



JOURNAL OF LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT

Volume 2, Number 1 (March, 2026)

ISSN: 1595-9457 (online); 3093-0618 (print)

Website: <https://jppssuniuyo.com/jld> Email: jppssuniuyo@gmail.com

Received: February 06, 2026 Accepted: March 20, 2026 Published: March 31, 2026

Citation: Umoh, Stephen A.; Ekeke, Nnanake & Ekeke, Dora N. (2026). "Orientation of Colour and Significations in Akwa Ibom Culture." *Journal of Leadership and Development*, 2 (1): 77-84.

Article

Open Access

ORIENTATION OF COLOUR AND SIGNIFICATIONS IN AKWA IBOM CULTURE

Stephen Asuquo Umoh¹, Nnanake Ekeke² & Dora Nnanake Ekeke³

Department of Performing Arts, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria^{1&2}

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, Nigeria³

Corresponding Email: stephenumoh001@gmail.com¹

Abstract

Colour entails the perception of light and the different wavelengths that can be seen through in the spectrum as they are being reflected off the objects. It is through the colours spectrum that human beings can see and identify one colour from others with the help of light. Each colour is a symbol that can be made to various cultural values. Drawing from Ferdinand the Saussure's conception of Semiotics, which explains the workability of a sign as an embodiment of concept and referent in a message, this paper uses qualitative approach to explore the orientation and signification of colours in the culture of Akwa Ibom people. Findings show that they are colours that are culturally peculiar to Akwa Ibom State, which appreciated solely on what they stand for Findings further suggest that colours are uniquely important to a particular people with a set of culture based on what they stand for. However, this study creates a platform for other issues related to colours in terms of messages, representations and significance as well as interpretation to suit with the belief system of a people. The paper concludes that regular performances with full state's support and encouragement can stabilize the Akwa Ibom sign system.

Keywords: Akwa-Ibom, Colour, Culture, Orientation, Signification.

Introduction

The need to decipher the actual signal a colour suggests is very important in the contemporary world following the various trends of human's creativity which communicate salient information in colours. Being that the various creative practices generating and sharing information to the audience are two sided: one evoking and idea while the other

situate the evoked idea, it is pertinent to acknowledge that what is presented in a creative construct is only a path to a destination of human imagination, which can be misinterpreted without in-depth knowledge of the system coding it. This view is a confirmation of Ferdinand de Saussure's speculation on language and signs usage and meaning generation as a system. According to Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, "it is based upon a distinction between the signified (image) and the signifier (the physical object or the image) (772). To make this link this dual processes effectively, an in-depth knowledge of the sign system is necessary as an aspect of rule or guide. "The rule seems to indicate to us the way to go like pointing finger ... (to) creative interpretation" (Eagleton 20). Colour is very important in the beauty and identification of humans, animals, fishes, vegetation and insects. A specific colour has a specific role in situating a thought and various colours play different roles in coding a message to the audience. This is made feasible by viewing what Saussure arranges as the "signifier" and the "signified", which an idea and what the idea really suggests is conceptualized. This defines how meanings are regulated within and outside one's cultural domain.

