

Igbo dress culture and costume

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Abstract: The evolution of clothing, influenced by environment and resources, has significantly shaped cultural identities. Dress and costume serve as powerful visual communicators of individual and cultural heritage. This study explores the rich dress culture and costume of the Igbo people in South-Eastern Nigeria. It aims to articulate the nuances of Igbo attire, identifying core traditional garments for men and women, and to unravel the influences shaping their sartorial expressions. The research highlights the unique blend of age-old customs and contemporary trends defining modern Igbo fashion.. Employing textual analysis of scholarly works, cultural resources, and visual depictions, the study examines historical and present-day Igbo dress, focusing on recurring motifs, symbolic meanings, and the impact of external forces. Findings reveal distinct traditional attire: women wear puffed-sleeve blouses with two wrappers (George, Ankara, Abada, or Akwete) and headscarves, while men wear "Isiagu" tunics and "Okpu Agbara" headwear with trousers or wrappers. Despite Western influences, Igbo dress culture showcases a dynamic fusion of tradition and modernity, reflecting cultural heritage with global appeal. Igbo dress and costume are therefore vital expressions of identity, embodying a rich history and a vibrant interplay of tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Akwete, Costume, Culture, Elements, Hybridization, Identity, Igbo

1. Introduction

In every part of the world, people have a distinct way of dressing, each dress pattern is usually accompanied with a suitable costume. This implies that every race and culture places more emphasis on their costume and dress pattern, holding it in high esteem. This has the tendency and ability to communicate someone's personality and origin. The essence of dressing is to conceal the sensitive parts of the body, for protection and for beautification (Frith and Gleeson, 2008), in conformity with the popular saying "looking good is good business." However, Todorović et al. (2014) argued that dressing can generate a metaphoric perception about an individual's appearance, because it symbolizes the social, spiritual, and cultural affiliation of that individual; notably, individualities can be communicated through a person's appearance. How one dresses is how he/she would be addressed, whether morally or otherwise. Hence, dress and costume are visual means of transmitting information and messages about ourselves to the audience.

Costumes are clothes, jewelry, and accessories worn by people at a particular time, or in a particular ethnic or geographical location (Collins Dictionary, Online Edition). Shukla (2015) stressed the importance of costume and the significant roles it plays by projecting the wearer and anchoring them with a special identity, as well as making ordinary dress extraordinary. The researcher opined that her studies in the United States, Brazil, and Sweden emphasized how people leverage costume as a means for social communication and to express personality differences. Therefore, costume forms a basis for cultural identification. Culture is mostly viewed as a way of life of a group of individuals, including their dressing pattern. Ndubisi (2019) noted that "identity is the totality of one's perception of self, or how we as individuals view ourselves as distinct from others." However, cultural identity simply means the way of life of a group of people that is unique and different from

others. Nigeria, as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, comprises diverse dress cultures from its various tribes. The interesting aspect about this is the beauty found in diversity.

However, the Igbo tribe in the South-Eastern region of Nigeria is renowned for its rich and vibrant traditions due to the uniqueness of their choice of costume and dress pattern. Igbo costume entails the traditional attire and accessories associated with them. This rich heritage, shaped by historical, social, and religious factors, has evolved over centuries to become a distinctive expression of its identity. The dress culture of a people is a major distinguishing factor of their culture, as it portrays and communicates more about such a group (Nwokike, 2022; Adeola, 2024). This is because it shows the availability of materials used for their clothing accessories in that climate, and the peculiarity in the mode of dressing should not be overlooked. Igbo dress culture is a dynamic blend of ancient traditions and modern influences. While the core elements of Igbo attire have remained relatively constant, the specific styles and fabrics have evolved over time.

By implication, therefore, Igbo traditional attire is distinct for men and women. For men, the most common costume includes the *Isiagu*, a short-sleeved tunic with embroidered tiger heads, often worn with trousers, and the *Okpu Agbara*, a traditional headwear worn by traditional title holders. For women, the main traditional costume is the puffed-sleeve blouse—embodied and influenced by European fashion—wrappers (usually two pieces of fabric, often Hollandis known as *Abada/Ankara* or *George*, and the prestigious *Akwete*) wrapped around the body, and a headscarf, a traditional head cover (Figure 1). This classic style is still widely worn, particularly during cultural ceremonies and special occasions. One sector where the assertion of the Igbo traditional costume is profound is in the Nollywood movie industry. This industry has, over the years, been a major vehicle transporting the rich Igbo traditional motifs to the whole world (Okadigwe, 2019). In this article, therefore, various dimensions of the Igbo costume and dress culture shall be explored, with special attention to its essential elements, symbolic meanings, significance, and contemporary expressions in relation to posterity.

