

The Sociocultural Impact of the Carnival Costume in Theatrical Practices in Kinshasa, DRC

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ABSTRACT

Kinshasa, as the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is a major cultural center in Africa, influencing not only music but also fashion. The artists of Kinshasa play a key role in energizing local culture and fashion, making the latter a vehicle for fame and success. In the fields of theater and cinema, the carnival costume is increasingly prominent, both in film productions and in the staging of performances related to the country's major historical and political events. Due to their influence, some artists are also sought after for advertising and promoting products from local businesses. Charmes (2016) addresses the symbolic and sociocultural dimension of the carnival costume, a theme that forms the foundation of this study. This study focuses on the traditionally festive aspect associated with popular celebrations, particularly its central role in theatrical productions, where it becomes a powerful tool for artistic expression and social critique. According to Parker (1984), the carnival costume, in the theatrical context, symbolizes transformation, cultural identity, and the questioning of social norms. Thus, it becomes a means of conveying social and political messages while affirming belonging to Congolese culture. This study also highlights the importance of the work of fashion designers and clothing technicians, whose creations help define significant cultural events and strengthen the collective bond around these dress expressions, and it also analyzes the influence of the carnival costume on the theatrical message.

Keywords: carnival costume, theatrical practice, cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

Carnival Costume

The carnival costume refers to the set of garments worn during the production of a film or a theatrical performance, which acquire a sartorial meaning consistent with the scenario or dramatic context. It constitutes a central element of carnival celebrations, particularly in cultures where this event carries a strong symbolic dimension.

In the field of performing arts, the carnival costume goes beyond its function as a festive outfit; it becomes a vehicle of artistic expression and a tool of cultural representation. In this regard, Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes that the costume is not merely clothing but a symbolic instrument that marks a rupture with everyday life, allowing individuals to reinvent themselves, to disguise, or to express themselves differently.

As a concept, the carnival costume is a powerful symbol of transformation, social liberation, and cultural affirmation. In dramatic art, it plays an essential role, serving not only as a stage element but also as a means of social expression. Senghor (1964) views the carnival costume as an instrument of social critique and a factor of collective cohesion.

In contexts such as Kinshasa, the carnival costume goes beyond its role as an identity garment; it becomes a tool of cultural assertion, integrating both traditional and modern elements, and offering a space for creative expression and social reflection.

Theatrical Practice

Theatrical practice constitutes a space for cultural expression and a crossroads for the transmission of sociocultural values. It serves as an educational and formative medium, capable of conveying knowledge, traditions, and symbolic representations from one generation to another. According to Boal (2004), theatrical practice is a major component of the performing arts, on par with dance, music, and cinema. It is primarily manifested as an art of representation, traditionally performed on stage, but it can also take contemporary forms such as street performances, happenings, or experimental theatre.

In its classical sense, dramatic art consists of creating, interpreting, and staging a dialogued story intended to be performed before an audience. It mobilizes language, body, voice, and space to convey emotions, raise ideas, represent conflicts, and explore human questions.

Ubersfeld (1996) emphasizes that theatrical practices rely on several fundamental elements, each playing a specific role in the creation and reception of a dramatic work. These components include the dramatic text, the characters, the staging, the actors, and the audience — all of which contribute to the construction of meaning.

For his part, Brecht (1970) identifies several essential functions of theatre, placing the human being at the center of the social and cultural stage. Theatre fulfills educational, aesthetic, cathartic, political, and social roles. It questions power relations, denounces injustices, and gives a voice to the voiceless. It also plays a ritual and identity role, perpetuating traditions, reaffirming cultural belonging, and serving as a form of collective memory.

Cultural Identity

While many African countries have claimed independence from colonial empires, it is evident that all Africans build their identity in relation to their culture, society, customs, and traditions. This identity holds great significance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where every individual defines themselves as *Congolese by blood* rather than by land, as is the case in the United States. A Congolese by blood has his homeland — the Congo (DRC). This identity serves as a reference point within the political, economic, and socio-cultural landscape of the nation.

