

TRENDS IN INDIGENOUS EFIK ATTIRE: A CASE STUDY OF THE USOBO APPAREL AMONG THE EFIK PEOPLE OF CALABAR, CROSS RIVER STATE

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Abstract

Dressing in Nigeria has always been a reflection of the culture of the people. It denotes the practices of the society and serves the basic needs of clothing. The function of cloth and dress has been summarized within boundless limits to include an indicator of self-worth, measurement of social value, religious and political power amongst others. Dressing among the Efik embraces colourful mix and display of traditional attire, chief among them is the Usobo apparel. In Efik tradition, a high value is placed on individual's dress code. Hence, the rich adornment and display of Usobo dress is embedded in the Efik traditions. Traditional events like Utomo-Obong, burial ceremonies, the coronation of the Obong of Calabar, Ndidem of Quas, Muri Munene of Efuts and several others in the Efik kingdom cannot be complete without the variant blend of Usobo apparel. This paper examines the current trends in indigenous Efik dress patterns using the Usobo apparel as a case study. Relevant literature was reviewed and interviews were conducted under the following subheadings namely the significance of Usobo apparel in Efik traditional ceremonies, Usobo dressing in ritual and religious ceremonies of the Efik, Efik traditional fashion accessories and the impact of modernization on the Efik traditional dress pattern. It was recommended that the use of Usobo should be encouraged in contemporary Efik society due to its significant role in the Efik cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Usobo, Tradition, Apparel, Trend*

Introduction

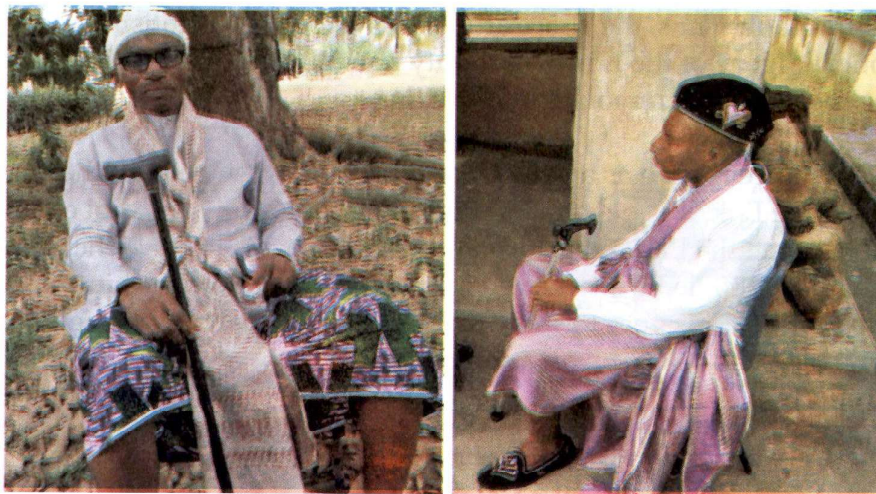
Efik is an ethnic group located in southern Nigeria, in the southern part of Cross River State. They occupy the basins of the Lower Cross River, down to southwestern Cameroon including Bakassi, the Calabar River and down to its streams – the Kwa River, Akpa Ikang and the Eniong Creeks. Having associated so much with foreigners in the pre-colonial era and beyond, the Efik have still managed to preserve their culture to this day. The people boast of a rich culture comprising a unique language, cuisine, dance, music, festival and dressing.

The people of Efik are deeply connected to traditional dressing styles because clothing is a means of expressing their identity. Traditional Efik attire such as the *Usobo* apparel provides the medium for the people to express themselves in an observable way. It is an accessible, visible and changing indicator of individual character, identity and status. The *Usobo*

traditional attire is also an expression of group identity, such that it can strengthen ethnic, religious or political recognition and belonging.

Indigenous Efik dress, just like dress in other ethnic groups in Nigeria, communicates age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, power, and religious commitment for everyday celebration, ceremonies and rituals. Along with fashionable western dress, the Efik wear an indigenous apparel, which totally or partially covers the body when supplemented with accessories such as head wraps, necklaces and beads. A good dress sense among the Efik involves proper conduct, elegant clothing style such as *Usobo* dress and cosmetics, complemented with graceful movements.

