



## The Lioness of African Music: Cultural Interpretation of Wiyaala's Stage Costume Art

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### ABSTRACT

In stage performance, costume art is an essential visual signature device with the veracity to unveil the character and cultural identity of the performer. Stage costume art could also be deployed to respond to pertinent societal issues. In spite of its versatile essentiality in performing arts, there seems to be a dearth of scholarly interpretation of stage costume art of Ghanaian musicians, thereby creating a knowledge gap. This qualitative case study makes a hermeneutical interpretation of eight random-purposively sampled stage costumes of Wiyaala (a Ghanaian female musician) to establish their cultural symbolism. The study found Wiyaala not only an iconic Ghanaian artiste but an internationally recognised musician who toured many countries across Africa, Europe, the Americas, and other continents for musical stage performances. It emerged that Wiyaala's stage costumes were locally self-constructed, and ably reflected the uniquely versatile indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress cultural identity in respect of African (Ghanaian): royal dress fashion, war costumes, initiation costumes, and others. Wiyaala could be said to have prioritised interest in using her locally sourced stage costume art to promote and preserve indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress cultural identity. Since Wiyaala is an iconic musician, she is encouraged to continue deploying locally sourced costume art for her stage performances to promote and preserve African (Ghanaian) dress cultural identity for posterity. This tends to decolonise the stage costume choice of many Ghanaian musicians with its cascading impact on the Ghanaian textile and fashion industry for economic and job gains.

**Keywords:** *Culture, costume art, the lioness of African music, stage performance, Wiyaala*



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### 1. Introduction

The costume is a prominent element of performing arts. Eicher (1972) affirms that costumes are integral to many of the performing arts, especially those of theatre, masquerade and dance. Pantouvaki, Fossheim and Suurla (2021) position costume as a powerful visual artefact in its own right with an effective communicative agency that is relevant to a wide audience. Abuku and Odi (2011) note that costume, and its associated make-up, form an essential element of any dramatic or stage performance projecting the total visual appearance of the performer to the audience. Many studies corroborate those costumes have the primary ability to portray the character of a performing artist (actor or dancer) while capturing and intensifying the attention and mood of the audience as well as conveying pieces of message to the audience through non-verbal means (Dennis, 2022; Jing, 2021; Sika, 2016; Eze & Akas, 2015; Abuku & Odi, 2011; Eicher, 1972). In addition to the invaluable role of costumes in defining and projecting the performer's character during a stage performance, is the ability of costumes to reveal the cultural identity of the wearer.

In view of the integral role costumes play in the effective and efficient deliverability of performing arts, studies have provided deeper theoretical knowledge on the manifestations of costume art in the multifaceted performing arts from various perspectives. For instance, in the areas of theatrical and dramatic arts, studies report that costumes serve as visual signature devices with the ability to unveil the character and sociocultural identity of performers (Dennis, 2022; 2018; Jing, 2021; Okadigwe, 2016; Jung, 2015; Annila, 2014; Shields, 2012; Lublin, 2003). Similar studies equally exist in the area of musical performance. Although many of such

studies do not centre on musical stage costume art, they deeply delve into musical performance in terms of cognitive and motor skills; psychological/emotional response to music performance; the relationship between visual and aural experiences of music performance; band instrumentation, musical resources, and training; historical trajectories of musical performance in Ghana, Africa, and the world; communication dynamics between musicians and listeners through musical performance; various aspects of popular and traditional Ghanaian musical performances (Kudonu, Coffie & Konu, 2021; Nikoi, 2019; Dordzro, 2017; Entsua-Mensah, 2015; Ampomah, 2014; Akrong, 2012; Nakamura, Davidson & Correia, 2001; 1987; Palmer, 1997; Persson, 1993) and many others.

However, Griffiths (2009) doctoral thesis delves into the role of concert dress of solo female instrumentalists performing within Western classical music tradition. The findings of Griffiths' study suggest that practical, social, and psychological factors influence performers' choice of concert dress, whereas both the style of concert dress and expressive body movement style significantly affect observer perceptions of performance quality. As profound as Griffiths' study may be, its scope was narrowed to selected concert dress choices of solo female instrumentalists in the Western classical tradition but not from the Ghanaian context. Also, Howard, Ayesu and Amoah (2016) examine the impact of the costume choice of the Ghanaian movie and music industry on locally made textiles compared to Western textiles. The authors established that Ghanaian celebrities and producers in the movie and music industry in Ghana occasionally patronise local Ghanaian textiles, whereas the use of Western fashions highly dominates in the industry, as observed in Figure 1 (a, b, c, d & e), which is stifling the growth of the local textile and fashion industry.



(a). Eazyzy



(b). E.L.

Eazyzy and E.L. in Western Attires for Musical Stage Performances at Ghana's Peace Concert



(c). Sarkodie



(d). E.L.

