

APPEARANCES AND CULTURAL SYMBOLS AS FORMAL FUNCTIONAL SYMBOLS: ON THE HERMENEUTICS AND RECOGNITION OF YORÙBÁ DRESS CODE

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Abstract. *This paper argues that Yorùbá dress codes (fondly called traditional dress) ought to be symbols of both cultural and formal identity. As part of the being of the Yorùbá, dressing represents more than covering human nakedness, it defines the individual just as it symbolizes different things and moods. Colours, designs and functions all serve as symbols. Unfortunately, within these symbolisms the Yorùbá dresses are not generally welcomed as symbols of formal environments (especially nongovernmental corporate offices). Such outfits at best may be allowed as a dress-down. Formal symbolisms of Yorùbá dresses are restricted to political office holders or government functionaries, beyond which cultural attires are reserved for social functions. In other words, corporate dress codes do not give room for normative or psychological recognition of Yorùbá cultural dressing. Although in recent years Africans have given life to very rich indigenous identities, which have begun to re-affirm the functionality of our arts, yet not many people today have tried to relate these to questions of corporate dressing. It is believed that African cultural symbols are better reflected as traditional symbols. The methods of exposition, hermeneutics, conceptual analysis and critical evaluative reasoning are used in this paper to expose on the one hand Yorùbá dress symbolisms and on the other hand to submit that Yorùbá costumes are as formal as wearing a tie and suit to the office. This lends a voice to the recognition and incorporation of Yorùbá garments (and other African cultural dresses) into general formal symbols.*

Keywords: *Cultural Symbols, Formal Symbols, Identity, Recognition, Yorùbá Dress Code*

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Introduction

On the hermeneutics of Yorùbá dress codes I attempt an interpretation of symbolisms represented by these codes. Some of these symbols portray positive events like taking a new bride, the birth of a child or community festivals, while others illustrate negative events like the death of someone or a natural disaster. Taking Yorùbá dress codes as a representation of African dress codes, I look at the meanings of colours, accessories and cultural functions pertaining to dress. Dress from this perspective goes beyond clothes worn. It includes hair styles, body markings and forms of scarification, or other decorations added to the body for aesthetics or functional purposes. For the purpose of analysis I focus on colour symbolism in Yorùbá clothes culture and analyse Yorùbá dress codes as formal/corporate symbolism. It behoves that these cultural symbols should receive the recognition as formal symbols in the holistic understanding of the Yorùbá culture.

Currently, such recognition is not the case, thereby necessitating cause for examination. The staff cannot choose to wear his/her nicely tailored *adire* to the bank or Oil Company or nongovernment corporations on a Monday morning. These environments are deemed too

formal for such cultural dress codes. Interestingly, even in the traditional Yorùbá milieu there exists symbolic separation of clothes. What is worn for work is different from social clothing in Yorùbá culture. The cloth worn by the hunter to hunt, or the blacksmith to his smithy or the farmer to his or her farm, or the market woman to the market is different from that worn for social functions like naming ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, festivals or social visits. Similarly, a woman mourning the death of her husband or child does not dress in an elaborate or flashy manner because moments depict clothing.

Based on their functions, Oyeniyi avers that Yorùbá cloths could be broadly classified into four: work or professional cloth, casual cloth, ceremonial cloth, and fashion cloth.¹ Citing examples Oyeniyi further writes that for farmers and hunters, *Gberi* and *Sokoto Digo* were the norm. The major differences between farmers' and hunters' dress were that hunters' dress had pockets, especially in front, and a hunter's dress was deemed incomplete without a flywhisk, an *Aparu*.² Hence functionality is an essential characteristic of dress symbolism in Yorùbá culture. To analyse the hermeneutics and recognition of Yorùbá dress codes this paper is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on an understanding of the concept of symbols, while the second part discusses colour symbolisms in Yorùbá cloth culture. The third part centers on the formal recognition of Yorùbá dressing as suitable for the corporate environment.