In the area of culture and what each hue codes based on the reality of their customs, there is need to review colours and how meanings are coded in each as an aspect of cultural communication. In a society like Akwa Ibom State, colours have become very important to the cultural practices of the people especially during performances, festivals and carnivals. Colours play vital roles in interpreting the design people put on and the customs that allow them to work as a set of communication tools. Apart from the appeal of the hues, different moods, significant ideas, concept and values are coded in colours especially in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. Red, for instance, may denote redness but connotes danger or heat; white may openly mark whiteness but signal innocence, morality, orderliness, and purity; so do other colours maintain the suggestive and the referent parts in the society from the reality a people's culture. Cultural practice is one of the distinguishing factors of the people of Akwa Ibom State from others, and within the state, cultural enactment rooted in various designs established by colour perception marks one set of people from another. Apart from the general view of culture, the outstanding human practice that encompasses tangible, intangible and deal culture is performance. Performances are enacted in festivals, ceremonies, churches, schools, political rallies, rites of veneration, marriage celebrations, interment services, and for beliefs purposes. In terms of festival, colours play important roles from the perspective of makeup design to costume found on the performers' body. According to Dora Ekeke and Nnanake Ekeke, "the perception of make-up colours is one of the most interesting psychological experiences"(110). Looking beyond live performance, Anietie Udofia, Uwemedimo Atakpo and David Udoiwang conceive colour as "one of the clear processes of cultural projection and preservation in ethnic pigment through film" (50). Using life or screen performance, all colours are made to represent and idea in the Ibibio philosophy. This paper discusses colour orientation and signification in Akwa Ibom State culture.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on a linguistic theory known as semiotics. The theory is one of the contemporary speculations conceived by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss Philologist, in his Structuralism that all languages possess two parts, which one side is suggestive while the other is denotative (Bressler 180). However, the theory was developed as a field of study by Charles Sanders Peirce, an American Linguist. His conception appears broader following his elaboration of a sign as a constituent of three ideas through which concrete ideas, causative

ideas and representational ones can be conceptualized in society especially art. In Anietie Udofia and Aniekan Akpan's views, semiotics shows "imitative arts as human centred... (that) stimulates responses with aptness that generates concern for humanity" (39). Semiotics is form from the Greek root *sema*, meaning 'sign'. The word also suggests *parole* denoting a process than being, and is still derived from *semeiotikos*, another Greek, which means, "'observant of signs', suggesting the "study of signs, analogies, metaphors, symbolism – and the way they are used in language to aid communication" (vocabulary.com). It is one of the Western theories that discusses the nature of signs and application as an aspect of language in the society.

Semiotics is a principle projected as the science used in dissecting language. According to Keir Elam, it "is a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in the society... concerned with processes of signification and with those of communication, that is, the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged" (1). Based on its self-organization, "the rule seems to indicate to us the way to go like pointing finger ... (to) creative interpretation" (Eagleton 20). From seeing semiotics as a guide or principle, Tzvetan Todorov posits that "things and state of mind are linked by a motivated relation... one is the image of the other" (16-17). Be that as it may, semiotics basically operates as an approach of linking one idea to another. In Saussure's view, Charles Bressler explains that the two ideas, namely: the *signifier* and the *signified* are used to denote an idea projected (*signifier*) and the referent of the idea (*signified*). As Umoh intones, "the signifier points to a concept; the signified confirms the concept which is referent" (270). In other words, what Peirce expresses in his three plunge-conception Colin Counsel and Laurie Wolf widen these three factors further thus:

There are three kinds of signs which are all indispensable in all reasoning: the first is the diagrammatic sign or icon, which exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse; the second is the index which, like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it; the third (the symbolic) is the general name or description which signifies its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified. (10)

Relating these views to the focus of this paper, colour used to express an opinion possesses two parts. One part is the "colourness" of the hue drawn from the reflection of light; the other is the mood it conveys through which a cultural value is attached.

Colour Orientation and Signification in Akwa Ibom People's Culture

Colour is one of the major components in Performing Arts and the significant aspect of it is its serving as a code for cultural communication. According to Etop Akwang, "codes produce messages or meanings which are far more stable within several communicative contexts and concerts" (68). A code reflects an aspect of a sign and it functions as "a system of differences and correspondences which remain constant across a series of messages" (Stam and Lewis 30). Within a culture, then, there is a specific denotation which the sensation of colour stimulates. According to Oren Parker and Harvey Smith, "each designer has need of the same knowledge of colour. As code is unambiguous, a sign is subject to various suggestions; colour on the other hand, is a perception, which is subject to a gamut of interpretation until it regularized in a society since it is "the eye's perception of wavelength of light" (Ekeke and Ekeke 139). This implies that particular wavelength can only function as a code when its hue of light reflection is culturally certified as symbol for an idea. Orientation of colour is the

