

## **Exploration of Izon Traditional Colours in Contemporary Nigerian Art Practice**

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### **Abstract**

The Ezon, Izon, Ijo or Ijaw as an ethnic group live mainly in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has a very rich cultural heritage. The Izon colours are a means of mystical messages and religious beliefs, but this art and traditions has almost died out due to the influence of foreign religion and are not understood by contemporary Nigerian artist. The IZONS only have recognition for three major colours which are black, white and red. All other colours fall under the shade of these major colours. These colours are applied in their raw state on traditional art works, masquerade and tattoos on warriors. Little has been known or studied on the rich traditional colours of the IZON. The IZON environment has all the colours but all colours fall under these major colours shade. Application of this ancient colour on contemporary Nigerian painting could achieve better harmony. Practical studio research on the traditional colours will be helpful to contemporary paintings. This will help the traditional IZON colour to be recognized and classification of colours in the IZON scheme to be better understood and other ways of achieving harmony will be recorded. A good understanding of cultural classification of colour will help the artist to apply the right colours for different cultures and good understanding of the people involved.

### **Introduction**

The issue of the origin and migration of the IZON people of Nigeria has evoked unlimited controversies. This was stated in the internet thus;

“In 1906, Major Artor Golyn Leonard listed a number of tribes of the Delta. Then in triangle formed by Num and the Gana-Gana allso outside it to a small extent, both Eastward and Westward dwell the Ijaw the most important tribe in the lower Delta and indeed after the

Ibo in the whole of the southern Nigeria”.

<http://www.ijaw-naa.org/ijaw/home.nun>

It is believed like some other ethnic groups in Nigeria must have migrated from the northern fringes of the Sahara (Sudan) to the Delta Area. The religious beliefs of the Izon people hold that water spirits are like men, and that humans dwell among the water spirits before being born. Each year, the Izon honour in celebration, the water spirit that lasts for days. This was well stated thus:

Central to the festivities is the role of masquerades, in which men wearing elaborate outfits and carved mask dance to the beat of drums and manifest the influence of water spirit through the quality and intensity of their dancing. <http://www.ijaw-naa.org/ijaw/home.nun>

The fishing occupation of the Izon people is reflected in the masquerades with curious mask symbolizing different kinds of fishes, in most cases, the masquerades dance in accordance with the spiritual relationship fish has with man.

The Nigerian contemporary artist use the spectrum of colours to create aesthetic harmony with less importance on the cultural or traditional concept and understanding of colour for the best appreciation of cultural work, the meaning and classification of the audience or the people the works are created for being taken into consideration.

The IZONS have a wide range of art, symbol and mystical form of communication. The religion of the IZONS reflects the environment, culture and occupation of the people.

In the art of the IZONS, colours are means of mystical messages and religious beliefs. Colours are not just for aesthetic but for religious beliefs, communication and symbols. Kandinsky (2002) said:

“different colours means different things in different places. This is extremely important for designers to know because without an awareness of the culture’s significance of a particular colour, you risk your entire target audience.”

This important colour grouping and symbolism of the Izon colour is not well recognized but harmony in painting could be achieved with these colour groupings.

### **Colour Classifications**

Colours are classified into neutral colours which are white and black. The primary colours are yellow, blue and red; then are secondary colours which are orange, purple, green, while the tertiary colours fall into categories of shape of the secondary colours.

Hot colours are colours which have red shapes while cold colours are colours which have white tint and blue shades. These are the universally accepted standard of classification of colours. Colours are also classified according to the predominant shades; for example, red shades of colour are red, orange, alizarin, creamsin purple and pink. Blue shades are blue, purple, Persian blue, light blue, sea blue, combat blue and sky blue.

### **Colour as Symbols**

The effect of colour is received by man as rays of light on the retina. The ray of light interpreted by the understanding of the brain is what colour means to the individual. What some culture see as red may be different from what other culture may understand as red. There are some universal accepted standard of colour symbols.

