

**Ethnic Identities through Costuming and the Future of the Nigerian Film Industry: A Study of Moonlight Girl by Nonso Okonkwo and Goddess of the Sun by Iyke Odife**

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**Abstract**

*This paper looks at the use of costume in projecting ethnic identity of a particular people in Nigerian film industry. The term ethnicity currently refers to people thought to have common ancestry who share a distinctive culture. Culture may refer to the appreciation and understanding of literature, the arts and dress code of a people. For the purpose of this paper, the concept of the culture of the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria is explored through costume. The dress they wear is examined using films that reflect their culture. Igbo culture is held to be the mirror that reflects the lives, histories, and identities of 196 million people. For this reason, the artists have tried to protect and promote Igbo culture through home video films. It has been argued that through the use of costume, history can be recreated and culture preserved for ethnic identity. The Igbos are regarded as culturally distinctive people. However, studies have shown that most Igbos are ignorant of their cultural past, people and arts. Hence, the video film is used to propagate the Igbo identity and ensure cultural sovereignty. Natural identity is about shared values. Based on the critical analysis of two films set in traditional 1960 environment, this paper wants to establish that Nigerian video film costume designers have the potentials of rising up to the challenges of cultural promotion through costumes,*

**Introduction**

An ethnic group is a group of people whose members identify with each other through a common heritage, consisting of a common culture, 'including a shared language or dialect. The term ethnicity currently refers to people thought to have common ancestry, and share a distinctive culture,

Here, we will use the term nationality synonymously with ethnicity. Ethnic group as defined by Max Weber(2014), a German Sociologist, refers to those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs. Ethnicity is a fundamental distinct factor in human life. It makes a people distinct and unique. That is why anthropologist, Frederic Barth (132) and Eric Wolf(27) consider ethnic identity as distinct and not universal. They regard ethnicity as a product of specific kinds of inter-group interactions rather than an essential quality inherent to human groups. To Barth, ethnicity was perpetually negotiated and renegotiated by both external ascription and internal self-identification. His view is that ethnic groups are not discontinuous cultural isolates.

Similarly, national identity is defined as a group of people who share culture, ethnic origin and language. It is a person's identity and sense of belonging to one state or to one nation, a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one's citizenship status. National identity is not an innate trait; various studies have shown that a person's national identity is a direct result of the presence of elements from the "common points" in people's daily lives: national symbols, language, national consciousness, culture, arts among other things.

### **Culture and National Identity**

The justification of the requirements of ethnic identity is deeply embedded in the concepts of culture. For example, the African community system reflects African attitudes, ideas, values and artistic creativity that

enhance their survival. The term culture, may refer to the appreciation and understanding of literature, the arts and music of a people, For the purpose of this paper, the concept of the culture of the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria is important.

The culture of a nation comprises many aspects of their lives. It is shaped and molded by the background of its people, their languages and beliefs. It includes the many ways the people express themselves in words, movement, music, images and dress codes. It reveals itself in the ways people choose to spend their time, the music they listen to, the dress they wear among other things. These factors shape how a nation sees itself, and how it establishes its identity. The culture of a nation is said to be the expression of the character of that nation.

Igbo culture is held to be the mirror that reflects the lives, histories and identities of Igbo people. For this reason, artistes have attempted severally to protect and promote Igbo culture through home video films. Igbo dress code is one of such culture.

### **Defining Culture through Dress**

Dress is an important component of our daily lives. Through

clothing, individuals establish their senses of self as well as their place in society. The connections between dress and both individual and collective identities continue to be of interest to scholars and practitioners in the field of Theatre Arts. Essentially, Nigerian video films are exploding with increasing viewership and widening popularity, hence, more people are showing interest in Nigerian video films. Therefore, critics all over the world are showing interest in Nigerian video film as a genre. A number of articles have been written on this genre.

This paper sets out to investigate how the Nigerian film industry handles costume as visual effects to enhance Igbo ethnic identity. Costume is one of the major components to a successful film production. It has been said to be the tool used to transform an actor into the image he is to portray. Laver opines that costume is " ... apparel that is intended both to impress an audience and to impersonate a character ... "(6). Video films as art form, create exciting pleasure and communicate specific messages to an audience. Costume is one of the piece of puzzle in ensuring the unique experience provided by the video films. Costume refers to items of clothing worn by the actor for the purpose of defining a character, portraying a situation, an era, a locale, a person, an event, or a state of being as projected

by the script.

