



The Nexus between Fine and Performing Arts in Central Africa

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ABSTRACT

Background: African art is frequently represented through Western academic categories that separate visual objects from performance, a framing that misrepresents artistic realities in Central African societies. In communities such as the Bamileke, Tikar, and Bassa of Cameroon; the Yaka and Suku of the Democratic Republic of Congo; and the Fang and Mitsogo of Gabon, masks, sculptures, drumming, chanting, and dance operate as a unified cultural system. This disconnect between lived practice and fragmented interpretation limits understanding of how these art forms generate meaning, sustain identity, and shape communal experiences.

Objective: This study examined how fine and performing arts intersect within cultural rituals and daily life in Cameroon, the DRC, and Gabon, and assessed how these integrated expressions contribute to spirituality, social cohesion, cultural continuity, and emerging tourism opportunities

Method: A qualitative ethnographic design was adopted, drawing on secondary data from scholarly publications, museum archives, cultural reports, and ethnographic studies. The documents were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of integration between visual and performative elements.

Results: Findings reveal that masks, costumes, sculptures, music, and dance acquire full meaning only when used together in ritual contexts. These art forms serve symbolic, moral, and spiritual roles, reinforcing communal values and ancestral connections. While these traditions remain strong, they are also being adapted in urban festivals and contemporary cultural expressions. The study further identifies growing interest in cultural tourism, though concerns persist regarding cultural dilution and misrepresentation.

Conclusion: Fine and performing arts in Central Africa function as an inseparable cultural unit rather than isolated artistic categories. Their integration sustains intergenerational knowledge, strengthens community identity, and provides continuity amid modernization and globalization.

Unique Contribution: This study challenges Western-based artistic classifications and introduces an African-centered framework that acknowledges the embodied, communal, and ritual nature of Central African arts. It offers new insights into how meaning is produced through the fusion of visual and performative elements.

Key Recommendation: Policymakers, museums, cultural institutions, and researchers should adopt holistic approaches to documenting and representing African art. Community-led preservation, culturally sensitive museum practices, and ethical models of cultural tourism should be prioritized to safeguard artistic traditions in Cameroon, the DRC, and Gabon.

Keywords: Fine arts, Performing arts, Central Africa, Ritual performance, Masks, Indigenous aesthetics, Cultural tourism



INTRODUCTION

Central Africa is culturally rich; Art is an integral part of social structure, ritual life and spiritual practice of the people of the area. Countries such as Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gabon showcase ancestral traditions of visual and performance-based artistic expressions, including sculpture, mask-making, textile design, dance, music, masquerade and drama (Onwe, et al., 2017). Fine art objects such as carved masks and body jewellery serve practical, symbolic and spiritual purposes. For example, masks used by the Fang of Gabon and the Congo of the DRC are often considered the embodiment of ancestors or spiritual institutions active in community rituals and initiation rites (Fang Mask Tribal History; Ngil Mask, 2023; Njoku, 2022).

Performing arts transmit values, celebrate heritage and maintain social harmony. Traditional performances combine music, costumes, dance and oral storytelling at mass community events. Masquerade rituals exemplify this fusion, where carved masks, symbolic costumes, live drumming and storytelling combine to bridge the boundaries between the visual and performing arts. The urban theatre movement in Cameroon and contemporary productions of Gabonese and Congolese performances demonstrate the persistence and adaptation of these traditions to modern contexts (Ndansi, 2021; Njoku, 2022). Despite this richness, research often views the fine and performing arts in isolation, neglecting their intersection. This study bridges the gap by examining how these art forms collectively create cultural meaning, particularly in rituals and contemporary practices.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Art in Central Africa represents cultural memory, spiritual expression, and social belonging. Traditional practices such as masquerades merge visual and performative traits into unified events (Njoku, 2022). However, most academic literature and institutional classifications treat fine and performing arts as separate fields, reducing understanding of these practices as functional cultural units. African visual arts studies emphasize sculpture and masks, often overlooking music, dance, and ritual (Clark, 1989; Silva, 2015). This narrow framing obscures the integrated nature of Central African art, undermining heritage understanding, policy, and modern expression. A conceptual and empirical framework examining the convergence of fine and performing arts is lacking. This study addresses that gap, focusing on how visual and performative elements coalesce in ritual and contemporary contexts and what this reveals about identity, continuity, and originality.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are fine and performing arts traditionally integrated within the rituals and cultural practices of Cameroon, DRC, and Gabon?
2. What symbolic, spiritual, and social functions do masks, music, dance, and other visual-performative elements serve in these communities?
3. In what ways are these traditional art forms preserved, adapted, or transformed across generations in response to modern societal and cultural changes?
4. What role do these integrated art forms play in attracting cultural tourism, and how can they contribute to sustainable development within Central African communities?



