

## **The Narrative Power of Dress in Nigerian Museum Exhibitions Lace and Onyonyo Traditional Attires in Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

In Nigeria Dress and Dressing speaks for a person and is a form of identity. It holds for us the values and the very idea connected with defining self and, a way of understanding cultural diversity. Dress exhibitions have been held in several museums in Nigeria. These exhibitions have traced the history of both the dresses and the people who wear them, thereby revealing very interesting facts about social relations, showcasing history, fashion, creativity, transatlantic encounters and, the effect of such encounters. In this paper, I have made an attempt to examine some dress exhibitions with a focus on two major ones in Lagos and Calabar Museums. The paper makes a case study of the elegant Onyonyo of the Efik and the Traditional Lace of the Yoruba elite, and what value it holds for the people. The paper further explores local community interaction with the exhibition, and how the themes of these exhibitions have helped to enhance a contemporary aspect of culture that extends beyond the borders of a single nation interconnecting people, ideas and creativity.

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### **Dress, an Important Aspect of Exhibitions within Nigerian Museums**

In Nigeria where there are several ethnic groups, dress happens to be one of those things that distinguish these groups from one another. While Nigeria can identify more than fifty-two ethnic groups, they have been grouped into three main ones: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. The nation itself has been categorized into six geo political zones for easy management. Dressing style happens to be one of the major items used in telling one ethnic group from the other. Likewise, in Nigeria, there are about fifty national museums spread across the thirty six states of the country and, dress features prominently in most of their exhibitions (fig. 1). This is so because dress is an important aspect of what forms an identity for the people. Dress is not just a covering, it speaks volumes and tells a story about the person wearing it.



Fig. 1:  
African Lace Exhibition at the National Museum Lagos.

## History and Significance of Lace and Onyonyo Traditional Attires

There are definite distinctions between traditional Nigerian clothing and other attires in Nigeria. Traditional Nigerian dressing immediately signifies which ethnic group one belongs to. It can also indicate the wearer's gender, class, religion and ethnic affiliation. For instance, the *buba*, *iro* and *ipele* three piece traditional attire readily presents the wearer as a female, of Yoruba descent, from the southwestern Yoruba speaking region of Nigeria. While there have been a significant number of crossover traditions in the Nigerian fashion scene, traditional dressing still remains a determining factor in knowing a person's ethnic affiliation. It is for this reason among others that dress features prominently in exhibitions within the museums in Nigeria.



Fig. 2:  
An Igbo woman dressed in accepted traditional outfit of imported *hollandis* wax print and lace blouse.

There are various kinds of traditional clothing in Nigeria. The Igbo women are today distinguished by their *hollandis* up and down wrapper (two layers), a matching blouse (made from lace fabric) and head tie (fig. 2) while the men are distinguished by their *George wrapper*, a cotton shirt and cap to go. The Yorubas dress in a traditional attire of indigo (*adire* tie and dye) fabric which they use in making the *iro* and *buba* for women and, *buba* and *sokoto* for the men. There is also the *aso oke*, hand woven yarn for the Yoruba. The Hausas also have their own traditional fabric locally dyed and woven fabric which they use in making the *danshiki*. These traditional attires vary and in some cases, there are several modifications to these designs by the minority ethnic groups or the major ethnic groups depending on the preference and creativity of the wearer.

The National Museum Lagos is located in the Southwestern Yoruba speaking part of Nigeria. It is one of the largest of about forty-eight national museums under the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria (NCMM). It has a comprehensive selection of about fifty percent of the commission's object in its collection with quite a considerable number of clothes therein. The museum's collection of art objects are from different parts of the country, almost all ethnic groups in Nigeria are represented, being that it is situated in the former capital city of Nigeria. The museum often organizes temporary exhibitions where some of these clothes are featured. In pre-colonial times, the traditional clothing of the Yoruba comprised mainly of *Adire* (tie and dye) and *aso oke* (woven cloth). At the time, while the *adire* was one of those fabrics used to make clothings for everyday use, the *aso oke* was more of a ceremonial outfit worn during important occasions such as weddings, child naming and house warming ceremonies etc.

Slave History Museum Calabar, a much smaller museum is one of the two museums in Calabar belonging to the NCMM. The museum which is located in the Southern region of Nigeria is primarily charged with giving first-hand information, through the use of exhibitions, seminars and several other programmes, about slave trade in Nigeria. In this wise, the history of the trade in Nigeria and its consequences and, the need to promote tolerance and human rights are some of the focuses of the museum. The indigenous inhabitants of Calabar are mainly the Efik, a minority ethnic group who were among the first to meet with white colonialists due to the closeness of their location to the seaport. It has been recorded that since the sixteenth century, Calabar had been a recognized international seaport, shipping out goods such as palm oil. During the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, it was also a major port in the transportation of African slaves. By the eighteenth century, most slave ships that transported slaves from Calabar were owned by English merchants.



Fig. 3:  
Efik/ Ibibio couple in traditional wedding attire with the lady wearing the *Onyonyo* dress.

