

Considerable Factors Affecting the Costume Design of Benin Chiefs

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Abstract

This study examines the factors that shape the design and use of chieftaincy costume in Benin culture, situating costume as a structured system of visual communication through which hierarchy, authority, and cultural identity are articulated. The Benin chieftaincy institution, one of the oldest surviving traditional institutions in Africa, operates through clearly defined categories of titled chiefs whose distinctions are historically embedded in costumes sanctioned by the Oba. Although contemporary chieftaincy attire often appears visually similar, there has been limited focused scholarship on how costume functions as an organised communicative system within this hierarchy. This study addresses that gap by analysing costume as both cultural artifact and performative medium. Adopting a qualitative, ethnographic approach, the research draws on direct observation, visual documentation, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected titled chiefs and cultural custodians in Benin. The analysis reveals that hierarchy, wealth and social status, and ceremonial occasion are the primary factors determining the design, construction, and usage of chieftaincy costume. These factors who may wear specific costumes and the contexts in which they are worn. The study further demonstrates that chieftaincy costume functions as a semiotic system whose meanings are legible primarily to cultural insiders, reinforcing institutional order and ancestral authority through repeated ritual performance. It concludes that Benin chieftaincy costume remains a vital medium for preserving cultural heritage, sustaining traditional governance, and expressing collective identity. By foregrounding costume as an institutional and performative language, the study contributes to scholarship in costume studies, visual semiotics, theatre, and African cultural studies.

Keywords: Costume Design, Benin Chieftaincy, Visual Semiotics, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Performance

Introduction

Costume, as an expressive element of culture in African societies, functions as a visual medium through which social structures, cultural values, and collective identity are articulated. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, dress operates as a system of signs that communicates authority, status, and belonging within specific cultural contexts. In many African communities, costume traditions are not merely decorative but are embedded within ritual practices, festivals, and institutional hierarchies, making them central to cultural continuity. Costume thus becomes a symbolic language through

which history and identity are performed and sustained. Scholars have argued that dress, particularly in traditional societies, serves as a form of non-verbal communication that reinforces social order and shared meaning (Lyndersay 1; Shukla 27). Within this framework, costume is understood not as an isolated artifact but as a cultural text shaped by history, belief systems, and social relations.

In Benin society, costume plays a particularly significant role within the chieftaincy institution, one of the oldest systems of traditional governance in Nigeria. The institution, headed by the Oba, operates a carefully structured hierarchy that classifies chiefs into distinct categories based on rank, function, and historical lineage. These distinctions are visually encoded through regalia, colours, accessories, and styles of dress that signify authority and proximity to royal power. Chiefs confirmed by the Oba occupy highly respected positions, and their public appearance during rituals, festivals, and official functions is regulated by long-established conventions. Costume, in this context, serves both symbolic and functional purposes, identifying titled individuals while reinforcing the sacred and political authority of the monarchy. As such, chieftaincy costume becomes a visible manifestation of institutional order and cultural ideology.

Despite the richness of Benin costume culture, contemporary observations reveal increasing visual similarities in the costumes worn by chiefs across different categories, particularly in colour usage and stylistic form. These similarities have made it increasingly difficult for observers – especially non-initiates – to differentiate between ranks based solely on appearance. While existing scholarship has paid considerable attention to Benin art, royal iconography, and general dress traditions, there remains limited focused inquiry into the specific factors that shape the design, construction, and usage of chieftaincy costumes. Much of the literature privileges historical or artistic interpretation, often overlooking costume as a structured communicative system governed by social rules. This gap has contributed to the misconception that Benin chieftaincy dress is largely uniform, rather than hierarchically differentiated. Addressing this oversight is essential for a deeper understanding of how tradition adapts while retaining symbolic coherence.

This study responds to that gap by examining the major factors that influence the costume design of Benin chiefs in contemporary Edo State. It interrogates how hierarchy, title, wealth, ceremonial context, social status, and evolving social conditions shape costume choices within the chieftaincy institution. The central problem guiding the research asks how and why these factors determine costume design and usage, despite the apparent visual uniformity observed in recent times. To address this problem, the study poses three research questions: what cultural identity influences determine the design and use of chieftaincy costume; how chiefs interpret and assign meaning to regalia within the context of their titles and duties; and how these costumes contribute to the preservation and expression of Benin identity in modern settings. These questions foreground costume as both a cultural artifact and a performative medium.

