

Isi-Agu Printed Fabric A Fashion Signifier On Pop Culture

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Abstract

Isi-Agu(meaning Lion Head) is an industrial printed fabric embellished with lion symbol/motif that has broken social boundaries between the **High Culture** and **Pop Culture** fashion. The traditional soft texture Isi-agu cloth was a royal monopoly and an aristocratic dress with a strong sense of the historicity of the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria. It represents the prominent symbol of leadership, strong future, and lion symbol being a vehicle of communication expresses a culturally understood visual language in the Igbo region. However, it has influenced Pop culture fashion due to innovative technology, effective mass media, and cheaper versions that exhibit excellent colour schemes and designs. The study seeks to understand what influenced pop culture fashion trends, their acceptance, design concept, and popularization. The essence is to encourage the production of cheaper Isi-agu durable fabrics, higher patronage amongst the younger generation, the expression of creativity, and thus innovativeness. The study employs a descriptive research method and library information. It is essential to promote the fashion and textile industries in Nigeria.

Keywords: Isi-agu, lion head, pop culture, Ide Iche, Nollywood

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria textiles, whether hand-woven, factory-printed, stamped, embroidered, or resist-dyed; the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria *Isi-agu* industrial printed fabrics is arguably the most remarkable and visually stunning fashion signifier of their material culture. The *Isi-agu*, also called Chieftaincy, a distinct pull-over tunic shirt (long or short-sleeved) similar to the long caped garments, a modification of Victorian English shirt and Portuguese Catholic priests worn in the 1880s by Europeans along the coasts of Biafra and bonny kingdom (Fig. 1). It is a cultural phenomenon that expresses the Igbo people's values of strength, political power, intellectualism, courage, and prestige. A conceptualization of dress culture that is uncommon in Africa, where rare textiles, wealth, elegance, colour coordination became its hallmarks and power are intertwined in the clothing iconography has influenced Pop culture.

Textiles across different cultures are a form of communication as an individual's appearance is the ticket to transmit non-verbal communication signals that indicate social stature, values, and lifestyle (Saravanan, 2000). Currently, *Isi-agu* fabric has influenced Pop culture fashion due to the adaptability of material, availability and affordability, cultural and emotional preferences, excellent craftsmanship, and increasing purchase power from the younger generation. Culture is integrated and dynamic and consumer culture is driven by aspirations that diminish the gap between the wealthy and economically volatile sections as regards the accepted, rejected, and the adopted trend. The availability, accessibility, and affordability of the new version of Isi-agu fabric have increased patronage and mass consumption amongst the younger generation. This has resulted in breaking social boundaries between high culture and pop culture because fashion is nothing but a constantly changing trend.

Fashion globally is influenced by cultural changes, modernization, and technological innovation while fashion trends are influenced by popular figures in a culture like musicians, celebrities, and high profile individuals: Nollywood artists, social media personality, model, screenwriter, film producer, business and television personalities. As such, fashion icons are an important component that defines the shape of any popular culture.

This paper, therefore, focuses on understanding *Isi-agu* printed fabric sociological significance on pop culture trend, patronage, consumption, and design concept embellished in form of the lion iconography for socialization, group solidarity, cultural authentication, and identification. It investigates how traditional *Isi-agu* cloth that was a royal monopoly, aristocratic dress with a strong sense of historicity that was adopted and adapted; restricted to nobility and titled Chiefs (Ide Iche), a powerful cohesion in traditional Igbo paradigm used for weddings and religious activities, now have cheaper versions used for, **Pop culture** fashion, customized haute

culture, and others conceivable item of dress. The factors that influenced this fashion trend, its acceptance, design concept, and popularization is what this paper investigates using the descriptive research method and library information.

Isi-agu Attire Symbol/Motif

Cultural meaning is expressed in *Isi-agu* fabric through motif (lion symbol), colour scheme, and the printing technique process. Cheesman, (2007) and Heckman, (2003) attest that symbolism, which is developed by the culture over time, communicates culturally understood visual language such as cultural beliefs, history, politics, status, and as well as the culturally specific symbolic communication of dress. Roberts (1993) affirms that the symbolism in *Isi-agu* attire implies a hierarchy of privilege and dependency since lions are known fighters when it comes to bouts for dominance. *Isi-agu* was **gifted** to warriors, battle-tested cloth as the name implies **OgbuAgu**, for those who have killed *Agu* (leopard and lion). This is how passionate the relationship between the Igbo and lion is.