### **The Izon Colours**

Traditional Izon colours are gotten from tree roots, sea shells and earth. The Isons have recognition for three major colours which are red, black and white; not that other colours do not exist in the colour scheme of the environment of the Izon culture, all other colours are categorized or fall under three major colours. This could be attributed to cultural and religious reasons. Getlein (2002) “most colours could elicit a similar variety of response”

People could respond to colour due to their cultural and emotional conditions. Getlein further states: “we quickly discover that emotional responses to colours are both culturally conditioned and intensely personal”.

The general acceptance of colour as quoted by Okunlola (2010) is as follows:

Red	-	Danger, warning, brevity or disapproval
Blue	-	Love, friendship or sincerity
Yellow	-	Joy, success, hope, light heartedness
Orange	-	Anger, strength, endurance
Purple	-	Femininity, womanhood, royalty
Green	-	Growth, fertility, buoyancy, agriculture
Black	-	Death, sorrow, calamity
White	-	Peace, holiness, purity

Izon colours are used in her traditional art and reflected in her:

Textiles

Painting

Sculpture

Architecture

But in the Izon colours, symbolisms are grouped into the three categories of colours along the three major colours.

Kwa-kwa (red)	-	Strength, power, royalty
Pena-pena (white)	-	Purity, holiness, peace, cleanliness
Dirimo (black)	-	Death, evil, wickedness, witchcraft, secret

In the Izon culture, colours are known or classified as follows:

Kwa-kwa (red)	-	Orange, red, red violet, red orange
Pena-pena (white)	-	White, all light colours, yellow, yellow orange
Dirimo	-	Black, violet, blue, green, purple and all dark colours

In the traditional Izon colours, white and black are regarded as colours because of the colour classification.

This concept of colour was achieved from a long time experience; religious and cultural interpretation of colour symbols. Different cultures have various ways of colour interpretation. Kandinsky (2012) opined thus:

“purple for example is a colour in Thailand. In Western culture however, it is associated with royalty, luxury, wealth and sometimes magic. The brand of colour for Thai Airways is purple. Purple is a colour of mourning in Thailand.

In the western culture, black is a colour of mourning. In Japan however, it is a colour of honour, with white the colour of mourning. Red in West represents danger, live passion. In India, it is a colour of purity; in China, it is a colour of goodluck and in South Africa, it is a colour of mourning. Yellow represents courage in Japan, mourning in Egypt and hope in the West”

Colour affects our mood, our health, our emotions, our well being, our energy, our mind and our spiritual awareness both conscious and subconscious.

This study is carried out to recognize the colours of the Izon, their mode of colour classification, their religious attachment to colours, these colours to create harmony in the coy to use these colours to create harmony in the contemporary Nigerian Art.

Most contemporary Nigerian Artists used various colour schemes in interpreting different Nigerian culture in their paintings without bothering to recognize the traditional colours or colours that best appeal to the culture.

Much has not been written about the traditional Izon colours, their meaning and cultural attachments and symbols. This study is focused on the true colour of people of Izon of Niger Delta and IZONS in Diaspora, how these colours could be used by the contemporary artist to make painting of the Izon culture.

This study is important because it provides the colour perspective of the Izon people and how these colours are generally classified into only three groups of red, white and black colours.

## **Conclusion**

New names have been fashioned to call colours that originally do not exist in Izon language, for example Biluyu is now been used to refer to blue colour. Originally, blue does not exist as colour in Izon on its own, it falls under black (Dirimo).

The use of these Izo colours are done on a practical base in visual arts, the researcher will embark on a fact finding mission by carrying out findings on the use of Izo colours.

The Nigerian Contemporary Artist use a spectrum of colours to create aesthetic harmony with less importance given to the cultural, traditional concept, meaning and understanding of colours for the best appreciation of cultural works. The meaning and classification of the audience or the people the works are created for should be taken into consideration. When works concerning Izo traditional colours are expressed in true Izo colours, it will make understanding easy, this will also contribute to the contemporary Nigerian artist in the expression of ideas, sales of works and Nigerian educational development.

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