

КУЛЬТУРНАЯ АНТРОПОЛОГИЯ

AFRICAN SARTORIAL CULTURE AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY: TOWARDS AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF DRESS

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Abstract. *This paper is a critical interrogation of the apparel culture as a marker of African identity in traditional and contemporary Africa. The article philosophically discusses the sartorial culture of sub-Saharan Africans in the light of its defining elements, identity, and non-verbal communicative proclivities. Focusing on the Yoruba and the Ashanti people, the author argues that African dress expresses some symbolic, linguistic, and sometimes hidden, complex and immanent meaning(s) requiring extensive interpretations and meaning construction. With illustrative examples, he defends the position that the identity of some cultural regions in Africa can be grouped together based on the original, specific techniques and essence of dress that they commonly share. Against the present absence of an African philosophy of dress in the African sartorial culture and knowledge production, he argues the imperativeness of an African philosophy of dress, its subject matter, and connections to other cognate branches of African philosophy, and the prospects of such an ancillary African philosophy.*

Keywords: *African identity, dress, dress code, communication, African philosophy of dress*

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The way people clothe themselves, together with the tradition of dress and finery that custom implies, constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness, that is to say the one that is most immediately perceptible... great areas of civilization, immense cultural regions, can be grouped together on the basis of original, specific techniques of men's and women's dress.

Frantz Fanon

Introduction

In recent times, African dress scholarship is gaining increasing attention with rich anthropological, ethnographical and historical literatures. Except for few works by African scholars (Mustafa, 1998, pp. 13-48; Ngwenya, 2002, pp. 1-27; Dogbe, 2003, pp. 377-395; Akinwunmi, 2006, 24-49; Essel & Amisah, 2015, pp. 32-38; Chingono, 2015, pp. 152-158; Oyeniyi, 2016a, 2016b), the discourses on African dress have been largely dominated by Western authors with relatively little philosophical dimension. Without undermining the globalist outlook of scholarship in contemporary times, regardless of the subject-matter or point of origin, it is instructive that African dress experiences are narrated by Africans themselves. Telling our own story better reveals the nuances and connexion in the narrative with other lived experiences, and considerably reduces the suspicious concern about objectivity and the struggle

for meaning. In a way, such attempt would contribute to counter-balancing the privileged Western dominating narratives on dress (Kimani, 2005, p. 140).

This paper is an interrogation of the identity of African dress in pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa. It seeks to philosophically discuss the sartorial culture of sub-Saharan Africans in the light of its defining elements, identity and communicative proclivities. An important question in African fashion studies scholarship that has rarely gained attention is whether African cultures can be validly grouped and identified together on the basis of their dress cultures. The dynamism of African dresses from pre-colonial, colonial through post-colonial periods echoes the process of continuous identity construction. In this paper, I do not intend to re-enact the existing dichotomies of modernism, as typified by Western dress norm, and traditionalism, popularly associated with African dress. Rather, my aim is to search for the prevalent and common element in dress among Sub-Saharan Africans that defines the people's identity. Recognising the dynamism of culture, sartorial norms inclusive, this paper acknowledges individual creativity and differences, change, and the influences of global networks on the patterns and sound of dress. However, I establish that a salient component of African dress is the social function of communication and that African dress code has a relational function of identity.

African dress communicates several things, which are altogether aspects of cultural experience: class, ethnicity, gender, rituals, celebration and festivities, occupation, individuality, and as Fanon (1967) rightly noted, the African tradition of dress is in some way the African distinctive and original recognition in human civilization. All these aspects considerably overlap, and the task of this paper is to show how the meanings evoked by the sound of African sartorial culture promote or inhibit the flowering of African identity.

In this paper, I limit myself to four specific and related tasks. The first is a conceptual exercise having much to do with clarification of terms in order to avoid possible confusion and ambiguity that the subject-matter – African dress code – is predisposed to. Clarified in this paper are concepts such as: dress, dress code, identity and African identity. The second task is to provide, by a way of contextual examples, some expose of dress code in Yoruba and Ashanti cultures.¹ The third task is an examination of the nexus between dress code and identity. In the final analysis, I pontificate on the imperative of having an African philosophy of dress and what the subject matter would be.