The study is significant for several reasons. Within costume studies and visual communication, it contributes an indigenous framework for understanding dress as a semiotic system embedded in traditional African institutions. For theatre and performance scholarship, the research offers insights into how chieftaincy regalia functions performatively, shaping perception, authority, and narrative during rituals and ceremonial displays. At a cultural level, the study contributes to the documentation and preservation of intangible heritage at a time when modernisation and aesthetic appropriation pose challenges to traditional codes. By situating Benin chieftaincy costume within broader scholarly debates on identity, performance, and visual culture, the study underscores its relevance beyond local ethnography, positioning it as a meaningful contribution to African and global costume discourse.

Theoretical Framework

Costume functions as a powerful system of visual communication through which

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identity, authority, and cultural meaning are expressed. In many African societies, dress is not a neutral or decorative element but a structured language that conveys social position, ritual function, and communal belonging. Costume communicates through fabric, colour, texture, silhouette, and line, allowing meaning to be transmitted without recourse to speech. As Lyndersay observes, “costume does not exist in isolation; it is a vital part of the whole design concept of a society” (1). This perspective foregrounds costume as an integral cultural text shaped by history, belief systems, and institutional structures. Within traditional contexts, costume becomes a repository of cultural memory, sustaining values and hierarchies across generations.

Scholars within costume studies and performance theory increasingly recognise dress as an active agent in meaning-making rather than a secondary visual support. Eze and Akas describe costume as “a form of expression of oneself as well as a communicative tool that interprets its sociological effects at any given time” (23). This position challenges earlier functionalist approaches that reduced costume to practicality or ornamentation alone. Instead, costume is understood as performative, shaping how individuals and institutions are perceived within social space. Shukla reinforces this view by arguing that clothing performs, since “clothing always signals identity, intention, and cultural belonging, whether in everyday life or in art” (27). These perspectives situate costume firmly within semiotic and performative discourse.

In African cultural settings, costume design is deeply intertwined with systems of hierarchy, ritual, and worldview. Dress traditions serve as visual extensions of cosmology and social organisation, encoding meanings that are legible to members of the culture. Okpu notes that “body adornment especially for festivals or dances is usually colourful and is worn to attract attention” (22), yet such visibility is never merely aesthetic. Rather, adornment communicates information about role, status, and ritual responsibility. Costume thus operates simultaneously as spectacle and sign, reinforcing social order while enhancing ceremonial presence. This dual function is particularly evident in institutions where authority is sacralised, such as chieftaincy systems.

Within the Nigerian context, costume design reflects the country’s cultural diversity, with specific fabrics, colours, and styles associated with distinct ethnic identities. Dress becomes a means of differentiating communities while reinforcing internal cohesion through shared visual codes. Among the Benin people, white and red dominate traditional colour usage, symbolising ritual purity, peace, authority, and power. These colours are not arbitrary but are embedded in historical narratives, spiritual beliefs, and royal ideology. Costume, therefore, functions as a structured cultural language rather than a matter of personal preference. Understanding these visual codes is essential for interpreting meaning within Benin chieftaincy attire.

Traditional costume design is unique to the culture it represents, carrying symbols that convey layered meanings about hierarchy and identity. The peculiarity of costume lies in its ability to transfer information through design elements that appear decorative but are symbolically charged. Umukoro asserts that “cultural symbolism is the hallmark of Nigerian traditional dress,” noting that emblems may evolve through environmental influence and cultural interaction (cited in Utoh-Ezeajugh 134). Whether consciously designed or culturally inherited, such symbols gain authority through repeated use and communal recognition. Costume thus operates as a living archive, preserving cultural knowledge through visual continuity. This archival function becomes particularly significant in traditional institutions with long historical trajectories.

Costume design also functions as a collaborative and interpretive practice, especially within ritual and performance contexts. Designers manipulate formal elements such as line, shape, texture, and colour to establish expressive coherence. Durbin observes that “designers in every field manipulate the same formal design elements...to establish expressive or symbolic qualities that create characters and build a visual

world" (31). In traditional societies, however, this creative process is regulated by cultural prescriptions that limit innovation in favour of continuity. The designer's role therefore involves negotiating between creativity and cultural responsibility. This negotiation is especially critical when designing for titled chiefs, whose attire must conform to established conventions.

