Nigerian Dress Culture: an Anthropo-Linguistic Communication Tool

A. A. Olaoye & BELLO, Yekeen

1Prof. Department of English Studies, Nigerian Turkish Nile University, Abuja
E-Mail: tonyolaoye2002@yahoo.com Gsm: 0803587306

2Department of English Studies, Nigerian Turkish Nile University, Abuja
E-Mail: belight1010@gmail.com Gsm: 08065241336

This paper tries to put forward an anthropo-linguistic approach to the promotion of Nigerian dress culture in corporate institutions. Linguistic anthropology is a twin discipline which is concerned with the study of human society. It examines culture in its totality – traditions, customs, languages, dress, artifacts and technology, together with human social behaviour and relationships. Dress culture belongs to the sub-division of anthropology called ethnology, which looks at cultures in their traditional forms, and in their adaptation to the changing conditions in the modern world. Dress culture is therefore seen in this paper as a system of communication that functions just like any language functions. For instance, the related subject of Semiotics – the science of signs and significations, i.e. the study of symbols and their communicative meanings – has made dress culture an interesting and intriguing mode of communication. Dress is symbolic, iconic and symptomatic, and it is open to diverse interpretations and meanings. Dress code in corporate institutions just like any symbolic language, speaks volume. The authors therefore explore dress culture in its ramification – ethnic / national ceremonial dress, occasional / festival dress, corporate / professional dress, religious / ritual dress, political dress, etc., the interpretations of colours, and the role of dress culture in the promotion of national identity. It is suggested that Nigerian dress culture must be sensitive to people’s taste, convenience, style, sex, religious belief, and must consider climatic or weather conditions and modernity if it is to serve as a veritable communication tool.

Keywords: Nigerian dress culture, anthropo-linguistic, communication tool, anthropology, and ethnology.

INTRODUCTION

Dress or clothing is a kind of garment worn by people of all cultures since prehistoric times. Different peoples of the world have their unique dress culture. The materials used for making dresses range from cotton, wool, silk fabric to flax fabric and rubber. Dresses that people put on, in all cultures, are determined by a number of factors. The main factor that has variety of clothes in different times and locations, is climate (Braun Schneider, 2005). In Nigeria for instance, we have the rainy season and the dry season, with their characteristic coldness and hotness. Dress culture therefore has to bow to the prevailing weather conditions. Dress culture has also been affected by changing styles or fashion in vogue. Other factors that influence the dress that people wear are the availability of materials, cost of materials, technology of the period,
peoples’ social status, human migration, religious tradition, assimilation of various traditions, social cosmopolitan outlook or modernity, travels and perhaps colonization, conversion and nationalism.

In sociology and anthropology, culture is the belief, behaviors, language and the entire way of life of a particular people. Culture includes customs, ceremonies; works of arts, dress, inventions, technology and traditions of a people. Culture distinguishes human beings from other animals. Social anthropologists are interested in how cultures emerge and develop. They enquire into the social conditions behind different cultures, and in doing so they examine the ways that norms and values operate as guides to human behavior.

In any society, there also exist sub-cultures, that is, groups of people with beliefs, attitudes, customs, and other forms of behaviours differing from those of the dominant society, while at the same time being related to it. The concept refers to minority groups such as ethnic minorities, religious and social groups. Sub-cultures created by such groups serve to provide recompense for the fact that their members are viewed as outsiders by the mainstream society. Some of the characteristics of these sub-cultures such as forms of dressing, language, traditions are emphasized to create and maintain a distinction from the dominant culture. The distinction may represent a pride of identity. The sub-cultures like those of the drug users, armed robbers, touts, cultists, the gay, etc have their idiosyncrasies. Their dress culture is peculiar and odd.

Nigeria dress culture differs from one place to another based on ethnicity, religious affiliation, occupation, profession, socio-political associations and economic groupings. The law court, the church, the mosque, the military and the professional guilds have their different dress culture. The financial houses like the banks and insurance houses have their dress code. Students in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions also have their dress code. We also have traditional and royal dress code. The Emirs, the Obongs, the Owelles, the Obas, etc., have their regalia comprising their robes, caps and staff of office.