disclosure of Ibibio values expressed through the wavelength of light. Colour signification, on the other hand, suggests what a specific wavelength of light denotes based on the hue it reflects and what it is used to express by the people of Akwa Ibom State. Although, in the world's blocks, colours are not viewed alike; yet within a specific bloc, unison in configuration is crucial to the ultimate unity of the system. There is a marked difference between the Western conception of colour and significations compared to that of the East. According to Philip Freund (2005: pp 140-141), in Chinese (Oriental World) performance and colour code,

a white powdered face identifies a man as powerful but treacherous; scarlet emphasizes his honesty and fidelity; green and black denote personal crudeness...blue are worn by demons and obstinate ruffians or outlaw, purple by robbers but red on a man's face is mark of his virtue, and yellow of his strength and wit.

Oriental notion of colour is different from that of Occident. White conceived as peaceful evokes violence in the East. Yellow/gold which is linked to wealth and foreboding aura is the colour of the supernatural and intellect. Within the Occidental or Western conception of colour, it is possible to see certain ideas in one nation transcending another to signify the same idea from the perspective of performance. That means, "colour in theatrical design is the quality which allows the eyes to see the difference between the objects...such as red and blue" (139). That means, in the human society, or as would be conceived of a specific culture deploying colour as a code through which human practices are coded, there is the tendency to lose the trajectory of ideas and what they stand for if a means of engaging with the colours are not feasible. Colour signification works based on constant usage as a cultural practice. According to Ekeke and Ekeke they "can be identified with attendant peculiarities in terms of various beliefs, customs, traditional practices, activities, norms and values" (39). The beginning designer in the theatre must be aware of the separate uses of colour and seek a colour explanation that satisfies the use of colour" (215). The knowledge of colour sensation and denotation is widely acknowledged in the culture of the Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Eket, Ibeno and other nations making up Akwa Ibom State.

The notion of colour and its appeal is generalized in certain practices such as worship, jurisdiction and war. In *Who Are the Ibibio?* Edet Udo explains the association of certain colours to certain activities undertaken by the "Ibom people". The *Ndem-mong* aspect, for instance, white among other colours, is both notational and connotative in the worship, practices and influence of *Ndem-mong*. *Ndem-mong* is water spirit. For being a water spirit, whiteness is aligned to its being; for being a supernatural being or ghost, whiteness is suitable; and for being a god/goddess, the circle terminates in the white. Akwa Ibom people conceive of the supernatural as the all perfect, un-ravished, spotless and stainless – that is, all pure and all immaculate entity to behold (278-279). For arrogating whiteness to a water spirit, Akwa Ibom people situate the concept of denotation and for expanding whiteness to purity, they establish connotation in their conception of colour. This means that in the Ibibio conception of colour, there is a direct denotation and the implied one. Umoh opines that "Ekpo mask is made in a way that it reflects the traits of the masked personality impersonated.... A black mask made with very obvious larger eyes ball and heavy projected teeth is likely to represent a very strict and disciplined spirit" (5). This makes colour usage to suggest both direct and indirect or denotative and connotative referents. The extension is seen in the use of certain animals and insects to symbolize many things in the society especially in the aspect of performance. According to Ekwere Bassey,

the Ibibio people observe various annual festivals which are celebrated... On such occasions that use of certain... symbols of dignity and unity are elaborately decorated and used... for worship of deities, snakes, crocodiles, cowries; and *nsibidi* symbols are used to reflect different gods (86).

