

SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION OF THEATER COSTUME AS A VISUAL LANGUAGE IN *JOROMI* DANCE PERFORMANCE

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Abstract : This study examines theater costume as a semiotic and communicative icon in the dance production of *Joromi*, choreographed by Felix Akinsipe at the Department of Performing and Film Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. It interrogates the function of costume beyond aesthetic ornamentation, positioning it as a visual language that communicates meaning, emotion, and sociocultural identity within dance performance. In dance, where verbal dialogue is minimal or absent, costume assumes a central role in shaping audience perception and facilitating narrative comprehension. Employing a qualitative research methodology grounded in semiotic theory, the study investigates how costume elements including colour, texture, fabric, silhouette, and stylistic design operate as symbolic signifiers that articulate character roles, thematic intentions, and cultural values. The analysis further explores the interactive relationship between costume and performative components such as movement, rhythm, gesture, and spatial organization, demonstrating how these elements collectively construct meaning within the performance environment. By situating theatre costume within the frameworks of visual communication and theatrical semiotics, the

study argues that costume in *Joromi* functions as a dynamic signifying system that collaborates with the performing body to generate layered interpretive possibilities. The research contributes to contemporary scholarship in semiotics and performance studies by advancing understanding of costume as an essential medium of non-verbal storytelling and visual dramaturgy in dance theater.

Keywords: Theater costume, Visual Language, Dance Performance, Cultural identity, Semiotics

ملخص البحث: تتناول هذه الدراسة أزياء المسرح كرمز دلالي وتواصل في عرض الرقص "جورومي"، من تصميم فيليكس أكينسيب، قسم الفنون الأدائية والسينمائية، جامعة إيلورين، نيجيريا. وتستكشف وظيفة الأزياء بما يتجاوز الزخرفة الجمالية، مُصنفةً إياها كلغة بصرية تنقل المعنى والعاطفة والهوية الاجتماعية والثقافية ضمن عروض الرقص. ففي الرقص، حيث الحوار اللفظي محدود أو معدوم، تضطلع الأزياء بدور محوري في تشكيل إدراك الجمهور وتسهيل فهم السرد. وباستخدام منهجية بحث نوعية قائمة على نظرية السيميائية، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية عمل عناصر الأزياء، بما في ذلك اللون والملبس والقماش والشكل والتصميم الأسلوب، كدلالات رمزية تُعبّر عن أدوار الشخصيات والنوايا الموضوعية والقيم الثقافية. كما يستكشف التحليل العلاقة التفاعلية بين الأزياء وعناصر الأداء، كالحركة

والإيقاع والإيماءات والتنظيم المكاني، مُبينًا كيف تُشكل هذه العناصر مجتمعةً المعنى ضمن بيئة العرض. من خلال وضع أزياء المسرح ضمن إطار التواصل البصري وعلم العلامات المسرحية، تُجادل هذه الدراسة بأن الأزياء في مسرح جورومي تعمل كنظام دلالي ديناميكي يتفاعل مع جسد المؤدي لخلق إمكانيات تفسيرية متعددة الطبقات. يُسهّم هذا البحث في الدراسات المعاصرة في علم العلامات ودراسات الأداء من خلال تعزيز فهم الأزياء كوسيلة أساسية للسرد غير اللفظي والدراما البصرية في مسرح الرقص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أزياء المسرح، اللغة البصرية، أداء الرقص، الهوية الثقافية، علم العلامات

Introduction

Theater costume has long been recognized as an essential component of stage production, serving not only decorative and functional purposes but also communicative and symbolic roles. Within contemporary performance practice, costume increasingly operates as a visual language through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted. Scholars in Theater and performance studies emphasize that visual elements such as costume, scenography, and lighting function as semiotic resources that shape audience perception and enhance narrative communication (Elam, 2002). In dance theater in particular where spoken dialogue is minimal or entirely absent the body becomes the primary expressive medium, and costume functions as a critical extension of that body, reinforcing characterization, emotional expression, and narrative intent. As performance scholarship continues to expand its focus on visual dramaturgy and embodied communication, the study of costume as a semiotic system becomes relevant within contemporary theater discourse (Monks, 2010).

