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Morolake Dairo

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Nigerian University Dress Codes: Markers of Tradition, Morality and Aspiration

Morolake Dairo

Manchester Fashion Institute (Manchester Metropolitan University), Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to give an overview of the fashion and dress cultures on Nigerian campuses. Through clothing, we see the various ways in which institutions and individuals engage with “tradition” and with an imagined professional future. The clothing rules on campuses also reveal the extent to which women are held responsible for sexual misconduct there. I show how the debates around clothing have been part of Nigerian universities since their founding.

Abstract in Yorùbá

Àròkọ yíí dàrò láti fún wa ní isọ nísókí nípa ìmúra àti àṣà-iwọṣọ tí ó lòdè ní ọgbà ọmọléèwé ti Orílẹ̀-èdè Nàìjíríà. Nípasẹ̀ ìmúra, a rí àwọn oríṣiíríṣíí ọ̀nà tí àwọn ilé-ẹ̀kọ́ àti àwọn ènìyàn n gbá bálo pèlú àṣà àti ọ̀nà tí a maa ẹ ní ọjọ iwájú fún àwọn ọ̀jọgbọ́n. Àkọlé yíí sì fí hàn bí ilàṅà iwọṣọ ní ọgbà ọmọléèwé tọka sí bí wọn ẹ maa n dá ọmọ obinrin akẹ̀kọ́ lẹbi fún ibáṣepọ̀ tó lódi sí ọ̀fin ní ilé-ẹ̀kọ́ gíga. Mo ẹ àfihàn àwọn àrìyànjiyàn tí ó maa n wáyé nípa tí aṣọ wíwọ̀ ní nínú àwọn ilé-ẹ̀kọ́ gíga Nàìjíríà láti igbà tí a ti dá wọn.

KEYWORDS

Fashion and dress; Nigerian universities; tradition and modernity; gender

Kókó-òrò

Imura ati àṣà-iwọṣọ; Ile-ẹkọ Giga Orílẹ̀-èdè Nàìjíríà; asa ati ode oni; ako ati abo

Nigerian university students are much like students everywhere: fashion leaders and creators of trends. But there is a wide range of styles and codes regulating the fashions one sees across the different types of universities. In this article, I analyse some of the unique features of Nigerian campus fashion and argue that the rules and regulations around fashion and clothing on Nigerian campuses show a tension between tradition and innovation, and that the future imagined by students’ clothing is often that of a subjective “projected professional self”.

The projected professional self is imagined and determined by the university, and is often outdated and out of touch with the norms in creative and technology industries. For many students, dress codes are viewed as an imposition by universities, and by limiting their choices, the codes are regarded as an infantilising force. When the first university in Nigeria, the University of Ibadan, was established in 1948, the discussions around dress codes expressed a battle between embracing colonialism and losing out on individual

CONTACT Morolake Dairo  m.dairo@mmu.ac.uk

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and unique cultures that were expressed through dress (Livsey 2017, 89–94). In his criticism of the dressing of students of the University of Ibadan, Eni Njoku, a lecturer at the university, described the wearing of Western attire such as shirts and blazers as being elitist. In those early years, the university was an almost all-male environment, and the few women who did attend were from affluent and educated families. Due to the imbalance in the gender mix in the population of students, it was recorded that female students kept a low profile on campus by wearing sober and plain clothing to prove their academic worth among the competitive horde of male students and mostly foreign lecturers (Livsey 2017, 95). The association between “modest” dressing among women students on campus and their right to be at university pre-empts the later introduction of dress codes, which have focused primarily on women’s bodies as disruptive.

Student dress codes were largely influenced by the political situation in postcolonial Nigeria. Tim Livsey (2017, 97), whose work has been very useful to my thinking, uses the University of Ibadan as a case study to illustrate the influence of British lecturers on impressionable Nigerian students in the areas of academia and religious beliefs as well as dress. Despite the humid climate, Livsey (*ibid.*, 100) notes that male students were proud to don woollen suits to maintain a certain air of dignity and intellectual distinction. The use of academic gowns for both formal and informal occasions on campus was not rare. Students used their various forms of Western dress to distinguish between themselves and others in Nigerian society, to serve as a visible marker of class difference, social status and their proximity to the colonial centre.

