

FUNCTIONS OF CLOTH IN TRADITIONAL NIGERIAN SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Ethnic textiles flourished in Nigeria before the colonial period. Textile materials were used by the people in various ways, especially in social, religious, economic and secular contexts. It was woven into the threads of life of the people who used them. Extant literatures on the evolution, development and uses of textiles in Nigeria focused more on the traditional techniques of production and their secular functions with little attention on its symbolic association. This paper examines textiles as instruments for social, religious and economic stability, as well as tools for communicating traditional norms and values. It examines various cultural norms associated with textiles and discusses functions of textiles as agents of social control, justice, security, authority and spiritual regeneration, among others. It shares an interpretative view of Nigerian textiles to provide a better understanding of the purposes for their creation and relevance. It concludes that the history of textiles in Nigeria needs to be in-dept and holistic.

Introduction

Textile industry in Nigeria is one of the oldest industries and it has recorded dynamic transformations in post-colonial period. It has contributed significantly to national economic and social development and has also been a major player in the country's labour market. Although serious economic and financial conditions have recently affected progress in most Nigeria textile industries, the impact it has made in national development is indeed great. Literatures on modern textile industry in Nigeria are many. This is because much effort has been made by indigenous art critics and art educators to provide information concerning developments in this sector. Information in this sector occasionally appears in some Nigerian news papers and the writers of these articles are free-lance journalists. Some studies that have been published in this subject were written by foreign authors, such as Lambs and Holmes (1980), Aronson (1980), and Bohannan (1955), who had fair knowledge particularly of the cultural and religious factors responsible for production and use of various kinds of local textiles. In this regard, their publications present their personal interpretative views of Nigerian textiles, while the indigenous philosophical and instrumentalist aspects were omitted. Consequently, there is need to present traditional views and concepts concerning forms and functions of traditional textiles. Against this background, therefore, there is need to examine the ways textiles have

been used as instrument by members of the society that most often commission and use the fabrics.

In order to give direction to this paper, the writer poses the problem of this study as questions: What is traditional Textile? How has this phenomenon contributed to the development and growth of local textile industry? These issues will be examined under the following headings: Cloth as money, Cloth as symbol of love, Cloth as medicine, Therapeutic cloth, Cloth for protection, sign of authority, Ties of obligation and agreement and cloth as warning sign. However, it might be necessary to give a brief background of indigenous Nigerian textiles to prepare the ground for presentation of their functions.

Indigenous Nigerian Textiles.

Textiles featured early in Nigeria as a result of the position it occupies in the hierarchy of man's basic needs. Textile material, particularly clothing is ranked second after food. The need for textiles has made every nation to encourage its development. In Nigeria, some ethnic groups have developed local methods of textile production. Research reports by some indigenous writers such as Afigbo and Okeke (1985), Diogu (1989), and Okeke (2002) identified the following major cloth weaving areas in Nigeria: Akwete, Okenne, Igbira, Isheyin, Nsukka, Abeokuta, Kano, Bida, Aniocha, Oshogbo, Tiv, and Ijebu-ode, to mention a few. In the book, "Weaving Tradition in Igbo land", Afigbo, and Okeke, presented a comprehensive history on development of cloth weaving in Igboland, highlighting the social, economic and political conditions that led to its assimilation and spread among the Igbo. Diogu(1989), in his studies on Traditional Cloths of the Tiv People of Benue State of Nigeria examined the Tiv weaving tradition and identified eight local woven cloths of the Tiv people of Nigeria.

These various efforts of indigenous writers notwithstanding, research and documentation on African textiles remain heavily dominated by foreign art historians and anthropologists. In this regard, credit is given to Perani (1992), Sieber (1972), Johnson (1973), Eicher (1976), Picton and Mark (1979), Lambs and Holmes (1980), Aronson (1980), and Gilfoy (1987) who have published books and articles on African textiles. These writers reviewed cloth weaving techniques and decorative aspects of cloth construction among ethnic cloth weaving communities in Nigeria such as: Okene, Akwete and Tiv weavers, and presented their interpretative views of African textiles, their secular functions and relevance.

In her studies in particular, Judith Perani worked on the "cloth connection", high-lighting the patrons and producers of Hausa and Nupe "prestige stripe weave". She discussed how the traditional textile industries of the Northern and Central Nigeria played important role in developing the economic prosperity of the Hausa and Nupe states. Cloth weaving communities give local names to their woven cloths but the users (individuals) and the society decide how to use the fabric.

BASIC FUNCTIONS OF TEXTILES

Textiles are produced to be used by member of the society. It is designed to be useful products, attractive and aesthetically pleasing material. Globally, it has been used for protection of the body from insect bite and harsh weather conditions. We wear cloths to warm the body when we feel cold. We use it to support the body particularly, those who are physically challenged. When we wear clothes, it helps to enhance our personality and also makes us to appear modest and attract attention of people around us.

Cloth has been an important symbolic object used to distinguish social, religious and political class, and finally it has been used to improve the quality and appearance of homes. When one looks at textiles from the above perspective, its focus is on its traditional utility/aesthetic value. But there are more ideas which have not been significantly studied by both foreign and indigenous researchers, these are their cultural values.

