
EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY OR OBJECTIVITY AND THE CONTOURS OF EXPRESSION: EXPLORING THE RHYTHMS OF NIGERIAN FASHION

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Abstract

Constructions on the technique in which bodies are fashioned through clothes demonstrate the socially constructed nature of fashion. The aim of this paper is to examine the embodied dimensions of meanings and functions paradigmatically expressed in fashion especially in Nigeria. The method of study is historical and qualitative in approach and made use of participant observation for data collection. As an art that is expressed through the body, meanings are embodied in fashion by the wearer and observer. It is a form of embodiment that commands admiration, aversion, wealth, class, prestige and influence. The resurgence of the Aso-ebi from a mere ethnic culture to a springboard of mainstream Nigerian fashion is analyzed in the light of these meanings and functions. In conclusion, the study found out that whether meanings embodied by fashion are subjective or objective they are discursively reinforced by the contours of expression in Nigerian styles.

Key words: Fashion; embodiment; contours of expression; meanings, aso-ebi.

Introduction

Fashion is a form of embodiment linked to subjectivity and a veritable means of expression and communication. As a 'body technique' it bears indices that express social conduct by shaping the body in a material dimension. Fashion projects the identity and image of the body. Power, class, era, personality, fame, religion and affluence are some of those embodiments that are linked to fashion. McCracken (1990) affirms this view point in his consideration of fashion as a language. Corroborating this view (Craik 1994) notes that "it is a short-hand way of signaling place and identity as well as a way of performing social intercourse, both synchronically and diachronically." Fashion behaviour projects a sense of identity, self and individualization and is considered in terms of predetermined gestural and expressive arrays. The beginning of fashion is associated with the show of political power. "The development of fashion systems in Europe has been associated with the emergence of courtly etiquette and subsequent challenges to the power of the court with the expansion of civil society" (Elias 1978, 1983). Fashion in the 14th to 18th centuries tended to follow power. The white linen shirt and a fitted jacket worn over hose was men's fashionable attire in Europe of 16th century. More so, the English monarch used fashion to create an impressive royal image. MSN Encyclopedia article on Fashion – Encarta affirms that Queen Elizabeth 1 of England's fashion statement embodied by ornate garment encrusted with

jewels, gold, and other decoration symbolized the assertion of political authority, power, legitimacy and her right to rule, even though she was a woman. The use of ornate garments and fashion to assert power is not only limited to pre-industrial and post-industrial societies. It is equally common amongst traditional rulers and title holders in contemporary Nigerian society. Long flowing gowns with slits up the two sides worn over trousers with beads on the neck and wrist symbolize traditional power in the south-east and south-south geopolitical zones of the country. The aim of this paper is to examine the embodied dimensions of meanings and functions paradigmatically expressed in fashion especially in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology is employed to understand the meaning of phenomena or things from which social reality is constructed other than causes. This theory is a branch of philosophy applied to Sociology by Alfred Schutz. Phenomenologists are of the view that the classification of phenomena and meanings attached to them by human beings are examples of ‘typifications’. These typifications enable people to communicate with others through fashion because they share the same world view. Consequently, members of society build up ‘common sense knowledge’. The theory notes the non-existence of any objective reality in the subjective meanings attached to phenomena. Phenomenology stresses the subjective aspects of social life that are internal to people’s consciousness.

Method of Study: The historical method of study was adopted in order to study fashion origin in Nigeria and the antecedents of contemporary fashion in Nigeria. It is purely qualitative in approach. Phenomenologists reject the use of statistics for any causal explanation of human behaviour. Researches from phenomenology are mostly qualitative. This reasoning rejects the possibility of objective measurement and classification of social reality. Participant observation is about the most significant way of collecting qualitative data. It provides a potent picture of the rhythms of Nigerian fashion.

Embodied Subjectivity or Objectivity

Sometimes, esoteric meanings are attached to particular modes of fashion worn in society. Fashion as an art which is perplexing exists at various realms of meaning that appear specific or embedded in the phenomenon. It accounts for the reason of ambivalence in reactions to fashion. Craik (1994) recognizes this point as she posits that “fashion constitutes an effective and pervasive means through which women become objects of the gaze and of male sexual desire.” Such meanings attached to fashion tend to see fashion as technique of femininity.

As the process of expressing ideas Craik again infers “that the ways in which bodies are fashioned through clothes, make up and demeanour constitute identity, sexuality and social position” (Craik). Due to the varying means through which patterns of fashion are diffused into other cultures, subcultures and countercultures in fashion are created. Also, McDowell (1984) identifies such qualities as “success, importance, attractions and desirability” that distinguish high fashion systems from everyday fashion.

