

BEYOND EUROCENTRISM: CLASSIFICATIONS, THEORIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN AFRICAN DRESS, BODY DESIGNS, COSTUMES AND MAKE-UP

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Abstract

This work critically examines the practice of indigenous dressing, stage costuming, body designing and make-up, as utilised in African daily life and African performances; in a bid to theorise African adornment practices and articulate a position of enquiry, which will be employed in explaining techniques and methods; describing trends and styles, and explaining design practices and preferences within the African fashion and performance space. Many scholars and practitioners have made significant claims about traditional African dress culture, make-up, body designs and the costumes used in myriad performances spread across the continental landscape, but these claims have mostly been based on Eurocentric categorisations of non-Eurocentric cultural attires as "costumes". Using the analytical, descriptive and interpretative approach of the qualitative research methodology; the study attempts to theorise African dress culture, body designs, costumes and make-up practices, especially as utilised in everyday life, on special occasions, on stage, in films, carnivals, street performances and traditional communal performances. The study exposes the limitations of Eurocentric categorisations, and explores some terrains of indigenous artistic distinctions defined by certain established dress codes, adornment cultures and ethnic orientations. In the course of this engagement, strong claims, assertions, and conceptions capable of generating critical stand -points that may amongst others, define the process and classify the practice, trends and identity of African dress culture, make-up and body designs; are initiated.

Key Words: Dress, Body Designs, Body Decorations, Costumes, Eurocentric, Tradition, Make-up, Collective Representation.

Introduction

Many scholars and creative artists have made significant claims about traditional African dress culture, make-up, body designs and the costumes used in myriad performances spread across the continental landscape (see for example, Kwakye-Opong and Adinku 2013; Rovine 2019; Eicher 1972). These claims have mostly been based on Eurocentric categorisations (Egan 2012; Starck 2020), however, other scholars have also made different attempts to re-define the practice of indigenous dressing and performance costumes based on scholarly enquiries rooted in African lived experiences and practical experiments. These postulations invariably provide the bases for the classification and conceptualization of African body adornment practices (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2021; Okadigwe 2015); and the deconstruction of Eurocentric perspectives.

In earlier studies, I had used the term "African costumes", in a broad sense, to describe the attires of African people and to qualify both performative attire and everyday dress (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011). I must explain here that my use of the term "costume" in such a broad manner devoid of clear distinction, is not an affirmation or endorsement of the Eurocentric description of non-Eurocentric cultural attires as "costume". Studies on Western fashion, clearly show that Western clothing may never be referred to as "costume" unless it is worn for the specific purpose of role-play or character definition in a performative situation (Campbell 2012; Gordon 2007). However, despite my views about the inappropriateness of the use of the term "costumes" to describe the dress culture of indigenous people from other climes such as Africa, I had used the term costume to qualify both performative attire and everyday dress within African cultural experiences; not for purposes of strengthening Western misconceptions and misrepresentations, but for purposes of establishing a common ground in order to articulate a point of departure. This is based on the idea that a deconstruction and

classification at the same time may be too cumbersome as readers need to connect with the existing notion of costumes to enable understanding and comprehension of newer concepts and classifications of indigenous attires and body adornment. However, I realise now, that my continued usage of the term costumes to describe African dress culture is a clear contradiction to African design identity. A critical scholar John Flaherty (2021, Par. 1) gives a clearer perspective in his observation; " We would never refer to western clothing worn in public as costuming unless someone was attired as such for a specific purpose". and he further queries; "Why, when we are referring to indigenous peoples or people from non-dominant cultures, do we speak and write of being dressed in costumes rather than simply the attire of one's culture, tribe, people, region, or origin?" (2021, Par. 1). Flaherty's observation and query further illuminates the need to address the misconceptions about African dresses/costumes and to discuss the different dress practices of Africa, and at the same time, theorise these practices in the context of usage. Joan Eicher who has done a lot of work in the area of African dress observes that;

Dress as an African Art form demands notice, not because of the unique use of dress on the African continent, but because it has been either neglected, or misunderstood. Dress in Africa is basically similar to dress anywhere in the world- items of clothing, etc. Nevertheless, the details and total composition are distinctive. (1972, p. 516)

This work, aims, amongst other goals, to address concerns such as the one raised by Flaherty and to re-state the concept and context of African dress as different from African costumes, given the ignorance with which African scholars have continued to ape and sustain Western descriptions of indigenous attires from other climes as costume rather than attire/fashion. A clearer notion of African dress culture will surely emerge from an understanding of the limitations of Eurocentric categorisations.

Eurocentrism according to Savana Amin;

Is an ideology; some critics call it a "distorted ideology" that interprets the world from the point of view of Western, especially European lenses. Eurocentrism represents an inherent belief in the pre-eminence of European culture, knowledge and values. It is a way of seeing Western civilization as the pinnacle of human progress. (2010, p.143)

"Eurocentrism also negates the history, story and importance of half of the globe at the expense of its own grandiose self- image and self interest" (2010, p. 143). As observed by Starck;

Eurocentrism in fashion discourse is in no way isolated Its origins date back to colonialism, to the birth of the "West and the rest", when clothing-based distinction and hierarchization were established". (2020, Par. 2)

Given the inadequacy and inappropriateness of ascribed identities based on Eurocentric opinion, which tends to describe the dress culture of indigenous people from other climes such as Africa as costumes, and further push African dress and other adornment practices to the precipice of performativity, ornamentation and antiquity devoid of normalcy; I find it imperative to re-evaluate certain dominant views about African adornment practices by attempting to conceptualise and classify these practices. Starck encourages such an attempt to re-establish an appropriate identity for the dress practices of non Western cultures in her submission:

First and foremost, we need to be aware, and understand that these biases are not pervasive because they are true - they are pervasive because they remain largely unchallenged. So, let's challenge them. Seek out non-Western discourse and non-Western fashion. Normally, we see a fraction of the fashion story. Now let's open our eyes to the entirety. (2020, Par.7)

In an attempt to theorise African dress culture, body designs, costumes and make-up practices, especially as utilised in everyday life, on special occasions, on stage, in films, carnivals, street performances and traditional communal performances; I find it

relevant to explore some terrains of indigenous artistic distinctions defined by certain established dress codes, adornment cultures and ethnic orientations. The aim is to initiate strong claims, assertions, and conceptions capable of generating critical stand points that may amongst others, define the process, practice, trends and identity of African dress culture, make-up and body designs.

