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Being Seen Right: Cultural Representation Through Costume in the Stage Presentation of Benedict Binebai's *Ferryboat*

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Abstract: *This article examined costume as a semiotic tool for cultural representation in Benedict Binebai's Ferryboat, a play that dramatized the symbolic journey of Nigeria's four major ethnic groups Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Ijaw toward national unity. Drawing on Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation, the study employs a qualitative method of textual and performance analysis to explore how costume functions as a visual language that communicates identity, status, and sociopolitical position. The analysis reveals that costume in Ferryboat transcends aesthetics to encode historical memory, cultural specificity, and ideological meaning. Each character's attire contextually grounded and ethnically distinct resists cultural flattening by affirming nuanced identities and regional narratives. The article concluded that accurate, intentional costuming is vital for ethical cultural representation, ensuring that communities are not merely visible, but seen right.*

Keywords: character, communicate, culture, representation, identity, visual language.

INTRODUCTION

Costume in theatrical performance is often viewed as a visual aid used to establish time, place, or character. However, within the broader discourse of cultural representation, costume assumes a far more critical role: it operates as a visual language through which identity, ideology, and sociopolitical commentary are constructed and communicated. Scholars such as Erika Fischer-Lichte and Patrice Pavis highlight the semiotic power of costume, framing it not as passive ornamentation but as an active agent in meaning-making on stage.

In multicultural performance contexts, costume carries more responsibility. It can either preserve cultural complexity or reduce it to flattened, stereotypical imagery a process referred to as cultural flattening. Within this dynamic, the concept of being seen right emerges: visibility is not enough unless it is accompanied by accurate, respectful, and culturally specific representation. Drawing on Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation, this study approaches costume not as superficial embellishment but as a potent semiotic system where cultural identity is constructed, contested, and interpreted.

Although African theatre scholarship has extensively examined performance, ritual, and symbolism, relatively limited attention has been paid to costume as a critical site of cultural signification. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Benedict Binebai's Ferryboat, employing Hall's framework to explore how costuming functions not merely as aesthetic differentiation but as a vehicle for ethical representation and layered political discourse.

In this context, Ferryboat offers a valuable case study. Through its deliberate use of culturally grounded costumes such as the Hausa Babanriga, Yoruba Agbada, Igbo Isi Agu, and Ijaw Etibo the play affirms ethnic specificity and resists homogenizing portrayals of Nigerian identity. It demonstrates how theatrical costume can construct ethnic identity with intentional precision, ensuring that the communities represented are not only visible but seen right.

This paper argues that costume in Ferryboat transcends decorative function to serve as a cultural signifier that encodes history, ideology, and social belonging. It calls for a deeper engagement with costume in performance studies, positioning it as a critical tool in resisting cultural flattening and affirming the dignity of cultural particularity within Nigeria's complex multicultural landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The understanding of costume in theatre has evolved from a purely decorative function to a critical semiotic and cultural role within performance studies. Scholars across disciplines recognize its power to shape identity, construct meaning, and guide audience interpretation. Erika Fischer-Lichte identifies costume as one of the core semiotic systems of performance, emphasizing its role in establishing character while simultaneously contributing to the theatre's broader network of signs. Costume, she argues, functions as a visual interface between performer and spectator, offering cues that activate cultural memory and interpretive response (Fischer-Lichte 45). Similarly, Patrice Pavis introduces the concept of mise en signe, through which costume operates as a visual text embedded with layers of symbolic meaning, essential for rendering performance legible to the audience (Pavis 71).

Marvin Carlson expands this notion by arguing that costume constructs theatrical time, place, and cultural positioning. He suggests that recurring motifs and styles in costume design can affirm or subvert archetypes, positioning it as a powerful vehicle for ideological engagement (Carlson 89).

In African theatre, Duro Oni emphasizes the ritual and symbolic weight of indigenous attire. He contends that costume is not only an aesthetic expression but a carrier of cultural heritage and communal identity, rooted in spiritual cosmology and performative tradition (Oni 203). Julius-Adeoye Abiodun similarly views costume as a narrative device, interpreting it as a visual script that encodes historical memory and sociopolitical commentary (Abiodun 116).

Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation offers a foundational lens for understanding costume as a site of cultural production. Hall asserts that representation is not a reflection of reality, but a system through which meaning is generated, making costume a critical medium in the performance of identity and ideology (Hall 15). Within this framework, costume becomes not just a sign of visibility, but a mechanism for being seen right.

