

Dance Costumes as Expressions of Cultural Identity: A Study of Selected Cultural Dances

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Abstract

The intricate and lively costumes adorned by dancers frequently mirror the rich cultural legacy of Nigeria, showcasing traditional attire, fabrics, accessories, and body art that are distinct to each ethnic group. However, dance costumes are often affected by cultural shifts emanating from globalization, technology, and modernity, leading to some alterations in cultural representation. The objective of the research is to examine how dance costumes express cultural identity in Nigeria. Drawing upon Mary Collier and Milt Thomas's cultural identity theory, the study examines two Nigerian dances. The selected dances are the Inyemobi dance of Onicha-Ugbo in Delta State and the Aja k'Idoma dance in Benue State. These case studies were purposively selected. The study utilizes the content analysis approach of the qualitative research methodology to engage cultural identity issues in the selected dances. Major findings reveal that the costumes serve as symbols of ethnic and national identities. However, many costume practices are endangered and on the brink of losing their indigenous identities as a result of changes orchestrated by varied influences. The study, therefore, recommends scholarly documentation as a sustainable means of cultural and ideological preservation.

Keyword: dance costumes, cultural identity, cultural dances, Inyemobi, Aja k' Idoma

1. Introduction

The choice of costume is important in establishing cultural identity in Nigerian dances. Each dance has symbolic costumes that enhance the accurate transmission of cultural codes. But, while most Nigerian dance costumes fall under the categorization of modern traditional and contemporary costumes due to modernity, technology and globalization, Utoh-Ezeajugh (2021) argues that they evoke an autonomous authenticity that is inherently African in style and design concept (3). Therefore, the relevant choice of dance costumes has a symbolic relationship with the message a dance conveys about a cultural group.

Consequently, the selection of accurate costumes is important in representing a cultural group in a dance performance. In other words, the inappropriate selection of costumes impacts the quality of representation, leading to the misrepresentation of the cultural identity of the people that a particular dance may tend to represent. To ensure an accurate representation of cultural identity through dance costumes, the material, color, and texture of the costume must be appropriate and fit for purpose.

However, while cultural identity remains dynamic due to changes caused by globalization, modernity, and technology, costume designs are also undergoing evolutions to reflect the global changes. The changes in dance costumes often alter the original form and design, thereby creating new aesthetics with significant functions for the dance and the people it represents.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how costumes are used to express cultural identity in Nigerian dance. The focus is to examine the *Inyemobi* dance of Onicha-Ugbo of Delta State and the *Aja k' Idoma* of the Idoma tribe of Benue State. The study argues that the costumes used in these dances convey deep cultural meanings that signify the identity of the ethnic groups involved. It also argues that although the costumes have evolved due to global influences, the changes have not affected the meaning and identity of the people.

1.2 Literature Review

The concept of costume is as old as the study of artistic performance. Mayokun (2024) defines costume as "the creation of clothing for the overall appearance of a character or performer during theatrical, film, or television

productions” (p. 151). According to Utoh-Ezeajugh (2015), costume also involves accessories, and ornamentation worn by the actor or actress (or dancer) to define a character (p.10). However, while a costume can stand alone as a separate art, Lyndersay (2011) argues that it must never be seen as an independent element but rather as an integral part of the whole production design, harmonizing with the chosen concept, style, mood and atmosphere of the particular presentation (p.1).

Costumes are crucial signifiers of identity and the most visible element in dance performances. It helps in communicating explicit information on the identity of the dancer. Hence, as a unique symbol of identification, “the design of the costume, and their cultural/environmental colours, colour of body paintings and shapes of patterns applied” (Wanyama and Shitubi, 2012, p.228) play important roles in characterizing a dancer’s cultural background and identity. Oga (2003) adds that even the type and texture of the materials used, which could be “coarse or delicate” (p. 52) are equally significant.

In African performances, costumes “constitute the most formidable and versatile cultural agents for the transmission of knowledge and values across ethnic, national, and international boundaries” (Kwakye-Opong and Adinku, 2023, p.9). Studies on some of the traditional dances in Nigeria by various dance scholars reveal that dance costumes are essential aspects of the performance that enhance cultural affinity and identity. In Amali’s study of the Idoma cultural dance, he observes that the red and black fabric, which features significantly in the design of the costume, is regarded as the life-wire of performances because they represent the worldviews and values of the Idoma people (2022, p. 469). Olakdana-James (2016) also notes that dance costumes create cultural uniformity and also reveal the occupational identity of a cultural society (p.76-7).