In this work, I use the term costumes to qualify apparels and accessories used for stage appearances, festivals, ceremonies and performative occasions. The terms dress, attire and adornment are used to qualify apparels and accessories for every day formal and informal purposes, while make-up is used to describe all forms of instant make-up materials and applications as well as some forms of body decorations. The term body design/decoration, describes temporary and permanent body decorations and patterns.

In the terrain of performance, many challenges confront the African costume and Make-up designer such as- the challenge of uncoordinated and inconsistent classifications for traditional African costume practices and body designs; the challenge of transforming the performer using traditional costumes and make-up to the degree that the performer loses his/her personality on the stage or screen so as to pick up the personality of another, for some moments, minutes or hours; the challenge of historical accuracy/authenticity in costuming African plays; the challenge of locating the notion and practice of African dress culture, make-up and body designs within some theoretical and conceptual frameworks; the challenge of effectively costuming contemporary African plays/films in the midst of trending/emergent fashion and so on. Certain queries easily come to mind in the quest for a conceptual framework and ideological standpoint, and one of such is; how does the African designer manipulate traditional dress materials, make-up and body design elements and costumes, to achieve effective character transformation in the communal performance arena and on stage or screen, in the midst of such daunting challenges?

This work critically examines the practice of African indigenous dressing, stage costuming, body designing and make-up as utilised in African daily life and African performances; in a bid to theorise African adornment practices and articulate a position of enquiry, which will be employed in explaining techniques and methods; describing trends and styles, and explaining design practices and preferences within the African fashion and performance space.

Theorising African Dress Culture, Costumes, Make-up and Body Designs within the Context of "Collective Representation"

When we use the term "African dress, costumes, make-up and body designs", we are immediately confronted with a visualised landscape resplendent with arrays of colourful clothing, bearing peculiar styles and iconic patterns, as well as intricately patterned bodies adorned with body paintings, varieties of beads and other objects of body adornment. This visual kaleidoscope may share some kinship with African performance aesthetics, but it also throws up the critical query- what do we actually mean by African dress, costumes, make-up and body designs? Since distinctions are decipherable in fashion trends, ethnic specificities and global practices; how do we classify the different existing practices and notions vis-à-vis the emergent trends (both local and global) in African dress, make-up and body design practices?. Blumer (1969) describes fashion influence as a process of "collective selection" whereby the formation of taste derives from a group of people responding collectively to the zeitgeist or "spirit of the times." Scholars such as Julie Umukoro, Peju Shuaib, Nkechi Okadigwe, Lilian Bakare, Anuli Okafor and a host of others have made important submissions on the nature and usage of African dress, costumes and body designs/make-up. Such studies on indigenous dress culture and body design practices have inadvertently exposed some of the challenges facing African dress,

costume and make-up scholars who are attempting or grappling with the challenge of framing discourses on indigenous conceptual models.

However, based on available studies in the theory and practice of theatrical/ film costumes and make-up, and given the limited number of critical and scholarly documentations on African costumes and make-up; one is not surprised that the bulk of scholarship on costumes and make-up and the retinue of scholars in the African continent tend to lean heavily on non -African experiences in interrogating indigenous experiences. This calls to question, the level of attention that African costume and make-up scholars are paying to local scholarship and the gap created by their seeming reluctance to critically, dedicatedly and academically engage local experiences, cultural specificities and the wealth of shared experiences arising from dominant communal design repertoires. Such an interrogation will amongst other factors, initiate a robust African -based discourse on costumes, make-up, dress and body designs, which will not just shift the emphasis from the existing practice of adapting foreign models and ascribed identities; but will open up discourse on the distinctions between African dress and African costumes.

In the process of analysing, describing, interrogating, articulating, characterising and invariably explaining the motivations for African dress, costumes and body design forms and the expected impact on audiences/spectators and acquaintances; I find certain concepts central to the construction of an intellectual and scholarly identity. I approach the construction of identity in African dress, costumes, make-up and body designs, from the dimension of “collective representation”. The concept of collective representation in dress, costumes, make-up and body designs derives impetus from the concept of "collective representation" developed by Émile Durkheim, a famous French sociologist who in his search for the sources of social solidarity, provided a framework which describes "ideas, categories and

beliefs" that do not belong to isolated individuals, but are instead the product of a "collective social endeavour" (Falasca-Zamponi 2014, p. 44). Collective representation for Durkheim, describes symbols or images that have a common significance amongst members of a group in that they convey ideas, values, or ideologies. These representations are perceived as being the product of a sustained interaction between society and religious rituals, however, because the collective rituals or actions or activities provide more enriching options than individual activities, they inevitably become independent of the group from which they emerged. Thus, collective representations "give meaning to the world and social interactions and help humans make sense of their existence" (Falasca-Zamponi 2014, p. 45). The Christian cross stands out as a good example of collective representation because it is a symbol that has a common meaning and holds great significance for Christians. Collective representation therefore ensures order and sanity in human society at the same time as it expresses, symbolizes, and interprets social relationships and inhibits and stimulates social action. Consequently, in his submission Wouter de Nooy contends that,

Ever since Emile Durkheim introduced the concept of collective representations, the interplay between social and cognitive structure has fascinated sociologists. A society, a social group, or a social institution is thought to maintain shared convictions and classifications that legitimize the existing social structure because they present it as a natural fact. Collective classifications serve as unquestioned categories of perception that make people adjust their behavior to the current social order. In an art world, mechanical solidarity based on shared classifications is probably very important since classifications according to artistic quality receive much attention and raise fierce debates. (2003, p.1)