The Efik dress culture is rich and the traditional attires worn by the indigenous people cannot be over emphasized. It is detailed and has a unique blend of colour varieties. The male folks combine a mix of colourfully designed wrappers tied around their waists with a white shirt and a long piece of cloth to adorn their necks (*Okpomkpom*). The female folks dress as royalty which is carefully displayed in their long flowing gown popularly known as *Oyoyon*. The *Usobo* outfit is not complete without the traditional beautifully beaded shoes and colourful coral beads. A wrapper is used by the Efik for formal occasions. The male wrapper is wider than the one worn by women, usually reaches a man's ankles and it is decorated with ornaments. Sometimes, the ornaments are hand-made and other times, people purchase suitable fabric with the patterns designed on it. The materials used for such wrappers are often the best ones a person can afford. Such materials can be cotton or modern types of silk, which are designed to attract viewers with their inbuilt sparkling light.



Usobo attire



Men in Usobo During Ritual Ceremony

Efik Traditional Fashion Accessories

Fashion accessories are worn on the body. The main purpose of accessories is for adornment. Adorning the body with dress accessories is a way of indicating personal identity and one's status in the society. In ancient African setting, bracelets were worn to indicate the socio-economic status of an individual in the society. The number of bracelets worn spoke volume of the amount of wealth and influence of such an individual.

The fashion accessories worn by the Efik can be broadly grouped into two categories. There are fashion accessories that are worn. Some of them are caps, hats, shoes, ties, gloves and jewellerys. The other variants of fashion accessories are carried. Examples of such are bags, canes, fans, parasols, umbrellas etc. Generally, fashion accessories most often complement the body wears. However, there are different types of Efik traditional fashion accessories. Some are used during special events such as Ekpe masquerade or to perform traditional dances. Some common fashion accessories worn by the Efik are beads, corals, jewellerys, comb, walking sticks, rattles, shells and cowries, bird feathers, etc. Each accessory detailed in such attire like the *Usobo* is carefully thought out and it has special meaning.



Crown



Walking Stick



Shoe & Cap

Accessories adorned as part of Usobo apparel

Meanings of Colours and Symbols on Usobo Apparel

Various colours and symbols such as *nsibidi* writings and motifs are all aesthetically enshrined in the *Usobo* attire to denote the wearer's personal self-worth, occupation, social and economic value, etc. The Efik people are known to beautifully blend varieties of colours and symbols with the *Usobo* attire to convey meanings. Such stylistic mix of colours and symbols is fundamental in the the *Usobo* apparel because it represents an individual's status in the community. Chief Essien notes that *Usobo* apparel which features the *ukara* wrapper with *nsibidi* inscription on it is worn as a symbol of royalty and can only be worn by chiefs or kings. He further states that "the *ukara*" wrapper distinguishes members of the Ekpe society from non-members in traditional functions like festivals or *Obong*'s coronation. Effiong affirms that colours and symbols on the *Usobo* attire enrich the culture of the Efik as they attract people's attention, create aesthetic appeal and give pride to the wearers. The white coloured shirt worn on top of the *Usobo* attire signifies cleanliness, sincerity and purity of the Efik people.

The apparel bearing pieces of insignia is not just worn to justify a man's need for clothing, but it is carefully selected because it portrays meanings. *Okpomkpom*, which is an integral part of *Usobo* apparel, is often hung on the neck as a means of protection against evil occurrences. The walking stick (*esan*) that is held by the wearers of *Usobo* is a mark of authority. More so, cowry shells, which are attached to *Usobo* attire or worn as *Usobo* accessories, symbolize nobility.

Impact of Modernization on the Efik Traditional Dress

A key feature of any modern society is the presence and manifestation of modernization and globalization concepts on the indigenous traditional beliefs and practices. It is usually typified by the exchange of ideas, clash of cultures and spread of materialistic values. The impact of modernization on Efik traditional dress pattern cannot be overemphasized because it has an enormous sway on how people think, act and behave. A respondent explained that Western culture has tremendously impacted on the traditional society of the Efik both positively and negatively.

Using the dress as a case in point, the Efik have positively benefited from modernization because it has presented the people with modern and improved methods of body adornment. For instance, the modern *Usobo* attire is made up of beautifully woven foreign fabrics such as the wrapper tied around the waist and a long white piece of cloth hung on the neck (*Akpomkpom*). These foreign designs were introduced in modern period to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the *Usobo* dress.



