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Dress and Accessories as Identity in Benin Art Objects

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Abstract

The Benin people already had a distinct dress culture long before their 1897 encounter with Europeans. The dressing style and accessories have undergone numerous changes in design and creativity over the years. Dressing and accessories are important cultural elements of identity for people. They have continued to function as a medium through which personality, occasion, sex, and occupation can be identified in various ways. Before the innovations in different dressing styles in Benin society, the Benin Bronzes and other objects served as record-keeping items, where dressing, accessories, history, and stories of past events were documented, often in the absence of videography. Through these various objects, the dressing styles of past kings, queens, chiefs, and other palace functionaries have been made visible in historical works of art. Using the qualitative research approach, this paper adopts an ethnographic method of research through personal observation, interviews, documented archives, and historical materials that are significant to the study. Findings reveal the importance of Benin art objects as record-keeping tools for the people's dress, accessories, stories, and ceremonial events of past periods. Thus, these objects stand as documented records of the Benin people and their culture. The study concludes that further research should be carried out by art scholars on the significance of these art objects as documented evidence of the regalia and other body ornaments of the royal class of the Benin people.

Keywords: Benin Dress, Accessories, Benin Arts and Cultural Identity

Introduction

The Benin Kingdom is known for its arts, crafts, and traditions, which have sustained a rich cultural expression through various art forms that embody the people's social, political, and spiritual life. Among these, costumes and accessories stand out as essential markers of cultural identity that communicate status, lineage, gender, profession, and religious significance. Thus, costume in Benin culture has served as a powerful medium of non-verbal communication from time immemorial, as evidenced in the art objects of the people. To the Benin people, dressing functions as a very important cultural element at different occasions for different purposes. From the Oba (King) to chiefs, priests, warriors, and ordinary citizens, every item of clothing and ornamentation signifies belonging, authority, and responsibility. Before the 1897 British invasion, the Benin people were not naked. They already had a dress pattern that reflected their cultural beliefs. Corals, raffia, brass, ivory, and textiles were deeply embedded in their traditional aesthetics and spirituality. These materials were valued for their beauty and their sacred, symbolic meanings. Thus, Benin art objects offer a deep visual documentation of these cultural practices. The intricate details of

costumes, headdresses, body ornaments, and accessories represented in these artworks serve as historical records of the people's identity and traditions, which were record-keeping objects in the absence of modern technologies for documentation.

Benin People's Dress

Costume is a non-verbal communication tool within African society, transmitting knowledge and values across ethnic nationalities. A person's identity, history, and place in society can be ascertained from the clothing and other apparel they wear. The culture of a people is reflected in the dressing patterns of individuals within that society. Therefore, clothing has, over the years, been part of every culture. A person usually learns the dress patterns of their people before embracing attire from other ethnic groups. Thus, the mode of dressing could be for traditional purposes to a group of persons, which is used for special occasions such as festivals, rituals, marriages, burial ceremonies, and other traditional engagements and for casual purposes.

Dressing among the Benin people is an essential part of their cultural identity. The Benin people already had a distinctive dressing style that reflected their culture before European influence in the 19th century. Dress and accessories were not for beautification purposes only; they were reflections of their identity and a signifier of the beliefs, class, occupation, occasion and values associated with the people. The Oba, for instance, dresses like a deity. He is adorned in heavily embroidered attire, elaborate accessories and other body ornaments that reflect his status as the king and foremost indigene of the Benin kingdom. Lyndersay notes that the roles of beads and charms worn on the neck of the Oba are so done because tradition does not permit the exposure of the Oba's neck (Lyndersay 374).

