

Kwaghkondo Agber Ph.D
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Abuja
Email: agberndo@yahoo.com

Challenges of Costume and Makeup in Nigerian Video Films

Abstract

Costume and make-up play crucial roles in establishing the identity of the actor. Actors such as Charlie Chaplin, Roster Keaton etc, stars of the 1920s and 1930s created characters in which costume was an integral part of their total identity. Characters were recognized and identified as hero, villain, romantic, rival etc by the clothes they wore.

In this paper, we will examine the concepts of costume and makeup and the role they play in film. We will then examine them within the context of the Nigerian video film to identify the roles they have played in enhancing mood, creating realism, establishing the identity of the actors and in suggesting the historical period of the films. We will then proffer suggestions towards the better utilization of these accessories for the production of films in Nigeria.

Introduction

Costume and makeup have been used as important elements of theatrical performances from very early times when imaginative decorations of the body and face helped to establish dramatic action, identify the period in which the action occurred and establish the locale of such action. They have remained important because they help us to establish the style and character of an actor either on stage or in film.

In the Nigerian video film, costume and makeup have similarly been used to lead the audience to a greater understanding of the characters and the relationships among them. They have helped us

to draw a balance between the old traditions and the transitions to modernity. In this paper therefore we examine the two concepts, their application in film and in the Nigerian film. We then explore the challenges faced by the Nigerian producers in their efforts to apply costume and makeup to enhance action, portray mood and realism in their films.

Costume

Costume according to Buribara and Anderson (cited in Okoye, 2006, p.46) refers to 'all the materials by way of dress or clothing, which a theatre performer has on her/his body in the course of a performance'. It is 'anything worn on stage...whether it be layers of clothing or nothing at all'. It includes hairstyles, head dresses, footwear and accessories such as canes, necklaces etc which contributes to the establishment of the identity of an individual. Costumes provide information about time and place of a film. They express the social milieu and personal style of an actor. It helps us interpret the context of a film. In *Bhaji on the Beach* an Indian film, the generational divide between the young and old is aptly captured; while the older women wear traditional Indian dresses, the younger ones wear contemporary English garments.

The clothes that people put on either in real life or on the screen create a character type about them. They tell a lot about who these people are and what they stand for. Clothes indicate economic, social and occupational status. They help us to express our individual personalities. Costume is used in theatre and film to symbolically shape the subconscious attitudes of the audience towards the wearer. According to Pittal,

A character is conspicuous if he wears black when everyone else is wearing white. Or the costume can be so unusual that it makes the characters stand out in the scene, as Audrey Hepburn does in her appearance at the races in *My Fair Lady* (1964) (1980 p.40)

Costumes are sometimes used in films to suggest the historical period in which they (the films) were made. It is not necessarily an attempt to accurately reproduce the costumes used at that time but to recreate as much of it as possible. This feature is found most

especially in women's costume in American westerns. In these films, the style of dress design and the cut of the neckline have as much to do with contemporary fashion as it does with the actual clothes worn in the old west at the time.

Costume can play specific functions in the total film. Some film producers like Erich Von Stroheim were passionate and committed to creating authenticity in the costume and settings of their films. In Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the display of poverty of the defeated southerners at the end of the civil war is apparent (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001, p.162).

Costume is also used in film to direct attention to the graphic qualities of an actor. It can play important roles in enhancing narration. For example, the film Director Guido in Fellini's *8½* persistently uses his dark glasses to shield himself from the World. Dracula films show the billowing case of Dracula enwrapping his victims. In the film *His Girl Friday*, when Hildy Johnson switches from the role of aspiring housewife to that of a reporter, her hats change as well (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001, p.162).

Make Up

Makeup on the other hand refers to 'all the materials used by actors for cosmetic purposes and as an aid in taking on the appearance appropriate to the characters they play' (Britanica, 1988). Make-up plays important roles in characterization in film. In the cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, make up was used to make actor's faces more visible. They also helped to establish time period as well as reveal character traits. They were also used to signal or indicate changes in film characters. Over the years therefore, make up has been used to 'enhance the appearance of actors on the screen' (Bordwell, 2001, p.162).

While some film directors rely on close-up shots and tiny facial changes to create intense religious drama, other producers like Nikolai Cherkasov,

Did not look particularly like Eisenstein's conception of Czar Ivan IV, so he wore a wig and false beard, nose and eyebrows for *Ivan the Terrible* (Bordwell, 2001, p.163).

Make up helps to create realism in film. In the film *Othello*, Lawrence Olivier blackened his skin and hair to act the part of a Moor. Women often wear facial makeup while in most men, the makeup is designed in such as to appear as if they were not wearing any. Bizarre makeup on the other hand, plays a major role in horror films and comedy.