The concept of Collective Representation in African dress culture, body designs, costumes and make-up design derives from the collective ethos, the relatedness of communal design elements; the relationships expressed in group aesthetics, and the deep recognition which the society attaches to collective identity. In my conceptualisation, collective representation in African dress, costumes, make-up and body designs describes the cultural idioms, icons, fashion trends, body adornment practices and stylistic composition of dress and make-up arrangements steeped in communal ethos which collectively represent what a group of people wear and adorn themselves with, in an African communal setting or in an African/ Africanised activity; and which are generally identified as representing that community's dress culture and body adornment expressions. Community here, could represent a kindred, an ethnic group, a social group, members of an association, a geographic enclave, a region, a country and even a nation. Thus, it is acceptable to make reference to Kikuyu dress and costumes; Igbo dress and costumes; Yoruba dress and costumes; Ashante dress and costumes; and Zulu dress and costumes; and present them as items of collective representation. Collective representation also describes the dress styles, peculiar patterns on fabrics, body designs, make-up, costume arrangements, colour preferences and particular colour combinations; as well as acceptable fashion codes and related items, accessories and objects of dressing generally utilized by a community, associated with a community, ascribed to them and accepted by observers as bearing the identity of that particular community. Such costumes and body designs would be identified as representing particular ethnic groups or regional locations. When particular dresses, costumes and body designs which are associated with different ethnic groups are utilized with the intention of presenting a national image and asserting cultural identity, they thus translate into national dress, costume and body design cultures and become items of collective representation for the nation. Thus, within the

concept of collective representation, Tiv dress, costumes and body designs would translate to Nigerian dress, costumes and body designs; while Akan dress, costumes and body designs would bear the identity of Ghana dress, costumes and body designs. Collective representation further describes those items of dressing such as skirts, blouses, gowns, shirts, trousers, caftans and so on, created or designed with certain fabrics, colours, patterns and cultural idioms associated with Africa; as well as peculiar beads, jewellery, accessories, body designs and patterns, which are generally associated with particular ethnic groups in Africa and which are collectively recognised and described globally as African dress, costumes and body designs. The Ashanti *kente*, Yoruba *Aso Oke* and Masai *Shuka* will thus bear the identity of African costumes while the Hausa *Laali*, Igbo *Uli* and Samburu *Naitulu* will bear the identity of African body designs. In theorising African dress culture, costumes and adornment practices therefore, the concept of collective representation presents a theoretical context for defining, describing and ascribing meaning to the African appearance.

Kenya for instance, has forty two ethnic groups with different dress cultures and body designs and with similarities existing in the design practices of neighbourly or related groups. The body adornment practices of the largest six tribes however exert greater influence and hence higher impact on Kenyan culture. Two of these are the Masai and the Samburu. The Masai are famous and easily recognizable because of the great significance that their traditional attire the Shuka (Masai blanket) has attained over the years. The Masai dress usually consists of red kanga, shuka and a lot of brightly patterned necklaces, bracelets, and bead headdresses. These attires and body design practices would be easily identified as a collective representation of the Masai people's adornment culture. Shuka is a bright-coloured cloth, predominantly red which is wrapped around the frames of the men. Red has become synonymous with Masai culture and it is believed to have

the force to scare off lions even from a great distance. Masai jewellery, created with beads and metal wire, are quite famous. Men wear wrist or ankle bracelets, and sometimes belts and necklaces too, while women wear a variety of jewellery, many bracelets and big flat bead-decorated collars in various patterns and colours, that identify the clan they belong to and their social status. In describing Shuka within the context of collective representation, one would identify Shuka as representative of Masai culture at the ethnic and national levels because it is easily identified as the dress culture of the Masai. At the same time, it would also be identified as the collective representation of the national dress of Kenya from a universal and global perspective.

For the Samburu, collective representation is evident in their vibrant culture of body adornment. Red is the most significant colour for the people as it is believed to represent life, purity, youthfulness and vigour. The use of the red colour by women and young men is a form of colour coding where various colours are used to convey meaning. Colour coding is applied in the arrangement of beadwork which are used to communicate meaningfully depending on the design. For instance, Samburu beads known as Mporo are usually worn by married women only and the beads are traditionally given by the groom as part of the bride price. In her submission, Ngoroge corroborates this claim by stating that;

The traditional dress of the Samburu tribe is a striking red cloth wrapped like a skirt and a white sash. This is adorned with many colorful beaded earrings, bracelets, anklets and necklaces. Each piece of jewellery worn represents the status of the wearer. (2015, p.43)

One would therefore, view the concept of collective representation from an ideological and conceptual perspective, given its relatedness to African communal existence and world view. As I had postulated in an earlier writing.

Africans share life deeply in common. There are communal squares, farmlands, economic trees, streams and markets. There are also communal shrines, masquerades, musical instruments, ritual objects, festivals and squares for recreational activities as well as for social, economic and religious purposes. Members of the same kindred or clan could distinguish themselves by their proficiency in a particular trade, skill or profession such as basket/mat weaving, black smiting, body designing, pot moulding and so on. Some communities or lineages may be experts in rain-making, wood carving, divination and practice of traditional medicine. These and similar features characterize the communal life of traditional African societies. (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2011, p.75)

Communality is at the root of African body adornment expressions. In the construction of identity using collective representation, emphasis is laid on the usage of certain fabrics/styles/colours/patterns/arrangements of clothing, hair styles, body decorations, make-up, beads/jewellery and accessories by a particular community, ethnic group or nationality. The Asoebi dress culture of Nigeria reflects the concept of collective representation. As Okechukwu Nwafor observes in his seminal work on Aso ebi culture titled: *Aso Ebi Dress, Fashion, Visual Culture, and Urban Cosmopolitanism in West Africa*;