Postcolonial theory further deepens this analysis. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity underscores how costume can disrupt fixed cultural binaries, negotiating between indigenous traditions and colonial legacies. In this context, costume becomes a site of cultural contestation and symbolic resistance (Bhabha 112). Richard Schechner's notion of "restored behaviours" complements this, suggesting that traditional dress in performance evokes collective memory and continuity through repeated cultural gestures (Schechner 36).

Felix Emeka Anyansi's semiotic study of Nigerian video films reinforced these ideas by showing that costume mediates class, ethnicity, and morality. His findings demonstrate how visual signifiers such as fabric choice, silhouette, and ornamentation encode complex social hierarchies and identity markers, paralleling the interpretive function of costume on stage (Anyansi 78). Together, these theoretical perspectives position costume not as ancillary decoration but as a dynamic semiotic tool central to narrative construction and cultural expression. This understanding informs the current study, which investigates how costume in Ferryboat represents Nigeria's four largest ethnic groups, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Ijaw, with attention to authenticity, symbolic meaning, and cultural responsibility.

By synthesizing these interdisciplinary insights, this study situates costume analysis within a conceptual framework that recognizes costume as a political, cultural, and representational agent. Through its materiality, form, and symbolism, costume in Ferryboat resists cultural flattening and affirms the plural identities embedded within Nigeria's diverse theatrical landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation, which argues that meaning is not intrinsic to objects or images but is produced through language, culture, and shared systems of signs. Representation, in this view, is not a passive reflection of reality but an active, interpretive process by which meaning is constructed, circulated, and negotiated. As Hall asserts, "representation is the production of meaning through language" (Hall 16) with "language" encompassing not only spoken and written words but also symbolic forms such as images, sounds, gestures, and, in the context of theatre, costume.

Hall distinguishes among three approaches to representation: reflective, intentional, and constructionist. The constructionist model central to this study holds that meaning emerges from culturally embedded codes and conventions, which enable audiences to interpret signs in specific, socially conditioned ways. Meaning, therefore, is not fixed or universal; it is constructed through cultural frameworks that shape perception and guide interpretation. In theatrical performance, these cultural codes determine how costume, gesture, and staging are "read" by the audience (Hall 18).

Three interrelated concepts underpin this framework: cultural codes, meaning-making, and semiotics. Cultural codes refer to the implicit systems of knowledge that allow societies to assign meaning to forms, behaviours, and appearances. Meaning-making is the interpretive act through which audiences derive significance from what they perceive. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, provides the analytical lens to understand costume not merely as attire but as a communicative text that conveys identity, ideology, status, and memory (Pavis 71; Fischer-Lichte 45).

Within this theoretical context, the distinction between being seen and being seen right becomes critical. Mere visibility may fulfil superficial criteria of inclusion, but it does not ensure accuracy or respect in representation. To be seen right is to be depicted with symbolic precision and cultural specificity, acknowledging complexity rather than reducing identity to stereotypes. This imperative is particularly salient in multicultural performance, where the portrayal of ethnic identity carries significant sociopolitical implications (Anyansi 78; Oni 203).

Costume, as a visual and symbolic element in performance, occupies a central position at the intersection of these concerns. It is both a sign and a site of meaning-making, simultaneously grounded in cultural tradition and open to interpretive variation. Through the lens of Hall's constructionism, costume becomes a dynamic representational tool that does more than reflect identity; it actively constructs it (Hall 20). As demonstrated in this study's analysis of Ferryboat, costume serves as a medium through which ethnic narratives, social roles, and historical tensions are communicated with intentional depth.

Ultimately, this framework positions costume as essential to resisting cultural flattening and achieving ethical representation in performance. It affirms that to "be seen right" is not merely a matter of presence but of cultural accuracy, representational justice, and semiotic richness.

Synopsis and Cultural Context of *Ferryboat*

Benedict Binebai's *Ferryboat*, performed at the Niger Delta University Arts Theatre and directed by Sabenus Timiebere, is a politically charged allegory that dramatizes the quest for national unity in an ethnically diverse Nigeria. The story follows four main characters, Danladi, Eniola, Chima, and Ebimotimi, who represent the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Ijaw ethnic groups, respectively. These characters and their followers are stranded at a riverbank, unable to cross to the other side, which symbolizes a land of wealth, hope, and shared national purpose.

