

Costume and Accessory Design in the Construction of Animated Characters in Nigeria

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Abstract

Costume and accessory design play an important role in the construction of animated characters, particularly in a visual culture as diverse as Nigeria. Clothing, jewelry, headwear, patterns, color combinations, and other decorative details can communicate information about a character before dialogue or action begins. In Nigerian animation, these elements often carry more than decorative value. They may suggest age, occupation, social position, personality, regional background, or links with local cultural traditions. This paper examines how costume and accessory design contribute to animated character construction in Nigeria, with particular attention to visual recognition, personality expression, cultural references, and narrative function. The discussion focuses on the use of silhouette, color, pattern, textile-inspired motifs, traditional clothing forms, and symbolic accessories, while also considering how these elements are simplified or reshaped for contemporary animation. Nigerian character design often develops through a negotiation between local visual resources and modern animation styles. Traditional forms may be retained in recognizable details, but they are rarely reproduced without adjustment. Designers modify proportion, decoration, and material appearance so that costumes remain readable within stylized characters and different screen formats. Accessories can also serve as compact visual signs, helping distinguish characters and reinforcing their roles within a story. The paper argues that effective costume and accessory design is closely connected with the overall clarity of character construction. When cultural references, personality, and visual form are handled together, costume becomes part of character identity rather than an added surface decoration.

Keywords: Nigerian animation, character design, costume design, accessory design, visual identity, cultural elements

1. Introduction

Animation in Nigeria has developed gradually from advertising, television graphics, and small independent productions toward a broader range of locally produced works. Although the industry still faces limitations in funding, training, infrastructure, and distribution, its development has become more visible in recent

years. A notable example is *Lady Buckit and the Motley Mopsters*, released in 2020 and identified as the first Nigerian feature-length animated film to receive both theatrical screening and Netflix distribution (Fayenuwo & Iwuh, 2025). This development has also increased attention to character design and to the visual forms through which Nigerian animation can establish a more

distinct local identity.

Costume and accessories are important parts of that process. In animation, viewers often recognize personality, status, occupation, age, or cultural background before a character speaks. Clothing, headwear, jewelry, patterns, and color can therefore function as part of character construction rather than as decoration added after the design is complete. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where dress can communicate social and cultural meanings through garment type, fabric, color, and the way clothing is worn (Alabi & Okebiorun, 2024; Fayemi, 2021; Oni & Sharomi, 2021).

This paper examines how costume and accessory design contribute to the construction of animated characters in Nigeria. The discussion focuses on personality, visual differentiation, cultural elements, decorative motifs, and narrative function, while also considering how traditional forms are adapted to contemporary animation. Costume is treated here as part of the character's visual structure, linking outward appearance with identity, role, and story.

2. Visual Foundations of Costume and Accessory Design in Nigerian Animation

Costume and accessory design begin with the basic visual logic of the character. In animation, clothing has to remain readable when the figure moves, turns, changes scale, or appears briefly on screen. A costume may contain many cultural references, but if its overall shape is unclear, those details can easily lose their effect. For this reason, silhouette, proportion, and the distribution of visual weight are important before smaller decorative elements are added. Tillman (2011) notes that character design depends heavily on recognizable shape and visual consistency, while Bancroft (2006) emphasizes the need for outward appearance to support the personality and function of the character. Clothing therefore works best when it is integrated with the body rather than treated as a separate layer.

Color and pattern also influence character recognition. Strong color contrast can separate one figure from another, while repeated colors can connect characters who share a social or narrative relationship. Nigerian costume design offers a wide range of visual possibilities because local dress traditions often make extensive use of patterned fabrics, embroidery, headwear, jewelry, and layered garments. These elements

can enrich animated characters, but they usually need some degree of simplification. Dense textile patterns, for example, may be reduced to larger motifs so that they remain visible during movement. The aim is not to reproduce every material detail, but to preserve the visual quality that makes the garment recognizable.

Accessories can carry a large amount of information in a relatively small visual form. Headwear, necklaces, bracelets, staffs, bags, or other objects may indicate status, age, occupation, or cultural background. In Yoruba dress culture, garments and accessories often function together as signs of social identity rather than as isolated decorative objects (Alabi & Okebiorun, 2024; Oni & Sharomi, 2021). This makes accessory design especially useful in animation, where a single object can help distinguish a character quickly. The meaning of an accessory, however, depends on how it is placed within the whole design. Too many small details can weaken the visual hierarchy, while one or two carefully chosen elements may make the character more memorable.

