



## ANALYSIS OF SEMIOTIC FEATURES OF COSTUMES IN KANNYWOOD CULTURAL MOVIES

Evangelista C. Agu<sup>1</sup>  
Onyinyechi Innocent<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup> Department of English and Literary Studies  
Federal University Wukari, Nigeria

### Abstract

*This paper examines the use of costumes in some selected Kannywood movies (movies that are mainly based on the lives and people of Northern Nigeria) from the perspective of semiotics. Semiotics is the systematic study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior. It explores how meaning is generated, transmitted, and interpreted through different forms of human expression, including language, visual imagery, gestures, and material culture. Two Hausa movies are purposively selected and analysed. The paper adopts the fusion of the Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of grammar of visual design with Ryan's notion of prototypical narrativity conditions as its theoretical framework. The study finds out that costume functions as a critical semiotic resource in Hausa cultural cinema, operating beyond its superficial aesthetic role to communicate layered meanings about identity, hierarchy, gender, and spirituality. The paper concludes that costumes are not mere embellishments for adornments for scenes and characters but very crucial tools for communication and creation of cultural awareness and thus it recommends that further researches be carried out on the socio-semiotic and narrative dimensions of Nigerian cultural cinema. Future studies could undertake a comparative analysis of costume used in African film industries to highlight regional variations and transnational influences in visual narrativity.*

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Analysis, Costumes, Kannywood, Cultural, Movies/films

### Introduction

The study investigates the socio-semiotic features and visual narrativity in the costumes of selected Hausa cultural movies, focusing on how objects, symbols, and linguistic elements contribute to meaning-making and narrative development. Specifically, it examines the visual elements contained in the costumes and explores how these visual resources aid the unfolding of the plots and themes, and analyzes the linguistic and cultural features that reinforce narrative

coherence and identity construction in the Hausa movies. narrative theory. This combination enables the interpretation of costume as a multimodal sign that not only encodes meaning through visual composition but also sustains causal and temporal coherence in movie making. Findings reveal that costume in Hausa cultural movies operates as a potent socio-semiotic system that transcends aesthetic appeal to embody identity, hierarchy, and cultural memory. Across all Nigerian cinemas, costumes communicate moral values, spiritual authority, and communal belonging. They serve both representational and narrative functions, guiding the viewer's interpretation and emotional engagement while reinforcing cultural ideology (Agu, 2025). The study concludes that through their integration of narrative sequencing, linguistic expression, and visual semiotics, Nigerian filmmakers use costume as a narrative and cultural language.

Costumes not only aid plot development and character identity but also preserve indigenous worldviews, making them central to the visual and thematic coherence of Nigerian cultural cinema (Ekwueme, 2024). Literature is replete with scholarly works on semiotics and analyses of costumes in Nigerian cultural movies (Okafor, 2022; Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2021; Robert, 2019; Badeji, & Emu, 2019; Bature Uzor, 2018). The studies carried out so far reveal that costumes are vital elements of movies and contribute to the understanding of plot structure and theme. However, despite the very large amount of studies done on images, not much attention has been paid to the meanings of regularities in the way image elements are used especially in Kannywood movies. In order to properly focus the use of costumes as narratological and linguistic elements of movies, this study sets out to examine the cultural as well as the visual properties of the costumes.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to investigate the socio-semiotic features and visual narrativity in costumes of selected Kannywood Cultural Movies. The costumes that adorn the cultural landscape of most of the movies are not mere embellishments to the stories. Some of them have cultural elements, some have visual elements and some contain linguistic and narratological elements that aid in the development of the themes and plots of the stories. Consequently, the specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. examine the significance of the visual elements in the adorning costumes used in Kannywood cultural movies
- ii. interrogate the effect of visual elements on the narrative sequence and themes in the Kannywood movies.

## Literature Review

### Studies on Semiotics

There is a myriad of studies on semiotics; this explains why scholarly works on the subject of semiotics abound. For example, Kaka (2022) focused on a semiotic analysis of selected signboard advertisements within Maiduguri. The study presented a semiotic analysis of selected billboard/signboard advertisements using Ferdinand de Saussure's Dyadic Theory. The study focused on politics, banks and poultry feed advertisements. Twelve (12) selected billboards/signboards within Maiduguri, were obtained as data using sophisticated camera. The study revealed that the political, bank and poultry feed advertisers used different signs to attract customers. While the political advertisers use images of roads, schools and flyover constructed by the governor and IDPS being fed together, and the vehicles bought to show the governor's achievements to persuade the people of the state to vote them to power for the second time. The present study differs significantly from the one being reviewed in focus and analytical depth. Kaka's work concentrated on the meanings of visual signs in advertisements, while the present study goes further to explore the narratological and socio-semiotic dimensions of costumes in Nigerian cultural movies.

