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FROM RITUAL TO SCREEN: WESTERN THEATRE MAKE-UP REVOLUTIONS AND AFRICAN INDIGENOUS INNOVATION

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the historical development of theatrical make-up by challenging the dominant linear narrative that frames Western innovation as the universal endpoint of cosmetic progress. Drawing on historical analysis, performance theory, and postcolonial perspectives, it traces how make-up evolved from ritual body transformation practices into a technologically sophisticated component of modern stage and screen production. Highlighting Western theatrical make-up breakthroughs such as the nineteenth-century introduction of greasepaint and the twentieth-century development of camera-ready cosmetic formulations as context-specific responses to changes in lighting, performance aesthetics, and visual recording technologies rather than as markers of global superiority. The study places these developments in dialogue with African indigenous make-up traditions, demonstrating that such systems embody equally complex forms of material knowledge rooted in ritual transformation, ecological awareness, and embodied cognition. Through comparative analysis, the paper argues that Western make-up practices historically prioritised realism, optical control, and psychological legibility, whereas African indigenous practices emphasised visibility, spiritual mediation, and communal identity formation. These differing orientations reveal not a hierarchy of progress but parallel trajectories of innovation shaped by distinct cultural ontologies of the body and performance. By reframing theatrical make-up as a trans-historical technology of identity and embodiment, the paper contributes to contemporary debates in theatre studies, performance anthropology, and cultural production. It further proposes that the future of global make-up industries particularly within rapidly expanding film sectors such as Nollywood and Ghallywood depends on integrating indigenous materials and knowledge systems with modern production technologies.

Such integration offers pathways toward sustainable, culturally grounded, and economically viable cosmetic innovation beyond Eurocentric models.

Keywords: *theatrical make-up, western theatre, African theatre, indigenous make-up innovation, cosmetic revolution, performance studies.*

1. Introduction

The history of theatrical make-up is often narrated through a linear Eurocentric trajectory that begins with ritual disguise, matures through Western stagecraft, and culminates in cinematic realism. Such accounts privilege technological refinement and visual naturalism while marginalising non-Western practices as antecedent, symbolic, or pre-theoretical. Yet the persistent uncertainty surrounding the origins of make-up complicates this narrative. Despite sustained inquiry by historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and theatre scholars, the genesis of body adornment remains a speculative and contested field (Brain 1979; Eicher, 1970; Groning 1997; Joyce 2024; Lyndersay, 2010; Murray, 1935; Negri, 1976). This indeterminacy suggests that make-up does not originate from a singular historical moment but from a fundamental human drive toward identity modulation, understood as the intentional transformation of body appearance to negotiate selfhood, power, and cosmological relation across ritual, theatrical, and mediated contexts.

Across cultures and epochs, human societies have consistently altered the body through pigments, oils, clays, powders, scarification, and tattooing, using materials such as camwood, kaolin clay, charcoal, chalk, and vegetal dyes (Langley, 2024; Lyndersay, 2010;). These practices predate institutional theatre and persist well beyond it, indicating that make-up is not merely an accessory to performance but one of its earliest material conditions. The body surface functions as a communicative medium through which cultural values, social hierarchies, and spiritual affiliations are rendered visible. From ritual enactments to contemporary screen performance theories, make-up operates as a technology of appearance through which identity is not only represented but materially produced and cognitively inhabited.

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides a critical foundation for understanding the highlighted ideological standpoint. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) conceptualised social interaction as performance, in which individuals manage impressions through appearance, gesture, and setting. Within this framework, the body becomes an expressive surface that mediates between performer and audience. Make-up, whether ritualistic, theatrical, or cinematic, functions as part of this expressive equipment, shaping how identities are stabilised, amplified, or contested. Later theorists of embodiment and performance have extended Goffman's insights by emphasising that physical appearance does not simply communicate identity but actively structures social reality and embodied subjectivity (Entwistle, 2015; Turner, 2012;).

