

REWA

Embodied Spirits

Masquerades of Igboland

September 2026





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REWA

VISUAL ARTIST

REWA is a Nigerian contemporary artist whose bold, narrative-driven portraiture explores African identity, Igbo heritage and the changing role of women. She calls her practice *Igbo Vernacular Art*, drawing on the visual language of her heritage: its Uli line, coral and ivory, its masquerade regalia, telling contemporary stories of womanhood, identity and belonging.

She has held seven solo exhibitions, four duo shows and more than a dozen group exhibitions across Africa, Asia, Europe and North America, including The Africa Centre in London, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, the Museum of Ethnology and Cultures of the World (MuEC) in Barcelona and the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans (CACNO). Her work has shown at Art Miami, Art Dubai and the RMB Latitudes Art Fair in Cape Town.

Her paintings have reached far beyond the gallery. They appear in Usher's music video *Ruin*, directed by Dave Meyers and released just before his Super

Bowl LVIII performance, and across television including NBC's *Law & Order*, ABC's *Black-ish* and the Oprah Winfrey Network's *All the Single Ladies*.

In 2024 she became the first African artist to design the official poster of the Carnaval de Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the second-largest carnival in the world, bringing Uli and Nsibidi iconography to a global stage. Her work was featured on the cover of *The Southern Review* (Summer 2025), the acclaimed literary journal published by Louisiana State University and one of the oldest and most prestigious in the United States. Her works are held in the Afreximbank Contemporary Art Collection and AXA XL, and in the collections of Beth Rudin DeWoody and CCH Pounder.

Alongside her studio practice, REWA is the founder of Cranstoun, an investment fund she launched in 2020 to give African investors access to global markets.

REWA is a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader (2026) and an Aliko Dangote Foundation Fellow (2026), and a recipient of the Veuve Clicquot Bold Woman Award (2024).

In her own words

I grew up in the diaspora, an outsider to my own culture. I taught myself to paint, and painting became my way back to it.

I did not begin with masquerades. I began with women. First, the West African deities of *The Pantheon*; then the women of title, the *ndi otu odu* of Onitsha, with ivory at the arms and legs and coral at the throat. Slowly, the work moved from personal identity to a shared one, from who I am to who we are.

The masquerades came when I started to ask a simple question: How do we see African culture? Too often, we encounter it behind glass, as something finished, a mask in a museum case. But the masquerade is not an object. It is a body the spirit can wear and dance. It still walks the streets of Onitsha. I wanted to paint that life, not its afterlife.

Behind every masquerade is a whole economy of makers: the carvers, the weavers, the drummers, the dancers and the apprenticeships through which knowledge is passed on. My hope for this work is that it helps us sustain not only the art, but also its makers: the drum, the drummer and the dance.

REWA

Embodied Spirits: Masquerades of Igboland

Embodied Spirits gathers new paintings drawn from the living masquerade traditions of Onitsha, in south-eastern Nigeria. It is the most recent movement in a body of work REWA calls *Igbo Vernacular Art*: portraiture that takes the visual language of her heritage, its Uli line, its coral and ivory, its masquerade regalia, and tells contemporary stories of womanhood, identity and belonging.

The series completes an arc. It opens with the Pantheon, the female deities REWA first painted in 2016, women imagined as the source of power and of story. It moves to *ndi otu odu*: Women of the Elephant Tusk, the titled women of Onitsha painted at life scale, a culture held in the hand rather than behind glass. And it arrives at the masquerades themselves, where the spirit is not depicted but embodied, worn and danced by the living.

The animating idea is that culture is not a relic. A masquerade is a supply chain and a spiritual technology at once. An Ijele takes about a hundred makers six months to build and is performed for a single afternoon before it is dismantled. Nothing about it is made to last, and yet it has outlasted empires because it lives in skill rather than in stone. To paint it is to argue that living heritage is an economy worth investing in, and that the people who carry its knowledge are worth supporting.

Women run through the whole series as makers, patrons and subjects. They uphold the culture, carry it and keep it alive. Presented in Lagos as part of the Aliko Dangote Foundation's convening, in collaboration with the World Economic Forum, the works ask an audience of industry and capital to see African culture not behind glass, but alive.

The Masquerades

A mask is not a disguise. It is a body the spirit can wear, and dance. Five masquerades of Onitsha, each with its own duty, its own music, its own meaning.

