

Re-Evaluating Fashion Photography in Central Nigeria

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Abstract

The invention of photography in the early 19th century became a blessing to professional disciplines. It added value to and changed the dynamics of operations in the fashion industry. Fashion illustration profited immensely and consequently fashion modeling rejuvenated. The influence of photography on society, art and fashion development was gradual and prompted by continuous invention of new cameras, photo editing tools and the introduction of halftone printing process. This monumental photography influence on fashion, in the late 19th century to early 20th century, in Europe and America took decades later before impacting on Africa fashion. Fashion style, its evolvment, distinctiveness in central Nigeria has been captured and documented through the lenses of the photographers of the region at various times. These documentations consequently may give clues to the history and trends of fashion of the tribes in the region. The paper examines the cultural fashion documentations of selected photographers in Central Nigeria and highlight factors that that influences stylistic trends.

Keywords: *Invention, Development, Editing, Printing process, Fashion trends, Cultural fashion.*

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Background to the Study

Long before the invention of photography in France in 1839 Europeans have had contact with Africa through navigators and explorers whose purpose, among many others, was to discover new territories. Oloidi (1988), avers that “by early fifteenth century, Portugal had penetrated the coast of West Africa and for a long period remained the only European force in this area”¹. After the Portuguese exploration of the Coast of Guinea they headed towards the interior (Congo region), exploring the hinterlands. This exploration was followed by the introduction of the Portuguese Missionaries along with artisans who supported mission work. After the invention of photography, the camera became a tool for image documentation for the colonial explorers. Following the introduction of photography to the hinterland of Africa, indigenous photographers began to explore.

Works of selected Photographers, from Central Nigeria between 1950 and 1980 were reviewed for this study. The photographers include the following Felix Onwuka, from Gboko and Lemmy Ijioma from Makurdi, Anthony Idegbesor from Idah, Titus Adewunmi from Odo Ere, Adetunji Oyedokun from Ebge and Chief Moses Adejo from Obbo Aiyegunle.

Fashion Photography

The invention of photography in the early 19th century became a blessing to some professional disciplines. It added value to and changed the dynamics of operations in the fashion industry. Fashion illustration benefited immensely and consequently fashion modeling rejuvenated. The influence of photography on society, art and fashion development was gradual and prompted by continuous invention of new cameras, photo editing tools and the introduction of halftone printing process. This monumental photography influence on fashion in the late 19th century to early 20th century in Europe and America took decades later before impacting on Africa fashion. After photography was introduced to Africa in the late 19th century, it assumed the role of documenting people, events, landscape and just a little attention was paid to fashion and cultural heritage of Africa. For the colonialists, documenting fashion, at the time was not for any promotional profit, but rather to document the “strange” mode of appearance of “the natives”.



Fig. 1: *Mina, Gunsumi, Free Beriberi.* A native man.
© British Archives, London, circa 1900.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalarchives5>.

Fashion Photography is an aspect of photography that focuses on style of clothing, personal appearance including hair, body decoration and accessories. It is the use of photography to document and promote fashion. Fashion photography is aimed at promoting the sale of clothes and fashion accessories in the years of the late 19th century, however, artist photographers found fashion photography a useful means of artistic expression. Before the invention of photography, graphic artists in Europe promoted fashion through visual illustration. The practice was common for pioneering fashion magazines such as *vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Fashion is an integral part of African culture. In Nigeria for example, various ethnic nationalities have particular styles of Fashion that is peculiar to them. The Yorubas, Igbos, Hausas Fulanis, Ibibios, Edos and Idomas could be identified merely by their style of dressing. The Yorubas of the southwest (including the Yorubas in Kwara and Kogi States of North Central Nigeria) are known for *Asooke* (woven cotton fabric) design and *Adire* (tie and dye) which Yoruba men make into *Agbada* and *Sokoto*. In some cases, they make it into *Buba* or *Dansiki* and *Sokoto*. The Yoruba women dress in *Buba*, *Iro* and *Gele* (a round neck free-flowing gown, wrapper and headgear).

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Dansiki and Sokoto. The Yoruba women dress in *Buba, Iro* and *Gele* (a round neck free-flowing gown, wrapper and headgear).



Fig. 2: Yoruba Woman in *Buba, Iro* and *Gele*.

The handspun, woven cotton fabric is also unique to the *Igbiras* of Kogi state, North Central Nigeria, the fabric is worn mostly by their women in the same manner as the Yoruba women, (The woven cotton fabrics the *Igbiras* and style seem derived from the Yoruba *Asooke*). Cotton woven fabrics were common to many communities in the Central Nigeria. Women of these communities were engaged in the spinning of the traditional wool and weaving. Similarities have been observed in woven fabrics of different nationalities; the Yorubas *asooke*, the *Igbiras ikitipa* and the Igbo *akwete*. There are evidences that traced the origin to the Yorubas of the southwest.



