



COMMUNAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL MEMORY: THE PLACE OF TRADITIONAL ATTIRE AMONG THE HAM PEOPLE

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Abstract

Traditional attire is one of the most enduring expressions of cultural identity and collective memory in African societies. Among the Ham people of Southern Kaduna, Nigeria, traditional dress serves not only as clothing but also as a symbol of ancestral heritage, communal values, historical consciousness, and ethnic identity. However, globalization, modernization, urbanization, Christianity, and socio-economic changes have significantly altered indigenous dressing practices, threatening the continuity of Ham cultural heritage. While previous studies have examined dress and identity among major Nigerian ethnic groups, limited scholarly attention has been given to the cultural significance of Ham traditional attire. This study addresses this gap by investigating how traditional attire functions as material culture that preserves and transmits communal identity across generations. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach supported by interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis, and archival sources, the study interprets its findings through Afrocentric theoretical perspectives. It argues that Ham traditional attire strengthens social cohesion, communicates identity and moral values, and preserves historical memory. The study concludes that its preservation requires collaborative efforts involving traditional institutions, educational systems, churches, government agencies, cultural organizations, and younger generations through both conventional and digital strategies.

Keywords: Communal identity, cultural memory, traditional attire, material culture, African ethics, cultural preservation.



Introduction

Culture forms the foundation of every society by preserving its history, values, beliefs and collective identity across generations. It comprises both tangible and intangible elements such as language, customs, religion, festivals, oral traditions, and material artefacts that define a people's way of life (Falola, 2018; Woodward, 2022). Among these cultural expressions, traditional attire occupies a unique position because it embodies historical memory, social identity, moral values, and indigenous knowledge. Across African societies, traditional clothing extends beyond its functional purpose to serve as a visible symbol of communal belonging, cultural continuity, and shared heritage. It communicates social status, age, gender, authority, and spiritual affiliation while preserving indigenous aesthetics and values through ceremonies such as marriages, festivals, coronations, and funerals (Arthur, 2017; Kaiser, 2019). This study is anchored on Afrocentric Theory, which emphasizes the interpretation of African cultures from African perspectives rather than Eurocentric viewpoints. Asante (2003) argues that African cultural institutions, including traditional attire, should be understood as authentic expressions of indigenous knowledge, history, spirituality, and communal values. From this perspective, traditional attire functions as a cultural archive that preserves historical memory, reinforces identity, and transmits cultural values from one generation to another. Afrocentric Theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for understanding the significance of indigenous clothing within the social and historical context of African communities. Among the Ham people of Southern Kaduna, traditional attire remains an important symbol of ethnic identity and cultural continuity. The Ham possess a rich cultural heritage expressed through the Hyam language, traditional institutions, festivals, music, dance, and distinctive ceremonial dress (Hayab, 2016; Chom, 2018). Their traditional attire, characterized by symbolic colours, weaving patterns, beads, and ceremonial accessories, reflects values such as dignity, unity, courage, fertility, and ancestral heritage. The introduction of the contemporary Ham fabric in 2014, featuring the distinctive maroon, yellow, and green colours, further demonstrates the community's commitment to preserving its cultural identity while adapting to contemporary realities.

Despite rapid modernization, urbanization, Western education, and globalization, traditional attire continues to serve as an important expression of Ham cultural resilience and communal identity. However, existing studies on Nigerian traditional attire have focused predominantly on major ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, and Fulani, with limited scholarly attention devoted to the Ham people. Consequently, the cultural meanings and historical significance of Ham traditional attire remain insufficiently documented. This study addresses this gap by examining the role of traditional attire in preserving communal identity and cultural memory among the Ham people of Southern Kaduna. Guided by Afrocentric Theory, the study argues that Ham traditional attire is not merely ceremonial clothing but a living repository of indigenous history, cultural values, artistic creativity, and communal identity. By foregrounding the experiences of the Ham, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on African material culture and highlights the importance of preserving indigenous heritage in the face of contemporary social transformation.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional attire has historically functioned as one of the most important symbols of indigenous identity among the Ham people of Southern Kaduna. Beyond its decorative and practical purposes, it embodies historical experiences, social values, artistic creativity, and communal relationships