In later decades, Nigerian students also drew inspiration from other countries’ cultures, mainly from youth culture in the USA. Hairstyles such as Afros and Jerry curls among both males and females became a fashion trend, together with bell bottoms, platform shoes and unbuttoned shirts which showed a major part of male chests. Most of these styles were mainly worn for parties as there seemed to be an unwritten code to keep “flamboyant” clothing out of the classroom. However, even though miniskirts for females were a global trend in this era and the subject of heated debates at African universities elsewhere, they did not seem so common in Nigeria (Livsey 2017, 115). Once again, female students felt the need to prove their academic merit through the self-policing of their attire (*ibid.*, 95–6). The culture of Nigerian universities often presented Western dress as professional and elite, while traditional dress was perceived as informal and “local”. In spite of Nigeria’s diverse cultural makeup, there is rarely any mention in the early documents of traditional or cultural dress on campuses. The university acted as a unifying ground and meeting point for various ethnic groups across Nigeria, yet Western dress was the dominant mode associated with intellectuals and students in the early years.

It is important to understand the dynamics of the university system in Nigeria and the impact this has had on dress code policies for students. Currently, there are two types of university in Nigeria as determined by the administrators of these institutions (Mogaji 2019, 94). The first category includes the government-owned universities, while the second comprises private-owned universities. Government-owned universities, which include federal and state universities, rarely have dress code policies and the dress codes they do have are usually not strictly enforced. However, some courses, such as Law and Engineering, may demand specific dress. In Figure 1, for example, we see a signboard that was placed outside the School of Foundation Studies at the University of Lagos with information about what is allowed and what is forbidden. The suggested ideal dress



Figure 1. A signboard photographed on the campus of the University of Lagos in 2022. Photograph courtesy of Tim Livsey, reproduced with permission.

code favours formal black and white outfits, and it is clear that denim is forbidden in all its forms. It has been observed that the clothing for law students across Nigerian universities is usually black and white formal wear once they get close to graduation (Fayokun, Adedeji, and Oyebade 2009, 84), as it prepares them for the monochrome dress codes that are observed among lawyers globally.

A closer look at private-owned universities in Nigeria reveals that there are several sub-categories, as outlined by Emmanuel Mogaji (2019, 94). The first category involves

ownership without religious affiliation and includes universities that are owned by individuals, companies or communities. The second category involves universities owned by religious institutions such as churches and mosques and seems to be the most common category for privately owned universities. For the first category, the dress codes are more relaxed; students are allowed to wear casual clothing such as jeans, T-shirts and even caps. For the second category, the dress code for students is mostly guided by the religious beliefs and cultures of whichever church owns the university. For example, members of the Deeper Life Church in Nigeria do not wear jewellery, except a wedding band. Hence, the dress culture in the church is also applied to the dress code of the university students. Others, such as the Redeemer's University (as seen in [Figure 2](#)) of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, also mirror their dress codes for students (Bakare-Yusuf 2012, 1–12). This also pertains to universities such as Mountain Top, which prohibits the wearing of trousers by females, a rule stipulated in their university dress code (Adeniji 2017). Others, such as Muslim-owned universities like Crescent University, enforce the use of head coverings for all female students regardless of their religious affiliation. For other religious institutions, such as the Pan-Atlantic University, which is owned by the Catholic body Opus Dei, their dress code stems from their vision to nurture students to become professionals from their first day at university. The application of religion in these universities is not limited to their dress codes; it is also visible in some of the activities on campus. Some of the universities require compulsory attendance of religious events on campus.



Figure 2. Students in formal wear at Redeemer's University in 2022. Photograph courtesy of Redeemer's University Communication Unit, reproduced with permission.