(e).

Stonebwoy

Sarkodie at the BET awards-2012; E.L., and Stonebwoy at VGMA-2016.

Figure 1(a, b, c, d & e). Ghanaian Iconic Musicians Dressed in Western Attires for Musical Performance Events in Ghana

(Source: Howard, Ayesu & Amoah, 2016).

Although the scope of Howard et al. (2016) study was delimited to establishing the impact of the dress fashion choices of Ghanaian musicians and movie actors on the Ghanaian textile and fashion industry, their revelation about the domineering use of foreign textiles and fashion products by the movie and music industry in Ghana creates a plausible need for further intensive research on the two sub-sectors to arrive at a more corroborative and conclusive stance. The current study, therefore, sought to contribute to the discourse on

costume art and its cultural manifestations and symbolism with specific reference to the musical stage performances of Ghanaian musicians. In the existence of many notably famous musicians in Ghana, this study narrows its lenses to focus on the musical stage costume choices of Wiyaala, a Ghanaian female iconic musician, to establish their cultural manifestations and symbolism. A critical look at the materiality, construction and stage manifestations of some selected stage costume art of Wiyaala are interpreted to establish their associated cultural symbolism.

## 2. Philosophical Framework

The study was situated within the framework of philosophical hermeneutics. Etymologically, hermeneutics as a philosophical framework is traceable to Greek's mythological world, and by the 17th century, it was seen as a theological design used for the interpretation of Biblical texts (Rasool, 2018; Agrey, 2014; Barrett, Powley & Pearce, 2011; Guignon, 2003). However, around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for that matter, this contemporary era, scholars of hermeneutics see it as the science and art of interpretation that extends to cover all human expressions (Rasool, 2018; Guignon, 2003). This extension of scope lends philosophical hermeneutics the basis for considering artistic works as meaningful entities requiring critical examination and interpretation (Noland, 2015; Guignon, 2003; Davey, 2002). Guignon (2003) explains that contemporary philosophical hermeneutics sees works of art as meaningful embodiments in which works of art have to be stripped from their social and historical contexts so that they can be treated as self-contained aesthetic objects.

Since the work of art expresses a dimension of life itself, understanding the meaning of the work is not a matter of understanding the intentions or creative processes that go on in the mind of the artist. Instead, it involves understanding the meaningful context of life expressed and given form by the work [of art]. (Guignon, 2003, p. 33)

The explanation suggests that context is critical when embarking on a hermeneutical interpretation of artworks. In providing further clarification on the applicability of hermeneutical interpretation of artefacts, Noland (2015, p.128) explains that an artwork is an intentional creative product with associated identity and that “in the artwork, there is an indeterminacy that provokes the participant, asking us to reevaluate our interpretive process and overall understanding. We are drawn into the world of the artwork and in this movement, we become something else”. The interpretive suitability of philosophical hermeneutics in dealing with creative arts, as afore-discussed, pivoted its adoption since the focus of the study was to interpret selected musical stage costume art of Wiyaala culturally. The suitability of employing philosophical hermeneutics to give a cultural interpretation of Wiyaala musical stage costume art is further buttressed by the assertion canvassed by hermeneutics scholars that “every culture has its codification system of signs that in the process of hermeneutical interpretation of target culture, they should be de-codified and received as something new in the source culture” (Panahbar & Dabagh, 2012, p. 456). The authors explain that interpreting these signs and making them understandable for the source culture is one of the most potent substances in the hands of humans. Since philosophical hermeneutics equally bothers on the interpretation of artefacts and cultural codes, as discussed, it contextually resonates with the focus of this study which sought to identify the cultural codes embedded in Wiyaala's musical stage costume art and interpret their cultural manifestations and symbolism.

### 2.1 Empirical Review on Musical Stage Costume Art

Human society is noted for its ubiquitous proclivity to perform and watch performances. For that reason, costume art has integrally and historically expanded its cultural influence across the globe in live manifestations that include; dance, opera, and other theatrical performances (Barbieri & Pantouvaki, 2016). Generally, whether indigenous or contemporary, public musical stage performances call for the adornment of unique costumes for enhanced outlook and/or cultural identity construction of the performer. Dean (2011) affirms that dance has always incorporated costume as a stimulus for the choreographic process, as a scenographic element in creating character, and in support of a particular artistic or aesthetic style. Since musical stage performances are visual artistic expressions, they become more revealing and appealing when appropriate costumes are deployed. This makes the music performer's general outlook a critical subject matter (Roberts, 2019). It is so because musical performance is an important communication channel, requiring musicians to always adorn the appropriate costumes when performing (Roberts, 2019) to maintain effective nonverbal dialogue with their audience.

