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## The Construal of Yoruba Colour Philosophy and Symbolism

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### Abstract



This article examines the construal of colour symbolism in the indigenous culture of the Yoruba people. The article assessed colour sources, indigenous values, importance and its classification in the Yoruba indigenous milieu. The crust of this article is established on colour in the idiom of Yoruba philosophy. The appraisal finally focused on the Yoruba aesthetics, values, religion and colour healing therapy using descriptive method in achieving the objectives. It was observed that foreign language, technology and religion poses treats to Yoruba colour culture. It concluded that colour and its associate in the Yoruba philosophy is fast disappearing because of lack of tenet theories on colours through which Yoruba colour identity could be preserved. Therefore,

there is need for revisiting and reviving theories of colour representation in Yoruba worldview for posterity.

**Keywords:** colour, interpretation, religion, symbol, Yoruba

## Introduction

Yoruba are one of the major ethnic groups found in Nigeria. They are located in the South West of Africa. Yoruba have a very rich philosophy of colour. Nigeria as a country lies to the immediate West of the River Niger (below the confluence) and South to the Quorra, Dahomey on the West and Bight of Benin to the South. The Yoruba as a group are assumed to have developed around the Volta-Niger populations in the first millennium. The early settlements of the Yoruba are found in the Niger area from about the 4th century BC (Adebanji, 2010). NNPC (n.d, p.1) report that

Nigeria is situated on the west coast of Africa, lies on latitudes 4° north of the Equator and latitudes 3° and 14° on the east of the Greenwich Meridian. Shares boundaries with The Republics of Benin and Niger in the west, Cameroon in the East, Niger and Chad in the north And the Gulf of Guinea in the South.

According to CIA (2013), the population of Yoruba ethnic group is about 35 percent and estimated at around 40 million. Yoruba as a language is also spoken in Benin Republic, Togo and in other communities in Europe and the America. It is most closely related to the Owo and Itsekiri language (spoken in the Niger-Delta) and Igala spoken in central Nigeria. Bolaji (2008, p.4) writes that “Of all over 3,000 different ethnic groups in Africa, the Yoruba appear to be one of the most predominant, having received the most critical attention worldwide”.

Yoruba are highly skillful in arts and crafts including painting, sculpture and other works of art that are expressed in symbolic colours. Oluwole, Amed and Ossen (2013, p.79) reports that “Colours were used as symbols for gods and goddesses in representative form for the deities. The colour yellow and gold represent the goddess Osun till date”. This practice is seen in the culture of the Yoruba to express themselves in colour, for example, a fiercely looking human face is depicted red, orange, and yellow. These colours are the representation of the volatile attitudes of the deities among the Yoruba namely, Ogun, Sapona and Sango.

Many scholars have defined culture in various ways through the ages. Ogunbameru and Ratimi (2002, p. 50) define culture as a complex whole, which encompasses knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and any other habits and potentials acquired by a group of people. The material aspect of culture includes artifacts, tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils, and housing. Institutions include politics, sociology, legal and economic activities, while philosophy includes the ideas, beliefs and values. The creative aspects dwell on people's literature, (oral/written) visual and performing arts, technology and science, and these philosophies are well established in the life of Yoruba artistic culture (Vess, 2000).

The crust of this article is to highlight and interpret the importance of colour in the idiom of Yoruba philosophy. This article described colour as it is applied on objects in homes, palaces, shrine, on clothes, beads, on human body and other domestic functional items. Ayoade (2007) affirms that it is in the custom of the Yoruba people to associate colours with something as a canon. Colours are used based on the fore knowledge of the user who is also part of the Yoruba community. The Yoruba colour and its symbolism is been threatened due to Christianity and Islam. Modern murals are done for art for art sake. Bolaji (2008, p. 8) writes that, "Colours employed on the sacred walls are not merely for decorative purposes, they make things happen. They are a means of communication, of healing, of empowerment, and of transformation".

