

Between Conventional and Unconventional Styles: Analysis of Dress Styles of Female Figures in Modern Nigerian Art

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Abstract

Women's social identity has been changing rapidly in Christian-dominated southern parts of Nigeria due to the influences of globalization and new media culture. This paper engages the local practice of female figures in conventional and unconventional dress styles in Nigeria. The nonconforming modern mode in reference is trousers while non-bifurcated styles primarily associated with the female gender constitute the conventional styles. The paper adopts both discourse analysis and visual analysis methods. It reveals two broad categories of Nigerian artists. The first and mainstream, beginning from Ben Enwonwu, has the general tendency to depict women in conventional female dress. The second, exemplified by Obi Nwaegbe, portrays women in trousers. This paper extends key arguments raised by my recently concluded post-doctoral fellowship project on female cross-dressing in Southeastern Nigeria. The paper hinges on the conceptual frame: the social responsibility of the artist. The argument is that the prevalence of skirts, gowns, and other purely female styles in more general art practice is based on their longstanding feminine characteristic and some moral stance. Local artists are more frequently representing them and this tends to obscure the appearance of female trousers in artworks by home-based Nigerian artists.

Keywords: Nigerian artists, trousers, skirts, gowns, wrappers, female figure.

Introduction

The prevalence of Western-style clothing in parts of Africa today evinces an aspect of sartorial change in the absence of formal dress reforms. Some styles have attained the status of conventional while other styles have been restricted to the margin. Interestingly, the peripherals are becoming a status symbol.

This speaks to the dynamics of culture. Change is expected in any cultural contact. The more powerful cultures introduce their cultures to less powerful cultures, sometimes in a forceful manner. For instance, during the European colonial project in parts of Africa, colonial masters made efforts to persuasively and legislatively introduce Africans into a new sartorial culture (Comaroff, 1996).

Undoubtedly the change was to craft a respectable look, modern and decent in the Western sense. The commercial interest behind the move becomes clear when one realizes that colonial service uniform which was compulsory for male and female workers was produced in Europe and shifted to Africa. The changes in this regard were noticeable because clothing as a social skin cannot be hidden in an embodied context (Hemmings, 2005).

Before the European 'dress reform' in colonial Africa, various ethnicities had their dress codes intact. Clothing was an important marker of gender, social status, class, ethnicity, and occupation. In their gendered clothing practice, the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, for instance, permit both genders to tie loin wrappers differently. For instance, passing a part of a loincloth in-between the legs was acceptable for men but forbidden among the Igbo women (Okafor, 1992). This is why the earliest attempt by the local

women to wear panties was resisted by the locals. Female cross-dressing among the Awgu people of Southeastern Nigeria once attracted such a grave consequence as selling the culprit as a slave to slave dealers (Eze, 2013, p. 101).

This paper explores how conventional and unconventional dress styles have been portrayed in Modern Nigerian Art, starting from the period of Ben Enwonwu and until the contemporary time when young artists, such as Obi Nwaegbe, challenge the stereotypical pattern of portraying women's mode of appearance. While frocks, wrappers, and other robe-like garments have remained popular female styles, trousers have entered women's wardrobes and thus constitute atypical styles for women.

The primary data are visual images of female figures (artworks) which will be examined in art historical terms where contextual dimensional will be emphasized. The paper adopts both discourse analysis and visual

analysis methods. It reveals two broad categories of Nigerian artists. The first and mainstream, beginning from Ben Enwonwu, has the general tendency to depict women in conventionally female clothing styles. The second, exemplified by Obi Nwaegbe, portray women in the unconventional outfit – trousers. The analysis will be infused with ideas from personal observation. Secondary data are literature subject to annotation.

In what follows, I will hint at the conceptual frame, review relevant literature and contextually analyze and discuss selected images of female figures in both conventional and unconventional styles.

