

Costume as Medium for Cultural Expression in Stage Performance

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ABSTRACT

Costume is not just about clothing the performer; it is the process of studying who and what the character in the scripts is. In character description costume plays an important role because, what the audience sees gives a more immediate impression of who the character is, than what he or she says; that is what they (the audience) hear from the characters speech. Consequently costume naturally gives a form of expression about an individual either of his or her social status, culture, religion, profession, sex, age and so on. It reflects in the daily life of the people because it is closely related with festivities, culture, pleasure, fashion and basic religious practices in Africa and the world over.

This ability of dressing to make an impression about the wearer on an onlooker is even more profound in the theatre because once a character appears on stage the audience instantly begins to interpret that character by what they see on him. In this respect, costume performs a primary role in helping the audience understand the character as well as his cultural background. This study is centred on the African culture as reflected in some theatrical performances in Ghana and Nigeria; with focus on how costume help to express the culture and identity of the community and persons in these stage performances.

Keywords: Costume, Culture, Stage Performance, Expression

1. INTRODUCTION

Of all the different means of dramatic expressions known to man, costume is undoubtedly the most popular, probably because it is an art that is as old as creation or drama itself. (Kwakye-Opong 2011) Drama is the reflection of life; it reveals the past, present and projects into the future depending on the thematic concept and type of drama. It is an expressive art form and because of its importance in the life of man, its production takes many faces of appearance. In other words a dramatic piece can be investigative, therapeutic; it can border on expressionism or serve as a veritable means of communicating information or, mobilizing a group of people. To achieve all these and many more, drama often depends on costume and other visual elements of the theatre to create a believable impact on its audience.

Costume constitutes one of the most formidable and versatile cultural agents for the transmission of knowledge and values across ethnic, national and international boundaries. The Independence Day Celebration of Ghana, (6th March of every year), for instance brings together all forms of costumes as used by the various ethnic groups throughout the country. Culturally and through dress and grooming, rare clothes which may not be seen on ordinary days are displayed. It is remarkable that during this occasion, in many of the ethnic groups, regardless of any scientific, social, political and other advancement, many communities especially the royals find it expedient to project their identity and powers through the wearing of very distinct dresses; some of which are symbolic of a specific ethnicity (Dzrappedo 2009).

Ghana celebrated its 50th Independence Anniversary on 6th March 2007, which brought to light costumes of cultural diversity. One such remarkable exhibition of royal dress code was from the Northern part of Ghana precisely Upper West Region where the chief was clad in green and white striped smock over a two-piece embroidered cloth; a pair of embroidered leather boot; a woollen red cap that has a knot at the tip; a green and white towel (to match the smock); talisman made with leather around the wrist and ankle, and a horse tail as a symbol of his authority. The *Mamprusi*, *Kotakoli*, *Baasare*, *Konkonba*, *Kusasi*, *Gurma*, and *Moshi* are a few of the ethnic groups found in the North, among whom the wearing of smock cuts across. However, a distinguishing feature among the chiefs is that; whereas the red woollen cup is worn by the chief from the Upper West Region, the Northern Region chief uses any other colour but red.

2. STAGE COSTUME

In the theatre, costume occupies a vital position in enhancing the characters ability to project his or her mood, profession, status, age, sex, and culture - religion, ethnicity, etc - without uttering a word. This emphasises the saying "Cloth make a man." To further buttress this statement some scholars in analyzing human behaviour affirm that in the first four minutes of contact with a stranger, the understanding of that person's nature and personality will be based on three primary but unequal factors:

1. That the appearance will be scored 55 percent.
2. The tone of his voice will be scored 38 percent.
3. And what the person says will be scored 7 percent.

This submission denotes that truly, appearance or what we wear is important because it transmits more information about us more than what we say. In this light, actors like ordinary people are not just costumed only for the purpose of covering the body but also to present and create a lasting impression, pleasant or otherwise, to pass information about the character to the audience. Wilson (2001) reinforces this assertion by stating that; "theatre clothes send signals similar to everyday costumes; but as with other element of the theatre, there are significant difference between the costume of everyday life and those in the theatre". He asserts that stage costume communicates the same information as ordinary clothes with regards to sex, position and occupation, yet on stage during performance, this information is magnified because every element in the theatre is in a spotlight. In other words, Wilson is saying that the purpose of costume is to serve as a communicator of everyday life, expressing socio-economic status and class, as well as the culture of the character.