When read alongside the theory of enclothed cognition, the material force of make-up becomes even more pronounced. Adam and Galinsky (2012) demonstrated that what individuals wear exerts a measurable influence on cognitive processes, emotional states, and behavior. Although initially articulated in relation to clothing, enclothed cognition can be extended to pigments and cosmetic substances applied directly to the skin. In ritual and theatrical contexts, make-up reshapes not only how the performer is seen but how the performer experiences the body. Through repeated material engagement, pigment and pattern become integrated into body schemas, recalibrating posture, affect, and agency. This dynamic is central to understanding the transition from ritual performance to Western stage realism and, later, to screen acting, where make-up increasingly mediates between corporeal presence and visual representation.

Western theatre history often frames make-up revolutions as responses to changing aesthetic regimes. From the exaggerated masks and painted faces of classical and medieval theatre to the development of greasepaint in the nineteenth century and the subtle tonal modulation required by film and digital screens, Western make-up practices are typically discussed in terms of technological adaptation and representational fidelity. These developments, while significant, are frequently detached from their deeper anthropological roots in ritual transformation and embodied cognition. As a result, Western theatrical make-up is positioned as progressive innovation, while indigenous practices are relegated to symbolic origin stories.

African indigenous make-up traditions fundamentally challenge this hierarchy. Far from being primitive or static, these practices constitute sophisticated systems of material knowledge grounded in cosmology, ecology, and social organisation. Substances such as camwood, kaolin clay, charcoal, and chalk are selected for their visual, medicinal, and metaphysical properties and are deployed within tightly regulated aesthetic and ritual frameworks (Bollig, 2013; Eicher & Erekosima, 2010;). In many African performance contexts, make-up functions as a spiritual technology that mediates relationships between the human and non-human worlds. The painted body operates as a liminal site where ancestry, communal memory, and cosmological order are activated through material inscription.

Masks, body paint, and adornments in African ritual performances are deeply embedded in spiritual and social frameworks, connecting the living with ancestors and reinforcing community cohesion. They serve as symbolic mediators of identity, social order, fertility, and collective harmony (Van Beek & Leyten, 2023). These functions position the adorned body as an active participant in cosmic negotiation rather than a passive representational surface. From a post-colonial perspective, such practices must be understood as epistemologically generative, offering alternative models of embodiment that resist Western binaries between illusion and reality, actor and role, surface and depth. Recent decolonial scholarship in theatre studies emphasises that African performance traditions theorise the body as a communicative art in which material transformation is inseparable from social and spiritual agency (Balme, 2019; Plastow, 2020).

Historical accounts of early human performance further complicate distinctions between ritual and theatre. Robert (1974); Buckner (2021) note that early humans disguised themselves to resemble animals or adversaries during hunting practices, not merely as camouflage but as a means of assuming alternate identities. (Brain 1979; d'Errico, Nowell, & Macdonald, 2023) similarly described how painting, tattooing, and scarification facilitated both physical and

psychological transformation. These practices underscore that make-up has always functioned as a technology of becoming, enabling humans to exceed biological limitation through intentional self-fashioning. This logic persists across the evolution of performance, from ritual enactment to stage representation and screen realism.

In contemporary performance cultures, including film and digital media, make-up continues to operate as a powerful non-verbal system that structures perception, credibility, and emotional resonance. As Ani and Ayaoha (2012) argued, make-up functions as a symbolic medium through which identities are constructed, revised, and maintained within social space. The difference lies not in function but in epistemic framing. While Western screen make-up often prioritises invisibility and naturalism, African indigenous make-up foregrounds visibility, transformation, and relational meaning. Both systems innovate, but they innovate according to different ontological assumptions about what the body is and what it can do.

