

AEHAN EGBEHIA: A CEREMONIAL ATTIRE OF TITLED MEN IN BENIN CITY, EDO STATE

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Introduction

The basic human needs are food, shelter and clothing. Human beings make use of available skills and materials to meet their clothing needs. Often times, cloth is worn by an individual, not only for protection or beauty, but as means of communicating with other people. Clothing materials are acquired from plants and animals in the immediate environment where people live. In the modern day, it is easier to get raw materials for dress production. This is because the different machines for making cloths are now readily available. The beauty of any dress depends on the skills of its makers.

Some other words used in this paper, which have the same meaning with the word 'cloth' include clothing, dress, attire, garment, costume, fabric, adornment, regalia, garb and outfit. The colours and motifs found on dresses are often the images of plants, animals, and other physical things in human environment. When designed on clothes, colours and motifs convey meanings and messages about the culture of the people. Dress culture is therefore an essential part of every community such as Benin kingdom.

Benin kingdom is a member of the Edoid speaking groups, bordered by the mangrove swamp and located in the tropical rain forest, with series of rivers and streams (Bradbury, 1957; Plankensteiner, 2007). The rights to become king in Benin kingdom belong to paternal lineage (Ayisi, 1972). It is the eldest son that succeeds the king. The present-day title of the king is *Oba* and the current king is His Royal Majesty (HRM), Omo N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba Ewuare II N'Ogidigan, Oba of Benin. He was crowned as the 40th Oba on 20th October, 2017, same day as his birthday. The Oba and chiefs in Benin City wear different traditional attires to attend ceremonies.

Ceremonies were created by people for the purposes of worship and pleasure. All the ceremonies in Benin City consist of special performances such as cooking, singing, dancing, and displaying of ceremonial regalia. Such ceremonial clothes are specially decorated to pass certain information to the viewers. Any information passed becomes meaningful when both the senders and receivers of the contents can understand them. Ceremonial attires of the titled men in Benin City are full of accessories. Ceremonial

attires and accessories are made up of either native or a mixture of native and foreign items. Varieties of beads and pieces of brass are the most noticeable communication accessories on the ceremonial garbs worn by various chiefs in Benin City. The beliefs Africans have about ceremonial dressing are different from those of the West. According to Western thoughts and understanding, the four categories of clothes include "uniforms, occupational dresses, leisure clothing and costumes" (Hybels and Weaver II 2001). The African opinions concerning adornment are described by Andreasen (1999:85) who says that "frequent visitors to Africa marvel at the variety and beauty of the continent's traditional textiles...not only as garments but also as a means of communication." Any garbs worn in Benin City contains communication items, but the ceremonial apparels have more communication objects that further reveal the wearer's identity, character and status. Although there are various ceremonial attires used by titled men in Benin City, they have over the years undergone different phases of evolution.

Phases of Ceremonial Attires in Benin City

The traditional cloth making techniques and dress patterns in Benin City had been in existence before the advent of colonialism, hence the popular local saying that "before the white man arrived Benin City, the local people who lived during that period were not wearing plantain leaves". Okpokunu, Eghafona and Ojo (2005) maintain that the colours of fabrics made in Benin City before colonial rule, were ordinary indigo and blue spotted with white stripes. One of the earliest 'styles of dressing' in Benin was the customary artistic nudism of children and slaves. Nudism is a dressing style whereby no clothes are worn on the body. In the past, customary nudism was also the dressing pattern of all the royal sword bearers called *Emuada*. Nudism as an ancestral dress culture, was proudly displayed during festivals like *Igue* and other ceremonies such as burials, marriages and naming. Some members of the nobility wore body marks known as *Iwu*. In old Benin, nudism was only a phase in the evolution of dress patterns. It was practiced and sustained at that time possibly because it was a cultural means used to nurture and keep children natural until adulthood. But for the Oba and chiefs, some gorgeous royal and ceremonial apparels were worn. Osaigbovo (n.d) explains that before the Portuguese arrived Benin City, the Oba and chiefs wore special ceremonial attire made with a thick fabric. It was worn on purpose, to thicken the hip before wearing on top of it, a long cloth spun from cotton, which was known as *Ukponoru*.

