

# **THE PARNASSUS**



**University of Uyo Journal of  
Cultural Research**

**Vol. 9, No. 1, March 2013**

**&**

**Vol. 9, No. 2, September 2013 (Special Edition)**

# PATTERN COMPOSITION AND COSTUME DESIGN FOR THE THEATRE

By

**Margaret G. Akpan, Ph.D**

*Department of Theatre Arts*

*University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria.*

*peggylee59@yahoo.com*

+234 803 632 7171/+234 802 339 3571

## **Abstract**

The term, pattern, is inextricably linked to decorative design. It is a common principle of design used in textiles to reinforce and enhance fabrics with different visual sensations that help to stimulate interest because of their rich surfaces. Pattern functions in organizing or unifying the area of an object, provides visual enrichment and enjoyment, and communicates thought through symbols. Some patterns are composed purely for aesthetic reasons while others combine both aesthetic and symbolic meanings. Aesthetically, plain surfaces are vitalized with rich variety of patterns to captivate the eyes; whether large or small, the intricate patterns contribute to the richness of a surface appearance. Symbolically patterns communicate direct messages, or represent moral values, beliefs; ethics and principles, while at the same time are enchanting. Patterns could be planned or allowed to flow randomly. In the case of planned patterning, there is a careful consideration of the placement of shapes or lines, values, colours and textures so that a cohesive design is achieved. On the other hand, random patterning involves accidental occurrence of shapes or lines without purpose and without conscious design consideration. The focus of this paper is on patterns that are consciously planned to achieve a certain effect *vis-à-vis* that of enhancing characterization during theatrical productions. The paper opens a new vista and sets the pace for costume designers who are interested in building meaningful costumes for future theatrical productions.

## Introduction

Patterns are made up of a basic element known as motif. This is a simplified shape of an object, which forms the unit design. When it is non realistic, it is said to be abstract. It may be in the form of a dot, shape or line. Sometimes it comes in a complex form and at other times; it is intricate. There are many types of motifs involving single or complex arrangements. Some authorities in design enumerate and explain the different types thus:

**Grid:** This is composed of a network formed by intersecting lines or shapes in vertical and horizontal manner usually uniformly spaced. By so doing, there is provision for equal emphasis throughout the enclosed area. A superimposition of more than one grid creates a vibrating optical effect. The grid pattern is readily seen in the checkerboard design used mainly in West African fabrics. A structural quality to pattern is achieved with grids, colour, textures and values making it a complex entity (Gilfoy, 1983: 45, Gatto *et al.*, 1978: 183)

**Alternating Pattern:** This is the grouping of motives along one line with alternating number either below or above. There may be variations in colour, lines or shapes but the patterning must be consistent. The idea is the manipulation of the placement of motifs. The general effect is that of an undulating look which gives a feeling of movement that increases as elements are spaced further apart (Gatto, *et al.*, 1978: 185). In other words, the motifs may also be placed in alteration by altering their positions as they relate to the central axis without changing the original direction of the pattern (Parker and Smith, 1974: 52)

**Radial Pattern:** This kind of pattern radiates from the centre outwards and usually in precise intervals. Bedaux and Bolland (1980: 19-20) in their study of West African design noted that the radial design explodes and accelerates, thus making design dynamic, active and structurally strong. Examples of radial design include the 'star', 'wheel spokes', fireworks', 'peacock plumage' and so on.

**Border and Bands:** These enrich surfaces with decorative design, which add a feeling of elegance and individuality to the fabric. Talabi (1979: 18) sees them as a combination of repeated symbols and a repeated unit design, or lines and texture, which add a unifying force to the piece of design. Throughout history, sport teams have used this unique design pattern to identify themselves. "Borders and bands will emphasize the edge of a form or set apart a particular area, somewhat like underlining a word to make it more important" (Gatto, *et al.*, 1978: 186). Borders make clothing visually stronger. Depending on the role, a border may emphasize the neckline, sleeves, edge or hem of a character's costume.

**Rhythmical Patterns:** This is a kind of pattern that pulsates and flows in simple or complex motion. Gatto, *et al.* (1978: 187) reckon that:

Patterns that move along curved, circular, or undulating paths will produce a visual motion that moves our eyes along prescribed directions. We sense a flowing action in rhythmical pattern because each motif seems to move easily to the next unit throughout the total flow of the design.