This study argues that the movement from ritual to screen should not be read as a unidirectional evolution culminating in Western theatrical and cinematic practice. Rather, it should be understood as a field of parallel and intersecting innovations, in which African indigenous make-up traditions constitute autonomous sites of theory-making and technological intelligence. By situating Western make-up revolutions alongside African indigenous innovation through the compass of post-colonial theory and enclothed cognition, this paper reframes theatrical make-up as a trans-historical practice that continually negotiates identity, embodiment, and visual power across ritual, stage, and screen.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. The Concept of Theatre Make-up

Drawing from the preceding analogies on the notion of make-up in the human society, it can be rightly submitted that indigenous theatrical make-up just like other societal make-up is an integral platform of human communication. This submission is based on its close affinity with the people's way of life and their cosmology that cannot be over-emphasised. Regardless of their concordance however, the utility of make-up within the theatrical parlance transcends how they are observed in the society. That is why Bucham (1989); Maliarchuk (2024) asserted that they are the vital link between the actors and the audience. This is because the conception and application of make-up in modern theatre is not essentially predicated on the foundation of culture alone, but more importantly on the dictates of the play-text which is based on the message being communicated, the physiognomic features of the actors, directorial interpretation, production style, harmonious collaboration of other visual designers and the audience to whom the message is transmitted. Corson, Norcross, and Glavan (2009) adduced that through make-up:

> The performer must visually convey the image the author originally conceived when creating the character. This is only possible when the performer, like the author, has a clear and informed mental picture of the role. Achieving this requires a practical understanding of facial bone structure, muscular movement, and the effective use of tone and colour, all of which contribute to truthful and expressive character representation on stage. (p.17)

With the already painted scenario, it is important to say that, make-up art has been given a pride of place in the theatre. It is strategically positioned and magnified as crucial element of stage craft that cannot be totally jettisoned in most theatrical experiences. Hence, it is perceived in the variety of cosmetics materials and appliances designed for and applied by actors to effectively and convincingly modify their heads, faces and other parts of their exposed bodies in the portrayal of their character's identity, mood, status, health, race and aesthetic effect to the audience. To this end, Gaffar (2008) concluded that, theatre make-up is an art form that is different in manner, matter, and motive from real life make-up. According to him, real life makeup merely glamorise his wearer by lending the hair, face, and body a new grace and charm, while theatre makeup is specifically designed for actors' characterisation.

2.2 Historical Survey of Make-Up Art in Western Theatre

The origins of Western theatre have long been traced by nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists to the mythic and ritual performances of the Dionysian festivals in Classical Greece. These festivals integrated chant, dance, costume, and body transformation as mechanisms for engaging supernatural forces and communal memory (Brockett, 2008; Carlson, 2022; Wiles, 2014;). Within these ritual narratives, the body was already understood as a site of symbolic inscription. Yet, despite the centrality of embodiment, Classical Greek theatre did not cultivate a robust tradition of facial make-up in the modern sense. Instead, character delineation relied heavily on the mask, which functioned as both a visual amplifier and an acoustic device within vast open-air amphitheaters.

The dominance of the mask profoundly shaped the relationship between the actor and the face. This was because a single performer often played multiple depicting various genders, identity transformation was achieved through rapid mask changes rather than cosmetic manipulation of the skin. Although historical accounts indicate that Greek women employed substances such as lead-based whites, berry pigments, and reddish powders for beautification in everyday life, these materials were only minimally incorporated into theatrical performance (Robert, 1974; Kaplan, 2022). When make-up appeared, it did so in service of the mask rather than as an independent expressive medium. The face beneath the mask remained largely irrelevant to the audience, reinforcing what Wiles (2014) identified as an externalised performance ontology in which identity resided in form rather than psychology.

Nevertheless, traces of facial modification persisted. Robert (1974) documented instances in which characters re-entered performance spaces with altered appearances, such as Helen’s pallor in Euripides or Oedipus’s blood-smeared face in Sophocles. These moments suggest that even within primary mask-based performance systems, body alteration retained narrative and affective significance. The painted or marked face operated as a signal of psychic rupture, suffering, or transformation. Yet materially, such applications were from toxic mixtures because they relied on heavy, mineral-based substances such as lead and red mercuric sulphide (cinnabar) that hardened upon the skin, producing a sensation closer to encasement than expression. The actor’s face was burdened rather than liberated by cosmetic intervention, a condition that scholars of embodiment now associate with pre-modern performance regimes that prioritised signification over sensation (Turner, 2012; Xiong et al., 2024).

