

AN INSIGHT INTO THE BINI TRADITIONAL APPARELS AND ACCESSORIES

Abstract

Mrs. T. V. Osaigbovo

Culture is the general way of life of a group of people. It encompasses mode of dressing, dancing styles, etc. The Binis are known for their dignifying apparels and accessories, which they use to adorn themselves from their highly esteemed Oba to the commoners. The 1897 punitive war against the Binis and the eventual looting and exportation of Bini art works to enrich and beautify British museum and private homes in England and other parts of the world did not only increase the admiration and reputation of Bini arts and culture but led to a change in apparels of Bini cultural. The peculiar Bini adage which says that "what you put on to your in-law's house will determine your personality and the honour bestowed on you by your in-law", plays a vital role in the mode of dressing of the Binis. Thus, apparels have played and continue to play an essential role in the social, cultural, and economic development of the Bini people. This paper deals extensively with Benin City as it is socially stratified into different groups as depicted by the different apparels, western influence and its effects on Bini traditional apparels and accessories. The paper also gives useful suggestions and recommendations.

Introduction

In the history of human race, apparels have improved the organization of social and political life of any given society. They serve to adorn the wearer, thereby adding both material luster and a sense of well-being.

The Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Current English defines apparel as "dress or cloth". The adage in Benin, which says "what you put on to your in-laws house will determine your personality and the honour bestowed on you by your in-laws" plays a significant role in the mode of dressing of the Binis. Thus, apparels have played, and will continue to play an essential role in the social cultural and economic development of the Benin people.

Obviously, the characteristics of an apparel, vary widely in different cultures in that what is a minimally acceptable apparel in one may be little more than a bunch of leaves, and in another, it may be a complicated assemblage of garments. The individual's sense of propriety is not only defined but enforced by the parent culture. Ultimately, though a mode of dressing may appear strange or even ridiculous to outsiders, only the values of the parent culture are of consequence or meaning for the wearer. Indeed, each culture evolves its own distinctive apparel that serves to distinguish it from other groups. Thus, the apparels of a Benin woman and a Yoruba woman both in Nigeria are different and as such clearly express separate traditions.

In Africa, as elsewhere, a minimal apparel may carry for some traditions the same prestige as accumulative ones does for others. Roy Sieber (1972), referencing Barbot (1732), corroborates this when he noted with some astonishment that "the spare dress of upper-classmen in Gold Coast who wear only fine clout about their waist, a cap made of fine deer's skin on their heads, and a staff in their hands, with a string of coral about their necks, by this their habit looking rather poor than rich men". Likewise, the Binis are reputed for their cultural excellence all over the world. Hence, no one was left in doubt when the British Government looted art works in the Benin Palace and treasury during the Benin punitive war of 1897. Thousands of art works once housed in the royal palace and used in the service of divine kingship, were confiscated. These were eventually deposited in British museums and also in private collections throughout the world. Igbafe (1979), compliments the above views when he said "after capture, the city was looted by the forces, the ivory taken from the palace was offered for sale and by the end of February 1897, over £800 had already been realized from such sales. Much of the bronze and carved ivory and other antiquities were removed by the Niger Coast Protectorate officials and those not sold were sent over to England to adorn the British Museum and enrich private collections".

The Ancient Benin Kingdom

Benin City, the capital of Edo state of Nigeria was the heart beat of the ancient Benin Empire. Oral traditions and myth have it that the Binis migrated from Egypt. Egharevba (1956), buttresses this when he said that "wrapper with apron are generally in use from the beginning. Perhaps, they were introduced from Egypt or the Sudan in the early days".

Benin Kingdom as it used to be known was a Kingdom whose empire spread all over West Africa. Omoruyi (1981), referencing Burton (1862), opines same when he said "the territorial limits of ancient Benin Kingdom were bounded on the East by Niger, on West by Port Novo, and on the south by

the sea".