In other words, when a pattern curves in and out especially in arcs or wave-like action, a rhythm is created with overriding organization or unifying factors. Rhythm is an easy way to tie units together to form both optically and intriguing well-organized patterns. Parker and Smith (1974: 52) sum up this observation, in the following words: "motifs in opposition tend to break the rhythm in a series of static arrangements creating a feeling of stability. Inverted motifs change the direction of the movement." Variations of motifs establish different rhythms or feelings of movement.

### **Patterns and Materials**

Gilfooy (1983: 8) comments that the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization of textile manufacturing made most foreign textiles dispensable materials. In Africa, textile is regarded as part of an expression of cultural values, so that, marriages, funerals and other rituals governing the physical and spiritual

worlds require proper cloth". Textiles are therefore part of cultural life whose patterns are readily linked to particular people. Examples include the Ghanaian *kente*, the black-white stripes of the Tiv people of Benue State, the Yoruba *aso oke*, the Igbo *akwete*, to mention but a few. This is why Gilfoy (1983: 1.1) writes that:

Textile reflects the cultures from which they come. They are simultaneously personal, societal, religious and political, and they are valuables for the spread of ideas from one culture to another... culturally, they express the accumulated wealth and knowledge of a society and the status of their owner, and they may also have spiritual significance when used in religious ceremonies.

The accumulated wealth, status and spiritual significance mentioned above, are due to the type of patterns that are embedded on the surface of fabrics. To this end, Lamb (1984: 26) writes that "in Sierra Leone, some group of men use raffia palm fiber cloths in their association to maintain order in daily life, propitiate the ancestors and educate the young". According to him, the Poro School, "takes place in the forest separated from the daily life of the community... Poro cloths were woven in the bush, to keep the uninitiated from seeing the secret patterns in production".

McLeod (1981: 78) cites another example when he observed that the Ghanaian *Kente* carries patterns that serve to identify the rank and purpose of the wearer, and also to express ideas about political and moral relationships. Baumann (1974: 37) also notes that "in Kumasi, during ritual ceremonies, the King wears a large white cotton cloth studded all over with Arabic writings in various coloured inks, and of a most brilliant well-formed characters, said to further empower the Chiefs to perform the rituals properly"

Apart from the need for special occasion, cloths are also related to the wisdom of proverbs, which are visually realized through the use of specific motifs intricate weft-flat patterns (Gilfoy, 1983: 42). The wax and non-wax prints function as language or as a facilitator of the spoken or written word. One's identity, beliefs and set values are embedded in these

fabrics. Some wax prints combine proverbs with visual forms to express certain Akan beliefs, values and social relations. The visual form on the cloths elicits the spoken proverbs. Therefore the surface of the cloth is used to convey messages either through written or representational imagery. The manner in which the cloth is worn can also be used for very expressive communication.

### **Significance of Pattern Composition**

There seems to be a general agreement that well composed patterns make the wearer to look more elegant, bold, sophisticated or even mysterious. Large, strong, powerful patterns command attention, while subtle, muted and closely-knit patterns produce a more reserved or refined effect (Gatto *et al.*, 1978: 150). As long as a pattern is planned, it will always give the same effect of enrichment and visual interest. In this case, purposeful patterns are used to camouflage, assist or enhance the character of the wearer. Examples abound in nature where animals and birds are known to be attracted to one another through recognition of specific patterns. This could be observed among the different species of monkeys ranging from guenons, mangabees, drills and baboons. If animals can be identified by their patterns; it is believed that patterns on clothing can also communicate to reveal the personality of the wearer or the reason or motive behind the adornment of such clothing. Specifically, Gilfoy (1983: 210) notes that the North African inspired lozenge design is to protect the Muslims against a harmful glance. Thus, wearing this image of an eye is believed to cast off evil and this belief makes most Islamic motifs to be thought of as being magical as well as protective. Special mention is made about Dogon people of Mali who perceived that rectangles give structure to the unformed words of the spirit, thereby making the checkerboard (grid) the most important in both daily life and ritual. Accordingly, "Dogon fields are plowed in crisscrossed rectangles; and rectangles also appear on ritual masks, and as shadow and light motifs on buildings" (Gilfoy, 1983: 45). The shadow and light designs also symbolize the opposition and contrast found in life as well as in the spirit realm.

