

IDENTITY AND MYSTIFICATION: THE PERFORMING ARTIST AND THE  
LÁGBÁJÁ SYNDROME

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**Abstract**

*The paper addresses the trends in mystification of personal identities by performing artists in a variety of ways such as the adoption of pseudonyms or the use of make-up, masks and special costumes for partial or total physical transformation. After a brief overview of this phenomenon in the worlds of literature and performance, the paper focuses on the mystification of the real identity of Bisade Ologunde by the acquired image of Lágbájá, the representative of the supposedly common man who is at once everybody and nobody in particular. The paper attempts a semiotic analysis of this unusual phenomenon and argues that it is not Lágbájá, but Bisade Ologunde, who turns out to be faceless and essentially 'non-existent', after all. Lágbájá, on the other hand, has acquired a brand new image with full public recognition and acceptance, such that it is now impossible for Bisade Ologunde to perform in his place. The implications of the Lágbájá phenomenon for artistic replication and perpetuation, far beyond the capacity of the physical stage actor, are explored and commented upon, with a whole lot of creative possibilities.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Mystification, Lágbájá Syndrome, Performing Artists.

**Introduction**

A name supposedly serves to identify, indicate, or point out someone, something or some place to others; hence it is considered a *mark* or a *sign* by which a person, animal, place or thing is known. This *mark*, which for the most time is derived from convention, stands as a sign of that which it purportedly represents. Signs are usually *verbally*, *aurally* or *visually* oriented. In naming, however, the first two (verbal & aural) are much more obvious than the third (visual) since the name-term is

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mostly appreciated through the act of speaking and hearing. That is to say, in naming an entity, the verbal and aural attributes tend to occupy the more central position in the power hierarchy, much more than the visual, where the photograph has pride of place. Even where names are written in words for mental and visual appreciation, the sound quotient is first to manifest in the sub-conscious, thus giving it pre-eminence over the visual act. Therefore, in mental reading, sound, though latent, assumes a more dominant position. This argument suffices in so far as the visual element is not consciously explored for iconic branding. Visual aesthetics, well utilised, could in a very dynamic way be consciously pressed to use for the creation of identity peculiar to oneself. This study addresses critically the iconic or branded costume as a kind of pseudonym for its owner.

**The Performing Artist and the Pseudonym Trend**

From time immemorial, artists have been concerned with individual identities and have explored different methods to either shield or reveal their personalities. So much has been said of the age long tradition of the symbolic use of *pseudonyms* or *pennames* by writers of all ages. Many writers and performing artists have been known to hide under the cover of other names assumed either to shroud their identities or make significant statements about their personalities. The Bronte Sisters and Mary Ann Evans are examples of English women who made history writing in anonymity under the cover of pseudonyms. This indulgence of assuming new names to supplant original identity is also rife among performing artists (musicians, actors and actresses) across the ages. Worldwide, actors and actresses revel in the novelty of assuming stage or screen-names which eventually overshadow their real names. What is however remarkable in this case, is that stage or screen-names evolve mostly in association with the artistic phenomenon that catapults the performer into the limelight. This was the case with Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, the French playwright and actor who had his name displaced



by his stage-name, Molière. Nigerian performing artists are not left out either, as there are persisting pennames and stage names that have become, for the bearers, part and parcel of their identities. Femi Osofisan, one of Nigeria's prolific dramatists, notably, has published under the pseudonym, Okinba Launko. In the same manner, Duro Ladipo was popularly known as *Sango*, Wole Soyika, among his associates is *Kongi or Ogun*, while Moses Olaiya, better known as *Baba-Sala*, cannot be forgotten in a hurry for his very comic escapades in his *Alawada Travelling Theatre*. Today, a huge percentage of contemporary Nigerian musicians have assumed stage-names. Below is a modest list of examples sourced from the Internet.

#### LIST OF TOP NIGERIAN MUSICIANS AND THEIR REAL NAMES

1. Wizkid: real name, Ayo Balogun.
2. Ice Prince: real name, Panshak Zamani.
3. Asa: real name, Bukola Elemide.
4. M.I: real name, Jude Abaga.
5. D'banj: real name, Dapo Daniel Oyebanjo.
6. Terry G: real name, Gabriel Amanyi.
7. Jesse Jag: real name, Jesse Garba Abaga.
8. Banky W: real name, Olubankole Wellington.
9. Eldee: real name, Lanre Dabiri.
10. 2face: real name, Innocent Idibia.
11. Don jazzy: real name, Michael Collins.
12. Psquare: real names, Peter Okoye & Paul Okoye (twin brothers).
13. Sauce Kid: real name, Babalola Falemi.
14. Eva: real name, Eva Alordiah.
15. Timaya: real name, Inetimi Alfred Odom.
16. 9ice: real name, Abolore Adegbola Akande.

