

DRESS NIGERIA, DIVERSIFY THE ECONOMY

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Abstract

This essay contends that dress and identity are inseparable companions. Dress form an outstanding base for personal and cultural identification. Identity is a necessary process of a healthy personality as it is a part of self-realisation of a person. The paper sees Nigeria as a personality to dress up with derivable economic potentials and gains. It posits that even though Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society, we can successfully dress Nigeria, arguing that there is strength in diversity; diverse cultures give us a lot of cultural options to choose from and project. Ultimately an ethno-national dress culture can emerge to symbolise our national identity. To dress Nigeria therefore, with her large population, will translate to huge economic boost in terms of job creation, vibrant textile industry with vast value chain. To diversify the Nigerian economy through dress culture, the paper offers a number of recommendations which in themselves anticipate an all-embracing dress and textile policy for Nigeria.

Introduction

Dress is clothing with the associated accessories. It has been described as the total arrangement of all outwardly detectable modifications of the body itself and all material objects added to it. In other words, dress includes not only clothing, but all accessories, hairstyles, and any other alterations made to the body, temporary or otherwise. Dress is an important feature of all human societies. In addition to the obvious function of providing protection and warmth, dress serves many other purposes, most of them having to do with communicating our identity to others. Indeed, protection and warmth may not have been the earliest purpose of dress. Many people have always lived in warm climates where clothing is not needed for protection from the atmospheric elements, yet they have developed forms of dress. Other basic functions of dress include identifying the wearer (by providing information about sex, age, occupation, or other characteristics) and making the wearer appear more attractive.

For hundreds of years, people have put some message in the type of clothing they wore. Long ago people started wanting to stand out from the “crowd” and be different from other people by means of changing their clothing. Some examples of these “standing out” became very popular and were followed by more people. This was the moment when fashion appeared. Nowadays, fashion is sometimes defined as a “constantly changing trend, favoured for frivolous rather than practical, logical, or

intellectual reasons”. Nevertheless, it is necessary to say that at the present moment fashion has a deeper influence on the life of people and possess more than just frivolous reasons for its existence. Clothing has become an integral part of self-realisation of every person. It is no longer just an “external shield” and a frivolous attitude towards it may cause losing a very important physical, psychological and social aspect of a person’s life. The harmony attained by the combination of the inner world of a person and his “exterior” makes it very hard to say not even being a professional in this sphere that fashion is just about looks. Clothing is basically a covering designed to be worn on a person's body. This covering is a need, a necessity that is dictated by the norms of social conduct. This “necessity” brings a lot of variety into the lives of people and makes their image more complete. It is not about people serving fashion; it is about fashion meeting the needs of people.

Dress gives identity to the wearer and reflects self-perception which equates to personal identity. The choice of clothing and accessories (clothing, ornaments and hand props that are worn or carried, but not part of a person’s main clothing) is as important as identification through the colour of hair, height, skin and gender. Clothing nowadays is a media of information about the person wearing it. It is a cipher; a code that needs a decryption in order to understand what kind of person is underneath it. The clothing of a person is therefore a means of communicating with the outside world. It is the way of telling people about the “state” and the “status” of its owner. Most times, the foundation of dressing is located in culture as every person belongs to a definite culture and has the right to reveal it. As such, personal identity may sometimes be replaced by cultural identity. Cultural identity is the type of identity that is related to a certain culture or a separate group. It brings people belonging to a culture definite highlighting differences with other people. Clothing in terms of culture is to reveal either the historical roots of a person or the roots of the group he belongs to. Demonstrating a belonging to a certain cultural community is the free right of every person just as people can freely declare who they want to vote for in an election.

Dress and identity are inseparable companions. Dress with all its symbolism and attributes form an outstanding base for personal and cultural identification. Identity is a necessary process of a healthy personality as it is a part of self-realisation of a person that is so much required for finding a place in life of every person. Fashion has become a tool for achieving harmony with the inner world and a way of revealing or concealing peculiarities. Fashion possesses a specific meaning and the more diverse is the society around us the more fashion-trend would appear and surprise us. As long as it does not hurt people around, fashion symbols are acceptable, nevertheless while thinking about fashion and identity it is necessary to remember the ethical side of the issue. Even though fashion and identity still remains a twofold issue but there are a lot of positive aspects one can enjoy and share with other people. It is against this background we want to see Nigeria as a personality to dress up.

