
Institutionalising Idoma Cultural Heritage through the Dress Code Emblem ‘ATU’

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Abstract

The study gives an exposition of the Idoma cultural identity and how this heritage is promoted through the cultural emblem “ATU”. The Idoma dress code is a fabric designed in two major beautiful colours: black and red with gold colour lining in the middle. The study x-rayed and highlighted the symbolism and connotations of these colours with a view to creating awareness and consciousness in the psyche of every Idoma son and daughter wearing the attire so that they may be able to enlighten anyone who cares to know thereby promoting and institutionalising the Idoma cultural heritage. The origin of the Idoma people vis-a-vis their present state and status was also traced. Based on the findings of the study, the various colours in the cultural emblem have the following connotations: Red connotes the power, authority, and strength bestowed on Idoma people by their fallen heroes and ancestor’s (the alekwu). Black arouses consciousness of the end of all mortals (death) which also causes the transition of the living to the great beyond to which is the beginning of the new form of life with attendant blessing upon the living in form of agriculture, soil fertility and human emancipation while the gold colour lining gray of hope for the youth and posterity.

Keywords: Idoma Attire, ATU, Cultural Heritage

I. Introduction

The biblical account has it that, God having created many other things and decided to create man on the last day after his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). God having created man put him in the Garden of Eden with some instruction given to him (Genesis 2:6-17). God saw that it was not good for man to be alone; therefore caused man to fall into deep sleep and performed a surgical operation on him by taking one of his ribs covered it with flesh and presented it to him as a woman to be his wife and help meet. Adam was pleased with this beautiful creature and hewed a sign of relief (Genesis 2: 21-22). The biblical account of God as the creator is also buttressed by various ethnic groups in Africa. According to Mbiti, the Akan of Ghana see God as ‘excavator’, hewer, originator and architect of the universe.’ Their name for God “borebore” is demonstrated in the different ways, they see God as earlier highlighted. They firmly hold that, God alone created all things (34).

The Wuzi, Mendenand and others believe that God ended his work of creation with the creation of man. The Yungu also have the same view as the Bible, all other things were created and finally God created husband and wife (Mbiti 40). The bible has it that, when first man and woman were created they were naked but were not ashamed (Genesis 2:25). Their failure to adhere to instructions brought sin which caused their down fall. After Adam’s wife had eaten the forbidden fruit, sooner than later it dawned on them that they were naked, and therefore attempted to cover their nakedness by sewing figs together around their waist (Genesis 7). This effort of theirs could not stand a test of time, as the leaves dried up quickly

and could not perform its intended function. God however slaughtered an animal and used its skin as coverage for them. This practice of using hides as covering went on for ages until further invention and civilization started emerging.

Jenkins buttresses this use of hides as coverage before the advent of civilization, he says

“the earliest men were with special throwing stones and later they pursued wild animals with spear in Europe people ate horse flesh and in the colder climates sewed the skins together with bone needles to make clothing”(1).

A while after the Noachic flood, people wanted to have an identity and fame so they decided to build a tower (tower of Babel) (Genesis 11: 4-8). God came and confused their language such that the construction could no longer continue. There was a breakdown in communication as a result of their different languages; thus they parted and each person went his way to different directions. This unique language which they shared culminated into distinct languages and tribes today on the surface of the earth with each trying to maintain and perpetuate its culture, i.e. the language they speak, clothes they wear, the food they eat. The various ethnic groups are identified with their distinct languages and tribes. The clothes they wear speak volumes of the diverse ethnic nationalists that inhabit the country Nigeria. Amongst these tribes is the Idoma tribe which is predominant found in Benue State and scattered in various parts of Nigeria. Nigeria is a nation which consists of about 371 tribes and over 521 languages. Some of these tribes are easily identified with the way they dress and language they speak and Idomas are also easily identified as such.

This study therefore examined the quintessence of the idoma cultural emblem popularly called “ATU” and its role in maintaining and perpetuating its culture. Oral interviews were carried out to buttress the points of the study. The rest of the paper is structured to elucidate on the following: the origin of idoma, the idoma dress code emblem (ATU), and the significance of the ATU and its colours.

II. The Origin of Idoma

The study will briefly give an exposition of who the Idomas are and their origin before dwelling on the ‘atu’ their cultural emblem. Idoma people are found in Benue state of central Nigeria. In Benue state Idoma has their geographical location in the southern part of the state. It is made up of nine (9) local government areas: Apa, Agatu, Ado, Obi, Ohimini, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo, Oju, and Otukpo; although, Obi and Oju are principally made up of the Igede tribe. There are however other idoma speaking people who can be found in large numbers in Cross River, Kogi, Nasarawa and Enugu states, these groups including those in Benue state migrated from Wukari area of the present Taraba state which is identified as the ancestral home of all Idoma speaking people (Armstrong, 27).

