

Visual Analysis of Igbo-Ukwu Artifacts with Dress Imagery

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Abstract

In this article, we attempt a critical visual analysis (CVA) of images of Igbo-Ukwu artifacts excavated by Thurstan Shaw. The images that constitute the primary source data are mostly obtained from Thurstan Shaw's texts on Igbo-Ukwu. Here, we focus on the dress imagery seen in those images. To deconstruct the meanings encoded in them, we rely on experiences from diverse sources—texts, oral tradition, and personal observation. The images exemplify a visual culture and function as a realistic representation of man-made objects—objects that reveal the clothing tradition in a traditional Igbo society. The analysis highlights the aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic, ideological, and functional purposes of the artifacts as well as one key construct, brevity or skimpiness, often misconstrued to mean nakedness by some European visitors. It affirms that the dress styles communicate the dynamics of the socio-cultural life of the Igbo-Ukwu people and provide cues on the earliest known local textile technology and other important traditions of the Igbo. It supports the notion of the antiquity of the indigenous Igbo clothing tradition that vanished during the British colonial project in Nigeria. It also exposes and challenges some comments credited to Ward Price, a British colonial officer in the second quarter of the 20th century that demonstrates his superficiality of knowledge, and indeed others like him, of Igbo dress sense.

Keywords: Dress, Bronzes, Nudity, Body Markings, Jewelry, Igbo

Introduction

Archaeological findings remain invaluable, especially in contexts where written records are hard to find. Studies have shown that the earliest written accounts associated with the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria are relatively recent. They are traceable to the earliest contacts of the people with the Portuguese and other European visitors.

In other words, there was no written record about the Igbo between the 9th and 10th century CE when Igbo-Ukwu buried artifacts belonging to the Igbo group were scientifically proven to have been produced. These artifacts were excavated around 1959 (Shaw, 1967). Scholars interested in Igbo history found such 'prehistoric' data invaluable.

The Portuguese world map of 1519 reveals that the Igbo areas were occupied by people celebrated for their energy, achievements, and astuteness (Oputa 2008). It is also believed that the Spaniards identified them in 1593 a people noted for their art, industry, and achievements (Oputa 2008). Their geographical spread once was beyond present southeastern Nigeria reaching the terrain along the Bight Biafra. Hence, the Ikwerre people in the present River State were once regarded as belonging to the Igbo group. This is true of the people of Abo, Akoko, Ogwashi-Ukwu, Agbo, Isele-Ukwu, Illa, and Asaba, on the western side of River Niger, in today's Delta State. Their population was said to be about four million in 1921 and five million or 16 percent of the Nigerian population in the 1950s (Umeukeje, 1972). The Igbo are Republican in their political system, highly business-oriented, and adaptable. However, they are "probably the most receptive of culture change and the most willing to accept Western ways, of any large group in Nigeria" (Otterberg, 1962, p. 130). These notable borrowers and individualists hardly retain their indigenous practices for a long time (Murray, 1948; Williams, 1962). Hence, much of Igbo tradition has been modified and some lost completely. Analysis of Igbo-Ukwu artifacts will show some degree of change and continuity in Igbo clothing tradition.

Culture is dynamic and is best studied in its historical dimension, especially as regards the relationship among its components (Herskovits & Bascom, 1962). Various aspects of

indigenous institutions and cultures have been varnished through cultural contact in colonial contexts (Comaroff, 1996; Oloidi, 1989). Perhaps, in a bid to accommodate new cultures, the Igbo often quickly lose what should constitute their cultural heritage. For instance, *ichi* facial marks seen in Igbo-Ukwu figures have long been associated with titular men of the region. Such men traveled unharmed to other towns to perform some functions in connection with coronations. Their characteristic facial marks known as *ichi* helped people to distinguish them easily. During fieldwork around the Igbo-Ukwu region in 2020, it was reported that there was only one survivor with an *Ichi* mark in the entire region.

