

DRESSING THE MESSAGE: COSTUME AS A TOOL OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN NAIJA CHRISTMAS FILM BY KUNLE AFOLAYAN

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Abstract

*In the realm of visual storytelling, costume serves as a vital element of nonverbal communication, conveying layers of meaning that often transcend spoken dialogue. As a semiotic tool, costume functions as a visual language through which filmmakers communicate cultural values, social hierarchies, emotional states, and narrative shifts. Within the Nigerian film industry—popularly known as Nollywood, costume plays a particularly critical role in articulating cultural identity, social status, generational dynamics, and ideological conflict. Kunle Afolayan's *A Naija Christmas* (2021), a contemporary Nigerian holiday film, exemplifies the dynamic use of costume as a communicative device. Characters' attire reflects generational perspectives, religious values, and personal identity struggles, communicating internal conflicts and societal expectations without reliance on explicit dialogue. This paper explores how costume functions as a form of nonverbal communication in *A Naija Christmas*, analyzing how visual attire supports character construction and advances broader socio-cultural commentary. Anchored in nonverbal communication theory and film studies, the analysis highlights how traditional vs. modern costumes, visual symbolism, and sartorial shifts throughout the film communicate emotional and ideological transformations. By examining the intersection of fashion, identity, and storytelling in Afolayan's work, the study affirms costume's central role as a visual narrative device in African filmmaking and underscores its power to shape character development, thematic interpretation, and audience engagement.*

Keywords: Dressing the Message; Costume; Nonverbal Communication; *Christmas Film*;

Introduction

In the realm of visual storytelling, costume serves as a vital element of nonverbal communication, conveying layers of meaning that often transcend spoken dialogue. As a semiotic tool, costume functions as a visual language through which filmmakers communicate cultural values, social hierarchies, emotional states, and narrative shifts. According to Barnwell (2004), costume design is integral to character construction and world-building, allowing audiences to infer context, status, and intent without the need for explicit verbal cues. In cinematic narratives, especially within culturally rich contexts such as Nigeria, costume becomes more than decorative, it becomes communicative. Within the Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, costume design plays a particularly critical role in articulating cultural identity, social status, generational dynamics, and ideological conflict. As Haynes (2016) notes, Nollywood films often engage with complex themes of tradition and modernity, and visual elements such as costume are essential in mediating these tensions. Costuming in Nollywood not only reflects Nigeria's cultural heterogeneity but also reinforces or challenges prevailing social norms regarding gender roles, class, and morality.

Kunle Afolayan's *A Naija Christmas* (2021), a contemporary Nigerian holiday film, exemplifies this dynamic use of costume as a communicative device. While the film is structured as a romantic comedy interwoven with familial drama, it also serves as a subtle commentary on societal expectations, particularly surrounding marriage, masculinity, and cultural values. Costumes in the film help delineate character archetypes ranging from the traditionalist matriarch to the modern,

image-conscious sons and visually express unspoken tensions between Westernized lifestyles and Nigerian traditional values. For instance, characters' attire often signifies generational perspectives, with older characters favoring indigenous dress (such as agbada or ankara), while younger characters gravitate toward urban, Western fashion—thereby embodying the clash between tradition and modernity. As noted by Akullo and Matu (2019), clothing in African cinema frequently serves as a code for interpreting identity and social belonging, often without the need for dialogue. In *A Naija Christmas*, costume functions in a similar way—not just as an aesthetic component but as a narrative strategy that communicates relationships, internal conflicts, and shifts in character development. The careful styling of characters aids in advancing the plot and deepening viewers' understanding of the characters' roles, values, and transformations.

This paper explores how costume functions as a form of nonverbal communication in *A Naija Christmas*, analyzing how visual attire not only supports character construction but also advances the film's broader socio-cultural commentary. By examining the intersection of fashion, identity, and storytelling in Afolayan's work, this study highlights the implications of costume design as a narrative tool within contemporary Nollywood cinema and affirms its central role in shaping visual and cultural discourse in African filmmaking.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the interdisciplinary intersection of **nonverbal communication theory** and **film theory**, particularly within the context of African cinema. These frameworks provide a lens through which costume can be examined not merely as aesthetic embellishment, but as a significant channel of meaning-making and cultural representation. Nonverbal communication encompasses all aspects of communication that do not involve words, including gestures, facial expressions, spatial relationships, and visual appearance—of which clothing is a major component. As argued by Knapp and Hall (2010), clothing and personal appearance function as forms of "artifactual communication", sending messages about identity, mood, status, and social roles. In *A Naija Christmas*, costume acts as a form of nonverbal expression, encoding messages about a character's socioeconomic status, cultural alignment, gender expectations, and interpersonal relationships. Knapp and Hall (2010), assert that nonverbal codes often carry more weight than verbal language, especially in highly visual media like film. This underscores the importance of analyzing costume as a visual language that not only reflects but also shapes audience perception. Costumes, through their color, texture, style, and cultural references, communicate context-specific meanings that often guide the viewer's interpretation of character motivations and social dynamics.