Okpokunu, Eghafona & Ojo (2005) emphasize that the early travellers from Europe, who visited Benin City in the 18th and 19th centuries, affirmed that

there was already a successful technology of textile, which they regarded as court weaving. This is because, the then cloth makers were residing in the royal palace of the Oba. Umogbai, Awodiya & Ogboro (2012) mention that the Iwebo Royal Society coordinated the dress making guilds who engaged in weaving cloths, producing beads and making costumes. It was the Iwebo Royal Society that took care of all the Oba's wardrobes, beads and attires. Egharevba (1956) as cited by Osaigbovo (n.d.) says that during the days of Oranmiyan, there were some shirts named jumpers. These were among the ceremonial regalia of the nobility especially the Oba and senior chiefs. The ceremonial jumpers, which were neither tight nor fitted attires, hung loosely on the body when worn. Afterwards, jumpers were replaced with coral or beaded robes and many other fabrics and regalia such as the *Aehan Egbhia*. All these formed the ceremonial clothing styles of the Oba and top chiefs till today, whenever they engage in any celebrations till today.

Native Ceremonial Dress in Benin City

Native ceremonial dress refers to the traditional apparel, which members of an ethnic nationality often wear, particularly during various celebrations. Some researchers agree that the earliest ceremonial clothes in Benin City were spun by women for the general public and men for the Oba. The act of spinning cotton was known as *Siou*, while the locally made loom for weaving cloths was called *Ayonayadukpon*. Some of the ancient fabrics woven and worn during festivals, marriages, funerals and several other rites and rituals comprise *Ukponoru*, *Ukponokhuen*, *Ukpon Isa*, *Ukponohian*, and *Ukpon Ivie*. *Ukponoru* is the fabric which was manufactured from cotton. *Ukponokhuen* is the cloth produced with the yarn obtained from the bark of a certain tree named *Okhuen* in Benin. *Ukpon Isa* is the fabric woven with raffia palms. *Ukponohian* is the clothing material made with tanned animal skin. *Ukpon Ivie* is the apparel produced with beads. Women in that ancient period mostly wore cloths, which were swathed on their body from the chest region down to their feet. Men, on the other hand, wore a thick fabric which was meant to thicken the hip before covering it up with a long cloth (Osaigbovo, n.d.; Edo Affairs, 2019). Children at that time often moved about without clothes.

In the present time, the ceremonial dress for Benin men is a combination of white T-shirts and long skirt-like attire, which hangs on the waist and flows down to the feet. The major thing that distinguishes this skirt-like regalia from the ancient type known as *Ebuluku* is the modern use of sewing machines. The women wear different beautiful multi-coloured wrappers derived from assorted cloths like lace, george and velvet. On top of the wrappers, women wear blouses made with beads. It is called *Ewu Ivie* (Edo Affairs, 2019). All the above-mentioned ceremonial clothes for men and

women are featured in weddings, christening and other ceremonies. There is a different dress style for the people who are honoured with chieftaincy titles. Curnow (1995) discloses that all the chieftaincy honourees are dressed to the palace in white wrappers. Woven belt-like cloths referred to as *Egbele* are tied around their waists all through the period of their initiation.

Foreign Items on Ceremonial Regalia in Benin City

Some clothes contain items that were not part of the Benin dressing, but were brought in from other places. These regalia have been used for decades to the point where the present and next generations may not know that they contain foreign items. Previous ethnographic studies reveal that some of the ceremonial attires worn in modern Benin City have some foreign features. The major reasons why there are attires with foreign contents include culture contacts and exchanges together with social change caused by trade, travels, missions and colonial rule (Agbontaen, 1997; Osagie and Frank, 2015). These exchanges resulted to a change of religious beliefs and other cultural practices. Most ceremonial attires with foreign items in Benin City came via Christianity.

