

**TECHNICAL THEATRE
AND THE
PERFORMING ARTS
IN NIGERIA**

Celebrating
Olateju Wasee Kareem



Edited by:
Duro Oni
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**National Association of Nigerian
Theatre Arts Practitioners
(Lagos State Chapter)**



CBAAC
**Centre for Black and African
Arts and Civilization**

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Celebrating Olateju Wasee Kareem**

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Cultural Influences and Considerations on Costume and Make-up Design in Mbopo Celebration of the Efik/Ibibio

by

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Abstract

Perhaps far older and richer than that of the Western theatre is the costume and make-up of the African theatre performances. Influenced by culture and sourced from nature, the costume and make-up designs thereof often come in elaborate, distinctive, highly stylized and beautiful patterns. These often serve both the aesthetic purpose and perform the functions of passing cultural and religious messages, expressing the aesthetics and sharing their worldviews of the people having originated from the rites and rituals of the society. This paper examines the costumes and make-up designs in the MBOPO celebration of the Efik/Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom and the Southern Cross River state of Nigeria. It explores the principles of form, patterns, styles, application and functions of these essential theatrical elements in line with the culture and traditions of the people taking into consideration the geographical location of the place which often dictates and affect the culture of the society. The paper therefore discusses the influence of culture on the design practices in the African theatre by looking at costume & make-up as it exists in this theatre. This study utilizes descriptive and analytical approach with pictures to attempt a portrayal on how costumes and make-up designs in the MBOPO is influence by culture with regard to aesthetics, symbolic perception and the worldview of the people. The African theatre shall be considered as a whole as there exist the inter-weaving and cross fertilization of ideas between the traditional/indigenous and the contemporary African theatre.

Introduction

Influenced by culture and sourced from nature, the costume and make-up designs of African theatre are often elaborate, distinctive,

highly stylized with beautiful patterns which often serve more than the aesthetic purposes. It serves to perform the functions of passing cultural and religious messages, expressing the aesthetics and sharing their worldviews of the people.

The theatre is often said to be as old as mankind and all theatrical actions evolve out of man's daily activities which is influenced by long standing tradition and attitude and the phenomenal influence of traditional performances driven by culture. Culture, which is generally accepted as the way in which activities are carried out by man in his society is defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (284) as "way of life, the customs, beliefs, arts of a particular society". Theatre, therefore, is a true reflection of human behavior; the costumes and make-up in the theatre also are true reflections of the culture of the people. The theatre, festivals and celebrations evolve out of rites and rituals which were/are carried out in various ways and manners in different societies dictated by the geographical location and condition to ensure the survival of the community such as the Greek Dionysius celebration, the Abidos passion plays of Egypt, the Ekpe and Ekpo masquerades of Efiks/Ibibios etc, "theatre" which "is a stage performance" (Brockett, 6), reflects human behavior whether it be spoken drama, mime, songs, pantomime, sketches, musicals etc.

In *The History of Theatre*, Brockett, G. (1996) traces the history of the European theatre; he records that, the Greek worship of Dionysius, the goddess of fertility and peace, developed into the Dionysian festival of theatrical performance. The theatre records show fantastic costumes, masks and make-up of the Greek influenced by their culture. In *The River God*, (1994) Wilbur Smith gives an excellent account of the first recorded performance in Africa, "The Abidos Passion Play", which took place in 2,600BC, some two thousand years older than the Greek theatre. Found in the tomb of Pharaoh Amenhotep II, it was written for him by the Chief Priest Ikhanetfet, the story dealt with the Egyptain mythology involving the gods Osiris, Horus, Anobis and others, it also tells of the origin of evil among mankind on earth. Also revealed are the records of Taita, a slave and personal attendant from birth to death, of the first female Pharaoh of Egypt who reigned in exile and held regency for

her son during the Hyskoss invasion. Wife of Pharaoh Memose, Queen Lostris returned to install her son Pharaoh Tamose and free Egypt from the era of Hyskoss occupation, from then onwards, The Abidos Passion Plays were performed every two years at the full flood of the Nile to entertain the Pharaohs and the people of Egypt as part of the religious activities. Smith also state of the use of elaborate make-up, which was designed in line with the Egyptian culture in their performances, it will therefore be acceptable to assume that the costume used were also elaborate and influenced by the culture of the people.