The river serves as a physical and symbolic obstacle, highlighting the deep-rooted ethnic divisions, political struggles, and leadership conflicts that have shaped Nigeria since its independence. Tensions rise as Danladi, who represents the North, claims leadership based on population size, while the other groups demand fairness and equal participation. These disputes reflect real-life debates about power, resource distribution, and representation in Nigeria's political system. A turning point in the play comes with the arrival of an elderly woman, A metaphor for wisdom. She encourages the groups to cooperate, and it is only through unity that the ferryboat begins to move. However, even this progress is threatened by internal sabotage, underscoring the fragile nature of unity in the face of persistent self-interest. The eventual inclusion of women in rowing the boat reinforces the theme of inclusive participation and reaffirms the importance of collective effort in nation-building.

Aside from its political themes, *Ferryboat* is rich in cultural symbolism. Each character speaks, sings, and dances in their native style, with costumes reinforcing their ethnic identity. The careful representation of each group's cultural identity on stage serves as a commentary on Nigeria's diversity and the need for mutual recognition. The play thus sets the stage for an analysis of costume not simply as an element of design, but as a powerful tool for cultural representation. Through visual and performative detail, *Ferryboat* offers a compelling reflection on what it means to represent ethnicity ethically and meaningfully in contemporary Nigerian theatre.

Character and Costume Analysis

In *Ferryboat*, costumes are essential visual aspects in the portrayal of dramatic characters because they helped the characters come to life visually. As soon as the actor enters the stage, their costumes convey a message to the audience about the performance. in this respect, Rebecca Cunningham posits that a character's costume plays a vital role in the visual definition of a character. In effective costume design, the costume will be able to put a character in a certain time and space, establish the character's age and possibly gender, relate rank or social status of the character, convey the character's personality, and communicate changes in any of these elements over the course of the production. By the costumes of the actors seen below, any Nigerian audience should be able to identify each actor with a certain ethnic group.

In *Ferryboat,* the four principal characters Danladi, Eniola, Chima, and Ebimotimi serve as artistic representations of Nigeria's major ethnic groups: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Ijaw. Through their dialogue, behaviour, and especially their costuming, each character embodies a set of cultural signifiers that communicate ethnic identity and sociopolitical stance. Costumes in the play are not merely aesthetic choices; they function as visual texts that convey complex historical, ideological, and symbolic meanings. By examining each character's costume alongside their actions and beliefs, the performance articulates a vision of cultural specificity that resists homogenization and deepens audience understanding.

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Figure 1 Danladi and his troupe

In Ferryboat, Danladi symbolizes Northern Nigeria and is portrayed as a figure driven by a desire for dominance, rooted in his belief that population size grants him a divine right to lead. Although all ethnic groups arrive at the symbolic riverbank as equal stakeholders, Danladi asserts unilateral authority and attempts to control the journey. His repeated efforts to row the ferryboat alone fail, underscoring the futility of self-interest in the pursuit of national unity. Only after an elderly woman intervenes does he momentarily embrace collaboration. Yet his subsequent attempt to sabotage the group's progress reinforces the dangers of unilateralism and underscores the play's central message: that sustainable development depends on unity, equity, and collective will.

Danladi's role as a symbol of dominance is visually reinforced through costume. He appears in a richly embroidered green Babanriga, a traditional cap, and wields a staff while speaking in a deep Hausa accent. As Joanne B. Eicher observes, embroidery has long been integral to Hausa and Nupe textiles, appearing on everything from farmers' garments to ceremonial robes (Eicher 88). Similarly, Trace Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh notes that among the Hausa and Nupe, voluminous, intricately embroidered robes signify prestige and high rank (Utoh-Ezeajugh 34). These costume elements establish Danladi as a figure of cultural and political authority.

Historically, the Babanriga has deep roots in Northern Nigeria. Last Murray traces its origins to pre-colonial Islamic empires like Kanem-Borno and the Sokoto Caliphate. Influenced by North African garments such as the jellabiya and kaftan, it was traditionally worn by Islamic scholars and nobility to signify status and piety (Murray 87). Carol Bier highlights the garment's early use

of geometric embroidery, reflecting Islamic artistic traditions. During British colonial rule, the Babanriga became a visual marker of indigenous leadership. Paul Lovejoy notes that it was retained by emirs and aristocrats as a symbol of continuity and colonial validation (Lovejoy 123). The postcolonial period saw figures like Ahmadu Bello wear it to assert Islamic and Northern Nigerian identity (Falola 203). Eicher and Doran Ross add that the garment became more ornate, often paired with a jalabiya and hula (Eicher and Ross 48).