On the origin of Idoma, Agbo has it that Idoma historians just like historians in most communities in Nigeria groped in the dark, in their effort to reconstruct the history of Idoma and this was due to dearth of written sources. Most researchers assert that it is more rewarding to reconstruct the history of the societies which had some of its history documented (7). Idoma had their first documented history done by the British colonial officers who had their information through interviewing those whose memories were still fresh with the stories of migration from Wukari area and Igala land. These people wrote nothing spectacular about Idoma, their ethnographic view of Idoma was done with prejudice and the rich culture of Idoma was not mentioned. “Idoma as a tribe was thought to be

primitive, politically and intellectually inferior, therefore a difficult group to deal with” (Efim, 96).

The study carried out a brief interview with Chief J. E. Antenyi the Odejo k’Apa, the clan head of Oiji-Ochekwu – one of the major custodians of Idoma culture on the origin of Idoma. The chief gave an exposition on the origin of Idoma as an ethnic group domiciled in the south of Benue of North Central Nigeria today and has its origin from the Middle East being that they are progenies of Noah’s children after the flood. They are from Mesopotamia – the land between River Tigris and Euphrates implying that the languages at the tower of Babel might have metamorphosed into various languages which today Idoma is one of. The migrational odyssey of the tribe through the ages from Middle East to the Kwararafa Empire from where they migrated to their present abode in Benue, Enugu, Kogi and Cross River states is not on record. However, Idomas, Jukuns, and the Igalas etc were together in Apa Kingdoms that constituted Kwararafa Empire. Like any other Empire in history, Kwararafa reached its apogee, started declining and collapsed as a result of leadership tussle among the kingdoms.

III. **Atu the Idoma dress code or Emblem**

Idoma people are a tribe with unique culture which they cherish and treasure. One of this is the ‘Atu’ their cultural identity. The importance of this emblem in fostering unity and identity among Idoma and the connotations of the various colours is the crux of the matter of this research and exposition.

The Idoma emblem which is their dress code is a special fabric made up of two colours **red** and **black** with gold colour lining in between. This emblem or attire can be proudly worn by any Idoma person at any time especially during occasions or festivities. It is for cultural identity and speaks volume on what the Idomas believe in.

Just as Idoma emblem which is their dress code is a special fabric made up of two major colours red and black with gold colour lining in between their Tiv counterpart in Benue has black and white called “Anger” and it is of great importance to them, apart from the “Anger” the Tiv people have a bag called “Kp’aabor” a pluming spear added to its cultural attire which depicts the appearance of a warrior (Funke).

3.1 **Significance of the Colours**

There are highlights of various colours by modern philosophy but only a few will be considered. Going by modern philosophy on colours;

Red: It is the first colour or rainbow from top. It signifies passion vitality, enthusiasm and security.

Yellow: It is the colour of sunshine it represents clarity of thought, wisdom, orderliness and energy.

Green: This denotes fertility, growth balance, health and wealth.

Violet: It is a mixture of red and blue, it is considered the highest element of spirituality. It can ignite imagination and inspiration to artists. Dark tones of violet are associated with sorrow.

Black: It is associated with the unknown or the negative; it represents strength, seriousness power and authority. Black can evoke strong emotions.

Considering the significance of the various colour highlighted by modern philosophy as analysed in this write up, one may wonder why Idoma made the choice of the 'Atu' as red and black with gold colour lining in between. The study had an interface with some illustrious sons and daughters of Idoma who are knowledgeable in the Idoma traditions and culture to provide insight into the 'raison-d'être' as the choice of these colours.

3.2 Significance of the 'Atu'

The **black colour** in the Idoma emblem symbolizes death and a reminder that all humans are mortals and vulnerable therefore should do everything with moderation and modesty. According to Chief Antenyi, the Odejo k'Apa, Idomas believe in death and life after death. Death is seen as inevitable, indisputable and ultimate. People who are of human existence and live on this planet earth (Eche) are called (Aleche). Those who die from this world and are buried are believed to come back to live in another form in their abode (O'lekwu) and are therefore called (Alekwu). This belief in the life after death is also held by many ethnic groups in Africa, e.g. the Sonjo among others are of the view that death is a process which removes a person gradually i.e., after the physical death the individual continues to exist in where his people still remember him, call him by name and sometimes appear to older members of their surviving families (Mbiti 25).

Chief Antenyi has the same view as the Sonjo people, as he is of the opinion that the 'Alekwu' are spirit beings who once in a while visit their progenies on earth in a bodily form i.e. masquerades (ekwu). Thus Idomas believe in the protection and power of these ancestors who can bless and protect them from calamities. These alekwu also checkmate the activities of Idoma sons and daughters and purifying when the need arises.