The paucity of recorded accounts of surviving traditions and the extinct probably inspired the early Europeans who made some documentary efforts in this regard (Basden, 1966, 1982; Jeffreys, 1954; Talbot, 1924, 1969a, 1969b). Their idiosyncratic and eisegetical interpretations of the people's sartorial practices, for instance, appear superficial; they do not reflect reality or capture the true picture. For them, nakedness is a mark of savagery and primitivism. Similarly, African Art was not regarded as artworks in the West or by the European visitors cum colonial agents. Klemm (2016) observes that early European explorers who returned home with objects from African societies did so out of sheer interest in primitivism or something spectacular and not necessarily because there were fascinating art forms. Interestingly, the notion of primitivism and craft associated with African art is no longer

tenable. Murrell (2000) also explains that it was the aesthetics of traditional West and Central African sculptures that influenced Modern Art styles during the early 1900s, especially in France where avant-garde artists such as Matisse and Picasso adapted certain elements of African aesthetics in their works. Analyzing some of the original African arts, as is the case here, has potential for contemporary art practice in Africa and beyond.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frame of the article derived in part from the expression "in search of meaning in African Art," a title of text credited to Fagg (1973). William Fagg (1914-1992) worked in the Department of Ethnology at the Museum of Mankind in London as an anthropologist and keeper. He was in tune with traditional art-historical methods: stylistic studies, aspect of connoisseurship, and iconography which deals with levels of meaning associated with the subject matter – overt content and real content, something that Erwin Panosky had already written extensively about. In the article, Fagg presented images of two lookalike wooden figures from Western Igboland and explained based on duly guided value judgment how one of the figures is a crude imitation of the other. Fagg (1973) notes that a well-guided and complemented subjective judgment recognized by the intellect should be considered necessary and indispensable in the study of arts with seeming coded meanings. So

our concern is about making sense of the dress imagery in Igbo-Ukwu artifacts in line with extant and existing traditions.

Art historians have a long-standing attachment to the formal analysis of artworks and their interpretations. Preziosi (2009) features an article by Panofsky (1955) which presented iconography and iconology as basic approaches for the study of Renaissance arts. Iconography deals with description and classification based on forms and symbols in the artworks. This helps in the establishment of provenance, date, and perhaps authenticity. Iconology relies on iconography to deepen interpretations. To Erwin Panofsky, "iconology" (which is synthesis-based) is "an iconography (which is analysis-based) turned interpretative and becoming an integral part of the study of art instead of being confined to the role of a preliminary statistical survey" (1955, p. 224). The difference between the two lies in the fact that the former is outside-inclined while the latter is inside-inclined. Thus iconology shares the functions of interdiscursivity or intertextuality – "the transposition of one (or several) sign systems into another," according to Kristeva (as cited in Morgan et al., 2022).

This article therefore advances the tenets enshrined in Critical Visual Analysis CVA as presented by Morgan et al. (2022), and Wang (2014). Morgan et al. simply appropriated Wang's (2014) model to address a concern, thus

advancing the CVA framework as presented by Jiayu Wang in their study. Although CVA is an offshoot of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Fairclough (1989, 1995), the former appears more critical-oriented than the latter which is language-centered (Wang, 2014). Critical CVA is an essential analytical tool for visual images with communicative qualities (Schroeder, as cited in Morgan et al. 2022). We will therefore explicate Morgan's et al. approach and how we intend to appropriate some portions in this article.

Morgan et al. (2022) analyzed ten images purposively selected from 21 digital illustrations by Jide Okonkwo (p.322). These images were accessed online from the artist's Facebook account in a series he named *Daily Bible Challenge*. Their interest was in the visual semiosis of the data. Wang's model or models of CVA have a tripod structure: Discursive narrative analysis, visual intertextuality, and critical Visual Metaphor Analysis. The first part has three sub-categories: visual description, visual interpretation, and social practice. The second has two: manifest Visual Intertextuality [further subdivided into visual sources and ideological implications] and Visual Interdiscursivity [that metamorphoses into social distance]. The third which is critical visual metaphor analysis has two major branches: Identification of metaphors and analysis of visual arrangement.

In their analysis of Okonkwo's visual composition, Morgan et al. showed some degree of fidelity in their application of three CVA modules. After presenting and labeling all ten images on one page, they began with a discursive narrative (visual description, visual interpretation, and explanation of social practice). Next was Visual intersexuality analysis which was followed by critical visual metaphor analysis characterized by identifying metaphors in the compositions and arrangement of elements. Particularly instructive is how the authors used the concept of Visual Grammar (VG) put forward by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to express the visual elements found in Okonkwo's illustrations. They paid attention to the three meta-functions of visual images: representative, interactional, and compositional, all coming under social semiotics. These have further divisions that make up what one may call VG's toolbox or taxonomy which helps one to engage image salience and informational values that mark the compositional system akin to the study of artworks.