One of the notable differences between government-owned and private-owned universities is the compulsory use of student ID cards in Nigerian private universities, reflecting how much better resourced they are in monitoring student compliance. ID cards are a key part of the dress code as campus activities are highly regulated compared with government-owned universities. A visit to federal and state universities in Nigeria shows that the entrances and exits are not as strictly monitored as in Nigerian private universities. The gating system in the latter is usually more stringent, with security checking visitors and also inspecting the dress code of students before they are admitted into the school campuses and teaching areas. Another key difference is the demographic of students admitted to these universities. Greater numbers of younger students are found at private universities compared with public universities in Nigeria because incessant strikes are more common in the latter, leading to students having an extended tenure of study (Ayomikun 2021). A 2017 report by the British Council on Nigerian universities indicated that, between 2010 and 2015, only 26 per cent of Nigerian university applicants from a population of 10 million gained admission (British Council 2017, 11). Public universities have a larger number of applicants as their fees are typically more affordable. Unsuccessful applicants usually have to wait a number of years before they finally gain admission, or, if they are able to do so, they resort to paying the higher fees charged at a private university. Given the younger undergraduate student body at private universities, there are greater efforts to discipline students through the rules and regulations on campus.

A major concern around dress codes is the policing of women's bodies. Sexual harassment is a well-documented feature of Nigerian universities (see Popoola 2023). In a bid to reduce the rising number of sexual misconduct cases, a former minister of education, Professor Fabian Osuji, suggested the institution of dress codes on campuses. Unsurprisingly, these regulations focused mainly on female students. The directive that was introduced focused on banning "indecent" dressing, which involved wearing "scanty or provocative" clothes (Anigbogu 2007, 2). A review of the dress code policies from both private and publicly owned universities shows that the focus of most of the policies is centred on "decency". For the public universities, the focus of the dress code policy is driven by morality and mostly determined by the university authorities (Mofoluwawo and Oyelade 2012). However, these dress code policies are ineffective in preventing sexual harassment on Nigerian campuses, as can be seen in the BBC documentary by Kiki Mordi exposing lecturers in both Nigerian and Ghanaian universities harassing female students in exchange for grades,¹ especially as the majority of occurrences take place in the offices of male lecturers, some of whom exploit their female students by blocking their academic pathways, failing to progress students unless their sexual demands are met. This happens irrespective of how their female students dress.

In detailing the justification for their dress code, UNILAG (University of Lagos) dress code policy states that indecent dressing – which has been defined as "too tight, too short or exposes sensitive parts of the body" – can lead to "general lowering of moral and academic standards in the University" (Ogbeche 2017, 5). An analysis of the language shows that most of the rules are directed at women. A particular paragraph in the dress code section (ibid., 5) prescribes a ban on "all clothes which reveal sensitive parts of the body such as the bust, chest, belly, upper arms and the buttocks". The document further

lists the kind of garments that are prohibited: transparent clothing, “spaghetti tops”, “wicked straps”, “mono-straps”, “Tubes” and “show me your belly”, as well as “skirts and dresses with slits above the knees”. The university draws an association between female appearance and morality, unfairly burdening female students with the responsibility for sustaining morality standards on campus. This narrative mirrors that of the wider society, where female sexual harassment cases have been dismissed through accusations of “seductive dressing”.

For other universities, like Ahmadu Bello University, located in Zaria, the details of their dress code are not clearly stated, but the subject is addressed vaguely in their handbooks for undergraduates. Their dress code policies reflect the codes characteristic of the northern part of Nigeria, where the culture of dress tends to be observant of Islamic practices, with strict rules for women. Ahmadu Bello University includes some rules for men too, stipulating that they should adopt a clean appearance and avoid wearing earrings or plaiting their hair (Ahmadu Bello University 2020, 98). For Islamic universities, dress codes are a symbol of religious observance and respect for Allah and society and apply to both male and female students. While some non-Islamic universities require the cropping of beards, the growing of beards in an Islamic university signifies emulation of the Prophet Muhammad.

