

SEMIOTICS AND THE LANGUAGE OF COSTUMES IN NIGERIAN VIDEO FILMS: A STUDY OF *CRY OF A WIDOW* AND *ADAEZE*

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Abstract

This paper discusses signs and symbols of costume for visual communication and the contribution that the concept of semiotics analysis makes with regard to enhancing a costume designer's experience and engagement with the elements of costume. The concept of semiotics is indicated as contributive factor to effective visual communications; meaning is seen as dynamic, predominantly described in terms of subjective reality. To address this, the researcher employed Semiotic theory: the foundation of contemporary film theory and qualitative methodology in order to analyze selected Nigerian video films. This form of analysis allows costume a distinct voice in words dominated film. It reinforces costume as communication through style, lines, colour, fabric and texture. This work has been able to create a communicative distinction of costumes in films using the socio-cultural and conventional interpretations of colours, lines, fabrics, styles and textures of clothes and accessories. It has attempted to understand how lines, colours, fabrics and textures convey meaning in film. This paper discovers that costume helps us to form individual opinions about characters and at the same time reconstruct their socio-cultural realities. Based on this discovery, semiotic interpretation can be recommended as a useful adjunct to traditional idealistic research, particularly when the film costume being studied is so complex that objectivity is hard to maintain. Having analyzed the costumes of selected Nigerian video films in relation to semiotics theory, the contexts of the films selected and the researcher's experiences and observance of convention and Igbo culture; significations of costumes are presented as subjective truth, making way for further interpretations and several different meanings. The paper argues that the meaning of costumes in video films centers on the viewer's experiences and culture. Thus this research emphasizes the participation of the audience in visual communication process and film costumes.

Introduction

The Nigerian film industry is believed to have blossomed with the success of Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage*. According to Ayakoroma, "In 1992, the experimental effort of an Ibo businessman, Kenneth Nnebue, paid off" (2). From then on, the industry has continued to witness unprecedented success. According to Ayakoroma, "The commercial success of *Living in Bondage* was an impetus for other artisans and peripheral businessmen, who joined to jumpstart what has become an industry" (21). *Living in Bondage*, the pacesetter of the Nigerian film industry was done in Igbo language and subtitled in English language. As this film was immensely enjoyed by large number of Nigerians, both Igbo people and Non-Igbo people, the film industry started pumping films done in English language into the market. This in turn expanded the popularity of Nigerian video Nigeria films, and critics became interested in analyzing the Nigerian video films via different genres. Some scholars are of the opinion that it is the second highest grossing film industry behind Hollywood in the United States of America. While some contend that it is occupying the third position behind Hollywood and Indian's Bollywood. Ayakoroma (22). Consequently, the Nigerian movie industry has had

profound name recognition among Africans, the Diasporas and the world since its emergence at the turn of the twenty-first century. This has prompted Utoh-Ezeajugh to submit:

Nigerian video films have become popular not just with Nigerians audiences but with an international and multi-cultural mix of audiences in recent years. The films are being marketed and consumed all over the African continent and have attracted the attention of cable Television networks in different parts of African (201).

With the inception and subsequent development of the industry, many technical and artistic aspects of films such as costumes have attracted scholarly attention. In other words, the Nigerian video films have been variously read by critics through their costumes. According to Ayakoroma, “The video film medium in Nigeria has become very engaging: academics, film critics, producers and consumers” (21).

Costumes help viewers tune in more while seeing a film. In other words, film costumes help us to better understand the characters in the film. According to Emasealu, “Costume is used to denote characterization...” (94). Costume plays a strong role in film in defining the characters. They transform recognizable stars into specific roles, and films depend on costumes to complete the full picture of their characters. Costume is crucial to how a character is perceived. It helps make film characters well-rounded. Costumes have been referred to as tools use in transforming 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 help the performer to impersonate a character...” (6). Video-film as an art form creates an exciting pleasure and communicates specific messages to the audience, and costume is one of the major pieces of puzzles in ensuring the unique experience provided by video-film.

Costume refers to items of clothing worn by the actor for the purpose of defining a character such as portraying a situation, an era, a locale, a person, or an event, or state of being as projected by the script. Film costume aids audience in understanding the film, it illuminates the character, and expresses the film’s quality.

Sociology of Costume

People wear clothes for many different reasons. Generally, people’s physical and emotional healths are protected by some clothing. Hence, people wear clothes in order to get protection from weather and other hazardous activities. People also tend to communicate with clothes. Their clothes tell us who they are, what they are like, how they feel, or what they would like to be - a glance at someone’s clothes may tell you who they are. So, people’s clothing determines to great extent the first impression they make. Tracy suggests that: “...when you choose the clothes you are going to wear and how you groom yourself, you make a personal statement to the world. You tell others what you think of yourself, and you signal to others how they are to evaluate you...” (24). Hence, for centuries individuals or societies have used clothes and other body adornment as forms of nonverbal communication to indicate occupation, rank, gender, locality, class, and wealth and group affiliation. According to Gillette, “There may be some truth to the adage that “Clothes make the man” (385). He maintains that:

A study, summarized in the book *The Four Minutes Sell*, by Janet Elsea, indicates that during the first four minutes of contact with a stranger, our understanding of that person’s nature and personality will be based on three primary, but equal factors: appearance, 55 percent, tone of voice, 38 percent, and what the person is saying, 7 percent (38).

