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## Extreme Make-Up and Costume Designs on the Nigerian Stage: The Techniques of Oye Ogungbe

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### **Abstract:**

*Extreme designing is a specialist field within the larger theatre design workspace where hundreds of talented experts give life to the thoughts of the scriptwriter. One of the few extreme designers in Nigeria today is Oye Ogungbe(aka Akobi) whose focus area is costume and make up. This study is a pioneering effort at documenting the styles and creative devices of this prodigious self-taught extreme designer. The paper traces the historical development of Oye Ogungbe, catalogues his works and analyses his techniques, styles and materials. The study concludes that while exploration of techniques, theories and formal academic training are good for the development of the designer, the lack of these may not obstruct on-the-job effectiveness as Oye Ogungbe, in spite of his lack of formal academic training and exploration of techniques has succeeded immensely by relying on his inner gift of intuition.*

### **1. Introduction**

Extreme Design could be said to be a special effect scheme whereby designers go beyond the normative, ordinary laws, principles or guidelines in rendering designs. They explore deliberate exaggeration and over-illustration in romanticizing the scripted message. By virtue of their professional calling, Extreme Designers often go out of their ways in manners that no one could either question or explain. They mindfully play with distortion, creation and decoration. They utilize creativity in the physical construction of the stage as well as in the visual stimulations of the scenery, costume and make-up of characters. The Extreme Designers are concerned with the message of the theatrical productions which they employ extreme optical illusions to achieve. Extreme Designers use three-dimensional forms to transform the actor's appearances with particular respect to make-up.

Extreme design of costume and make-up does not just include the creation of cloths for spirit-beings, fiendish creatures or protuberant foreheads, hanging jaws large scars or such unsightly appearances, rather it includes the creation of mask and dummies meant to "deceive" the eyes of the audience and in many cases are to illusively substitute for human heads, legs, arms and as well weird beings. For example during the three stage productions of Bakare Ojo Rasaki's *Drums of War* as convocation play at Obafemi Awolowo University in 1998, dismembered limbs, legs and torso of a baby slashed into two halves were part of the theatrical set.

### **2. Make-Up**

Make-up as the name suggest involves the use of extra-theatrical methods to make -up an actor or actress into that character which he or she is not an actual every-day sense. Extreme make- up compels the designer to waggle up his intellectual repertoire for unusual touches that will effectively include the eyes of the audience. The artist could utilize synthetic attachment in creating scripted characters within an amazing period of time.

### **3. Costume**

Lindersay (2011:1) has indicated that: "Of all the arts, the theatre costume is the most multi-dimensional." The designer-artist thinks of costume subjectively as a means of artistic expression with a rather extreme effect on the audience. The designer, whether he is in charge of the whole visual scene or of the costume alone, wishes to see a certain emotion or mood made manifest in fabric of a certain shape and colour on an actor moving in and out of light on stage. Sometimes his aim is to astonish, excite an audience by exaggeration and distortion of the actor's body at other time, his aim is to beautify and enhance the human form. There are times where the designer is not interested in actors at all but only in the creation of rich, sensuous effects in movement on stage; while other times he is interested only in textual and draped effects as they are actuated by light. Costumes designers tend to recognise the urge to express themselves in their works, as a result of their own personalities and experiences, they find certain spurs tp work stronger than others.

#### 4. Akobi Oye Ogungbe: Training, Style and Techniques of Design

Born on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 1955, in Abeokuta to the family of that popular Nigerian veteran artiste Akin Ogungbe, Oye Ogungbe had all he needed to take to the arts from a very young age. Though his father was a contemporary of prominent Nigerian theatre exponents like Chief Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola and others, he did not dabble directly into acting as a career. Oye thought it better to carve a niche for himself in the sub-theatricals.

#### 5. Education and Apprenticeship

After his elementary and post elementary education between 1963 and 1969 and between 1971 and 1976 respectively, Oye underwent tutelage under his father to become an actor. His talent as an artiste became exposed on the international scene in 1977 when he doubled as a member of the technical crew as well as the youngest actor in a cast of about one hundred and sixty (160) people for the command performance of "Langbodo" at the World Black Festival of Arts and Culture. He worked in his father's "Travelling Theatre Company" for a short while before setting-up a publicity and sign writing studio, designing posters and hand-drills.

However, Akobi did not find enough satisfaction with the establishment of the sign and publicity studio. He denied the Yoruba celluloid (cinema) film industry, distinguishing himself with the creation of outstanding special effects in scenic make-up and costume designs in numerous productions. He created dummy replicas of skulls, skeletons, corpses and many of the fiendish and mysterious characters often depicted in the imaginary and mythological evil forests of the Yoruba literary creations. Akobi (firstborn), as Oye Ogungbe is popularly called, considers himself a product of auto-didactic development. A trend which has generated serious philosophical argument in many similar situations.