Title: Traditional *Isi-agu* Etibo Shirt
Medium: Industrial Printed *Isi-agu* Fabric
Courtesy: Iheanyi Igboko (1860)

Fig. 1.



Title: Chieftaincy *Isi-Agu* Attire
Medium: Printed *Isi-Agu* Attire
Courtesy: Ndidi Enyinda (2020)

Fig. 2.

Similarly, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, lion symbols encased in circles, in brick repeat patterns are printed on dyed cotton fabric called *shweshwe*. Also, in Nigeria, the Ibibio *Ukara* cloth containing *Nsibidi* ideograms are worn by members of the *Ekpe* or *Mgbe* society. *Ukara* cloth conveys the sanctities and notability of the *Ekpe*-leopard secret society domiciled in *Uruan*, Akwa Ibom State, the *Efiks* of Cross River State, Abia and Imo States. In these regions, the leopard, crocodile, and python symbols take on a different connotation, indicating social status, wealth, and patriarchal power. This indicates that Lion and Leopard's zoomorphic motif play significant roles in fabric embellishment in different geographical location globally.



Title: Nsibidi Symbols
Medium: Ideographic Writing Technique
Courtesy: Pinterest (2020)

Fig. 3.

Leopard (*Agu*) head, lion (*Odum*) head, and tiger head are the Zoomorphic motifs on the soft texture, velveteen /woolen based printed *Isi-agu*. Leopard is known for strength, agility, boldness, and courage but Enyinda (2020) observes that the leopard motif has since disappeared in favour of the lion motif on the notion that *Odumnaegbuagu* (A lion kills a leopard) because in ancient cultures, legends, mythology, astrology,

literature, the lion has been portrayed as the symbol of power, nobility, strength, courage, and majesty. Despite this knowledge, the lion has no special recognition in Igbo cultural systems. Enyinda (2020) confirms that Leopard was more suited to Igbo rain forest while the lion prefers the savannah or grasslands and the savannah vegetation does not exist in Igboland. Igboid exists in the lowland rainforest of the Northern Igbo region. However, the tiger head and feline (cat species) design was a recent introduction.

In this regard, Madukasi (2018) asserts that the lion symbol embellished on the *Isi-agu* attire did not become an Igbo man's cultural symbology by mere chance but for the singular reason that a lion is traditionally known for its fearlessness, power, strength and as the king of jungle typifies the authentic identity of the Igbo race. Stories always portray lions tackling leopard, tiger, jaguar, and other ferocious, powerful animals with success. Eze (2016) also buttresses that the Igbo are built strong, bold, and courageous and that is why the lion insignia is always ingrained in the Igbo aesthetics to distinguish an Igbo titled man from a commoner in a specific social, secular or religious convocation. As it represents the personage of the high and noble character, the prominent symbol of leadership, strong future, and cultural heritage. Similarly, the lion symbol has been associated with notable icons as Eze says:

In much the same way, most medieval warriors Kings who were reputed for their bravery were affectionately nicknamed "Lion". Like King Richard of England (Richard the Lion Heart), King Henry of Germany (Henry the Lion), and the Duke of Saxony who was known as William the Lion (2017: 17).

This concept of symbol made Clifford Geertz conceive of culture as a text (Crapanzano, 1986: 68-76) which set out as a vehicle for conception (Geertz). Ricoeur (1995) buttresses symbol as a multiple meaning expression characterized by a hidden logic of double reference. Aniakor (1997) defines a symbol as a contraction of experience, a condensed quality message built into a level of graphic quality symbols that train the target audience more directly. A symbol is also a conventional representation of an object, function, or process that convey messages in words, pictorial image or symbol in various units, shape and colour combination like the Cross, (a sign of infinite love), the Ankh, (key of life). These facts indicate that various symbolic forms give several meanings and such meanings would equally be given at different segments depending upon the ability and capability of the interpreter's level of consciousness and intelligence (Nabofa, 1994: 6). As such, *Isi-agu* lion symbol being a vehicle of communication expresses a culturally understood visual language in the Igbo region.

