

**THE POLITICS OF ADORNMENT: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND POWER
THROUGH DRESS IN EGBA YORUBA RITUAL**

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BENIN CITY**

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS,
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DECLARATION

I, Declare that this project work is based on a study undertaken by me in the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts University of Benin under the supervision of Dr. (Mrs.) Owens P. Eromosele for the purpose of acquiring Bachelor of Arts B.A (Honours) Degree in Theatre Arts. All ideas and views are products of my research where others view have been used and expressed, they were acknowledged.

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this research study was carried out by OMORODION, EMMANUELLA ESEGBORIA in the Department of Theatre Arts under my supervision.

DR. (MRS.) OWENS P. EROMOSELE
Project Supervisor

DATE

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to God, and to my family, who believe in me.

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TABLES OF CONTENTS

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Title Page | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | i |
| Declaration | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ii |
| Certification | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | iii |
| Dedication | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | iv |
| Acknowledgements | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | v |
| Table of Contents | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | vi |
| Abstract | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | viii |

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

| | | | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|---|
| 1.1 | Background to the Study | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 1 |
| 1.2 | Statement of the Problem | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 2 |
| 1.3 | Research Methodology | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 3 |
| 1.4 | Aim and Objectives of the Study | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 3 |
| 1.5 | Scope of the Study | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 4 |
| 1.6 | Limitations of the Study | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 5 |
| 1.7 | Significance of the Study | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 5 |

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

| | | | | | | |
|-----|--|------|------|------|------|----|
| 2.1 | The Concept of Adornment | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 7 |
| 2.2 | The Concept of Dress as Cultural Identity | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 8 |
| 2.3 | Dress and Adornment in African Societies | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 10 |
| 2.4 | The Role of Clothing in Power and Identity Formation | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 11 |
| 2.5 | Cultural Elements of Clothing | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 12 |
| 2.6 | Dress in Yoruba Cosmology | ---- | ---- | ---- | ---- | 14 |

| | | | | | |
|-----|--|------|------|------|----|
| 2.7 | Symbolism of Colour Fabric and Accessories in African Dress | ---- | ---- | ---- | 16 |
| 2.8 | Dress, Gender and Social Stratification in Yoruba Societies | ---- | ---- | ---- | 17 |
| 2.9 | Symbolic Interactionism as a Framework for Understanding Dress and Adornment | ---- | ---- | ---- | 19 |

CHAPTER THREE: ETHNOGRAPHY STUDY OF EGBA PEOPLE

| | | | | | |
|-----|--|------|------|------|----|
| 3.1 | The Cultural Worldview of Egba People | ---- | ---- | ---- | 21 |
| 3.2 | Historical Origin of Egba Culture | ---- | ---- | ---- | 22 |
| 3.3 | Elements of Culture of Egba People | ---- | ---- | ---- | 24 |
| 3.4 | Egba Ritual Ceremony: An Overview | ---- | ---- | ---- | 26 |
| 3.5 | The Role of Power and Status in Egba Rituals | ---- | ---- | ---- | 27 |
| 3.6 | Dressing Amongst the Egba Tribe | ---- | ---- | ---- | 29 |

CHAPTER FOUR:

| | | | | | |
|-----|---|------|------|------|----|
| 4.1 | The Politics of Adornment in Egba Rituals Ceremony | ---- | ---- | ---- | 32 |
| 4.2 | Identity and Power in Traditional Festivals | ---- | ---- | ---- | 46 |
| 4.3 | Identity and Power in chieftaincy installation | ---- | ---- | ---- | 50 |
| 4.4 | Identity and Power in Age Grade Ceremony | ---- | ---- | ---- | 53 |
| 4.5 | Adornment as Identity in Egba Land | ---- | ---- | ---- | 56 |
| 4.6 | The Political Influence in Ritual Dressing in Egba Land | ---- | ---- | ---- | 58 |

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATION AND FINDINGS

| | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------|------|------|------|----|
| 5.1 | Summary | ---- | ---- | ---- | 60 |
| 5.2 | Recommendations | ---- | ---- | ---- | 61 |
| 5.3 | Conclusion | ---- | ---- | ---- | 62 |
| | Works Cited | ---- | ---- | ---- | 64 |

ABSTRACT

Adornment serves as a powerful form of communication within many cultures. This study investigates the profound relationship between adornment, identity, and power within the ritual practices of the Egba Yoruba people. It argues that dress and bodily embellishments are not merely aesthetic choices but are critical sites for negotiating social status, expressing spiritual affiliations, and reinforcing political hierarchies.

Through a qualitative analysis of specific Egba rituals, this research demonstrates how the deliberate selection and arrangement of clothing, beads, and other ornaments serve as a visual language. This language communicates an individual's lineage, age-grade, and role within the community, while also signifying a powerful connection to the divine.

This research reveals that these forms of adornment are a dynamic tool used to contest, affirm, and reshape power structures, highlighting the complex interplay between material culture and social order. Findings show that specific traditional Egba elements help to preserve cultural identity, history, and individual expressiveness. Based on this findings this researcher recommends that a deeper understanding and documentation of the cultural importance of these elements are essential for the preservation of this rich heritage. By focusing on the Egba context, this study offers a micro-level examination of a broader African phenomenon, contributing to a deeper understanding of how dress acts as a powerful agent in the construction and maintenance of cultural identity.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Dressing and adornment amongst the African culture are much more than just fashion or personal choice, they carry deep meanings related to social identity, power, and cultural knowledge. In Nigeria, dress is an important way of revealing personalities, status and cultural belief. Clothes play an important role in the day to day life of the Nigerian people, whether functional or otherwise.

Clothing reflects political imitation and cultural roots. In Nigeria, most time during election campaign, the aspirant tend to dress in the cultural attire of any region or state they visit. This is to capture the people, making them feel at home or ease during their campaigns. This clothing sends numerous messages across.

Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, dressing is especially important in both daily life and ritual practices. For the Yoruba people, the body is seen as a place where social meanings are shown and power is displayed. The Egba, a subgroup of the Yoruba people from Abeokuta in southwestern Nigeria, are well known for their rich rituals and festivals where dressing and adornment play a key role. Items such as beaded crowns (ade), coral beads, aso oke fabrics, wrappers (iro), head ties (gele), and caps (fila) are not just beautiful to look at, they are important symbols that show a person's status, age, role, or spiritual authority.

In Egba Yoruba rituals, like chieftaincy coronations, annual festivals, initiation ceremonies, and funerals, dressing is a way people show who they are, their social position, and even their spiritual importance. Community leaders, priests, and chiefs wear special clothes to show their power and authority. At the same time, ordinary citizens also use dress to show their

place in the society, their gender roles, or their age group. In this way, the politics of dressing is not only for the leaders; it affects everyone and helps organize social life.

Many studies in anthropology and sociology have looked at Yoruba culture and rituals. Scholars like J.D.Y. Peel, Karin Barber, and Jacob Olupona have written about the Yoruba religious system and the importance of rituals in keeping society together. These studies have explained how rituals help express social roles and power. However, while these works mention dress, they often see it as just decoration, not as an important part of social and political life. Some scholars, like Joanne Eicher and Nina Sylvanus, have written about African dress and its role in identity, but few have focused on how dress and adornment work as tools of power and negotiation in Yoruba rituals.

This study aim to fill that gap by focusing on the Egba Yoruba. It will show that adornment is not just about beauty or tradition, but also about negotiating identity, power, and authority. It will also explore how dress connects to gender, age, class, and religion, shaping both how people present themselves and how the community remembers its culture.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The importance of dress as a means of cultural expression have been continually and widely acknowledged by researchers. However, there is little or no study specifically focusing on the socio-political dimensions of adornment within Egba Yoruba rituals that have been carried out. Also, studies concerning ceremonial attires have been carried out which lacks detailed analysis on how these choices play a role in shaping identity and uphold or question the existing power structures within the Egba community. This study fills this gap by investigating the specific symbolic meanings embedded in Egba ritual attire and how these meanings are interpreted and utilized by participants to assert social standing, express allegiance, and navigate

the complexities of power dynamics within ritual contexts. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for a comprehensive appreciation of Egba cultural practices and the ways in which material culture shapes social interactions.