The dress codes in private universities, especially those that are religiously affiliated, are more stringent. Dress codes form part of a broader culture of religious affiliations in these universities, with some of them requiring strict attendance at weekly religious services such as Friday prayers and Bible study. In Pentecostal-affiliated universities, the dress codes mimic the dress culture adopted by most of the early Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. Some of these churches make it compulsory for female members and church workers to refrain from wearing sleeveless blouses and even trousers (Okobia 2021, 2–5). In addition, they also require that women cover their hair while in church; this requirement is also extended to the students of universities owned by such churches (Taiwo 2022, 6). The male workers at the church are not left out. Usually, corporate wear (suit, trousers and ties) is recommended for pastors and workers such as ushers who minister during church services.

The Covenant University, located in Ogun State, was established in 2002 by the Winner’s Chapel International Church. The dress code for both males and females is listed in detail. The university enforces the wearing of corporate dress during academic lectures between 8 am and 6 pm, on special occasions such as convocation and matriculation, and during public lectures (Covenant University 2020, 113–120). Even while wearing corporate suits, female students are advised that their jackets should “fall below the hip line” and skirts should not be “tight or body-hugging” (ibid.). However, the dress code for males is more focused on adopting a professional look rather than covering up sensitive body parts. For all students, jewellery such as multiple piercings and elaborate accessories are considered “excessive” and are not permitted.

The Fountain University, located in the south-west of Nigeria, is also a faith-based university with Islamic affiliations. The university’s philosophy to build an environment focused on the development of humans is influenced by Islamic ethics.² The influence of Islamic ethics is evident in the dress code recommended for students and also for academic and non-academic staff.³ According to their dress code, all females are required to wear a non-transparent *hijab*, the popular head covering for Muslim women that covers

the head down to the bust. Scarves, turbans and caps are not permitted as a substitution for *hijabs*, as *hijabs* are viewed as a symbolic religious item rather than a fashion accessory. Male students are required to wear corporate Western or “native” attire, except when they are required to wear other outfits such as those for *Jumat*, the Islamic Friday prayers.

Some of the private universities, such as the Pan-Atlantic University, have a distinct dress code for various academic levels. The undergraduates are permitted to wear smart casual clothes that meet the university’s dress code.⁴ Coloured hair and tattoos are allowed for both sexes, while male undergraduate students are allowed to wear their hair long. For postgraduate students in the professional courses such as the MBA and MSc classes, corporate wear is prescribed for both male and female students. It is compulsory for the males to wear a tie (whether with or without a jacket) while women wear corporate-style outfits that are not sleeveless, short, transparent or tight-fitting.⁵ The privately owned universities embrace more corporate wear. On Fridays, students are allowed to wear corporate-looking and smart outfits that include traditional prints such as Ankara and updated “traditional” styles like the *Buba* and *Sokoto*. This is a reflection of the evolving dress code in the Nigerian corporate space, where these same styles are increasingly welcomed.

This short article has attempted to give an overview of the fashion and dress cultures on Nigerian campuses. Through clothing, we see the various ways in which institutions and individuals engage with “tradition” and with an imagined professional future.

Notes

1. “Sex for Grades: Undercover Inside Nigerian and Ghanaian Universities: BBC Africa Eye Documentary.” BBC News Africa, 7 October 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weF0GiOLqs>.
2. See “Our History” on the Fountain University website. Accessed 3 March 2022. <https://fuo.edu.ng/about-us/>.
3. See “Dress Code” on the Fountain University website. Accessed 3 April 2022. <https://fuo.edu.ng/dress-code/>.
4. See “Professionals from Day One” on the Pan-Atlantic University website. Accessed 3 April 2022. <https://pau.edu.ng/life/first/professionalism/>.
5. See “PMBA Student Policies and Procedures Handbook” on the Lagos Business School website. Accessed 3 April 2022. <https://www.lbs.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PMBA-Detailed-Prgramme.pdf>

Disclosure Statement

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