

**BOOK REVIEW**

Dani Lyndersay, *Nigerian Dress: the Body Honoured*, pp. xv + 616 illus. b/w line drawings throughout, 12 pages in full colour, Centre for Black African Arts and Civilization, Lagos, 2011.

Dr. Dani Lyndersay's nineteen year sojourn in Nigeria took her all over the country: to Jos, Kano, Maiduguri and Zaria in the north; to Benin and Ibadan in the Southwest; to Calabar, Enugu and Uyo in the Southeast. Wherever she went, her eager eyes absorbed the diverse richness of Nigerian dress. As a costume designer in Theatre Arts, she was aware of the important role played by costume in the creation of character and mood in a performance. She intended this book as a resource tool for theatre and film practitioners. But it is far more than that! With 616 pages, including an index; a glossary of 534 terms related to dress, a bibliography of 582 entries; 500 + line drawings by the author herself and a list of figures classified by ethnic group or area, arranged in alphabetical order—this work is a veritable encyclopedia of Nigerian dress! No one in Nigeria, since Eve de Negri in the 1960's, has shone the spot-light so brightly on Nigerian dress and body adornment.

Dr. Lyndersay has organized her scholarly work in three parts. The first part deals with the significant role played by costume in a theatrical production and the importance attached to dress and adornment at all times and in all places throughout Nigeria. The second part presents archaeological and historical perspectives of traditional Nigerian dress. Dr. Lyndersay's thorough library research presents evidence collected from the writings of travellers, traders and missionaries century by century, from Ibn Batuta in the mid 1300's to Mary Kingsley at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The third part is a 'kaleidoscopic view' of the dress of selected ethnic groups in Nigeria, classified geographically. She included not only the major ethnic groups but also minorities such as the Dakarawa, Gwari, Angas, Birom, Idoma and Ejagham, whose cultures are seldom publicized. There are line drawings by the author or every page so the reader can see exactly what Dr. Lyndersay is describing.

Dr. Lyndersay documents the various materials used for body covering before cotton—animal skins, bark-cloth, woven raffia and bast fibres (flexible fibrous bark) found in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. chiefly burial tomb at Igbo-Ukwu. Some groups, living in remote hilly regions in central Nigeria to which they retreated to avoid cultural domination, wore a critical minimum of clothing, an apron or a belt to which leaves were strategically attached. However, in 1960, the Prohibition of Nudity Bye-laws came into force and people going to sell their produce in large towns donned wrappers.

The culture of Islam prescribed garments which covered the entire body, thereby stimulating the arts connected with clothing and textiles. Male converts wore a tunic

(kaftans) and if they were prosperous, the flowing, embroidered *riga* to which the Yoruba *agbada* is related.

Although locally woven prestige fabrics have been worn by the elite in West Africa for a very long time, Italian cloth dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. has been found in Timbuktu. The Sahara Desert was not a barrier (as I was taught in school) but a great highway criss-crossed by caravans acting as a conduit for goods and ideas from North Africa and the Mediterranean, including fabrics and beads.

When sea trade to West Africa was offered up by the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, European traders quickly acquainted themselves with local preferences which they were eager to satisfy. The people of Benin were particularly fond of red cloth and red beads.

Just as Islam influenced dress and fashion in northern Nigeria, Christianity had a great impact on dress in the south. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, groups of European ladies formed sewing-parties to make Mother Hubbards for female Christian converts, which, it was hoped, would lead to national improvement! Those were high-necked dresses with long skirts falling from a yoke and garnished with a deep frill. These ladies would have been shocked to hear that British trading companies sold Victorian ladies chemises, intended as underwear in their country of origin, which were worn as outerwear in Nigeria, with nothing over them!

In southeast Nigeria, men adopted European shirts with fancy pin-tucked yokes, but wore them with wrappers. European men's hats of various styles (bowlers, panamas, boaters, top-hats, trilbys) were much sought after and are still in use today in southeastern Nigeria as an important part of male attire which is a combination of local and foreign elements.

The black C.M.S. suit, as seen in iconic photographs of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, influenced the dress of men working for the colonial government who always wore suits in dark colours to go to the office. Western dress became a mark of prestige, though some reacted against it. The teachers of Lagos in 1889, at a general meeting resolved to wear only native dress!

From this cornucopia of information emerge facts which help us to construct a pattern of West African dress which has persisted for centuries and which is evident today. The wrapper remains the classic item of women's dress on both formal and informal occasions. The flowing gown worn by men (*riga*: Hausa; *agbada*: Yoruba) usually enriched with embroidery, was in the past and still is today a garment conveying the status and prestige associated with age and is still worn on formal occasions. The use of beads for adornment is of great antiquity. Evidence of this has survived from Nok culture and Sao culture (Borno State, 600BC 1300 A.D.), in the form of quartz, carnelian and glass beads. The 9<sup>th</sup> century

A.D. chiefly burial tomb in Igbo-Ukwu yielded beads from both local and foreign sources. Recently, beads have made a come-back on the modern fashion scene in Nigeria in materials ranging from semi-precious stones to glass and plastic.

The head was, and still is, the focus of adornment in the form of coiffure, jewellery and head-gear. In the past, women's hairstyles could be indicators of age, marital and social status and religious affiliation. In Yoruba thought, the head was regarded as the seat of one's personal destiny and had to be treated with care and respect at all times. Unkempt hair was the sign of a disordered mind.

It is not possible to do justice to this monumental work in a short review. Suffice it to say that for breadth of coverage of Nigerian dress, it has no equal! This book is a tribute to the scholarship and devotion of Dr. Dani Lyndersay and to the dynamism and creativity of the Nigerian peoples who inspired it. It deserves a place on the bookshelf of everyone who is interested in Nigerian culture.

— Pat Oyelola