

## Applied and Implied Interpretations of Fashion Photography in Colonial and Post-Colonial Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Fashion Photography is an aspect of photography that focuses on style of clothing, personal appearance including hair, body decoration and accessories. It also involves the use of photography to document and promote fashion. Recently, artist photographers found fashion photography as a useful means of artistic expression. Before the invention of photography, graphic artists in Europe had promoted fashion through visual illustration. The practice was common for pioneering fashion magazines such as Vogue and Harper's Bazaar. Various ethnic groups in Nigeria have particular styles of fashion. The Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa Fulani, Ibibio, Edo, Idoma and other groups can be identified merely by their styles of dressing. The paper considers the applied and implied interpretations of fashion photography in Nigeria between 1900 and 1970. It analyses how colonialism altered fashion styles and it concludes by enumerating the implication of photography on the development of fashion in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Photography, fashion, decoration, clothing, graphics

### Introduction

Photography may be classified into different categories, depending on the nature of subject. These are Portraiture, Landscape, Architecture, Art, Still Life, Sport and Action, Close-ups, Night and Low Light Photography. These classifications are according to related subject theme. Other classifications of photography may be according to the type of camera or equipment used; in this case, these are Analog, Digital, Microscopic, Telescopic and Photogram. The earlier categorization which is based on the nature of subject is considered here.

The photographers of the colonial era gave clues about Nigerians, the way of life, occupation, culture and environment. Their photographs remain the earliest photo documentation. In discussing applied and implied interpretations of Fashion Photography in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, it is appropriate to examine some photographs of the period. Portraiture and Fashion photography are two categorization that capture fashion and accessories. Portrait photography deals with photographing individual or group of people, and this focuses on the face that reveals personality, mood or facial expression.

When the colonial explorers started photography in Africa, one of their primary interests was to document the people of various cultural backgrounds. Most of these portraits represented the earliest photograph documentation of the people and depict the profile and expressions of the people, although, there were biases in the composition of some of the portraiture. These biases could be attributed to perceived worldview of the colonialists, and their intention to portray the Africans in a particular way. Some of the postures, costumes and props were staged. The expression on the faces of subjects sometimes gave way to the persuasive communications between the photographer and the subjects. Apparently, in many cases, the subjects had no idea of what photography was all about and might not have had the privilege of seeing a copy of the photograph.

Portraiture, as presented by early Nigeria photographers, had a different perspective. In this case, there was a better relationship between the subject and the photographer, and usually, the photographer had no hidden motive besides the objective of portraiture in the interest of the subject. An average Nigerian photographer of the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century concerned himself primarily with portrait photography. He had little interest in landscape, architecture, documentary and other types of photography. Whenever any other subject featured in their photograph, it was only as background to the main subject or by accident. Nonetheless, the skill in manipulating camera was comparable to that of the colonialists.

The important point here is that equipment and accessories did not limit the creative potentials of the Central Nigeria photographers.

### **Fashion Photography**

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

Fashion Photography is an aspect of photography that focuses on style of clothing, personal appearance, including hair, body decoration and accessories. It is the use of photography to document and promote fashion. Fashion photography is aimed at promoting the sale of clothes and fashion accessories. Recently, however, artist photographers found fashion photography a useful

means of artistic expression. Before the invention of photography, graphic artists in Europe had promoted fashion through visual illustration. The practice was common for pioneering fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Various ethnic groups in Nigeria have particular styles of fashion that are peculiar to them. The Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa Fulani, Ibibio, Edo, Idoma, and other ethnic groups can be identified merely by their styles of dressing. The Yoruba of the southwest (including the Yoruba in Kwara and Kogi States of Nigeria, part of Central Nigeria) are known for *Asooke* (woven cotton fabric) design and *Adire* (tie and dye) which the Yoruba men use for *Agbada* and *Sokoto*. In some cases, they are used for *Buba* or *Dansiki* and *Sokoto*, while the Yoruba women dress in *Buba*, *Iro* and *Gele* (a round neck free-flowing gown, wrapper and headgear).