Ijele

Eze Mmuo, the King of Masquerades

The name Ijele carries the sense of the majestic, the great. When it enters the square in Onitsha, every other masquerade falls silent. Standing roughly four metres tall, it is built on a vast circular frame of bamboo and cane, enriched with wood, raffia, foam, cloth and layered textiles. A python, *eke*, coils across its middle in the central division known as *Eke-Ogba*, separating the upper tier, *mkpu Ijele*, from the lower, *akpakwulu Ijele*. The structure becomes a moving sculpture of the Igbo world: warriors, elders, animals, spirits, rulers and episodes of communal life gathered into one body.

The upper tier was historically associated with subordinate masquerades that performed upon the structure; today their presence is recalled through sculpted and modelled figures. Across the body, each motif carries weight. *enyi*, the elephant speaks of resilience and unopposed leadership; *eke*, the python, conveys royalty, continuity and cosmic authority. A mirror fixed into the body turns away malevolent gazes and is believed to expose wrongdoers in the crowd. Notably, Ijele avoids fixed masculine or feminine markers: it represents the community as a whole rather than any single person.

Ijele traces its origins to the Omambala River basin and to communities including Anam, Aguleri, Umueri and Anaku, its lineage associated particularly with Umudiana in Umueri, from where it travelled to neighbouring towns. It appears in the dry season to call for fertility and a good harvest, and at the great communal moments: New Yam festivals, coronations, the funerals of important titled people. Its arrival is not solitary but processional, accompanied by attendants, supporting masquerades, musicians and singers. The rhythms of *igba ino*, the four drums, together with other instruments, chants and songs, carry prayers, histories and messages between the visible and spiritual worlds.

IN THE WORK

REWA paints Ijele at full, towering scale. Its architecture, motifs, colour and accumulated labour are rendered as a living economy rather than a relic: a monument that survives not by remaining fixed, but by being continually remade.

Authority, and the economy that carries it

Its movement is stately and deliberate. As the King of Masquerades, Ijele embodies authority, wisdom, justice and ancestral force. It may reinforce moral values, address communal concerns and restore social cohesion, while its commanding presence can halt every other performance in the arena. It is spectacle, but never spectacle alone: its beauty is inseparable from ritual, memory and collective identity.

UNESCO inscribed Ijele on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, naming the real risk plainly: not simply the loss of an object, but the loss of the people who carry the knowledge. An Ijele requires a large community of specialist makers: framework builders, carvers, textile artists, tailors, embroiderers, beadworkers, metalworkers, musicians, dancers and cultural custodians. Months of labour culminate in an appearance that may last only a single afternoon before the structure is dismantled.

That apparent impermanence is the source of its endurance. Ijele lives in skill rather than in stone. Its preparation mobilises patronage, distributes resources across a specialised creative economy and creates opportunities for performance, tourism, documentation and cultural exchange. As Ijele enters festivals, museums and international exhibitions, that visibility brings both opportunity and responsibility: adaptation must not strip the masquerade of the spiritual and communal integrity that gives it meaning.

STRUCTURE	A circular frame of bamboo and cane, dressed in wood, raffia, foam, cloth and layered textiles; the python band <i>eke-ogba</i> divides <i>mkpu Ijele</i> above from <i>akpakwulu Ijele</i> below.
PERFORMANCE	Processional and stately, with attendants, supporting masquerades, musicians and singers; <i>igba ino</i> , the four drums, with <i>ichaka</i> (the beaded gourd / calabash), <i>okpokolo</i> (the gong) and <i>ogene</i> (the flute).
SOCIAL ROLE	Authority, wisdom, justice and mediation, moral instruction and social commentary carried in public, at New Yam festivals, coronations and the funerals of titled people.



Ijele

2026 · Acrylic on canvas · 9 × 9 ft

Scan to watch
the Ijele dance





ONITSHA · IJELE IN PERFORMANCE

Cloth cut, layered and stitched by hand. Roughly a hundred makers, six months of work and one afternoon of dancing.





DETAIL · THE UPPER TIER

Warriors, elders and a rider on a pale horse ranged across *mkpu ijele*, the tier that is read from every corner of the square.



DETAIL · THE LOWER TIER, AKPAKWURU

Warriors, elders and animals crowd the *mkpu ijele* above; below, panel after panel of appliqué, a moving sculpture of the Igbo world, assembled to be taken apart.

