

ISSUES IN THE USE OF COSTUME AND ITS RELATIONSHIP  
TO SKIN DISEASES IN THE NIGERIAN THEATRE

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Abstract

This article focuses on the fundamental issues in the use of costumes and its relationship to skin diseases in the Nigerian theatre. It examines skin diseases that can be contracted through the use of contaminated costumes which can bring infections to the human skin. In the Nigerian theatre, like other theatre traditions across the world, it is an accepted norm to use costume and keep it for future uses. It is in view of this that the issues of costume management take the central stage in this study. The paper is built on multi-disciplinary of Environmental Medicine Theory (EMT) which highlights environmental factors that can potentially affect health. It underscores the prevention of diseases and health supportive interactions between human beings and the environment. Adopting the historical-analytic and participant-observation methods, the paper explores the possible solutions that can protect actors/actresses from contracting contagious diseases through the usage of costumes for performances. In doing this, the article advises on how the transmission of skin diseases in Nigerian theatre can be checked by the costumier in charge of costumes through treating costumes with utmost care by washing all the costumes after use in order to make them safe for subsequent users. The conclusion reached is that proper attention should be given to costumes in the area of management; this will preserve the life span of the fabrics and a health assurance to actor's skin. The study also recommends that medical trainings should be organized for screen or stage costumiers and students of theatre and media arts to know the risk involved in the use of costumes for performances and possible ways that actors can avoid contracting skin diseases as they use costumes with others from time to time.

Keywords: Nigerian theatre, Costume, Environmental medicine theory, Skin disease,

## Introduction

In the Nigerian theatre, there are some fundamental issues in the use of costume which includes: hiring of costumes, washing of costume, mis/management of costume, artist phobia/fear of contagious diseases through sharing of costume, inability of costumier to procure new and maintain unused costume due to economic problem, and scarcity of some certain costumes. It has been observed that the aforementioned issues are related to one another which make actors' skin to be prone to skin diseases. Skin diseases can be eczema, ringworm, skin rash, dermatitis and scabies, etc., but their mode of transmission seldom differs. They are mostly transmitted through contact with an infected skin or things that have been worn by an infected person if not properly washed. This postulates that actors are vulnerable to skin diseases if the costumes used are not well catered for before another user picks it up.

Costume has played a central role in the theatre and this has overtime metamorphosed into a tradition. However, the use of costumes in a theatrical work brings out the basic aesthetics of the production or performance. Costumes, in the theatre, is a storytelling tool-communicating details of each character's personality and status to the audience. Costume help actors drop their real person and become new as make believe characters on stage or screen. Costume includes all the garments and accessories worn or carried by the performer, wigs and related head coverings, mask and anything used to transform facial appearances. Of all the visual elements for performance, costumes are the most personal because they are actually worn by the performers (Wilson 1991, p.357). Closely related to costumes are make-up, hairstyles and masks. Costumes suggest a number of things about the wearer's position or status, occupation, gender, occasion, special events, among others. When a theatrical director thinks about how to make a performance meaningful, one of the arts of the theatre he or she considers is the costume for performers. This is because costumes and performers are perceived as one because they merge into a single image for performance. Eghagha (2002, p.74) comments that:

Costumes add to the stage presence of the actors by enriching his physical personality. Without the appropriate and relevant costume, an actor could be flat or convey the wrong message to the audience. The colour combination of costumes ought to reflect the mood of the play and this would help in the interpretation.

The point being made is that costume gives vital information that may not appear in the dialogue of a play. This, simply means costume can tell a story and personality of a character even when the character did not render any lines. Cohen (1941, p.139) asserts that costume of course is clothing. It must be functional as well as meaningful and aesthetic. Shedding more light on this Badeji (2000, p.74) opines that stage costumes have to be designed more broadly and extensively than everyday clothes. When we look at the sensitive areas of the theatre that really needs proper attention, costume section is a major issue here because it is surrounded by many problems that can affect the skin. Basically, any infectious disease can be contracted if the clothes or fabrics performers wear are contaminated. For example one can contract sexually transmitted disease if one shares underwear with an infected person. You can catch flu or cold, if you share handkerchief with an infected person. It is not hygienic to share things that come in contact with someone else's skin and body fluids indiscriminately.

