



## CREATIVITY AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE COSTUME OF AKAKUM PERFORMANCE OF NTO USUH PEOPLE IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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### Abstract

The controversy over indigenous creativity and the context of spirituality in indigenous masquerades has led to many people, especially the young ones, who should draw from the ancient ingenuity to constantly look at the craft with disdain. This, in a way, encourages extreme detour from fidelity to common codes for social order that laid the foundations of the society as revived in these performances. Using descriptive method premised on symbolic interactionism, this study interrogates the creative and supernatural in the costume design of *Akakum* Performance of Nto Usuh people in Ika with the intent to investigate the extent to which the ingenuity of the costume designer establishes innovation that authenticates the myth of spirituality surrounding the performance. Findings show that *Akakum* history is conflicting in terms of origin but the purpose of the performance and supernatural essence are alike. It is the costume designer that shapes the design patterns in colours and shapes to mystify or secularise the performance, and that the introduction of new costumes and adaptable outfit shows creativity, while the presence of the *iwuo-afum* (head of the wind) as *iso-mkpo* (shrine/altar), *afuud* (supernatural talisman), the red tunic and *ajei* (palm frond) as the main costume of *Akakum* retain the supernatural in the masquerade. The study concludes that human imagination which is properly directed can benefit humanity and stimulate innovative impulse for newness that can promote the society, thus the secularisation of *Akakum* may encourage a wider audience participation and cultural promotion in the contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Akakum*-Performance, Costume, Creativity, Secularisation, Supernatural.

### Introduction

Creativity in the traditional African society may contribute to certain myths that authenticate the supra-mundane in the society. This is significant because, in a performance, "costume is a signifier which directs viewers' mind to the concept of cultural reality" (Akpan, Udofia and Edem, 633); and in Akwa Ibom State, performance is a unique cultural practice that develops as the people develop. Remarkably, masquerading, that is covering an actor's face with a mask during performance is quite prominent in the state. Nonetheless, through theatre and performance

practices, innovativeness that leaves a remarkable imprint which transcends generations surface. Beyond performance, there is the maker of what a performance is before the audience. This draws the attention of this study to the imaginative powers of the costume designer in his ingenuity of imputing what Effiong Johnson calls “the total effect results in an aesthetic experience (146), a term Stephen Kenekwue describes as the “ultimate appeal that attracts virtually everyone in the same way” (83). This gives the impression of creativity elevated to a collective appeal. On the other hand, the ability to push the creative consciousness to establish the supernatural presence that commands some mythical assumptions and facts of a dual cosmic reality in the performance, also marks the costume designer as one that can stretch his mind further to establish aesthetics from his imagination. To this effect, a performance becomes an instrument to code deep cultural information. According to Stephen Umoh, such creativity “denotes ideas away from their appearance” (278). Such is the case in the *Akakum* performance of the people of Nto Usuh of Ika Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State.

On the same note, *Akakum* is a rare masquerade in Nigeria. Other masquerades such as *Ekpo*, *Ekpe*, *Ekoong*, *Atamma* etc are found in other states; but may bear a different name based on the dialect of those people. *Ekpo*, for instance, is the same thing as *Egungun* of the Yoruba people; it is the same masquerade as *Mmuo* of the Kalabari and Ikwerre people; it is the same thing as what Ossie Enekwe identifies as “*Nwaotam* of the Opobo people... and the one in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area of Nsukka in Anambra State called *Odo*” (157). The masquerades command exceptional awe that elevates the supernatural than mere aesthetics. As Onuora Nzekwu observes, “It is the traditional carver who has found a strong source of patronage in masquerading (that) has contributed towards the accentuation of these qualities” (135). As all these same but differently named masquerades are, so is *Akakum* different and the tale of its existence also narrowed down to a small village of Nto Usuh in Odoro Clan of Ika Local Government Area. However, it is observed that many other villages in Ika have imitated the weaving of *Akakum* and have been able to introduce innovation into the performance design. To this effect, the secularisation of the original *Akakum* Nto Usuh may shape the notion of the supernatural redefining the costume designer as one of the creators of the object of beliefs from design appeal, hence the focus of this paper

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is symbolic interactionism. According to Eddiefloy Igbo:

Symbolic interactionism theory is founded in the pioneering thought of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and developed by Herbert Blumer, John Dewey, and William Thomas. This theory is based on a view of man as both the creator of, and the product of his environment i.e. as both determining and determined. Symbolic interactionism theory acknowledges... the influence of social conditions in the causation of human behavior and emphasizes the active role of individual in meaningfully responding to, interpreting, and interacting with his surrounding social environment (339).

