COSTUME IN TRANSITION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OLD AND NEW NOLLYWOOD USING OGBORI ELEMOSO AND ELESIN OBA.

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolution of costume design in Yoruba cinema, highlighting its symbolic and expressive significance through the theoretical lens of Expressionism. It addresses a gap in scholarly literature concerning the transition from traditional to modern costume styles, particularly in how these styles communicate identity, cultural values, and visual aesthetics. The research uses a qualitative comparative methodology, analyzing two films, Ogbori Elemoso (1963) and Elesin Oba (2022), as case studies. Framed within Expressionist theory, the study explores how costume functions as a narrative tool that expresses the internal emotions of characters and reinforces Yoruba cosmological and social structures. Data were collected through direct film observation, visual analysis, and supporting literature. The findings reveal a transformation in costume design, with Ogbori Elemoso emphasizing cultural immersion through traditional garments and symbolic accessories, while Elesin Oba integrates traditional fabrics with modern tailoring to reflect emotional complexity and societal evolution. This shift illustrates how Yoruba cinema continues to preserve heritage while adapting to contemporary tastes. Costumes remain vital in portraying power, status, and identity, with fabrics, colors, and patterns reflecting deep-rooted beliefs. The study concludes that Yoruba film costumes act not merely as visual elements but as expressive cultural texts that bridge tradition and modernity. Recommendations include deeper cultural research, institutional support, academic integration, and recognition of costume design in cinematic storytelling.

Keywords: Costume, Yoruba cinema, Expressionism, Cultural identity, Visual aesthetics

Introduction

The study of costumes in Yoruba movies is an important aspect of the wider field of cultural and film studies. Yoruba movies are a significant part of the cultural landscape of Nigeria, and they have a rich history and cultural significance. Costume is an important element of Yoruba movies, and it plays a crucial role in the representation of characters and their stories, as well as in conveying cultural themes and values. The attires used in old and new Yoruba cinema movies offer insights into the evolving cultural and artistic expressions within the Yoruba film industry (Adekemi, 2024). In the early days of Yoruba cinema, which dates back to the 1930s, costumes were relatively simple and often reflected traditional Yoruba attire. Movies were mainly produced in black and white, limiting the scope for elaborate colour designs. Costumes were mostly handmade and reflected the cultural and societal norms of the time, showcasing traditional Yoruba clothing, such as *Iro* and *Buba* for women and *Agbada* for men
In the 1970s and 1980s, the Yoruba film industry witnessed a surge in production with the rise of notable filmmakers like Hubert Ogunde and Moses Olaiya. These filmmakers continued to use traditional costumes, but there was also an introduction of more elaborate and stylized costumes

to suit the storylines and characters. The focus was on authenticity, reflecting Yoruba culture, history, and mythology (Ndu, 2024). The late 1990s and 2000s marked significant changes in the Yoruba film industry. With advancements in technology and access to better production resources, filmmakers began to experiment with a broader range of costumes and styles. The influence of Nollywood (the Nigerian film industry) also brought in new ideas and trends (Asiegbu Bature-Uzor, 2023).

In new Yoruba cinema, costume design has become more diverse and sophisticated, reflecting a fusion of traditional Yoruba attire with modern fashion trends. Designers now play a crucial role in creating unique and visually appealing costumes that enhance character development and storytelling (Elegbe & Fadipe, 2017). Additionally, colour cinematography is widely used to bring out the vibrancy of the costumes. In old Yoruba cinema movies, costume was used to represent traditional Yoruba culture, including traditional clothing and accessories. The use of costume in these movies was intended to evoke a sense of cultural heritage and to reinforce cultural values and beliefs. In new Yoruba cinema movies, costume has evolved to reflect changing cultural values and beliefs, and it is used to communicate cultural themes, such as power, status, and identity (Asiegbu Bature-Uzor, 2023).

