

INTRODUCTION

Throughout man's documented history, his need to express himself has transcended everything. Immediately after he ticks off the basics of life and, sometimes, even while doing that, the artist within him always seeks to express his individuality. This urge cascades into communal expressions of the perceived self via language, food, rituals and dress. Cloth and dress have been described as a mirror of the culture of the people in any society (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 25). They symbolize the practices of the society, bounded by the same geographical location, sharing the same cultural values.

There is no consensus yet on when man first started to wear clothes, but the earliest known forms of dress were materials such as furs, leathers, leaves or grasses which were either draped, wrapped or tied around the body. In the course of time, different cultures evolved various ways of manipulating materials around them into cloths that they used in creating diverse kinds of clothes. The foregoing explains what probably constituted the earliest forms of dressing among the Nigerian cultures. Today, several states in Nigeria engage in textile works. According to Maiwada *et al* (2012), traditional textile works like hand spinning, weaving (on horizontal and vertical looms), tie-dye, batik, cassava paste resist which the Yoruba call "*adire-eleko*", garment embroidery (both hand and machine), screen printing, hand block printing, traditional calendaring which the Hausa call "*bugu*", tailoring and fashion design are being carried out in most states of Nigeria.

Clothing and textiles are significant forms of art, which play vital roles in the cultural milieu of the people (Bewaji, 2003: 193). Cloths are markers of identity, status, wealth, age and even occupation. According to Akinbileje (2014), across the Nigerian and African cultures, specific clothes associated with occupations are worn. For example traditionally, Bambara (Bamanan) women of Mali, as well as those of the Minianka, Senufo, Dogon and other ethnic groups, produce *bogolanfini* (mud cloth) for important life events. Men, especially hunters, wear it for hunts and celebrations. Men's shirt may be white, indigo or brown in colour. If the shirt is for hunting, it would be brown and adorned with amulets, horns and other traditional medicines to help improve the hunters' effectiveness. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, *Nganga*, a diviner, wears a costume covered with many symbolic objects, such as wild animal skins, bird feathers, leopard teeth, bells and anything else that is unusual.

The Yoruba of Nigeria also have particular dress for different works. The cloth for the farmer is different from that of the hunters and is also different from that worn for war. A lot of Yoruba religious textiles, country cloth of the Mende in Sierra Leone, Ukara cloth of the Igbo and a host of other cloths and dresses from Africa, perform religious purposes and are repositories of supernatural powers. The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria produce *Ukara* cloth, covered with *nsibidi* symbols and motifs, which was initially meant for the

Ekpe society. *Ukara* cloth, an indigo stitched and dyed cloth is significant to the people of Igbo land. The cloth is traditionally used as either a wrapper, worn by high-ranking members of the *Ekpe* group who often custom design it or use as backdrop in the throne rooms of chiefs and kings (Wikipedia, 2012).

Fashion and dress choices have evolved over the years. As local civilizations grew, trade with other peoples and cultures saw the introduction of new clothes and clothing materials. The arrival of Europeans on the continent also inspired its own distinct shift in dressing. More westernized clothes and styles were introduced and the influence they had on traditional dressing is still prevalent today. According to Awodipe (2021), in the 1960s most Nigerian women wore long dresses and hats in the Western style. The more affluent and educated women dressed in both fitted and oversized outfit depending on their preference and complemented it with permed, well-sprayed Afros. The uneducated people simply wore their native clothes and did simple, local hairstyles.

Another trend that took the fashion industry by storm then was mini skirts and dresses. This trend was allegedly invented by Mary Quant and aimed at seductively showing off women's legs. During that time, bright colours were introduced for men and there was also an obsession with prints and patterned fabrics. Women's fashion constituted of mini dresses with ladylike silhouettes (outline), while men wore loud, coloured, patterned shirts. Also, skinny ties were in vogue. During this time, platform and wooden shoes were very fashionable, although they weren't as tall as they are today. In addition, the stiletto heels were very popular at that time. Men rocked boot-legged pants, tightly fitted shirts with loud prints and the first two buttons open-topped.

The seventies were defined by the *Oleku* trend for women; this inspired the release of *Oleku* movie in 1997 by some Yoruba artists in South Western Nigeria. *Oleku* comprised a baggy-sleeved *buba* (blouse) worn over an *iro* (wrapper) that stopped anywhere from a little above the knees to mid-thigh. Men wore *agbada* and *danshiki*, trends that have made a stunning comeback today. For a more western look, it was all about the colours. For example, a man could rock a blue jumpsuit and shoes to match. The baggy western attires of 80s fashion became smaller and smaller by the 90s with American hip-hop culture inspiring fashion choices for a generation of young people. Today, the western influence on dressing is very obvious. Although this has an effect on traditional dressing, it can be argued that both have found a way to coexist. Traditional attires are still regularly worn by men and women particularly on special occasions such as traditional and religious holidays, weddings, social receptions and even in corporate spaces. Today, local fashion designers have come up with creative ways of integrating both the

traditional and western styles of cloths and clothes making methods and fabrics. Furthermore, Nigerian clothing is recognizable across the world and that trend would only increase with more and more Nigerians in the Diaspora taking up more spaces in global entertainment and fashion industries.

The gains of sustaining the Nigerian dress culture are multi-faceted. Cultural dressing is an age-long avenue through which the people of Nigeria are imbued with morality. Besides fashion, one vital use of clothes is to cover the wearer's nakedness. All ethnic groups in Nigeria, irrespective of their religious affiliations, openly encourage the act of dressing up to cover the sensitive parts of the body especially the pubic areas. Such a style of dressing is often imparted to children, wards and devotees at homes, schools and worship centres. One sure way to fathom the rising or dwindling standards of morality in the society is the dress culture of the people. Unless it is for some religious solemnities, putting on revealing clothes is considered an abnormality culturally.

Again, local fabric production in Nigeria is a means of livelihood and also a symbol of national identity, prestige and cohesion. The sundry ethnic groups in Nigeria earn a living by producing cloths and clothes which are peculiar to them. *Aso-oke* is produced by the Yoruba people; *abaya* is made by Hausa people, while *isiagu* is manufactured by Igbo people. Increased funding and access to working materials can birth many more small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in the above-mentioned local fabric production locations. Also, a substantial inter-ethnic patronage can result in a boost in local and foreign earnings for the local fabric manufacturing sector.

However, little is known about the dress culture of many ethnic groups in Nigeria. This is for the reason that scarce or no research has been conducted to bring such to the limelight. Although local fabric productions undertaken by a number of ethnic groups have been studied and documented, much has not been done to promote them to meet best global practices. Dressing patterns that pose a threat to morality are on the rise, but enough is not yet done to curtail this mounting phenomenon. Moreover, the way out of the effacing effect of modern dressing on traditional dressing has not been subjected to exhaustive investigation. These are obvious gaps which this publication is meant to fill.

The ethnographic research papers in this book provide a window into the different dress cultures of Nigerians via the prism of the six geopolitical zones thereby capturing the evolution of our dress sense as well as the various fashion statements which echo from our cultural heritage. The exact aim of this publication is to document objects, materials and tools associated with dress culture; enhance local fabrics production; project dressing as an

instrument of national identity, pride and unity; promote cultural dressing and morality; and unveil the influence of modern dressing on traditional dressing.

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