

Traditional Attire on Screen: Negotiating Identity and Ethics in the Representation of Toghu in Cameroonian Cinema

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Abstract

Traditional attire occupies a central position in African visual culture, functioning as a medium through which identity, history, and cultural values are communicated. In Cameroonian cinema, Toghu attire, an embroidered velvet garment that originated from the Bamenda people of the North West Region, has become a recurring visual symbol used to signify tradition, authority, and cultural authenticity. While its increasing presence in film contributes to cultural visibility, it also raises critical ethical questions regarding symbolic accuracy, cultural context, and representational responsibility. This article examines the cinematic representation of Toghu attire and interrogates how issues of identity and ethics are negotiated through its use on screen. Using a qualitative approach grounded in visual and semiotic analysis, the study analyzes selected scenes from the Cameroonian films *GREED* by Ngang Romanus and *BITTER LESSON* by Keka Tassi Sylvester. Drawing on semiotic theory, cultural heritage theory, and postcolonial representation theory, the article argues that Toghu attire is often deployed as a generalized marker of tradition, thereby simplifying its cultural meanings. The study concludes that ethical representation of traditional attire requires cultural knowledge, contextual sensitivity, and engagement with indigenous meaning systems. By foregrounding costume as a critical site of meaning-making, this article contributes to broader debates on African cinema, cultural identity, and ethical visual storytelling.

Keywords: Toghu attire, Cameroonian cinema, cultural identity, costume symbolism, ethical representation

Introduction

Cinema has long served as a vehicle for cultural expression, identity formation, and historical narration (Diawara, 1992; Hall, 1997). In African contexts, film functions not only as entertainment but also as a

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cultural archive where indigenous identities are visually negotiated (Ukadike, 2000). Through costume, setting, and performance, African filmmakers construct narratives that affirm cultural belonging while engaging with modern social realities (Adeyemi, 2019). Among these visual elements, traditional attire functions simultaneously as an aesthetic feature and a symbolic system.

In Cameroonian cinema, Toghu attire has emerged as one visible traditional garment used to signal cultural rootedness. Toghu originates from the Bamenda (Grassfields) people of Cameroon's North West Region and is traditionally associated with royalty, ceremonial authority, and communal identity. Its rich embroidery, distinctive motifs, and symbolic colors encode social meanings that are widely recognized within Bamenda cultural contexts. It was historically associated with royal institutions and palace authority (Ndam, 2018).

Traditionally worn by titled men, palace officials, and members of the royal court, its use reinforced social hierarchy and political order. The garment is distinguished by dense geometric embroidery on velvet fabric. Its dominant colors, often red, yellow, white, and black, carry symbolic meanings related to vitality, prosperity, spiritual balance, and ancestral presence (Foncha, 2019; Tabe, 2020). Because of these features, Toghu functions not merely as clothing but as a culturally regulated symbol of authority and communal identity.

As Toghu increasingly appears in films, it is often mobilized to communicate tradition, moral authority, or ancestral legitimacy. However, cinematic representation inevitably involves translating lived cultural practice into a mediated visual narrative. This process raises important questions: How faithfully are Toghu's cultural meanings represented on screen? Does its cinematic use reinforce or dilute its symbolic significance? And what ethical responsibilities do filmmakers bear when using culturally regulated attire? This article explores these

questions by examining how Toghu attire is represented in selected Cameroonian films: *GREED* by Ngang Romanus and *BITTER LESSON* by Keka Tassi Sylvester.

GREED by Ngang Romanus is a Cameroonian drama that explores complex family relations and cultural traditions. The village grapples with unexpected calamities, promoting a search for a solution. Instant dialogue reveals conflicts streaming from the beliefs. *BITTER LESSON* by Keka Tassi Sylvester is also a Cameroonian film that highlights the importance of building an inclusive society where people are judged by their capacities rather than their physical appearance and where everyone has equal rights and opportunities.

This article, therefore, examines how Toghu attire is represented in selected Cameroonian films and assesses whether these representations align with its traditional cultural meanings. It also seeks to evaluate the ethical implications of using culturally regulated attire in cinematic storytelling. It argues that while Toghu contributes to cultural visibility, its symbolic depth is frequently simplified, raising ethical concerns about representation and cultural responsibility in cinematic storytelling.