On the Meaning of Dress and Dress Code

Dress is a creative artefact and a state of having tangible and visible symbols or items used to either cover, protect human body or adorn the body, or both. It can be broadly conceived from two perspectives: the individual and the collective. Dress of an individual is “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 1). Modification in this respect means transformation of any part of the body such as the hair, skin, nails, etc. Such modification can change the “texture, sound, taste, or smell and visual aspects of the body” (Eiche, 2010, 274). Dressing with supplements means using attached items or body enclosures such as cloth, jewellery, garments, scent, beads, etc. on the human body. At the collective level, dress is the “total repertoire of body modifications and supplements that a particular social group makes available to its members... [resulting] in

¹ Africa is heterogeneous and rich in ethnic nationalities, and culturally diverse. With over 800 linguistic groups and ethnic nationalities spread across fifty-five countries, Africa is not only complex in terms of inhabitants, its environmental and geographical characteristics are also notably varied: arid Sahel region bordering the Sahara; the desert of the Sahara and the Kalahari; tropical rain forest in West and Central Africa; mountainous descents of the Great Rift valley among others. In different parts of Africa exist distinct traditional dresses dictated not only by environmental and cultural factors but also by the socio-economic state of the individual member of the society. In contextualizing the discussion on African dress culture and code, the two representative ethnic groups that shall be used are Yoruba in South West Nigeria and the Ashanti region in Ghana.

the non-verbal communication of identity [of the people]" (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 2) at a particular time and space. In this sense, reference can be made to such phrases as: men's dress, baby's dress, military dress, African dress, American dress, etc.

While both definitions of dress involve a non-verbal communication, the second definition of dress is more identity-oriented, gender-neutral and group based. In such understanding, dress is "embedded in current and historical sets of meanings, shaped by social and economic forces, reflecting current social and cultural concerns" (Twigg, 2009, p. 105). Dress reveals and conceals the body; "it espouses values, identity and position" (Oyeniyi, 2016, p. 106). As a non-verbal communication channel, dress may echo sound (that is, communicate) about age, gender, social class, religion and other identity's formation of an individual.

Dress code presupposes a regulated, specified and controlled nature of the dress a person or an agent is to wear. Coding dress restricts the dress freedom and patterns of a person. It reflects minimal expressivity, choice and agency, whether in formal or informal settings. Dress code is aimed at achieving goals such as uniformity, discipline and communication of identity. Dress code could either be formal, informal or ceremonial. Irrespective of the type, dress code is anchored on the principles of conformity, community and orderliness. Formal dress code is usually the default in formal and corporate functions and events. In Western dress culture, a typical example of a formal dress code is suit and tie. Informal dress code describes dresses defining social moments, such as dinner, date night, beach and boat cruise among others. There are appropriate dress codes for different events. When discussing African traditional dress code, it tends to be applicable much less in both what is termed formal dress and informal dress. However, it is meaningful to mention ceremonial dress, which the African apparel includes. In this respect, *aso-ebi* (family dress) as it is popular called among the Yoruba, or *adrinka* (stamped motif cloth) among the Akans, is an instance of ceremonial dress code, which is aimed at symbolic visualization and communication of historical moments, uniformity, solidarity and identity of the wearers.

On the idea of African Identity

"Identity is the self-constructed, mental representation of who and what we are, and it is essential for organizing our beliefs, individual histories, and social relations" (Strubel, 2012, p. 27). It is a way by which one conceives oneself, expresses, affiliates with and within a group. Construction of human identity is at various levels: social, racial, ethnic, gender, cultural, religious, among others. Social identity has to do with the self-consciousness, emotional attachment of belongingness and value-appreciation an individual experiences as a result of being a member of a social group or groups (Segall, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). Physical and social attributes are important in the categorization of people as members of a particular group. Ethnic identity is a subset of social and cultural identity; it is the conscious part of the self that is formed through self-identified associations with others who one not only shared similar experiences and values, such as language, food, dress and other habits with, but also similar and common aspirations for cultural continuity (Cislo, 2008 pp. 230-250). Humans do have multiple identities with different degrees of embedded membership.

However, the question of the unique identity of the Africans has been very controversial. The motivation for reflection on who the Africans truly are and what constitutes their identity is externally generated. The question about the identity of the Africans came up as a consequence of ethnocentric castigation of African culture and personality in very negative terms as primitive people without appreciable landmark identities in arts, science, politics, religion, technology among others. Western anthropological and philosophical literatures are bloated with such ste-

reotyping. In no small measure has the African continent been negatively affected by the identity crisis. Many African states have perpetually been victims of marginalization and identity crisis occasioned by the West, especially in the age of globalization. Over the years, the African responses to the question of what constitutes the peoples original identity have been called different names. Such responses are articulated through ideas such as negritude, pan-Africanism and African Renaissance (Ahluwalia, 2002). All these pro-identity terms are aimed at realizing Africans self-conception of themselves as 'legitimate'.