The demand for horror and science fiction has in recent years, given rise to the rapid development of the craft. Rubber and plastcene compounds create bumps, bulges, extra organs and layers of artificial skin used in films like *The Fly* directed by David Cronenberg.

Makeup like costume becomes important in creating and enhancing character traits or in motivating plot action. Improvements in film stock and lighting techniques according to Tom Wallis (2004, p.18) have assured that makeup is now used to "enhance or minimize the prominent features of an actor". It is also used to stimulate advanced age by for example, adding wrinkles and colouring the hair grey. It can alter an actor's appearance in a way that he or she more closely resembles a historical figure. This was the case with Henry Fonda in *Young Mr. Lincoln* (Ford, 1939) or Ben Kingsley in *Ghandhi* (Attenborough, 1982).

Oscar Brockett (1983, p.388) is of the view that makeup helps establish the age, state of health and race of an actor. It may also suggest profession, basic attitudes and self regard. It aids expressiveness when it emphasizes facial features to make them more visible to the audience. It restores color and form in a character which can be diminished by lighting.

A careful application of makeup can greatly enhance the quality of a film. Buck Houghton (1991, p.148) asserts that the ebullience of the performer i.e. the film actor is enhanced "with a bit of thoughtful attention" in the way he uses makeup/hair design. *The Twilight Zone* was successful partially because William Tuttle, head of the makeup and hair dress at MGM and his staff played a major role in the film. Houghton says that "aging a player is very difficult to do well, so is beautifying a plain face or uglifying a beautiful face" (1991, p.148). In both circumstances, one needs to use certain appliances, bits of metal or cloth or cotton ball, glued to the face thereby changing its contours.

Challenges for the Nigerian Video film

We have indicated above that makeup and costume are very important elements in film. They help us to establish the identity of the actors, indicate the historical period of a film, provide the social milieu of the actors and determine the economic, social and occupational status of the characters in a film. To what extent can we therefore say that the Nigerian video film uses these techniques to depict these attributes in the films that are produced in the country?

Costumes contribute to a film's visual system. They help us lead the audience into an understanding of the characters, the relationships among the characters and the themes of the film. In the Nigerian home video film, costume and makeup are also used to portray these attributes. In the epic films, the directors and costumiers have tried to draw a balance between tradition and modernity. By this, they have tried to portray the customs and traditions of the people without necessarily compromising the need for decency in costume. If you take a critical look at *Igodo* for example, the costumes depict what was in use during the pre-colonial period captured in the film. The men tie short wrappers or loin cloths made of jute. The old men in addition, have scarifications on their bodies and faces. The warriors put white or black camwood on their faces to depict the roles that they are performing. The women on the other hand, tie wrappers made of jute on their waists. They tie strips of sack cloth across their breasts. They also engage in other body adornments such as beads on their necks and are marked in black camwood on their faces as a sign of beauty.

The above costume and makeup do not differ much from what obtains in *Oduduwa* (2000) another epic film. The film is set in Yoruba land where Adire has been in use for centuries. Three types of dress are discernible: the Oba wears a long gown; he has a beaded head crown (Ade) and horse tail to portray his royalty. The elders put on white loincloths (Ala) which could possibly signify their membership of the Ogboni society. The women tie wrappers (Iro) and wear beads. The commoners in the society are attired in Adire (Iro) whose value and quality is lower than that of the King and the elders.

The other films also portray contrasts of their own. The costume

and make up used in the films show the divisions within society. On the one hand are the expensive dresses or attires of the urban elite. They wear designer suits and shirts from the most exclusive boutiques; they go round town in expensive cars and are shown to live in exquisite houses that leave nothing to the imagination - Italian leather settees, expensive electronic gadgets etc. On the other hand are Nigerians who live on the fringes. Their costume and makeup are different, tattered wrappers, second hand clothing, cheap makeup coupled with filthy environments and antiquated furniture.

As Meyer (2005, p.57) opines, a prosperous way of life is depicted in the films by "the abundance of exclusive mansions, flashy cars, and expensive outfits". Even where the actors engage in the occult or traditional practices, they "are people dressed in the latest style" suits or gowns and they meet in "an office tower rather than somewhere in a shrine in the bush or on the beach".