Conceptual Frame and Literature Review

Boas (1947) has written a beautiful text on the social responsibility of the artist. His ideas on the subject provide a conceptual framework for this work. He remarks, for instance, that the social responsibility of the artist is about his or her social relevance as an artist. This relevance lies in telling the truth,

not an alternative to the truth, “whether one does anything about it or not” (Boas, 1947, p. 276). Sometimes, the truth one tells does not require action as in the case of the selected Nigerian artists who have simply represented women in their ‘choice’ dress for various purposes. I believe they did not envisage the kind of engagement their works would elicit. I share the view all the artists who represented women in trousers are socially responsible for depicting women as they appeared. They made appearances that bear testimony to the “currents of changes” of the time (p. 275).

It is in the sense of being precise in their social commitment as writers that they occasionally describe the attire of their characters. Achebe’s (1958) fictional *Things Fall Apart*, in capturing the intriguing encounter between the Igbo and the Europeans before and during the colonial period, reveals, for instance, the traditional dress of the Igbo. Female dress is said to

consist of pieces of jewelry such as *jigida* waist beads, necklaces, and anklets while men's styles include raffia skirts and pieces of fabric loosely wrapped around the body draping down either from one shoulder or from the waist to the knee or below. This male style would be changed to trousers in imitation of British dress practice at the time (Comaroff, 1996). Several African groups adopted trousers and shirts as work dresses or civil uniforms. Christian and other religious groups popularized foreign modes such as trousers and shirts for men and gowns and frocks for women towards the beginning of the twentieth century. Such attires enabled them to achieve a sense of respectability and maintain a close relationship with their European masters.

Bastian's (1996) study of the adoption of voluminous outer garments locally called *agbada* by Igbo women reveals the disrupting nature of the phenomenon. *Agbada* ensemble consists of two-piece tops and a piece of

trousers. Misty Bastian did the study in the 1980s among the Igbo, particularly in Onitsha. The cross-dressing tendency among women was portrayed as a means of offense to men and a way of challenging gender stereotypes in a patriarchal society where "the dress of men is seen as the dress of power ..., whether mediated by generation, class, ethnicity...."(p.125). Women in such dress were seen as being too assuming and loose. It is today they would be regarded as tomboys or ones with a transgender identity. In a different context, one of two female queer characters in trousers was described by Stobie (2005, p.74) as having transgender sexuality in South Africa.

Before the time the Igbo were "fully exposed to the full blast of Europeans influence" (Diogu 2010, p.92), few boys/men could be seen in singlets, jumpers, and shorts. Some young women had access to Western-styled gowns, blouses, and skirts. The Igbo women have shown a particular preference

for factory prints known as "Abada." Apart from wax and fancy prints, other women's designs include fancy brocades and yards of cloth (George) from Manchester and Holland. They often turn these into two-piece wrappers occasionally using a portion thereof as scarfs while the blouse is often from a different kind of fabric. Tying of wrappers is so significant among women that have assumed certain ceremonial status as in "Ima Ogodo," a marriage ritual among some groups (Egbochukwu, 1974) where the bride symbolically ties the wrapper to mark her entry into family life.

Amanke Okafor (1992, p.142) in discussing the cultural practices of the Awka of Southeastern Nigerian people provided an account of how the priests and other patriarchs revoked the customary prohibition on women's access to pant-like tying apparel. The origin of European-styled dress among the people was linked to the early imitative attempts by local women who desired their

white counterparts' style. Two dates were given in this regard. British administrators ended Nri's political and ritual hegemony in Igboland in 1911. In 1936, a ceremony at the shrine of *Aja-oka* was held; during the event, it was solemnly declared by the key participants that passing a piece of cloth between a woman's legs in a fashion like a man was no longer an abomination. This event was not effective as an Awka-Igbo priest denied the event during an interview.

