

Imperialism and Loss of Identity in Second Hand Clothes: The Nigerian Okrika Experience

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Abstract

The use second hand clothes in Nigerian have been around for decades. Among other benefits it provides is clothing for those who cannot afford to buy new ones and employment opportunities for the teeming population. However, the use of second hand clothes by many Nigerians seems to have eroded the rich cultural heritage of traditional dress culture which hitherto existed among many cultures and societies in the country. It has also paved way for imperialism by former colonial masters thereby, making Nigerians to succumb to pressures dictated by fashion, civilization, modernity, necessity, and survival instinct. This has further helped to forge a relationship of dependency on the West and in many ways preventing Nigeria from developing in many ramifications. This study explores the factors responsible for the continuous use of second hand clothes by Nigerians and the measures that could be put in place to ensure that this problem is addressed. Some of the measures suggested in the paper to forestalling the use of second hand clothes in Nigeria include: enforcing the law prohibiting second hand clothes in the country, import substitution, leadership by example, reducing the prevailing poverty rate and cultivating the spirit of patriotism.

Keywords: *Poverty, Employment Opportunities, Brand Names, Affordability, Durability, Import Substitution, Patriotism.*

Introduction

Nigeria is a country blessed with rich cultural heritage and diverse ethnic firmament with over 250 ethnic groups and languages (Paul, Simons, and Fennig, 2016), but the use of imported second hand clothes by Nigerians has been around for decades. This dates back to the early post-colonial period when ships of used clothes were brought into the Nigerian shores through Okrika, a sea port in Rivers State, Nigeria, thus, the name “Okrika” (meaning

used clothes). Prior to this time, Nigerians were known to dress in their local attires such as that which show-cased various cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the country but, the arrival of European explorers brought with it, the European way of dressing which was over time acculturated into the Nigerian societies and cultures.

The Yoruba cultural group for instance have legendary types of clothes with men appearing in *Buba* and *Sokoto* while women appear in their traditional *Buba* and *Iro* (Steele, 2006 Makinde, Ajiboye and Ajayi 2009, Akinbileje and Igbaro, 2010 and Lawal, 2015). This made the Yorubas' distinct among other cultures around them because they take immense pride in their attire for which they are well known. Among the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria, clothing attire was primarily to conceal private parts, with both men and women appearing in wrappers Achebe (1958), while the Hausas on the other appear in their elaborate flowing gown known as *Babba Rigga* with their women appearing in *wrapper* with a matching blouse and head tie.

Although second hand clothes are a contraband item in Nigeria, it is usually moved into Nigeria illegally from neighbouring countries (Ojomoyela, 2015). It provides massive employment opportunities for the teeming population, since it is a means for many Nigerians to afford this basic necessity. Unfortunately, dumping of second hand clothes in the country by developed countries seem to be a tool of making Nigeria depend on West for her survival. In addition to this, the increasing demand for these clothes seems to have also eroded the rich cultural heritage in Nigerian attires which was traditionally preserved for centuries

It is against this background that, this study explores the factors responsible for the continued increase in demand for second hand clothes among many Nigerians in the country and how this problem can be addressed.