In film studies, *mise-en-scène* refers to the arrangement of everything that appears in the frame, including costume, setting, lighting, and actor positioning. Costumes are thus a vital part of a film's visual storytelling. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2013), costume contributes to the "spectacle" of film and plays a critical role in characterization and narrative development. Through careful costume design, filmmakers can foreshadow events, reinforce themes, and influence audience alignment with characters. In *A Naija Christmas*, Afolayan uses costume to enhance the visual storytelling and to subtly guide audience interpretations of character motivations and social contexts. For instance, the sartorial contrast between the matriarch's traditional outfits and her sons' urban fashion choices visualises the generational and ideological conflict central to the film's narrative.

The Concept of Communication

It's not what you say, but how you say it! Communication is not only what we verbally say, but what

we consciously or unconsciously do during our communication. Individuals often do not understand what happened during a conversation that caused another individual to feel the way they do. Communication is in everything we do and how we do it. The way an individual communicates affects them in the spiritual surrounding, their workplace, friendships, and personal relationships. “Communication may be defined, following Wilson (1979), as occurring “whenever the behavior of one individual (the sender) influences the behavior of another individual (the receiver)” (Mandal, 2014, p. 417). According to Garbon et al (2014), when communication is broken down, 7% is verbal (words that are spoken), 38% is vocal (the tone and pitch in your voice), and 55% is nonverbal messages. Nonverbal communication is all around you and is exhibited in everyday life; it is expressed through facial gestures, touch, personal space, and vocal characteristics. The most common nonverbal communication signs that are the easiest for individuals to identify and interpret are facial expressions, outfit, gestures, body posture, pitch, and the tone of the individuals' voice (Abercrombie, 1972). Nonverbal behavior is in everything that an individual says or does during communication except for speech. This includes any type of signals or body language that is displayed when a message is relayed Mandal (2014). “Communication is a conscious and continuous process through which attitude and behavior are built (Gabor et al, 2014). Non-verbal communication is what is happening in the information that is verbally transmitted and can be culturally determined (Gabor et al, 2014). Verbal language is used to transmit the information while nonverbal language expresses the sender's true intention of the message (Gabor et al, 2014). Any conversation that an individual has, always had nonverbal context that can work in one of two ways: to hinder the message or to help encourage the message (Abercrombie, 1972). Nonverbal communication can tell us more about a person than the verbal information the individual contributes. Smiling, waving, cheerful tone all translate into words of happiness, while using a deeper than normal tone and frowning translates into words of aggression or dislike. Nonverbal communication is in the individual's eye movements, meaning read to physical objects, facial and hand gestures, and their body as they convey important feelings or attitudes about the information that is being relayed (Gabor et al, 2014). Eye contact can convey an interest in the message, boredom, or sincerity (Gabor et al, 2014).

Costume and Non-Verbal Communication

Costume is a central element of non-verbal communication, particularly in visual media such as film and theatre, where it functions as a highly coded system through which identity, power, class, gender, and cultural values are communicated. As a visual signifier, costume does not merely serve a functional or aesthetic role; rather, it operates within a symbolic framework that conveys deeper socio-cultural meanings. According to Argyle (1988), non-verbal communication encompasses all forms of communication excluding verbal speech, including facial expressions, gestures, posture, and crucially, clothing. Because clothing is part of physical appearance and one of the first things observed in human interaction, it is an immediate and highly interpretable form of communication. It influences how a character is perceived and can even shape narrative expectations and audience sympathies. In cinematic storytelling, costume is integral to the construction of character and the overall mise-en-scène. Barnwell (2004) emphasizes that costume in film is not incidental; it is a carefully curated element that contributes to character development, thematic articulation, and the emotional tone of a scene. For instance, costume may signal whether a character is authoritative or submissive, traditional or modern, trustworthy or deceptive—sometimes more effectively than spoken dialogue. Viewers interpret these signs in line with prevailing cultural codes and symbolic associations, often unconsciously. In this regard, Roland Barthes (1967), in *The Fashion System*, identifies clothing as a “signifier” within a broader semiotic structure, whereby garments become signs that convey socially constructed meanings. A red dress, for example, may signify passion,

danger, or power depending on its narrative context. These meanings, though not explicitly stated, are understood through cultural conditioning and visual literacy.