Okadigwe (2021) carried out a semiotic reading of costumes in Nigerian video films. The study, made a semiotic analysis of costumes and how they express the user's socio-cultural attributes. The research demonstrated the phenomenal role that costume as a form of communication plays within the cultural and social space, specifically in video films. This work has been able to create a semiotic distinction of costumes in films using the socio-cultural and conventional interpretations of colours, fabrics, styles and textures of clothes and accessories. It has attempted to understand how colours, fabrics and textures convey meaning in film. The study found that costumes aid people to form individual opinions about characters and at the same time reconstruct their socio-cultural realities. Based on this evidence, it concluded that semiotic analysis can be recommended as a useful adjunct to traditional idealistic research, particularly when the film costume being studied is so complex that objectivity is hard to maintain. The study conducted by Okadigwe (2021) aligns with the present research in several ways, as both examine the semiotic interpretation of costumes in Nigerian cultural films and explore their communicative significance. However, the present study distinguishes itself by integrating a narratological dimension into the analysis. Whereas Okadigwe's work focused primarily on the multimodal communicative

functions of costume, this study extends the inquiry by investigating how visual elements within costume design contribute to the thematic construction and narrative progression of films.

Sadiq (2021) conducted a semiotic analysis of the movie “The Black Panther”, using Charles Pierce’s Triadic Theory. Important scenes containing signs in the movie were screen grabbed and presented as data. The signs in the movie were categorized and analyzed based on Pierce’s types of signs (icon, symbol and index) and elements of sign. The findings showed that icon is the most frequently used sign with thirty-five (35) occurrences, followed by symbol with thirty-three (33) occurrences. Index was the least used sign in the movie with only eleven occurrences. The study concluded that Pierce’s Theory therefore, provided a systematic description of the signs in the movie by using tool (elements and type of signs) in identifying and creating patterns which uncover concealed meaning. The study shares methodological similarities with the present research, as both relied primarily on selected movies from which relevant scenes were captured through screenshots and analyzed as data. However, the two studies differ in their theoretical orientations. While the previous study was grounded solely in Peirce’s semiotic theory, the present research adopts a more eclectic approach by integrating multiple theoretical frameworks. This combination allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the semiotic features and narrative functions of costumes in Nigerian cultural movies.

### **Research on Costumes**

Costumes are part of the integral portion of this research. Quite a good number of works or studies have been carried out by scholars. Some of these studies are reviewed here. For example, Utoh-Ezeajugh (2021) examined the practice of indigenous dressing and makeup, as utilized in African daily life and African performances; in a bid to theorize African adornment practices and articulate a position of enquiry, which will be employed in explaining techniques and methods, describing trends and styles, and explaining design practices and preferences within the African fashion and performance space. The researcher made up of the analytical, descriptive and interpretative approach of the qualitative research methodology in his analysis. The result findings showed that the costumes, body designs, and masks, which are used to design performers and create characters in African theatre performances, no doubt possess the grandeurs, splendor, spectacle and intricate artistry which clearly distinguished African design aesthetics, yet, they are

clearly distinctly distinguishable from African dress/fashion practices. This work is very similar to the present study in terms of data sourcing. But they differ significantly in that whereas the former dwells on direct contact with the people who made use of the costumes through interviews and personal observations; the latter gets its data through cultural movies as seen in the films.

Okafor (2020) delved into a historical accuracy in Nollywood costume designs, approaches, constraints and gains. The study opined that in recent years, that historical accuracy in costume design has attracted much attention based on the activities of many scholars, performing artists, and audiences. The researcher said that Accuracy of Costumes in period films is an issue because modern productions of historical events can differ dramatically from the actual period in which the designer is striving to recreate. Based on a critical analysis of three period films, this paper was anchored on Gofman's Dramaturgy Theory, which investigated historical accuracy in costume designs of Nollywood and seeks to determine if the costumes captured in these movies are historically accurate to the Nigerian dress culture from 1960 – 1970. The findings reveal that designers of Nollywood in a bid to create the right period look are encumbered by numerous factors including limitations in documented history, research, budget, material artifice, professional historians and so on. Consequently, the costume designs of the selected films are characterized by inadequate use of lines, colour, scenic background and hair styles. The study differs from the present study in that it primarily focused on the historical accuracy of the costumes, without addressing their narratological functions or the linguistic and semiotic meanings these costumes may convey.

Robert (2019) investigated the influence of costumes on the perception of dance, highlighting the relationship between attire, performance, and cultural expression. The study observed that dancers spend significant time training before mirrors, using visual feedback to refine line, unison, and clarity—factors that may also shape their perceived performance. It further posited that clothing can affect a dancer's self-confidence and sense of ability, particularly in national dances where costumes reflect roles, express meaning, and embody cultural depth. However, the study lacked a clear methodological or theoretical framework, making it largely descriptive. In contrast, the present research adopts a structured semiotic and narratological approach to analyze how costumes function as visual signs that communicate meaning and reinforce cultural narratives in Nigerian cultural films.

