

# **Nsukka Igbo Dress Fashion: A Paradigm of Culture Change**

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## **Abstract:**

*The dress fashion trends of the Nsukka Igbo of the southeastern Nigeria have not been the subject of any scholarly study. The present attempt is therefore to find out whether the dress tendencies of the people were so inconsequential as not to attract the attention of researchers and scholars or whether they lived in a hermetically sealed terrain as to shield off completely the ever-groping lenses of the researchers and scholars. This paper in an attempt at addressing the issues thus raised investigates the trajectory of the dress fashion of the Nsukka Igbo area from the earliest time, specifically between 1900 and 1980; and as well tries to locate how time and space have affected the style changes of the Nsukka Igbo dress fashion. In so doing, historical and sociological methodological approaches are employed to source and elicit information from available scanty sources. The paper considers the traditional and contemporary periods of dress fashion changes of the Nsukka Igbo. Traditional as used in this context refers to the authentic dress fashion of the Nsukka Igbo not tainted by Western presence while contemporary refers to the dress fashion as it exists presently amidst western influences.*

## **Introduction:**

*Our senses become fatigued without the variety of change. The nose loses its sensitivity to any constant odor. The ear becomes deaf to incessant sound; the tongue finds a constantly repeated taste increasingly tasteless. And the eye soon indifferent to an unvaried stimulus and requires something different - a new look to stimulate it.<sup>1</sup>*

Dress, clothing, and fashion are terms often used interchangeably as synonyms, but in their proper usages and applications, they connote different meanings. To understand better their usages in the context of this paper, the meanings of these terms are thus given. Dress refers to a particular style of clothing worn on special occasions when people are to appear in their fineries. The rarity of its appearance gives it its name, *ekwa ohualaakpati*<sup>2</sup> in the Nsukka Igbo area of the southeastern Nigeria. Clothing signifies the fabrics intended to be worn on the human body either as everyday or occasional wears. Simply put, clothing refers to all fabrics and non-fabrics used to cover the human body for every occasion. Basic clothing differs from trendy fashion. Fashion stands for styles in clothing or dress that is popular among a particular group or society at a particular historical period.

Accordingly, it is fashion that gives meaning and relevance to dress within any given society, period or style; without fashion, dress would be lackluster, monotonous, and unappealing. In the context in which fashion is discussed here, it denotes those elements of clothing styles that signify the social, gender and cultural identity; and characterizes as well as identifies the expressions of the dress culture change of the Nsukka Igbo across time and space. Fashion in dress is a transient phenomenon; it has always implied a process of change that makes dress go out of fashion long before it wears out. This suggests that fashion undergoes several style changes and, taking different forms at different historical epochs, wears out clothes more than men do. Thus, fashion is likened to an *ogbanje*<sup>3</sup> that comes and goes now and again several seasons<sup>4</sup>...once and the repeated time, ageless.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, fashion is both a process and product of change. From the preliterate period to the present, the fashion of the Nsukka Igbo, like elsewhere the world over, has intermittently changed as a result of a number of sociological variables. These affect, alter and, to a great extent, modify their dress fashion styles. Some of these sociological variables include social, religious, cultural and political factors that manifest in socio-cultural interactions with others: wars and conquests; art and religion; and competition for status within a society and, in the recent time, improvement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

### **Traditional Dress Fashion of the Nsukka Igbo from 1900 to 1920:**

The dress fashion of the Nsukka Igbo considered within this period constitutes all fashion modes that existed as part of the cultural complex of the people from the earliest time to the period of the contact with the western civilization in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This denotes that the dress fashion was the real state of affairs, resulting from the ancient and relatively conservative local heritage society before their initial contact with the Europeans; with

their cultural domination, willful exploitations and intentional disruptions of Africans' ways of life.<sup>6</sup> Thus, fashion under consideration here is essentially of the traditional period that existed without much influence of western cultural and aesthetic values. The dress fashion modes of the period were fundamentally and holistically indigenous to the people in terms of materials and styles, and in conformity with the prevailing circumstances of the period. The history of fashion in this area goes back to as early as the period of the people's occupation of the area around 2555 B.C.<sup>7</sup>