Roberts posits that “there are different costumes for every kind of dance; their fashion always depends on the origin of the dance, its music, and purpose” (Roberts, 2019, p. 58). Whatever the differences may be, musical stage costume art, generally, may comprise a lot of accessories, such as; a comprehensive modification

of the body shape of dancers in the areas of headdresses, necklaces, brooches, arm ornaments, wristlets, foot ornaments, design patterns, beads, makeups, cloth, baskets, calabash, cowrie shells, horns, seeds, and feathers of varied colours which may be sewn, stitched, plaited, woven, crocheted or applied (Sieber, 1972; as cited in Sika, 2016; Zhang, 2015). In designing dance costumes, the emphasis is placed on movement while also visualising and suggesting how the costume style will contribute to the choreography or dynamically modify the body form of the dancer during a stage performance (Morgan & Malva, 2013). Morgan and Malva conclude that a costume for dance should, therefore, be designed with the knowledge that the costume will equally be seen in motion as far as the music, the rhythm, and the performer's body movements are concerned. This suggests that good dance costumes are flexibly constructed to enable choreographers to make all kinds of aesthetic and artistic dance movements without damaging them (Roberts, 2019; Zhang, 2015). It is noteworthy to state that the design make-up of some dance costumes comes with extensions (Abuku & Odi, 2011), even when adorned by a slim person or a youngster, tends to visually add layers of body size thereby creating a visual illusion of a vast and or elderly personality. This presupposes that many dynamics go into the construction and utility of costumes in musical stage performances.

On the cultural relevance of stage costume art, Abuku and Odi (2011) argue that costumes reflect the exact character and identity of the wearer concerning the indigenous or traditional cultural dictates of his/her ethnicity. Kwakye-Opong and Adinku (2013, p. 9) contribute to the dialogue on cultural identity construction potency of stage costume art by asserting that "costume constitutes one of the most formidable and versatile cultural agents for the transmission of knowledge and values across ethnic, national and international boundaries". It is also argued that costume art ornaments (musical) stage performances, serve as a vibrant tool for cultural expression and identity construction and punctuate the performer's artistic and aesthetic expressions (Eze & Akas, 2015). Musical stage costume art may also be used to create awareness about pertinent sociocultural issues through its design semiotics. Effimova and Kortunov (2013) concur that costume, as an artefact, has always reflected a certain step in the development of peoples' culture and, for that matter, carries a figurative description of the wearer's response to pertinent ethnic or national affairs. In concurrence, Pantouvaki, Fossheim and Suurla (2021) argue that "costume design is a practice whose materiality is marked by cultural connotations related to human life" (p. 205). Against this backdrop that Turner (1987) sums it all up by saying that costume carries symbolic meanings in many human cultures. Since stage costumes have symbolic meanings, costume language (vocabulary) and details are very important factors to consider when it comes to the construction and deployment of costumes (Le, 2018) for musical stage performances to explicitly and aesthetically convey the character, cultural identity of the musician and other intended nonverbal messages to the audience.

In summary, the empirical dialogue on musical stage performance and the cultural relevance of costume art points to the case that musical stage performance and costume art are two interrelated components of the same discourse. Costume art is deliberately employed in musical stage performances for aesthetic, and artistic reasons just as the character and identity of musicians could be conveniently packaged and communicated to the audience through their stage costume art.

### 3. Research Method

This study, which interpreted the stage costume art of Wiyaala (a Ghanaian female iconic musician), was conducted under the dictates of the interpretive research paradigm. The epistemological tenet of the interpretive research paradigm is qualitative in nature and hinges on the subjective interpretation of social realities from their contextual purviews (Ugwu, Ekere & Onoh, 2021; Phothongsunan, 2010; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Schutz, 1967). Human nature is such that "we can communicate with one another, and in interpretive research, such forms of communication are given priority" (Phothongsunan, 2010, p. 2). Informed by the aforementioned basis of the interpretive research paradigm and situated within the case study design, the study made empirical interpretations of some selected stage costume art of Wiyaala for her musical stage performances to contextually decode their cultural meanings. With the use of an interpretive case study design and focusing on Wiyaala as a single case drawn from the many iconic musicians in Ghana, the study relied upon in-vivo interview transcripts emanating from a semi-structured personal interview encounter with Wiyaala on eight (8) random-purposively sampled photographic data of her musical stage performances. The variously synced data (both interview transcripts and photographs) on Wiyaala's stage costume art were coded and contextually subjected to hermeneutical interpretative analysis to establish their cultural manifestations and symbolism.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Brief Background to Wiyaala's Profile and Musical Career

