IDUU AND NKWANWITE DANCE COSTUMES: TOWARDS A CULTURAL DOCUMENTATION

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Abstract

Traditional dance costumes play a crucial role in enhancing visual appeal while conveying profound cultural significance. However, as globalisation, technological advancements, and modern influences continue to shape cultural practices, there has been a notable shift in the originality of these costumes. This evolution often results in a unique blend of Western and African fabrics in the designs of traditional dance attire. Unfortunately, the original designs are frequently lost due to inadequate documentation. This study employed a purposive sampling technique in selecting the dances, and it used in-depth interviews and participant observation to collect appropriate data, Utilising the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, it evaluates the cultural relevance of these costumes within performances. The findings indicate that the Iduu and Nkwanwite dance costumes have undergone some evolutionary changes due to global influences. It ultimately recommends that scholarly documentation is essential for preserving endangered costume

practices and calls for more academic research in the field of Indigenous traditional dance costumes.

Introduction

In Nigerian dance performances, costumes play crucial roles in not only enhancing the visual appeal but also in conveying deep cultural significance. However, as globalisation, technological advancements, and modernity continue to influence cultural practices, there has been a noticeable shift in the originality of traditional dance costumes. The adjustments can be seen in the fusion of traditional attire with western dress culture, thereby creating a unique blend that reflects the evolving cultural landscape which Adeoye argues leads to "the contextual shift in the visual representation of African dance"(Parr.1). The changes in dance costumes are often influenced by various factors such as climatic conditions, economic constraints, and global interactions Utoh-Ezeajugh (1). For instance, In Nigeria where the climate is often hot, most traditional dance groups opt for lighter fabrics and minimal makeup to stay comfortable during performances. Economic factors are also responsible for the evolution in costumes, with traditional dance groups having to make do with limited resources to accommodate increasing membership. The evolution of costumes frequently gives rise to noticeable adaptations and enhancements of traditional Nigerian dance costumes.

Clearly, the evolving nature of Nigerian dance costumes reflects a complex interplay between tradition and modernity. However, while these modifications are being absorbed by respective cultural dance groups to enrich the aesthetics of their performances, a gradual cultural alteration or erosion takes place,

most times, with irreversible consequences; giving rise to new design modes, which eventually obliterate all traces of the original cultural design cum practice. It is a given that cultural documentation is essential for preservation and sustainability of cultures and cultural practices, especially endangered ones. Available documents show that many researchers have carried out projects designed to document cultural practices including some dances in visual and digital forms for the purpose of preservation and sustainability. However, not many scholars have carried out scholarly researches and literary documentations of endangered costume practices as used in traditional dances for purposes of preserving them as endangered materials and cultural knowledge. In effect, the knowledge of these indigenous costume practices may eventually be lost forever, as the costume practices gradually phase out or go into extinction and are replaced or supplanted by an emergent dress culture.

There is no gainsaying the fact that technology has now created the possibility of a global culture, as the internet and social media are sweeping away cultural boundaries. By documenting the costume designs, and understanding their cultural and aesthetic import, one can ensure that the essence of cultural identity is sustained, even in the global space. Consequently, this study purposively examines Iduu and Nkwanwite dance costumes to document, ascertain their cultural importance and to also determine the extent to which these costumes have evolved. The study argues that scholarly documentation of these dance costumes is a significant step in preserving them.

Evolution of Performance Costumes in Theatre Practice

Performance costumes have significantly evolved over centuries,

becoming integral to theatre practice. This evolution reflects changing cultural influences and technological advancements. However, Shuaib notes that "the arts of costume and make-up developed alongside the art of drama" (133). Theatre was formalised in Greece during the 5th century, with Thespis as a pioneer, and costumes were referred to as "the robes of Thespis" (Gillette 1). Greek theatre costumes drew from the local dress culture which Kohler identifies as the chiton (a linen shirt), the peplos (a woolen garment for women), and the chlamys (a woolen cloak) (93). Otranto explains that chitons reflected a character's status (par. 4). Costume designers used colours, fabrics, and masks to create character portraits suited to the plays' mood, tailoring costumes to fit different genres (Shuaib 134). Aeschylus played a critical role in developing tragic costumes by the mid-5th century BCE (Gillette 1). Overall, classical Greek tragic costumes included long robes, tunics, boots, and masks, evolving as performances became more elaborate and involved multiple actors.