Generally, the different types and forms of dance costumes worn by dancers enable them to communicate vital information about their culture. Consequently, dance costumes are sine qua non in the representation of a group’s identity, and have been used by several communities in Nigeria to highlight the cultural heritages and practices that are native to them.

2. Methods

The study focuses on the effective role of costumes in expressing cultural identity in two dances. The case studies are selected cultural dances from two geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The dances are the *Inyemobi* dance of Onicha-Ugbo in Delta State, south-south zone, and the *Aja k’ Idoma* dance of Benue state in north-central. The dances were purposively chosen because of their uniqueness and relevance to the ethnic identities of the two cultures.

While the case studies form the primary sources of data, other important information about the dance costume was collected through participant observation and interviews with dancers from the respective dance groups. Participant observation was significant in learning the different aspects of the dances and the role costumes play in the entire performance process. However, the interviews were used to obtain historical facts about the dances, the cultures, and the relevance of the different dance costumes.

Secondary sources like video clips, uploaded videos of the dances online, and still photos also provide vital information. Finally, the study uses the interpretative and descriptive methods of analysis to examine how these dance costumes establish cultural identities.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Cultural Identity theory (CIT) is one of the interpretative frameworks developed to learn the ways individuals communicate and express their cultural group identities. Propounded by Mary Jane Collier and Milt Thomas in 1988, the theory is concerned with cultural identity as the enactment, representation, and negotiation of social identifications by group members in a particular setting (Chen and Lin 2016, p.1) in ways that are enabled and constrained by relational dynamics, macro context, and public discourses (*Identity...*, n.d., par.1).

Naturally, culture is expressed through encounters and exchanges that result in the formation of distinctive cultural identities (Fisker, Sepe, and Rimei 1). As such, the interactions between cultures produce an experience that supports an individual’s connection with a particular culture. For this reason, Emara (2018) asserts that cultural identity is formed through a social construction process that exists side by side with an individual’s discursive accounts of experience (p.9).

CIT describes six properties that can help in understanding how a cultural identity is formed in a communication process. Hirvonen (2014) outlines these properties as follows:

An individual possesses multiple types of cultural identities like national, racial, ethnic, and class identities.

These identities differ in salience across situational contexts, time, and interaction,

Identities are visible in particular forms with varying scopes or prevalence

Forming an identity involves the process of avowal and ascription, which vary in intensity depending on the situation, context, topic, and relationship.

cultural identities remain over time and space, but can also change significantly

cultural identities possess content and relational aspects (p.14)

These properties provide the basis through which identity can be constructed and identified. Consequently, CIT will be applied in discussing how the various dance costumes help performers establish the identities of the cultures they represent.

3. Result

3.1 Historical Context of the Inyemobi Dance

The Inyemobi dance is a ritual dance that is performed by the royal women of Onicha-Ugbo during the Ine (Yam) festival. The origin of this dance is traced to the heroic role played by the king's wife during the invasion of Ani-Emi, the original settlement area of Onicha Ugbo people, by warriors from the Benin Empire. Consequently, the annual Ine festival in Onicha-Ugbo serves as an opportunity for female members of the royal house to celebrate and honor successive queens through the Inyemobi dance repertoire. This performance is displayed across the four corners of the community, on the fourth day of the festival for purification and cleansing of the land.

3.2 Inyemobi Costume

The Inyemobi dance costume is a combination of fabrics and accessories. Central to the costume is a two-piece white wrapper known as Akwaocha. The fabric is crafted from pure cotton and is tied around the waist, over a red blouse. However, the lead dancer is the queen. Instead of the white wrapper and red blouse, she ties a red cotton lace on a white blouse.

Common accessories include the neck bead, known as oshinaolu, and the hand bead, known as oshinaaka. There is also the eshuru (head bead), which is used to style the hair of the queen and other female members of the royal court. The eshuru is specifically designed to hold the hair in five distinct sections, creating a unique hairstyle for the performers.



Plate 1. Inyemobi dancers with the researcher

3.3 Historical background of Aja'k Idoma dance

The Aja k' Idoma dance is a social dance performed by young boys and girls at various social events and gatherings in Idoma land. Regarded as the most energetic dance of all the dances performed in Idoma land, the movements and rhythmic beats of the dance symbolize the vibrant spirit and unity of the Idoma people. Through this dance, the community comes together to celebrate their history, values, and identity, creating a sense of belonging and pride among the younger generation.