Wiyaala is a courageous, young, energetic, creatively talented, and internationally recognised Iconic female musician of African descent. She is a Sisaala by ethnicity and an indigene of Funsu, the capital town of Wa East District, in the Upper West Region of northern Ghana. Born on 22nd December 1986, Wiyaala, with Noella as her Christian name, was uprightly raised by her parents, N-waade Nwiakadaa Ali Bayong (father), and N-waade Dassah Helen (mother), in accord with the ideals of the indigenous Sissala culture. Wiyaala revealed to the study that she started formal education at Saint Andrew's Kindergarten and was later transferred to Ahmadiyya Basic School both in Wa in Upper West Region. Upon the relocation of her parents to Tumu (the capital town of Sissala East Municipality) in the Upper West Region, Wiyaala had to continue her basic education at Ahmadiyya Junior High School in Tumu. After having successfully passed the Basic Education Certificate Examination in 2002, Wiyaala proceeded to Kanton Secondary School in Tumu where she offered Visual Arts. Wiyaala seized the opportunity to nurture her God's given artistic talents in painting, Graphic design, and creativity in general when she was a Visual Arts student at Kanton Secondary School. After the successful completion of the Visual Arts programme in 2005, Wiyaala proceeded to Takoradi Polytechnic (Now Technical University) in 2006, where she offered industrial art with the focus of polishing up her creative skills into a professional artist.

Musically, Wiyaala disclosed that her career started serendipitously when she was about seven years of age. She reconstructed that at that tender age, she took an inherent delight in gathering her peers together while leading them to mimic popular songs and dance moves she heard from the radio and watched on the television set. The humorously distorted manner in which the lyrics of those songs were sung, coupled with her childish dance moves, always attracted the interest of the elderly people around her, who would laugh off her infantile musical activities. In her words, Wiyaala notes that:

At that tender age, I didn't know that my rampant noisy singing and aggressively formless dance moves at the family level, in school, and everywhere was actually a calling into the music career. As a child, I didn't know that I was actually expressing my God's given musical talents. But, now that I am older, I have realised that these were the little things I was doing that were musically artistic which I didn't know, but, have culminated in making me the international music star that I am today. (Wiyaala, Personal Communication, November 3, 2022)

Wiyaala added that one key contributor to the sustenance of her interest in music was the melodic choir sessions she witnessed and participated in any time she joined her mother for the weekly Sunday Roman Catholic church services. And in adolescence, Wiyaala's participation in Saturday entertainment dance activities in Kanton Secondary School, admired and eulogised by the entire student body and staff, completely tuned her mind onto the music path. Wiyaala added that shortly after completing secondary school and having fully devoted time to her musical ambition, she released her maiden album in 2009 which escalated her popularity beyond the confines of the Upper West Region of Ghana to the national level. Thereafter, Wiyaala indicated that the melody of her music and her energised stage performances created a non-existent space at the national level, which she capitalised on to become an internationally recognised Music star touring Africa, Europe, and the world in general. In revealing the type of music she engaged in, Wiyaala mentioned that her music covered traditional African, pop, and *Afro trollic music*. According to Wiyaala, the term *Afro trollic music* was coined by her to refer to hybrid African traditional music, which involves the use of contemporary instruments or sound systems.

Wiyaala enumerated some career-threatening challenges that nearly got her to abandon her music career. Wiyaala's rural Ghana (Funsu) origin was considered the biggest challenge she faced in the growth of her music career. She named the absence of electricity and recreational facilities in Funsu at the time and the inadequate appreciation of music as a lucrative full-time career as compared to; law, banking, and other jobs as challenges she fought head-on in pursuit of her music career. Wiyaala also had to endure a *bad girl* label from some elderly people in her immediate society who misconstrued her smart-looking musical dress code and her choreographic body shakings at the early stages of her career development as signs of wayward conduct. And lastly, being a female musician has its negative tag and challenges. She highlighted that being a female musician in Ghana is a huge challenge to overcome because the Ghanaian music industry is dominated by men. She buttressed her claim by citing that most, if not all, vibrant music studios in Ghana are owned by men whereas the female counterparts seem comfortable just being singers, idolised pretties, and sexy looking. Having surmounted the challenges as discussed, Wiyaala asserted that she is well prepared and ready to rely on her richly accumulated music experience to provide the needed nurturing to young and upcoming musicians using Funsu, her hometown, as the starting point. She added that steps have been initiated to extend such a social corporate responsibility to cover her home region (Upper West) and Ghana at large. In view of that, she

has already established an art centre, and two music stages; one in Funsu and another in Wa, the Upper West Regional capital town. Wiyaala added that processes were far advanced with key equipment already purchased in her preparation towards establishing a state-of-the-art music studio in Funsu and another one in Wa. Additionally, Wiyaala hinted that she has initiated steps to establish a vibrant live band in Wa in the very near future to be labelled as *Chinchika* band. *Chinchika* is a Sissala word which contextually relates to body shaking. According to Wiyaala, the *Chinchika* band, when established, would engage locally groomed instrumentalists, and talented choreographers with the energised capability of skilfully shaking their bodies during stage performances to the admiration of the audience.

