspects that promote entrepreneurship in the *Omabe* masking tradition. The most relevant aspects of this study include sculpture (wood carving, metal works and installation), drawing and painting and textile/costume design (weaving, knitting, stitching, and embroidery).

Creative procedures for wood carving

Wood carving and other traditional art engagements are as old as the *Omabe*

masquerade and its tradition in the study area and informal in nature. Wood carving is accomplished by following the age-old, well-established rudiments and procedures for executing each given art form in Orba and elsewhere within the Nsukka cultural zone. Some of the steps for wood carving employed by the master artists while imparting entrepreneurial skills to potential entrepreneurs include wood shaping/blocking, designing, detailing/ornamentation, finishing processes and stylization.

(1) Wood shaping and blocking

Many varied wood carving rudiments exist and are employed by established traditional carvers in Orba. One of the wood-carving procedures is wood blocking/shaping, which refers to shaping a log of wood to tangibly bring out the conceptualized form. Chopping and demarcating different parts and straightening the faces of the billets to attain a somewhat parallel shape of the conceptualized imagery is usually achieved through the skillful use of the locally produced Adze. In single-block carving, the wood carver holds the log with one hand and skillfully swings the

Adze (*anyu-nko*) with sharp, well-calculated chopping movements to ensure that the amount of wood removed at a time can be measured and controlled to create the desired form. It is also worth noting that carvers prefer certain types of woods over others. The object to be carved determines whether hardwood or softwood will be used. Choosing the right wood for carving is crucial for the success of a project. From a cultural perspective, according to Mr. Atu during an oral interview, hardwoods such as *orji* or *okpeye* are used in carving ritual and musical instruments like the traditional xylophone (*mkporo*), flutes (*oja/osu*), slit-wooden gong (*ekwe*) and figurines/statuettes usually found in *Omabe* shrines. Softwoods such as *egbu* and *okwe* are used in the production of certain musical instruments like membranous drums (*igba*) and other lighter objects. The deep involvement of the youths in the production of these cultural artworks creates an entrepreneurial drive that leads to new artistic ventures and self-sustenance.

Figure 2:
Figurine/Statuette under a Carving Process



Figure 3:
Wood for Mask Carving



Note. Reproduced from Arua (2017)

(2) Wood Designing

Wood designing here refers to the appearance/visual visage given to a wooden object, especially one intended to enhance the meaning and aesthetics of the conceived image under construction. The visual visage is first conceived by the artist and created through the artful use of local tools such as gouges (*nko*), chisels (*nkpo*), knives (*nma*) and others. One of the youths who learnt and excelled in the art of wood carving business through proactive participation in *Omabe* masking, noted in an interview with the cult members that there are no

preliminary markings/patterns on the log before the actual forms are cut out (O. Odoh, personal communication, 2017). The preliminary designs are also conceived prior to the initial carving by the carver and made tangible through the skillful use of appropriate tools. The *Adze* is the appropriate tool used to chop off various areas of the log of wood to bring out the form(s). The design is infused with elaborate symbolism that creates layers of meaning and metaphor, in accordance with the dictates of the elders, cult adepts and the characteristics of a masquerade's performance. The

traditional artist uses a direct pedagogical approach characteristic of informal art teaching to impart these unique artistic entrepreneurial skills to the youth initiates, who would in turn open and operate an art business unit which helps to propagate cultural art entrepreneurship prowess from one generation to another.

(3) Detailing/ornamentation

This refers to the conscious effort by the artist to infuse the conceived nuances that would depict or manifest the visual features of the object in process. In other words, it refers to the skillful actualization of the conceived intricate details of form(s) through carving with appropriate tools. The detailing stage demands that the carver harness great creative imagination, artistic experience and unparalleled dexterity to carve abstract, realistic, symmetrical and/or symbolic features on the image in making. This stage of wood carving exonerates the object in the making from doubts, contradictions, misinterpretations and irreverence. The object in process bears visual features that present it as representational, masculine, ugly, beautiful, offensive or humorous. Detailing/ornamentation in carving is achievable through the skillful

employment of two main carving tools – chisels and gouges. These tools are creatively and consciously employed to remove undesired small parts from the already fashioned image and also to add nuance, symbolism and aesthetics to the image. The traditional artist does all these with the youth initiates and interested adults (apprentices) at the height of and after the masking period, thus placing them in the entrepreneurs' guild.