In the area of arts and entertainment, the English-language Nigerian video films are gaining popularity among African populace. Its audience cut across the borders of Africa. According to Ekwuazi (et al):

Notwithstanding the near total disappearance of the optical/cine film, the video film has kept activities in the industry at a peak. With such an astonishing rate of growth the industry is almost bursting at the seams. What is more, all over the West coast, if not entire continent, the Nigerian video film enjoys a clear lead. (viii)

There have been a lot of campaigns among Nigerian ethnic groups agitating for cultural revival. But most times, these campaigns are short-lived, hence leaving little or no impact at all on the populace. Drama as we know informs and educates through entertainment. The Nigerian video films have become veritable tools for cultural revival. Especially, in the epic films, because historical productions are embedded within the culture of a people at a particular period of time. costume and makeup are the commonest means of indicating culture, period and locale. Features that are associated with ethnic origin.

The term costume can refer to wardrobe and dress in general, or to the distinctive style of dress of a particular people, class, or period. It may

also refer to the artistic arrangement of accessories in a film, appropriate to the time, place, or other circumstances represented or described; or to a particular style of clothing worn to portray the wearer as a character or type of character other than their regular personae in a film. Film costume can help a character portray ethnicity and even information about historical period and geographical location.

### *Costume in Moonlight Girl and Goddess of the Sun*

#### *Synopsis of Moonlight Girl:*

*Moonlight Girl* is a film directed by Nonso Okonkwo, with the costumes designed by Esther Uyana. *Moonlight Girl* produced in 2009 is a film set in traditional Igbo society. The film revolves around two maidens, Olamma and Efu who are cousins. Olamma is a spoiled child from a wealthy home. She believes that she is the most beautiful maiden in the community. Hence, she should be the only girl to gain all the attention and admiration. This has been the case until her cousin Efu arrives from her poor home in another community to live with Olamma's family. Efu being prettier, more modest, domestic, and homily than Olamma. begins to attract all the attention and admiration to herself. She is so lovable that even Olamma's

parents and her handsome boyfriend, Abuchi seem to prefer her to " Olamma. This sudden change eventually induces and ignites a passion of I, hatred and envy in Olamma whose only means of putting a stop to this is to II terminate Efu's life. So, induced by envy, Olamma lures Efu to the stream at an odd and unusual time (afternoon) and drowns her. Henceforth, Efu's ghost continues to appear with the moon to haunt Olamma until she confesses her crime.

Costumes in this film reflect the ancient Igbo people and their culture (dressing pattern). The costumes for the characters vary according to their ages, gender, occupation, marital and economic status. Therefore, varieties of fabrics are used to depict a character's economic and marital status. Heavily embroidered george materials are worn by the wealthy characters, while the poor and average characters wear plain' george materials. Ankle-length wrapper (two-wrappers) depicts a married woman, whereas a thigh-length wrapper depicts youthful maiden. Costumes in this film evidently portray the identity of the Igbo ethnicity.

All the young girls in this film wear wrapper tied on chests, and a second wrapper tied on the waist down through their thighs. The young men equally wear wrappers tied in loin-cloth fashion and they are bare

ched. However, among the young-men, the palm-wine tapper is identified with his matted hat.

### ***Portrayal of the Igbo Identity in Moonlight Girl through Costumes***

The *Moonlight Girl* has been able to portray to a certain degree the Igbo traditional world in its use of costumes. Thus, all women in the film are costumed similarly in the Igbo traditional dress pattern. Costumes in the film are complimented by accessories: men wear anklet, wrist-bands and neck-beads, while women wear jigida, wrist-beads, neck-beads and earrings. Nevertheless, the accessories and the designs of the cloths differ according to their economic, social and marital status. The wealthier the character, the fuller the accessories. The costumes tell the audience who the characters are and where they come from even before they speak. It is to this effect that Umukoro maintains that:

The most pervasive Nigerian features found in indigenous Nigerian drama is the traditional Nigerian dress. Among the dynamic creations of humans today, dress uncontrovertibly ranks top most of things that most pervasively distinguish or evoke him or her (47).

Costumes in this film make a statement that visually unifies the historical period. Traditional Igbo society has plethora of design styles with an



overwhelming number of variations. Using textures, fabrics and details that represent the essence of the traditional Igbo past, costumes establish the theme of the film. The genre of the film is epic, and epic films attempt to capture, telescope and condense history, myth and legends.' Basically, costumes play vital roles in every epic film, because they deal with the culture of a particular people. It should be noted however, that the use of "aso-oke" (worn by Olamma in one of the scenes) as costume in this film, is not appropriate. Aso-oke does not establish an Igbo setting and identity. So, rather than using "aso-oke" to create variety, the costume designer would have used "akwaete" with which Igbo people are identified.

