

IGBE-UMUADA DANCE COSTUME AS A SYMBOL OF COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY IN AKPO COMMUNITY

Judith Akunne Ume (Ph.D)

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Anambra state.

Ja.ume@coou.edu.ng

Abstract

The gradual neglect of important cultural symbols of communication that have significant impact on cultural identity in the contemporary era informed the problem of this study. Consequently, the study examined the Igbe-Umuada dance costume to evaluate how the dance costume communicates and reflects the identity of the Akpo people in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Using ethnographic/sociological method of research with interviews as an instrument of data collection, the study applied George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism and Joshua Meyrowitz's Medium theory in the interpretation of the costumes. Findings in the study reveal that the Igbe-Umuada dance costume is a potent tool of communication and a major means of cultural identity in the community. Therefore, the study recommended that more studies should be conducted in the area of traditional practices that have significance on the culture of the people as it will lead to the preservation and promotion of cultural symbols that are essential parts of cultural identity.

Keywords: Igbe-Umuada, Costume, Communication, Identity, Akpo.

Introduction

Dance costumes are cultural symbols that amplify the aesthetics of a dance performance. They have both extrinsic and intrinsic values that make dance a veritable tool of communication and expression of identity. Primarily, in traditional dances, costumes are used for identification and uniformity, creating a unique blend that enhances the overall ensemble. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Judith Ume opine that dance costumes “play crucial roles not only in enhancing the visual appeal but also in conveying deep cultural significance” (2). Therefore, across different cultures in Nigeria, dance costumes are used to show unique diversities while also embodying salient codes and meaning about the cultures represented in the dances.

Despite the important role of dance costumes in traditional performances, they are often under explored in addressing cultural issues. As such, the gradual neglect of this important cultural symbol of communication has a significant impact on cultural identity in the contemporary era, where the impact of modernity and its resultant cultural flux affects the quality and originality of traditional dance costumes.

As a result of this, the study looks at the Igbe-Adamma dance costume of the indigenous people of Akpo in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. The objective is to identify the various ways through which dance costumes communicate important cultural codes and how it helps in identity formation. Using interview and participant observation as tools for data collection, while applying the Symbolic interactionist and medium theories in analysing the dance costume, the study argues that the Igbe-umuada dance costume remains one of the significant mediums of communication and a symbol of cultural and group identity among the Akpo community.

Dance and Costume Art

Dance is an aspect of non-verbal communication that requires the use of rhythmic body movements to expand human knowledge symbolically. Nastase Dan observes that “the wish to dance comes also from the wish to communicate” (4780). This is evident in prehistoric man's use of dance to connect with the metaphysical world.

Generally, dance played a pivotal role in the development of human communication in the past. Before the invention of modern technology, the use of body movement, be it stylised or non-stylized movements, in addition to other nonverbal elements, was used to preserve and promote historical moments, worldviews and values that were important to different cultural groups in traditional societies. Remarkably, the effect of dance as a symbol of communication has also remained potent in contemporary society.

Different symbols used in a dance serve as embellishments towards the interpretation and meaning of such dance. Nicholas Akas observes that “some important elements of expression are required in indigenous dance movement. These elements include: rhythm, time, space, dynamics, costume, props, make-up, lighting and music” (142). He explains that these elements are highly indispensable because they guide people's perception, understanding and interpretation while watching a dance performance. It is these elements that state categorically the essence of indigenous dance beyond aesthetics, chanting and stylised movement into a serious communicative tool (142). Thus, the combination of these elements in dance influences our perception of the important role of dance in the re-enactment of the cosmological identity of a people.

One of the important cultural elements that aids dance in effectively communicating and creating identity is costume. The costume of any dance gives an insight into the nature and origin of the performance. It helps the dancer to realistically interpret his role and communicate the message of the dance, while also helping the audience to interpret the motif behind such dance performance. Emmanuel Oga notes that “costumes convey information to the audience through their texture (whether coarse or delicate), through their colour (whether dull or bright) and through their shape (whether creme de la creme, dainty, grody or outlandish” (52). Consequently, the nature and design of a particular costume help to understand the story behind a dance.