Aso ebi is a form of social change, a means of individual and collective mannerism, offering an opportunity to endless design evaluation, observation, and socialization. Here, aso ebi is deployed as a social uniformed dressing in Nigeria...(Nwafor 2021, p.15)

Thus, one sees aso ebi as a unifying symbol of family bonding and friendship, in the same way one would view the dress culture of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria who have peculiar

dress and body adornment designs which are easily identified as belonging to them. Aso ebi thus becomes a national symbol of collective representation emanating from different groups and institutions. The Igbo *Isi Agu*, the Yoruba *Aso Oke* and the Hausa *Babanriga* constitute items of Collective Representation in their cultural domains. In Benue State of Nigeria for instance, the Idoma and the Tiv who constitute part of the ten ethnic groups in the state, have peculiar and identifiable dress cultures which make it easy for people to identify them at a glance or pick them out from the crowd. As I observed elsewhere:

Among the many ethnic groups found in Nigeria, dress cultures carry peculiar identities. Each ethnic group has its own name for different types of attires made out of traditional fabrics particular to that culture. Similarities could however be found across cultures because with migration and interactions, ethnic groups have adapted and shared customs of dressing. (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2010, p.22)

Idoma attire is usually made out of a fabric designed in two major colours of stripped black and red with gold coloured lining in the middle. The red and white woven cloth is usually crossed/draped across a man's left shoulders while the wrapper is knotted on the right side of the waist. A cap made of the same fabric would usually complete the outfit, especially during formal occasions. For the women, the cloth is tied across the chest or on the waist over a plain blouse or with a tube like top. A headtie of similar fabric or colour would complete the outfit for formal occasions or in place of that, a coiffure arranged with beads and stones. Tiv attire on the other hand is a stripped black and white woven fabric with similar styles of draping, tying and knotting for men as that of the Idoma; while the women would design and arrange their outfits in styles also similar to the Idoma . Discussing Idoma and Tiv traditional dress, Akpa reiterates that

The Idoma emblem which is their dress code is a special fabric made up of two colours red and black with gold colour lining in between. This emblem or attire can be proudly worn by any Idoma person at any time especially during occasions or festivities. It is for cultural identity and speaks volumes on what the Idomas believe in. Just as Idoma emblem which is their dress code is a special fabric made up of two major colours of red and black with gold lining in between; their Tiv counterparts use a black and white fabric called “Anger” and it is of great importance to them. (2017, p. 3)

For the Ijaw people of Nigeria, the men have a ceremonial dress which is called 'Bayelsa'. This attire is a large shirt with long sleeves, worn with a long piece of wrapper tied from the waist to the ankle, and in most cases, hung over a shoulder. Other ethnic groups in Nigeria have identifiable cultural attires, body designs and in some instances, facial markings. These are representative of cultural bonding, communal identity and group aesthetics which are indices of collective representation. The usage of body decorations in their permanent and temporary forms by both men and women, including the use of beads, anklets, circulates and other objects and items used in body and hair adornments and dress accessories encapsulate collective representation. Njoroge in her Thesis on Body Adornment among the Samburu of Kenya, observed that;

Body adornment was a significant cultural activity which was widely practiced by Samburu. Some of the forms of body adornment were temporary while others were permanent. Forms of body adornment emphasised power, wealth, age and social status within the community. (2015, p.25)

Collective representation is also distinguishable in the designs, styles, fabric type and quality; and the colour scheme of the costumes used in traditional performances, festivals, dances and ceremonies usually enacted in the various African communities, ethnic groups and countries.

Classification of African Dress Culture, Body Designs, Costumes and Make-up

The dress culture, body designs, costumes and make-up used by the many ethnic groups found in Africa, evolved through circumstances of geographic location, weather conditions, inter-ethnic interactions, colonial activities, foreign interests, religious orientations and the impact of local and international migrations. Ethnographic and archaeological evidences point to a vibrant and sustained body adornment culture among Africans. This involves the use of permanent and temporary body decorations to enhance beauty or compose identity. Varied woven and matted fabrics for dressing the body and various objects for accessorising the attires, aided personal and collective identity. For the traditional society, distinctiveness in dressing did not necessarily require distinct gender classifications in terms of items of clothing or even items of body adornment; but rather, the emphasis sometimes lay on the positioning and selection of the beads, motifs, symbols and patterns utilised on attires or body decorations. Usually, items of clothing and body designs are embodied with visual signs which communicate the socio-cultural context in which they are being paraded (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2010, p.25). This communicative essence is very significant because members of the community usually possess the ability to read the language of the cultural attires such that African aesthetics of beauty are artistically expressed in the dress and body designs of the traditional society as well as in the evolving contemporary styles.

The dress practices, costumes, make-up and body designs utilised by the many ethnic groups found in different countries in Africa such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, Morocco and South Africa; have overtime and in response to fashion trends, environmental/social changes and technological advancements, incorporated changes into the dress styles, fabric types/designs, patterns and colour codes. However, distinct identities exist in the different and sometimes similar or parallel design practices of Africa's ethnic groups. Considering Africa's contributions to global fashion and the influx of African clothing, headgears/wraps and accessories on the runway; it has become necessary to give classifications to the different costumes, make-up and body design practices utilised in the various festivals, carnivals and ceremonies exhibited or performed in diverse communities.

