

## **Nigerian Dress Culture: A Linguistic and Anthropological Communication Tool**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper tries to put forward a linguistic and an anthropological approach to the promotion of Nigerian dress culture in corporate institutions. Linguistic anthropology is a twin discipline which is concerned with the study of human society. It examines culture in its totality – traditions, customs, language, dress, artifacts and technology, together with human social behaviour and relationships. Dress culture belongs to the sub-division of anthropology called ethnology, which looks at cultures in their traditional forms, and in their adaptation to the changing conditions in the modern world. The author tries to find out whether dress culture can be seen as a system of communication that functions just like any language functions. To answer this research question the author therefore explores dress culture in its ramifications – ethnic/ national ceremonial dress, occasional/ festival dress, corporate/professional dress, religious / ritual dress, political dress, the interpretations of colours, and the role of dress culture in the promotion of national identity. Although this is a review paper which does not involve participants it however has a well- articulated method of data collection and analysis. It was found that Semiotics, the science of signs and significations, which is the study of symbols and their communicative meanings, has made dress culture an interesting and intriguing mode of communication. Dress is symbolic, iconic and symptomatic, and it is open to diverse interpretations and meanings. Dress code in corporate institutions, just like any symbolic language, speaks volume. The paper concludes that dress culture is both a linguistic and an anthropological communication tool. It is suggested that Nigerian dress culture must be sensitive to people's taste, convenience, style, sex, religious belief, and must consider climatic or weather conditions and modernity if it is to promote true national identity.*

**Keywords:** Anthropology, ethnology, semiotics, ethnography, iconic, symptomatic, symbolism, emblematic, rituals, dress culture/code.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper is on the linguistic and anthropological aspects of dress culture as a veritable communication tool. The author posits that dress culture is a non-verbal communication system that is just like any language system in the society. The paper illustrates the semiotic aspects; the symbolic, iconic and symptomatic nature of dress culture. The main objective of the paper is to show how dress culture in corporate institutions can be emblematic, and how it could be a tool for the promotion of national integration and unity. Although this is a review

paper, its methodology is nonetheless analytical. It has a theoretical framework and data elicitation method, data analysis and interpretation. The major concepts or terms which the paper discussed are: dress, clothing, costumes, dress culture, dress code, colours, linguistic anthropology, semiotics, rituals, the politics and economics of dress culture and dress as a form of paralanguage.

Dress or clothing is a kind of garment worn by people of all cultures since pre-historic times. Different peoples of the world have their unique dress culture. The materials used for making dresses range from cotton, wool, silk fabric to flax fabric and rubber. Dresses that people in all cultures wear are determined by a number of factors. The main factor that has determined, and is still determining, the variety of clothes in different times and locations, is climate (Braun, 2005). In Nigeria for instance, we have the rainy season and the dry season, with their characteristic cold and hot temperature. Dress culture therefore has to bow to the prevailing weather condition. Dress culture has also been affected by changing styles or fashion in vogue. Other factors that influence the dress that people wear are the availability of materials, cost of materials, technology of the period, peoples' social status, human migration, religious tradition, assimilation of various traditions, social cosmopolitan outlook or modernity, travels and perhaps colonization, conversion and nationalism.

## **2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Dress Culture**

Culture, according to Dada (2011:134), quoting Andah (1982), is “all the material and non-material expressions of a people as well as the processes with which the expressions are communicated”. It is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment. Ayodele (2006:18) says “culture is the soul, anchor... and identity for stability and change”. It is a veritable tool used for bringing change and meaning to people's day-to-day-living. Adesina and Adetoro (2000) believe that culture gives order and meaning to the socio-economic, political, religious and value system of a people. Obafemi (2011:12) asserts that culture summarizes and reflects life's very essence in economy, politics and sociology. He avows that “dress culture harmonizes, unites and integrates a people”. “Dress helps to define human character, essence, particularities and disparities”. It “marks out vocations, professions and engagements”. According to him, cloths have ancestral and spiritual values, and are regarded with veneration. Dress is used to support the moral and ideological postulations of religious institutions. Dress portrays common lineage linkages, and can be used for competitions. Dresses can mark generational or age differences. They also mark or represent ancestorship, socio-economic and political class, and religious conviction.