Agbogho Mmuo

The Dancing Maiden Spirit

Agbogho Mmuo, the Dancing Maiden Spirit, is the masquerade of the beautiful maiden: an idealised young woman with serene, carved features and brilliant appliqué. Although traditionally performed by a man, the dancer's body all but disappears beneath the female spirit he embodies. It is masking as reverence: masculine strength giving way to honour feminine grace.

Across Onitsha, the maiden masquerade is loved for its colourful regalia, delicate and precise dance steps, and graceful choreography. It is associated with cultural groups including Obiligbo and Nkolika, and appears at burials, communal celebrations and other important functions. Its lightness distinguishes it from the fiercer masquerades that share the arena. Where those figures may test strength or discipline, Agbogho Mmuo embodies beauty, poise and the community's memory of its daughters.

Music is inseparable from its presence. The rhythm of the dance is guided by the *oja* flute and supported by *igba* drums. *Mgbiligba Ukwu*, the bells worn at the ankles, turn each step into sound, announcing the maiden before she is fully seen. A ceremonial horsetail carried by the spirit evokes dignity and authority. Together, movement, music and regalia create an immersive encounter between the physical and spiritual worlds.

To watch Agbogho Mmuo is to see a whole set of ideals made visible: how a people pictures youth, modesty and elegance, and how it carries those ideals forward through performance rather than preserving them in stone. The maiden is not a portrait of any one woman. She is a spirit of womanhood renewed each time she is danced.

IN THE WORK

The maiden spirit sits at the heart of REWA's argument that culture is made, carried and upheld collectively. She paints Agbogho Mmuo in full regalia, poised between stillness and the next step of the dance. The ceremonial horsetail, rhythmic bells and layered costume make music and movement visible, while the male performer's concealed body gives form to a feminine ancestral presence.



Agbogho Mmuo

2026 · Acrylic on canvas · 6 × 4 ft

Scan to watch
the maiden dance



Masking as
reverence:
masculine
strength giving
way to honour
feminine grace.