The term "Traditional African dress, costumes, make-up and body designs", is a broad categorisation that requires further classification for a more concise description of African adornment practices. From indigenous dress culture, body design practices, costumes and make-up; through modern, to contemporary design creations; to the globalisation of African design elements; traditional African attires, body designs, costumes and make-up have remained consistent as conveyors of African artistic heritage despite shifting paradigms in terms of production and usage. Broadly speaking, traditional African dress, costumes and body designs refer to all forms of traditional attires, costumes, make-up and body designs utilised by Africans and non-Africans; and identified as belonging to African design repertoire; and embodying African stylistic idioms, and cultural heritage. In my attempt to classify traditional African costumes, make-up and body designs, I find three distinctions appropriate. In making these distinctions, I have chosen functional/functionality as sensorial issues/criteria for classification. The distinctions are based on created identities, autochthonous authenticity, trends and content and style of the designs rather than on chronological periods and

regions. The three categories are identified as follows; Indigenous Traditional Designs (indigenous Trad.), Modern Traditional Designs (Modern Trad.), and Contemporary Traditional Designs (Contemporary Trad.).

Indigenous Traditional Designs (Indigenous Trad.)

Africa is a nation with diverse ethnic groups and a robust artistic cultural heritage (Kerchache, et al. 1993). Indigenous traditional African costumes, make-up and body designs were initially made with materials derived from plants, animals and mineral deposits, as well as feathers, quills, fronds and the teeth and skin of animals. Indigenous attire consisted of bark cloth, grass or raffia skirts, animal skins, furs and hides. The body and hair were accessorised with beads made from ivory, corals, seeds and cowry shells; as well as seashells, bones, wood, grass, bells, pressed metal, ostrich eggshells and feathers. Others were circlets and anklets derived from tusks and animal horns. Leg rattles made from animal shells or seeds were used for aesthetic appeal and to enhance sound effects during dance performances. Make-up and body decorations were made with liquid extracted from leaves, seeds, pods, insects and animal fat; as well as solutions made out of mineral deposits, plant extracts and wood ash. The predominant colours of make-up in use are red, black, yellow, brown and white. However, factors arising from the colonial experience led to a drastic decline in indigenous body adornment practices. The circular- shaped hats which are made with grass and local cotton and cow-hide skirt worn by married Zulu women; the skirt made of grass or beaded cotton strings worn by unmarried Zulu girls; skirts of animal skin and head feathers worn by Zulu men and Leopard skin skirts worn by men from the Zulu royal family; are some examples of indigenous traditional costumes. The Yoruba tribal marks and the facial scarification of the karamojong- Jie of Uganda are examples of permanent traditional body designs. The Igbo *Uli* and the Hausa *Laali* present good examples of temporary

traditional body designs; while the red and white ochre decorations usually applied on the bodies of Masai Moran warriors and brides represent indigenous traditional make-up.

Following the introduction of weaving machines, the discovery of dyeing pits and the availability of cotton; woven fabrics, dyed fabrics and prints, and imported make-up materials became available. In Nigeria for instance, the inception of cloth weaving has been traced through archaeological discoveries in Eastern Nigeria to more than one thousand years ago. The earliest recorded evidence is in the accounts of Africanus Leo who reported cotton growing in “an abundance near Kano” in the 1500s. In the 1590s, Kano cloth was reported to be used as ‘currency’ and Barth observed in 1851 that dyed and woven cloth was the main product of Kano. As many as twenty five different kinds of cloth were noted to have been locally made in Kano and nearby towns. And in about 1900, French officers estimated that “nearly everyone living in the central and East Sahara and two thirds of the population in the Sudan zone wore Kano cotton”. An Englishman visiting Western Nigerian in the 1850s also talked about the cotton produced in that part of the country. His account as rendered by Eicher says:

With regard to the present quality of the cotton which is grown in such vast quantities in Yoruba ... it is declared by those who are most capable of judging that although the supply is intermittent and the sample not over clean, it is very well thought of in the Liverpool market and commands a paying price, equal to that of Louisiana and superior to that of India. (1976, p.13).

Apart from local cotton, silk was also available in some parts of the country and weavers made silk cloth out of them. Records from the 1800 show that Yoruba people had started wearing Sanyan, a prestigious local silk cloth made from the

Anaphe Larvae. In the Eastern part of Nigeria, Basden in his book *Niger Ibos* which he wrote in 1917 after spending seventeen years among the Igbo, observed that the woven cloths from the town of Akwete which were initially called Akwa Mmiri and later Akwete, were testimonies of “the unique artistic skills of the weavers” (Basden, 1960, p. 159). In Benin, the weaving tradition was highly regarded by both explorers and indigenes. Eicher (1976, p.33) observes that “Bini cloths were praised for their fine quality and were sought by explorers and trading vessels for trade with other African nations”. In the 19th century, Barth reported that the Nupe people “were also skilled weavers”. Igbirra and Okene broad loom cloth were also highly admired. In Bida, Ilorin, Zaria and Benin, tufted cloths were woven for use by women who used them to tie their babies to their backs.

Weavers from the many ethnic groups of Nigeria produced locally hand woven cloths for use in their localities and surrounding communities. Apart from the use of local materials for weaving, some indigenous weavers especially those living along the coast had access to imported yarns, fabrics and dyes as far back as the 18th century. In addition, it is of note that India had exported cloth to Africa for a long time. With this development, local weavers and dyers began to use the imported materials alongside the local ones. Even as imported printed cotton cloth later became available, the locally woven cloth continues to occupy pride of place as it is regarded more highly than the imported ones.

Weaving and dyeing traditions began to produce fabrics which gradually edged indigenous traditional attires out of usage, thereby given rise to the emergence of modern traditional designs in Africa.

Modern Traditional Designs (Modern Trad.)