So, from Gillette's submission, we can see that people's appearance and clothing determine to a larger extent the first impression they create. Categorically, what a person wears and how he or she wears it says a great deal about that person and the society in which he or she lives. Similarly, film uses costume as a form of nonverbal communication to reveal characters. Hence, costume as an element of film production is a form of free-speech. They do not only embrace clothing but also skin colour, accessories, hairstyle and jewelries. What actors wear in video-film, provides the audience with shorthand to subtly read the surface of the play's background and social situation.

Hence, this research derives impetus from the semiotics theory. It is based on the concept of signifier and referent articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* and Charles Sanders Peirce's triad of icon, index, and symbol. According to Peirce the three rubrics (icon, index, and symbol) indicate types of representation, signs that mean something to somebody in their respect or capacity. According to Krasner,

Signs stands in for an object being represented, making a reference to an idea or meaning derived from the original object. Icon represents directly; for instance, a box of matches onstage stands for a box of matches...symbolic representations are patterns of convention, fashion, or social context" (136).

In theatrical terms, the object is represented as an icon by virtue of its similarity to the real thing both in appearance and in utility. Theatre semioticians employ these indicators in decoding performances. Krasner again submits that:

In 1931 two important Czechoslovakian studies of theatre semiotics appeared: Otakar Zich's *aesthetics of the Art of Drama* and Jan Mukoravsky's "An Attempted Structural analysis of the phenomenon of the actor". Zich maintained that theatre consists of multiple and interdependent systems, with written text merely one of many components. The text was one facet of theatre's total dramatic presentation" (137).

Explaining further, he posits that "Mukarosvsky believed art resides in the public's collective consciousness. Not only the theatre but also the social context of the performance emerge as signs constituting the total effect" (137). Semiotics seeks to understand how meaning works. It accepts the belief that things cannot be understood individually. Instead, they have to be seen as part of a larger society to which they belong.

Semiotics and the Language of Costumes

Semiotics provides a way of playing with costumes and meaning that teases and delights. It is the rules for reading and interpreting costumes. There is no doubt that with a semiotics analysis, an understanding of costume in relation to the film character will lead to meaning. Semioticians are therefore called upon to supply missing material to fill in the implicit meaning of the film costume. This, they do by using their own experiences with culture and convention, thereby creating even differences in interpretations. In other words, it is no longer a given in film that the signification of a particular costume is static, absolute, and unified. With semiotics, meaning is deemed to be relative, dynamic, and open. According to Dobie,

The long-held view of the world as a knowable, objective entity that could be discovered through direct experience of sense encountered serious challenges...In Philosophy, for example, thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) began to question the existence of objective truth (151).

Friedrich Nietzsche called for a reevaluation of basic beliefs that would make it possible for human beings to develop their creative powers. Using different terminologies like semiotics, spokespersons from other areas of study echoed Nietzsche's denial of an ultimate reality that is static, unified, and absolute, to be replaced by an understanding of the world as relativistic, dynamic, and open. Eco was one of the scholars who followed Nietzsche's school of thought, according to Brandt:

Initially inclined towards an open methodology that would give the interpreter a major role in determining the meaning of any given text, professor Eco later came around to the view that there was an inherent hard core of meaning and that interpretation had been given too much theoretical scope (279).

The study of film costume was not immune to such probing. For many years, costume has been viewed as a transparent medium through which reality could be set down accurately and shaped into an aesthetic form. Finding meaning, which was assumed to be present, required finding colours, textures, lines and fabrics that correspond to the character and context observed. Colours, textures, fabrics, and lines are taken to be reflecting and presenting truths about characters and their world. By film costume here we mean clothing and accessories specifically designed and worn for dramatic performance in films. It connotes whatever is worn on the performer's body. It conveys information about the character and aid in setting the tone or mood of the film. According to Umukoro, "...costume...bear indices and attributes which most appropriately evoke the personality of the actor(s)...it serves basically as tool for character delineation..." (54). Furthermore, Utoh-Ezeajugh defining costume submits that, "These instruments are used to physically transform performers, thereby aiding them to lose their own identities and assume that of the characters they are impersonating...they are universally regarded as indispensable aids to performance" (83).

Thus costume is regarded as a language which has its own dialectics and used by film to tell its story; and semiotics a means of reading and analyzing the language of costumes in film. Semiotics however, sought to determine not what the costume means but how it generates its meanings. The long-held view of the world as knowable, objective entity that could be discovered through direct experience of the senses encountered serious challenge in fields as diverse as linguistics, psychology and anthropology. French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who is generally regarded as the father of modern linguistics following Nietzsche's ideal about objective truth, proposed a model for studying language. According to Berger:

Ferdinand de Saussure described his hopes for the science of semiotics in his book *Course in General Linguistics*...A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable, it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology. I shall call it semiology...Semiology would show what constitutes a sign, what laws govern them (48).

Saussure's idea swept away the 19th Century correspondence model between words and things and gave us language that is connected only conventionally and arbitrarily to the world outside it. One of the concepts important to Saussure's explanation of language system is that of signs, which he describes as being composed of two parts: signifier (which this research takes to mean costume), and its meaning, called the signified. A crown for instance, is a signifier. The concept that flashes into our mind when we see crown on a character is the signified. According to Berger, "We must keep in mind the point made by Saussure, that the relation between a **signifier**, or marker (what he called a sound or object), and its **signified**, or meaning, is arbitrary and based on convention" (23). With the introduction of these terms, and the theory underlying them, Saussure transformed the sense of what a costume is. He made it no longer possible to

conceive of a costume as a symbol that represents a character outside of it, as it had conventionally been known. Because a film-costume does not refer to some phenomenon in the world, but to a concept in the mind; it is culture, and not the world external to us, that mediates our reality and modifies our definition of film costume. We see only what costume (in the socio-cultural context of a particular film) allows us to see both inside and outside the character.