Badeji (2019) viewed on costume enterprise as a panacea for poverty reduction among young people in Nigeria by x-raying the potentials embedded in it, in order to ascertain its viability for poverty reduction. The objective of the study was to fill this knowledge gap by carrying out empirical study on the business potentials resident in costume entrepreneurship. The methodology followed survey research design and involved general data from individuals who are involved in costume enterprise business from six geo-political zones in Nigeria. Also, primary data sources came from phone call interview and questionnaire survey. In both cases, the respondents for the study were asked questions regarding their average monthly income from their costume business. The result findings showed that the average monthly income of retail costume entrepreneurs was N30,625; exceeding the monthly earnings of some employed people in Nigeria. The study discovered that the costume entrepreneurs in the Northern region do not earn as much as those in the Southern region. The study diverges from the present research in focus and scope. While it primarily examined the socio-economic relevance of costumes, the present study broadens the inquiry by incorporating cultural and pedagogical perspectives, exploring how costumes function not only as economic or social symbols but also as carriers of cultural meaning and educational value.

Badeji and Emu (2019) examined the challenges of realistic costuming in Nigerian Christian. The study discovered that realistic elaborate and spectacular costume design is not prioritized in Mount Zion films, and since the audience cannot be ignorant of the clothes and their functions in real life, it would be erroneous to assume that they will not be able to relate with them in production. The researchers are of the opinion that the most important thing is that professional costume designer needs to be artistic, creative and detail oriented. This usually contributes greatly in bringing out the inner meaning of a film production, through the use of appropriate costume. The costume designer therefore establishes the identity and personality of characters by designing the production. In the cause of the analysis, the researchers did not make use of any methodology or theoretical framework to analyze the two films. (Haunted and the Last Man Standing). In their findings, it was established that costume is important in production process and should be integrated to aid an entire production process. It was however discovered that, the Mount Zion films or Drama Ministry (which the work studied), has not resident professional costume designer and many of the costumes are handled by volunteers whose intention is to evangelize through their works. And on some occasions, actors

wear what they deem fit, because, the stakeholders have no real interest in realistic or appropriate costumes. Although Badeji and Emu's (2019) study corresponds with the present research in recognizing costume as a vital semiotic and communicative element in film production, the two studies diverge in both scope and focus. Badeji and Emu's work centers on Christian films, emphasizing the practical and production-oriented challenges of achieving realistic costuming. In contrast, the present study investigates costumes in Nigerian cultural films, adopting a socio-semiotic and narratological perspective to examine how visual attire functions as a system of signs that constructs cultural identity, conveys symbolic meaning, and advances narrative development.

Bature-Uzor (2018) studied the costumes scenery and location as narrative agents in Tchidi Chikere's *World Apart*. The study focused on the use of these narrative agents as communicative elements to portray the main idea in the film narrative. The study hinges on a critical analysis of these elements to understand how they are used – in this film in order to interpret their signification.

In conclusion, the study revealed that costumes set/scenery and location played significant roles as narrative agents towards the realization of the ideology that underlie the narrative; following this argument, the artistic success of any film narrative is dependent, to a large extent on the proper use and application of these narrative agents. Both studies examine the narratological functions of costumes as communicative elements in film. However, Bature-Uzor's (2018) study focuses on a single film, *World Apart*, emphasizing the combined role of costumes, scenery, and location, whereas the present study analyzes multiple Nigerian cultural films, concentrating specifically on the socio-semiotic and narratological dimensions of costumes.

Ejikeme and Nnamdi (2018) focused on Nigeria video films and the significant roles of costumes and makeup in Tchidi Chikere's "World Apart." The study concludes that films very powerful media of communication if effectively packaged and deployed. It is a special medium of communication that transcends and surmounts the functional barriers of language and culture differences through the combination of the creative and communicative qualities of visual and audio effects. The study did not make use of any methodology or theoretical framework for the analysis of this study. The research revealed the communicative functions of costume in the named Nigeria video film. Costume and makeup in any drama production whether screen or stage reveal and enhance communication through fabric, colour, and line. It also reveals the actor's race, environment, social class, and economic status, locale and style, mood, and many other

paraphernalia targeted at enhancing needed communication affects and effects. Both studies recognize the communicative role of costumes in Nigerian films. However, Ejikeme and Nnamdi's (2018) work focuses primarily on descriptive analysis of costume and makeup in *World Apart* without employing a defined theoretical or methodological framework, whereas the present study adopts a structured semiotic and narratological approach to examine how costumes function as socio-cultural and meaning-making devices across selected Nigerian cultural movies.

