

## **Communicating Character Through Costumes in the Stage Presentation of Benedict Binebai's *Legend of Egbesu***

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol13n41425>

Published April 06, 2025

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**Citation:** Etale P.M. (2025) Communicating Character Through Costumes in the Stage Presentation of Benedict Binebai's *Legend of Egbesu*, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.13, No.4, pp. 14-25

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**Abstract:** *This study examined the role of costumes in communicating character in the stage production of Benedict Binebai's Legend of Egbesu at the Niger Delta University Arts Theatre. Using a semiotic framework, the research analyses how costumes function as signs that convey character roles, social status, and cultural identity. The study employs historical, sociological, and literary methodologies, including participant observation and content analysis, to explore how the choice costume enhances character portrayal and narrative development. The findings reveal that costumes have a significant impact on audience perception, establishing character traits even before dialogue is spoken. The study also highlights the importance of culturally informed costume choices in promoting understanding and engagement with the play's themes. Recommendations for future theatrical productions emphasize the need for careful costume design to reflect the performance's sociocultural contexts and enhance the characters' non-verbal communication*

**Keywords:** character, communication, costume, cultural identity, makeup, performance

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Stage performances rely on various dramatic elements to subtly convey messages to the audience. From costumes and makeup to props, sets, stage designs, and locations, each component enriches the theatrical experience. This study focuses on how costumes convey character in *Legend of Egbesu*. In theatre, costumes are vital as they anchor the audience in the world of the play, providing nonverbal cues. The way actors present themselves through their costumes shapes how the audience perceives their characters. This nonverbal communication invites the audience to explore different perspectives, whether through the eyes of villains, heroes, men, women, children, or anyone in between. Thus, costumes play a central role in creating realism and immersing the audience in the narrative.

Costumes act as a crucial system of signs, communicating cultural identity and social status. They allow the audience to understand characters before they even speak, through the fabric, texture,

and design of their attire. While some directors may view costumes merely as decorative elements, their potential as a powerful tool for communication extends far beyond aesthetics. Scholars like Kafewo Samuel Ayedime view costumes as tools for negotiating meaning within a performance. As Ayedime states, "Performance, be it community, traditional, or political theatre, is a series of negotiations in the elucidation of meaning that uses costume as an instrument to detect that meaning" (5). Many researchers, including Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, Barnabas Danladi, Abdulmalik Abubakar, Habeeb Salaudeen, and Mary Nkechi Okadigwe, note that costumes are often overlooked despite their crucial role in conveying meaning. While some exploration of costume and character communication exists, a semiotic analysis of costume design in *Legend of Egbesu* is lacking.

This research addresses this gap by analyzing how costumes communicate character roles, cultural identity, and social significance. Employing a qualitative approach, the study combines historical, sociological, and literary methods, including participant observation, content analysis, and interviews with actors, directors, and audience members. Ultimately, the study contributes to African traditional performance research and deepens understanding of costumes' role in characterization from a semiotic perspective.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Costumes are nonverbal signs that convey meaning about individuals and groups. The New Webster's Dictionary defines "dress" as a comprehensive term for body coverings, while Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher describe dress as representing human creativity in adapting to the environment (3). Frantz Fanon notes that "dress constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness" (35). The term "costume" is often used interchangeably with "dress," though it carries specific connotations in the theatrical context. Although costume would often be referred to as dress, it is important to make known that dress may assume the image of costume under certain conditions. A costume is normally a dress, which by some restriction is set apart as a unit of its own. Costumes in Nigerian theatre often reflect the customs and cultures of the people, with elaborate designs frequently seen in performances. Julie Umokoro observes that cultural symbolism in Nigerian traditional dress evolves to bear emblems unique to its owner (23). Costumes in traditional theatre provide more than aesthetic value; they signify social status, personality, and cultural identity, essential for character development.

