

AFRICAN CULTURE TRENDS AND FUTURE HOPE: HOSPITALITY AND DRESSING IN IKWERRE (EVO) CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The culture of hospitality and dressing, for the African, is a unique phenomenon of global concern. Hospitality and dressing are striking identities for the distinct African communities in Nigeria. In the pre-colonial era, the way an individual dresses in Evo community determines his status, occupation and religious affiliation. On the other hand, it is expected that a stranger is properly cared for when he or she visits the house of a native. These are as a result of the communal-centric nature of the people. In the pre-modern era, everyone cared for the welfare of a kinsman. However, there is a recent decline in the act of hospitality and modest indigenous dress styles today in Evo communities of Ikwerre ethnic group of Rivers State. This is as a result of forces of social and religious changes in the communities in modern times. This paper surveys the challenges of the decline in hospitality and inappropriate dressing styles in the culture of Evo people, including its participation in the social vices that trend in the society. Thus, using a phenomenological approach, this paper addresses the drastic development that will be achieved when these traditional ethos of hospitality and appropriate dress styles are reinstituted in Nigeria (forestalling rape, abuse and molestation) which will

impact coherence and order in Nigeria and enhance national unity, peace and progress.

Conceptualization of Culture

Chukwuokolo J. Chidozie (2014) viewed the etymological derivation of the word ‘culture’ as originally from the Latin word ‘Cultura’, meaning to cultivate. Citing Alfred North Whitehead, he suggests that culture does not mean an end state, an achieved state; rather, it is a process of achieving through cultivation. He further cited B.W. Andah who saw culture as an embrace of all of material and non-material expressions of people as well as the process through which these expressions are communicated. Culture is, therefore, the totality of human experience in all ramifications.

E.E.Evans-Pritchard (1965) discusses culture in the ambit of Australian aboriginals and their religious concept of totemism. He opined that culture is a part of each member of the society which is a social order. Culture makes a man, person, a social being... It is the personality as distinct from the individual organism. Man is a rational and moral animal, but the rational and moral aspect of him is what the society has superimposed on his organic part. John Mbiti (1969) suggests that African culture is the rhythm of his life.

Kilani and Iheanacho (2013) suggest that culture is a very common issue of human concern and existence. Moreover, human beings cannot live without culture nor can culture emerge without human being. Therefore, culture could be understood in two prisms, namely; substantive and functional cultures. Substantive culture describes meaning of something, a gesture or an action, values of things and the way of life of a group of people. Culture also can be the understanding of the aim of living. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) avers that every culture must add value to the life of man for it to be meaningful. Thus, what makes meaning to human beings is their culture.

The functionality of culture addresses the social practice that is meaningful to the society. This aspect of culture places more emphasis on symbolism, rituals and reality. Since the structure of the society is based on the foundation of human and superhuman interaction, culture is used to explain the meaning of actions to the society. This is why most practices of an indigenous people are gestured in symbolic structures of social relationship.

Owete and Iheanacho (2013) further stress that culture is one of the universal basic facts of existence which is a part of humanity. Citing Haviland (2002:55), they suggested that culture evolved with the early Hominides who started making tools for butchering animals for meat. This is traced back to about 2.5million years ago which coincides with the appearance of Homo at that time. Similarly, major importance is placed on the way of life and success of humans which are inevitable, considering their insatiable need and interaction.

Robert Bock (1992), viewing culture from the agricultural perspective, opine that culture was developed from the ability of man to cultivate his environment to meet his need of food in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The early effort was regarded as the cultivation of human mind as well the field and plant.

As this activity progressed, culture was understood as the following: share (culture can be shared among people), learnt, not biological inheritance (culture can also be studied), symbolic (culture is symbolic through the use of language), integration (culture can be broken down into parts and functions), continuity (culture can be passed from one generation to another generation), dynamic (culture can be influenced by changes as a result development), and the element of culture includes: i) language ii) religion iii) norms iv) values v) organization vi) historical

Schultz and Lavenda (2012) assert that culture can be a set of learned behaviour and ideas that human beings acquire as members of the society. This agrees with the assumption of Owete and Iheanacho which suggests that human beings use culture to adapt to and transform the world which they live in.