In keeping with the tenets of intertextuality explained in the article, we appropriate the parts of CVA considered useful in the analysis of the images of artifacts in reference. Texts that accompany illustrations are quite useful in CVA. However, photographic images of Igbo-Ukwu artifacts do not carry such texts. Legends attached to them are given by the authors based on

the information gleaned from the primary source text written by Thurstan Shaw, the archaeologist who supervised the excavation. In the absence of the texts, we will rely on value judgment (intuitive). As earlier noted, one's subjective assessment, once it is duly guided, has been accepted in determining the meaning of art forms (Fagg 1973).

Methodology

The article relies on visual data supported by relevant textual data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data are archival materials while the secondary data are published texts. The article relies on critical visual analytical approaches in engaging the artifacts as enunciated earlier. The dress imagery includes various dress styles and accouterments/accessories/fashion supplements. Our interest is in their visual elements and their social meanings. Discursive narrative analysis, visual intertextuality analysis, and critical visual metaphoric analysis used here share the same theoretical foundation—social semiotics.

Significance of the Study

This article also adds to the succession of materials on Igbo culture, dress, history, and aesthetics that have proved useful to those who are interested in Igbo studies and fashion design. The essay presents images of Igbo-Ukwu artifacts which serve as graphic illustrations of Igbo fashion of the pre-colonial era; the

visual data also serve as an exhumation of the hitherto lost tradition of Igbo people and thus reminds one of some indigenous Igbo fashion and makes one see the extent to which western culture has infringed on the locals' clothing culture (Nkwo, 1984). Again, this discourse would help people to distill Igbo aesthetics as it relates to fashion and beauty. Although the artifacts arguably belong to the Igbo-Ukwu people, their analysis arguably applies to the surrounding Igbo regions due to the quality of homogeneity that defines Igbo traditions. This article has been limited by the dearth of supporting visual and textual data and might be affected by limitations of value judgment.

An overview of writings on Igbo clothing tradition

Several studies on Igbo-speaking people's clothing traditions are available online and in print. However, two are essentially pivotal to this essay. Misty L. Bastian's essay, "The Naked and the Nude: Historically Multiple Meanings of *oto* (Undress) in Southern Nigeria", is relevant to this study because it attempts an overview of the meaning of nudity or nakedness in Igboland both in the past and present. Bastian includes in her article the frontispiece of a book by Waldo Fleming entitled *Talking Drum* to graphically highlight the contrast between a well-clothed colonist and a scantily dressed African. Misty Bastian (2005, p.35) observes the specifically and historically gendered understandings that guided how "Igbo-speaking people take

immense pains with their appearance” with “specific understandings of how bodies ought to be displayed, both in and out of clothing”. The foregoing point suggests the way the Igbo saw their bodies differed from the way the colonial masters did. Perhaps, the report of Ward Price, one of the earliest colonial masters sent to Southeastern Nigeria—Onitsha and Awka—illustrates this point more poignantly.

Price (1939) chronicles his experiences in Southern Nigeria—his initial aversions and his coming to terms with the locales’ culture. Price stayed awhile in Onitsha before he became an administrative officer in Awka where he met two Europeans. One was Reverend G. T. Basden of the Church Missionary Society who wrote extensively about the Igbo and the other was Mr. Rumann, the District Commissioner of Awka. The Igbo who came to carry his baggage from Onitsha to Awka was described by Price as having "a wild and unprepossessing appearance" and wearing "an old rag of small dimensions" (p.20). The author, while at Awka, discovered "that all the unmarried girls and some of them were strapping young wenches, walked about entirely naked, as unashamed as Eve before the fall" (p.20).

It seems that Price felt discouraged after seeing for the first time the supposed outlandish outfit and physical appearance of the Igbo. As earlier observed, Price (1939) stated thus:

On the morning I left Onitsha, eighty sad-faced Ibo men, with ebony, sun-cracked skins, appeared outside the rest-house door to carry my baggage the twenty-two miles to Awka.

Hardly any of them were over 5ft tall; they were bony and shapeless, with hair hanging in numerous oily plaits over their necks. They wore nothing except small rags around their loins, and each had a sheath hanging at his waist (p.20).

In the above excerpt, Price ascribed the quality of sadness to facial marking, a highly rated mark of honor. He saw an important clothing item of the Igbo people as a rag. Although Price disliked the people’s dress and other forms of appearance, he later got used to it. His comment after he was reposted to Onitsha from Awka affirms this. He admitted that he had enjoyed not only the people but also their environment which presented subjects of varying interest to him like “awesome looking images in their shrines, the masks and dancers, the blacksmiths, and primitive forges...scores of unclothed children playing about” among other things (p.18). Price’s comments give an insight into the Igbo clothing practice which was quite different from that of the Europeans at that time. To him, the general appearance of the Igbo in their traditional attire was weird, grotesquely odd, and irritating.