The use of costumes is a crucial aspect of filmmaking that helps to convey the characters' personality, social status, and era in which the story is set. Nigerian movies, popularly known as cinema, have evolved significantly over the years, and so has the costume design. This study aims to compare the costumes used in old and new Yoruba cinema movies, with a focus on two specific movies, *Elesin Oba* and *Ogbori Elemoso*. Old Yoruba cinema movies often featured traditional Yoruba costumes, such as *Iro* and *Buba*, *Agbada*, *Gele*, and *Fila*. These costumes were made from traditional fabrics, such as *Aso-oke*, *Adire*, and *Ankara*. The costumes are usually colorful, and they reflect the Yoruba culture and tradition. In contrast, new Nollywood movies feature more modern costumes. Actors wear western-styled clothes such as suits, jeans, and t-shirts.

Elesin Oba, a movie directed by Biyi Bandele, was released on the 28th of October 2022. It is an adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. It tells the story of Elesin, the king's horseman, who is expected to commit suicide after the death of the king in order to meet him in the afterlife. *Ogbori Elemoso*, on the other hand, is an old cinema movie released in 1963. It is based on a popular Yoruba folktale and features actors such as Lere Paimo, Toyin Adegbola, Ojo Arowosafe, among others.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant role that costume plays in shaping narrative, identity, and cultural symbolism in Yoruba cinema, there is a noticeable lack of comprehensive academic research that traces the evolution of costume design from traditional to contemporary styles. Presently, costume choices in many Yoruba films appear to shift between cultural representation and modern aesthetics without documented analysis or theoretical grounding. Ideally, costume design in Yoruba cinema should consciously reflect historical continuity, cultural values, and artistic innovation, serving as a visual archive of Yoruba identity. However, the absence of critical

scholarship on this transition leaves a knowledge gap that limits our understanding of how costume mirrors societal changes and influences audience perception. This gap raises critical questions: how has costume design evolved in response to cultural, technological, and economic shifts, and why has this transformation gone largely undocumented? Without addressing these questions, there is a risk of underappreciating the artistic contributions of costume designers and filmmakers, overlooking the sociocultural narratives embedded in visual aesthetics, and ultimately, allowing the erosion of Yoruba cultural identity in visual storytelling.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate Costume in Transition: A Comparative Study of Old and New Nollywood using Ogbori Elemoso and Elesin Oba. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Ascertain the differences in costumes used in the selected movies, *Elesin Oba* and *Ogbori Elemoso*.
2. Analyze the evolution of costumes in Yoruba cinema and their reflection of Yoruba cultural values and beliefs.
3. Investigate how costumes in Yoruba movies communicate cultural themes such as power, status, and identity.
4. Compare the use of fabrics, colors, patterns, and styles in the movies to the cultural values and beliefs of the Yoruba tradition.

Significance of the Study

This study sheds light on the underexplored area of costume design as a visual language and cultural archive in Yoruba cinema. By examining the transition from traditional to modern costume styles, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual aesthetics shape and reflect cultural identity, social values, and artistic expression in Nigerian film. It highlights the vital role costume designers play in storytelling, cultural preservation, and audience interpretation. The study also provides a reference point for filmmakers, designers, and scholars interested in cultural authenticity, heritage transmission, and the creative evolution of indigenous cinema. Furthermore, it aims to elevate costume design from a functional aspect of film to a critical artistic and cultural practice deserving of scholarly recognition.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to a comparative analysis of costume design in selected Yoruba-language films from two time periods: early Yoruba cinema (pre-2000) and contemporary Yoruba cinema (post-2000). The study focuses specifically on the films Ogbori Elemoso (1963) as representative of old Yoruba cinema and Elesin Oba (2022) as a reflection of new cinematic approaches. It explores the stylistic, cultural, symbolic, and narrative functions of costume within these films, while also considering the sociopolitical, technological, and economic contexts that influence design choices. The study focuses on selected examples to illustrate broader trends and shifts. Primary emphasis is placed on visual analysis, cultural interpretation, and design intent.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Expressionism theory, a framework rooted in both cultural studies and film studies. Expressionism emerged as an influential art movement in the early 20th century, particularly in Germany and Austria. While it was not founded by a single theorist, its development was shaped by the contributions of various artists, writers, and philosophers. Notable figures associated with the movement include German painter and printmaker Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Austrian painter Egon Schiele, and Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (Expressionism, n.d.; Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

Expressionism emphasizes the portrayal of inner emotional experience over external reality. It holds that artistic beauty is derived from the creator's ability to vividly express emotions, ideas, and subjective perspectives through their work. In the context of film, costume design serves as a critical visual language through which identity, status, culture, and emotion are communicated.