But there is a fallacy in this legitimate conception of who Africans are, especially when construed in terms of a fixed identity. Henri Lopes' critique of African identity as original and fixed identity is cogent when he writes that:

The exaggerated cult of cultural, original, national or religious identity leads to obscurantism, fundamentalism and policies of exclusion. Instead of restoring the past, in its full reality, a mixture of shadowy and luminous areas, they [the early nationalist scholars such as Senghor, Nyerere, Diop] depict it as Golden Age to which one must return. There is no paradise lost; it must be conquered, constructed. (Lope, 2007, p. 24)

The insight in the above excerpt is that caution should be exercised when defending African identity. It is a site of construction and not one of completion. Just like John Locke's mind *tabula rasa*, identity is not a feature given to Africans or any human in the cradle; it is something to be continuously constructed in line with the logic and dynamism of culture.

Unlike the famous triple heritage of Ali Mazrui (1986) that talks about identities in terms of the fusion of indigenous traditional identity with the Judeo-Christian and Arabian influences on who the contemporary Africans are, Lopes identified three kinds of identities that the African carries. Africa's first identity is its roots passed down from its ancestors, rich with wisdom, hospitality, sartorial culture, artefacts, indigenous knowledge, and heroes. Africa's second identity is its international identity, which does not necessarily discountenance the original identity. It only reinforces it through a deliberate act of transiting from "the family of community to [and integration with] the community of minds" (Lope, 2007, p. 25) irrespective of the provenance. The third is personal identity that individuates each being. A combination of these three identities, analogically, using Lopes' words, is like "three strings on the same guitar, which must be plucked separately or together or all three, taking care not to break any one of them, so that the music does not lose its harmony" (Lope, 2007, p. 25). Identity is therefore not an incorrigible heritage that is fixed; rather it is essentially a process of construction, possession, production and adjustment of the defining features of both an individual and group.

However, less known is the extent to which African identity concepts have impacted aspects of popular culture in Africa such as the African dress sense. When broadly interpreted, the old impetus for the identity question, which reinforces the Western image of a dark continent and the consequent responses from African nationalist scholars, still persists, albeit subtle, in the question of African dress culture. Western sartorial values and codes are viewed as universal, when in fact they are not. The desire for keeping up with the fashion vogue is generalized and constantly popularized through the global media and e-market places, but indeed, it is a promotion of Euro-American dress ideals and codes.

Some scholars have argued that African dress, at best, qualifies as costume and does not fit into the Western fashion category. In this sense, supposed 'ethnic dress' of African flavour is usually admonished for vilification as it does not signify an individual's incorporation into the mainstream culture epitomised and dictated by the Western fashion culture. This line of thought is best described as the universalist but hegemonic orientation of identity in dress culture. Opposed to this view is the essentialist orientation, which construes

dress a means of identifying, defining and symbolically expressing cultural identity, ethnic group or showing allegiance to specific tribal root. In this wise, dress is functionally a matter of priding in one's heritage and group cohesion (Strubel, 2012, p. 30). Identity in dress is here understood to mean being indigenous and not endogenously international. A third sense by which African identity concepts impact the conception of and attitude towards dress in Africa is what can be called 'crisscross dressing', which takes dress to mean exclusively fashion expressivity and creativity of combining African dress with Western apparel. Such fusion of dress horizons in different cultural heritages, though seen by the essentialists as conflict of dress identities, is a formation of newer identities and construction of individuality in the emerging sartorial order. The patronage of Western dress and fashion is on the increase; however, many Africans identify themselves as Africans when they engage in indigenous ritual activities and ceremonies.

On African Dress Code

Is there an African dress code? Should there be an African dress code? Is there a difference between dress code and dress sense? Which one is more conceptually meaningful with reference to the Africans? What defines a dress as African? When is dress codified? These questions are important in understanding the effects, the hidden meanings and sound of African dress. Just as there is no such thing as universally and uniquely African cultural element, there is hardly any dress code that is universally African. It is impossible to generalize the dress code of Africans. Given that there are variations in African dress, it is suggestive that there are different dress codes in the African sartorial cultural space.

Let us illustrate with Nigeria, which has over 250 ethnic nationalities, among which are the Yorubas, Hausas, and Igbos. The bride dress code, as an example, among the Hausa is not uniform with the Yoruba's; the *gomesi* dress, common among the bride in Buganda and Busoga in Uganda, is not the same with the *ofod ukod anwang* and *onyonyo*, two dominant bride dresses in Calabar, Nigeria. Consistent with the same logic, it can be inferred that there is no uniform identity in African dress codes; at best, there are only sub-African dress identities. To be better positioned in discussing the dress code among some groups in Sub-Saharan Africa, aspects of common cultural components shall be used. Selected in this regard are festivals and funeral rituals among the Yoruba and the Ashantis.