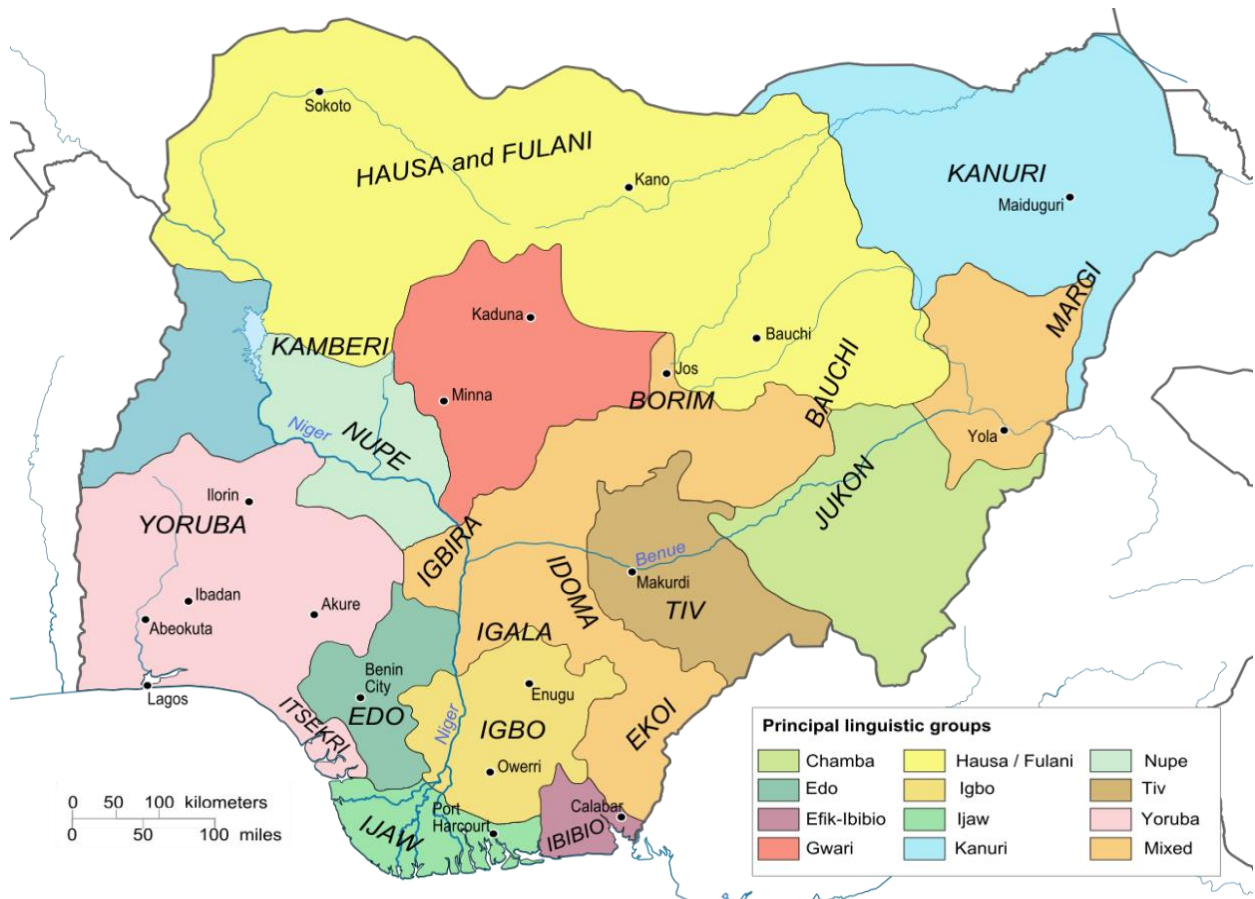


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Diverse Cultures and Languages

Source: https://lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/nigeria_linguistic_1979.

The Genesis of Second Hand Clothes in Nigeria

In the past, second hand clothing from Europe and the North America was an important source of clothing well into the nineteenth century, until mass production and growing prosperity enabled more and more people to purchase brand new rather than previously worn garments (Lemire, 1997). However, when mass production of garments became readily available and at affordable prices, the trade in second hand clothing became export oriented.

Consequently, charity shops responded to the clothing needs of the local poor. At this time, established charitable organizations became the single largest source of the twenty first century global trade in second hand clothing, supplying both domestic and foreign second hand clothing markets through their collection efforts. These charitable organizations dominated the domestic second hand clothing retail scene in the 1960 and 1970s (Heike, 2005).

This period coincided with the long history of Nigerian colonization which came to an end in 1960 and was followed by the Nigerian Civil War of 1966. Developed nations such as France, United Kingdom and the United States of America are the sources of second-hand clothes which are exported to Nigeria (Areo and Areo, 2015). The history of the entrance of second hand western clothing and its supplements known as *Okrika* among other names into the Nigerian market scene is traceable to the urge of becoming modern with Western education and modernity. It is also a symbol which their colonizers who were the role models in the Euro-centric setting represent.

Okrika is a port town and headquarters of present day Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State, Southsouth Nigeria. The town is situated on a small island just south of Port Harcourt, the state capital, making it a suburb of the much larger city. It lies on the north of the Bonny River, as well as 35 miles upstream from the Bight of Biafra. The town can be reached by vessels of a draft of 29 feet or less (Onukwugha, 2013). The name originated among the Ibo-speaking people of South eastern Nigeria. Until recently, the name was not derogatory; it derived from the fact that Okrika, a coastal town of Southeastern Nigeria, was believed to have had the largest consignment of second hand clothes donated by developed

countries to meet the needs of victims of the Nigerian civil war. Second hand clothes were believed to have been dispersed from Okrika in the past to other parts of the country.