A motif, on the other hand, is the most basic unit, a source of inspiration, and a recurring repeat pattern from which a design is created. Musa (2019) defines a motif as an idea, pattern, image, or theme that is repeated. That is, a pattern is a repetition of specific visual elements either singular or a combination of different motifs (aquatic motif, floral motif, zoomorphic motif, or inanimate motif) to create a design using block, mirror, brick, half-brick, diamond, orgy, face to face, or turning repeat pattern. Motifs are arranged in different repeat to create a pattern whereas patterns are repeated to create a design but, symbols point beyond themselves to something more than the immediate meaning while textiles iconography according to Silverman (2008) functions as recurring motifs respond to one another in aesthetic, meaning, and sentence structure.

A symbol may appear once or twice in an artwork, whereas a motif is a recurring narrative element with symbolic significance used to embellish fabric surface as reinforcement. Therefore, George Mead and Charles Cooley's (1920) theory of symbolic interactionism synonymous with symbols in the social institution of human interaction argues that people's selves are social products, but that these selves are also purposive and creative. Symbolic interactionism provides opportunities that the Igbos will not react automatically to special stimuli, just through their constructive processes use symbols to define their actions and meanings because meaning, is stimulated through adjustable social processes through communication between individuals and their environment.

The lion symbol's meaning is determined by its history and purpose in *Isi-agu* design, and the relationship among the Igbos within a given society, communicating the exchange of meaning through language, interpretation, and symbols. No wonder Jung (1970) attests further that symbols are meaningless in themselves; they equally have acquired recognizable meanings through common usage or even deliberate intent. Especially, when people ascribe a symbolic stereotype on the motif of clothing while adorning the cloth, the characteristic, strength, and ability symbolized by the clothing have measurable effects on the psychological states and performance because the symbols themselves represent the continued role of tradition (Gibson & Dunbar-Hall, 2006). However, *Isi-agu* is contemporary worn by all tribes not necessarily an Igbo outfit, the new designs are used for mass-production for mass-consumption amongst the younger generation.

Isi-agu Designs



Red *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 4.



Cream *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 5.



Green *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 6.



Blue *Isi-Agu* Design
Fig. 7.



Black *Isi-Agu* Design
Fig. 8.



Peach *Isi-Agu* Design
Fig. 9.

Courtesy: Bella Naija (2000)

Influence of Pop Culture on *Isi-agu* Fabric

Storey, (2019) defines pop culture as a set of practices, beliefs, and objects that are dominant or prevalent in a society at a given time. Partly imposed on by the dominant classes, and partly resisted or changed by the subordinate classes. **Pop** is a short name for **Popular**, pop culture is also known as popular culture or mass culture. It refers in general to the traditions and material culture of a particular society (Crossman, 2019). The above definitions indicate pop culture as cultural traditions of the people but pop culture is more than cultural products; it is a phenomenon that reflects our values and arises with active engagement with it.

Godsil, MacFarlane & Sheppard (2015), define pop culture as those elements of culture capable of sustaining and perpetuating themselves based on endorsement and participation by a large group of people through their agency. Also, Madeon Meadbuttresses that pop culture also encompasses the activities and feelings produced as a result of interaction with these dominant objects. Contemporarily, Storey confirms the distinction between authentic versus commercial is blurred because the presence of mass media toward mass accessibility aimed particularly at the younger people because pop culture has some essential characteristics: it is dynamically expressive, accessible, affordable, accumulative, and it is transmissivity.

The media serve as cultural expressions and major forms of entertainment and knowledge among the youths and this easy accessibility to media enables them to communicate directly to manufacture content, accept it, discard it or artistically recreate its aesthetic appeal. As such, the extension and consumption of *Isi-agu* fabric to younger consumers, offered an emerging market for trendy fashion in the mainstream of Igbo's lifestyle, as pop culture is a powerful force that reflects our culture and diverse fashionable dresses has a way of influencing an individual's attitude toward content and culture.