But before such exploration, a distinction should be made, first, between traditional and modern dress among the Sub-Saharan Africans. This distinction is not unmindful of the temporality and dynamism of what we call tradition. No tradition is permanent. Traditional dress of the Europeans is not what obtains now; just as many of the traditional apparels of the Africans have been either dropped, transformed, or modified, resulting in neo-African dress creations. Both the materials and non-material aspects of culture spread in unimaginable ways.

African dress code, whether at the formal, informal or ceremonial level, is a function of the physical environment, culture, and status primarily. Secondly are factors such as creativity, external influences of cultural exchanges through globalization, migration, media, and trade. Climate is one of the determining factors of a people's sartorial culture. Dress is a reaction to the physical environment. For instance, animal skins and hides dress in Kigezi, Tsonga, Zulu, Maasai tribes, *Lamba dress in Madagascar*, and bark-cloth in Buganda are traditional dresses informed essentially by climatic and environmental conditions as well as cultural beliefs. While dress is a universal language, its meaning and codes are particularistic.

African dress code, at the celebratory and ceremonial level, involves the wearing of identical dress made from the same fabric of the same colour, pattern or semblance of it, for a specific occasion. African dress tends to emphasize solidarity, group belongingness and sharing

of burdens and joys of the celebrant. While agency and individuality is minimized as regards the choice of apparels, it is not the case that individuality is totally absent in a dress code as the wearer still has choice in matter of style and fashion.

African dress, over the ages, has evolved and grown according to its own pace through the process of borrowing, picking, dropping, and adaptation of different kinds of sartorial cultures. “Dress styles and patterns throughout West Africa, as in other cultures, were not static. [Dress], styles and patterns changed overtime as a result of the dictates of fashion, competition, new technology, social changes and availability of resources” (Buckridge, 2004, p. 25). Hence, contemporary African dress as Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire (n.d.) correctly noted “is neither a direct imitation of precolonial dress nor mimicry of colonial and contemporary European fashion.” A contemporaneous culture of dress is growing in spite of the postcolonial condition, which, characteristically, is ideologically and structurally hegemonic to the extent that one wonders if the new evolving dress culture is also not designed to serve imperialistic ends.

Yoruba Dress

Let us now turn to the dress culture among the Yoruba. There are different types of dress among the Yoruba: *Kijipa, etu, alaari, ofi, sanyan*; though broadly classified, they all fall under *aso-oke*, which is a unisex material for making styles such as: *agbada* (flowing gown), *dansiki, buba, kafutaani, sokoto* (trousers), and *ila* (cap) among the males. Female’s wear consist of five components: *iro* (wrapper), *buba* (blouse), *gele* (headgear), and *ipele* (shawl). Some other body supplements that constitute part of dress sense, especially among Yoruba women, include: *egba-orun* (necklaces), *yeri-eti* (earrings), *egba-owo* (bangles), *laali* (the use of henna), *ila-oju* (facial scarification), hairstyles (*panumo, ipako elede, suku, etc.*) among others. However, if the body modification and supplementary aspects are de-emphasized in the Yoruba dress to focus exclusively on the wear-on-dress, three broad categories of dress can be glimpsed: “*aso iyile* (play dress), *aso ise* (work dress), and *aso-imurode* (occasional dress)” (Oyeniya, 2016b, p. 107).

According to Bukola Oyeniya (2016b, p. 107), “specific dress patterns and modes give some Yoruba communities their identities. For instance, Abeokuta is renowned for *adire* (tie and dye); Yoruba communities as Oyo, Iseyin, Ilorin and Ilesa are known for *aso-oke* with the Ondo notable for *alaari*. *Aso-oke* in particular is classically expensive such that in the traditional past, “people of prestige (the Kings, Chiefs, Princes, Princesses and Oloris, and other prominent persons were the only ones having the financial wherewithal to possess it. In contemporary time, these materials are not limited to the aforementioned people in the society but as many as could afford them” (Yemisi & Joe, 2010, p. 48).

Mention should also be made of the dress pattern of some groups within the Yoruba worldview. For instance, the *Osun* worshippers are famous for wearing white dress, while the devotees of *Sango* wear red clothing. However, generally, “different occasions demand different outfits among the Yorùbá. The *sánányán, lítà, lómolangi* and *òúnjawú* are commonly used as casual wears, while *etù, petùje, orúkopé* and *láyínyán* are often used for traditional festivals like Sango and Ogun festivals” (Yemisi & Joe, 2010, p. 48).