The Benin Kingdom is socially stratified into different groups. The diversity of these groups creates room for different types of apparels worn by the Binis. Omoruyi (1981), corroborates this when he said "some thousands of years ago, the Binis were known to have a kind of constitutional monarchy in which one ruler was always the head. The ruler had subordinates who helped the king in the day-to-day affairs of the state".

The stratified nature of the Benin Kingdom was also attested to by Roth (1903)'s reference to Dapper (1668), when he said,

"the Binis have many strange varieties of clothes of which not one is similar to another-but all are made of cotton. The rich people do wear two, some even four garments, the one shorter than the other, the one over the other worked with needle so that the under garment is visible through the other one. The poor people only wear a single piece of cloth over their naked body. The women wear on the lower portion of their bodies a blue skirt reaching to the ankles, some wear small pieces of cloth across their breast, while they wear copper bangles round their arms. The boys and girls go naked as youths but those in the King's court even at maturity go naked until they are presented with clothes by the king".

This observation is also buttressed by Trowell (1960), referencing Nyendeal (1704),

who says that "almost all the children went naked, the boys till they were ten or twelve years old, and the girls till they arrived at puberty. Until this time, they wore nothing but some strings of coral twisted at about their middle, which was not sufficient for purpose of decency. The women wore necklaces of coral very nicely arranged, their arms were covered with bright copper or iron rings as were also the legs of some of them, and their fingers were as thickly crowded with coppers as they could possibly wear them".

However, Ebharevba (1956), opines that "right from the time of oranmiyan, the loose shirts called jumpers formed part of the royal style of dress and these were afterwards converted to the coral robes". He stated that a distinctive dress for the oba and royal family, and for most prominent chiefs, is usual among most nations and the Binis are no exception.

Types of Bini Traditional Fabrics

The Binis from time immemorial spun different materials to make their fabrics. Hence they say "Siou" meaning spinning. They interlaced the warp and the weft of different yarn-like materials spun on a local loom called 'Ayonayadukpon' to produce a woven fabric. In most cases, women used 'Ayo' to weave different fabrics in Benin but the men used the Ayo to weave for the Oba in the palace.

" The Bini traditional fabrics are as follows:

- Ukponoru (cotton fabric)
- Ukponokhuen (fabric made from bark of Okhuen tree)
- Ukpon Isa (fabric made from raffia palm)
- Ukponohian (fabric made from leather)
- Ukpon Ivie
- Adagho

Ukponoru; The Binis spun cotton into threads (Siou) and used these threads to produce woven fabrics. Basically, the men produced woven fabrics within the courtyard for the Oba. The Ukponoru (cotton woven fabric) served as an outer layer of the fabrics worn by the Oba and high-ranking chiefs in Benin.

Ukponokhuen (Ikele): The fibres from the bark of Okhuen trees were extracted and beaten thoroughly by the weavers. As a result of this, threadlike materials were achieved. These threads were dried and interlaced into warp and weft on a local loom called 'Ayonayadukpon' to form a woven fabric. They called the fabric made from bark of Okhuen tree, 'Ikele'. This Ikele was used for making different shapes of clothes as well as leisure chairs "Agailovbie". It was also used for making an underwear for the Oba and the chiefs.

Ukpon Isa: The fibres from the "Omen" raffia palm were spun and woven into a fabric.

Dancers and masquerades mostly wore this. The female dancers combined this dress with beads called "akpolo" of different types. They were normally coloured plastic or moulded beads worn around the waist.

Ukponohian: These are leather fabrics. The Isekpoki specialized and still specializes in leather works in Benin. They make bags, foot wears and leather dresses for the Oba and the children. Ohian (leather) from reindeer, lion, tiger and pythons were used as dresses for the Oba, children, wives and even prominent chiefs.

Adagho: This was specifically meant for the 'Ohen' (priest and priestess). This was made of Ukponoru or Ukponokhuen. It had different accessories like beads, cowries, and coins etc. applied to it. It was never to be washed because of the belief that it was spiritually fortified. The 'Ohen' (priest and priestess) wore it when he was going before the shrine or into the 'Ogwa'. The 'adagho' helps the 'ohen' to be spiritually lifted and hence he can divinate. An example of this type of Ohen; is the 'Ohen Okhuaehé'.