(4) Finishing processes

Wood carving steps are many and varied, and the finishing process, one of the steps in wood sculpture, involves smoothening (*nkpucha*), sanding with imported sandpaper of different tactile qualities or the locally sourced rough leaves (*anwarinwa*) and painting. Paint at this stage is applied after priming and sizing with earth colours such as white clay/chalk (*nzu*) or other vegetable dyes like red cam wood (*ufe*). At the stage of smoothening, an evenly smooth tactile quality is achievable by the use of a small sharp knife. The knife, which is locally produced and comes in different sizes, is used to remove unwanted pieces of wood, a step that precedes priming and sizing. After perfect scraping and smoothening with sandpaper, the carved object is then given a creative smooth

surface treatment with local dyes, earth colours or imported pigment. A study by Law (2023) established that finer polishing is done with abrasive paper (finer-grained paper) to make the surface of the sculpture slick to touch.

(5) Stylization

Innumerable styles abound in *Omabe* mask and other cultural art productions. These styles are greatly influenced by the dictates of the priests, elders, cult adepts and the artist's creative ideas. Symbolic materials are profusely appropriated to underscore important features that characterize the art form(s). Such symbolic materials as dotted cloth used to emblemize a leopard's spots (*dotted skin design*), are in use. From our findings, it was observed that almost all *Omabe* masquerades are adorned with leopard skin or any material that simulates a leopard's dotted skin design. For instance, *Ediogbene* is aggressive and offensive in its visual visage and is artistically donned in leopard skin to infuse spiritism and awe into its theatrical characteristics and core performance.

Tools and materials for imparting entrepreneurial skills

Traditional and entrepreneurial artists in Orba (*dioka / ndi-anya-oka*) excelled

greatly in mask production through the creative use of tools and materials available within their cultural environment, which to a great extent influences the finishing of masks, costumes, musical instruments, props and other art works. Most of the tools are sourced locally, such as Adze (*anyu-nko*), gouges (*okpo-utu*), cutlass/machete (*Ogbuadla*), U-adze (*anyu aga nko*), needle (*ntutu / aha*), scraper (*nko*), axe (*anyuike*) and others. Major materials used include fabrics, woods, palm fronds (yellow palm leaves), raffia, chrome buttons, feathers, furs, cowries, metal bells (both local and imported) and others. Traditional artists use these materials either separately or in combination, with the aid of appropriate tools, to produce masks in different styles that exert varied symbolic and spiritual meanings and functions within the cultural sphere. Consequently, *Omabe* masking activities have become a convenient platform for the development of entrepreneurial skills by youths using local tools. Modern communities utilize entrepreneurship as a tool for job creation and improvement of the local economy. Thus, the concept of entrepreneurship has undeniably become a potent and necessary skill for survival (Byun et al., 2018).

Figure 4: *Anyu- ike & utu (Axe and Mallet) Local Carving Tools*



Note. Reproduced from Arua (2023).

Figure 5: *Osha (Basket cone- rattle)*



Note. Reproduced from Arua(2023).

The *oshaa* is one of the common musical rattle instruments in Igbo land. It is also a ritual instrument for *Omabe* and other masquerades. The local basket rattles (*oshaa*) are made of interwoven strips of coconut palm leaves or fronds. However, in recent times, synthetic fibers have been used for *oshaa* weaving because they withstand the effects of insects and weather better than the former. Some are also multi-coloured, like the ones shown above. The *oshaa* is also a

traditional twitter sound maker, and it synchronizes well with other rattle and percussion instruments. Mr. Hyacent Ugwuonyugwu of Umuokara, Orba was one of the *Omabe* cult members and entrepreneurs who excelled greatly in the art of basket-rattle and slit wooden-gong production and sales. He claimed to have imparted the art of basket-cone rattle weaving to a significant number of *Omabe* masking participants, who later engaged in producing and selling them to others.

Figure 6.