Some examples of foreign ceremonial garments worn by ordinary people in Benin City comprise shorts, shirts, short skirts, trousers and suits that are imported from Europe (Okpokunu Eghafona & Ojo, 2005). These foreign attires are common dress codes of men and women in the present generation of Benin wherever they attend ceremonies. Also not spared are some traditional clothing of the nobles. Osaigbovo (n.d.) claims that what influenced the ceremonial dress of many chiefs are various gifts of foreign clothes given by the Portuguese priests and missionaries to the Benin monarchs right from the reign of Oba Esigie to Oba Ovonranmwun (16th to 19th century). The robe worn by the priests of Holy Aruosa Cathedral (a vestige of Portuguese presence and influence in Benin) and the tiny round ceremonial caps of chiefs like Eribo, Osodin, and Esama have a semblance of the priesthood and dressing patterns of the Portuguese. Other dress culture affected was *Iwu* body striation which lasted till 1930s before its abolition. Again, *Emuada* nudism was faulted by the wife of Sir Hugh Clifford, a colonial Governor that visited the palace of the Oba in 1920s. This made Oba Akenzua II stop the nudism of *Emuada* in 1933 (Ekhaguosa, 1986; Okpokunu, Eghafona & Ojo 2005).

Types of Ceremonial Clothing Accessories

Clothing accessories include the various items which are carried by hand or worn on the body as dress enhancers. The general functions of whichever clothing accessories include adornment intended to add beauty, glamour,

grace and attraction to apparels. The typical ceremonial clothing accessories in the culture of Benin consist of, but are not limited to, royal bracelets, pendants, hand fans, shoes, caps, bags, finger and ear rings, walking sticks, bangles, headdresses, and anklets (Curnow, 1995; Edo Affairs, 2019). Each of these royal ceremonial fashion accessories can be produced with metal, coral, wood, leather, or ivory. Bortolot (2003) observes that Benin, Owo and Ijebu kingdoms shared similar accessories like royal pendants and masquettes, openwork bracelets and altar sculptures. Such similarities are the results of cultural exchanges that happened during wars, trades and travels embarked upon for empire building. Some of the aforesaid accessories are attached to the *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial attire.

The Aehan Egbehia Ceremonial Attire

In no particular order, the attires of titled men in Benin City include, but are not restricted to *Ewubuluku*, *Eyon*, *Iruan* and *Aehan Egbehia*. Informant one avers that *Aehan Egbehia* is the greatest ceremonial adornment that all chiefs wish to wear. All who wear the dress are chiefs but not all chiefs are entitled to wear the ceremonial garment. From top to bottom, the items on *Aehan Egbehia* garb are: *Urhui I'vie*, the head dress; *Igho'oloye*, 'V' shape strip brass pointing to the sky from the back of the head dress; *Ugho'oven*, sun protector flap attached to the head dress; *Odigba*, beaded collar; *Ikele*, circular bead; *Udeghogho*, thick bead worn on the neck; *Eroro*, pectoral bell; *Uhunmwun'Ekue*, small face-mask, hip-brass; *Igoro*, brass bracelet; *Ivie abo*, wrist bead; *Abuwa*, finger-shaped decorative cloth and brass object hanging from the hip; *Ikpakpa'Ekhui*, pangolin scales; *Eben*, ceremonial sword; *Eguen*; and *Ivie awe*, ankle beads.

Picture 1: Titled Benin Man in Ceremonial Attire



Source: Field Observation 2021 Igue Festival

Importance of *Aehan Egbhia* Ceremonial Clothing Accessories

Informant four posits that the headgear is given spiritual enhancement at the *Ogbelakaa* altar. There, the owner of the ceremonial cloth performs rituals with some items and ritual dance before he is adorned with the cap by Odionwere Eso who will first wear the cap on his own head before placing same on the owner's head. Informant two calls the cap *Erhu'Ugie*. The activities are done at *Edion S'Igie N'Ogbelakaa*, meaning the altar at *Ogbelakaa*. The cap is the glory of the dress. It has a 'V' shaped, flexible, strip brass object pointing to the sky, which is a sign of enduring wealth (*Igholoye*). Brass is a durable metal. Most brass objects on the attire, especially the cap, stand for wealth. Brass also beautifies the headdress as it reflects when it contacts light. The eagle feather (*Egan oghoohon*) signifies the strength and speed of an eagle which are the attributes transferred to the wearer of the outfit. The feather is placed in a very visible part of the cap pointing upwards, just like the fish eagle bird that flies very high. The cap also has two flaps on either side of the face of the wearer, which are called *Ugbovben*. They are meant to shield the wearer from the heat of the sun. Due to the fact that the entire attire is a full-bodied dress worn in a hot climate, the kingdom is proactive in reducing the heat that nobles encounter while wearing the costume and performing various cultural dance steps. The brass on the flaps is a further demonstration of the excellent qualities of the titled man.