Some scholars caution against overemphasising symbolism at the expense of functionality, arguing that traditional costumes originally evolved to meet environmental and practical needs. While this counter-argument is valid, it does not negate the symbolic dimensions of dress but rather highlights its layered nature. Costume can simultaneously fulfil practical, aesthetic, and symbolic functions without contradiction. In Benin culture, the use of heavy fabrics, layered wrappers, and elaborate beadwork may respond to ceremonial demands while reinforcing hierarchy and authority. Recognising this multiplicity allows for a more nuanced understanding of costume as both material culture and semiotic system.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotics of costume, articulated in *The Fashion System*. Barthes conceptualises clothing as a structured system of signs that communicates meaning through culturally recognised codes. He identifies three interrelated dimensions: the vestimentary real code, where garments function materially within social space; the terminological code, which translates clothing into descriptive language; and the rhetorical code, which mediates fashion through images and symbolic representation (Jobling 134). Central to Barthes' theory is the idea that clothing becomes meaningful only through interpretation within a shared cultural framework. The sign, in this sense, emerges from the interaction between garment, cultural code, and viewer.

Applied to Benin chieftaincy costume, Barthes' semiotic model provides a useful framework for understanding how dress communicates hierarchy, authority, and ritual function. Chieftaincy attire operates as a system of signs that is intelligible primarily to cultural insiders, while remaining opaque to outsiders. Specific costume elements – such as colour combinations, bead arrangements, wrappers, and regalia – function as signifiers whose meanings are anchored in historical and spiritual codes. For instance, full-body regalia worn during specific ceremonies communicates rank and ritual responsibility without verbal explanation. The difficulty outsiders face in interpreting these symbols underscores the depth of cultural encoding embedded in Benin costume.

Status and power emerge as central semiotic themes within Benin chieftaincy dress. Costume visually articulates a chief's position within the hierarchy, distinguishing between categories through regulated forms and accessories. These distinctions are not merely decorative but serve to maintain institutional order by making hierarchy visible. Barthes' emphasis on cultural readability is particularly relevant here, as the meaning of these costumes depends on shared knowledge within the Benin cultural system. Costume thus functions as a form of institutional language, reinforcing authority through visual repetition. This visual language sustains continuity even as materials and techniques adapt over time.

Importantly, Benin chieftaincy costume also functions as a performative medium. During rituals, festivals, and public ceremonies, costume shapes perception, movement, and interaction, contributing to the overall theatricality of the event. This performative dimension aligns with performance theory, which views ritual as embodied communication. Costume mediates between the individual body and collective meaning, transforming the wearer into a representative of ancestral authority. Through repeated performance, these costumes reinforce cultural narratives and institutional legitimacy. The durability of these practices demonstrates the resilience of traditional semiotic systems in contemporary contexts.

In synthesising costume theory and semiotics, this framework positions Benin chieftaincy costume as both cultural artifact and communicative system. Costume is not merely worn but performed, interpreted, and regulated within a complex network of

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signs. By integrating Barthes' semiotic theory with indigenous costume practice, the study offers a culturally grounded analytical lens for understanding dress within traditional African institutions. This approach moves beyond descriptive ethnography to reveal how costume actively produces meaning, authority, and identity. The framework thus provides a foundation for analysing the specific factors that shape chieftaincy costume design in Benin society.

Discussion

Chieftaincy Institution in Benin Culture

The chieftaincy institution in Benin culture represents a long-standing system of traditional governance rooted in history, ritual, and collective values. Headed by the Oba, the institution functions as a structured administrative and cultural system through which authority is exercised and social order maintained. Chieftaincy in Benin is not merely political but deeply symbolic, intertwining governance with spirituality, ritual obligation, and cultural representation. The institution has existed from time immemorial, evolving through different historical phases while retaining its core hierarchical structure. Chiefs function as intermediaries between the Oba, the ancestors, and the people, thereby occupying positions of both political and ritual significance. Their authority is visually reinforced through costume, which serves as a visible marker of legitimacy and rank within the institution.