Cultural Context and Theoretical Perspectives

Despite the prominence of Toghu attire in Cameroonian cultural life, scholarly engagement with its cinematic representation remains limited. Existing studies on African and Cameroonian cinema tend to focus on narrative structure, political themes, and postcolonial identity, often overlooking costume as a primary site of meaning-making. When costume is discussed, it is typically treated as a supplementary visual element rather than a culturally embedded symbol.

In cinematic practice, Toghu is often used as a visual shorthand for tradition or authentic culture, without sufficient attention to its specific cultural functions, symbolic restrictions, or historical associations. This

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generalized usage risks stripping Toghu of its cultural specificity and reducing it to an aesthetic object. Such representation raises ethical concerns, particularly when traditional attire with regulated meanings is detached from its cultural context.

The central problem addressed in this article is the absence of critical, culturally grounded frameworks for understanding the use of Toghu attire in Cameroonian cinema. Without such frameworks, filmmakers risk unintentionally misrepresenting cultural symbols and undermining the very identities they seek to celebrate.

Toghu Attire and Cultural Meaning

Scholars consistently describe Toghu as a culturally significant garment deeply embedded in Bamenda social and political structures. Ndam (2018) explains that Toghu historically functioned as a symbol of authority, worn primarily by traditional rulers, palace officials, and titled individuals. Its restricted use reinforced social hierarchy and cultural order. Over time, Toghu became more widely worn during festivals, funerals, and cultural celebrations, reflecting both continuity and adaptation (Tabe, 2020).

Foncha (2019) conceptualizes Toghu as a cultural text through which history, values, and collective memory are communicated. The motifs and colors embroidered on Toghu garments carry symbolic meanings that are understood within the community. This symbolic depth distinguishes Toghu from ordinary clothing and positions it as a cultural heritage object.

Costume and Visual Meaning in African Cinema

Film scholars increasingly recognize costume as a key component of visual storytelling. Smith (2017) argues that costume contributes to character construction and ideological framing, often communicating meaning more subtly than dialogue. In African cinema, traditional attire

is particularly significant, as it visually asserts cultural identity and resists colonial narratives that historically devalued indigenous cultures (Adeyemi, 2019).

However, Kum (2021) notes that African film scholarship often marginalizes costume analysis, focusing instead on narrative and thematic concerns. This neglect limits critical understanding of how visual symbols function in African films, especially when traditional attire carries culturally regulated meanings.

Ethical Representation and Cultural Responsibility

Ethical representation has become a major concern in cultural and media studies. Young and Brunk (2012) argue that cultural appropriation occurs when cultural elements are used without adequate understanding or respect for their original context. In film, this often manifests through the decontextualized use of traditional symbols.

Miller (2016) emphasizes that ethical representation requires cultural literacy, consultation, and accountability. For traditional attire like Toghu, ethical engagement involves recognizing cultural ownership and symbolic boundaries. This ethical dimension is central to the present study.

Traditional Attire and Other African Films

The use of traditional attire as a visual marker of identity, authority, and cultural authenticity is widespread in African cinema. Filmmakers frequently rely on indigenous clothing to communicate tradition, social hierarchy, and moral positioning within their narratives. While this strategy enhances visual recognition and cultural visibility, scholars have noted that traditional attire is often employed without sufficient attention to its deeper cultural meanings (Adeyemi, 2019; Ukadike, 2000).

In Nigerian cinema, particularly Nollywood, traditional attire plays a central role in constructing character identity and power relations.

Garments such as Agbada and Isiagu are commonly used to signify wealth, elder authority, and cultural legitimacy. In films that focus on kingship, chieftaincy disputes, or family leadership, characters dressed in these garments are immediately positioned as custodians of tradition (Haynes, 2016). While this visual coding is effective for storytelling, it often simplifies the cultural specificity of these garments. Rather than functioning as regulated cultural symbols, they are presented as generalized signs of authority, detached from their original social rules and contexts.