The efforts of improving on costume in the Nigerian theatre have had a slow development because many actors seem to complain of one skin ailment or the other after they are done with a performance. Skin diseases can become a serious issue in the use of costume in theatre. This can happen during performance where costume soaked with perspiration worn by an actor which contains bodily fluids can develop into or attract micro-organisms that cannot be seen and if the costume is not properly disinfected before another actor uses it, could cause skin irritations like dermatitis, scabies and other diseases to the body of an actor. This happens because the skin is a visible organ. Therefore, it easily gets exposed to dangers which cause impairment of health or problem to it. Human skin is the outer protective layer of the human body. However, in the theatre where clothes are shared among casts, skin diseases can easily be contracted if the costumes are not properly catered for. But looking at the situation of things during mid year 2014 in Nigeria, fear gripped everyone in the country with the issue of Ebola virus that resurfaced then. This made costume section in theatre schools to start to face some challenges on the use of costumes for performances. Since body fluids like sweat is one of the ways one can contract the virus people are becoming scared to use costumes which they do not have the health history of the previous user.

The motive of this study is to examine the major diseases that affect the skin through the use of costumes in the Nigerian theatre. However, the fact cannot be ruled out that the artists on stage are openly vulnerable to the dangers of contagious diseases which may

emanate from the sharing of costumes. According to the American Academy of Environmental Medicine, AAEM, (1965), "many infectious diseases can spread from contact between people through various types of personal contact". To this end, this paper is aimed at focusing on those issues (in relation to the use of costume in the Nigerian theatre), their causes and the possible solutions to them. The paper adopts the historical-analytic and participant-observation methods. Having historically situated the role of costume in theatrical productions, we deploy the participant-observation research method, which enables us to witness the reactions of actors to use of costumes when it is time for performances. Sam Ukala cited in Musa (2007, p.17) says that the observation research methodology is the:

Oldest and common means of obtaining data about man within his environment the first systematized used of it was by man's earliest theatre artists, who constructed rituals and other mimetic performances from their observations of man, beasts, nature and its forces. Studies in today's Theatre Arts are still on man in relationship with society and with natural and supernatural forces and observation have remained the handiest tool of the researcher in the discipline.

Therefore, the observation method is of great value to us in this study. This researcher as a costumer was able to observe reactions of actors during the 2014 induction ceremony performance of the students of Visual and Performing Arts, Kwara State University Malete. Many of these students were reluctant to use the costumes in the wardrobe because of fear of skin infection and because of Ebola virus that resurfaced then.

### Theoretical Framework

In order to effectively explore the root and provide solutions to problems of skin diseases that can be contracted through the use of costumes in the theatre, we arrived at using Environmental Medicine Theory (EMT) to anchor our position so that actors in the theatre can rest assured to use their costumes without any fear. Environmental Medicine was created by the American Academy of Environmental medicine (AAEM) in 1965 by a group of clinicians from various specialties who came together to form a medical society to promote optimal health through prevention, safe and effective treatment of the causes of illness by supporting physicians and other professionals in

servicing the public through education about the interaction between humans and their environment (AAEM, 1965). This theory encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially affect health. It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments.

Environmental medicine theory is concerned with the interaction between mankind and the environment. More specifically, it involves the adverse reactions experienced by an individual on exposure to environmental excitants which are found in air, food, water, and drugs, and are frequently found in the home, work, and school and play environments. Exposures to these agents may adversely affect one or more human organs or systems. Correspondingly, the arts have become vital tools to re-educate, re-inform and re-sensitize people on how to curb the disease. Afolayan (2012, p.53) made it clear that: The didactic and utilitarian functions of literatures and theatre make is a vital tool in the hands of medical discourses, these literatures are use to teach topics on subjects such as; science, art of diagnosing, treatment, and prevention of diseases and injuries, research on new drugs and technology, medical business, and the physician-patient relationship with the aim of helping people to live longer, happier, more active live with less suffering and disability.

To this effect, literature has become one of the vibrant apparatuses used in bringing back the values and concerns of humanities to the medical sectors using what Jonne Trautmann & Robert Coles called aesthetic and ethical approaches (Jone McLellan, 1996, p.1360). Literature works that have been used to discuss medical problems include Tunde Kelani's Dazzling Mirage (2014) and Arugba (2008).