Ekwe (wooden gong)



Figure 7. *Ogele / Ivom (Metal Gong)*



Note. Reproduced from Arua (2016)

The metal gong (*ogene*) is seemingly irreplaceable because of its bellowing and sonorous sound accompaniment. *Ogene* is believed to possess some spiritual magnetism for invoking the presence of spirits and oracles. Spiritually or physically, the *ogene* is an announcer. It is a tone detector as well as a ringer of the arrival of ancestral harbingers and other higher masquerades. Costumes and other cultural art objects are creatively produced by both males and females, depending on the aspect of the art. Sculpture and metal smiting are predominantly done by males, while weaving is dominated by females – for instance, weaving of *anyaka* and *ugere-ekwa* (local net and cloth). The wooden gong (*ekwe*) is of similar essence as the *ogene*. It is an announcer as well as a sound leader. It is fashioned out of hardwoods. There

are different types and sizes of wooden gongs, depending on their use. Both wooden and metal gongs are categorized into male and female versions because of their varying sounds and uses. The Amaube Amalla Orba community is dominated by metal art production and selling, which is an art practiced by their forefathers and passed down from generation to generation. Metal works are numerous, and they include rat traps, rattle staffs, metal bells, hoes, and machetes, to mention but a few. The researchers encountered Mr. Madu whose unique manual dexterity in the blacksmithing enterprise has portrayed him as the most creative, affluent and prominent among the existing successful cultural entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship is a key contributor to economic development and sustenance (Meyer & de Jongh, 2018).

Figure 8: *Uma Omabe (Forged Machete)*



Note. Reproduced from Arua(2017)

All *igele* masquerades observed in Orba heighten their aesthetic status, spiritual and symbolic essences with locally forged long machetes in each hand. The machetes are sculptural metal objects produced by local blacksmiths. According to Madu (2014), to fashion a long machete, a long strip of iron is found and cut using a chisel, then heated with a bellow and thinned down using a sledgehammer. At the handle part, wood is bored and fastened with a metal pin and finally

smoothened. The machetes, which come in different designs and sizes, are used by the maskers during core performances. At the end of the handle, different colours of striped fabric materials are fastened or fixed either by tying or stitching with thread. These red, blue, yellow, purple, black and white striped fabric materials are added to enhance the beauty of the *igele / echaricha* masquerades as they dangle in every direction during performance. Apart from creating

beauty, these fabric materials are believed to appease and vitalize the spirit behind the tangible *Omabe* masquerade and also act as a cover for the wrapped mystic power attached to the knife's handle. This mystic power is believed to re-channel any negative energy unleashed by enemies during performance. The long-striped cotton materials on the forged machete are found to be imported, except for the locally woven dark blue and white fabric material known as *ugere-ekwa* in the study area. However, in the course of the interview with Mr. Madu, the researchers observed and were reliably informed that the youths working with him are apprentices who hope to become entrepreneurs after being certified as fit to open their own art entrepreneurship centres.

Drawing and painting

Entrepreneurial art skills attainable in the *Omabe* masking tradition are many and varied, including body adornment, house/wall decoration, mask-making, musical instrument crafting, prop construction and costume painting.

Body adornment

Body adornment is a practical method of manipulating or drawing symbols or

motifs on body surfaces repeatedly with *uri/uli* or moth stain, using any pointed object such as a quill feather stalk or a sharpened broom/chewing stick as a drawing instrument. Body adornment is an aspect of drawing and painting that is profusely practiced in the study area, and it is predominantly done by both accredited and non-accredited womenfolk during *Omabe* festive periods. Though there is strong evidence that a few spiritually accredited men (*attamas*) also adorned their bodies to exemplify their spiritual status and boundaries. Apart from the priests, the spiritually engrossed *Omabe* cult members also adorn their bodies to establish a boundary between themselves and the non-initiates within the theatrical environment. According to Robin (2014), every culture has its own unique body adornment that is used in expression and identification.

Tribal art engagement is done by extracting *uri /uli* hue from the pods (local plant seed) or stain from moths and creatively manipulating the quill feather or a pointed stick (*azizauri /uli*) to draw the desired motifs manually on the body over and over, either to exemplify spiritual boundaries or to

heighten body aesthetics. In fact, the art of drawing *uri / uli* hue to create patterns or motifs on the body surface is generally and metaphorically conceived in the Nsukka cultural zone as a magic/magnet that attracts beholders to the bearer. Other drawing instruments needed here include a locally forged knife (*nmauri / okpekpe*), which is used in cutting the *uri / uli* pods to extract the stain, and the clay saucer (*oku*), which serves as the receptacle. During an oral interview, the researchers were reliably informed that body adornment adepts sometimes prime the parts of the body to be adorned with *ufe*i (red cam wood) before the actual body decorations (C. Obeta, personal communication, July 6, 2017). It was observed that the old body painters are presently very few, and the young ones who learned the art either from their mothers or through the highly skilled and accredited body adornment women in the community are also minimal in number. The few young ones that have mastered the art have all shifted to modern body adornment businesses for better profit. This aligns with the assertion Bosma et al. (2020) that: entrepreneurship refers to what one does in an attempt to utilize an

existing opportunity which is geared towards survival.