### **Studies on Narratology**

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) aptly demonstrated in their work that pictures or diagrams, including visual elements, when presented adequately, do narrate stories. The pictures they used for the demonstration were taken from an Australian primary-school social studies textbook (Oakley *et al.*, 1985, cited in Agu 2025). One represents the traditional technology of the Australian Aborigines, the other the superior technology of those who invaded their territory (The British had a technology that was capable of changing the face of the earth. Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) study aligns with the present research in its semiotic exploration of visual communication and the construction of meaning through imagery. Both studies emphasize that visual elements function as sign systems capable of narrating stories and conveying complex cultural or ideological messages. However, they differ in focus and application. Kress and Van Leeuwen analyze visual semiotics within educational texts, illustrating how compositional structure, inclusion, and arrangement of visual elements produce meaning. In contrast, the present study applies semiotic analysis to cinematic costumes in Nigerian cultural films, examining how these visual components act as narrative and cultural signifiers that communicate identity, ideology, and thematic significance within filmic representation.

Jabeen and Cheong (2022) carried out a multimodal analysis of narrativity in a Pakistani TV advertisement. The study maintained that deciphering the social implications of visual texts can be greatly aided by a multi-perspective approach. The analytical framework was based on Kress & van Leeuwen's social semiotics, as well as Ryan's narratological observations and the storytelling components of Fog *et al.* The study revealed the performers' psychological and physical characteristics in the images, which depict social connections by describing a family in a

Pakistani sociocultural setting. This work advances our comprehension of the applicability of narrative and multimodal socio-semiotic theories. The analytical method that has been suggested is intended to provide a basis for successful multimodal narratives in television commercials.

Jabeen and Cheong's (2022) study relates to the present research through its application of social semiotics and narratology to visual media analysis, emphasizing how visual and multimodal elements communicate meaning within specific sociocultural contexts. Both studies share an interest in exploring how visual signs construct narrative and cultural meaning. However, they differ in medium and scope. Jabeen and Cheong focus on multimodal narrativity in Pakistani television advertisements, analyzing how imagery and performance convey social relationships and cultural values. In contrast, the present study examines costumes in Nigerian cultural films, interpreting them as socio-semiotic and narratological devices that encode cultural identity, convey social meanings, and contribute to narrative structure and thematic development in cinema. Akinmoto and Oguta (2021) examined a narratological approach for narrative discourse in the implementation and evaluation of the system based on Genette and Jauss. The study proposed a computational system of narrative discourse generation and its implementation. In the system, Genette's discourse theory is reconstructed as discourse techniques which transform the tree structure for a story into discourse structures. Also, the study introduced Jauss's reception theory to construct the control mechanism, which continues discourse generation through generation cycles based on the interaction between both narrator and narratee mechanisms. Moreover, the study attempted two kinds of performance checks and two types of evaluation experiments and confirmed that the system generates diverse discourse structures on the rough correspondence with generative parameters. And furthermore, this study show that two different types of literary knowledge are organically integrated into a system's framework. This study further explained that Genette's Narrative Discourse Theory is a representative literary theorist and narratologist mainly associated with structuralism. The discourse theory by Genette (1972) comparatively clearly categorizes various types of discourse techniques through the analysis of a novel. The theory consists of following three broad categories: "tense" relevant to the relationship between story's time and discourse's time, "mood" relevant to the modality for regulating narrative information, and "voice" relevant to the relationship among narrating, story and discourse. Each category is further divided into many subcategories. This study is very relevant to the present study because

the latter would draw inspirations from the former towards examining the time frame and the multimodality structure in the analysis of costumes in Nigerian cultural movies.

### **Perspectives on Kanywood Movies**

Habsat (2022) discussed the reflection of National Integration in Nigeria through films. The study adopted the theory of Hermeneut, which is the study of interpretation. It originated with Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German Philosopher and Bible Scholar. The study also adopted the qualitative method of analysis since the research was essentially qualitative in nature; that is, purely textbased. Content analysis of some selected movie up-north was focused on the extent at which the movies portrayed images and situations that make national integration in Nigeria desirable. The study found out that the movie portrayed the Nigerian culture positively, significantly, encouraged national integration through focus on good morals, mutual respect among individuals, promotion of hard-work, and respect for and tolerance of cultural diversity. The study concluded that films is a veritable means of social re-engineering and nation building, and suggested that through greater synergy between the stakeholders in the culture industry, Nigerian films should be made to reflect mainly the positive cultural ethos of the nation, while promoting peace in the society as depicted in the movie *Up North*. Habsat (2022) focused on the reflection of national integration in Nigeria through films, analyzing the movie *Up North* using a hermeneutic and qualitative content analysis approach to examine how films promote unity, moral values, and cultural tolerance. The present takes a different direction. It specifically investigates the semiotic and visual narrative dimensions of costumes in Nigerian cultural films, exploring how costume design communicates social meanings, cultural identity, and narrative progression.