Thus, in cultural practices, the costume reflects this image that embodies the beauty and pride of Congolese traditions. This idea aligns with the thought of Sarraute (1956), who states that identity refers to the set of symbolic elements, languages, traditions, beliefs, values, social practices, and artistic expressions that allow an individual or a group to recognize themselves and to be recognized as belonging to a particular culture. It plays a fundamental role in the construction of the self, the feeling of community belonging, and in social and political dynamics.

Speaking about cultural identity, Ubersfeld (1996) adds that it is both inherited (transmitted by previous generations) and constantly recreated, particularly through arts, fashion, theatre, and music. In Kinshasa, music establishes its solid foundations on language, artistic practices, beliefs and rituals, cultural symbols and objects, and social cohesion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As part of this research on the sociocultural impact of the carnival costume in theatrical practices in Kinshasa, emphasis was placed on the methods and techniques of data collection through random sampling. The sample studied consists of 80 artists from various fields, including musicians, filmmakers, fashion designers, stylists, and other cultural actors.

The methodological approach adopted is ethnosociological, allowing for the analysis of cultural practices within their social context while valuing indigenous knowledge systems. This method aims to articulate the symbolic representations surrounding the carnival costume with the social and identity dynamics observed in contemporary Congolese theatre.

It thus makes it possible to produce results with high interpretative value, taking into account the historical, aesthetic, and political dimensions of the phenomenon under study.

RESULTS

The scientific value of this study, beyond its methodological framework, lies in the answers provided to the main research questions: *What influence does the carnival costume exert on the theatrical message? How does it contribute to the affirmation of Congolese cultural identity? And what role does it play in the transmission of values in theatre?*

Data analysis was conducted through a statistical interpretation aimed at validating the formulated hypotheses.

The results indicate that the carnival costume occupies a central place in the implementation of artistic practices—particularly theatrical and musical ones—in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It appears as an essential element not only in structuring the artistic message but also in enhancing cultural identity and transmitting social, political, and symbolic references.

The Influence of the Carnival Costume on the Impact of the Theatrical Message

The survey conducted among actors, costume designers, and directors involved in popular theatre in Kinshasa highlights the central role of the carnival costume in the construction and transmission of the theatrical message.

The findings show that 84% of respondents believe the costume is used to represent the *ethnic or regional identity* of characters, thereby affirming a specific cultural identity on stage. Furthermore, 71% of participants noted that the choice of colors, patterns, and cuts is directly inspired by traditional Congolese dress codes, particularly those from Kasai, Kongo Central, and Équateur. These aesthetic references, deeply rooted in local cultures, help situate the characters within a collective imagination rich in historical, cultural, and social symbols.

In addition, 62% of respondents consider that the carnival costume helps strengthen cultural identity among young people, especially through contemporary forms of urban theatre. In this sense, it acts as a vector of living memory, reviving traditional clothing knowledge that is sometimes neglected or marginalized in modern practices.

In a context marked by multi-ethnicity and cultural globalization, as is the case in Kinshasa, the carnival costume functions as a tool of cultural reappropriation. It revalorizes local identity symbols while asserting a theatrical aesthetic that is both expressive and meaningful. Thus, the stage becomes a space of cultural resistance, where local roots are highlighted in the face of the growing influence of external cultural models.

The Carnival Costume as a Vehicle for Asserting Congolese Cultural Identity

Data collected from playwrights and actors belonging to urban theatre troupes such as Ciné-Art and Théâtre des Intrigants reveal that the carnival costume is widely perceived as a tool of critical expression within contemporary Congolese theatre.

Thus, 69% of respondents stated that they use this costume to denounce social injustices, particularly corruption, poverty, and urban violence. In addition, 53% reported that they intentionally incorporate exaggerated or parodic elements into their costumes—such as oversized proportions or bright, clashing colors—in order to ridicule figures of power or deconstruct certain social stereotypes. This use of hyperbole and satire enables a critical distancing from lived realities.

Furthermore, 41% indicated that certain costumes are designed to embody symbolic characters, such as the *corrupt politician*, the *market woman* (“*mama*”), or the *manipulative prophet*. These figures, immediately recognizable to the audience, facilitate identification and amplify the impact of the social message.

