

**COMMUNICATIVE, AESTHETIC AND SYMBOLIC VALUES OF COLOUR  
UTILISATION IN CARNIVAL CALABAR**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the communicative, aesthetic, and symbolic values of colour utilisation in Carnival Calabar, Nigeria's foremost cultural tourism event. Despite the increasing scholarly attention on performance and tourism in the carnival, limited research has systematically analysed how colour functions as a communicative and symbolic medium within the event. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic research design, the study draws on participant observation, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, and documentary analysis. The research investigates how colour is consciously selected, interpreted, and deployed by carnival bands to convey meanings that are simultaneously local, cultural, and global. Findings reveal that colour usage in Carnival Calabar is neither arbitrary nor purely decorative; rather, it operates as a structured visual language that communicates identity, hierarchy, ideology, and thematic narratives. The study further establishes that while certain colour meanings align with pan-human symbolic interpretations, their application within the carnival is shaped by socio-cultural context and performance objectives. The research concludes that colour serves as a vital semiotic resource that enhances both the aesthetic appeal and communicative depth of the carnival.

**Keywords:** Colour symbolism, Carnival Calabar, aesthetics, communication, performance

## **Introduction**

Over the years, Cross River State in Nigeria has emerged as a major hub of tourism, driven largely by its annual Christmas Festival, within which Carnival Calabar is a central attraction. Held every December, the carnival has grown into one of Africa's most prominent cultural events, attracting participants and spectators from across Nigeria and beyond. As a highly visual and performative spectacle, Carnival Calabar is distinguished by its elaborate displays of costumes, floats, music, and dance, all of which are characterised by a striking and deliberate use of colour. Within this context, colour functions not merely as an aesthetic embellishment but as a significant medium of communication. The deployment of colour in the carnival operates at both individual and collective levels, reflecting personal creativity, group identity, and institutional branding. It also incorporates traditional African colour symbolisms alongside contemporary global influences, resulting in a rich interplay between indigenous meanings and modern interpretations.

Scholarly perspectives suggest that while colour perception may exhibit certain cross-cultural similarities and even pan-human cognitive tendencies, its meanings are largely shaped by cultural, social, and contextual factors. In performance settings such as Carnival Calabar, these meanings are further amplified through coordinated visual expression, where colour becomes a tool for storytelling, emotional engagement, and thematic representation.

Despite the prominence of colour in the carnival's visual landscape, existing studies have tended to focus more on its economic, cultural, or entertainment value, with limited attention to its communicative and symbolic functions. This study therefore, explores how colour is consciously utilised within Carnival Calabar as a system of meaning-making, examining its aesthetic, symbolic, and communicative roles within the broader framework of performance and cultural expression.

The problem therefore, is that although colour plays a dominant role in Carnival Calabar, existing studies largely treat it as a visual or aesthetic component rather than a structured communicative system.

## **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** grounded in ethnographic and performance analysis approaches. This design is appropriate because Carnival Calabar is a cultural and performative event in which meanings are embedded in visual symbols, social interactions, and collective practices. Ethnography enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and interpretations, while performance analysis facilitates the examination of the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of colour within the carnival.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations. The researchers attended and documented carnival performances, focusing on the use of colour in costumes, props, floats, and audience interactions. Interviews—both structured and unstructured—were conducted with key stakeholders, including titled chiefs, community elders, shrine custodians, youth leaders, performers, costume designers, and festival organisers. These interactions provided insights into the meanings, motivations, and cultural significance attached to colour usage in the carnival.

Secondary data were sourced from relevant scholarly materials such as books, journal articles, and archival documents on African theatre, colour symbolism, performance studies, and cultural tourism.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with direct involvement and relevant knowledge of the carnival. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, through which patterns and recurring themes relating to colour symbolism, communication, and aesthetics were identified and interpreted in line with the study's objectives. Ethical considerations were observed by informing participants of the study's purpose and obtaining their consent, while ensuring confidentiality where necessary.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this study is to examine the communicative, aesthetic, and symbolic roles of colour utilisation in Carnival Calabar, with a view to understanding how colour functions as a medium of meaning-making within the festival's performative and cultural context.

