

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture: Indices for designing historically informed Films of Nollywood

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Abstract

Over the years, the connections between dress, individual and collective identities continue to be of interest to scholars and practitioners in the field of art, fashion, textiles and Nigerian entertainment industry. Historically, dress through the ages provides a broad overview of costume traditions of diverse cultures so much beyond the description of what people wore and why; but with detailed descriptions of the obvious variables of nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, etc. It also takes into account the geography, climate, occupation, marital status, ideology, historical milieu and its influence on traditional societies. With the inception of Nollywood, the traditional dress culture of Nigeria has reached global viewership and has contributed significantly in showcasing the country's identity and heritage to the outside audiences. But the portrayal of traditional dresses in most of these films do not accurately reflect the historical context and intricacies of Nigerian dress culture due to lack of indepth research in cultural knowledge. This paper therefore aims to provide indices for designing historically informed films in Nollywood, with a specific focus on traditional Nigerian dress. Through an in-depth analysis of historical survey of traditional Nigerian dress culture of seven (7) ethnic regions, between 1960-1970 of Nigerian historical dress practices; the paper seeks to identify key elements and characteristics that can be incorporated into film costume design to create a more authentic representation of traditional Nigerian dress. The paper thus suggests that Nollywood designers should tap into the flux of these diverse traditional dress practices in designing historically informed films. For it is hoped that creating convincing costumes can aid in a holistic understanding of socio-cultural history and identities; no matter the genre, concept or historical setting.

Introduction

Over the years, dress and other forms of body adornment have been worn by people of all cultures since prehistoric times. Hence different nations of the world have had their own unique dress culture that distinguished them from the rest of the world. Dresses or clothes are originally worn as a garment for the purpose of covering, adorning and protecting the body. The materials used in making dresses can range from cotton, wool, rubber, silk fabric to flax fabric, etc. However, dresses that a given culture wears are determined by a number of factors which according to Braun (2005) is determined by the prevailing weather conditions. However, Nigerian dress culture has also been affected by the ever changing fashion trends. Other factors that influence dress that people wear include; availability of raw materials, cost of materials, religion, tradition, technical knowhow of the time, human migration, social status, travels, nationalism, modernity, etc. For instance, a typical Nigerian climate for example has rainy season and dry season, with their characteristic cold and hot weather period. This invariably implies that Nigerians in their way of dressing have to bow to the effect of these weather conditions.

Like other African nations, the development of cultural dresses in Nigerian dress culture can be said to have evolved from the conglomeration of diverse cultural groups in Nigerian geographical space. By the very nature of her existence i.e. the conglomeration of disparate

ethnic groups as a corporate entity, Nigeria cannot but endorse such marked peculiarities in the general appearance of the varying groups that make up the massive region. The reason for this conglomeration is due to the fact that Nigeria as a country is made up of a collection of different ethnic groups and each ethnic group having a distinct form of identification through the uniqueness of their different cultural dresses. This emerging costume culture appears to be a collection of cultural recognition from diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thus the typical Nigerian dress connotes fundamentally cultural indices that are remarkable attributes peculiar to a given geographical enclave.

In assessing the relevance of traditional Nigerian dress culture as indices for designing historically informed films or in costume designs of epic movies, F. E. Sparshott says that; "... more than any other art, film is technologically determined" (81). This is to say that the cine (video) film format cannot exist without technical effects. Concurrently, Abone in her essay on "Film medium and the Democratic Space in Nigeria" asserts thus:

Actually, the visual element of the cinema (video-film) needs no translation; they give the motion picture a universal power of communication. (22).

Film is a vivid reflection of people's culture through the use of the right costumes; thus costume designs for the film medium are relevant tools for historically accurate character. On that note, Bamidele responds:

Costume, style and fashion are part of our cultural wealth for which, but for the film, many are ignorant about it. For a new generation weak on cultural knowledge in this area; no matter how our costumes are glamorized... It is helping us in the revival drive for traditional costumes (130).