The story has it that in the early periods of their occupation of the area, there was culture of nudity among the people. That they were –seldom clothed /sic/...but go stark naked playing, bathing, and swimming together, without distinction...||<sup>8</sup> The only art of beautification prevalent in the era was

the intricate *uli* body paintings, and cicatrization on the bodies and faces. Corals, *jigida*, and cowries later came to be part of the objects of body adornment for the ladies, and the young men. Apart from these, they were usually naked until the age of puberty when they were introduced to wraparounds and loincloths respectively; particularly the boys at initiation into adulthood, cults and or societies and the girls usually at marriage during a ritual known as *itu ekwa*.<sup>9</sup>

References to the use of any materials for body covering are fairly rare but not unknown. The use of plant materials and animal skins later came to be fashionable among the people. They were hunters and subsistence farmers who domesticated crops and animals as well as hunted wild beasts and other games. They flayed their skins and used them as clothing. They also made profuse use of banana leaves and *ukpo nkwu*.<sup>10</sup> Banana leaves were of a universal use as a body covering in different traditional societies and historical epochs. For instance, Kochlar writes that in the Hindu legend, banana was the forbidden fruit in the earthly paradise, and it was with its leaves that the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, covered their nakedness in the Garden of Eden at the realization of their nakedness after they ate the forbidden fruit.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, it is good to note that the people of the Nsukka Igbo did not stop at using the plant materials as naturally obtained from the plants. With great dexterity, they aesthetically improved on them for clothing. A few informants<sup>12</sup> could, for instance, remember how the brittle fresh banana leaves were softened to a pliable state by adeptly waving them over a flame of fire severally to improve on their luster, and consequently their applicability as a body covering. Subsequently, the Nsukka Igbo produced their first fabrics with natural fibres, using the techniques of crocheting, knotting or macramé, tying, and weaving. The more prominent of these were

the macramé and weaving techniques. Macramé or knotting technique was

mainly for the production of costumes especially for masquerades. Weaving was more of a general purpose cloth production technique, using straws and fibres from raffia palm. These preceded the development of looms and subsequent weaving on the looms.

This new development brought in the weaving of narrow strip cloths. The narrow strip cloths were used as loincloths by the men and as wraparound by the women respectively. The narrow strip cloths, woven on men's traditional horizontal looms, were usually about 30 cm to 40 cm wide. According to Adepegba, Fagg observes that originally, men seemed to have had only one-piece clothes that were tied or wrapped around the body, implying that men's tailored clothe might not be considerably old. This suggests that the traditional narrow strip textiles were the earliest clothes for men, as evident in different ancient art forms such as the Bwari figurine from Nok, a horse rider on a hilt and the male figurine on an altar stand from Igbo Ukwu, and seated Tada figure of the Tsoede bronzes, among others.<sup>13</sup>

Adepegba further explains that *abamte* is the common name for loincloths among several Nigerian peoples.<sup>14</sup> This is not a generic name *per se*, but one of the styles or methods of wrapping or tying loincloths. The many and varied styles of tying loincloths determine the names given to the loincloths in Nsukka Igbo area. For instance, *Ekaihu* which was the most casual, incongruous and ludicrous, was usually folded in two halves and passed over a rope of yarns tied around the waist. The cloth was just wide enough to cover the genitals and worn only in the groin region to shield the genitals from view, leaving the buttocks bare (Fig. 1). The second type called *Owe* was an improvement on the *ekaihu* and this was worn between the legs and under to parcel up the genitals, and over a rope of threads around the waist to hold it in place. The front part of the cloth was usually made to hang low to cover the parceled up genitals (fig.2). *Owe* antedates *abamte* that was worn around the waist with the cloth pleated lengthwise, passed between the thighs, tucked in and firmly knotted at the back (Fig.3). Worn on the body, *abamte* resembles in every respect the modern item of underpants. As a result, when the modern underpants were introduced in the area in the wake of colonial administration in Nigeria, ladies were skeptical about wearing them because –it was an abomination for anything to be between the thighs

of an Igbo woman in the name of clothing.||<sup>15</sup> Consequently, writing on the culture of the Igbo, Basden misconstrued this puritanical observance of traditional way of life to mean men placing embargo on feminine apparel and deliberate barring of women from the use of clothing.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 1  
Ikarhu