Wiyaala's art centre, the two music stages she has already constructed, her plans to establish two music studios, and a live band would go a long way to provide the needed opportunity for the identification, nurturing and/or training of many young talented girls and boys in Funsu, Upper West Region and by extension Ghana for them to develop their music potentials to the fullest.

#### 4.2 Wiyaala's Stage Costume Art

The stage costume art of musicians is of significant importance and ought not to be serendipitously decided. A carefully chosen costume art for musical stage performance inherently contributes to constructing imprints of memories in the audience's minds about the character and cultural identity of the musician in question. Wiyaala affirms the significance of her musical stage costume art, arguing that her customised indigenous African-inspired costumes have contributed to projecting her African identity as well as her musical career in the globally competitive music industry. Unlike her Ghanaian musical compatriots who have sustained interest in the use of Western dress fashion for their musical performances, Wiyaala stressed that her choice of costumes for musical stage performances is strictly inspired by indigenous African dress culture which she witnessed growing up in rural Ghana. Wiyaala explained that:

The costume choices I make during my musical stage performances, unapologetically, are inspired by indigenous African dress culture such as African; warrior costumes, royal costumes, and everything that has to do with African culture. However, because I jump, kick, and make many different rigorous moves during my stage performance, I have restyled my costumes to add flexibility and aesthetics to the typical indigenous African dress fashions. I must emphasise that the colour schemes of some of my stage costumes are informed by the colours of African flags. Because as I went international, and because of my skin complexion, I am first seen as an African music icon, a West African music star, a Ghanaian musician, northern Ghanaian musician before knowing that I am a Sisaala musician from Funsu of the Upper West Region of Ghana. (Wiyaala, Personal Communication, November 3, 2022)

Wiyaala further argued that she uniquely stood out when she came out in her indigenously designed African costume for musical stage performances. She buttressed her argument by advancing that most popular African musicians have always copied the dress culture and body art (tattooing) of iconic Western musicians such as; Beyoncé, Rihanna, 50 Cent, and others. Although Wiyaala admitted that the musical successes of globally recognised musicians such as Beyoncé and Rihanna have greatly inspired her musically, she approached music from a completely different angle without assimilating their dress fashion and body art or bleaching her skin to appear like them.

The fact is that Beyoncé, Rihanna, and other Western musicians inspire and influence African musicians in different ways. Some African musicians will bleach or tattoo their black skin and bodies to look like them or copy their dressing style. But for me, the boldness, and musical wealth of Beyoncé and Rihanna inspired me to be an independent young female musician who is all out to globally promote African music while maintaining my enviable black skin complexion and using indigenous African dress fashions to project my African identity. My musical stage costume art is perfectly chosen to complement my lion-like roaring stage vibes, thereby projecting me as the true lioness of African Music. (Wiyaala, 2022)

The study ascertained that Wiyaala places a high premium on indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress culture, for which she took full responsibility for self-constructing customised costumes to reflect notable aspects of indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress cultural identity appropriately. In the words of Wiyaala (2022) "...you cannot find exactly the type of costumes I use for my stage performances anywhere in the world. They are purely needle-made. Machines cannot give me the customised aesthetic effect and the notable ancient

indigenous African needle-constructed dress fashion”. Wiyaala revealed that her creative skills acquired at the second cycle and tertiary levels of her education in Visual Arts played a key role in the construction of her customised costumes and, for that matter, her body art. Her understanding of colour psychology and colour harmony, coupled with her creative hands, gave her ease in her costume construction, hairstyling, and other body art. It is also noteworthy to state that Wiyaala often teased out the names of her stage costume art from their African sources of inspiration. Wiyaala further added that “as a walking gallery of Africa, my stage costume art is carefully chosen to promote indigenous African identity, which can attract tourists to visit the content” (Wiyaala, 2022).



Figure 2. Wiyaala Self-constructing one of Her Stage Costumes  
(Source: Wiyaala Gallery, 2022)