Historically, the evolution of the Benin chieftaincy system can be traced to early forms of governance during the Ogiso period, when elders known as the *edion* managed communal affairs. With the restoration of monarchy, these elders were reorganised into more formalised roles, later becoming the *Uzama*, the highest category of chiefs and recognised kingmakers. According to Eweka, these developments marked the emergence of an ordered hierarchy that continues to define Benin chieftaincy today (4). Over time, chieftaincy titles were created in response to administrative, ritual, and political needs, resulting in a layered system of senior and junior chiefs. Each category carries specific responsibilities assigned by the Oba, reinforcing the functional nature of hierarchy. Costume emerged alongside these titles as a key means of visual differentiation and authority.

Within the Benin chieftaincy institution, three major categories of high-ranking chiefs are recognised: the *Uzama* (state counsellors), the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (town chiefs), and the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* (palace chiefs). These categories work collectively with the Oba to administer the kingdom, yet each maintains distinct ritual functions and privileges. Their hierarchical distinctions are visually encoded through specific costumes, accessories, and modes of dress that set them apart from untitled individuals and junior chiefs. Costume thus functions as an institutional language, allowing observers to identify rank and responsibility at a glance. The authority to wear particular forms of regalia is granted solely by the Oba, reinforcing the sacred and political legitimacy of chieftaincy attire. Through this system, costume becomes inseparable from governance and cultural identity.

Before the advent of Western contact, Benin chiefs were traditionally clothed in the *eyon* (bogus wrapper), tied from the upper part of the stomach with a lapel on the left side. This form of dress, though seemingly simple, carried symbolic meaning and differentiated titled men from the general populace. With increased contact with Western civilisation, particularly during the colonial period, changes were introduced into Benin dressing practices. Historical records indicate that in 1934, colonial officials expressed discomfort with the exposure associated with traditional dress, leading to discussions with Oba Eweka II on modifying chiefly attire. This intervention resulted in the introduction of the *Eziokherhe* robe, designed to provide fuller coverage while retaining indigenous symbolism. The adaptation illustrates how chieftaincy costume evolved through negotiation rather than cultural erasure.

The *Eziokherhe* robe marked a significant transformation in Benin chieftaincy costume,

blending indigenous aesthetics with modified forms influenced by external contact. While inspired by priestly garments, the chief's robe was made wider, more elaborate, and distinguished by additional features such as capes and symbolic inscriptions. Over time, variations of the robe emerged, differentiating categories of chiefs through cape length and ornamentation. These changes did not undermine tradition but rather demonstrated the adaptive capacity of Benin costume culture. The evolution of chieftaincy attire thus reflects continuity within change, preserving symbolic codes while responding to historical circumstances. Costume remains regulated by tradition despite these adaptations.



Fig.1 Benin Chiefs on white cassock during Igue festival. Screen short from *NTA Programme on Benin costume 2015*.



Fig.2. Chiefs on wrapper during Igue festival. Screen short from *NTA programme on Benin costume 2015*



Fig.3. Benin Chiefs on Cassock with cape. Screen short from *NTA Programme on Benin costume 2015*

Within Benin chieftaincy culture, several styles of costume are recognised, some worn generally across categories and others reserved for specific ranks. Common styles include the skirt and blouse (*ebuluku* and *ovbie-ewu*), big wrapper tying (*ukpe-eyon*), and the cassock gown without cape (*Eziokherhe*). More specialised costumes include the cassock gown with short cape worn by *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* chiefs, and the long-cape cassock reserved exclusively for *Uzama* chiefs. The full-body regalia (*Ehaengbehia*) is worn by selected high-ranking chiefs during major ceremonies. These distinctions reinforce hierarchy and ritual responsibility through dress. Costume thus becomes a system of visual classification within the chieftaincy institution.



Fig.4. Benin chiefs on Ehaengbehia costume at ugieroba ceremony. Photographed by the researcher 2020

Accessories play a crucial role in reinforcing the symbolic meaning of Benin chieftaincy costumes. Beads, staffs, caps, feathers, and swords are not ornamental

additions but integral elements of identity and authority. The number, size, and quality of beads worn often reflect a chief's rank and level of affluence, while specific accessories such as *Ada*, *Eben*, *Ikile*, and *Udehae* are tied to particular titles and ceremonies. Colour usage further enhances symbolic communication, with white signifying ritual purity, peace, and royalty, and red symbolising power, authority, and spiritual potency. These colour codes are deeply rooted in Benin cosmology and ancestral belief systems. Costume and accessories together create a complete visual statement of chieftaincy identity.