3.4 The Aja k'Idoma Dance Costume

The Idoma ethnic colors are significant aspects of the Aja k' Idoma performance costume. Dancers are dressed in a woven red and black fabric that is tied around the waist up to the knees. This material is also used to form a scarf that is tied to the forehead. The upper body is clad with a white polo/blouse for the female dancers, while the men wear a white singlet. Accessories like waist beads and leg rattles are worn to enhance both the waist and leg movements. Another important accessory is the horsetail which the dancers hold to perform their hand movement.



Plate 2. Group of Aja K' Idoma dancers performing in a community event in Benue State

4. Discussions

All the cultural elements visible in the performance of Inyemobi dance play a significant part in the construction of identity. One of the properties of CIT is that every cultural expression must have content that it portrays. The Inyemobi dance is revered because of the story behind the evolution of the dance. The thematic focus of Inyemobi dance is deeply rooted in history, ritual, and spirituality, which are explored in the costumes worn by the performers.

The akwaocha is an important part of the Inyemobi costume. Made from pure cotton lace, the Onicha-Ugbo people attach value to the costume as a representation of the women's salience and prominence to their regal status. In CIT, the idea of salience and prominence is an important property of cultural identity, which underpins the attachment a group or an individual holds to their institutions and practices. As a result of the attachment to akwaocha, the women use the costume as a symbolic tool to highlight the importance of peace and purity in the collective fabric of the society. The emphasis on white connotes purity and cleanliness which are the basic tenets and underlying philosophy of the Inyemobi dance.

In an interview with one of the dancers, Mrs. Ezinne Mokwe, it was revealed that the akwaocha "is exclusively donned by the Inyemobi group on the culminating day of the Ine festival, known as the Abaano (fourth day)". The final day of the Ine festival, according to Mokwe, holds great importance as it marks the occasion when the king and community partake in the consumption of the new yam. More importantly, it is the day when the Inyemobi dance is performed by the Inyemede (members of the dance group) at the four major spots in the community.

Traditionally, the ritual of purification at the four spots is led by the king's wife who is the head of the dance group. Thus, the presence of the Inyemede royal women wielding the akwaocha authenticates the profound cultural significance of the dance during the festival.

Some cultures can share similar ideologies, especially where there are common boundaries. Onicha-Ugbo culture shares a similarity with the Igbo culture. In the Igbo culture married women are known to tie two wrappers on a blouse to signify motherhood. The Inyemede are married women of princes and chiefs who make up the royal household. As such, two pieces of akwaocha are worn by these women to signify their marriage status. By this, the identity of motherhood is further reinforced in the narrative of class consciousness in the performance.

Moreover, a red lace blouse is worn on top of the akwaocha. While the lace material has become a dominant choice of fabric when designing blouses for women within the south-south and south-eastern political zones in Nigeria, the choice of red for the performance of the Inyemobi dance is very symbolic. Red generally connotes life, war,

courage, love, and religious fervor. These connotations also reflect the thematic focus of the dance and, ultimately, help in the visual interpretation of the history of war and survival, life and death, courage, love and patriotism towards the people's cultural values and common existence.

In addition to the akwaocha, the eshuru and ejije are exclusively worn by the Inemedede. Eshuru is a head bead that is used to pack the hair of the royal wives. Braiding of hair is an important aspect of Inyemobi costuming that aids in the construction of the Inyemede identity during the festival. Hence, it is part of the pre-activities of the Inyemobi dance, where the queen's hair and that of other female royal members are neatly packed to enhance beauty. This elaborate hair-braiding ritual takes place early in the morning on the final day of the Ine. The royal hair is braided into five sections and secured with the eshuru. Eshuru serves as a symbol of affirmation of authority that is bestowed on the royal women who perform the dance to distinguish them from other women in the community during the festival. Through this, a distinctive identity is bestowed on the members of the Inemedede.

On the other hand, ejije consists of neck beads known as oshinolu and hand beads (oshinaka). The utilization of these royal symbols further demonstrates the cultural identity theory thesis that visible cultural elements found in each culture or performance play a fundamental role in fostering an identity, as well as how people collectively appreciate such identity. While cultural identity theory suggests that cultural symbols such as costumes evoke feelings of affection and attachment, the effective utilization of this element in performance helps in the preservation and promotion of cultural identity.

Through the intricate costumes and accessories worn during the Inyemobi dance, the people of Onicha Ugbo express a profound sense of connection to their traditions, while also placing significant value on the royal institution. The akwaocha, eshuru, and ejije which form the basic components of the costume hold a special allure during the dance, highlighting the importance of cultural symbols in defining the identity of royal women in the community.