In many African performance traditions, costume embodies cultural memory, social identity, and communal values, often carrying symbolic meanings that are immediately recognizable within specific cultural contexts. Costume materials, colors, patterns, and adornments frequently communicate social status, ritual significance, and collective heritage, thereby functioning as visual markers of cultural identity (Adedeji, 2000; Banham, 2004). Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of costume in preserving cultural memory while adapting to contemporary performance contexts (Okagbue, 2018;). The emergence of contemporary African dance theater has introduced new aesthetic practices that blend indigenous costume traditions with modern theatrical design principles. This hybridization reflects broader processes of cultural transformation and globalization within performing arts (Kruger, 2019). Scholars note that such developments require new analytical frameworks capable of interpreting the symbolic complexity of modern performance design (Barbieri, 2017; Afolabi, 2021).

Thus, the study of theater costume has evolved significantly within performance scholarship, moving from descriptive documentation of stage attire to critical analysis of costume as a communicative and symbolic system. Contemporary scholars increasingly recognize costume as a fundamental component of visual dramaturgy, contributing to character development, narrative construction, and audience interpretation in performance environments (McKinney & Butterworth, 2015; Barbieri, 2017). Research in theater semiotics demonstrates that visual elements such as costume, lighting, and scenography function as interconnected sign systems that communicate meaning within theatrical performance (Elam, 2002; Chandler, 2017).

Costume, in particular, serves as a visible marker of identity and social status, enabling audiences to interpret character roles and thematic intentions through visual cues. Despite these advancements, theater costume remains comparatively under-examined as a structured communicative language within African dance theater scholarship. Most of the existing literature focuses on choreography, music, and performance narrative, while costume is often treated as a secondary visual element. The limited attention to costume as a semiotic system has created a gap in knowledge regarding its role in non-verbal communication and visual storytelling in contemporary performance (McKinney & Butterworth, 2015).

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of theater costume in the dance production of *Joromi* as a visual language that interacts with movement, rhythm and spatial dynamics to communicate narrative meaning in a performance to the audience. By situating costume within the frameworks of semiotics in performance context, the research contributes to the growing field of visual dramaturgy and expands scholarly understanding of costume as a central communicative medium in contemporary dance theater. In doing so, the research contributes to ongoing discussions of semiotics in performance studies, visual culture and sociolinguistics.

Theoretical Framework: Theatrical Semiotics

This study is anchored in theatrical semiotics, a branch of the Semiotics that conceptualizes theater as a structured system of signs through which meaning is produced, communicated, and interpreted in performance. Within this framework, theater costume is understood not merely as decorative attire but as a

communicative medium that conveys symbolic, cultural, and emotional meanings to audiences. In dance theater, where verbal dialogue is minimal or absent, costume assumes a central role as a visual language that facilitates narrative comprehension and audience interpretation. The theoretical foundations of theatrical semiotics originate in the linguistic model of signs developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Saussure defined the sign as a relationship between the signifier (form) and the signified (concept), establishing the principle that meaning is socially constructed through systems of representation. This model provides a basis for understanding costume as a signifier that communicates identity, status, and emotional states within performance contexts.

Expanding semiotic theory, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce developed the triadic model of signs between 1931 and 1958, identifying three categories of signs: icon, index, and symbol. This classification is particularly relevant to theater costume analysis, as costume elements may visually resemble cultural forms (icon), indicate conditions or actions (index), or represent socially learned meanings (symbol). The development of theatrical semiotics as a specialized field in performance studies was significantly advanced by Keir Elam in *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* (1980), which conceptualized theater as a network of visual, auditory, and spatial signs that communicate meaning through performance. Similarly, Patrice Pavis in 1998 emphasized the concept of performance as a multi-layered visual text in which costume interacts with movement, gesture, and spatial organization to produce meaning.