DETAIL · AGBOGHO
MMUO

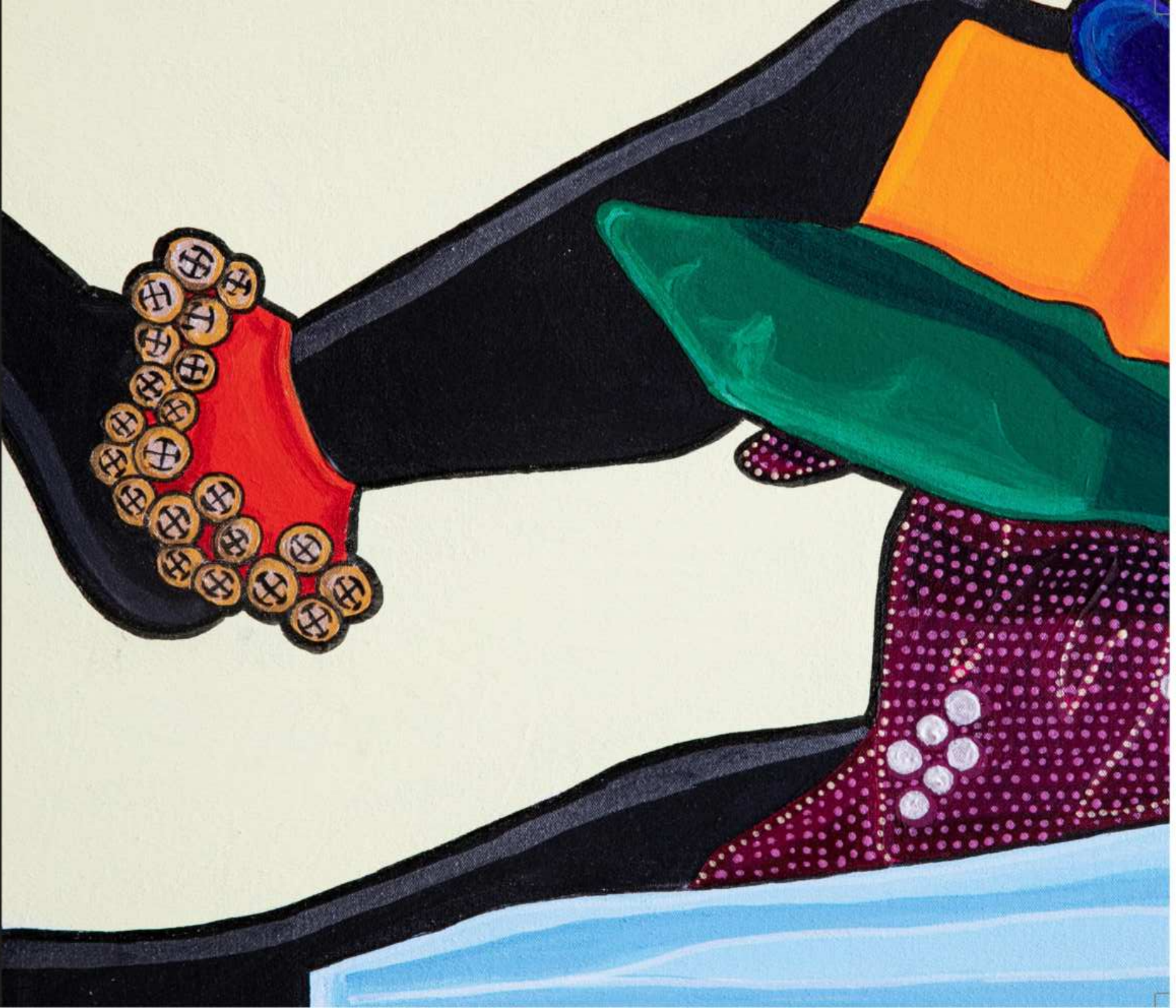




THE MAIDEN ABROAD

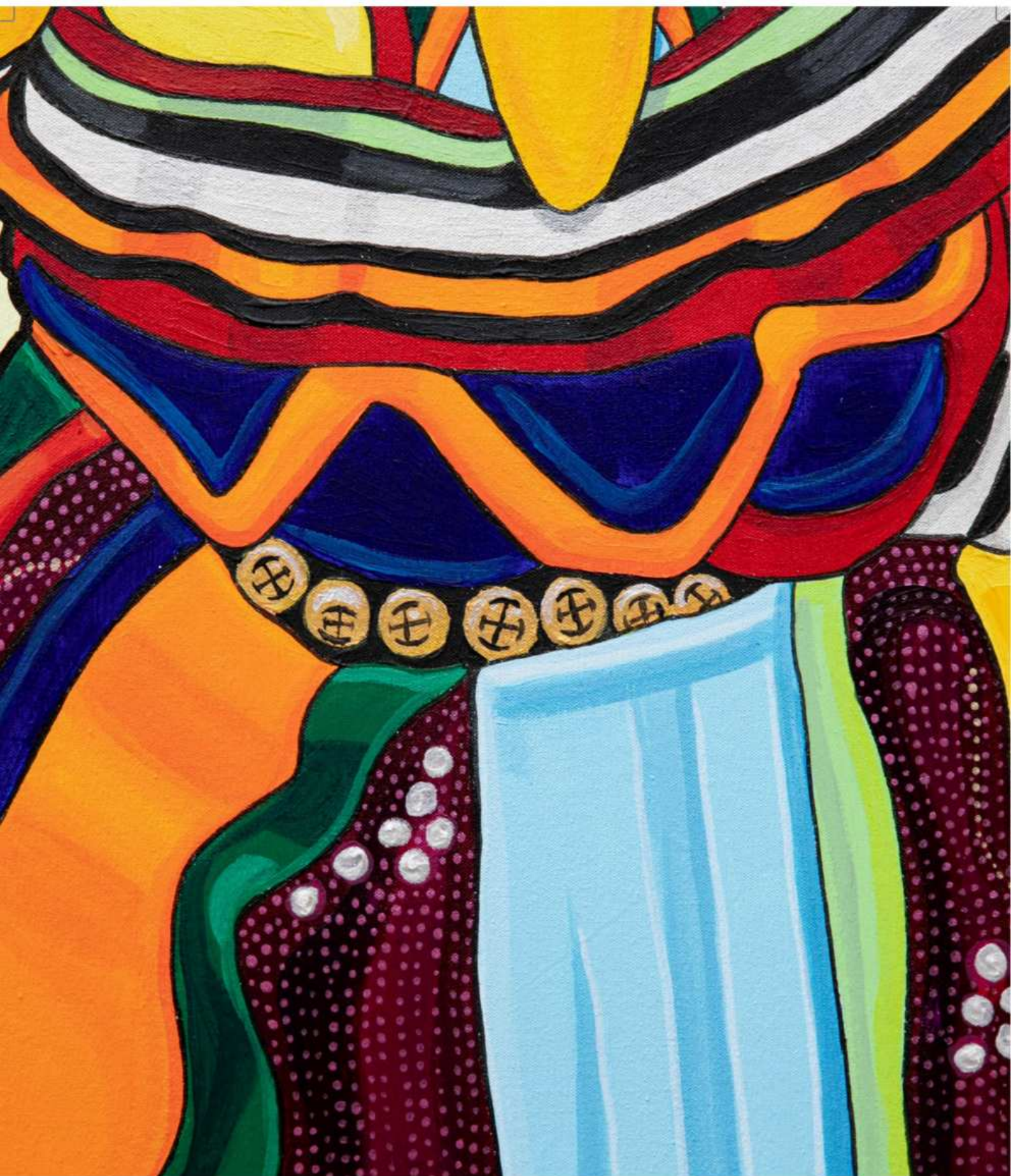
Carnaval de Santa Cruz de Tenerife

Official poster, 2025. REWA is the first African artist commissioned to design it, carrying Uli and Nsibidi iconography, and the masking language of Onitsha, onto the stage of the world's second-largest carnival.



DETAIL · MGBILIGBA UKWU

Brass ankle bells turn each step into sound. The maiden is heard before she is seen.



DETAIL · BELT AND SKIRTS

Beaded belt over layered cloth: the waist that carries the whole weight of the regalia.

Otu Iche

The Stone-Thrower

Otu Iche is a fierce and youthful masquerade, energetic and troublesome in the manner of Agaba. It belongs to the world of Onitsha's young men and carries the charge of their initiation.

It appears at *Iwaji*, the new-yam festival, and at the burials of male youths who have been initiated into the masquerade cult. Historically, it engaged in inter-village contests, floggings and mock battles in the manner of Ulaga. This is not spectacle for its own sake. It is a rite of passage: a proving ground on which courage, discipline and belonging are demonstrated and earned. The epithet "the Stone-Thrower" carries the memory of those charged encounters between neighbouring quarters.

For all its ferocity, Otu Iche is bound by rules and meaning. It marks a threshold in a young man's life, the moment he assumes responsibilities to the masquerade institution and the community, and it does so publicly, in colour and motion, so that the whole town witnesses the passage.

IN THE WORK

REWA paints Otu Iche as a pair of figures charged with movement, the cloth and energy of the arena caught at the edge of a battle.



Otu Iche

2026 · Acrylic on canvas · 6 × 6 ft

Scan to watch
the Otu Iche dance