As a medium of expression it could be used to communicate social issues. It is a non-verbal language which elucidates the meaning of clothing behavior, adornment and grooming within any given society. Barnard (1996) enunciates:

The things people wear are significant or meaningful, and it has attempted to explain what sort of meanings fashion and clothing may have, how those meanings are produced or generated, and how fashion and clothing communicate those meanings ... meaning, like fashions, were not static or fixed ... even the use of the term 'fashion' was not static or fixed, that it was a product of the context in which it appeared and that an item could function as fashion at one moment as clothing or anti fashion, at another.

Meaning portrayed by fashion may be subjective or objective. Fashion can be contemporary, bohemian, conventional or traditional (old school) style. A style can function as a mark of distinction, create frisson or exotic code. Whatever function any style may serve, it is embedded in aesthetic meanings. Fitzpatrick in Goshgarin (1999) elucidates:

We live in a culture so caught up with image that we judge people by the physical shape they're in, their hairstyle, the clothes they wear, and the labels on their shoes. Likewise, through these we also forge our own identities. The images we project in flesh and fashion are statements about ourselves.

This accounts for the crave for high fashion brands to keep status and the urge to be trendy. High cost, premium, quality and value of luxury brands tend to boost the business in second-hand goods. An Adidas-made track-suit with a pair of trainer (sneaker) distinguishes the wearer in any sports practice. What one wears speaks volume about one's image (good or bad). It creates an impression about the character of the wearer though appearance may be deceitful. In Nigeria, there has been a notion that criminals or bad guys usually dress up in dangling or loose T-shirts or singlet over a pair of bogus three-quarter length jeans with sneakers or boot to go with. Davis (1992) construct of clothing renders a good advice to this effect. "What is signified by a particular style is different for different groups in different contexts at different times". This style of dressing being reviewed is common among youths in the media, sports, music, drama even undergraduates. Entwistle & Wilson (2001) pointedly comment that "the body is not a passive but active player that must be draped according to the body of conventions". Craik (1994) shares the same view. Clothing as a "situated bodily practice" has to be worn according to its rule and convention. People's ambivalent attitudes to fashion make it imperative to draw a line on the role of fashion. Flugel as cited in Kawamura (2005) acknowledges that 'there is the principal confrontation between emphasis on adornment on the one hand, and modesty or respectability on the other. Indeed, dress attempts to balance two contradictory claims: it focuses on our attractions and at the same time protests our modesty". A pleasant and beautiful look engenders attraction. What is considered beautiful or attractive is subject to the decision of the observer. Modesty on the other hand, is relative. A modest fashion in the western world may vary in the east. It is common amongst female Muslims to cover most part of their body (veil) in public places where as in the Christian fold there are polemics.

Further more, Entwistle in particular observes the role of the body as phenomenological. This means that "clothing has to be selected, used, and worn and it has effects upon its wearer". This phenomenological approach to clothing and fashion is a principle that underlies the study of the body. The adoption of a particular style must take

into cognizance the shape, contours, size and height of the wearer. Any attempt to ignore this point imposes a negative impression on the wearer. A person's style says much about the individual's personality. Style and taste communicate messages about one's personality and identity. The way an individual dresses determines to a great extent the way society perceives or addresses the person. They constitute the bases for public perception of responsible attitude. Craik (1994) cites Chanel's anecdote for mourning the demise of her lover.

When she gave orders for her bedroom to be, first, 'dressed in black' and then done in pink', Gabrielle was using shoptalk. She presumably hoped her heart would be as docile as the strangers who made up her clientele, that it too would follow the fashion for pink, and that sorrow, once she had made her palace fresh, luminous, would subside. In short, she was telling her pain what to wear. Oh costume! ((Charles-Roux, 1989:184).

Fashion in this sense is therapeutic. It lightens the heavy heart and soothes away sorrow, pain and depression. Dressing of the body flows from the mind and depicts the mood of the wearer. The mutual relationship that exists between bodies and clothes underscore their interdependencies. Mourning clothes is a common feature of most Nigerian societies whose usage and duration has been mediated by religious beliefs and modernization. They elaborate on the use of fashion to articulate personal and social statements. In this respect, Entwistle & Wilson criticize the approach of other academics on fashion who they argue "trace a succession of styles, tastes, fabrics, semiotic codes without examining the body that wears the clothing in question".

The practice of body decoration is another means of composing social bodies. Body decoration takes the form of tattoo, cosmetics, ornaments, pierced ear, nose or navel, perfumes and grooming. "Body decoration is the technique of self-actualization of personhood and habitus" (Craik, 1994). She notes that while make-up is based on visual techniques, perfume is a technique of smell. Paradoxically, most of these body decorations are rooted in certain subcultures (prostitutes) and the theatre. Make-up is not only used by females but males as well and constitutes a major component of any theatrical or media production.