Recent scholarship between 2018 and 2024 demonstrates a renewed interest in costume as

a dynamic semiotic system within contemporary theater and dance. For instance, Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) developed a theoretical framework for theatrical costume design that integrates semiotics with symbolic interactionism, highlighting how costume communicates historical and cultural authenticity in performance contexts. Their findings indicate that contemporary costume designers consciously employ symbolic strategies to construct character identity and narrative meaning. Similarly, Abdulmalik (2021) examined costume as a semiotic element in stage performance, arguing that costume functions as a communicative sign that reveals character attributes such as occupation, age, and social identity while enhancing audience understanding of performance narratives. More recent studies have expanded theatrical semiotics into interdisciplinary domains. Aliabieva and Furse (2022) explored the relationship between fashion and performance, demonstrating how costume operates as an embodied communicative system that shapes audience perception through visual symbolism and performative expression.

Contemporary research continues to emphasize the interaction between costume and embodied performance. Pan and Alizadeh (2024) analyzed costume and body language in dance drama, demonstrating that costume symbols work in conjunction with bodily movement to generate artistic meaning and cultural interpretation in performance environments. Recent theoretical developments also highlight the evolving technological and material dimensions of costume semiotics. Lozinskaya (2024) argues that modern theatrical costume demonstrates increasing levels of symbolic codification and cultural encoding, reflecting changing aesthetic practices in contemporary Theater production. Collectively, these contemporary

studies confirm that theatrical costume remains a dynamic semiotic system that communicates meaning through visual symbolism, cultural codes, and embodied performance. In the context of this study, theatrical semiotics provides a systematic framework for examining Theater costume as a visual sign system that communicates cultural identity, emotional expression, and narrative meaning within dance performance. By applying semiotic principles to the analysis of costume elements such as color, texture, silhouette, and stylistic design, the study interprets costume as an essential medium of non-verbal communication and visual dramaturgy in the dance production of *Joromi*.

Methodology

The methodology employs qualitative research design using a case study approach to examine Theater costume as a semiotic and communicative system in the dance production of *Joromi*. Qualitative research is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting symbolic meanings and visual elements within performance rather than measuring quantitative variables. The case study approach allows for in-depth exploration of costume within a dance theatrical context, enabling detailed analysis of its aesthetic, cultural, and communicative functions. The research employs an interpretive semiotic approach, which focuses on understanding how visual signs embedded in costume design communicate meaning within performance. This approach is grounded in qualitative inquiry and emphasizes contextual interpretation, cultural symbolism, and audience perception. The study is conducted at the department of Performing and Film Arts, university of Ilorin, Nigeria. The selected site provides an appropriate setting for examining contemporary dance Theater practices within an academic performance environment.

Data for the study are derived from multiple qualitative sources to ensure credibility and triangulation, live performance observation, video recordings of the dance production, photographic documentation of costumes, costume design sketches and production notes, Interviews with, choreographer, costume designer, and performers, Archival and documentary materials. Data are collected through non-participant observation, visual documentation analysis, semi-structured interviews, content analysis of costume materials. These methods enabled comprehensive examination of costume as both a visual artifact and a performative element. Data are analyzed using semiotic analysis, which involves systematic interpretation of visual signs embedded in costume design. The analysis follows four stages; Identification of costume elements, classification of symbolic features, interpretation of cultural meanings, and contextualization within performance dynamics.

SYNOPSIS OF *JOROMI*

Joromi is a dance Theater that centers around the princess of the Benin kingdom, an ancient community in Nigeria, who out of curiosity enters a forbidden room in the palace against the warnings of her parents. This action, however, ignites the anger of the evil spirits in the room and they angrily possess her. Consequently, at the annual wrestling competition by the king for the warriors from the six geo-political zones of the kingdom, the princess suddenly manifests a strange illness, in order to unravel the mystery behind her strange behavior. The oracle of the kingdom is consulted, and the chief priest instructs the warriors to get sacred water from the forbidden forest to heal the princess. Fear

grips many of the warriors in attendance, but *Joromi* summons courage to embark on the journey alone. Others warriors are encouraged by his selflessness and indomitable spirit and they collectively pledge their allegiance to go with him on the rescue mission. While on the journey, they encountered many predicaments. Unfortunately, many warriors died along the line, but only *Joromi* makes it back home with the sacred water. The princess regains her sanity, and peace is restored in the land.