Costume deals with everything the actor puts on to enable him or her portray a stage action; be it layers of clothing which includes underwear, hair dress/headdress, accessories such as, umbrella, hand fan, jewellery and footwear. The concept, design and appearance of all these items are the concern of the costume designer, and she/he must be able to manipulate the design of each character's costume to project and transmit specific personal information about the character since costumes worn by an actor can profoundly affect the audiences' perceptions of the character.

The purpose or place of costume in theatre can be fully understood when juxtaposed with the demands it has to meet during any given production. Among these requirements, the costume is expected to aid the audiences understanding of the play through the identification of the period in which the play is set, time of the year or day, or in determining the cultural background. Culture reflects a people's way of life and this is manifested in their political, social, economic and religious lives for which clothing plays a dominant part. (Dzamedo 2009).

3. CULTURE AND CLOTHING

Culture is the holistic socially acquired behavioural patterns material and non- material, not acquired instinctively, but learnt, and observed by a group of people. Material culture consists of all products of technology and science: sites, buildings, monuments, and objects. Non-material culture incorporates the value-systems, religious beliefs, moral, linguistic and literary activities, dance, music and other products of art that includes clothing (Dzamedo 2009).

As admitted by Sarpong (1974) "culture is dynamic, never static . . . , and have not only been manifested and shared by the members of a society, but also been passed on from one generation to another in an uninterrupted succession". It is so binding on the people that it has become difficult for society to change its culture or an essential part of it overnight. Culture is a social and objective fact which moulds us into either a Ghanaian or a Nigerian; because the society of our origin gives it to us. It is a more or less knotted society where individuals seem to have the same beliefs, values, ideas, language, practices, dress code, food and so on. By nature therefore, culture becomes obligatory; for even though there is no constraint, a man from birth has to consent to what society approves of. To that end Sarpong (1974) further reiterates that "in every society . . . by reason of his culture, man is confronted with two sets of norms: what is done and what ought to be done; real and ideal culture." This paper seeks to dwell on the ideal culture since the style may be affected by globalization, acculturation and identity; therefore, presenting an adulterated reflection of what ought to be.

Africans, believe and live their culture for which clothing and adornment is not an exception. Before a man can learn of other fashions he has already been introduced to one at birth, which is automatically imbibed. Many important moments of life are accompanied by the wearing of ritual costumes prescribed by custom in each culture; manifested in a people's political, religious and economic life. As noted by Tortora and Eubank (1989) "clothing tells the observer something about the organisation of the society . . . , reveals whether there are rigid delineations of social and economic class or a classless society".

4. POLITICAL

In the political life of a people, costume can be portrayed in their culture. For the *Akans* of Ghana for instance, the paramount chief, *Benkumhene*, *Nifahene*, *Ankobeahene*, and many others do not dress the same during durbars. It is a taboo within the Ashanti culture for any of these sub-chiefs to wear the same cloth as the *Asantehene* (Otumfo4). To avoid such a clash it is culturally expedient for all these chiefs to be seated before the appearance of the *Otumfo4* so that a change in clothe will be effected, if needed. This is simply to say that the *Otumfo4* should not be dressed the same way as the sub-chiefs. In view of this the *Otumfo4* is assigned a special weaver who makes his clothes with designs that are distinct from all others. (Kwakye-Opong 2011). In the olden days, for instance, *Kyeretwire*, a black and white *kente* clothe was solely reserved for the king; and no other chief was expected to wear it (Kyeremateng 1965).

Through the use of fabric, texture, and colour, the political hierarchy is therefore achieved and this has come to be imbibed consciously; helping to delineate the different cultures even among the *Akans*. When it comes to accessories the picture is clearer; because, ornaments used by the *Otumfo4* would not be worn by any of his sub-chiefs because the finger that wears a particular ring and the relevance attached to it, all have cultural connotations (Ross 2002). For example, the *Otumfo4* wears the royal rings on the last-but-one finger known as the *Mpiteansa* (finger for rings) and these rings come in different shapes and designs. Worn to suit a particular occasion, the rings are also symbolic depicting a specific message the king would want to communicate to the people (Kwakye-Opong 2011) -See plate 1a and 1b.