In semiotics, costumes do not simply record our world or provide labels for what it means. Instead, according to Saussure's ideal, costume constitutes the world of the character wearing it; it structures his/her experience. Consider, for example how costume designers of different video films tend to have differing views of the interpretation of characters- they see the world through different cultures. Thus, a Hollywood costume designer interprets a witch through the eyes of the Western culture, while a Nollywood costume designer interprets a witch through the eyes of the African culture.

The connection between a film costume and its meaning has several important characteristics. First of all, it is not a natural relationship but an arbitrary one. In essence, a black cloth has no inherent link with bereavement, it could just as easily have been a green cloth. Then how does a costume and what it signifies become tied together? The relationship comes about through culture - an agreement on the part of society that the two are associated. Hence, Dobie opines that:

Any organized, structured set of signs carries cultural meanings, making it possible to "read" a culture by examining those signs. Saussure, in fact, proposed the development of a science called **semiology** that would investigate meaning through signs observable in cultural phenomena" (155).

Again, we know what one fabric signifies from what another fabric signifies not because of meanings they inherently carry but because of the differences among them. For instance, the signifier silk is distinguishable from cotton because they have different textures. Furthermore, elements of film-costumes worn by a character cannot be defined in isolation, because they exist in chain formed by relationship with costumes worn by other characters in the film. The meaning of a film costume, then, is arbitrary, cultural, conventional, and based on differences among textures, fabrics, lines, and colours. The contrasting concepts such as smooth/rough, white/black, horizontal/vertical, and satin/cotton make it possible for us to understand the other more fully. According to Dobie, "We are able to understand black because we understand white..." (154). All costumes carry cultural meanings, making it possible to read a culture by examining the elements of costume design in the costume.

The Grammar of Colours, Lines, Texture, and Fabric in Video Films

Studies of signs, symbols and their meanings evolved from semiotics, a philosophical approach that seeks to interpret messages in terms of their signs and patterns of symbolism. The study of semiotics originated in a literary or linguistic context and has been expanding in a number of directions including costumes. Taking up Saussure's idea, Roland Barthes in his *The Fashion System* (1967) analyzed the written fashion description in "Elle" and "Le Jardin des Modes", (fashion magazines) instead of their visual presentation, and classified the system of communication through two categories: image clothing and descriptive clothing. He shows how the adulteration of signs (seams and plaids), could easily be translated into words. He explained how in the fashion world any word could be loaded with idealistic bourgeois emphasis. Thus, if popular fashion says that a 'skirt' is ideal for certain situation or ensemble, this ideal is immediately naturalized and accepted as truth, even though actual style could just

as easily be interchangeable with a 'wrapper', 'caftan' or 'trousers' or any number of combinations. Barthes' theory questions the overall utility of demystifying culture for the masses; hence it drives into a search for individualistic meaning in art.

Whereas, in the past, determinists like Aristotle saw things in terms of cause and effect, semiotics looks for signs and symbols. It challenges common sense, which believes that things have one meaning and that this meaning is pretty obvious. Semiotics tells us that meaning is constructed, as a product of share system of signification. For instance, the traditional Igbo society denotes the wearing of two wrappers to signify that a woman is a wife and mother. Thus the signification of a woman's marital status by two ankle-length wrapper is a constructed meaning which has over time become the Igbo culture. Again, semiotics can be defined as the study of signs: how they work and how we use them. Berger defines semiotics as "The science that investigates the way meaning is produced and transmitted" (244). Whereas a sign is anything that could be used to stand for something else. For instance, using a white robe with cape and a cross pendant to signify a catholic priest. So a sign can be a word, a sound, or a visual image. Saussure divides a sign into two components: the signified, which is the concept the signifier represents, or the meaning. However, a sign or symbol can mean anything we agree that it means, and it can mean different thing to different people and culture. Nevertheless, the meaning of a symbol is based on agreement and learned through experience. Costume uses textures, colours, lines and fabrics that have to be learned. It will be important therefore to deconstruct the visual image of a film character's costumes using semiotic analysis to discover the perceived meaning of the colours, textures, fabrics, lines and styles.

The Language of Costumes in *Cry of a Widow*

Costumes use signs and symbols in the form of colour, patterns, lines, textures and fabrics to communicate; therefore their visual impact can better be understood contextually. Elements of costumes carry with them not only beauty but also messages. Costumes do not only carry meaning but evoke the definitions of the characters wearing them. The semiotics conventions are endowed with cultural reflexes, and going by Barthes' ideal, words are supplemented with semiotic signs which are: colour, lines, textures and mass of costumes.

Semiotics and the language of costumes in Nigerian films defines the elements of costume which operate together to produce meaning. Semiotics is used here as the science of signs, that is, how the elements of costume design operate and the ways in which they are used in the film *Cry of a Widow*. This research is concerned with colours, fabrics, lines, textures and mass of costume employed by the costume designer to portray the film characters on their journey through the film's life.