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF COSTUME AS A VISUAL LANGUAGE IN *JOROMI*

Costume as an Icon of Cultural Identification

Costume serves as a visual representation of cultural identity within the dance performance. Traditional costume materials and decorative elements serve as semiotic icons that communicate communal heritage and social values, reinforcing the geographical setting and cultural context of the performance as domiciled in Benin kingdom; an ancient setting in Southern part of Nigeria. The performance is segmented into different scenes in line with the storyline, the first scene is the palace scene which shows the domain of king of Benin kingdom, where the king and his family reside. At the same time, it is where the affairs of the state are discussed and decided. As a nonverbal performance, the color, fabric, accessories, texture and style of costumes worn by actors in this scene are used in alignment with the scenic design as semiotic language that explicitly communicate the cultural background of the dance performance to the audience.

The appearance of the king in this scene shows his cultural heritage and his royal personality as the leader of the community and a person of high affluence and authority within the Benin society. He is costumed in red heavily beaded blouse with big red velvet wrapper stylishly tied around his waist to showcase his cultural affinity and social status. He also has on his head a big traditional carved beaded crown and on his neck and wrists red coral beads that reinforce his royal lineage and cultural background. To complement this outfit is his ancestry wooden staff of office known as (Ukhurhe) which is a symbol of his authority and power within the Benin community. Apart from the king, the red and wine velvet wrappers beautifully tied around the chest of the queen and princess as well as the coral beads on their necks, wrists and legs respectively connote the traditional fabric, color, and fashion style synonymous with the Benin royal family among the females. Beyond aesthetics effect, the elaborate beaded headdress called (okuku) worn on the head of the queen with the outlandish beaded hairstyle of the princess culturally depict their royalty, gender roles and hierarchy within the palace and the community at large.



Fig 1: Benin King with his Queen and the Princess in their Royal costumes dancing in the palace
Photo Credit: Researcher

Additionally, the traditional big white top, skirts and beads of the Benin chiefs and their staff of office known as (Eben) are markers of their cultural heritage and high social ranking within the Benin society where they function as kingmakers and councilors to the king on the affairs of the state. Furthermore, cultural identity is highlighted in the performance through the color, style and texture of the costumes of the dancers from the six geopolitical zones of the kingdom, irrespective of the fact that, there is a blend of indigenous and modern fashion styles in them. The female dance group from the northern part of the kingdom, for example, are projected in vibrant colors of modern brocade fabric sewn into traditional kaftan blouse style and wrapper with corresponding accessories while their male counterparts wore bright colored traditional hausa long tops, with trousers and

caps as a symbol of their northern heritage. In the same way, the female Ibo group from the eastern part wore colorful georgette, and ankara fabrics sewn into traditional blouse and skirt style with matching beads while their male wore big top and wrapper with traditional caps representing their cultural affiliation. Similarly, the style, color and texture of the traditional Aso-oke fabric worn by the dancers from the southwestern part of the kingdom equally signified their cultural identity among other ethnicity in the wrestling competition. Hence, costume functions as a cultural symbol that preserves and communicates cultural identity and heritage in the contemporary dance performance.



Fig 2: The Benin Chiefs in their Cultural Costumes with the Chief Priest and the Townspeople dancing at the Celebration Scene
Photo Credit: Researcher

Costume as a Symbol of Emotional Expression

Costume color, style and fabric are used to express emotional states and dramatic tension within the dance performance. Visual contrasts between costume elements signal shifts in mood and narrative intensity. Costume operates as a non-verbal emotional language that enhances audience understanding of performance dynamics. Bright and vibrant colors are associated with celebration, vitality, and communal identity, while darker tones suggested solemnity, ritual significance, or narrative tension. An archetypal example of emotional expression through color symbolism is reflected in the wrestling competition and celebration scenes of the dance performance, brilliant colors such as white, yellow, orange, blue, green, and red among others are found in the costumes of the dancers and participants to show that the occasions are joyous, blissful and very entertaining experience.