Costume is therefore, an integral part of a dance and a very important aspect of communication. Its unique nonverbal appeal influences how the audience perceives and interprets a particular dance performance. Zhang Wei notes that “in the dance, the basic function of the dancing costumes is to reflect the characteristics of the dance role as the actors themselves cannot directly completely explain the roles to the audience” (70). Hence, Utoh-Ezeajugh confirms that “costumes aim to communicate facts and suggest meanings to an audience about the character in a performance, which otherwise may not be easily deciphered without this visual aid to performance” (10).

Primarily, costume aids to situate a performer, including the dancer, in time and space by delineating his/her “age, gender, profession, social class, personality, and race; as well as give information about the historical period/era, geographical location and time of day, and even the season or weather of a particular play (dance)” (Utoh-Ezeajugh 10).

The choice of costume is important to the message a dance tends to convey. Dance costumes are selected based on the occasion, season, and reason for a particular dance. In most cases, traditional African dances rely on the uniqueness of costume in delivering the underlying message of their performance. To this end, the material used for the design of the costume, the colour and texture of the costume play a significant role. Hence, Wei observes that:

Dance costumes made of different materials have a different sense of art. Different materials also give the audience different visual feelings to help actors and actresses better shape their roles, heighten the feeling and the theme of the dance... After the basic dress style and the colour of the dress, the choice of material is the key factor to the success of the dance costume. (71).

For instance, in *Egba* festival, Chiamaka Eze and Nicholas Akas observe the important role of colour, material, and texture in the design of costumes for dance performers. They explain that:

The priest and priestess of Egba both wear a white costume, likewise the entire community both indigenes and non-indigenes. The priestess also wears white beads and holds a horse tail to show honour and dignity. The priests wear skirts (Ubuluku) and a top to match. From time immemorial, the early skirt was made out of raffia weaving but with the present modern exposure, the priests and male participants make use of white materials of different types depending on the status of the person. This white material was chosen to show the peaceful nature of the seven days of the celebration of Egba. The white colour in their culture represents the best in morals, peace-seeking, and orderliness within the stipulated time (28).

Costume plays a complementary role to makeup in influencing how the audience interprets a dance. In other words, makeup intensifies the process of using dance to communicate with the audience. In most cases, it is hardly divorced from costume. Depending on the type of dance, it is used to conceal all the exposed parts of the body that cannot be covered with a costume, and “its form could be in liquid or solid form depending on its purpose and communicative potency” (Eze and Akas 23). The effect is to heighten the artistic and aesthetic emotions an audience feels when watching a dance performance, as well as to enhance communication.

Theoretical Framework

The theories selected to explore the communicative potential of Igbe-Adamma dance costume are symbolic interactionism and medium theory.

Symbolic Interactionism: This is a theory that focuses on the relationship between individuals in society and the understanding of their social and cultural environment through symbols. This theory was propounded by George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) in the early Twentieth Century, but because most of his seminal works on the theory were not published before his death, Herbert Blumer, who was one of his students developed, the theory in the middle of the Century. The basic assumption of the theory is “that people interact with things based on meanings attributed to these things. To achieve this, one attributes importance of things through his/her interactions with others and society.

Blumer outlines the three basic premises upon which Symbolic Interactionism is laid. Firstly, human beings act toward things based on the meanings the things have for them. Secondly, the meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. Thirdly, these meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things that he encounters.

Explaining the three premises of the theory, Dionysios Dionysiou states that in the first premise, “material objects and social objects like rules, norms or values acquire meaning from human beings within a specific context of action” (9). Hence, objects do not have meaning by themselves, nor do they determine human behaviour; rather, meaning is attached to them by people based on the context of their specific situation or experience. Dionysiou further explains that “the second and third premises suggest that meanings are not intrinsic to the objective makeup” (9) but based on the subjective interpretation and shared experiences people have over an event, activity, idea, or object. People live both in the natural and symbolic environment.