Roman theatre inherited and intensified this approach. Although Roman performers adopted masks from Greek, Etruscan, and Southern Italian traditions, they demonstrated little interest in cultivating moderate make-up materials for actors’ facial expressions. Make-up remained

thick, opaque, and often toxic, composed largely of lead whites and carbon blacks (Hamilton, 2011). The physical sensation of these materials was substantial. The painted face was stiff and resistant to muscular articulation, effectively immobilising the lower face. Performance aesthetics favored spectacle, declamation, and visual excess over interior psychological nuance. In this context, make-up functioned less as a means of embodiment than as a form of visual armor, reaffirming what Carlson (2018) described as the Roman emphasis on performative display rather than character impersonation.

During the medieval period, theatrical make-up was absorbed into religious performance practices. In mystery and morality plays, facial coloration served moral and cosmological symbolism rather than character psychology. Actors portraying God or Christ often painted their faces in white or gold, while angels appeared in vivid reds and devils in darkened soot or grotesque coloration (Westlake, 2017).The Church's ambivalent stance toward cosmetics, often condemning them as immoral or deceptive, further restricted the development of make-up as an expressive craft. Yet, performers continued to endure abrasive mixtures of fats, powders, and pigments that clung heavily to the skin. Recent performance historiography has emphasised that this physical discomfort was not incidental but structurally aligned with medieval conceptions of sacrifice and penitence (Schechner, 2013). This indicated that make-up was something the body suffered rather than something it inhabited.

The Renaissance period marked a decisive shift in Western attitudes toward the body, visibility, and artistic innovation. Changes in political structure, urban culture, and visual art revitalised cosmetic practices, particularly among the elite. Pale skin became a marker of nobility and moral refinement, prompting widespread use of lead-based white paint, as famously documented in portraits of Queen Elizabeth I (Johnson, 2025). This aesthetics migrated into theatrical performances, where actors powdered their faces with chalk or flour and darkened skin with soot or cork to signify race and social difference, practices that contemporary scholars now read through the lens of early racialisation and visual politics (Smith, 2019).

Importantly, performances in Renaissance theatre were mostly performed indoors under candlelight and later gaslight. These lighting transition conditions demanded exaggerated facial contrasts to ensure visibility. Heavy make-up was not simply stylistic excess but a technical necessity. Under flickering flame, subtle coloration disappeared, forcing actors to apply pigments in thick layers. The face became a high-contrast surface, readable but rigid. The physical sensation of these materials was oppressive. Lead paint tightened on the skin, cracked with movement, and produced a mask-like immobility that shaped acting styles. Gesture and voice compensated for the face's limited mobility, reinforcing rhetorical and presentational modes of performance (Fischer-Lichte, 2014).

The true revolution in Western theatrical make-up emerged in the late nineteenth century with the transformation of stage lighting technologies. As Suramayeva (2025) highligted, the transition from gaslight to electric illumination introduced unprecedented brightness, consistency, and spectral clarity, exposing the artificiality of traditional powders and mineral-based paints. Under electric light, these materials appeared excessively reflective and grotesque, while the heat generated by lighting equipment caused heavy make-up to melt, streak, or pool, disrupting performance continuity and prompting the necessity for new more adaptable cosmetic materials.

Interestingly, this technological shift coincided with the rise of naturalism and psychological realism in theatre. Playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen helped establish modern theatrical realism with performances grounded in internalisation, psychological depth, and social plausibility, reshaping how character and everyday life are portrayed on stage and influenced by both acting practice and audience engagement (Miller, 2021). To this end, the actor's face could no longer function as a rigid surface of signs. It needed to breathe, move, and respond to internal psychological states. The old make-up materials were incompatible with this new performative demand. A crisis of embodiment emerged in which make-up, rather than supporting performance, actively impeded it. Contemporary theatre scholars identify this moment as the birth of modern actor's self-consciousness, where material constraints directly shaped acting psychology (Zarrilli, 2015).