### **Objectives**

The study seeks to:

1. Analyse how colours are consciously selected and applied by carnival bands in the design of costumes, props, and floats.
2. Examine the symbolic meanings attached to colours within the cultural and performance context of Carnival Calabar.
3. Investigate the relationship between indigenous (local) colour interpretations and global or cross-cultural symbolic meanings.
4. Evaluate the role of colour in enhancing the aesthetic appeal and visual impact of the carnival performances.
5. Assess how the use of colour contributes to the communicative effectiveness of the carnival in expressing themes, identities, and cultural narratives.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Symbolic Nature of Colour**

Colour has long been recognised as a powerful medium of communication, operating across physical, social, and psychological domains. Studies suggest that certain colour categories may function as pan-human cognitive universals, aiding perception and memory (Heider, 1972). While interpretations of colour vary across cultures, there are widely shared symbolic associations that give colour its communicative power. At the physical level, colours often convey universally recognised meanings. For instance, red, yellow, and green in traffic systems signify stop, caution, and movement, respectively. Similarly, bright colours such as red, orange, and yellow are commonly associated with heat and energy, while green is frequently linked to ecology and environmental sustainability.

At the social level, colours serve as markers of identity and ideology. National flags, such as Nigeria's green-white-green, demonstrate how colours can symbolise patriotism and collective identity. Expressions like "black and white" or "grey areas" further illustrate how colour metaphors are embedded in social communication to signify certainty or ambiguity. At the psychological level, colour influences emotions and behaviour. Red is often associated with power, intensity, and passion, while blue is linked to calmness and conservatism. Bright colours such as yellow and orange evoke warmth and optimism, whereas darker tones may convey coolness or sadness (Anyira & Essi, 2026a). These associations, however, are not fixed; they are shaped by context, experience, and cultural conditioning.

Scholars caution against rigid interpretations of colour symbolism, noting that meanings are fluid and culturally determined (Brusatin, 1991). What MacKenzie (as cited in Sloane, 2006) describes as "colour clues" highlights the importance of context in interpreting colour. Similarly, research demonstrates that colour can influence cognitive performance and behaviour under specific conditions (Elliot & Maier, 2009; Mehta & Zhu, 2009). These studies suggest that colour meanings are shaped by learned associations and situational relevance. In performance contexts, colour becomes a dynamic semiotic resource, capable of triggering emotional responses and guiding audience interpretation. Its meaning is therefore not inherent but constructed through interaction between cultural knowledge, context, and visual presentation (Sloane, 2006).

### **The Colourful Nature of Carnival Calabar**

Carnival Calabar, established in 2000 in Cross River State, Nigeria, is widely regarded as Africa's largest street carnival. Conceived as a cultural tourism initiative, it has evolved into a globally recognised festival characterised by elaborate performances, vibrant costumes, and extensive use of colour (Uguru, 2010).

The carnival is organised around five major bands—Passion 4, Seagull, Master Blaster, Bayside, and Freedom—each with distinct identities and official colours. These bands comprise thousands

of participants who rehearse and perform in coordinated displays during the annual parade. The event also includes additional components such as the Cultural Parade and Children's Carnival, further expanding its scope and inclusivity.

A defining feature of Carnival Calabar is its structured use of colour in performance design. Each year, themes are developed and interpreted visually through costumes, props, and floats. Bands operate with a degree of autonomy, allowing them to creatively translate themes into vibrant visual spectacles while maintaining coherence through their official colour schemes. The carnival's organisation reflects a blend of local creativity and global influence, drawing inspiration from established carnivals such as those in Trinidad and Tobago (Dolby, 2006). Institutional support and sponsorship have contributed to its growth as a major cultural and economic event (Calabar Carnival Commission, 2012).

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the carnival plays a significant role in tourism and socio-economic development, generating income for artisans, designers, and small-scale businesses involved in costume production and event logistics (Dolby, 2006).