In Nigeria, theatre as in other lands, originated from rites and rituals of each society, evolved into organized forms such as the Yoruba Alarinjo theatre, the Hausa Yankanmanci comedy, the Annang drama of the Ibibios, the Tiv Kwagh-hir theatre etc. From the Greek theatre to the Abidos Passion plays and the various theatre forms in Nigeria, costumes and make-up are distinct, being dictated and influenced by the culture and traditions of each society. Adedeji and Ekwuazi (42) states that "environment...serves as a strong base for...creative activities" this is confirmed by Emoruwa (iii) that "the contentual and contextual forms, styles, patterns, conventions and designs are...hinged on the culture, beliefs and worldview of the people who create and practice it" The MBOPO celebration of the Efik/Ibibio has it unique and attractive costume and make-up designs which is influenced by culture. Design, therefore, is defined by *The Webster's Unabridged Family Dictionary* as "the organization or structure of formal elements in the work of arts: composition, *The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (318) gives the definition as "the general arrangement of different parts of something that is made", in the celebration of MBOPO, "design is expression" (Ododo 93), it expresses the culture, traditions, worldviews and also showcase the aesthetic values of the Efik/Ibibio society. These designs are an important entry point of the celebrations as it impacts and contribute to the general viewing pleasure, giving necessary and useful information, adding meaning and aiding understanding and appreciation of the event. The costumes and make-up therefore goes beyond serving as cover and decoration to the body of the Mbopo, it also "elucidates ideas and emotions" (Oni, 31).

Geographical Location of the Efiks

The Efik people inhabit the present day Cross River State which has the latitude of 5°45 north and 8°30 east, however, they occupy the Southern part of the State which borders the Atlantic and Bakassi peninsula. The Ibibio people occupy Akwa Ibom State, also a south – Southern part of the nation with latitude 4°321 and 5°331 and longitudes of 7°251 and 8°251 East, in Nigeria. The Efik and the Ibibio people co-existed together in the old Eastern Region of Nigeria and again as the old Cross River State until the creation of Akwa Ibom State by the military in 1987 sharing boundaries with other State, Cross River and Akwa Ibom which implies the Efiks and the Ibibios, share common boundary with Cross River State by the East South by Atlantic Ocean and again by Cross River State (Akwa Ibom online). Though divided by political administrative line, the Efik and Ibibio people who have same language with mild dialectal variations, have similar culture, occupation, aesthetics and worldview; one of such shared cultural practices is the Nkugho (Mbopo celebration).

Culture of the People

The word culture has engaged various definitions and understanding, one feature common in nearly all the definitions is that culture is the way of life of the people in a given society; this forms some kind of social understanding and binding laws on social rights, behaviors, duties and taboos. The *Encyclopedia Americana*, International edition (1978) breaks down the term culture as follows:

- (i) The complex whole of ideas and things produced by men in their historical experiences.
- (ii) Distinctive group of traits characterizing particular society(ies).
- (iii) A pattern of thinking or doing things that runs through the activities of the people and distinguishes them from all other people
- (iv) A distinctive human mode of adapting to environment, moulding nature to conform to man's desires and goals.

With two main characteristics which anthropologist Bodley (2009) itemized culture as having the following attributes as:

- (i) Culture is symbolic
- (ii) Culture is shared
- (iii) Culture is learned
- (iv) Culture is adaptive.

It is seen that culture is a mobile factor. Obafemi (2005) therefore describes culture as “fundamental to human existence and human civilization, embodying in its dynamism the totality of the people’s response to the challenges of life and living in any given environment”. Thus, we see that culture and environment are closely linked. The paper proceeds to access culture and the environment of the Cross River/Akwa Ibom people as it relates with the environment. The geographical location of the area affects the environmental factors which in turn contributes and dictates the behaviors and social characteristics of the people and indeed, their culture. The Cross River/Akwa Ibom people and indeed most of the Niger Delta area have similarities in costume. For example, children and young ladies use short wrappers tied around the waist and stopping a little above the knees, beads form an essential port of costume especially in a celebrative situation and festivities.

To conquer the ocean, the people are mostly fishermen in the dance steps show gentle, rhythmic and wavelike body movement, make-up also reflect the waves of the ocean as most make-up applied on the face and the exposed sections of the body are not often simple straight lines but curves and designs. The ripples of water are replayed at the legs of the young maiden by the rings on her legs (see picture one). The culture of the people places emphasis on seniority as it makes clear differences between the first female child and others; this is reflected in the hair style.

Mbopo Celebration: An Overview

While “NKUGHO” is the actual seclusion process, “MBOPO” is the maiden that is in seclusion, Mbopo celebration is an end rite of a

long marital process of the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom and the Efiks of southern part of Cross River State. The two States share common boundary, similar geographical conditions, same language and both have boundaries with the Atlantic ocean.