Similarly, Nollywood frequently uses traditional attire to contrast tradition and modernity. Characters dressed in Western clothing are often associated with ambition, moral conflict, or urban lifestyles, while those in traditional attire are portrayed as moral anchors or defenders of communal values (Okome, 2007). Scholars argue that this visual opposition, while narratively convenient, risks presenting African culture as static and opposed to social change (Adeyemi, 2019).

In Ghanaian cinema, Kente cloth is one of the most recognizable traditional textiles used on screen. Kente often appears in scenes involving royalty, weddings, funerals, and public ceremonies, where it signals tradition and prestige. However, as with Toghu in Cameroonian films, Kente is rarely contextualized within its philosophical and symbolic system. Specific meanings attached to colors, patterns, and modes of wearing are often ignored, reducing Kente to a decorative symbol of Ghanaian culture rather than a complex cultural text (Arthur, 2014). This visual simplification enhances aesthetic appeal but limits cultural depth.

South African cinema offers another important point of comparison. Traditional attire associated with Zulu, Xhosa, or Sotho cultures is frequently used to mark ethnic identity, ancestral continuity, and ritual

authority. In films addressing rural life or spiritual themes, traditional clothing reinforces connections to heritage and the past (Maingard, 2007). However, in urban or post-apartheid narratives, such attire is sometimes framed as outdated or incompatible with modern life. This reinforces a tension between tradition and modernity, suggesting that cultural symbols belong primarily to the past rather than evolving alongside contemporary society.

In East African cinema, particularly in Kenyan and Tanzanian films, traditional attire is commonly used during rituals, initiation ceremonies, and scenes involving elders. Beaded ornaments, wraps, and ceremonial dress visually distinguish cultural authority from everyday life. While these representations often respect ritual contexts, they still rely heavily on visual cues rather than narrative explanation, leaving audiences to interpret meaning without cultural guidance (Diawara, 1992).

Across these diverse cinematic contexts, a common pattern emerges. Traditional attire is widely used to establish authenticity and cultural identity, yet it is rarely explored as a dynamic cultural system governed by historical, social, and ethical codes. Clothing serves as a visual shortcut, allowing filmmakers to convey tradition quickly, especially to audiences unfamiliar with local cultures. While this practice is understandable within the constraints of film production, it raises ethical concerns similar to those identified in the representation of Toghu attire.

Situating Toghu alongside other African traditional garments demonstrates that its cinematic treatment is not an isolated case but part of a broader continental pattern. This comparison strengthens the argument that ethical frameworks for representing traditional attire are necessary across African cinema. Respectful representation requires more than visual inclusion; it demands cultural knowledge, contextual sensitivity, and an awareness of how meaning shifts when cultural symbols move from lived practice into cinematic representation.

This study draws on semiotic theory, cultural heritage theory, and postcolonial representation theory.

Semiotics Theory

To begin, we shall look at the Semiotic theory, which enables the analysis of Toghu as a system of signs in cinematic representation. Umberto Eco states that “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign” (1976, p. 7). Anything that can stand for something else is understood or read as a sign. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, meaning emerges from the relationship between the signifier, the physical form, and the signified, the concept it represents. In film, costumes serve as powerful signifiers that communicate meanings visually. Roland Barthes’ extension of semiotics into cultural and ideological analysis is practically relevant. Barthes (1977) emphasizes the ideological dimensions of visual signs, which often operate at the level of myth, presenting culturally constructed meanings as natural or universal. In cinema, traditional attire can easily become mythologized, stripped of historical specificity, and presented as a timeless symbol. Chandler posits that:

Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as signifying something- referring to or standing for something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics (2007, p. 13).

This perspective is useful in understanding how Toghu attire functions as a sign within cinematic narrative, where meaning is constructed through cultural conventions and audience interpretation.

Accordingly, M.S. Abdullahi Idiagbon in “African Traditional Semiotics: The example of Ar’oko’ in Yuroba Tradition” submits that “a semiotic interpretation requires a shared environment or setting between the

sender and receiver which could be physical, social, or even spatio-temporal territories of the participants” (2010, p. 3). Ify (2020) posits that “in Semiotics, cultural phenomena or icons are explored as signs. It explains the content of an icon as a sign system and its uses” (p. 297). Applying semiotic theory in this study involves decoding Toghu’s colors, motifs, and textures as signifiers of culturally constructed meanings. Semiotics, therefore, enables critical analysis of both meaning-making and misrepresentation.