Participants in *Omabe* masking also excel greatly in surface embellishment of shrine houses, mask pieces, costumes, props, musical instruments and others, using tools locally fashioned by them. Mud-walled shrine houses are predominantly used and are lavishly decorated with earth colours, depicting creatively rendered patterns/motifs with an exaggerated cultural symbolism and metaphor. Most of the motifs are either representational or abstract and are usually painted with earth colours procured from the banks of streams or purchased at the local markets. Earth colours could be red-brown, yellow-ochre, white or grey. These pigments are termed improvised and could be replaced with imported colours where necessary. The artistic engagements associated with *Omabe* have enticed the youth to venture into art profit-oriented businesses to improve their economic status.

Other areas that have turned *Omabe* practitioners into entrepreneurs include dyeing fabrics such as *ugere-ekwa* (locally woven strip cloth) and some

synthetic materials with improvised pigments. Painting of masks with colours that suggest the anticipated theatrical actions and the spiritual

meaning latent in the masks was also practiced by entrepreneurs and remains remarkable in the study area.

Figure 9: *Uri/UliPods for Body Adornment*



Note. Culled from <https://www.emkp.org/speaking>

Design and use of *Omabe* costumes – knitting, stitching and embroidery

Figures 10 & 11: *Igele/Echaricha* Masquerades**Note.**

Reproduced from Arua (2023).

Igele/Echaricha masquerade is a unique and elegant dramatic masquerade that symbolically represents the ancestral spirits in an animal form, specifically, the Leopard (*Omabe* spirit). *Igele* is intricately designed with black woolen fabric as a base, on which white dazzling chrome buttons are deliberately and creatively fastened by impressive manual stitches to emblemize leopard spots. The reflective buttons are comely hand-sewn all over the fabric surfaces and are spectacularly and closely knitted; hence, they have magical crowd-pulling power and simulate leopard spots. The headpiece,

unlike most masquerades that use a wooden head cover, is artistically designed with strands of bright-white woolen thread, thickly embroidered to simulate sunrays that radiate from the eye-opening, projecting towards the back of the headpiece in a very artistic way. *Echaricha / Igele's* headpiece is an oval-shaped fabric design that carries on the top numerous clustered upward projections of sticks covered with black or white locally woven fabric (*ugere-ekwa*). The upward projections are stuck with numerous white, black, and red feathers (*awo* and *abubaogo*), which symbolize

high socio-economic and spiritual status. The *ugere-ekwa* holds the feathers in position on the projection, basically to sate the aesthetic and symbolic quest of the artist, participants and admirers.

The organization and installation of these mask design elements are done collectively by the participants but are most often handled by the spiritually accredited priests and cult adept members. The participants here include the young initiates, whose active involvement in cultural activities ensures the continuity of the masking culture and its related entrepreneurship activities. Through the young initiates, the nuance, symbolism, and general skills are propagated from generation to generation. In all *Igele* masquerades observed, *ozoebule* (animal skin elbow-band) is tied around the upper part of the elbow as an elbow-band, while a folded cloth (usually imported fabric) is tied around the waist of the wearer to hold other costumes in position, such as the long leopard skin that runs from the back waist down to the knee level to symbolize

the tail of a leopard. The sewing of the fabrics and their encompassing artistic nuance touches are presently done by men in Orba since the death of the spiritually accredited woman, Oyimaa Nwaona Nwaugwu of Amagu Umadeshi (G. Odo, personal communication, July 6, 2024).

Most of the existing artists got their artistic inspiration from the late Mr. Agboeze Ugwuobia of Amagu and Odo Nwa Ngwoke of Umuokara, respectively (I. Ezech, personal communication, June 15, 2015). In line with this, I. Onyeke (personal communication, June 15, 2015) also inferred that Mr. Onyebuchi Odo of Umu-Eworogu, who gained art entrepreneurial knowledge and established an art profit-oriented business centre through active participation in *Omabe* masking, is the only active traditional artist producing *Omabe* masks presently in Ajuona Orba. According to him, the women who engaged in such creative works in Orba have all passed away.