However, when the happy mood of the performance shifts to a scary, depressive and sorrowful state, the costumes worn by actors depict the traumatic narrative tension and the sad transition through costume evolution. For instance, in the scene where the princess is possessed by demons after disobeying her parents instruction not to enter the sacred room in the palace, the drastic and erratic transition in her mood and mental state are symbolically interpreted through the color and design of her costume beyond her uncoordinated dance steps. This is because the style of her costume and the red and black colors of her creepy gown are in direct synchrony with the style and color of the costumes of the actors playing the roles of demons. This signifies the deep spiritual connection between her soul and the esoteric world in that scene. In the same vein, the dreadful designs and dark colors associated with the costumes of the different wild creatures that the warriors encountered in the

forests on their way to secure water of life to cure the princess of her illness also heightened the emotional tension of fear, anxiety, and danger encapsulated in that scene in the mind of the warriors, turning an imaginative world into reality on stage for audience perception and comprehension through visual symbolism and performative expression. As a result, costume functioned not only as an identifier of social role but also as an expressive tool that revealed the psychological and emotional dimensions of the characters in the dance performance to the audience.

Costume as an Index for Character Identification

Costume plays a central role in facilitating character identification within the dance performance of *Joromi* by providing clear visual distinctions that enable the audience to recognize individual roles and social-economic positions. Costume functions as an immediate visual marker through which spectators identify characters, interpret their relationships, and understand their significance within the performance narrative. Due to the absence of dialogue in the performance, costume assumes a communicative function that supports audience comprehension by visually organizing the characters into recognizable categories. Distinct costume styles are deliberately used to differentiate characters and social roles within the performance, thereby enabling the audience to recognize variations in authority, responsibility, and personality traits.

Visual elements such as color combinations, fabric textures, decorative motifs, accessories and overall costume style contribute to the formation of identifiable characters' profiles as showcased in the wrestling and celebration scenes. Costume also serves as a symbolic

indicator of power and prestige. Characters occupying leadership or authoritative positions such as the king of Benin, the princess, his wives, chiefs, Joromi and the chief priest are typically distinguished by more elaborate costume designs that features bold colors, prominent accessories, and visually dominant silhouettes. In contrast, supporting or subordinate characters like townspeople, palace guards are represented through simpler costume forms that convey modesty, obedience, or other functional roles within the performance setting. These visual differences create a hierarchical structure that allowed the audience to interpret social relationships quickly and accurately.

Costume also supports character identification by communicating personality traits such as age, gender and occupational leaning of characters. Certain costume features suggest behavioral characteristics such as strength, humility, confidence, or vulnerability while others instantly show the vocation of characters. For example, the spectacular warriors costumes connote skill, strength and courage akin to their profession while the horrific costumes designs of the wild beasts convey fear, fierceness and danger. These visual cues enable the audience to anticipate character behavior and interpret emotional responses during the performance. As a result, costume functions not only as an identifier of social role but also as an expressive tool that reveal the physical and innate disposition of the characters. This demonstrates that costume functions as a practical and effective index for character identification within the performance. This is because through the strategic use of visual differentiation, costume enables the audience to recognize characters, understand their social roles, interpret personality traits, and follow narrative relationships throughout the performance. The consistent application of distinctive costume

styles contributed to narrative clarity, reinforced social hierarchy, and enhanced audience engagement, confirming the essential role of costume as a communicative resource in dance Theater.



Fig 3: Joromi in his warrior's costume
Photo Credit: Researcher



Fig 4: The Costume of the Gorilla in the Forest

Photo Credit: Researcher

Costume as an Enhancer of Movement and Visual Rhythm

Beyond rhetoric, the costume design of the characters in *Joromi* influences their physical movements and enhances visual rhythm within the performance space. For example, the flowing garments of Benin king and his queen projected the visibility of their body movements, through spatial dynamics creating visual rhythm that projects choreographic patterns of authority and power synonymous with their roles. Similarly, the skimpy design and texture of the warriors costumes aided their energetic movements during their encounters with the wild beasts in the forest and at the wrestling scenes. Furthermore, the sweeping arcs of wide-skirted costumes

during group dance sequences at the celebration scene, transform individual garment into a collective visual field, creating the impression of a unified and peaceful community. At the same time, costume accessories such as headpieces and waist adornments also contribute to the visual expansion of the performers' bodies in the dance by amplifying the beauty and meaning of their gestures and body movements to the audience. This analogy illustrates that in *Joromi* dance performance, costume serves as the primary activating mechanism through which the meaning of movements are mobilized and communicated to the audience because dance movement relies on costume for its weight, time, space, and flow. In this sense, costume becomes inseparable from the choreographic movements.