Cry of a Widow was produced by Chibuzor Sunday Eriobu, directed by Ikechukwu Onyeka and its costumes were designed by Uche Nancy for Softel Productions Limited in 2011.

The film is based on Sussy also known as Madam Gold and her adopted daughter, Chidinma also known as Dinma. In order to aid an objective and multiple readings and interpretations of this film, this paper gives a summary of the film. Sussy is a very wealthy widow who came across a young beautiful girl whom she fell in love with and adopts as her daughter. She initiates Chidinma into lesbianism and other vices like kidnapping. To the world, Dinma is her daughter, but in reality; Sussy and Dinma are partners in crime.

Visual images such as fabrics, colours, lines and textures of costumes in the film can be read in an identical manner as a text using semiotics theory. Costumes in this film prove that they to have their own idiolect and can be interpreted as a justification of personality and character.

Semiotics theory encourages a researcher to assume that a film character's costume is directly related to aspects of his/her personality. It goes without saying that society acknowledges certain dress codes and attributes them to particular qualities in individuals' traits. For instance, one would expect a doctor in a film to hang a stethoscope on his neck. Hence, we conclude that costume is communication and has a crucial role in constructing and maintaining cultural ideals and responsibilities. This becomes a stereotype, a conversation and a reflection of personality. It is not necessary for a character to tell the audience his/her personality; his/her costume will do the talking for him/her. However, Berger notes that:

Because the relationship that exists between signs and what they mean (from Saussure's perspective) is arbitrary, we have to find ways of making sense of signs; we do so via codes. Codes can be looked at...as systems of conventions that we are taught or pick up from our culture (54).

In analyzing the film, we rely on the notion which culture and convention hold on colour, texture, line and style in addition to our knowledge of the meanings and significance of colour, fabrics, lines, and style of clothes and accessories. Costumes and accessories do not only have language of their own, but can be read as an explanation and text of a character's personality and character. Semiotic reading of film however involves an effort to make explicit what is usually implicit.

The film begins with Chidinma in a faded purple synthetic blouse, and a faded navy blue skirt with a kissing pleat in front. In this scene, she is shown in a mechanic workshop serving food to the workmen. It is important here to note again that in addition to dialogue, the formal aspects of visual composition of a costume are like the grammar of a language. In writing, a story is written with words, in producing a film, costume like dialogue and action presents better aesthetic and communicative pictures. The colour, the fabric and the line can make or break a good story. In film, the way the elements of costume design are employed can make or break a good costume idea.

Chidinma at the beginning of this film is portrayed as an orphan working for a canteen owner. She goes to distribute food to mechanics working in a nearby workshop. The lines in her faded navy blue skirt speak volume about her emotional state. According to Brockett, "Two lines that move farther apart as they rise vertically can generate a feeling of openness, while those that come closer together may create a sense of oppression because they seem to be falling inward" (518). Chidinma's skirt with kissing pleat in front reflects her emotional state. Following Brockett's submission that two lines that come closer together may create a sense of oppression, the lines in Chidinma's skirt come closer together forming a kissing pleat; are thus telling the audience that she is emotionally oppressed. Actions of the characters in this scene towards her, justify these lines in her skirt. In addition to the language of the lines, the colour navy blue also speaks further about her emotions. One connotation of blue holds that apart from signifying serenity, blue brings sadness and depression. According to Craig, blue "...is associated with...sadness" (209). Just like her actions in this scene, where she is mocked and pursued around by the mechanics, (she remains calm explaining why they need to pay for the food they ate); her blue clothes speaks of her calm temperament as well. Hence, Enahoro submits that, "...blue...suggest calmness and quietness" (56). So the blue costume becomes a colour code symbolizing and speaking about her calm nature. She never lost her temper even when the mechanics continually hurled abuses at her, violently and aggressively pushing her away from the workshop; yet she remains calm. Theatrically, the colour purple is regarded as a colour that symbolizes royalty and wealth, but Chidinma's purple silk blouse is on the verge of fading out entirely; thereby telling us that the colour purple acquire this faded look due to

many years of usage and washing. So the faded purple blouse talks about her social and economic status. If she is financially buoyant, she should not be wearing a faded blouse at her age - she is a young girl, and at this age girls tend to be very conscious of their general physical appearance.

