International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions, 13 (1), 99-107, 2025
Print ISSN: ISSN 2056-5771(Print)
Online ISSN: ISSN 2056-578X (Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Costume as Transitional Phenomenon: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Kenneth Eni's *Pebbles*

Patience M. Etale and Success E. Perefagha
Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ijasct.2014/vol13n199107 Published September 17, 2025

Citation: Etale P.M. and Perefagha S.E. (2025) Costume as Transitional Phenomenon: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Kenneth Eni's Pebbles, *International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions*, 13 (1), 99-107

Abstract: *This article explored costume in Kenneth Eni's "Pebbles" through a psychoanalytic framework grounded in Donald Winnicott's concepts of transitional phenomena, potential space, and the holding environment. While African theatre scholarship has often emphasized costume as a cultural or semiotic signifier, this study argued that costume also functions as a psycho-affective mediator that enables play and identity negotiation. Using close textual and performance analysis, the article examined four key costume moments: the half-dress liminality of rehearsal, Ese's contested triangular garment, the militant youths' masquerade, and the women's dance attire in the reconciliatory finale. Situated within the allegorical Garbage Kingdom, costumes are shown to operate as transitional objects simultaneously "me and not-me" mediating between vulnerability and authority, aggression and reconciliation. By tracing a theoretical genealogy from Freud's unconscious and repression, through Jung's collective archetypes, to Winnicott's transitional play, and grounding it in Campbell's insights on performance, the study bridged psychoanalysis and African theatre studies. It concluded that costume in "Pebbles" is not static decoration but a dynamic medium through which societies project anxieties, sustain paradox, and rehearse renewal.*

Keywords: costume, holding environment, potential space, psychoanalysis, transitional phenomenon

INTRODUCTION

Kenneth Efakponana Eni's *Pebbles* (2009) dramatized generational conflict, political corruption, and reconciliation in postcolonial Nigeria. Belonging to a wider tradition of Niger Delta theatre, the play staged the tensions between elders and youths, ultimately transforming potential violence into a communal dance. Within African theatre scholarship, such works are frequently examined

through ritual, semiotic, or postcolonial frameworks (Banham, 2004; Ismaila & Akakpo, 2020). Costume, however, has generally been treated as a cultural or semiotic signifier. This element encodes identity, ritual presence, or symbolic power, rather than as a psycho-affective object that mediates inner experience.

This study addressed that gap by reinterpreting costume in *Pebbles* through Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic concepts of transitional phenomena, potential space, and the holding environment (Winnicott, 2005). These ideas provide a framework for viewing costume not merely as decorative attire or cultural marker but as a transitional object that sustains paradox, enables play, and facilitates identity negotiation.

Methodologically, the study combined close textual reading and performance analysis. The primary sources are (a) the published play-text of *Pebbles* and (b) documentation of a stage performance that adopted a non-killing, dance-based resolution. Attention is paid to scripted costume references (such as the contested "triangle dress"), rehearsal imagery, and the staging of dance. Analysis draws on theatre and performance studies approaches that emphasize semiotics, embodiment, and affect (Carlson, 2008; Elam, 1980); while reinterpreting these elements through Winnicott's psychoanalytic lens. By integrating textual and performance data with psychoanalytic theory, the study seeks to illuminate how costume in *Pebbles* operates as a transitional phenomenon that mediates tensions between self and other, violence and reconciliation, vulnerability and role. In doing so, it contributed to African theatre studies by introducing a psycho-affective dimension to costume analysis, complementing existing ritual and semiotic readings with an exploration of identity as play

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship has emphasized the symbolic, cultural, and performative dimensions of costume in theatre and performance, particularly in African contexts. Babili and Mbathu (2025) argued that costume communicates "symbolic cultural meanings, gender disparities, and religious practices," shaping not only character but also audience perception (p. 1182). In stage productions, costume is increasingly seen as an active agent of meaning. In *Ferryboat*, costume resists homogenizing representation, affirming identity as "living, contested, and dignified" (Etale, 2025, p. 50). Similarly, in *Legend of Egbesu*, Etale (2025) showed how costume conveys status and personality traits before dialogue begins, underscoring its role as nonverbal communication (pp. 14–15). In dance, Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ume (2025) stress that Nigerian cultural costumes embody ethnic heritage yet are threatened by globalization (p. 34). Beyond aesthetic symbolism, Mayokun (2024**)** highlighted costume management as a practical and logistical process central to theatrical production, showing its material and organizational weight (pp. 150–151). Together, these recent studies demonstrate that costume functions as a cultural marker, identity bearer, and performative agent. However, none of the extant studies explicitly addressed the psycho-affective dimension of costume, how it mediates inner and outer realities in performance.