The visual foundation of Nigerian animated character design therefore lies in balance. Cultural detail needs to remain visible, but the design must also be clear enough for animation. Costume, color, pattern, silhouette, and accessories have to work together as one system. When these elements are coordinated, they can establish character identity before narrative explanation begins and prepare the ground for later development of personality, cultural reference, and story function.

3. Costume Design and Character Construction

3.1 Costume Style and Character Personality

Costume style can shape the first impression of an animated character before the narrative provides much information. In character design, clothing is read together with body proportion, posture, facial features, and movement. A loose or layered costume may create a different impression from a fitted, highly structured one, while the amount of decoration can suggest restraint, confidence, authority, or a desire for visibility. Bancroft (2006) argues that visual design should support the personality and role of a character rather than exist independently from them. Costume is part of this visual logic.

The relationship between clothing and personality is especially important when several characters appear within the same animated

world. Differences in silhouette, garment length, layering, or ornament can help separate one personality from another. A character intended to appear formal or authoritative may be given more controlled shapes and clearly organized details, while a more energetic figure may be designed with stronger contrasts, asymmetry, or greater movement in the clothing. These choices are not fixed rules, but they help make personality readable at a glance. Tillman (2011) similarly stresses that successful character design depends on the consistency between visual form and the traits assigned to the character.

Nigerian animation has additional possibilities because costume can draw from both contemporary fashion and locally familiar dress traditions. Traditional garments, headwear, patterned fabrics, and jewelry can be adapted in different ways depending on the personality being constructed. The same cultural element may appear formal on one character and playful or exaggerated on another. Its meaning changes through proportion, color, placement, and the way it interacts with the character's movement.

Costume design is most effective when it does not simply label a character but contributes to how that character feels on screen. Personality is built through the combination of dress, body, gesture, and behavior. Clothing can support that construction quietly, without becoming the only source of meaning. In Nigerian animation, this approach also leaves room for local visual references to become part of individual characterization rather than functioning only as general signs of cultural background.

3.2 Color, Pattern and Visual Differentiation

Color is one of the quickest ways to separate animated characters visually. A character may be recognized from a distance through a dominant color scheme even before facial details become clear. In costume design, color can suggest temperament, status, age, or group affiliation, but its effect depends on consistency. Too many competing colors can weaken the design, while a controlled palette usually makes the character easier to identify. Tillman (2011) notes that color choices should support the overall logic of a character rather than function as isolated decoration.

Pattern adds another level of distinction. Nigerian clothing provides a particularly rich source because patterned fabrics and decorative surfaces are already closely connected with dress

and social presentation. In Yoruba clothing, fabric, color, and ornament can contribute to the recognition of social and cultural identity (Alabi & Okebiurun, 2024; Oni & Sharomi, 2021). Animation can draw on these visual resources, but direct reproduction is not always practical. Very dense patterns may become unclear when the character moves or appears at a smaller scale. Designers often need to simplify them into larger shapes, repeated motifs, or limited areas of decoration.

Visual differentiation becomes more important when several characters share similar body proportions or appear together frequently. One figure may be associated with a strong warm palette and bold geometric pattern, while another may use quieter colors and less ornament. Such contrast helps the audience distinguish characters without relying entirely on facial features. Pattern placement can also direct attention. A decorated headwrap, shoulder area, belt, or border may become a focal point and make the silhouette more memorable.

Color and pattern are most effective when they support the whole character rather than compete with it. Their purpose is not simply to make costumes more attractive. They help organize visual information, separate personalities, and reinforce the cultural setting of the animated world. In Nigerian animation, the challenge lies in keeping local textile references recognizable while adapting them to the clarity and movement required by animation.

3.3 Costume Changes and Character Development

Costume can change as a character moves through different stages of a story. These changes may be small, such as the addition of an accessory or a shift in color, or more obvious, such as a complete change of clothing style. In animation, such visual adjustments help the audience notice changes in status, confidence, responsibility, or emotional condition without depending entirely on dialogue. Bancroft (2006) points out that character appearance should remain closely connected with personality and narrative role, which also means that visual design may develop as the character changes.

A costume change does not always require a completely new design. Small details can be enough. A character who becomes more confident may adopt stronger colors, more structured clothing, or accessories that were absent earlier. A younger or less experienced

figure may begin with simpler forms and gradually acquire more distinctive visual features. These changes work best when they remain connected to the original design, so that the character is still immediately recognizable.

Nigerian animation can use this approach while drawing on local clothing traditions and contemporary fashion. Changes in headwear, fabric pattern, jewelry, or garment structure may indicate a new social role or a shift in the character's position within the story. Dress can also mark movement between everyday life, ceremonial settings, and situations of greater responsibility. Such visual development is especially useful when a narrative involves growth, leadership, or changes in social identity.