The Pop-Culture Movement

The **Pop-culture** movement which combined the likes of common people and **popular culture** was coined in the 19th century, it means the **cultural tradition** of the people against the **Official culture** of the **upper classes**. Pop culture was discovered by a British curator Lawrence Reginald Alloway in 1955. He articulated that Pop art is 'art about popular culture' rather than 'the art of popular culture' (Encyclopedia

Britannica). Alloway's pluralistic sense of critical priorities was based on the understanding that popular culture and official culture should be seen as a set of evolving culture codes and practices that are speculative rather than contemplative.

However, The South-South and Eastern Nigeria clothing: *Ankara, Abada, Aso-oke, Adire, George, peletebite, fimatebite, Akwete, AkwaOcha, and Isi-agu*, and other African textiles Kente and Adinkra produced in Ghana and Bogolanfina produced in Mali create an effortless illusion of customized proportioned figure, class, and exclusivity. Some of these textiles have been elevated to the status of national dresses, giving prestige and authority to the personage, from prominent kings to flamboyant Festus Samuel Okotie-Ebor (1912-1966), then Minister of Finance in the 60s was a dresser and fashionable stylish impressionist. He was nicknamed Omimi-Ejor translated as the man with long features and flowing George wrappers to Dr. Michael Iheonukara Okpara (1920-1984) a politician and the Premier of Eastern Nigeria during the First Republic, from 1959-1966, who wore *Isi-agu* attire to many public functions. This cultural renaissance was pushed forward to the former Vice President, Dr. Alex Ifeanyi Chukwu Ekwueme, Valerian Maduka Okeke a prelate who serves as the Archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha and others believed to have popularized the wearing of *Isi-agu* attire since the early 1970s. *Isi-agu* cloth is used to sew *Etibo, Woko, Angapu, and OpuSeti* meaning (Big shirt), *Doni Pali, and Doni* the longer version of *Etibo*. When prominent personalities wear *Isi-agu* attire, it expresses the value of identity, cultural authentication, and incorporation.



Title: Chieftancy Ceremony
Medium: Printing *Isi-agu* Fabric
Courtesy: Valerian M. Okeke (2018)
Fig. 10.

This prestige item of royalty according to Renne (1995) has become an integral part of civilized behavior that is projecting African philosophy because fashion is influenced by cultural and social changes such as modernization, art, technological innovation, and vogue influenced by popular icons in the society. *Isi-agu* attire became trending amongst the youths when the host of Big Brother Naija season 3 (Double Wahala) Chukwuebuka Obi-Uchendu a Nigerian lawyer and social media personality from Okija in Anambra State, showed up at the live show in an aesthetically appealing modernized cream *Isi-agu* (Etibo) outfit. He complemented his dressing with coral beads on his neck and wrist, a wool cream cap to match, and a customized lion head on his shoulder (coming to America inspired), a cream trouser combination, and slippers with the lion head insignia embellished on it.



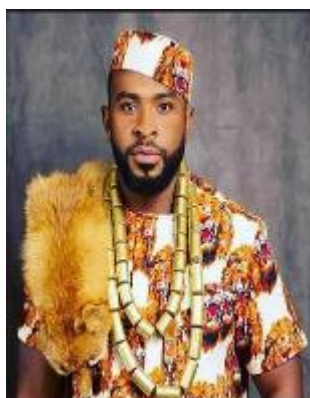
Title: Chukwuebuka Obi-Uchendu Attire
Medium: Industrial Printed Isi-agu
Courtesy: BellaNaija (2020)
Fig. 11.

This redesigned and befitting *Isi-agu* outfit set forth pop culture fashion trend amongst youths due to the television high profile personality (the wearer), its association with commercial products and paraphernalia, marketing, and dissemination process (social media).

