

Application of Technical Aesthetics of Costume, Make-up, Props and Performance Space in Idoma Traditional Performance Theatre

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Abstract

Traditional performances in Africa are cherished and honoured with divinity despite the advent of modernity. These performances are taken with seriousness of life and death because they embody the people's culture, belief, life and life after death. Consequently, these performances are often accompanied by music, dance, songs, masquerades and so on to actualise and merge their corporal and spiritual cosmos. Therefore, the technicality of costume, make-up, props, performance space and so on are harnessed and utilised to establish the performance and to bring out the message, meaning and aesthetics in the performances. The study hinges on the descriptive and analytical methods, complemented with materials from books, journal articles and appropriate internet sources. Findings reveal that, technical aesthetics defines the performance, brings out its beauty and establishes the Idoma cultural identity. The paper concludes that, technical aesthetics of costume, make-up, props and performance space create communication and identity in Idoma culture. We therefore, recommend that, traditional performances should be encouraged and sustained to unite and maintain the people's identity, using it as a cultural voice for the Idoma people.

Keywords: Belief, Culture, Technicality, Costume, Performance Space.

Introduction

Technical aspect of the theatre is a conglomeration of costumes, light, sound, properties, make-up, music, dance, drama, and so on which are also the core component of what gives meaning and essence to a theatrical performance. When properly utilised, these components enhance and give a production the desired outlook and concept by creating a harmonised blend for a performance and the way it is perceived. Enendu (2014, p. 21) describes technical theatre as the:

Coordination of diverse professional skills, talents and crafts of the production team, using appropriate tools and equipment, within a suitable work-space and environment for a unified stage result. In practical terms, theatre production is a synthesis of the elements of production, and bringing them into meaningful stage concordance and congruous whole by ingenious creativity for a singly aesthetic impression. The elements of . . . productions which are brought before the audience are a combination of both technical and artistic elements.

These challenges give room for the technical aspect of the theatre to feel in these gaps with artistic technical knowhow of the director and actors to achieve a good performance be it traditional or modern theatre. African art is not art for art sake. It is derived from the society and shapes the society and those therein. Idoma art like other African art, art has diverse effect and greatly reflects in all aspect of their life. These arts are explored within the elastic space of technical aesthetics such as costume and make-up, props, performance space in relation to this study.

Costume

Costume is one of the major components that make up African performances and this fact cannot be discountenanced. Its relevance can be seen from the irreplaceable role that it plays within the various contraptions of African traditions and cultures. With the use of costumes, performances are enhanced, conceptualised and contextualised within the cultural realities of the society in which they are being worn. Consequently, costumes help to identify and define a people in light of the backdrop of their cultural background.

The indispensable role of costumes in African performances has encouraged various scholarly opinions on the need to contextualise and re-contextualise the notion and functions of costumes across time and space. For example, Shuaib (2009, pp. 133-153) examines the uses of costume and make-up in traditional and modern theatre practice in Nigeria. She submits that the art of costumes and make-up are paramount among the elements used in communicating human experiences to an audience. She insists that in the Nigerian traditional performances, costumes and make-up are crafted with great artistic and aesthetic artistry which are deeply rooted in the various cultures of Nigeria.

More also, Eze and Akas (2005, p. 25) reflect critically that:

Costumes serve as a vibrant medium of performance, a tool for cultural expression which apart from its feature as an item of clothing worn by the performers to make a statement, serves a great purpose of cultural identification. It showcases the cultural aesthetics, artistic styles and traditional representation of a people. A metaphor of cultural space, providing an identity and consciousness among the people. It is a known fact that costumes worn by people of a tribe reflects them, even as it preaches the aesthetics and artistic nature of that tribe.