In Nigerian theatre, costumes are central to storytelling, symbolizing class, occupation, sex, and cultural background. According to Adolf Rosenberg, "without makeup and costume, the manifestation of the text becomes non-dramatic, dull, and devoid of visual effects" (925). In stage performances, the costume serves to create dramatic signs that help substantiate the textual features of the performance. The costumier's role, as described by Edwin Wilson, involves sending signals about sex, occupation, and class, which are magnified on stage to help the audience understand the

character's social standing and personality (361). In *Legend of Egbesu*, costumes are carefully designed to reflect the characters' roles and emotional states, guiding the audience's perception.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The semiotic theory, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, provides the foundation for this study. According to Saussure, semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings. The theory's dualism between the signifier (the physical form) and the signified (the mental concept) is crucial for understanding how costumes function as signs in theatre. A costume's meaning is derived from its cultural and social context, as highlighted by Charles Sanders Peirce, who introduced a triangle of sign components: the object, its representation, and the meaning. The interpretation of costumes in *Legend of Egbesu* follows this model, where elements such as color, texture, and design serve as signifiers that communicate character traits and cultural identity. Semiotics allows for a deeper understanding of how costumes convey complex meanings that go beyond their visual appearance.

### Synopsis of *Legend of Egbesu*

Egbesu, the spirit agent of restoration and order, fights a battle with Seikoromowei to restore the dislocated order of the Izon nation. A vision was shown to Borowei (Community chief priest) and explained to the Izon King and founder of Izon land (nation) and the people of the land, calling for caution in all they do. A few days after this revelation, while the people celebrate their festival, the land is attacked by a neighboring king, Benganh-ada, who is instigated to do so because the Izons worship and recognize the queen of heaven as their god, and because he is desirous to plunder their gold and wealth. This invasion leads to the death of Izon, the King and Founder of the Izon nation, who stood and fought gallantly; however, he is survived by his son, Izon-ebi, who now leads the Izon people.

After many years, Tiglah, another Warrior King, attacks Izon land again, killing, plundering their wealth, and rendering them homeless. At this point, the task of defending and restoring, coupled with the survival of the Izon nation on earth, rests on the shoulders of Prince Izon-ebi and Agadagba, the son of the late Borowei, the seer of the Izon land. In one of such moments of critical reflection, they are visited by a strange friend who later reveals himself as Egbesu (the Prince of the Air). They enter into a covenant with Egbesu for the defense and survival of the Izon nation. Shortly after the covenant, another neighbouring invader, Ogungbenowei, comes to attack the Izon nation with the intention of wiping it out of existence and stealing its wealth. However, this time around, the Izons, supported by Egbesu, the god of war and justice, with whom they had entered into a covenant, defeated the invaders, thus restoring pride, peace, and nationalism to the Izon nation.

The play *Legend of Egbesu* is set in Izon land, the geographical location being the Izon land of the modern-day Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The historical setting of the play illustrates how the

Izons were continually invaded in their previous homes, leading to their nomadic lifestyle as fishermen and their current distribution across various locations. The historical setting of the play also lends insight into the scattered settlement of the Ijaws and why they are found in different regions and locations among people of diverse tongues and cultural heritages

### **Colour as a Signifier of Meaning in *Legend of Egbesu***



**Figure 1 scene four King Izon and his warriors.**

In *Legend of Egbesu*, colour plays a pivotal role in conveying character, mood, and thematic undertones, acting as a form of coded iconography that communicates deeper, often subconscious, messages to the audience. Colours carry unique cultural and contextual meanings, yet even as their interpretations evolve, specific colours retain universal connotations. The costume's colour functions as a dramatic signifier, creating a visual language that connects the character's inner state to their outward appearance, enabling nonverbal communication. In scene four (Fig. 1), King Izon comes on stage in a red costume, which immediately signals impending danger, alerting the audience to the tragic fate that awaits him. Conversely, the warriors dressed in white are symbolic of purity, yet white also carries dual meanings in the context of life and death, reflecting their roles in both the preservation and destruction of the Ijaw nation. This duality encapsulates the weight of the warriors' decisions and actions, with the future of their people hanging in the balance. This use of colour to signify impending danger is not unique to *Legend of Egbesu* but is a well-established tool in theatre, where the audience's cultural knowledge allows them to decode the colour choices and associate them with specific meanings. In this way, colour becomes a coded iconography that layers the narrative with subtext, enhancing the audience's emotional engagement and understanding of the story.