The Mode of Apparels in Benin

The Benin Kingdom is socially stratified into royalty, the nobles and the commoners. The royalty comprises the Oba and his immediate family, the nobles are the chiefs. The commoners are divided into the very elderly (Edionman or Ediomwan), elders (Edionevbo) youth (Ighele) and children (Evbinrobaevbo or Ibieka).

The Oba

The highest authority in Benin Kingdom is the Oba. He is considered to be a divine being and an intermediary between God and man. More significantly, he is believed through mystical power to have control over the wellbeing of the entire kingdom. Omoruyi (1981), supports this when he said "the Oba occupies a special place in the lives of the Binis. His title is hereditary since what was called the republican regime at about 900 A. D. He is regarded not only as the kind of the kingdom but also as the spiritual-head whose words are divine"-. —

Bradbury (1957), in agreement, says, "the sacred kingship is the focal point of the Benin political system. The Oba is surrounded with mystery. Before the coming of the British rule he left the palace only on ceremonial occasions. It is forbidden (formerly under penalty of death) to say that the Oba dies, sleeps, eats or washes, all these being expressed through metaphorical circumlocutions".

The Oba's Apparels

The Oba has several apparels for different occasions. The Iwebos are in charge of the Oba's wardrobe. They have a workshop within the courtyard where these apparels are made. The Enisen are responsible for the dressing of the Oba and prominent chiefs for all occasions. Hence Bradbury (1957), states that, "the three palace associations (otu eguae) are in order of seniority-Iwebo, Iweguae and Ibiwe. Each has special duties which its members perform in royal household. The members of the Iwebo are in charge of the Oba's wardrobe and state regalia, and make and repair the coral bead garments and ornaments which are the mark of high rank".

Isekhure (1995), in an oral interview says that the Oba appears on red skirt (Ebuluku) with bangles of protection (Egba), sword, bow and arrow, when he is to go to war. According" to him, a good example is Oba Erediauwa-s appearance during the preliminaries and post coronation ceremonies when he engaged in a mock battle with Chief Ogiamien at Ekiokpagma. During this encounter, he wore red (ododo) skirt (Ebuluku) with bangles and bracelets. He also had on him bow and arrow, gun and sword with a hen tied around his neck.

In complimenting the above, Obasogie of Igun-Ughola (1996), in an oral interview talks elaborately on the Oba's apparel at Ugie-Erobn festival.

"The Oba dresses differently during Ugie-Eroba, a ceremony meant to commemorate his ancestors. In this particular occasion, he dresses like a round pot. Hence we say, "Qyovbuk-ebo". That is he is dressed like a round English calabash. Cream colour velvet material applied with different motifs, forms the outer apparel that covers the waist. This is seriously stuffed with other materials that give it the outlook of a round calabash. Hence we say "Ubanbanmuban avbenogiebanfo". That is no matter how you may try to remove the apparels of the chiefs, you cannot get to the last. The top of this apparel is covered with white fabric that makes it to look like white kaolinc. On top of the white fabric below the chest, is an object

which looks like a belt that ties him round called "Ukugbaobiomoero", meaning "the cloth a woman uses in tying a baby to her back requires a regular adjustments and never rests." It has a bell hanging from under belt down to the waist level. This bell is called 'eroro'-Ience we say, "eroroidolode". This means the bell cannot go along the road unnoticed. This bell signifies the Oba as a person who will not go unnoticed. His two hands have a cup-like bronze metal around them. This is called "Ikorobo". His fingers have rings for both decoration and protection, the shirt covering his chest is heavily beaded having short sleeves. The beads are extensively used to decorate his neck. The particular one that goes around his neck is called "Urhuivie". He has white handkerchief in his hand. The Oba has on his head, the crown made of beads. It has 'Ada and Eben' on both sides. Attached to the crown are bunches of beads called "Ititiako", meaning a bunch of pepper fruit that adorns it at all sides. Another stripe of bead is used to tie his forehead. This is called ughahae. On the crown are two long beads, which run down to below his waist level. A scimitar bearer (Omuada) also goes by him." The interviewee reaffirmed that those in charge of the Oba's apparels are the fwebos.