Plate 1a

The Ashanti king Otumfo4 Opoku Ware II in royal regalia with appropriate rings to suit the occasion

Sources: (1a & b) from the book *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*

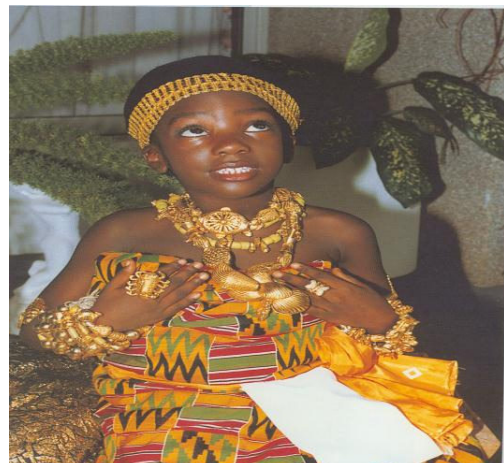


Plate 1b

A young Ashanti royal exhibiting gold spider designed ring

Some of these rings are; *Kotoko* (porcupine) which stands for bravery; *Nanka Bobinini* (puff adder) representing patience; *Effiemosea* (house hold pebbles/gravels) a caution to be wary of close relations; and *Abusua d4 funu* (a family cherishes the dead) worn at funerals and which symbolizes the hypocritical showy display of love for dead relations. Aside these royal rings, the king may wear different rings on all the other fingers either for beautification or as a display of his wealth. In effect, for a person who is abreast with the *Akan* tradition, therefore, clothing and adornment help to fully comprehend the culture.

3. SOCIAL

Another way of cultural manifestation of costume is through the people's social life. Right from birth through initiation, to marriage and finally till death, a person's dress and grooming tells where he or she originates from without any verbal communication. Festivals, naming, marriage and funeral celebrations therefore becomes a platform to exhibit true culture. While the *Gas* of Ghana may decide to use white cloth in celebrating the funeral of an elderly person, Ashanti's may use white or maintain the black colour regardless of age. However, if an Ashanti parent loses to death a first child, whether young or old, they are obliged to wear white clothes. (Kwakyee-Opong 2011, Dzramedo 2009)

A time for celebration offers Akans the opportunity to display their rich cultures. Their clothing and adornment is of paramount importance in their cultural presentation. Osei Kwadwo (2002) notes that the way of dressing of a people depicts their culture. This further explains why when an Ashanti is attending a special ceremony, he/she will not only feel comfortable in wearing the Ashanti hand woven *kente* cloth but also wear it with pride and dignity since it is one of the ways of projecting his/her culture. The Ashanti King will wear the *kente* cloth wrapped round the body leaving the right shoulder bare, gold anklets, exaggerated gold rings and a crown embedded in gold. The queen mother will also wear *kente* clothe with the same shoulder bare over a silk or velvet cloth and its accompanied accessories, such as a long necklace with a big pendant, exaggerated gold rings on both hands, and anklets. This obviously distinguishes her from other women, and even royals, during any festive occasion (see plates 2a & 2b)

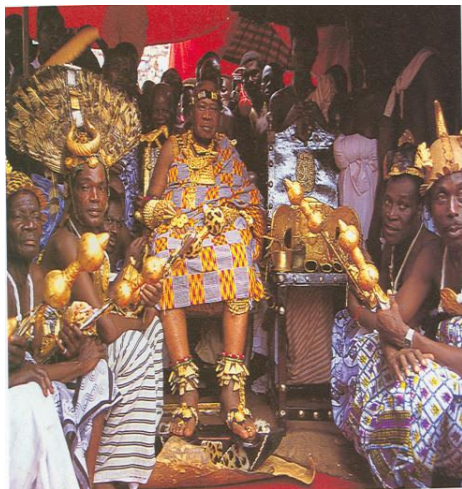


Plate 2a

Otumfoɔ Opoku Ware II sits
mother
in state with some Ashanti courtiers

Source: From the book
Theatre

Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente



Plate 2b

An Ashanti Queen
with other female royals

Source: Abibigromma

Company Library,

and African American Identity University of Ghana

6. RELIGION

Religion according to Mbiti (1990) permeates into all areas of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to separate it. Religion does not only “centre on God who reveals himself but also with a concrete, visible, phenomenological and existential fact”. It is built on the faith of the people and therefore expressed in diverse ways. The Moslem woman in identifying her religious background would wear a veil as the culture demands. In the same vein, the costume of the traditional priest communicates his role in the worship, and the particular deity he represents. All these can be observed through the type of fabric used, symbolic materials attached to the costume and the way and manner the costume is worn.