The point to be made here is that, in the face of daunting problems, Nigerian videographers are putting to use their creativity in coming out with films that make use of costume and make up as part of the efforts to tell their story. In the epic films, costume and make up are used firstly to periodize or emphasise the time when the stories were written. Secondly, they are used to create the context of the films and thirdly, to show the social, political and economic divisions within society. In *Lord of the Mountain* (Andy Amenechi), these techniques are used to bring out the cinematic effect. The Igwe (Pete Edochie) is dressed in a long red gown with an animal skin cap on his head. This is decorated with feathers. The warriors have pieces of cloth tied around their waists and are bare-chested. They however, wear beaded caps with feathers to portray their status in the society. The women tie wrappers up to their arm pits to cover their breasts. The dressing depicts the class character of pre-colonial Igbo society. The Ozo title holders and chiefs are well dressed in expensive costume while the commoners as we indicated earlier in the case of the modern films, are poorly dressed. Black camwood is used especially by the women as makeup on the faces and other parts of the body.

In the modern films, there are a lot of problems in the use of costume and makeup. It is either they are used wrongly or they are misapplied. For example, *The One I love* (Kenneth Egbuna, 2004), is

set in an Igbo environment, the costume used by most of the actors is however, Yoruba. This is unthinkable in real life situations in Nigeria. After many months in prison, Daniel's wife (Stephanie Okereke) is still looking splendid and well dressed. Her attires, hair and make up are still neat and intact. It is expected that prison life would have changed her appearance. Application of the appropriate makeup and costume would have made the difference.

In some of the films, the costumes conflict with the time period captured by the film. For example, *Fear of the Unknown* (Greg Fiberesima) portrays a period in which the women are seen fetching water from the river in clay pots. This must have been a time in the past when a situation like this was understandable; however, the women are attired in modern clothes. A little care for detail would have eliminated the contrasting presentation. In another situation, Nneka and Onyema don't age. Many years after their marriage and after giving birth to kids they are still looking the same. Some grey hairs and some other makeup like bags on the eyes would have facilitated the aging process and made their appearance in later years better.

This lack of attention to detail is replicated in many other Nigerian video films. In *Butterfly*, the female characters use the same hairstyle from the beginning of the film to the end when the filmic time is about a year. They sleep with their makeup and continue with it every day. In *Taking Chances* (Tarila Thompson) Dennis's lawyer friend (Anita Hogan), is seen in two different costumes between her office and Dennis's house. If she must change costume, the situation for this must be created.

The Nigerian home video film has given certain stereotypical roles to particular ethnic groups or genders like the situation in old Hollywood films. The Nigerian female actors are cast in roles as housewives, prostitutes, witches and as greedy individuals who must rely on the men to survive. In most of the films, a house servant must be Calabar (Efik/Ibibio) while the gateman must be Hausa/Fulani. The roles ascribed to these groups and characters are therefore sanctified by their costume and makeup. This started right from *Glamour Girls* (1994) through *Domitilla* (1997) to the more recent ones like *In Totality* (Emmanuel Isikaku). The prostitutes are usually made to wear mini skirts and put on heavy makeup, the

mallam gateman must in most cases, wear the Hausa 'Danshiki' or similar costume while the house girl or house boy must appear in the appropriate costume, a worn wrapper, old skirt and blouse or an old pair of shorts and shirt or old trousers.

The depiction of Nigerian university undergraduates is rather poor. On campuses, there are many typologies of students - the serious bookworms and the unserious whose idea of the university is the freedom to drink, womanize and join cults. In the use of costume and make up in films like *Heritage* (Ladi Ladebo, 2003), the undergraduate students dress like street girls. This mode of costuming is replicated in other films like *My Faithful Friend* (Kabat Egbuson) and *My Conscience* all shot on location in the University of Lagos.

We stated earlier that costume and make up provide the atmosphere for stimulating emotional reaction or mood in the spectators. A film can be considered as exciting, depressive, humorous, and tragic or scary depending on the feelings the costume and make up stimulate in the audience. In *Holy Diadon* (Ifeanyi Onyeabor, 2005) the director has not created the right atmosphere for the audience. In the film, Obinna and Ikenna are two princes and heirs to the throne. Obinna's mother died quite early leaving him at the mercy of his stepmother and sister who make life very miserable for him. The throne becomes vacant when their father dies. Tradition demands that the two go into the evil forest to get the royal treasure of succession and that whoever of the two finds it would become King.

The mood of the film is dull and un-exciting. This could have been heightened by the use of appropriate costume. For instance, the status differentiation between princess Adaeze and her maids is not clear because they wear the same costume (clothes, beads) and make up - tattoos etc. A different fabric for the princess, different tattoos, beads and better quality acting would have made the difference. The costumier in a film must take note of colour values or interpretation in actualizing the theme, location, characterization and the message in a film.

Conclusions

We have stated in this paper that costume and makeup help to establish identity and to provide information about time and location in a film. Although Nigerian home video film producers have incorporated aspects of these techniques in their films, they have not paid attention to the details that will emphasize that usage. It is our belief that producers should pay more attention to costume and makeup in the actualization of the film image. This will further enhance the quality of these films and make them more acceptable to film audiences.

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