Figure 3. Wiyaala Testing the Efficacy of a Self-constructed stage Costume

Figure 2 reveals Wiyaala manually constructing one of her indigenous African costumes for stage performance. The efficacy of the constructed costume was tested (Figure 3) and found to be suitable for deployment for stage performance. Wiyaala explained that the costume construction, as observed in Figures 2 & 3, for her musical stage performance was inspired by the ancient African indigenous skin dress culture. “Growing up we were told of how as Africans, we used skins as our clothing materials during the prehistoric era” (Wiyaala, 2022). Wiyaala explained that though the costume (Figures 2 & 3) was not made of leather, it was designed to look like embellished tanned goat skin. The extended striped-edges of the skirt assumed the legs of tanned goatskin (Figure 3). Both the top and down of the costume (Figure 3), which replicates the ancient African feminine dress fashion, have been carefully embroidered with whitish intricate patterns which aesthetically project Wiyaala’s Africanist identity in a contemporised state. Wiyaala’s claim of the use of decorated goat skins as clothes by ancient Africans is affirmed by Kennett (1994) that “animal skins and bark cloths were the first materials used in African clothing” (as cited in Agaasa & Ampa-Korsah, 2016, p. 61). Aris (2007, pp. 3-4) concurs that “traditional Swazi clothing also included goatskin aprons imprinted with native designs”. In Ghana, Adjei and Osei-Sarfo (2016) observe that animal skins of various kinds are worn by hunters, priests, landlords, or elders for the Dia War Dance or other occasions by the Frafra people to reflect the hunting mastery, spiritual endowment, or social status of the wearer. Therefore, Wiyaala drawing her inspiration from the goatskin as an indigenous African (Ghanaian) costume is grounded in literature as herein authenticated. Wiyaala explained that the embroidered hems were to strengthen the costume (Figure 3) to withstand her usual rigorous stage dance moves. The study further ascertained that Wiyaala’s heart-shaped hairstyle (Figure 3) represents the symbol of love she deeply expressed to the audience of the show, and its dark colour matches the colour of the costume.



(a).



(b).



(c).

Figure 4 (a, b & c). Wiyala in Pseudo *Okomfo* (Priestess) Costume for Musical Stage Performances (Source: Wiyala Gallery, 2022)

Figure 4 (a, b & c) reveals Wiyala wearing three similar stylishly constructed indigenous African costumes identified as pseudo-Okomfo (Priestess) spiritual costumes of southern Ghanaian origin. Wiyala explained that in the traditional Ghanaian setup, the *Okomfo* of Akan ethnicity is the spiritual intermediary between humanity and the cosmological world, who are noted to wear special open-ended fibre costumes for spiritual incantations and/or sacred performances during public ceremonies. The three costumes (Figure 4 a, b & c) were self-constructed by Wiyala and represented different versions of the *Okomfo* spiritual costume, which she variously deployed for her musical stage performances. While the costume art of Figure 4a was adorned for the 2018 made-in-Ghana concert held in Accra-Ghana; Figures 4b, and 4c respectively reveal the costume art deployed by Wiyala for her musical stage performances at Hague African Festival held in the Netherlands in 2018 and the Africa Technovate Award organised in Accra-Ghana in 2021. In a vivid description of how the three similar stage costumes (Figure 4 a, b & c) were variously constructed, Wiyala explained that:



I call them pseudo-*Okomfo* [priestess] spiritual costumes. I made them all by myself. I used differently dyed threads [black & yellow] spun from cotton wool, and in some cases, beautified with strings of beads all needled onto my bikini. In one of the costumes [Figure 4a], I embroidered patterns on the top costume to give it an eye-catching effect. With the black *Okomfo* costume [Figure 4b], the top including my bra, are beaded products. In the case of the other costume [Figure 4c], the top is made of northern Ghanaian smock fashion while the bottom (skirt) replicates the *Okomfo* dress identity of the Akan of southern Ghana to create a harmonised northern and southern Ghanaian local dress identity. My heavy locked hairstyle [in the case of Figure 4a] reflects the indigenous hairstyle of an *Okomfo* priestess except that mine was held and decorated with strips of my costume. So, my customised *Okomfo* costumes [Figure 4 a, b & c] and how they are worn, create in me perfect appearance of *Okomfo* priestess for energetic, spirited, and super vibes on the stage. Besides that, because I dance a lot on stage, I need costumes that simmer my body, and the three pseudo *Okomfo* costumes [4a, b & c] are perfectly good at that (Wiyaala, 2022).

Wiyaala's description of her costume art (Figure 4 a, b & c) and pseudo hairstyle of *Okomfo* (Figure 4a) is empirically corroborated by studies that, amongst the indigenous people of Akan and also true of the Ewe and Ga people in southern Ghana, the religious authority of messengers of spirits such as priests, priestesses and diviners are noted for their *Mpesempese* (long locked hair) (Sieber & Herreman, 2000; Botchway, 2018; Essah, 2008) and the wearing of fibre-costumes (skirts) (Kwakye-Opong, 2014; Dzramedo, 2009; Pyne, 2009). Therefore, Wiyaala's choice of pseudo-*Okomfo* (Priestess) costume for her musical stage performance showcases the socio-religious dress culture of the highly revered *Okomfo* (priest/priestess) of the traditional Ghanaian cosmological world.



5: Wiyaala on stage in France, 2022



6: Wiyaala on stage in the USA, 2022

Figures (5 & 6). Wiyaala in Ghanaian Princess Costume for Musical stage Performances in France and USA (Source: Wiyaala's Gallery 2022).