The popular traditional modes from the pre-colonial period to the late 1970s in Southeastern Nigeria appear highly gender marked. Women could wear an earthworm-like brass coil, plastic disc, or cowrie shell waist bead (Dike, 1978). Wearing such ornaments usually begins at the first sight of the girl's menses. Necklaces, body patterns drawn with local plant dye extract known as *uli*, body marks in the form of scarifications, varieties of hairdos, anklets in the form of disc-like brass, and the spiral variant

constitute women's vanities. Dike was interested in the changes in women's styles. For instance, he notes that in the late 1940s, Western-style gowns became shorter due to the effect of the Second World War. The size reduction tendency continued in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Then dresses appeared knee tight. Umoetuk (1983) shared a similar narrative, reporting that Southern Nigerian Ibibio women's dress include: Western maxi gowns, 1900 – 1918; midi dress, 1919 – 1925; knee-length dresses, 1926 – 1930; midi dress, 1931 – 1937; knee length (and knee-tight) dress, 1938 - 1944; more different knee-tight dress styles, 1945 1956 and flared and knee-length gowns, 1957 - 1961. None of these styles included trousers which were essentially regarded as male clothing. Although controversies surrounding trousers have been discussed in several texts, the arguments for or against the outfit appear tangential here.

Trousers have been described as something that reveals the sexualized parts of women's bodies. The palaver revolves around the concept of nakedness. So much was the fuss about nudity and indecent dressing among women it received some official attention in Nigeria's legislative chambers at the time (Bakare-Yusuf, 2011). This is true of Uganda, for instance, where the Anti-Pornography Act (APA) signed into law by Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni in 2014 heightened social distaste for sexually provocative female dresses in the country (Tamale, 2016). APA is reminiscent of Kamuzu Banda's Decency Act of 1973 which forbade women to wear miniskirts and trousers in Malawi. Hence, there have been reported cases of public stripping of women perceived to be indecently dressed in short skirts or tight-fitting trousers by some moral police and vigilante groups for falling short of standards of public decency. These developments position female dress as

something historically charged. Little wonder, clothing items have been delicately rendered in art forms across the ages.

Artists from the Paleolithic age through Renaissance and up to modern times have idealized the image of women. Consequently, they have produced fascinating female figures in different attires and accessories. In Bronze Age Europe, for instance, two different sets of female clothing have been established (Sørensen 1997, p.98). They show simple cuts for skirts, gowns, and blouses. That no such study was conducted to address similar concerns on the part of male clothing at the time suggests female dress styles appear more popular than male styles. In other words, the attention given to her sartorial elegance tends to surpass that of man who is the primary gazer of the female body. The body has become an important historical site for the artist in history.

For instance, the Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman artists have demonstrated some

sense of social responsibility through the naturalistic figures they created. They might not have set out to document people's dress styles but their works have become a resource for the study of peoples' dress history. When the figures represented predate the period of their creation, they still bear the semblance of the dress cultures of the artist at the time of their creation. For instance, Andrei Lublyev created *Three Angels*, around 1410, a tempera-wood artwork that exemplifies the Byzantine style in Russia and features three Old Testament characters, angels who appeared to Abraham. Italian Renaissance fresco painters created similar historical and socially significant works. Yet there are some works like *Monalisa* and the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci which exude an outstanding aesthetic quality and socio-historical significance.

Nigerian artists have frequently represented women in bronze, terracotta, stone, wood, cement, painting, and drawing. Benin

bronzes and Esie stone figures are clear examples of the interest traditional artists had in female imagery. Nigerian artists have engaged the female imagery more than male figures. Onipede, A and Ajayi, T. (N.D) who looked at selected works showing the human body by selected Nigerian artists presented four or so female images out of the seven images presented as Figures. One of the female figures was nude and two others were in semi-nude appearances in conventional female skirts. In what follows, I shall examine the primary data: twenty-one artworks that bear images of African women in traditional and modern modes. I have classified the former as conforming modes, and the latter as non-conforming modes. The reason for the classification is based on the level of acceptance; the first is generally accepted while the former has been resisted in some quarters.