The Oba's Crown Beads

The Oba's crown is elaborate and is of different sizes. They are mostly made of beads. The crown signifies the power and authority of the oba. The Ada and Eben that are attached to both sides of the crown are like the coat of arms of a country. They show the strength and dignity of the Oba. Egharevba, in a remark on the Oba's crown says "Oba Ovonramwen wore a heavy beaded crown on August 7, 1897, when he held a palaver with the British Expedition under Captain E.P.S. Roupell". According to him, the crown was so heavy that the oba's retainers had to remove it from time to time as they fanned his head.

Obichere (1981), in agreement says, "in Benin, crowns were and are still made of large beads of red carnelian, agate, jasper and Balearic coral". He added that "the Oba of Benin and personages of ranks and other dignitaries of the kingdom wore and still wear strands of coral necklaces piled about their necks reaching up to, and almost covering their chins." Roth (1903), buttresses this when he gave detailed description of Oba Ovonramwen as follows,

"The king who is a stout but fine man of considerable intelligence, about forty years of age, was in a very nervous state. The king was simply covered with masses of strings of coral, interspersed with larger pieces, supposed to be worth many pounds. His headdress, which was in the shape of a leghorn straw hat, was composed wholly of coral excellent quality, meshed closely together, and must have weighted very heavily on his head, for it was constantly being temporarily removed by an attendant. His wrists up to his elbows were closely covered with coral bangles, so were his ankles. He only wore the usual white cloth of a chief and underneath, a pair of embroidered and brocaded trousers, he had nothing in the way of coat, but his breast was completely hidden from view by the coral beads encircling his neck".

Oba's Wives

The Oba's wives are called ILOI. The most senior wife of the Oba is popularly called Eson. Bradbury (1957), compliments this when he said "the most senior of the Oba's wives has titles (Egie-Iloi) which fall into two groups; Eghaevbo, headed by the senior wife, Eson and Egie-Egbe (body-titles), headed by Ehioba." He added that Osodi, known as "the father of the Oba", has jurisdiction over all matters concerning the Oba's wives. They have apparels, which comprise velvet, brocade, or expensive laces tied from chest level to the ankles. They have beads of different sizes about their neck.

They wear an elaborate hair-do called 'Ukpokhokho' meaning fowl peak. Hence, Obichere, a Professor of African history says that "the Oba's wives called (Hoi), had their own cosmetologists who were experts in the various styles of coiffure reserved for them". According to him, although Ukpokhokho hairstyle was reserved for the Oba's wives, Ewuare the great granted the Ihama the right to have his wives wear the Ukpokhokho style.

The ukpokhokho has a projected top that looks like fowl peak. It comprises a bunch of beads called 'ititiako' at all sides and a bronze metal object that looks like the blade of an elephant grass. This metal object glitters and gingles as they move about. The metal object is called "Igholoye". They have beads adorning their necks, wrists and ankles. They also place a folded two yards of light material longitudinally on their left shoulder.

Prince and Princess

The Prince (Okoro) and Princess (Uvbi) had their own special attendants such as barbers and cosmetologists. The Prince wore and still wears Asokosagba as a house wear and ties wrapper around the waist and a long string of bead called 'Udeguogho' around the neck and beads about his wrists for outings. He also wears gathered skiiT(Oyegbe) and also with a long bead "Udeguogho" round his neck. The Princess (Uvbi), on the other-hand ties cloth from the breast level to her ankle. She wears a string of long bead around her neck, and she also wears beads about her wrists. They have right and privileges to dress themselves unlike the Oba.