that distinguish the Ham from neighbouring ethnic groups. Through its use during festivals, marriages, funerals, and traditional ceremonies, indigenous attire has preserved cultural memory and strengthened communal cohesion for generations. However, contemporary social transformations have significantly altered traditional dressing practices. Urbanization, globalization, formal education, Christianity, migration, technological advancement, and the influence of Western fashion have contributed to the declining everyday use of indigenous attire, particularly among younger generations. Traditional clothing is increasingly viewed as ceremonial rather than an essential aspect of daily cultural life. This development threatens the gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge embedded in traditional attire, including its symbolic meanings, craftsmanship, historical significance, and ethical values. Although considerable research has been conducted on traditional attire among Nigerian major ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, relatively little scholarly attention has focused on the Ham people. Existing studies on Ham society have concentrated primarily on language, migration, political organization, festivals, and religious transformation, leaving the relationship between traditional attire, communal identity, and cultural memory insufficiently explored. Consequently, there is a need for a focused study that examines how Ham traditional attire continues to preserve communal identity and cultural memory despite contemporary social change.

Theoretical Framework: Afrocentric Theory

This study is anchored on Afrocentric Theory, developed principally by Molefi Kete Asante (1987, 2003). Afrocentricity emerged as an intellectual response to Eurocentric interpretations that marginalized African cultures, histories, and knowledge systems. The theory argues that African societies should be studied from their own historical experiences, cultural values, philosophical traditions, and indigenous epistemologies rather than through external frameworks that often distort African realities. According to Asante (2003), Afrocentricity places African people at the centre of the analysis of African experiences. Rather than viewing African societies as peripheral to world civilization, Afrocentric Theory recognizes Africa as possessing sophisticated systems of governance, ethics, religion, technology, aesthetics, and material culture that deserve independent scholarly interpretation. The theory therefore rejects colonial assumptions that regarded African cultural practices merely as folklore or relics of a primitive past.

One of the central assumptions of Afrocentric Theory is that indigenous knowledge systems are legitimate sources of scientific and historical understanding. African oral traditions, festivals, rituals, indigenous technologies, artistic expressions, and material culture are therefore regarded as authentic repositories of knowledge rather than secondary sources requiring validation from Western scholarship (Dei, 2020). This position is particularly relevant for the Ham people because much of their history has been preserved through oral traditions, cultural festivals, traditional institutions, and material objects rather than extensive written documentation. Afrocentric scholars further emphasize that African identity is fundamentally communal. Individual identity is understood within networks of family, kinship, ancestry, and community. Consequently, cultural artefacts including traditional attire perform important social functions by expressing collective identity, reinforcing communal values, and preserving ancestral memory. Traditional attire is therefore interpreted not simply as clothing but as an embodiment of historical consciousness, spirituality, indigenous aesthetics, environmental adaptation, and moral responsibility.



The theory also highlights the importance of recovering indigenous cultural heritage that was marginalized during colonialism. Colonial administration and missionary activities often promoted Western clothing as symbols of civilization while portraying African dress as inferior. Afrocentric Theory challenges these narratives by demonstrating that indigenous attire reflects complex systems of artistic creativity, technological innovation, environmental knowledge, and cultural symbolism. For the Ham people, traditional attire represents centuries of accumulated knowledge in weaving, colour symbolism, craftsmanship, ceremonial practices, and communal organization. Recent African scholars have expanded Afrocentric Theory beyond its original formulation. Dei (2020) argues that African knowledge systems should guide contemporary research on indigenous communities because they preserve alternative ways of understanding history, ethics, and development. Similarly, Chilisa (2020) advocates indigenous research methodologies that privilege community voices, oral histories, and local interpretations over externally imposed analytical frameworks. These perspectives reinforce the relevance of Afrocentric Theory for studies involving minority ethnic communities such as the Ham, whose cultural heritage remains underrepresented in mainstream academic literature.

