

AJESIDE DRESS OF GBAGYI PEOPLE IN THE FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY (FCT): CHANGES AND CONTINUITY

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Introduction

Dress is an important component of our daily lives. Through clothing, individuals establish their sense of self as well as their place in the society. Dress provides a mark of identity through which non-verbal messages are communicated in our traditional society. It also functions as a language that can indicate person's age, gender, marital status, place of origin and social status.

Viewed from another perspective, traditional dress is the ensemble of garments, jewelry, and accessories rooted in the past that is worn by an identifiable group of people. Though slight changes over time in color, form, and material are acknowledged, the assemblage seems to be handed down unchanged from the past. Traditional dress or costume is a phrase used widely both by the general public and writers on dress. It conjures up images of rural people dressed in colorful, layered, exotic clothing from an idealized past in some faraway places.

Nigeria, a multi-ethnic as well as multi-lingual society, is endowed with rich culture in terms of dressing; different ethnic group is defined by its own dressing and dressing style based on such factors as geographical location, weather and religion. In most cases, the pattern of dressing defines not only one's worth but also his identity. In fact, cloth and dress have been described as a mirror of the culture of the people in any society (Perani & Wolff, 1999: 25). They symbolize the practices of the society, bounded by the same geographical location, sharing the same cultural values. In the cultural context, cloth serves basic needs as clothing and shelter (Payne, 1965). "Beyond basic role in shelter and protection, cloth and dress have overlapping mediating functions including measurement of self and personal worth; indicator of occupation; measurement of social value; standard of economic value; definition and negotiation of political power; religious signifier and repository of supernatural powers; indicator of culture and change" (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 28).

In contemporary Nigerian societies, the adorning or covering of the body is 'manifested in many ways, individuals clothe themselves with wrappers, tunics, headgears, footgear, and other coverings' (Eicher, 1972: 517).

Although women dress to cover nakedness, their dressings are also used to beautify their bodies, show group cultural heritage, and are also recognized as markers of life stages in the society. Thus, women's dressings can be analyzed as a type of body language that speaks to particular orientations and identities.

The Gbagyi people of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja are known for their unique attire which sets them apart from the others. This is known as *Ajesude*, a deep blue, tie and dye clothe with designs on them. It is made from local cotton, traditionally woven by women before dyeing. The evolutionary trend of this culture suggests that despite modernization pressures, the culture has remained albeit, with noticeable changes.

This paper therefore looks at *Ajesude* as a traditional dress of Gbagyi people of FCT from the standpoint of who wears it, how it is worn, when it is worn and the changes that have affected the use of it.

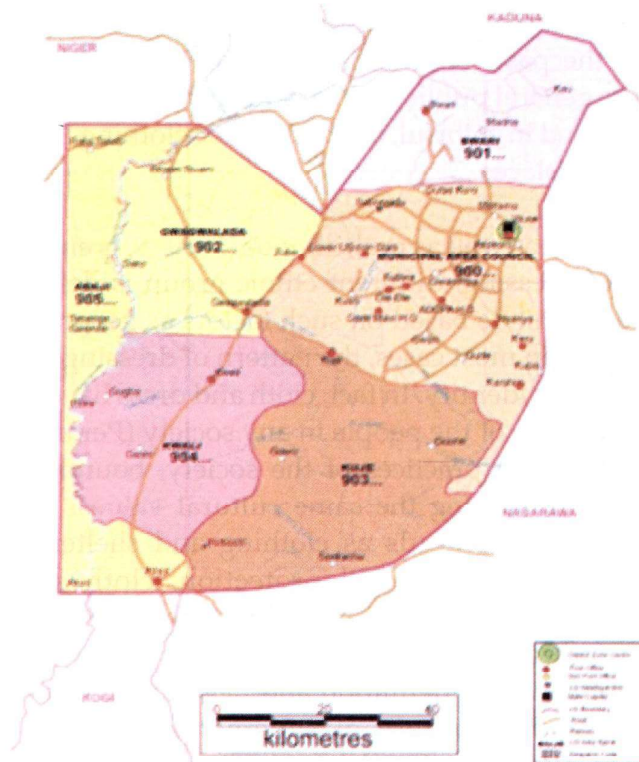


Fig. 1: The Gbagyi (Gwari) Speaking People of the FCT

Source: Ozioma, Ofobruku & Okafor (2017). Manpower development and employee's performance: Qualitative Assessment of SME in Abuja. *Journal of Economics, Management and Trade*, vol. 18

Definition of Terms

Dress: Dress as defined by Barnes and Ericer in Byfield (2004) is a comprehensive term for direct body changes as tattoos and hairstyle and items added such as clothing and jewelry. Dress is an important component of our daily lives.