The **red colour** of the Idoma traditional attire symbolizes authority, power and invincibility of every Idoma person as bestowed on him/her by the spirit of the ancestors "alekwu" (the living dead). According to Mr. Joseph Ada the secretary to Idoma Traditional Council, the Red colour in Idoma traditional attire symbolizes the blood of their heroes who were slain in the course of defending the Idoma in their various wars and battle for emancipation.

In the same vein the **black colour** reminds the Idoma of the death of their heroes. It is a common practice among Idomas to wear black clothes when they are mourning the death of their beloved ones, as well shave their hair. This practice is mainly carried out by women. Though this practice is waning a little with Christianity but the core Idoma traditional women still imbibe this traditional practice.

The **gold colouring** in between the two major colours stands for hope for young Idoma people that no matter the situation they find themselves anywhere, anytime, no matter how dark it may look there is light at the end of the tunnel.

In another interview, Dr. Usman Kuti a lecturer in the department of fine Arts Ugbokolo, who is also an illustrious son of Idoma, graphically adduced the red colour to the abode of the alekwu (the living dead) which he explained by the typical red-earth noticed when graves are being dug for burial. After digging to some depth, say six feet (about two metres) and below, a rougher and reddish soil is encountered where corpses are usually laid which is the abode of the living dead (the alekwus). The strong and reddish colour of the habitation of the ancestors corroborates the view of Odejo k'Apa as earlier mentioned. This

goes to explain why in any Idoma community, if a chief comes to an arena and he wears red cap which symbolizes power and authority bestowed to him, no Idoma person in that area is allowed to wear a red cap at that moment.

The uniqueness of the cultural dress is demonstrated at the palace of the leader of Idoma people the Och'Idoma whose palace in Otukpo is adorned with red and black colours. The Och'Idoma adorns himself with the traditional attire whenever he is on an outing or official functions. This attire is normally worn to important occasions such as annual cultural festivals and marriages etc. by Idoma sons and daughters.

Dr. Onoja an elite and a lecturer in the department of history, college of advanced and professional studies Makurdi when asked by the researcher opined that 'Atu' was an adopted fabrics from Apa kingdom in Kwara Empire and it is a symbol of Idoma unity and cultural identity. In response to why these colours were chosen by Idoma, he asserted that the red colour depicts love's charisma – Idoma people are known to be loving, very hospitable, receptive and accommodating even to strangers. Idoma are also very law abiding and are guided by the consciousness that wherever they find themselves, they try to exhibit discipline.

Dr. Onoja further gave an insight to the black colour that it symbolizes agriculture, especially as the black colour has a semblance of loamy soil which is of high fertility resulting into bountiful products. Idoma being predominantly farmers therefore treasure fertile soil to such an extent that they would do anything that would constantly remind them of the need to secure and protect their fertile land which is a sine-qua-non to high yield of agricultural products which are sold all over the country for their economic emancipation hence the choice of the black as one of the colours in their traditional attire.

IV. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

There is hardly any published work on the Idoma dress code, so the study obtained information from interviews of various Idoma prominent sons and daughters who have some good knowledge of Idoma history, facts and mythology. The opinions given regarding the connotations of the two main colours of red and black which the attire is made up of are as varied as the interviewees except the gold colour lining which seems to have a common consensus portraying of ray of hope for youths and generation yet unborn. A careful analysis of the seeming divergent opinions of the interviewees however reveals a point of convergence as various colour interpretations given such as red representing power and authority, blood of past heroes, love, passion, red-earth depicting the abode of the living dead (alekwu) etc. all point to the alekwu as their source of power, authority, blessing and a whole myriad of successful Idoma endeavours.

The black whether seen as death, the unknown, agriculture cum soil fertility, strength, seriousness, emotion etc. can also be collapsed together to imply a hall mark of death and the dead. Death is an unknown phenomenon which cannot be wished away, and being conscious of this, but without death you cannot have the dead (the alekwu) which Idoma believe are alive in hades, and can be invoked upon to bring blessings upon them, be it inform of soil fertility and good agricultural yield strength. The various opinions can therefore be summarized to fall in line with the principal submissions of J. E. Antenyi the Odejo k'Apa, a custodian of Idoma culture and member of Idoma traditional council and Mr. Joseph Ada, the secretary of Idoma Area Traditional Council.

Based on the above findings, it can be said that the various colours in the Emblem have the following connotations: Red connotes power/authority/strength bestowed on Idoma

people by their fallen heroes and ancestor's (the alekwu). Black arouses consciousness of the end of all mortals (death) which also causes the transition of the living to the great beyond to which is the beginning of the new form of life with attendant blessing upon the living in form of Agriculture, soil fertility and human emancipation while the gold colour lining gray of hope for the youth and posterity.

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