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Colour worth from Western perspective**

From the contemporary point of view, Halse (1978) sees colour as an integral element of art in human lives, which is enshrined in their daily communication on objects found around in their environment. Colour is a forceful element of art, which often affects our nervous system. It sometime makes us dull, sad, bright, and happy because colour has the power to stimulate our senses. Francois and Guineau (2000) aptly write that the earth, sky and water are colourful from creation; these have prompted artists and scientists to reproduce from time to time because colour is a source of life on earth. Adejumo (2002) defines colour as a sensation produced in the eye by rays of decomposed light of different wavelengths. Colour is the natural light that decomposed light of different wavelengths comprising the visible spectroscopic analysis (Gardners, 1996). Seiberling (1959) avers that the Artist considers colour as pigment while the scientist describes colour as light. However, both are connected. Individuals from different discipline have undergone various studies of colour. Schwarz (1975), states that the scientist, psychologist and artist have been interested in the mystery of light and colour ever since 1666 when

Isaac Newton discovered colour spectrum. Newton found out that whenever light passes through a glass prism, soap bubbles, a drop of water or a rainfall in the sky makes these colours appear in the order of violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red. Abiodun (2004) describes colour as a communicative language of expression. Feldman (1982) sees colour as one of the most powerful instruments available to painters. Colour has the capacity to affect the nervous system. Deborah (2002) holds that colour is the painter's tool. It has the power to excite, control space, create atmosphere, express emotion and represent the illustration of reality. From all these definitions of colour, it is obvious that this element is germane in artistic culture in every civilisation.

## **Yoruba Colour Perspective**

Expressions of colour in Yoruba culture are often demonstrated in religion, royalty, clothing and in healing therapy. Akinbileje (2010) corroborates that Yoruba culture have a rich track record idea of colour. Colour as an indispensable element of art, plays a vital role in all visual arts in every culture. There is no culture that does not associate herself with colour to her day-to-day life. Adejumo (2002) avers that the use of colour in the Yoruba culture is seen in both visual language and religions.

## **Methodology**

This article adopted descriptive method. It covers the South-west of the Yoruba land which is Ogun, Osun and Oyo States. Various places of interest such as shrines, palaces, village squares were visited to observe the use of colours as an idea and symbol in the Yoruba traditional culture. For this instance, these places visited formed the location for the study. Four (4) places from each State were visited. This sum up to Twelve (12) places. Purposive sampling was adopted for proximity sake and on-the-spot assessment of the use of colours on the space and objects. Direct observation was employed as a tool. Data collection is from primary and secondary sources. The visited places constituted the primary source, while the secondary source is from related literature reviewed.

## **Results and Discussion**

Visiting shrines, palaces and village squares were for the purpose of on-the-spot assessment to ascertain how colours are symbolically used in the Yoruba land. It was directly observed that in all the shrines visited, the colour of the sacrifice used was according to the kind of *orisa* and its worshippers. It was observed that the *Ogun* and *Sango* shrines are painted in red in colour and with exhibit of iron objects such as cutlass, gun tied with red pieces of cloth. These objects which serve as symbol of *Ogun* and *Sango* are sprinkled with red palm oil. Food for rituals at the entrance is prepared with red oil. In an interview with Bamgbose, a shrine attendant, he explained that during

out-break of smallpox in the dry season, a container of palm wine is often placed at the entrance of the shrine to appease *Ogun* and *Sango*. He further explained that the white palm wine neutralises red, which is their symbol of the *orisa*.

Moreover, the *Osun* and *Obatala* shrine and the worshippers both appear in white colour. Interviewed with Madam Sofowowe revealed that *Osun* worshippers everywhere in the Yoruba land do not associate with any colour except white. Even in greetings and prayers, white is emphasised (personal communication, July 16, 2016). It was observed in her white facial makeover was not Kaolin powder but from today's make-up substances. This practice is a confirmation of what is read in the literature reviewed about modernisation.

It is observed that the three chromatic classifications are still upheld in all the palaces and public spaces except that modern industrial paints were used instead of local pigment. One respondent explained that due to the ephemeral nature of the local colours, it requires continuous painting of shrines, palaces and spaces. He further described English language, Christianity and Islam as major challenges because large number of the Yoruba people have left the traditional religion and now expresses their thoughts in English, therefore, makes the meaning and colour symbols fading.