Moreover, costume choices in film can instantly communicate a character's socio-economic background, profession, religion, or emotional state, without the character needing to say a word. As Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992) explain, clothing functions as a form of “dress,” a broader term that includes all modifications and supplements to the body, used to signal social identities. These meanings are not fixed; they are subject to cultural, historical, and situational interpretation. In this way, costume becomes a flexible yet powerful means of constructing identity within narrative spaces. It is particularly potent in film, where visual economy—communicating more with less, is a storytelling necessity. Within the Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, costume design holds even greater significance due to the country's cultural diversity, religious plurality, and complex socio-political landscape. According to Haynes (2016), Nollywood filmmakers frequently use costume as narrative shorthand to convey class distinctions, moral positions, religious affiliations, and the tension between tradition and modernity. For example, the visual contrast between characters dressed in indigenous attire (such as agbada, iro and buba, or isiagu) and those in Western-style fashion often reflects deeper ideological or generational divides. These costume choices are not merely decorative but serve to embody character arcs, familial expectations, and societal pressures.

In contemporary Nollywood films like Kunle Afolayan's *A Naija Christmas*, costume plays a dual role: it reflects both the evolving urban aesthetics of Nigerian youth and the enduring presence of traditional norms. The film's narrative—focused on the pressure to marry, the significance of family, and the celebration of Christmas within a Lagos setting—relies heavily on costume to subtly express the shifting values and internal conflicts of its characters. In this way, costume transcends its decorative purpose and becomes a crucial non-verbal narrative tool, reinforcing or subverting thematic concerns in the film. It is through this visual language that the audience navigates character identities, cultural affiliations, and interpersonal dynamics, making costume a key semiotic and communicative device in Nigerian cinematic storytelling.

The Functions of Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction in Films

Communication occurs through both verbal and nonverbal means, and in most interpersonal interactions, these two modes operate in tandem to create meaning. Nonverbal communication refers to all aspects of communication that do not involve spoken or written language but still convey significant information, including gestures, facial expressions, body movements, posture, eye contact, and clothing (Knapp & Hall, 2010). Scholars widely agree that nonverbal cues often carry more weight than verbal messages, particularly when the two conflict (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2016). According to Parvez (2022), nonverbal communication serves several important functions: complementing, substituting, accenting, contradicting, regulating, influencing, and communicating closeness. One key function is complementing, where nonverbal cues are used to reinforce or support verbal messages. For example, a verbal statement such as “Get out!” may be accompanied by a pointed finger toward the door, adding urgency and intensity to the message. Similarly, saying “Yes” while nodding the head or “Please help me” while clasping the hands in a pleading gesture enhances the emotional impact of the verbal content. As Argyle (1988) points out, nonverbal signals often enhance the credibility and sincerity of a spoken message, making it more persuasive and emotionally resonant.

Another important function is substituting, where nonverbal signals replace spoken words entirely. In many social contexts, gestures or facial expressions can effectively communicate messages without verbal speech. For instance, placing a finger on the lips to indicate silence or winking at someone to express romantic interest are examples of nonverbal behaviors that substitute for verbal communication. These nonverbal acts, as Eaves and Leathers (2018) note, often reduce ambiguity and foster shared understanding, particularly in informal or emotionally charged situations. Accenting is a third crucial function, where nonverbal behaviors serve to emphasize or underline parts of a verbal message. A speaker may raise their voice, point a finger, or use a deliberate hand gesture to highlight a specific word or phrase. According to Knapp and Hall (2010), these accenting behaviors guide the listener's attention and help structure the message more clearly, ensuring that key points are recognized and retained. Understanding these functions reveals the integral role that nonverbal communication plays in human interaction. It not only complements spoken language but can also serve as a standalone system of meaning, particularly in contexts where verbal language is insufficient or culturally restricted. As Mehrabian (1972) famously suggested, a large portion of emotional meaning in communication is conveyed nonverbally—through tone, gesture, and expression. Thus, nonverbal cues are not supplementary but essential to how humans convey thoughts, emotions, intentions, and social relationships.