Today, the Babanriga transcends ethnic and national boundaries, evolving into a broader symbol of African pride and cultural heritage. On stage, it evokes this rich history and carries political weight. Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that costume operates as a central semiotic code in performance, shaping character and meaning through visual signals (Fischer-Lichte 45). Julius-Adeoye Abiodun reinforces this, noting that costume can convey historical and political subtexts even before dialogue begins (Abiodun 116). Danladi's regal attire thus functions as a powerful nonverbal cue, visually encoding themes of entitlement, dominance, and control.

Eniola (Yoruba)

Eniola embodies the Yoruba values through calm participation, strategic restraint, and quiet diplomacy. He does not overtly seek power but remains committed to fair representation for his people. Though he opposes Danladi's ambition, Eniola avoids confrontation or self-promotion, contributing steadily to the collective cause. His composed demeanor presents an alternative leadership model rooted in cultural dignity and mutual respect.

His Costume Agbada and Sokoto visually reinforce these traits. The Agbada, a voluminous robe traditionally worn by Yoruba men, symbolizes authority, elegance, and elevated social status. Historically referred to as agbádá ọba ("royal robe"), Makinde David Olajide noted that it

originated in pre-colonial Yoruba society, where it was reserved for kings, chiefs, and spiritual leaders. Woven from hand-crafted Aso-Oke cloth, early versions emphasized simplicity and textile craftsmanship (Makinde, et al 56; Clarke 18). Picton John, and Renne Elisha observe that during the colonial period, Islamic and British influences introduced ornate embroidery, velvet fabrics, and tailored structures. These elements, drawn from Northern styles like the Babanriga, transformed the Agbada into a signifier of pan-Nigerian elite identity (Picton 99; Renne 102).

In the post-independence era, Oyelola Patience, Amubode Adetoun, all agreed that Agbada evolved into a nationalistic and political symbol, particularly among Yoruba leaders, featuring metallic threads, monograms, and machine embroidery (Oyelola 132; Amubode and Adetoro 30). Contemporary Agbada adopts slimmer cuts, minimalist embellishments, and modern textiles like cotton-silk blends, making it suitable for both formal occasions and everyday elegance. The Agbada has evolved into a versatile symbol of cultural pride and elite status. Today, it is a staple in formal events, political inaugurations, and even popular culture, signifying respectability and refined heritage, and a declaration of rootedness in Yoruba cosmopolitan identity. The Agbada's evolution from sacred robe to global style icon encapsulates the resilience of Yoruba cultural expression. It illustrates how costume operates as a living text, responding to changing materials, identities, and values. paired with his measured movements and restrained speech patterns,

Eniola's costume thus becomes a semiotic tool. It visually communicates Yoruba cultural sophistication and political diplomacy, reinforcing his leadership style through symbolism. His measured gestures and restrained speech, paired with the Agbada's historical connotations, embody Yoruba ideals of balance, wisdom, and dignity. As Erika Fischer-Lichte posits, costumes actively shape the audience's perception of character. In Ferryboat, Eniola's costume, through its cultural markers, encodes Eniola's role as a mediator, reinforcing his diplomatic character through visual semiotics.

Chima

Chima, representing the Igbo ethnic group, is portrayed as perceptive, pragmatic, and entrepreneurial. Rather than engaging in power struggles, he focuses on the opportunities presented by the journey, interpreting the arrival of the boat as a divine act of providence from Amadioha. His optimistic perspective and forward-thinking attitude channel the enterprising spirit often associated with the Igbo, emphasizing self-determination, resilience, and economic empowerment within a collective framework.

Chima's attire, the Isi Agu shirt and red cap (okpu agu), visually encodes these traits. The Isi Agu (meaning "lion's head") is a cultural totem and symbol of honour among the Igbo people. Typically crafted from rich velvet, the shirt is adorned with repeating golden lion-head motifs and is often complemented by coral beads and a walking stick, constructing a visual narrative of status, pride, and continuity.

Semiotically, the lion's head motif represents strength, authority, and vigilance traits traditionally associated with Igbo masculinity and leadership. The luxurious texture of velvet conveys dignity and prestige, while the dominant colour palette of red, gold, and black carries layered symbolic meanings: red for vitality and ancestral power, gold for royalty and wealth, and black for maturity and solemnity (Amubode and Adetoro, 30).