On Symbols and Symbolisms

It can be rightly argued that the use of symbols cuts across several spheres of human existence and activities. A cursory look will reveal that from the humanities to the sciences, from philosophy to advertising, from culture to religion, from Africa through Asia to Europe, from ancient history to contemporary times, symbols have been employed as representations by humans. In other words, symbols are associative representations of objects or social realities.³ These symbolisms have often times taken essences of their own that they are now subjects of discourse, meanings and identities both physically and metaphysically. Radcliffe-Brown ordinarily captures a symbol as a thing recognised as normally typifying, representing, recalling something of great practical importance by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought. This includes objects, activities, relations, events, gestures, and spatial units in a ritual situation.⁴ Defining symbols is believed to be restrictive by some scholars but there are clarifying definitions that are valuable to our understanding of this concept.

Ikwuagwu cites *The Encyclopaedia Americana* on the claim by authorities that the origin of symbolism is traceable to the hieroglyphics or pictorial writings of the ancient Egyptians and was transmitted from them to other nations by the Jews.⁵ The Egyptians are noted to symbolise their gods with animal forms or combinations of both human and animal form. This submission emphasizes the fact that the understanding and documentation of symbol originated from Africa. Several religions, cultures and nations have developed unique identities which have developed the concept of symbolism in human existence and interaction. Cultures and religions like Christianity have acculturated some of the ancient Egyptian symbols and used same to develop their thoughts and teachings. This supports Landrit's insistence that symbolism is the science of the relations which unite the created world with God, the material world with the supernatural; the science of the harmonies existing between the diverse parts of the universe (correspondences and analogies), operating within the process of involution, that is, of the materiality of all things.⁶

Symbols in the view of Thiselton bear investigating both for the beauty they convey and for their truth and spiritual edification.⁷ They are the replica of the meanings of words, things, actions, emotions, behavior, and ideas of a people within a particular culture. People's actions can be motivated and guided by symbols and their meanings.⁸ Symbols sometimes convey

meanings more than words. Umeogu says symbols... start where words have stopped and are used to delve and signify meanings that defy the constructive use of words.⁹ From a holistic perspective Cirlot agrees with Diel's assertion that the symbol embody the duality of being universal and particular; universal, since it transcends history; particular, because it relates to a definite period of history.¹⁰ He further considers symbols to be 'a precise and crystallized means of expression,' corresponding in essence to the inner life (intensive and qualitative) in opposition to the external world (extensive and quantitative).¹¹ In principle, the elastic and dynamic qualities of symbol tend towards infinity. That is why each symbol is regarded as a microcosm, a total cosmos.¹²

The primary object of a symbol is to reveal reality. A symbol is tightly bound to this reality that it is taken as an accurate reflection of the reality. In the philosophical sense, Ikwuagwu says the knowledge of symbol, Gnosis, which distinguishes it from conceptual knowledge (accumulative or discursive), keeps us in touch with a fundamental ignorance, which Socrates and other philosophers held to be the objective of philosophy.¹³ To Ngangah they are not mere representations of pictures or abstract ideas, as are normal signs, but are deemed to be symbolic signs because there is a "semiosis" or "cooperation" between the given objects and their symbols.¹⁴ Cirlot identifies the basic ideas and suppositions which allow us to conceive of 'symbolism,' together with the creation and vitality of each symbol to include:

(a) Nothing is meaningless or neutral: everything is significant. (b) Nothing is independent, everything is in some way related to something else. (c) The quantitative becomes the qualitative in certain essentials which, in fact, precisely constitute the meaning of the quantity. (d) Everything is serial. (e) Series are related one to another as to position, and the components of each series are related as to meaning. This serial characteristic is a basic phenomenon which is as true of the physical world (in its range of colours, of sounds, of textures, of landscapes, etc.) as of the spiritual world (in its virtues, vices, humours, feelings, etc.).¹⁵