Hence, culture is unique to humans; since dependence for survival through interaction is inevitable, humans use their instinctive knowledge to protect themselves and look for food and shelter.

Iheanacho (2009) asserts that world civilization has passed through three phases and relationships till about 1990. But given the collapse of communism, the main contentions and controversies in the world now revolve around religion and culture – a fundamental aspect of living in which cultural globalization has brought significant alteration to African societies, like Nigeria. Cultural globalization is currently challenging, bringing about rapid and radical religious changes and societal transformation in different aspects of our social system. Such a phenomenon has induced changes in human perception.¹

Uzorka and Ebisi (2014) support the argument of Owete and Iheanacho as they state that culture, in their view, is dynamic, in terms of human language, morals, technology and skills which are elements of culture that can change with the passage of time. Our culture can be learnt through social interactions and relationship beginning with families, through participation in cultural institutions, like schools and religious affiliations. Thus, culture enhances the sharing of resources for thinking. Culture is indispensable of time and the environment.

¹ Iheanacho, Ngozi N. (2009) Globalization Challenges and Change Factors in the Religions of Africa: The Nigerian Experience Bassey Andah Journal Vol2 p 81

In summary, Idang asserts:

African culture is the ideal to have a bird's eye view of the ontology... which is the science that investigates everything. African culture exist in the spiritual and physical realm inseparably and linked together... viewing the world as a complex reality in which living things seen and experience spiritual dimension (G. E Idang P144)

Conceptualization of Hospitality in Ikwerre Culture

The Ikwerre people's ethno-historical origin has not been completely determined.² This has given rise to the various explanations of the Ikwerre origin by various groups and individuals. Hence, most of the historical descriptions of the Ikwerre people may not be completely reliable. The focus of this paper is to shed light on the practice of hospitality in the Ikwerre culture during the pre-modern era and in this contemporary time. The people of Ikwerre ethnic nationality can be described as loving and accommodating, following their cultural tenets.

The Evo division of the Ikwerre people sees caring for other people and accommodating them likewise as a duty that their deities use as merit for blessing during the pre-modern era. It was not common to eat alone, farm alone, live separately or worship separately in Ikwerre culture. The people practised communal living; this knitted the love bond that they shared which was carried out by showing concern for kits and kinsmen in their diverse communities.

They lived in knits of family unit called *Oro and Mgbu* where the whole family gathered momentarily to discuss and solve the problem of their relatives. The families were customarily governed by the

² Wotogbe-Weneka .O W (2020) *Owumini* beliefs and practices of the aquatic spirit among the Ikwerre people of the Niger Delta , Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.

eldest male member who was called *Ojiowhor*. He was considered the closest to the ancestors who oversee the affairs of the family in the spirit world.

Their patches of thatch homes enclosed with large farmlands and surrounding shrines where they practised their indigenous religion were the thrust of their love and unity in the families, communities and clans in general. During the farming season, each family assisted other families' members to cultivate their farmland which was a favour that was returned to other kinsmen without grudges or a show of indifference. This is why before colonization, Ikwerre people were self-sufficient in food production. Notwithstanding that they practised subsistence farming, their food production was enough to feed the population. The people of Ikwerre engaged in crop farming, hunting, fishing and trading in towns and villages around them. Hoes and cutlasses were their common and primary farming and hunting implement. Their trading prowess which was borne out of their culture of hospitality engaged them in transacting businesses with the Igbo, Kalabari, Etche, Okirika and Ogoni people.

Hence, visiting a kinsman without partaking in meals prepared in his house was seriously frowned at. Such a person was considered evil or has an evil intention. It was customary to visit and spend time with kits and kinsmen without entertaining fear of being harmed or poisoned. Visitors were not allowed to visit and leave without being taken care of through partaking in a welcome kola nut shared with drinks, and a well-prepared sumptuous meal to relax their nerves after a long day's work or journey.