The theory throws more light on the use of traditional components such as cloth, grass, wood, root, ropes, fowl feathers, mat, animal skins etc. to weave a masquerade, and how these components used as the accessories in the body of the masquerade denote ideas that are understandable across the various strata of the society. Another idea of the theory is that all activities in the society are carried out as a social recycling of understandable signs, and the past application is rehashed to meet up with the present conception which allows each generation to interact easily from the social contract set by the contributive code manufactured culturally to

aid the interaction of citizens with each other in the society. This means, "Interactionists focus on what makes meaning from the point of view of the society as a collective code" (Onogu and Ukama 179), and in Chinua Achebe, quoted in Asigbo, symbolic interaction narrows down to the specificity of symbols, "Speaks of a particular place, evolved out of the necessities of history, past and present, and the aspiration and destiny of a people shared as a social contract" (103). The shared social contract suggests "the need to turn the energies of literariness to environmental factors" (Umoh 100). This shared idea can be seen in beliefs, legal, economic, cultural and political undertone of a people. Meanwhile, Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald see it as "a product of long-established art forms... They include opera, painting, critically acclaimed literature and folk culture... often taken to arise from the grassroot, (which) is self-created and autonomous and directly reflects the lives and experiences of the people (664). The connection between *Akakum* masquerade and symbolic interactionism is that *Akakum* is a subculture originally fashioned by the people of Nto Usuh basically from their folk culture as a means of entertainment, interaction and information. From the attempt to express the creative, a more sublime essence has also evolved making the ordinary mortal masquerade to become a spiritual force in the society as made to be from the cultural symbols the people have been interacting from.

### ***Akakum* Performance**

*Akakum* is a traditional performance of the Nto Usuh people of Ika Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The performance is also called *Afum*, which means, the wind. It is a belligerent masquerade. However, the chronicle of its origin is conflicting. Facts are gathered based on the nature, occurrences and the state of the masquerade. In a live interview with Ime Idungafa, who happens to be the son of the Late Clan Head of Odoro 1 of Ika, a native and Village Head of Nto Usuh Village mentions that calling it *Asakum* and *Akakum* are both correct that the performance dates back to 1472 and that it was formed as an entertainment to end the farming season. (cited in Akpan and Udofia 15). At this level, *Akakum* is not actually a spiritual masquerade. On the contrary, a more in-depth analysis of *Akakum* Nto Usuh is drawn from Nsikan Ekwa cited in Akpan and Udofia thus:

*Akakum* is performed in worship of the *nnem ilung* for guidance over a peaceful planting and bountiful harvesting period in the land.... Any would-be performer will be confined in the shrine (the custodian's house) to confirm his sanctity before he carries the head (mask). If the person has polluted himself, the mask will bend his neck of which he will propitiate for a release... The head which is the mask is protected by the chief priest (18).

By way of evaluating Ekwa's position, *Akakum* is a spiritual enactment performed as a social masquerade and it is fraught with the potency of the supernatural. The performance of *Akakum* is in two ways, marking two ideas. According to Akpan and Udofia,

When it is a command-ritual, the costume will be red. It will wield *afuud* and *ajei* in both hands. The head has both a man and a woman's visage: one at either side of the wooden pole. On a day like this, the male face will turn to the front. *Ajei* will be tied on the head. A special rattle will be tied on the hands and feet, and on the completion of the construct, the *Akakum* runs to *Iso-ikpa isong* (the village shrine) and thuds the head. Sometimes it prostrates completely. When it lifts the head, it hurries to *Akpo-ikut*... and embraces for invocation... The chief priest will emerge with *akai-kai*... guzzles a generous quantity and spews on the head before he begins incantation. He will invoke

the spirit of dead people who were custodians and initiates of the deity to fortify the actor... At this level, *Akakum* is engulfed with the desire to shed blood (18).