Apart from enhancing dance movement, costume also mediate between actor's body and visual rhythm through space. Within *Joromi*, actors costumes reinforces the rhythmic structure of the choreography, creating a multi-sensory signifying system in which what is seen on stage by the audience is in consonance with the storyline of the dance through the movement of dressed bodies in space. This is because spatial organization interacts with costume to communicate the visual rhythm of the dance to the audience. In *Joromi*, the spatial distribution of differently costumed bodies across the performance area constructs a visible social geography for communication. This is because the positioning of elaborately costumed principal figures relative to more simply dressed ensemble members encodes power relations and narrative hierarchy in spatial terms. The audience reads this geography intuitively, drawing on culturally ingrained spatial understanding to orientate themselves within

the performance world. Costume, in this sense, is not merely worn by individual performers but distributed across the performance space as a system of visual communication that organizes perception and guides interpretive attention of the audience. This analysis demonstrates that costume in *Joromi* cannot be understood in isolation from the performing body alone, without the rhythmic environment, or the spatial architecture of the stage. It is precisely through the network of relationships between garment, gesture, rhythm, and space that costume realizes its full function as a dynamic signifying system and a central instrument of non-verbal dramaturgy in African dance Theater.



Fig 5: The stylized Costumes of the Warriors Showing their Energetic Dance through Movements and Space
Photo Credit: Researcher

Costume as a Vehicle for Narrative Communication

Costume elements contribute to storytelling in *Joromi* by conveying thematic meanings and supporting narrative progression within the performance. Costume operates as a story telling device in the performance because it plays a significant role in clarifying narrative relationships among characters. By visually distinguishing individuals through consistent costume styles, and colors the performance establishes recognizable patterns that allowed the audience to follow the progression of events and interactions on stage from the beginning to the end. Costume elements in *Joromi* extend beyond semiotic ornamentation to perform an essential dramaturgical function. This is visible in the structuring and sustaining of narrative across the temporal arc of the performance where the conventional mechanisms of verbal storytelling dialogue, monologue, expository and narration are largely absent or subordinated to movement, the burden of narrative coherence falls substantially on the visual domain. Costume, in this context, assumes a role of "narrative discourse," providing the audience with the organizing codes through which sequence, causality, and relational meaning are comprehended by the audience. In *Joromi*, this narrative function of costume is executed through two interrelated strategies by the costumier; the maintenance of visual consistency across the performance arc, and the deployment of costume as immediate visual shorthand for character identity, social position, and relational status.

The first of these strategies concerns what is described as costume continuity; the deliberate maintenance of recognizable visual symbols for individual characters throughout the production, regardless of shifts in choreographic configuration, spatial arrangement, or group formation. The continuity of costume design throughout the performance ensures that characters remains

visually identifiable even during complex choreographic sequences involving multiple performers. This consistency enhances narrative coherence and minimized confusion, particularly in scenes where rapid movements or group formations could otherwise obscure character recognition. This consistency is not incidental but constitutes a deliberate dramaturgical choice, one that serves a critical cognitive function for the audience. This is because theatrical spectatorship is fundamentally an act of pattern recognition, in which audiences construct meaning by identifying and tracking recurring visual, spatial, and kinetic codes across the duration of a performance. Costume continuity directly supports this cognitive process by ensuring that each character retains a stable and distinguishable visual identity whether through a consistent color palette, a distinctive silhouette, or a culturally specific adornment that the production equips the audience with as well as the interpretive anchors needed to follow the progression of events and relationships on stage.

The second and equally significant function of costume in this analysis is captured in costume as visual narrative index, its capacity to communicate complex information about character identity, social status, and other significant information to the audience instantaneously without verbal mediation makes it an efficient and culturally potent symbol of dramaturgical narrative. In *Joromi*, each character's essential social and dramatic identity are established at first appearance through the immediate legibility of their costumes. To this extent, the two aforementioned costume narrative signifiers have demonstrated that the relationship between costume and storytelling in *Joromi* is neither peripheral nor supplementary.