Nigeria as a Personality Entity and Socio-Cultural Space

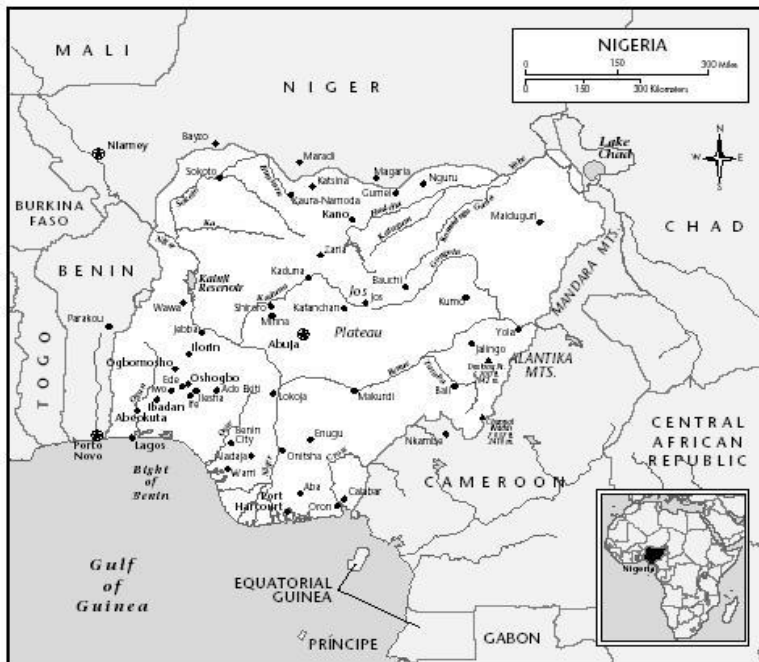
Nigeria as a political expression is a product of British consolidation of their colonial power over the area in 1914. The name Nigeria was suggested by British journalist, Flora

Shaw in the 1890s. She referred to the area as Nigeria, after the Niger River, which dominates much of the country's landscape. More than 250 ethnic tribes embrace present day Nigeria as home. The three largest and most dominant ethnic groups are the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. Other smaller groups include the Fulani, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Tiv, Ebira, Manda and Edo. Prior to their conquest by Europeans, these ethnic groups had separate and independent histories. Politically, Nigeria is divided into thirty-six states and a federal capital territory. The nation's capital was moved from Lagos, the country's most developed largest city, to Abuja on 12th December, 1991. Abuja is in a federal territory that is not part of any state and serves as the official capital of Nigeria.

Demographically, Nigeria has the largest population in Africa. Nigeria's population is estimated to be more than 180 million people. With about 345 people per square mile, it is also the most densely populated country in Africa. Nearly one in every six Africans is a Nigerian. Despite the rampages of socio-economic hazards, Nigeria's population continues to grow at about 2.6 percent each year. The Nigerian population is very young. Nearly 45 percent of its people are under age fourteen.

Because there is little feeling of national unity among Nigeria's people, there is little in terms of national symbolism. What exists was usually created or unveiled by the government as representative of the nation. The main national symbol is the country's flag. The flag is divided vertically into three equal parts; the centre section is white, flanked by two green sections. The green of the flag represents agriculture, while the white stands for unity and peace. Other national symbols include the national coat of arms, the national anthem, the National Pledge and Nigeria's national motto: Peace and Unity, Strength and Progress.

Every ethnic group in Nigeria has its own stories of where its ancestors came from. These vary from tales of people descending from the sky to stories of migration from far-off places. Archaeologists have found evidence of Neolithic humans who inhabited what is now Nigeria as far back as 12,000 B.C.E. The histories of the people in northern and southern Nigeria prior to colonisation followed vastly different paths. The first recorded empire in present-day Nigeria was centred in the north at Kanem-Bornu, near Lake Chad. This empire came to power during the eighth century C.E. In the south, the Oyo Empire grew to become the most powerful Yoruba society during the sixteenth century.



Map of Nigeria

National Identity

The spread of overt colonial control led to the first and only time that the ethnic groups in modern Nigeria came together under a commonly felt sense of national identity. The Africans began to see themselves not as Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba, but as Nigerians in a common struggle against colonial domination.

The nationalistic movement grew out of some of the modernisation the British had instituted in Nigeria. The educated elite became some of the most outspoken proponents of an independent Nigeria. This elite had grown weary of the harsh racism it faced in business and administrative jobs within the government. Both the elite and the uneducated also began to grow fearful of the increasing erosion of traditional culture and values. They began movements to promote Nigerian foods, names, dress, languages, and religions.

Increased urbanisation and higher education brought large multi-ethnic groups together for the first time. As a result of this coming together, the Nigerians saw that they had more in common with each other than they had previously thought. This sparked unprecedented levels of interethnic teamwork. Nigerian political movements, media outlets, and trade unions whose purpose was the advancement of all Nigerians, not specific ethnic groups, became commonplace.

