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## THE DESIGN OF CHARACTERS IN *TINGA TINGA TALES*: A KENYAN ANIMATION FILM

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of character design in the Kenyan animation industry. The study specifically focused on the use of character design to convey meaning in the animation series *Tinga Tinga Tales*.

**Research methodology:** The study used a qualitative methodology. The data was gathered through observation of six selected episodes of the animation series. The researcher watched the episodes and took notes on how the characters were developed using different techniques of shape and color.

**Findings of the study:** The study found that the characters in *Tinga Tinga Tales* were designed to be simple and memorable. The characters were also designed to be representative of the African culture. The study found that the use of shape and color was an important way to convey meaning in the animation series. For example, the use of bright colors was used to create a sense of joy and excitement, while the use of dark colors was used to create a sense of mystery or danger.

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that character design is an important tool for conveying meaning in animation. The study also found that the use of shape and color is an important way to create visually appealing and memorable characters.

Keywords: *Design, Characters, Tinga Tinga Tales, Animation Film, Kenya*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A lot of scholars have researched on the subject of how an individual is perceived based on their visual clues, which in turn defines character design for animation films. Asch (1946) researched on how the impression of a human being and their personality traits are influenced by previous imprints of their physical appearance. This is coupled by the Karen K Dion, Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Walster in, 'What is Beautiful is Good' (1972), where they interrogated how physical appeal affects the brands of a person's personality traits. The conclusion was that physically attractive individuals are assigned more favourable qualities, traits and success. This analogy informs this paper in the bid to understand how characters have been designed in *Tinga Tinga Tales*.

## **CHARACTER DESIGN**

Character Designer David Colman discusses the 'who' Vis a Vis the 'what' in his animation tutorial '*The Art of Character Design Vol. 1*'. He says that the character designer's focus should not be only on what the character is, nor should they just focus on who the character is. Achieving a balance between the two is very key. This gives the viewer a wide understanding of the character. Collins, D., Jordan, C., & Coleman, H. (2010) proffer that facial expressions are secondary to body expressions and should be used to re-enforce what is happening to the rest of the body. Solarski (2012) further says that the design of the body and how a character carries their physical weight will distinguish them as individuals as well as adding to their personality. The antiquity of character design goes back to the commencement of storytelling. Individually, a story had a lone or many characters.

However, their display was not necessarily visual illustrations. Every character had its traits and detailed descriptions of its appearance (Hedgpeth, 2006). The audience would use their imagination to envisage these characters. With the advent of film, storytelling took a new route that required major alterations in character design. As a story unfolds, the traits of every character are further revealed. The character is shown from different perspectives, emotions and angles. The audience therefore understands the character in different scenarios, forming a strong intimacy (Su, 2012). This argument is further compounded by George (1996) who says that with a great detail

being served, imagination aspects are lessened. Instead, the analytical skills are triggered and it focuses on how the characters play their roles to the audience's anticipations.

Eric (2008) argues that the believability of a character is highly dependent on the success of the character design. Sometimes this might not be achieved due to a disagreeable design, variation of the character's physique in different scenes and inconsistency of the characters traits as the story unfolds. Character design therefore is creating someone or something that, taken in the setting of its surroundings, will elicit a credence, response, or expectation from the audience concerning its physicality, character and its personality (Gil, 2009). This process involves many steps that end in a visual creation that is easily identifiable by the audience.

There are many resources for studying character design. Some focus more on the visuals and the art of drawing. Some discuss more in depth both the visuals and personality of the character and how it should be in the context of the story. Whatever angle one chooses to undertake the study, it is important to note that through character design, the corporeal and the psychological aspects are presented, providing the character with depth and the ability to connect with the audience. To achieve this, the designer has to do more than just draw an attractive image. Bryan (2011) confers that the amalgamation of story, narrative aspects, shapes, and aesthetics constitute a good character design. This combination provides the created character not only with a good look but more importantly it gives the character life so as to convince the audience.

Kenyan animators have in some way adhered to a systematic way of designing their characters based on a specific production channel. This therefore means that the industry is aware that the creation of characters is not merely a drawing exercise but rather it is a way of assembling the vehicles that carry the message. When analyzing character, one should consider the character's material composition (signifier) and the information that the character is carrying (the signified) (Bryan, 2011). In order to convey the information that the animated film is supposed to provide, the key is harboured in the character's design. Therefore, how the designer will portray and deliver the message through the character is based on their understanding and array of the shape of the characters, the colour, which creates the expressional language of 'painting' the character and the facial expression and dynamics that create the expressional language of moving.