Utoh-Ezeajugh (2011:22), supporting Obafemi's view point, says that “dress defines all the effects employed by man to physically distinguish himself in society”. She believes that dress is a form of non-verbal communication which gives mental clues to a person's social identity. Dress to her is a “form of semiotic distinction which can be translated into a language of signs, symbols and iconography” which communicates meanings about a people in a non-verbal way. Utoh-Ezeajugh asserts that dress provides external covering for the body. It also conveys information about “historical and cultural landmarks, philosophical concepts, political thoughts, religious orientation and moral values”. Writing on the history of Nigerian traditional dress culture, she states that “geographic location and inter-ethnic and inter-racial

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interactions” are responsible for the emergence of dress cultures of many Nigerian ethnic groups.

In Sociology culture is the belief, behaviors, language and people’s entire way of life. Culture includes customs, ceremonies, works of arts, dress, inventions, technology and people’s traditions. Culture distinguishes human beings from other animals. Social anthropologists are interested in how cultures emerge and develop. They enquire into the social conditions behind different cultures, and in doing so they examine the ways that norms and values operate as guides to human behavior. In any society there are sub-groups with beliefs, attitudes, customs, and other forms of behaviors differing from those of the dominant society, while at the same time being related to it. The concept refers to minority groups such as ethnic minorities, religious and social groups. Sub-cultures created by such groups serve to provide recompense for the fact that their members are viewed as outsiders by the mainstream society. Characteristics of these sub-cultures, such as forms of dressing, language, traditions, are emphasized to create and maintain a distinction from the dominant culture. The distinction may represent a pride of identity. The sub-cultures like those of the drug users, armed robbers, touts, cultists, the gay, have their idiosyncrasies. Their dress culture is peculiar and odd.

## **2.2. Anthropology and Dress Culture**

Dress culture can be viewed from linguistic and anthropological perspectives. Social anthropology is the study of human social life or human society, and it is concerned with examining social behaviour and relationships. Cultural anthropology examines culture that is the people’s learnt and transmitted belief and standards of behaviour, and in particular, meanings, values, and codes of conduct. Dress culture is very important, and it is one of the major issues in linguistic anthropology. Ethnology, or cultural anthropology, is one of the four sub-divisions of anthropology. Dress is an aspect of culture which belongs to linguistic anthropology. Ethnography, the observational branch of ethnology, investigates and describes all aspects of culture, including food, shelter and dress (Redmond, 2008). Language is an aspect of culture. Many developments in social and cultural anthropology have been influenced by ideas, concepts and models derived from linguistics.

## **2.3. Dress Culture in Corporate Institutions**

Nigeria dress culture differs from one place to another based on ethnicity, religious affiliation, occupation, profession, socio-political associations and economic groupings. The law court, the church, the mosque, the military and the professional guilds have their different dress culture. The financial houses like the banks and insurance houses have their dress code. Students in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions also have their dress code. We also have traditional and royal dress code. The Emirs, the Obong, the Owelle, the Oba, have their regalia comprising their robes, caps and staff of office

Corporate institutions are organizations shared by all the members of a group. There are organizations that are recognized by law as single unit, such as banks, academic institutions, insurance companies, media organizations, the law court, hospitals and the military and paramilitary. These institutions have different dress culture called corporate dressing. Dressing code in these establishments has different functions or purposes. It makes the organization

unique, as it marks out the workers or members as distinct from others. It makes the members look decent and pleasing to the eyes. It makes the institution neat, orderly and beautiful. It encourages a sense of belonging or we-feelings. It helps in building moral discipline, and makes the wearer of the dress more responsible. It makes it easy to identify those who do not belong. It helps in crime control. It reduces immorality, indecency, licentiousness and idiosyncratic behaviour. It promotes integration and national identity. Most of the dresses worn in these institutions are not completely indigenous; some belong to some foreign culture.