The views of the above scholars on costume in performances capture the view in which we look at costume and make-up in this paper. For example, in Idoma culture, particularly Idoma performances, costume is regarded as the life-wire. Subsequently, costume represents so many things to the Idoma people, and can be accepted as indispensable in the way it is applied based on colour(s). For example, the use of colour red in Idoma tradition signifies royalty. In Idoma tradition, colour white can be seen as evil, a concept which originated based on the historical myth of Onugbo and Oko. This legendary account was converted to a play by S. O. O. Amali titled *Onugbo Mloko* in 1972. In this story, a white horse deceived Onugbo to kill his younger brother (Oko) during a hunting expedition. As such, white colour is seen as evil in Idoma culture. On the other hand, black colour in Idoma culture is seen as good and matured colour for elders and men of honour. This is further buttressed by Okwori (2010, p. 101) who notes that, “royal colour red and the ancestral and fertility colour black were adopted” as the national Idoma colours. All these views are widely accepted as contrasts to the Yorùbá perception in which

white “Funfun” represents the categories of colours which include white, which connotes peaceful feeling, this category includes turquoise, blue, silver, chrome, and other icy colours. The primary influence and purpose of white is seen as a replica of purity. The next group of colour is referred to as “pupa”, which can be translated as “red”. The colour of fire is regarded as red which connotes danger and fearful individuals. “Dudu” is the last group of colours, and can be translated as “black”. “Dudu” also includes any colour that is dark with a resemblance of the earth. Brown, and leafy dark greens and moss greens are also considered “dudu”. (Oluwole, Ahmad and Ossen, 2013, p. 80).

Furthermore, costume has been conceptualised and re-conceptualised, and it has several definitions by several scholars from the core aspect of traditional performances as against the modern theatre in which it is used to delineate characters. In the traditional performance Ododo (2001, p. 18) accentuates that costume, “apart from pure aesthetic values, they serve as identity marks”. This situates the fact that, in traditional performances, the use of costume gives the patent to the character adorning the costume, thereby giving validity to the role and act being undertaken.

Within the nexus of the scholarly definitions that have been explored above, one can conclude that:

- i. Costume is the cloth we wear;
- ii. Costume represents so many things to different cultures across time and space;
- iii. Costume is important and it is the life-wire of the African culture and performance; and
- iv. Costume serves as a mode of transformation of perception and identity.

Therefore, for us in this paper, we evaluate costume as the major vivacious medium in which the indigenous performances are being transmuted or transformed into its essence of existence. Through this means, mystify characters are brought into actuality to showcase and reflect the aesthetics, artistic nature and cultural expression.

Make-up

Make-up plays dominant roles in most African theatre. It is one the most visible and dominant elements in a performance. Make-up is the use of created enhancement of either liquid or solid to transform a character or an actor to fit into the specification of an act. It is also applied to give an identity and form to a character in a performance be it traditional or modern. Shuaib (2017, p. 414) substantiates this that make-up ethos

has always been perceived as a means to an end. Where the human body is primarily conceived and adopted by man through his indigenous artistry as canvas for inscriptions and adornment of cosmetic substances by the artist in diverse religious, secular, and theatrical activities, performed by man in the bid to understand, master and even coerce cosmic nature and his environment to his advantage.

In light of the above, it can be deduced that make-up plays a wide range of multifaceted and important roles in African performances. However, in Idoma performances, make-up plays a very important but limited role in performances. Make-up is used on the masks of masquerades such as *Ichahoho*, *Ibo*, *Alinga*, and so. In these instances, make-up is used for decorative purposes without any intrinsic meaning beneath its use. Interestingly, make-up is applied on the faces of the warriors when going for war as camouflage and to instill fear in the minds of the enemies. Make-up is also used in performance arena by warriors when enacting war actions, and this is done without any connotation beyond the creation of war aesthetics. By implication, make-up becomes one of the elements employed by the organisation as part of the spectacles for entertainment. Nevertheless, make-up is a very prominent and important feature in other Idoma masquerade performances such as *Idadu* and *Akpulu*. In these instances, the actor has his face covered by powdery make-up as the only form of concealing his identity rather than the wearing of mask as against the prevalent practice of masquerades within Idoma culture.