#### Features of Environmental Medicine Theory

- It is related to organization, management, education and consultation.
- It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can affect health.
- It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating healthy environment.
- It implements health policies through monitoring and control activities.
- It carries out that role by promoting the improvement of environmental parameters and by encouraging the use of friendly and healthy technologies .
- The theory made it clear that climate change has a serious effect on health issues.

## Culture of Costume Management in the Nigerian Theatre

The practice of costume management in the Nigerian theatre had a slow growth rate when compared to other arts of the theatre such as acting and directing. Management is the utilization of materials and human resources through cooperative effort and it is accomplished by performing the functions of learning, organizing, accessing and controlling (Adeoye, 2008). One of the major issues that costume management is faced with in the theatre is the lack of professionalism. To manage costume in Nigeria theatre demands a high measure of professionalism. Anyone managing the costume must articulate his or her role effectively as any little mistake can destroy the fabrics used in making the costumes. Some situations about how some costumiers handle costumes in the Nigerian theatre are unethical and this is likely because of the level of ignorance them. Professionalism in any area of specialization has to do with some ethical consideration that may guide the operations of the field. Costuming like any other area of theatre should have its ethics. Shimsenge & Gbileka citing Sunday Ododo assert that a majority of the people seen as costume and make-up artists are largely fashion designers cum untrained make-up artists who just took up the profession to make ends meet without requisite training in the ethics modality of operation of these two physical appurtenances of the theatre(2014, p.159). The above assertion implies that professionalism in art of costuming must be backed up with training of costumiers to enable them know how to care for this costume to make it healthy against skin irritations to the body.

Economic constraint is another problem that we face in the costume segment of the Nigerian theatre. For the past four decades, the somersaults in the Nigerian economy have resulted in serious poverty in the lives of the citizens. This poverty has also extended to the theatre. It has adversely affected the costume subdivision seriously. Sometimes a theatre company or institution that organises theatrical productions or offer theatre courses are not ready to provide the required finance to procure costume which can improve the aesthetic status of productions for stage or screen. In such a situation, costumiers are left with no option but to rent or hire costumes whose history of previous users is unknown due to insufficient funds. For instance, this issue almost marred the command performance of Efunsetan Aniwura (1961) by the School of Visual and Performing Arts, Kwara State University for 19<sup>th</sup> coronation ceremony of the Emir of Ilorin in November 2014. As the lead costumier the researcher was confronted with the challenge of inadequate funds to procure the needed costumes for the production. The alternative was that the researcher had to manage the little fund by travelling around to hire

some costumes that fit into the setting of the play. But health-wise it was not a good idea.

### Possible Diseases that can be Contracted through the Use of Costumes

**Eczema:** eczema (Atopic Dermatitis) is a term for group of medical conditions that cause the skin to be inflamed or irritated. It is always itchy; sometimes the itch starts before the rash appears. The rash mostly appears on the face, back, neck and other areas. Affected areas usually appear very dry, thickened or scaly. In fair skinned people it appears reddish and then turns brown. In dark skinned people the affected area is lighter or darker. Eczema destroys the beauty of the human skin and it can be transmitted from one person to the other through perspiration, if an actor uses the costume of an infected person (wikipedia.com, 2015).

**Ebola:** this is another type of disease that is not only dangerous to the skin but to human life. Ebola is a type of Ribonucleic Acid Virus (RNA) that causes the disease known as Ebola hemorrhagic fever, or simply called 'Ebola.' Until recently, Ebola virus could have been said to be a thing of the past, but virus has emerged as a new wave in the trends of events in African countries and the world at large. It claimed the lives of eight Nigerians before it was contained towards end of 2014 (www.ebola.com, 2015). However, the means of transmission of this virus makes a larger number of people vulnerable to it especially people in professions such as banking, transportation, medicine and performing arts. The Ebola virus is transmitted through contact with body fluids of an infected person, bats and monkeys. Examples of these fluids are sweat, saliva, semen and other fluid that emanate from the body of an infected person.

**Scabies:** scabies is a contagious skin condition caused by a small mite. The mite lays eggs in human skin, which hatch and grow into adult mites. This means that symptoms of the condition can last for months or even years. Scabies causes generalized itching and is sometimes called the "seven year itch." Skin lesions vary and may include short, linear, or nodular "burrows" between the fingers, tiny red bumps and blisters on the skin, or a widespread, crusted rash. The mite is spread from person to person by skin-to-skin contact (google.com, 2016). Scabies can affect anyone, but it is particularly common in congested areas, such as nursing homes and hospitals and theatre where it can spread widely via the exchange of costumes. Scabies infestation can happen through the sharing of clothes and beddings.