Ashanti dress

The Ashanti in Ghana are popularly associated with the *kente*, which is considered as quintessentially an African dress.² *Kente* dress is popularly known for being elegantly colour-

² *Kente* is a national dress in Ghana, though not legally coded. Like in Ghana, there is no written, legal and formal national dress code for Nigerian leaders. However, the civilian Heads of Government and Presidents of Nigeria have opted for traditional or non-European wear as their formal dress codes.

ful. The colours interact with the patterns on the dress in communication of some beliefs, motifs, experiences and moments. Traditionally, *kente* was valued and revered initially as the preserve for chiefs, royals, priests and priestesses in the southern part of Ghana. But this is no longer the case today as it is now within the pocket fold of the commoners. The creative combination of colours is not just merely to satisfy emotive or aesthetic appeals; indeed, colours on Kente's dress are condensed in meaning. For each wearer, there is a presumed epistemological awareness of what the colours communicate. It is conventionally taken that black depicts maturation, expresses negative mood and conveys the spirit of the ancestors. This perhaps accounts for why during many burial rituals; sympathizers are on informal black dress code to commemorate the legendary, achievement, life, and the believed transition of the dead to the ancestral world.

Black dress code is not only a common sight at funeral ritual in Ghanaian culture, but such tradition also exists among some other African cultural groups albeit different in degree of emphasis on the number of days such black dress should be on and for whom to wear it. To lend credence to the diversity in African dress culture and why it is false to speak of a uniform sound of African dress code, it is important to refer to the Bunu tribe in Nigeria, for whom black dress code also subsists but in a different social meaning. Among the Bunus, young women dress in black dress at marriage. Their hunters wear black and white striped shirts and their chiefs wear red masquerade cloth with magnificent patterns (Renne, 1996).

Another instance of the sound of a black dress, which differs from the Ghanaian interpretation can be found among the Zanzibaris when wearing their *kangas*. "Colour remains important in the choice and wearing of *kangas*. Red and black *kangas* are worn during menstruation and communicate to family and friends that a woman has either just given birth or is unavailable for sex. Conversely, white *kangas* are worn during the full moon or to indicate a woman's fecundity and purity" (Boswell, 2006, p. 446).

To return to the sound of Kente's dress, red on the dress does not alarm of danger as it is conventionally implied in European hermeneutics of colour; it reveals strong political and spiritual feelings. Just as red is an expression of mood and not an alert or flash of danger and insecurity, green communicates growth, strength, renewal of both spirit and matter as inseparable components of existence. Blue and yellow on *kente* are positive expressions of personality and wishful expectations. Blue for instance conveys peace, harmony, love whether as a factual state of mind or as an inspirational expectation of the spirit. Yellow, just like gold, echoes royalty, preciousness, wealth, power and spiritual purity. For communication of healing, liberation, purity and festive conviviality, white is the colour of expression. The point here is that the colourfulness of *kente* cloth weaves patterns or any other African dress is not mere accidental; it is teleologically infused with meanings relational to a person's psychological frame, social context, personality and identity crafting. More designingly African are the *adinkra* visual signs that are stamped on *kente* cloth. *Adinkra* signs are complex symbols with specific identities and meanings, expressed in different aspects of Akan art culture. The signs provide a cultural frame that links the wearer to the communal artistic, social, and political order. When stamped on *kete*, they comment on and express interplay of moral maxims, status, political leaning and social mood. In the words of Daniel Mato:

Stamped *adinkra* images embody principles of behavior, and contain homilies or maxims characterizing man's relationships in the face of life's shortness and unpredictability. They comment upon the family or the structure of society or refer to historical events. A number of stamps can be described as royal regalia in that they are conditionally reserved for use as a component of statecraft. (Mato, 1994, p. 5)

The popularity of *kente*, its colour meanings and the *adinkra* motifs is not to be generalized for the whole of Ghana. In the Northern part of Ghana, smock dress defines their aesthetic and identity clout. The smock is “an exterior robe-like garment worn over inner garments. The garment received impressive embroidery decorations especially at the front part, and was probably Nupe or Hausa manufacture” (Essel & Amissah, 2015, p.33). Also called *Batakari* or *Fugu*, the smock refers to a three-piece wear consisting of a flowing outer gown, long sleeve inner robe and trousers collectively. “It is a word ‘used to describe a variety of loose garments sewn from strips of cloth woven on traditional looms in Northern Ghana” (Tetteh-fio, 2009, p.109).