LITERATURE REVIEW

In many central African societies, art is not considered as single, isolated discipline. Rather, it is part of a large, living system where music, dance, storytelling, sculpture and rituals are all interconnected. These communities do not draw sharp lines between different art forms. Instead, they mix them into experiences that are communal, spiritual and educational. Artistic expression is woven into the rhythm of daily life, which is shaped by oral tradition and cultural memory. In places such as Gabon, Cameroon and Democratic Republic of Congo, art is not seen from far away - it is used, transferred, heard, heard and felt.

Roberts and some other scholars have emphasized that carved figures, masks and musical instruments in Central Africa were never seen as stable objects behind the glass of the museum. Instead, these items were designed to come alive - to dance, chant, or carry with processions involving the entire community. For example, the observation of the region of Britannica confirms that the traditional art in the Central African Republic includes not only material objects, but music and movement that surround them during ceremonies, festivals and everyday communal events. This pattern is correct in many Central African communities. In the Gabon, among the fang and quota people, ancestral figures are used in rituals and are often accompanied by drumming, singing and dance. In the Congo region, masked dances such as using masks are tightly bound to community morality and work of secret societies. And in Cameroon, dance, dress, and music merge into formal life that teaches values and preserves identity. These forms are not only artistic but directed. They are how people remember, mourn, celebrate and pass on knowledge.

Integration of art forms in Central Africa is also associated with oral culture. It is performed in communities where history is not written below. Stories are passed from generation to generation through singing, dance and acting. Theatres and rituals overlap in ways that work to educate, entertain and connect the spiritual world with physical (Ezike, et al., 2016). According to the work published in important stages, many of these traditions are essential for the pre-colonial structures and how people in the region express both personal and collective meanings. This review examines the relationship between visual and performance art in central African societies. It assumes how carved objects, masks, and musical instruments are not used in separation, but as part of large performances. It attracts studies on broad regional comparison along with Fang, Kota, Sonye and other cultural groups. It also reflects how these practices keep shaping identity, memory and education in their communities. By examining the integrated nature of these traditions, the review wants to highlight the complex methods in which the Middle African art lives, instead of being displayed.

In recent decades, the fusion of fine and performing arts has also gained importance in the realm of cultural economics and tourism. Festivals, rituals, and ceremonial performances are increasingly viewed as assets for tourism development, heritage preservation, and creative industries (Nwafor, & Nwabuzor, 2021). This growing intersection between tradition and tourism presents both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, cultural tourism can fund preservation efforts and support local economies. On the other, it risks oversimplifying or commodifying sacred traditions (Aligwe, & Nwafor, 2016). Thus, this study also considers the touristic implications of integrated art forms and their potential as tools for sustainable development.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand how fine and performing arts come together in Central African culture, this study draws on three main theories: embodiment theory, symbolic interactionism, and ritual theory. Each theory offers a different way to think about how people use art to express meaning, pass down tradition, and shape identity through shared practices like ceremonies and performances.

Embodiment Theory

Embodiment theory is associated with Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945). It is based on the idea that body is not just something we use, but something we think, feel and communicate. In many African communities, especially during cultural or spiritual events, the body becomes the center of expression. Movements, gestures, costumes and other visual elements are not separated from the message being shared. They are the message. In the performance of Central Africa, this is clear. A dancer is not just a mask or fantasy. The moment they move, this art becomes part of them. Painting, fabric, carved wood and sound gathers through the body, creating something significant and alive. This theory helps to explain why visual art and performance are deeply connected in this region. They exist together in motion, not separated

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is associated with George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969). The theory focuses on how people create shared meaning through symbols and how these symbols are shaped by everyday social life. In this view, the meaning is not corrected. It is how people interpret things together within their own cultural context. In central Africa societies, performance is full of these types of symbols. A mask can represent an ancestor, a specific beat can be worn during a rite of passage, and different colors or movements can signal important ideas such as fertility, mourning or justice. None of these meanings is explained directly. They are understood because they were taught, repeated and lived by generations. This theory helps to show how thin and scenic arts are used to transport cultural values and social identity over time.