Corporate institutions are organizations that are recognized by law as single unit, such as banks, academic institutions, insurance companies, media organizations, the law court, hospitals and the military and para-military. These institutions have different dress culture called corporate dressing. Dressing code in these establishments has different functions or purposes. It makes the organisation unique, as it marks out the workers or members as distinct from others. It makes the members look decent and pleasing to the eyes. It makes the institution neat, orderly and beautiful. It encourages a sense of belonging or we-feelings. It helps in building moral discipline, and makes the wearer of the dress more responsible. It makes it easy to identify those who do not belong. It helps in crime control. It reduces immorality, indecency, licentiousness and idiosyncratic behaviour. It promotes integration and national identity. Most of the dresses worn in these institutions are not completely indigenous; some belong to some foreign culture.

**SEMIOTICS AND SYMBOLISM**

Dress culture can be viewed from linguistic and anthropological perspective. Social anthropology is the study of human social life or human society, and it is concerned with examining social behaviour and relationships. Cultural anthropology examines culture, that is the people’s learnt and transmitted belief and standards of behaviour, and in particular, meanings, values, and codes of conduct (Sanders, 2005). Dress culture is very important; it is one of the major issues in linguistic anthropology. Language is a
field of vital interest in anthropology because of its social importance in human communication. Language is an aspect of culture. Many developments in social and cultural anthropology, particularly ethnology, have been influenced by ideas, concepts and models derived from linguistics.

The related subject of semiotics, a branch of linguistic anthropology according to Olaoye (2014) is the science of signs and signification which has influenced anthropologists to view dress culture as a system of communication (Howells 2005). The two major founders of semiotics or semiology were the American philosophers C.S. Peirce and the Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. They based their theories on the fundamental distinction in the sign between the signifier and the signified. Dress culture as the signifier symbolizes many things or means many things. The meanings embodied in the dress culture are the signified. Dress is symbolic. It could be iconic, that is the signs bear some resemblance to their referent. For instance, flamboyant dressing symbolizes festive mood, joyous occasion. Black or dark dress is a sign of sorrow, sadness, mournful occasion, funeral or something to do with death. Dress is also indexical. An indexical sign fulfils its function by pointing out its referent. For instance, smoke is an index of fire. An indexical sign, as Ajiboye (2006) observes, is regarded as symptomatic. The white Baptismal dress, used in churches, is symptomatic of holiness. Dress culture conveys all kinds of meanings; it is an aspect of sociolinguistics which requires skills, knowledge and social tact in interpreting and decoding.

Symbolism according to Barnerjee (2005), is the use of symbols to convey different meanings. Symbols could be objects, words, colours or patterns or dress, all of which stand for something other than their intrinsic property. For instance, while there is nothing intrinsically dangerous about the red colour, it has become a symbol for danger in a number of societies. In human history, symbols have been used to express ideas, to communicate meanings, and to convey emotions. Ethnographers often pay attention to the way symbols are used and the meanings that they convey. Social anthropologists have examined the relationship between the structure of ritual symbols and the creation of social solidarity which dress culture promotes. Although symbols can be ambiguous as they convey different meanings to different individuals and groups, they however or nonetheless enable people to have common allegiance to the same symbols such as the national flag, the national anthem, the Nigerian coat of arm and other emblems. These are cultural artifacts.

DRESS CULTURE AS RITUALS

Dress culture, particularly dress code, is a ritual culture that dates back to the time of creation. Ritual, Woodburn (2005) asserts, is a particular type of formal performance or activity in which the participants carry out series of relatively stereotyped actions, and make series of relatively standardized statements largely prescribed by custom and sanctioned by precedent. Rituals have congregation, like members of organization or institutions or corporate groups, who participate – who dance, sing, kneel or bow or join in prayer and other standardized utterances. The congregations see rituals as very serious affairs which do not merely communicate but also accomplish both personal and communal objectives through the intervention of gods or spirits.