DETAIL · WOOL, BEAD AND GLOVE

Layer upon layer of knitted wool and cloth, made to be flung about the arena; the ferocity lies as much in the making as in the dance.



DETAIL · THE HEADDRESS

Wool worked into flame. Each mass is knitted, dyed and stitched by hand before it ever moves.



DETAIL · HEMS AND GLOVES

Where cloth meets the ground: the part of the masquerade seen most closely, and remembered, by the crowd.

Izaga

The Stilt Masquerade

Izaga is a stilt masquerade seen in Onitsha but not regarded as being of Onitsha origin. It walks high above the crowd on tall wooden stilts, crossing fences and boundaries with remarkable ease. A machete forms part of its commanding appearance, held at height as an emblem of balance, daring and controlled threat.

Where Ijele astonishes by mass and Agbogho Mmuo by grace, Izaga astonishes by height, movement and improbable control. The performer trains for years to walk, turn and dance on the stilts. Its display is a feat of mastery as much as entertainment, drawing every eye upward at festivals and communal celebrations.

Its verticality carries its own meaning. To raise the human figure so far above the ground is to place it between earth and sky. The masquerade becomes a bridge between the everyday and the elevated, the living and the ancestral. It is heritage enacted at a great height, a reminder that a culture can lift its people up.

IN THE WORK

REWA paints Izaga at a towering scale, emphasising the tension between height, balance and controlled danger. The extended stilts, raised machete and patchwork body turn athletic skill into charged vertical form.



Izaga

2025 · Acrylic on canvas · 9 × 4 ft



DETAIL · MASK, MACHETE, PATCHWORK

The face at four metres up: a helmet, a curtain of raffia, and a blade held for balance as much as threat.