### **Significance of Traditional Yoruba Colours and Values**

Colours have rich meanings in Yoruba culture as well as all the symbols and motifs. These colours replicate a variety of meanings in their spoken, visual language and religion. For Fadipe (1970), the traditional Yoruba colour spectrum consists of the three primary colours, just like the western world, each of which has various polychromes comprising: black (*dudu*), red (*pupa*) and white (*funfun*). The others, which are classified as secondary and tertiary colours, are a mixture in varying proportion of two of the three, or all the primary colours. Abraham (1958) and Fadipe (1970) record these as: magenta (*ayinrin*), orange (*topala*), sky-blue as (*ofefe*), green as (*awo-eweko*), siennas and browns as (*pupa resuresu*) and yellow (*iyeye/safa*). In Yoruba culture, colour is very important and thus the artist must know its interpretation. Yoruba people see colour as a medium of art, which evokes temperature and temperament – mood or state of the disposition. For instance, *funfun*, which comprises of white hues, suggests composure, old age, wisdom, icy, or cold feeling. It also includes turquoise, blue, silver, chrome, and other icy colours. *Pupa* refers to hot materials of red colours signifying anger while *dudu* dark and generally cool colours such as black, are in the family of blue, indigo, purple and green as well as dark browns, red-brown, and dark grays suggests the restraint and tranquility of Yoruba divination and problem-solving.

## Colour connotation with personality trait in Yoruba Culture

Abiodun (1990) believes that the three chromatic categories of the *pupa*, *funfun* and *dudu* represent the various possibilities of character *iwa* the essential nature that an individual is endowed with at the point of birth. Red (*pupa*) as a colour in the Yoruba tradition is often associated to people who are hot tempered, a character of blood thirsty beings. *Dudu* is correlated a moderate mannered or wicked person; *funfun* is linked to the cool, distance, somewhat remote trait of a just individual person. Aside from these mannerisms, people's physical colour appearances are sometimes referred to as light in complexion (*amolawo*), dark in complexion (*dudu bi koro isin*).

## Sources of Yoruba Traditional Colours

The use of colours in day-to-day life in Yoruba culture is highly symbolic. Adeyemi (2008) observes that patterns, motifs and symbols are important in the expression of the beliefs and philosophies of traditional African. He further discerns that there are many such samples of symbols and motifs found in Ghana such as *Adinkra*, *Ona* in Southwest of Nigeria, *Nsibidi* and *Uli* in Southeast Nigeria. Colours and symbols reflect in the areas such as religion, royalty, clothing and healing therapy that are associated with the Yoruba colour wheel (red, black, white and mixture of two or all). The source of colour is more of planetary, which is mainly from minerals, plants or animals. Colours from minerals include, clay powder (red, white and black); plants include Camwood (*osun*), green (*elu*), yellow-ginger (*ata-ile*), charcoal (*eedu*) and while animals source include blood and fat.

Henna leaves (*Lali*) are often used to paint or decorate palms of the hands and the sole of the feet in different patterns. To extract the colourant liquid substance, one needs to grind the leaves and mix it with water. Ladies who are preparing to get married mostly apply the substance on their bodies for beautification.

The bark of camwood (*osun*) after being harvested is pounded or grounded and mixed with water, just like (*lali*). The camwood can be used on foot or lightly use on the body with oil. Women are the most end users. Kaolin (*efun*), a white clay, is dug and pounded into powdery form to be used on the body. Women apply this on their body after childbirth, and especially, for *Obatala* worshippers who believe in *Obatala* as god that creates and protect all human beings. Graphite (*tiro*) is a black and stony mineral substance from the ground. It is grounded into powdery form for easy application to the eyelashes. The use of this substance brightens the wearer eyeball. Bolaji (2008, p. 41) says:

Like language, color carries deep philosophical messages. Each of the colors applied on the shrine walls are the equivalent of special prayers for healing, for empowerment,

for placating the spiritual presences inhabiting the human community. In essence, the colors represent the metaphoric clothing, signatures, and temperaments of the *orisa*.