There are two types of traditional outfits for women from this ethnic group. The first one is known as the *Ofod Ukod Anwang* and the second is the *Onyonyo* (fig. 3). These outfits are mainly worn as bridal outfits by women. The former consists of a skirt which goes as far as the knee of the bride and a sleeveless blouse which is not too long but reveals the bride's waist, while the *Onyonyo* is a simple wide dress which is decorated with lots of beads. Both attires are worn with lots of jewelry, beads, and even body paint.

It is worthy to note that one of those who popularized the wearing of the *Onyonyo* (albeit unknown to her) among the Efik women was the young Christian missionary, Mary Slessor who arrived the shores of Duke Town, Calabar in September of 1876 at the age of twenty eight years:

She was every inch the Victorian missionary, seeking converts to Christianity amid the African jungle... But as she settled into life among the ordinary people of Calabar, her attitude quickly changed - and not only did she change, and save, lives in the city and beyond, she changed the whole meaning of missionary work and how to serve the church abroad. At her new posting, instead of staying in the missionary compound, Slessor spent far more time among the people of Calabar, first learning to eat their food - she could hardly afford to feed herself, she sent so much of her wages home - and then learning the local language. Revered to this day by the Efik peoples in Calabar, Mary Slessor's legacy became one of mercy, rather than religious conversion. (Hardage 2010)

One of Slessor's most memorable accomplishments is her role in the stopping of the killing of twins. She fought the act successfully and in most of her statues in Nigeria today, she is often shown carrying a twin. Before the final abolition of the killing of twins in Calabar, Slessor had already resolved to rescue the babies and had a home full of them. Perhaps these qualities endeared her to the people, for they admired her and wanted to be like her. They emulated her ways and the Victorian style gown was not left out. This was one of the ways *Onyonyo* gained prominence among the Efik women of Calabar.

For the Lace fabric, however, it found its way into the Nigerian fashion scene in the late 1950s becoming very popular in the late 1960s and during the time of the oil boom. It gained wide acceptance especially among the Yorubas (fig. 4) and for a period, almost replaced the indigo dyed fabric and the *aso oke*. In some cases, it was used to combine the indigenous fabrics. With slow but steady move, it soon gained prominence and was referred to as 'traditional' outfit. Today, Lace fabric has gained acceptance not only among the Yorubas, but among every ethnic group in Nigeria.



Fig. 4:  
Yoruba woman dressed in traditional attire with Austrian lace.

Both the Lace and *Onyonyo* speak opulence, they add colour to an occasion, radiating beauty, elegance and generally adding overall glamour to events. They are both symbols of prestige and convey supreme elegance and value.

### **Interconnecting People Beyond Borders**

Lace fabric and *Onyonyo* dress are both offshoots of European encounter with Nigeria. While Lace is produced in Lustenau, Vorarlberg, Southwestern Austria, the *Onyonyo* dress is a legacy from the British colonizers who had major and long encounters with the Calabar people. The *Onyonyo* is made in the Victorian dress style.

Both the Lace and the *Onyonyo* have today taken over as traditional attires of the people and have remained as a major fashion trend in the Nigerian fashion scene. The largest market for the lace produced in Lustenau is in Nigeria and, in recognition of this bilateral trade relation that has spanned over fifty years, the museum of ethnology, Vienna and the NCMM, Nigeria co-organized an exhibition titled "African Lace", which was viewed both in Vienna and at the National Museum Lagos, Nigeria. The exhibition was well received at both venues. It opened an insight to a very enduring relationship by which lives have been shaped. The lace market in Nigeria has grown over the years and has provided a means of livelihood for the lace merchants who are on the increase, created jobs for fashion designers, celebrity magazines, journalists, event planners and for the lace producers in Vorarlberg among others.

## Enhancing Local Community Interaction with the Museum



Fig. 5:  
Edo ladies dressed in traditional attires of imported velvets.

Featuring dress and textile exhibitions in the museums in Nigeria has helped to draw the communities closer to the museums. It helps the people identify with the museum and give them a sense of belonging. Whenever such exhibitions are put up, it easily gets attention because a group will certainly see something that speaks to them. Besides, textiles are just naturally amazing and captivating (fig. 5). The colours and styles will catch the attention of even children.

### Conclusion

As Finch and Putman have put it “A history of textiles is virtually a history of civilization”. Dressing and textile art tradition, an integral part of man’s cultural heritage, is an expression of man’s mental processes. It is an expression in certain artistic medium of forms and functions, of changes and phenomena observed in the social and natural environment, of societal happenings, past, present and to come, therefore, it will remain dynamic adapting to new trends as they come.



Fig. 6:  
A Yoruba man clad in traditional attire of *aso oke*- woven fabric locally made.

The exhibitions carried out in these museums demonstrate the core aim of museum work by preserving cultural heritage (fig. 6), aiding research on material culture, conveying innovative approaches and communicating knowledge. While the *Onyonyo* clearly reminds the Efik and Ibibio of a long interaction and contact with the British colonialists, the Lace textiles have connected Austria and Nigeria in a very special way:

Embroidery textiles connect Nigeria and Austria in a way. As a result of a lively exchange that has endured for over half a century, they can be clearly asserted as an Austrian-Nigerian product. A product that defines the appearance of Nigerians around the world and, contributes in keeping a thriving industry alive. (Sabine Haag, Director General of Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

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### Picture Credits

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