1.3 Research Methodology

This study is an ethnographic study that adopts a qualitative research approach, using a combination of primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary source includes semi-structural interview, participant and non-participant observation of selected Egba rituals such as traditional festivals, chieftaincy ceremonies and age-grade initiations. Detailed field notes will be taken to document the various forms of dress, their context, and the interactions surrounding them. Visual Documentation; photographs and potentially video recordings (with informed consent) will be used to document the diverse forms of dress observed during rituals. These visual materials will serve as valuable data for analysis.

While the secondary method shall review existing literatures that are of significance to the study. All information sources shall be duly analysed.

1.4 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate how dress functions as a medium for negotiating identity and power within selected rituals of the Egba people of Yorubaland. It shall examine the following:

1. To examine the concept of dressing
2. To examine traditional dressing styles
3. To study dress in relation to politics, status and power
4. To study the culture of Egba people

5. To study the ritual ceremonies of Egba people
6. To document the various ritual costumes as determined by political influence.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study will focus specifically on the dress worn during selected rituals practiced by the Egba people of Yorubaland, primarily within the Abeokuta metropolis and its surrounding areas in Ogun State, Nigeria. The rituals under investigation would include:

1. **Egungun Festival:** This is a masquerade celebration held in honour of the ancestors. Participants wear elaborate, multi-layered costumes and masks that conceal human identity and represent ancestral spirits. These garments symbolize sacredness, lineage, and social memory within the community.
2. **Oro Festival:** A sacred and male-exclusive ritual involving the invocation of ancestral forces. Participants adhere to strict dress codes, and the ritual reinforces gender roles, secrecy, and traditional spiritual authority. Clothing serves to mark insiders from outsiders and signals ritual purity and power.
3. **Lisabi Festival:** This is an annual cultural festival that celebrates Lisabi, a legendary Egba warrior and defender of the people. Participants often dress in coordinated traditional outfits (aso-ebi), and traditional leaders wear ceremonial garments that highlight their roles and statuses. Adornment in this festival expresses communal pride, unity, and historical identity.
4. **Chieftaincy Installation Rituals:** These are ceremonies in which individuals are conferred traditional titles. These rituals feature highly symbolic garments such as richly embroidered agbada, beaded crowns, and sashes. The attire reflects status, lineage, and political authority, reinforcing hierarchical structures within Egba society.

The analysis will primarily focus on the visual and symbolic aspects of dress and their social and political implications within the ritual context. The study will consider the perspectives of participants across different age groups and social strata within the Egba community.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The study may encounter the following limitations:

- **Access to Rituals:** Gaining unrestricted access to all Egba rituals and obtaining permission for observation and interviews may be challenging due to cultural sensitivities and the sacred nature of some ceremonies.
- **Subjectivity of Interpretation:** The interpretation of symbolic meanings in dress can be subjective and may vary among individuals and across generations within the Egba community.
- **Time and Resource Constraints:** The timeframe for a final year project and available resources may limit the scope and depth of the ethnographic fieldwork that can be conducted.
- **Language Barriers:** While Yoruba is widely spoken, nuances in local dialects and specialized ritual language may require careful attention and potentially the assistance of interpreters.
- **Generalizability:** Findings from this study, while providing in-depth insights into Egba rituals, may not be directly generalizable to all other Yoruba subgroups or other ethnic groups in Nigeria.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for several reasons:

- **Contribution to Scholarship:** It will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on Yoruba culture, the anthropology of dress, and the socio-political dimensions of ritual practices in Nigeria.
- **Cultural Preservation:** By documenting and analyzing the significance of traditional Egba attire in rituals, the study can contribute to the preservation and understanding of this important aspect of Egba cultural heritage.
- **Intercultural Understanding:** The findings can provide valuable insights for researchers, cultural practitioners, and the wider public interested in understanding the complexities of identity and power dynamics within Nigerian societies.
- **Practical Implications:** The study may inform cultural tourism initiatives and educational programs aimed at promoting a deeper appreciation of Egba traditions.
- **Foundation for Future Research:** This research can serve as a foundation for future studies exploring the evolution of Egba ritual dress in response to modernization and globalization, or comparative studies with other Yoruba subgroups or ethnic groups.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept of Adornment

Adornment refers to the practice of decorating or enhancing the human body using clothing, jewelry, beads, hairstyles, body painting, or accessories. Across cultures, adornment serves not only as a form of aesthetic expression but also as a vital means of communicating social, spiritual, and cultural identity. In anthropology and cultural studies, adornment is viewed as a symbolic language that conveys messages about the wearer's status, group membership, emotional state, or spiritual connection (Eicher and Roach-Higgins 15). These messages can be encoded in the style, colour, texture, or placement of adornments, making them an important part of non-verbal communication.

Adornment is not a recent invention of human creativity, but rather one of the oldest cultural practices. Archaeological evidence suggests that prehistoric societies used shells, bones, feathers, and paints to adorn themselves, often for ritual purposes or to signify belonging to a particular group. Thus, adornment has always been deeply connected to survival, spirituality, and identity. In many traditional African contexts, adornment reflects cosmological beliefs, where the body is not just a biological entity but a sacred vessel that can be transformed and beautified to connect with higher powers.

In African societies, adornment is deeply integrated into everyday life as well as ceremonial practices. It is not only a form of beautification but also a medium through which individuals and communities express beliefs, assert authority, and participate in rites of passage. For instance, among the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, beadwork patterns reflect age, gender, and social status, while among the Zulu, bead colours and arrangements communicate coded

love messages or social affiliations (Spring 39). Similarly, in the Yoruba context, adornment is rich with symbolic meaning. Items such as beads (ileke), headwraps (gele), wrappers and blouses (iro and buba), and body paint are used not merely for fashion but to articulate personal identity, family lineage, and spiritual alignment (Abiodun 136).

Adornment also plays a critical role in ritual performance. In events like initiation ceremonies, marriage rites, festivals, and funerals, what a person wears is carefully selected according to traditional norms, spiritual requirements, or communal expectations. During the Yoruba Egungun festival, for example, the costumes worn by masqueraders are not simply elaborate garments but are considered sacred coverings that transform the wearer into a spirit being (Drewal and Drewal 97). This underscores the belief that adornment can mediate between the human and spiritual realms. Similarly, scarification, once widely practiced in Yoruba land, was considered an adornment of the body that carried social and spiritual significance, marking the individual as belonging to a specific lineage or prepared for certain roles.

Adornment must be understood not as superficial or decorative, but as a culturally coded practice with social, religious, and political implications. It is through adornment that individuals are celebrated, remembered, elevated, or sometimes even marginalized. It provides a rich lens through which identity and power dynamics can be observed and analyzed in any society, particularly one as ritually and visually expressive as the Egba Yoruba.

2.2 The Concept of Dress as Cultural Identity

Dress is one of the most visible and immediate markers of cultural identity. It plays a significant role in how individuals define themselves and how they are perceived by others within a specific cultural context. According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher (12), dress includes any intentional modification or supplementation of the body, and it functions as a primary

medium through which identity is negotiated and communicated. Cultural identity refers to the shared beliefs, practices, and expressions that bind members of a group, and dress often embodies these elements visibly and tangibly.

In African cultures, dress reflects deeply held communal values and signals belonging to a specific ethnic, religious, or social group. For example, traditional Yoruba clothing such as agbada, iro and buba, aso-oke, and fila not only symbolize ethnic pride but also reflect generational ties, regional variations, and societal roles. At major public events like weddings, naming ceremonies, and religious festivals, individuals often wear coordinated outfits (aso-ebi) to express solidarity and group identity (Oyeniya 75). This act of dressing alike reinforces familial bonds and marks the wearers as members of a specific social network.