As the film progresses, Chidinma undergoes a dramatic change and her costume reflects this change. As her employer fires her, and she eventually moves into her boyfriend's house; her dress code here changes also. She is shown in the salon where she now works as an apprentice, and her clothes are: a sky blue lycra maxi gown with high neck, scanty frill, and short sleeves. Her costumes here signal degree of restriction and freedom. In the beginning of the film, she wears a cotton kissing pleat skirt and a silk blouse of large mass (the blouse has no dart to make it cling to the body and reveal her contour), but here she is wearing a lycra gown which clings to her body thereby revealing her curves, and symbolizing freedom and desire for attraction and attention from the opposite sex. The colour of the gown which is blue also portrays her as being a calm person. In Brockett's opinion "...green and blue may suggest coolness and restraint." (520). In another scene in the salon where she works, she wears a synthetic silk blouse with coffee brown and yellow zebra vertical stripes with collar, v-neck and a cream calve-length pleated skirt. Although, zebra stripes are black and white, the costume designer uses yellow and dark brown stripes to make a statement about Chidinma's personality. Bright colours such as yellow represent warmth not only with emotions but with temperament. However, it also reveals Chidinma's lust for money. As Craig posits, "Yellow has varying associations in different cultures. And held in disdain by early Christians because of its association with gold (money)...it is also a color associated with warmth and gaiety" (209). Her costume here reveals the transformation she will undergo in the life of this film. It is in this scene that Lady Gold spotted her and volunteers to take up her financial needs. So this research sees it that her costume here speaks to the audience as well as to the other characters in the film. Chidinma does not have any conversation with Lady Gold here, but her yellow costume does, thereby attracting her to Lady Gold. It is like the yellow costume tells Madam Gold that she is a gold-digger. Furthermore, zebra stripes are thick curved lines, and thick lines are bold and make a statement. Thick lines appear difficult to break, they suggest strength. We see costumes in this film speaking more than words and preceding actions. In this scene, Chidinma is yet to show her inner strength, but her costumes already reveal to us her strong personality. Talking about the curved lines of her zebra stripes blouse, they also reveal a lot about Chidinma's personality. Curved lines are softer than straight lines. They sweep and turn gracefully between end points. Craig opines that they "...are associated with youth and gaiety...Curved lines are especially becoming to ...feminine figure..." (230). Curved lines are less definite and predictable than straight lines. They bend and change direction. In this film, they express the fluidity of Chidinma. She can be calm, yet dynamic. Her blouse as described above is v-neck. V-neck line is diagonal lines rising up to the shoulders. Brockett posits that "Two lines that move farther apart as they rise vertically can generate a feeling of openness, while those that come closer together may create a sense of oppression because they are falling inward" (518). It is important to remember that at the beginning of the film when Chidinma is working in a local restaurant, the costume designer symbolizes her emotional state with a kissing pleat skirt. That is, diagonal lines coming close together as they rise; and this research says that the grammar of these lines tell us that she is oppressed. Now, Chidinma is enjoying some degree of freedom as she now lives with her boyfriend, and her v-neck blouse expresses this freedom and openness. The vertical lines of the pleats in her skirt give the impression of dignity. According to Craig, "Vertical lines are associated with stability and dignity" (230).

From the time Chidinma begins to live with her boyfriend till the end of the film, the necklines of her costumes become more of v-neck revealing her cleavage, yellow clothes, micro mini gowns and skirts, and her ornaments becomes bolder and more colourful. This change in the colours, lines and mass of her costumes relates the tremendous transition which she undergoes as she gradually changes from a local waitress, to a girlfriend, from a girlfriend to a daughter, from a daughter to a partner in lesbianism, and from a lesbian to a “business partner”. Costumes and accessories do not only have language of their own, but can be read as an explanation and text of a character’s personality and character.

Suzy also known as Lady Gold in the context of this film is portrayed as a very wealthy woman who inspires admiration and hate simultaneously with her costumes. Her costumes are richly made yet there are subtleties in the grammars of her costumes which relate her personality before she acts it out or even speaks about herself.

In her first appearance, she is seen in bold pyramid-shape gold earrings, bold gold bangle, jean trousers, and a free-flowing cotton, thigh-length, tie and dye (African hand-made print) blouse, embroidered around the neckline. The shape of her earrings which is pyramid conveys sophistication. Pyramid is made up of diagonal and horizontal lines. According to Craig, “Diagonal lines convey height and sophistication whether used bisymmetrically...or asymmetrically...” (231). Diagonal lines appear solid and unmoving if they are resting on a horizontal line. So Suzy’s earrings speak about her socio-economic status and character. Craig posits that “Horizontal lines give the illusion of breath and repose” (231). However, semiotics studies reject the idea that costume is simply a tool to be used to represent a preexistent reality. That is, it does not accept the idea that it is mimetic or transparent. Instead, it argues that costume is a tool that has its own rules of operation. So Brockett while defining lines in costume design posits that, “...emotional value depends in part upon the context...” (518). Hence, what the shape of Suzy’s earrings communicates is perceived from the perspective of the film’s context. Based on the film’s revelation of Suzy’s character, and in part on Craig’s submission that diagonal lines appears solid and unmoving, we deduced that apart from expressing her socio-economic status, the earrings also tell us that although Suzy is a kidnapper and murderer; she is so heartless and unmoving as to not feel remorse for the lives she wastes.

In reading the language of costumes, line is an important device for creating character, mood and atmosphere. The atmosphere of the movie is that of a dishonest living. The mass of her blouse expresses more about her personality to the viewer - this interpretation is based on the film’s context since a large mass clothe can also mean that a character is decent. Semioticians argue that a character’s costumes are fluid, dynamic entities that are given new life with repeated readings and through interactions with other characters’ costumes. Thereby providing an ongoing plurality of meanings. The mass of her blouse which is loose, when compared to the tight-fitting clothes of Chidinma can be said to indicate her age, and may also be interpreted semiotically to mean that she is a loose woman. This can be justified as the film progresses and she gradually reveals herself as a chronic lesbian. Semioticians are not so much interested in operations of meaning of a single entity as they are in trying to describe the underlying (and not necessarily visible) principles by which the costume exists. Assuming that individual characteristics that can be noted on the surface are rooted in some general interpretation, semioticians will collect observable information about the costume or culture in order to discover the laws that govern it. For instance, a semiotician studying an Igbo costume of the ancient times will be interested in the characteristics of a single costume only insofar as it provides elements of design that help define the culture to which that costume belongs.