Images of African Women's Dress: Analysis and Discussion

Male and female masters as well as burgeoning artists, mostly from southeastern Nigeria, drew from diverse sources to render the images. Some of them have been archived online and others in printed texts such as art exhibitions catalogs and other volumes. For instance, a book edited by Paul Chike Dike and Patricia Oyelola, on Nigerian women in visual art, features fifteen essays on the challenges and success of women in art; it includes images of 135 works from over 50 female artists such as Stella Awoh whose works show female figures in the characteristic dress.

Conventional Female Clothing Styles in Artworks

Conventional styles of dress are found with figures by masters. For instance, Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994), arguably the most influential modern master in Nigeria, is behind several masterpieces in painting and sculpture showing female figures in conventional Western styles. I see it in the *Portrait Statue of Queen Elizabeth*,

Christine, Tutu (Figure 1), and *Anyanwu* (Figure 2) for their characteristic Western dress styles.



Figure 1: Ben Enwonwu, *Tutu*, 1973. Oil painting. Source: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ben-enwonwu-portrait-found-1612051>



Figure 2: Ben Enwonwu, *Anyanwu*, 1956. Bronze. Source: <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/23892/lot/29/>

The *Portrait Statue of Queen Elizabeth* by Enwonwu also features an English dress of a female leader, Queen Elizabeth. The body-fitting bodice and flared-down parts of her gown must have been the cynosure of all eyes in the late 1950s. The form, particularly the bodice and frayed lower part, has defined a typical wedding gown in Churches in Nigeria. *Christine* is a depiction of an American hairstylist who relocated with her British husband to Lagos where she became friendly with the artist. Enwonwu painted a portrait of the Nigerian royal princess, Adetutu, Ademiluyi, also called *Tutu* (Figure 1) in 1974. *Tutu* was said to be “the most expensive Nigeria modernist painting ever sold at auction” at \$1.67 million in 2018 (Cascone, 2018) while *Christine* produced in 1971 was sold in 2019 for \$1.4 million (Mohamud, 2019). *Anyanwu* (Figure 2) is a bronze work depicting a female figure whose legs are stylistically conjoined and tappers towards the down part of the legs, forming an

elongated pole-like stand. Although the title was drawn from the Igbo name sun, which is also the name of the deity in Igbo, this work produced in 1956 symbolically represents Nigeria as a nation emerging from the suppressive colonial government. Four years later, Nigeria had her independence.



Figure 3: Uche Okeke, *Motherhood*, 1959.
Oil on board, 36 x 24 in.
Source: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/ucheokeke/>



Figure 4: Uche Okeke, *KATE*, 1965.
Oil on board, 27.6 x 19.3 in. Source:
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/ucheokeke/>

Uche Okeke (1933–2016), a creative master who produced a series of drawing and

painting with themes and forms drawn from Igbo traditions, produced realistic works such as *Motherhood* (Figure 3) and *KATE* (Figure 4). Both paintings are of female figures dressed in gowns, accessories, and headgear, possessing a matron look. The gown evinces Western influence. Demas Nwoko is a versatile artist known to “produce works that propagate national ideal” (Ikpakronyi, 2019, p.40) His painting captioned *Explosion Crisis* was produced in 1967. It was inspired by the effect of the Nigeria-Biafra war. All five women in the painting were captured topless in relative miniskirts; they appear frightened and thus grab their breasts and children in their confused state. Adimora-Ezeigbo (2005, p.225) affirmed Nwoko’s figure representation in context by quoting a woman who witnessed the Nigeria-Biafra war saying, “Seven of the children couldn’t walk ... We carried two babies each while the older ones held on to our skirts.” Such skirts are basically for the female gender.