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17. Davido: real name, David Adedeji Adeleke.
18. Wande Coal: real name, Ojoshipe Wande Jnr.
19. D Prince: real name, Charles Enebeli.
20. Dr SID: real name, Sidney Onoriode Esiri.
21. Stylplus: real names, Shifi Emoefe, Tunde Akinsanmi and Zeal Onyecheme.
22. Rugged Man: real name, Michael Ugochukwu Stephens.
23. Skales: real name, Raoul John Njeng-Njeng.
24. Mo'Cheddah: real name, Modupe Ola.
25. Naeto C: real name, Naetochukwu Chikwe.
26. Sould Sultan: real name, Olanrewaju Fasasi.
27. Nigga Raw: real name, Okechukwu Ukeja.
28. Durella : real name, Oluwadamilare Kulaja.
29. Darey Art: real name, Dare Alade.
30. GT da guitarman : real name, Olaolu Olugbemiro Tokunbo
31. Sasha: real name, Anthonia Yetunde Alabi
32. Mode 9: real name, Olusegun Babatunde
33. Faze: real name, Chibuzor Orji
34. Vector Tha Viper: real name, Olanrewaju Ogunmefun
35. Olamide: real name, Olamide Adedeji
36. Bouqui: real name, Bukola Folayan
37. Brymo: real name, Ashimi Olawale
38. Cidyrella: real name, Maryam Hiyana
39. GM Compere: real name, Olugbenga Odusanya
40. Ill Bliss: real name, Tobeckukwu Ejiofor
41. DJ Zeez: real name, Kingsley Elikpo
42. Kwam 1: real name, Omogbolahan Anifowoshe
43. Lágbájá: real name, Bisade Ologunde

The last-named is, of course, the focus of this paper.



### **The Celebrity and the Iconic Costume**

Costuming is an art for which the body serves as a playing field to unearth the aesthetic passions of designers, providing a rich semiotic field for meaning-making practices. Costume generally contributes to the outward appearance of the wearer or performer. Animated by the performer who physically wears it, a costume responds to his/her moving force, while also revealing conspicuously the circumstantial mood in relation to the movements (Hollander, 1975; Storm, 1987; Umukoro, 2004; Lyndersay, 2011). The motives behind costume practices, collectively or individually among performing artists, differ from one to the other. For one or more reasons, which may include *adornment*, *protection*, *modesty* and *communication* (Storm, 1), every costume should address the functional attributes of expressing temperament, cultural affiliation, aesthetic passion and flamboyance. This paper, however, looks beyond these basic functions to focus on the symbolic use of costume and make-up for image branding. Today, performing artists who have carved out niches for themselves in their artistic careers have become so enthusiastic about creating distinctive images or identities. Apart from the traditional act of adopting new names mentioned earlier, this is reflected in several other ways. However, this study is mainly concerned with the potent use of costume and make-up to evolve new identities. It focuses also on the mystification of self, particularly of celebrities. The thrust of the study, therefore, is the inventive use of material culture for the creation of a recognisable persona. The phenomenon of creating brands or instituting personal identity through the medium of clothing is by no means new as prominent examples abound in different societies. The king's regalia, the warrior's dress, the ritual dress of the chief priest and the masquerade costume are perfect examples of African institutionalised types. These ensembles of clothing and accoutrements which are consciously packaged as stereotypes adopt fixed patterns and are restricted to designated users for specified occasions. In view of their quality or

ability to individualise their owners, such costumes as those described above are iconic and sometimes anthropomorphic. Indeed, they suffice as items of identity for the rightful users. Although one may argue that every dress possesses intrinsic iconic qualities, the iconicity of some dresses is absolute.

One perfect example of an absolute iconic costume marked out for this study is the stage costume of the Nigerian musician, *Lágbájá*. He is a performing artist and, indeed, a celebrity whose costume concept most typifies the ideals of this research. Basically, his costume constitutes a face mask cum headgear built with cloth and which, along with his saxophone, complement whatever dress he chooses to wear for his stage performance. The musician's name tag, *Lágbájá*, is a Yoruba word used as a general reference word which addresses no person in particular. Its equivalents in the English language are such words as 'someone' 'anybody' 'nobody' or 'everybody'. The musician's philosophy is built on the concept of the common man who usually is seen in the image of an underdog in the society and therefore metaphorically considered *faceless* and *voiceless*. Thus in the tradition of the *egungun* masquerades of his forebears, he performs wearing a face mask. He has been described as "one without a face" or "the one who speaks for the voiceless". Although the face mask of *Lágbájá* may have been conceived as an icon for man's facelessness, and the man himself, a personification and mouthpiece of the proletariat, this study debunks the notion that *Lágbájá* is faceless. *Lágbájá*, to his legion of fans, embodies a specific identity, a facial construct as well as other elements that complement and completely define the vision which acceptably indexes the *Lágbájá* syndrome. Bisi Ologunde, said to be the man behind the mask, alongside all other perceptible elements, constitute in totality the *Lágbájá* image. Thus, the convolution of that image is best appreciated in the combination and complementarity of these basic elements. However, by the peculiar nature of *Lágbájá's* costume which shields the face and thus the identity of the man behind the mask, one can make a



few submissions through this study.