In another scene, she is clad in a sleeveless blouse with diagonal white lines which interchange with black lines, some of the lines are thick, and some are thin forming a design like rainbow, silver tiny bangles, a silver wedding ring, silver necklace, and wrist-watch with purple belt indicating her financial status. All the accessories used here portray her as a rich woman. Purple is usually associated with royalty, pomp and power. But, apart from signifying her as a woman of power and authority, the purple colour of her wrist-watch can be said to express her association with occultism. According to Craig, "The Hebrews dressed their high priests in purple robes. Purple was rejected by early Christians because of its association with the crown and paganism" (209). Suzy is a widow who was accused of killing her husband, but we see her wearing a wedding ring on her wedding finger. This can also be said to express her false life, a deceitful life. Furthermore, Suzy, as projected by the costume designer, is a rich woman. Through her costumes, she endeavours to appear in the dignity of a good mother and wife despite her real social status. However, while she showcases herself as a rich businesswoman, she also uses her cunning behaviours to lure her victims into her car, hypnotizes them and delivers them to the evil kingdom she belongs where they are finally sacrificed to the spirits. The costume designer used colours, fabric and style to give her the appearance she intends to communicate to other characters in the film: that is a dishonest appearance. This in essence is symbolic to her character as she lives in deceit; hence her costumes also become deceptive. In this wise, Berger makes this submission, "In addition to these more-less conventionally understood signs of identity, there are some people who try to mislead others about who they are and what they are like by the signs they use" (23). We see Suzy in white chiffon maxi-gown gathered at the neckline with black ribbon, long-sleeve, and gathered at the waist too. Generally we regard ladies in maxi dress as decent and responsible women, but in the socio-cultural context of this film, maxi dress is used to signify deceit. It symbolizes an imposter appropriating a decent profession or pretending to have a different profession. Her costumes also include purple gabardine, v-neck, sleeveless blouse, a black hand-bag, gold necklace, jean three-quarter trousers and round bold earrings. She lives like an "actor" living in a good and decent mother's world via her costumes. At least that is what she makes most characters in the film believe she is. However, events in the film show that she is a murderer and lesbian who uses her wealth to lure a girl young enough to be her daughter into lesbianism. But with her costumes and accessories she maintains the attitude and demeanour of a high-class individual; and as long as she acts like this, other characters in the film believe she is one; then she is able to keep them believing her appearance until she traps them into her evil net. Her costumes include: yellow blouse, duvet (while in bed with Chidinma), here duvet becomes a costume signifying that they are lesbians as they play under the duvet, three-quarter shorts, designers' wrist watches, bold dark sun shade glasses, richly embroidered caftan and beautiful designers' pairs of shoes. All her costumes are bundles of contradictions symbolizing her character.

Costume Reading of *Adaeze*

Adaeze, an Igbo Language Film Initiative Productions is a film done in Igbo language and subtitled in English. The film is directed by Stanley Amadi, produced by Sele D. Sele and the costumes were designed by Jennifer Ogbonna.

Treating clothes more or less in same way Saussure treated words, one research discovers that costumes as coverings for the body have no intrinsic meaning in themselves, but can only be understood in relation to the deeper beliefs through which social organizations are structured. Thus, Roland Barthes argues that cultural artifacts (clothes), presupposed systems of deep structures through which social meanings could be classified. For Barthes, clothes sought to make benign on a surface level the deeper structuring presuppositions of a culture. Costumes in this film create look and mood for actors/actresses in the film. Costume designs reflect the

story being told and portray the characters' personalities, culture, age, social status and relationships. The exposition of the story and characters by particular fabrics, colours, textures and lines is the function of costume. Costume in *Adaeze* does tell a story.

The film is based on *Adaeze*, the princess of Naze community, and costumes in this film defines the attitude and feelings of the characters which change with every new scene, setting and development. Costumes establish the genre of the film which is epic: apart from the set design, costumes are the only clue to the genre of the film- no other element of film production establishes this.

The film begins with *Adaeze* garbed in orange colour headgear made with beads, neck-beads, orange colour jigida (waist beads), royal blue george wrapper with black and golden diamond-shape designs. The wrapper is worn in the traditional Igbo maiden style- with one wrapper wrapped around the breasts and the second wrapper tied around the waist, from waist through the thighs. In her costumes we see the grammar of lines, colours, style and fabrics. Firstly, the style she wears her clothes provide a great deal of information about her age and marital status. The clothing of the traditional Igbo era has its own characteristics that differentiate between youth and aged. Young people tend to reveal more of their bodies than do their elders. To this effect, Gillette submits that:

Two theories suggest the reasons: Young people generally are more interested in attracting romantic partners than their elders, and exposed skin attracts notice; young bodies with smooth skin...are generally more attractive to look at than the skin...of their elders, on whom time and gravity have taken their toll. For example, miniskirts, short-shorts, halter tops, and muscle shirts are all clothes of youth (390).