**Figure 2 Egbesu group and Serikoromoweis**

From a semiotic perspective, colour functions as a signifier, forming part of a broader system of signs that the audience must decode to understand the layered meanings embedded within the performance. Craig Hazel posits “black has been associated with mystery, tragedy, and silence” (209). In many cultures, black is traditionally associated with darkness, evil, mystery, and tragedy, while white typically symbolizes purity, innocence, and light. These associations are not only grounded in cultural practices but also in the collective consciousness, making colour a powerful tool for nonverbal communication. The use of black and white in the costumes of key characters such as Serikorowei and the Prince of Air exemplifies how colour can distinguish moral alignments and emotional tones. Black, a dominant colour in theatre, can be overpowering, casting the wearer in an autocratic and ominous light. In *Legend of Egbesu*, Serikorowei, the villain, is consistently draped in black, especially in scenes where his evil and aggressive nature is emphasized. As Gillette Michael notes, “Costume can also be visible clues to the wearer’s emotional state” (388). In stark contrast, the Prince of Air and his followers are costumed in white, which immediately distinguishes him as the protagonist, embodying the themes of purity and heroism. The juxtaposition of these two costumes does more than just differentiate the characters; it sets the stage for the audience's understanding of the dramatic tension between good and evil, allowing the colours to speak volumes without a single word being uttered as seen Fig 3



**Figure 3 Egbesu warriors and Serikorowei's warriors**

In the scene above, the use of colour goes beyond aesthetics, it forms an integral part of the performance's semiotic structure. The audience intuitively understands who the hero and villain are based on these visual cues, underscoring the power of colour to communicate character and morality in a direct and effective way.

This ability of colour to serve as a signifier reinforces its crucial role in the nonverbal code of the performance. Oscar Brockett notes that "Colour is one of the most powerful means available to the costumer for expressing mood and character" (559). The strategic use of colours in the costumes used in the stage presentation of *Legend of Egbesu* amplifies the emotional and thematic aspects of the performance, with each colour chosen deliberately to evoke specific responses from the audience. Through the deliberate use of colour, the production communicates layers of meaning, symbolizing not only the characters' roles but also the cultural and emotional subtext of the performance. This rich, visual language ensures that the audience is not merely passive observers but active participants in decoding the play's meaning, with each colour carrying its own narrative weight.

### Communicating Character Through Costume.



**Figure 4 Scene one King Izon and his people of izon nation**

From the image above (fig4) that we see King Queen the chief priest and Villages, they are subtleties within the character's costumes that allude to social status, career, and emotional makeup of the characters. In this performance, costumes are more than just visual aesthetics; they are a powerful nonverbal tool that was used to communicate vital aspects of the character. The costumes were intricately selected to reflect the characters' roles, social status, and cultural identity. Looking at (figure 4) As scholars like Dianne Berry have highlighted, communication involves the "transfer of information between a source and one or more receivers, using a set of common rules." In theatre, this communication can occur both verbally and nonverbally. Bade-Afuye emphasizes that "costume is an interpretative tool of semiotics that enhances the actor's appearance in a performance, creating aesthetic pleasure while delivering meaningful information about the character."

The actors first impression on the audience relies strongly on the costume since it covers up most of his body in interaction, his appearance, and thus the costume he is wearing in being interpreted as a king, servant or chief and it is these interpretations in which meaning is established, and on which most initial opinions and belief about a character is based, not only does a costume have an

The impact on the audience's perception of the actor also plays a significant part in portraying the character's personality. In wearing certain types of costume, colour, shapes, textures, and exposing and covering parts of the body, costume is used for communication and shaping perception of the audience. As such the costume of a character shapes his interaction with the audience, and the way costumes shape the audience perception are subject to the underlying social and cultural contexts of the performance and what is considered appropriate costume in respect to the settings of the play and geographical locale of the performance. It provides details about the character and helps to establish the performance's mood. According to Umukoro, “costumes bear indices and attributes which most appropriately evoke the personality of the actor(s). It serves basically as tool for character delineation” (54).

Furthermore, Utoh-Ezeajugh defining costume opines:

These instruments are used to physically transform performers, thereby aiding them to lose their own identities and assume that of the characters they are impersonating they are universally regarded as indispensable aids to performance” (83).