Psychoanalytic performance theory provides a framework for filling this gap. Turri (2015) critiques traditional theories of spectatorship for excluding unconscious processes, arguing that Aristotle's *katharsis* can be reconceived through Freud's notion of transference. For Turri, spectatorship operates as a "transference dynamic" in which unconscious identifications between actor and spectator are constitutive of theatre's affective power (pp. 69–74). Building on Klein and Bion, she suggested that the actor performs a psychic function for the audience, transforming unconscious elements into symbolically assimilable experience.

Abu-Arja (2017) illustrated the dramaturgical utility of psychoanalysis in her analysis of Harold Pinter's plays. She shows how aggression, the uncanny, and dream analysis serve as dramaturgical tool that externalize unconscious conflicts (pp. 94–110). Her work demonstrated that psychoanalysis can illuminate not only characters but also theatrical structures, thereby justifying its extension to the material elements of performance, such as costume.

At the core of this framework is Winnicott's (2005) concept of transitional phenomena. He defined the transitional object as "not an internal object … Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either" (p. 13), situating it within an "intermediate area of experiencing … retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living" (p. 19). This intermediate space, what Winnicott terms *potential space*, enables creativity and play, providing a psychic arena where identity can be tested and negotiated.

Townsend (2017) extends Winnicott's framework to artistic practice, showing how artworks embody inner experience: "the developing artwork takes on more and more of her inner experience until it no longer needs her intervention. It has, in a sense, acquired a life of its own" (p. 141). Her analysis highlighted how creative objects exceed the control of the maker while mediating between inner and outer worlds, an idea directly applicable to theatrical costume, which similarly acquires autonomy once placed in performance. Bringing these insights together, this study conceptualized costume in Kenneth Eni's *Pebbles* as a transitional phenomenon. For Winnicott (2005), play is central to identity: "In playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative … and discovers the self" (p. 72). Costume enables precisely this form of play by allowing the actor to inhabit the paradox of being both "me and not-me." For the audience, costume sustains unconscious identifications, resonating with Turri's (2015) view of spectatorship as transference dynamic. For dramaturgy, Abu-Arja's (2017) model underscores how material elements can stage unconscious conflict, positioning costume as a tool that externalizes psychic aggression and facilitates its transformation. For creative practice, Townsend (2017) demonstrated that objects can embody and extend inner experience, showing how costume may "acquire a life of its own" in performance. Accordingly, this study framed costume in *Pebbles* not simply as a semiotic signifier or cultural emblem but as a psycho-affective mediator. Within the holding environment of theatre, costume creates potential space where aggression can be transformed into reconciliation, vulnerability into role, and selfhood into collective negotiation.

International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions, 13 (1), 99-107, 2025
Print ISSN: ISSN 2056-5771(Print)
Online ISSN: ISSN 2056-578X (Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Theoretical Framework

Sigmund Freud laid the foundations of psychoanalysis by proposing that much of human behaviour is driven by unconscious desires and repressed experiences. His structural model of the psyche, the *id, ego,* and *superego*, emphasized the tensions between instinct, social regulation, and internalized authority (Freud, 1960, pp. 12–20). For Freud, art and performance were privileged spaces where repressed psychic material could be displaced and symbolically expressed, as in the cathartic dynamics of tragedy (Freud, 2010, pp. 150–160). Carl Jung expanded Freud's framework by introducing the collective unconscious, a repository of archetypes that structure symbolic meaning across cultures. For Jung (1990), performance is not merely an enactment of personal conflicts but also a medium for archetypal expression (pp. 57–61). Costumes, masks, and dramatic characters often embody figures such as the Hero, the mother, or the Trickster, resonating beyond individual psychology (Jung, 1990, pp. 75–80). Donald Winnicott shifted psychoanalysis from a focus on pathology and archetype to creativity and play. Building on Freud and Jung, but also departing from them, Winnicott (2005) introduced the concept of the transitional object, which he described as *"*not an internal object … Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either" (p. 13).