Adaeze's mini-wrapper thus expresses her age. The second wrapper tied around the breasts also talks about her gender. However, it is true that the idealists seem to have provided a method of arriving at meaning through analysis of the elements of costume design, what a costume means and how it means simply cannot be determined because it is not possible to systematically find the signs of a costume. Thus, semioticians argue that meaning is essentially indefinite, thereby denying the idealists' belief in the possibility of establishing objective knowledge, systematic observation and logical deduction. For instance, the semioticians suggest that in a single costume one can find many meanings, all of them possible and all of them replaceable by others. Instead of looking for detail, then, the researcher looks for those places where the elements of costumes of characters contradict, and thereby define the characters due to oppositions in elements of costume design which equally define oppositions in characters' personalities, social status, gender, age, socio-economic status, and marital status. Hence, the meaning we ascribe to a costume in a film is based on collective behaviour, convention or culture. Quoting Saussure, Berger states that, "Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms in the system" (51). For instance, a black costume is defined by its relationship with a white costume (which is its opposite). Consequently, we define black as connoting gloom and evil, since white has culturally been attributed with purity and grace. Meaning of costume therefore, is determined not by content but by relationship. Thus, Enahoro analyzing the film *Xala* by Sembene states that, "The colour BLACK which signifies leaving the marriage is the opposite of WHITE, which signifies entering into marriage. The two costumes are logically related but are normally widely separated in time" (56). Here the meaning Enahoro ascribes to a black costume is derived from its relationship with a white costume. Black is the opposite of white, so if white is worn during a wedding, signifying that one is entering a marriage, black worn by a married woman should therefore be seen to portray widowhood- exit from the marriage. It

should be noted however that this definition of black and white is still based on the context of the film. In some other films depending on the story being told, they could mean some other things. In *Adaeze* this research is able to define Adaeze's gender as female because from the researcher's view, she uses another wrapper as covering for her breasts, while the males in the film use the second wrapper in form a muffler. The men's wrappers are merely folded and run through the nape to waists. We are able to define the gender of the character based on the differences in the styles of their costumes. This definition is still based on the context of the film. The film is set in traditional Igbo society, if the film is to be set in a community where people still go nude, then defining the genders of characters by saying that those who have covering for their breasts are females would not have held any water. For instance, in Jamie Uys' *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), a South African film produced by Jamie Uys, both male and female go bare-chested. So one cannot define a covering for the breasts as indicating gender rather it can be said to indicate tribe and civilization. So instead of showing how the conventions of costume work, semiotics shows how they falter. The result is that film costume can no longer have one unifying meaning that an authority or critic can enunciate. Instead, meaning is accepted to be the outgrowth of various signifying systems within the costume that may even produce contradictory meanings. For instance, in the film, *African Bride* by Okoroji, we see Leo, a fraudster dressed in well tailored suits. Generally we regard men in suits as gentlemen, but in the socio-cultural context of this film, suit is used to signify deceit and greed. It symbolizes an imposter appropriating a decent profession.

The language of lines and fabric of Adaeze's cloth described above express her emotion and action. The diagonal lines that form diamond shape convey restless and uncontrolled energy. The lines appear to be rising and falling at the same time conveying her emotion of tension and excitement. In accordance with her costume design, her actions also convey these same emotions that are expressed by her clothes. She is seen to be very excited when her beauty is praised, but once no one notices or acknowledges her beauty, we see her very tensed with angry. More so, the lines on her george material do not only express her emotion but also her personality. Motifs and colour have great value in Igbo clothing. Igbo people do not just randomly pick their clothes - colours have lots of symbolism among Igbo people. The most common being black colour which symbolizes grief and death among the ancient Igbo people. According to Aniako, "For the women also there are a variety of cloths and costumes types; some for everyday use and others for special occasions" (337). A distinctive feature of traditional Igbo dress is its use of festive colours, intricate patterns and figurative symbols to communicate meaning. Adaeze's royal blue george and the diamond shape pattern of the embroideries are much more than mere adornment, they are used as forms of rhetoric- a silent projection of argument. The argument projected by her costume is the same as that expressed by her dialogue, namely that she is the most beautiful maiden in Naze community and that her beauty will last forever just like diamond. The colour and fabric of her costume also convey her social status: a princess. The embroidered george goes to express her economic status as well as her desire to be the most fashionable maiden. Craig while explaining the history of embroidery states that, "Man's early desire for ornamentation inspired him to improve upon plain woven cloth by sewing designs on the surface" (263). The beautifully embroidered golden diamond-shape patterns symbolically convey Adaeze's personality, the black thread which runs in between the golden colour woven-patterns symbolizes her authority over the entire maiden in the palace. Her jewelries all of which are orange colour go to relate her place in the film- she is the protagonist in the film and the most important character in the film. Accessories are one of her dominant forms of expression; they give her the choice and tools to assert individuality. In this light, her jewelries are seen as being highly charged with meaning, a language in its own right, being very much a statement about Adaeze.