Jimi, Salau and Folarin (2022) did an appraisal of the dominant depiction of women in Nigeria Nollywood movies. The work examined how female stereotypes are portrayed in Nigerian movies using a feminist critic point of view. The study made use of the quantitative research method via secondary data to collect necessary information for the period of 20 years (2002 – 2022). The feminist cinema theory established the foundation for explaining the dominant depletion of women in movies. The study concluded by saying that encouraging positive portrayals of women in Nollywood movies is important. This study is at variance with the present study on a number of issues. In the first place, the study, though depicts some aspects of culture, did not in any way portray anything on signs or signals. Both studies examine how Nigerian films reflect social and

cultural realities. However, while Jimi, Salau, and Folarin (2022) focused on gender representation and female stereotypes in Nollywood using a feminist and quantitative approach, the present study explores the socio-semiotic and visual dimensions of film, emphasizing how costumes convey cultural meanings and aid storytelling.

Olanrewaju, Gbenga, and Oluwakemi (2021) investigated the Influence of Nollywood movies on Social life of women in Ilorin South LGA, Kwara State. This study attempted to find out how Nigerian women interpret the images they see in Nollywood movies, if what women review in Nollywood movies are responsible for increase in violence in social life, uncontrolled desire for a life of affluence and ritual killings in the society. This study also established if some of the themes in Nollywood movies are true reflection of what goes on in our society. Drawing a sample of 250 from population of study, survey method was adopted. The theoretical framework of this study was hinged on Cultivation Theory of Mass Communication, as developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976; to examine Mass Media effects, most especially television on the audience. The study found out that women's exposure to Nollywood movies does not predict social life as being occultic but presents social life as patriarchal. It however, recommended that the image of women should be portrayed positively in movies to reflect how women should be perceived and treated in the society. Both studies are concerned with the social impact of Nollywood films on Nigerian society. However, while Olanrewaju, Gbenga, and Oluwakemi (2021) focused on how women interpret and are influenced by portrayals in Nollywood movies using a survey and the Cultivation Theory to assess audience perception, the present study examines the socio-semiotic and visual narrative functions of costumes in films. The former investigates audience responses and social behavior, whereas the latter analyzes visual symbols and costume design as tools for cultural communication and storytelling.

Obiora and Odoh (2020) did an exploration of Igbo Monarchy in Nigerian films. The study examined the depictions of Igbo monarchy in Nollywood films situated within the framework of representation theory by Serge Moscovic. This is a theory that is about role of representation in communicative practices, particularly in the transmission of knowledge and the representation of identities. The study adopted quantitative sample of 20 films was randomly selected. Data collection instruments was coding sheet. This study found out that Nollywood films have constructed Igbo monarchy as an important aspect of Igbo cultural setup as royals are portrayed as playing vital leadership role – political and religious, in their respective communities. Qualities

portrayed of Igbo monarchy in Nollywood films include physical power, valor, and wealth. Data further showed that the emerging themes in Nollywood Igbo monarchy films were war, valor, and intrigue (for films released from 1996 to 2003) and love, marriage, wealth and class conflict. Nonetheless, the themes of power play and succession featured prominently. The studies share an interest in how Nigerian culture is portrayed in Nollywood films. Obiora and Odoh (2020) concentrated on the depiction of Igbo monarchy, using representation theory to analyze leadership, power, and cultural identity in films. In contrast, the present study focuses on the semiotic and visual functions of costumes, examining how they convey cultural meanings and contribute to narrative development. While the former emphasizes themes and character representation, the latter highlights visual symbolism and storytelling through costume design.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopts the fusion of the Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of grammar of visual design with Ryan's (2006) notion of prototypical narrativity conditions as the theoretical framework. This theory (grammar of visual design) was propounded by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwens in (2006). The study of visual design grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) provides a foundation for analyzing visual communication and highlighting the different visual components that highlight a certain visual message. The visual grammar theory was a response to Barthes's (1967) image theory, which "focuses too much on the interdependence of word and picture. Halliday's work on social semiotics, a subfield of Systemic Functional Grammar, served as a major inspiration for Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of visual grammar design. Language, according to Halliday, is a semiotic system that has resources for encoding social interaction and experience interpretations. Thus, the theoretical framework of "social semiotics" (2006, p. 9) serves as the theoretical foundation for van Leeuwen and Kress' study on visual representation. Interestingly, Kress and van Leeuwen see the visual component of a text as an independently organized and structured message that is connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it. The theory of grammar of visual makes some assumptions:

"Visual grammar" is a "general grammar of contemporary visual design in "Western" cultures," which consists of the components and guidelines that underpin a culture-specific type of visual communication. It describes both explicit and implicit knowledge and behaviors surrounding a resource. As a synonym for visual grammar design, visual literacy refers to the capacity to

comprehend, negotiate, and derive meaning from information that is presented visually. Accordingly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) define "visual grammar" as a "general grammar of contemporary visual design in "Western" cultures, an account of explicit and implicit knowledge and practices around a resource, consisting of the elements and rules underlying a culture-specific form of visual communication" (p.3).