Cloth/clothing: According to the World Book Encyclopedia (Vol. 4), clothing includes garments, accessories and ornaments, and evolved around 100,000 years ago. From the earliest times, early humans used clothing to look better, cover themselves from the weather elements and establish identity. The earliest clothing was probably animal skin, used for warmth, and wearing the skin of a ferocious predator, could have been used as a signal of the hunting prowess of the wearer. Clothes are a source of information about historical events and ethnological origins.

Tradition: This simply refers to a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance which originated from the past. In essence, it is "an inherited or established way of thinking, feeling or doing: a cultural feature preserved or evolved from the past" (Green, 1997; Shils, 2001)

Traditional Dress: Traditional dress is an ensemble of garments, jewelry, and accessories rooted in the past that is worn by an identifiable group of people. Such dress embodies the culture and belief system of such people. Traditional dress is usually graceful and says a lot about the history and cultures of the people.

Wearing traditional ethnic clothes in festivals is a way of showing love, respect, and regard to each other along with acknowledging the traditional values that have been passing on to one generation from the other.

The Gbagyi People

Gbagyi are peaceful people, agriculturalists, artists and Nupoid- speaking people living in North-Central geo-political zone of Nigeria. The word Gbagyi refers to both the people and their language. Like many ethnic groups in Nigeria, the early history of the people is not clear mainly due to the paucity of historical documentation. However, according to oral tradition, the first settler was a hunter who went to hunt in Paikokun land, a thick forest in Abuja. Paikokun was the name of the mountain where the first settler inhabited. Other sources have it that the people migrated from the Middle-East and later settled in the Borno area of the present-day Nigeria. From there, they further migrated south west wards to parts of Hausa land

particularly Kano and Zaria. It was further gathered that that the Gbagyi were living with the Koro in Bornu and when the Kanuri drove them out, they scattered into Kano and Zaria provinces. Though oral traditions, like other sources have several limitations as reliable sources of history, based on the recorded oral history of the people, it appears that the people migrated from the northern part of the country particular Bornu and Hausa land. After series of migrations, they arrived at their present locations. The causes and the pattern of the migrations could have been as a result of population pressure, succession disputes, trade, and other social cultural and political reasons. The people's cultural developments especially their technology could have been enhanced or influenced through such migrations and inter-group relations. Presently, the Gbagyi are mainly found in parts of the central Nigeria particularly in states like Kaduna, Niger, Nassarawa, Kogi, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. In the Federal Capital Territory, the Gbagyi are the dominant ethnic group. The main Gbagyi settlements include Gwarimpa, Garki, Karu, Kurudu, Jikwoyi, Dutse, Idu, Bwari, Takushara, Dobi and Kwali.

Being predominantly farmers, they are found in almost all the major settlements in the territory. In terms of occupational activities, the Gbagyi are famous for their farming activities. The main crops they cultivate are yams, maize and guinea corn. Apart from farming, the people are also known for the production of arts and crafts such as blacksmithing, weaving of straws into mats, textiles, carving and pottery. As people whose economic mainstay was, and is still centered on farming, iron working was and is still very central to the economic and cultural developments of the people. Iron implements such as hoes, cutlasses, axes, sickles and several other tools are used by the people for farming activities.

A unique feature of the Gbagyi woman is the placing of loads on their shoulder; this is because they believe the head represents the king of the entire body and so should not be disturbed. They also believe that the load feels lighter when carried on the shoulder. Their main religion is Knunu, which they believe protects them from the evil that exists in the community. They worship the Knunu by offering fowl and beer as a sacrifice to a special tree found deep in the forest.

Ajesude Dress of the Gbagyi People

Gbagyi people are known for their unique attire which differentiates them from others. This attire has been a symbol of identification for the Gbagyi race. It is popularly known as '*Ajesude*'. It is usually woven, traditionally tied around the breast by the female. In this mode of dressing, the ladies tie

wrappers above their breasts without blouses. *Ajesude* is popularly worn by females but these days men are found using it to sew trouser and top.

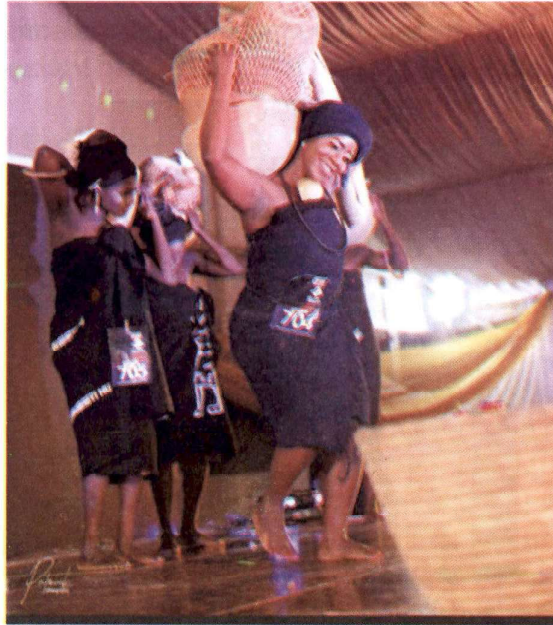


Fig. 2: Ajesude being adorned by women (Doris Dan)

An excerpt from an interview revealed that there are different types of *Ajesude*.