Modern traditional dresses, body designs, costumes and make-up, refer to fabrics and their styles; make-up materials and

application procedures; and body design patterns and styles which are produced by Africans using weaving/sewing machines and modern make-up equipment and materials. It also refers to the use of dyes, processed wool and tattoo technology. Modern traditional designs describe certain styles achieved with fabrics manufactured locally or imported into the continent, which are intrinsically African in style, design concept and cultural aesthetics. Modern traditional make-up and body designs took off from the point where factors arising from the colonial experience encouraged a decline in the use and practice of local dress items, make-up and body designs; and an increase in the use of “colours and patterns, created in printed and dyed cloth; woven fabric strips; and beaded attires...” (Ashworth and Varshney 2020, Par. 1). This marked a shift in the African ideology of beauty and style, where the adorned and decorated body spoke volumes concerning the bearer's personality. The "natural" and "bland" body began to gain significance over the decorated body, and make-up simply defined or enhanced beauty, and nothing else. Make-up materials such as eye pencil, rouge, lipstick, powder and eye shadow began to dominate the scene, although local make-up and body designs are still utilized sparingly. Modern traditional dress, costumes, make-up and body designs are achieved using either local or imported materials or a mixture of both; as well as a fusion of foreign design processes with local artistic expressions. Weaving technology enabled the use of cotton, silk and wool in the processing and production of attires. Weaves, tie and dyes, batiks and Industrial prints represent the four types of cloth that emerged. Examples of modern traditional fabrics include the machine or hand woven Yoruba Aso Oke and Adire; the Igbo Akwete and the Ghana kente and the numerous Wax and Ankara (patterned cotton fabrics) and printed materials; including the different styles achieved with the fabrics. Unique hair styles enhanced with attachments and weavens; body designs/motifs/patterns made with machines; walking sticks and jewellerys of beads, shells, glass,

bronze and gold, represent modern traditional designs and body adornment.

Gradually, a distinct traditional African identity began to emerge, embodying certain unifying elements foregrounded in African tastes and design repertoire. Discernible in the emerging styles, are certain symbolic indexes and cultural idioms such as representations of African heroic exploits; the quest for identity and the merging of identities; cultural specificities; African communal experiences, and the primordial strive for artistic excellence, elaborate artistry and sophisticated creativity. The *Isi Agu* of the Igbo, the *Njiri* of the Ijaw and the *Iyeruan* of the Benin of Nigeria; as well as the *Kente* of the Ashanti of Ghana and the *Shuka* of the Masai of Kenya, are some examples of modern traditional attires/designs.

Contemporary Traditional Designs (Contemporary Trad.)

Given the diversification of fabrics and styles and the penchant for imported make-up and body tattoos, African dress culture and body designs are becoming more dynamic and more malleable. African cultural idioms are identifiable in those dress and body design practices that have evolved in the past fifty years; which are distinctively associated with various African nations/ethnic groups. The term “contemporary traditional designs”, defines those styles/fabrics and body designs/make-up procedures, items and patterns which are representative of contemporary African identity both locally and globally. It represents the styles and designs sewn or handcrafted with African cloth/fabrics, prints and materials that are African in outlook. It also refers to designs that have come to be identified and accepted as African style; which are achieved using fabrics and clothing from Western or other cultures. Given these descriptions, one realises that the style may be African, and the fabric African; or the style may be African but the fabric Western or other cultures; or the style may be Western or other cultures, but the fabric African.

Contemporary traditional designs thrive on the total look of the individual or performer, and on the effects achieved. The distinction lies in the Africanness of the styles- Boldness of designs, peculiar body design motifs/patterns, spectacular and distinctive colours, as well as conformity with environmental and socio-cultural realities. Contemporary traditional African attires, costumes and body designs reflect the cultural, social, political and technological changes that are taking place both in the continent and across the world. That is why the Igbo of Nigeria can use George material made in India and create their own unique style to such an extent that George wrappers have become synonymous with Igbo dress culture. The various styles that are being created with African print materials, which range from different cuts of skirts and blouses and dresses; to trousers and shirts and different wraps and tops; all bear the identity of contemporary traditional African dresses. Designers are also re-creating myriad multi-ethnic and continental styles using African Ankara and wax prints for purposes of establishing an African identity. Such designs have gained global import as African fashion. As observed in *African Fashion: History and Future*;

In the 21st century, African fashion is in the global spotlight, from runways to its use by celebrities in music videos and film... Certainly, seeing in real time, how Africans dress and the variety of styles available makes people want to connect with African culture and style. (2020, Par. 13)

The numerous attires, make-up applications, body design practices, and the costumes of performers in different festivals, which have come to be identified as traditional African designs, would be more easily understood within the context of these three classifications.

African Body Designs in the Context of Collective Representation

The practice of decorating the body has been identified as one of man's primordial engagements. Ethnographic and archaeological evidences point to a vibrant body decoration culture among early settlers across the globe. It is evident that the human body is fundamental to art and this may have motivated the many ethnic groups found in Africa to create varied forms and categorizations of designs on the body surface. Identifiable evidences of human body decoration come from the rock paintings of the Sahara desert of Northern Africa. The oldest of these paintings dates to about 7000 B.C. Other paintings date to as late as 1500 B.C., with the earliest and most famous located in Algeria in North Africa. Scholars such as Murray, 1935; Basden, 1939; Jeffreys, 1957; Northcote, 1970; Negri, 1976; Okeke, 1981; Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Willis, 1986; Egbo, 2001; and Peri, 2002 have studied and in some cases, documented varied forms of African body designs.

Since traditional African society relied much on oral transmissions, local artists creatively devised precise iconography which presented the body as message, with its decorations symbolizing a wide range of meanings. Body designs are integral with the social existence of traditional African Communities, so much so that for the African, beauty, valour, honour, social status- indeed identity; lies in the decorated skin rather than in the natural body (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2008, p.20). Many people in Africa use their bodies and skins as mediums for expressing their individual and collective aspirations. Using varied mediums and styles of body decoration; traditional designers endow the skin with special significance in response to the demand for collective representation of communal aesthetics. Africans thus, decorate their bodies for varied reasons. In an earlier study, I had identified some of the reasons for decorating the body as the desire;

- i. To enhance their looks and make them appear more attractive.
- ii. For psychological boost to their ego.
- iii. For ethnic identity.
- iv. For medical purposes
- v. To commune with spiritual beings
- vi. For personal expression and individuality.
- vii. For rite of passage ceremonies.
- viii. For bravery and/or valour
- ix. To provide information about status, rank and the membership of people in different groups.
- x. For magical purposes. (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2008, P 70).