Transitional phenomena occupy an intermediate zone, which Winnicott called potential space, where inner and outer realities overlap. He argued that "throughout life [this space] is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living*"* (p. 19). Unlike Freud's focus on repression or Jung's on archetypal symbolism, Winnicott emphasized that "in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative and discovers the self" (p. 72).

Patrick Campbell (2001) draws the connection between psychoanalysis and performance into sharp relief: *"After all, if performing is a process in which individuals, physically present on stage, think, speak and interact in front of other individuals, then that very activity must throw into relief crucial questions about human behaviour. In making the hidden visible, the latent manifest, in laying bare the interior landscape of the mind and its fears and desires through a range of signifying practices, psychoanalytic processes are endemic to the performing arts"* (p. 1).
Campbell's insight underscores the methodological resonance between psychoanalysis and theatre: both aim to reveal hidden psychic processes and make them available to collective interpretation(Campbell,2001,p.2).

This convergence provides a strong rationale for applying Winnicott's framework to costume in African performance

Synopsis

Kenneth Efakponana Eni's *Pebbles* stages the political and generational tensions of postcolonial Nigeria. The play opens in a rehearsal, where debates about costumes, including the contested "triangle dress", expose anxieties around gender, vulnerability, and theatrical illusion. As the

performance shifts into its main action, elders embody corrupt authority while militant youths, led by Ufuoma, storm a civic ceremony dressed in black and masquerade attire. Their chants and aggression dramatize the region's political rage, with Ufuoma poised to execute the elders with a cutlass. At the height of conflict, the Artistic Director interrupts, proposing an alternative resolution. Women, adorned in dance costumes, lead a communal performance that transforms violence into festivity. The knife is set aside, and the community rehearses reconciliation through symbolic play. *Pebbles* thus allegorizes Nigeria's crises while showcasing theatre's power to mediate identity, aggression, and collective imagination.

Costume as a Transitional phenomenon in Pebbles

The play opened in a state of chaotic rehearsal: *"Actors and Actresses are standing expectantly, some with costume already pinned on them, while others are half-nude in the process of putting on their costumes"*. This tableau dramatizes Winnicott's paradox of transitional phenomena, where the actor is both self and role, simultaneously "me and not-me" (Winnicott, 2005, p. 13). Costume here is unfinished, a threshold object mediating between private vulnerability and public character. As seen in (Fig. 1A).

Figure 1 A, B, C

Even in banter, costume becomes a point of tension. Harry mocks Ese: *"Look at her costume! I won't put that on for anything in the world. No wonder she is in a foul mood. My God! You look like the wrath of God! Like Jezebel come to woo Solomon! Where did you get that from, the archive? (P,2)*

Ese's costume here is neither neutral nor decorative; this line is more than playful banter. It mobilizes biblical imagery to cast Ese as both sacred threat and sexual temptation. In psychoanalytic terms jezebel functions as the archetype of the over-sexualized woman alluring yet dangerous. Her costume is charged, provoking ridicule and discomfort. This aligns with Winnicott's claim that transitional objects carry projections of inner anxieties. For the audience, watching half-dressed actors and contested costumes stages liminality itself as a shared potential space. The debate around Ese's "triangle dress" as seen in (Fig.1C) is clear instance of costume as transitional object. The Artistic Director insists: *"The dress should swing wide at the bottom so that the actress can feel the breeze as she moves. Always reminding herself of her femininity"*. Costume here encodes patriarchal projections of femininity, reinforcing Ese's body as spectacle. Ese, however, resists, retorting: *"I will probably go down with pneumonia if I get more breeze than I'm getting now"*. Ese's complaint dramatizes her ambivalence toward sexuality: she resists being made spectacle, yet the costume places her within that very role. Sigmund Freud' theory of the Oedipus complex address this. Freud (2010) argued that, Desire is always entangled with prohibition; the forbidden object is simultaneously desired and condemned. Ese's triangular dress thus stages an unconscious struggle between erotic display and moral restraint. From a Winnicottian perspective, the triangle dress mediates between Ese's bodily vulnerability and the external demands of the male gaze. Audience laughter during the catwalk scene suggests that the costume creates a potential space where gender anxieties can be playfully negotiated rather than repressed.