Figure 5: Solomon Wangboje, *Romance of the Head Load II*, 1978. Lino Print, Source: *Zaria Art School 50th Anniversary Exhibition Catalogue*

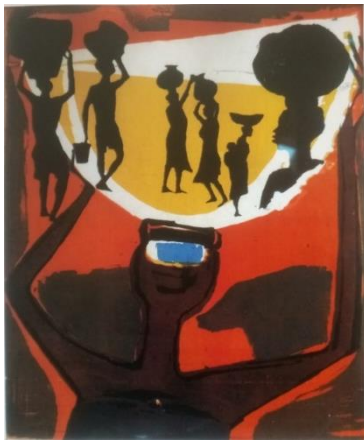


Figure 6: Solomon Wangboje, *Romance of the Head Load I*, 1978. Lino Print, Source: *Zaria Art School 50th Anniversary Exhibition Catalogue*

Solomon Wangboje, a notable Nigerian artist, produced several prints. Two of such are in Figures 5 and 6, captioned *Romance of the Head Load*, I & II respectively. They

feature local women in their characteristic dress, carrying loads. The first looks more stylized. The second is easily identifiable with Fulani young women who carry who usually carry calabash from place to place. Etsename (2007) did a visual analysis of a print showing a Fulani woman in her prime, bedecked in a revealing calico blouse, with some rows of beaded necklaces. Her minimal clothing was said to possibly connote that she is doing some domestic chores and that she is not married (p.39). Emerging artists have produced artworks showing female forms in various dress styles. For instance, Tsedemo's Emoseh's *Visual Arts: A Means of Effective Communication* (Figure 7) depicts a young maiden in traditional attire that leaves the upper part of the body, including the belly and the breast, bare. This is somewhat reminiscent of the Fulani maiden's wear in Figure 5. Regina Okafor's *African Rhythm* in Figure 8 is a painting that images a dancing damsel whose long wrapper and short

sleeveless top, a “show belly” style, reveals her navel region.



Figure 7: Tsedemo'a E. Emoseh, *Visual Arts: A Means of Effective Communication*, 2009. Oil on canvass. Source: 2nd National Visual Arts Competition, NGA.

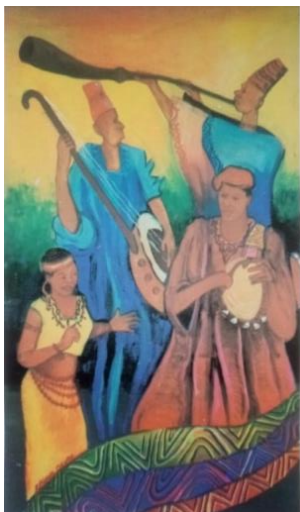


Figure 8: Regina Okafor, *African Rhythm*, Acrylic on canvas. Source: Ikpakronye (2019).

Fashion Parade, Figure 9, by Betty Bassey is a painting that portrays at the center two women in voluminous gowns. One could see

in the same painting two other women whose portraits dominate the foreground. All four women wear conforming modern women's attires. There is no gainsaying the fact that conventional representation of female dress is in the mainstream while unconventional styles remain at the margins, being promoted by avant-gardes and young artists who were simply recording the social realities of their time from their standpoint. Stella Awoh created *African Costume Design* (Figure 10) using concrete and Metal as a mannequin (Dike and Oyelola, 2004). The illustrated dress costume appears fashionable among the Igbo people of Nigeria at the time of this writing. The three figures represented in the ensemble tied wrappers however, the style of tying the male wrapper appears differently. Awoh seems to be positing that a piece of the wrapper is the traditional attire of the people or group she represented. Of course in certain traditional contexts, trousers are unsuitable

for neither males nor females in the local Igbo context.



Figure 9: Betty Bassey, *Fashion Parade*, 1994. Oil on canvas. Source: Dike and Oyelola 2004



Figure 10: Stella Awoh: *African Costume Design*, 2001. Concrete and Metal 18", Source: Dike and Oyelola (2004).