It is imperative therefore to state that Africans have religious and ritual costume. These clothes depend on the type of religion or ritual in perspective and its mode of performance. Some even have colour codes. For instance, the predominant colours of ritual and traditional religion for the Yoruba’s in Nigeria are white, red, and black. White symbolizes the benevolent spirit or the holiness of the object of ritual as in the case of *Osun*, *Obatala*, *Olokun* and *Ifa* deities. The colour red represents the earth, while black symbolizes the forces of darkness. Just like the deities, what the ordinary man wears communicates information about his tribe, nationality, ethnicity, religion and occupation, which might differ from one African community to another.

For the Masai ethnic group in Kenya for example, cultural costumes are in two variance. The first is a piece of skin leather cut in triangular form and worn just to cover the male genital while the buttocks are left exposed without a top garment. This is worn during the hot season; enabling the wearer feels comfortable as he/she is protected from the hot weather. The second variant is two yard skin leather that is thrown over the body across the shoulders and knotted behind the neck to provide some protection from the rainy and harmattan seasons.

Jewelleries are also an essential part of the Masai clothing tradition. They wear bangles made from brass and copper (worn on the hands and ankles), most of them wear rings on their nose and ears. They also carry leather pouches on their backs as bags in which they keep their personal items such as tobacco, pipe, cutlass, bow and arrows. Because of their nomadic nature they have a long stick used in controlling their animals and for defence.

In North Africa, Islam has influenced the life of the people; the traditional dress is a copy of the Arabian style. In Egypt for example, the women’s costume is designed to cover the whole of the body without any part revealing and because most of them are in purdah, the use of scarf to cover their head down to the shoulders become an important part of their dress code.

Having examined these above African countries, it is apparent that culture has great effect in the forms and functions of dressing, though over the years the influence of western culture has been so patent in the Africans way of dressing. But it is impressive to note that in certain parts of Africa, some groups still find the traditional outfit quite functional and fashionable as we observed with the *Yoruba*’s in Nigeria and the *Ashantis* of Ghana, who will proudly wear their traditional attire to any occasion without any compromise. The traditional dress forms of the *Yorubas* for instance can be divided into what for the benefit of this study we will refer to as Formal and Informal costumes.

7. FORMAL COSTUME (WEAR)

It is important to note that the *Yorubas*’ traditional outfit are made from two types of fabrics: the *Ofi* which is popularly known as the *Aso-Oke* like the *Ashanti kente*, is hand woven with colourful cotton threads. The second type of fabric is the traditional tie and die known as *Adire*. The *Ofi* or *Aso-Oke* is a fabric used for both male and female formal wears. This fabric is designed for men like the English three-piece suit which includes a trouser, an under and outer garment. The inner garment known as *Dansiki* is a smaller vest/gown that is slightly below the knee, with opening on both sides to serve as sleeves. And the outer outfit popularly known as *Agbada* is a larger and longer flowing form of robe, with opening on both sides that covers the arms. This gown usually comes with embroideries on the neck and breast. In addition to this, is *Girike*, a larger and much heavier robe similar in design to the *Agbada* but with richer, elaborate embroidery on the neck, breast and back of the garment spreading as far as the ankle and extending beyond the arms. The trouser known as *Sokoto* is worn below the gowns and with a cord to fasten it around the wearer’s waist. They come in different shapes and lengths (Johnson 1960).