In this film, one notices that there is mixture of fabrics and styles from different periods in Igbo history. Even though the costuming may not be described as very appropriate, it would be considered as effective, because as long as a costume designer has appropriated the basic elements or items of clothing from a particular period, she can achieve a believable character portrait representative of that society in a particular era. In that wise, apart from the inappropriate use of aso-oke fabric, which is a Yoruba item of Clothing and not an Igbo item, all other fabrics and style may be considered effective tools for role interpretation and ethnic identity. In the

area of ornamentation, beads are quite appropriate to traditional Igbo society.

When specifying gender differentiation, costumes provide visual reflection of the society from which it sprang. For instance, during the traditional periods, Igbo women were covered from chest to ankle, but there was visual emphasis on the hair and face, with uli design, and on the waist with jigida (waist-beads). This provides a visual reflection of an ideal woman as wife and mother. While, costumes in contemporary period comes as a revolt against the ancient codes. A primary fashion statement reflects the societal re-evaluation of the role of woman with its stylish skirt and blouse. It can categorically be said that the Nigerian film industry welds costumes into tools for ethnic identity. So through an accurate use of costume, history is again recreated in this film, while national identity is portrayed.

### *Costumes in Iyke Odife's Goddess of the Sun.*

*Goddess of the Sun* directed by Iyke Odife, produced by Kenneth Ogbunike: with Amaka Akigwe as costumier; is an epic film set in traditional Igbo society. It revolves around Mmolokwu, a warrior who

murders the former king's son, who was to succeed his father.

*Goddess of the Sun* is homage to the traditional Igbo heritage. According to Amaka Akigwe, the costume designer, "I got the actors to wear what the characters ought to wear" (oral interview). The costume designer is behind all the transformative wears in the film. The film has been able to portray to an extent the Igbo traditional world in its use of costumes, especially in its use of fabrics. The film made extensive use of Akwaete material with which the traditional Igbo society is identified. Women in this film are dressed similarly with ankle-length wrapper. However, the king's wife wears blouse over ankle-length skirts and sometimes, unfitted maxy gowns. It seems that the costume designer has employed some touch of eclecticism in designing the costumes for the film. For instance, the royal native doctor does not really reflect a traditional Igbo "Dibia" (diviner). The fabric used for his costume is synthetic fur. Though, this could be the designer's way of appropriating modern fabric for animal skin.

The eclectic sense of costume design in this film is also reflected in the costumes of the maidens. Their costumes depict the traditional Igbo maidens; however there are some touches of adaptation in the design. Their

Upper garments which ought to be made in a way that the belly is exposed have another cloth attached to them like those of ancient Egyptians. This shows that the designer did not lift the entire costume design mode of the era of the film but rather, infused other design elements into existing design idioms.

The costume designer has been able to depict to some degree the traditional garments in accordance with the concept of the video film. Though, it seems she has added some alien though African elements like making the lower garments of the maidens into skirts instead of the usual wrappers. However, the basic idea has been expressed. Moreover, this is to effect ease of movements of the actresses so that costumes will not hinder their actions.

Costumes in this film are complemented or completed by accessories. Warriors wear animal skins on the waists and over the upper body. They also wear anklets made with beads.

### **Conclusion**

It has been argued that through the use of costumes, history can be recreated and culture preserved for ethnic identity. National identity is

necessary for the present as it is for the future. Igbo people explicitly regard themselves and are regarded by others as culturally distinctive people. They are identified by a tendency towards non-violence tradition and a tolerance of others. However, studies have shown that most Igbo people are ignorant of the nation's past and arts. Hence, the video film is used to propagate the Igbo identity.

National costume or ethnic costume express location, local identity and emphasizes a culture's unique attributes. It is often source of national pride. In Igbo nation, common practice is for a married woman to dress up in ankle-length wrapper (two wrappers), whereas, a thigh-length wrapper portrays a young maiden. Similarly, an ankle-length wrapper depicts a married man, while a knee-length wrapper depicts a youthful bachelor. Costumes make non-verbal, but effective visual communication in films and may serve as an instrument of ethnic identity--: According to. Dirks, epic films are "Costume dramas or period pictures that often cover large expanse of time set against vast panoramic backdrops" (6).

The Nigerian video films that are of the epic genre attempt to reconstruct the Nigerian identity. The Nigerian identity is recreated through the use of local costumes in epic films. This paper shows that

costume designers in the Nigerian film industry have attempted to attain some degree of effectiveness in the use of costume as tools for depiction of national identity in epic films.

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