

Aesthetic Intelligence as Governance Infrastructure: Movement, Colour and Objects in Anaañ Data Protocol

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Abstract— Governance is commonly associated with written law, bureaucratic institutions, and archival records. This association privileges text and marginalises other modes through which societies regulate behaviour, allocate rights, and assert authority. Among the Anaañ of south-eastern Nigeria, governance is also enacted through aesthetics. Movement, colour, and objects operate as protocols that determine who may perform, who may witness, and who may know. This article proposes the concept of aesthetic intelligence to describe this phenomenon. Aesthetic intelligence refers to the use of sensory and material forms, including dance, chromatic application, and regalia, as systems of data governance. These systems encode law, mark jurisdiction, and enforce restrictions. They function without writing and persist across generations. Three Anaañ protocols illustrate this argument: the movement of awieagwo, the soldiers for defence of Anaañ sovereignty; the application of nnom, kaolin used in ritual access; and the regalia of Ekpo, the Anaañ mask protocol. Analysis of these cases demonstrates that aesthetics are not ornamental but infrastructural.

Keywords: Anaañ aesthetic governance; Indigenous data sovereignty; opacity; awieagwo protocols; Ekpo material law.

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INTRODUCTION

Governance is commonly associated with written law, bureaucratic institutions and archival records. This association privileges text and marginalises other modes through which societies regulate behaviour, allocate rights and assert authority. Among the Anaañ of south-eastern Nigeria, governance is also enacted through aesthetics. Movement, colour and objects operate as protocols that determine who may perform, who may witness and who may know.

This article proposes the concept of ‘aesthetic intelligence’ to describe this phenomenon. Aesthetic intelligence refers to the use of sensory and material forms — dance, chromatic application, regalia — as systems of data governance. These systems encode law, mark jurisdiction and enforce restrictions. They function without writing and persist across generations.

Three Anaañ protocols illustrate this argument: the movement of awieagwo, the soldiers for defence of Anaañ sovereignty; the application of nnom, kaolin used in ritual access; and the regalia of Ekpo, the Anaañ mask protocol. Analysis of these cases demonstrates that aesthetics are not ornamental but infrastructural.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Governance and the Limits of the Written Archive

Anthropological and political scholarship on Africa has long emphasised oral tradition, lineage, and elders as mechanisms of governance. However, the material and aesthetic dimensions of these systems remain under-theorised. The archive is often treated as text. This privileges writing and excludes performance, colour, and objects as sources of law. Recent work in Indigenous Studies challenges this. The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance articulate rights to Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics (Global Indigenous Data Alliance, 2019, p. 3). They position data not as neutral information but as relational and governed. Aesthetic protocols fit this framework. They are data. They are governed. They produce collective benefit. This paper extends CARE to performance and material culture. It argues that aesthetic intelligence is a pre-digital form of access control.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and the Senses

Christen and Anderson (2013) have demonstrated that Indigenous communities manage knowledge through protocols of circulation. Not all knowledge is meant to be open. Some knowledge is restricted by gender, age, initiation, or lineage. These restrictions are ethical, not secretive (Christen & Anderson, 2013, p. 197). The senses are the interface. Movement, colour, and sound carry governance information. To see a mask, to hear a song, to witness a dance is to access data. Restricting that sensory access

is equivalent to restricting database access. This framework allows Anaañ aesthetic practices to be read not as culture but as infrastructure.

Performance as Governance in Africa

Scholars of African performance have documented the political work of masquerade, dance, and ritual. Barber (2007) demonstrates how Yoruba orature encodes law through performance. Achebe (2011) and Jeyifo (1984) analyse masquerade as political commentary and enforcement. Among the Anaañ, these dynamics are present but specific. The institutions are not generic African tradition. They are Anaañ: awieagwo, nnom, Ekpo. This specificity matters for sovereignty. To collapse Anaañ practice into Ibibio or Igbo categories is to erase the data governance system itself. Messenger (1960) documents Anaañ political autonomy and distinguishes Anaañ institutions from those of neighbouring Ibibio groups.