Occasion plays a decisive role in determining the type of costume worn by Benin chiefs. Ritual ceremonies, coronations, festivals, and official assignments each require specific forms of dress regulated by tradition. Chiefs performing ritual duties are often required to wear red attire, while white costumes are prescribed for coronation rites and periods of mourning or transition. Certain ceremonies permit only specific categories of chiefs to wear full regalia, reinforcing hierarchical boundaries. For example, the *Uzama* chiefs perform distinctive roles during ceremonies such as *Igue*, *Otue-Ugierhoba*, and coronations, wearing costumes unique to their status. Costume thus functions as a visual guide to ritual order and responsibility.

Wealth and social status further influence the construction and embellishment of chieftaincy costumes. While design conventions are regulated, the quality of materials used often reflects individual affluence. For instance, the *Ehaengbehia* costume is traditionally constructed with expensive red scarlet fabric (*ukpon'ododo*), though some chiefs substitute similar materials due to cost. Variations in fabric quality, weight, and embellishment are therefore observable, even within the same costume category. Edo notes that *Eghaevbo n'Ore* chiefs historically included individuals who attained wealth independently of the palace, influencing their capacity for elaborate dress (94). Despite such variations, costumes must conform to established stylistic boundaries to maintain cultural legitimacy.

In contemporary times, Benin chieftaincy costume continues to retain cultural relevance despite increasing exposure through media and popular culture. The palace actively regulates the use of chieftaincy regalia, restricting access to titled individuals to prevent misuse or aesthetic appropriation. This regulation underscores the sacred and institutional value attached to costume beyond visual appeal. The continued enforcement of costume codes demonstrates the resilience of Benin cultural systems in the face of modernisation. Chieftaincy costume thus remains a living cultural practice rather than a static historical artifact. Through dress, the Benin chieftaincy institution continues to assert identity, authority, and continuity.

Factors Considered in Chieftaincy Costuming

Chieftaincy costuming in Benin culture is governed by an intricate system of cultural rules that determine what is worn, by whom, and under what circumstances. Costume is not selected based on personal preference or aesthetic appeal alone but is shaped by a convergence of institutional hierarchy, wealth, social status, and ceremonial context. These factors operate collectively to ensure that dress functions as a structured system of visual communication within the chieftaincy institution. Through regulated costume codes, distinctions between ranks are made visible and authority is publicly affirmed. While to the uninitiated many chieftaincy costumes may appear similar in colour and general form, their meanings are clearly defined within Benin cultural logic. Understanding the factors that govern chieftaincy costuming is therefore central to interpreting the visual order and symbolic coherence of the Benin Kingdom.

Hierarchy remains the most fundamental determinant of chieftaincy costume in Benin culture. The Benin chieftaincy institution comprises more than two hundred titled chiefs, yet only a limited number occupy high-ranking positions formally recognised by

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the Oba. These include the *Uzama* (state counsellors), the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (town chiefs), and the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* (palace chiefs), each of which carries distinct political, administrative, and ritual responsibilities. Costume functions as the primary medium through which these hierarchical distinctions are visually communicated during ceremonies, festivals, and official functions. Specific styles of dress, accessories, and regalia are restricted to particular ranks, ensuring that hierarchy is immediately legible within public space. Through this visual system, costume reinforces institutional order without the need for verbal explanation.

Within this hierarchical structure, each category of chief is entitled to specific costume forms that reflect both rank and function. The *Uzama* chiefs, as the highest-ranking category and custodians of critical ritual responsibilities, wear long cassock gowns with extended capes during major ceremonies. This costume visually distinguishes them from other chiefs and reinforces their proximity to royal authority. The *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* chiefs, who serve as town and palace administrators respectively, are entitled to wear the *Ehaengbehia* (full-body regalia) during select ceremonies such as *Otue-Ugierhoba* and other major palace events. Junior chiefs, including the *Ekhaemwen Ukor*, are largely identified through simpler dress forms such as the *eyon* wrapper, accompanied by fewer accessories. These distinctions ensure that hierarchy is maintained through appearance as well as title.