## SYMBOLIC CONSTITUENT OF 'PAINTING CHARACTERS'

Painting characters is mainly exemplified in the shape and colour the characters have/acquire. The combination of these elements elicits a feature that portrays the characters as having the representative features. A designer's major problem in the expressive need of character design is to use shapes that have accurate meaning to a character. This is achieved through the different applications of proportion, position and the configuration (Wade, 2011). For every chosen combination, different meaning will be achieved. To further understand and explore this, a character's constituents will be divided into head and body. The symbolic features will then be discussed and analyzed as per the varying personalities.

### Shaping the head

Shaping of the head is key in reflecting the personality of the character. This is because it can reflect the character's age and facial expression, a feature that differentiates one character from the other (Gil, 2009). It also helps portray the character's emotions, mood and psychological situation. For this reason, the research will look at the various shapes that form the head and their symbolic features created by the varying combinations of these shapes.

### Round

A round shape is a faultless graph that has the most tranquil manifestation, giving the audience a feeling of light, smooth and a friendly feeling (Shi, 2008). The round shape is common in character design of 2D animation. As is seen in the animation, *Mickey Mouse*, the head modelling is done with two ears at the top of the head, with an enlarged size. This aids in having a flawless transition from the larger round of the facial features and outline to the small round dots of the eyes and the nose. Comparing the above discussion with *Tinga Tinga Tales*, the character designer has used round shape in the character design process in the selected episodes. This appears mostly in the eyes. As much as the character designer is using natural reference, the use of the circles goes beyond this. The round eyes are a portrayal of the friendly nature of these characters. This also aids in wooing the audience to identify and love the characters, especially the kid audiences. As in the case of the Crocodile, Puff adder and Snake, feared animals, the character designer has exaggerated their eyes by using bigger circles to elicit calmness within the audience (**FIG 1, 2 &**

3). Coupled with other elements, this helps in creating an intimate relationship between these characters and the audience and therefore offers a platform to drive the story easily.

In the case of Tortoise and Snake (**FIGS 4 & 5**), the character designer has used the circles not only on the eyes but for the entire head. The Tortoise in nature is a slow, calm and friendly animal. The character designer has therefore transferred this to the character shapes. As much as in the episode, 'Why the Tortoise has a cracked shell', where Tortoise is shown as an opportunistic character, at the end of the story, he regrets his actions and is seen as a gentle character who is ready to ask for forgiveness.

Snake and Puff adder, despite the fact that they are dreaded reptiles, the story shows them at their vulnerable points. Snake is desperate to get a pair of eyes to attend the *Tinga Tinga Festival* and will do anything to have them. He even offers to present food to Frog and Chameleon just so to have the eyes. The Puff adder is also desperate to have a friend. His dull skin is denying him a chance to easily interact with the other animals. His urge to get a shinier skin exposes his vulnerability and humility. This elicits the emotion of pity from the audience and the character designer achieves this with the use of round or circular shapes for the head.