Rituals require conformity to dress culture. The ritual initiates go through all kinds of nerve-racking psychological phases. The dress code, style and colours are imposed on the neophytes who are subjected to various ordeals as test of endurance, masculinity, decorum, discipline, bravery, valour and virility. Rituals have important socio-political objectives. They tend to act
to maintain political differentiation, to invest the powers that be with sanctified legitimacy, and to maintain political inequality.

**RITUAL CEREMONIES AND FUNCTIONS**

- Coronation and other installation rituals. Here special dress code is mandatory as it sanctifies, defines and legitimates transfer of power and authority.
- Marriage and other life-cycle rituals bless, mark out, and sanction significant transitions in the lives of individuals. Children and adolescents pass through rite de passage with colourful dresses.
- Initiation rituals, such as the Christian Baptism, Confirmation, the first Holy Order such as Priesthood, Knighthood, etc and royal orders like the chieftaincy, call to the bar, etc involve investitures symbolized by special dress code, with perhaps staff of office in political rituals.
- Graduation ceremonies in academic institutions require academic gown and cap of different styles and colours.
- Hunters’ obsequies (funeral rituals) require dress code- Hunters wear dresses of variegated colours, and are often festooned with raps of charms, amulets, animal parts, insects and birds’ parts, etc.
- Ordinary burial ceremonies also require dress code. AsoEbi known as “And co”, that is a common uniform worn by participants at the burial ceremony is a cultural common denominator.
- Traditional religious rituals, such as Sango, Oya, Osun, Ifa, festivals also conform to dress culture.

**DRESS CULTURE AND COLOURS**

Dress culture prescribes colours, shape and style, and all these have to be followed religiously. Nigeria’s national colours, as shown in the national flag, are green and white. Different countries have different national colours which are marks of identity. Corporate institutions, organizations, ethnic groups, religious and socio-cultural and political groups, etc have their colours. There are also universal colours with almost universal meanings or interpretations. White, for instance, is a colour of purity, holiness and pureness. Red is a symbol of blood, danger or death, while black colour symbolizes evil, devilment or even death. Green symbolizes peace, freshness, productivity, life or agriculture. Ritual ceremonies prescribe colours to be served and adhered to as a matter of course. White is the colour of dress used for Christian Baptism, Confirmation, First Holy Communion and church wedding. Knighthood requires a combination of black, white or green colours. Graduation caps and gown with the hood come in different colours.

Priesthood, as a corporate institution, requires white cloth as a major dress. The Christian (Catholic) Holy Mass and other Masses are said with the use of dresses of different colours depending on the liturgical calendar and other ecumenical doctrines. Most of the cloths used for dressing the Christian church altars are white, such as the Corporal, the Purificator, the Pall, etc all representing purity. The dress put on by the Catholic Reverend Fathers, Christian pastors and the clerics in general is white. We have such cloths as the Miter (a long, crown-like cap) worn by the Pope, Cardinals, Arch-bishops and Bishops. The Cassocks, Surplice, Amice, Alb, Cincture, Stole, Chasuble, Cope, Humeral, Vein and all priesthood vestments are made of different colours (Abifarin, Rev.Fr.2000). White Chasuble stands for joy and purity of soul, and is
used during Christmas, Easter and memorials.

- Red chasuble stands for fire and blood, and is used at Pentecost in commemoration of the coming down of the Holy Spirit on the twelve disciples in form of tongues of fire. It is also used on Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

- Green chasuble symbolizes hope and growth, and it is used on Sundays and ordinary days for mass.

- Gold chasuble stands for Gold, and it is multi-purpose. It may be substituted with white, red or green chasuble.

- Violet chasuble stands for penance, humility and expectancy, and it is worn during Advent/Lent and funeral masses.

Colours are symbolic in dress culture. The traditional religious worshipers wear different colours. The Osun (goddess of river) priest and their followers wear white dress symbolizing purity, virility, peace, fecundity or fruitfulness. Sango (god of Iron and thunder) worshipers wear red and black dress. Ifa (god of divination) priest and worshipers wear white dress too. In Nigeria sports festival, the colour of sportswear is the national colour – Green and White, though different participants wear their sponsor’s colour. At wedding, invitees are enjoined to wear the prescribed dress code colours as stipulated in the wedding invitation cards. These colours for the bride and bridegroom are prescribed by the celebrants. The much talked – about AsoEbi, (ethnic/lineage/clan/social – cultural common uniform) is a symbol of common ancestry, or that of solidarity, fellowship, friendship, brotherhood, social camaraderie, ethnic affinity and political alliance or identity.