The Essence of Costume in Productions

Costume plays a fundamental role in theatrical and screen productions, functioning not merely as clothing but as a powerful communicative tool that enhances characterization and storytelling. Costumes are designed and worn to convey essential information about a character's identity, social status, background, emotional state, or transformation. At the moment of a character's appearance on stage or screen, visual signals are immediately transmitted to the audience, allowing for the formation of quick impressions or even judgments, often based on cultural preconceptions and visual stereotypes. According to Umukoro (2002), “The art is a manifestation of cultures as flowers are manifestations of a tree.” This insight underscores the idea that all artistic expressions, including costume design, are products of specific cultural and environmental contexts. Costumes, therefore, are not arbitrary; they are embedded with cultural symbols, values, and meanings that reflect the world in which the performance is situated. In this regard, costume becomes both a cultural artifact and a narrative device.

Moreover, costume is instrumental in the process of transformation, enabling actors to step beyond their real-life identities and fully inhabit their roles. It aids the suspension of disbelief, allowing both the performer and the audience to immerse themselves in the fictional world. Utoh (1999) affirms this by stating that, “For the stage actor and actress, costume and make-up transpose him or her into the role, and illuminate the character both for the impersonator and for the audience.” In essence, costume facilitates the physical and psychological embodiment of character, enhancing believability and narrative engagement. Beyond aesthetics, costumes contribute significantly to the interpretation and understanding of a performance. They support the visual storytelling process, reveal thematic concerns, and often communicate symbolic meanings that verbal dialogue may not fully express. As such, costume is an indispensable element in production design, serving as both a functional and symbolic tool that enriches the performative experience for audiences and performers alike.

Synopsis of Kunle Afolayan's *Naija Christmas* (2021)

Naija Christmas is a Nigerian holiday comedy-drama film directed by Kunle Afolayan, centered around family dynamics, love, tradition, and the holiday spirit. The story follows the conflicts and celebrations that arise during the Christmas season in a wealthy Lagos family. The patriarch, Pa

Oedekun, is determined to see his three children—each pursuing different life paths—married before the year's end, in accordance with family tradition. The film's central narrative revolves around the children's resistance to this familial pressure. The three siblings, Dunni, Chike, and Femi, all have their own aspirations and complex relationships with their father. While Dunni, the eldest daughter, wants to pursue her career rather than settle down, Chike, the second child, is grappling with his own identity and responsibilities. Meanwhile, Femi, the youngest, is caught between fulfilling his father's expectations and living his truth. As Christmas approaches, the family's preparations for the holiday celebrations become an emotional battlefield where each member's desires and values come into conflict. Alongside these familial struggles, the film portrays the vibrant traditions of Nigerian Christmas celebrations, from the festive cooking to the dancing and music, blending humor with poignant moments of reconciliation. *Naija Christmas* explores themes of modernity versus tradition, the pressure of generational expectations, the complexity of family relationships, and the changing dynamics of Nigerian society. Ultimately, the film underscores the importance of love, understanding, and coming together despite differences during the holiday season. Through humor and heartfelt moments, the film celebrates the nuances of Nigerian culture and the enduring significance of family, tradition, and Christmas.

Analysis of Non-Verbal Communications in Kunle Afolyan's *Naija Christmas*

The analysis of this study is divided into four segments.

Traditional vs. Modern Costumes

One of the key tensions explored in *Naija Christmas* is the contrast between tradition and modernity. This is evident in the costumes worn by the characters, particularly in how they navigate the expectations of their family, society, and personal aspirations. Pa Oedekun (the father figure) is dressed in traditional, formal attire that signals his commitment to family traditions and authority. His costume, typically consisting of rich, well-tailored agbada (a traditional Nigerian garment), communicates his status as a figure who values heritage and expects his children to adhere to these cultural norms. This traditional dress functions as a symbol of his generational values and authority, suggesting that he holds on to cultural customs and desires to maintain control over the family's adherence to tradition.