Rash: rash is a general, non-specific term that describes any visible skin outbreak. Rashes are very common in all ages, from infants to adults, and nearly everyone will have some type of rash at some point in their life. There are a wide variety of medical diagnoses for skin rashes and many different causes. Infections associated with rashes are: ringworm, impetigo, staphylococcus, scabies, herpes, chickenpox, and shingles. They are caused by infectious agents that include viruses, bacteria, fungi, and parasites (google.com, 2015).

### Solution to Prevent Transmission of Diseases through Sharing of Costumes

However, the costumier should be schooled and be used to medical environmental precautions so as to protect him or her from contracting the viruses that are dangerous to skin and health through the use of costumes by the actors. This schooling should entail proper hand washing before and after coming in contact with costumes that have been soaked with sweat from actor's body. It is advised that the regular use of disinfectants on the costumes in the course of washing should be adopted. This will help to protect the costumier as well as the actor who will later use the costume for another performance. Also, the application of sanitizers on the body of the actor before the use of costumes would go a long way in ensuring the safety of the actor and the costumier. At the same time, enlightenment is important in the sense that when costumiers and actors are enlightened on these skin diseases, their means of transmission and ways of contracting them, there would be a drastic reduction in the incidences of skin diseases that are spread through the sharing of costumes by theatrical performers. Basically, any infectious disease can be contracted if the cloth is contaminated. It is not hygienic to share things (especially clothes) that come in contact with someone else's skin and body fluids. Costumes could be properly laundered and autoclaved. That is how hospital clothing is sterilized. When washed, it is clean but there are still some micro-organisms which cannot be seen with the naked eyes, but when autoclaved, all organisms die making it sterile. An autoclave is a pressure chamber used to sterile equipment and clothes subjecting them to high pressure saturated steam at 121 degree centigrade 249 Fahrenheit for around 15-20minutes depending on the size of the load and the contents. It was invented by Charles Chamberland in 1879. Today, sterilization autoclaves are widely used in microbiology, medicine, body piercing, tattooing, veterinary science and dentistry (wikipedia.com, 2016). In medicine, for instance, autoclave is used to steam and sterilize equipment which makes all bacteria, viruses and

fungi to be inactivated. It can also be introduced to the Nigerian theatre as well to make our costumes sterile



Autoclave (www.goggle.com 2016)

### Suggestions

Autoclave is the best equipment to sterilize our costumes to be free from 99 percent of germs but if we cannot afford autoclaves we can acquire a big pot and put it on fire in a way that it can contain our costumes for sterilization. It would be preheated, by the time the costumes are inside the pot, we can tie the edge of the lip to prevent the heat from escaping, thereby rendering the germs powerless. Spreading the costumes in the sun is another option to eradicate germs in it but it is not 100 percent reliable. The use of body sanitizers is also another way of preventing skin diseases from penetrating into the body. It can be rubbed on skin before wearing of costumes. At any rate, theatre professionals in Nigeria should cultivate the act of buying costumes and stop renting them. With this the costumier will rest assured that the costumes are in good health condition, having observed the necessary precautions. Washing machine can also be introduced in theatre to wash these costumes after performances. This can prevent the germs from forming colonies that can be dangerous to the human skin when the costumes they infest are worn by actors. The use of disinfectants and fragrances should be encouraged to preserve costumes and to avoid bad odour which can distract the actor from acting perfectly. After performance, it is mandatory for actors to shower before they leave the theatre premises. This presupposes that our theatre should have modern bathrooms or

restrooms fitted with the necessary paraphernalia, where actors can shower to protect their skins against the sweats from the body which must have been mixed up with the unseen germs.

### Conclusion

The issue of skin diseases have posed a great challenge to costume management in the Nigerian theatre. However, preventive measures, which can salvage the situation, are available. One of the preventive measures is the involvement of medical practitioners in the theatre business to give tips on safety measures for costume care to prevent skin problems which stand as deep-seated issue in live theatre performance today. Training programmes should be organized on educating theatre professionals and students on how to care for costume and to ensure proper maintenance for specialised ones. For Nigerian theatre to assume a superior place in the entertainment world, be it stage performance or film production, costume management must be standardized.

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