The Edionmwan or Edionwan

The Edionmwan or Edionwan normally throws about ten yards of fabric to wrap his body, leaving one arm out and the other one wrapped into the cloth covering diagonally. He wears a round bead on the neck and probably beads around each arm. Hence, with this dressing and grey hair they are easily recognized.

The Edionevbo

The Edionevbo (elders)' tie cloth round the waist to ankles. They wear a long bead round stretching from the neck to the navel. This bead is called 'Udeguogho'. They also wear gathered skirt tied on one side. This could be with or without a blouse. It is worn without a blouse when it is casual but with a blouse for outing. It was formerly made of Ukponoru, Ikele, Ukponohian etc. Presently, synthetic materials like the bag of rice mixed with light foam are used for landing it to enhance the largeness of the waist when it is covered with Tgbegbe' in Eypn (fian eyon). Laces, velvet (evbu), white poplin often yards may be used for eypn. The Chief ties this style called 'eypn' when he is going for a ceremony like marriage, a ceremony in the palace or when he is being honoured.

Aisien (1986), confirms it when he said "prior to the ascension of Obas Akenzua H, the chiefs dressing for the palace on non-ceremonial occasions wore only Iwu on the upper part of the body adorning it with a string or two of coral necklaces. His cap consisted of natural hair shaped in front into heaped up inverted half-moon called 'Uguakpata', the unique Edo chiefly hair-do. The lower half of the body down to the ankles was covered by the chiefly wrapper; a large yardage of material worn in strictly formalized shapes each having its own name and place in the usage of the Benin court. The more formal shape was called eyoen. It was more filled out, more billowing than the more casual type that was called the Uhunmwun-Ogho (ram head)¹.

The Ighele

The Ighele (youths) wear Asokosagba, which is a loose knicker that goes up to the knees with two ropes to fasten it to waist. They can also tie short wrapper round their waist, and use the cloth to wrap their bodies and tie the loose ends round the neck. A good example of Asokosagba is what the Omuada (Scimitar bearer) wears in the palace in the present day.

The Evbinrobaevbo or Ibieka

The Evbinrobaevbo or Ibieka (children), tie cloth round their body and neck. They could go stack naked or wear small pant to cover their nakedness. This pant is called 'Ovbibebe'. The young girls lie cloth or 'Akpolo' just covering their stomach to their private part. A string of cloth covers their breast and tied at their back.

The Women

The women (Ikhuoba) mostly tie cloth from chest level to the ankles. They wear beads round their neck and their wrists. Originally, the woman placed and still places a folded two yards of fabric (light material) longitudinally on her left shoulder.

It is significant to note that Binis used a lot of motifs drawn from events, found objects from the environment, materials for worship, and even geometric motifs as designs. This implies, that the Binis combined and still combine different lines in their formation of designs. Their immediate environment influenced and still influences their choice of motifs.

Western Influence On Bini Traditional Apparel And Accessories

The Benin fabric process is quite dynamic; it changes with time and civilization. The greatest change that easily comes to mind was during the intervention of the Portuguese during the period of Oba Esigie up to 1897. This period witnessed a great change in the way of dressing in terms of materials

and methods of sewing. This was due to the fact that the Priest and missionaries who were Portuguese gave out some dresses to the Oba as relics of friendship with Benin Kingdom. These gifts automatically influenced the way of dressing of the Oba and even his chiefs. This is evident in the white apparels the Oba and his chiefs wear today with complete resemblance of that of the Roman Catholic Reverend Father.

Before the advent of the Portuguese, the Oba and his chiefs tied "Ikele¹ round their waist and latter covered it with a cotton woven materials called Ukponoru. This made their waist very large. The aim of having this large waist is to show that they are well fed. Hence the adage, "agharuan gheku vbukebo, evbare odion". This means that if you dress round like an English calabash, good food is the underlying factor.