Picture 2: Titled Men Exchanging Pleasantries During 2021 *Igwe* Festival

The back of the festival attire has a long rectangular flap, attached to the back of the cap and it flows down towards the thigh of the wearer. The long flap has a big design which adds to the qualities of the wearer. The three round bells dangling from the hem of the long flap announce the wearer's presence anywhere he goes.

Beads are “small, usually round objects made of glass, wood, metal, nut, shell, bone seed pierced for stringing” (Fadipe, 2021). The author further explains that “the existence of beads is dated back to the Nok culture.” This means that the manufacture and use of beads have been with this part of the world for a long time. “Coral is developed (grows) in the deep ocean...it is found in the Mediterranean Sea, Sea of Japan, Canary Isles and the Bay of Biscay. Only the solid external skeleton of the sea creature is used in jewelry”. Beads are “polished into gemstones which we know as coral” (Yadav, 2019 & Traderoots). The above assertion suggests that corals were not found near the kingdom of Benin. In tracing the origin of coral in Benin Kingdom, Fadipe (2021) opines that “the Portuguese in the 16th century brought coral beads to Benin through trade”. Also, Ogunbor (2021) avers that those European traders brought beads, in bags called *ekpo ivie* in Benin, to the Oba of Benin. It means that the coral is not a native fashion accessory in Benin. Beads can be worn on the head, wrists, ankles, neck, ears, [waist] and nose as body enhancements by both men and women (Fadipe, 2021). In her research, Plankensteirner (2007:512) observes that:

the stiff circular necklaces known as ikele, denote chiefs in Benin and are a badge of rank. The circular shape results from stringing the agate or coral together with metal wire. The ikele is worn only after the Oba of Benin has conferred the right to wear it. And once a chief or yet to be chief has been conferred with the honour to wear the ikele, it is a taboo for him to appear before the monarch without it. ...but the ikele is the only one carrying the weight of formality...protocol forbids that (the wearer) is seen eating or drinking in public with the ikele round his neck. It constitutes an embarrassment to the Benin palace.

When putting on beads, the wearer must be of good behaviour everywhere and at all times. Although beads come in different colours like blue, brown, black, red and orange coral, they are well known and sought after (Yadav, 2019). Beads can be made into different shapes and styles like barrel, chips, large stick with European designs on them. In addition, beads have found their way into the language of Benin through this proverb “*aiye ivie vbe ebioya, egua aiyajo*” (Ogunbor, 2021:12). It means that “coral bead is not used to do useless or valueless things. It is mainly worn to the palace. The author further highlights that a man putting on the bead must be respected by everyone.

The history of coral bead dates back to the reign of Oba Ewuare (1440-1473) (Ogunbor, 2021:12). Informant two affirms that *Ikele* is wired, thus giving bead its circular shape. He stresses further that hundred (100) years ago, it

was unheard of for a chief to lose his circular bead or have it cut while having it on. The penalty was death. He called the attire a pangolin dress because it has some designs that look like the overlapping scales of a pangolin.

Odigba, the beaded collar which is about two to three-and-half inch wide is a status symbol, which not all chiefs are allowed to wear (informant two). It might have been influenced by the collar worn by the Catholic Priest of Portugal who made contact with the kingdom in the 16th century (Okpokunu, Eghafona & Ojo, 2005). Irrespective of the status of the title given to a person, the use of beads is the seal of approval offered to an individual as a chief. It is the common artefact that adorns the garb of all chiefs.