Inspired by the popular carnival—perceived as a space for the transgression of norms and freedom of expression—the carnival costume becomes, in urban Congolese theatre, a powerful satirical tool. Through visual contrast and humor, it provokes laughter while stimulating critical reflection. In a context like Kinshasa, where the performing arts are deeply rooted in social engagement, the costume serves as a channel of protest, reinforcing the role of theatre as a space for civic dialogue and collective reflection on contemporary social issues.

The Role of the Carnival Costume in the Transmission of Social, Political, and Cultural Values in Theatre

For young artists and costume designers from local cultural centers such as the Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles or Yolé! Africa, the carnival costume carries a strong cultural and identity-based significance. It plays a key role in preserving the customs and traditions of the various Congolese communities.

According to the data collected, 78% of respondents believe that the collective creation of these costumes fosters a spirit of intergenerational collaboration, involving seamstresses, artists, and elders in a shared project. Moreover, 66% of participants emphasized that the costume represents a space for creative innovation, where tradition and modernity are interwoven. The combination of *wax fabric*, *beads*, *recycled textiles*, and *contemporary elements* transforms the costume into a genuine aesthetic laboratory.

Additionally, 59% of respondents consider that the use of the carnival costume in theatre reinforces social cohesion, particularly during community performances in neighborhoods, parishes, or schools.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the uses of the carnival costume in Congolese urban theatre highlights two major functions: that of a tool for social critique and that of a lever for cultural cohesion. These two dimensions, far from contradicting each other, complement one another and reveal the symbolic richness of this garment within the Kinshasa context.

According to Boal (2004) and Brecht (1970), theatrical practices play a central role in connecting visual arts, traditional tailoring, and stage performance. The costume becomes a point of convergence between generations, between professional and amateur artists, and contributes to the construction of a shared urban memory through ephemeral yet meaningful creations. In a city like Kinshasa, often marked by social divides, the carnival costume plays a key role as a symbolic social object, strengthening social bonds both in tangible and intangible ways.

On one hand, the carnival costume embodies a form of visual satire. Through exaggerated shapes, the use of striking materials, and the portrayal of typical characters, artists denounce painful social realities such as corruption, inequality, and abuse of power. This satirical approach is rooted in the carnivalesque tradition, where laughter becomes a means of social

protest. On stage, the costume makes the invisible visible and gives voice to the unspoken, while maintaining a playful distance that facilitates the audience's reception of the message.

On the other hand, the carnival costume serves as a space for collective expression and cultural transmission. Its creation involves a collaborative process, mobilizing various artisanal and artistic skills, often across generations. This process not only strengthens social cohesion but also values local know-how. Furthermore, material innovation—through the combination of textures and styles—illustrates the vitality of this tradition, which is constantly reinvented by younger generations. The costume thus becomes a reflection of a plural urban identity, simultaneously rooted in history and open to modernity.

In a context marked by social, economic, and political tensions, the carnival costume emerges as a “total social object” (in the sense of Mauss), positioned at the intersection of aesthetic, cultural, and political issues. It transforms theatre into a space of dialogue, memory, and collective imagination.

CONCLUSION

The carnival costume, as manifested in Congolese urban theatre, goes far beyond its aesthetic function. It proves to be a true vehicle of social communication, a medium for critical expression, and a catalyst for cultural innovation. Through the testimonies of artists, costume designers, and urban collectives, it becomes evident that this costume plays a fundamental role in staging Congolese realities: it helps denounce injustices, preserve traditions, strengthen social bonds, and promote local creativity.

In a city like Kinshasa, characterized by rapid transformations and multiple tensions, the carnival costume becomes a space of identity appropriation and reconfiguration. It embodies both the memory of social struggles and the drive toward a more inclusive and engaged artistic future. By combining satire and solidarity, tradition and modernity, it situates Congolese theatre within a dynamic of continuous cultural transformation.

This work highlights the scientific value of the carnival costume as an essential element of the theatrical scene. It invites us to reconsider the stage costume not merely as an accessory, but as a language in its own right—one capable of telling the world's stories while contributing to its transformation.

Moreover, this study paves the way for further research on the role of visual and performative arts in processes of resilience and social construction within African urban contexts, particularly in Kinshasa.

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