Costume development therefore becomes part of character development rather than a separate design exercise. The clothing does not need to explain every change directly, but it can make narrative progression easier to read. When costume, accessories, and personality develop together, the character gains a stronger sense of continuity while still showing visible transformation across the story.

4. Accessories and the Visual Definition of Animated Characters

Accessories are often smaller than costume elements, but they can carry a large amount of visual information. Headwear, jewelry, staffs, bags, belts, weapons, and other objects can help establish a character's social position, occupation, age, or cultural background. In animation, this is especially useful because the audience needs to recognize characters quickly. A single distinctive accessory may become part of the character's visual identity and remain memorable even when other costume details are simplified.

The meaning of an accessory depends on its relationship with the whole design. In many Nigerian dress traditions, items such as headwear and jewelry do not function as decoration alone. They can indicate status, occasion, gender, or cultural affiliation (Alabi & Okebiorun, 2024; Oni & Sharomi, 2021). When these elements are adapted for animation, their form usually needs to be clear enough to remain visible during movement. A complex ornament may be simplified, while its basic shape, placement, or symbolic feature is retained.

Accessories can also help distinguish characters who wear similar clothing. Two figures may share the same general costume style but appear

very different through the use of contrasting headgear, jewelry, or personal objects. These details can support personality as well. A restrained accessory may suit a quiet or formal character, while larger and more exaggerated objects can strengthen a more dramatic or energetic design. The visual effect comes from proportion and repetition rather than from the number of accessories used.

Effective accessory design therefore depends on selection. Too many small details can make an animated character difficult to read, while a few carefully chosen elements can strengthen recognition and personality. Nigerian animation has a wide range of local visual resources to draw from, but their value lies in how they are adapted to the character rather than simply added for cultural decoration. When costume and accessories are designed together, the character becomes more coherent and easier to identify within the animated world.

5. Nigerian Cultural Elements in Character Design

5.1 Traditional Clothing Forms and Local Textiles

Traditional clothing provides an important visual resource for Nigerian animated character design. Garments are not only used to locate a character within a cultural setting. Their cut, volume, layering, fabric, and method of wearing can also suggest age, gender, social position, and the degree of formality attached to a particular scene. Yoruba dress, for example, includes recognizable combinations of garments and headwear whose meanings are shaped by social context and cultural convention (Alabi & Okebiorun, 2024; Oni & Sharomi, 2021). When such forms enter animation, they give the character an immediate visual connection with a specific cultural environment.

A clear example can be found in *Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango*. Its character design draws on Yoruba dress traditions, including forms associated with garments such as agbada and sokoto for male figures and iro and gele for female characters. Hairstyles and accessories also contribute to the cultural appearance of the characters (Fayenuwo & Iwu, 2026). These elements are useful because they do more than indicate that the story is set within a Yoruba cultural world. They help distinguish characters visually and support differences in gender, status, and role.

Local textiles add another layer to character

construction. Nigerian fabrics are often visually rich, with repeated motifs, strong contrasts, woven textures, embroidery, and patterned surfaces. Their direct reproduction in animation, however, can create practical problems. A complex textile may look effective in a still image but become visually crowded during movement. Designers therefore need to decide which parts of the textile are essential to recognition. Larger motifs, reduced pattern density, or simplified borders can preserve cultural reference while keeping the costume readable on screen.

The treatment of textiles also affects personality. A heavily patterned garment may give a character a strong and ceremonial presence, while a simpler textile treatment can create a quieter or more informal impression. Fabric choice, pattern scale, and garment structure work together. Cultural clothing is most convincing when it has been adjusted to the needs of the character rather than copied as a complete ethnographic model. Fayemi (2021) notes that dress participates in the expression of identity; animation extends this function by turning dress into part of a designed visual personality.

Traditional clothing and local textiles therefore offer Nigerian animation a large visual vocabulary, but their value depends on adaptation. The aim is not to place as many cultural details as possible on a character. More effective designs select forms that remain recognizable, support the character's role, and still function clearly in motion. *Dawn of Thunder* shows how traditional dress can become part of character construction while retaining a visible relationship with Yoruba cultural references.

5.2 Cultural Motifs and Decorative Elements

Cultural motifs and decorative elements can strengthen the visual identity of animated characters when they are integrated into the costume rather than added as surface ornament. Patterns placed on fabric, borders, headwear, jewelry, or other accessories may help indicate cultural background and social meaning. In Nigerian dress traditions, decorative details often work together with garment form, color, and occasion, so their meaning depends on context rather than on the motif alone (Alabi & Okebiorun, 2024; Oni & Sharomi, 2021).