In Nigerian socio-cultural system, textile materials have continued to play important roles, particularly in its connection with religious practices, transformation rites, physical and spiritual life cord, death, freedom and healing. To examine textile from these perspectives, means looking at it symbolically.

Cloth as Money

Cloth has very high economic value and some communities in Nigeria have used cloth as means of exchange. The Igbo wise saying, *Akwa Bu Ego*, meaning "Cloth is Money" shows that the Igbo in the history of their development used cloth as a standard of exchange; trade by barter (Afigbo & Okeke, 1985). Also among the Tiv people of Nigeria, Bohannan (1955) notes that the "anger" and "tugudu" cloths were used as money or unit of exchange. This practice is also common in most West African countries during the colonial periods, particularly in Ghana and Sierra Leone. Edwards (1992) wrote that local cloth or "Country cloths has high value and that debts and court fines could be discharged with country cloths". Quoting Author Abraham (1976), Edwards notes that "in Mende country even in the twentieth century, it was not uncommon to see a native staggering into the native court beneath a heavy pile of these cloths in order to publicly discharge an obligation"

Cloth as Symbol of love

In most Nigerian traditional communities, cloth has been used to show love to parents, spouses and friends. Therefore, cloth is used as gift item, an important instrument used to fulfill social and cultural obligations. This important function is responsible for the dispersal of cloth from one region to another as a result of trade, marriage and payment of tribute, to mention a few. Most wealthy members of the society give cloths to people as a way of discharging social responsibility, demonstration of status and affirmation of prestige. Smith (1962) and Heathcote (1972) noted that this practice was popular among the emirs and royal Fulani leaders

who either commissioned or purchased local cloths or gowns from weavers. These cloths were distributed to palace courtiers and members of the royal household. In the same light, Perani (1992) observes in the early 1970's, "that a favourite gift in the Sokoto Caliphate was a robe". Also, Perani observe that the late Sultan of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello was particularly instrumental in making gifts of gowns more popular in Hausa Land.

Medicine Cloth

Elisha Rene (1995) discussed this subject extensively in his book. He observed that in most communities medicine cloths, sometimes referred to as "power cloth" has spiritual or powerful force which can be used to alter the state of the body. An example of this type of cloth is the "hunter's cloth". To understand this type of cloth, it would be necessary to examine ideas about illness, disease and cure from the perspective of cloth.

Cloth is regarded traditionally as the second skin because it is the closest material to the skin. It has absorbent quality that makes it easy to absorb secretions such as sweat, semen, saliva, urine and blood. This important quality of cloth has informed its choice by medicine men as an instrument or channel to alter the state of the body mystically. For example, in Bunu land, North-Western Nigeria, "it is believed that an incantation over a piece of yarn, thread or cloth can cause madness, deformity or death" (Rene 1995), this view is equally shared by Idoma, Nsukka and Agila communities where women are not permitted to touch the masks and masquerade costume. A woman who touches masquerade costume or mask may become sick, mad or deceased.

Therapeutic Function

The uses of local cloths for religious sacrifices or therapeutic purposes are still very much a part of traditional Igbo, Yoruba and other Nigerian cultures. Just as cloth can be used to cause deformity, sickness, madness or death, it has also been used to impart strength and extra-ordinary vision to the user. This traditional belief has been exploited by herbalists and local medicine-men who produce special cloths for mad people in their clinics. Edwards (1992) confirms this among the Mende, when he notes that "such cloth is part of the *ronkooi*, a hunter's shirt or short gown said to be of Limba origin, and gowns worn by leaders at important meetings or during political campaigns".

Protective Power of Cloth

In some Nigerian communities, notably Yoruba, Igala and Hausa, cloth or fibre is employed as an instrument for protection. In traditional Yoruba culture, for example, Rene (1995) notes, "the protection of children, wife, farmland and properties are the responsibility of the family heads". In the discharge of this responsibility, they get the assistance of "diviners or medicine men who prepare special cloths or fibre-strings which is worn by family members for protection against

thieves and sexual harassment". A special medicine in the form of a thread of cloth is worn by vulnerable young girls and women. If any man has sexual relationship with such a person who is protected with this object, gets mad or may die in the act, this is one of the ways of social control; enforcement of security and administration of justice in some traditional societies, such as the Bunu community in Yoruba land.

Sign of Authority

Cloth has been used to assert authority, social and economic status. Chieftaincy costumes, royal caps or crowns, special marriage and burial cloths have been used to demonstrate authority. The Bunu and Tiv peoples of Nigeria produce special cloth that is worn by virgins during traditional marriage ceremonies. It is a taboo for non-virgins to wear this special cloth during their marriage ceremonies (Rene 1992). The cloth which serves this purpose is the "Iviv-Ityo" fabric. With regard to the above, the restriction of a special marriage cloth for use by virgins shows cloth as a symbol of authority, and authority to wear a special marriage cloth is determined by one's level of moral discipline or moral rectitude on sexual matters. This is one of the ways stability is assured in marriage in traditional social system.