According to her, costume transposes the actor/actress into the reality of his/her role, and illuminates the character both for the impersonator and the audience. she posits that costume as an element of play production, remains an integral part of characterization, so much so that performances would decidedly be incomplete without costumes (84). Accordingly, listing costume as one of the “Sign Systems Common to all Dramatic Media

Robert Cohen explaining the functions of costumes posits that “the individual costumes can express the specific individuality of each character’s role; they reveal at a glance, for example, the character’s profession, wealth, age, class status, taste, and self-image” (149). Cunningham went further to say that:

A costume can be defined as anything worn on a stage, including clothing, makeup, accessories, or even held objects or attached décor. To be effective, however, a costume must speak to the subconscious awareness of the audience with its visual appeal sending subliminal support to the character and overall theme of a story (72).

The choices of costume of each character contained symbols that communicated information about the social and economic status of the character. At first glance, these actors on stage can be mentally categorized according to their social and economic status. Through the colour and texture of the costume, we give off certain signs about the actors to the audience.



Costumes on stage have the unique ability to transform an actor into their character, supporting their physical and emotional embodiment. In *Legend of Egbesu*, this transformation is especially significant as costumes serve not only to differentiate characters but also to communicate cultural symbols and social hierarchies. In traditional Ijaw society, for instance, the 'Amananaowei,' or community leader, wears a distinctive costume that marks his authority and separates him from the rest of the population. The style, fabric, and embellishments of the costume reflect the wearer's high status, and these visual markers are communicated to the audience through the actor's performance. Okadigwe's notion of semiotics as applied to costume "the study of signs in costumes, which stand for something else" is relevant here, as the costume conveys layers of meaning, from cultural heritage to individual role.



**Figure 5 Serikoromowei**

Looking at Figure 5, his costumes help the Audience internalize the essence of his characters. The performance, amongst other things, uses costume to introduce notions of evil dispositions of Serikoromowei. When taking account of the dark aspects of his character and wicked attitudes of the others, we can definitely establish links between costumes and emotional disposition.

As Jegede asserts, "whichever way a costume is used in the theatre, it must have a degree of communicative value to both the audience and the characters." This reflects how costumes are not

just decorative, but integral to the narrative. They convey not only the character's identity but also the underlying dynamics of the story.

Semiotic theory suggests that a character's costume is intrinsically linked to aspects of their personality. Society assigns particular meanings to certain dress codes. Red and white gowns, for example, signify spiritual power and authority in the role of a chief priest. Similarly, the costumes used in the performance reinforce the characters' roles and relationships with one another. The king and queen, in their regal attire, stand apart from the common people, visually signaling their authority and status. If a queen were to appear dressed in the attire of a market woman, the audience would be distracted from the narrative, focusing instead on the incongruity of the costume. The design of a costume, aligned with the character's social and economic position in performance

The semiotic system of costumes operates through culturally specific codes that influence how they are interpreted by the audience. According to Saussure, these codes are socially constructed and culturally conditioned. The costumes in *Legend of Egbesu* reflect this cultural specificity, as they communicate the identity and status of each character without needing explicit verbal explanation. As Berger notes, the relationship between signs and what they signify is arbitrary and shaped by cultural conventions. These conventions guide how the audience interprets the costumes, allowing them to identify a character's position within the narrative instantly

Through the application of semiotic theory, we can comprehend how costumes in the play convey character traits, cultural identity, and the narrative's broader themes. The symbolic language of costumes enhances the audience's engagement with the performance, revealing hidden meanings and offering deeper insight into the characters' roles. Costumes, therefore, are not just clothing they are signs that communicate power, identity, and emotional states, enriching the overall theatrical experience.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study confirms that costumes in stage performances are powerful non-verbal tools that communicate meaning, influence audience perception, and enhance storytelling. Through a semiotic analysis of the performance, the research demonstrates that costumes reflect character roles and cultural identity, particularly in Nigerian theatre. Key findings include: Costumes effectively convey character traits and cultural context, such as using black attire to represent villains. Correct costume use is essential to narrative development, though directors may sometimes prioritize visual symbolism over realism. Costumes have a psychological impact, helping audiences interpret character intent even before the dialogue begins, as seen in *Legend of Egbesu*. Overall, the study highlights the significance of costumes as intentional storytelling devices that enhance the meaning in theatrical performances. The study recommends that Future

research should expand beyond a single performance to explore a broader range of theatrical productions for a deeper understanding of costume semiotics.

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