Fig .6. Uzama chiefs on red long cape for mock battle. Chief G.I Akenzua. Photograph with permission. 2021

The regulation of costume by hierarchy extends beyond garments to include accessories and insignia that carry symbolic weight. Items such as beads, staffs, swords, caps, and feathers are not ornamental additions but culturally sanctioned markers of authority. The number of bead strands worn, the style of headgear, and the presence of ritual objects such as *Ada* and *Eben* all communicate rank and responsibility. For instance, the use of one or two cross beads distinguishes between lower and senior chiefs, while the length and embellishment of caps further reinforce hierarchical placement. These accessories function as visual shorthand, allowing informed observers to identify rank instantly. Any unauthorised use of such items is regarded as a serious violation of tradition.

Hierarchy-driven costume regulation also serves a stabilising function within the

chieftaincy institution. By clearly distinguishing ranks through dress, costume prevents ambiguity and contestation of authority during public rituals. This is particularly important during large-scale ceremonies where multiple categories of chiefs appear together. Costume thus becomes a mechanism for maintaining order, ensuring that roles are clearly defined and respected. From this perspective, dress functions as an extension of governance, translating institutional structure into visual form. The durability of this system underscores the importance of costume in sustaining Benin political culture.

Wealth and social status constitute another significant factor influencing chieftaincy costuming, particularly in relation to material quality, scale, and embellishment. While the form and style of costumes are regulated by tradition, the materials used in their construction often reflect the economic capacity of the wearer. Wealthier chiefs are able to afford more expensive fabrics, heavier textiles, and richer beadwork, which enhance the visual impact of their attire. For example, the *Ehaengbehia* costume is traditionally constructed from costly red scarlet fabric known as *ukpon'ododo*. However, not all chiefs can afford this material, leading some to substitute visually similar fabrics such as velvet or thick cotton. These substitutions introduce subtle variations without altering symbolic form.

The influence of wealth on costume is not limited to fabric choice but extends to construction scale and accessory quantity. Some chiefs wear costumes that are more voluminous, consuming more fabric and creating a more imposing silhouette. Others use fewer layers or lighter materials, resulting in less elaborate appearances. Similarly, the number and quality of beads worn may vary depending on affluence, with wealthier chiefs able to display multiple strands and finer craftsmanship. These differences, though visible, operate within culturally acceptable limits. Tradition ensures that wealth enhances costume without undermining symbolic consistency.

Historical scholarship supports the link between wealth and costume display within the Benin chieftaincy system. Edo observes that *Eghaevbo n'Ore* chiefs historically included individuals who achieved wealth and influence independent of palace structures, enabling them to invest heavily in costume and regalia (94). This economic independence contributed to the prominence of town chiefs in public ceremonies. However, despite their wealth, these chiefs were still required to conform to established costume codes. This balance demonstrates how Benin culture accommodates social differentiation without allowing wealth to override institutional order.

A counter-argument within costume studies suggests that material variation risks weakening symbolic clarity by introducing inconsistencies in visual codes. From this perspective, differences in fabric quality or embellishment could blur hierarchical distinctions. While this concern may apply in less regulated cultural contexts, Benin chieftaincy costuming demonstrates how strong traditional control mitigates such risks. Even when materials vary, the underlying design forms, colour symbolism, and accessory usage remain consistent. This ensures that symbolic meaning is preserved despite economic differences. Rather than undermining the system, wealth-related variation adds depth to visual expression while maintaining cultural coherence.

Occasion or event represents another decisive factor in determining chieftaincy costume in Benin culture. Different ceremonies require specific forms of dress that correspond to their ritual significance and historical origins. Ritual ceremonies, coronations, festivals, funerary rites, and official assignments each carry prescribed costume requirements that must be strictly observed. Chiefs performing ritual duties are often required to wear red attire, reflecting spiritual potency, ancestral authority, and ritual engagement. White costumes, by contrast, are associated with purity, peace, and transition, and are commonly worn during coronations, mourning periods, and specific palace rituals. The occasion thus dictates not only costume form but also

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colour symbolism.