Even though, according to Akobi, apart from acting which he tapped from working with his father, he is self trained since he did not learn extreme designs from anyone or formal training. Education philosophers would argue, 'If it involves training or teaching, it can not be auto.' Teaching is a two-way activity from one to another. The scenario intended by the respondent subject of this discussion may have been similar to intuition, which is the most powerful intellectual factor influencing creativity especially in arts. During an interview on the S with Oye Ogungbe, he declared he has often received inspiration from his dreams where he has seen pictures and gotten ideas as support for his actual creations.

Perhaps in addition to intuition which is similar to most artists, is the professional environment. This is because there is an evidence that Oye Ogungbe, apart from working with his father, also worked with other artistes and artists on the technical side of productions, even while still growing up. Great evidence of his artistic contributions could be found in the following productions to his credit: Ireke Onibudo, Lisabi, Agbongbo-Akala, Langbodo Kurumi, Sango e.t.c. During the production of Lisabi he created a mechanical environment in which Lisabi superficially descended into the earth. In Moses Olaiya's (Baba Sala) film Mosebolatan he constructed a contraption of a burning ship on the sea. He also created in the same production a big bird that carried Baba Sala in the sky with the cloudy environs with a painted baft material. For the purpose of this research we would use Akobi's works in Ojo Bakare's Drums of war and Wale Ogunyemi's Langbodo which were produced in Obafemi Awolowo University and University of Abuja respectively. Evidences of the extreme designs and special effects as used in the various design elements will be analysed.

#### 6. Analysis of Akobi's Works

##### 6.1. Drums of War

Akobi's designs in Drums of War: An analysis.

"Drums of War", a play by Rasaki Ojo Bakare is an illustration of Nigerians historical conflicts and the solemn suggestions of the ways out of the conflicts. The play provides a theatrical alternative to the prevailing peace and conflicts negotiation, using the stage to persuade Nigerians to exercise a strong bias for peace. To achieve this exploit, extreme designs become inevitable, particularly Akobi's designs and special effects. Akobi has designed for the production Drums of War on several occasions, but of particular interest to this study is this production of Drums of War at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in November, 1998.

In this work Akobi did not restrict himself to building the costume and make-up alone, one realises the fact that in achieving his purpose he had to interweave all the elements of design in other to communicate. This is because in some cases for the effect of a particular costume and make-up to be accomplished it has to be placed side by side with the scenes and these Akobi attempted to achieve in the production, therefore we are not only looking at the costume and make-up element on its own but will analyse it against the background of the scenes and other elements as presented in the production.

Akobi, as a result of his extreme creativity could be said to have often created from entirely nothing. This is because most of his beautiful and technical concepts rely usually on waste products like used cans, cylinders or cartons, and fabrics in his make-up designs as used in the production. He grossly employed the convention of distorting the human face towards the actual semblance of particular characters. For instance, fat characters played by actors who are not fat enough are achieved by padding up with resilient materials or many layers of foam or the costumes are made with inundaable strings materials or malleable rubber as well as other workable materials.

In designing, Akobi employs his experience of the signwriters art to carry out detailed and meaningful creations. He uses dark curtain colours such as black, red ochre, brown and yellow ochre against which background is characterized by costumes of major actors such as the Akogun which were built with sack clothes and strewn with various types of amulets and charms making it look heavy and fearsome. The implication of this use of natural colours is that once the eyes of the audience are set at the scene, the eyes become restless and become reluctant to look away. Once arrested the audience rises with the tempo to the top of the climax. In the war scene,

wounded townspeople and warriors are seen with amputated limbs especially two characters who have their right legs and left legs each cut by the rival warriors. With the use of cheap workable fibre materials, Akobi achieved artificial effects that attracts natural reactions from the audience.

In other to achieve conviction on the enormity of the effects of war on the people, Akobi used blood effect on the wounded warriors and some of the towns people. For example, the warrior that has a sword running from his back through his chest and the warrior that died in the palace. Special pigments are simply mixed with water to show the effects of blood. The pigments are often prepared and mixed to a blood red hue, warm enough to depict the intensity of the human blood. The blood could be textured with gum or starch to achieve tickness without necessarily losing consistence.