Hausa and Yoruba Fashion Style © Ayo Adewunmi



Benin and Fulani Fashion Style © Ayo Adewunmi

The handspun, woven cotton fabric is also unique to the Ebiras of the Central Nigeria (Kogi State). The fabric is worn mostly by women in the same manner as the Yoruba women. The woven cotton fabrics of the Ebiras and style must have been copied from the Yoruba *Asooke*. Woven fabric was common to many communities in Central Nigeria, where women were engaged in the spinning of the wool and weaving. According to John Picton:

The region comprising the eastern and northeastern Yoruba-speaking peoples, the various northern Edo groups, and Ebira, was characterised for among other things, the active household production of hand-spun cotton textiles. In the 1960s women continued to spin and weave locally-grown cotton using an upright single-heddle loom. The cotton itself was mostly white, though a natural brown variety was also available, and some women were adept indigo dyers, producing cotton yarn in lighter and darker shades. Making use of these, weavers produced hand-spun cotton cloth in a range of patterns always with a wide variety of stripes in the warp. These cloths were largely intended for household consumption, but with a Nigeria-wide focus upon 'Okene cloth' much of this production found its way to the market. The generic term for these fabrics was *ikitipa* (clearly cognate with the Yoruba *ki;jipa*), though cloths only in white were known as *uba* (Picton, 1996, p. 34)

While the fabric and weaving methods may be the same for these different ethnic nationalities, the peculiarities remain in design. Mbelu buttresses the point of commonality of woven fabric and she also describes Akwete cloth, a hand spun woven cotton fabric common to the Igbo, as a fabric, "produced in the Akwete area near Aba, Abia State" (Mbelu, 2013), of Nigeria. Photographs taken during the colonial era captured, to a large extent the fashion styles.



Igbira Children, Traditional Woven Cotton: About 1900-1920  
(© British Archives, London)

Colonialism came with foreign culture and fashion ideology which gradually influenced fashion trends. There was deliberate effort by the colonialist to influence fashion design. In Lisa Aronson's review:

Renne learned from her careful reading of archival sources dating to the colonial period that Europeans were intent on eliminating traditional handspun, woven attire which they

associated with things backwards and uncivilized, and did so by introducing western forms of dress and increasing the importation of factory made textiles.

(URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1149>)

Although the influx of Western fabrics and accessories during the colonial era affected the production of local handspun woven fabrics for a few decades, as locals preferred the light and soft nature of the fabric to the heavy and rough texture of the local fabrics, the love for and production of the traditional hand-woven fabric soon returned in the 1980s and 1990s. That time, technology made it possible to produce light hand-woven fabrics since attention was also being drawn to the promotion of traditional fashion. In addition, people began to appreciate their own creativity and the beauty of their textile designs.

Fashion photography has revealed that despite the changes in style and fashion enumerated above, the distinctive values and style of various ethnic groups did not change significantly. Though accessories and fabrics might have changed, the style that identified each ethnicity remains constant.

### **Colonial Photography Documentation in Nigeria: Influences and Biases**

Creativity is inspired by philosophies and experience. Creative objects are thus imbued with applied and implied interpretations. To fully grasp the true interpretation of photographs created during the colonial and post-colonial eras, one needs to understand the background and philosophy of the photographers of the same period.

The European had fixed perception that the Africans were primitive and naive and as a result, many of what the European photographers shot, which ironically were the first images, in terms of photography in Africa in general, were influenced by their erroneous worldview. They sought to substantiate their pseudo perspective in their photography documentation of the natives and landscape of Africa. They captured self-imagination rather than candid images. Their preconceived ideas about Africa were projected more than the candid situation they met. On the contrary, however, the African photographers viewed and documented their own people and environment differently. It is therefore imperative to analyse these opposing views.

Only a few Westerners have openly confessed to the pseudo opinion about Africans. One of such is William Henry Clarke, a Baptist Missionary. In the opinion of Clarke (1972), the idea commonly held in his days in Europe and America about Africa and Africans are preconceived and erroneous. Such ideas that Africans are no more than barbarians, savages, uncivilized people, etc., which are found in a number of books written by European travellers and missionaries to Africa, for Clarke, require elaboration. Clarke, as he himself confessed, was “imbued with those sentiments concerning Africa” which had been “so firmly rooted in my childhood”, when he approached Yoruba land. He expected “vile hovels, filth, nakedness, indolence and want”, but when he entered Abeokuta and his

environs in 1854, he declared: “so greatly and so happily was I disappointed that I was almost ready, even at this early period, to exclaim how poor Africans have been belied”. Clarke, who was one of the first Missionaries to explore the Yoruba land, covering areas as far as Ilorin and other northern Yoruba land up to Nupe and River Niger (areas now within Central Nigeria), after he reached Ilorin in 1855, was shocked at the level of civilization of the people. He expresses his disappointment at this preconceived opinion about Africans, thus:

Dear Sirs, your conclusion is wholly illogical based on a false hypothetical premise. They are not barbarous. They cultivate thousands of acres. They eat corn, rice, yams, potatoes, peas, mutton, kid, beef and butter; drink, and ride fine horses, and sleep, drink and rejoice as the rest of mankind (Clarke, 1972, p 186).