Perhaps one of the greatest implications of this 'anonymity' is the conclusion that Lágbájá is not faceless, after all. Whereas Lágbájá's masked face is known, the human face of Bisi Ologunde, the man behind the mask and, indeed, the signified of the Lágbájá phenomenon, is unknown. It is therefore logical to postulate that it is Bisi Ologunde, and not Lágbájá, that is faceless! Although Lágbájá is the signifier and the brainchild of Bisi Ologunde created from the figment of his imagination, and concretised in his form, soul and energy, the Lágbájá phenomenon subsumes in entirety the image of his creator, acting in his place as the pseudonym par excellence. In other words, with respect to this synergy, the name Lágbájá is perpetually linked with the name Bisi Ologunde whose face is unknown to us in the public arena. Thus, Lágbájá, the masked figure, is a perfect combination of Bisi Ologunde plus the mask, in which Bisi Ologunde loses his physical autonomy and original identity.

This phenomenon draws attention to the ability of costume to mystify the physical personality. The entertainment industry is said to be the most prominent arena where the practice of using costume for the mystification of self is highly prevalent. Performing artists are known to resort to the use of costume and make-up to re-invent themselves. This is very common with those who have more or less become celebrities. In the attempt to highlight their perceived enhanced social status and artistic stature, they resort to visual aesthetics, largely through the use of costume. For instance, the Charles Oputa look of yesteryear compared with the Charly Boy look of today, are miles apart, having become rather mystified. In his write-up, "The Riddle of Charly Boy", Jahman Anikulapo has had to ask a series of pertinent rhetorical questions as follows:

Who is Charly Boy? Who is Charles Oputa?  
Are these two characters interfacing in anyway?  
Or are they intruding on each other's comfort zone?  
Do share common values that make them symbiotic?  
Or are these two distinct entities that only share  
a common body, a common soul?  
Are they two separate entities that only share a common  
structure? ...Can one divorce the other and still survive? Are  
they destined to live together forever, till the ultimate end  
terminates their relationship?

(43)

In the same way, the *Lágbájá* syndrome completely mystifies Bisi Ologunde, so much so that his face remains a mystery to the fans of *Lágbájá*, his alter ego. Thus, the known *Lágbájá* persona effectively displaces the unknown personality of Bisi Ologunde, who cannot publicly lay claim to that identity. This issue of Bisi Ologunde's mystification brings to the fore other lines of reasoning. Since we do not know and cannot identify the man, Bisi Ologunde, we invariably see *Lágbájá* in the image of *everyman* or *anyman*, suggesting that anybody can, in practice, be used to animate the *Lágbájá* costume ensemble. The proviso, however, is that such a man must *ipso facto* possess the indubitable physical and vocal features already associated with *Lágbájá* the performing artist. Apart from the obvious features of height and voice, other factors to look out for are the speech mannerisms, and abilities to speak English and Yoruba, as well as sing, dance and play the saxophone, all established qualities of the *Lágbájá* that everybody knows. Seen from this perspective, one gets the feeling that *Lágbájá* can actually live in perpetuity so long as mirror-image performers, parading features closely associated with Bisi Ologunde, abound. By the same logic, the *Lágbájá* costume ensemble can be replicated and donned by



several persons with identifiable features of the original Bisi Ologunde toward the execution of multiple live performances by *Lágbájá* in different locations at the same time, like duplicated film copies, showing simultaneously in different places. This feat is clearly impossible with the physical stage actor who can only perform in one location at a time.

Thus, *Lágbájá*, the masked saxophone-wielding crooner who sings a blend of jazz, afro-beat, highlife, juju, and traditional Yoruba music, stands absolutely as pseudonym for the faceless Bisi Ologunde. What is remarkable, however, is that *Lágbájá* is only a *costume ensemble* while Bisi Ologunde is merely the *man* who dons the costume. Therefore, the *Lágbájá* appurtenances, all by themselves, are nothing but articles of material culture, hanging in a closet after every performance. In the same vein, Bisi Ologunde, on his own, is not *Lágbájá* but merely the man behind the mask, the creator of *Lágbájá*, the body and soul of *Lágbájá* who gives *Lágbájá*, the performing artist, the concreteness of existence. All in all, *Lágbájá*, the celebrated performing artist, derives life only by a consummate synthesis of man and artificial objects, and is literally capable of being replicated and perpetuated.

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