By applying Expressionism theory, this study explores how costume functions as a medium for potraying the cultural heritage of the Yoruba people in both old and new Yoruba cinema. The analysis will highlight how costume design goes beyond aesthetics to become a tool for cultural storytelling, character development, and emotional expression in Nollywood films such as Ogbori Elemosho and Elesin Oba.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

Costume, as a visual and narrative tool, refers to the garments and accessories worn by performers in a production to reflect character identity, historical context, and cultural specificity. According to Atwood (2015), costumes are the first impression that a character conveys to the audience even before dialogue is spoken, establishing tone, social status, and personality. Costume in performance has origins in ancient ritual traditions, where early humans used clothing and masks in dramatic enactments for survival and spiritual connection. Costumes are not mere decorations but integral communicative devices within performance, helping to immerse the audience in the world of the story. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2024) affirms that costume remains a core aspect of characterization and that performances are often incomplete without it. These garments enhance visual storytelling by reflecting not just the characters' identities but also the philosophies, beliefs, and cultural nuances of the society portrayed.

Costume also functions as a powerful means of non-verbal communication in cinema. In screen productions, costumes are deliberately selected or designed to convey essential information about the character's age, status, profession, personality, and transformation over time. The moment a character appears on screen, their clothing communicates volumes about their backstory, emotional state, and relationship to the social context of the narrative. Central Casting (2022) notes that costume design in screen productions helps the audience instantly form impressions about the characters before any dialogue is delivered. The role of the costume designer extends beyond aesthetic styling to ensuring historical accuracy, thematic coherence, and cultural integrity. Costumes, especially in Yoruba cinema, are deliberately chosen to reflect traditional values or to signal modern identity, merging artistic vision with cultural expression.

The connection between clothing and identity formation remains central in understanding the transformative power of costume within storytelling.

In Yoruba cinema, costume design has historically drawn from indigenous garments such as agbada, iro and buba, and gele, all made from fabrics like aso-oke, adire, and ofi. These textiles are emblematic of Yoruba cultural identity and are often used to signify class, role, or status within the narrative. In *Ogbori Elemoso* (1963), characters were adorned in full traditional regalia—agbada richly embroidered for royal characters, and simple, unembellished buba and iro for commoners. These visuals reinforced a social hierarchy grounded in Yoruba cultural norms. The costumes were symbolic, reflecting the dignity of Yoruba kingship, spirituality, and community values. In contrast, *Elesin Oba* (2022), while retaining traditional clothing elements, integrates modern production design aesthetics with elaborate tailoring and structured silhouettes. The film opens with bold visuals of aso-oke in vibrant hues, presenting a sophisticated interpretation of Yoruba royalty. The contrast between these two films illustrates how costume design has shifted from raw traditionalism to stylized authenticity. Costume choices in both cases are deliberate, functioning as an artistic bridge between past and present, myth and modernity.
Costumes in Yoruba cinema continue to serve as visual signifiers of power, identity, and status. Royal characters are often draped in flowing robes and crowned with symbolic headpieces, denoting authority and spiritual responsibility. In *Elesin Oba*, the lead character's agbada is embellished with intricate patterns and paired with coral beads, a stark representation of sacred kingship and impending transition to the spiritual realm. In *Ogbori Elemoso*, similar characters wore attire made from hand-woven ofi fabric, indicating nobility but in a simpler, less cinematic manner. The fabrics used in both films, aso-oke in *Elesin Oba* and ofi in *Ogbori Elemoso* carry cultural weight. Aso-oke's geometric and metallic patterns suggest wealth and ceremony, while ofi, with its muted tones, reflects humility and spiritual depth. These fabric choices do not merely serve fashion purposes; they communicate the values and beliefs of the Yoruba people. Thus, across both traditional and modern interpretations, Yoruba cinema continues to use costume as a cultural archive, reflecting the dynamic interplay between history, identity, and visual narrative.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, using content analysis to examine the evolution of costume design in Yoruba cinema. The population consisted of Yoruba-language films, with purposive sampling applied to select two representative films, *Ogbori Elemoso* (1963) and *Elesin Oba* (2022) as case studies for their historical and contemporary significance, respectively. The sampling technique is based on their availability, cultural depth, and thematic relevance to the research focus. The primary instrument for data collection is a content analysis checklist, designed to assess elements such as fabric type, color symbolism, patterns, accessories, and how these aspects relate to cultural values, status, identity, and symbolic meaning. Data was collected through repeated viewings of the films, supported by secondary materials such as academic articles, interviews with designers, and film production notes. Field notes and visual documentation were kept to track costume elements across scenes.