Masquelier (2005) states that what struck European travelers first and foremost during their original encounters with indigenous people was their nakedness or scanty clothing which was one of the visible marks of difference between the people and Europeans. For them, including the early Christian Missions, nakedness signifies darkness, disorder, and

pollution; hence they made an effort to create more orderly and chaste personhoods (p.2). Masquelier drawing from other sources—Greek tradition and Western views—defines nudity as a form of dress or an art form, while body nakedness is an exposure of the essential self (p.3). There is plenty of evidence supporting that nakedness is not universally equated with revelation and that the "meaning of nakedness, nudity, and modesty shifts concomitantly with the identity of the observer" (pp.4 &15).

Local authors have equally made some contributions to the field. For space constraint, two would be mentioned here. Diogu (2010), for instance, writes about the changes in Igbo Clothing tradition and classifies Igbo clothing into two modes—formal and casual—and advises that the Igbo mode of dressing, especially for formal and ceremonial occasions, should be more voluminous than it is at present. The improvement in Igbo cloth and fashion is evident in some visual and perceptible areas such as weight, size, color, weaving pattern, and motifs. For Diogu, the history of modern Igbo cloth is traceable to British colonial history in Nigeria foreign fashions like "Abada" design, fancy brocades, Indian cloths (George) as well as wax and fancy prints from Manchester and Holland were introduced.

Relying on historical and sociological approaches, Asogwa and Phil-Eze (2011) examine the cultural change in the dress fashion of the Nsukka Igbo in two distinct periods: 1900-1920 and 1920-1980. Beginning from 1900 to 1920, it examines the

traditional clothing style of the first epoch, which is said to have been in existence since around 2555 BCE. Such classification appears highly subjective and arguable though we agree with them that the effects of the colonial intervention have transformed local dress such as men's loincloths—*ekaihu*, *owe*, and *abamte*, part of the styles seen in Igbo-Ukwu artifacts. By implication, no one has discussed Igbo fashion about Igbo-Ukwu bronzes.

Igbo-Ukwu Buried Artifacts

In early 1939, J. O. Field, the Assistant District Officer of Awka Division, came across some "most peculiar bronze castings" (made by the wax core process known as *cire-perdue*) discovered in the previous year by an Igbo man digging a well in his compound (National Archives, Enugu, NAE). The collection includes several bowls, some chains, one piece of the scabbard, and several twisted articles, such as twisted snakes, snails' shells, an elephant's head, and two fish-like objects. The reports on the discovery stated that there were two castings which might be examples of the Awka blacksmiths who did such works in the past.

Thurstan Shaw who later undertook a more careful and somewhat detailed excavation of the area in late 1959 reported the full account of the archaeological discoveries in a book titled *Igbo-Ukwu*, published in 1970, in two volumes. He later gave a cursory report of the same in *Nigeria Magazine* in 1974 in an article captioned, "The Mystery of Igbo-Ukwu Buried Bronzes". Igbo-Ukwu bronzes exemplify a sophisticated design approach to the stylization of human figures common with

many other African sculptures or similar works.

Prominent characteristics of African sculptures: elongated torso, near flatness of the face and other forms, and lack of effect are evident in Figure 1. These are typical elements of African aesthetics. It is noteworthy how modernist painting and sculpture in European modernism, American Modernism, and German Expressionism reflect these subtle characteristics. The positions of the hand and legs in Figure 1 appear as sign-like forms.



Figure 1: An altar stands from Igbo-Ukwu showing a female figure. Height 27.4 cm. © Thurstan Shaw, *Igbo-Ukwu*, Vol. II, 1970.

The highly geometrically patterned altar stand features a female figure in the characteristic dress of the aristocrat. The dress consists of a coiffure, three rows of necklaces, and two rows of bracelets in each hand. There are also halo-like keloids formed around the navel and a

pubic loincloth suspended by two rows of waistbands. The designation of some of the buried bronzes as altar stands suggests their ritual function on one hand. The figures of scarified men and 'highly' ornamented women seen on the surface of the conical altar stand on the other hand carry some political undertones. The bronze objects like many other traditional African artworks primarily served a specific non-aesthetic function despite the clear manifestation of their artistic and aesthetic elements. Of course, Igbo-Ukwu art facts, like several art forms produced before the 18th century around the world, featured functional and aesthetic elements.