Ritual Theory

Ritual theory as propounded by Victor Turner (1969) explains how rituals help people go through different stages of life, usually involving a change in social or spiritual identity. Turner described three stages in the ritual: separation of everyday life, an intermediate transition or phase and reintegration with a new role or understanding. This intermediate stage is where change really happens, and art plays an important role in the guidance of this process. In central Africa traditions, rituals such as initiations, funerals and healing events depend a lot on the arts. People wear symbolic masks, play rhythms that match the emotional energy of the moment and perform dances that help move the community through experience. These actions are not just for appearance. They are part of how people understand what is happening and participate in it. Turner's theory highlights how visual and performance elements are not extra, but essential tools for cultural and spiritual transformation.

These three principles help explain why the fine and performing arts in Central Africa should be studied as a connected system. The incarnation theory shows that body brings art to life. Symbolic participation shows how the meaning is made through shared understanding. The ritual theory shows how art becomes a tool for change and continuity. In this context, a carved mask is not just an object to praise. This is something to wear, move and understand in a specific cultural moment. Dance, music and performance are not only entertaining. They are how knowledge is passed, how identity is shaped, and how people stay connected to their history and each other.



CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

This study has been directed by understanding that, art is not seen as a separate activity in many Central African societies, but is experienced through a combination of different forms of art, including sculpture, music, dance, theatre, and rituals and everyday life. These forms are not divided into different subjects, but are often practiced simultaneously, which can be described as a total art experience (Anyangwe, 2022).

One of the main concepts shaping this framework is integration. In the context of this review, integration refers to the natural blending of creative practices. A carved mask might be worn during a dance. The dance may involve drumming and chanting, and the chant might include a story about ancestors or moral values. In these communities, art does not function in parts, but as a whole. It is different from Western artistic traditions where music, sculpture, painting and theater are often considered as different styles. In Central African communities, the relationship between these forms is organic and culturally embedded (African Art, 2024).

Another key concept is orality. In many African countries, traditions are transferred not through written records but through stories, performances and songs. Scholars who write on the African theater, in *Critical Stages*, suggest that orality is not just a way to pass time; it is a structured way of teaching, remembering and sharing knowledge. In this way, the performance becomes a type of living collection and the beat of each event, movement, and drums carried history with it (Kamau & Mvuyekure 2023).

Linked to this is the idea of ritual performance. In Central African Settings, the art of demonstration is often not only for entertainment, but is seen as sacred. Dance and songs are used in funeral, healing ceremonies, harvest festivals and initiation. These performances are spiritual functions. They are meant to connect the living with their gods and ancestors, to fix the sick, or bring balance to the community.

Another key idea is communal participation. In many of these societies, there is no hard line between the performer and the audience. Everyone participates—whether through clapping, singing, dancing, or simply being present. Children watch and learn. Elders teach and guide. This is how knowledge moves through the generations. It also shows that art is not for private consumption—it is for the collective. This idea appears often in Roberts' and Britannica's accounts of African artistic practice (Central African Republic, 2024).

The final idea grounding this framework is embodied knowledge. In Central African traditions, learning happens through doing, the young people don't just hear about history they dance it, carve it and sing it. This way of knowing is not about memorizing texts but it's about movement, rhythm, participation, and repetition. Art becomes the method through which values, beliefs, and identities are passed on (Osei, & Adeyemi, 2023). The review used an outline manufactured on integration, verbal communications (orality), rituals, community and embodied knowledge. This art is not as an isolated form, but as something living, something that connects people with each other and shared, through creative acts to its history.

Cameroon: Rituals, Masks, and Music as Social Tools

In Bamileke, Tikar, and Bassa groups, rituals combine masks, costumes, song, and dance to inform stories, mark transitions, and support network family members. Festivals including RIMAC exhibit how oral history and religious values are maintained thru overall performance (Shout-Africa, 2024; Miller, 2022). Masquerades like the “Elephant Mask” signify royal strength; choreography, rhythm, and pathways are guided by means of ritual leaders. Art gadgets handiest gain complete that means through overall performance.



“Bamileke Elephant Mask, Cameroon, 2014 source: THK Gallery via Artsy



Democratic Republic of the Congo: Symbolism in Ceremonial Performance

Groups which include Kuba, Yaka, Suku, and Lega combine mask and sculptures into rituals for initiation, leadership, justice, and recovery. Masks are energetic contributors; elimination from performance renders them meaningless (Onah, 2020). Documentation efforts are ongoing but similarly observe is wanted to preserve choreography, chants, testimonies, and cultural questioning.

Gabon: Spirit Possession and Visual Performance

Fang, Mitsogo, and Pygmy communities center rituals on Bwiti faith, the use of Iboga, trance, track, dance, and carved figures. Masks and statues keep ancestral strength; motion and sound cause spiritual presence (Samorini, 2024). Video recordings, community interviews, and ritual transcripts help record those traditions.