Ikele, the circular bead carries more meanings and messages than the other beads worn by the chiefs in the kingdom. The circular nature of the bead is as a result of the wire used to string each bead together (Informant two & Plankensteirner, 2007). *Ikele* stands for the honour given to its wearer, which in turn demands his proper behaviour, good conduct and relationship with others (Barthes, 1970 as cited by Robinson, 2011; Blumer, 1969 as cited by Clark, 2012; Ogunbor, 2021; & Manwa & Ndamba, 2011). Also, the viewers must treat the wearer of *Ikele* with respect. Where food is offered, it is expected that the organisers will package the chief's food as take-away because they are not expected to eat in public. Any errand run by the chiefs while putting on the circular bead, indicates the seal of His Royal Majesty (HRM). The chief must ensure that the circular bead is not taken away from him or cut while he has it on.

The circular bead also gives official status to the wearer as an official representative of the Benin kingdom and the Oba. It serves as the letter of recognition that confirms the bearer as a chosen representative. The circular bead is the chief's approval to enter the palace and the presence of HRM (Barthes, 1970). The chief putting on the circular bead is not expected to be engaged in a violent fight or any other dishonourable behaviour that is not good for an Oba's representative. Plankensteirner (2007) posits that the circular bead is a badge of rank. This statement implies that there is a relationship of give-and-take respect between an ordained chief and a commoner or between a high-class chief and a low-class chief (Blumer (1969) as cited by Clark (2012).

Udeghogho is a bead that is longer than the circular bead. Its use is a matter of choice and the length is at the discretion of the wearer. In the photograph used for this enquiry, the chief is wearing three long beads of varying length

with the biggest bead in size at the middle. *Ivie abo* is a wrist bead while *Ivie awe* is ankle bead. *Ekpa obo'evba* is a double stringed bead that flows from the shoulders across the chest of the chief. These beads have red and white colours, but they are not made with coral.

Uses of *Aehan Egbehia* Ceremonial Attire in Festivals and Rituals

It is clear from the information gathered from the field that *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial attire is used as an object of traditional worship in Benin City. The top palace chiefs are adorned with this ceremonial regalia for rituals and festivals such as *Igue* celebrated each year. This implies that it is bad and unacceptable for titled Benin men not to wear *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial attire during traditional ceremonies. Wearing this ceremonial dress is one of the ways of worshipping the gods. The informants attest that *Erhu'Ivie* is dedicated to the gods in *Ogbelakaa* shrine before it is used by the chiefs. Apart from being the customary dress for rituals, this ceremonial garb has some other uses.

Aehan Egbehia ceremonial apparel is used to honour the Oba of Benin. The authorized chiefs wear it as a mark of reverence to the Oba during royal festivities. What this means is that no other regalia is required from the ordained wearers when bowing to greet the Oba. Using another apparel will be dishonouring the king. It will also bring down the reputation of the ordained chiefs. Also, the use of *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial attire is an act of obedience to traditional practices. Not wearing it for royal ceremonies, makes the titled men appear disrespectful to traditional practices. More so, wearing the ceremonial regalia is an important aspect of Benin culture. It is therefore a means of sustaining the age-long dress culture in Benin City.

Meanings of Colours and Symbols on *Aehan Egbehia* Regalia

As earlier mentioned, the African opinion regarding garment is different from that of the West. The way the whiteman interprets the colours and symbols on clothes is not the same with that of the indigenes of Benin. The *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial costume is made of red colour. The interpretation of red in Benin City is completely different from the Western thought and understanding which views red as a symbol of danger or a stop sign. Plankensteiner (2007:511) citing Levadomsky & Inneh (1983:52) maintains that *Ododo* is understood as the most important quality of the colour red and it is different from the common red which is regarded as *Baa* in Benin language. *Ododo*, which is the bright red colour of *Aehan Egbehia* attire, stands for strength to overcome possible evil and failure everywhere. In addition, red is a colour which somehow makes people nervous and afraid. As such, the red colour on the ceremonial attire gives its wearer a kind of frightening appearance that commands respect.

Moreover, the red colour of the dress acts as a spiritual shield and protection against evil spells and enchantments. In Benin culture, it is believed that when people gather in large numbers, evil occurrences are likely going to take place. The few rich people who are in position of authority, are always the envy of wicked people that possess spiritual powers during the celebration of festivals. Thus, the evil attacks received by celebrants are either committed by wicked people or angry spirits especially the ones that have been treated without respect. The red colour on *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial garment guards the wearer against all the spells that are thrown at him by evil people or released by dangerous spirits roaming the premises during such celebrations.