The introduction of greasepaint by Ludwig Leichner in the 1860s constituted a great breakthrough and solution to this crisis. Unlike the earlier cosmetics, greasepaint was formulated to soften at body temperature, allowing it to blend with the skin rather than sit atop it (Groning, 1998). Actors described the sensation as transformative. The face no longer felt sealed or burdened. Instead, it became supple, responsive, and expressive. Greasepaint moved with facial muscles, enabling subtle emotional articulation under intense stage lighting. This material innovation facilitated a profound psychological shift. The actor's relationship to make-up changed from endurance to collaboration, reinforcing what Zarrilli (2015) terms psychophysical integration in performance. However, the transition from stage to screen technology revealed the defects in grease paint. Early film shoot, particularly under evolving lighting regimes, rendered stage make-up with grease ineffective because heavy grease paint resulted in exaggerated features and appeared unnatural in close-ups which undermined realism.

Unexpectedly, the development of panchromatic film, which captured a broader spectrum of light, further exposed the inadequacy of grease paint and other existing stage cosmetics at that time. Every pore, crease, and tonal inconsistency became visible, creating what film scholars identify as a new regime of facial surveillance (Brown, 2016; Everton, 1974).Fortunately, Max Factor's development of pancake make-up in the early twentieth century represented a second major revolution in the makeup industry. Designed specifically for motion pictures, pancake make-up was lightweight, matte, and absorptive, reducing glare under intense studio lighting (Basten, 2008). Actors reported a radically different make-up application experience on their bodies. The material felt dry, breathable, and almost imperceptible. Unlike earlier products, pancake make-up did not announce its presence through weight or heat. This sensory invisibility aligned with the emerging psychology of screen acting, which required restraint, intimacy, and emotional internalisation (Brown, 2016).

By the mid-twentieth century, Western theatrical and cinematic make-up had become a specialised discipline grounded in chemistry, optics, and physiology. However, these revolutions were culturally specific responses to technological conditions rather than universal advancements. The Western pursuit of naturalism privileged certain bodies, skin tones, and aesthetic norms while marginalising others. This historical perspective sets the stage for a critical comparison with African indigenous make-up systems, which developed parallel innovations rooted not in concealment or illusion but in visibility, ritual potency, and material presence.

2.3 African Indigenous Make-up Innovation

African indigenous theatrical make-up practices have long been misconstrued within Western historiography as residual traditions that precede, but do not meaningfully contribute to, modern performance innovation. Such assumptions emerge from a direct model of theatrical progress that privileges technological uniqueness over epistemological diversity. When examined on their own terms, African cosmetic systems reveal a complex material intelligence grounded in ritual efficacy, environmental knowledge, and embodied cognition. These practices do not aim primarily at character illusion, as in Western naturalist theatre, but at ontological transformation, whereby the performer enters a reconfigured state of being. In many African performance cultures, ritual and theatre are not discrete categories but overlapping modalities of social action. Make-up functions as a transformative technology that mediates between the visible and invisible worlds, activating ancestral presence, spiritual authority, and communal memory (Ezeajugh, 2006; Schechner, 2013).

The performer's body is not merely decorated but reconfigured as a site of transmission. Facial and body markings establish thresholds through which performers pass, marking transitions from ordinary social identity into ritual codification. This logic stands in sharp contrast to Western theatrical make-up, which since the rise of realism has emphasised characterisation and psychological plausibility. Western make-up seeks to stabilise identity, rendering the performer believable within a fictional narrative frame. African indigenous make-up destabilises identity, suspending the everyday self in favour of a collective, ancestral, or cosmological role. The performer does not simulate transformation but undergoes it. This distinction is not expository but material. The substances used the methods of application, and the sensory experience of wearing the make-up all contribute to the altered state of performance.

Indigenous materials such as camwood, kaolin clay, charcoal, chalk, and vegetal dyes are selected not only for their chromatic properties but for their symbolic, medicinal, and tactile qualities (Bollig, 2013). Camwood, for example, is associated with vitality, beauty, and spiritual protection in many West African cultures. When applied to the skin, it produces a cooling sensation that performers describe as calming and centering, reinforcing ritual readiness. Kaolin clay, often used in ancestral masquerade traditions, carries connotations of purity and sacredness. Its matte texture absorbs sweat and heat, allowing performers to sustain extended ritual movement without discomfort. These material choices demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of what contemporary scholars described as embodied cognition. The theory of enclothed cognition posits that what is worn on the body influences psychological states and behavioral outcomes by activating symbolic meaning and sensory feedback (Adam & Galinsky, 2012).