Elements of cultural identity often encounter changes due to shifts in culture. In the Inyemobi dance, akwaocha has remained unchanged since the inception of the dance. Mokwe, in an interview, asserts that "akwaocha, previously referred to as Ogbeepene, has retained its original form throughout the history of the dance." However, she notes that "there are variations in the use of blouse, especially when it comes to the choice of color". But despite the color chosen by the women, Mokwe revealed that uniformity is essential in giving the women a unique identity".

On the other hand, the Aja k' Idoma dance costume reflects the cultural heritage and sartorial traditions of the Idoma people. The present-day Aja k' Idoma costume is the red and black striped fabric often referred to in the Idoma language as 'Ili K' Idoma. This fabric is tied around the waist and flows to the knee. It goes with a white blouse for women and a singlet or polo for men, with accessories like neck, wrist, and ankle beads to help the dancers communicate effectively the identity of the people.

Generally, among the Idoma people, the black color on the costume, also known as Apa, signifies the earth. According to the Idoma worldview, the earth plays a lot of role in the physical and spiritual essence of the people. The annual 'Ej' Ajaje ceremony, which is performed across the communities where Idoma people are found, is a veneration of the earth deity.

Occupationally, Idoma people are predominantly farmers both in commercial and subsistence quantity. As a result, agriculture is integral to their economic growth and human development. Apart from the impact of the earth on physical needs, Idoma people also believe that the earth plays a major part in the transition process of mortals from the physical realm to the transcendental. Therefore, the black colour on the costume holds a lot of value to the spiritual and occupational identity of the Idoma tribe.

Alternatively, red is believed to stand as a symbol of strength and authority. The Idoma tribe, like every other ethnic nationality in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the legitimacy and sovereignty of their traditional institution. The history of Idoma land is based on their migratory experience and settlement. Therefore, the people believe that the red is a sign of authority bestowed on their leaders to defend them. This is why the paramount ruler of Idoma land, Och'Idoma, is always caped with a red feather as a symbol of his authority in protecting the lives and property of his subjects within his territory. Meanwhile, the incorporation of the white polo and singlet also has symbolic implications on the character identity of the Idoma people. The people believe that the white color represents their peaceful and warm nature.

The accessories that add to the costume of the dance are the waist beads, horsetail, and rattles. While these may not have any underlying interest in the spiritual, economic, and political aspects of the Idoma worldview, they contribute to the aesthetic and social significance of the dance towards enhancing the beauty of the Idoma culture.

All these visible aesthetic elements of the Aja'k Idoma dance costume are rooted in the Idoma cosmology, reflecting their philosophy of life and death, peace, and sophistication.

However, the Aja k' Idoma dance costume is part of the evolutionary aspect of Idoma dress culture aimed at globalizing the Idoma fabric and design. Historically, the Ili K' Idoma is believed to have emerged in the 1980s following the need to have a uniform identity for the tribe. As a result of this, Aja k' Idoma costume evolved to promote the ideology of uniformity. Before the advent of Ili k' Idoma, Oko, in an interview, reveals that “dancers wore their everyday wrappers with the Odugbo waist bead as the only unifying symbol”.

The implication of this is that expressing a unique identity that transcends beyond the performance space was unattainable in the past. As such, the narrative embodied in Aja k' Idoma only offered entertainment pleasure with little information about the identity of the people. The adoption of the red and black attire, which is used across different performances in Idoma, provides valid information on the identity of the people. Hence, the Aja k' Idoma costume has been affected by cultural changes tailored towards creating a common identity.

5. Conclusion

The evaluation of the costumes of the selected Nigerian dances reveals that they play a significant role in enhancing the visual appeal of the performances while also conveying deep cultural symbolisms. These costumes are essential in reflecting the cultural identities of the ethnic groups associated with the dances. Key elements such as the type of costume, accessories, and colors help define these identities and highlight the various symbolisms tied to them.

Specifically, the Inyemobi and Aja k' Idoma costumes demonstrate their symbolic functions within their respective cultural contexts, emphasizing the historical and evolutionary aspects of identity in these cultures. Beyond shaping ethnic identities, these costumes also touch on broader national themes such as religion, leadership, security, class identity, and social inclusion.

Over time, the evolution of these dance costumes has responded to cultural shifts, but the core messages and ideologies of the dances remain intact. Instead, these changes have contributed to enhancing the visual aesthetics of the costumes and fostering cultural uniformity.

Finally, documentation is very important in preserving cultural heritage and identity. While most cultural expressions enjoy digital documentation due to the influence of digital technology, scholarly and critical documentation are equally important in the preservation of cultural elements like dance costumes especially in the era of rapid changes in culture. Therefore, this study recommends scholarly documentation as a sustainable means of cultural and ideological preservation.

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