### **3.0 FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

#### **3.1. Semiotics and Dress Culture**

Semiotics, a branch of linguistic anthropology, according to Olaoye (2008), is the science of signs and signification which has influenced anthropologists to view dress culture as a system of communication. The two major founders of semiotics or semiology are the American philosopher C.S. Peirce and the Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. They based their theories on the fundamental distinction in the sign between the signifier and the signified. Dress culture as the signifier symbolizes many things or means many things. The meanings embodied in the dress culture are the signified. Dress is symbolic, and it could be iconic. This means that signs bear some resemblance to their referents. For instance, flamboyant dressing symbolizes festive mood, joyous occasion while black or dark dress is a sign of sorrow, sadness, mournful occasion, funeral or something to do with death. Dress is also indexical. An indexical sign fulfils its function by pointing out its referent. For instance, smoke is an index of fire. An indexical sign is regarded as symptomatic. The white Baptismal dress is symptomatic of holiness. Dress culture conveys all kinds of meanings; it is an aspect of sociolinguistics which requires skills, knowledge and social tact in interpreting and decoding.

Symbolism, according to Barnerjee (2005), is the use of symbols to convey different meanings. Symbols could be objects, words, colours or patterns or dress, all of which stand for something other than their intrinsic property. For instance, while there is nothing intrinsically dangerous about red colour, it has become a symbol for danger in a number of societies. In human history, symbols have been used to express ideas, to communicate meanings, and to convey emotions. Ethnographers often pay attention to the way symbols are used and the meanings that they convey. Social anthropologists have examined the relationship between the structure of ritual symbols and the creation of social solidarity which dress culture promotes. Although symbols can be ambiguous, as they convey different meanings to different individuals and groups, they, however, enable people to have common allegiance to the same symbols such as the national flag, the national anthem, the Nigerian coat of arms and other emblems.

According to Umukoro (2011:68) “the Nigerian dress is a cultural icon” and that Nigeria is a conglomeration of ethnic enclaves that are accounted for in both material and human culture. Although the distinctiveness of each ethnic group is ubiquitous, it is in the uniqueness of their dress cultures that their identity is most powerfully expressed. Nigerian dress is a “multi-vocal collage”, by which she means a variegated communication art form which speaks just like languages do. She concludes that Nigerian dress, “predisposed to regional nuances”, is seen as an “autochthonous feature” that not only signals the group to which it belongs but is

also considered “anthropomorphic in disposition”. Nigerian dress is emblematic. It assumes the image of a “visual shibboleth” by which she means that dress is indexical and iconic. She concludes that Nigerian dress is “an idiosyncratic symbol” which could promote national interest by fostering the spirit of national consciousness and integration.

### **3.2 Dress Culture as Rituals**

Dress culture, particularly dress code, is a ritual culture that dates back to the time of creation. Ritual, Woodburn (2005) asserts, is a particular type of formal performance or activity in which the participants carry out relatively stereotyped actions, and make series of relatively standardized statements largely prescribed by custom and sanctioned by precedent. Rituals have congregation, like members of organization or institutions or corporate groups, who participate – who dance, sing, kneel or bow or join in prayer and other standardized utterances. The congregations see rituals as very serious affairs which do not merely communicate but also accomplish both personal and communal objectives through the intervention of gods or spirits.

Rituals require conformity to dress culture. The ritual initiates go through all kinds of nerve-racking, psychological phases. The dress code, style and colours are imposed on the neophytes who are subjected to various ordeals as tests of endurance, masculinity, decorum, discipline, bravery, valour and virility. Rituals have important socio-political objectives. They tend to maintain political differentiation in order to invest the powers that be with sanctified legitimacy, and to maintain political inequality.