The Garbage Kingdom's imagery frames costume not only as clothing but as an emblem of moral disintegration: elders' robes conceal corruption, while youths' black militant attire externalizes

International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions, 13 (1), 99-107, 2025
Print ISSN: ISSN 2056-5771(Print)
Online ISSN: ISSN 2056-578X (Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

rage. Costumes here are more than stage properties; they embody the psychological and political remnants of a society in crisis.

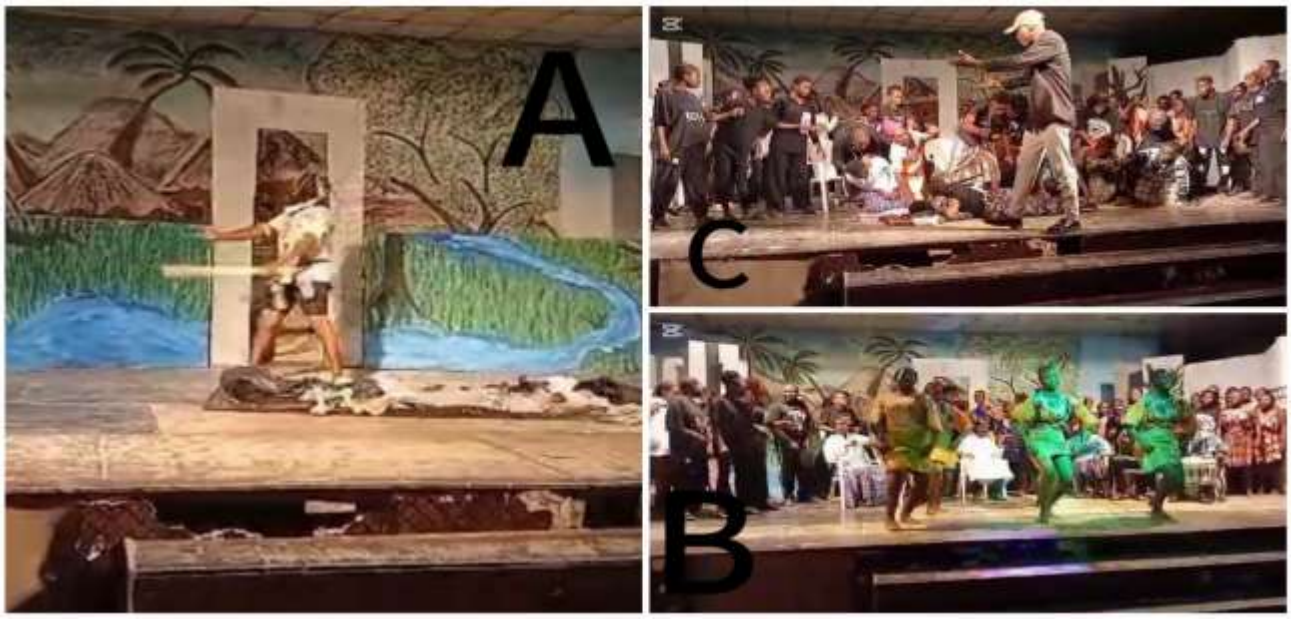

Figure 2

From a Winnicottian perspective, the Garbage Kingdom itself functions as a kind of collective transitional space. Just as the infant projects inner states onto a blanket or toy, the community projects social anxieties onto the costumed stage of Garbage Kingdom. As seen in (Fig. 2A)

> Wahehe Oh! It is another beautiful day. Life must go on as usual. Welcome to the garbage city in the land of Zanhar! And I am the king of this beautiful city. This is a land where the only job you do is to eat from the sweat of the mad world outside. Yahoo…. fighters of Zanhar, wake up. The twenty-eight wings fly far… mona mona, (***demonstrates holding a gun***) bang… bang… bang… (***Laughs***) ha… ha… ha… (***Stops abruptly and peers directly at the sun)*** Shei! This sun fit make madman mad! (p 19)

This imaginative space enables the portrayal of corruption, authority, and rebellion without annihilation, holding conflict in suspension. The Garbage Kingdom erupts into open conflict when militants storm a civic ceremony chanting war songs and shoving around anybody on their way. The Black costume embodies collective anger, externalizing aggression in ritualized form. Ufuoma's cry, *"They must die to wash our land clean"*, these lines suggest violence. Costume and weapon merge, dramatizing psychic and political hostility.