2. Literature review

Historically, pre-colonial Igbo costume and dress were deeply imbued with symbolic meaning, serving as visual markers of social stratification, marital status, and religious affiliations (Olaoye and Yekeen 2016; Nwafor 1987). The crafting of Igbo attire relied heavily on locally sourced materials, including cotton cultivated within the region, raffia palm fibers, and animal hides obtained through hunting (Ebokam, 2024; Green, 1947). These raw materials were skillfully transformed through weaving into intricate patterns and dyed using vibrant colors derived from natural pigments found in the local environment (Ntagu, 2015). The specific techniques and aesthetic outcomes of this weaving process often varied significantly across different Igbo communities, reflecting the diverse ecological conditions, available resources, and unique cultural practices prevalent in each region (Silas-Ufelle & Uka, 2023). Ntagu (2015), as cited in Silas-Ufelle and Uka (2023), posits that these traditional woven fabrics played a crucial role in "preserving, maintaining, and strengthening the empirical reality of a unique and established cultural behavior of a people." This underscores the intrinsic link between clothing and the perpetuation of Igbo cultural identity.

Among the notable textiles of the Igbo people is *Akwete*, a distinctive hand-woven fabric originating from the town of Akwete in Abia State, Nigeria (Ugochukwu, 2019). This weaving tradition holds a unique gendered dimension, being exclusively practiced by women (Chudi-Duru, 2021). According to Ugochukwu (2019) and Chudi-Duru (2021), Igbo (*Akwete*) weaving is carried out on vertical looms within cottage industries or women's cooperative societies established within the community. A significant aspect of this tradition is the prohibition of male involvement in the weaving process itself, although men are permitted to wear garments made from *Akwete* fabric (Figure 3). The transmission of this specialized skill has historically followed matrilineal lines, with *Akwete* women passing down their weaving expertise to their daughters across generations (Okpoko, 2023).

The arrival of Europeans marked a significant turning point in the evolution of African dress patterns, including those of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The gradual adoption of European modes of dressing introduced new materials, styles, and tailoring techniques into various Nigerian cultures (Chudi-Duru, 2021). Chudi-Duru (2021) observes that this process of acculturation and imitation of European dress had both positive and negative impacts on the dress patterns of Igbo women, leading to a complex interplay of cultural exchange. However, this interaction ultimately fostered a hybridization of traditional Igbo and Western elements, resulting in a distinctive blend of styles that continues to reflect Igbo identity while incorporating an international aesthetic (Adeola, 2024; Nwokike, 2022).

The enduring appeal and significance of traditional Igbo textiles, particularly Akwete, are further highlighted by their increasing recognition within the global fashion industry. Priscilla, as noted in Okpoko (2023), observes that "the revered Akwete fabrics have garnered the attention of notable fashion designers, who now incorporate them into their exquisite collections." This is exemplified by designers like Coker, who draws inspiration from Kenneth Ize, renowned for featuring traditional Nigerian textiles in international fashion shows, and has embraced Akwete in his own creations. Similarly, Lisa Folawiyo incorporates the Aso oke woven cloth of the Yoruba people into high-end clothing lines, often commanding significant prices, demonstrating the growing appreciation and market value of indigenous Nigerian textiles (Okpoko, 2023). This contemporary engagement underscores the continued vitality and evolving relevance of traditional Igbo dress culture in a globalized world.

3. Methodology employed in the research

The study adopted a straightforward textual method of inquiry to explore the dress culture and costume of the Igbo people in South-Eastern Nigeria. This approach involved a close examination and analysis of existing literature, visual resources (such as photographs), and cultural insights pertaining to Igbo traditional attire. The focus was on understanding the key elements of Igbo dress, their symbolic meanings, and their significance within the broader cultural context. By synthesizing information from diverse sources, this method aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution, relevance, and contemporary expressions of Igbo costume and dress culture.

4. Implication and relevance of igbo dress culture

One significant implication of Igbo dress culture lies in its connection to marital relationships. Traditionally, the Igbo people have associated a woman's attire with her husband's status and prosperity. A well-dressed woman is often seen as a reflection of her husband's success and social standing. This cultural belief has deep historical roots, where a man's wealth and influence were often displayed through his wife's appearance. By providing her with quality clothing and adornments, a husband could elevate his social status and demonstrate his ability to care for his family. While these traditional notions have evolved over time, the connection between a woman's attire and her husband's reputation remains a subtle but potent aspect of Igbo culture (Fakunle, 2022).