Fig. 2  
Owe

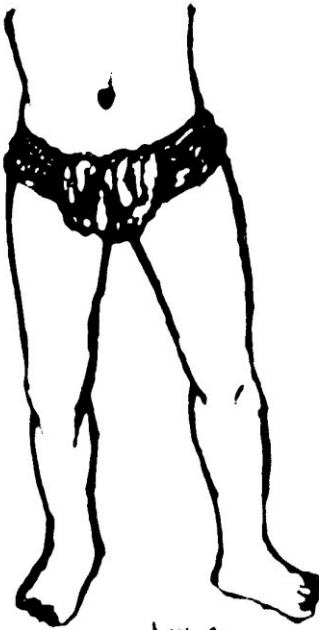


Fig. 3  
Ahante



Fig. 4  
Aitap

The women had their own methods of tying the wraparounds. The loincloths used by the women were usually two or more pieces of the narrow strip cloths joined together to get a wider cloth they used as wraparound. These they wrapped or tied around their waist, long enough, almost knee-length, to cover the genitals and the buttocks but leaving the upper part of the body bare (Fig.4). An improvement on the wraparound was the *patari* worn around the waist. It is a modified, sewn wraparound; it was the women's first tailored dress in Nsukka Igbo area. It is a hollowed, tubular knee-length dress. A few women still wear it at home or as underwear, but modern textile technology has introduced slip or simmet underwear similar to it.

The traditional fashion styles of the Nsukka Igbo have always continued to evolve new trends of change over time. The prevalent cultural and social changes of the time were more of effects of internal influences rather than –responses to opportunities or alternatives presented by the more recent urban, national, or international sphere of relations.<sup>17</sup> The predominant changes of the time were largely as a result of their interactions with their Nigerian neighbours, mostly the Idoma and Igala of the north-central axis, and Nri and Aro of the southeastern zone. For instance, the people's first contact with English cloth (*ekwa eru*) was through the Aro cloth merchants who had links with them. The Nsukka Igbo and these neighbours shared a common history and destinies of belonging to the preliterate and pre-industrial society whose ideas and ideals were similar in many ramifications and among whom were remarkable indications of cultural borrowings and syncretism. Accordingly, these interactions continued to influence, alter, and modify their fashion lifestyles. Although there were glaring evidences of close affinities of dress modes of these traditional Nigerian societies, particularly in the tradition of loincloth that was widespread among them, there still existed peculiar dress traditions associated with each sub-group which, through socio-cultural interactions, had influenced Nsukka Igbo dress modes.

For instance, *aso oke*, a traditionally woven cloth, and *agbada* all associated with the Yoruba, a highly organized society with cultural homogeneity and a culture of splendid dress mode had infiltrated into the dress culture of the area and become a commonplace fashion since the traditional era. *Baba riga*, a voluminous, long free-flowing robes, and *kaftans* associated with the Hausa, also came into the area and assumed a prominent position in the fashion milieu of the Nsukka Igbo. The voluminous, free-flowing *agbada* and *baba riga* were worn in the area as prestige dresses meant to show affluence, prominence or social status. This does not however suggest that the people of Nsukka Igbo were unresponsive and unreceptive to the changes resulting from western cultural and

aesthetic values; with the



passage of time, they began to show penchant for acculturation to western cultural values. The socio-cultural influences on the people started, with time, to drift from internal to the external. Their main external influence was as a result of their closer contact with the colonial administration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which hitherto was minimal.