As calls for self-determination and transfer of power into the hands of Nigerians grew, Britain began to divest more power into the regional governments. As a result of early colonial policies of divide and conquer, the regional governments tended to be drawn along ethnic lines. With this move to greater regional autonomy, the idea of a

unified Nigeria began to crumble. Regionally and ethnically based political parties sprang up as ethnic groups began to wrangle for political influence.

Nigeria gained full independence from Britain on 1st October, 1960. Immediately following independence, vicious fighting between and among political parties created chaos within the fledgling democracy. On 15th January, 1966, a group of army officers, most of whom were Igbo, staged a military coup, killing many of the government ministers from the western and northern tribes. Six months later, northern forces within the military staged a countercoup, killing most of the Igbo leaders. Anti-Igbo demonstrations broke out across the country, especially in the north. Hundreds of Igbos were killed, while the rest fled to the southeast. This dovetailed into civil war in 1967 and the spirit of ethnic distrust has remained alive since then. Today it is still difficult to signpost an all-embracing cultural totem that can symbolise Nigeria's national identity. National integration should therefore still be a potent area of concern for our national leaders and all of us.

With split personalities and varying ethnic identities, can we successfully dress Nigeria? I say yes. In our diversity there is strength. Diverse cultures give us a lot of cultural options to choose from and project. Variety of ethnic products would certainly stimulate excitement and a rich aesthetic pool for creativity. In the end we shall have ethno-national dress culture that can symbolise our national identity.

Economic Diversification through Nigerian Dress

After the discovery of oil in 1957, Nigeria practically paid less attention to other areas of national income and concentrated more on gains from oil. The relegation of other vital and necessary sectors of the economy like agriculture, solid minerals, industrialisation/manufacturing, taxation, investment and tourism is a regrettable policy somersault. Added to this is the sobering reality that too much emphasis on revenues from crude oil sales has made Nigeria to face the precarious future of oil doom owing to several principal factors. These include the unstable nature of the international crude market; possible glut in the market due to new oil finds and exploitation in different parts of the world in the recent years, the downward trend in the demands for oil by China, one of the major consumers of the commodity, following a lull in her industrial output in recent years; evolution of alternative energy sources (including those of hydro, solar, wind, biomass and geothermal) and efforts to explore and exploit shale oil (oil from rock) and gas by countries like the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Russia, China, Czech Republic and South Africa.

The resulting consequences of this adverse development are the increasingly dwindling revenues of government at all levels and the attendant slump in financing of capital projects and social services, sluggish economic growth and the terrible fate of naira whose exchange rate has noticeably depreciated against hard currencies like American dollar and pound sterling; dramatic reduction in foreign reserves, layoffs of workers, rising inflation, bankruptcy of many states of the federation (that now depend on bail-out support from the federal government) and incidence of banks facing bad debts from oil companies that bought oil fields when prices were high and are now struggling to repay their loans. The frail nature of the Nigerian economy can be attributed to its

being petroleum based. The instance the global oil price plummets, the economy of Nigeria begins to wobble. This economic imbalance can be corrected by the development of other sectors. Meaning, Nigeria economy calls for diversification.

Economic diversification is basically the idea of having multiple streams of income; it encourages the creation of different ways to increase cash flow. It recommends creating multiple revenue centres, as opposed to building a single income stream. It is an act of investing in a variety of assets. Its benefit is that it reduces risk, especially in the time of recession, inflation, deflation, and so on. Economic diversification strives to smoothen out unsystematic risk events in a portfolio so that the positive performance of some investments will neutralise the negative performance of others.

Indeed, diversification has been recommended to the government in the past, but has not been given the prime attention it deserves. President Muhammadu Buhari seems to see things from this direction when he said “diversification is urgent”. As a major policy thrust, all arms of government and their agencies have been committed to how to buy into the diversification policy. From the cultural perspective, especially through dress culture, the Nigerian economy can be expanded and given a robust boost.

Our population and cultural diversity is a huge advantage. If three quarter of our 180 million population patronise Nigerian fabrics and made in Nigeria dresses consistently, this would translate into great economic boost. To supply the textile needs of this large population so many cotton plantations have to be established; many textile plants have to spring up along with feeder factories; traditional weavers would be very busy too; textile and fashion designers would be well occupied. Textile value chain will stimulate vibrant commercial activities and allied businesses. Ultimately, the textile industry in Nigeria would be an avenue to absorb our teeming youth from the unemployment market.

Strategies and Recommendations

To achieve this diversification objective through dress, the following strategies and recommendations are proposed.