- *Awaja*- this is mostly worn by men and it comes with wool at the edges.
- *Abubuje*- this type comes with designs and it is woven in pieces and then joined together like the Yoruba *aso-oke*



Fig. 3: Abubuje Patterned Cloth Design

Ways of Adorning *Ajesude*

The *Ajesude* is worn in different ways according to the wearer's age, for example:

- a. Aged women- this category of people tie the *Ajesude* on their waist and they tie it in front.



Fig. 4: Image of how old women wear *Ajesude*

- b. Married Woman – Married women tie the *Ajesude* on the chest, the difference between married women and young girls is the wearing of beads. Unmarried girls wear beads on their waist; the beads are called *afunko*, an equivalent of *ajegede* in Igbo.



Fig. 5: Young lady adorning *Ajesude*

- a. Young girls and ladies- They tie *Ajesude* from the chest, above the breast and it is held on the left, reason being that Gbagyis are known to be clean, and neat people. For example, while working or cooking, they use their right hand, in case they need to adjust, they will not use the same right hand to adjust the wrapper but the left.

Significance of the Colour

As revealed by one of the interviewees, the colour found in *Ajesude* is symbolic and significant. According to her, black color signifies strength and hard work. This is because the Gbagyi are hardworking farmers who cultivate yam, corn, rice, etc.

Production Technique

The production of *Ajesude* attire is long rooted in their culture; they are produced from locally sourced materials ranging from cotton, local silk and dye, and are commonly hand woven by women. The equipment for weaving is basically the loom which according to Ishaq (2014) is classified into two types namely, the horizontal and vertical looms. These loom's parts are crafted by the cloth weavers themselves, the other parts such as pulley, tensioning iron-rod are made by blacksmith, while the shuttle, wooden post, breast beam, sledges and wooden plates are made by carpenters.

The Gbagyi as it is done in other Northern parts of Nigeria use large scale dyeing pits. Places are set aside for dye-pits. According to Idowu (2011), termites hand earths called *eka*, mixed with mud is used to plaster the wall and floor of the pit, firewood and grasses are filled into the pit before fire is set into the pit to burn for a period of 3-4 hours, after which the debris of the firewood and ashes are cleared out of the pit, ready for dyeing. The dye pit is called *Osingbo*, while the plant from where dye is derived is called *Osin*. The back of the *Osin* plant called *Agule* is cut, and the root dug out, both are pounded and soaked in water, after which it is poured into the pit before dyeing takes place. After dyeing, the fabric comes in plain navy blue and the design is then drawn on it.

Changes and Continuity

There is a serious decline in the production of indigenous attire which is not unconnected to various types of cheap factory woven fabrics, government policies which do not favour local industries, urban drift which has made youth move away from rural communities in search of better living. Pits for dyeing are now being replaced with large drums/ plastics containers, the dye are now replaced with imported dyes. Today, however, modern factory manufactured fabrics have displaced the indigenous ones because of their

availability, lower cost of production and availability of more producers. This is confirmed by Makinde (2009) who observed that the introduction of cotton cloth and modern style garments in the early 20th Century changed the consumption patterns, creating stiff competition for the indigenous attires and industries.

They now prefer to wear a white blouse on the wrapper, while the men prefer to sew the *Ajesude* to wear on a trouser. However, on festivals, most of the participants prefer to return to the traditional mode of dressing. Now, some people are against these traditional modes of dressing, feeling that they are indecent. This feeling of indecency is rather misplaced as nothing suggests so in the *Ajesida* mode of dressing.

In this mode of dressing, the ladies tie wrappers above their breasts without blouses. On the other hand, the men wear what is called *Abache*. This piece of clothing looks like underwear except that it crosses in-between the gonads, exposing each part of the buttocks. The men literally have their butts out. With civilization and globalization, it has become rare to see the ladies with just their coverings. They now prefer to wear a white blouse on the wrapper, while the men prefer to sew the *Ajesude* to wear on a trouser.

Conclusion

The change in patterns and trends in the making and adorning of the *Ajesude* is a reflection of the impact of civilization and cultural imperialism. A traditional clothing pattern ought not to be abandoned. There is absolutely nothing 'indecent' about the dressing or anything inferior about the clothing. Rather, it is a complex problem arising from the unrestrained acceptance of western civilization. This leaves the study to advocate for sustenance of indigenous clothing culture as one way of portraying Nigerian identity. The traditional institutions have a significant part to play in this direction.

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List of Informants

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1	Doris Dan	25	Media Personality	Abuja
2	Zainab Usman	43	Trader	Abuja
3	Mary Sule	45	Trader	Abuja