The costumes adorned by Wiyaala for her musical stage performances in France (Figure 5), and the USA (Figure 6) in early 2022 were made of indigenous Ghanaian smock fabric in a similar design structure and referred to as Ghanaian princess costumes. Wiyaala asserts that “so many years ago this was how simply and beautifully young northern Ghanaian Sissala girls dressed, with a simple hairdo and without any heavy body makeup yet they were admired by everybody, including handsome and rich men of the society”. Wiyaala posited that as a Sissala by ethnicity, Ghanaian and African, promoting the enviable indigenous dress culture of her origin was appropriate through her musical stage costume art. It was explained that anytime such specially constructed smock skirts with exaggerated long front and back flops (Figures 5 & 6) are deployed, it means that Wiyaala intended to portray her proud northern Ghanaian (Sissala) feminine dress identity to the world. In interpreting her stage costume art for the France performance (Figure 5), Wiyaala stated, “... “...as an African girl from rural Ghana, here I am wearing Sissala smock performing in France. Regardless of my origin, I'm up-to-date with what is happening in the world. I can even play modern guitar. So, don't underestimate me”. The costume art of Wiyaala for her USA performance (Figure 6) was also interpreted as:

My smock costume reminds the audience of the USA that this is the proud African princess Wiyala from Africa and Ghana. So, if you have not been experiencing the African flavour in the USA let me encourage you to come home and find your ancestral roots. The playing of the local drum on stage and the hanging of the Ghana flag around my neck clearly communicate my Ghanaian identity. (Wiyala, 2022)

Consensually, studies affirm Wiyala's claim that smock is an indigenous northern Ghanaian dress fashion (Navei, 2023; 2021; Atampugre, 2018; Acquah, Amissah & deGraft-Yankson, 2017; Adjei and Osei-Sarfo, 2016; Essel & Amissah, 2015). The deployment of the smock costume by Wiyala outside the confines of Ghana and Africa for musical stage performances contributes to projecting the indigenous Ghanaian (Sissala) dress cultural identity at a larger global stage.



(a). Side view of the costume



(b). Front

view of the costume

Figures 7(a & b). Wiyala Costumed like a Ghanaian Dipo Girl for Her Musical stage Performances at Accra Conference Centre  
(Source: Wiyala's Gallery 2022).

In another indigenous Ghanaian costume (Figure 7 a & b), Wiyala joined other distinguished Ghanaian musicians for a joint musical stage performance at Accra Conference Centre (Ghana) in 2013. Wiyala revealed that her loincloth choice was inspired by the customarily prescribed costume worn by puberty girls during the Dipo initiation rite of the Krobo people of Ghana. Highlights of Wiyala's interview transcripts clarify that:

...I call it [Figure 7 a & b] *Dipo-inspired* outfit. When I say *Dipo*, I'm referring to the traditional dress style of adolescent girls for initiation into adulthood by the Krobo people of Ghana. Because the Krobo people are known for the use of massive beads during Dipo initiation, I decided to use beads to design the sides of the skirt. The front and back of the skirt are also made of long dropping cloth and it looks exactly like how the *Dipo* girls of Krobo will always dress to be initiated into fully ripped ladies ready for marriage. My barbered natural hair depicts me as a young girl and perfectly portrays the *Dipo* girl I wanted to project on stage. (Wiyala, 2022)

Empirical findings of previous research corroborate that *Dipo* is a traditional public initiation of puberty girls into adulthood customarily performed by the Krobo people of Ghana (Abbey, Mate-Kole, Amponsah & Belgrave, 2021; Djokpe, 2020; Adinku, 2016; Ostrow, 2011; Boakye, 2010; Avotri, 2009; Adjaye, 1999). The aforementioned studies corroborate that young virgin girls adorned themselves in loincloths during its celebration while wearing many strings of exposed waist beads. Fascinated by the cultural relevance of the

*Dipo* rite, Wiyaala decided to similarly costume herself as the *Dipo* girls would always do for her musical stage performance at the Accra conference centre (Figure 7 a & b) to highlight the cultural importance of the *Dipo* rite. According to Wiyaala, the sustenance of the *Dipo* rite by the Krobo people of Ghana in this era of globalisation is a step in the right direction as the practice stands to curtail promiscuous sexual lifestyles in girls before marriage and, invariably, minimise teenage (unwanted) pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and school dropouts while properly preparing young girls to become responsible parents in the society.



Figure 8. Wiyaala in Shaka Zulu War Costume for Musical Stage Performances in Shambala, UK (Source: Wiyaala's Gallery 2022).