Scholarly Debates and Research Gaps

Across Central African societies, traditional artistic expressions often merge visual and performative elements in ways that challenge Western distinctions between fine arts and performance. Yet, many academic studies and institutional representations continue to divide these forms. Scholars have long debated how to properly interpret African masks, dance, sculpture, and music without losing the cultural context in which they exist. Earlier research often treated African masks as ethnographic artifacts, isolated from the rituals and performances they belong to. Museums, in particular, have been criticised for displaying masks as static objects, separated from the dance, music, and social environment that give them life (Sleigh, 2024). This approach limits understanding of African art by ignoring the communal and temporal nature of its performance. Recent scholars push back against this division. Miller (2022) argues that in Cameroon, performances involving masks and music carry layered meanings that cannot be reduced to individual parts. Similarly, Samorini (2024) emphasizes that in Gabonese Bwiti rituals, spiritual meaning emerges only through the combined use of carved objects, movement, chanting, and trance. These studies suggest a need for more integrated approaches that reflect how African communities understand and use their art.

Despite this shift, there are still gaps in the literature. First, most research tends to focus on individual countries or ethnic groups, without drawing broader comparisons across Central Africa. For example, while the symbolism of Yaka masks in the DRC has been well documented, fewer studies compare these with similar ritual functions in Cameroon or Gabon. A cross-regional view could reveal shared cultural patterns or differences shaped by geography, colonial history, or religion. Second, many academic accounts rely heavily on written descriptions and visual documentation, often neglecting oral histories, local interpretations, or the lived experience of performers and audiences. This leaves out how knowledge about art is transmitted through apprenticeship, performance, and daily practice. Third, younger generations may not be participating in these traditions at the same level, especially in urban areas. However, few studies examine how modernity, migration, or education systems are impacting the transmission of ritual arts. Understanding how these traditions are being preserved, adapted, or lost remains an underexplored area.

In summary, the literature supports the idea that Central African fine and performing arts are deeply connected, but existing studies still fall short of capturing the full complexity. There is a clear need for research that respects the integrated nature of these practices, involves local voices, and takes a broader view across regional and generational lines.



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, based dynastic science and documentary review methods. Since visit to Middle African communities is not possible, research depends on rich secondary sources such as ethics studies, cultural reports, scholars' publications and museum archives. These materials provide insight into the correct and traditional integration of performance art within central rituals, ceremonies and communal lives.

Research Design

The study used document-based ethnographic approach. This involves collecting and analyzing cultural documentation - such as previous fieldwork reports, educational studies, cultural organisation publication and institutional archives - to understand how traditional art forms are practiced and interpreted within their communities. Through this lens, studies show how masks, dance, sculpture, music, and oral stories work together.

Study Area

Research focuses on three countries in Central Africa: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Gabon. These countries were deliberately chosen due to their deep traditions in ritual performance and symbolic visual expression. Each of these countries have a representative community or ethnic groups with known history of artistic traditions (e.g., Bamileke in Cameroon, Yaka in DRC, Fang in Gabon) are examined based on existing ethnographic and cultural literature.

Sampling of Sources

A purposive sampling method was used to select relevant documents and studies. The countries were selected based on traditional art, ritual performance and their attention on symbolic meaning. Priority was given to: Ethnographic studies and dissertations, Museum publications and exhibition catalogues, Cultural heritage reports and NGO documentation, and Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025

Data Collection

Data were gathered from Academic databases (e.g., JSTOR, Google Scholar, ResearchGate), Digital archives of African museums and cultural institutions, and Cultural reports published by UNESCO, national heritage bodies, or regional cultural networks

Data Analysis

Documents were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. This includes close reading and coding to identify major themes, recurring symbols, ritual patterns and conclusion of visual and performing elements. Initial, treatment, ancestral rituals and how art is used in festivals was noted. The goal is to uncover both the social function and symbolic structure of these integrated art forms.



Ethical Considerations

The study was based entirely on publicly available sources. Full citations and proper academic referencing was used to credit original authors and institutions. No personal or sensitive information was collected. Cultural respect and sensitivity are maintained in the interpretation and presentation of traditional knowledge systems.