Though not the literary meaning, the word MBOPO seem to have a general interpretation and/or reference to mean “fattening room”, probably so because the once slender lady usually comes out for her wedding looking fat and robust at the end of the seclusion period.

Mbopo customs finds similarities in other lands. In Ogori-Magongo Local Government of Kogi State, Ogori people celebrate the Ovia-Oseese, a yearly festival where young ladies of age are secluded and trained in the arts of womanhood for few weeks, which culminates in formal festival for the inductees; the “Ovia” (the maiden) celebrates and is ready for marriage. The celebration is considered important to the extent that an Ovia who is unavoidably absent is represented by a family member who holds her portrait high and parade, along with others. Interested suitors may pick their bride at the celebration. The Iria Festival, a culture native of Kalabaris, adopted and made popular by the Ikwere people along to their own Ejiji coming of age ceremony both of Rivers State has similarity in structure and organization. Often sponsored by the parents as in Ovia-Oseese, the young ladies of age twenty to forty are secluded, fed and treated for two months, this culminates in Iria dance celebration where she may be chosen by a suitor. Though dynamic as most culture, often, until the Iria is danced, no man may approach her for marriage no matter her age. The Benins also have Irovbode ceremony.

Nkugho has unique features and structure which makes it different from others, these include: 1) Mbopo celebration is one lady per time, not a group affair as in Ovia-Oseese and others. 2) The seclusion period is longer, the minimum duration being three calendar months. 3) The seclusion begins when the two families have given their consent to the marriage of their children hence the lady does not come out to await a suitor as the end of the seclusion culminates in full traditional marriage rites. 4) It is mostly sponsored by the groom who determines the duration which he may also use to showcase his wealth (the longer, the richer!). 5) The lady undergoes training in the various arts of womanhood such as, cooking, general

hygiene, music and dance, art of gentle speech, family life and lots more. 6) She need also find a "love name" for her fiancé. 7) The groom may only visit her accompanied, preferably by his best man and with a gift. 8) Mbopo celebration features the lady (and the groom) in a highly stylized costume and elaborates make-up dictated by culture, thus, in the first outing; she ties a short wrapper above the knee which the wrapper slants up on one side with a shot blouse which has small puffed sleeves. Other decorated pieces are fitted to the remaining part of the hand, her face and other exposed part of the body is decorated with "ndom" (white clay), her legs are decorated and fitted with large springs that reach the knee. Her body glitters from the palm oil mixed with 'idud' applied. 9) On the wedding day, she is dressed in the traditional ceremonial gown, the "Onyonyo" while the hair style is determined by her birth position.

The Influence of Culture on Costume and Make-up Designs in Mbopo Costume in Mbopo Celebration

Theatre communication is audio-visual, though the visual aspect seems to communicate directly to the audience as it is often the first



Plate 1: Mbopo with mother at first outing (Akwa Ibom Arts Council at NAFEST 2010)

point of contact between the character and the spectator. Costume, "a visual phenomenon of the theatre" (Okoye, 49) communicate immediately and directly often sending direct and unambiguous messages about several factors to the audience. The costume and make-up in the African theatre is greatly influenced by the culture, tradition and religious beliefs and the location of the people, thus, cultural practices are often carried out as influenced by the geographical position of the place; which dictates the climate and the season of the place which in turn will decide the occupation of the people. The costumes and make-up design of the society will automatically be influenced by such, thus "if we see someone bundled up in a heavy fur coat, we assume that the weather is cold. Dark hues, heavy fabrics and multiple layers are also strong indicators of cold climate" (Brockett, 392).

In Mbopo, the maiden is dressed to reflect the culture and tradition as affected by the location. This chapter proceeds with attempt on definition and explanations of costume and make-up.

Amidst several definitions. Barbara & Cletus Anderson (20) defines costume as "anything worn on stage, whether it be layers of clothing or nothing at all" While the African world view may not accommodate "nothing at all", this paper shall consider the "layers of clothing" Costume seem to be more than the dressing of the character thus, Gillette (385) state that

More specifically, this definition includes clothings, underclothing's, hairdressing, make-up and accessories such as hats, scarves, fans, canes, umbrellas..... the design and appearance of these costume element.....