### **3.3 Ritual Ceremonies:**

Dress culture is exemplified in the following ceremonies:

- Coronation and other installation rituals. Here special dress code is mandatory as it sanctifies, defines and legitimizes transfer of power and authority.
- Marriage and other life-cycle rituals. These rituals bless, mark out, and sanction significant transitions in the lives of individuals. Children and adolescents pass through rite de passage with colourful dresses.
- Initiation rituals. The Christian Baptism, Confirmation, the Holy Orders such as Priesthood and Knighthood, and the royal orders like the chieftaincy, call to the bar, all involve investitures symbolized by special dress code, with perhaps staff of office in political rituals.
- Graduation ceremonies in academic institutions. These require academic gown and cap of different styles and colours.
- Hunter’s obsequies (funeral rituals). These require a dress code. Hunters wear dresses of variegated colours, and are often festooned with raps of charms, amulets, animal parts, insects and birds’ parts.
- Ordinary burial ceremonies also require dress code. “Aso Ebi” known as “And co”, that is a common uniform worn by participants at burial ceremonies, is a cultural common denominator.
- Traditional religious rituals, such as Sango, Oya, Osun, Ifa festivals also conform to dress culture.

### **3.4 Dress Culture and Colours**

Dress culture prescribes colours, shape and style, and all these have to be followed religiously. Nigeria's national colours, as shown in the national flag, are green and white. Different countries have different national colours which are marks of identity. Corporate institutions, organizations, ethnic groups, religious and socio-cultural and political groups have their colours. There are also universal colours with almost universal meanings or interpretations. White, for instance, is a colour of purity and holiness. Red is a symbol of blood, danger or death, while black colour symbolizes evil, devilment or even death. Green symbolizes peace, freshness, productivity, life or agriculture. Ritual ceremonies prescribe colours to be observed and adhered to, as a matter of course. White is the dress colour used for Christian Baptism, Confirmation, First Holy Communion and church weddings. Knighthood requires a combination of black, white or green colours. Graduation caps and gowns, with the hood, come in different colours.

According to Rev. Abifarin (2002), priesthood, as a sacred institution, requires white cloth as a major dress. The Christian (Catholic) Holy Mass and other Masses are said with the use of dresses of different colours depending on the liturgical calendar and other ecumenical doctrines. Most of the cloths used for dressing church altars such as the corporal, the purificator, the pall, are white, all representing purity. The dress put on by the Catholic Reverend Fathers, Christian Pastors, and the clerics in general, is white. We have such cloths as the Miter (a long, crown-like cap) worn by the Pope, Cardinals, Arch-bishops and Bishops. The Catholic Church also has the Cassocks, Surplice, Amice, Alb, Cincture, Stole, Chasuble, Cope, Humeral Veil and all other priesthood vestments made of different colours (Abifarin, Rev. Fr.2000). White chasuble stands for joy and purity of soul, and is used during Christmas, Easter and Memorials. Red chasuble stands for fire and blood, and is used at Pentecost in commemoration of the coming down of the Holy Spirit on the twelve disciples in form of tongues of fire. It is also used on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Green chasuble symbolizes hope and growth, and it is used on Sundays and ordinary days for mass. Gold chasuble stands for Gold, and it is multi-purpose. It may be substituted with white, red or green chasuble. Violet chasuble stands for penance, humility and expectancy, and it is worn during Advent/Lent and funeral masses (Abifarin, 2002). Colours are symbolic in dress culture. The traditional religious worshipers wear different colours. The Osun (goddess of river) priest and their followers wear white dress symbolizing purity, virility, peace, fecundity or fruitfulness. Sango (god of Iron and thunder) worshipers wear red and black dress. Ifa (god of divination) priest and worshipers wear white dress too. In Nigerian sports festival, the colour of sportswear is the national colour, Green and White, though different participants wear their sponsors' colours. At wedding, guests are enjoined to wear the prescribed dress code colours as stipulated in the wedding invitation cards. These colours for the bride and bridegroom are prescribed by the celebrants. The talked – about “Aso Ebi”, (ethnic/lineage/clan/socio-cultural common uniform) is a symbol of common ancestry, or that of solidarity, fellowship, friendship, brotherhood, social camaraderie, ethnic affinity and political alliance or identity.