Symbols are inherent in cultures. Ngangah citing Dukor expounds that symbols are cultural realities imbued with cultural meaning and any suggestive symbol is epistemic and thematic.¹⁶ Within such symbolism there is an overt expression of the reality behind any direct act of perception and apprehension, which really possesses scientific connotation outside its normal, obvious or conventional meaning.¹⁷ Cultural symbols are 'signs' that stand for something else, and are conventionally accepted as such... Given the nature of man as a cultural symbol, man is able to make representations of his cultural identity through symbols in the form of arts, language, myth, rituals, names, to mention but a few.¹⁸ Symbolic systems tell us how to mark and interpret perceptions, depending on their social situations. People respond to symbols just as they respond to their meanings or what they represent. Symbols in Ojo's view are created. There is nothing inherent in any symbol that gives it power over people but its power lies in what they signify to those people who share its meaning.¹⁹

Gonzalez according to Oladumiye describes cultural symbol as a physical manifestation that signifies the ideology of a particular culture or that merely has meaning within a culture.²⁰ They have a shared social meaning that is understood by all the people living in a particular society.²¹ This cultural trait eases communication of values and beliefs to those around them through symbols. Ikwuagwu asserts that symbol touches almost all aspects of human culture. Its sources, he says, reflect a diversity and multiplicity deriving from theology, liturgy, philosophy, mysticism, anthropology, mythology and history of religions.²² Others sources include esoteric, emblems, hagiography, psychoanalysis, bestiaries, sermons, music, numbers, poetry, alchemy and lapidaries. Also included in its sources are magic, astrology, science of dreams, of colours, liturgical drama, profane literature, folklore, traditions and diverse influences, superstitions, pictures, sculpture, ornamentation and architecture.²³

In his explanation of the revered place of symbols in African Philosophy, Umeogu for instance, acquiesced that every knowledge, every meaning of existence must almost all of the

time, involve some kind of reasoning with symbols, in symbols, by symbols and through symbols.²⁴ Jean-Marc Éla equally observes that in Africa, the invisible is as real as the visible; the two are inseparable, and communicate with each other through appropriate symbols.²⁵ Since symbols by definition point beyond themselves, it is appropriate to explore their use in every context.²⁶ I do this by citing some symbolic representation of dress in Yorùbá culture.

Dress Symbolism in Yorùbá Culture: A look at Colour and Accessories

As noted earlier, there is a wide representation of dress in Yorùbá culture, which includes clothes, hair styles, body markings and scarification. Oyeniyi further cites dress to broadly include an assemblage of modifications and/or supplements to the human body. This conception further includes coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other items added to the body as supplements.²⁷ For the purpose of this paper we will focus on clothing taking cognizance of colour. I choose clothing because it is universal to all Yorùbás (and all humans). Not everyone puts on hair styles, not everyone has body markings neither thus everyone engages in scarification or tattooing. These are elements of fashion interest based on the individual (or group, if such individual chooses to be identified with a group). But clothing is essential to all.

Whether for the basic covering of human nakedness, for functional purposes (e.g. identity, communication) or simply for fashion statements, humans once birthed, are clothed, we live in clothes and are shrouded with clothes. Roach-Higgins and Eicher describe clothes as being primary in biological existence than social,²⁸ and Kodzoman points out these primary functions include protecting the wearer from the elements by enhancing safety; it protects by providing a barrier between the skin and the environment; it can insulate against cold or hot conditions; it can provide a hygienic barrier.²⁹ Beyond the basic significance, clothing is essential in social representation, and this is where colour comes to play. Colours have social and shared meanings within cultures, between cultures and in space and time. The critical nature of colour creates an appeal. This, as rightly pointed out by Kodzoman, has led to the fact that the use of colour has become an important expression of who we are, how we feel and what we believe.³⁰

Colour is an inherent visual property of form in natural and designed environments.³¹ Colour as a system plays a great role in communication in various cultures... colours carry important messages when talking about culture or in the context of religion.³² Colours are used to beautify, identify, and capture the essence of things among other purposes they serve. There are varied understandings of the chromatic classification from a Western perspective and from Yorùbá cultural perspective. Writing from Western point of view Berlin and Kay (as cited by Adegbite) categorise colours into two, namely, warm and cool. Warm colours evoke emotional effects ranging from warmth and comfort to anger and hostility. Colours in this category are red, orange and yellow. Colours in the cool category are blue, purple and green and these colours are said to portray calmness, but sometimes evoke mild feelings of sadness or indifference.³³

