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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 the seriousness of life and death because they embody the people's culture, beliefs, 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 employs 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: Technicality, Costume, Idoma, Performance space, Cultural identity.

Introduction

The technical aspect of the theatre is a conglomeration of costumes, light, sound, properties, make-up, music, dance, drama, etc., which are also the core components of what gives meaning and essence to a theatrical performance. When properly utilised, these components enhance and give

a production the desired outlook by creating a harmonised blend for performance and the way it is perceived. Enendu (2014, p. 21) describes technical theatre as:

> 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 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; some are static while some are in moving forms, all creatively arrayed in a panoramic, sequential order of presentation within the aesthetic field – the stage, the world of the performers.

Campbell (2016, p. 8) rightly notes that "every space has peculiarities and unique problems . . . It's these peculiarities that make a theatre what it is." These challenges give room for the technical aspect of the theatre to fill in these gaps with needed elements to achieve a good performance be it traditional or modern theatre. We look at the phrase, technical aesthetics, having in mind the meaning and use of the terms technical elements and technical aids. The word technical aesthetic becomes relevant because of the accepted fact that, a performance is a collaboration of interactive arts to bring out a meaning which affects the people using mediums that are understood by them.

Technical aesthetics is the beauty attributed to the whole gamut of technical know-how in the performance. To performance critics, the technical know-how of performance is beautiful, when the technical objects and process conform to particular canons. For instance, in a realist play, the technical pieces must be realistic. In symbolic plays such as Strindberg's *The Father*, and Ernest Toller's plays, the technical makeup must be symbolic. Technical aesthetics is achieved as a result of the perfect harmony between technical elements and technical aids. Technical elements are achieved in conjunction with the actors, directors and their relationship with elements like the props, make-up, light, sound, scenic design and costume, "applied in one form or the other in… productions to enhance aesthetic appreciation and communication" (Nwadigwe, 2006, p. 81).

Technical aids are a mélange of costume, make-up, sound, light, properties and scenography and how they are specifically utilised in the performance of the song, music, opera, dance theatre, drama, pantomime and other art forms. This on the other hand, "adds up to give out the total outlook of how the performance turns out to be seen, appreciated and defined" (Iwuh, 2012, p. 9). Ododo (2015, p. 122) claims that this helps the performance to "convey their unique characteristics that make the difference through the convention of utilization." When we see a performance, what gives the actors and performance its identity and meaning that we appreciate are the technical aesthetic result. Suru (2008, p. 176) corroborates that "the audience comments on 'the play is beautiful', 'it is very interesting', 'the dances were good', 'and I love the play' and so on", reflects on the quality of technical aesthetics used in the production.

Technical elements and technical aids combine to make technical aesthetics. Technical aesthetics in traditional performances are those things that are created or natural that are culturally applied in the performance, performance process and the performer to give a holistic meaning as well as pleasant viewing and listening pleasure to the participant and the observer to establish a patent peculiar to the performance. In fact: Every experience is best appreciated and valued within a socio-cultural context. Even though there may be cross-cultural persuasions, the final shape, content and value of a theatrical experience are determined by the cultural perceptions and expectations of the participants in the experience and the owners of the core culture . . . it would be rewarding to rely on what African artistic forms present before us in terms of their unique elements to arrive at some aesthetic decisions.

The meaning these elements hold for the African people within their cultural sensibilities should, therefore, be a major factor in determining the decisions we take in the end because, to the Africans, art must be functional to the extent that it refurbishes their belief systems and reinforces their socio-cultural values. (Ododo, 2015, pp. 121-122). African art is not art for art's sake. It is derived from society and must shape the society and those therein. This adds to the construction and reconstruction of African society. Idoma art, like other African arts, has a diverse effect and greatly reflects in all aspects of their life. The multi-functionality of African art cannot be overemphasised. Drawing from the discourses that have been explored within the elastic space of technical aesthetics in indigenous African performances, it is important to further expand upon

the import of technical aesthetics such as costume and make-up, props, and performance space with this study.

Costume

The 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 explains that costume and make-up were developed alongside the art of drama, and later became an indispensable art of theatre practice. She retraces the role that costume played in theatrical productions from the Greek Classical period with the use of colours, fabrics, lines and masks (Shuaib, 2009, p. 134). Similar to the use of costumes and make-up within the African context, Shuaib submits further that masks were an essential aspect of the costume of all performers during this period. She insists that in 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.