For animation, these details usually need to be simplified. A motif that is highly complex in textile form may become difficult to read when the character is moving or appears at a smaller

scale. Designers can retain the basic structure of a pattern while reducing repetition, enlarging individual shapes, or limiting decoration to selected areas of the costume. This keeps the cultural reference visible without allowing it to dominate the whole character.

Decorative elements can also support differences between characters. A figure associated with authority may use more formal ornament, stronger pattern organization, or distinctive accessories, while another character may be given simpler decoration to create a more informal appearance. These choices allow cultural references to participate in characterization. The motif does not only tell the viewer where the character comes from; it can also help suggest position, temperament, and narrative role.

This approach is visible in Nigerian animation that draws on local mythology and historical imagery. *Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango*, for example, combines culturally recognizable clothing, hairstyles, and decorative details in the construction of its characters (Fayenuwo & Iwu, 2026). The effect depends less on reproducing every traditional detail than on selecting elements that remain legible within the animated style. Cultural reference and visual clarity have to be considered together.

Decorative design is most effective when it remains part of the character rather than becoming an independent display of tradition. Repeated motifs, textile references, and accessories can provide cultural depth, but they still need to support silhouette, movement, and personality. Nigerian animation has a rich visual vocabulary available for this purpose, and careful selection allows local cultural elements to remain recognizable while fitting the demands of contemporary character design.

5.3 Adaptation of Traditional Elements in Contemporary Animation

Traditional elements cannot always be transferred directly into contemporary animation. Clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, and decorative motifs may carry complex meanings in everyday cultural practice, but animation requires forms that remain clear during movement and at different viewing scales. Designers therefore have to decide which features should be preserved and which can be simplified. The aim is not exact reproduction. What matters more is retaining enough visual information for the cultural reference to remain

recognizable.

This process can involve changes in proportion, pattern density, color, or the size of accessories. A traditional garment with detailed embroidery, for example, may be represented through a simpler border or a limited group of motifs. Headwear and jewelry can also be enlarged slightly so that their forms remain visible on screen. Such adjustments do not necessarily weaken cultural meaning. When handled carefully, they make traditional elements more compatible with animation while keeping their main visual characteristics.

Ajaka: Lost in Rome provides a useful example of this kind of adaptation. The work draws on Yoruba history and cultural imagery while placing its characters within a stylized animated world (Fayenuwo & Iwu, 2026). Traditional visual references are not treated as fixed historical replicas. They are reshaped to suit character movement, narrative clarity, and the overall design language of the production. This allows cultural material to remain visible without making the characters appear visually overloaded.

Contemporary animation also creates room for traditional and modern elements to exist together. A character may wear clothing inspired by older forms while using simplified shapes, stronger color contrast, or a more modern silhouette. Such combinations can make the design more accessible to present-day audiences, especially when the story itself connects historical material with contemporary visual expectations. The important issue is whether the combination remains coherent rather than whether every detail follows traditional form exactly.

The adaptation of traditional elements is therefore a design process rather than simple cultural borrowing. Nigerian animators work with inherited visual materials, but those materials are selected, reduced, reorganized, and sometimes exaggerated for the needs of animation. When this transformation is successful, cultural reference does not disappear. It becomes part of a contemporary visual language that supports character recognition, movement, and storytelling.

6. Costume, Accessories and Narrative Function

Costume and accessories do more than identify how a character looks. They can also help the audience understand what position the character

occupies in a story. Clothing may suggest whether a figure belongs to an ordinary domestic setting, a ceremonial environment, a position of authority, or a more unusual narrative world. Accessories can make these differences even clearer. A staff, piece of jewelry, distinctive headwear, or personal object may become closely associated with a character and help the viewer recognize that character's role before the plot explains it in detail.

This function is especially useful in animation, where visual information often has to be communicated quickly. Tillman (2011) notes that effective character design depends on the relationship between appearance, personality, and role. Costume can support this connection by giving different characters clearly different visual profiles. A leading figure may be designed with a stronger silhouette and more distinctive accessories, while supporting characters may use simpler clothing or less visually dominant details. These choices create hierarchy within a group and make narrative relationships easier to follow.

The relationship between costume and narrative can also be seen in *Lady Buckit and the Motley Mopsters*. The film presents a range of characters with different personalities and functions, and their visual distinction depends partly on clothing, color, and accessory choices. The design of female characters is particularly relevant because appearance is used together with behavior and narrative position rather than functioning as an isolated decorative feature (Fayenuwo et al., 2026). This allows costume to contribute to characterization without carrying the full burden of explaining personality.