### **Contemporary Dress Fashion of the Nsukka Igbo from 1920 to 1980:**

Nsukka Igbo began to feel the full British colonial presence when they were made, and administered as, part of Awka sub-district between 1906 and 1908 and later as part of Okpoga Division in the then Middle Belt Region (now Benue State) between 1909 and 1919. This Okpoga Division was later broken up in 1919 and Obollo Division was constituted with its headquarters at Obollo-Afor. This was later transferred to Nkpologwu in the present Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area, and finally moved to its present location, Nsukka in 1921, till today the geopolitical zonal headquarters of the area.<sup>18</sup> Thus, 1921 becomes an historical landmark in the political and cultural history of Nsukka Igbo. The creation of Nsukka Division brought the British colonial administration closer to the people of the Nsukka Igbo. From

then onwards, British rule has been firmly established and in its wake altered the old order of things and brought a sudden change to existing pattern of life in the Nsukka Igbo. The result was the social, cultural, commercial, and matrimonial interactions between them and their Nigerian neighbours. However, before these epochal periods, precisely between 1903 and 1904, the British colonial officers had only been paying periodic visits to the Nsukka Igbo area from their distant stations of Awka and Okpoga Divisions. As a result, their influences on the people were sparingly felt.

At the inception of British colonial administration in the area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, two features of the administration were therefore responsible for the sudden change in the general patterns of life of the Nsukka Igbo: the establishment of their judicial, religious, and educational institutions as well as the general trends of modernization which brought about a sort of dramatic change in the dress pattern of the Nsukka Igbo. Dress modes of the people that were hitherto traditional were gradually being eroded by western dress styles. The people of the Nsukka Igbo, as most other people under the British colonial administration, began to see adornment in European dresses as a mark of modern civilization; they began to develop predilection for, and started dressing in, them. The British colonial administrators in order to stamp their cultural and aesthetic values on the minds of the people even banned the wearing of traditional dresses in the colonial offices.

The Europeans came with English-tailored shirts, trousers, and suits. Among the English-tailored dress styles introduced by the western influence were suits of different styles such as the three-piece, double-breasted, and double-lapel suits, jeans (normal and later, stretch), bongo or *labu*, and pencil-mouthed trousers for men, and mini-skirts (cross-no-gutters), micro-mini gowns, maxi, midi, halter-neck show back for the women. As western civilization continued to engulf the people's socio-cultural landscape, there came to be no distinction between what men and women wore; women started aping the men in the use of trousers. Gender sensitivity brought in the wearing of trousers by women in the early 1970s and from then on, men have been competing with them over the use of men's attire. Not only did they wear trousers, they wore the brief knee length tight *oriokpa*<sup>19</sup> style of trousers that brings out the contours of the wearers.

Another important factor on the Nsukka Igbo fashion modes was the establishment of the University of Nigeria in the area in October 1960. The university brought people from diverse cultural backgrounds to the area. Thus, there came to be a sort of multicultural dress styles from these diverse cultures. As a result of the intermingling of these cultural values and aesthetics, the Nsukka Igbo dress culture was greatly influenced. In view of this diverse cultural dress cultures, it was now very difficult to associate any particular fashion genre to the Nsukka Igbo.

Fashion has never followed any regular pattern of style change either from the old to new or vice versa. This signifies that dress in fashion today may be out of fashion momentarily but may stage a comeback only in a very short period. This however depends on the prevailing value patterns of the time. For instance, between the late 1960s and 1980s, pencil-mouthed trousers popularly known as *-tanner* came to be fashionable. The trousers were so close and tight to the body that they brought out the contours of the wearers. There was also in fashion then the slim-fit type of shirt. The name was given to the shirt because of the way it clung to the body of the wearer. This period was therefore regarded as a period of the body hugging style of dressing.

Shortly before the Nigerian – Biafran Civil War of 1967 – 1970, the fashion experiences responded to the yearnings and aspirations of the national consciousness of the Nigerian polity of the period. Most African political leaders of the period made themselves the avant-garde of cultural consciousness and renaissance. For instance, Mbonu Ojike, the prophet of *-boycott all boycottables*<sup>20</sup>, and Leopold Senghor of Senegal, an acclaimed apostle of negritude, agitated vehemently against British cultural domination. These and other African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, to mention

a few, were always adorned in their respective traditional attires, probably in

defiance of the British cultural domination, manifesting in every sphere of the peoples' life. The efforts of these juggernauts reawakened the cultural consciousness of the African people towards traditional and cultural rearmament, and Africans began to appreciate the beauty and dignity of African cultural values, including their dress patterns. As a result, the campaign against cultural domination continued even thereafter, and in the mid-1980s, Air Commodore Emeka Omeruah, the then governor of the old Anambra State, made Igbo traditional attires a mandatory official dress in government ministries and parastatals. He made it a law that, even, the television newscasters must always appear in traditional dresses.