Dress also serves as a cultural signifier in diasporic and global contexts. As Jean Allman notes, the reclaiming of traditional dress by Africans in postcolonial societies became a tool for resisting colonial narratives and asserting indigenous identity (Allman 112). This was particularly significant in Nigeria after independence, when the revival of Yoruba attire symbolized both a cultural renaissance and a political statement of self-determination. In this way, dress not only reflects identity but actively shapes and politicizes it. Among the Egba Yoruba, the use of ritual attire during events like the Egungun and Oro festivals becomes an act of reaffirming cultural roots and maintaining continuity with ancestral heritage.

Furthermore, changes in dress often signal transformations in identity, whether personal, spiritual, or political. A person's transition from childhood to adulthood, or from ordinary citizen to titleholder, is often marked by a corresponding shift in clothing. For instance, during Yoruba initiation rites such as those for Ifa priests, white garments and specific beads mark the initiate's

new spiritual status. Similarly, Egba chiefs are distinguished by elaborate agbada, embroidered patterns, and beaded regalia, visually communicating their elevated social identity.

In essence, dress becomes a visual narrative of one's life journey, community standing, and ideological positioning. It carries symbolic weight that transcends the material fabric and becomes an archive of memory, identity, and belonging.

2.3 Dress and Adornment in African Societies

Dress and adornment in African societies are highly diverse, symbolically rich, and deeply embedded in social structures. Across the continent, clothing is used to reflect a person's ethnic background, gender, marital status, occupation, and spiritual affiliations. It is also closely tied to rites of passage, religious ceremonies, and leadership roles (Spring 36).

In West Africa, and particularly among the Yoruba, traditional clothing systems are sophisticated and often serve multiple purposes, practical, aesthetic, and spiritual. The Yoruba people, including the Egba subgroup, use fabrics such as adire, aso-oke, and ankara not only for style but to encode cultural meanings. Aso-oke, for instance, is a handwoven cloth traditionally worn by royalty or on significant occasions, such as chieftaincy installations or marriages. The patterns, colours, and textures chosen are highly symbolic: white for purity, red for vitality or war, and blue for protection and endurance (Drewal and Drewal 99).

Adornment through beads is another crucial aspect. Beads are used to mark transitions, signal priestly or royal status, and invoke spiritual protection. According to Esi Sagay, beadwork among Yoruba women is a deeply meaningful practice tied to fertility, social ranking, and cultural identity (Sagay 58). Hairstyles, body painting, and scarification also function as adornments that carry encoded messages within the society. Hairstyles, in particular, have long

histories in Africa. Among the Yoruba, intricate hair designs often reflect age, marital status, and social standing, and are considered forms of art as well as adornment.

Moreover, in many African traditions, the body is viewed as a sacred space, one that must be respected, adorned, and presented according to cultural norms. During rituals like the Egungun festival, the body becomes a vessel for the ancestors, and the garments worn by masqueraders are considered spiritually potent. As Karin Barber explains, the elaborate costumes are not just disguises but ritual tools that mediate between the living and the dead (Barber 144). In this sense, African dress traditions blur the line between the material and the spiritual, showing how fabric and ornamentation can channel unseen forces.

Dress and adornment in African societies go far beyond functionality or decoration. They are integral to the transmission of knowledge, expression of beliefs, and regulation of social life. They also reinforce continuity with tradition, ensuring that each new generation inherits both the practical and symbolic wisdom encoded in clothing practices.

2.4 The Role of Clothing in Power and Identity Formation

Clothing plays a vital role in expressing and negotiating both personal and collective power. In traditional African societies, garments are often associated with status, leadership, spiritual authority, and access to sacred knowledge. The visual distinction created by dress allows society to recognize and affirm hierarchies, and it also enables individuals to project or contest power within their communities.

Among the Yoruba, clothing is strongly linked with titles and rituals. Kings (Oba), chiefs, and priests are easily identifiable by their unique attire, capes, beaded crowns, and sashes that symbolize ase, the spiritual authority believed to reside in leaders (Abiodun 143). These garments are not simply ornamental, they possess ritual efficacy and confer legitimacy upon the

wearer. During public events or festivals, such clothing establishes the wearer's place in the sociopolitical order.

In Egba society, the politics of dress is particularly visible in rituals such as the Oro and Egungun festivals. In the Oro festival, only men are allowed to participate, and strict dress codes, often plain white garments or traditional wrappers, are enforced to denote spiritual purity and control. Women are excluded from seeing the masqueraders, reinforcing gendered power structures and community control through dress (Ajayi 94).

The Egungun festival, on the other hand, employs elaborate, brightly coloured costumes and masks that signify ancestral presence and spiritual hierarchy. These costumes serve as a form of power, the ability to connect with the ancestral world and influence the living. Margaret Drewal asserts that these attires are "sacred cloths" that not only conceal but transform the individual into a vessel for the spirit (Drewal and Drewal 98).

Dress can also be used to challenge or redefine power. In postcolonial Nigeria, traditional attire has been recontextualized by politicians and social leaders to assert authenticity and distance themselves from Western influence. In feminist discourse, the use of coordinated aso-ebi by women in protests or ceremonies represents collective identity and female agency (Allman 115). Thus, dress can operate as both a tool of conformity and a medium of resistance.

Ultimately, the politics of clothing in Yoruba culture highlights how dress functions as an active participant in the construction of identity and the exercise of power. It is not merely reflective but constitutive, creating and maintaining the social order it appears to represent.

2.5 Cultural Elements of Clothing

Understanding the cultural elements of clothing is essential to appreciating its role in Yoruba and Egba rituals. These elements include fabric, colour symbolism, design patterns,

textile techniques, context of use, and the performative nature of wearing traditional attire. Each of these components adds a layer of meaning to how clothing is produced, worn, and interpreted within the culture.

- **Fabric:** The type of fabric used, such as aso-oke, adire, or imported ankara, signals different cultural and economic meanings. While ankara is widespread and often used for everyday or group wear, aso-oke remains reserved for highly significant events such as weddings, funerals, and chieftaincy rituals. Adire, a traditional indigo-dyed fabric, is associated with local creativity and spiritual protection (Sagay 61). The Egba in particular are well-known for their mastery of adire, which has become a cultural trademark and a powerful identity marker even beyond Nigeria.
- **Colour Symbolism:** Colours are not chosen at random. White symbolizes purity and is commonly worn during spiritual cleansing or worship of deities like Obatala. Red is linked to aggression, power, and masculinity, often seen in Ogun or Sango worship. Blue and black may symbolize mystery, ancestral connection, or depth of emotion (Barber 148). Gold and purple are often associated with royalty and wealth, further reinforcing hierarchy and social distinction.
- **Design and Motifs:** Embroidery, printed symbols, and beadwork all carry specific meanings. Some designs may signify fertility, status, or even warnings. For instance, spiral motifs might suggest continuity and life cycles, while sharp zigzag patterns could indicate danger or divine power (Barber 148). Aso-oke patterns often incorporate geometric forms that function as visual metaphors for cultural wisdom and social order.
- **Performance and Context:** The act of dressing itself is performative. In Yoruba rituals, clothing is not merely put on, it is worn in a particular way, at a specific time, and within a

sacred or social space. This ritualized wearing transforms both the individual and the garment into symbols of larger cultural forces (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 14). For example, during an Egungun outing, the donning of the costume is accompanied by chants, prayers, and offerings, demonstrating that the garment itself is a sacred object with life-giving force.

- **Gender and Age:** Different clothing styles and accessories are used to indicate age grades and gender roles. While men may wear agbada and caps (fila), women often adorn themselves with iro, buba, gele, and layered beads, each with distinct cultural messages about modesty, fertility, elegance, and maturity. Among the Egba, elderly women wear heavier and more conservative fabrics, symbolizing dignity and wisdom, while younger women wear lighter, more colourful garments that emphasize youth and vitality.