The decline of Greek theatre led to the rise of Roman theatre, which borrowed elements from the Greek style but was enriched with dance, acrobatics, and sports. Costumes varied for different performances. For tragedies, Gillette notes that costumes were inspired by Greek styles, with tragic characters like kings and queens wearing padded attire, tall wigs, and specific robes. Bright colours were used for joyful characters, while gray or blue indicated fugitives. Gods wore distinctive insignia, and seers had less ornate garments (2). In Roman comedies, known as fabula palliata, actors donned chitons and cloaks (pallium), while fabula togata actors wore togas. Historical figures in fabulae praetextatae dressed in togas with decoration to signify their rank. The toga,

described by Kohler as resembling two segments of a circle, was a uniquely Roman garment (112). Otrantonoted that the toga varied in colour and design to reflect the actor's role and social standing (para 5).

Costumes in medieval performances changed due to religion and superstition. Medieval theatre costumes often came from Catholic Church garments, like priests' robes (Studocu par. 3). The main types of plays were liturgical and cycle plays. In liturgical dramas, Holley and Przybylek note that female characters usually wore dalmatics with hoods (para. 9).Cycle plays, including mystery and miracle plays, also featured actors in church vestments. Gillette explains that these plays were performed in churches with actors and priests dressed in these garments. Records show that Adam and Eve wore white leather, God wore bishop's robes, and Jesus wore a simple white robe. Other biblical characters wore contemporary clothes or were marked by a kerchief for female roles (3). Other costumes included coats, hoses, and surplices for angels. Masks were popular for characters like God and the devil. Artists depicted grotesque masks in bright colors (Gillette 3). Cohen adds that masks were mainly for extreme characters rather than ordinary ones (qtd. in Mitchell 3). Anderson describes gilded masks used for divine roles and mentions that angels' masks were often silvered (22). Overall, medieval theatre used costumes to reflect the beliefs of the time, creating a distinct visual style.

Costumes in Renaissance theatre transformed significantly as performances became more secular due to the revival of classical learning. Kinsey notes that costumes during this time became more lavish and colourful, mirroring contemporary fashion (par 3). Across Europe, particularly in Italy,

France, and England, costumes began to merge classical styles—like togas and hairstyles with modern trends (Otranto par. 14). In neoclassical theatre, costumes were primarily drawn from actors' personal wardrobes and made from various fabrics like silk and taffeta, often accessorised with long scarves reflecting an actor's wealth (*Costumes in Neoclassical...* par 1). The English sumptuary laws restricted clothing choices, yet theatre practitioners could design costumes that adhered to societal norms, with actors frequently wearing expensive fabrics (*Shakespeare's World...* par 3). Colours were used to help the audience quickly identify characters (Kinsey par 4). By the late 17th and 18th centuries, costume designs included specific items to signify character roles, such as crowns for royalty (Kinsey par. 5). Male actors, often portraying female roles, wore elaborate gowns and wigs. Female costumes consisted of multiple layers, including corsets and intricate accessories (*Elizabethan*... par 5). Male costumes included shirts, britches, and doublets, rounded off with capes and hats (Elizabethan... par 8-9. The nineteenth-century theatre experienced significant growth and transformation, influenced by advancements in science, technology, migration, and education (Fullerton par 9). During this period, there was a shift towards realism in theatrical productions, with costume designs reflecting the audience's evolving artistic tastes. Veronica Isaac notes that this era emphasised historical accuracy in costumes, leading to designs that were both "archaeologically correct and artistically appropriate" (par. 1). For example, notable figures like David Garrick and Charles Macklin introduced authentic historical attire in their performances (Gillette 7).

However, the twentieth century marked a departure from realism, with movements such as symbolism and expressionism emerging across Europe. These shifts influenced costume design, which moved towards symbolism rather than historical representation, as promoted by figures like Adolphe Appia (Gillette par. 9). The Nigerian theatre flourished in the twentieth century with the popular and nationalistic theatres and the emergence of the educational theatre, following a large dominance of the traditional African theatre. These developments gave scholars the vista to trace the evolution of costume and makeup in the Nigerian theatre. Tracing the evolution of costume and makeup in Africa Utoh-Ezeajugh notes that "costumes and body design culture of the many ethnic groups found in Africa evolved through the circumstance of geographic location, weather conditions, interethnic interactions, colonial activities, foreign interests and the impact of local and international migration" (1). These underlining influences are well represented in the design and utilisation of costume and makeup in both stage and screen culture in Nigeria. however,

Nwachuku argues that although "makeup and costume in Nigeria have long been practiced from the traditional festival theatres, for as long as African villages have existed... the earliest historically acclaimed literary mention of the use of body makeup is the Alarinjo theatre" (304-5). The Alarinjo theatre is popular for its itinerate peformativity similar to the medieval theatre. The use of colourful traditional fabrics and attires as costumes in the Alarinjo theatre according to Bakare and Barbieri points to the role of costume in the survival of ancient performance practices at the core of Yoruba civilization (35). Implicitly, costume and makeup are functional parts of the Nigerian theatre practice as they

represent the culture and ethnic dimension of the various traditional communities in Africa and Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotic Theory