Visuality, Opacity and the Right to Look

Mirzoeff (2011) provides a critical link between aesthetics and governance through the concept of visibility. Visuality is the authority to classify, separate, and aestheticise in order to make power appear self-evident (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 3). The inverse is the right to look, the claim to see and to be seen on one's own terms (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 1). Complementing Mirzoeff, Glissant (1997) offers a framework for understanding the right to not be fully known. Glissant argues that communities must retain the right to opacity against demands for transparency, legibility, and extraction (Glissant, 1997, p. 190). Opacity is not the absence of information. It is a sovereign protocol that governs what becomes visible and what remains internal. *Anaañ* protocols of awieagwo, nnom, and Ekpo operate within this tension. They are technologies of visibility: they decide who is allowed to see, what can be seen, and under what conditions. Simultaneously, they enact opacity by withholding movement, colour, and objects from unauthorised circulation. The restriction of spectatorship, the regulation of nnom application, and the prohibition of Ekpo reproduction are not secrecy for its own sake. They are assertions of sovereign control over aesthetic data. Reading Anaañ aesthetics through both visibility and opacity positions performance and material culture not as passive objects of study, but as active enactments of governance and refusal.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two interlocking frameworks.

The conceptual framework is *aesthetic intelligence as governance infrastructure*. This concept proposes that aesthetic forms - movement, colour and objects - function as technologies of data governance. Within this framework, three analytic tools operate: 1)

access control, the regulation of who may perform, witness or know; 2) *protocol*, the codified rules that govern circulation; and 3) *opacity*, the sovereign right to withhold. Applied to Anaañ practice, this framework reads awieagwo, nnom and Ekpo not as culture but as operational systems of law.

The theoretical framework draws from four bodies of work. First, the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance provide an ethics of Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility and Ethics (Global Indigenous Data Alliance). Second, visibility studies (Mirzoeff) frame aesthetics as technologies of power and the right to look. Third, opacity theory (Glissant) asserts the right to remain partially illegible to extractive systems. Fourth, Indigenous data sovereignty scholarship (Christen and Anderson; Smith) insists that knowledge circulation is governed, not open by default. Together, these theories position Anaañ aesthetics as political technology rather than ornament, and authorise the reading of performance and material as infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses archival analysis, published ethnography and community protocols. Primary sources include Messenger (1960) on Anaañ political organisation and Udoka (1984) on Anaañ chromatic systems. Analysis centres Anaañ terminology and refuses conflation with neighbouring terms except where cited sources require it.

Limitations include restricted access to some Ekpo materials due to the right to withhold. This limitation is itself data. It demonstrates that governance and opacity are active.

Positionality: This paper is written from a commitment to Anaañ intellectual sovereignty. It does not seek to expose restricted knowledge. It seeks to theorise the existence of governance through aesthetics. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, research must be accountable to the communities it studies (Smith 10).

AESTHETIC INTELLIGENCE AS GOVERNANCE INFRASTRUCTURE IN ANAAÑ SOCIETY

Aesthetic protocols among the Anaañ are not ornamental. They are operational systems for the allocation of rights, responsibilities and restrictions. Three domains demonstrate this: movement of awieagwo, colour of nnom and objects of Ekpo. Each functions as a form of access control. Each enacts sovereignty by determining who may see, who may perform and who may know.

Case 1: Movement - awieagwo as Security Protocol

Among the Anaañ, awieagwo constitute the soldiers for the defence of Anaañ sovereignty at both clan and collective Anaañ levels (Messenger, 1960). Performance of

movement by this group is highly codified and restricted. Drill formations, weapon dances and processional patterns are not public entertainment. They are visible enactments of political authority and territorial claim.

The chromatic protocol of awieagwo is central to this governance. As Arnold Udoka demonstrates in "Ekong Songs of the Annang," awieagwo performance deploys a triad of white, black and red with specific legal and ritual meanings (Udoka 70). White denotes purification and ancestral authorisation. Black signals war readiness and defence. Red marks danger, blood and the activation of sovereign force. The application and combination of these colours regulate who may perform, what level of authority is being enacted, and what kind of access is granted to spectators. The colours are not decorative. They are instructions.

Access to training in awieagwo movement is lineage-based and gated by initiation. Only initiated members may learn specific steps, formations or weapon handling sequences. Public performance occurs only during sanctioned moments such as clan defence rituals, funerals of title holders or collective Anaañ assemblies. Unauthorised imitation or performance outside these contexts is treated as a breach of governance, not simply as cultural appropriation.

This protocol illustrates aesthetic intelligence as infrastructure. Movement and colour together encode information about rank, readiness and jurisdiction. The body becomes a database that is legible only to those with the right to read it. Messenger documents Anaañ political autonomy and distinguishes Anaañ institutions from those of neighbouring Ibibio groups, noting that Anaañ social organisation maintains distinct structures of authority and defence (Messenger 45). The performance of awieagwo movement materialises that distinction in space. To withhold the movement from public view is to withhold the capacity to mobilise, and therefore to maintain sovereignty.