These cultural elements collectively shape how clothing is understood in Yoruba society. For the Egba people, especially during major rituals such as the Egungun, Oro, Lisabi festival, and chieftaincy ceremonies, dress becomes a crucial interface between the individual and the collective, the visible and the invisible, the historical and the contemporary. Clothing thus acts as a living archive of cultural memory and identity, reaffirming the enduring significance of dress in the construction of Yoruba society.

2.6 Dress in Yoruba Cosmology and Ritual Practices

Dress in Yoruba culture is not merely an aspect of aesthetics or physical adornment, it is deeply embedded in the cosmological worldview of the people. For the Yoruba, clothing functions as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, playing a central role in rituals, ceremonies, and everyday life. The Yoruba believe that the visible world (aye) and the invisible world (orun) are interconnected, and ritual dress becomes a medium for negotiating this interface

(Peel 43). Through clothing, individuals and communities connect with ancestors, deities, and spiritual forces that govern existence.

One of the most prominent examples is the Egungun festival, which celebrates ancestral spirits through masquerades. The Egungun costume is an elaborate ensemble made of layers of colorful cloth, often embroidered with symbolic motifs. These costumes are not arbitrary, they embody the spiritual power (*ase*) of the ancestors, allowing them to manifest among the living (Drewal and Drewal 58). During performances, the Egungun's flowing garments, which conceal the human identity beneath, transform the masquerader into a spiritual entity. The layers of fabric symbolize the continuity of life and death, with the living enveloped in the spiritual protection of their ancestors.

Similarly, in the Oro festival, which is associated with male authority and the sacred, dress is used as a form of restriction and identity demarcation. Oro is a secretive cult ritual tied to the protection of the community. During Oro festivities, women are prohibited from witnessing certain rituals, but distinctive attire, such as palm fronds (*mariwo*) tied to the body, becomes a sacred dress code for initiates, marking their affiliation with spiritual authority and male exclusivity (Falola and Genova 102). The ritual use of clothing here not only identifies participants but also signifies obedience to cosmological order.

Yoruba deities (*orisa*) are also clothed in distinctive costumes that express their cosmological attributes. For example, Sango, the god of thunder, is represented with red garments symbolizing fire and power, while Osun, the goddess of fertility and rivers, is adorned with yellow or gold fabrics, reflecting her association with wealth and femininity (Akintoye 212). These color codings are not arbitrary but are spiritual signifiers rooted in Yoruba cosmology.

Worshippers often wear similar colors during festivals to show allegiance to their deities, transforming dress into an act of devotion.

Also, chieftaincy installation rituals employ specific regalia that affirm the spiritual legitimacy of rulers. Beaded crowns (ade), embroidered robes (agbada), and coral beads are not mere embellishments but cosmologically sanctioned items. The beaded crown, for instance, is believed to contain spiritual energy, linking the king (oba) to divine ancestry and legitimizing his role as an intermediary between the gods and the people (Barber 97).

Dress in Yoruba cosmology and ritual practices is not simply functional but is integrally tied to spirituality, symbolism, and ritual authority. It embodies the Yoruba understanding that clothing is a vehicle for sacred meaning and cosmic balance.

2.7 Symbolism of Colour, Fabric, and Accessories in African Dress

Clothing in Yoruba and African societies conveys meaning through color, fabric, and accessories, all of which act as cultural signifiers. Each element encodes messages about status, identity, power, and spirituality. The Yoruba are particularly skilled at employing textiles and adornments in ways that communicate symbolic depth.

Colour carries potent symbolism in Yoruba cosmology. White (funfun) is linked with purity, peace, and sacredness. It is associated with deities like Obatala, regarded as the orisa of wisdom and moral purity. White garments are worn in rituals of cleansing, peace-making, and funerals to symbolize transition and purity of spirit (Falola 85). Red (pupa), on the other hand, represents vitality, danger, and power. It is the color of Sango, the thunder deity, and is worn during rituals that celebrate masculine energy and authority. Black (dudu) conveys profundity, ancestral wisdom, and the mystery of death. It is used in rituals involving ancestors and signifies the deep, transformative aspects of existence (Akintoye 237).

Fabrics such as aso-oke, a handwoven textile, hold high prestige in Yoruba society. Aso-oke is used in weddings, funerals, coronations, and other rites of passage. Its prestige derives from its durability, artistry, and symbolic association with Yoruba identity (Nwafor 142). Wearing aso-oke communicates not only wealth but also cultural pride and social belonging. The cloth itself often features symbolic designs, zigzags, spirals, and interwoven patterns that reflect philosophical notions of continuity and resilience.

Accessories also play a symbolic role. Beads, particularly coral beads, are markers of royalty and spiritual authority. Chiefs, kings, and high priests wear coral beads as visual emblems of status and ancestral power (Ebron 64). Cowries are another symbolic accessory, once used as currency, they now signify wealth and fertility when incorporated into dress. Women often adorn their hair with cowries to express beauty, prosperity, and continuity with African traditions.

Headgear such as the gele for women and the fila or abeti aja for men is another dimension of Yoruba symbolic dress. The gele, intricately tied, not only enhances feminine beauty but also conveys confidence, wealth, and social distinction. Men's headgear reflects cultural sophistication and is often matched with flowing robes to communicate dignity and authority (Oyewumi 45).

In essence, color, fabric, and accessories form a semiotic system in Yoruba society. They communicate layered meanings that transcend the individual, situating them within cultural, spiritual, and political frameworks.

2.8 Dress, Gender, and Social Stratification in Yoruba Societies

Dress in Yoruba societies serves as an important marker of gender roles and social stratification, reflecting and reinforcing the hierarchical structures of the community. Clothing is

one of the most visible ways through which distinctions between men, women, children, elders, and chiefs are expressed.

For men, attire such as the agbada (flowing robe), buba (shirt), and sokoto (trousers) represents authority, dignity, and social maturity. Chiefs and rulers often distinguish themselves with elaborately embroidered agbada and beaded regalia that signify their elevated status. The beaded crown (ade) is particularly symbolic, as it is reserved for kings and high-ranking chiefs, marking them as custodians of ancestral and spiritual authority (Falola 134). The stratification is thus encoded in both the style and ornamentation of male dress.

For women, clothing reflects both gender identity and social position. Married women often wear wrappers (iro), blouses (buba), and shawls (ipele) coordinated with matching gele head-ties. The choice of fabric communicates wealth, respectability, and marital status. For example, a woman wearing aso-oke on ceremonial occasions signals both affluence and adherence to Yoruba cultural pride (Falola 134). Widows and older women may wear more subdued colors, symbolizing dignity, restraint, and wisdom.

Children's clothing is simpler but still symbolic. During naming ceremonies, infants are often dressed in white garments to signify purity and innocence, aligning them with Obatala's symbolism of purity (Falola 144). As children grow, their dress evolves to reflect age, family status, and initiation into cultural practices.

Gender differentiation is also reinforced through dress in ritual contexts. For example, in the Oro cult, women are prohibited from wearing ritual palm frond garments reserved for male initiates, reflecting male dominance in spiritual leadership. Conversely, female power is expressed in the Gelede masquerade, where costumes emphasize fertility, motherhood, and female creative energy (Drewal and Drewal 117).

Social stratification is likewise evident in the distinction between the clothing of the wealthy and the poor. Access to high-quality fabrics like lace, damask, or imported textiles is often limited to elites, while poorer individuals may wear simpler cotton attire. These differences visually reinforce the social hierarchy, making clothing both a material and symbolic marker of class.

Thus, Yoruba dress operates as a gendered and hierarchical system of identity, embedding notions of power, status, and cultural continuity in the fabric of society.