Some of the used clothes imported into the country according to (Areo and Areo, 2015) are male wears such as trousers in denim jeans, corduroy, blazers, shirts, jackets, suits, boxers, mufflers and stockings face caps. female cloths such as skirts, trousers, blazers, blouses, shirts, skirt suits, trouser suits, dress suits, evening wears, wedding gowns, swim suits, underwear comprising of brassieres, pants, leggings, panty hose, camisoles and tights blouses, sweaters, jeans, slip-on, trousers, blazers, gowns, face cap, shirts, gowns, trousers, mufflers, jackets, undies, stockings, ties, pants, shawls, camisole, baby layette, stockings, skirts, bowler, hats, brassieres, head wears, t-shirts, girdles, belts, knickers, skirt suits, blazers, scarves, mufflers. Children's second hand clothing include: baby dresses, layettes, shawls, stockings, trousers, dungarees, baby bonnets, christening gowns and party wears.



Figure 2: Pictures Showing Second Hand Clothes Market in Some Locations in Nigeria
Source: Areo and Areo (2015).

Why Do Nigerians Use Second Hand Clothes

1. Poverty

Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon depending on the context in which it is being used. According to World Bank (2001), poverty can be viewed from such dimensions as a lack of opportunity, lack of empowerment and a lack of security. In Nigeria, widespread and severe poverty is a relatively a reality (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). It is a reality that depicts a lack of food, clothes, education and other basic amenities. Many severely poor people in the country lack the most basic necessities of life to a degree that it can be wondered how they manage to survive (Ucha, 2010). Poverty in Nigeria is on the increase

with almost many Nigerians living on less than \$1 per day despite a strong growth in Africa's second largest economy (Daniel, 2011).

In 2010 compared with 54.7% in 2004 the percentage of Nigerians living in absolute poverty – those who cannot afford the bare essentials of food, shelter and clothing – rose to 60.9% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Although Nigeria's economy is projected to continue growing, poverty is likely to get worse as the gap between the rich and the poor has continued to widen. Kale (2012) posited that poverty in Nigeria is a paradox, this is because, despite the fact that Nigeria's economy has continued to grow, yet the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty has continued to increase every year.

2. A Source of Employment

The International Labour Organization defines the unemployed as members of the economically active population who are without work but available for and seeking work, including people who have lost their jobs or who have voluntarily left work.(World Bank, 1998).. According to (Morio and Zoctizoum, 1980), unemployment is defined as works available for employment whose contract of employment has been terminated or been temporarily suspended and who are without a job and seeking paid employment. It can also be defined as persons never previously employed whose most recent status was other than that of employee, together with persons who had been in retirement, who were available for work during the specified period and were seeking paid employment, or persons without a job and currently available for work who have made arrangements to start a new job at a date subsequent to the specified period; and persons temporarily or indefinitely laid off without pay.

The expression of these definitions of unemployment depicts that people who are without paid jobs who can earn decent living in the country are unemployed. In Nigeria's unemployment scenario, the young school leavers of all categories are the worst hit (Nwagwu, 2014). Thus, starting a second hand wears reselling business in Nigeria is a practical way to make money. Many young and unemployed Nigerians are making money from this investment (Abe, 2014).

3. The Quest for Brand Names

The unusual craze for foreign products by Nigerians cannot be overemphasized. Nigerians in their multitude are crazy for anything foreign (Owolabi, 2016). These include expensive clothes and designer wears with popular brands like Tommy Hilfiger, Gucci, Hugo Boss, Polo Ralf Lauren etc. which they may not be able to afford as a result of the prevailing poverty hitting the country, and yet they could readily be found in second hand clothes markets. Therefore, for individuals who "worship" the tags on clothing, they are likely to find many recycled, brand-name clothes available. Therefore, the use of second hand clothes is a great way to suit stylish needs and yet save for other needs (Froelich, 2013).

4. Affordability

In a poor country with a large proportion of its population living on less than \$1 per day Daniel (2011) where people can hardly afford to feed and clothe themselves Ucha (2010), second hand clothes is surely the best option for clothing . This is because; second hand clothes are far more affordable than new locally made ones. According to Froelich (2013), used clothes are usually 50% cheaper to get and therefore the poor will have more to save and spend on other pressing needs rather than spending so much on buying new clothes.

5. Good Quality and Durability

Second hand clothes categorized *grade one* are generally more durable being made from higher quality fabrics that do not fade quickly (Didymus, 2012). Many Nigerians, therefore, would prefer to buy second hand rather than, clothes made from locally produced fabrics that are more expensive but fade quickly with washing. Many relatively poor or absolutely poor people prefer second hand western clothing over new Chinese or Indian made clothes because it is often of a better quality and it has associations with the western cultural imperative that matches what they see on the media (Adow and Asenault, 2012). Many cannot compromise quality which they believe they can find in second-hand clothes (Bienose, 2017).