Limitations

The lack of primary field data means interpretations depend on how previous researchers have documented cultural practices. Some rituals may also be underreported or misunderstood in earlier studies. However, by cross-checking multiple sources, the study seeks to offer a culturally informed and respectful understanding of traditional Central African art forms.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Based on the thematic analysis of ethnographic and documentary sources, five key findings emerged that deeply reflect the integrated relationship between fine and performing arts in Central Africa. Across these 3 African countries Cameroon, the DRC, and Gabon, traditional art forms are inherently participatory and performative. This finding aligns with the conclusions of Miller (2022) and Samorini (2024), who demonstrate that traditional rituals rely heavily on the integration of visual symbols and live performance.

The symbolic meanings behind these art forms are closely tied to spiritual and moral instruction. This observation echoes the studies by Njoku (2020) and Obasi (2022), which emphasize the ritual use of masks and objects as conveyors of ancestral and ethical meaning. The symbolic meanings behind these art forms are closely tied to spiritual and moral instruction. This observation echoes the studies by Njoku (2020) and Obasi (2022), which emphasize the ritual use of masks and objects as conveyors of ancestral and ethical meaning.

Ritual performance promotes unity and social harmony, strengthening collective identity through shared participation. This supports previous research by Sleigh (2024) and UNESCO (2023), who note the role of performance in reaffirming communal bonds and identity.

Continuity and Adaptation in Contemporary Contexts

The communities of Central Africa have continued to adapt artistic traditions to new settings. These results correspond with findings by Ndansi (2021), who showed how traditional forms are preserved and modified in urban festivals and performances.

Cultural Economy: The integration of fine and scenic arts into central Africa societies has unexplored potential to stimulate local economic development. This aligns with the discoveries of Shout-Africa (2024) and the Metropolitan Art Museum (2023), which highlight the cultural and economic meaning of community performance traditions. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (RDC), cultural protection workshops and the establishment of community museums in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi represent efforts to preserve and present traditional art forms. These initiatives aim to achieve a wider audience through exhibitions and performances, contributing not only to cultural preservation, but also to economic engagement through the arts. Similarly, the use of Gabon of traditional performance elements such as prey masks, spiritual music and symbolic rituals - exemplifies how heritage can be taken to support local economies. These



cultural expressions, incorporated into rituals, such as Bwiti ceremonies, artists, artists and artisans, allowing community participation in a growing cultural economy.

Touristic Value: The tourist appeal of Central Africa's cultural traditions is not only in its visual and auditory spectacle, but also in its rich narrative and symbolic depth. Ceremonies such as the Bwiti rituals in Gabon offer the powerful sensory and emotional experiences of the tourist through music, dance and spiritual symbolism.

Tourism based on such performances can be structured on sustainable and community models. Cultural artists and custody can guide visitors through immersive learning experiences that respect and show traditional knowledge. These forms of tourism attract cultural tourists, filmmakers and humanists who seek authentic and educational encounters. However, there is a need for caution. For cultural tourism to be significant and ethical, governments and NGOs must work to ensure that sacred rituals are not diluted or marketed. A moral tourism model must be led by the community, defend cultural integrity and prioritize the conservation and documentation of traditional knowledge systems.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These arts are not independent discipline, but parts of an integrated cultural system. Rituals such as masquerades, Bwiti ceremonies, and initiation rites show how artistic expression in Central Africa operates as a living, communal experience. The art is not created for observation alone - it is applied, embodied, and collectively shared. It acts as a store of moral instructions, ancestral communication and community relations. As the older generations pass on artistic knowledge using symbolic forms and performance, they ensure that the cultural heritage still remain rigid despite external pressures such as globalization, urbanization and institutional misinformation. Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are offered:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Prepare the institutional and educational representation of African art.**
Museums, schools and cultural policy-makers should adopt integrated approaches who show how the African communities see and practice arts as both visual and performance.
- **Support community -led documentation and protection.**
The elderly, local artists and carriers of tradition should be included in cultural protection projects to ensure authenticity and continuity of knowledge.
- **Encourage ethnology research in African art studies.**
Future scholars should use participating and culturally sensitive methods that respect the living experiences of African communities rather than implementing harsh western categories.
- **Invest in inter -state art education.**
Governments and NGOs should support programs that allow youth to learn traditional art through practice, storytelling and mentorship from local patron.
- **Promote cultural festivals and exchange.**
Regional festivals that celebrate integrated African art should be promoted as platforms to cultural pride, tourism development and communities to share knowledge.



Ethical Clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from all participants in this study. Participants were informed that the exercise was purely for academic purposes and that their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Ogunsile Joanna conceived the study and designed the methodology. Ogunsile Joanna collated the data, Joanna handled the analysis and interpretation, and Joanna drafted the initial manuscript. All authors critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and the similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets used to support the conclusions of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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