Yet, the Artistic director also suspends destruction, keeping violence at a symbolic level. Artistic Director interrupts: *"Blood begets blood. Violence begets violence. But peace is the mother of prosperity. Let us end our play differently this time"*. Women are called forth: *"Women of Zanhar, lead us in this new dance"*. As Winnicott (2005) suggests, play is uncertain but sustaining; here, costume allows the community to flirt with destruction without enacting it fully. Their colourful dance costumes absorb aggression, transforming hostility into festivity. Fabric and rhythm replace weaponry, creating a Winnicottian holding environment where reconciliation becomes possible. The Garbage Kingdom, once a site of decay, is reimagined as a stage for renewal through symbolic play. Costume thus mediates the transition from violence to reconciliation, embodying the paradox of "me and not-me" at both individual and communal levels.

By situating *Pebbles* in the Garbage Kingdom, Eni ensured that costume is always more than clothing: it is allegory, projection, and transformation. From rehearsal half-dress to the triangular garment, from black militant costume to women's dance, costume operates as a transitional phenomenon. It sustains paradox, externalizes aggression, and enables reconciliation. The Garbage Kingdom itself becomes a collective transitional space, a theatre where a corrupt society portrays its anxieties and imagines renewal.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that costume in Kenneth Eni's *Pebbles* operates as a transitional phenomenon, mediating between self and role, aggression and reconciliation, and vulnerability and authority. In rehearsal half-dress, the contested triangular garment, militant masquerades, and women's dance attire, costume functions as a psycho-affective mediator that sustains paradox and enables play.

Set in the Garbage Kingdom, a world of corruption and decay, the play frames costume as emblem of political and moral crisis. Elders' robes and militant regalia embody dysfunction, while women's dance costumes reimagine the kingdom as a holding environment where aggression is transformed into symbolic reconciliation.

By integrating Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory with African performance analysis, this study reframes costume not as a static signifier but as a dynamic medium of negotiation. The Garbage Kingdom itself becomes a collective transitional space, allowing society to project anxieties and imagine renewal

REFERENCES

Abu-Arja, D. (2017). A psychoanalytic reading of Harold Pinter's plays [Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter].

Babili, R., & Mbathu, M. (2025). Costumes as an expression of character: A study of selected short stories in Sepedi and isiZulu. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies, 3*(4), 1182–1195.

Banham, M. (2004). *A History of Theatre in Africa*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Campbell, P. (2001). *Analysing Performance: A Critical Reader*. Manchester University Press.

Carlson, M. (2008). Intercultural theory, postcolonial theory, and semiotics: The road not (yet) taken (Keir Elam). *Semiotica Journal*, 168, 129-142.

Elam, K. (1980). *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. Methuen, London.

Eni, K. E. (2025). *Pebbles*. Stage Performance of a Play at the Niger Delta University Theatre.

Eni, K. E. (20O9). *Pebbles*. Carltop Publications, Yenagoa, Nigeria.

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, 13*(4), 14–25.

Freud, S. (1960). *The ego and the id* (J. Riviere, Trans.). W. W. Norton.

Freud, S. (2010). *The interpretation of dreams* (J. Strachey, Trans.). Basic Books.

Ismaila, M. & Akakpo, S. B. (2020). Adding the Dots and crossing the Ts: A historiographical overview of African theatre history. *Research Journal of Advanced Humanities*, 1(2), 43-57.

Jung, C. G. (1990). *Man, and His Symbols*. Anchor Books.

Mayokun, A. (2024). Costume design and management in the Ghanaian play *Corpse's Comedy*. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development, 6*(2), 150–162.

Townsend, P. (2017). The artist's creative process: A Winnicottian view [Doctoral thesis, University of the Arts London].

Turri, A. (2015). *A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Theories of Theatre and Spectatorship*. University of London Press.

Utoh-Ezeajugh, T., & Ume, K. (2025). Nigerian dance costumes and the preservation of cultural identity. *Fashion and Design Studies Journal, 4*(1), 30–42.

Winnicott, D. W. (2005). *Playing and Reality*. Routledge Classics.