Besides the conglomeration of diverse ethnic groups, insight into the emergent cultural costumes can be found in the contemporary outfits of Nigerian dress culture. Take for instance the cultural Nigerian dress of the Niger-Deltans seem to be most popular among the Nigerian men today. This trendy style popularly known as "Senator's wear" was actually popularized by the immediate past president of Nigeria- Goodluck Ebere Jonathan Ph.D, this dress style has since then become the most favourite dress culture among Nigerian men (both young and old, rich and poor). For the women, "iro and buba" of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria has recently been transformed into eclectic designs that suit both young, middle aged, and old Nigerian women. Also Indian 'Sari', embroidered chiffon and silk from India has become the most favourite fabric amongst the women of South-East and South-South Nigerian women. This is so because group characteristics exist only by the strengthening and holding firm to the cultural norms indigenous to the group in question.

By and large, costumes and other forms of body adornment are classified on the basis of their usefulness in the Nigerian geographical space. Hence, each ethnic group costume may be considered less than one or more of the following categories: occupational costume, political, religious and royal costumes, festive, dance costumes, work dress, etc. Also geographic antecedents guide dress classification among ethnic groups. Thus, we tend to speak in Nigerian parlance that such cultural dresses can be ascribed to an Igbo cultural costume, Hausa, Yoruba, Urhobo, an Isoko or Ukwuani costume. In the same vein, we may speak of a Rivers- State costume, an Imo-State costume, or a Delta State costume or we may even designate costumes with tags such as Northern, Southern, Eastern or Western in orientation. In the same vein, the entertainment industry in Nigeria has been richly blessed with these diverse

cultural endowments. Over the years, the display of these diverse cultural legacies has been the major crux of the matter in the chronicling of Nollywood films as we display these popular cultural costumes into the Nigerian Entertainment Culture. Having this notion, this study thus believes that the designers of the Nigerian Entertainment Industry have had their inspiration from the influx of diverse ethnic dress cultures in the Nigerian geographical space. For easy navigation into the Nigerian diverse dress culture; figures 1-7 presents pictorial images of Nigerian dress culture from 1960-1970 with special reference to their traditional denotations and use.

Fig. 1 Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture- Igbo Modern Costume in 1960 and Post- 1960



Fig.A- The Obi of Amichi. The Obi's regalia include a horn, 'odu', and studded staff (mkpoeze)

Fig.B- A traditional/modern Igbo costume 'Akwa-nkukpo' for leisure at home especially in the evenings and modernized traditional costume for special occasions.

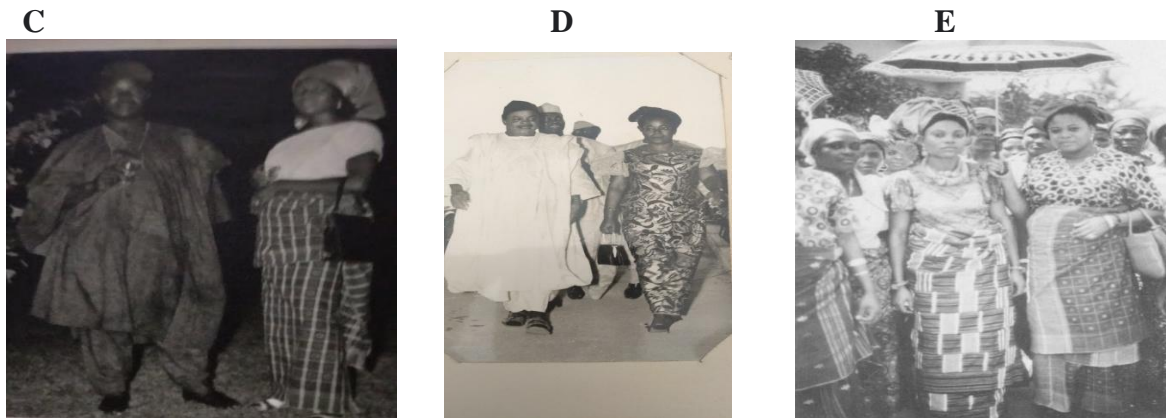
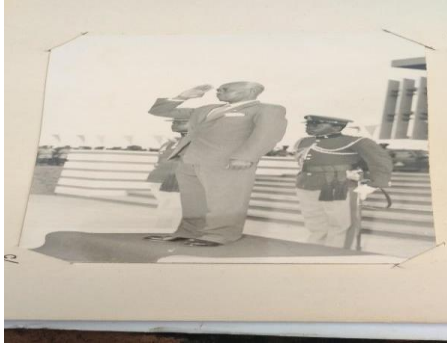