Figure 2: Bronze altar stand showing a male figure. © Thurstan Shaw, *Igbo-Ukwu*, Vol. II, 1970.

The male figure seen in the altar stand (Figure 2) had a similar fashion as that of

Fig. 1. In other words, Figure 2 bears the four common styles of traditional fashion which include nudity, scarification, jewelry, and scanty use of cloth or related material in the same way as the earlier bronze altar stand (Figure 1) which reveals female figure. The difference is that the male figure wears only one row of necklaces, bracelets, and waistbands. Other remarkable markers of male gender difference include a row of anklets and profuse face marks consisting of multiple straight lines and the absence of coiffure and keloid at the navel region. Although only frontal views of the figures are visible here, their genital organs appear covered. Except for their dress, one would find it difficult to establish their different sexes. The dimension of the cloth covering the pubic part of the female figure is wider than that of the male. The pattern of women's fashion in the pre-colonial period is discernible here. Women covered their bodies more than men in most circumstances.



Figure 3A: Equestrian figure on the fly-whisk hilt, from Igbo-Ukwu. © Fred Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*. 2009.



Figure 3B: A Close view of the Equestrian figure on fly-whisk hilt from a different text

The meanings of the gesture of the male and female figures, seen on the altarstands, remain a matter of speculation. The hairdo of the female figure is not quite visible but one can assume that it could be more elaborate than that of the male figure. Only a few Igbo males could have their hair plaited and their bodies decorated with uli dye similar to the women's.

The Equestrian figure (Figure 3A) is the oldest known African lost-wax cast bronze. We assume that the person who used it as a ceremonial fly switch was probably a warrior since it was excavated from a burial chamber. The artist exaggerated the head of the rider over the horse and his pommel. Such practice is common with traditional African artists who usually enlarge the parts of figures they consider more

important (Lawal, 2000). The equestrian figure wore a loincloth, bracelets, well-crafted headgear, and ichi face marking and gripped an object with his hand.

Discursive Narrative

The structure of visual grammar (VG) as presented by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) provides three constructs: representational structure, interactive meanings, and compositional structure (Morgan et al., 2022). The details of representational structure, and the visual content of the images, are expressed in action, reaction, speech, and symbol. The representational structure of Figure 1 has an action process of a standing female figure with legs that curved inward at the knee level; the figure is crafted as part of the surface design of an altar stand. Its reaction process is a woman gesturing with her hand with an air of confidence that reflects her stern mien. There is no text to explain the speech process. The symbolic process is the sun ray-like keloid design around the navel and the hands clasped over the chest. The representational structure of Figure 2 has an action process of a standing male figure with legs that curved inward at the knee level; the figure is crafted as part of the surface design of an altar stand. The reaction process is that of a man gesturing with both hands, one covering the pubic part, and the other the lower lip and jaw region. There is no text to explain the speech process. The symbolic process includes ichi facial marking and hand gestures.

The representational structure of Figure 3 A & B has an action process of a male figure riding a stylized and

disproportionate horse; the horse stands on a drum-like fly-whisk hilt. Its reaction process is the figure's sitting position in which the torso slants to suggest action/movement. There is no text to explain the speech process. The symbolic process includes the ichi facial marks and the hand-held object.

The interactive process which is about interpersonal relations between or among participants in the work and viewers (the interactive participants) is somewhat limited as there is a lone figure in each case. Nevertheless, the frontal position of the figures aids in direct eye contact or face-to-face engagement with viewers. Figure 3 is somewhat exceptional. The horse in Figure 3 stands as an additional participant. Again, the entire piece can be placed in a way that makes frontal view, profile view, or composite of both frontal and profile views possible. Since interaction could be either probable or certain according to VG modality, the horse appears stationary while the seated rider is active.

The compositional system of images contains three aspects: salience, framing, and informational value, and are quite instructive here. Figures 1 and 2 have as salience standing woman and man in respective instances within ornate altar stands while Figure 3 has a man sitting on a horse standing on a hilt. For Figures 1 & 2 the framing is curvilinear, openwork designs that form the vertical body or wall surface of an altar stand. Figure 3 is a three-dimensional piece and therefore has no frame. The informational value of a composition has to do with the subject broadly speaking and the placement of

subjects or texts in terms of up, down, margin, or center. Here, Figures 1 & 2 are woman and man, each sandwiched on the vertical side of an altar stand in a way that the head and soles of feet reach both extremes of the altar stands. The horse and the man in Figure 3 are as high as the pedestal, the fly-whisk hilt.