“The smock became a symbol of class, a political dress [riches, power and royalty] and enjoyed unequalled patronage since its purposeful public usage by Nkrumah and his fellows” (Essel & Amissah, 2015, p. 33) during 1957 Independence Day celebration in Accra. “Smocks are fashioned in different styles. Its expressive sartorial design orientation, peculiar coarser hand-woven characteristic, vertical running stripes and thicker plain weave structure distinguish it from other hand-woven fabrics” (Essel & Amissah, 2015, p. 34). Generally, most smocks are sewn to appear as loose garments to allow fresh air to circumnavigate around the body. This makes its typically heavy fabric characteristics unproblematic to wearers because it does not accumulate much heat to make wearers feel less comfortable in wearing (Essel & Amissah, 2015). Smocks have caps as accompanying accessories. While colours that used in smock production in Ghana North do not have symbolic underpinning, those in the Akan of Southern Ghana do have symbolic connotations (Antubam, 1963). In the words of Essel and Amissah (2015, p. 36):

...colours are, therefore, used arbitrarily irrespective of the occasion. Any colour of smock may be worn for a funeral or merry-making festivity without recourse to choice of colour and affect. Both weavers and tailors choose colours based on their aesthetical appeal. One of the modern trends in the use of colours in smock production is the preference of using political party colours in smocks.

African Identity and African Dress Code: Fusion of Sound Horizons?

What does an African dress communicate? A popular assumption is that one of the markers of Africans is the dress mode. Writing on the importance of dress to identity in the context of the Zanzibar, L. Fair (2001, p.64) states that “dress has historically been used as one of the most important and visually immediate markers of class, status, and ethnicity in East African coastal society.” This conclusion is not universally given in African cultures. A limited exception in this regard can be found among the Yoruba, especially in their proverbial repertoire. Proverbs are axiomatically instructive among the Yoruba and many other African groups as a signpost to indigenous philosophy. A Yoruba proverb on dress states that *aso nla ko ni eniyan nla* (sartorial appearance is not a sufficient marker of high profiled personality). This proverb serves as a “caveat that dress differs markedly from identity and that one should make efforts to separate a person’s accoutrement from his or her real identity” (Oyeniyi, 2016b, p. 106). Objectionable as the Yoruba proverbial example may be against the dress-identity thesis; identity is not the only loud sound of by African dress.

African dress is also a site of resistance and agitations for some ends. “In Africa, dress provided a powerful arena for colonial relations to be enacted and challenged, and served as a method of cultural expression and resistance” (Aris, 2007, p. 1). Writing on the politically expressive functionality of African dress, Giselle Aris articulates:

In Swaziland and South Africa, Africans manipulated Western fabric to suit their own cultural agenda. In Algeria, choice of dress played a key role in the success of the Algerian war of resistance against French cultural aggression. In Tanzania and Zanzibar, clothing was

used to display affiliation with anti-Western sentiment. Among the Masai of Tanzania, traditional dress served as a point of conflict on the country's path towards modernity. Despite the differing circumstances in each country, dress consistently provided a battleground for Africans to assert their culture and build nationalism in the fight against external attacks on their way of life. (Aris, 2007, pp. 2-3)

Worthy of mention as well is how nudity and semi-nudity as forms of dress have historically been used, either as a threat or in actual terms, to engage and sometimes negotiate contested patriarchal boundaries, political domains, draconian policy, and voicing of vote of no confidence in political leadership (Oyeniya, 2016a, pp. 151-154).

Moreover, African dress identifies the class one belongs to; "it is an aspect of cultural capital, part of how elites establish, maintain and reproduce positions of power, reinforcing relation of dominance and subordination" (Twigg, 2009, p. 2). For instance, the apparel appearance of a king, or chiefs are conspicuously known and loud in many African societies. To bring home this point, the South African example suffices. In this part of Africa, "traditional dress was used to differentiate between socioeconomic levels, and thus visually displayed the prestige of the chief and the lower status of the residents in the village" (Twigg, 2009, p. 2). Also, traditionally, *kente* was a dress of class worn by kings and chiefs to communicate wealth and status.