The Foreign Influence in Second Hand Clothes

The history of second hand western clothing in Nigeria known as *okrika* is traceable to the urge of becoming modern with Western education and modernity. The countries of sub-Saharan Africa in which Nigeria is included are the world's largest second-hand clothing destination, receiving close to 26% of total world exports in 2004 (United Nations, 2006). Second hand clothes have been said to be a symbol of colonizers who were the role models in the Euro-centric fashion (Areo and Areo, 2015). Majority of the second hand clothes brought into Nigeria originate mostly from the United States, United Kingdom and other European countries that colonized many countries in Africa including Nigeria while just very few others come from relatively affluent Asian countries such as South Korea, Dubai, and China (Didymus, 2012).

Second hand clothing business in Nigeria which started as a necessity or means to an end has now become a global phenomenon, succumbing to pressures dictated by fashion, civilization, modernity, necessity, and survival instinct. In second hand clothing, utility,

styles and status found common expression (Greyson and Crewe, 2005). Most of the developed nations such as France, United Kingdom and the United States of America from where second-hand clothes are exported to Nigeria were observed to have derogatory names given to it like “Cast Off”, “Previously Owned” among others with connotations of devalued or degraded products (Callahan and Paoletti, 1999).

The economic impact of used clothing imports in Nigeria cannot also be overemphasised. This has help to forge a relationship of dependency on the West and in many ways prevent Africa from developing. Although, Nigerians were not taught how to dress by colonisers because they already had various forms of clothes, whether skins and hides or bark-cloth, yet, part of the colonial ideology was the labelling of the entire culture of the colonised as uncivilised (Mwesigire, 2015). Thus, clothes also became an ideological battlefield for superiority and inferiority. Despite attainment of political independence, cultural aspects of the colonial project have not been as scrutinised. Thus, much of the colonial cultural ideology that perpetuates discourses of the inferiority of African culture is still experienced in postcolonial societies (Mwesigire, 2015).

At the turn of colonialism, Nigerians were meant to produce their own clothes and other basic goods to help industrialise and develop economies as happened in China and South Korea, but in the 1980s and 1990s, clothing industries declined and imports of used clothes increased. According to Haggblade (1990), second hand clothing consumption practices in many parts of Africa including Nigeria are shaped by the politics that regulate these imports and by distinct regional conventions concerning bodies and dress. They are forced to liberalise their economies under political pressure from banks and governments in the West who had earlier lent them money, and to whom they owed massive interest

repayments. Donated underwear raise issues of human dignity (Brooks, 2015). Brooks says that whilst used t-shirts, jeans and dresses can satisfy a basic need for affordable clothing, they ultimately help keep people in poverty. Second-hand clothing maintains the status quo; it doesn't help the poor get richer; it just keeps things as they are at the moment (Brooks, 2015).

A Loss of Social Identity

According to McLeod (2008), Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership. A social identity is the portion of an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group. The culture of a group plays a huge role in their social identity. While culture is the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects and behaviour such as ideas, values, customs and artefacts of a group of people (Schaefer 2002), it also entails patterns of human activities and the symbols that give these activities significance. It determines what people eat, how they dress, what beliefs they hold and activities they engage in. It is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation thus distinguishing people from their neighbours.

Culture can be transmitted or acquired through information or symbols. Cultural identity is those attributes, behavioural patterns, lifestyles, social structures and norms that distinguish a people from other peoples (Omekwu, 2003). These are passed on or inherited from one generation to another (cultural heritage), or horizontally passed on from one society to another through such agents as globalization. The ways in which people dress have been described as a mirror of the culture of the people in any society (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 25).

Although, clothing tend to meet the basic need of people just as shelter Payne (1965), dressing symbolizes the practices of the society, bounded by the same geographical location, sharing the same cultural values. How people dress also serves as a measurement of self and personal worth, occupation, social value, standard of economic value, definition and negotiation of political power, religious signifier and repository of supernatural powers as well as indicator of culture and changes (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 28). Although the effects of globalization and education for example on the dress culture of many Nigerians cannot be overemphasised because the world is now a global village while formal education has also exposed many to the Western dress culture yet,, relinquishing the Nigerian traditional dress culture for the western ways of dressing is a total loss of social identity, which has also been enhanced through the massive use of second hand clothes by Nigerians.