Hence, Symbolic interactionism is a process that ensures that people produce meaning and values as a result of their experiences and interaction with a particular object or symbol. These experiences are not random or unrelated but are subject to their being relevant to the needs of the people who experience them.

Medium Theory: Although the medium theory has a rich theoretical history that dates back to Socrates, Joshua Meyrowitz's theoretical modification of the theory in 1984 is selected for this study. The core of Meyrowitz's theory is that “human behaviour or identity is not fixed but changes depending on access to information which differs depending on a person's social situation” (Meyrowitz 59). To this end, Catherine Brand notes that “Meyrowitz's medium theory explores the impact of media on society and our perception of space and time by considering their effects on human behaviour in everyday life” (2).

Generally, medium theory is a mode of analysis that examines how a particular communication medium impacts the specific content they are meant to convey. Medium theorists argue that media are not simply channels of transmitting information between environments, but are themselves distinct social-psychological settings or environments that encourage certain types of interaction and discourage others.

Some factors affect the choice of a particular medium for expressing ideas. According to Meyrowitz in *Medium Theory: An Alternative...* “Individuals' personalities and inclinations-combined with cultural and sub-cultural differences, generational styles and relational contexts-influence the choice of medium and the ways in which selected media are used for particular purposes” (524).

Consequently, both symbolic interactionism and medium theory are applied in evaluating how the dance costume serves as a symbol of identity and a medium of communication in Igbe-Umuada dance repertoire.

Origin of Igbe-Umuada Dance

Igbe-Umuada is a solemn dance performed by the association of first daughters (Umuada) in Ogbo kindred in the Akpo community to mourn the passing of old women in the community. Originally, it was performed by pagan (idem) female worshippers to mourn the demise of their members. However, in 1976, young maidens of Ogbo copied the dance and presented it at the *Iwaji* Akpo festival competition, which they later won. Since then, the dance has remained a part of serious ceremonial activities like funerals, communal festivals, and church activities in the Akpo community.

Igbe Umuada Dance Costume

The young maidens who started the dance in 1976 used assorted wrappers for costumes. These wrappers were tied across the bosom to form a free-flowing gown, with neck, hand, and ankle beads accessories. However, the inability of the original pattern of costume to create a definitive identity for the dancers and communicate the seriousness of the message of the dance led to the introduction of uniform costumes.

Presently, Igbe-Umuada dance costume is a two-piece George material worn over a white blouse. Originally, a red wax was used. However, due to the need for novelty and to accommodate increasing membership, the blue George wrapper was introduced to replace the red wax. A black horse tail, which serves as a hand prop, also forms part of the costume.



Plate 1. An Igbe-Umuada dancer in the old costume performing the dance in an event action



Plate 2. The researcher, in an interview session with the leaders of Igbe-Umuada dance in their new dance costume

Igbe-Umuada Dance Costume as a Symbol of Communication

The Igbe-Umuada costume is the major symbol of the dance that helps to communicate its underlying messages and also provides a source of identity for the dancers. The dance communicates the solemnity and reverence accorded to women who die well-advanced in age, and the dance is only performed by Ogbo's first daughters (Umuada).

A symbolic interactionist reading of the dance costume shows that the costume is a major symbol of the dance. As such, the choice of costume through its evolutionary phases is tailored towards having a unique symbol that depicts the essence of the dance as well as creates an identity for the dancers. Interacting with other elements like rhythm, body movement, and song, the dance costume enhances the message of the dance.