This is also true of the female figure seen wearing a loincloth in another altar stand (Figure 2) although Figures 1 & 2 tend to have analogous frameworks. The female figure covers her genital part with one of her hands placed over a piece of material that hangs down from the loin cord. The appearance of the female figure corroborates the notion of scanty dressing. In a European view, such dress is as revealing as nudity. From the bronze object and subsequent ones, one sees or perceives bare-bodied or topless forms. The only exception could be the kings and some titled or wealthy people; as will be seen later. Social distance is part of the interactive process. It manifests in two ways: the degree of close-up and the distance between the participants. We could say that social distance somewhat manifests in Figure 3 as the rider, probably a ruler, is depicted to be larger than the horse. This is based on the higher importance attached to the figure.

Visual Interpretation

In line with the VG concept, the visual description above hints at production, distribution, and consumption—the three modules of visual interpretation. The artifacts in reference are products of *cire perdue*, a lost wax method. In the process, a bronze material with a high

melting point is used to coat the wax model. When the wax is melted, the space is filled with molten bronze. Viewers of the production age could easily decode the forms' narrative and emotive roles. The narrative structure here could be read through the postures of the figures, formed by the use of legs and hands, to show direction and action. If it were a digital illustration, it would be the vectors, formed by parts of the human body represented and by certain background features. That single figure is involved in all the images under discussion suggests a non-transactional process or lack of reactional process. This form of action process is suggested by figures seeming to lack a clear goal. Figure 3 seems to differ albeit slightly as the rider is arguably on the move, perhaps, on a grave mission. The action process of the figures hints at their emotive direction, role distribution, and symbolic nature as lone participants. In social contexts, the cultural elements seen on and around the figures all have social, religious, and aesthetic connotations.

The cylindrical open-work bronze altar stands (Figure 1) reveal some aspects of traditional Igbo fashion such as scarification, nudity (despite loincloth), coiffure, bracelet, necklace, and what can be described as total nudity. The male figure, which forms part of the surface design of the altar stand, has these fashion items. Quite noticeable is how the little piece of cloth is hung over his waist cords to shield the genitals from the public gaze. This is somewhat similar to *ekaihu*, *owe*, and *abamte* styles that existed in rural communities, especially in farming,

wrestling, and religious contexts, up to the third quarter of the last century (Asogwa & Phill-Eze 2011). These styles of men's loincloth in the latter period appear more refined or sophisticated, a sign of cultural development and dynamism.

Further analysis of dress styles in Igbo-Ukwu artifacts

The aspects of pre-colonial Igbo fashion such as nudity, body marking and ornamentation, and the use of jewelry and headgear need further explanations. These cultural elements will be analyzed under visual intertextuality, and critical visual metaphor before explaining their social practice as they constitute an integral part of timeless Igbo fashion. Intertextuality refers to how layers of previous information and imageries act directly on the visualization and meanings of texts or images under discussion. Interdiscursivity is where the inter-action from extant sources and discourses appears subtle, and less discernible. Accompanying words, texts, legends, or linguistic messages play a clarifying role; it is the connection that Roland Barthes, one of the proponents of semiotics, sees as anchorage (Morgan et al. 2022, p.330). Metaphors of visual forms refer to source domains (signs represented) and target domains (what they signify). Social practice refers to actions or activities linked to the represented figures and objects that relate to approved customs and everyday practice.

Nudity, semi-nudity, and scanty dressing

Nudity is a state of undress. It implies total or partial nakedness. The latter appertains to the figures in reference; only the genital part of the body appears covered. The figures appear topless in loincloths that barely cover the waist, buttocks, or pubic region. Such mode was prevalent at the time the works were produced and continued up to the early colonial period. Hence, Price (1939) referred to such as old rags of small dimensions. Explaining the concept of nudity as it applies to Igbo-Ukwu artifacts with an intertextual lens will demand examining some scholarly texts.

Although people have different ways of conceptualizing nudity or nakedness, Misty Bastian acknowledges the view that "nudity is a term that was reserved in aesthetic circles for an elevating or ennobling undress, an innocent, reserved, and artistically constructed undress that supposedly represented humankind's spiritual nature" while "nakedness, on the other hand, was seen as eroticized undress, a purposeful lack of adornment that was meant to titillate and speak to our baser nature" (Bastian 2005, p.34). Nudity, most probably, is the earliest form of personal appearance in both private and public spheres. From the biblical point of history, the first man who ever lived remained naked in the Garden of Eden until after the Fall of Man. This was when clothing, made of leaves and animal skin, was introduced (The Holy Bible, KJV).