Figure 12: *Edi-Ogbene* from Orba (one of the *Omabe* variants)



Note. Reproduced from Arua (2023).

Edi-Ogbene is another artistically garbed *Omabe* variant. It plays the character of a leopard, as it is dominantly costumed as such. *Edi-Ogbene* is meant to control and maintain an entertaining peace within the square of its performance. It is considered aggressive and sometimes too hyperactive, but in all that, it maintains an artistic motion. The headpiece is

totally masked with leopard skin, which is pierced with a sharp, tiny needle to indicate the eye openings. *Edi-Ogbene* does not hold the rattle staff (*ojii*) or any form of machete due to its aggressive nature and function. It holds only the whip for controlling the over-excited mammoth crowd that usually turns out to watch its performance. White ram

skins (*ozoebule*) are used to wrap the greater part of its elbows, signifying strength and serving as a dominant costume in all high-spirited masquerades in Orba and in the wider Igbo traditional

masquerade performance. White ram skin's fur is used to adorn persons and places of authority among the Igbo in general.

Figures 13 & 14: *Omabetype-, Egbeocheala/ Ogbuokwuru*



Note. Reproduced from Arua (2014).

Egbeocheala is one of the *Omabe* masquerades, mostly designed with white locally woven fabric costumes (*ekpoto*), and usually sewn as a suit. The

masquerade is usually worn by young men, typically between the ages of 25–40 years, since its primary function is to control and maintain law and order

within the fluid environment during Omabe performances. According to Nwoko (1986), *Egbeocheala* is a crowd-controlling and whipping spirit that performs with other, higher-ranking masquerades during performances. On certain occasions, it appears alone, especially when rendering political or social functions such as imposing fines and punishing those who violate socio-cultural ethics in the community.

Egbeocheala has a peculiar visual appearance that lacks heavy decorative elements; hence, *Egbeocheala* and *Igele* / *Echaricha* have a sharp visual contrast in terms of costuming and functions. The former is simple in design because the form of a masquerade must align with its anticipated performance actions. A masquerade's visual design should provoke and sustain interest, understanding, and meaning in the minds of those who create it and the spectators during performances. The costuming of this ancestral spirit aligns with its performance actions; hence, it focuses on enforcing and maintaining law and order during the performance of other, higher masquerades that have crowd-pulling power, such as *Igele*, *Edi-Ogbene*, *Obianwaishi* and *Eze bu n'Obodo*. *Egbeocheala* also holds a forged machete

in one hand. Its machete is not usually decorated like the ones held by the more elaborate *Igele*. It is specifically used to exert its power and authority over social and political issues. White calico is tied around the waist, running down from the waist to knee level, with a knot at the end. (Some tie the cloth without knotting).

The "knotting" at the end of the white calico is symbolic. It symbolizes the complete binding or capturing of all negative forces against the masquerade and its participants (I. Omeye, personal communication, September 6, 2017). It was also gathered that the tied cloth around the waist heightens and sustains the masker's spiritual and physical energy throughout the performance period. All *Egbeocheala* maskers wear cylindrically shaped ram's skin (*ozoebule*) on the upper part of the elbow as a band. *Omabecult* members in Orba insist on using white ram's skin (fur) to produce *ozoebule* rather than other animal skins. The ram's skin is cut from the neck area of a very mature and healthy ram with long, healthy hair. It is then folded, sewn or woven, and worn on the elbow to satisfy the aesthetic preferences of the artist and participants and also to indicate the socio-economic status of the social group

that owns the masquerade. The higher the socio-economic level, the more heavily costumed and revered the masquerade becomes in the community and beyond. *Egbeocheala* maskers paint their legs with white clay (*nzu*) using a stippling technique to simulate the dotted spots of leopards and enhance their spectacle.

Agbaeji cloth, locally called *akparakpa* / *ekereke* in Orba, is a thick embroidered cloth worn by *Agbaeji* masquerades (an *Omabe* variant), which feature numerous clusters of feathers on its headdress. *Akparakpa* / *Ekereke* is woven with different bright, colourful woolen threads, patterned with stripes of cloth depicting different geometric motifs and symbols. It is pertinent to note that the costumes of *Agbaeji* and *Ekpe* masquerades do not have significant differences in the study area (I. Omeje, personal communication, September 6, 2017).