Fig.C- Assorted men's, women's and children's dress for special occasion. A traditional wedding day (Igba-nkwu) in Abiriba.

Fig.D/E- 'Agbada'(an Igbo version of Yoruba name) usually seen as a National dress. This type of 'National Costume indicates nationalism, prestige, and wealth especially by Nigerian politicians and for the wife – Ankara or such delicate materials like brocade, damask, lace, chiffon, etc. for big occasions by fairly well to do Nigerians.

E



F



Fig.E-Eastern Nigeria modern/western costume- ‘Coat and Trouser’ used for official and private, in everyday life and special occasions. Sir Francis Ibiam (fmr. Gov. of Eastern Nigeria) during an official ceremony.

Fig.F-Modern western wedding gown worn by an Igbo bride. Nylon lace and veil with a flat white shoe to match.

Traditional Nigeria Dress Culture - Rivers /Efik/Jukun modern costume (1960)

A(RIVERS)



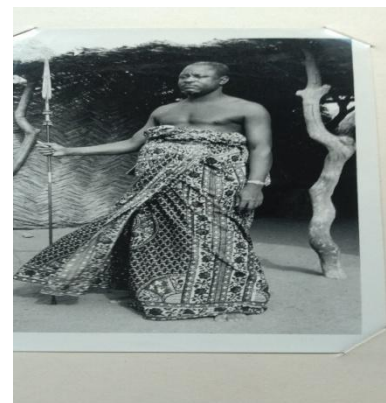
B(IJAW)



C (EFIK)



D&E (JUKUN)



A- Rivers Traditional Modern Costume (1965). A fashionable young Nigerian student’s leisure (occasional) wear. Jumper and Sekou Toure Cap. House of Assembly opening 1965.

B- Informal everyday male wear in Rivers area. A woolen Jumper and trousers, 1966 Buguma.

C- C- Efik Traditional Modern Costume (1965). An elegant version of up and down Ankara, made in light green brocade for special occasions.

D&E- The ‘ Aku Uka of Wukari (Priest King of the Jukuns) wearing his official robe called ‘Nyikpo’. Made of locally woven triangular shape and red imported red cloth. The designs at the bottom of the robe, reading from left to right are :- crocodile's teeth; scorpion; Zodashan’ eyes of the juju’; Nanabi, a water bird; moon and star (top of the gown) worn for ceremonies that can be witnessed by anyone. And on the right is one of the attendants of Aku Uka holding the spear called Tsogege, 1962.

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture - Nupe and Shuwa Arab (Kano) 1960 and above.

A (NUPE)



B (NUPE)



C (NUPE)



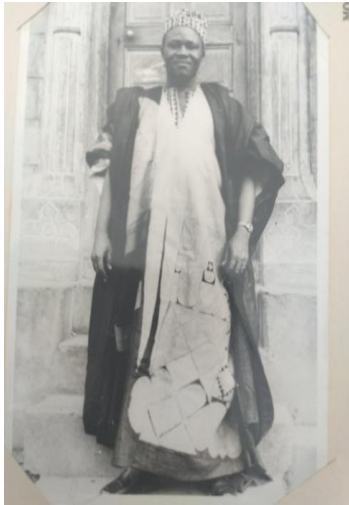
D (KANO)