In the art of making a performance up to portray the essence of the Akwa Ibom people's cultural focus, the use of colour is prominent to situate the sensation and meaning as one sees on the performer's body. This may be the reason Umoh further posits that "in Akwa Ibom State, performance is a unique cultural practice that develops as people develop" (1). Such development stems from the regular enactment of performances with colour application bent towards societal interest. Colours are significantly delineated and appropriated for both direct and subtextual meanings in the Akwa Ibom culture. In the view of Enoima Etteokon each colour has its identifiable name and the name sometimes determines what it is linked to within the semiotic parlance of the Akwa Ibom people (48-49). For this reason, colour becomes an instrument to portray the human emotions, especially, as expressed in the various dramatizations in social events even in the supra-mundane act by native doctors or such unexplainable realm. According to Derek Bowskil:

... our emotional response to colour is highly subjective, but, in general terms we can state the following: warm colours tend to advance. Cold colours tend to recede. Red and orange are powerful and strong, assertive, aggressive and warm. Yellow is gay, happy and cheerful. It stimulates. Blues and greens are tranquilizing, restful and cold. Purple and magenta are pompous, regal, powerful and stimulating. White stimulates. Black depresses. Gray neutralizes (309).

Nonetheless, beyond the generalization conceptualized by Bowskil, Duro Oni avers that "while colour associations are universal in their application, differences sometimes occur across national boundaries" (62). This is the case of Akwa Ibom people which Jacob itemizes to be: Annang, Eket, Ebughu, Efai, Enwang, Etebi, Ibeno, Ibuoro, Ibibio, Idere, Igbo (as found in Ika and Etim Ekpo), Iko, Ilue, Itu-Mbon-Uzo, Nkari, Obolo, Okobo, Oro, and Uda spread across the geographical terrain of the state (6-7).

Apart from Akwa Ibom State, the notion of colour and its association with abstract qualities and human practices is ubiquitous in Nigeria. In the view of Chukwuma Okoye, among the Igbo,... "white is symbolic of death, as seen in the principle which forms the basis of all re-embodied spirits which appear with white faces" (46). In Hausa, Suleiman Saye affirms that "white is the colour that stands for purity... and peace of mind because it is believed to be the colour that the Prophet Mohammed preferred" (50). However, a remarkable representation is drawn from Maude Walhmann's averment on the Yoruba cosmology and their conception of colour that "...among the Yoruba, white, identified with the god *Obatala*, represents character, pre-intensions and the source of knowledge" (75). This notion has a remarkable semblance with Akwa Ibom people's conception of white resplendent of its connotation in, especially, the interplays between the mortal and the supernatural. This gives a clue to the ideation of the white and red chalk conspicuously drawn on the eyes of a seer or diviner in the Ibibio society. It further widens to the belief behind the coating of the *Ekpo* masquerades with charcoal (Black) and allows their buttocks to remain bare without any piece of cloth, down to their use of the *Mkpatat* (Carpet grass) to lay their head. This can be realizable by listing the colours based on how they are called in Akwa Ibom State.

The conception of colour in Akwa Ibom State is detailed in Enoma Etteokon as *Afia* (white), *Ndaidad* (Red), *Awa-awa* (Green), *Obubid* (Black), *Nsan-nsan* (orange), *Uto-uto* (Yellow), *Bru-bru* (Blue) and *Ndom-ndom* (Milky). *Obubid* speaks death, shame, condemnation and dark secret. *Afia* portrays exultation and soundness of mind. *Ndom-Ndom* is a feminine colour depicting their tranquility and elegance. *Ndaidad* depicts danger, aggression or violence. In such masquerades such as *Ekpo*, red symbolizes the thirst for blood; while *Awa-awa* portrays continuity of culture and fertility (51-52). This expose leads to the paraphernalia deployed in the Akwa Ibom real life and orchestrated enactment. To this effect, Ekong Ekong mentions that the eye of the native doctor painted white “maintains transcendental powers over the earthly world of man” (64). The one with the white circular design on the eye, Okon Ntia mentions that he/she “is one dedicated to the service of the Deity and therefore the servant of the deity... He knows the deity, be able to hear the voice of the deity and be able to speak with the deity. He is at the same time the mouth-piece between the deity and man (143). Nonetheless, traditional priests with a red design in the eyes do not actually evince evil; “they terrorize the forces of pestilence” (Thompson 219). Colours in cultural codes, from Nnanake Ekeke’s position, “should not be viewed from the perspective of fantasy but on the viability...” (91). The use of colour among the Akwa Ibom people is equally a way of coding direct and deeper meanings in the various signs to express the symbolic communicative values that keep the society in its aliveness. These codes are generally defined by Charles Bressler as “signs governed by rules... (which) give meanings to all our social and cultural customs and behaviour” (63).