8. THE INFORMAL COSTUME (WEAR)

The informal wears are made with the tie and dye fabric (*Adire eleko*) into simple design of top and trouser that is, *Buba* or *Dansiki* with *Sokoto*. Apart from these, the Yoruba's like some other African ethnic groups, have dress forms that are peculiar to various professions and used as a mode of identification. The hunters and warriors costume for instance, are distinct among the Yorubas: the fabric is simply cut into a rectangular shape and stops just a little below the waistline sewn together without any form of embroidery. It is accompanied with a skin tight pair of short worn a little above the knee, Adeoye (1980) calls this *Gberi Ode* and *Sokoto Digo*. This outfit is worn with different potent charms sewn or attached to it. The hunter's dressing, however, is incomplete without the *Apo- Ode*; a rectangular bag usually made of animal skin. Like the Maasai in Kenya, this bag contains personal items like charm, kola nut, cutlass and so on. In addition to this, is the hunter's cap which has different names such as *Ikori Ode*, *Akoro* or *Gobi Ode* – depending on the ethnic group. There are also slight differences between the warrior's and hunter's costume. Although the warriors wear the *Sokoto Digo*, they also wear *Kàfo*, described by Johnson (1960) as "a tight-legged dress... that reaches as far as the ankles".

9. BEADS

Beads are an important part of the African culture, and in different parts of Africa there are different kinds of beads which have different names with diverse use and significance (Steggstra 2005). Even though beads are highly used by the royals they are equally patronized by other members of the society at different occasions as part of their dress forms. They are usually worn around the neck, ankle and wrist. They are also used in decorating crowns, King's Staff of office, walking sticks, shoes and horse tails. In most Yoruba communities, a king is not considered a full king if he does not wear a beaded crown. In this regard, he is referred to as *Baale*, that is a chief of provincial town or vassal state. A king in Yoruba land will always have more than one crown. For instance, the *Are* crown which is used during the investiture of the king of Ife (*Oni of Ife*) is usually worn on official or ceremonial functions such as the *Olojo* festival. Moreover, among some ethnic groups, beads are ingeniously sewn into cloths as vest and skirts to be worn by kings, queen mothers, dancers and so on. (See plates 3a, 3b, 3c and 3d)

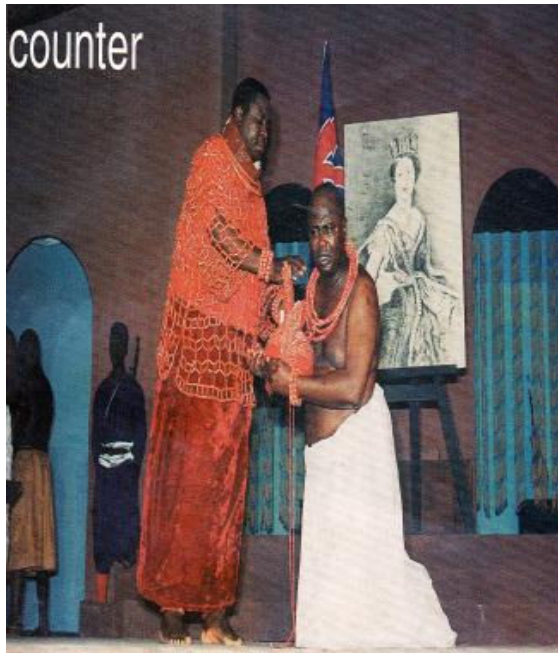


Plate
Plate 3b

A Benin King adorned in beaded



3a

Beaded crown of Oyo King from the

Vest from *The Trial of Ovoranwen*
Production

Langbodo Production.

Sources: (3a & 3b) Grace Adinku's Library



Plate 3c

The Ndebele, South African
Bridal beaded costumes- headband,
necklace, skirt, waist and leg hoops.

Source: From the book *African Ceremonies*.



Plate 3d

The Krobo *Dipo* Puberty Rites Initiate
adorned in layers of beads around the
neck and waist.

Source: Grace Adinku's Library

10. THE ROLE OF THE COSTUME DESIGNER

Since drama is a reflection of life, the role of the costume designer in any stage performance is to be able to portray all these cultural connotations and their relevance as revealed in a play to educate the audience. In the theatre, costume is regarded as one of the main medium of identifying and expressing the cultural background of a play. The designer's greatest challenge therefore is to give visual forms to abstract ideas (Wilson 2001). To achieve this aim the designer must be familiar with the script. He/She must divorce herself/himself from his/her world of reality and be transported to the cultural world of the drama by understanding the philosophy and concept of the playwright. Furthermore, the designer should be willing to experiment, relying on the desired atmosphere of the play to determine among others, the cultural milieu and suitability of the designs (Tortora & Eubank 1995). To achieve these, the designer is expected to carry out research, read wide and arrange for oral interviews when necessary.