Body designs are of two types- permanent and temporary. The permanent forms are those made with sharp objects such as pins, needles, fish hooks, knives, spooks, thorns, razors and so on. Permanent body designs such as tattoo, piercing, branding and cicatrization were associated with rites of passage or tests of bravery or even spiritual experience and as such, they tended to indicate social status and social structure. Permanent body designs were very significant for members of many ethnic groups such as among the Igbo of Nigeria, and the Baule of Ivory Coast. The importance is not just restricted to the designs, but also to the endured pain whose proof can be seen, because pain is considered a crucial part of initiatory rites of passage. It serves to elevate the status of the individual proudly undergoing the process and establish his worth in society. Thus, the social status of the individual who had received permanent body markings was clearly outstanding. A case in point, is the Ichi marks of the Igbo of Nigeria. Ichi are closely carved continuous marks made in parallel rows, over the entire upper part of the face, even including the eyelids, parts of the nose and the cheek bones. Basden reports that among the Igbo, a full set of Ichi marks was the highest mark of honour and bravery a youth or a man could achieve (1960, p.141). The temporary forms are those made with paints, dyes, ink,

different colours of chalks and powdery substances. Temporary body designs are mostly used for personal beautification, to enhance aesthetic appeal and to enjoy social cohesion. Examples of temporary body designs are the Igbo Uli, the Hausa Laali and the Samburu Naitulu.

In many African communities, body designing which is still a feature of many ethnic groups today, has distinct functions. On the one hand, there is the decorative function, but on the other hand, the decoration gives information about status, rank, age, and the membership of people in different groups/associations. Body designs are thus, a part of the personal development from childhood to adulthood, and they are also often used in ritual initiations as a clear sign of the social development. In relation to women, the form and style of the designs show if she is married, single or betrothed, or if she is a mother or a widow. With men, designs are elevated to the level of social distinction where honour and status are clearly spelt out in design language. Depending on the nature and character of the designs, a successful warrior or hunter for instance is easily distinguished (Negri 1976, p.10 - 11). Body designs thus play central roles in the different ceremonies and festivals which contribute to the socio-cultural sustenance of the society. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, Luluwa women decorate their navels with concentric designs believed to symbolise birth, growth and life. Other social functions which body designs have been known to perform, include medical/hygienic functions, protection against diseases, aids to camouflage, as well as a means for social labelling. Also, emotions such as happiness, sorrow and aggression are shown through body designs thereby giving it a kind of personal classification and clarification. There are body designs for ethnic identity, bravery and/or valour, as well as fashion and beauty.

Body designs usually reflect the essence of any festival or ceremony such as Rite of Passage, Ancestral Feasts or Marriages. Some ethnic groups such as the Yoruba of Nigeria, try to

determine the sex of a child during the pregnancy with the help of permanent body designs, which also serve as a protection for the unborn child against evil spirits. These designs are also employed as identity symbols and show affiliation to tribes or clans. Negri writes about the face-marks of the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria which have definite forms to distinguish various families within a tribe, or geographical area, making it easy to locate people at a glance. Such body designs were also made for purposes of protecting the bearer from capture in the days of slave-trade (Negri 1976, p. 9). Designs have also been used to aid healing or even to boost immunity, as in the case of some ethnic groups in Central-Sudan where a pattern of lines is incised into the entire skin of the body, to strengthen immunity. There are others which have magical purposes. Negri identifies the Abiku marks among the Yoruba of Nigeria, as belonging to this group. Abiku marks are tiny cuts made in one or two parallel line or lines over the back and the shoulders, which were rubbed-in with medical spices that would prevent the Abiku – child from being snatched away to the spirit world (1976, p. 11). Among the Massai of Kenya, body designs played very significant roles in match-making. A girl would design the boy of her choice in an erotic dance and then put her legs on his shoulder to mark him (Kerchache 98).

The relationship between individuals and their property or personal effects were known to have been established through body design motifs and patterns. Among ethnic groups such as the Boran, Oromo, Gabbra and Tswana of Kenya, such designs were very symbolic of the wearer's personal worth. As such, designs on the body were often identical with the symbols on the property of the carrier such as pots or weapons. Designs therefore, possessed great socio-cultural values for the many ethnic groups who effectively utilised the art, and they were considered more or less, a part of the wearer's personality.

African body designs are thus used to enhance natural beauty, and in the process, some of the motifs, symbols and

patterns become a visual language to define the socio-cultural context in which they are being paraded. The designs, patterns and motifs go beyond their physical attractiveness to depict the cultural, spiritual and religious disposition of the individual and the community. Collective representation in African body designs, engages body decorations and adornment practices as communal products, which are representative of the people's ideals of beauty, honour, valour, spiritual communion and communal identity. The patterns and motifs drawn on the body, are indices of collective representation, which are easily identified in the context of usage; and acknowledged as belonging to, or emanating from the design repertoire of a particular community or ethnic group; within which the designs hold great significance.

Does the Term "Costume" hold a Different Meaning for Africa?

Costuming is a universal practice. Costume characterises the wearer and enables him/her to play a given role in a dramatic performance. The term African costumes refer to attires, fabrics, and accessories used to dress a performer, to enable him/her take on the likeness of another, and play a given role in a performance; or to enable him/her put on a spectacular or unusual appearance in order to play the role of a celebrant or a participant in a festival or ceremony; or even to take on the personality of a god, a Masquerade or similar personages. The term then, obviously does not refer to African indigenous dresses and adornment practices; but rather, to the usage of African dresses in a performance. It is a given, that traditional African society encourages artistic productions and creates settings and performances where creativity and artistry are exhibited and appreciated. In enacting these performances, the arts of costume and make-up are central given the fact that they are primordial engagements which have over the years, aided man to physically transform himself into any character his situation demands he becomes. The two elements are inter-related, and are both tools of the actor.