The procedure for data collection involved segmenting each film into major scenes, identifying costume variations per character, and categorizing them by cultural function. Ethical considerations included appropriate citation of all visual and academic materials, and obtaining permissions where necessary. Challenges encountered included limited access to full-resolution versions of *Ogbori Elemoso* and scarce archival resources. These were mitigated by cross-referencing visual and academic sources to ensure data integrity.

Case Study: Ogbori Elemoso and Elesin Oba

In *Ogbori Elemoso*, costume design emphasizes traditional Yoruba dressing with minimal stylization. Characters are clothed in hand-woven *ofi* and *adire* fabrics, adorned with symbolic beads and headgear to reflect their status, roles, and communal affiliation. The costumes are culturally immersive and grounded in indigenous storytelling, with earth tones and loose-fitting garments that align with Yoruba rural settings.

In contrast, *Elesin Oba* uses costume as a cinematic spectacle, integrating traditional fabrics like *aso-oke* with modern tailoring. The costumes are visually rich and colour-saturated, emphasizing not only status but also emotional and psychological dimensions. The king's horseman, Elesin, is dressed in regal layers that evolve throughout the film, reflecting his internal struggle and spiritual journey. The film fuses heritage with theatrical elegance, demonstrating how costume can evolve without losing cultural depth.

Results

Comparative Analysis and Findings

The analysis of *Elesin Oba* and *Ogbori Elemoso* reveals key differences in costume design that reflect both cultural continuity and artistic evolution. *Ogbori Elemoso*, representative of early Yoruba cinema, employed costumes primarily to assert cultural identity and preserve traditional aesthetics. The fabrics were rustic, the colors were subdued, and the designs adhered strictly to Yoruba sartorial customs. These costumes signaled communal identity and spiritual symbolism, especially in their use of hand-woven ofi and naturally dyed patterns. In contrast, *Elesin Oba* demonstrates a refined and theatrical costume approach, where garments are carefully curated for visual impact and symbolic resonance. The fabrics are richer, colours more vivid, and tailoring more defined, reflecting contemporary cinematic sensibilities and a growing recognition of costume as a narrative force.

This evolution reflects broader shifts in Yoruba cinema where costume is no longer merely functional but a deliberate artistic and cultural statement. Costumes now mirror both indigenous roots and global aesthetics. The emphasis on polished textures and structured layers in *Elesin Oba* shows how modern Yoruba filmmakers use costume to align traditional storytelling with global cinematic standards. Despite this shift, cultural values remain intact, as even modernized garments in *Elesin Oba* retain symbolic fabrics like aso-oke and motifs rooted in Yoruba tradition.