**FIGURE 1: Chameleon**



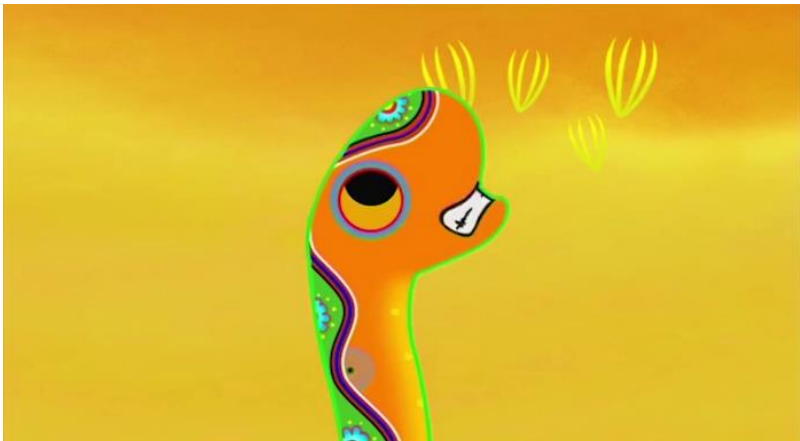
**FIGURE 2: Crocodile**



**FIGURE 3: Lizard**



**FIGURE 4: Puff adder**



**FIGURE 5: Snake**



**FIGURE 6: Tortoise**

### **Triangle**

In character design, a triangle gives a visual impression of a thin, sharp, moving and restlessness. When used, the designer portrays a character that is sinister, cunning and unsatisfied (Bryan, 2011). This can be seen in the case of *Lion King*, whose head is an amalgamation of different triangles, portraying the image of an ominous and a toxic conspirator. In the selected episodes of *Tinga Tinga Tales*, the triangle shape appears in the character designs of Crocodile, Lizard and Chameleon as seen in (**FIG 1, 2 & 3**). It could be argued that the character designer has to a large used nature's reference, but this goes beyond the natural physique. The main trait that the triangular shape portrays is that of unsatisfied and cunning characters. Chameleon (**FIG 1**) hates his skin, he is grey and does not fit in with the other animals. He feels unsatisfied in his own skin, so much so that he sets out to be alone. It is only after getting a colourful skin from the rainbow that he is able to settle in with the other animals.

The Crocodile (**FIG 2**) is also unsatisfied. He does not feel comfortable being with the other animals. His egocentric nature only allows him to stay away in the shade. He even warns Monkey against using pseudo names when addressing him, despite Monkey's intention to be friendly. This is magnified by the use of the triangular head in portraying this character. In the case of Lizard (**FIG 3**), the triangular shape serves many purposes. His light-fingered nature, as he is referred to by Monkey shows him as a character that preys on others weaknesses. He steals from Monkeys and Chameleon, knowing that they are gentle and won't harm him. This is further shown in the way he tricks Frog when he invites him over for dinner. He applies tricks to make sure that Frog



doesn't partake of the food. Throughout the episode, 'Why Lizard hides under rocks', the audience is exposed to these traits by these shapes.

### **Designing the Body**

This stage has a great degree of freedom to the character designer and may employ different techniques of exaggeration, distortion and deformation to either create a body that resembles a human or animal structure or one that differs from the human or animal form by utter imagination and variation (Shi, 2008). The natural structure of a character's body is the head, neck, trunk and limbs. During the design of the body, a character's age, gender and personality is determined by the different proportionalities of the body Vis-à-vis the head. As opposed to the portrayal of characters in actual film where an adult would be portrayed with a natural height proportion, while a kid is differentiated by their age stages, animation character design does not stick to objectivity of proportions (Bryan, 2011). The animator can amplify or shrink a character's proportion of the head and the body to reinforce the character's personality and individuality. According to Rudolf (2005), this might be done by enlarging the proportions of the head to fully embody and convey a character's naivety, lively nature or cuteness.

In *Tinga Tinga Tales*, the character designer has tried to use nature's reference to create the characters. This goes a long way to help the audience to easily identify with the characters in the animation. The use of smooth curvature in the six characters' body design impresses the audience with lovable and good-natured characters. The curves also give a sense of stability and peace. There have been no exaggerations in the body design of the selected characters to warrant a different portrayal. The generality and audience expectation therefore play a big part in the body design of the selected characters.

### **SYMBOLIC CONSTITUENT OF COLOUR IN CHARACTER DESIGN**

Colour as discussed before is a crucial element in animation and plays a vital role in the character design process. A sound understanding of the symbolism of colour language is key for the designer. This helps in creating characters that carry a great mental influence power and a solid visual impression. In *Tinga Tinga Tales* colour plays a major role as a visual art. In the study, different colours have been used to amplify the personality of the characters.

## **Lizard**

The character designer has used a number of colours in this character. The use of pink, purple, and yellow colours are symbolic (**FIG 3**). The colours make the Lizard a brilliant, lively and energetic character. In colour psychology, pink is a symbol of optimism. It is an affirmative colour that motivates warm and calming feelings (Ambrose, 2005). The Lizard in the episode ‘*Why the Lizard hides under rocks*’, is presented as a loving and calm character. He is willing to share and even invite Frog over for dinner. Although this did not come to fruition, and is later seen as a cunning and up to no good character, his calmness does not fade. He regrets his decisions and his new found trait of hiding shows his guilt.