In support of Gilfoy's assertion, Prussin (1986: 75) relates the checkerboard design to an Islamic belief which ties the cosmos to an

orderly arrangement of squares, with power emanating from the centre which Muslims relate to Allah. Selorm (2011: 3) believes that contrary to western fashion, there is often a deeper meaning hidden away in African designs. Therefore, colours, patterns and designs have an ancient root and meaning, which could be used deliberately. For example:

A pattern of a hand refers to a maxim; 'it is with the hand we work'. A locket denotes 'one must be wealthy to wear a gold locket' or 'one must have means for any 'undertaking'. Crossed lines mean 'everyman must carry his own mark' signifying a person is known for his own personality. (*Clothing and Textile*, 2011: 2)

In Africa therefore, and in Nigeria in particular, unique motifs are created to express cultural values.

### **Pattern Composition and Costume Design for the Theatre**

In the theatre, the costume worn by a character is much more significant and complex than a simple article of clothing. A costume, just as the script, gives information to the audience, such as the character's wealth status, type of job, race, religion or sex of a character among other things. Undoubtedly, costumes are the most intimate aspect of the visual theatre experience because the characters wear them.

The patterns on costumes should add more meaning and differentiate the characters. According to Nobikko (2010: 2) "the brain attempts to discern and understand patterns as they occur and give expressions to unique and creative patterns of its own. It will resist having meaninglessness imposed on it." By meaninglessness, Nobikko meant pieces of information unrelated to what makes sense to observers or learners. A typical example are the signs and symbols on the *Ekpe Efik* masquerade paraphernalia. *Ekpe* signs and symbols tell stories that would have called for extensive writing. *Ekpe* patterns are called *Nsibidi*. These are coded messages embedded in the mane, hand amulet and leg amulet of the paraphernalia. The *Nsibidi* signs are not open to non-initiates because *Ekpe* is a secret society and all does not subscribe to *Ekpe*. The patterns on *Ekpe* costumes communicate and direct the affair of the *Ekpe*.

Though the patterns are secret writings and are not revealed, they are coded messages which are understandable to the initiates. It is intriguing to discover that these patterns communicate loudly what ordinary words would have called for extensive writing. The colours used for the patterns are white, red and yellow orange. Their meanings have esoteric connotations (Bassey, 2001: 59-60).

Patterns on materials used for theatre costumes should also make meaning to the audience. It was believed that in most African cultures, images and forms have latent powers which must consciously be released if the rite of creation is to be completed satisfactorily. According to Bassey (2001: 67) the *Ekpe* masquerade of the *Efik* is richly coded with allusions of energy and powers and any misapplication has disastrous conceptual effect. Nzegwu (2010: 3) notes that Obatala is decorated in white, the colour of Orisa. Red is avoided since "it is held to unleash energy changes that are antithetical to the soothing, calming force of Obatala." Picton and Mack (1979: 9) record that the "tribal affiliation of a Moroccan Berber woman can be read in the pattern of the stripes on her cloak."

In China, patterns are used meaningfully, and are always embroidered on ceremonial robes worn by actors. Buss(1922: 94) writes that "scroll and animal and flower knots and leaves, claws, scaly tails, fangs, and squinting eyes depict fury, malice, cunning, goodness or wisdom...." In China, the pattern of a dragon means protection and that of a fox means betrayal. The list is unending. The important thing about pattern is that the meaning is always cultural. In Nigeria, a typical Igbo Chief could easily be identified with his chieftaincy dress top with patterns of the lion's head, known as *Isi Agu*. The Tiv people of Benue State are identified with their black and white stripped patterns. Many more examples abound within the cultural milieu of the country's cultural life. The Zulu beadwork design is not merely a decorative art of weaving small glass beads into aesthetically pleasing patterns but, "research has shown that these designs were surprisingly articulated vehicles of communication that helped to regulate behavior between individuals of opposite gender" (Stan, 1983; 114). Further explanations reveal that men could see whether a woman is uncommitted, engaged, married, unmarried, has children or unmarried sisters. The above ability of the Zulu beadwork to communicate is said to be rapidly subsiding



under the pressure of urbanization and culture change. The theatre is a good place to revive this unique use of pattern to communicate.