Dress culture, particularly colours, shapes and styles are sometimes based on status or rank. Dress colours are therefore a form of communication system. Colours speak volume. The dresses worn by the armed forces are graded according to ranks. The colour of their dress is also not the same. The colours and styles of the dress code engender reciprocal respects. The soldiers wear green dress while the navy wears blue. The air force wears brown. Seniority is detected by the shade of whiteness, greenness, blueness or brownness of the officers’ dresses and the colour of the epaulette. All these promote discipline and es – prit de corps. The university graduands wear academic caps and gowns with hoods, while the matriculating students wear no hood. Dress culture therefore promotes a culture of seniority based on achievement and desire for success. It is a motivating culture. Students in the primary and secondary schools also conform to dress culture. Students’ uniforms are based on levels – the senior secondary school (SSS) level and the junior secondary school (JSS) level. The colour and styles mark out the distinction. The quality of the cloths used also differs. The SSS students’ uniform is far superior. This dress culture encourages hard work. School uniforms distinguish one school from another, and students guard their uniform jealousy as it is a mark of identification. Knights also wear uniform that is graded in quality style and colour according to their ranks. The higher a knight goes in rank or status the more prestigious and colourfull becomes his uniform and cap including his hood and epaulette.

**NIGERIANISING CORPORATE DRESS CODE**

Cultural dresses of the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other ethnic groups in Nigeria are the quintessence of a truly Nigerian culture. The Hausa caftan, the Igbo trousers and long silk top, and the Yoruba Dansiki, Buba and Soro, and Agbada are really identity markers. Corporate institutions however have not fully embraced Nigerian dress culture in their
dress code. While many still embrace foreign culture, some are trying to adapt. Corporate institutions should try to promote Nigerian culture by providing their staff with dresses or uniforms that are purely Nigerian in style, fashion and materials. Their dress code should however accommodate people’s religion, ethnicity, taste, sex, climatic conditions and modernity.

School uniforms should be gender-sensitive, smart, fitting and weather compliant. Dresses for Nigerian cultural troupes, sportsmen and women, should be smart, decent, culture compliant and nationalistic in colour and design. Uniforms for the armed forces can also be adapted to portray Nigerianism. Nigerian dresses for corporate institutions should not be flamboyant or too ornate, but simple yet elegant. Dress attachments like jewelry, epaulette, caps, beret, belts, etc should be moderate, decent, not too heavy, and must not exhibit colour riot.

Nigerian dress culture must stand out, and be very distinct either within or outside the shores of the country because dress culture is both a linguistic and an anthropological communication symbol. In fact, Nigeria in the diaspora and Nigerian companies abroad should cultivate the habit of dressing in their native cultural attire, as Nigeria’s worthy ambassadors. This promotes national identity. All Nigerian establishments and corporate institutions should endeavour to promote Nigerian dress culture. Nigeria government should also create the enabling environment where Nigerian dress culture can thrive by reviving all the ailing indigenous textile manufacturing companies so that better and cheap Nigerian fabrics will be produced.

CONCLUSION

Dress culture is considered in this paper as a symbol which communicates meanings like languages do. From linguistic and anthropological point of view, Nigerian dress culture in corporate institutions is a semiotic sign. It is a mark of national identity. Dress culture in corporate institutions advertises Nigeria’s rich cultural heritage, promotes unity in diversity, encourages a sense of belonging, engenders the spirit of co-operation, helps in instilling discipline, prevents criminal tendencies and tends to remodel and rebrand people.

Works cited


Ajiboye, J.A. “Communication” Lecture notes on linguistics, Dept. of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Abuja, 2006


Braun Schneider. “Clothing”.Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia standard, 2005

Howells Christian. “Semantics” Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia Standard, 2005


Sanders, Andrew. “Social Anthropology”.Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia standard, 2005