Certain ceremonies restrict costume usage to specific categories of chiefs, reinforcing hierarchical boundaries through ritual performance. For instance, during *Otue-Ugierhoba* and other major palace ceremonies, only qualified senior chiefs are permitted to appear in *Ehaengbehia* costume to pay homage to the Oba. The *Uzama* chiefs perform distinct ritual roles during ceremonies such as *Igue*, *Emobo*, *Igue-Iron*, and coronations, wearing costumes unique to their status. These ritual prescriptions ensure order and clarity during ceremonies involving large numbers of participants. Costume thus operates as a visual guide to ritual responsibility and authority.



Fig.5. Chief Oliha with the researcher at Oba's palace function
Photographed by the researcher

The quantity, arrangement, and combination of accessories worn by chiefs are also shaped by occasion. During major festivals and rituals, chiefs may wear multiple bead strands, hand ornaments, leg beads, and symbolic items that enhance ceremonial presence. In contrast, simpler combinations are used for less elaborate events. For official assignments outside the palace, chiefs are often required to dress in white blouse and skirt or white cassock with round neck beads (*Ikile*), reflecting restraint, dignity, and formality. These distinctions ensure that costume remains contextually appropriate while preserving symbolic meaning. Occasion-specific dressing reinforces the performative nature of chieftaincy rituals.

The role of costume in ceremonial performance extends beyond visual identification to embodied expression. Costume influences movement, posture, and interaction, shaping how chiefs engage with ritual space and authority. Heavy regalia and layered costumes impose controlled movement, reinforcing solemnity and gravitas during rituals. This performative dimension aligns with the understanding of costume as an active participant in meaning-making rather than a passive covering. Through repeated ceremonial use, these costume codes become deeply embedded within collective memory. Costume thus sustains both visual and embodied traditions.

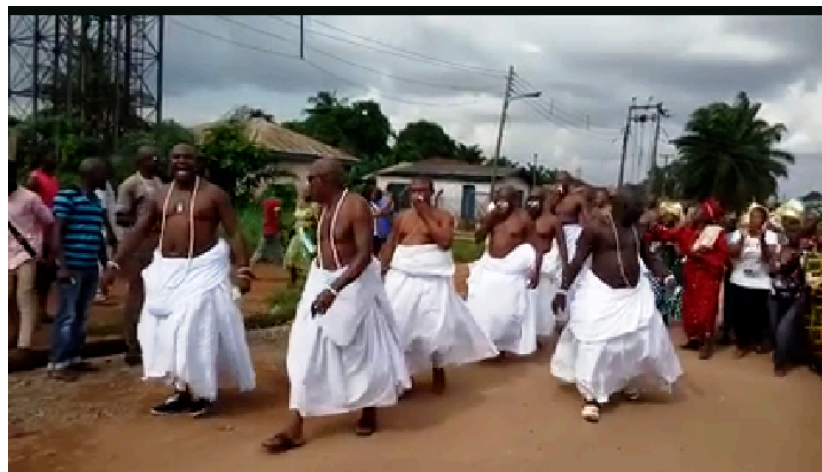


Fig.7.Chiefs performing special duty at coronation tying wrapper (eyon) with white neck bead. Photographed by *researcher*

In contemporary times, the increasing visibility of Benin culture through media, tourism, and popular aesthetics has led to attempts by non-titled individuals to appropriate chieftaincy costumes and accessories. Such practices are viewed as threats to cultural integrity and have been actively discouraged by the palace. Warnings and sanctions have been issued against unauthorised use of regalia, particularly sacred beads and ritual items. This enforcement underscores the institutional and spiritual value attached to chieftaincy costuming beyond its aesthetic appeal. Costume remains a marker of legitimate authority and responsibility, not a costume for casual display.