On the day of this kind of performance, virtually all victims, if there will be any, appease the head with two corks. "When *Akakum* hits someone, it is said *Akakum ateed agwo*. Another expression is *Afum adia agwo*... A hit from it will make the victim to experience heaviness. Another occasion *Akakum* performs is the ordinary entertainment which is the showcasing of human creativity. On a day like this, *Akakum* Nto Usoh will be costumed in white. The performance of *Akakum* thickens Ika air with delight and enthusiasm because the audience themselves understand the performance as a masquerade that is violent and energetic enough to chase them about the open theatre. Every performance has its unit of appeal. *Akakum* does not dance to appeal; it does not sing to attract; but it chases to hit-possibly to kill for appeal. Nonetheless, the masquerade is an embodiment of creativity as well as awe from its supernatural essence.

### **Creativity in the Costume Design of *Akakum***

Creativity denotes bringing new ideas to reality through imagination. It suggests innovativeness through thought. This has practically surfaced in Performing Arts practice in the various units of expertise. In the area of costume, creativity is the improvement and creation of bodily gears to enhance production. According to Bruce Ardin, "there are various techniques in dress making which is (*sic*) affecting other body accessories currently, a proof that costume design is a deliberate act intuit from in-depth imagination" (67-68). For whatever purpose especially in performance, costume production is an aspect of art. Art is a creative task primarily borne from clear thinking and application of imagination in body accessories design. That is, "the creative costume designer embarks on constant research to satisfy her curiosity... This, she does to add flesh to the bones of his creative imaginations" (Dan 17). When the body accessories are given their proper shape and colour to heighten the required mood, the costume maker is appraised for application of intelligence, hence, the stimulation of aesthetics. According to Effiong Johnson, "the aesthetic-giving costume is the costume which establishes character relationships... When this happens, a painstaking approach to the use of costume would have been the case, and the success in its equilibrate (*sic*) to the aesthetic success" (159).

The use of costume to stimulate fear, awe and even the imagination of horror is also an aspect of creativity. For instance, *Ekpo*, is considered to be a ghost who reincarnates in a human form, or as Inih Ebong puts, "a replica of a person who died in this world and passed transit into the underworld with all masks, tattoos, deformities, diseases, beauty and neutral qualities it carried to the grave. The replica at this stage acquires super-human force" (45) brought to bear by the body accessories. Though it is human beings that act these personality, there is a very strong conviction that based on what is found on the bodies of the actors, a certain level of transformation has occurred. According to Itoro Etim, "costumes are one of the components of the people's culture and they are understood as signifiers in a community" (112). That means, through what an actor puts on to perform, he is automatically seen and believed to be transformed into a spirit. This is the height of creativity in costume design. The ability to immortalize human beings and give them a different personality that specifically comes with the actual spiritual manifestation through body accessories has made creativity in costume design to be synonymous to life re-creation.

The most outstanding part of *Akakum* masquerade is the accessories. Each accessory is a component of human facility brought to bear in a specific craft. The numerous crafts reflect the

human mind and the powers of imagination in which the ingenuity of thinking is brought to bear in what makes anything in life to be. To this effect, what makes *Akakum* a unique and outstanding performance is the costume design elevated to the limelight of intoning a spiritual persona to the masquerade. These pieces of creativity are presented in subheadings below.

#### **Establishment of Conventional Motif**



**Fig 2: Symbol of Peace (Idungafa)**

The *Akakum* is a violent masquerade. Its normal costume is red, and the redness is acknowledged because it goes for blood. The introduction of “white” in the middle of the costume is a creative concept which successfully bends the masquerade to a traditional theatre practice instead of an agent of death. White symbolizes purity and peace. This brings the idea of Essien to focus “if *Akakum* wants to hit anybody, he can easily do that by pursuing the person to where he likes. It will point *afuud* at the person to tangle the feet, and that is all” (Akpan and Udofia 22). This shows that even as *Akakum* is principally controlled by a potent force, the force itself has the mind to entertain and bring people together over the desire to spill blood. This makes the masquerade to go for years without killing anyone. The peace decorated across the red tunic is a creative concept. It makes the performance to obey the colour connotation of the Western order- peace be still!