African indigenous make-up practices apply this principle through generations of empirical experimentation. The performer's cognitive orientation is shaped by the weight, temperature, texture, and smell of the applied substances. Transformation begins at the level of sensation. One of the most intellectually rich examples of indigenous innovation is the uli tradition of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. Uli is a system of linear, abstract body and wall painting executed with plant-based dyes. Far from being merely decorative, uli operates as a non-verbal communicative system encoding gender roles, social status, ritual timing, and moral values (Ani & Ayaoha, 2012). When applied to the body in performance contexts, uli transforms the

performer into a legible cultural text. Meaning emerges through line, spacing, and movement rather than representational imagery. Importantly, uli is ephemeral. The dye fades gradually, often within days.

This temporality is central to its aesthetic logic. The fading mark mirrors the transitional nature of ritual states and resists the Western impulse to fix identity in permanent visual form. Contemporary African performance scholars argue that this ephemerality should be understood as an innovation that privileges process over product and becoming over representation. Henna practices across North and parts of West Africa offer a parallel system of material intelligence. Henna designs function simultaneously as adornment, ritual protection, and social inscription. Patterns applied to hands, and feets are not arbitrary but correspond to culturally specific understandings of gesture, visibility, and body communication ((Eicher & Erekosima, 2010). In performance contexts, henna enhances the expressive capacity of the body by emphasising movement and rhythm. The slow oxidation of the dye on the skin allows transformation to unfold over time, aligning body appearance with celebrations and ritual duration.

Essentially, these indigenous systems are not frozen in precolonial time. Contemporary African theatre practitioners continue to adapt ritual-based make-up practices to urban stages, experimental performance, and screen media. Natural pigments are combined with modern lighting technologies, while traditional motifs are re-imagined to address postcolonial identity, gender politics, and ecological crisis (Adeyemi, 2021; Plastow, 2020). Innovation here operates through continuity rather than rupture. From a sustainability perspective, African indigenous make-up practices offer viable alternatives to chemically intensive Western cosmetics. Many contemporary theatrical products rely on carcinogenic compounds that are environmentally damaging and dermatologically aggressive. Indigenous materials, by contrast, are biodegradable, locally sourced, and culturally embedded. Their use sustains ecological knowledge systems while resisting global cosmetic homogenisation (Adeyemi, 2021; Bollig, 2013). In an era of increasing concern about environmental ethics in performance production, these practices represent forward-looking innovation rather than nostalgic return.

Postcolonial theory further clarifies the stakes of this comparison. To frame African indigenous make-up as tradition alone is to rein-enforce colonial hierarchies that equate innovation with Western technological advancement. Scholars such as (Fasiku & Stephen 2025; Mbembe, 2017) argue that African cultural practices must be understood as sites of ongoing theoretical production rather than static heritage. Indigenous make-up systems exemplify this dynamic, alternative models of embodiment, visibility, and material agency that challenge the dominance of Western naturalism.

Within the broader argument of this paper, African indigenous innovation does not function as an ethnographic supplement to Western theatrical history. It constitutes a parallel genealogy of performance knowledge that complicates linear narratives of progress. When placed in dialogue with Western make-up revolutions, these practices reveal that theatrical innovation can emerge from ritual necessity, ecological alignment, and embodied intelligence as much as from laboratory chemistry and optical science.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historical–comparative research design to examine the evolution of theatrical make-up as a material and cultural practice across Western and African

performance traditions. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on theatre history, performance studies, anthropology, and postcolonial theory to analyse make-up as a technology of embodiment and communication rather than merely a cosmetic craft. Data were derived from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, theatre history texts, ethnographic studies, and documented analyses of ritual and theatrical performance practices. These materials were selected based on their relevance to theatrical make-up, cultural performance, and technological change in stage and screen production contexts.