One of the ways through which the costume communicates is through the type of material used. In Igbo land, the use of the George wrapper is associated with prestige and royalty. In the case of the Igbe-Umuada dance, the use of the George wrapper is an insignia of tradition. According to Mrs. Mary-Ann Chika, who is one of the vision carriers of the dance, the “George wrapper is a symbol of tradition and is used for serious communal activities in Akpo community like the burial of an aged person”. Implicitly, the use of George in the Igbe-Umuada performance is for a ritual purpose targeted at celebrating the transition from life to afterlife.

Originally, the initial choice of red wax and white blouse for the dance was because of the symbolic relevance of the colour in matters of life and death. However, the decision to change from red to blue colour, while retaining the use of the white blouse, according to Mary-Ann, was because the dance, though it is performed during a funeral, is executed to celebrate women who died in good old age. Implicitly, the blue colour symbolises light and hope for the dancers who, through the dance, supplicate for the grace to die only when they have advanced well in age.

Additionally, the dance Igbe-Umuada costume is an exclusive preserve of the dance and can only be worn by the Umuada during funeral celebrations and other serious communal engagements. Hence, people who are not part of the group are forbidden to wear the costume for any reason due to the significance of the costume as mourning attire for a selected group of mourners. Mary-Ann, further notes that there are penalties for using the costume for any other purpose. According to her, “the costume is different from the ordinary wrapper and is recognised by all as Igbe-Umuada dance costume. When people see the costume, they quickly recognise that it is the Igbe-Umuada costume. The costume is strictly for the dance, and anybody who wears it for any other occasion is fined and suspended”.

By and large, the dance costume serves not just as one of the elements of the dance but is used by the dancers to convey the hidden messages in the dance. The messages are communicated through the type of material and colours which have specific meaning to the philosophy of the dance.

Igbe-Umuada Dance Costume as a Medium of Identification

Basically, the Igbe-Umuada costume is the identity of the dance group and thus a veritable medium of group identification in the entire Ogbo-Akpo community in Aguata, Anambra State. As a medium of group identity, the Igbe-Umuada costume shapes perception and experience during communal events. As a result, the costume is not just a channel for transmitting salient cultural codes but also a tool that fosters a type of association among a set of women called the Umuada in the Ogbo-Akpo community. Through the costume, the women who make up the group are isolated and given special attention in communal gatherings. In this regard, the dance costume becomes a medium of cultural identification and substantial message.

A person who wears the costume, whether for performance or leisure, sends a direct message to the mind of a spectator because the cultural sensibility of the Ogbo people is tailored towards seeing the costume as a symbol of mourning worn by a particular group of women. Hence, the Igbe-Umuada costume is symbolic and is a fundamental element of communication that influences how people generally perceive and relate to the dance. Its influence on identity and perception of the dancers demonstrates its significance as a reliable medium of expression.

Medium theory also reflects on how cultural shifts over time are responsible for the change in meanings. The change from the use of everyday wrappers, to wax and now to Goerge reveals the shifts in material and design. Although these changes do not alter the main philosophy of the dance, they show the evolutionary changes occasioned by ideology and social factors. Ideologically, the change from everyday wrapper to red wax and white blouse was to encourage uniformity. Though the red and white enforced the desired uniformity, the change to blue George also shows an ideological difference in the use and interpretation of colour.

Conclusion

Dance costumes remain an important element in a dance performance. Dance costumes serve different functions depending on the dance. The analysis of the Igbe-Umuada dance costume indicates their ritual presence conveyed through the type of material and colour. Beyond that, a symbolic interactionist reading of the costumes shows the interaction between the costume as a symbol of communication serious existential concern that generally affects both the members of the Umuada in particular, and the people in general. On the other hand, the costume embodies a message centring on perception and cultural shifts.

Igbe-Umuada costume embodies the spirit of the dance and thus reflects the underlying messages inherent in the dance through the use of costume. The communicative potential of the costume makes it a significant cultural heritage. Consequently, this study recommends that more studies should be done in the area of traditional practices that have significance on the culture of the people. The implication is that it will lead to the preservation and promotion of important cultural symbols of communication that are important to the people.

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