In dress culture, colours, shapes and styles are sometimes based on status or rank. Dress colours are therefore a form of communication system. Colours speak volume. The dresses worn by the armed forces are graded according to ranks. The colour of their dress is also not the same. The colours and styles of the dress code engender reciprocal respects. The soldiers

wear green dress while the navy wears blue. The air force wears brown. Seniority is detected by the shade of whiteness, greenness, blueness or brownness of the officers' dresses and the colour of the epaulette. All these promote discipline and esprit de corps. The university graduands wear academic caps and gowns with hoods, while the matriculating students wear no hood. Dress culture therefore promotes a culture of seniority based on achievement and desire for success. It is a motivating culture. Students in the primary and secondary schools also conform to dress culture. Students' uniforms are based on levels – the senior secondary school (SSS) level and the junior secondary school (JSS) level. The colour and styles mark out the distinction. The quality of the cloths used also differs. The SSS students' uniform is far superior. This dress culture encourages hard work. School uniforms distinguish one school from another, and students guard their uniform jealousy as it is a mark of identification. Knights also wear uniform that is graded in quality style and colour according to their ranks. The higher a knight goes in rank or status the more prestigious and colourful becomes his uniform and cap including his hood and epaulette.

### **3.5 Corporate Dress Culture.**

Cultural dresses of the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other ethnic groups in Nigeria are the quintessence of a truly Nigerian culture. The Hausa caftan, the Igbo trousers and long silk top, and the Yoruba Dansiki, Buba and Soro, and Agbada are really identity markers. Corporate institutions however have not fully embraced Nigerian dress culture in their dress code. While many still embrace foreign culture, some are trying to adapt. Corporate institutions should try to promote Nigerian culture by providing their staff with dresses or uniforms that are purely Nigerian in style, fashion and materials. Their dress code should however accommodate people's religion, ethnicity, taste, sex, climatic conditions and modernity.

School uniforms should be gender – sensitive, smart, fitting and weather compliant. Dresses for Nigerian cultural troupes, sportsmen and women, should be smart, decent, culture compliant and nationalistic in colour and design. Uniforms for the armed forces can also be adapted to portray Nigerianess. Nigerian dresses for corporate institutions should not be flamboyant or too ornate, but simple yet elegant. Dress attachments like jewelry, epaulette, caps, beret, belts, should be moderate, decent, not too heavy, and must not exhibit colour riot.

### **3.6 Politics of Dress Culture**

Dress culture, Ojah (2011) asserts, is a tool for cultural diplomacy. It is a sociolinguistic and political tool for advertising a nation to the world. For instance the Nigerian Festival of Arts and Culture called FESTAC '77 is a cultural diplomatic tool for the promotion of Nigerian dress culture abroad. Exhibition of Nigerian dress culture also promotes national and international trade, particularly in "Adire" fabric. The mass media with Nigerian indigenous dress cultural contents put Nigeria on the world map. Mohammed (1991), writing on the cultivation of cultural links with Africans in the diaspora, opines that Nigerian dress can be used for preserving, promoting and presenting Nigerian dress to the world. Ben-Iheanacho (2011) also believes that the way one dresses is the way one is addressed, and that a dress is a political symbol which makes a political statement. Rev.Fr. Kukah (2007:11) had earlier asserted that a people's dress is a part of its culture where "culture is a tool for survival". Ben-Iheanacho also posits that "culture is the root of life" while "dress is the umbrella and royal diadem". For her, dress is a symbol of power and charisma. Dress sign-posts economic

wealth and status; it makes a political statement. Elaborate dress confers presence and respect. Dress is a critical tool in the symbolically rich world of politics. Maiwada (2008) also shares the same view with Kukah when he says that although dress is subject to rapidly evolving styles and fashion, it can, however, be made to express everything from material condition to ideological concept. Ejiofor (2011:54) says that dress is used by the Kalabari of Niger Delta State of Nigeria as “mechanism for status distinction for Kalabari men”. The factors that determine the types of dress which men wear are age, group identity and individual self-centered achievements. This is politics of dress culture.