As identity is a fluid concept in the process of construction, possession, production and adjustment in any human society, African dresses are now being used in crafting new identities. An example of such new identity in the political space is provided by Elisha Renne. In the article, "From Khaki to Agbada: Dress and Political Transition in Nigeria" Renne (2004, pp. 125-143) discusses the politics of dress in Nigeria political space. Politicians in Khaki dress signify military rule, while those in *agbada* simply denote civilian rule. The wearing of either of the dress is a signal to the political aspiration of such leader or ruler. "When the government aspired to civilian rule, this led to the absurd situation in which the putative leader in most cases would "disrobe" from the military khaki, while retaining a military style of rule – a strategy that many Nigerian citizens identified with the corruption and fraud that characterized these leaders" (Kimani, 2005, p.137).

Julian Twigg, writing on dress generally, notes that dressing echoes a linguistic code, by which he meant how people communicate messages about themselves. Though writing with more postmodernist slant, Twigg (2009) argues the logic between dress and identity, which he thinks is ultimately related because the "meanings of dress are by their nature, immanent and hidden; they are subject to masking, interpretation, and uncertainty." In the same vein, Feinberg, Matero & Burroughs (1992) establish that the meanings attached to dress codes are inexact, unfixed and less shared. This is because the relationship between the intention of the wearer and the interpretation of the observer is not a simple one.

The code in African dress could be symbolic as much as linguistic with ambiguous and sometimes hidden, complex and immanent meaning(s) requiring extensive interpretation and meaning construction. A closer look at the dress code between the Yoruba and the Ashantis would show that they share some semblance and differences, which is not of kind but of degree. Two aspects of their cultural life to glean their dress codes and identity are the funeral rites and festival. Funeral in Ashante culture showcases the wearing of red dress by the relatives and black by those who came to commiserate, respectively. This nuance in funeral dress code is rare among the Yoruba as different *aso-ebi* (family dress) in different colour shades adorn their funeral rites, especially if the deceased was old.

The Yoruba *agbada* and the Ashante's smock are not fundamentally different in essence. Both are flowing robes that reflect the climatic conditions of the West African sub region. The caps used in these two ethnic groups are also not fundamentally different in style and meaning. For instance, caps in both cultures are worn in four major distinctive ways:

[i] in stiff standing position, [ii] oblique postures (either towards right or left), [iii] skewed towards the front, and [iv] skewed posture towards the back of the head. Each of the four styles has its symbolic meaning. The stiff and erect positioning of the cap means supremacy and oblique style towards right or left signifies peace. Cap with frontal skew denotes humility or servitude while backwards skew depicts strength or spiritual powers. (Essel & Amissah, 2015, p.37)

In many African ethnic cultural groups, from the Yoruba of Nigeria to Ashanti of Ghana, Mali's Bamana to Zulu of South Africa, one observes the critical importance of natural elements in dress. For many sub-Saharan African groups, the use of natural elements as beads, shells, skins, bark-tree, nuts, fibre, weaving, and colours with adept meanings have continuously reinforce the relationship of Africans with environment and natural order. While cultural significance of varying degrees is attached to the natural elements in different cultural groups, the unifying point is in the hidden and complex meanings associated the African sartorial culture. Thus, quoting Steeve Buckridge, "from the 'rhythmic' and checkerboard textiles of the Mande and Ashanti people to the intricate hand-sewn beadwork of the Yoruba, dress ... [has been] a form of artistic expression" (Buckridge, 2004, p. 25).

With the foregoing, Fanon's (1967, p. 35) idea that some cultural regions can be grouped together on the basis of original, specific techniques and essence of dress finds a good placement in the example of the Yoruba and Ashanti sartorial cultures. However, for a more holistic consideration and integration of African dress codes, there is need to chart a path of an African philosophy of dress, which presently is lacking in the African sartorial and knowledge production.

Concluding Remarks: Towards an African Philosophy of Dress

The project of an African philosophy of dress is ripe for systematic construction and articulation. In a complex and convoluted African world immersed in many problems – identity crises, loss of moral and cultural values, political turmoil sometimes occasioned by lack of communication and cohesion, economic destitution and environmental hazards – the need for an African philosophy of dress is urgent in providing some interventions in these spheres of existence. Hitherto though, philosophy of African dress is under-explored genre of dress scholarship; broadly construed, philosophy of African dress involves both the aesthetical, ethical and ontological underpinnings as well as the rationale of the cultural and political economy of dress among the Africans, both traditionally and contemporaneously. The intellectual exercise in this respect is purely constructive using philosophical ideas and principles, irrespective of the provenance, in interrogating the subtle components and effects of African sartorial culture on the global scale.