2.9 Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Dress and Adornment

To understand the significance of dress and adornment in Yoruba society, it is essential to ground the analysis in theoretical frameworks that illuminate the layers of meaning embedded in clothing. Scholars have employed Semiotics, Performance Theory, Material Culture Studies, and Symbolic Interactionism to interpret how dress functions as a cultural system.

Semiotics, derived from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce, views clothing as a system of signs where garments, colors, and accessories signify broader cultural meanings. In Yoruba rituals, for example, the red attire of Sango devotees is not just clothing but a “sign” that conveys power, masculinity, and devotion (Barber 99). Semiotics helps explain how dress communicates coded messages that participants and observers decode within a cultural framework.

Performance Theory, as articulated by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, positions dress as a performative element that enables ritual and identity enactment. Yoruba masquerades, such as the Egungun, demonstrate how costumes transform ordinary individuals into spiritual beings. The layered Egungun costume functions as a theatrical device that both conceals and reveals, making the performance an embodied display of ancestral presence (Turner 83).

Performance theory thus highlights the dynamic role of clothing in staging identity and cosmological truths.

Material Culture Studies emphasize the physical and symbolic significance of objects, including textiles, beads, and crowns. From this perspective, Yoruba clothing is more than mere fabric, it is a repository of cultural memory, skill, and artistry. Aso-oke weaving, for instance, embodies not just craftsmanship but also the continuity of Yoruba cultural identity across generations (Nwafor 156). By studying material culture, scholars uncover how dress reflects values, social organization, and creativity.

Symbolic Interactionism, rooted in the work of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, focuses on the micro-level of social interactions and the meanings people assign to symbols. In Yoruba society, the act of tying a gele or wearing a beaded crown is not just personal but a socially interpreted action. These adornments signal respect, prestige, and social expectations, guiding how individuals are perceived and treated in daily interactions (Ebron 71).

Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for understanding dress and adornment in Yoruba culture. Semiotics reveals symbolic meanings, performance theory highlights ritual enactments, material culture underscores the significance of objects, and symbolic interactionism illuminates social interpretations. Integrating these approaches provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the politics of dress in Egba Yoruba rituals.

CHAPTER THREE

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF EGBA PEOPLE

3.1 The Cultural Worldview of the Egba People

The cultural worldview of the Egba people, a prominent sub-group of the Yoruba ethnic nationality, is deeply rooted in spiritual dualism, reverence for ancestry, communal living, and a strong sense of identity preservation. The Egba believe that the universe consists of both physical and metaphysical realms, with the spiritual world directly influencing earthly events. Central to this belief is the worship of Olodumare, the supreme deity, and a pantheon of Orisha, or intermediary deities, who govern specific aspects of nature and human existence (Abiodun 140).

Among the Egba, spiritual beliefs are not abstract but manifest through daily life, especially in ritual practices, festivals, and modes of dress. Religious expression is performative, and rituals are embedded in their social structure. The living are seen as interconnected with the ancestors and the unborn, a philosophy that reinforces moral accountability and societal cohesion (Drewal and Drewal 45). This view informs how power is exercised and how individuals relate with one another, especially during culturally significant events.

Ancestral reverence is one of the most important components of Egba cultural consciousness. The belief that the dead can influence the living underpins the elaborate Egungun festival, in which the spirits of ancestors return to bless or punish their descendants. The spiritual beings are represented by masqueraders whose costumes and movements are believed to house these ancestral forces (Oyeniyi 62). Thus, the worldview of the Egba people positions rituals as spiritual negotiations between worlds, and these rituals depend heavily on symbols expressed through dress, music, and performance.

This worldview also upholds the importance of hierarchy, age, gender roles, and community integrity. For instance, seniority is a valued social currency, with elders respected not just for their age, but for their proximity to ancestral knowledge. These values are encoded visually: older men wear elaborate agbada and caps (fila), while respected women wear heavily beaded gele and wrappers (iro), signifying their societal roles and spiritual maturity (Oyeniyi 63). The dress is not random but a codified language that communicates who holds power, who mediates between realms, and who preserves tradition.

Moreover, cosmological balance, between the natural and supernatural, the human and divine, is seen as essential for community survival. This balance is ritually reenacted during ceremonies like the Oro festival, where spiritual cleansing, enforced silence, and restricted movements create sacred boundaries within the society. The rituals are typically male-dominated, revealing how gendered structures are legitimized through spiritual belief and expressed visually through differentiated dress codes (Ajayi 91).

In summary, the Egba cultural worldview can be seen as spiritual, and performative. It informs every aspect of Egba life, from governance and religion to aesthetics and identity. Within this framework, dress and adornment are not merely for beautification but serve as visible conduits of invisible cultural forces, rooted in tradition, spirituality, and communal life.

3.2 Historical Origin of Egba Culture

The historical origin of the Egba people is closely tied to the broader narrative of Yoruba migration, state formation, and resistance. The Egba trace their roots to the ancient Oyo Empire, which was one of the most powerful and centralized Yoruba kingdoms in precolonial West Africa. However, during the early 19th century, a series of political crises and invasions,

including internal conflicts within Oyo and attacks from the Dahomey Kingdom, prompted the migration of the Egba people southward to the forested areas around the Olumo Rock (Ajayi 77).

According to oral histories and local accounts, this migration was led by notable leaders such as Sodeke, a respected warrior and community organizer who played a vital role in establishing Abeokuta, the capital of the Egba nation. The name “Abeokuta” means “under the rock,” symbolizing both a spiritual and physical refuge. The rock itself became a sacred symbol of Egba resilience, unity, and divine protection (Ogunremi 54).

The settlement under the Olumo Rock was not accidental, it was both strategic and spiritual. The rock served as a natural fortification against enemy attacks and later evolved into a sacred cultural symbol. As a result, Egba culture developed in a context of survival, adaptation, and spiritual symbolism. Rituals and festivals began to incorporate elements of this migration history, and clothing patterns reflected this transition. For example, warlike motifs, hunter-themed embroidery, and strong color contrasts in traditional wear continue to symbolize the Egba’s early struggle and eventual settlement.

In the new settlement, the Egba organized themselves into five major townships or subdivisions; Ake, Gbagura, Oke-Ona, Owu, and Ibara, each with its own traditional ruler and governing system. These units were later brought under the central leadership of the Alake of Egbaland, creating a federated yet unified cultural identity. This historical evolution influenced not just governance but also ritual hierarchy and dress symbolism. For instance, during the Lisabi Festival, which honours the legendary warrior Lisabi Agbongbo-Akala, the attire worn by chiefs and participants often reflects historical Egba military valor and the heroism that birthed their independence (Ogunremi 60).

The colonial encounter further shaped Egba identity. The Egba were among the first Yoruba subgroups to interact with Christian missionaries, leading to early Western education and the emergence of a literate elite. However, rather than abandoning their traditions, the Egba integrated new influences into their cultural expression. Adornment evolved to include both traditional and modern styles, particularly in ceremonial contexts, where a blend of imported fabrics and indigenous textile techniques is often seen (Ajayi 97).

The history of the Egba is one of displacement, resilience, spiritual symbolism, and adaptation. This rich heritage is continually expressed in their rituals, festivals, and particularly in their dressing styles, each garment worn is imbued with layers of historical meaning.

3.3 Elements of Culture of the Egba People

The cultural life of the Egba people is a complex interweaving of traditional beliefs, social institutions, expressive arts, and daily practices that reflect their historical experiences, religious cosmology, and communal values. These cultural elements, language, religion, family structure, oral tradition, performance, visual art, and clothing, serve as frameworks for maintaining social order and reinforcing group identity. Significantly, many of these elements come alive in rituals, where dressing becomes a vehicle through which these values are publicly expressed and transmitted across generations.