Amongst various types or classification of costumes are,

- (i) Character costume, which is dictated by certain information such as weather, historical, socio-economic status, cultural and the worldview, and
- (ii) Decorative Costume, which is more for showcasing than serving functional purpose though also influenced by styles and certain

information especially season and culture. To be effective, the costume and make-up must provide visual reflection of the personality and provide visual information about the character including culture, aesthetics, locale, period, religious, political environment, etc. In the Abidos Passion play of the ancient Egypt, different actors playing different roles were attired differently, thus, the costume of the chief priests were different from the royal family and some to the gods and the slave retinue. Each cast and class has its own particular and highly decorative costume.

The African theatre places emphasis on costume and its purpose goes beyond covering for the actor. Influenced by culture and tradition, the costume in African theatre reflects the world view of the particular community.

Considering the costume of the "Mbopo", the maiden on her first outing dance, uses short wrapper "mkpin" and a brief top which stops a little above the navel/belly button, by the culture of the people, this is to showcase her soft and supple body which has undergone transformation during the nkugho period, the rest of her body is decorated with ndom (white chalk melted in water), aran (palm oil) and idud (red camwood dye). In the culture of the Efik/Ibibio, a woman is supposed to be gentle and totally feminine in every way, her dance steps reflects this feminine nature, since the dance steps are choreographed with cultural influence of the society, it excludes energetic and acrobatic dance steps, the costumes are also designed in a way that the aesthetics of the gentle, quick and elaborate dance steps will not be hampered, rather, it will be seen to be appreciated. It is worthy of note that in the Efik/Ibibio custom, apart from the dancers that carry the "Abang", there is no traditional dance costume that goes below the knee, long wrapper will hamper the movement and admiration of the dance steps. In the culture of the Efik/Ibibio, hair style is an important part of costuming for Mbopo, it is meant to serve more than mere aesthetics during her outing, and thus the hair is elaborately done and decorated with small combs. The culture of the people places honor and respect on "ADIAHA", the first daughter, by this, the first daughter reserves the right to the design of extended hairdo while the rest, though attired in similar

fashion, have their hair done in shorter length, the hairdo therefore, does not only add beauty to the lady, but also communicate other information. On the wedding day, she is dressed in the traditional ceremonial gown the "Onyonyo", a long flowing gown which gives her elegance and grace. The Mbopo costume is not complete without her staff; the staff, usually a head higher than the Mbopo, is decorated at the top with scarf and materials of the three significant colours, family colours and the ones chosen by the Mbopo. This is also a way of flying the family colours (flag). It can therefore be seen that costumes designs of the African theatre is greatly influenced by the culture of the society, because it "goes beyond aesthetic reflection of reality as it is often associated with most Western theatres. Such objects.... Are not contemplative objects but intended to produce aesthetic and satisfaction as well as perform other social functions"

(Asomba, xxi).

The study now focuses on make-up which in general parlance can be taken to be anything applied on the face, with the aim of enhancing the beauty or affecting appearance, however, in theatrical productions, "make-up is a vital element in creating the total appearance of the actor. To a great extent, the make-up design gives the audience its primary clue to the age, health and vitality of the character" (Gillette, 360) we can therefore understand make-up to be the use of cosmetics to change or alter the physical or real appearance and looks of the character to enhance and suit his ability to play his required and desired role. Nwachuku (13) posits that make-up is "the use of non-natural means to change the physical appearance of the actor/actress to create a dramatic identity". There are various types of make-up such as the straight, character, fantastic, stylized and corrective make-up. Basically, make-up is used to;

- (i) Identify gender: Make-up will tell if it is male or female such as the used of feminine designed masks in the Greek theatre.
- (ii) Create character evolution, by this, it should reflect changes in the character such as entry period, childhood to maturity. "Effective make-up projects the character to the audience" (Gillette, 360) and also helps the character to carry out his role efficiently.

The use of make-up in African theatre comes along with the historical background that has evolved to contemporary make-up practice. It is noted that various theatre forms, like the Tiv Kwaghbir theatre, the Yoruba Alarinjo theatre, etc, made copious use of make-up in their performances. Nwachukwu (33) confirms that "make-up use is present in all... Theatre". In African theatrical practices, make-up is often not intended to conceal completely the identity of the artiste rather it serves to enhance the communication and aesthetic appeal of the artiste. Undertaking the study of the unmasked dramaturgy in the context of African understanding, using the Ebira Ekuechi in the "Facekuerade" festival theatre, Ododo (254) states that "the base of the "Facekuerade" theory is formidably rooted in the duality or double essence of Ebira masking practices. The Eku' rahu's performance, in the absence of the major icon of the mask" reveals the techniques and styles of presentation and also shows that in the absence of mask, there is the presence of elaborate use of make-up.