#### **Indigenous Craftsmanship Showcased**



**Fig 3: Indigenous Craft (Idungafa)**

*Akakum* is portrayed as an imagination made manifest in the design of the costume. The careful carving of the trunk to give it the varying human visage is an aspect of creativity. This showcases Performing Arts as a discipline with numerous potentials that are yet to be explored. Beyond this, the aura of the supernatural is properly situated in the mood which the mask designer makes to come prominent in the faces carved. This indicates that the costume designer can stimulate any manner of thought including the making of spirits to exist through body accessories.

#### **Fertility god Conferral**





**Fig 4: Akakum, Portrayed as Fertility God (Idungafa)**

There is the newness in the contemporary *Akakum* which makes the performance more and more adaptable to circular yearnings for globalization. *Akakum* knows death and life, and these are clearly decorated on the costume which are red and white. However, the performance is argued to be formed to celebrate successful farming among the folks. The introduction of Green with red as the cross conveys the aura of the fertility gods on the masquerade. Besides, the costume does not look like the normal belligerent tunics for pursuing the audience, rather it looks like an “Athenian tunic” which is both glamorous, cool and slow, depicting a flourishing god of fertility in display.

**Occasion/Society Conferral**



**Fig 5: Akakum in Social Colour and a Female (Idungafa)**

*Akakum* is costume currently to portray the motifs of the occasion, it is hired or deployed to grace. In occasion of National Interest, the national colour is now costumed on the masquerade. This makes the masquerade more of a social, national and artistic factor that can grace any occasion to entertain as an indigenous theatre practice.

**De-ritualization through Aesthetics**



**Fig 6: Modern Akakumwith Leggings (Idungafa)**

*Akakum*, culturally belongs to *Ekpo* configuration in the native or traditional dialect. This is because it covers the face with a mask. The mask is ritualized and invoked with supernatural powers, making the actor half-human and half-spirit. Anyone who covers such mask on the face is a spirit or is controlled by spirits. He does not put on shoes, and the accessories on the body are mainly the costume, which are usually in the custody of the chief who foresees their purification and sanctification. However, the contemporary *Akakum* as seen above puts on leggings and canvass to perform. This outlook is more of creativity than the normal accoutrement of *Akakum* in red tunic for that matter.

**Woven Visage/Mask**



**Fig 7: Woven Face for Air and Beauty (Idungafa)**

The use of decorated lace on the face of *Akakum* shows creativity. This allows the masquerade to breathe freely and there is sufficient in-let of fresh air. This makes the performer to enjoy his arts instead of suffering the suffocation as if the gods wish their acolytes to always go through travails to please them. Besides, the masquerade appears more beautiful and neat to behold. This act of re-designing the visage with a lace material is an aspect of creativity.

### **The Supernatural in the Costume Design of *Akakum* Nto Usuh**

The supernatural as used in this study is spirituality. According to Uwemedimo Atakpo and Anietie Udofia, it refers to “powers that are beyond human” (54). As Yemi Ogunbiyi puts, its “primitive root...(is) sought in the numerous religious rituals” (4). In a performance such as *Akakum*, the idea of the supernatural is the presence of the mysterious or the unexplainable, which is caused by a spiritual factor. This is found in the body accessories. As the indicator of the supernatural, in the traditional African performance, costume can code some spiritual essence in a performance. According to Alex Asigbo, “the characteristics of power of a specific masquerade is most often embedded in its costume... Costume transforms masquerades from mere clothes combination to spirits to make them conform to themes and other utilitarian considerations. (10-11). As Etim puts, “with the application of costumes and appropriate rituals, he automatically is believed to be transformed into a spiritual being and is possessed by the spirit of the ancestors” (112). This is typical of the mask; and as John Esema put, “the mask is an altar, a meeting point of the mortal and the immortal, (and that) ... it functions also as a shrine” (77). This supernatural presence is identifiable in *Akakum* costume. Although the adapted *Akakums* are de-ritualised, there are some bodily gears on the body of *Akakum* especially that of Nto Usuh that are purported to contain the supernatural aura currently. Some of them are discussed as subheadings below:

#### ***Iwuo-Afum* (mask) and the *Iso-Mkpo* (shrine) Phenomenon**



**Fig 8: The Mask is a Shrine (Idungafa)**

The *Iwuo-Afum* (head) is the original head carved in 1472. History keeps that even when termites devour everything around the trunk (head), the *Iwuo-Afum* is always safe. The head is more like a shrine in that it has been preserved in some shrines to avoid people with evil intention using it for danger. The nail on the head is dangerous. If it scratches the human skin, the spot may rot and get infested with maggots except when an intensive ritual is performed to vindicate the victim. Like any other ancient mask:

There is only one thing that is believed to be inside the mask, that one thing is forces, a vital force, a force external to man and foreign to his ego-a spirit. There is the spirit of the dead generally and the ancestors in particular. The *Ibibio* makes no difference between masks and shrines for each is believed to be this spirit force (Ukpaide 55).

However, *Iso-mkpo* denotes ‘the face of a thing’, which suggests: the altar of a deity. An altar in this sense can be invoked to operate negatively. An accused even the accused person can be compelled to justify his or her innocence by swearing to *iso-mkpo* (shrine) Culturally, *Iwuo-afum* is *iso-mkpo* (face of the gods/shrine). It could be invoked to act with full potency.

**Afuud (A Piece of talisman enclosed in the right hand)**



**Fig 9: Afuud, the secret of Akakum force (Idungafa)**

The *afuud* is acknowledged as the force behind *Akakum*'s raving, race, dance and all forms of display on stage. It is the *afuud* that makes it run; it is the *afuud* that makes it pursue, maybe, a specific person even to hitting the person to death. Significantly, “when *Akakum* is excited, it might turn the head and target a coconut tree with a monstrous top. It will use the *afuud* to touch the head and hit. Everything the tree had on top will scatter on the floor... The audience members will then rush for the fruits. (Essien cited in Akpan and Udofia 24).The *afuud* is the force behind the *Akakum*. It is the supernatural factor that regulates the spirituality of the masquerade. *Afuud* is an accessory.

**The Concentrated Head**



**Fig 10: Akakum head wrapped with ajei is a force (Idungafa)**

Tying the *Akakum* trunk with an open palm frond is an indication of spirituality or a spiritual rite on course for a specific purpose which has not been fully utilised. The mask may be very dangerous until the palm frond is taken down. The palm frond makes the mask to become a direct shrine taken about the open space.

**Danger Tunic + Palm Frond**



**Fig11: Red Tunic and Ajei become an altar (Idungafa)**

The use of red tunic is itself a danger prone signal during *Akakum* performance. The *ajei* (palm frond) is not always linked to the tunic. Whenever it is merged together, as Ekwa mentions, “*Akakum adia agwo*” meaning *Akakum* has sopped on someone. Therefore, “*Akakum* has claimed the victim's skull (Akpan and Udofia 23). This case is usually seen when *Akakum* has hit a



person and, maybe, split the skull or the person fails to appease and end up dying. At this juncture, the red tunic (cloak of death) and the *ajei* (palm frond) are symbols of spiritual alertness or concentration.

### **Conclusion**

The study of *Akakum* accessories has indicated that man is the creator of his social outlook. The *Akakum* masquerade is believed to be formed by the people and preserved to be enacted yearly or once in seven years to celebrate each successful planting season. As time unfolds, the masquerade turns both a creative and supernatural indicators of the costume designers' arts. That notwithstanding, the dreaded *Akakum* Nto Usoh is still about the most enticing and real masquerade that commands the mammoth crowd because of its spiritual and satisfying ability which is the desire of the audience. To suit the contemporary temperament, *Akakum* is practically de-ritualized for the actor to put on leggings and canvass; the red tunic is used along with contemporary tunics that evoke aesthetic instead of intimidating the contemporary audience (who are usually born-again) as a piece of profanity. Observing the potency of the hybrid forms of *Akakum* performance in the gradual re-creation of its accessories to carry everyone along, imagination is the power of creation and the designer can influence human beliefs. However, there is much space for the costume designer in the contemporary performance world.

### **Recommendations**

This paper recommends that costume and makeup in, especially the traditional theatre, should be designed to reflect the system that sets the performance's philosophy. It also recommends that more creative opportunities should be encouraged among local craft makers to regenerate and promote indigenous crafts.

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