The theory is particularly appropriate for this study because it enables Ham traditional attire to be interpreted from the perspective of Ham cultural values rather than external aesthetic standards. Instead of reducing indigenous clothing to decorative apparel, Afrocentric Theory recognizes it as a repository of communal identity, historical memory, indigenous technology, artistic excellence, ethical values, and ancestral heritage. It also validates the use of oral traditions, community narratives, local archival materials, and indigenous historical accounts as credible sources of knowledge in reconstructing the historical significance of Ham traditional attire.

Relevance of Afrocentric Theory to the Study

Afrocentric Theory provides the conceptual foundation for understanding the significance of traditional attire among the Ham people in several important ways:

1. It interprets Ham traditional attire as an authentic expression of African identity rather than as a ceremonial costume or folkloric artifact.
2. It recognizes traditional attire as a repository of indigenous knowledge, craftsmanship, artistic creativity, and historical consciousness preserved through generations.
3. It validates oral traditions, local historical narratives, Ham cultural publications, and indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate academic sources.
4. It explains how traditional attire reinforces communal identity by strengthening social cohesion, kinship relationships, and collective memory.
5. It demonstrates that preserving Ham traditional attire is both a cultural responsibility and an ethical obligation necessary for sustaining indigenous heritage in the face of modernization and globalization.

Accordingly, Afrocentric Theory offers the most appropriate framework for explaining how traditional attire continues to preserve communal identity and cultural memory among the Ham people of Southern Kaduna while contributing to broader discussions on African material culture, heritage preservation, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research objective, which sought to examine how traditional attire preserves communal identity and cultural memory among the Ham people of Southern Kaduna. The findings are derived from documentary evidence, oral traditions, participant observation, archival materials, and existing scholarly literature. The discussion is organized thematically and interpreted within the framework of Afrocentric Theory, which emphasizes the centrality of indigenous knowledge systems, cultural symbols, and African historical experiences in understanding African societies (Asante, 2003; Dei, 2020). The findings reveal that Ham traditional attire is much more than ceremonial clothing. It functions as a repository of indigenous knowledge, a marker of ethnic identity, a transmitter of moral values, a symbol of traditional authority, and a living archive through which the Ham preserve their history and cultural heritage amid rapid social transformation.

Traditional Attire as a Marker of Communal Identity

One of the most significant findings of this study is that traditional attire remains one of the strongest visible expressions of Ham communal identity. Throughout the documentary materials and oral narratives consulted, respondents consistently described traditional attire as an outward manifestation of belonging to the Ham ethnic community. Wearing indigenous attire immediately identifies an individual as a member of the Ham irrespective of geographical location, occupation, educational background, or religious affiliation. This finding agrees with Arthur (2017), who argues that African traditional attire functions as a visual language through which communities communicate ethnic identity and social belonging. Likewise, Kaiser (2019) maintains that clothing is a social marker that enables individuals to negotiate identity within changing cultural environments.

Among the Ham, the widespread adoption of the maroon, yellow, and green cultural fabric has strengthened ethnic consciousness both within Southern Kaduna and among Ham communities living in other parts of Nigeria. During cultural festivals, weddings, church programmes, political meetings, and academic gatherings, members deliberately wear the Ham fabric to express solidarity and collective identity. Participant observation further revealed that many young professionals who ordinarily wear Western clothing intentionally change into traditional attire during important community functions. This demonstrates that traditional attire remains an enduring symbol of Ham identity despite increasing modernization.

From an Afrocentric perspective, these findings support Asante's (2003) assertion that indigenous cultural symbols remain central to African identity because they preserve the historical experiences and philosophical values of the community.