Theoretical Orientation

The study employed the Social Identity Theory. The theory was originally formulated by Tajfel (1979) and Turner (1986). The theory explains the concept of a social identity as a way in which to explain intergroup behaviour. According to the Social Identity theory, groups (e.g. social class, family, football team etc.) which people belong to are important sources of pride and self-esteem. Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world. In order to increase our self-image, we enhance the status of the group to which we belong.

Resting on this proposition, Nigerians may be said to have lost their social identity by embracing the Western way of dressing. The feeling of cultural inferiority to the western

dress culture mortified the Nigerian traditional dress culture and replaced it with that of the Western world. This invariably led to imperialism and continuous control of Nigerians by their colonizers. Even after many years of independence, the pattern of our trade and political grip still tend towards the Western society

What is the Way Forward?

1. Enforcing the ban on the Importation of Second Hand Clothes

Although it is true that importation of second hand clothes has been banned by the Nigerian government from being imported into the country, Adow and Arsenault (2012), enforcing this law seems to be a mirage. Most of these clothes are still being smuggled into the country from neighbouring countries through the porous borders of the country (Ibrahim, 2017). Second hand clothes should not only be banned from the country, the government and relevant agencies in the country should take it as responsibility that they do not get into the country. This will go a long way in ensuring that the influx of these clothes is reduced to the barest minimum in the country. It is expected that with this, many Nigerians will look inwards and make do with local dresses that is available in the country.

2. Import Substitution

The government of Nigeria should encourage mass production of quality clothes in the country by investing massively in the Nigerian textile industry. Private investors must be encouraged to invest in this industry by giving them financial support and creating a conducive environment for them to operate. Aside, infrastructural development such as power, good roads that would support the industry to thrive must be a major priority of the Nigerian government if a positive change in this direction must be realised.

3. Leadership by example

One other way to eradicate the dumping and use of second hand clothes in Nigeria is for the leaders in the country to live by examples to the populace by patronizing local made clothes and local fabrics such as those made in Aba, Southeastern Nigeria as well as the Yoruba Aso-Oke, the Adire (tye and die) and many other local fabrics made in the country. It could be recalled, during the President Olusegun Obasanjo's regime in 2003, *Ankara* the Yoruba local fabric was encouraged by the President by himself wearing the cloth during occasions including public formal events Oyedele and Obisesan (2013) and as such many Nigerians followed suit making this local fashion trend thrive till date even after many years of concluding his regime as the president of the country.

4. Reducing Poverty Rate

Poverty is endemic in the Nigerian society and has eaten deep into the people as many Nigerians cannot afford to eat three square meals per day let alone afford new clothes to wear (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). If the dumping and use of second hand clothes in Nigeria must be eradicated, then it is imperative for the government of the country to reduce to the barest minimum the poverty rate in the country. This can be achieved by improving the standard of living of the people through infrastructural development and meeting the basic needs of the people like safe water, food, health, education etc. This is expected to have a ripple effect on the people, the economy and the society at large thereby reducing the prevailing poverty rocking the country. It is expected that if this is done,-then many Nigerians would be able to afford new clothes and would not need to depend on used clothes dumped into the country by foreign countries.

5. Cultivating the Spirit of Patriotism

One other key way to eradicate the dumping and use of second hand clothes in Nigeria is for Nigerians to cultivate the habit of patriotism. Until Nigerians value their own country, the culture and the goods and services provided locally, eradicating the dumping and use of second hand clothes in the country would be a mirage. Nigerians should be proud of their cultural heritage and desist from feeling inferior to Western cultures and ways of life. The culture of preferring anything foreign should be seriously discouraged in the country. Nigerians should be re-oriented on the need to embrace and value their traditional dress culture which must also reflect in government and public functions. This will go a long way in sustaining the cultural values of the Nigerian society in which dressing culture is a key variable.

Conclusion

This study has explored the dumping and use of second hand clothes in Nigeria as imperialism to the country and also loss of social identity. The study examined extensively the Nigerian cultural heritage, the Nigerian dress culture with special emphasis on the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria that is Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The study also traced the origin of second hand clothes in Nigeria and the various types of second hand clothes being imported into the country. Furthermore, the factors responsible for the continued increase in demand for second hand clothes among many Nigerians in the country were explored. The study also examined the dumping and use of second hand clothes as a tool for imperialism and loss of social identity. Lastly, the way out of this predicament was suggested in the study. Some of the suggestion made in the study include: enforcing the law prohibiting second hand clothes in the country, import substitution, leadership by example, reducing poverty rate and cultivating the spirit of patriotism.

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