Semiotic theory gained prominence through the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure in the twentieth century. The core of Saussure's semiotics is the idea that "language is a system of signs that express ideas" (Visual Communication... 3). Essentially, a sign is anything that conveys a meaning that is separate from the sign itself to the interpreter. Saussure defines a sign as comprising both a physical form—such as letters or gestures, which he termed the signifier—and the image or concept to which the signifier refers, which he called the signified (Sebeok 6). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is known as signification (Sebeok 6). This implies that the meaning of a sign is contextual and can represent an idea that may not have any natural connection to the object it denotes. Understanding signs relies on three aspects: physical representation, the referent or allusion, and an interpreter who can interpret this relationship (Stamper 2). These three components provide the basis from which an interpreter draws on both the physical object and its referent to evoke meaning.

In dance, semiotics is crucial due to its rich cultural elements. Bond argues that dance exists within a "language" and offers choreographers multiple semiotic resources to recreate literarytexts in kinetic forms (65). Analysing dance using semiotics provides insights into the performance's elements and their role in cultural identity, highlighting how costume and makeup transmit cultural identity in Nigerian dance.

Iduu Dance of the Akpo People: A Brief Overview

The Iduu dance highlights the history and culture of the Akpo community. According to myth, as presented by Akas in a study; *Dance beyond Movement...*,Iduu dance began in the early 20th century to honour a strong community figure known for his wrestling, bravery, and farming skills. To celebrate his masculinity, young men created a ritual dance replicating his feats. In contrast, Okpala suggests that the Iduu dance is a result of acculturation, introduced from Umuomaku town over fifty years ago by leaders like Late Azubuike Okemili, Late Ezechi Ezeno, and Late Alaedum Dimnwaeze to strengthen ties between the two communities. After two years of training under Umuomaku, Akpo adopted the dance and has since performed it at significant events.

Documentation and Evolutionary Analysis of Iduu Dance Costumes

The Iduu dance costume is carefully made from local materials that signify the community's different roles as warriors, farmers, and hunters. The costume includes a skirt made from cocoyam leaves worn over black briefs, along with a headpiece, arm and ankle decorations, and necklaces. Dancers may also wear hand beads. Charms and amulets are often added to the costume, enhancing the visual appeal and conveying significant spiritual meanings. Cocoyam leaves, a common crop in Igboland, is the main material used for the costumes. These leaves are flexible and strong. Harvested while green, they are dried over the fire to turn brown, which signifies the earth that supports food production for the community. The leaves are then crafted into costumes, woven together with palm fronds. The skirt is worn on the lower body

while the upper body stays exposed. Dancers may also decorate their arms and ankles with this material, along with dried goat skin pieces. This costume is designed to make the dancers look like real warriors, instilling fear in the audience and sometimes causing them to flee for safety.



Photo 1. Iduu Akpo dancers in their full dance costume

Historically, this outfit helped warriors conceal their presence during battles. It served as a trick for Akpo warriors,

aiding both attacks and defense against enemies. The costume is consecrated with the blood of a goat, giving it a sacred status for the Iduu dance. As a result, the Iduu dance costume serves as a signifier of cultural and professional identities, thus holding great significance in Akpo and the wider Aguata area. It connects performers and the community to their culture. Preserving this rich tradition shows how the people use local resources to create a unique cultural symbol that reflects their history and artistic expression. The materials used demonstrate the creativity of the Akpo people and their connection to nature.

Despite evolutionary changes as a result of globalisation and modernity, the Iduu costume remains largely the same, although dancers now wear black inner pants made of fabric for modesty. This shows how much the people value the costume as key part of their identity, especially for dancers. For the Akpo community, the Iduu costume is not just a symbol of communal identity but it also strengthens the people's connection to their culture and art. The community's appreciation of the Iduu dance costume reflects a rich history and strong cultural connection that defines the people's existence.

Nkwanwite Dance of Afikpo People: A Brief Overview

Nkwanwite dance is a traditional female dance performed by the women of Afikpo community in Ebony State. Its origins are disputed, with Mbey tracing it back to the "Ebu Mbe" festival held annually in late October (par.3). The festival begins on the evening of an Orie market day and continues until the following Afor market day. During the event, women form age grades to create songs that publicly ridicule men for their misdeeds, while men do the same for women, using instruments such as drums,

gongs, and maracas.In 1954, a group of women, led by prominent singers, innovated by introducing musical instruments during their practice, creating a new sound that led to the establishment of the Nkwanwite dance, named after the small pot used in their music. The introduction of instruments received mixed reactions, particularly from men who felt it defied tradition. Despite being prohibited from using the instruments, the women continued to perform Nkwanwite, highlighting their defiance through songs.