This culture of hospitality among the people of Ikwerre gave rise to the confidence non-indigenes had which made them flood Port Harcourt and its environs since they were received and well taken care of.

Conceptualization of Dressing in Africa

Dressing in the African context goes beyond the ordinary covering of cloth on the body; it is enshrined in three main components: the material, the dressing style and the event or activities, which are the socio-cultural meanings of the dress.³ For the Africans, every dressing must be meaningful and applicable to status in an event.

Dressing is the act of covering the body. Dressing, for the African, is relative to the identity of an individual as a socio-cultural heritage. People dress according to their culture. Dressing identifies status; the manner a single individual dresses is completely different from the way those that are married are expected to dress. The African dressing is built from the socio-cultural framework of the people. The dressing of Africans incorporates the physiological differences in gender; the dress of a man is completely different from that of a woman. With the dressing identities royalty can be distinguished from a commoner in the society.

The occasion also determines the type of dress an individual is expected to wear; there is a specific type of clothing used for farm work, as compared to the quality of dress people wear during ceremonies like marriage, worship and parties. The activity a person is engaged in determines the type of dress he or she may wear.

Dress is a cultural phenomenon in Africa, as language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, roles, knowledge, skills and all other things. "Cloth and dress have been described as a mirror of the culture of the people in any society. Dress symbolizes the practices of the society, bounded by the same geographical location, sharing the same cultural

³ Otto, Charles T. & Joanes Bubolz E. African dress: Action, form and meaning, *African Journal* p115

values.”⁴ For the Africans, the type of dress you put on determines your personal worth in the society. You are addressed the way you dress.

As was mentioned above, people dress according to their occupation. As hunters dress in their hunting clothings, warriors and traditional rulers are adorned separately in the regalia that befit their statuses. In the indigenous religious tradition, there are dresses that are worn by diviners and other religious adherents which are believed to be fortified with spiritual potency capable of warding off evil attacks. Such a dress is a repository of supernatural powers made through divination. Such a dress for the African is a measure of relationship between human beings and supernatural forces.

Akinbileje (2014) further explains that “the African life is wrapped in religion” (Hackett et al, 1998). This explains why the whole community faithfully carries out all rites and rituals connected with rites of passage, such as in birth, puberty, marriage, death and life-after-death. These ceremonies symbolize religious values which govern the family and society (Idowu, 1991; Ejizu, 2013).⁵

The type of dress people wear in Nigeria is a simple way of identifying their distinct and unique cultural background. It is a special feature for defining self and cultural diversity. Dressing is not just a covering of the body; it speaks volume about the person wearing it. Therefore, the indigenous religion of Evo people places a high premium on dressing as a highly prized cultural value and identity.

⁴ Akinbileje, Thessy Yemisi (2014) Symbolic values of clothing and textiles art in traditional

and contemporary Africa; *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* vol3 number 4

⁵ Ibid

Dressing in Evo Culture

In the pre-modern era in Evo, dressing style among females and males was a matter of concern. Every individual was expected to dress appropriately in a way that befits their status, religious affiliation and the occasion. Indecent dressing was seriously frowned at, as people who were caught with dresses that expose their private parts were severely punished. The dress worn by the people determined their cultural status.

Unmarried individuals, especially girls, appeared beautifully endowed in ceremonies and festivals to showcase themselves as ripe for marriage. They often covered themselves properly with long gowns and skirts, as they stayed at home to help their mothers with home chores.

The married women dressed appropriately with two-piece wrappers and a full blouse with a head tie to showcase their status of respect and honour which was accorded them in the community. Thus, it was a serious offence to look down on or molest a married woman with no consideration of her age. Once a lady was married, she was given the respect every mother was given in the community. The issue of physical assault and sexual molestation was not common. It was a taboo for a woman or man to dress inappropriately, exposing their private parts in an attempt to seduce or lure an opposite sex. The value of chastity was demonstrated in decent dressing. A man that was mature and married dressed in an attire fitting to his status; this was also the case with a woman. In this wise, the problem of rape was minimal. The cultural and religious ethos of the indigenous people of Evo gave rise to order that they enjoyed within the time. This was a consciousness the people had, that the deities and divinities in anger would punish offenders of taboo.