Colour may have a universal or a local interpretation, which may differ from one society to the other. Also, it may be contextualized.³⁴ Generally across African cultures black and white are significant colours. Black symbolizes death and sadness, while the white colour is a symbol of purity, joy and peace. It is commonplace to find black cloth used at funerals, especially of one who died at an unripe age,³⁵ although there are African societies where white is also used as a funeral colour. This occurs sometimes when the dead is believed to have died an untimely death.³⁶

The Yorùbá colour classification is conventionally divided into three chromatic categories namely *funfun*, *dudu* and *pupa*. *Funfun*, which can be translated as white, represents the categories of colours which include white, which connotes peaceful feeling; this category includes

turquoise, blue, silver and other icy colours. The primary influence and purpose of white is seen as a replica of purity.³⁷ *Pupa* is the next group, which can be translated as red. *Pupa* also encompasses any colour that relates to hot, fiery characteristics, such as orange, dark yellow, gold. The colour of fire is regarded as red, which connotes danger and fearful individuals or creatures.³⁸ *Dudu* is the last group of colours, and can be translated as black. *Dudu* also includes any colour that is dark with a resemblance of the earth. Brown, and leafy dark greens and moss greens are also considered *dudu*.³⁹

Each of these categories has an emotional or psychological dimension. *Funfun* in psychological terms translates to a kind, cool and homely personality, *pupa* has the psychological dimension of a dangerous personality who possesses a trait of wickedness and lacks mercy, someone who is very passionate about evil, which might get angry very easily, does and sees evil as a second nature, while *dudu* is perceived as having down-to-earth, practical, earthy sort of personality.⁴⁰ Such personality is believed to be reflected in the individuals' dressing, which oftentimes conveys peculiar messages including joy and sadness. Nwafor emphasizes that being well dressed played a significant role in the Yorùbá class system with much importance being attached to the size, colour, quality and quantity of fabric.⁴¹

An important accessory in whose absence dressing is deemed incomplete in Yorùbá culture is the use of beads. Beads complement dresses especially for women, but men are equally noted to use beads. These beads range from wrist beads to neck beads of different colours and quality. Waist and ankle beads are mostly common in women as symbols including beauty and fertility. According to Busari, for the Yorùbás beads play a very significant role in many cultural events. They are a major feature of many traditional festivals, during which devotees and participants decorate their bodies with beads of different shapes, colours and sizes.⁴² Oyeniya buttresses this fact noting that the use of jewelry among the Yorùbá was both for aesthetic and religious purposes. Culturally, it was not part of Yorùbá culture to leave the necks, waists, and wrists bare. Beads and jewelry (from precious metals) of different colours, sizes and worth were usually worn either as part of dress ensemble on important occasions or as part of everyday wear.⁴³

Busari contends that beads are grouped into different categories according to their quality. *Iyun* is said to be the richest and most expensive of all the categories. This submission can be found in the Yorùbá axiom which asserts: *Iyun* is the father of all beads.⁴⁴ Others that must not be lacking in any woman's wardrobe, according to Oyeniya, included *segi*, *okun wewe*, *jojo wewe*, *lagidigba*, *enla*, and *ankara*.⁴⁵ When worn on traditional Yorùbá ethnic attires such as fabrics as laces, Ankara prints, and more, the beaded jewellery makes a bride or any occasion celebrant appear royal, and also makes celebrants look elegant.⁴⁶ It is also worth noting that mostly the crowns, shoes and walking sticks of *Obas* and *Kabiesies* are decorated with expensive beads to show case royalty.⁴⁷