The Resident colonial officer Mr. Williams also played his own role in influencing Bini traditional apparels. Aisien (1986), corroborates this when he said

"the role adopted by the Resident colonial officer in 1934 regarding the matter of costuming in the palace of the Oba of Benin had its roots in the little incidents that occasionally occurred in the interaction of these officers with the Palace. A case in point was the visit of an early colonial governor of Nigeria, Sir Hugh Clifford in the 1920s. His wife frowned at the sight of the naked Emuada (Sword bearers) flanking the Oba. It was left to Oba Akenzua II in 1933 to de-institutionalize the nudity of the Benin Omuada. I-fe put (he Omuada on an Akafa or an Asokosagba".

The small round cap worn today by the Eribo, Osodin, Esama etc, is copied from the Portuguese way of dressing. The officiating dress worn by the Priest of Aruosanohuanren at Akpakpava street, Benin City is also a copyright of the Portuguese Priesthood dress. The only difference is the mode of worship, which is worshipping God directly and not worshipping God through Jesus Christ.

The Ukponoru, ukponokhuen, Ukponivie etc., were notable fabrics of the Binis. Similarly, some of their notable modes of dress are ehangbehia, eyon, uhunogho, ebuluku, asokosagba etc. unfortunately the emergence of the Portuguese in Benin brought a tremendous change in Bini traditional apparels and accessories.

Summary and Conclusion

The Binis are greatly endowed by God with a unique cultural heritage. This uniqueness of culture is greatly admired worldwide. The 1897 Benin punitive expedition in which the British government looted art works in Benin palace and treasury attests to this assertion. The Benin traditional apparels is a significant aspect of Benin culture. The Benin Empire under the rulership of the royal highness Omo-noba-ne-edo Uku-akpolokpolo is socially stratified into three different groups. These are the royalty, nobles and commoners. This diversity creates room for different apparels worn in Benin.

The Oba's palace, which practices court art, can be likened to the federal and state governments of today where you have different ministries, and parastatal specializing in various activities beneficial to the Oba and palace in general. The Iwebos are in charge of the Oba's wardrobe. The Binis had their textile technology. They had a loom (Ayonayadukpon) with which they produced ukponoru, ukponokhuen, ukponisa etc.

The western civilization has not only influenced the royalty but also the commoners. It is not a surprising thing today to see men, women, old and young wearing trousers and shirts, skirts and blouses and having English gold necklaces and other fanciful beads around their neck.

In conclusion, the advent of western civilization has brought different innovations and adaptations in Bini traditional apparels and accessories. For example, 'Iwu' the Bini popular body scarification has now been adapted on dress. However the uniqueness of Benin traditional apparels has to preserved and projected from one generation to the other. This could be achieved through continuous usage by the Binis, backed with proper and detailed documentation of the apparels and accessories.

References

- Aghama Omoruyi (1981), *Benin Anthology*. Cultural publications, Benin city.
- Aisien Ekhaguosa (1986), *Iwu-The Body Markings of the Edo People Benin*. Printed by Maula Enterprises Nig. Ltd.
- Alan Ryder (1969), *Benin and Europeans*. Longman publishers, London.
- Bradbury R. E. (1957), *The Benin Kingdom and The Edo-Speaking Peoples of Western Nigeria*. International African Institute, London.
- Egharevba J. U. (1956), *Bini Titles*. Hollywood press. Benin City.
- Eweka E. B. (1992), *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. Uniben Press, Benin City.
- Igbafe P. A. (1979), *Benin Under British Administration-the impact of colonial rule on an African Kingdom 1897-1938*. Longman Group Limited, London.
- Ling Roth (1903), *Great Benin; its customs, Art and Horrors*. Halifax, England.
- Trowell Margaret (1960), *African Design*. Faber and Faber Limited, London.
- Obichere B. I. (1981), *Benin City and the Royal Patronage of the Arts- A Journal of Images of Power: Art of the Royal Court of Benin*. Published by New York University.
- Roy Sieber (1972), *African Textiles and Decorative Arts*. Museum of Modern Art. Printed by Eastern Press, Inc., New York.