On the other hand, nude figures feature prominently in many notable art

history books. Some of these nude figures are actual portrayals of people as they are while some are stylized. An example is the stylized female figure known as the Nude woman (Venus of Willendorf), one of the oldest and the most famous of the prehistoric artworks, which was discovered in 1908 (Keliener, 2009). It is probable that when the figurine was executed around 26,000 BCE, nudity was taken to be the ideal fashion for women. Similarly, one of the earliest rock paintings executed in about 6,000–4,000 B.C. in Africa titled Running Horned Woman shows a running woman, perhaps an Algerian, who was scantily dressed in a raffia skirt; her topless body was highly ornamented in addition to two horn-headgear (Kleiner, 2009).

This tradition must have persisted in many parts of Africa until much later, specifically between the 15th and 19th centuries. Hence, European explorers, slave dealers, and colonists, who arrived at some coastal parts of Africa, saw many "unclothed" indigenes and reported the same. Such reports are not only about Africans. For instance, when Columbus met Amerindians, he wrote that "they all go naked, men and women..." (Masquelier 2005, p.1) Women's (and men's) undress among the pre-colonial Igbo has a good deal to do with how bodies are carefully watched by others, but not always and necessarily with men's lust after women's bodies (Bastian, 2005). From the book, one learns that the indigenous ideas about nudity in contemporary Igbo land have changed from what they used to be. Today, nudity is shameful, it also shows indiscipline or madness,

immaturity (as in the case of children), and anger. This is not different from that of the Europeans who equate undress with "primitive otherness" (Bastian 2005, p.24). The critical visual metaphors of Figures 1, 2, and 3 are similar. They represent unclothed male and female bodies. They signify innocence and the scarcity of clothing at the time.

Coiffure and headgears

The head is an aspect of the body to which much attention is given. People expressed their status, wealth, and affiliation through coiffures and headgear. It seems the ancient Igbo people valued the tradition of fashioning the hair as their Igbo of the present century. The head decoration, seen on the male figure on the bronze altar stand (Figure 1) is a typical example. It appears in form of circular forms on the forehead. Corresponding forms also appear on both sides of the temples with the head. The equestrian figure's headgear appears well-crafted. The form of the headdress of the equestrian figure somewhat appears like some local hats seen among the northern Igbo during the colonial period. The major difference is in the design and material with which the hats were fashioned.

Permanent Body Marking

Another form of pre-colonial Igbo fashion is body ornamentation through permanent body markings. The Equestrian figure (Figures 3A & 3B) has facial scarification known as *Ichi* that resembles those seen on the bronze pendant in the form of a human head (Figure. 4). Similar marks are seen on the

bronze altar stand showing a female figurehead (Figure 2). Permanent body markings are also evident on the male figure depicted in the altar stand (Figure 1). However, this is in the form of a keloid design around the navel. The keloid design seems to simulate a full moon or sun with radiating rays. This type of body marking was popular among the women folk during the colonial era.

The above pendant might have been worn by the king as a pectoral medal. *Ichi* markings were part of the distinguishing features of *Ozo* titled men. The fact that the mark was seen on a male figure (Figure 2) does not imply that a woman could be so scarified. The possibility of women having the *ichi* face marking, which is always associated with men, is evident in a book, *Igbo Arts, Community and Cosmos* written by Chike Aniakor and Herbert Cole (1984). A photograph reportedly taken in the early 1980s shows an image of an Igbo woman, from Iwolo, bearing such face marks is seen in the text. This is clear evidence of continuity and change in Igbo fashion. This is also true of the type of knives used for the *ichi* operation. The discovery of iron razors, among other artifacts in Igbo-Ukwu, suggests that the pre-colonial Igbo blacksmiths produced iron razors that looked like curved blades which they used as cicatrization knives. The iron razors are somewhat different from the triangular surgical blades used during the early colonial days in some parts of Igboland.