Other very profound implications of the Igbo dress culture are grouped into the following:

a. Cultural identity and heritage

- i. Preservation of traditions:** Igbo attire acts as a tangible link to the past, preserving cultural heritage and traditions for future generations (Onyima, 2016; Anyanwu *et al.* 2022).
- ii. Community cohesion:** Shared dress codes foster a sense of belonging and unity among the Igbo people, strengthening social bonds (Nwafor, 1987).

b. Social status and hierarchy

- i. **Class distinction:** Specific garments, such as the Isiagu for men and certain types of wrappers for women, can indicate social status, wealth, and title within the community (Chinedu, 2024).
- ii. **Marital status:** Traditional attire often conveys marital status. For instance, the style of wrapper worn by a woman can signal whether she is married or single (Okpewho, 1976). Maidens often tie their wrapper on the chest (figure 4), while the married women tie on the waist.

c. Religious and spiritual significance

- i. **Ritual attire:** Certain garments are worn during religious ceremonies and rituals, symbolizing devotion and connection to the spiritual realm (Green, 1947).
- ii. **Aesthetics and beauty:** Igbo aesthetics, embodied in their clothing, are deeply intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and cosmology (Ufearoh & Odilichukwu, 2023).

d. Economic impact

- i. **Textile industry:** The production and trade of traditional fabrics and clothing contribute to the local economy, supporting artisans and entrepreneurs.
- ii. **Fashion and design:** Igbo fashion has influenced global trends, with designers incorporating traditional elements into contemporary styles (Okonkwo, 2016).
- iii. In essence, Igbo dress culture is a multifaceted phenomenon that encapsulates the rich history, social dynamics, and spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people. It continues to evolve while remaining rooted in tradition, making it a vital aspect of Igbo identity and heritage.



Figure 1: Traditional Igbo attire (*Isiagu* wrapper for the male and Lace blouse and George wrapper for the female). Source: Bing.com



Figure 2: Igbo Women dressed in Akwete woven fabric (wrapper) and Lace blouse. Source: Bing.com



Figure 3: A young Igbo Man dressed in Akwete Attire with black trouser. Source: Bing.com



Figure 4: Igbo Maidens dressed in George wrapper. Source: Bing.com

5. Relationship between Igbo costume and dress culture

Igbo costume and dress culture are deeply ingrained facets of Igbo identity, mirroring the extensive history and cherished traditions of the people. This cultural expression, transmitted across generations, transcends mere fabric and form; it operates as a visual lexicon conveying social standing, spiritual convictions, and geographical origins (Ngcobo, 2024; Batten, 2010).

Consider, for instance, the *Isiagu*, a short-sleeved tunic frequently embellished with tiger head designs, a quintessential component of Igbo men's wear. This garment, once the preserve of royalty and esteemed dignitaries, now enjoys wider usage, embodying notions of strength, bravery, and cultural esteem. For women, the *wrapper*, particularly the Akwete cloth, stands as a foundational and adaptable textile. Its various draping methods and inherent designs each communicate distinct meanings. A woman's manner of tying her wrapper can signal her marital status, social rank, or the specific event being attended. Furthermore, the elaborate patterns and diverse colour palettes of the wrapper often denote the wearer's region of origin, adding yet another stratum of cultural importance (Adebayo, 2024).

Igbo dress culture extends beyond simple visual appeal. It is intricately interwoven with religious and societal customs. Traditional ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and festivals are distinguished by specific modes of attire, thereby reinforcing the collective nature of these gatherings. The elaborate costumes donned during these times serve to solidify social connections and reaffirm core cultural principles. While the advent of globalization has introduced novel fashion trends and exerted influence on Igbo dress culture, the fundamental values and symbolic weight associated with traditional attire and costume have largely persisted. Contrary to the view of Asikaogu (2018) that globalization would intensify the appreciation of Igbo cultural attire, this study suggests that the merging of traditional and contemporary elements has spurred modern Igbo fashion designers to reinterpret ancestral styles for today's consumers.