Immediately after the war, the fashion mode that prevailed was the four-pocketed safari-type suit and trousers styled after the military uniform and were popularly known as the –Biafran suit||. The safari-type suit was later in the late 1970s and early 1980s popularized by the then governor of Anambra State, Chief Jim Nwobodo, who always wore safari suits to any state public functions and because of his position, he became a model to many. Bongo or *labu*, the wide-mouthed trousers, emerged almost at the time pencil-mouthed trousers were going out of fashion. Bongo has a wide mouth, tapering as it moves up to the waist region. The bongo and slim-fit shirts later, between 1972 and 1974, gradually faded out of fashion, and loose, baggy trousers and shirts became fashionable; they allowed the wearer better freedom of movement. Bongo trousers later came back to the fashion stage and became fashionable again among the ladies. Thus, what is today seen as contemporary fashion in the dress modes of the Nsukka Igbo may not necessarily be a totally new creation but a fusion of the new and old styles or a reappearance of what was fashionable in the past. For instance, among the women, what is fashionable today is a resurgence of, except for those who ape the men in the wearing of trousers, the aftermath of the Nigerian – Biafran Civil War styles of leg-baring mini, the knee-length and sedate-looking maxi or full length style that is hot that come in different shapes: the slim pencil style, pleats, ruffles, puffballs, tulips, A-line or flared. To add splendour to their fashion, the women pair their downs with tops such as tank tops, spaghetti, halter necks, jackets, shirts, tunic tops, and low camis –that reveal even hotter cleavages||<sup>22</sup>, among others.

### **Conclusion:**

The study of the trajectory of fashion change among the Nsukka Igbo has revealed that no clear line delineates periods of change in fashion trends; the change has always, like elsewhere the world over, been –a history of loss and gain||<sup>23</sup> as well as transitional. It has also been observed that

cultural

borrowings have had serious impact on the fashion modes of the people and

rendered the dress fashion across cultural groups almost impossible to be identified as the product of any particular culture, group, or period. As they intermarried, engaged in wars, and interacted commercially, socially and culturally, they inadvertently exchanged and borrowed styles from one another. Similarly, improvement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has significantly blurred, if not totally obliterated the line dividing the geographical boundaries of the world, somewhat transforming the whole world into a microcosmic entity; a global village. As a result, people from different parts of the globe now easily share fashion styles, and therefore, it has become very difficult or almost impossible for younger generation to easily identify a fashion mode as belonging to a particular group, period, society or continent.

This study of fashion trends of the Nsukka Igbo within this historical epoch has also shown that the dress fashion of the people was not as inconsequential as non-documentation seems to make it; they had always moved with the trends like other cultural groups of the traditional societies. More so, they had also mutually existed and interacted with their neighbours which encouraged exchange of cultural borrowings among them. This is evident in the socio-cultural similarities, especially in their dress modes that attest to the historical and cultural links between them and their Nigerian neighbours. A major evidence of cultural affinity between the Nsukka Igbo and their immediate Nigerian neighbour of Igala is in the weaving traditions. There have been suppositions that Nsukka weaving tradition was a direct import from Igala influence. This is probably because of the similarities in the names of some locally woven fabrics as *ekpoto*, *oja*, and *ajiraji*, to mention only a few. The similarity in the names of their material cultures is not enough reason to attribute the weaving traditions of the Nsukka Igbo to Igala influence. The two sub-cultural groups have lived and interacted with each other for centuries. It is therefore not impossible that there have been frequencies of cultural hybridism between the two groups. Igala no doubt may have significantly influenced, and impacted on the lives of, the people but not to the extent of attributing any significant development of the people to the Igala. The westerners always believed in the supremacy of the more centralized societies over the non-centralized ones; to them the latter lacked the ability to generate any form of cultural inspiration.<sup>24</sup> As a result, any development they met in the non-centralized societies was usually attributed to the more centralized ones. That may have been the case of weaving tradition of the Nsukka Igbo; a prejudiced historicization that lacked experiential or empirical substantiation. The Nsukka Igbo, like most preliterate and pre-industrial traditional societies, had no means of documenting their inventions and histories, and therefore, could not