Props

Properties are of extreme necessity in a performance because they assist the creativity and realisation of a performance. Props help the narrative and enhance the imaginative and overall physical picture of a performance. Koski (1966, p. 2) defines props or property as

any object that an artist utilizes to further enhance or communicate the plot or story line. The term derives from live-performance practice, especially theatrical methods. However, its modern definition extends beyond traditional dramas and musicals, as well as circus, novelty, comedy, and even public-speaking performances, all the way to film, television and electronic media.

Be it in traditional or modern performances, props help to enhance or complement the artist or the artistic image. This notion is corroborated by Chen (2015, p. 110) who states that, “prop can create the artistic image with unique charm”. This uniqueness helps to contextualise a performance while simultaneously situating the character, the act and the art. Props used in performance can be:

- i. Realistic – that is, using the object as it is applicable in real life;
- ii. Stylised – this design is done to replicate the original with resemblance; and
- iii. Mimed – pretending or miming to use the object with the aid of gestures, action, nuances and so on.

Drawing from the above, props are classified into different types and are used in performance be it traditional or modern.

Performance Space

The ceremonial and robust nature of African performances are usually characterised by ancestral belief, myth, spirit medium and so on. These are often expressed by means of masquerades, dance, music and songs which are displayed in festival styles that necessitate a great demand for the use of space. Performance in Idoma culture is like other African theatre performances which involved the audience as full participants and part of the performance. By implication, it consists of communication and response from both the performers and the audience to make the performance complete.

To this end, the definition of performance space in this study is in tandem with Ukaegbu (2013, p. 31) who is of the view that

performance spaces in Africa communicate and reinforce cosmological unity and the universe of the presenting community. They are more than architectural buildings and spaces—such sites and locales are chosen for more than pragmatic reasons and are used specifically for performances because of their “mythical symbolism”. They are not mere theatrical or narrative aids used to

embellish and reinforce plots. They have cultural meanings and play active parts in the unfolding performances, and are, thus, significant “actants” that contribute to the atmosphere and meaning of performances.

Contextually, performance space is not an ordinary space to the Idoma people and their spiritual existence but ordained with respect as the core essence of the performance. It is accepted as the venue for the transition of the celestial relationship between human and spirits. To the Idoma culture, it is a space seen as the boundary that sets the creation from the transition of power to the mystic guided with the reality of fluid and autonomous boundaries. In this instance, the performance space is seen as one of the core rites of passage which enhance the transition from one level in the Idoma cosmology to another. This it is emphasised by Anyebe (2015, p. 582) who indicates that, “the cosmological rite of passage involved in the practice notwithstanding, the art remains essentially ephemeral performance involving a combination of drama, dance, music, mime, language, aesthetics and costume”.

It is important to note that, performance space can also determine the type of performance or the time it would take place. The use of space depends on the intention and purpose of the performance because sometimes, quotidian spaces used for public performance can also become a sacred place for a sacred-ritual performance.

It should be emphasised that, in Idoma culture, performance space can be classified into:

- i. Public performance space; and
- ii. Sacred-ritual performance space

In the public performance space, the performance is held at the full glare of all to see and in most cases, the participation of the audience is necessary as characteristic of Idoma and most African traditional performances.

On the other hand, a sacred-ritual performance space is usually regarded as an exclusive preserve of the initiates with limited participants and it could be in a secluded place or in the open. The space is usually sanctified for the performance to take place.

Conclusions

This study concludes that, in Idoma traditional performance, the application of technical aesthetics of costume, make-up, props and performance space have greatly contributed as the core of defining the performance and as the main medium of how the performance is perceived. These technical aspects of the performance are usually within the toga of the performance and therefore, bring a combination to give a holistic aesthetics and values to the performance.

Recommendations

It is therefore, recommended that there should be financial investment by government and relevant stake holders in to our indigenous arts of Costume, Make-up, Props and Performance Space to bring out the cultural effervescence of our traditional performances which would exposure our unique art internationally and attract tourism to boost our economy. It is also recommended to educate, encourage and enlighten the developing population the importance and the need to sustain traditional performances in the face of the changing dynamics ushered in by modernisation and globalisation.

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