For the musical stage performance at Shambala in the United Kingdom in 2022, Wiyaala opted to portray the wardress regalia (Figure 8) of the South African heroic ruler, King Shaka Zulu, of blessed memory. In South African historiography, Shaka Zulu (1787-1828) is variously described as an African historical figure (Black Napoleon), a hero, great warrior, strategist, and many other compliments who successfully established the dominance of the Zulu Kingdom in South Africa through the application of his innovative and tactical warrior actions (Allen, 2014; Peires, 2009; Tomaselli, 2003; Worger, 1979). Wiyaala posited that:

I call this costume [Figure 8] Shaka Zulu vibes. As you may be aware, Shaka Zulu was one of the greatest warriors that ever lived in South Africa. As human as he was, he might have had his flaws, but, it is important to highlight his positive deeds as a King and a warrior who fought for the protection and development of South Africans, particularly his people. As I have noticed through video documentaries, Shaka Zulu's war costumes often appear shorter frontally but with longer back dropping as he held his spear in action. So, I chose this costume [Figure 8] to celebrate the heroic and warrior life of Shaka Zulu. (Wiyaala, 2022)

Wiyaala further added that while Shaka Zulu used a spear in warfare to dominantly defend and protect his South African subjects when it mattered most to him, she, as an astutely popular African music icon, relied on the use of the microphone in her musical discourse to preserve and promote African music and rich cultural ideals to the admiration of the world for posterity. Wiyaala typified that, in addition to her stage costume, her microphone and its stand, as observed in Figure 8, illustrated Shaka Zulu's long, sharply pointed spear weapon. Instead of the spear going into people's flesh during war battle, her microphone melodiously conveyed messages that sharply go into people's hearts across the globe with the tendency to holistically decolonise the world's mindset to truly accept and love Africans in dignity and with respect for their uniquely unparalleled and versatile musical products, cultural identity, and creativity in general.



(a).



(b).

Figure 9 (A& B). Wiyala Adorned Bead and Leather-made Costume for Her Musical Stage Performance at the 2018 Alafia Festival in Hamburg (Wiyala's Gallery, 2022).

In an all-beaded costume with punctuated long black strips of leather applied onto the beaded skirt (Figure 9 a & b), Wiyala conveyed her unadulterated African black-skinned beauty to the viewing audience at the 2018 Alafia Festival in Hamburg, Germany. The black and white self-constructed top costume with cowrie decorated leather encasing her succulent African breasts clearly reveals Wiyala's innovative, creative and alternative ways of constructing her stage costume art. Wiyala posited that the design structure of the costume did not only reveal her sexy African black skin but it flexibly allowed her to engage the audience as she freely ran, jumped, rolled, and made all interesting dance steps during the performance. In the exact words of Wiyala, she explained that:

When you look at the costume [Figure 9 a & b] it is sexy, nice, and flexible enough to support my rigorous stage dance moves. It is extraordinary and symbolises my musical independence as the truly African lioness who roars musically across the globe. With the help of my costume and my plated spikes of hair, I was able to point out to my German audience that I am not ashamed of my black body as African. Yes, I am black and muscular. But, I love who I am. Because I know I am sexy and beautiful, I decided to show every inch of my body in an artistic form to let the German audience know that this is Wiyala, the incomparable natural beauty of an African music star. (Wiyala, 2022)

In establishing Wiyala's source of inspiration for using beads and strips of leather to produce such a unique costume [Figure 9 a & b] for her musical stage performance, she averred that beads occupy a very important space in the lives of African Women. "African women wear strings of beads around their waist for sexual gratification. They also wear beads on their ankles, hands, and necks to sexily beautify their bodies, and sometimes, African girls wear beads during cultural initiations" (Wiyala, 2022). Wiyala further explained that the attachment of long flowing strips of leather on her costume (skirt) was to uniquely add a rhythmic effect to the costume during her stage performance.

## 5. Conclusion

The study set out to interpret the costume art of Wiyala (a Ghanaian female iconic musician) for her musical stage performances to establish their cultural manifestations and symbolism. The study found Wiyala not only an iconic Ghanaian artiste but an internationally recognised music star who toured many countries across Africa, Europe, the Americas, and other continents of the globe for musical stage performances. In each of the musical stage performances, Wiyala inspirationally sourced her costume art from the repertoires of indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress culture to reflect (project) the uniquely versatile indigenous dress cultural identities of Africans (Ghanaians) in respect of African (Ghanaian): royal dress fashion; war costumes; spiritual dress regalia; initiation costumes, among others. The study further established that Wiyala leveraged

on her formal Visual Arts training to stylishly self-construct her stage costumes to add flexibility and aesthetic appeal to the indigenous African dress styles. It could, therefore, be concluded that Wiyaala has prioritised interest in using her locally sourced stage costume art to promote and preserve the indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress culture for posterity. Therefore, Wiyaala is encouraged to continue sourcing her stage costume art from the repertoires of indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress culture. This tends to not only preserve and promote indigenous African (Ghanaian) dress cultural identity but could earnestly contribute to decolonising the costume choice of many more African (Ghanaian) musicians with its cascading positive impact on Ghanaian textile and fashion industry for economic and job gains.

## 6. Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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