The analysis employed thematic and interpretive methods, guided by three analytical perspectives: (1) historical materiality, to examine how technological developments such as lighting and film influenced cosmetic innovation; (2) embodied cognition, to explore how the sensory qualities of make-up shape performer experience and identity transformation; and (3) postcolonial comparative analysis, to evaluate Western and African make-up systems as parallel traditions of innovation rather than hierarchical stages of development. The study is delimited to theatrical and performance-related make-up practices within Western and African contexts, particularly in the transition from ritual performance to stage and screen media. Scholarly rigor was ensured through critical source evaluation and conceptual triangulation across disciplines to support the reliability and coherence of the analysis.

4. Discussion: From Ritual to Screen

The historical movement from ritual performance to screen based representation marks one of the most significant ideological shifts in global performance practice. In Western theatrical history, this transition was driven largely by technological mediation. Innovations in lighting systems, optical recording devices, and cosmetic chemistry collectively reshaped how the human face was perceived, evaluated, and disciplined. By contrast, African and other non Western performance traditions maintained a ritual orientation in which the body remained a site of metamorphosis rather than representation. A comparative analysis of these trends reveals divergent assumptions about visibility, imperfection, and the purpose of body make-up itself.

In Western screen culture, the rise of photography, cinema, and later digital media intensified scrutiny of the human face. As recording technologies increased in precision, cosmetic imperfections, such as uneven texture, reflective oils, and pigment inconsistencies, became visually disruptive under high definition and panchromatic sensors. This technical demand for flawless skin coincided with a broader Western aesthetic ideology of naturalism, one that frequently equates authenticity with visual invisibility. In this context, make-up was paradoxically expected to disappear while simultaneously perfecting the face, reflecting a deeper cultural investment in seamless representation (Ellis & Paterson, 2021).

This paradox produced a new discipline of cosmetic control. Screen make up shifted from theatrical exaggeration toward micro calibrated concealment. Products were engineered to absorb light, blur pores, and neutralise tonal variation so that the actor's face became a high resolution surface subject to continuous correction. Psychologically, this intensified the performer's self surveillance. The camera's proximity collapsed the distance between performer and spectator, rendering the smallest involuntary facial movement narratively significant. In this context, the body was no longer primarily transformed into a character but disciplined into legibility and standardised visual coherence (Marks, 2022).

Under this visual representation, imperfection became a problem to be erased rather than a sign of presence. The Western screen aesthetic privileges faces that appear unmarked by labor, ritual, or environment, and this aesthetic standard has marginalised bodies that do not conform to Eurocentric norms of skin tone, texture, and reflectivity. Scholars in performance and cultural studies argue that such processes are not neutral technical norms but mechanisms that embed racialised hierarchies into the technologies and aesthetics of representation, re-inscribing inequalities in visual media and performance.

By contrast, African indigenous and many other non Western performance traditions operate within a ritual epistemology that embraces exaggeration, abstraction, and material visibility. In these systems, make-up does not conceal the performer's body but amplifies its symbolic charge. The performer does not attempt to appear natural but to become other. Masks, pigments, and markings function as agents of transformation rather than tools of illusion. Traditional African masks, body paints, and masquerade adornments are used to represent spirits, ancestors, or cosmological forces, and their visibility, far from diminishing meaning, is a core mechanism of transformation within community performance practices.

In ritual performance, the face is not a site of individual psychology but a link between worlds. Make-up signals the performer's withdrawal from everyday identity and entry into a cosmological role. Imperfection, asymmetry, and material thickness are not flaws but indicators of potency and communal resonance. The visibility of the substance itself matters. Clay cracking on the skin, pigment running with sweat, and textured designs stand as embodied signs of ritual labor and corporeal investment, signals of experience, participation, and embodied commitment rather than attempts at visual erasure (Nzegwu, 2023; Ukadike & Ogunleye, 2022).

This distinction becomes especially clear when comparing screen acting with ritual embodiment. Western screen performance often emphasises internalisation: emotional truth is conveyed through micro expressions and restrained movement, where subtle shifts in facial expression are indexed as markers of psychological depth. African ritual performance, by contrast, emphasises externalisation: meaning is generated through rhythm, repetition, bold visual elements, and symbolic saturation. The performer's body becomes an archive of communal knowledge, a field of visible signs and shared cultural references rather than a vessel for individual internalisation alone.