### **Ryan's Theory of Narratology**

For a long time, narratology was thought to be an unproblematic field of study that primarily focused on the study of literary fiction in its different forms. In recent times, however, the idea of narrative has permeated almost every field of humanities, including anthropology, medicine, advertising, and law. Moreover, the idea of story was extended to include non-representational creative forms like music and architecture as well as media that relies on signs other than words, such as computer games, paintings, and movies. (Ryan, 2010). Narrative as an art form was the primary focus of narratology; more recently, however, the emphasis appears to have moved to narrative as a mode of thought due to the influence of cognitive techniques. Yet, only a small percentage of stories are produced as works of art.

### **Methodology**

Using a qualitative research design, two purposively selected kannywood cultural movies from platforms such as Netflix and YouTube were analyzed. Some screenshots of costumes and related semiotic resources such as colour, fabric, gesture, and spatial arrangement were examined using the principles of visual grammar and narrativity. Anchored in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design and Ryan's (2006) prototypical narrativity, the study adopts a theoretical lens that integrates visual semiotics of costumes used in cultural movies.

## Findings

### IMG 1: Amina

In the image, Amina is depicted wearing a blue war-like jacket adorned with touches of gold and spotty black from the neck collar to the waist, a choice of costume that immediately signals both her martial readiness and regal authority. At the representational level, the colours and textures carry distinct meaning: the blue communicates strength, calm, and control, while gold connotes royalty, power, and valor, reinforcing her status as a queen. The spotty black adds a sense of intensity and seriousness, marking her as a formidable warrior. Her hair is neatly plaited all-back, decorated with white coral beads, which serves not only a decorative function but also anchors her character in Hausa cultural tradition, linking her visually to historical identity and heritage. The golden bow and arrow strapped to her back function as a symbolic prop, explicitly representing her readiness for battle and her role as protector of her people, thus extending the representational meaning into narrative territory.

More so, at the interactional level, the costume establishes a dynamic relationship between Amina and the viewer. Her upright, gallant posture and the half-open mouth forming a mean smile project confidence, defiance, and assertive power, inviting the audience to both respect and fear her. The carefully structured lines of her jacket, the vertical rhythm of her plaited hair, and the diagonal placement of her bow and arrow guide the viewer's gaze across her figure, emphasizing discipline, strength, and readiness. These elements create an interaction where the viewer perceives Amina not just as a character in a story, but as a dominant, commanding

presence, demanding attention and recognition. From a compositional perspective, the costume works in concert with

Amina's posture and accessories to create visual hierarchy and balance. The bright touches of gold against the darker base color draw the eye to her torso, suggesting the centrality of strength and leadership. The diagonal line formed by the bow and arrow adds dynamic tension, implying movement and action even in a still frame. The coral beads punctuating her plaited hair introduce repetition and rhythm, softening the martial severity with cultural nuance, and maintaining balance between her feminine identity and warrior persona. Overall, the composition positions Amina as the focal point of the image, with her costume acting as a narrative tool that visually encodes status, readiness, and cultural legitimacy. Amina's costume, therefore, operates on multiple levels: it represents her as a culturally rooted, authoritative warrior; it interacts with the viewer by asserting her power and commanding attention; and it is composed to direct gaze, establish hierarchy, and convey both narrative and symbolic meaning, making her both historically resonant and cinematically striking.

IMG 2: Amina

In Image 2, the Emir of Zazzau stands centrally between his Madaki and Dogari, forming a visually and narratively significant tableau. At the representational level, the Emir's costume immediately conveys authority, status, and cultural identity. His white turban, covering his head, mouth, and neck, leaves only his furrowed, disapproving face visible, symbolizing both his elevated rank and emotional intensity. The white color denotes purity, spiritual authority, and prestige within Hausa/Fulani cultural context, while the visible wrinkle on his forehead emphasizes his concern or displeasure, possibly in response to Amina's unconventional pursuit of military service. The Madaki's attire, consisting of a white babariga paired with a blue turban-like Hausa cap, mirrors aspects of the Emir's expression, signifying alignment, loyalty, and shared authority. His white garment echoes the Emir's color symbolism, reinforcing his close association with leadership and trustworthiness. Meanwhile, the Dogari's costume, comprising a red and green babariga with a red turban-like Hausa cap, introduces vibrant hues that suggest vitality, vigilance, and martial readiness. His long staff, a formal symbol of office and responsibility, underscores his functional role in the hierarchy and signals discipline and control.