Historically worn by titled men during ceremonial occasions, the Isi Agu has evolved into a potent symbol of political visibility and cultural pride. In contemporary Nigeria, it is frequently worn by politicians and public figures, signifying leadership, ethnic identity, and respectability. Its prominent use in political rallies and formal events underscores the continuing relevance of traditional attire in shaping public personas and expressing collective identity (Oyelola, 132).

Patrice Pavis's concept of mise en signe demonstrates how costume becomes a signifying system within performance. In this context, Chima's Isi Agu operates as a visual language, staging identity, ideology, and cultural positioning (Pavis, 71). Marvin Carlson similarly argues that costume constructs theatrical time, place, and cultural identity; Chima's appearance thus situates him within a proud lineage of Igbo heritage and sociopolitical accomplishment (Carlson, 89). Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation reinforces this reading. According to Hall, meaning is not inherent but constructed through representational systems (Hall, 15). Chima's costume, therefore, does more than signify cultural heritage; it actively constructs a narrative of Igbo resilience, ambition, and pride. It serves as a semiotic bridge between tradition and modernity, visually articulating his identity, values, and social vision.

Ebimotimi,
Ebimotimi, representing the Izon people of the Niger Delta, serves as a powerful advocate for justice, equity, and inclusion. As the moral conscience of the group, he articulates a firm opposition to domination and marginalization, particularly rejecting Danladi's claim to leadership. His resistance is grounded in historical memory an awareness of the Niger Delta's long-standing struggle for recognition, resource control, and fair treatment in national discourse. Costume plays a critical role in amplifying Ebimotimi's presence. Clad in an Etibo shirt and wrapper, adorned with coral beads and carrying a symbolic staff, his appearance exudes cultural pride, authority, and defiance. The Etibo and wrapper ensemble is particularly significant in the Niger Delta, shared among ethnic groups such as the Ijaw, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Efik, and Ibibio. Eicher, Joanne, and Tonye Ross note that in pre-colonial times, elite men wore raffia wraps and symbolic adornments, their dress reflecting status, age, and ritual roles (Eicher and Ross 48; Nwachukwu-Agbada 134).

Asakitikpi Alex, Nwauwa Apollos observes the modern Etibo shirt evolved from British colonial naval tunics, which Niger Delta elites indigenized into a collarless, embroidered shirt. Paired with a waist-tied wrapper, this style became a marker of authority among chiefs, clergy, and colonial intermediaries (Asakitikpi 109; Nwauwa 162). Okigbo Okechukwu and Oyelola record that during the post-independence period, this outfit gained political significance, with the wrapper elevated

through fabrics like Indian George, lace, and brocade fabrics often used in ceremonial wear by elites and politicians (Okigbo 57; Oyelola 128).

Today, the Etibo and wrapper symbolize regional pride and sophistication, embraced across generations for occasions such as weddings, funerals, and political events. Contemporary designers have reimagined this ensemble with modern fabrics, bold colors, and accessories like fedora hats, integrating urban style with traditional form (Tamuno 75). This cultural adaptation illustrates what Duro Oni describes as the power of indigenous symbolism in maintaining authenticity within performative spaces (Oni 203). Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity is relevant here: Ebimotimi's costume simultaneously reinforces indigenous identity and resists national homogenization, blending ritual symbolism with political assertion (Bhabha 112). Similarly, Felix Emeka Anyansi notes that costume mediates class, ethnicity, and morality a triad clearly expressed in Ebimotimi's attire, which embodies both historical grievance and aspirational identity (Anyansi 78). Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behavior" is also applicable, as Ebimotimi's traditional costume and mannerisms activate cultural memory and embody the Niger Delta's enduring legacy of resistance (Schechner 36).

In Ferryboat, Ebimotimi's costume is not merely decorative it is a cultural signifier. It encodes ethnicity, historical consciousness, and ideological resistance. Theatrical costume, as demonstrated here, constructs identity and shapes audience perception, aligning with Stuart Hall's constructionist theory that meaning is actively produced through representation (Hall 15). The costume's intentionality underscores the ethical responsibility of performance in multicultural contexts: to represent with precision, depth, and respect. Ultimately, Ebimotimi's attire affirms the Niger Delta's distinct voice within the national narrative, signaling dignity, resilience, and the unyielding pursuit of justice.