The orientation of colour in Akwa Ibom State has been elaborated engaged by many scholars. Some link the colour deployment to the global conception such as aligning white to peace, red to violence and green to fecundity or fertility. Be that as it may, some delimit the universality to the indigenous conception of the hues as are conceptualized based on the way they are named. For instance, *Afia* is linked to immaculate/purity denoting the untinctured conception of *Afia*. *Ndaidad* is linked to redness such as ‘*adaidad anyen*’ which means to be red in the eye. This connotes daring or heat. *Awa-awa*, on the other hand, is linked to grass-because Ibibio call the greenness of the grass *awa-awa mbiet*. This practically links green to vegetation. The idea equally extends to “the use of indigenous components to embellish artistic work (which) has gained much popularity among the people of Akwa Ibom State” (Umoh 1). Therefore, colour signification in the makeup process of the Akwa Ibom people obeys both the universal and indigenous conception of the sensation of hue a colour is identified to situate the symbolic idea as conceived and as understood by the people.

Conclusion

The essence of traditional colours for cultural significance of the Akwa Ibom people is a proof of the true existence of a people because a group of people without a culture are already on the road to extinction. The culture of a people can be seen partly through their colours as represented through orientation and signification in both traditional performances and practices. However, these identifiable colours like in Akwa Ibom State may not fully reveal their identity and uniqueness without complementing some vital elements that are visible to the eyes – these vital elements can be seen on what they put on - costume and make-up. From this research work, it has become established that the people in Akwa Ibom State have maintained, in their repertoire, various inherent cultural codes in terms of orientation in their performances for better appreciation through colours.

This work calls for the full utilization of colours that are unique and embedded with indigenous messages to Akwa Ibom people (in their originality) on cultural performances to

help project culture as strong components and variables. Colours as shown and analysed in this study, give vital information to the Orientation and Signification in Akwa Ibom People's Culture. Colours serve the purpose of identification of a particular culture and cannot be appreciated in the aesthetics and cultural imports, but in performance. Colours project cultures in the best way possible, by giving life to festivals, thus standing out as veritable elements of cultural identity. It is the submission of this study that colours as in the case of Akwa Ibom State, can be explored and deployed with adequate orientation during cultural performances, mostly in festivals and carnivals, in order to sustain traditional practices, promote ethnic identity and traditional values.