Traditional Attire as a Repository of Cultural Memory

The study further found that traditional attire functions as an important repository of cultural memory among the Ham people. Rather than representing mere decorative clothing, indigenous attire embodies collective historical experiences preserved through oral traditions, ceremonies, festivals, and traditional institutions. Community elders explained that the meanings attached to colours, beads, ceremonial garments, and traditional accessories are transmitted from one generation to another during weddings, funerals, coronations, and annual cultural festivals. These ceremonies provide opportunities for elders to educate younger members about Ham history,



migration traditions, family heritage, and communal values. This finding supports Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory, which argues that societies preserve historical consciousness through enduring cultural institutions rather than through written records alone. Similarly, Erll (2020) observes that cultural memory survives because communities continually reinterpret their traditions within contemporary contexts.

The annual Tuk Ham Cultural Festival emerged as one of the most important institutions for preserving cultural memory. During the festival, traditional attire accompanies storytelling, indigenous music, dances, historical performances, and public recognition of traditional institutions. Young participants not only wear indigenous clothing but also learn the historical significance attached to various ceremonial garments and cultural symbols. These findings also agree with Falola (2018), who maintains that African societies preserve historical consciousness through festivals, indigenous technologies, oral traditions, and material culture.

Traditional Attire and the Preservation of Indigenous Moral Values

Another major finding is that traditional attire contributes significantly to the preservation of moral values within Ham society. Documentary evidence and oral traditions indicate that indigenous clothing has historically reflected virtues such as dignity, modesty, respect, discipline, responsibility, hospitality, and communal solidarity. Traditional attire is particularly associated with appropriate behaviour during marriages, funerals, coronations, religious ceremonies, and festivals. Elders consistently emphasize that wearing indigenous attire requires conduct that reflects honour upon one's family and community. Consequently, traditional clothing serves not merely as external appearance but also as a reminder of ethical obligations. This observation supports the communitarian philosophy articulated by Mbiti (1969), who argues that African identity is inseparable from communal moral responsibilities. Likewise, Metz (2018) contends that African ethics emphasize harmonious relationships, respect for elders, and collective responsibility. The findings therefore demonstrate that Ham traditional attire embodies ethical values that extend beyond aesthetics. It becomes a cultural mechanism through which acceptable social behaviour is reinforced within the community.

Traditional Attire and Traditional Leadership

The study also found that traditional attire plays an indispensable role in legitimizing traditional authority among the Ham people. Traditional rulers, district heads, clan leaders, and title holders possess distinctive ceremonial regalia that visibly differentiate them from ordinary members of society. These ceremonial garments are worn during coronations, festivals, dispute resolution, community meetings, and other public functions. The attire symbolizes continuity between present leadership and ancestral political institutions. Ham oral traditions indicate that leadership regalia are not merely decorative objects but represent communal trust, historical legitimacy, and cultural continuity. This finding supports Afigbo's (1981) argument that indigenous material culture preserves political history and institutional memory. Similarly, Ikime (1985) observes that traditional regalia throughout Nigeria provide important historical evidence regarding indigenous systems of governance before colonial rule.

The Impact of Christianity and Globalization

One important finding is that Christianity and globalization have transformed rather than eliminated Ham traditional attire. Missionary activities introduced Western clothing, particularly



within churches, schools, and formal employment. Urbanization and globalization further increased access to imported fabrics and international fashion trends. Consequently, Western attire gradually replaced indigenous clothing in everyday life. However, rather than disappearing, Ham traditional attire assumed new cultural functions. It is now predominantly worn during: Traditional marriages, Funeral ceremonies, Coronation rites, Church thanksgiving services, Christmas and Easter celebrations, Graduation ceremonies, Community development meetings, Cultural festivals and National celebrations.