The composition of the nonconventional elements that constitute this fashion concept: the ornamentation, embellishments, and excellent craftsmanship continue to evoke individual identity and appreciation of aesthetic experiences thus drawing a line of demarcation between the existing traditional styles. This concept undoubtedly inspired different *Isi-agu* styles amongst the younger generation. These Ebuka's customized dresses portray a visual cultural language and style of dressing that models the consumer's **Identity** in a specific environment. A reflection of African artistic design that unmistakably retains their African character and remains as a door through which individual Igbo-ness passes into an assemblage of Igbo and worldwide community (Ojukwu, 2002: v).

Ebuka as a popular social media personality; became a force to reckon within the fashion industry as designated people especially the prestige in the society like the multitalented Nigerian Highlife Afro musician Flavour N'abania, the Nigerian actor and producer, Enyinna Nwigwe, Nollywood actresses: Tonto Dikeh, Chacha Eke Faani, Chizzy Alich, and others express their value of identity and incorporation by adorning *Isi-agu* attires for events. Thus, establishing value-expressive attitudes function which maintains that as the living conditions, the environment, and the cognitive engagement in the life of a person changes simultaneously; the attitudinal expressions also change. Especially, the creation of personal identity (self-image and self-expression) has assumed absolute importance amongst the new generation and has paved way for uniqueness and social conformation.

Chukwuebuka Obi-Uchendu's Attire and other Nollywood Personalities



Enyinna Nwigwe Attire
Fig. 12.



Chacha Faani Family Attire
Fig. 13.



Flavour & Chidinma Attire
Fig. 14.



Tonte Dike Attire
Fig. 15.



Ebuka Obi-Uchendu Attire
Fig. 16.



Nollywood Model
Fig. 17.

Social Agenda of Isi-Agu Pop Culture Trends

High profile personalities, musicians, celebrities evocative styles provoked, inspired, and initiates creative feelings aesthetically. This influences communication and cognitive engagement amongst the younger people because pop culture is heavily influenced in modern times by mass media: film, dance, television, music, cyberculture, politics, fashion, and technology that are consumed by the majority of the society. Therefore, the creation of **Personal Identity** appearance has triggered artistic creativity and individuality; has come into fashion vogue since clothing and fashion are carriers of a wide range of ideological meanings.

The fact is nonverbal communication messages transmitted through fashion symbols express emotion or an illusion and communicating *Isi-agu* fabric in the form of dress and clothing as appearance; is a social etiquette and affective form of nonverbal communication (Saravanna: 2000). The younger generation examines a fashion statement for its social identification, relevance, and expressions since fashion is an interactive process and clothing behaviors are determined by pragmatic criteria. As such, Dovelung (2014) affirms that pop culture molds group and individual identities by illustrating behavioral norms, social boundaries, and displaying rituals that define the group while Kidd (2007) stresses it serves as pedagogical functions, providing a conduit for the meaning formation and knowledge acquisition. In other words, pop culture plays a significant role in determining how the youth define their own and other identity groups. That is, the term indicates an authentic culture of the people: a culture of the people for the people. As the culture of the people, pop culture in fashion is determined by the interaction between peoples' style of dress. As such, the nature of the fabric and accessibility of cheaper versions of *Isi-agu* fabrics are essential for socialization, self-identification, and cultural authentication amongst the youths.

The Nature of the Fabrics and Their Usage

Significant changes have taken place in the traditional industrial printed culture-based *Isi-agu* fabric embellished with fierce-looking lion's head and are produced with high-quality suede materials which make them expensive. This change is a result of innovative technological advancement, enhanced aesthetics, redesigning, manufacturing, and marketing of pop-culture *Isi-agu* fabrics. The most important change is related to the introduction of hi-tech spinning machines and advanced manufacturing systems. Apart from the six colour-way of Red, Blue, Black, Green, Cream, and Peach background with a golden effect to enhance aesthetic, the traditional designs remain rigid. But the pop culture *Isi-agu* is embellished with more zoomorphic motifs (antelope, cat, birds, reindeer, elephant, horses, dogs, tigers), intricate background, half-drop repeat patterns, and cool and warm hues. The evocative introduction of flamboyant hues, connecting of background, and embellishment on cotton material a less expensive material has stimulated patronage amongst generation Z.