Mmuo Ogonogo

The Tall Ghost · Mmuo Avia, also called *Gq̣q̣menti*

Mmuo Ogonogo, or Mmuo Avia, is among the highest-ranking masquerades in Onitsha. Known affectionately as *Gq̣q̣menti*, Government, it acts as custodian, watchdog and enforcement arm of custom, maintaining checks and balances over both the monarchy and the town. Its authority is spiritual, moral, social and political: it checks political cruelty and holds the line of social and legal order.

Its duties are grave. It carries sacred funerary rites, maintains discipline and morals, and initiates young boys and women past menopause into the masquerade cult. It is the community's enforcement and its conscience. Alone among the masquerades, it may dethrone an Obi once it sits upon its throne, the *ukpo*; its verdict is final and cannot be appealed. Its presence commands total silence, above all at traditional burials. It chants like a nightingale, soberly or joyfully, before returning to the world of the dead.

Its lineage is traced to Igala, the maternal home of Obi Ezearoli, the eighth Obi of Onitsha and a grandson of the Attah of Igala. Oral history holds that Ezearoli returned from exile with members of his mother's people and their *egwugwu*, settling them at Obikporo. Through this history, Mmuo Ogonogo carries both Igala ancestry and a distinctive place within Onitsha's institutions.

IN THE WORK

REWA paints the Tall Ghost as majesty, restraint and institutional power: a presence whose covered face, pooled cloth and disciplined silence carry more weight than another masquerade's noise.

The verdict, and the making of it

It acts against serious breaches of custom and may take part in the punishment, ostracism or banishment of offenders. The source tradition also associates it with marital enforcement, including sending a persistently disobedient wife back to her father's home. Its arrival commands total silence, especially at traditional burials; it may halt other performances and, by some accounts, even the royal drums, *Egwu Ota*.

Mmuo Ogonogo may personify or recall a deceased spiritual head, village elder or red-cap chief, keeping the memory and authority of the departed present among the living. Its meaning lies in continuity, rebirth and ancestral power: the conviction that those who have gone before continue to watch, protect and guide the town.

The making and first outing of a new Mmuo Ogonogo sustain a specialised economy and a communal rite of their own. Trained makers hold the knowledge required to erect the tall, concealed structure and are paid for that expertise. A newly completed masquerade is welcomed publicly, with joy, gifts and rites of passage that may include the initiation of young boys. Its construction therefore renews not only an image of ancestral authority, but also the network of makers, patrons and initiates through whom the institution survives.

STANDING

Custodian and watchdog of Onitsha custom, keeping checks and balances over both the monarchy and the town; known affectionately as *Gọọmenti*, Government.

AUTHORITY

Executive enforcement of the masquerade cult; alone among the masquerades it may dethrone an Obi seated upon the *ukpo*. Its verdict is final and cannot be appealed.

VOICE

A chant compared to the nightingale, sober or joyful according to the rite, and then a return to the world of the dead.



Mmuo Ogonogo

2026 · Acrylic on canvas · 9 × 6 ft



DETAIL · THE KNOTTED CROWN

No face at all. The Tall Ghost is cloth, height and silence, and its verdict cannot be appealed.



DETAIL · THE TASSELS

Plaited cords and tassels at the crown. Everything that marks rank here is made of thread.



DETAIL · WHERE IT MEETS THE GROUND

Cloth pooled on the earth. The Tall Ghost has no visible feet: the town is not permitted to see them.

REWA at the World Economic Forum

Alongside these paintings, REWA has made the argument in writing. In an essay for the World Economic Forum, she takes the Ijele masquerade as her starting point and asks what it teaches us about value. An Ijele takes about a hundred people six months to build and is performed for a single afternoon before it is dismantled. Nothing about it is made to last, and yet it has outlasted empires because it lives in skill rather than in stone.

That paradox, she argues, is the point. Cultural and creative industries already account for around 3.1% of global GDP and nearly 50 million jobs. In Africa the trajectory is steeper still: UNESCO and Afreximbank estimate the continent's creative industries could create more than 20 million jobs and add 20 billion dollars to GDP. Living heritage, the masquerade among it, is the under-counted half of that same economy, and the case for investing in the people who carry it is an economic case, not only a cultural one.

SCAN TO READ THE FULL ESSAY

“What a Nigerian masquerade can teach the creative economy about keeping culture alive”

World Economic Forum · weforum.org









Embodied Spirits: Masquerades of Igboland by REWA

Presented in Lagos within the Aliko Dangote Foundation's convening,
in collaboration with the World Economic Forum.

Lagos, Nigeria
September 2026