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 for cultural space, providing an identity and consciousness among the people. It is a known fact that costumes worn by people of an ethnic group reflects them, even as it preaches the aesthetics and artistic nature of that ethnic group. Adeoye, Bade-Afuye and Lawal (2017, p. 436) also agree that "costuming as an art in the theatre plays many roles and serves many functions, all in the

process of enhancing theatrical productions." The diverse functional roles that costume plays in theatrical performances across time and space cannot be overstressed. The views of the above scholars on the costume in performances capture the perspective in which we consider costume and make-up in this article. For example, in Idoma culture, particularly in Idoma performances, the costume is regarded as the life wire. The 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 the colour red in the Idoma tradition signifies royalty. In the Idoma tradition, the 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 could be seen as evil in Idomaland. On the other hand, black colour in Idoma culture is seen as good and it is a mature 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 a peaceful feeling, these categories include turquoise, blue, silver, chrome, and other icy colours.

The primary influence and purpose of white are seen as a replica of purity. The next group of colour are 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 to the earth. Brown, and leafy dark greens and moss greens are also considered "dudu". The psychological type is a down-to-earth, practical, earthy sort of personality. They are symbols of the secret world and occult. Deities and gods under this category are usually worshipped at the night and behind closed doors. (Oluwole, Ahmad and Ossen, 2013, p. 80). Furthermore, the 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) stresses that costumes, "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. Utoh-Ezeajugh also admits that costumes are, "the items of clothing, accessories and ornamentation worn by the actor or actress to define the character and establish the circumstances of the character's existence, by situating him/her in time and space" (Cited in Asigbo, 2012, pp. 6-7). 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 very 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 indigenous performances is been transmuted or transformed into their essence of existence. Through this means, mystifying characters are brought into actuality to showcase and reflect the aesthetics, artistic nature and cultural expression.

Make-up

Make-up plays a dominant role in most African theatre. It is one of the most visible and dominant elements in 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 performance be it traditional or modern. Shuaib (2017, p. 414) substantiates 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 a canvas for inscriptions and adornment of cosmetic substances by the artist in diverse religious, secular, and theatrical activities, performed by a 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 the performances. Make-up is used on the masks of masquerades such as Ichahoho, Ibo, Atumayi, Alinga, Oglinye

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 to war as camouflage and to instil fear in the minds of the enemies. Make-up is also used in the 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 a mask as against the prevalent practice of masquerades within the culture.

Props

Properties are of extreme necessity in performance because they assist the creativity and realisation of a performance. Props help the narrative and enhance the imaginative and overall physical picture of the performance. Koski (1966, p. 2) defines props or property as any object that an artist utilizes to further enhance or communicate the plot or storyline. 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 "props 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: Realistic – that is, using the object as it is applicable in real life; Stylised – this design is done to replicate the original with resemblance; and Mimed – pretending or miming to use the object with the aid of gestures, actions, nuances and so on.

Drawing from the above, props are classified into different types and are used in performance be they traditional or modern. In the same vein, the types of props include the following: hand props: things that are used by the actor and carried on stage which include phones, bags, briefcases, pens, and so on; set Props: serve the actors and the script, creates atmosphere (examples are dining table, centre table, sofa, chair, door); props complementing costumes: these are props that are used or

worn by an actor to complete their costume (examples are handkerchief, purse, cane, glasses, and gloves);special effects props: these are used intermittently to create an effect in the performance process used by the actor on stage (examples are using a touch light for effect, using a candle, matchsticks, flammable canisters for fireworks, and so on); perishable or Consumables: props that are eaten, used or destroyed such as food and drinks; and set Dressing Props: a collection of props that define the environment and do not interact with actors (examples are pictures, drapes, rugs, lamps, and tables); These classifications are translated in the usage of props in performances such as masquerade performances where the Okpa spear and cutlass are real as applicable in real life. There is also the use of stylised Ukala which is a wooden design to replicate the original cutlass. On the other hand, the acolytes in masquerade performances of *Ichahoho*, *Odumu* and *Oglinye* mimic the use of props when taking a round of dance in the performance arena with the use of gestures, action, and nuances to support their actions.

Performance Space

The ceremonial and robust nature of African performances is usually characterised by ancestral belief, myth, and spirit medium and so on. These are often expressed through masquerades, dance, music and songs which are displayed in festival styles that necessitate a great demand for the use of space. 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, our definition of performance space 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, the performance space is not an ordinary space for the Idoma people and their spiritual existence but ordained with respect as the essence of the performance. It is accepted as the venue for the transition of the celestial relationship between humans and spirits. To

most African cultures just like the Idoma culture, performance space is seen as the Liminal Space. The use of the term, liminality, according to Gennep cited in Tuner (1979, p. 466) is to denominate the second of three stages in what he called a "rite of passage" which is found in all cultures, and are seen as both indicators and vehicles of transition from one socio-cultural state and status to another, childhood to maturity, virginity to marriage, childlessness to parenthood, ghosthood to ancestor hood, sickness to health, peace to war and vice versa, scarcity to plenty, winter to spring, and so on.