These design requirements are evident in achieving the costumes for Femi Fatoba's *Death of Sanpona*, presented by the students of the University of Ibadan in 2004. This play parades a flight of deities in Yoruba land such as *Sanpona* – the god of small pox, who in this production was costumed in a earth colour, (costumes that looks like his skin) with a mixture of black and white stage make- up applied in dotted patterns on the entire body to indicate poxes scars (see plate 4a).



Plate 4a

Sanpona with black and white poxes scars
Aso-Oke



Plate 4b

Sango and *Oya* in red

Sources: (4a & b) Grace Adinku's Library

Among the Yorubas *Sango* the god of Thunder and *Oya* (his wife) goddess of the river are associated with red colour; because of *Sango*'s fear-some nature as it is believed that he spits fire, (eyes red) when he is angry. His wife *Oya* who is believed to have transferred her power of lightning and thunder storms to him out of love is also adorned in red. An important accessory of *Sango*'s costume is the thunder bolt which he carries with him always and uses with the assistance of *Oya* to conjure thunder and lightning. The worshippers of *Oya* in *Yoruba* land wears *Segi* beads as a symbol of her beauty since this deity is considered pretty. The designer made a conscious effort to reproduce this impression in the costumes designed for these characters in the play as evident in (plate 4b).

Obataba, *Osun*, *Olokun* and *Ifa* are deities synonymous with the colour white because they are considered to be gods of purity. Their worshippers, therefore, usually dress in white cloth and *Sese Efun* beads which can be ascribed to as African Pearls. (See plates 5a, 5b & 5c). To the *Yorubas*, *Ogun*, the god of Iron and all things made of iron is also considered as the god of war; a fearless hero and a great Blacksmith. Without *Ogun* *Yorubas* believe that people would not have tools to farm and fight. His worshippers are usually costumed in palm fronds to indicate the ever ready nature of *Ogun* for battle, as expressed by the designer in *Esu*; sometime referred to as the trickster god. Because of his mischievous disposition he is costumed in black and white to further signify his ability to manipulate human mind and situations.



Plate 5a (*Ifa*)



Plate 5b (*Obatala*)



Plate 5c (*Osun*)

All these deity characters from *Death of Sanpono* Production are in white costumes

Sources: (5a, b & c) Grace Adinku's Library

In *The Story Ananse Told* written by Martin Owusu and performed by the Abibigromma Theatre Company in the University of Ghana, Legon in 2007, the designer, by the use of costume presented an unquestionable parade of the Ashanti culture. Wrapped in colourful rich Ashanti *kente* cloth, the king is adorned in gold ornaments which came in forms of crown, necklace, anklets, bracelets and rings. (See plate 6a).



Plate 6a



Plate 6b

The King (left) and the Queen mother (right) in *The Story Ananse Told* Production

Source: Abibigromma Theatre Company, University of Ghana

The queen mother also wears her white silk cloth with yellow satin trimmings under a multi-coloured kente cloth. She

is also adorned with a headdress embedded with gold ornaments, rings on both fingers, and gold hoops around her biceps. In addition, she wears layers of different colourful beads around her neck, elbow, wrist, below the knee and ankle. (See plate 6b)

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how stage costume has been used as a means of cultural expression for two stage performances: *Death of Sanpona* (Nigeria) and *The Story Ananse Told* (Ghana). The goal of this paper was to examine how stage costume is an integral part of theatre; whose main aim or role is to express the physical looks of the characters in relation to their social status, health, age, mental condition, geographical location etc. Costume serves as a veritable medium for expressing cultural values of the locals of the play not only to the character but also to the audience. The study has observed how costumes in *Death of Sanpona* and *The Story Ananse Told* are culturally rooted in the traditions of the origins of plays. It is evident that the costumes of these plays are reflections of the culture of the people from whom the stories originate. Therefore when adequately researched into, stage costumes without any verbal communication portray the cultural inferences of a people, hence, to understand a culture it is necessary to study a people's clothing.

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