Purple has been used to amplify the pink colour. Purple represents power, royalty and ambition (Ambrose, 2005). Lizard through the episode ‘*Why Lizard hides under rocks*’ is perceived as having the ambition to be seen as a good character. When cornered, he opts to lie that the food he has is for his guest. He does this to shun off any criticism. This can also be seen in the way he is determined to eat the food served by the Frog, despite the fact that he cannot be able to last in water. Yellow colour in the eyes has been used to portray the happiness that Lizard has as well as compounding the optimism that he holds. Other than that, yellow colour is also used to show deceit. In the character of Lizard, we encounter his deceitful nature in the way he treats Frog during the dinner.

## **Chameleon**

Chameleon has three main colours; grey, blue and yellow as seen in (**FIG 1**). Grey colour is associated with dullness, dirt and dinginess (Bear, 2017). This is a direct relation with how Chameleon is treated by the other animals. He is seen as a dull, not so fun and emotionless character by the other animals. This is clearly seen during song and dance as he is alienated because of his character and inability to take part in the fun games. In the design of Chameleon, the character designer has also incorporated shades of blue colour. Blue colour symbolizes loyalty, knowledge, cleverness, faith (Gage, 1999). Of focus in this interpretation will be the aspect of faith. Despite being jeered at by other animals, Chameleon takes a leap of faith and believes that he can solve his problem. He sets out to exactly do this. He meets Butterfly who encourages him

and the audience can see Chameleon's determination, hope and faith that he will be able to get a colour. This eventually happens after his encounter with the rainbow.

### **Crocodile**

Crocodile's design has three main colours; red, brown and yellow (**FIG 2**). Brown is the dominant colour in this design. Brown represents wholesomeness and stability (Ambrose, 2008). The satisfaction and pride that Crocodile portrays is well brought out in the use of this colour. In his eyes, the character designer has used red. Red as a colour portrays vigor, war, risk, strength and power. In the case of the Crocodile, his snappy behavior poses a risk to the other animals. He is known to have a deadly bite. As much as therefore his body is covered in wholesomeness, stability and self-pride, the character designer uses it to hint at potential dangers that the character harbours in his personality. The green colour on his nose is used to portray renewal of life. As the story unfolds in the episode, 'Why Crocodile has a bumpy back', the validity of this symbolism is portrayed when he gets trampled by the wild beasts and his skin changes forever. On the positive side, he no longer has to stay away from the sun for fear of getting hurt by the sun.

### **Puff adder**

When discussing the use of colour in the character design of Puff adder, there are two colour themes that have been used. The first part is his initial state that he had (**FIG 7**) and the state that he acquired after shedding off the skin (**FIG 8**).



**FIGURE 7: Puff adder's former color**



**FIGURE 8: Puff adder's new color**

In his former physique, the designer has used brown and blue. Brown is an earth colour. A down-to-earth colour that portrays simplicity of a situation it is applied to (Gage, 1999). In the case of Puff adder, he is considered by the other characters as hopeless. He tries as much as he can to interact with them but is shunned away. The character designer therefore applies this colour in his design to show his hopelessness and rejection. Blue colour is used to show his loyalty as well as faith and hope in changing his situation. It foreshadows his success in this quest when he sheds his skin to have a brighter and more visible skin.

In his new state (see **FIG 8**), the character designer applies yellow colour to his body. Yellow is a colour that represents freshness, cheerfulness, oomph, hopefulness and joy (Ambrose, 2005). This colour has been used to represent the new self that Puff adder has acquired. He is visible, vibrant and above all has been accepted by the other animals. The joy that he now holds is clear in the

colour that has acquired. The touch of blue spots goes further in compounding this by representing the affirming loyalty that Puff adder still harbours.

### Snake

Snake as a character has been presented as a needy character that is always in need of assistance. He is blind and his wish is to get a pair of eyes so as to attend *Tinga Tinga Festival*. This vulnerability despite being seen through his actions and dialogue in the episode, ‘*Why Snake has no legs*’, the character designer has amplified this through the use of colour. The ordinary perception of snakes is that of a venomous and deadly animal, but the character designer has tried as much as possible to make the character (snake) likable to the audience (**FIG 9**).