In scenes where accephalous bodies are carried on stage, Akobi used his sculptural ingenuity by creating the whole body using foam and other synthetic fibres, at other times he conceals the head of the characters by wrapping it with the upper torso, so that the head becomes hidden. He also designs a separate dummy head lying inert somewhere on stage. According to Akobi; what he does is to use a block of synthetic fibre or foam and apply subtractive and additive sculpting techniques to develop it first to the basic geometrical shape underlying the human head. After simplifying the material into its basic geometry with the subtractive method, he now applies additive method to reflect the detailed features of the human head, carefully gearing it to the resemblance of a given character.

The same method he applied in the creation of the gods contraption that emanated from the underground, the skeleton being was made of fibre and string together and the bird representation of the rival village. The fibre and errie sound accompany the presentation and the reaction of the audience supported its believability. Construction of metal and wooden weapons are also evident in the work. For instance, the audience finds it amazing when a warrior struck with a sword has the sword suspended or hung in his loin and travels with it to the next scene. Simple sculptural casting method are also employed especially the high relief template from which Akobi achieves the masks used for the gods.

### *6.2. Akobi's Approach In Langbodo*

The nature of Lanbodo as a work of art requires design to expose the audience to metaphysical dimensions explored by the play. Meaning and experience as portrayed by the director are such that transcend verbal words though as a guide, Akobi relies on the verbal dialogues in the play to initiate three dimensional spartial interpretation. The mise-en-scene (which results from mere transformation of such materials and ordinary clothing, furniture, architecture, paper, synthetic foam and pigments into an artistic code) now appears as a sacred forest or an ancient location in the eyes of the audience.

Creation of mysterious characters in the production really emphasized Akobi's ingenuity, he uses it to depict out each of the characters and relating them to their individual environment. The characters of "Were Orun, Egbere, Agbako" were given such imaginative costume and paraphenelia that the audience were outstouted. And this is fueled by the Yoruba cosmotological belief of how such mysterious characters would look alike.

The concept of fear is portrayed by Akobi in his creation of the seven warriors costume as well as that of the king of birds ( the Ostrich). Using ordinary plain fabric material with elaborate attachment of ritual symbols such as shells, gourds and stains of colour pigments, even though the ritual materials do not carry the attendant efficiently of traditionals rituals, the emblems and symbolic art object create substantial aura or atmosphere of fear and the seriousness of their assignment and responsibility towards their people while the same fear as represented by the costume and other properties of the king of the birds and the likes of Agbako depicts the fear and the resistance the warrior will encounter in their journey to seek solution to the problems of their community as well as their world.

Akobi's use of colour is a principal factor which influences the costume design and make-up and has sufficient psychological influence on the audience. He does not seem to obey any formal rule in the use of colour, but his dominant hues are obvious derivatives of the three primary colours, red, yellow, and blue. He borrows tonal influences from white and black directly instead of "cooking" each colour from its freshest hue to the dullest of the greys. He deliberately uses lighter colours to highlight the costumes on characters that are portrayed as positive in the play such as the first medium, while using darker colours to re-emphasize costumes and the make-up of characters that are not ethically supported in the tone of the storyline. The logic behind this is psychological since the costumes and make-up need lighting effect to properly project their colours, he relies on the power of the colours which is deep-seated in the audience psychological perception. Darkness repels, disturbs or alarms, while it is apparent that light suggests reassurance or hope.

Akobi, as earlier noted had little or no formal education and as a matter of fact he marries the different aspects of design together. He therefore relies on his workshop. His work stands sometimes shoulder to shoulder and even more profound and intriguing with works of artists and set designers who have been trained within the four walls of western class rooms. However, the factor that is responsible for this is that Akobi's works is not technique-centred but result centred. As an artist who has the required imaginative and intellectual energy to picture the end result of an artistic endeavour, he constantly pursues design until it is attained. In doing this little or no attention is paid to the issue of theoretical procedure or adherence to particular technical styles. The primary focus is on the end being justified by all means. In designing costumes and make-up, Akobi derives great inspiration from the scripts of the plays for which the design is meant. Like most other designers, the storyline of each of the scripts on which a production is based forms an interesting and challenging topic for artistic designs. Unknown to most play directors, designers see new challenges, new motivations and inspiration each time they are given the opportunity to design for such productions. Therefore, the nature of the scripts itself forms a great inspiration for Akobi, like most other good artists where it comes designing or building costumes or make-up.



7. Appendix (Pictures Showing Some of Oye's Works)



*Oye Ogungbe (Akobi) At Work Making Up Kako One Of The Hunters In Langbodo Production*



*A Fearsom Looking Hunter Costume (Another Of Akobi's Creation)*



*Egbera (Mysterious Character) Costume And Made Up By Akobi*



*A Half Human Half Bird Costume by Akobi*



*Agbako (Mysterious Being)*

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