Jewellery

Jewellery consists of small decorative items attached to the body as a means of

personal adornment. It is one of the most important indigenous Igbo fashion accessories. The Igbo got their jewelry from a wide range of sources. Bones, metals, shells, and seeds constitute the major sources. Apart from the usual functional use in enhancing one's look and means of displaying wealth, people used such ornaments as a medium of exchange or as a measure of the value of goods and services (Eyo, 1979). The discovery of jewelry in Igbo-Ukwu suggests that the practice of fashioning oneself with them is an age-long tradition among the Igbo. For instance, the bronze altar stands (Figures 1 & 2) have male and female figures, wearing rows of necklaces and bracelets. In addition, there were many beads discovered independently. Among Igbo-Ukwu artifacts were copper anklets, knotted and plain wristlets, and an array of coloured beads of approximately natural size. Some copper wristlets appeared beaded.

Copper anklets and bracelets associated with Igbo-Ukwu findings might have been used as parts of the insignia of authority. This is also true of the series of bronze pendants that were probably attached to necklaces. The leopard's head pendant found among other bronze works is an example. Because of the importance people attached to man and certain animals, artists created wholly or partly to highlight certain characteristics. Hence, people so valued, for instance, some parts of leopards like teeth and skin that they served as ornaments. Leopard symbolizes strength and bravery; little wonder, one of the Igbo-Ukwu bronze pendants depicted it (Shaw, 1967). They

were appurtenances of a great man. Another important item of jewelry, known among the Igbo from ancient times, is the bead. The number and variety of beads found at Igbo-Ukwu archaeological sites render credence to the high value the Igbo attached to beads in pre-colonial times. These sites were named Igbo Isaiah, Igbo Richard, and Igbo Jonah. Those found in Igbo Isaiah alone were put at 63,458, those of Igbo Richard, 102, 294 while those of Igbo Jonah were about 15 pieces (Shaw, 1970). These quantities of beads are proof that the use of beads is ancient and customary among the Igbo. It is difficult to mention in detail the types of these beads, but the majority of them were of blue and variegated patterns as well as stone and glass.

The pre-colonial Igbo had other varieties of objects that served as insignia of authority. Some of them were fashioned with beads. For instance, the burial chamber in Igbo Richard, which was one of the sites excavated in Igbo-Ukwu, found a pair of beaded armlets of about 15cm in height. From the ancient time and in different parts of the world, people used weapons to fight wars. The fighters protected themselves with charms and physical accessories, in case of any eventuality. The pair of beaded armlets appears more as a defensive mechanism rather than a decorative form. Such items, including swords, have always been associated with bravery. Warriors used them and so did kings. The discovery of an ornate bronze scabbard from Igbo Isaiah suggests that the pre-colonial Igbo were quite familiar with such weapons. Besides their function as

warfare tools, swords were used to mark one's social status, especially during important ceremonial occasions.

Conclusion

We have attempted a critical visual analysis of images of Igbo-Ukwu artifacts excavated by Thurstan Shaw. Our focus has been the dress imagery of the images. Based on the principles of visual interdiscursivity, attempts have been made to deconstruct the ideology encoded in them, relying on our experiences obtained from diverse sources. The article has shown that aspects of Igbo-Ukwu artifacts in reference function as a realistic depiction of the clothing tradition in a traditional Igbo society. The concepts of brevity and sturdiness observed in the pre-colonial Igbo dress, as identified, do not foreclose their aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic, ideological, and functional significance. In the dress styles, one could read the dynamics of the socio-cultural life of the Igbo-Ukwu people, and gain insight into the local textile technology and other important traditions of the Igbo of the time, long before the British colonial project in Nigeria. Part of the significance of the analysis is that it exposes the shallowness of Ward Price's comments arguably intended to discredit Igbo in terms of appearance in the early colonial period.

As this study has shown, the traditional fashion industry once served as one of the viable local industries. People relied on homemade textiles such as *Aji*, and bark cloth. Then, those practices that sustained indigenous fashion such as permanent body marks

had not declined. It is therefore necessary to say that, in the context of stylistic, symbolic, and aesthetic dimensions the Igbo fashion of the pre-colonial period appears sophisticated. The indigenous costumes signified their core values. What is therefore worth considering, at this point, are those valuable principles that guarded the generation of the Igbo who lived during the time of Igbo-Ukwu bronze artifacts when Western civilization was never experienced. One such kept many girls and boys of marriageable age sexually pure even in their state of nudity (*oto*). The article has shown that the indigenous Igbo fashion is still much alive in visual culture despite its simplicity and some elements of crudeness. It is hoped, or even certainly, that they can be the sort after soon based on the values they represent and as a result of the recent wave of cultural revival (Ejiofor, 1984).

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