Ties of Obligation/Agreement

It is believed that cloth ties or binds people together and when it is torn, it means that the relationship has been broken. From the writer's investigation, tearing of marriage cloth among the Tiv and Idoma peoples of Benue state of Nigeria, show that marriage ties have been broken as a result of death of one partner, extra-marital sexual act by female spouse or divorce. It can also stand for broken treaties / relationship or agreement between tribes or groups. This means that cloth is used to form ties of obligation, love, marriage and affection. "The breaking of relationship is graphically depicted in dispute settlement in which the chief and elders take the cloths of two disputants and tear them into half showing separation of relationship" (Ibejigba, 1988).

Similarly, among the Tiv and Idoma of Benue state, the wrapper and sleeping mat of a couple is torn half when one of the couple dies, showing separation. Also, among the Tiv people of Benue state, the display of clothing along the road shows transition or transformation of life from the human to the spiritual. When a Tiv man dies, he is believed to be on a journey to complete the circle of life. His cloths are spread along the road, near his earthly home to announce his transition. Cloth is therefore used as instrument for communication to the people when someone dies in Tiv community.

Cloth as Warning Sign

Cloth as a material and thread, which is a component of cloth have supernatural implications, especially, when it is displayed for publicity. Red and white coloured threads have power of attraction and revelation. Red cloth or thread is used to alert people of possible danger in shrines, fetish objects, farm land, dangerous

equipment, bad sport and hidden traps. Land marks are often made and demarcated with threads warning people not to cross boundaries. Among diviners, red colour is a sign of power force or presence of ancestral spirit. These qualities are similar to the power of kings, chiefs, priests, and diviners who are associated with red cap, red regalia and crown which typify uniqueness and threatening force.

Discussion

Nigerian people have depended on cloth and fibre products for their social, religious and economic activities. Apart from the use of cloth, conventionally, as apparel and furnishing material, its use/ application in proverbs, metaphor and aphorism from some Nigerian ethnic groups have shown its close relationship to man. The following Igbo wise sayings can be used to demonstrate the proverbial, metaphoric, aphoristic and instrumentalist concepts of locally woven cloths:

- A. *Akwa mgbochi*,
Meaning: cloth that covers or protects;
- B. *Akwa Nkpuhe*,
Meaning: the cloth that opens;
- C. *Eriri ji ndu*,
Meaning: the cord of life;
- D. *Akwa oche ndo*,
Meaning the cloth that shelter's;
- E. *Akwa bu ego*,
Meaning cloth is money;
- F. *Akwa omumu*,
Meaning: cloth that regenerates or procreates;
- G. *Akwa nbibi*,
Meaning: cloth that separates;
- H. *Akwa njikota*,
Meaning: cloth that unites;
- I. *Akwa nwa muo*,
Meaning: ritual cloth;
- J. *Akwa ocha*,
Meaning: white cloth or purification cloth;
- K. *Akwa Ojii*,
Meaning: black cloth;
- L. *Akwa Obara*,
Meaning: red cloth;
- M. *Akwa uhie*,
Meaning: yellow cloth and,
- N. *Akwa odo*,
Meaning: cam wood coloured cloth.

The meanings attached to these special cloths are derived from their functions and their production helped to boost the quantity and types of local fabrics. For example, the *Akwa Ojii*; black cloth is a ritual cloth used by priests, diviners and mourners. The fabric is also used in constructing masquerade costume. This particular cloth is not commonly used as apparel but revered for ritual and transitional ceremonies or rites of passage.

The *Akwa Obara*, Red cloth is assumed to have a power force, and that is one of the reasons why it is a signs of danger; ancestral presence; social and religious status. *Akwa Odo*, yellow cloth and *Akwa Uhie*, cam wood coloured cloths are very useful for diviners, soothsayers and herbalists/powerful medicine men. When diviners wear this special cloth, they are believed to have the eye of the spirits. This is one of the myths that give support for cloth manufacture in different communities. These types of cloths were used to en-code and de-code information about the Igbo world view on the circle of life, social and economic values. This is because when cloth or textiles are used either symbolically or metaphorically, a new mode and feeling is created through exchange of ideas.

Symbolic textiles have the power to convey new meanings to a textile product and consequently, define new realities. Symbolic or Instrumentalist textile has tried to humanize textiles. This means transferring human spiritual characteristics to non-human elements such as cloths. The writer is of the opinion that the uses of cloth for religious sacrifices, divination or medicinal purposes, among other functions, was very much a part of traditional society and this, apparently, is still in use today. This is one of the ways the society has encouraged entrepreneurship in cloth weaving and thus, sustained its cloth weaving tradition.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to offer a broad view of various un-addressed functions of local cloths principally in Nigeria. These aspects are its symbolic, metaphorical and instrumental associations. Roy Sieber (1992) observes that "the technical, historical, aesthetic, and contextual aspects of textiles have been too little considered" among most scholars and researchers. Therefore, this paper tries to provide a good understanding of traditional textiles, especially the reasons for their creation and the meaning for the people who use these cloths. It indicates that the use of textile as a symbol to achieve various objectives expanded the peoples' view about cloths and increased the peoples' participation in cloth production.

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