- **Language** plays a central role in Egba identity. The Egba speak a distinct dialect of Yoruba that is enriched with proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and praise poetry (*oríki*). These forms are not merely decorative but function as tools of cultural instruction and ritual invocation. During festivals or chieftaincy installations, *oríki* is often chanted in honour of individuals or deities, accompanied by attire that visually reinforces the spoken praise. For instance, a

person's lineage or heroic history may be symbolized by the patterns on their agbada or the choice of color in their gele (Abiodun 140).

- **Religion** among the Egba is multifaceted, blending traditional Yoruba spiritual systems with Islam and Christianity. Despite the spread of Abrahamic faiths, traditional religion remains vital, especially during rituals and festivals. Deities such as Obatala, Ogun, Esu, and Sango are venerated through offerings, chants, and specific clothing. White is often worn in Obatala worship to symbolize purity, while red or dark hues may be used in Ogun rituals to evoke war, iron, and sacrifice (Abiodun 143).
- **Kinship and family structure** are also foundational to Egba society. Families are patriarchal and often organized around extended kin groups. The role of the elder is crucial, and age hierarchies are reflected both in seating arrangements and in dressing. Elder women may wear heavier wrappers (iro), multiple strands of beads, and more elaborate gele, signifying seniority and respect. Men of elder status or titled lineage often don richly embroidered agbada and distinct caps (fila) that signal authority (Abiodun 143).
- **Visual and textile arts** are expressive aspects of Egba culture. The people are known for their mastery of indigo-dyed cloth (adire), handwoven ceremonial fabric (aso-oke), beadwork, and bronze casting. These crafts are often incorporated into ritual attire. Specific motifs in adire or aso-oke may represent fertility, victory in battle, or spiritual protection. During the Egungun festival, for instance, the layered costumes incorporate patchworks of significant cloths, each with symbolic value tied to the ancestor being honoured (Oyeniyi 99).

These cultural elements are not static, they evolve with time, adapting to social changes while preserving core Egba values. However, rituals remain the primary stage for their performance and preservation. In these ritual settings, dress becomes the unifying aesthetic and

communicative device through which the Egba express who they are, where they come from, and what they believe.

3.4 Egba Ritual Ceremony: An Overview

Rituals in Egba society are not peripheral activities; they are central to the cultural fabric and act as dynamic stages for spiritual interaction, community affirmation, identity negotiation, and political display (Ajayi 89). These ceremonies, public, symbolic, and often dramatic, require participants to embody cultural values through actions, speech, and significantly, through dress. Among the numerous rituals practiced by the Egba, four stand out for their historical significance and visual richness: the Egungun Festival, the Oro Festival, Chieftaincy Installation Ceremonies, and the Lisabi Festival.

- **The Egungun Festival:** This is perhaps the most elaborate of all Egba rituals. Held annually to honour ancestral spirits, the festival features masked dancers who represent the return of the ancestors to the living world. Each masquerader wears an intricately layered costume, with layers of fabric, amulets, embroidery, and sometimes mirrors, designed to both honour and conceal. The regalia is spiritually potent, as it transforms the wearer into a medium between the worlds. The garments are imbued with charms (ẹbọ), and the patterns are carefully selected to reflect lineage and status (Ajayi 89).
- **The Oro Festival:** In contrast to the Egungun festival, this is a more secretive and gender-exclusive ritual, primarily reserved for initiated men. Oro is considered the custodian of justice and spiritual discipline, and the festival serves to cleanse the town, maintain order, and uphold traditional law. During the ritual, women and non-initiates must stay indoors. Men dress in symbolic wrappers, usually white or brown, and carry ritual items such as palm fronds and staffs. The simplicity of the attire reflects both humility and sacredness (Ajayi 92).

- **Chieftaincy Installation Ceremonies:** These are formal public rituals that confer traditional titles upon deserving individuals. These rituals serve both spiritual and political functions, as they reaffirm the cultural continuity of Egba leadership structures. Dress plays a crucial role here: the initiate wears richly woven aso-oke, beaded crowns, coral necklaces, and often holds a royal staff (lẹ̀kẹ̀). The regalia distinguishes titleholders from commoners and visually asserts their new status (Ajayi 101).
- **The Lisabi Festival:** This is a celebratory and commemorative event held in honour of Lisabi Agbongbo-Akala, the legendary military hero credited with unifying the Egba people. The festival involves parades, prayers, oríkì recitations, and coordinated aso-ebi among families. The Alake of Egbaland and his chiefs appear in full ceremonial attire, including layered agbada, embroidered sandals, crowns, and staff. The garments worn during the festival symbolize unity, heritage, and resistance, reminding the community of their shared past and collective destiny (Ajayi 101).

In each of these ceremonies, dress is not decorative but essential. It transforms, empowers, and communicates. It signals who belongs, who leads, who remembers, and who invokes the divine. Egba rituals are thus visual and performative, with clothing as the medium through which culture speaks.

3.5 The Role of Power and Status in Egba Rituals

Power and status are fundamental components of Egba ritual life. While spiritual aims are often foregrounded in public discourse, the underlying social dynamics of these rituals reveal complex negotiations of authority, hierarchy, and prestige. These dynamics are performed and solidified through dressing practices, especially during rituals such as the Egungun Festival, Oro Festival, Chieftaincy Installations, and the Lisabi Festival (Abiodun 145).

In Egba society, power is often hereditary or achieved through community service, religious devotion, or political involvement. The visual representation of this power, especially during rituals, is unmistakable. Chieftaincy installations are perhaps the clearest expression of this. During these ceremonies, individuals are publicly adorned in royal fabrics such as aso-oke, embroidered with gold or silver thread, and accessorized with beads, sashes, and crowns. The regalia is not merely decorative but imbued with symbolic meaning. The crown, for example, represents divine sanction, while coral beads signify ancestral connection and social standing (Abiodun 145).

At the Oro Festival, power is demonstrated through exclusion. Only initiated men are allowed to participate, and the secrecy surrounding the event enhances its spiritual authority. The dress code for participants, plain wrappers and minimal accessories, reflects a paradox: simplicity signifying sacred privilege. Here, dress becomes a gatekeeping tool that determines access and visibility (Ajayi 93).

The Egungun Festival presents a more layered expression of status. Not all masqueraders are equal; some represent prominent ancestors and wear more elaborate costumes with rare fabrics and sacred charms. The wealth and social capital of the family sponsoring the masquerade are often judged by the quality and intricacy of the attire. In this context, dress serves as a public performance of family prestige, spiritual depth, and historical legacy (Oyeniya 60).

Even in community-wide events like the Lisabi Festival, power is spatially and visually organized. The Alake and chiefs are positioned in prominent places, their regalia signaling their roles. Chiefs wear wide-sleeved agbada, embroidered with totems or historical symbols, while women in leadership positions may wear iro and gele in unique fabrics designated for the

occasion. The hierarchy is not only seen but affirmed through the symbolism of clothing (Oyeniya 65).

Ultimately, dressing in Egba rituals serves to create and sustain power structures. It differentiates the initiated from the layperson, the noble from the commoner, and the sacred from the secular. In this way, clothing is both a mirror and maker of status within Egba cultural practice.

3.6 Dressing Amongst the Egba Tribe

Dressing practices among the Egba Yoruba are deeply embedded in their identity and social life. Clothing is not merely functional or aesthetic; it is symbolic, performative, and often sacred. What one wears signals not only gender and age but also social status, spiritual affiliation, and participation in cultural history. In both everyday life and ritual settings, dress functions as a visual archive of Egba values, beliefs, and lineage (Drewal and Drewal 102).

Men typically wear a loose-fitting top (buba), trousers (sokoto), and a flowing outer robe (agbada) with cap (fila), often embroidered with clan symbols or sacred motifs. During ceremonial events, fabrics like aso-oke, lace, brocade, and velvet are preferred, with adornments such as coral beads, sashes, and staffs of authority. Each combination conveys messages about the wearer's role in the community. For example, a titled man's attire during the Lisabi Festival will often include family insignia and color-coded sashes that align with his township (Sagay 67).