Trends of Hospitality and Dressing in Evo

The trend of sexual molestation, harassment and rape in the society is a phenomenon that is truncating the peace, unity and stability of the Nigerian society, especially in Evo, Rivers State. The changing trend in hospitality and dressing in Evo is as a result of the challenges of globalization. “Globalization and its effect on the Nigerian culture have always worn a controversial mask.”⁶

The major aim of globalization is to achieve homogeneity of cultures by fusing different cultures together to benefit the entire world. Following the above objective, Nigerian cultural ethos are suffering from a decline of dominance being affected by other invading Western cultures. Although globalization is a double-edged sword, having both positive and negative effects on the cultures of the Nigerian people, especially Evo people, it has succeeded in destroying the value of communal relationship of kits and kin as well as engendering the taboo of rape and sexual molestation in the Nigerian society.

As far as this foot is not handled, crisis that is capable of forestalling the peace and unity, and enhancing continuous inter-communal/tribal conflicts will be on the rise. Observing the causes of molestation in recent times, this paper sees sexual molestation and rape as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic women’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”⁷

⁶ Ugbam, et.al (2014) The Effects of Globalization on African Culture: The Nigerian Perspective IOSR Journal of Business and Management Volume 16, Issue 4.

⁷ WHO: Sexual violence: prevalence, dynamics and consequences (online document accessed 6/04/2021)

More often, the perpetrators of these acts of societal abnormality have alluded to the manner their victims dress seductively as their motivation. The trend of dressing in short skimpy clothes, like body hugs and spaghetti clothes, that expose the private and sensitive parts of the body is prevalent. Immodest and indecent dressing among male and female members of the society is plunging the society into a community of irrational people.

The trending fashion today is common with attire worn by women that is so transparent that all their sensitive body parts are exposed through a popular cloth called “see through”. “The tight fitting eg. Jeans, skirt, hip star, petra, lactra that reveals the contours of the body”⁸ is the fashionable cloth in recent times. For the men, an unkempt appearance of bushy hairs, beards, tattered jeans with holes makes them suspects of societal nuisance. These acts often times have generated conflict between the growing teenage group and security agencies that attribute such types of dressing to criminals.

It is important to note that globalization and modern forces of change in cultural practices in Evo have set up conflict as it pertains decline in hospitality. The advent of modernization, globalization and commercialization came with the challenges of family independence in which each member of the family strives to make ends meet and sustain their immediate family members, against the practice of communalism. This disintegration of family unity is a major factor that necessitates conflicts in the communities. A lot of family members can no longer seek for the well-being of members of kin. There is a continuous strive for the greatest achiever than for the maintenance of peace and unity of the family for the greater good of the society at large. This is the fueling foundation for the cry of

⁸ Special Bulletin(2019) Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria vol 10, public affairs
directorates the
office of the vice chancellor

disintegration of the Nigerian nation. If this trend of lack of teeming hospitality and decency in dressing in the society continues, the nation will continue to suffer from the problem of conflict, rape and sexual molestation/harassment.

The future

Hence, after considering the challenges the trend of decline of hospitality and decent dressing is having on the peace and stability of Evo and the Nigerian nation at large, it will be appropriate for the indigenous religious ethos that kept the society in order to be re-enacted. This value system kept the society in check as ordained by the deities. The rules that guided the society were basically for the peace and unity of the people. People cared for their kith and kin and strangers as well. Communal festivals and ceremonies that will ignite the inter/intra-communal relationship should be encouraged.

Carnivals that show the rich cultural values of the people in decent dressing and hospitality can be promoted regularly using the instrument of globalization known as the social media. Thus, when these recommendations have been applied, the modern people will have intimacy for the value of the rich African culture, and a deep benefit from the ethos of the indigenous religion will help to curtail the widespread conflict, rape and sexual molestation that is trending in the societies.

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