Cultural Heritage Theory

Cultural heritage theory provides a framework for understanding Toghu as a form of intangible cultural heritage whose meaning is rooted in communal history, identity, and continuity. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (2003, p. 2). This definition emphasizes that cultural expressions are not isolated symbols but are embedded within specific communities and social practices. Toghu, therefore, extends beyond its material form to include the cultural knowledge, rituals, and social rules that govern its use.

Smith (2006) argues that heritage should be understood as a process rather than an object, noting that it is “a cultural process, engaged with the construction of identity and meaning” (p. 44). From this perspective, Toghu’s significance lies in how it is performed, transmitted, and recognized within Bamenda society. When Toghu appears in film, it is removed from its original cultural setting and recontextualized within cinematic narratives. Cultural heritage theory thus enables critical evaluation of whether such representations preserve cultural meaning or risk reducing heritage to visual ornamentation. Applying this theory allows the study to foreground ethical responsibility, emphasizing that filmmakers act as cultural stewards when representing heritage symbols.

Postcolonial Representation Theory

Postcolonial representation theory examines how historical power relations shape the portrayal of culture and identity. Central to this theory is the argument that representation is not neutral but is influenced by ideological and historical forces. Hall (1997) asserts that representation is “the production of meaning through language” (p. 16) and that meaning is shaped by social power. In cinema, visual language plays a key role in constructing cultural identity, and traditional attire functions as a powerful representational tool.

Edward Said (1978) further argues that representation operates as a form of power, shaping how cultures are seen and understood. In African cinema, traditional symbols often exist within a tension between cultural self-representation and global consumption. Toghu may be used to assert cultural identity, yet it may also be framed in ways that simplify or aestheticize tradition for broader audiences. Postcolonial theory, therefore, allows this study to interrogate whether Toghu is represented as a living and evolving cultural practice or as a static symbol shaped by inherited colonial frameworks. Through this lens, the study examines how power, history, and global visual conventions influence the cinematic portrayal of Toghu.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the symbolic and ethical representation of Toghu attire in selected Cameroonian films. Qualitative methods are appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting cultural meaning, visual symbolism, and ethical implications rather than on quantitative measurement.

A multiple case study design was employed to enable comparative analysis across films. Two Cameroonian films, *GREED* (dir. Ngang Romanus) and *BITTER LESSON* (dir. Keka Tassi Sylvester), were purposively selected for their prominent use of Toghu attire in their narratives. These films provide suitable cases for exploring how

traditional attire functions as a visual and cultural sign in cinematic storytelling.

Data collection involved repeated close viewing of the selected films. Scenes featuring Toghu attire were identified and examined in detail, with attention given to costume design, character association, narrative context, and cinematic framing. Observational notes were systematically recorded to capture patterns in representation.

Data analysis combined thematic analysis with semiotic interpretation. Recurring themes related to authority, morality, tradition, and conflict were identified, while Toghu was analyzed as a visual sign whose meaning is shaped by cultural context and narrative positioning. The analysis was guided by cultural theory, postcolonial theory, and cultural heritage theory, which together provided a framework for interpreting meaning, power relations, and ethical representation.

Although the study did not involve human participants, ethical considerations were central to the research. Toghu was treated as a culturally significant heritage symbol, and interpretations were grounded in existing scholarship to avoid cultural misrepresentation. While limited to two films, the study prioritizes depth of analysis, offering insight into the broader issues surrounding the cinematic use of traditional attire in Cameroonian cinema.

Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a detailed analysis of how Toghu attire is represented in selected Cameroonian films and discusses the implications of these representations for cultural identity and ethical cinematic practice. Drawing on visual observation, semiotic interpretation, and cultural contextualization, the discussion examines the symbolic roles assigned to Toghu attire and evaluates how these roles align with or depart from its traditional cultural meanings.

Toghu and Moral Authority in GREED

In *GREED*, Toghu is mainly used to show moral authority and cultural legitimacy. Characters who wear Toghu are presented as custodians of tradition and are often the ones who warn others or pass judgment. Through costume alone, the film makes it clear who represents cultural values and who does not, even before the characters speak.