The artistic practices of *Omabe* have overwhelmingly impacted the cultural community where they are practiced and beyond, enhancing and sustaining economic status and cross-cultural relationships among the people of the community and their surrounding neighbours. They learn, innovate and

produce a plethora of artworks, which they sell to others in fulfillment of their quest for a robust economy.

Art entrepreneurship possibilities

According to Cole (2023), entrepreneurship involves the purposeful activities of individuals or groups to establish and operate profit-oriented business units that produce or distribute economic goods and services. Cole's assertion is in line with and corroborates our contextual issues here; hence, participants of *Omabe* have opened and operated profit-oriented art businesses within and beyond their community. During the field work on the *Omabe* masking tradition, the researcher deduced that *Omabe* masking and its artistic configurations are indeed sources of entertainment as well as catalysts for entrepreneurship development and business enterprises. Lindy (1968) infers that art influences anyone involved in its practice and such experience is quite transformative and enriching. As earlier mentioned, the *Omabe* masking tradition celebrates and fosters expanded and tremendous empowerment skills, including the production of mask pieces and other cultural art objects to deepen and promote the economic and cultural art capacity of the individuals involved.

From the observations, almost all initiates are exposed to practical knowledge of art during initiation through apprenticeship. Fortunately, apprenticeship is one of the most important features of *Omabe* masking tradition in Orba during initiation into the cult. At the height of the cultural festival, to propagate the masking culture successfully and stimulate the local economy, some professional traditional artists within the community would provide training for young initiates and some interested adult members. The specific objective of the training is to immerse the participants in transformative art lessons that will unlock their potentials and set them on the path to success as entrepreneurs.

An entrepreneur is one who demonstrates creativity and transmits such knowledge to others. This may take the form of apprenticeship, in which the young initiates learn from the traditional professional artists while assisting them in their workshops (T. Ikem; S. Onu, personal communications, August 15, 2016). They stay around the master artist to observe him while he works for a reasonable length of time, before they are encouraged to practice on their own volition, primarily to instill courage and test their artistic professionalism. In this

way, for special needs initiates (handicapped / atypical), the initiation arena becomes an entrepreneurship development centre. Consequently, they become deeply engaged and proactive in creating unparalleled profit-oriented works of art, while typical (normal) initiates who seek to upgrade their artistic capabilities are also progressively developed. Therefore, apprenticeship here refers to the informal way of training young *Omabe* initiates to attain a specific art skill, which qualifies them as full-fledged *Omabe* cult members and entrepreneurs. This also empowers them to become self-reliant citizens (entrepreneurs) and consequently liberates them from the effects of persistent poverty that has engulfed Nigeria and other parts of the developing world.

A good number of *Omabe* youth initiates have been empowered and have metamorphosed into adult master carvers, painters and fabric weavers, among other artistic professionalism. This is due to the entrepreneurship skills inculcated in them while participating in *Omabe* masking and its related productions. They are taught through direct/traditional (demonstration) and inquiry-based pedagogy that

characterizes informal art education (G. Odo; C. Ejike, personal communications, August 15, 2016). These learners are exposed to different art engagements at an early stage of life for a reasonable period of time and thereafter allowed to explore, inquire and practice on their own volition and knowledge. These processes allow them to develop a heightened interest in taking business risks, and mustering courage and confidence to establish and operate a profit-oriented art business; thus, becoming entrepreneurs. Creswell and Creswell (2018) support this view and infer that unemployed youths become self-employed, some of them growing to become very successful within their rural backgrounds.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the cultural art engagements inherent in the *Omabe* masking fiesta of Orba community in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State have engendered a significant milestone in the art entrepreneurship landscape of the community. The participants in the theatrical activities of *Omabe* have shown obvious evidence of observable empowerment by establishing and operating profit-oriented art businesses

that produce and distribute economic goods and services within and beyond their cultural orbit. Entrepreneurial art prowess and professionalism in all spheres of tribal visual arts are evident benefits of active participation in *Omabe*. Consequently, the participants metamorphose into master carvers, weavers, painters and craftsmen (entrepreneurs). From this view, *Omabe* masking traditions have been observed and established as a major practice motivating youths to engage in cultural art entrepreneurship in Nsukka. The impressive manual skills and unparalleled dexterity of the youths, evident in their professionalism in cultural art engagements, have greatly enhanced and sustained their local economy, creativity and the acquisition of traditional entrepreneurial art skills in and beyond their cultural domain.