This finding agrees with Woodward (2022), who argues that material culture continually adapts to changing historical realities while preserving symbolic meaning. Participant observation also revealed that churches increasingly encourage members to wear indigenous attire during harvests, thanksgiving services, and cultural celebrations, demonstrating the successful integration of Christianity and indigenous identity.

Contemporary Cultural Revival

The study found substantial evidence of deliberate efforts to revive Ham traditional attire. The establishment of the contemporary Ham cultural fabric represents one of the most successful indigenous cultural initiatives in recent decades. The findings indicate that the activities of the Ham Cultural Development Association (HCDA) have significantly contributed to promoting indigenous attire through cultural festivals, educational programmes, publications, and community mobilization. Similarly, social media has become an important platform for cultural promotion. Young Ham professionals regularly share photographs of themselves wearing traditional attire during weddings, graduations, festivals, and church events. Fashion designers have also incorporated Ham colours into contemporary styles attractive to younger generations. These developments demonstrate that cultural preservation is increasingly taking place through modern technologies rather than through isolation from contemporary society. The findings support Dei's (2020) argument that indigenous knowledge systems remain dynamic and capable of adapting to changing historical circumstances without losing their essential cultural significance.

Challenges to the Preservation of Ham Traditional Attire

Despite encouraging developments, the study identified several challenges confronting the preservation of Ham traditional attire.

The most significant challenges include: Globalization and Western fashion; Declining indigenous weaving and textile production; Limited documentation of Ham dressing traditions; Inadequate government support for cultural preservation; Increasing urban migration among young people; Declining knowledge of the symbolic meanings attached to traditional attire; Commercialization of indigenous clothing without adequate cultural education; and Insufficient academic research devoted specifically to Ham material culture.

These findings correspond with Harrison (2018), who argues that many indigenous heritage resources face increasing threats arising from modernization, changing lifestyles, and inadequate documentation. The study therefore confirms the urgent need for systematic documentation, museum exhibitions, digital archiving, curriculum development, and sustained community participation in preserving Ham cultural heritage.



Discussion of Findings

The findings collectively demonstrate that Ham traditional attire performs multiple interconnected functions extending far beyond clothing. It preserves communal identity by distinguishing members of the Ham community from neighbouring ethnic groups while strengthening solidarity during communal ceremonies. It simultaneously preserves cultural memory by transmitting historical knowledge, ancestral values, and indigenous philosophies through ceremonies, festivals, and oral traditions. The findings strongly support Afrocentric Theory, which argues that African societies preserve their history through indigenous institutions, symbols, and material culture (Asante, 2003). Ham traditional attire illustrates that clothing functions as an indigenous archive containing historical, ethical, political, artistic, and spiritual meanings accumulated over generations. The findings also affirm the work of Nigerian historians and anthropologists such as Afigbo (1981), Ikime (1985), and Falola (2018), who maintain that material culture constitutes an important historical source capable of preserving indigenous knowledge alongside oral traditions and written records.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that modernization has not destroyed Ham traditional attire but has transformed its functions. Instead of serving primarily as everyday clothing, it has become an important ceremonial symbol expressing ethnic pride, historical continuity, and cultural resilience. The introduction of the contemporary Ham cultural fabric exemplifies how indigenous communities creatively negotiate modernity while preserving essential aspects of their cultural identity. Overall, the findings reveal that traditional attire remains one of the most resilient institutions through which the Ham people preserve communal identity and cultural memory. Its continued relevance illustrates the capacity of indigenous African societies to adapt creatively to social change while maintaining strong connections with their historical heritage and moral values. These findings contribute to the growing scholarship on African material culture by demonstrating that traditional attire should be understood not merely as an element of fashion but as a dynamic cultural institution central to heritage preservation, identity formation, and the transmission of indigenous knowledge.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of traditional attire in preserving communal identity and cultural memory among the Ham people of Southern Kaduna. Drawing on Afrocentric Theory and evidence from documentary sources, oral traditions, participant observation, historical narratives, anthropological studies, and archival materials, it established that Ham traditional attire is far more than a form of clothing. It represents a vital expression of the community's history, indigenous knowledge, moral values, artistic creativity, political heritage, and collective identity. The distinctive maroon, yellow, and green cultural fabric serves as a visible symbol of Ham identity, fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion during weddings, coronations, funerals, church services, cultural festivals, and other communal events, both within Southern Kaduna and among the Ham diaspora. The study further revealed that traditional attire functions as an important repository of cultural memory by preserving ancestral traditions, migration histories, indigenous craftsmanship, and communal values across generations. Cultural events such as the Tuk Ham Festival and traditional ceremonies provide opportunities for elders to transmit historical knowledge and ethical principles to younger generations, making traditional attire a living archive of Ham heritage. Beyond its cultural significance, indigenous attire also promotes ethical values such as dignity, modesty, respect for elders, communal responsibility, discipline, hospitality, and