Symbols have been known to be used by man from the past to the present time. The ceremonial dress is a symbol of kindness and promotion from HRM to the chiefs. The scaly designs on *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial attire, which are like the protective scales on the body of a pangolin, represent the guaranteed protection that its wearers stand to enjoy. A royal ceremonial sword known as *Eben* is held by the chiefs whenever they wear the *Aehan Egbehia* attire. *Eben* is a symbol of authority, which is used by the chiefs to reverence the Oba especially during festivals such as *Igue*. The *Eben* also signifies the presence of dignity surrounding whoever is holding it.



Picture 3: Different Classes of Chiefs Waiting for Commencement of Activities; *Igue* 2021

Impact of Foreign Clothes on Aehan Egbehia Ceremonial Attire in Benin City

One noticeable aspect in which foreign dress had impacted on the ceremonial attires in Benin City is the appearance. Osaigbovo (n.d.) explains that changes so far brought to bear on ceremonial attires are in the aspects of materials and sewing patterns. The modern sewing patterns of ceremonial attires worn by chiefs in Benin City make them look more like the regalia associated with priests and choristers in European churches. As a result of various foreign clothes brought to Benin City by the Europeans, there is difficulty in identifying ceremonial attires which do not have any foreign features. The dress pattern today in many ceremonies such as weddings is either the exact copy of the European way of adornment or a mixture of the native and Western dressing styles. One common example is the wearing of native shirts on English trousers. That is why, Okpokunu, Eghafona & Ojo (2005) argue that "for the Benin indigene, in matters of dressing, there are no roots to return to in search for identity."

The foreign dress has made ceremonial attires in Benin City to be seen as inferior to European apparels. It is the same feeling of inferiority complex that prevents a lot of Benin indigenes from having the desire to wear native clothes. Okpokunu, Eghafona & Ojo (2005) explain that the reason for this belief is the wrong mind-sets of most colonial civil servants and Christian converts in Benin who view native clothes as sinful and disgraceful.

Acculturation in dressing is another form of impact that most native dresses have on the ceremonial attires in Benin City. This intentional adaptation to foreign dress sense to the detriment of native clothing styles is a big threat to the dress culture in Benin City.

Conclusion

The study looked at the ceremonial attire of titled men in Benin kingdom, the various items found on the cloth, its messages from the wearer to the onlooker and the impact of culture contact on the outfit. Findings show that there are different ceremonial garbs and they are worn by different classes of titled men. In spite of the presence of different items on the dress, coral and other beads are visible on the festival clothing. Beads are found on different parts of the body from the neck to the ankle. Most of the beads like *Ikele* carry a lot of power, prestige, presence and meaning. Their power cannot be over-emphasised. The use of beads is noticeable in the ceremonial dresses of titled men in Benin kingdom. Beads add beauty to the ceremonial regalia and control the attitude of both the wearer and viewers. Though the other items are used together with one another, the beads seem to be of more importance

in all the materials that make up the festival attire of titled men in Benin City. However, the foreign dress patterns have identifiable impact on the ceremonial attires in Benin City. It is on the basis of this and other findings that the following recommendations are submitted.

Recommendations

- Cultural objects such as *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial regalia, which have symbolic meanings, should be given much attention when doing ethnographic research in Benin City. By so doing, the present and future generations of Benin indigenes will henceforth understand, as well as readily identify with their dress culture.
- It is suggested that those who understand the dress culture of Benin City should freely volunteer information to ensure its preservation. This is vital in the quest to reduce the threatening impact of foreign dressing styles on Benin dress culture.
- Benin history should be taught in schools and the names, meanings and sources of cultural items such as *Aehan Egbehia* ceremonial attire should be included in the curriculum. This will help the children to appreciate the relevance of cultural materials as well as work towards their preservation and sustenance.

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List of informants

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Informant two: Male. Interviewed: 1/02/2022

Informant three: Male. Interviewed; 22/02/2022

Informant four: Male. Interviewed; 20/01/2022