Recognition of Yorùbá Clothes as Formal/Corporate Dressing

A great wealth of academic scholarship has been carried out on the social function of clothes. Such functions have been rightly identified to include mostly psychological, identity and communication. Within these identifications, I wish to add the formal recognition of Yorùbá clothes. This representation encompasses the recognition and acceptance of Yorùbá cultural fabrics in corporate environments. I contend that recognition is an epitome of justice which ought to be extended to African traditional attires, with specific reference here to Yorùbá clothes. Not recognizing Yorùbá clothes generally as formal or corporate modes of appearance is reflection of the colonial sense of superiority which denigrated anything African in order to give value to colonial essence. As Chingono cites, since colonisers deemed their own norms of dress to be more civilised, dress was used as a vehicle to convey messages of superiority of the colonisers and inferiority of the colonised.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, such perceptions still prevail. Western clothes are seen as better suited for formal and corporate offices. Misrecognition as manifested in racism and colonialism engendered severe psychological harm in its depiction of Africa, Africans and all modes of existence of their being as inferior humans. Such perspectives of misrecognition can be understood as showing not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.⁴⁹ Interestingly, as Chingono argues, the way an individual adorns him/herself may not always be a reflection of his/her sense of self. Instead, his/her dressing can be a conduit that relays information about the society within which the individual finds him/herself.⁵⁰ Thus, since what the corporate world demands is wearing a suit and a tie, that is what the individual wears.

The various ways we are recognised (and recognise others) play an important role in shaping our quality of life. Recognition theorists, as McQueen notes, argue that recognition can help form, or even determine our sense of who we are and the value accorded to us as individuals.⁵¹ Charles Taylor reasons that the importance of recognition which intensifies an understanding of identity is one that arises along with an ideal; the ideal of being true to myself and my own particular way of being.⁵² Distinct meanings of recognition include: (1) an act of intellectual apprehension, such as when we 'recognise' we have made a mistake; (2) a form of identification, such as when we 'recognise' a friend in the street; and (3) the act of acknowledging or respecting another being, such as when we 'recognise' someone's status, achievements or rights, it is also fundamental to understanding ourselves.⁵³ My argument for Yorùbá clothes aligns with the third meaning. The status of Yorùbá clothes ought to be recognised beyond being for social functions to formal functions; in other words, one should be able to recognize a specific normative status of the other person.⁵⁴ According to Fanon:

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.⁵⁵

Colonialism led to changing fashions in Africa generally and in Yorùbáland particularly. European fashions were elements of a system designed to sweep away the culture and tradition of colonized Africa.⁵⁶ According to Chingono in their process of spreading the notion of civilization as a primary goal through colonisation, Europeans in Africa imposed laws on how the indigenous people were supposed to act, live and more specifically, dress.⁵⁷ It is worth noting that dressing offers more than aesthetic expression of a culture. It, according to Boswell, offers an alternative epistemological foundation, a form of political, visual, and tactile communication that reveals aspects of inner psyche, community practice and broader political change.⁵⁸ The political independence gained will not be deemed complete, if clothing of the culture is not incorporated into formal nongovernmental corporations, because this is where the broader political change can be felt. Yorùbá fabrics like *adire* can through this mode of recognition be (as Boswell says of *kanga* fabrics) a significant nexus and transit point between the local and the global.⁵⁹

Conventional analytical dichotomies of traditional/modern, African/Western, local/global fall short of capturing the many diverse influences on contemporary style dynamism Africa...⁶⁰ Citing the instance of Tanzania and Zanzibar, Aris avers that 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.⁶¹ Since clothes offer a useful lens through which to explore the possibly changing ways in which older identities are constituted in modern culture,⁶² it becomes paramount for Yorùbá fabrics to be appreciated and recognised as formal/corporate identities. Moreover, clothes are cultural artefacts, embedded in current and

historical sets of meanings, shaped by social and economic forces, reflecting current social and cultural concerns.⁶³