Costume is, rather, a primary narrative instrument, that structures the audience's interpretive experience from first entrance to final formation. This advances the growing body of scholarship in performance studies that argues for the repositioning of costume design elements from the margins of dramaturgical analysis to its center.



Fig 6: The Cleansing Costume of the Princess highlighting when She is Cured of her Mental Condition

Photo Credit: Researcher

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of theater costume in the dance production of *Joromi* reveals that costume functions as a dynamic semiotic system that communicates cultural identity, emotional expression, and narrative meaning within performance. The findings demonstrate that costume elements operate not merely as aesthetic embellishments but as structured

visual signs that interact with movement, rhythm, and spatial dynamics to produce layered interpretive meanings. Through semiotic analysis of visual features such as color, fabric, texture, and style, the study identifies recurring symbolic patterns that contribute to the overall dramaturgical coherence of the performance. One of the most significant findings relates to the symbolic use of color in costume design. Distinct color schemes were observed to correspond with specific emotional states and thematic representations within the performance. Bright and vibrant colors are frequently associated with celebration, vitality, and communal identity, while darker tones suggested solemnity, ritual significance, or narrative tension. These visual cues enabled the audience to interpret emotional transitions and character dynamics without reliance on verbal communication. The use of color as a symbolic device aligns with semiotic theory, which conceptualizes visual elements as signifiers that convey culturally embedded meanings within performance contexts.

The analysis also reveals that costume materials and textures play a crucial role in communicating cultural heritage and social identity. Traditional materials such as raffia, beads, and woven fabrics were incorporated into costume designs to evoke indigenous performance traditions and communal values. These materials functioned as visual markers of authenticity and cultural continuity, reinforcing the connection between contemporary performance practice and traditional cultural expressions. The integration of indigenous materials into modern costume design illustrates the hybridization of traditional and contemporary aesthetics in contemporary dance theater. Furthermore, the study finds that costume design significantly influences movement and spatial dynamics within the performance.

Flowing garments enhanced the visibility of body movements, creating visual rhythm and emphasizing choreographic patterns. Costume accessories such as headpieces and waist adornments contributed to the visual expansion of the performer's body, thereby amplifying gesture and spatial presence on stage. This interaction between costume and movement supports performance theory perspectives that emphasize embodiment and visual dramaturgy as central components of theatrical communication.

Another important finding is the role of costume in character representation and narrative construction. Distinct costume styles were used to differentiate characters and social roles within the performance, enabling audiences to identify narrative relationships and thematic structures. Costume functioned as a visual shorthand for communicating identity, authority, and social status, thereby facilitating audience comprehension of the performance narrative. Collectively, these findings confirm that theater costume in *Joromi* operates as an integrated visual language that contributes to meaning-making in the dance performance. The interaction between costume elements and performance dynamics demonstrates the central role of visual design in non-verbal storytelling and audience interpretation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that theater costume functions as a dynamic visual language in the dance production *Joromi*, operating as a semiotic system that communicates cultural identity, emotional expression, and narrative meaning within performance. Through qualitative analysis of costume elements such as color, fabric, texture, and style, the research establishes that costume plays a central role in

shaping audience interpretation and enhancing storytelling in dance theater. The findings reveal that costume interacts with movement, rhythm, and spatial dynamics to produce visual coherence and dramaturgical meaning. Rather than serving solely as an aesthetic accessory, costume emerges as an active participant in performance, contributing to character representation, emotional communication, and thematic development.

By integrating semiotic theory in performance context, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding costume as both a symbolic sign system and an embodied performative element. This theoretical perspective reinforces the importance of visual design in contemporary Theater practice and supports the recognition of costume as a critical component of non-verbal communication in performance. Ultimately, the research underscores the significance of Theater costume as an expressive communicative force in dance Theater and contributes to the growing field of visual dramaturgy. The study calls for further scholarly attention to costume studies within performance research, particularly in African Theater contexts where visual symbolism plays a central role in cultural expression.

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