6. Significance of the Igbo costume and dress culture

Igbo costume and dress culture is rich in symbolism and meaning. Colours, patterns, and accessories often carry deep cultural significance. For example, certain colours may be associated with specific deities or social groups. Patterns can convey messages about wealth, status, or religious beliefs. Jewelry, such as beaded necklaces (*mgha olu*) and brass anklets (*mgha ukwu*), are often used to adorn the body and enhance beauty. Body modifications, such as scarification, tattoos, *Uli* and *Nsibidi* symbols also play a significant role in Igbo dress culture, serving as markers of identity and social status. *Uli* is a body adornment and mural painting, mostly practised by the women folks of Igbo origin. It is a prestigious element that encapsulates the spiritual, social, artistic and cultural life of the Igbo. *Uli* symbols have been explored in various levels, particularly in textile production (Silas-Ufelle and Ntagu, 2020). *Nsibidi* symbols are esoteric in nature, therefore, the symbols were inscribed on the *Ukara* clothes; a traditional cloth being used by the members of *Ekpe* cult of certain Igbo communities. *Nsibidi* symbol has equally been artistically unravelled and utilized in different forms and media by artists especially the textile artists.

Hence, Igbo costume and dress culture is not confined to historical or traditional contexts. Contemporary Igbo fashion designers have successfully incorporated traditional elements into modern designs, creating a fusion of old and new. This contemporary Igbo fashion scene has gained international recognition, showcasing the beauty and diversity of Igbo dress culture globally. While modern trends have influenced Igbo fashion, traditional elements continue to be exported, celebrated and preserved.

7. Contribution

This research makes several key contributions to the understanding of Igbo dress culture and costume. Firstly, it offers a comprehensive overview of Igbo traditional attire, clearly outlining the distinct elements for both men and women, such as the *Isiagu* and *Okpu Agbara* for men, and the puffed-sleeve blouse, wrappers (including specific types like George, Ankara, Abada, and Akwete), and headscarf for women. This provides a foundational description that can be valuable for those unfamiliar with Igbo dress.

Secondly, the study emphasizes the dynamic nature of Igbo dress culture, highlighting its roots in ancient traditions while also acknowledging the significant impact of European influences. It articulates how this

interaction led to a unique hybridization, resulting in contemporary styles that retain Igbo identity with an international appeal (Adeola, 2024; Nwokike, 2022). This nuanced perspective moves beyond a static view of tradition and acknowledges its evolution.

Furthermore, the research underscores the symbolic significance embedded within Igbo dress. By referencing the literature on how clothing communicates personality, origin, and cultural affiliation (Frith & Gleeson, 2008; Todorović et al., 2014; Shukla, 2015; Ndubisi, 2019), the study implicitly positions Igbo attire as a visual language rich with meaning. While the specifics of this symbolism are explored further in the body of the work (as indicated by the mention of exploring symbolic meanings), the introduction and abstract establish this as a crucial aspect of the research.

Finally, the study connects Igbo dress culture to broader cultural identity. By framing dress as a key element of culture (Nwokike, 2022; Adeola, 2024) and a means of expressing distinctiveness (Ndubisi, 2019), the research reinforces the idea that understanding Igbo attire is essential to understanding Igbo identity itself. The mention of Nollywood's role in disseminating Igbo traditional motifs (Okadigwe, 2019) also points to the contemporary relevance and reach of this cultural expression. In essence, this research contributes by providing a descriptive foundation of Igbo dress, highlighting its dynamic evolution through cultural contact, emphasizing its inherent symbolic value, and firmly establishing its role as a significant marker of Igbo cultural identity in both historical and contemporary contexts.

8. Evaluation

The preceding exploration underscores that Igbo traditional clothing and costume are not simply functional coverings but rather profound modes of human expression, acting as tangible embodiments of Igbo history, cultural values, and unique social distinctions. The varied designs, the deliberate use of color palettes, and the intricate patterns woven into Igbo attire collectively articulate a compelling narrative, fostering a strong sense of communal unity, serving as visual markers for significant life events and celebrations, and playing an active role in safeguarding the rich nature of Igbo historic and cultural heritage for posterity.

9. Conclusion

In the final analysis, the Igbo costume and dress culture stand as a vibrant and multifaceted manifestation of Igbo identity. Tracing their roots deep into history and extending into contemporary expressions, Igbo attire has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for evolution without relinquishing its fundamental cultural significance. The striking vibrancy of the colours employed, the meticulous detail of the patterns, and the deeply embedded symbolic meanings within Igbo dress continue to captivate and serve as a source of inspiration, both within and beyond Igbo communities. As the Igbo people engage with the advancements of modernity, their distinctive and highly esteemed fashion sensibilities serve as a powerful and enduring means through which they simultaneously embrace the present and celebrate the enduring legacy of their cultural heritage and identity.

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