The Oba's full regalia hold both aesthetic and spiritual significance, as the Oba is both a sacred and a political ruler. According to Ezra, "the introduction of red stone and coral beads and red ododo cloth for the costume worn by the king and chiefs at ceremonies was introduced during the reign of Oba Ewuare the first, who is said to have significantly shaped the arts of divine kingship in Benin" (11). According to Igbafe, " Oba Ewuare also introduced facial and body tribal marks for the people of Benin, a custom initiated in order to easily identify subjects who fled Benin on account of the unbearably harsh laws which he made on the death of his two sons on the same day" (47). The people also employ various unique colours associated with their culture. Red, blue, purple, and white are the predominant colours in Benin dress. In Benin, dress and accessories serve as beauty enhancers; thus, people tend to dress colorfully and elegantly, especially for special events. The culture of dressing among the people has long been part of their history and everyday life. Lyndersay, citing Hodgkin and Ryder, affirms that "while the first European contact with the Benin was in the late 1400s by the Portuguese, it still demonstrates one of the richest dress cultures of the region" (369). To this day, the people maintain their traditional dress, now with more innovation and uniqueness.

Every Benin man or woman has a general mode of dressing. A Benin woman may tie a wrapper from the chest down to the ankle for everyday use, and she may also wear a buba blouse and wrapper for special outings. Men may tie a wrapper or wear a native shirt with trousers for different purposes. Generally, every Benin indigene has both general and specific dressing styles suited to all occasions, which vary according to one's rank or position in the kingdom.

Accessories of the Benin People

Significantly, the Benin people also adorn themselves with various body ornaments as part of their traditional attire. These include beads, body markings, bangles, anklets, raffia, bracelets, gold, silver, and other items used to promote their beauty, status, and culture.

Historically, coral beads were said to have been introduced during the reign of Oba Ewuare I. Thus, the Oba is regarded as the owner of all coral, which he distributes or gifts to title holders or other worthy individuals. In earlier times, the ornaments and regalia were blue in color, but they went out of use when another type of stone was introduced in the 15th century (Ekpo, cited in Lyndersay 85). Lyndersay identified two elements of dress that stand out in Benin culture when examining the bronze sculptures. According to her, one is the "importance attached to beads in the royal court and the other is the tremendous varieties of headdresses used" (85).

Thus, every Benin indigene is entitled to wear coral beads, although the type varies according to status and personality. The early bronzes in Benin history provide evidence of how the people attached great importance to body ornaments. Lyndersay asserts that "overwhelming archaeological evidence indicates that the early inhabitants of this region adorned and clothed their bodies in combinations of vegetable, animal and mineral materials. Various fibres were used; raffia, screw pine and cotton were common" (89).

Benin Art Objects as Cultural Identity

Benin art which is primarily made of cast brass and ivory. It provides valuable information about the past kings and queens of the people. These art objects were produced to honour ancestors for their greatness and accomplishments. Beyond honouring past rulers, Benin art also served as record-keeping objects, preserving the history, events, ceremonies, heroes, and culture of the people. It reflects the roles of past chiefs, priests, court officials, and attendants who made up the administrative system of the kingdom. These objects provide abundant information about past events and personalities who contributed to the greatness of the kingdom in both spiritual and political spheres. According to Ezra in *Royal Art of Benin*, "The art of Benin is unique in Africa art. Primarily made of cast brass and carved ivory, it provides an unbroken record of artistic heritage of one West Africa's greatest kingdoms" (1). Thus, the art objects of the Benin people first became known to Western viewers in 1897, following the invasion that led to their large-scale looting, which contributed to the fall of the Benin Kingdom.

The richness of Benin art, craft, and tradition has made it popular both at home and abroad, ensuring its continuous significance as a subject of study for foreigners, scholars, historians, art researchers, and ethnographers. With the looting of these objects in 1897, their significance has also contributed to present-day efforts to return looted artefacts to their original owners—the Palace of Benin and the Benin people. Apart from their sacred nature, these objects evoke historical memories that capture the existence and identity of the people. The enduring popularity of Benin art cannot be overstated, as contemporary artisans continue to express creativity in bronze casting, producing works with historical significance for modern audiences. According to Cartwright, Benin art gained popularity and fame due to the use of bronze in sculpture, which made it recognized worldwide from the 15th century onward, when the Portuguese introduced large quantities of brass for trade. This period witnessed the production, as Benin artists created life-sized sculptures of heads, small yet full human and animal figures, as well as ceremonial bells, many of which are now housed in the British Museum in London and in New York collections (Web). Ogene attests that "Benin art has universal acclaim in famous art exhibitions, which often command significant attention. The art has a physical appeal and a spiritual essence" (97). For the people of Benin, art has always been a significant aspect of daily life.