Fig. 3: Igbira
Showing the fashion of Igbira, Kogi state,
© British Archives, Photo taken by unknown Colonialist,
Date: Circa between 1890 and 1920

Culture is not static; this also applies to fashion and style. The fashion styles of the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria have steadily evolved over the years. The gradual change in style of fashion from one time to another is attributable to the many factors. One is cultural exchanges between communities especially as a result of migration. Moreover, trans-cultural trade between the various ethnic nationalities is a basic reason for transfers of taste and choices. Indeed, the third factor is the infiltration of foreign (western) fashion styles and their *portmanteaux* of accessories. The phenomenal infiltrations are responsible for new fashion style from the marriage of the cultures. During the colonial era, the colonialist made deliberate efforts to influence the fashion design industry. In Lisa Aronson's review of Renne, Elisha P., *Cloth That Does Not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life*, she avers that:

Renne learned from her careful reading of archival sources dating to the colonial period that Europeans were intent on eliminating traditional handspun, woven attire which they associated with things backwards and uncivilized and did so by introducing western forms of dress and increasing the importation of factory made textiles.²

Although the influx of western fabrics and accessories during the colonial era affected the production of local handspun woven fabrics for a few decades, as locals preferred the light and soft nature of the fabric to the heavy and rough texture of the local fabrics; the love for and production of the traditional hand-woven fabric soon returned in the 80s and 90s. At that time technology made it possible to produce light hand-woven fabrics as attention was also being drawn to the promotion of traditional fashion. Besides, Africans began to appreciate the creativity of her people and the beauty of her own textile designs. Despite the changes in styles and fashion as a result of the factors enumerated above the distinctive values and styles of the various ethnic nationalities did not change significantly. The accessories and fabrics might

have changed but the style that identifies each nationality remained constant. Due to the cross-cultural mix of fabric and style in Central Nigeria, one may find some fabrics common to more than one ethnic group. Designs, peculiarities of motifs and dressing style are unique to each ethnic nation. The *Asooke* of the Yorubas is different in design to that of the *Igbiras*, The woven fabrics of the *Igalas* is distinctive in design to that of the *Tivs* who are their neighbors.

During the colonial era there was the infiltration of European fashion into Africa. A few reasons have been proffered for the preference of the European fabric and fashion designs. The reasons are not far fetched: the machine-spun and factory woven fabric are lighter than the hand spun and hand-woven fabric of Africa. In Lisa Aronson, Review of Renne, Elisha's *Cloth That Does Not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life*, she enumerated reasons Elisha gave which were responsible for the decline in production of *Asooke* by the *Bunu* people (the *Bunu* people are from *Kabba* in Kogi State, Central Nigeria) and the reason for their choice of European attire above the local ones. Aronson states that:

Renne learned from her careful reading of archival sources dating to the colonial period that Europeans were intent on eliminating traditional handspun, woven attire which they associated with things backwards and uncivilized and did so by introducing western forms of dress and increasing the importation of factory-made textiles. But her Bunu informants imply that they were hardly passive recipients of these Western-imposed goods. Many of them say that they opted for aso oyinbo (white man's attire) and did so for reasons we might not expect. For example, Bunu women claim they began wearing brassieres to keep their chests from becoming flat "like a man's," (p. 183) not, as we sometime assume, for any European-imposed shame concerning exposed breasts. Moreover, they found the imported cloths lighter in weight, more comfortable to wear, and easier to tie and tailor. But, above all, it was for the sake of keeping up with fashion and for olaju (enlightenment or civilization) that they elected to change their attire. This change triggered a gradual decline in a weaving tradition that was once the main source for cloth and clothing in the Bunu area.³

Other factors that influenced the preference of European attire instead of the local include the introduction of Schools and Institutions by the Europeans. The students were made to wear European style uniforms. Thus, European style fashion became a status symbol.

Closing Remarks

The proliferation of western fashion styles, encouraged by the colonialist and modern technology imploded cultural conflict, especially in the sphere of fashion design and its industry. The proliferation of western fashion, accessories and entire *portmanteau* of styles, and the impact of local migration among ethnic nationalities inflected a cross-cultural mix of fabric design and fashion styles in Nigeria. However, an invariant wave of deliberate cultural values reimplantation and its influx has sustained the distinctive indigenous fashion identity of the people of Central Nigeria. There is a lot of cloth around. Textiles whether hand woven

or factory product, even ordinary everyday hand-made starch resist dyed, all are abundant signifiers of African commonplace every-day. These constitute the spectacle in modern day cities, towns and village market day sights. Textile is the most significant of the signifiers of African culture, heritage and political ethos (Spring, S, 2012). The cache of Images and selected photographs culled from a reel of both archival collections and the works of both foreign visitors and travellers, missionaries; and the emergent class of Nigerian photographers are a sufficient attestation to the observation. In a world that is deftly geared to cultural reorientation and emancipation, cloth is the signifier of that ethos of all former colonial people keen on the path of real serenity, cultural emancipation, political irredentism, social prestige and peace!



Fig4: Ceremonial Gown with embriodery, Photo by Titus Adewunmi



Fig 5: Yoruba Men in Native Fashion, Photo_Adejo



Fig 6: Women Fashion, Photo by Titua Adewunmi



Fig 7: Wedding Ceremony in Traditional Attire, Photo, Titus Adewunmi



Fig 9: Elite Fashion Collection of Adewunmi Photohouse



Fig 10: Elite Photo_ Adejo Photohouse

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