Costume refers to the items of clothing, accessory and ornamentation worn by an actor or actress for the purpose of role interpretation and to establish the given circumstances of the character, and situate him/her in time and space. Make-up on the other hand, refers to the materials and substances used to design the face, head and other exposed parts of the body of an actor or actress; as well as the designs achieved and effects created. The make-up designer thus utilises make-up to create a physical likeness of the character being played, by enhancing or changing the actor's features or by making special constructions on the body. Costume and Make-up Designers utilise design materials to create believable character portraits such that when the actors/actresses step onto the stage, the audience with conviction, would endorse and corroborate the evidence that the actor has become the character. For film productions, costumes and makeup are essential elements that constitute the *mise en scene* or the composition of shots. Other elements of *mise en scene* include the lighting, set design, movement of the actors and the position of the camera. In helping to compose shots, costumes and make-up play indispensable roles in projecting the mood and tone of a film. Film costumes are visual tools of communication which quickly and economically transmit a whole lot of information about the characters to film audiences. They act as agents of transformation, peeling off the distinct personalities of actors/actresses in order to change them into new and believable characters on screen.

For traditional African theatre performances, which range from drama to dance, to festivals, rite-of-passage ceremonies, masquerading, traditional street carnivals and other communal enactments; costume and make-up define those dress elements, body designs, ornaments and cosmetics used to transform dancers, singers, drummers, actors, celebrants, masquerades, and other performers involved in dramatic interpretations into the characters they are to embody in performance. This goes to buttress my earlier assertions concerning dance costumes and make-up that;

In Africa, traditional dances vary in style, tempo, rhythm and mode according to the practise of different communities and the ideology of the performers. Some dances involve movements and actions calculated to break down the body into various movement parts. It therefore, becomes necessary to accentuate, highlight and enhance those parts so isolated, with costume and make-up in order to draw attention to such parts, and subsequently heighten the overall aesthetic appeal. (Utoh-Ezeajugh 2008, p.120)

Costumes, make-up and body designs are also utilised in designing characters for epic films and feature films with African settings. Make-up, which is given expression through masks and body decorations, are commonly used in traditional performances. Masks present physical evidences of transformation by showing spectators that the actors have become supernatural beings. There are wooden masks, bronze masks, copper masks, tortoise shell masks, basket work masks, animal-skin masks, textile masks and many others. But whatever their materials, masks, when used in performance, almost without exception cover the entire head of the wearer and sometimes his shoulders and trunk as well. There are different types and categories of masquerades. Some are designed and imbued with features to represent birds such as the Ostrich or Peacock; animals such as the horse or elephant; reptiles such as snakes and crocodiles; while some others are made to represent varied distinctions of human personages such as very beautiful maidens, agile and aggressive young men and very ugly and stooped old men. Some are also designed to present unusual and spectacular phenomena which could range from fairies and monsters to highly imaginative appearances and ingenious creations. Accordingly, Weston observes that;

Masking has been developing over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, and new mask types are being created today. Some maskers are focal dramatic

characters, others clowns or police or supporting actors. Some appear alone or only at night, others are accompanied by a hundred or more “brothers and sisters”. Many are beautiful dancers, some stomp heavily; others seem to float across the ground. (1976, p.111)

However, there are performances where masking does not necessarily relate to facial covering. Sonnie Ododo (2008) elaborates on such masking traditions in his construction of the facekuerade concept of performance, which presents us with a style of masquerading where rather than wear masks, performances are creatively enhanced with the use of costumes, songs, dances, movements and props. However, whether the faces of performers are to be covered by masks or not, masks are often designed with symbolic patterns, moulds, totems and colours. Most significantly, Masquerades are usually communally owned and therefore, their costumes and props are communally determined, designed and maintained; with the result that Masquerade designs are strong indications of collective representation. It is therefore common for people to identify ownership and locality of a Masquerade through its peculiar features, costumes, props and masks. Traditional African theatre thus presents a lavishly composed design repertoire reposed in great artistry, which continues to engage the designer's creative resourcefulness, and project the community's artistic repertoire as collective representation.

Conclusion

This paper has explored an analysis of the African appearance- the dressed body; reflecting the position of attires, costumes, body designs and make-up; as well as ornaments and accessories, as utilized by African ethnicities from different regions. The term Traditional African dress, costumes, make-up and body designs are further clarified and classified for a more concise description of African adornment practices. The three categories that distinguish the different ways of dressing and

adorning the body are perceived as traditions:- indigenous, modern and contemporary. The inclusion of body designs is significant, given their predominant usage in traditional activities and daily life.

The study takes into consideration, the entire aspect of the African personality as represented by individuals and communities in different attires and in different cultures and circumstances. In following the developments in African traditional dress culture; one is able to navigate the interactions between tradition and present day practices, as well as the different techniques which mix up to offer new ways of assuming the presence and identity of the clothed body; even while taking into account, African history and the political realities that present day societies confront. The paper is able to explain how the adaptations of traditional models of different ethnicities and the use of fabrics produced in India, Turkey and different parts of the world, contributed to the creation of an aesthetic recognized worldwide as 'African'.

Eurocentric description of African attire as costumes, seems to unnecessarily stratify who people are and how they are attired, and as such, this paper has attempted to re-engage these biases and discuss the dress culture of African people and the utilitarian values of different dress items and body adornment traditions from a global perspective, as well as from an African ideological standpoint. The concept of collective representation is used to define and conceptualize African dress, costumes, body designs and make-up. The paper affirms that the costumes, body designs, masks and make-up, which are used to design performers and create characters in African theatre performances, no doubt possess the grandeurs, splendour, spectacle and intricate artistry which clearly distinguish African design aesthetics; yet, they are clearly and distinctly distinguishable from African dress/ fashion practices.

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