Historically, artworks were primarily palace creations, to represent various occasions, rituals, and historical records. These objects are integral to Benin festivals. According to Ezra, "during palace festivals, Benin City is a vibrant pageant of the arts, a virtual living museum, with the king himself as the main participant, bedecked with ornaments of shining

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brass and creamy ivory, as well as vivid coral beads and lavishly woven textiles. Cast brass plaques, carved lintels, pillars and beams, monumental sculptures of birds and snakes, and refined, elegant objects of use all contribute to this grandeur" (21). Eweka affirms that "the arts and craft of Benin were products of an organized society which had grown over the years into economic, administrative, and political units within the Benin Kingdom" (55).

Costume and Accessories as Identity in Benin Art Objects

Historically, before the Benin people encountered Westernization or European influence, a distinct dress pattern already existed among the people. The people of Benin were not naked before their encounter with the Europeans. However, there is little or no pictorial evidence that reveals the dressing pattern of the people. The arts objects of various kinds communicate with people in different ways, thus serving different purposes. The bronzes served greatly as record-keeping objects not only on events or performances, but also on the dressing style of past kings, queens, high-ranking title holders, warriors, servants and officers from different centuries.

The costumes and accessories revealed in these objects extensively showcase the dressing style of the people in their various roles, revealing each person's cultural identity and function while serving as a visual archive of the dress and its symbolic meaning to the royal court of Benin. Accessories such as neck beads, hand beads, bracelets, headgear, pins and other body ornaments and regalia showcase the people in their categories.

Fig 1: Relief Plaque of a titled figure



FIG 1: A relief plaque of a titled figure sourced from British Museum Collections online. 2025

Fig. 1 The above is a 16th-17th century plague depiction that shows a Benin high-ranking chief in ceremonial attire, accompanied by accessories and other cultural symbols. This figure depicts a chief's dress, consisting of a loincloth featuring leaf motifs and body ornaments. The neck collar is beaded and decorated with leopard teeth around it, along with beaded anklets, armlets, a beaded body ornament, and a beaded cap.

This dressing style reflects a ceremonial dress associated with high-ranking chiefs in the Benin kingdom. It reflects status, nobility and title, which cannot be associated with an ordinary Benin man. Armlets, anklets and fringed around the loincloth convey rank as a titled chief and ceremonial importance. This explains why this object is not just an art object, but also a reflection of the fashion and aesthetics of the Benin chiefs in the 16th to

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17th centuries, during a period when photography was not in use and there was no other way of keeping records.

Fig 2: Relief Plaque of a Chief Priest



FIG 2: A relief plaque of an object, sourced from British Museum Collections 2025

Fig. 2 above is a relief plaque that depicts a chief priest in Ancient Benin, 16th century, holding ekpokin (a traditional object). This symbolizes ceremonial ritual participation. This figure features a beaded headgear with droplets on both sides, typical of his status. He is also wearing a short layered beaded neck collar and Ikele (round neck bead). He is also using armlets made from brass or ivory materials. He is tied a stylized, decorated wrapper in a skirt-like form and a belt tied across the torso, which features fringes. This style of dressing indicates a ceremonial dress of a high-ranking chief priest in a ritual function or palace protocol.