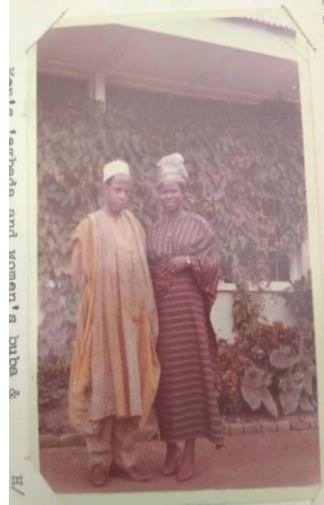
- A- ‘Bangabanga’- ordinary men’s working hat (woven fibre). Nupe
- B- B- Head-tie with traditional woman’s dress used for festivals (1962/63)
- C- C- Wrapper, Buba, head-tie. A work dress for ordinary Nupe women in Northern Nigeria. Note especially the cloth kept over the head to shade the sun.
- D- A traditional adult costume worn with white outer covering called ‘muslim’. Note her makeup and jewelry.

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture - Yoruba Modern Costume 1960 and above

A



B



C



D



E



F



- A- 'Agbada' is usually worn by adults. Dressing for big celebrations, meetings and such occasions.
- B- 'Agbada, Buba, Sokoto, Gele and Irobirin' Modernized Yoruba traditional outfit for high class educated modern Yoruba couple.
- C- 'Hakparkada' men's hat to be worn with 'Agbada'
- D- Head tie- a cotton hard material for ordinary women's head-tie
- E- 'Gele, Buba, Iro, Iborun' A typical everyday wear of the Yoruba women
- F- 'Buba and wrapper' Ordinary women's dress in Yoruba- (work dress)

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture - Hausa Traditional Modern costume 1960 and above

A



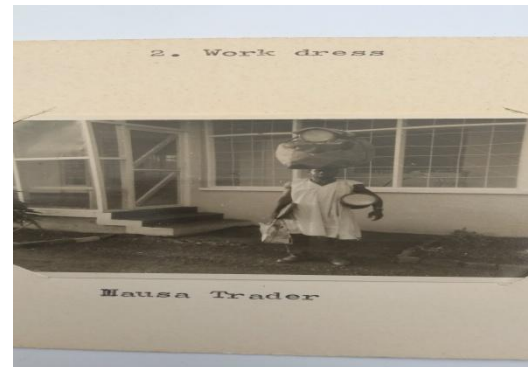
B



C



D



- A- Bubariga – Hausa traditional costume used for public occasions in 1960 and after.
- B- Hausa (Essie) traditional/modern costume used for chieftancy ceremonies
- C- Hausa facial marking and traditional hair style
- D- Hausa Trader- A long shirt-like garment worn with trousers for everyday use.

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture - Fulani/Kanuri Traditional dress 1960 and above

A



B



C



D (Kanuri)



- A- Fulani facial marking and also typical girl's hair dress Northern Nigeria. Note also her jewelry.
- B- B- Fulani's ordinary woman head-tie Northern Nigeria. Note her makeup and jewelry.
- C- C- Work dress for Fulani Shepherds. D. A Kanuri woman's hair do. Note her facial markings.

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture -Igala/Ishan/Idoma/Itsekiri Traditional Modern costume 1960 and above.

A (IGALA)



B(ISHAN)



C(IDOMA)



D(ITSEKIRI)



E (ITSEKIRI & IGBO)



F(ITSEKIRI)



A- 'IKPE ENYI Title': A women's title in Igala land equivalent to the Igbo women's title-Iyom. The ivory anklets and arm rings are purchased from Igbo traders.

B- This is Salami Osufure, apparently the priest of the ancestor shrine (Alo Enigie) of the Enogies of Amahor. His robe is a locally dyed cloth sewn with cowries, medicine packets and duiker horns.C

C -Benue Province. A lady's English head-tie for special outings and ceremonies, 1960.

D-A traditional head-tie for traditional women's costume Midwestern Nigeria-1962-63.