Visually, Toghu contrasts sharply with the modern clothing worn by characters motivated by wealth and self-interest. This contrast supports the film's main message, which presents greed as a departure from communal values. Toghu, in this sense, becomes a visual reminder of moral order and social responsibility.

However, the film does not always place Toghu in culturally appropriate situations. In some scenes, it appears outside traditional settings where such attire would normally be worn. When this happens, the cultural weight of Toghu is reduced. Although the film uses Toghu effectively to communicate authority, it sometimes prioritizes storytelling convenience over cultural accuracy. As a result, Toghu risks becoming a shortcut for morality rather than a carefully grounded cultural symbol.

Tradition, Conflict, and Resolution in BITTER LESSON

In *BITTER LESSON*, Toghu appears most clearly during moments of conflict and resolution. It is worn during scenes involving judgment, reconciliation, and moral decision-making. This use closely reflects Toghu's traditional role as a symbol of authority and mediation. The film visually emphasizes Toghu through careful framing and lighting. Scenes involving Toghu-clad characters are often slower and more deliberate, allowing the audience to recognize their importance. This approach gives Toghu a strong symbolic presence and reinforces its cultural significance.

Compared to *GREED*, *BITTER LESSON* shows greater consistency in the use of Toghu. The attire is mostly limited to appropriate settings related

to communal authority. Even so, the film does not explore the deeper meanings of Toghu's patterns, colors, or historical background. Toghu is respected as a symbol, but it is still treated in a general way rather than as a richly layered cultural text.

Toghu Attire as a Visual Marker of Tradition and Authority

Across *GREED* and *BITTER LESSON*, Toghu attire is consistently employed as a visual signifier of tradition and authority. Characters adorned in Toghu are frequently positioned as elders, chiefs, family heads, or figures associated with moral judgment and communal decision-making. In *GREED*, the king and the elders are always in Toghu. Also, in *BITTER LESSON*, Mr. Belabe, who is like the head of the community, is seen putting on a Toghu on several occasions. This pattern reflects Toghu's traditional association with leadership, dignity, and social legitimacy within Bamenda culture (Ndam, 2018). Through costume alone, the films establish power relations and cultural hierarchy, often without the need for explanatory dialogue.

From a semiotic perspective, Toghu functions as a signifier that signifies authority rooted in tradition. The embroidered velvet texture, bold colors, and distinctive motifs immediately communicate cultural status to audiences familiar with Cameroonian cultural symbols. Even for audiences without prior knowledge, Toghu's visual prominence signals importance and seriousness, demonstrating how costume can operate as a narrative shorthand.

However, while this use aligns broadly with traditional symbolism, it also reveals a tendency toward generalization. Toghu is treated as a universal emblem of authority rather than a culturally regulated garment with specific contextual meanings. This suggests that the films rely on established visual associations without engaging fully with the cultural logic behind them.

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Plate 1: Toghu attire worn by Mr Belabe in *BITTER LESSON* and by the Fon and elders in *GREED*.



A



B.

Source: Picture B © Ngang, R. (Director). (2020). Greed [Film]. Cameroon. Available on YouTube.

Picture A © Kake Tassi, S. (Director). (2021). Bitter Lesson [film]. Cameroon. Available on YouTube.

Contextual Displacement and Symbolic Misalignment

A recurring issue across the films is the contextual displacement of Toghu attire. In several scenes, Toghu appears in situations that lack traditional justification, such as informal domestic settings or interactions unrelated to ceremonial or leadership functions. In the film *GREED* by Ngang Romanus, a good example is the scene where the fon's wife is bathing the children while putting on Toghu, and in *BITTER LESSON*, the film starts with a scene where Mr. Belabe and his family are all dressed in Toghu like a royal family, which they are not. This displacement weakens the symbolic coherence of Toghu and raises questions about cultural accuracy.

Within Bamenda culture, Toghu is traditionally worn in specific contexts that affirm its symbolic weight. When the garment is removed from these contexts and inserted into everyday or dramatic contexts, its meaning becomes diluted. Semiotic theory helps explain this process, arguing that when a sign is detached from its cultural code, the relationship between signifier and signified becomes unstable (Barthes, 1977).