1. Government should create enabling environment for the growth of textile industry in Nigeria by investing heavily in cotton plantation; give meaningful loans to cotton farmers with well thought out interest free regime.
2. Import relevant farming implements and tools to assist farmers in their plantations. In other words, mechanised farming is sacrosanct.
3. Organise training and retraining workshops for cotton farmers. This would equip them with modern farming technical knowhow to facilitate better yields.
4. Encourage public-private partnership in setting up and running textile factories and feeder companies. In all of these, local production technology must be protected, expanded and improved upon. This should ultimately transform into a well-organised and standardised production technology that will have comparative advantage over foreign ones.
5. Challenge our textile designers to create design patterns that emphasis the very best in our traditional fabrics across cultures; experiment with a collage of dress

senses and fabrics to produce unique patterns and styles that could harmonise our multicultural identities into one prominent national dress identity with time.

6. Relevant legislation is expedient in order to back up and instigate robust initiatives for national dress renaissance. Make importation of foreign fabrics and dresses unattractive so as to simulate patronage for locally produced ones.
7. President Muhammadu Buhari has declared Mondays and Wednesdays every week, as Made-in-Nigeria Dress Days across the country. This is laudable if well implemented. This policy would create rising demand for made in Nigeria dresses. But how many state and local governments and government agencies have embraced this policy pragmatically? A task on implementation has to be put in place to drive the process.
8. Experience has shown that the cultural dress codes of our leaders often attract high level of patronage from the citizenry. When Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was the President of Nigeria, Yoruba dress attracted more patronage on a national scale. President Goodluck Jonathan similarly promoted the South-South dress culture and gained a lot converts too. With President Muhammadu Buhari on the saddle now, there is an obvious shift to Hausa Fulani dress types. This being the case, our leaders should take deliberate steps to showcase dresses from different Nigerian cultures weekly to give more awareness on Nigeria multicultural dress patterns and also the engender sense of belonging among all ethnic groups.
9. Our local fabrics can be used to create trendy fashion and those in vogue. This way, people would be attracted to these fabrics without inhibition. Traditional patterns and styles with the trendy ones would be available for all to choose from according to their preferences.
10. Design and fabric contents of our prominent carnivals, especially Abuja carnival and Carnival Calabar, should be revisited to predominantly adopt and utilise our traditional fabrics in the making of their costumes. This platform would serve a sure window to promote our traditional attires and dress sense nationally and internationally.
11. Our fashion design runways should exhibit more of traditional dresses in unique creations more than ever before. More dress exhibitions to hold periodically in order to expand the scope of awareness and availability of these dresses. There could be dress and fashion design competitions too to stimulate creative ingenuity and deepen the industry.
12. Our national traditional dresses should be a dominant feature in all our embassies, high commissions and mission offices abroad. All Nigerian nationals abroad should be encouraged to showcase our traditional wears as often as possible.
13. Nigerian fashion designers should deliberately use Nigerian fabrics to create dresses patterned after other people's cultures and traditions. As innovative creations, they would illicit interest and increase the market base for the products. To have non-Nigerians patronise our dress products would ensure market sustainability and expansion.

14. For systematic service delivery and monitoring, our dress and fashion industry should be mapped across cultural zones in Nigeria. The result of such mapping will also be useful for economic planning.
15. The social media and other relevant information technologies have to be relied upon to create a marketing and awareness hub for the made in Nigeria dresses. These are also veritable platforms for sharing creative ideas and designs.
16. All Nigerian dress creators and users of our traditional and trendy designs should don them with genuine sense of pride. Brand labels should be genuine and clearly tagged, “Made in Nigeria” or the name of the towns where they are made, for example, “Made in Aba”, “Made in Okene”, “Made in Bama”, and so on.
17. Fabrics are not just used to dress the human body, they can be used to dress our homes and public halls/places as curtains, drapes, table clothes, and decorative bands and stretched extensions. Our traditional fabrics should be so utilised in our homes and during public functions like wedding, inaugurations, conferences, public presentations, and so on.

Conclusion

The hallmark of our presentation with the suggestions and recommendations proffered, is to anticipate an all-embracing dress and textile policy for Nigeria which will provide the nitty-gritty of how the Nigerian economy can take due advantage of our multicultural fabrics and dresses, huge population and our creative ingenuity, while maintaining cultural integrity. To dress Nigeria is a serious business. When rightly done, it would soar our image and identity while commanding international followership. These are the intangible benefits of clearly articulated and well-implemented dress and textile policy. The tangible would be the resultant economic boom and wealth creation, which would end hunger in many homes and families.

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