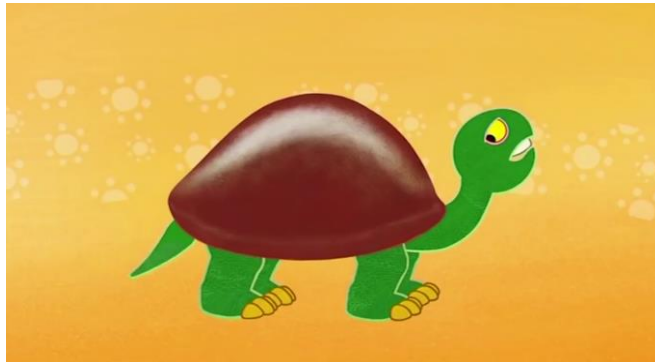


**FIGURE 9: Snake**

The use of yellow colour to show vibrancy and happiness can be attributed to this. The character designer has also incorporated green to magnify this. Green represents freshness, a trait that Snake acquires after getting the pair of eyes. On the contrary however, a dark shade of purple has been used to show frustration. The character designer is out to show a three-dimensional character. The frustration that Snake goes through to get the pair of eyes is well brought out through this colour.

### Tortoise

Tortoise has been presented in two stages in the episode, ‘*Why Tortoise has a broken shell*’. In the first part of the story, the shell is not broken (**FIG 10**). In this initial stage the character designer has used maroon, green and yellow.



**FIGURE 10: Tortoise's unbroken shell**

The Tortoise at first is a likable and sociable character. He is also passionate and insistent. Maroon colour has been used to represent this intensity and passion. It has also been used to show his confidence in his interactions with other characters. We see his confidence in winning the races against Hare and his confidence in wanting to guide the birds to the heavens for a party despite not being familiar with the terrain. Nevertheless, his confidence makes the birds trust him and they gladly donate their feathers to enable him fly. Green has been used to amplify the lively character of Tortoise. He is easily likable and fresh. The character designer therefore captures the audience easily with this colour. To add on this, yellow colour has been used. Yellow is associated with happiness and joy just as portrayed throughout the story.

After Tortoise falls from the heavens as a result of the birds retracting their feathers for playing a trick on them, his appearance changes as seen in (**FIG 6**). At this stage, the character of Tortoise has been exposed. He is a malicious character that was out to frustrate the birds and prey on them. The broken shell might be the repercussion of this but the character design uses it as fragments to amplify other behaviors. The character designer introduces blue, pink and purple colours.

Blue is a calm colour that shows peace and calmness. Pink is also a colour that presents a calming effect on the audience. Purple also represents peaceful nature, wisdom and tranquility. Looking at all these colours used in one space, the character designer is out to stamp the remorse and humility that Tortoise now has. The remorse is also captured in Tortoise's voice as he is assisted by Monkeys to patching up his once smooth shell. His voice and character elicit regret as he vows to have concern for other characters henceforth. Hence, it can be appreciated that the character designer uses these colours as an assurance of Tortoise's remorse.

## CONCLUSION

The deliberations above opened a channel to understand the nature of characters in animation film *Tinga Tinga Tales*. The discussions propose that when designing a character, one has to follow conventions that then expose the character to the audience in a better way. The design should first of all be centered on the head before spreading to the body. It is also important to note that the representative features of shape are key when either shaping the head of your characters (Barcroft, 1996). Depending on the choice of a shape, the audience may easily stereotype the character and therefore will have particular expectations. The second thing to think of in character design is the body. When designing the bodies of the characters, the research found out that the choice of colours and shapes go a long way in determining the final perception of the character. Each choice will have an implication of how the character will be perceived and a keen eye should be applied. It is therefore right to assert that the creation and design of characters is not merely putting together shapes. It goes beyond this and every animator should put a psychological angle to the character design so as to remain in tandem with the intended message. Character design therefore is an important process in animation as it creates the carriers of the story. As it is in film, character development in animation is about the appearance, the character's actions and thoughts. In analyzing the characters, the study used the approach of symbolic constituent of painting which is greatly based on shape and colour. The study discovered that *Tinga Tinga Tales* character design has employed different shapes and colours in designing the heads and bodies of the selected characters. The findings of the study further revealed that the character traits of the different characters are closely intertwined with the way the character is designed.

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