remember how, when and who introduced most age-old crafts in their localities. It is not impossible that the weaving tradition may have originated from the Nsukka Igbo and diffused to their neighbours through bilateral, cross-cultural interactions.

The postulations that there was culture of nudity may not be written off as ahistorical given the historical period to which the people belonged then. They belonged to the period when most preliterate and pre-industrial societies had no technology of textiles, and therefore were literally unclothed. But as people who lived in the terrain where they lived and prone to harsh weather condition, they might have devised a means of covering their body to protect themselves from the unfriendly weather. And as subsistence farmers who domesticated crops and animals as well as hunted wild beasts, it could be possible that they started early to make use of plant materials and animal skins for clothing. They were great hunters who hunted and killed wild beasts such as warthogs, lions, tigers, antelopes, wild cats, and other games and flayed their skins for clothing and other domestic purposes.

The history of dress fashion of any society, period or people is a transient experience; appearing, disappearing and reappearing intermittently over time and space like an *ogbanje* of the Igbo mythology. A trendy dress fashion in vogue today among a particular society may remain on the stage for a short or long period of time, depending on the value orientation prevalent at the given period which determines its acceptance and sustenance. Some leave the stage never to come back while others make temporary exit only to stage a comeback shortly after.

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2. Literally means ‘the clothes of the bottom of the box’ which simply implies that such clothes were usually kept away inside the ‘cloth box’ until there was a special occasion to attend.
3. *Ogbanje* (in Igbo), *abiku* (in Yoruba), and *dan jawabi*, (in Hausa). *Ogbanje* in the mythologies of these people is a phenomenon which refers to a changeling, a child who is believed to have been sent by the malevolent, evil spirit to torment their victim parents. The child is born, and within a short while dies to be

born again to the same parents. The child comes and goes now and again to the agony of its parents.

4. See John Pepper Clark's *Abiku* in D.I. Nwoga (annotated) *West African Verse: an Anthology*. Harlow Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1967, p. 61
5. See Wole Soyinka's *Abiku* in D.I. Nwoga (ed.) *West African verse: An Anthology*. Harlow Essex: Longman Group Limited. 1967 pp.62 – 63
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8. Sieber, R. *African Textiles and Decorative Arts*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972, p.11
9. *Itu-ekwa* in Nsukka Igbo culture was a sort of initiation ceremony where young girls who have come of age were initiated into adulthood and introduced into the act of clothing. This was usually done when the girl was being given out for marriage. Cloth as well as cooking utensils was one of the major and valuable nuptial gifts from her parents especially her mother.
10. *Ukpo nkwu*, a material in the outermost whorl calyx of a flower bud of the palm tree. From the dawn of civilization, man has always been confronted with the problem of covering nakedness. Adam and Eve at the realization of their nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden immediately went for leaves and covered their nakedness. Hindus epics also have similar accounts of the use of banana leaves for covering nakedness. Similarly, history also has it that the Igbo of which Nsukka Igbo is part used bark cloth (*aji*) for the same purpose. *Ukpo nkwu* was also profusely used for the same purpose among the northern Igbo to which Nsukka belongs.



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19. *Oriokpa*: This is a variant of *Omabe*, a popular masquerade in Nsukka Igbo area. *Oriokpa* is usually clothed in plain drab white cotton cloth known as *ekpoto*, *akparakpara*, or *akparanogwuere*. The trousers are usually knee length. *Oriokpa*, like the *Igele* variant, is entirely anthropozoomorphic in morphology. It has a catlike face beautifully, but scantily wrought with black and white threads.
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