Yet these traditions are not mutually exclusive. Contemporary African practitioners increasingly navigate hybrid performance spaces that include theatre buildings, film sets, and digital platforms. The challenge lies in adapting indigenous material practices to technologies that were not originally designed to accommodate them. Natural pigments or textured surfaces may reflect light unpredictably or register as visual noise on camera. However, these challenges also create opportunities for innovation and creative adaptation (Gibson & Omoera, 2024; Okome, 2022)..

Rather than adopting Western cosmetic products wholesale, African practitioners can emulate the Western creative drive for technological adaptation while maintaining indigenous material integrity. This involves rethinking lighting design, camera calibration, and post production processes to accommodate non Western aesthetics. It also requires recognising ritual make-up

systems as forms of applied knowledge, practices rooted in specific cultural practices and embodied histories, rather than symbolic residue of an earlier era. Recent work on indigenous makeup practices and performance materials highlights how such systems function as living, evolving technologies of expression and identity rather than static relics in some African film industries such as Nollywood and Ghallywood (Okome, 2022; Ukadike & Ogunleye, 2022).

Emerging interdisciplinary research in performance ecology and sustainable scenography supports this approach. Scholars now argue that performance technologies must adapt to cultural materials and aesthetic sensibilities instead of forcing materials to conform to dominant visual regimes. In this framework, African indigenous make up practices are reframed not as nostalgic alternatives but as forward looking models for ethical, sustainable, and culturally grounded performance production that resists homogenising impulses in global media.

The comparative movement from ritual to screen is therefore not a unidirectional narrative of progress but a contested field of aesthetic negotiation. By placing Western screen naturalism and African ritual metamorphosis in dialogue, this study reveals that the future of theatrical make-up lies not in convergence toward a single aesthetic but in the cultivation of plural material futures, where diverse material practices and visual aesthetics can coexist, challenge, and enrich global performance cultures.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to interrogate the historical and cultural trajectories of theatrical make-up from ritual origins to screen-based revolutions, with particular attention to Western technological innovation and African indigenous material intelligence. Rather than framing these progression as sequential stages in a universal history, the analysis has demonstrated that they represent parallel systems of knowledge shaped by distinct ontologies of the body, visibility, and performance. Western theatrical make-up evolved in response to technological pressures. Shifts from candlelight to electric illumination, from stage to screen, and from analog to digital imaging forced continuous realignment of cosmetic materials. These revolutions prioritised optical control, realism, and psychological legibility. The face became a surface to be perfected, managed, and rendered invisible in its labor. Innovation was measured by chemical refinement and technological compatibility.

African indigenous make-up systems followed a different logic. Rooted in ritual transformation, ecological knowledge, and embodied cognition, these practices foreground material presence rather than concealment. Pigments, clays, and dyes operate as active agents that shape aestetics experience, social meaning, and spiritual efficacy. Innovation occurs through continuity, adaptation, and environmental attunement rather than technological rupture. The future of theatrical make-up lies in global hybridity. As performance increasingly circulates across cultural and technological boundaries, practitioners must negotiate multiple aesthetic regimes simultaneously. Hybridity does not imply homogenisation. It demands critical selectivity. Western practitioners can learn from indigenous material ethics, sustainability, and embodiment. African practitioners can appropriate technological tools without abandoning ritual epistemologies.

Such integration requires a shift in scholarly and industrial frameworks. Make-up must be understood not merely as a cosmetic craft but as a material philosophy of performance. Training institutions, production houses, and research agendas must expand their epistemic horizons to include non-Western systems as sources of innovation rather than objects of preservation. In an era marked by ecological crisis, digital saturation, and renewed debates about identity and representation, indigenous make-up practices offer urgent lessons. They remind us that performance begins not with the camera or the mirror but with the body as a communicative art. the future of theatrical make-up will not be defined solely by chemistry or technology but by the ethical and cultural intelligence with which materials are chosen, applied, and understood. From ritual to screen, the face remains a site of becoming. The challenge ahead is to ensure that this becoming is plural, sustainable, and grounded in the full diversity of human performance knowledge.

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