Works Cited

- Akwang, Etop. "Code Transcendence and the Collapse of Motifs in Contemporary Theatre Directing: The Example of Effiong Johnson's *Not without Bones*," *The Performer*, vol. 8, 2006, p. 83-95.
- Bowskill, Derek. *Acting and Stagecraft made Simple*. A Woward and Wyndham Company, 1979.
- Bressler, Charles. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2013.
- Counsel, Colin and Laurie Wolf. Editors. *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Course Book*. Rutledge, 2001.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, 2010.
- Ekeke, Dora and Nnanake Ekeke. "Artistic Appearance and Make-Believe through Computer-Generated Make-up Designs in Coherence Hardy's *The Nun* (2018)". vol. 04, no.12, 2025, pp. 110-117. <http://knowledgeableresearch.com>. Assessed, 17 September, 2025.
- *Contextualizing the Trado-Afro Cultural Contents in Gloria Ernest-Samuel's The Beautiful Masquerade*. Creative Saplings, vol. 4, no.12, 2025, pp. 32-41.
- Ekeke, Nnanake. "Critical Evaluation of Theatre for Development Praxis in SBCC Approach," *Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts*, vol.5, no.2, 2024, pp. 88-96.
- *Designing Costume for Artistic Performance*. Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts, vol.5, no.2, 2024, pp. 136-143
- Ekong, Ekong. *Sociology of the Ibibio: A Study of Social Organization and Change*. Scholars Press (Nig.) Ltd., 2001.
- Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Methuen and Co, 1980.
- Etteokon, Enoma. *The Language of Colour in Ibibio*. *JOLAN*, vol. 3, 2018, pp. 47-59.
- Freund, Philip. *Stage by Stage Oriental Theatre*. Peter Owen Publishers, 2005.
- Haralambos, Michael, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald. *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*. 3th Ed. Harper Collins Publishers Limited, 2008.
- Jacob, Okon. "The People, Tradition and Culture of Akwa Ibom State," *Ibom Cultural Offerings: Arts, Crafts and Performances*, edited by Effiong Johnson, Cape Coast University Press, 2013, pp.1-18.
- Ntia, Okon. *Akwa Ibom Cultural Heritage: Its Invasion by Western Culture and Its Renaissance*. Abbny Publishers, 2005.
- Okoye, Chukwuma. "Costume in Traditional Igbo Masquerade Drama". M. A. Dissertation. Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, 1986.
- Oni, Duro. *Stage Lighting Design: The Nigeria Perspective*. Concept Publications, 2004.
- Parker Oren and Harvey Smith. *Scene Design and Stage Lighting*. Harcourt Brace College Publishers. 1996.

- Saye, Suleiman. "The Tanning Industry in Kano City: Structures, Process, and Changes," M. A. Dissertation. Department of History, Bayero University, Kano, 2024.
- Stam, Robert *etal.* *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post Structuralism and Beyond.* Routledge, 1992.
- Thompson, Robert. *African Symbolism in Afro-American Quilts.* African Arts, 1986.
- Todorov, T3vetan. *Theories of the Symbols.* Backwell Publisher Limited, 1984.
- Udo, Edet. *Who Are the Ibibio?* Africana-Feb Publishers Limited, 1983.
- Udofia, Anietie and Aniekan Akpan. "Uwemedimo Atakpo's Treatment of Decentred Deification and Indeterminate Religiosity among the Ibibio in *Edisua*," *Journal of Development Communication and Applied Theatre (JODCAAT)*, vol.2, no.3, 2025, pp.32-40.
- Udofia, Anietie, Uwemedimo Atakpo and David Udoinwang. "Contextualising the University of Phenomenology in the Arts and Ibibio *Signified* in 'Emergent Ibom Films,'" *International Journal of Arts and Social Science*, vol. 6, no.4, 2023, pp. 44-58. www.ijassjournal.com.
- Umoh, Stephen. "Semiology in the Costumes of *Ekpo* Performance in Ibibio Land," *AKSU Diakonia: Journal of Religion and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2019, pp. 64-94.
- "Semiotics and Perspectives of Meanings. In Bassey Ubong's *Praise the Lord*," *ICHOKE Journal of the Faculty of Humanities*, vol.19, no.3, 2021, pp. 267-283
- "Creativity and the Supernatural in the costumes of Akakum performance of NtoUsoh people in Akwa Ibom State. *Journal of Philosophy Policy and Strategic Studies*, vol.1, no 4, 2025, pp. 12-21. <https://jppssuyo.com>. Accessed 17 January, 2026.
- "Integrating Indigenous Herbs as Cosmetics in Film Making and Entrepreneurship in Akwa Ibom State," *Journal of Development, Communication and Applied Theatre*, vol.2, no.4, 2025, pp. 13-24.