This image depicts a traditional Hausa/Fulani court setting. At the center, an Emir is dressed in striped robes with a voluminous white turban covering his head and face, leaving only his eyes visible. He is surrounded by courtiers and guards: some wear baban riga in green, blue, and striped patterns, while others are clad in red turbans and red-green tunics, symbolizing palace guards (Dogarai). One figure in white sits close to the Emir, while others in richly patterned garments and bold colors flank the space, contributing to the visual hierarchy of authority and allegiance. The image below shed more light on this:

### IMG 3: Azazau

In this scene, the costumes function as a rich visual language that encodes cultural identity, authority, and hierarchy within Hausa/Fulani court life. The Emir's layered attire and white turban set him apart as the central figure, symbolizing purity, spiritual leadership, and supreme authority. Around him, the Dogarai, dressed in striking red uniforms and armed with staffs, embody strength, vigilance, and guardianship, visually reinforcing their role as protectors of power. The courtiers, clad in babanriga of green, blue, and striped patterns, reflect wealth, dignity, and their advisory positions within the palace structure, while the seated figure in white suggests loyalty, closeness to the Emir, and perhaps spiritual counsel. Beyond representation, the costumes also establish interactional meaning through posture, gaze, and positioning. The Emir's veiled face creates distance and mystique, compelling reverence, while his elevated stance asserts dominance. The Dogarai form a defensive frame that mediates between the Emir and others, while the courtiers' orientation towards him expresses collective allegiance and submission. For the viewer, the interplay of vibrant red against the more subdued tones of the robes heightens the sense of authority and unity.

### IMG 4: Zazau

The costumes in this scene operate as cultural signifiers that distinguish social identity, rank, and character. The man in green with a red cap is dressed simply, suggesting modest status or a supportive role, yet the striking red accent conveys assertiveness and presence. By contrast, Alhaji Mati's white baban riga, layered robe, and green turban project prestige, dignity, and piety, aligning him with cultural authority and seniority. The stripes on his attire further enhance his visual weight, underscoring his importance even in a moment of visible agitation. Interactionally, the costumes frame the dynamics between the two figures. The man in green, leaning toward Alhaji Mati, embodies the role of mediator, his plain attire shifting focus to his active intervention rather than his status. Meanwhile, Mati's elaborate dress contrasts with his unsettled demeanor, creating a tension between his social authority and his emotional unrest. The turban partially concealing his face reinforces the cultural expectation of composure, even as his agitation threatens to surface. For the viewer, the contrast between plain and elaborate dress becomes a dialogue of power and vulnerability. Compositionally, the costumes organize the scene through visual hierarchy. The luminosity of Mati's white baban riga immediately commands attention, establishing him as the focal point, while the red cap of his counterpart provides balance and prevents visual dominance.

### **Discussion of findings**

Costume designs in kannywood films play a crucial role in shaping cultural narratives and conveying identity, status, and values. In many kannywood movies, clothing and accessories are not merely decorative; they function as visual markers of social hierarchy, historical context, and gender roles. From the flowing robes and embroidered tunics of traditional elites to the distinctive hairstyles and beadwork that signal ethnic heritage, these films use costume to bridge cinematic storytelling and cultural authenticity. In historical and action-oriented films like *Amina*, costumes serve a dual purpose: they reflect the material culture of the period while simultaneously symbolizing the personal attributes and societal roles of the characters. By examining the visual elements of *Amina*'s costume through the lens of visual grammar, we can uncover how color, texture, form, and adornment communicate deeper meanings about power, identity, and cultural continuity in Hausa/Fulani society. This is in consonance with the findings of Okadigwe (2021) who carried out a semiotic reading of costumes in Nigerian video films.

Another notable instance in which cultural costumes assume a significant narrative function is illustrated in the image which depicts the traditional attire of the Emir alongside his Madaki and Dogari. This image exemplifies the visual articulation of hierarchy, authority, and cultural identity. The Emir's robes, often richly embroidered and adorned with distinctive patterns, signify supreme leadership and social prestige, while the Madaki and Dogari wear garments and accessories that denote their respective roles as advisors and palace guards, reflecting both function and status. The use of colour, texture, and ornamentation serves not only aesthetic purposes but also communicates symbolic meaning, signaling loyalty, rank, and adherence to Hausa/Fulani cultural traditions. Through these carefully constructed costumes, the film visually encodes historical authenticity and social structure, allowing viewers to interpret character roles and relationships even before any dialogue occurs. This assertion completely agrees with the conclusion drawn by Habsat (2022).

The costumes as seen in the various images of the movie, *Amina*, establish a dialogue between the figures and the viewer. The Emir's partially concealed face, combined with the solemnity of the Madaki and Dogari's garments, commands respect and attentiveness, positioning the viewer to recognize their authority, hierarchy, and collective judgment. The mirroring of expressions and alignment of posture among the three men communicates cohesion and institutional unity, while the color contrasts highlight individual roles within this hierarchy, allowing the viewer to interpret both personal and relational significance.