## **Colour Use and Symbolism in Carnival Calabar**

### **1 Structured Colour Application in Performance**

Colour utilisation in Carnival Calabar is deliberate and systematically organised. Bands centrally design and produce costumes to ensure uniformity and consistency in colour representation. Within each band, subgroups perform specific roles, with colour variations used to differentiate functions while maintaining overall thematic coherence.

### **2 Symbolism in Costume and Performance Design**

Colour symbolism is most prominently expressed in the costumes of the King and Queen, who serve as focal figures in each band's performance. Designers carefully select colour combinations to interpret themes, convey narratives, and enhance visual impact. These designs often integrate both traditional African symbolic meanings and contemporary global aesthetics (Anyira & Essi, 2026b).

### **3 Colour and Social Equality**

One notable feature of colour use in the carnival is its role in promoting social inclusivity. Unlike contexts where colour may signify class distinction, Carnival Calabar emphasises uniformity and collective identity. This reflects the broader characteristics of popular culture, where participation cuts across social boundaries (Barber, 1997; Dolby, 2006).

### **4 Local–Global Symbolic Integration**

The study reveals that colour meanings in the carnival reflect a hybridisation of local and global influences. While participants draw on indigenous symbolic frameworks, they also incorporate

widely recognised global interpretations of colour. This supports the argument that colour symbolism is both culturally grounded and universally resonant (Breidenbach, 1975; Brusatin, 1991).

### **5 Colour as a Medium of Modernity and Communication**

Colour in Carnival Calabar functions as a visual language through which modernity is expressed. It enables participants to engage in contemporary cultural practices while maintaining connections to traditional symbolism. This aligns with the concept of performance as a form of social expression that reveals deeper societal structures (Deflem, 1991).

### **Key Findings**

The analysis identifies the following core insights:

1. Colour selection in the carnival is intentional and meaning-driven.
2. Colours carry symbolic meanings that guide performance interpretation.
3. Colour usage reflects both indigenous and global symbolic systems.
4. Colour enhances aesthetic appeal and audience engagement.
5. Colour serves as a communicative tool for expressing identity, themes, and cultural narratives.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that colour utilisation in Carnival Calabar extends far beyond aesthetic decoration, functioning as a deliberate and structured system of communication. The findings reveal that colours are consciously selected and applied by carnival bands to convey meanings related to identity, culture, and thematic representation.

The study further establishes that colour operates simultaneously at symbolic, aesthetic, and communicative levels, enabling participants to express narratives and evoke emotional responses among audiences. While certain colour meanings reflect widely recognised or pan-human associations, their interpretation within the carnival is largely shaped by cultural context and performance objectives.

In addition, the integration of indigenous and global colour symbolisms highlights the hybrid and dynamic nature of contemporary cultural expression. Colour, in this sense, serves as a medium through which tradition and modernity intersect, allowing participants to negotiate cultural identity within a globalised framework. Overall, the study concludes that colour is a vital semiotic resource that enhances both the visual spectacle and communicative effectiveness of Carnival Calabar, reinforcing its status as a major cultural and performative event.

## Recommendations

### 1 Institutional and Policy Support

Greater involvement from national cultural agencies and the federal government is recommended to strengthen the organisational and financial framework of Carnival Calabar. Enhanced institutional support will enable the carnival to achieve broader global recognition and sustainability.

### 2 Promotion of Creative and Cultural Industries

The carnival should be further developed as a platform for nurturing creative talents in costume design, performance, and visual arts. Structured investment in these areas can position the festival as a hub for cultural innovation and professional development within Nigeria's creative economy.

### 3 Strategic Branding and Global Positioning

There is a need for deliberate efforts to position Carnival Calabar as a globally competitive cultural brand. This includes improved marketing strategies, international partnerships, and cultural exchanges with other major carnivals worldwide.

### 4 Capacity Building in Colour and Design Practice

Training programmes should be introduced for designers and performers to deepen their understanding of colour theory and symbolic communication. This will enhance the quality and intentionality of visual expression within the carnival.

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