Women's attire includes wrapper (iro), buba, headtie (gele), and shawl (ipele), along with ornate jewelry and beaded accessories. For major events, the layering and styling of these garments are essential. A woman's dressing during chieftaincy ceremonies or the Egungun Festival may include traditional motifs woven into the aso-oke, waist beads symbolizing fertility, or pendants that denote spiritual roles (Oyeniya 69).

During the Egungun Festival, the masquerade costumes themselves are deeply sacred. They are constructed using layers of cloth from different ancestors, adorned with symbols, charms, feathers, and cowries. The process of assembling an Egungun costume is often a family affair and is considered an act of devotion to ancestral spirits. No two costumes are alike, as each is tailored to represent the unique character or lineage of the spirit being invoked (Oyeniya 73).

At the Oro Festival, men wear minimal yet potent attire, white wrappers, amulets, and palm fronds. The dress code is intended to symbolize humility, discipline, and spiritual readiness. In contrast, during the Lisabi Festival, dressing is more communal and celebratory. Families wear coordinated aso-ebi to show unity, while traditional leaders display full regalia, reaffirming their authority and cultural stewardship (Ogunremi 62).

In Egba society, dressing is an active, meaningful practice. It reinforces communal bonds, preserves historical memory, and allows the individual to visually narrate their place in a complex social and spiritual hierarchy.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 The Politics of Adornment in Egba Rituals

Adornment in Egba rituals is never merely decorative, it is deeply political. Within Yoruba culture, dress and adornment operate as a language of symbols, often used to assert authority, communicate spiritual presence, and reinforce social boundaries (Eicher 45). For the Egba, adornment in rituals such as the Egungun festival, Oro rituals, chieftaincy installations, and the Lisabi festival functions as an important site of political negotiation, where issues of status, hierarchy, and influence are expressed and contested.

For instance, during the Egungun festival, the masquerader's elaborate costumes of layered cloth, embroidered designs, and vibrant colors are not only aesthetic but also serve to represent the collective ancestral authority of lineages. The families sponsoring the masquerades often compete by presenting more elaborate costumes, which reflect wealth, status, and the political influence of the family within the community (Eicher 45). This competition demonstrates how dress becomes a political tool of visibility, with each lineage vying for prestige through splendour.



Fig. 1: Masquerader in full Egungun

attire. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 2: Egungun mask showcasing ancestral symbolism
Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Similarly, the Oro festival, associated with male authority and secret societies, uses adornment to reinforce gendered power relations. The restricted dress codes such as white cloths, symbolic charms, and ritual objects, emphasize the exclusion of women and the control of sacred spaces by men. This highlights how clothing and ritual regalia are deployed politically to enforce boundaries of power and authority (Akintoye 89).



Fig. 3: Oro festival gathering in Egba community.

Source: Face2Face Africa.

Chieftaincy installation rituals further illuminate the political significance of adornment. Chiefs are adorned with specific regalia such as beaded crowns, flowing agbada garments, and traditional sashes, which symbolize authority and continuity of power. The choice of textile, the quality of beads, and the color combinations signal not only the chief's legitimacy but also the wealth and power of the family or faction backing the installation (Peel 131). Thus, regalia become political statements about hierarchy and legitimacy.



Fig. 4: Chiefs wearing full chieftaincy regalia during a ceremony. **Source:** Getty Images.



Fig. 5: Ceremonial beads of Yoruba chiefs.

Source: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

Festivals like Lisabi's, which commemorate the military heroism of Egba ancestors, employ clothing and adornment as symbols of resistance and unity. Participants wear uniforms and coordinated attires, sometimes invoking warrior imagery, to recall the collective struggle of the Egba against external domination. Here, dress becomes both political memory and political solidarity (Akintoye 115).



Fig. 6: Lisabi Day Festival. Source: Ogun State Government Official Website.



Fig. 7: Women in aso-ebi at Lisabi Festival. Source: Pulse Nigeria.

Adornment in Egba rituals cannot be separated from politics. Each item of clothing, bead, or fabric is infused with layers of meaning that reflect not only cultural identity but also struggles for power, status, and visibility within society. Adornment thus operates as a silent but potent language of politics in Egba ritual practices.

4.2 Identity and Power in Egba Ritual Ceremony

Ritual ceremonies among the Egba people are central to the construction of identity and the assertion of power. Identity in Yoruba societies, including Egba, is not fixed but performed and reaffirmed through cultural practices such as dress, music, dance, and ritual (Barber 57). In this sense, clothing during rituals acts as a medium through which personal, communal, and spiritual identities are displayed, while also communicating power relations.

The Egungun festival demonstrates this interplay vividly. Masquerades are seen as the embodiment of ancestral spirits, and the elaborate costumes serve as markers of both spiritual and communal identity. However, beyond the spiritual dimension, the festival provides opportunities for lineages to reinforce their political presence in the community. Wealthy families use the grandeur of their Egungun attire to assert dominance and reaffirm their socio-political relevance, while less affluent families may struggle to match these displays. Hence, identity and power are negotiated through sartorial competition (Oyeniyi 64).



Fig. 8: Egungun festival procession with masqueraders. **Source:** Guardian Nigeria.

In chieftaincy installations, the politics of power are overtly tied to clothing. Chiefs wear distinctive regalia that differentiate them from ordinary members of society, establishing a clear visual hierarchy. For example, the Alake of Egband, the paramount ruler, is identified by the uniqueness of his crown, beads, and robes, which embody not only his royal authority but also the collective identity of the Egba nation (Ajayi 102). Through this regalia, power is made visible, legitimized, and sustained.



Fig. 9: Chieftaincy installation ceremony with elders and chiefs. **Source:** Daily Trust.



Fig. 10: Chiefs wearing full chieftaincy regalia. **Source:** Getty Images.

Oro rituals reinforce male dominance in Egba society. The adornments and ritual insignia associated with Oro members serve as identity markers for the society, while also signaling the exclusion of women and non-initiates. This distinction underscores how clothing operates as a gatekeeper of sacred identity and political authority (Ogunremi 76).



Fig. 11: Oro festival participants in ritual attire. **Source:** Punch Nigeria.

The Lisabi festival, by contrast, highlights the collective identity of the Egba as a people with a shared history of resistance and valor. Uniformed attire worn by participants fosters unity and solidarity, reminding the community of its heroic origins and reinforcing collective pride. At the same time, political leaders who sponsor or participate in the festival use it as an avenue to showcase their alignment with cultural values, strengthening their legitimacy among the people (Falola 118).



Fig. 12: Man clad in full warrior regalia at Lisabi Festival. **Source:** The Nation Newspaper.



Fig. 13: Men holding swords during Lisabi Day Festival, symbolizing unity and valor. **Source:** Vanguard Nigeria.

Identity and power in Egba ritual ceremonies are inseparable. Through clothing and adornment, individuals and groups negotiate their place within society, assert dominance, and affirm communal belonging. Ritual attire is therefore not only symbolic but also instrumental in the politics of social order and cultural identity.

4.3 Adornment as Identity in Egba Land

Adornment in Egba land is an essential medium of self-expression, group identification, and cultural continuity. In Yoruba cosmology, identity is multifaceted, encompassing personal, spiritual, and communal dimensions. Adornment, whether in the form of dress, body markings, or jewelry, acts as a visible expression of these identities. Among the Egba, ritual dress plays a particularly vital role in affirming who one is within the community, the lineage one belongs to, and the spiritual forces one represents (Oyeniya 143).

The Egungun festival is perhaps the most prominent example of adornment functioning as identity. Each masquerade's costume is carefully crafted to embody the lineage it represents. The layers of cloth, vibrant colors, and embroidered motifs are visual archives of family history, wealth, and prestige. For the audience, the masquerade's appearance immediately communicates its identity, reinforcing the symbolic ties between ancestors, descendants, and the wider community (Drewal and Drewal 134).



