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Understanding Igbo Traditional Clothing and Culture

By Idenze Ezeme

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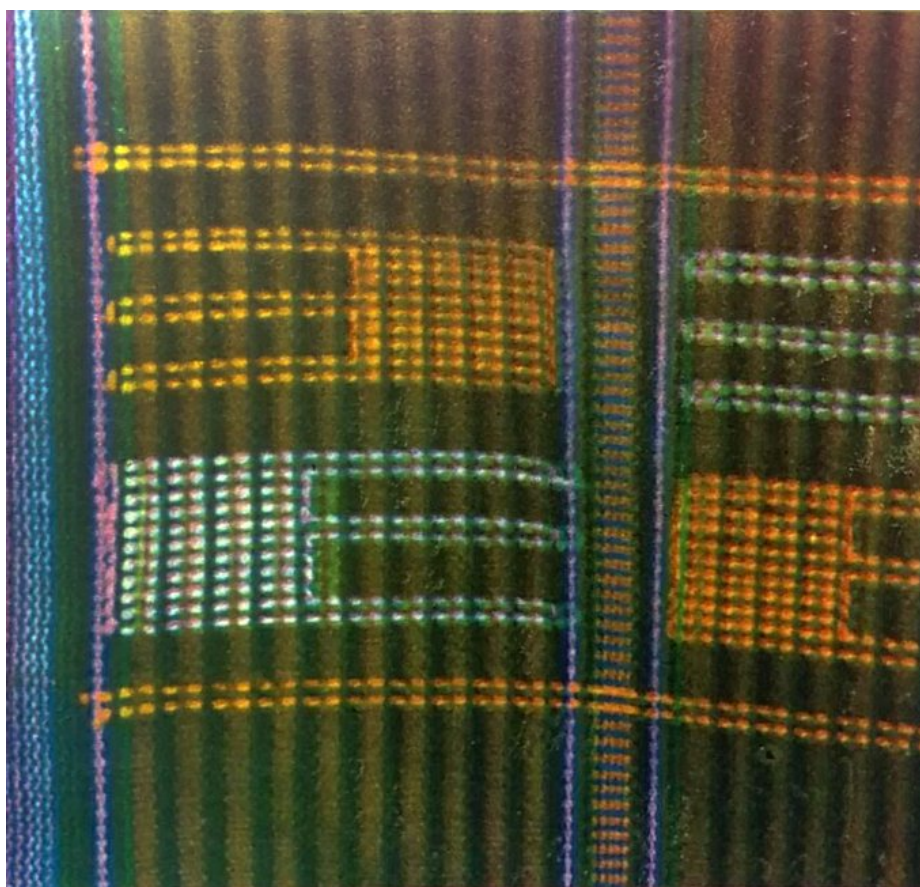
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UNDERSTANDING IGBO TRADITIONAL CLOTHING AND CULTURE

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An image of the Nvọ or Mbọ (comb) design, a traditional pattern found on Ori cloth made in the Nsukka region of Igboland. (Source: A. E. Afigbo & C. S. Okeke, *Weaving Tradition in Igboland*, 1985.)

Conversations about what constitutes “traditional” Igbo material culture often raise debates. It is particularly relevant in clothing, crafts, and other visible manifestations of Igbo identity. These conversations are complex and have many sides, showing how Igbo culture changes and interacts with both its own diversity and outside influences.



An Image showing a step in the traditional process of spinning cotton in the Abakaliki region of Igboland. (Source: A. E. Afigbo & C. S. Okeke, *Weaving Tradition in Igboland*, 1985.)

What Constitutes Igbo Material Culture?

Igbo material culture refers to objects, artefacts, and so on representing the Igbo people's beliefs, beauty, and traditions. However, pinpointing what is authentically Igbo can be challenging due to the fluidity of the culture over time and the pan-ethnic nature of the Igbo identity.

- **Regional Variations:** Igbo culture has several subcultures, each with its own practice. Some things considered part of "Igbo culture" might only show the traditions of certain regions. For example, the *okpu mme* (red cap), widely associated with Igbo traditional leadership, is not a universal symbol across all Igbo-speaking areas.



The Okpu mme or red cap of the present-day Omu of Okpanam. Photograph by George Agbo.

- **Cultural Borrowing and Adaptation:** The Igbo have long adopted and adapted elements from neighbouring cultures and foreign influences. Examples include the George fabric, an adaptation of Indian Madras, and red coral beads, which the Portuguese brought to Benin in the 15th century. These changes make it impossible to determine what is original and what has been added.



An Igbo chief of the “red cap” rank. By Neunzenwa

Static or Evolving? The Nature of Igbo Culture

Many people believe that Igbo culture, or any culture, does not change. But even before colonial times, Igbo culture was always changing and adapting. Colonialism and globalization sped up these changes by bringing in new materials, ideas, and practices. Colonialism and globalization sped up these changes, bringing in new materials, ideas, and practices.

- Why is the influence of a neighbouring Igbo subculture considered less foreign than an influence from cultures outside the Igbo?
- Should new ideas and outside influences be seen as part of Igbo culture, or are they still foreign things?

Examples of Material Culture Debate

One important debate is about the ishiagu (a fabric with lion head designs), which many people wear for ceremonies today. Some people say it shows Igbo tradition, while others say it is a new style and does

not show what Igbo people used to wear.



Isi Agụ Fabric

Similarly, red coral beads and factory-made ball gowns show the conflict between worldwide fashion and actual cultural styles. Even though red coral beads are now part of the Igbo style, they originally came from the Mediterranean, and trade connections historically supported their use.

The Cultural and Historical Context of Isi Agụ in Igbo Material Culture

A Path Forward: Local Production and Aesthetic Authenticity

One way to handle these complexities is by basing the definition of Igbo material culture on local production and traditional art. For instance:

- **Locally Made Materials:** Traditional Igbo clothing is made from materials grown, spun, and woven in the Igbo area. This would also include using patterns, symbols, and ùrì (traditional Igbo design)



that reflect the Igbo way of seeing the world.

- **Support for Indigenous Artisans:** By focusing on traditional crafts like woodcarving, panel making, and blacksmithing, the Igbo community can help keep their culture alive while assisting local businesses.
- **Cultural Events as Economic Drivers:** Annual cultural festivals and ceremonies will attract millions and can showcase and promote these indigenous industries. Developing a local economy based on the production of cultural goods can enable the Igbo people to keep their culture vibrant while creating stable employment opportunities for artisans.

The conversation about Igbo material culture is complex and vital. It encompasses questions of authenticity, evolution, and identity in a rapidly changing world. By focusing on local materials and traditional styles, the Igbo can create a way that respects their heritage while adjusting to modern life. This approach helps preserve cultural identity and boosts economic growth, ensuring Igbo traditions stay strong and vital for future generations.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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