moral integrity, thereby reinforcing acceptable patterns of behaviour within the community. The findings also demonstrate that Ham traditional attire has successfully adapted to social and historical changes brought about by colonialism, Christianity, Western education, urbanization, and globalization. Rather than disappearing, it has evolved into an important ceremonial symbol that reflects both cultural continuity and adaptation. The emergence of the contemporary Ham cultural fabric illustrates the community's ability to preserve its historical identity while embracing modern expressions of culture. This supports the view that culture is dynamic, resilient, and capable of responding to changing circumstances without losing its essential values. Additionally, the study contributes to scholarship by addressing the limited academic attention given to the Ham people compared to larger Nigerian ethnic groups. Through the integration of indigenous oral traditions, historical records, and cultural studies, it enriches existing knowledge on minority ethnic communities, African material culture, and heritage preservation. At the same time, the study identifies significant challenges to the preservation of Ham traditional attire, including the decline of indigenous weaving, growing preference for Western fashion among youths, inadequate documentation, limited institutional support, commercialization without cultural education, and insufficient scholarly research. In conclusion, Ham traditional attire remains a dynamic cultural institution that preserves communal identity, historical consciousness, indigenous knowledge, and ethical values. Its continued relevance demonstrates the resilience of indigenous African cultures in adapting to modern realities while maintaining strong connections with their historical roots. Preserving Ham traditional attire should therefore be recognized not only as an act of cultural conservation but also as an ethical responsibility that safeguards Nigeria's cultural diversity and ensures the transmission of valuable cultural heritage to future generations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. There is a need to systematically document and digitally preserve Ham traditional attire, its history, symbolism, and cultural practices. Universities, the Ham Cultural Development Association (HCDA), traditional rulers, and researchers should collaborate to produce books, digital archives, documentaries, and museum collections. This will ensure the preservation and transmission of Ham cultural heritage to future generations.
2. Schools should incorporate Ham history and traditional attire into their educational programmes to strengthen cultural awareness among young people. Community leaders, churches, and youth organizations should encourage active participation in cultural festivals and traditional ceremonies. Supporting young designers will also promote innovation while preserving Ham cultural identity.
3. Government agencies, NGOs, and private organizations should provide financial and technical support for indigenous textile production. Greater investment should also be directed toward the Tuk Ham Cultural Festival as a platform for preserving traditional attire and indigenous arts. Such support will help sustain cultural values and local economic development.
4. Relevant government agencies should formulate policies and provide funding for the preservation of Ham cultural heritage. Establishing a Ham Cultural Heritage and Research Centre would serve as a museum, research institute, archival repository, and educational centre. This will strengthen institutional efforts toward safeguarding the community's cultural legacy.
5. Universities, research institutions, traditional authorities, and religious organizations should collaborate to preserve and promote Ham cultural heritage. More interdisciplinary studies on Ham history, ethics, language, festivals, and material culture should be encouraged. Such research will enrich scholarship and contribute to preserving Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage.



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