The right to withhold movement extends to spectatorship. Certain formations may be viewed only by initiated elders or by specific clan representatives. Others are prohibited to women, children or outsiders. This is not secrecy for its own sake. It is data governance and opacity in practice. The movement and its colours contain tactical knowledge. Restricting their circulation protects the community from external surveillance and internal misuse.

Case 2: Colour - nnom as Access Control

Nnom, kaolin or white clay powder, functions as a primary chromatic protocol in Anaañ ritual life. Its application marks status, purity and permission within ritual space. Nnom is used in burial rites, healing ceremonies and purification procedures. Its presence signals that a space, object or person has been brought under specific governance protocols.

The meaning of white as *nnom* is not isolated to ritual. As Udoka (1984) documents, Anaañ chromatic systems operate as a triad where white, black, and red carry distinct governance functions (p. 70). White denotes purification, ancestral presence and neutrality. Black signals authority and defence. Red marks activation, danger and transition. This system appears across *awieagwo*, Ekpo and domestic ritual, demonstrating that colour is a consistent technology of access control.

Access to *nnom* is regulated. The preparation, storage and application of *nnom* are the responsibility of designated lineage custodians. Only those with the right to apply *nnom* may do so. The pattern, quantity and location of application are not arbitrary. They encode information about the type of rite, the status of the participant and the degree of access granted.

Nnom also operates in key social and performative contexts beyond formal ritual. It is applied to women to announce the arrival of a new born baby, marking the child's entry into the community and the mother's transition in status. It is used on children's masquerades, regulating youthful participation and signalling that the performance occurs under community sanction. It is also applied to **awieagwo** during processions and defence rituals, where the white markings denote authorisation to act on behalf of the collective.

Importantly, *nnom* as colour on masks or on a wooden baby doll is not decorative. On Ekpo masks, *nnom* indicates purification, ancestral presence, or neutrality within the ritual field (Udoka, 1984, p. 70). The specific placement and coverage communicate whether the mask is in a state of activation, mourning, or mediation. On a wooden baby doll, *nnom* marks the object as a ritual surrogate — it signifies a child's birth, loss, or spiritual protection, and governs who may handle or display the doll. In both cases, the colour carries legible governance data. To misread it as ornament is to misread the protocol.

For example, during burial rites, *nnom* may be applied to the body of the deceased, to ritual specialists and to designated mourners. The specific configuration communicates the relationship of the living to the dead and to the ancestors. To apply *nnom* without authorisation is to violate protocol. It is to assert a right that has not been granted.

Some published ethnographies use the term 'nzu' to describe white clay in Igbo contexts. This paper uses *nnom* to maintain terminological accuracy for Anaañ practice. The distinction matters because the rules governing *nnom* are specific to Anaañ institutions and may not map directly onto the rules governing similar materials elsewhere.

Colour here operates as metadata. It tells viewers who is inside the protocol and who is outside. It marks thresholds between sacred and mundane, between authorised and unauthorised. In this way, nnom performs the function of an access badge. It is aesthetic intelligence that regulates participation through both visibility and opacity.

Case 3: Objects - Ekpo as Encrypted Governance Data

Ekpo refers to the Anaañ mask protocol and its associated regalia, including masks, staffs and insignia. Ekpo objects function as encrypted databases of law, history and authority. The objects themselves contain information, but that information is accessible only under specific conditions. The governance of Ekpo is multi-layered. First, there are rules regarding who may carve the objects. Carving is restricted to artisans with the proper training and authorisation. Second, there are rules regarding who may wear the regalia. Wearing is limited to initiated members of Ekpo during sanctioned performances. Third, there are rules regarding when and where the objects may be displayed. Certain Ekpo performances occur only during funerals of specific title holders or during communal rites of passage. Fourth, there are rules regarding spectatorship. Some performances may be viewed by the general community. Others are restricted to initiated members only.

Photography, drawing and verbal description of certain Ekpo objects are prohibited. This is the 'right to withhold' and opacity in material form. The prohibition protects the integrity of the data contained in the object. It prevents decontextualised circulation that could lead to misinterpretation or misuse. Where published works reference neighbouring groups, those terms are retained and attributed to those sources only. For Anaañ practice this paper uses Ekpo to reflect the specific Anaañ mask protocol. Messenger (1960) notes differences between Anaañ and Ibibio social organisation, and this distinction extends to ritual governance structures (p. 67).

Ekpo objects therefore exemplify aesthetic intelligence as data governance. The object is not merely symbolic. It is a record. It is a licence. It is a restriction. The right to see, to touch or to reproduce the object is the right to access the information it contains.