A valid question is: how reasonable is wearing fabrics like *Aso oke* to offices daily? This is an unnecessary question, because *Aso oke* from time has been known to be social attire worn during special occasions. For instance, it is worn in major events such as naming ceremonies, engagements, weddings, house warming and funerals.⁶⁴ It can arguably be said that a Yorùbá (and several cultures today) wedding is not complete without *Aso oke*. *Adire*, *Ankara*, lace, *Aran*, damask, brocade, linen can be sewn into smart styles that would fit into any formal environment. Such orientation is necessary to replace the colonial ideal of formal clothes that persists over half a century after the formal end of colonialism. Although Yorùbá clothes are not generally worn in the country, other cultures too can wear their local fabrics thus enhancing the richness and beauty of our cultural fabrics. This call goes beyond the call for a return to the appreciation of our cultural artefacts but an assertion of the need to be authentic.

While there is value in Akinbileje's submission that clothes and textiles have turned to a scroll where the socio-cultural map of Africa can be viewed and enjoyed or that they often document the historical and symbolic past and also serve as a reference point to the world,⁶⁵ I see this as mere patronage. As Africans, we do not need to elucidate the value of our fabrics and the symbols or historicity of our fabrics to justify its use in formal environment. It is undeniable that the introduction of Western styled clothes as seeming formal or civilised is part of the emotional, psychological and physical scheme of the colonial interlopers and sustaining it portrays vestiges which should be easily done away with upon independence.

Dressing is an everyday expression of our being. Clothing, as Strubel rightly puts it, is an obvious outward symbol and one of the first aspects of culture that can be readily discerned.⁶⁶ Nobody goes out naked, hence the need to reflect our culture in that part of our being. Strubel cites that ethnic dress asserts that an individual's use of ethnic attire is related to their level of assimilation or acculturation into the mainstream culture, and serves as a material embodiment of ethnicity and social structure.⁶⁷ As Yorùbá (and same for other cultures), it is essential to assimilate ourselves in and attach significance to our roots in our formal dressing.

Conclusion

Although man is born naked, he lives in clothes all his life, and he is laid to rest shrouded. This paper has argued for the cultural and formal symbolism of Yorùbá dress codes. Culturally, I discussed the symbolism of colours in Yorùbá clothes while formally I argued for the recognition of Yorùbá fabrics in corporate nongovernmental environments. This need for the recognition of Yorùbá dress codes is borne out of the need for being authentic to our culture in all aspects of our being. Yorùbá fabrics in their colourful expressions and noted functionalities suit cultural, social, economic and formal spaces.

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ВНЕШНИЙ ВИД И КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ СИМВОЛЫ КАК ФОРМАЛЬНО-ФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ СИМВОЛИКА: О ГЕРМЕНЕВТИКЕ И ПРИЗНАНИИ ДРЕСС-КОДА ЙОРУБА

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***Аннотация.** Авторы статьи анализируют символизм цветов в традиционных костюмах йоруба, а также роль национального костюма в плане выражения национальной идентичности. В этой связи они обращают внимание на такой немаловажный аспект внутренних правил социума, как корпоративные дресс-коды. В то время как в культурной и даже в политической сфере национальные африканские костюмы в целом и традиционные костюмы йоруба в частности получают все более широкое признание, в деловой и офисной среде, где доминирует строгая одежда западного образца, они де-факто считаются неприемлемыми. В этом явлении авторы статьи видят пережитки эпохи колониализма, когда «правильным» и «цивилизованным» считалось лишь то, что привносилось на континент западными колонизаторами. Подчеркивая тесную связь национального костюма с менталитетом, историческим культурным наследием и национальной идентичностью, авторы статьи приходят к мнению, что национальный костюм йоруба может и должен стать частью современных корпоративных дресс-кодов и что все богатство традиционных тканей йоруба, несущих в себе глубокий символизм цветов, может быть использовано дизайнерами для разработки самобытных фасонов офисной одежды, которая, получив соответствующее признание, будет восприниматься столь же формальной, как привычные ныне костюмы западного типа.*

Ключевые слова: культурные символы, формальные символы, идентичность, признание, дресс-код йоруба

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