Costume as Resistance to Cultural Flattening

Cultural flattening occurs when the complexity of diverse identities is reduced to oversimplified or stereotypical representations, erasing nuance, history, and context. In performance, this often manifests through costuming that favors generic pan-African aesthetics over culturally grounded specificity. As Stuart Hall (1997) argues, representation is never neutral; it is a site of meaning production embedded in cultural codes, ideologies, and power structures. Costume, as a visual and semiotic tool, is central to this process. It not only situates characters within specific socio-historical contexts but also constructs identity through culturally coded symbols.

Intentional, well-researched costuming resists cultural flattening by preserving the unique visual lexicons and symbolic meanings inherent in a community's dress practices. Rebecca Cunningham (2009) emphasizes that costume "relates rank or social status, conveys personality, and communicates changes in any of these elements" (5). Textiles, silhouettes, colors, accessories, and body ornamentation function as more than aesthetic choices they are cultural texts. For example, the Yoruba Agbada is not merely decorative; it signals authority, ancestral continuity, and ritual presence. The Igbo Isi Agu, with its lion-head motif, communicates prestige, masculinity, and

lineage. Likewise, the Ijaw Etibo and wrapper signify resistance, spirituality, and coastal heritage. These visual markers shape audience perception and deepen narrative meaning.

Furthermore, costume design grounded in ethnographic research and consultation with cultural custodians' fosters authenticity and accountability. Patrice Pavis (1982) contends that costume is one of the most legible signs in performance, a "visual shorthand" that audiences must decode through cultural literacy (71). In this way, accurate costuming functions pedagogically: it educates audiences about cultural difference, resists appropriation, and challenges monolithic representations of African identity.

Ferryboat exemplifies this approach. The careful differentiation of costumes across its Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Ijaw characters safeguards against cultural flattening. Danladi's Babanriga reflects Islamic authority and Northern aristocracy. Eniola's Agbada communicates political restraint and Yoruba refinement. Chima's Isi Agu evokes entrepreneurial pride and masculine identity. Ebimotimi's Etibo, coral beads, and staff symbolize defiance, spiritual continuity, and Niger Delta advocacy. These distinctions operate as semiotic texts, allowing each character to be read through culturally specific visual codes.

As Hall (1997) asserts, "It is through representation that we construct the meaning of what it is to belong to a culture" (39). The costumes in Ferryboat do not merely reflect difference they perform it. In doing so, they resist the homogenizing gaze and reaffirm cultural specificity as a vital component of ethical theatrical representation.

Ultimately, the production demonstrates that to "be seen right" on stage requires more than visibility; it demands intentional representation. Through costuming, Ferryboat models how African theatre can engage diversity with respect, complexity, and responsibility, asserting identity not as a spectacle, but as a living, contested, and dignified presence.

CONCLUSION

This article explored the semiotic and cultural significance of costume in Benedict Binebai's Ferryboat, drawing on Stuart Hall's constructionist theory of representation as its analytical foundation. The study has shown that costume in performance is not merely an aesthetic supplement, but a vital semiotic tool that constructs meaning, communicates cultural identity, and negotiates sociopolitical realities.

In Ferryboat, costume resists cultural flattening by preserving the distinctiveness of Nigeria's major ethnic groups through contextually grounded, culturally specific dress. The visual differentiation between the Hausa Babanriga, Yoruba Agbada, Igbo Isi Agu, and Ijaw Etibo is not superficial; each costume encodes deep histories, values, and ideological positions rooted in its cultural origin. In this way, the production exemplifies what it means not just to be seen, but to be seen right. By recognizing costume as a visual language through which cultural codes are made

visible and interpretable, Ferryboat positions theatrical performance as a powerful platform for ethical and respectful cultural representation. As Patrice Pavis and Stuart Hall assert, representation is always meaningful and ideological. Costume designers, therefore, bear a significant responsibility: to approach culture not as decorative surface but as a dynamic, meaning-making practice.

This analysis confirms that costume in Ferryboat operates as both a political and semiotic medium. It actively encodes ethnic identities, historical struggles, and sociopolitical aspirations with intentional precision. In resisting homogenization and embracing nuance, the play offers a compelling model for culturally responsible performance in a global era where representation remains deeply contested.

Ultimately, this study underscores that true inclusion in theatre requires more than visibility it demands accuracy, dignity, and cultural specificity. Costume, when designed with sensitivity and scholarly awareness, becomes a critical vehicle for identity-making and historical affirmation. Theatre practitioners, scholars, and cultural creators must therefore recognize costume not merely as attire, but as a language of representation one capable of shaping how communities are seen, understood, and remembered.

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