The Mbopo celebration utilizes elaborate use of make-up, the face of the maiden is beautifully designed in various patterns that fits the shape of her face, the areas of emphasis is often the forehead, nose and chinbone. Unlike most facial decorations, the areas of the eyes and the cheeks are mostly left untouched.



Plate 2: Dancers at Mbopo outing (Cross River State Arts Council at NAFEST 2010)

Make-up practices in Mbopo celebration does not end in the application of make-up on the faces, it includes make-up applied also on the body as applicable in other traditional theatre types. Writing on the Alarinjo theatre, Nwachukwu (33), states that "the Alarinjo did use body make-up. The first "ghost mummers" were painted in white chalk/clay and dust to give them ghostly appearance". In Mbopo celebration, the maiden who is costumed in small wrapper that stops midway between her waist and the knee with a small blouse has the rest of her body decorated with Ndom (white chalk) as a symbol of love, peace and beauty. The design pattern is done in a twisting manner to reflect the waves of the waters, her feet is coloured with "Idud" (red camwood dye) mixed with aran (palm oil), and by the culture, this symbolizes good luck wherever she sets her feet and also reflect wellness while the body is made to shine with the palm oil rubbed on her. Other designs are added with "Utime Nkang" on their body.

Like costume, make-up in Mbopo celebration is influenced by culture; it communicates and enhances the aesthetics of the Mbopo. The "design approach to costume and make-up in is clearly realistic" (Ododo 20), it is designed in line with the Efik/Ibibio culture. The Mbopo and all concerned "endure great expenses and effort costuming and make-up" (Jeyifo, 18) to ensure that it is in line with the culture, customs and tradition because it serves more than aesthetic purposes as it communicates in various ways the worldview of the society. Perhaps it is in costume and make-up that the artistic values and the cultural heritage of the people are identified and assessed as they seem to remain vital elements of theatre designs that are held onto in the overall design and they are also appreciated as they reflect the culture of the people.

Since they are culture based, it therefore means that they evolved and developed by the people who over the years have refined and perfected the various elements of the costume and make-up of the Mbopo in line with their aesthetic values, world views and perception. However, few problems linger in the costume and make-up of the Mbopo such as:

- (1) The rings used in adorning the Mbopo's legs sometimes injure

the lady at the ankle that is the terminal part and the area of contact/rest. The thigh is hardly injured as it is always packed and padded with pieces of cloth, foams etc, as seen in plates 1 and 2. It sometimes slightly exposes the (Aran) skin to bruises. The make-up used includes palm and ndom (native white chalk/clay), Utime Nkang (local black dye) Idud (Red dye extract from plant). Utime Nkang dye which is the Uli or Uri of Igbos lasts long on the body up to three or five days. In contemporary time where the borrowed culture of Church solemnization often accompany the traditional celebrations, the follow-up events are often postponed due to make-up which may not have washed off, this affect the bride who may have the need to resume work/business. In general, the Nkugho period has greatly reduced almost to nil especially when the Mbopo works in some office that may at best permit a month for wedding and the honeymoon.

Income Generation: The costume and make-up, in product and design, are not expanded and develop for economic purposes as they are used mostly for social and cultural event, though with the advent of the Nigerian movie industry popularly referred to as Nollywood, application is made in the production of the home video. Culture is dynamic, some of the effects of this dynamism tend to be negative, and in the case of Mbopo it has reduced the value and pride in the system and has led to a situation where some ladies do not have the time and opportunity to be taken through the process.

To improve these few shortcomings;

- (i) A product made from Styrofoam or cork designed to fit into the shape of the human ankle can be made, this will prevent the rings from shifting thereby preventing contact between the skin and the ring which often causes bruises.
- (ii) The cosmetic industry should research into the properties in "Utime Nkang" to make it adoptable for use even in the movie industry and offer options to those who may not desire the product with long lasting effect on the body.

Conclusion

African culture, especially in the area of costumes, is often viewed in bad light and usually compared with Western ideologies.

It is however seen that costume and make-up of Mbopo celebration and indeed of costumes and make-up of the Efik/Ibibio are beautiful, acceptable and adaptable in various situations. When used in home videos production it is such a beautiful sight to behold which adds artistic and financial splendour to the total package.

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This study explains why as it is realized, proven that during the exchange of responses. Range of cultural make-up, the masquerade, that words that pervade the culture, pivotally to the cultural history. of the researcher

Introduction

The objective is attainable in the Such a goal is a to William L. H own languages understanding symbolic systems ethnographic in of Ekpo and E