Her costumes in other scenes include: crimson george embroidered with golden thread, orange colour bead-anklet, jigida, blue Nigerian Wax (Ankara) with white flowers, cream colour neck-beads, head-gear made with orange colour beads. The head-gear and neck-beads have some beads dangling towards her forehead and forming a V-shape - diagonal lines coming together as they descend, green george with horizontal and vertical lines forming squares. To the semiotician, costume is a symbol that is equal to the character it represents. Literary critics who subscribe to the tenets of semiotics work most often with culture and conventions. Usually they seek to connect a costume with a larger structure such as a culture or some universal convention. They often establish connections between a character's costume and other characters' costume. On the broader scale, they sometimes find parallels between a film-costume and culture of the character wearing it. Adaeze's costumes help us figure out the historical period this film is set as well as the locale it occurs. The film reveals Igbo ancient times' silhouette of clothing for young girls. According to Craig, "The silhouette not only reveals or conceals the figure, but dates the costume by the shape of the sleeve, the shape and length of the skirt" (229). The vertical and horizontal lines of her costume which run across each other express her state of mind. She does not really have an explicit opposition in the film, but she keeps battling with her own mind frightened that they may be some other characters more beautiful than she is. And the lines in her clothe rightly convey this inner turmoil which she suffers. Craig posits that, "Contrasting sounds in music and contrasting lines in a costume suggest rhythm by opposition. The principle is observed when vertical lines in a costume are interrupted by horizontal lines..." (237). Adaeze's costumes are example of clothes that appear on the surface to portray elegance explicitly, they could not easily be distinguished from those of Ugegbeoyibo. Yet on closer inspection, they reveal the problems and struggles that loom and surround her life. In the first sense, the costume designer approaches her from the perspective of myth: on the surface Adaeze' clothes present a myth of the upper class and convention (that richly made george material portrays elegance, wealth and fulfillment), but on a deeper level, her costumes reveal the constitutive fault which that myth attempt to cover. The lines in her costumes thus emphasize the opposition between relation by blood and relation by marriage in the ways that the plots do not. In other words, she does not see her younger sister as a threat but she sees her brother's fiancé as a big threat, and consequently an enemy. Semiotics aims to uncover a deeper level of understanding of costume elements. Such findings are in accordance with the semioticians belief that true, scientific nature of sign systems and systems of meaning are ones which lie beneath the surface of things, for it is only by delving beneath the surface that we can find the definitive ways in which things come to be structured. Based on Saussure's theory, costumes refer not to objective reality but to mental concepts. The meaning of any given costume will be derived from its interrelatedness with other costumes in an ongoing process that gives it a series of possible meaning and readings.

Igugbeoyibo, a princess from another community who is betrothed to Adaeze's brother Prince Obinna, is apparently the most beautiful maiden in Naze community. She has a very fair skin which this research considers a costume. Her cloths are not really different from those of Adaeze since they also comprise bright colour georges scantily but beautifully embroidered with feminine colour like pink, royal colours like purple and beautiful anklet, hand fan made with zebra skin and wrist and neck beads. Her skin colour, the thin lines in her clothes and the bright pink george convey her fragility and gender. Her blue george expresses her inner peace thereby conveying her as the character directly opposite to Adaeze (the protagonist). In accordance with semiotic principles, each character's costume gains its meaning by virtue of its difference from other characters' costumes. In the context of the Igbo culture, Ugegbeoyibo's overall look symbolizes classic elegance- the clean lines of her ensemble, beads, and black lipstick (uli), represent elegance regardless of the period. By understanding her character,

the audience will most likely have a deeper reading into the costume design and overall image typical of her character.

Conclusion

Using *Cry of a Widow* and *Adaeze* as examples, this paper explores the language of costumes in Nigerian films and argues that costumes cannot be described adequately in terms of objective reality. It is of the opinion that costumes are fluid and dynamic, and may provide ongoing plurality of meanings with repeated readings.

Like script writers, costume designers are story-tellers. Whether the film requires the actors/actresses to look beautiful or ragged, young or old, Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo; the costume designer helps the audience believe that what they see on the movie screen is real. Costume is a visual tool of communication and Nigerian film costume designers are providing indices for reading cloths and accessories as text. Colours, fabrics and lines are utilized as powerful visual elements of communication in this research. Elements of costume are viewed as the building blocks of visual grammar, which are usually defined to include: lines, shapes, colour, texture, value, space, volume or mass.

Costumes in *Cry of a Widow* and *Adaeze* reflect the genres and moods, styles and emotions of the films; as well as the characters. In this study, semiotics has proved to be valuable in studying phenomena as costume and the mythologies of the people's culture. Hence, this research brought meaning out of elements of costume design in *Adaeze* and *Cry of a Widow* which are ordinarily implicit.

Costumes in these films make some kind of continuous commentary. Thus the audience remains constantly aware of the steady gloom and chaos in *Cry of a Widow* and *Adaeze*; and of the formidable array of crime portraits surrounding Lady Gold (Suzy) and *Adaeze* respectively in these films - of the heavy presence of the two terrible murderers who brood oppressively but implicitly in the film. If the film is merely done without any consideration to special costumes, it will be difficult once the actions of the characters are passed, to keep such images visually present in the mind as other matters clamour for attention. But with the costume design of the characters, the personalities of the characters are kept vividly in the mind with colours, lines and fabrics. So, this study asserts that semiotics analysis of a costume defines not just what the costume declares explicitly, but also in terms of what it leaves out or even what it deliberately covers over. Working from the assumption that costume is inherently ambiguous and not the clear, efficient communicator we would like to think, this research recognizes that any film costume has a multitude of possibilities for meaning. The simplest costume may be perceived in a variety of ways, giving costume a tendency to undermine itself by refuting what it appears to be symbolizing. As Pavis opines that: "Thus meaning is not assumed in advance, it emerges from the bringing into view...of the different signifying systems always out of step in relation to one another..." (308). A semiotic reading involves asking questions in an effort to show that what the costume claims to be saying is different from what the costume is showing. It tries to undermine the costume's implied claim of having coherence, unity, and meaning, and to show that it does not represent the truth of what it obviously portrays. In fact no final statement about its meaning can be made, for each reading is provisional, just one in a series of interpretations, and can displace each other in ongoing readings. In the absence of a preconceived signified, a costume cannot be said to be tied to some meaning that existed before and outside it, and meaning can have no place to conclude, nothing in which to be subsumed. This study tried to find blind spots that a costume designer has absorbed from cultural systems.

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