Documentation and Evolutionary Analysis of Nkwawite Dance Costume

The Nkwanwite dance costume consists of a blend of fabrics and accessories. In line with the traditional female dances of the Igbo ethnic group, the dancers adorn themselves with a two-piece George wrapper paired with a blouse. The George wrapper, typically striped in pink and buff hues, may also feature yellow tones with pink and black motifs. The blouse is predominantly buff, occasionally white depending on the event. A head-tie made of red or pink damask, matching the George wrapper, is used to adorn the hair. Mrs. Ogiji in a face to face interview reveals that the original costume featured Ankara fabric; however, due to its unavailability in the market and the growing number of group members, it was decided to make a change.



Photo 2. Nkwanwite dancers in their costumes

In addition to the garments, there are significant accessories that contribute to the group's identity. Foremost is a vibrant feather adorned with red and yellow designs, affixed to the headscarf as a hair ornament to enhance the ensemble with more vivid colours. Prominent accessories adorning the dancers' necks and wrists consist of red and white beads, accompanied by a red earring for the ear. The dancers also carry a pristine handkerchief and horsetail as part of their attire. The colour of the horsetail may vary between white and black, depending on the dancer's personal preference.

The costume serves as a symbol of cultural identity for the Nkwanwite dance group in Afikpo, affirming the status of married women in the community. The dance, performed mainly by married women, highlights their transition from spinsters to mothers and promotes their role in social and cultural spaces. The

Nkwanwite costume symbolically reinforces this identity, showcasing the contributions of these women to community development through dance performance.

Additionally, the Nkwanwite dance embodies themes related to communal and social development, particularly those concerning morality and ethics. Historically, this dance was performed during the Ebu Mbe festival as a form of social commentary on various societal ills. Overtime, it has evolved into a powerful tool for addressing topics such as sex, marriage, domestic violence, oppression, resistance, and other genderrelated issues. The use of specific colours like pink, red, buff, yellow, and white in the dance significantly serves as a form of visual commentary. For example, white signifies purity, innocence and cleanliness. In this regard, the women inadvertently use the colour both in costume and makeup to emphasise the need for moral chastity among genders and also environmental hygiene. The use of pink colour highlights female related issues which are underlined in the message of the dance. The topography of Ebonyi State exposes it to hostile climatic conditions. As such, the use of buff colour symbolically represents this environmental challenge that is consistent in the region.

Consequently, the colours of the costumes and makeup play significant role in enforcing critical realities that are germane to the existence of the Afikpo people discussed from the perspective of women. Ultimately, the Nkwanwite dance plays a crucial role in contributing to the development and progress of Afikpo and the larger Ebonyi community by shedding light on important cultural and social matters.

However, globalisation has impacted on the dance costume, resulting to varied changes in design. Unlike the unchanged Iduu dance costume, the Nkwanwite costume is influenced by cultural shifts. Initially, Ankara fabric was the favoured choice for the costume. However, the scarcity of the material in the market led to the selection of George fabrics. The George fabrics utilised by the dancers come in two colours, pink and yellow. A critical evaluation of the various Nkwanwite dance groups across Afikpo and Abakaliki indicates that each Nkwanwite dance ensemble has the freedom to perform in either fabric. Nevertheless, it is also noted that due to financial constraints, some members who cannot afford the specific fabric available in the market may opt for any alternative fabric that matches in colour. This undoubtedly undermines the concept of group uniformity, which plays a crucial role in shaping cultural identity.

Conclusion

Dance costumes serve as significant elements in performances, functioning as vehicles of cultural expression that contribute to the identity of a community within a socio-cultural and political context. Analyses of Iduu and Nkwanwite dance costumes reveal their importance in preserving cultural knowledge linked to the specific cultural groups. Despite their significance, it is evident that these costumes have evolved over time due to global changes. However, these transformations do not significantly alter the underlying meaning of the dance; instead, they enhance \the aesthetics and functionality of the dances. For example, the inclusion of underpants in the Iduu

dance addresses potential health hazard associated with exposing sensitive area, while the change from Ankara to George material addresses the issue of cultural inclusion. Meanwhile, while the changes in Iduu and Nkwanwite dance costumes are inevitable due to global and social factors, proper documentation is crucial for the preservation of these costumes. Although visual documentation of dance costumes is commonly recognised, scholarly and critical documentation is equally vital for safeguarding cultural elements such as dance costumes, particularly amid rapid cultural changes and evading digital technology. Therefore, this study strongly advocates for scholarly documentation as a sustainable means of preserving cultural and ideological values.

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