Personal Interview with some respondents

On the negative impact of modernization on Efik dressing pattern, some aspects of Efik culture have been neglected. Efik traditional attires have in most instances been abandoned and replaced with European modes of dressing either by design or accident. Using himself as a case study, Andem (a respondent) explains that in most cases, he has been mockingly referred to as “Obong Ekpe”, which literal translation is 'an elder in the Ekpe society'. This mockery occurs whenever he dresses in his *Usobo* apparel to church. Such occurrence goes to show the wrong perception of most Christians towards the indigenous dress pattern of the Efik. Similarly, as a result of acculturation, most Efik indigenes wrongly mix up traditional attires with the modern mode of dressing when appearing in various cultural ceremonies in the present-day.

There have been instances where the indigenous people of Efik kingdom wore jean trousers together with beaded shoes, *okpomkpom* and other traditional dress accessories instead of the indigenous blended wrappers which accompany the *Usobo* attire. By so doing, the Efik have imbibed the Western culture and have appropriated it so much that it has now become part and parcel of their dress culture.

Significance of *Usobo* in Efik Traditional Ceremonies

In Nigerian societies, dress and dressing constitute a person's form of identity. It upholds the values and the very ideal connected with defining self and, a way of understanding cultural diversity. Festive events in the Efik land are worth watching because of the brightness and glamour of the indigenous outfit. The Efik people strictly follow their ancestral traditions and customs, especially their cultural dressing. Efik traditional ceremonies such as weddings, festivals, burials, and religious gatherings are not complete without the array of their dress culture such as wearing of *Usobo* apparel. Essien stresses that *Usobo* dress culture dates back to antiquity as this is visible in archaeological and ethnographic records, which had

spanned many decades. The various dressing forms and patterns have ranged from aesthetic nudity among children and slaves to the very lavish and overpowering heavy regalia of the nobles. In Efik kingdom, just like any other ethnic group in Africa, dress contents include beads, clothes, body marks, bangles, anklets, raffia works amongst others. Correspondingly, the *Usobo* apparel, which is one of the Efik's richest ceremonial dress is not complete without being spiced up with the some accessories.

To a varying extent, the adornment of people with *Usobo* apparel in Efik traditional ceremonies is a means to sustain the culture and individual behaviour. Depending on the occasion, the *Usobo* attire can be used to display some sense of belonging and unity amongst the Efik. It is a unifying symbol that help the Efik to identify with their original culture despite the pressure from the 21st Century intrusion of global values into their society.

Conclusion

The Efik people have a rich cultural heritage and *Usobo* attire is an integral part of it. the apparel serves as an identity symbol of the Efik and it is worn by all classes of the Efik people to showcase ethnic loyalty. None of the indigenous ceremonies of the Efik is complete without people wearing the beautiful blend of *Usobo* apparel. This study revealed that the *Usobo* apparel has been greatly impacted by Western culture. Some cultural elements and accessories that make the *Usobo* attire unique have been negatively and positively impacted upon, but the negative impact is more pronounced. This occasioned the recommendations made below.

Recommendations

It is recommended in this study that urgent measures should be taken to ensure the continued use of *Usobo* apparel as a symbol of ethnic identity amongst the Efik. This can be accomplished through the institutionalization of a compulsory cultural day across primary, secondary and tertiary schools in Efik communities where the sartorial brilliance of the *Usobo* attire will be on full display. When this is done, the cultural values of the Efik will be promoted and preserved for posterity.

In order to avoid cultural extinction, there is an urgent need for cultural restoration in the Efik communities through sensitization. This is to minimize Western indoctrination threatening the Efiks' cultural practices, which include dress. Without preserving *Usobo* clothing style, the Efiks stand the chance to lose this medium of cultural identity. Hence, the need to encourage the continuous production and use of the *Usobo* apparel.

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List of Informants

Name	Age	Occupation	Date	Place of interview
Essien, Out	65	Businessman	January 7, 2022	Henshaw Town, Calabar
Edet, Ibok	42	Civil servant	December 27, 2021	Ikot Ishie Town, Calabar
Effiong, Effanga	46	Trader	January 3, 2022	Creek Town Odukpani
Orok, Okon	70	Member Etubom Council	December 20, 2021	Okoyong, Odukpani
Eneyo, Andem	66	Farmer	December 28, 2021	Duke Town, Calabar South
Essien Effanga	61	Trader	January 5, 2022	Big Qua Town, Calabar