Collectively, hierarchy, wealth, and occasion function as interrelated determinants of chieftaincy costuming in Benin culture. These factors ensure that costume operates as a coherent system of visual communication capable of conveying rank, authority, and ritual significance with precision. While individual variation exists, it is carefully regulated within cultural boundaries that preserve symbolic meaning. Costume thus sustains institutional order while accommodating historical change and social diversity. Through regulated dress practices, the Benin chieftaincy institution continues to assert identity, authority, and continuity. The endurance of these costuming principles highlights the central role of dress in maintaining Benin cultural life.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that chieftaincy costume in Benin culture functions as far more than ceremonial attire, emerging instead as a structured system of visual communication through which hierarchy, authority, identity, and cultural continuity are articulated. By examining the factors that shape the design and use of chieftaincy costume – namely hierarchy, wealth and social status, and occasion – the research reveals that dress operates as an institutional language governed by long-established cultural codes. These codes regulate not only who may wear particular costumes but also how, when, and in what combinations garments and accessories may be displayed. Costume thus becomes a visible extension of the Benin chieftaincy institution, translating social order into material and performative form. Through repeated ceremonial use, these visual markers reinforce the legitimacy of traditional authority and sustain collective cultural memory.

A central contribution of this study lies in its clarification of hierarchical distinctions within Benin chieftaincy costume culture. While contemporary observers may perceive similarities in colour and general style among chiefs' attire, the research demonstrates that these costumes are far from uniform. Instead, they are carefully differentiated through regulated forms, accessories, and ceremonial contexts that signal rank and responsibility. The *Uzama*, *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* categories are visually distinguished through specific costume types and regalia, while junior chiefs are marked by simpler dress forms. These distinctions challenge assumptions that

modernisation has eroded traditional visual codes, revealing instead a resilient system that continues to function effectively within contemporary Benin society.

The findings further highlight the role of wealth and social status in shaping the material quality and embellishment of chieftaincy costumes. While tradition strictly regulates design forms and symbolic elements, individual affluence influences fabric choice, construction scale, and accessory quantity. This dynamic illustrates how Benin chieftaincy costume accommodates social differentiation without undermining institutional coherence. Wealth enhances visual presence but does not override cultural prescriptions, ensuring that symbolic meaning remains intact. In this way, the costuming system balances individual expression with collective order, demonstrating cultural flexibility within clearly defined boundaries.

The study also underscores the significance of occasion as a determinant of costume choice, revealing how ceremonial context governs colour usage, costume form, and accessory arrangement. Rituals, coronations, festivals, funerary rites, and official assignments each demand specific forms of dress that align with their symbolic and historical meanings. Through these prescriptions, costume functions as a guide to ritual responsibility, making roles and hierarchies visible during public performance. This performative dimension situates chieftaincy costume within broader discussions of ritual theatre and embodied communication, where dress shapes movement, posture, and interaction within sacred space. Costume, therefore, participates actively in meaning-making rather than serving as a passive visual element.

From a theoretical perspective, the application of semiotic theory provides a useful framework for interpreting Benin chieftaincy costume as a system of signs. Drawing on Roland Barthes' conception of clothing as a structured code, the study demonstrates how costume elements function as signifiers whose meanings are anchored in shared cultural knowledge. The difficulty outsiders face in interpreting these symbols highlights the depth of cultural encoding embedded in Benin dress traditions. Costume thus operates as a living archive, preserving historical narratives, spiritual beliefs, and institutional values through visual repetition and performance. This semiotic reading moves the analysis beyond description, revealing the communicative logic underpinning chieftaincy costuming.

The implications of this research extend beyond cultural documentation to broader scholarly and practical domains. For costume studies and visual communication, the study contributes an indigenous African framework for understanding dress as an institutional and semiotic system. For theatre and performance studies, it offers insights into how traditional costume codes inform ritual performance, authority, and audience perception. Cultural practitioners, designers, and curators may also draw on these findings to achieve authenticity and respect cultural boundaries when representing Benin traditions in contemporary contexts. By foregrounding costume as both cultural artifact and performative medium, the study bridges traditional practice and scholarly discourse.

In an era of increasing cultural visibility, digital reproduction, and aesthetic appropriation, the regulation of Benin chieftaincy costume assumes heightened importance. The palace's active efforts to restrict unauthorised use of regalia underscore the sacred and institutional value attached to these costumes. This enforcement reflects an ongoing commitment to preserving cultural integrity in the face of modern pressures. Ultimately, this study affirms that chieftaincy costume remains central to the expression of Benin identity, authority, and continuity. Through regulated dress practices, the Benin chieftaincy institution continues to assert its relevance, demonstrating how tradition endures not by resisting change outright but by adapting within the boundaries of cultural meaning.

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