The arrangement and costume choices create visual hierarchy, balance, and narrative clarity. The Emir's central placement, accentuated by the stark whiteness of his turban and garments, draws immediate attention, establishing him as the focal point of authority. The flanking positions of the Madaki and Dogari, their complementary colors, and the vertical lines of their turbaned heads and flowing robes guide the viewer's gaze across the group, reinforcing the formal structure of power. The repetition of traditional Hausa/Fulani elements, turbans, *babariga*, and staff, creates rhythm and cultural coherence, situating the characters within a recognizable historical and social context. Overall, the costumes of the Emir, Madaki, and Dogari operate on multiple levels: representationally, they denote rank, cultural identity, and emotional stance; interactionally, they communicate authority, loyalty, and relational alignment to the viewer; and compositionally, they organize the visual space to emphasize hierarchy, cohesion, and narrative focus, thus reinforcing both the story and the cultural authenticity of the scene. This is ultimately supported by Ryan's

(2006) notion of prototypical narrativity conditions earlier mentioned as one of theories used in this study.

The observations and findings in image 3 are not too far-removed from the results identified in the earlier images. From the standpoint of Composition, the scene is organized to emphasize hierarchy and order. The Emir's central placement, amplified by the brilliance of his white attire against the earthy background, makes him the undeniable focal point. The repetition of red turbans among the Dogarai introduces rhythm and balance, reinforcing palace order, while the courtiers' multicolored garments add variation, suggesting diversity within unity. The spatial arrangement of figures encircling the Emir directs the viewer's gaze inward, consolidating his symbolic and narrative centrality. Overall, the costumes do more than achieve historical authenticity; they act as visual texts that narrate power relations, cultural symbolism, and institutional hierarchy. They represent roles and ranks, establish relations of authority and loyalty, and organize the image through balance and contrast, ensuring that the Emir's authority is visually and symbolically foregrounded. Differently, costumes in Hausa films are not merely decorative elements but function as integral components of narrative construction, articulating identity, hierarchy, and cultural meaning. As visual texts, they provide immediate cues about character roles, social status, and emotional states, often before dialogue unfolds. For instance, the image presents two male figures in conversation: the man on the left wears a plain dark-green outfit with a red Hausa cap (zanna bukar), while the man on the right is dressed in a white baban riga layered with a striped robe and a green turban that partially covers his head and neck. This visual juxtaposition of simplicity and elaboration demonstrates how costume design narrates difference in status, authority, and disposition. Thus, Hausa costumes in film operate as narrative sequences in themselves, encoding cultural values and power relations while advancing the storyline through visual symbolism. This lends credence to an earlier study by Bature-Uzor (2018) who studied the costumes scenery and location as narrative agents in Tchidi Chikere's "World Apart."

The juxtaposition of simplicity and grandeur in costume as observed in image 4 reinforces the hierarchical relationship between the two men, while their close proximity underscores the intimacy and urgency of their exchange. Against the muted earthy background, the costumes emerge as the central conveyors of meaning, emphasizing the cultural symbolism embedded in

Hausa dress. This again, supports an earlier view by Ejikeme and Nnamdi (2018) whose study focused on Nigeria video films and the significant roles of costumes and makeup

## **Conclusion**

The study found that Hausa/Fulani cultural movies skillfully integrate narrative sequence, linguistic features, and cultural elements to construct meaning and reinforce moral and social values. These elements operate together to shape coherent and culturally resonant storylines. Movies such as *Amina* and *Mati a Zazzau* exemplify this integration, demonstrating how Hausa cinema translates cultural heritage into narrative form. In *Amina*, the narrative unfolds in a largely linear sequence tracing Princess Amina's evolution from a determined child to a formidable warrior queen. This temporal and causal progression aligns with Ryan's (2006) theory of narrativity, where each event, her defiance of gender norms, rigorous training, and quest for power, leads directly to conflict and resolution. Flashbacks and prophetic visions strengthen causality and thematic cohesion, emphasizing destiny as a central narrative force.

Cultural elements are deeply embedded in the storyline. Themes of family honor, leadership, and religious duty frame Amina's personal ambition within communal ethics. Her defiance of arranged marriage and pursuit of power dramatize the tension between tradition and self-determination, mirroring gender negotiations in Hausa/Fulani society. Costumes like flowing robes, turbans, and royal ornaments visually encode hierarchy and identity, situating the narrative in a historically authentic milieu. Linguistically, *Amina* combines Hausa and English dialogue, enriched with proverbs, idioms, and Arabic expressions. These linguistic features serve both aesthetic and didactic purposes, reinforcing cultural wisdom and moral instruction. Songs and chants embedded in ritual and battle scenes heighten emotional resonance while connecting the audience to oral traditions. Through this synthesis of narrative structure, linguistic expressiveness, and cultural symbolism, *Amina* exemplifies "high narrativity," achieving coherence, cultural depth, and moral significance.

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