Fig 3: Relief Plaque of Palace Functionary



FIG 1: A relief plaque of an object, sourced from Berlin Collections 2022

The Figure above is a relief plaque of a titled person from the palace. This status is depicted wearing a loincloth tied at the waist with a decorative motif at the bottom and multiple layers of the cloth. This garment may be hand-woven or imported to fit the class of the individual. He is also using accessories such as Ikele(round neck coral beads), anklets made

from brass or ivory and beaded headdresses and some decorative features attached to the head beads. The above figures reveal the significance of the personality and dress style of the chiefs, as well as their identity. Thus, title holders in the Benin Kingdom, especially at ceremonial functions, wore embroidered robes and coral bead necklaces, indicating their noble status and closeness to the Oba. The differentiation in dress serves to communicate the social hierarchy within the kingdom visually.

The 16th- and 17th-century commemorative heads of past kings and queens were also a significant cultural symbol that captured the status and authority of the Oba and the Queen. They differ based on the century in which they existed, and the style changes as the beads available to the people increase. The tiny walls became thicker with increased roles of beads in the 18th century. The features on this head identify them in sex, era, and personality, among others.

Figure 4: Commemorative head of the Oba



King commemorative head source online

The Oba commemorative head above is adorned with rows of high collar coral beads, from the chin down to the neck, not revealing any body part with a bead cluster. This head-beaded crown is designed with a leaf motif at different layers. The people of Benin believe that the Oba owns all coral beads and he can gift them to any individual as it pleases him. He can collect it back from any titled individual who, in one way or another, is found guilty of any cultural offence. The Oba is dressed like a deity because he is adorned with ritual ornaments of various kinds that are very heavy and sacred. It is important to note that the brass heads of past kings are commemorative heads placed on the royal ancestral altar located in the palace courtyard, each supporting a carved ivory tusk. This altar is a setting for important rites of divine kingship, such as Ugie erha oba, a ceremony performed by the Oba to honour the spirits of his ancestors. The commemorative head emphasises the accessories and regalia of kingship rather than just facial features. The bronze head depicts the king at his prime of life. The beaded headdress and collars of beads depict royalty, ancestral presence, wealth and authority of the Oba.

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Figure 5 Commemorative head of the Queen Mother



Head of a Queen mother. Source: web

The above is the 16th century commemorative head of the Queen Mother of the crown prince of Benin. The title of the queen mother (Iyoba) was first bestowed on Idia Niyesigie, the mother of Oba Esigie, for the bravery, exceptional and spiritual role she played in restoring power to her son and in defeating the Idah warriors during the reign of Oba Esigie. At the palace of the queen mother (Iyoba) at Uselu town and the palace of the Oba palace Benin, past queen mothers' ancestral alters are furnished with cast brass commemorative heads along with other cultural and ritual symbols.

The Queen Mother's head resembles that of the Oba. It has a special type of coral bead crown; scholars refer to it as a snood, like a net of precious coral beadwork known as ileke (royal) cylindrical beads. First worn by the queen mother, it features a high, pointed beak known as a chicken beak, and was also worn by Edo high-ranking women. The projection of the crown is called Ede Iyoba. It has a thick wall, a high cylindrical bead collar that covers the neck up to the chin with beaded clusters on each side, a beaded headband similar to that of the chiefs, wrapped around the forehead, with a loop trap motif decoration with an elephant tusk. This head is highly exaggerated and decorated for the personality of the queen mother.

Conclusion

This paper examined dress and accessories as identity in Benin art objects. It revealed the cultural significance of the people of Benin's dress and accessories, and also reiterates that Benin Arts objects are record-keeping objects of the people's songs, events, lifestyle, dress, and accessories of the past, which were documented through bronzes, sculptures, and other arts objects. It also identified that, despite little previous study by art scholars on the importance of dress and accessories in art objects, some scholars may have unintentionally made references to one or more paraphernalia attached to the object. Thus making it a very key cultural element to be studied. The study also recognized that over the years, a lot of changes have continued to be noticed in the dressing style and usage of accessories of the royal class and in general. The dressing styles as seen in different objects continue to change from time to time, resulting in the production of more cultural materials to keep up with the current reality of civilization. Thus, making it an important cultural element of study.

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