People's reaction to fashion influence creates a form of spontaneous and unstructured behaviour. In creating identities through this influence consumerist values are encouraged. Again, Fitzpatrick explores the relationship between fashion and identity with Adidas and hip hop culture. He corroborates Wilson (1985) description of this fashion as "oppositional dress". In this sense, fashion is used to oppose mainstream ideas, economy and opportunities. This kind of oppositional fashion as exhibited on Nigerian campuses perhaps portray 'social rebellion' against values, poverty and better opportunities in life.

The use of boob tops (tube tops), strapless bodice on hipsters for lectures negate the rules of fashion – dressing according to the rules of ceremony. Culturally the youth fashion derides mainstream fashion as old-fashion. Mass consumerism and subculture have helped to shape social identities and outlooks. Pitts in Goshgarian (1999) examines the subculture fashion 'saggin'. "Saggin is viewed as having less to do with fashion than dressing down to the desolation of a subculture. As a statement, it denotes a way of asserting control, inciting fear, demanding respect and saying that they haven't the words for: I am somebody". This

form of dressing provides leverage for subculture fashion by young boys and girls. The shift of focus to flaunt the erogenous zones of the body violates the norm of dressing prevalent in most Nigerian cultures.

Contours of Expression

Fashion provides a historical seed bed for dating archaeological finding. It is a reflection of the society of which it is a part. Braudel (1981) reveals that “art historians are therefore able to use fashion in dating images with increasing confidence and precision, often within five years in the case of 15th century images”.

The shortening and tightening of the male-over-garment from calf-length to hip-line originated in the 15th century. Again, the Louis heel (a thick heel, often covered, that curves in at the mid-section before flaring out) was named after Louis XIV of France. Specific fashions depict certain era in history for instance, the Victorian style, Edwardian style are named after these past rulers in Europe. Documentation of fashion falls into the roles of fashion photographers, artists, newspapers, magazines (print), television, fashion blogs, social networks, fashion websites, etc. Fashion journalism remains the most important form of publicity in the fashion industry. Craik (1994) succinctly adds that “fashion photographs have been celebrated as capturing the spirit of an era”. Fashion photography (Paparazzi) provides the major source of knowledge about prevalent modes of expression in a particular time. Again, Craik (1994) quotes Hollander (1980) thus: “The importance of photography was its apparent ability to transcend symbolic codes (of taste, emotions and narratives) and portray fashion stripped of meanings and associations into an undreamt-of condition of truthfulness.”

The growth of fashion photography has been influential on fashion and facilitated the promotion of designs, fashion diffusion, modelling and affect public taste. Fashion documentation initially comprised illustrations and engravings of portraits by artists. Paul Iribe’s hand-coloured engravings and illustrations are notable (Craik, 1994)

The emergence of fashion magazines in the world of fashion introduced new codes in the representation of fashion modelling and fashion photography highlighted the burgeoning market for high and ready-to-wear fashion. Among the famous and fore-most magazines are La Gazette du Bon established in 1912 and Vogue in 1892. Nigeria prides herself on such magazines as Ovation, This Day Fashion, Encomium, Genevieve and lots more.

The interplay between fashion magazines and models as sales tools provides the means for promoting desirable images and icons of fashion. Accordingly, Di Grappa (1980) writes down Horst’s comment that:

Magazines pick the models, the make-up people and hairdressers today. But I always tell the make-up people the girl must look natural and not made up. The hair should look like the girl did it herself. If the accent is on the hairdo, one forgets about the girl. It’s like being overdressed. Chanel used to say, ‘if a woman walks into a room and people say, “Oh, what a marvellous dress,” then she is badly dressed. If they say, “what a beautiful woman,” then she is well dressed.’ The girl must look like a person. The dress and make-up and hair are only to help.

The message conveyed here is explicit. Fashion must be produced, used and portrayed in accordance with defined parameters such as modesty, beauty and novelty. Using fashion especially, cosmetics, as a mask undermines its essence. Of great potential is the role of fashion in advancing social issues and its use to support or oppose a cause.