Cinematically, this misalignment may not be immediately noticeable to general audiences, but it carries ethical implications. The casual or

excessive use of Toghu risks normalizing symbolic misuse and may contribute to a gradual erosion of its cultural significance. This finding highlights the tension between narrative convenience and cultural responsibility in filmmaking.

Plate 2: Picture A shows Toghu worn by the Queen when bathing the child, while picture B shows Mr. Belabe's family during dinner.



A



B

Source: Picture A © Ngang, R. (Director). (2020). Greed [Film]. Cameroon. Available on YouTube.

Pictures B © Kake Tassi, S. (Director). (2021). Bitter Lesson [film]. Cameroon. Available on YouTube.

Simplification of Toghu's Symbolic Complexity

Although Toghu attire is visually prominent in the films, its symbolic complexity is rarely explored in depth. The films rely heavily on Toghu's surface-level association with tradition, without engaging with the meanings embedded in its motifs, colors, or embroidery. As a result,

Toghu is presented as a static symbol rather than a dynamic cultural text.

This simplification reflects a broader tendency in cinema to prioritize visual clarity over cultural nuance. Toghu becomes a sign of tradition rather than a culturally specific garment with layered meanings. From a cultural heritage perspective, this reduction is problematic because it obscures the knowledge systems and historical narratives encoded in the attire (UNESCO, 2003). A good example of this is the use of Toghu in *BITTER LESSON*, since the film has nothing to do with culture, yet Toghu appears in most scenes. The storyline is about the importance of building an inclusive society where people are judged by their capacities rather than their physical appearance and where everyone has equal rights and opportunities, which has nothing to do with tradition.

The absence of narrative or visual cues that explain Toghu's symbolism suggests a missed opportunity for cultural education. Film, as a powerful medium, can transmit cultural knowledge. By failing to engage with Toghu's symbolic depth, the films limit their role as vehicles of cultural preservation.

Plate 3: Pictures showing Toghu in different scenes of *BITTER LESSON*.



Source: © Kake Tassi, S. (Director). (2021). *Bitter Lesson* [film]. Cameroon. Available on YouTube.

Negotiating Identity Through Costume

Toghu attire also plays a significant role in negotiating identity within the films. Characters wearing Toghu are often positioned in opposition to

those dressed in Western or modern attire, creating a visual contrast between tradition and modernity. This contrast reinforces common binaries in African cinema, where traditional symbols are associated with moral authority and cultural authenticity, while modern dress signifies change or moral ambiguity.

While this binary can be narratively effective, it also risks oversimplifying complex social realities. Bamenda culture, like many African societies, is dynamic and adaptive. By rigidly associating Toghu with tradition and Western dress with modernity, the films may inadvertently reinforce static notions of culture. Postcolonial representation theory helps illuminate this issue, emphasizing that such binaries often reflect lingering colonial frameworks that position tradition and modernity as oppositional rather than interconnected (Hall, 1997).

Nevertheless, Toghu's presence on screen affirms cultural identity and asserts indigenous visibility. The challenge lies in balancing symbolic clarity with cultural complexity.

Ethical Dimensions of Cinematic Representation

The ethical concerns identified in this study do not stem from malicious intent but from symbolic simplification and lack of cultural consultation. Ethical representation, as discussed by Miller (2016), involves more than avoiding offense; it requires informed engagement with cultural symbols and acknowledgment of community ownership.

In the films analyzed, Toghu is treated as a readily available cultural resource rather than a regulated symbol. This approach reflects a broader issue within African cinema, where filmmakers often work under constraints of time, budget, and access to cultural expertise. However, these constraints do not negate the ethical responsibility to represent cultural symbols accurately.

Cultural heritage theory emphasizes that intangible cultural elements

belong to communities and carry collective responsibility. From this perspective, filmmakers act as cultural intermediaries whose creative choices influence how traditions are understood by audiences. Ethical engagement with Toghu therefore requires consultation with cultural custodians, careful contextual placement, and sensitivity to symbolic boundaries.