Costume can also reflect changes in narrative context. A character may appear differently in everyday scenes, moments of conflict, or situations that involve greater responsibility. Such changes do not need to be dramatic. A new accessory, different color balance, or more formal garment can indicate that the character's position has changed. Bancroft (2006) argues that visual development should remain consistent with the character, so these changes are most effective when they still preserve recognizable features from the original design.

In Nigerian animation, narrative function becomes more interesting when costume also carries cultural meaning. Traditional garments, local textile references, jewelry, and headwear

may identify a character's background while also supporting their role within the story. The strongest designs avoid making these elements purely symbolic. Instead, costume and accessories work with personality, movement, and plot. They help the audience understand who the character is, how the character relates to others, and how that position may change as the narrative develops.

7. Contemporary Approaches to Nigerian Animated Character Design

Contemporary Nigerian animation is moving toward a visual language that combines local references with design methods familiar to global animation audiences. Character construction is no longer limited to the simple insertion of traditional clothing or symbolic objects. Designers increasingly work with silhouette, color hierarchy, simplified costume forms, and more controlled accessory systems so that characters remain readable across different formats and screen sizes. This shift is important because Nigerian animation now operates within a wider media environment in which local cultural identity and visual accessibility need to coexist (Fayenuwo & Iwuh, 2025).

One noticeable tendency is the selective use of cultural elements. Traditional garments, textiles, headwear, jewelry, and motifs are often reduced to a few recognizable features rather than reproduced in full detail. This allows the design to retain a Nigerian visual character without becoming overloaded. Such simplification is especially useful in animation, where repeated drawing, movement, and digital rendering place practical limits on highly detailed costume design. Tillman (2011) and Bancroft (2006) both emphasize that clarity and recognizability remain central to effective character construction, particularly when costume and accessories are expected to support personality as well as appearance.

Another direction involves combining older cultural forms with contemporary styling. Characters inspired by Yoruba history or mythology may retain recognizable garment structures, hairstyles, or symbolic objects while adopting cleaner silhouettes, stronger color contrast, and more stylized proportions. *Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango* and *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* show how historical and mythological material can be reworked within contemporary animated design rather than copied as fixed visual models

(Fayenuwo & Iwu, 2026). This kind of adaptation gives designers more freedom while keeping the cultural source visible.

Character design has also become important beyond the finished animation itself. Concept art, costume sketches, promotional images, and character profiles can shape audience recognition before a film is released. *Ajaka: Lost in Rome*, for example, used concept material and character imagery during its crowdfunding and promotional process, and the project raised more than US\$20,000 through Kickstarter (Fayenuwo & Iwu, 2026). This shows that character design now has both artistic and practical value. A successful visual identity can support storytelling, promotion, audience engagement, and project development.

The current direction of Nigerian animated character design is better understood as a process of adjustment rather than a rejection of tradition. Local dress and decorative culture remain important sources, but they are being reorganized through contemporary design principles. Stronger results appear when costume, accessories, personality, and narrative role are developed together. The character then looks culturally grounded without becoming visually rigid, and traditional references remain active within a modern animation language.

8. Conclusion

Costume and accessory design play a substantial role in the construction of animated characters in Nigeria. Their function extends beyond decoration. Clothing, color, pattern, headwear, jewelry, and other visual details help establish personality, social position, cultural background, and narrative role. When these elements are coordinated with body shape, movement, and expression, they make characters easier to recognize and more visually coherent.

Nigerian animation has a particularly rich visual resource in local dress traditions, textiles, and decorative forms. Yoruba clothing, patterned fabrics, headwear, and jewelry can provide strong cultural references, but they often need to be simplified or reorganized for animation. The most effective designs do not reproduce traditional forms mechanically. They select recognizable features and adapt them to movement, scale, and contemporary visual style.

The examples discussed in this paper also show that costume can support different stages of character construction. It can distinguish

characters, suggest personality, mark changes in status, and contribute to narrative development. In productions such as *Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango*, *Ajaka: Lost in Rome*, and *Lady Buckit and the Motley Mopsters*, costume and accessory choices participate in the wider visual language of the animated world rather than remaining isolated design details.

Contemporary Nigerian character design is developing through this balance between local visual resources and modern animation practice. Cultural elements remain important, but their value depends on how well they are integrated with character personality and story. Costume and accessories become most meaningful when they help the audience understand who a character is, not simply where the character comes from.

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