Dunni (the eldest daughter), in contrast, often wears more modern, Western-style clothing, signifying her progressive values, independence, and career-driven aspirations. Her costumes typically reflect a desire to break away from the rigid expectations placed on her by her father. This non-verbal signal of modernity is reinforced by her choice of business casual or contemporary dresses, emphasizing her personal struggle with reconciling her professional ambitions and her father's traditional views. Chike (the second son) is portrayed in a mix of traditional and contemporary outfits, symbolizing his internal conflict between modernity and his family's expectations. His wardrobe transitions throughout the film, showcasing his evolving relationship with the values of the older generation. He oscillates between wearing modern casuals and traditional attire, signaling his identity crisis and his effort to navigate his own path while maintaining a link to his roots. Femi (the youngest son) adopts a more casual and laid-back approach to fashion, often seen in street wear or relaxed modern clothes. This costume choice visually differentiates him from the other characters and reflects his youth, nonchalance, and desire to break free from the intense pressures of family traditions.



Contrast between traditional and modern costumes

Source: Netflix



Dunni, showcasing her contemporary fashion

Source: Netflix

Family Dynamics and Costumes as Social Markers

Costumes in *Naija Christmas* also communicate the varying social statuses, roles, and expectations within the family. The way characters dress reflects their roles in the family hierarchy and their relationships with one another. The servants and lower-status characters are often seen in more modest, plain clothing. These costumes signify the socio-economic gap between the privileged family members and the working-class individuals in the film. The simplicity of their attire contrasts sharply with the more extravagant costumes of the family, highlighting the class divide that is subtly explored in the story. The contrast between the children's modern attire and Pa Odekun's traditional garb reflects the generational divide in values and lifestyle. The children's costumes, especially the more contemporary outfits, represent their struggle for autonomy and individuality, while the father's traditional costumes symbolize his attempt to impose cultural norms and control.

Costume as a Reflection of Character Development

Throughout the film, the characters' costumes also evolve, mirroring their emotional and psychological journeys. This is a direct example of how costume functions as non-verbal communication to communicate internal conflict and character growth. Dunni, initially dressed in sharp business attire, starts to incorporate elements of traditional clothing as the film progresses. This gradual blending of traditional and modern elements in her wardrobe symbolizes her growing awareness of her familial ties and the need for balance between her personal aspirations and her role within the family. By the end of the film, Dunni's costume subtly reflects her acceptance of some family values without sacrificing her individual dreams. Pa Odekun, on the other hand, remains mostly in his traditional attire throughout the film, but subtle changes in the richness or formality of his clothing suggest his evolving attitudes toward his children's desires and their changing worldviews. His costumes symbolize his attachment to the old ways, but the slight loosening of the formality in his clothing toward the film's conclusion represents his gradual reconciliation with his children's choices. Chike's wardrobe choices, marked by the shift from traditional attire to more

contemporary looks, signal his transformation. His changing costume choices indicate his movement towards accepting a new identity while still grappling with his cultural heritage. By the end of the film, his attire becomes more aligned with his true self, as he learns to balance his modern identity with respect for his family's traditions.

Visual Communication of Closeness and Distance

Costumes are also a tool for communicating emotional proximity or distance between characters. For example, in family scenes, the costumes of the characters align with their emotional states and interactions. When the family is gathered together during the Christmas celebration, the children often wear coordinated outfits that reflect unity and tradition, but their individualistic costumes simultaneously signal their differences and personal struggles. Their attire, while shared, showcases subtle distinctions, revealing the tension and emotional distance between them despite their familial bond. Pa Odekun's attire contrasts with that of his children during family gatherings, visually communicating his authority and emotional distance from the younger generation. This distance is further emphasized by the formality and seriousness of his costume, whereas his children's attire, though still formal for the occasion, suggests a more relaxed, modern, and emotionally approachable stance.

Conclusion

Costume in *A Naija Christmas* transcends mere aesthetic appeal to become an essential narrative vehicle that conveys deeper layers of meaning. Through calculated contrasts between traditional and modern attire, Kunle Afolayan visually articulates the tensions between generational values, social expectations, and evolving identities. Costume design serves not only to communicate character traits and emotional states but also to mediate cultural discourse around modernity, tradition, and family dynamics. By deploying costume as a form of nonverbal communication within its *mise-en-scène*, *A Naija Christmas* elevates visual storytelling, enriching narrative complexity and cultural resonance. This study underscores the critical role costume plays in Nollywood films, not just as sartorial embellishment, but as a potent tool for semiotic and emotional engagement, essential in shaping character development and thematic depth in contemporary African cinema.

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