The positive implication of this cultural heirloom from the onset is that it would enthrall and incite some foreign and indigenous scholars to review the extensive available studies on it as well as the erroneous conclusions that this cultural art in its entirety is a mere component of recreation and a futile masking display. This study disagrees with this conclusion, in that the *Omabe*

masking tradition has motivated most of its participants to engage deeply in entrepreneurial ventures. This study makes a clarion call and suggestion that people from all walks of life and other religious beliefs as well as academics should make assiduous efforts to challenge such baseless and contemptuous assertions and develop a heightened interest in participating in the *Omabe* culturally organized drama. Reasons for participating in it should be primarily for reliable ethnographic documentation and appreciation of art for art's sake or based on social grounds and not as a religious enterprise, inasmuch as many of its artistic

engagements are devoid of actions and functions related to fetishism. Cultural art should be encouraged by all religious groups, the academia and others, especially considering that the teeming participants of theatrical performances have become economically established, demonstrating evidence of art entrepreneurship possibilities. The participants' proactive involvement in unparalleled art entrepreneurship skill acquisition has consequently curbed their endless quest for white-collar jobs, which are presently elusive and somewhat unattainable in Nigeria, and thus, inspires and set them on the path to success through self-employment generation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

	RESEARCH CHECK LIST	
	Projections	Research Objectives
	1. <i>Omabe</i> variants. 2. Tradition and modernity in <i>Omabe</i> masking. 3. Entrepreneurship in contemporary masking. 4. Ornamentation in <i>Omabe</i> Costumes.	The specific objectives of the study were to ascertain the prevalent types of <i>Omabe</i> masquerades in order to make comparative assessments between the traditional and modern aspects of its art and culture. Equally, the study sought to identify the elements of <i>Omabe</i> culture that foster entrepreneurship and artistic skills. Additionally, there was a need to assess the tools and materials that enhance <i>Omabe</i> adornment and costume art.
	Item category	Specific materials
1	Digital Audio/Visual	Voice recorder, GSM phone video and audio recorder, digital camera, lap top computer, etc.
2	Literary Analogue	Paper, pen, pencil, sketchpad, etc.
3	HD cloud 9 software	Mozilla Firefox, Chrome, Opera Mini, Wi-fi hot spot, etc.
4	Fieldwork Refreshment	Water, water bottle, food, food flask, straw hat, sneakers, canvass, umbrella, etc.
5	Digital Hardware	Desk top computer, desk jet printer, expanded desk monitor, DI colour printer, etc.
*	<i>The above materials were identified from the outset to make the research easier and more manageable. Although a number of them were not obtained, alternatives were provided as the study progressed.</i>	

Appendix 2

	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1	Do you think the <i>Omabe</i> masquerade is a strong cultural identity of <i>the</i> Orba people? Explain your reasons.
2	When looking at the <i>Omabe</i> masquerade costumes during its festival, would you associate them with art and crafts, otherwise called <i>nka</i> , or with the sciences? Why?
3	How does the older generation pass down the skills of <i>Omabe</i> art to the younger ones? Is there any school where such skills are taught?
4	What aspects of art (<i>nka na uzu</i>) can you identify in the appearance of the <i>Omabe</i> masquerade?
5	When people say that <i>Omabe</i> is beautiful or wonderful to behold, what do you think they mean?
6	Can you name and discuss some types of <i>Omabe</i> masquerade you know?
7	Has Christianity and modernity altered some artistic features of <i>Omabe</i> masquerade? Feel free to give examples.
8	Do young men still show interest in learning the arts and crafts associated with <i>Omabe</i> ?
9	What are the chances that <i>Omabe</i> and other masquerades will survive the next 10 years, given the current trend of young men engaging in internet fraud?
10	Would you encourage the making of <i>Omabe</i> costumes and adornments for sale in the market, or should they remain strictly an informal art practice reserved for initiates only?
*	<i>Further questions and follow-up discussions that would emanate from the ones above or directly from the respondents were tolerated because the semi-structure interview style permits it.</i>