Trousers – The Unconventional Female Clothing Style in Artworks

Women in trousers constitute an uncommon sight in Nigerian painting tradition. Expectedly, young Nigerian artists who grew with the tradition advance the narrative of change in women's dress tradition. Several of Nwaegbe's paintings and Ndidi Emefiele feature female figures in trousers. For

instance, in Figure 11, *Bar Tales*, and Figure 12, two paintings by a young Nigerian artist, Obi Nwaegbe, capture seated women in trousers. The woman in Figure 12 sits more freely because of the practical nature of her trousers. Such a sitting position is difficult to assume by women in certain conventional female dress. Ndidi Emefiele, a young Nigerian female artist, painted two female figures assuming a masculine look in a dark uniform dress consisting of trousers. She titled it *Space Lunch*. Emefiele lives in the West at the time of this writing and uses such works to "explore and challenge the social, cultural, and religious pressures she has seen women face in Nigeria and beyond."



Figure 11: Obi Nwaegbe, *Bar Tales*, 2018. Acrylic on paper, Photo Credit: The Artist.



Figure 12: Obi Nwaegbe, *Untitled*, 2018. Acrylic on paper. Photo Credit: The Artist.

Kenechukwu Udejaja, a young artist of the Nsukka School, tried to appropriate Igbo masking costumes as a creative resource for innovative carnival costumes during his Masters of Fine Arts program. His *Maiden Beauty*, Figure 13, alludes to the Igbo maiden masquerade. The artist innovated by the use of leggings as part of the costume. The hand-painted trouser leggings bear the linear and marked design of the Igbo group. Figure 14 is a cartoon Akapa. It was published in a local newspaper, *Vanguard* in 1987. It captures what one may describe as a gender battle exemplified in female cross-dressing, the use of the male style by women. The text written below the image of the cartoon reveals the

sentiment thus: “Now I think you are carrying this your what-a-man-can-do-a-woman-can-do-stuff too far!” The message provides us a window into the politics of gender suggestive of female cross-dressing.



Figure 13: Udejaja KC, *Maiden Beauty*, 2018. Mixed media. Photo Credit: The Artist.



Figure 14:
Lawrence
Akapa, *MR & MRS*, 1987,
"Now I think
you are
carrying this
your what-a-
man-can-do-a-
woman-can-
do- stuff too
far!"
Source: Bastian
(1996).

Such is also a typical example of traditional dress among Fulani women in Nigeria. Figure 15 is captioned *A girl in front of her house* by the artist, Olamide Elegbede. This appears as a child's watercolor paperwork.



Figure 15: Olamide Elegbede, *A girl in front of her house*. Water Colour, 2007.
Source: Aresuva, NGA 2009

The title of the work suggests the subject, a little girl in front of her house. On the whole, one could see the dominance of the conventional female dress styles in the figures. Artists who depicted women differently are fewer in number compared to those who refused to break away from the tradition established by the early generation of modern artists in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The presence of female characters in African literature and visual arts in the post-colonial era implicates the dress practice of women. As this paper has shown, most of the writers and artists whose works have been reviewed did not primarily engage female dress as a subject. They simply described the dress of a particular character. These writing and artworks however clearly suggest that women's chief clothing styles were not the bifurcated styles such as trousers and shorts. Trousers as female attire is a recent development. They have come into favor

among women following their practical nature. However, some contexts and places forbid such outfits for the female gender. Many mainstream churches in Nigeria still frown at the practice, especially in their place of worship. The social transformations in African society which account for many women appearing in trousers tend to redefine the traditional understanding of female dress. The changing narrative is bringing the periphery (female trousers) to the center. Gowns, frocks, wrappers, and other conventional styles have retained their quality of femininity. Would local artists,

especially the living masters, be socially responsive to the changing trends by capturing female trousers in their works as a way of documenting the sartorial practice of the time? Although this question appears rhetoric, it begs for some answer, considering how masters appear to be inclined to classical styles in their arts. The tendency is bound to skew real-life social developments in women's dress practice represented in art forms.

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