The ability to afford and adorn the pop culture *Isi-agu* the **ELITE** affects the generation Z unclothed cognition in terms of psychological processes like emotions, self-evaluations, attitudes, mood, confidence, and even interpersonal interactions. Inadvertently, the adorning of *Isi-agu* among the generation Z exudes personality traits, social status, and cultural relevance. The style, material, colour scheme, and excellent craftsmanship express different emotions. The fabrics are used to sew comfortable and distinctive styles such as fitted dresses, wedding gowns, fashionable suits and jackets, loose dresses, fitted shorts, skirts and blouses, Etibo, Woko, Doni Pali, Senator, and Don. This up-gradation of technologies, innovation, and creativity has changed the traditional *Isi-agu* toward trending pop culture fashion. These styles are highly sophisticated and are blended with quality materials and accessories that create opulence: the complexity and the manipulation of dress components in fashionable ways to determine the trend. while others are expressed in beautifully

combined warm and cool hues, and embroidery and some come with short while others with trousers or wrappers.

Pop Culture *Isi-agu* Fabrics



Reindeer *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 18.



Antelope *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 19.



Lion Head *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 20.



Dog *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 21.



Reindeer Head *Isi-agu* Design
Fig. 22.



Horse Head *Isi-Agu* Design
Fig. 23.

Pop Culture *Isi-agu* Trending Styles



Isi-Agu Wedding Style
Fig. 24.



The Bride Back View
Fig. 25.



Isi-Agu Wedding Gown
Fig. 26.



Westernized *Isi-Agu* Jacket Fig. 27. *Isi-Agu* Etibo Shirt Fig. 28. *Isi-Agu* Children's Attire Fig. 29.

Most importantly, both the wealthy and less privileged can adorn *Isi-agu* fabric to any social functions comfortably without class/social segregation and still be culturally relevant because of the symbolic meaning associated with the lion iconography. 'What a strange power there is in clothing' Isaac Basheus Singer asserts that clothes that people wear hold considerable power and has an impact on self-perception. Thus, the functionality and application of the pop-cultural *Isi-agu* versions are greater and more important in the history of the high culture *Isi-agu* fabric.

II. CONCLUSION

The paper captioned the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigerian *Isi-agu* printed fabric as fashion signifier on Pop culture. Globally, fashion anticipates people's culture, traditions, and values, and elegance which is a state of the mind. Fashion has influenced and will continue to be a reflection of society and current events, *Isi-agu* styles that were distinguished into elite fashion decade past are now experiencing shift values in terms of cultural complexities and paradigm, styles transiting from one level of artistic conception to varying levels of functions. Both the expensive and cheaper *Isi-agu* fabric is malleable, it lends itself to wrapping, draping, and swathing as well as can suggest, enhance aesthetic and attract attention to what it adorns.

The fact is, Chukwuebuka Obi-Uchendu of Big Brother Naija season 3 (Double Wahala) customized *Isi-agu* attires has revolutionized the Popular culture as it portrays a visual cultural language, style, and a reflection of African artistic design that unmistakably retains an African character and an individual **Identity**. Especially with the composition of the nonconventional elements that constitute the fashion concept: the ornamentation, embellishments, excellent craftsmanship, and styles that continue to evoke individual identity and appreciation of aesthetic experiences amongst the younger generation. Thus, high personalities in the society have opened up innovative and creative *Isi-agu* trending pop culture fashion and this collection of ideas has permeated the younger generation lifestyles creating: self-identification, socialization, and cultural authentication.

While the lion symbolism in *Isi-agu* attire distinctively represents so many ideologies that are much deeper and more significant historically and culturally, the repeatedly recurring lion head motif assists to comprehend the underlying messages intend to communicate to the high culture and pop culture *Isi-agu* fabrics. This paper maintains that technological innovations, effective mass media, enhanced aesthetics, and affordability are the reason for greater freedom, expression of creativity, and thus innovativeness.

As culture changes, the culture-based *Isi-agu* fashion changes to promote people's nationality, cultural authentication, the symbol of dignity and social prestige, and the transmission of culture to the world. Both the traditional and pop culture *Isi-agu* printed fabric will never be static, it remains the mirror of the time in which we live and a translation of the future.

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