Again, socially high-ranking people are identified through special items of clothing in place of patterning. For example, the Roman Emperors wore garments dyed with Tyrian purple. Also, among the *Efik*, only the *Ekpe* wears the *okpomkpom Ekpe* (a long strip of decorative cloth tied around the neck). In some traditions, images are painted on clothing as decorative motifs to represent objects, place or events. Thus, patterns do not only enhance the person's appearance but also define his place in the community. Spencer (2003: 4) writes that in Japan, patterns have been used to exploit loopholes in the law by recreating cloths which ordinarily were banned by law but designed for use in the theatre. Creating costumes which are full of subtlety, illusion and hidden meaning helps to emphasize a character's role. Most textile materials, especially the wax prints, carry a number of identifiable and meaningful patterns which could be used for personal, political, social and religious expressions.

The size and shape of patterns in costume design have considerable effects on the development of character. The designer has the responsibility to understand the working principles of, and how to use the various elements of design in the manipulation of meaningful patterning. Decorative embellishment or shapes of garments may have prestigious value so that the wearer of such clothes is immediately marked out as having great wealth or status. Design elements and principles enable the creation of any pattern for visual sensitivity and creative order because in the theatre, good designs combine with the actor's experience to promote the action in the world of the play. Good patterning creates harmony which, in itself, is a pleasing arrangement of parts that engage the viewer, creating an inner sense of balance and order. A chaotic thing indicates disharmony, and as Morton (2002: 2) puts it, the brain has the capacity to reject something that is not stimulating or something that it cannot organize or understand.

## **Conclusion**

Costume designers should be bold to employ patterns in costume design to reflect the nature of the performance. There are patterns that specifically correspond with people's temperaments, and these should be purposefully employed. This is because the knowledge and application of the psychological meaning of patterns can further aid the comprehension of characterization. The design of costume has to take this growing need into consideration in order to meet the demands of play/film productions.

The costume designer creates the look of each character by designing costumes and accessories that the actors wear in performance. Their designs need to faithfully reflect the personalities of the characters in the script. The patterns, colours and textures that a costume designer chooses make an immediate and powerful visual statement to the audience. Most members of the audience can read meaning and understand the costumes that the actors wear. It should be understood that costume is a very powerful visual element in the theatre and when they fail to be meaningful, they create a barrier to the understanding of such a production.

## Works Cited

- Bassey, B. E. (2001). *Ekpe Efik: A Theosophical Perspective*. Canada: Trafford Pub.
- Bedaux, Rogier M.A. and Rita Bolland. (1980). "Medieval Textiles from the Tellan Graves in Central Mali." *Textile Museum*. 19-20
- Braumann, Rent A. (1974). *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buss, Kate. (1922). *Studies in Chinese Drama*. New York: Jonathan Cape and Harris Smith.
- Gatto, J.A., W. Porter and J. Sellack. (1978). *Exploring Visual Design*. Worcester, Massachusetts: Davis Publication Inc.
- Gilfoy, Peggy. (1983). *Fabrics in Celebration from the Collection*. Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Arts.
- Lamb, Verice. (1984). *Sierra Leone Weaving*. England: Oxford Books.
- McLeod, M.D. (1981). *The Ashante*. London: British Museum Publication.
- Mortor, J.L. (2002). "Colour Context" <<http://www.colourcontext.com>>
- Nobikko, J. (2010). "Costume Design" <<http://www.characterisation.com>>
- Nzegwu, M. (2002). "Ijele" <<http://www.ijele.com/ijele/vol/12/nzegwu.html>>
- Parker, W.O. and H.K. Smith. (1974). *Scene Design and Stage Lighting*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston Incorporated.
- Picton, John and John Mack. (1979). *Africa Textiles: Looms Weaving and Design*. Great Britain: Jarrold and Sons Ltd.

Prussin, Labelle. (1986). *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Selorn, Francis Seshie. (2011). "Communicating through African Fashion." <http://www.crawford.uk/africa/kente.html>>

Spencer, Michael. (2003). "Kabuki Story" <http://www.kabukistorycostume.html>>

Stan, Schoeman. (1983). "Eloquent Beads, the Semantics of a Zulu Art Form." *Africa Insight*. (3) 1-5.

Talabi, George. (1979). *Art Teaching in African Schools*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Limited.

Textile Museum (2004). "Clothing and Textile." <http://www.textilemuseum.ca/cloth-clay/how-textilemeaning>.