E&F 'Jakell George', Damask, Velvet and such popular expensive materials were imported. A complete set of adopted 'traditional' costumes for public gatherings like parliamentary and cultural meetings. And on his left, is a typical western type suit seen throughout Nigeria.

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture - Uniform and Non-tribal costumes from 1960 and post 1960

A



E

B



F

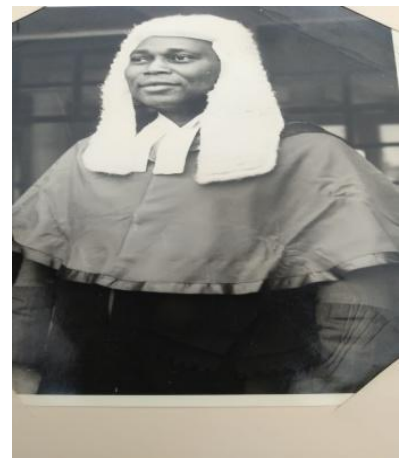
C



D



G



A- An official Nigerian Head of Police Uniform Eastern Nigeria 1965. A white and coloured khaki material used to welcome prominent Nigerian and dignitaries.

- B- Dress uniform for Nigerian Police Lagos 1960
- C- Typical uniform of the Nigerian Police Band, Lagos 1960
- D- Official Military uniform, a coloured and imported khaki materials, used for Military use, Enugu, 1965
- E- Non-tribal office work dress in early 60s Lagos. Made of cotton. Note her hair
- F- Student Nurses' Uniform, University Teaching Hospital, Ibadan 1960.
- G- Traditional English wig taken over by Nigerian legal profession, High Court Lagos, 1960
- H- Photographs Collection: Eicher, Joanne, Bubolz. University of Minnesota.

The Concept of Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture

Nigeria as a diverse geographical entity is richly embedded with very rich cultural heritage. Our diversity in culture, religion, festivals, and dressing, is in fact one of the major strengths as a nation. This is particularly true of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria where several hundreds of cultures have converged to produce national integration. In the Nigerian context for instance, this multi-cultural dress code has however contributed significantly in good neighborliness and of course true patriotism. It is therefore based on the socio-cultural nature of Nigerians that this study tries to identify each geographical location through their distinctive cultural traits and that distinguishes them from the rest of the region and the larger socio-cultural society through their dresses.

Nigeria as Africa's most populous country has numerous tribes and ethnic groups, many of which wear their own style of garb. Regrettably, some Nigerians have never seen or come in contact with people of other ethnic extraction. Others have little or no knowledge of other ethnic groups. And a few know nothing about their own tradition and culture. This however has become a thread among the recent generation of Nigerian youths, who have embraced western practice and dress codes as against their own traditional dress culture. Traditional dresses are worn on a daily basis in many areas of Nigeria. In other areas, traditional dresses are worn for specific and special occasions such as festivals and weddings. Based on this outlook, these subtopics will explore aspects of traditional Nigerian dress culture, particularly the Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, among other ethnic groups. This subtitle will not be able to discuss all the ethnic nationalities in the country due to time and space constraints but highlight some major ethnic groups across Nigeria geographical space and how they dress will be underscored.

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture-Igbo: The Igbo people occupy South-Eastern and parts of South- Southern Nigeria which has states such as Anambra, Enugu, Imo. Abia, Ebonyi, Delta, and Rivers. Igbo people are one of the three major tribes of Nigeria. Igbo people are highly creative and technocratic in nature. They do well in business and technology. They have a strong family bond and every successful member of the family becomes the succor for the rest. Centuries ago the only reason Igbo people wore clothes were for modesty; clothing was not used as style or to display status. Over time their garb evolved. Igbo people love class and elegance. They are self - preservative and fraternal in their way of dressing. Today most of the people, especially in urban areas, wear western styled clothing. However in rural areas, they often still wear traditional clothing. The traditional clothing for women are wrappers, some of which are designed for day to day activities and others for formal occasions. The women usually dress like Edo people with beads on the head. The formal wrappers (George) are made of expensive cloth which is often imported. Men usually wear cotton wrappers, shirts, and sandal for day to day wear. Formal wear for men consist of wrappers made of better materials that are used for day to day wears such as George, velvet embroidery- isi-agu, red cap, etc. Nevertheless, some Igbo tribes tie white wrappers across their shoulders.

Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture-Hausa/Kanuri/Fulani: The Hausa/Kanuri/Fulani people occupy the Northern part of Nigeria. These people have been grouped together because of the similarities in culture, dressing, and language. They are the most populated people in Nigeria and they make up the major tribe. Apart from the Fulani people, most Nigerians will not be able to differentiate between these tribes. Also religion has helped to strengthen the bond shared by these triad as well as other minorities in their region. These people live a quiet, reclusive and pastoral life. They are not known for extravagance. Their traditional system is modeled after the Islamic method of Caliphate, Sultanate and Emirate. These groups of people are remarkably nomadic in nature. They are mainly farmers and cattle herders while there are also large pockets of politicians and civil-servants. Hausa/Kanuri/Fulani men are unique in their dressing. They usually dress with “Kaftan” or “Jalabiya”. They wear a wide sleeved robe called a “babban-riga” which is a floor-length robe with very long sleeves which have to be folded up to expose the hands. It is the equivalent of the Yoruba outfit (agbada). Even though the “babanriga” is considered a Muslim garment; almost all Nigerian men wear one to go to formal locations. Hausa men also wear a traditional head piece, a round cap called a fula. Hausa women wear colourful wrappers (abaya) with matching blouses.

Hausa Women Dress Culture (Kano)

A



B



Traditional Nigerian Dress Culture-Yoruba: The Yoruba people occupy South-Western and North-Central Nigeria and in states such as Lagos, Oyo, Ekiti, Kwara, Kogi, Ondo, Ogun and Oshun. They are one of the three major tribes in Nigeria. They love partying and enjoyment generally. The Yoruba people of Nigeria are known for their exquisite clothing. They are extremely glamorous in dressing. For the Yorubas, clothing serves as an indicator of status and wealth. The Yorubas usually wear “Agbada”, an oversized cloth which is worn like a jacket over the lace or wrapper based clothes. For special occasions such as weddings and funerals they wear especially beautiful garb. Examples of Yoruba clothing includes the following;

Gele



This is traditional Nigerian cloth which women wrap around their neck. There are many variations of how they wrap it.

Agbada-



This is a loose fitting robe, worn in many different regions of Africa, especially in West Africa. These robes reach to the ankles and are either worn either open at the sides or stitched closed along the edges. In West Nigeria a loose-fitting robe is called an agbada. An agbada has sleeves that hang loosely over the shoulders and an opening at the front. These robes are especially worn for formal events amongst Nigerian Men. Nigerian men often wear a formal robe called an agbada over their clothes.

Iro and Buba-



Okafor

Iro- Iros are long wrap-around skirts. The rectangular skirt is worn by tucking it in at the end. Buba - This is a loose fitting blouse with a long sleeved and a neck line with either V-shaped or round neck. It usually falls a little below a woman's waist. Men can also wear a buba.

Nollywood Designers and Traditional Nigerian Dress Practices: key Elements and Characteristics to Designing Historically informed Films

Designing contemporary costumes is a tough job but the pressure mounts when a designer has to create costumes for a period film. This genre of films recreates a past era, one that may have little or no reference. So one of the most significant aspects of portraying this different period in time is the way people dressed and their costumes (Kosy 2021:95-96). The style of clothes, the fabrics, the embellishments and more, help us create a connection to the past (96).

To create a more authentic representation of traditional Nigerian dress in historically informed films, the following key elements and characteristics can be incorporated by the Nollywood designers:

Fabric: Traditional Nigerian clothing is often made from vibrant and colorful fabrics, including Ankara (African wax print) fabrics, adire (tie and dye) fabrics, aso-oke (handwoven cloth), and damask fabrics. Using these fabrics in costume design of historically informed films can aid in authenticity of traditional Nigerian dress culture.