Film as a Site of Cultural Preservation and Transformation

Despite these challenges, the films also demonstrate the potential of cinema as a site of cultural preservation. By incorporating Toghu attire into their visual narratives, filmmakers contribute to its visibility and relevance in contemporary society. This visibility can inspire cultural pride and encourage intergenerational transmission of heritage.

However, preservation through visibility must be accompanied by accuracy and respect. Cultural heritage is not preserved simply by being seen; it is preserved through meaningful representation. When Toghu is used thoughtfully, film can function as a cultural archive. When used carelessly, it risks contributing to symbolic erosion.

Audience Reception and the Meaning of Traditional Attire

The meaning of traditional clothing in film is not created only by filmmakers or by what appears on screen. It is also shaped by how viewers understand and interpret what they see. Toghu, as a cultural symbol, does not carry the same meaning for all audiences. Its interpretation depends on a viewer's cultural background, level of familiarity with Bamenda traditions, and personal experience with African cultural practices.

For audiences from the Bamenda region and the wider Grassfields area, Toghu holds deep cultural meaning. These viewers often recognize Toghu as a symbol of authority, tradition, and communal responsibility. Because of this familiarity, they are more likely to notice when Toghu is

used in ways that do not match its traditional purpose. When Toghu appears in inappropriate situations, such audiences may see this as a form of misrepresentation or oversimplification of their culture. This shows that local audiences do not simply watch films for entertainment; they actively judge the accuracy of cultural representation.

For non-indigenous Cameroonian audiences and international viewers, Toghu is often understood more broadly. Without detailed cultural knowledge, many viewers interpret Toghu simply as a sign of African tradition or local culture. In such cases, the film becomes a major source of cultural information. This places a strong responsibility on filmmakers, because inaccurate representation can easily shape false or incomplete understandings of a culture.

The spread of Cameroonian films through platforms such as YouTube further affects audience interpretation. These films now reach viewers across Africa and in the diaspora, many of whom encounter Toghu for the first time through cinema. While this increases cultural visibility, it also increases the risk that Toghu's meaning will be simplified or misunderstood. This makes careful and respectful representation even more important.

The findings of this study resonate strongly with the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis. Semiotic theory reveals how Toghu operates as a visual sign whose meaning is shaped by context. Cultural heritage theory highlights the ethical responsibilities associated with representing Toghu as part of communal heritage. Postcolonial representation theory situates these practices within broader power dynamics that influence how African cultures are portrayed. Together, these frameworks illuminate the complex negotiation between artistic expression, cultural identity, and ethical responsibility in Cameroonian cinema.

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The findings of this study underscore the importance of ethical guidelines for the use of traditional attire, such as Toghu, in film. Ethical representation is not only about avoiding offense; it also involves understanding cultural meaning and using symbols responsibly.

- First, Toghu should be used in situations that match its traditional purpose. When it appears in inappropriate contexts, its meaning becomes weaker. Filmmakers need to think carefully about why and when to show Toghu on screen.
- Second, cultural consultation is essential. Working with cultural custodians, historians, or artisans can help filmmakers understand the deeper meanings of Toghu. This improves accuracy and strengthens storytelling.
- Third, filmmakers must recognize that Toghu carries communal meaning. It is not just a costume choice but a cultural symbol that represents a people and their history. Misuse can affect how that culture is perceived.
- Finally, ethical engagement should be seen as a creative advantage. When filmmakers understand cultural symbols deeply, they gain richer narrative possibilities. Responsible representation strengthens both cultural integrity and cinematic quality

In summary, the analysis demonstrates that Toghu attire plays a significant role in constructing meaning and identity in Cameroonian films. While its use often aligns with traditional associations of authority and dignity, symbolic simplification and contextual displacement raise ethical concerns. The study argues that culturally informed and ethically grounded approaches to costume design are essential for preserving the integrity of traditional attire in cinematic storytelling.

This study focuses on only two Cameroon films, *GREED* by Ngang Romanus and *BITTER LESSON* by Keka Tassi Sylvester, which limits the

extent to which the findings can be applied. While these films reflect common trends in Cameroonian cinema, examining more films could provide a broader understanding.