Synthesis: Three Protocols, One Infrastructure

Across movement, colour and objects, a single logic operates. Aesthetic elements are used to allocate access. They determine who can perform, who can witness and who can know. This allocation is activated through performance and enforced through social sanction. These protocols meet the criteria of the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance. They enact Collective Benefit by protecting community knowledge. They assert Authority to Control by vesting decision-making in lineage and initiated custodians. They ensure Responsibility by linking access to accountability. They

prioritise Ethics by restricting circulation that could cause harm (Global Indigenous Data Alliance, 2019, p. 5).

Crucially, these protocols also enact opacity. They demonstrate that governance does not require total transparency. The power to decide what remains unseen is itself a technology of sovereignty. Thus, aesthetic intelligence in Anaañ society is governance infrastructure that operates through both strategic visibility and deliberate opacity. It precedes and exceeds the written archive.

COMPARATIVE CONTEXT: AESTHETIC INTELLIGENCE BEYOND ANAAÑ

Anaañ protocols are not isolated. Comparable systems exist globally where aesthetics function as governance.

Community	Protocol	Governance Function
Anaañ	awieagwo movement, nnom, Ekpo	Access control for defence, ritual, law
Māori	tā moko, whaikōrero	Marks genealogy and speaking rights
Hopi	kachina masks	Regulates seasonal knowledge and initiation
Yoruba	egungun, àṣẹ	Encodes ancestral authority and performance rights

The pattern is consistent: aesthetics allocate rights. What differs is the specific institution. This comparison shows Anaañ practice is part of a global Indigenous logic of data governance while maintaining sovereign specificity.

FINDINGS

1. **Aesthetic elements are data.** Movement, colour and objects carry governance information in Anaañ society.
2. **Access is regulated.** Initiation, lineage and context determine who may perform, see or know.
3. **Opacity is sovereign.** The right to withhold protects the integrity and power of aesthetic data.
4. **This is infrastructure.** These protocols function without writing and persist across generations.

IMPLICATIONS: ARCHIVES, MUSEUMS AND AI

Museums and Archives

Museums that hold Ekpo regalia or photographs of awieagwo performances often treat them as art objects. They catalogue by material, date and region. They do not catalogue by access protocol or opacity. This erases the governance layer. A data-governance approach would require museums to record: Who has the right to view this? Who has the right to reproduce it? Is there a right to withhold? Without this metadata, the object is decontextualised and the protocol is violated.

Digital Circulation and the Right to Withhold

Digitisation assumes openness. But for Anaañ protocols, openness can be harm. A video of awieagwo drill uploaded without lineage consent circulates tactical knowledge. A photo of Ekpo performed outside its sanctioned context breaks temporal law. A description of nnom application patterns shared without custodian approval breaches ritual authority and violates opacity. Digital platforms need ‘protocol flags’ — technical markers that indicate circulation restrictions, grounded in community authority rather than in assumptions of universal openness.

AI Training Data

Large models scrape images, video and text of African performance. They treat it as public data. But if that data is governed by opacity, then scraping is extraction. AI that trains on Ekpo images without acknowledging access rules reproduces colonial data logic. The alternative is to treat aesthetic intelligence as licensed data. Access requires consent from the governing authority. This aligns AI development with CARE Principles (Global Indigenous Data Alliance, 2019), with the right to opacity (Glissant, 1997), and with Anaañ sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that among the Anaañ, aesthetics are not decoration. They are governance. Through three protocols — the movement of awieagwo, the colour of nnom and the objects of Ekpo — Anaañ society allocates access, enforces responsibility and asserts sovereignty through both visibility and opacity.

These protocols demonstrate four core principles:

1. **Aesthetic elements encode law.** Movement, colour and objects are data-bearing.
2. **Access is conditional.** Initiation, lineage and context regulate circulation.
3. **Opacity is power.** The right not to share protects the integrity of the system.
4. **Governance does not require writing.** Infrastructure can be embodied, material and performed.

This reframes Indigenous aesthetics as political technology. It also reframes data governance as older and wider than digital code.

For scholars, the implication is methodological: read performance as policy and respect opacity as method. For institutions, the implication is ethical: respect protocols of access and refusal. For Anaañ communities, the implication is sovereign: the authority to control aesthetic data remains with the custodians of awieagwo, nnom and Ekpo. Aesthetic intelligence is governance infrastructure. Recognising it is the first step towards protecting it.

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¹ **ebieowo**: a variant spelling that appears in early colonial ethnography. This paper treats *ebieowo* as a carryover of colonial gloss and uses *awieagwo* as the preferred Anaañ term throughout. All Anaañ terms follow approved orthography.

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