On the people’s mode of dressing, Clarke further observes thus: “The dress of the natives certainly bespeaks for them a higher position than that generally assigned to the people of this benighted continent. All classes, rich and poor, male and female, are generally well clad...” (p.243). For Clarke, “it is a very rare thing to see a respectable boy or girl walking the streets in a state of nudity” (p. 244). While Clarke may be applauded for holding a different view about Africans, his actions, in some cases, while touring the Yoruba land did not portray someone who was completely divorced from familiar European stereotype. Nevertheless, his views, as far back as the mid-1850s, illuminated the bias perceptions of the colonial photographers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This background observation of European’s uninformed colonial attitude is important in order to understand why the European explorers took many photographs that were to be clearly sensational, amusing and curiously attractive to the Europeans back home. The implied attributes are clearly observed in their photography works. To support this argument one can look at some photographs taken by the Europeans between 1880 and 1930, but now in the British Archives. Some of these ridicule, to some extent, the wives of the *Bale* of Oshogbo. The first sets of photographs are those taken at Oshogbo, the photos of Bale of Oshogbo and his wives, the photo of some of his wives against the tent of the Europeans.

Observing the photographs of the Bale and his wives, one notes that the wives were properly dressed and the bodies not unduly exposed. The case was different with the photographs the colonialists took of the wives which were taken outside their tent. While one may argue that there was no big deal for African women to walk around with their breasts uncovered as at that time, this cannot be true of women of Oshogbo. The Yoruba, especially around Oshogbo, that time, were well advanced in traditional weaving and dying; a trade for which Oshogbo is outstanding till today. That time, women in Oshogbo and major towns of the Yoruba were already accustomed to dressing up with their breasts covered (Figs.24, 25 and 26). This, of course, did not agree with the image the colonialists would like to portray about Africans. At times, these women were deliberately asked to pose without their wrappers, particularly when the Bale or Kings were away from their palaces.



Photographs Showing the Bale of Oshogbo with His Wives and the Wives against the Tent of the Europeans, Early 1900, © British Archives, London

The Europeans were camped at the Osun River at that period. This gave the Europeans the opportunity to take photographs of the king's wives while fetching water at Osun River. The Bale and his wives apparently unaware of the intention of the Europeans and probably ignorant of photography would have innocently conceded to the postures of his wives and themselves respectively with water pots on their heads. There are many other examples.

Undoubtedly, some of the photographs taken by the Europeans had subjective interpretations. For example, the "Twin Mother" gave away the sinister motive of the colonial photographer. The posture, standing and supporting the two babies in breast feeding position, is rather unusual in African context. Many European photographs of the colonial Africa have negative connotations or motives.

In spite of the negative intentions of some colonial photographers, many inadvertently uncovered images that today can be taken to have historic, aesthetic and cultural values. The colonial photographs also offer insights into the life and culture of the traditional African people, including fashion. Some of these photographs offer bases for contemporary research into the history of the African societies.

### **Works of Local Photographers during the Colonial Period**

For a few decades, the European explorers had the monopoly of using the camera to capture Africa. In Nigeria, for example, this continued until the eighth decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when local photographers began to have access to cameras to tell their own stories. When the indigenous photographers began to use cameras, they were mostly under the supervision of their European masters whom they worked for. Invariably, they helped the Europeans to document various African experiences in manners similar to those of the Europeans.

As time progressed, local photographers became independent of their masters and some other people were able to own cameras. They began to capture images that had true reflections of the culture of their people. Only then did we begin to notice the true African perspectives in many of the photograph documentations. These African photographers were also able to document the beauty of the culture, the people and a little of the environment. Their emphasis was on the people, culture, ceremonies as well as the social issues and challenges faced by the Africans.



Traditional Fashion Style during the Colonial Era, Early 1900, © British Archives



Photograph showing Colonial Influence on Schools' Fashion Style, Early 1900, © British Archives

The photographs taken by the Africans in this early period, like those of the colonialists, were limited by the capability of the cameras. Motions were betrayed and the lens capability was limited. The limitation of the camera affected the creative expressions as seen in modern photography.

## Conclusion

Many fashion and portraiture photography of the colonial and post-colonial era when examined depicted values that immediately exposed implied negative attributes. European photographs of the colonial Africa evidently revealed negative connotations or motives.

The study of the photographs revealed that although there were notable changes in style and fashion as influenced by foreign culture, the distinctive values, and style that distinguish the various ethnic groups did not change significantly. Whereas the accessories and fabrics might have changed, the style that identified each ethnicity remains constant.

The implied content of photography of the colonial era greatly affected fashion trends in the academy sector, where uniform designs towed Western culture and consequently affected the fashion of the elite.

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