A related but different concern from the above is an exploration of what an African philosophy of dress might consist in, and of what effect. The fundamental concern here would be discovering, recovering and constructing the intersections among African apparel ethos, African life-world and African moral-ontology as they shape and ought to shape contemporary existence of Africans and Africans in the Diaspora. Questions that would constitute focus of concern in an African philosophy of dress include: what 'good' means in 'good dress' for Africans? What and who determines what constitute immaculate apparel: the individual or the community? What is the relationship between 'dress well' and human personality? Does African dress embed morality, or it is out rightly an amoral domain of cultural existence? Ought dress to be a vector of political communication and societal cohesion or an instrument of re-

sistance? What ranking principles should define and guide the choice of African traditional or modern dress over Western garb?

In many African societies, moral issues do arise in matters of dress, especially, as it concerns the etiquette on what is conceived culturally as proper and indecent dressing. The people's conception of modesty, virtue and vices plays a fundamental role in the ethical appraisal of African dress. African moral values such as harmony, responsiveness, common good, solidarity, sharing, reciprocity, humanness are cardinal to the production of knowledge in an African philosophy of dress. Though the African knowledge production space in ethical theories and moral concerns is just evolving, without a robust tradition of African moral theories, the ethical dimension of an African philosophy of dress may not be pungent. Relatedly, aesthetic concerns about dress and its beauty qualities cannot be undermined in an African philosophy of dress. Though with likely encumbrances just as the African moral theory, African aesthetic theories must be theoretically downloaded and applied to the issues emerging in African dressing.

From the Western standpoint, according to Hildi Hendrickson (1996, p. 11), "European fashions were elements of a system designed to sweep away the culture and tradition of colonized Africans." True to its goal, which has been well achieved; the germane question now is should sartorial neo-colonialism be resisted or hand-gloved as a normal phase of civilization? The idea here is not necessarily one of a wholesale return to traditional African mode of dress, nor a violent resistance against Western fashion (Rovine 2015, Hansen and Madison 2013). African philosophy of dress has the task of critiquing dress codes and providing the logic of dress sense in African space. For instance, one might argue that communalism and togetherness in traditional African dress culture, which the Yoruba *aso-ebi* exemplifies, does not optimally and collaboratively promote uniquely creative dress patterns that respect individuality. African dress code is not so sensitive to the fluidity of identity and the plasticity of the physical body as the traditional image still has more footing in contemporary African societies.

In developing an African philosophy of dress, there is need for conscious decolonisation of post-colonial dress in general, and a revaluation of the idea of African dress code. African dress codes should be constructed based on African cultural triple heritage which will be in tandem with the different African climatic conditions. Decolonizing the meaning of formality, which presently is in many ways synonymous with colonial, is imperative. Dress code need not be interpreted strictly and limited to the formal and professional sense. Whether in ceremonial, official or informal engagements, contemporary Africans should be circumspect of the colonial dress frame. Where would all these decolonization efforts in African philosophy of dress lead us?

For one, when more research is dispensed, they may lead to achieving a more inclusive African identity, promoting Africa's traditional attires and modernization of Africa's fashion industry both in Africa and in the Diaspora, expanding the frontiers of African feminist and gender studies. Both the economic prospects that an African philosophy of dress would navigate and the cultural-historical consciousness of meanings of dress motifs and symbols that would evoke in the younger generations make it a worthwhile aspect of African studies to be rigorously pursued. The need for future studies in the various mapped areas and others in African philosophy of dress is a task that African philosophers ought not despise.

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АФРИКАНСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА ОДЕЖДЫ И ВОПРОС ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ: ДВИЖЕНИЕ К АФРИКАНСКОЙ ФИЛОСОФИИ ОДЕЖДЫ

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***Аннотация.** Статья представляет собой критическое исследование культуры одежды как маркера африканской идентичности в традиционном и современном африканском обществе. На примере этносов йоруба и ашанти автор показывает, что одежда африканцев выступает носителем символических, лингвистических, а подчас и комплексных имманентных смыслов, которые требуют обширной интерпретации и реконструкции. Подчеркивая многообразие различных дресс-кодов, существующих параллельно на африканском континенте у различных этносов, автор приходит к выводу, что для населения ряда областей Африки идентичность может быть определена на основе тех общих характеристик и специфических техник, которые прослеживаются в их одежде. Автор отмечает, что в настоящее время в африканской системе ценностей отсутствует определенная философия одежды, и настаивает на необходимости ее формирования, подчеркивая необходимость уйти от колониального наследия в этой сфере общественной жизни, проявляющегося, в том числе, в диктате западных тенденций в области моды и дресс-кодов для формальной обстановки.*

***Ключевые слова:** африканская идентичность, одежда, дресс-код, коммуникация, африканская философия одежды*

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