Tuner (1979, pp. 466-467) further explains that Gennep distinguished the three stages as: separation (from ordinary social life); margin or hen (meaning threshold), when the subjects of ritual fall into a limbo between their past and present modes of daily existence; and re-aggregation, when they are ritually returned to secular or mundane life either at a higher status level or in an altered state of consciousness or social being. This explanation is seen as the boundary that sets the creation from the transition of power to the mystic guided by 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. To elucidate the metaphysics behind this transition, this can be broken down into the following ritual activities: Separation; Liminality; and Incorporation The above can be conceived as the beginning of the transition of the person's life to the level where there is no pre-ritual status to the end of the completion rite where the individual is spiritually prepared for a new role. Liminal space as it relates to a traditional theatre performance in most African and generally in Idoma culture has the following phases:

Pre-liminal stage - This is the period before the activity of transformation or assumption of a new role. At this stage, the character has been designated to be found worthy before the arrangement for the rite of transformation is put into action. A typical illustration is a qualification to be a member of a masquerade society. The moment someone is identified, he assumes the pre-liminal stage for the rite to be performed for him to become a full member. Liminal stage –This is the period where the activities that transform the person into a new phase are been carried out. At this phase, he is at the bridge between two distinct stages of spirituality and physicality. At the liminal stage, he only observes the rite to enable him to transcend into a new realm. Post-liminal stage – This is the assumption of a new phase, roles and identity. It marks the

beginning of a new realm of physicality or spirituality to bring about full integration of both realms to perform a function. Using the same case study as above, the post-liminal stage is when the member has been fully initiated and assumed the full membership and privileges attached. It is also at this stage that the new initiate has a full understanding of what it means to be a member.

In light of the three stages above, it is evident that the Idoma culture and spiritual space consist of stages that complement each other. They also help in the communal synthesis of adaptation, balance and satisfaction in the realm of spirituality. The presiding creation of space and time in Idoma culture is reiterated by Ratiani (2005, p. 6) who argues that "the categories of time and space define the parameters of artistic reality and individual transformations of the boundaries beyond which the objective and the subjective world takes final shape". This is in line with objectivistic and subjectivistic theories of conceptualising time and space. In these theories, human interaction and communication are stripped down to what is considered their essence. Objectivism, according to Huizing (2015, p. 99), "underlines that truths, understandings and meanings are anything but fixed in real life, and are instead dependent on situated processes of human interaction and negotiation", while "subjectivism is the awareness that understanding, truth and meaning are relative to the cultural and physical context people live in as well as to their mental frameworks of how the world functions" (Putman cited in Huizing, 2015, p. 93). These concepts are necessarily contextualised in this research because they can be juxtaposed with the circle of life within the Idoma cultures.

In terms of space, a rite of passage and transition from one model to another, the "Liminal times, as well as liminal space, reflect the most complex process of the individual's separation from the ordered chronological system, on the one hand, and his integration in an alternative, anti-chronological, anti-temporal system" (Ratiani, 2005, pp. 5-6). These passages are the core of the performance of Idoma culture, and it is emphasised by Anyebe (2015, p. 582) who claims 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 performances can also become a sacred place for a sacred-ritual performance. This scenario is typical of ritual aspects of *Ichahoho*, *Odumu* and *Oglinye* performances. In the *Ichahoho* performance, the *Itakpa* where the body of the deceased member is laid for the final rite by the *Ichahoho* members becomes a sacred venue. No one is allowed into the venue except the masquerade and members of the cult. A similar situation is also present in *Odumu* where the *Ogwu*, which is the masquerade cult of the organisation, comes out for the final burial rite of the deceased member. At this juncture, only members and adult males are allowed to be at the public performance space which has been converted to a sacred-ritual performance space, while women and children are either driven far away from the venue or sent into hiding where they would not be able to see the performance. These are the actual phases where all the liminal phases of transformation occur for the implementation of cultural and spiritual essence.

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 in the full glare of all to see and in most cases, the participation of the audience is necessary as characteristic of most African traditional performances. In this scenario, the performance space is established for the performance, but there is room for interaction amongst members, non-members and the general audience to form a kind of symbiotic relationship as necessitated by the nature of the performance. 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 the open. The space is usually sanctified for the performance to take place. In some cases, as earlier mentioned, non-members, children and females are dispersed from the performance space before the commencement of the performance.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the application of technical aesthetics of costume, make-up, props and performance space has greatly contributed to the core of defining any performance and as the main medium of portraying 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 holistic aesthetics and values to the

performance. It is therefore, recommended that proper utilisation of costume, make-up, props and performance space in traditional performances to bring out the cultural effervescence of the performances should be encouraged. This is necessary to sustain these traditional performances in the face of the changing dynamics ushered in by modernisation and globalisation.

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