The study is based mainly on visual analysis and does not include interviews with filmmakers or cultural experts. Future studies could strengthen this work by combining visual analysis with direct discussions with those involved in film production. While this study focuses on two films and relies primarily on visual analysis, it provides a foundation for further research incorporating audience reception studies and interviews with filmmakers. The use of online film versions may also limit access to original production details.

Conclusion

Using qualitative visual and semiotic analysis of selected scenes from *GREED* and *BITTER LESSON*, this study examined how Toghu attire functions as a cinematic sign within contemporary Cameroonian film.

The objective was to assess whether cinematic representations align with Toghu's traditional cultural meanings and to evaluate the ethical implications of their use. The findings indicate that while Toghu generally signifies authority and tradition, its symbolic complexity is frequently simplified or displaced from its original cultural context.

This study set out to examine how Toghu attire is represented in selected Cameroonian films and to interrogate the ethical and cultural implications of its use in cinema. By focusing on *GREED* and *BITTER LESSON*, the article positioned Toghu not merely as a costume, but as a culturally embedded symbol whose meanings are negotiated through visual storytelling. The analysis demonstrates that Toghu functions as a significant cinematic sign, conveying authority, morality, and cultural identity with clear visual emphasis. However, this symbolic power is

accompanied by ethical responsibilities that are not always fully acknowledged in film practice.

The findings reveal that Toghu attire is most commonly deployed as a visual shorthand for tradition and authority. Across the films, characters dressed in Toghu are consistently associated with moral judgment, leadership, and communal legitimacy. This aligns broadly with Toghu's traditional cultural meanings within Bamenda society. Yet the study also identifies moments of symbolic simplification and contextual displacement, in which Toghu is used primarily for narrative emphasis rather than cultural accuracy. In such instances, the garment's deeper symbolic layers, its motifs, historical associations, and regulated use are obscured, reducing Toghu to a generalized emblem of tradition.

By integrating semiotic theory, cultural heritage theory, and postcolonial representation theory, the study demonstrates that Toghu's cinematic representation is shaped by intersecting processes of meaning-making, heritage negotiation, and power. Semiotic analysis reveals how Toghu functions as a sign whose meaning shifts according to narrative context. Cultural heritage theory foregrounds the ethical obligation to respect community-owned symbols, while postcolonial theory exposes the lingering influence of representational binaries that frame tradition and modernity as oppositional. Together, these frameworks show that cinematic representations of Toghu are never neutral; they actively construct cultural knowledge and influence audience perception.

Importantly, the study does not argue against the creative use of Toghu in film. Rather, it advocates for culturally informed creativity. The presence of Toghu in contemporary Cameroonian cinema affirms indigenous visibility and contributes to cultural continuity amid rapid globalization. Film offers important platforms for preserving and reimagining cultural symbols, particularly as digital platforms such as YouTube extend the reach of local narratives to global audiences.

However, visibility without contextual integrity risks symbolic erosion. Cultural preservation through film requires not only representation but responsible representation.

The ethical framework proposed in this article underscores the need for contextual integrity, cultural consultation, and symbolic accountability in costume design. Filmmakers, costume designers, and producers must recognize that traditional attire functions simultaneously as a narrative device and a cultural inheritance. Engaging with cultural custodians and grounding costume choices in cultural knowledge can enrich cinematic storytelling while safeguarding cultural meaning.

This study contributes to Cameroonian and African film scholarship by foregrounding costume as a central site of analysis rather than a peripheral aesthetic element. It also extends discussions on ethical representation by situating traditional attire within debates on cultural heritage and postcolonial identity. While the study is limited to two films, its findings point to broader patterns in African cinema that merit further investigation. Future research could explore audience reception of traditional attire in film, comparative studies across regions, or the role of digital distribution in reshaping cultural interpretation.

In a nutshell, Toghu attire in Cameroonian cinema occupies a complex space between tradition and transformation. Its cinematic presence carries the potential to educate, affirm identity, and preserve heritage, but only when accompanied by ethical awareness and cultural sensitivity. By approaching traditional attire as a living cultural text rather than a decorative prop, filmmakers can contribute meaningfully to the preservation and evolution of African cultural expression.

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