The demand for fur coats is a crucial factor in the endangering of species worldwide. Fashion designers are of the view that it takes about forty animals to make a fur coat. To stem this demand for fur coats environmental movements have arisen to promote positive social change. These social movements adopt many strategies to campaign against the extermination of animals. More so, they played a crucial role in mobilizing government support for legislation on the conservation of endangered species. Consequently, in 1966, the United States government passed the "Fur Seal Act". This Act seeks to protect the rights of animal population. Schaefer (2005) displays an advertisement sponsored by www.respectforanimals.org. "If you don't want animals gassed, electrocuted, trapped or strangled don't buy a fur coat". The environmental activism on the protection of endangered animal species has been broadened to a global perspective. Irrespective of the social movements against the use of animals in fur coat production, the later remains a valuable fashion piece. The most formidable obstacle to the campaigns has been the entrenched social and economic interests of the developed nations (Skov, 2005).

As a follow-up to the global concern for environmental sustainability manufacturers of fashion items re-strategized design of consumer products with the environment in mind. Emphasis has shifted from a fashion paradigm of reckless fashionability to conscious fashionability. This philosophical change in the production of environmental friendly consumer products and services promotes sustainable living. The devastating impact of climate change re-directs interest to the use of natural and environmental-friendly fibre as raw materials. Wilcox (2009) presents a typical instance. Charmone; a shoe manufacturer explains that "its footwear is made from Italian microfibre that has a structure similar to leather but is made without any animal products. The material is also free of polyvinyl chloride and other common shoe materials that are hard on the environment." As a backlash to the damaging effects of climate change on the ecosystem, fashion serves as a potent tool for advancing sustainability principle.

The phenomenon of fashion could be applied in critical cases to pass on a message. Craik (1994) examines the role played by fashion magazines during the Second World War. "Displays of excess, frivolity and indolence were discouraged by fashion magazines. Fashion photography experimented with relating the impact of war on the lives of ordinary women and men."

Exploring the Rhythms of Nigerian Fashion

Nigerian fashion is distinctive in various ways. It thrives on custom made wears from ankara and other fabrics paradigmatically expressed in beautiful designs and styles. Nigerian fashion is an embodiment of the blend of diverse and diffused cultures that have shaped human experience in the nation. More so, the diverse ethnic nationalities of the Nigerian state are identified by their specific dress codes. Fashion has been designed and used as a gesture of solidarity in social issues. National celebrations like Nigeria's independence anniversary, presents an opportunity for fashionistas to showcase their different fashion in green, white and green. It is common amongst groups, unions, friends,

families, associations, clubs and the like to identify with their member through fashion. The “aso-ebi” is a growing trend and the wheel on which Nigerian fashion is driven in contemporary time.

It was originally a Yoruba culture meant to refer to family uniform for distinguishing family members of the celebrant. In recent times, the meaning, usage and fabric varies depending on the personality and social standing of the person involved. The Aso-ebi culture transcends diverse cultures and religious groups in Nigeria and also used by the Diaspora. It is now synonymous with the Nigerian culture and fashion. Fabrics used for aso-ebi varies from Ankara, different kinds of lace materials, aso-oke, head gear, velvet, George, etc. as may be deemed appropriate and affordable by the celebrant. Aso-ebi is used in such occasions like marriage/wedding, funeral, thanksgiving/party, child naming/dedication ceremonies including associations, clubs, political parties, meetings and other social gatherings. There is different aso-ebi for different groups in a particular ceremony. For instance, in a wedding ceremony there is aso-ebi for the couple’s parents, siblings, in-laws, friends, colleagues and all classes of invited guests.

Aso-ebi culture has been so integrated into the social fabric of the Nigerian society that guests at any particular occasion are identified and recognized based on their adornment of the celebrant’s aso-ebi. Aso-ebi varies in accordance with the cost of the fabrics and the group for whom it is made. The higher the quality of the fabrics used, the higher the cost of the aso-ebi which portrays the wealth and class of the wearer.

The aso-ebi culture provides the Nigerian fashion designers, tailors and seamstresses a platform to show case arrays of dazzling and beautiful styles. The trending styles displayed by aso-ebi’s determine the direction and pulse of Nigerian fashion.

Conclusion

This article builds on the scholarship on fashion, meanings and the Aso-ebi culture and employs the various analytical tools of power, royalty, prestige, identity, wealth, distinction, solidarity and class to illuminate intersections of fashion photography, journalism, communication, modelling, environmental sustainability and culture. The world of fashion is so exclusive and has its structure of meaning, its patterns of relationship, its rules and conventions and its system of typification and relevance. Most times, only the actors experience the meaning subsumed in fashion. Fashion communication is symbolic. The meanings attached to it refer to the way people perceive, define and interpret them. These forms of meanings are not immutable, they can be redefined. Whether meanings embodied by fashion are subjective or objective they are discursively reinforced by the contours of expression in Nigerian styles. Generally, fashion is illusory and deceptive.

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