Fig. 14: Masqueraders in full Egungun attire.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In chieftaincy installation rituals, adornment distinguishes chiefs from ordinary community members and signifies their identity as custodians of tradition and authority. Beaded crowns (ade), flowing agbada robes, and ceremonial sashes are not only markers of status but also visual cues of the individual's new identity as a leader. The installation regalia transforms the individual from an ordinary citizen into a recognized custodian of communal power (Drewal and Drewal 145).

The Lisabi festival, which commemorates the legendary warrior Lisabi, reinforces a shared Egba identity. Participants often wear coordinated attire (aso ebi) that signifies collective belonging. This practice of uniform dressing unites participants across class lines, creating a

sense of shared purpose and identity rooted in the memory of Egba resistance. Adornment in this context goes beyond individuality and becomes a collective symbol of unity (Akintoye 92).



Fig. 15: A Lisabi Festival participant in warrior-inspired costume. **Source:** Linda Ikeji's Blog.

Furthermore, adornment in Oro rituals carries spiritual identity markers. Members of the Oro society wear specific garments and insignia that differentiate them from non-initiates, reinforcing their exclusive identity. At the same time, these adornments highlight gendered distinctions by symbolically excluding women, thus shaping the contours of identity through clothing (Falola 70).



Fig. 16: Oro festival participants in ritual attire. **Source:** Punch Nigeria.

Adornment in Egba land, therefore, is not superficial decoration but a vital cultural language. It embodies lineage histories, signals social roles, asserts spiritual authority, and fosters collective memory. By wearing specific clothes in rituals, Egba people continually affirm who they are, both as individuals and as a collective cultural group. (Peel 97)

4.4 The Political Influence in the Ritual Dressing of Egba Land

The political influence embedded in ritual dressing among the Egba reflects how attire functions as a medium of control, legitimacy, and authority. In Yoruba societies, politics is not only enacted through governance structures but also through cultural performances, of which dress is central. Ritual dressing, in this sense, becomes a political instrument that reflects and sustains hierarchies of power (Barber 63).

During chieftaincy installations, the regalia worn by chiefs symbolize political authority and continuity of leadership. The elaborate beaded crowns, embroidered agbada, and ceremonial accessories distinguish leaders and reinforce their control over the community. The symbolism embedded in these garments is not only traditional but also politically strategic, chiefs use their regalia to legitimize their rule, command respect, and consolidate loyalty (Peel 152).



Fig. 17: Chiefs wearing full chieftaincy regalia during a ceremony. **Source:** Getty Images.

The Egungun festival also carries significant political undertones. Families sponsoring masquerades use dress as a way to project influence, with more elaborate costumes signaling wealth and social dominance. This public display of adornment is a subtle yet powerful form of political competition, where clothing becomes a battleground for prestige and recognition (Drewal and Drewal 140).

The Oro festival, closely linked to political control in Egba land, employs specific ritual dressing to maintain authority. The male-exclusive society enforces gendered power through distinctive attire that signifies membership and authority. By controlling who can wear certain garments and who is excluded, the Oro institution uses dress as a tool of political exclusion and dominance (Akintoye 98).

The Lisabi festival, although largely commemorative, is also a political space where leaders assert cultural alignment and solidarity with the people. Politicians and chiefs often sponsor *aso ebi* for participants, turning the act of dressing into a political gesture that signals

generosity, leadership, and alignment with community values. This demonstrates how ritual dress can be mobilized to garner political support and reinforce authority (Akintoye 123).



Fig. 18: Men in agbada and fila during Lisabi Festival procession. **Source:** Tribune Online.

In essence, ritual dressing among the Egba is not only cultural but inherently political. It legitimizes authority, reinforces social hierarchies, and provides a platform for competition and control. Through ritual attire, the political landscape of Egba land is constantly negotiated, sustained, and made visible.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1 Summary of the Study

This study examined how dress and adornment function as a medium for negotiating identity and power in the rituals of the Egba people, a subgroup of the Yoruba in Nigeria. It focused on selected rituals within the Abeokuta area, including the Egungun Festival, Oro Festival, Lisabi Festival, and chieftaincy installation ceremonies.

The research adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observation, and visual documentation to gather data. It explored the symbolic meanings embedded in Egba ritual attire and how participants use these meanings to assert social standing, express allegiance, and navigate power dynamics. The study highlighted that adornment is not just about aesthetics or tradition but is a culturally coded practice with social, religious, and political implications.

The literature reviewed established that dress is a visible marker of cultural identity and a tool for communication in African societies. For the Egba, specific items like beaded crowns (*adé*), *aso-oke* fabrics, and head ties (*gelé*) are not just for beauty; they symbolize status, spiritual authority, and social roles. The study further explored how clothing reflects political imitation in Nigeria and how it is used to project power and contest social hierarchies within Egba society. The Egba worldview is characterized by a strong belief in spiritual dualism and a deep reverence for ancestors, which is visually expressed through dress during rituals. The study details how dress in each ritual serves a specific purpose:

- Egungun Festival: Masquerade costumes are seen as sacred coverings that transform the wearer into a spiritual being, representing ancestral spirits and allowing families to display wealth and prestige through the intricacy of the attire.

- Oro Festival: This male-exclusive ritual uses strict dress codes to reinforce gendered power structures and mark insiders from outsiders, with simple attire signaling sacred privilege and control.
- Chieftaincy Installation Rituals: The highly symbolic garments, such as beaded crowns and embroidered robes, distinguish titleholders from commoners and visually assert their new identity, status, and political authority.
- Lisabi Festival: This festival uses coordinated traditional outfits (asó-ebí) and ceremonial garments to express communal pride, unity, historical identity, and political solidarity.

Overall, the research concludes that adornment in Egba rituals is a political tool that legitimizes authority, reinforces social hierarchies, and provides a platform for competition and control. It is an active, meaningful practice that preserves historical memory, reinforces communal bonds, and allows individuals to visually narrate their place in a complex social and spiritual hierarchy.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for future research and cultural practice:

- Expand the scope to include gendered adornment and resistance: Future studies should specifically investigate how women use dress and adornment in Egba rituals to express their own forms of identity, power, and resistance, given the male-dominated nature of some ceremonies. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within the community.
- Analyze the impact of modernization: It is recommended that a study to explore how the evolution of Egba ritual dress is influenced by modernization and globalization should be

carried out. This could include an analysis of how new fabrics, designs, and accessories are incorporated into traditional attire and what these changes symbolize.

- Conduct a comparative study: To build on the generalizability limitation of this study, future research could conduct a comparative analysis of ritual adornment among other Yoruba subgroups or different ethnic groups in Nigeria. This would provide broader insights into the role of dress in power and identity across various Nigerian cultures.
- Promote cultural preservation through documentation: Egba cultural practitioners and community leaders should be encouraged to collaborate on initiatives aimed at digitally documenting and archiving the symbolic meanings of traditional attire and ritual processes. This would help preserve this cultural heritage for future generations and make it accessible for educational purposes and cultural tourism.

5.3 Conclusion

This study successfully demonstrates that dressing and adornment among the Egba people are much more than aesthetic choices; they are a sophisticated and politically charged language through which identity, power, and authority are negotiated and expressed during rituals. By investigating the specific symbolic meanings of attire in festivals and ceremonies, the research provides a comprehensive appreciation of Egba cultural practices and the ways in which material culture shapes social interactions.

The findings underscore that Egba rituals are not static performances but dynamic stages where hierarchies are reinforced, historical memory is preserved, and social boundaries are maintained through the use of specific clothing and adornment. The study fills a significant gap in the scholarship by moving beyond a superficial view of dress as decoration and instead positioning it as an integral tool of power, legitimacy, and social control. The research highlights

the crucial connection between the visible (dress) and the invisible (power, spirituality, and identity), proving that in Egba culture, clothing is a fundamental conduit of cultural life and political order.

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