### **3.7 Dress as Paralanguage**

Dress is a type of body language. Flamboyant dress, for instance, communicates something about people’s festive mood, joy, success, great achievement and joyous celebration such as wedding ceremony, birthday, house commissioning, naming ceremony or even political victory. Flamboyant dress is a mark of opulence and royalty. Skimpy dress, on the other hand, portrays poverty, sadness, or mournful feelings. It is put on at burial or funeral ceremonies, and may be accompanied by somber outlook and macabre dance or dance of death. Dress festooned with garlands conveys joyousness, happy or festive mood, while one festooned with raps of amulets and charms represent hunters’ obsequies or saga. It is put on as war apparel or as the spiritual coverings of traditional priests. Half- nude dressing conveys the fashion in vogue, madness of some sort or protests. Dirty or tattered dress is a symbol of poverty, madness, craze or melodrama. Light dressing is for hot weather, while heavy dressing is for cold weather.

Dress functions just the same way a language functions. Dress covers nakedness, beautifies the body, identifies or distinguishes individuals, shows group cultural heritage and expresses human desires, emotions thoughts and aspirations. Any language can carry out these functions too. Therefore a dress is, analogically, a language. Dress communicates a lot of things about the wearer, the on-lookers and the society at large. For instance, indecent dress, according to Ododo (2011), tells something about the wearers’ poverty, poor educational background, socio-psychological condition, religious persuasion, or the wearers’ outrage against some societal norms. Dress also tells something about the wearers’ poor upbringing, lack of parental discipline, and perhaps societal anomie. Dress, like language, can communicate individual thoughts, inner feelings and personal psychological experiences. The way one dresses tells a lot about one’s personality. Dress sends a message to a known and unknown audience. Action speaks louder than words (Owolabi, 2011).

## **4.0 DISCUSSION**

Dress is a non-verbal means of communication. This point has been sufficiently exemplified. A number of sociolinguistic factors which determine one’s dress have been high-lighted and discussed. They include: time of the day, season, social events, religious tradition, economic and political consideration, technology of the period, modernity, colour preferences, societal norms, psychological disposition, level of education, profession, trade, occupation, age, festivals, ritual ceremonies, institutional norms, fashion in vogue and physical environment.

Nigerian dress culture must stand out, and be very distinct either within or outside the shores of the country because dress culture is both a linguistic and an anthropological communication symbol. In fact, Nigeria in the diaspora and Nigerian companies abroad should cultivate the habit of dressing in their native cultural attire, as Nigeria’s worthy

ambassadors. This promotes national identity. All Nigerian establishments and corporate institutions should endeavour to promote Nigerian dress culture. Nigerian government should also create the enabling environment where Nigerian dress culture can thrive by reviving all the ailing indigenous textile manufacturing companies so that better and cheaper Nigerian fabrics will be produced and used.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The paper has analyzed and interpreted the different types and functions of dress from the social, religious, economic, political, sociolinguistic and anthropological perspectives. Dress culture is considered in this paper as a symbol which communicates meanings like languages do. From linguistic and anthropological point of view, Nigerian dress culture in corporate institutions is a semiotic sign. It is a mark of national identity. Dress culture in corporate institutions advertises Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, promotes unity in diversity, encourages a sense of belonging, engenders the spirit of co-operation, helps in instilling discipline, prevents criminal tendencies, and tends to remold and rebrand people. Dress is a non-verbal means of communication. It is emblematic, iconic and indexical. It is a political statement, and a tool for cultural diplomacy. Dress colours are also very important in dress culture as colours are symbolic. Dress is a form of paralanguage, an aspect of body language which sends messages in different directions. It is a veritable communication tool.

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