Costumes in Yoruba films continue to communicate essential cultural themes such as power, status, and identity. High-status characters are often dressed in more elaborate garments, using embroidery, coral beads, or bold patterns to suggest wealth, leadership, or spiritual

authority. In *Elesin Oba*, the protagonist's regal attire visually marks his position as the king's horseman, while his gradual costume transformation reflects his internal conflict and societal role. Similarly, in *Ogbori Elemoso*, costume choices delineate social hierarchy, gender roles, and communal responsibilities. Through these visual cues, the audience can decode layers of meaning, connecting character design with Yoruba beliefs in destiny, status, and social order.

Fabrics, colours, and styles used in both films serve as cultural texts that convey Yoruba values. While *Ogbori Elemoso* relies on simple earth-toned fabrics to represent humility and tradition, *Elesin Oba* uses vivid red, gold, and indigo to express vitality, spiritual power, and royalty. Patterns on the garments are not random but rooted in Yoruba cosmology and identity. Triangles, stripes, and embroidered icons symbolizing balance, continuity, and ancestral presence. The colour symbolism remains consistent across both films: red for vitality, white for purity, and gold for affluence. In this way, costume functions not only as visual storytelling but also as a preservation of Yoruba worldviews within cinematic expression.

Ogbori Elemosho (1963)



Pic. 1 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 1963)



Pic. 2 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 1963)



Pic. 3(YorubaCinemaChannel, 1963)



Pic. 4 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 1963)

Elesin Oba (2022)



Pic. 5 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 2022)



Pic. 6 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 2022)

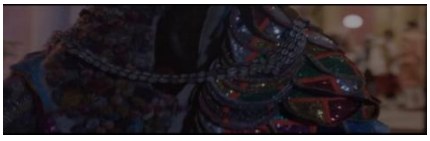


Pic. 7 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 2022)



Pic. 8 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 2022)





Pic. 9 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 2022) Pic. 10 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 2022)



Pic. 11 (YorubaCinemaChannel, 2022)

Conclusion

Costume design in Yoruba cinema plays a fundamental role in preserving cultural heritage, enhancing character development, and advancing narrative depth. In early Yoruba films, costume choices were deeply rooted in cultural authenticity, utilizing traditional fabrics like aso-oke and adire, symbolic embroidery, and earthy color palettes that reflected the identity, status, and societal roles of characters. These costumes were not merely aesthetic choices but important cultural signifiers that immersed the audience in Yoruba history, customs, and values.

However, with the evolution of cinema and the influence of globalization, there has been a noticeable shift in costume design in newer Yoruba films. Contemporary productions often blend traditional elements with modern fashion trends, creating a fusion that appeals to both local and international audiences. Films like Elesin Oba on Netflix exemplify this shift, showcasing vibrant colour palettes, intricate embellishments, and stylized adaptations of Yoruba attire that still maintain cultural relevance while reflecting contemporary tastes. This evolution demonstrates the adaptability of Yoruba cultural expression and the crucial role of costume designers in balancing authenticity with innovation. As Yoruba cinema continues to grow on the global stage, costume design remains a powerful tool for cultural representation, storytelling, and identity preservation. It is essential that designers continue to approach their work with cultural sensitivity, historical awareness, and creative insight to ensure that the visual language of Yoruba films remains both respectful and resonant in a changing world.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance costume design practices in Yoruba cinema. Firstly, it is essential for filmmakers and costume designers to engage in rigorous cultural research and documentation. Archiving traditional Yoruba attire, fabric types, and their symbolic meanings can provide a solid foundation for future productions, ensuring both cultural accuracy and creative relevance. Secondly, integrating costume studies into academic curricula, especially in performance and film departments, will equip future designers with both technical skills and cultural sensitivity. Collaborative workshops with indigenous weavers, artisans, and historians will also deepen designers' understanding of Yoruba aesthetics.

Furthermore, funding should be directed towards supporting traditional textile production and costume departments in film projects, particularly those focused on historical narratives. This will not only promote authenticity but also preserve the local crafts industry. Lastly, film festivals and award platforms should create dedicated categories for costume design to recognize and reward excellence in this vital aspect of storytelling. By implementing these measures,

Yoruba cinema can continue to evolve while preserving its cultural identity and offering a more immersive viewing experience for audiences worldwide.

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