Patterns and Prints: Nigerian traditional dress often incorporates intricate and bold patterns and prints in their varied designs. These patterns however can include geometric shapes, tribal motifs, and symbols that hold cultural significance. Thus, incorporating these patterns and prints into designing costumes for historical films can add depth and authenticity.

Silhouettes and Styles: Different Nigerian ethnic groups have their distinct dress styles and silhouettes. For example, Yoruba attire typically includes up and down attire for women called "bubas" and loose trousers called "sokotos," while men wear "agbadas" (flowing gowns) or "fila" (caps). Adapting these traditional silhouettes and styles in costume design can accurately represent Nigerian traditional dress culture.

Accessories: Interestingly, every Nigerian traditional attire is often accentuated with various accessories. These can include headgear, such as gele (headscarves) and fila (caps), as well as jewelry, such as beads, necklaces, and bracelets. Including these accessories in costume design can help create a more authentic representation of a typical Nigerian dress culture.

Embellishments: Nigerian traditional clothing frequently features intricate embellishments and embroidery. These embellishments can be done with threadwork, beadwork, or sequins, and they add a touch of elegance to the garments. Incorporating these embellishments into designing costumes of historical films can enhance their authenticity.

Cultural Significance: Each ethnic group in Nigeria has its own cultural symbols and meanings associated with their traditional dress. It is essential to research and understand these cultural symbols and incorporate them appropriately when designing costumes for historically informed films. This helps to convey the deeper meaning and significance behind the garments.

Authentic Traditional Techniques: Nigerian traditional attire is often handmade using traditional techniques. Costume designers can employ these techniques, such as hand-dyeing fabrics or traditional weaving methods like aso-oke, to create a more authentic representation of Nigerian dress.

Regional Diversification: Nigeria is a diverse country with many ethnic groups, and each group has its own distinct traditional dress. Considering the regional variation and incorporating elements specific to a particular ethnic group can enhance the authenticity of the costume design. Overall, the key elements and characteristics to incorporate in film costume design for a more authentic representation of traditional Nigerian dress involve the use of

vibrant fabrics, traditional patterns and prints, specific silhouettes and styles, cultural accessories and embellishments, meaning and symbolism, authentic techniques, and regional variation. By incorporating these elements, costume designers can accurately portray and celebrate the rich and diverse traditional dress of Nigeria in historically informed films.

Conclusion

However, every garment worn in a movie is considered a costume. Costumes are a storytelling tool, communicating subtle details of each character's personality and history quickly and economically to the audience. They help actors leave their own personalities behind and become new and believable people on screen. There is no gainsaying the fact that costumes generally are important in films not only for the comfort they provide the actor as he portrays his interpretative art but also because costumes convey information to the audience through their texture (whether coarse or delicate), through their colour (whether dull or bright), and through their shape (whether *crème de la crème*, dainty gaudy or outlandish). Actors and actresses would have great difficulty creating a part without costumes and, in some cases, without makeup or mask as well. An actor's costume is so successful to the point that the actor understands and accepts the idea of the character of whose costume he is wearing and to the point that the audience identifies this very character he is portraying. Costume design is the most personal aspect of design. The costume designer must create the right clothes for characters that, on one hand, reflect the ideas and goals of the screen play, but, on the other hand, should look like the character chose the clothing the same way we choose ours in everyday life. Similarly, because we all wear clothes but probably do not design houses, audiences tend to make strong personal associations with whatever an actor wears on screen. However, Nigerian dress fundamentally connotes such cultural indices that are remarkable attributes peculiar to a given geographical enclave. And the entertainment industry in Nigeria has been richly blessed with these diverse cultural endowments. Essentially, the costume designer should be able to research and factor all these variables together to determine the vestimentary and cosmetic codes for any performing arts production, no matter the genre, concept or historical setting.

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