Yoruba religion is a polytheistic religion, thus, the worship of multiple deities associated with nature. For example, there is a thunder god, river goddesses among other variants. The Yoruba traditional religion believes in many gods (*orisa*) created by the supreme God (*Olodumare*). The anthropomorphic nature of the *orisa*, gives us an insight into physiomystic manifestation of colour symbolism in Yoruba culture (Adejumo, 2002). Many writers have different perceptions and descriptions of gods (*orisa*). Idowu (1962) regards *orisa* as ministers of *Olodumare*, who is the mediator of God and the world (mankind). These ministers are seen as messengers who carry sacrifices to God. In the words of Mbiti (1969), and Gleason (1971) *orisa* can be compared to the Roman Catholic Saint who interceded with God on behalf of mankind.

These *orisa* have specific colour symbolism according to the worshippers. These are reflected in the dresses worn at the place of worship, object of worship and other paraphernalia. Some of the colours used in Yoruba religion are as reviewed: White (*funfun*), this is the symbolic colour of *Obatala* worshippers. They are also known as *Orisa Nla*, which occupies the top rank in the strata of (*Orisa*). Adejumo (2002) explains that the deity is given different names in different parts in the Yoruba land. At Ejigbo, it is known as (*Orisa Ogiyan*); Ikire people call it (*orisa olufun*). It is known as *orisa alaso funfun* at Iragbiji. At Ile-ife, three different names are associated with it, namely – *Obatala*, *Orisa Kire* and *Oduduwa*.

According to Yoruba mythology, *Obatala* is a deity that assists in the matter of creation such as moulding human forms while *Olodumare* breathes life into them (Idowu 1962). It is in the light of this matter that worshippers associate themselves with pure white dresses, which symbolizes holiness and purity as well as calmness and quietness. They clothe themselves in white cloths, white beads and other white ornaments. Their temples, images, shrine, and other paraphernalia are also in white. The worshippers of *Obatala* must feed on white food except on few occasions. During the *Obatala* festivals, the sacrificial meal is usually the bloodless animals like snails cooked in Shea butter instead of palm oil. *Obatala* worshippers are thought to be morally upright and truthful (Idowu 1962). They are expected to be clean and pure in their hearts and behaviours as the white colour symbolises.

Red (*pupa*) is the symbol of *Ogun* and *Sango* worshippers. The Yoruba generalize all colours that have elements of red or close to red as *topola* such as yellow *iyeye safa*, and sienna (*pupa rusurusu*). Red signifies blood, danger, fire and searing emotion. It is a strong colour for *Sango* (god of thunder); *Ogun* (god of iron) and *Sapona* (god of

smallpox). Ogun is god of iron and anything associated with iron. This deity is always referred to a being associated with war and warriors, hunters, smiths and anybody who uses or deals with iron. *Ogun* is (*orisa*) that drinks blood, the blood of circumcision and scarification, of the hunts, of war and of sacrifice. Since *Ogun* is always thirsty for blood, it has to be appeased to prevent bloodshed either by gunshots or any accidents related to iron. His worshippers wear red all over Yoruba land including Ire, Ondo, Ilesha, and Oka-okoko.

*Sango*, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning according to Johnson (2001), is powerful and temperamental. He is a great fighter who wears bright colours particularly red. His shrines are mostly found in Oyo, Ede and Ibadan where the worshippers both male and female wear red clothes. The shrines objects and the walls are painted or decorated with red clothes. Sometimes the backgrounds of the shrines walls are spotted with white showing the relationship between *Sango* and *Sapona*. The followers of *Sapona* wear red with spotted white and beads of red and white round their necks. *Sapona* is feared because of the deadly disease, smallpox and other pestilences, which he inflicts on people. A person inflicted by smallpox can appease to *orisa* by raising a temporary white flag. The use of white colour instead of red is to calm the *orisa* down. In addition to the white flag, palm wine in big gourds, need to be kept at the shrine entrance of *Sapona*. However, both palm wine (white) and palm oil (red) are to be kept at the entrance of the house of the patient with smallpox infection. Also, camwood powder mixed with palm oil is used in rubbing the body of the victim for quick healing.

The Yoruba considers all dark shades as black (*dudu*). This includes: Prussian blues, as in (*aro*) indigo for dying clothes: magenta or purple (*ayinrin*): dark-green algae as in (*ewedu*) vegetable with green leaves; umber (*alawo dudu*), lamb-black as (*eedu*) charcoal and sky blue (*ofefe*). Black (*dudu*) is the last category, includes any colour that you might think of when you think of the earth, brown and leafy dark greens and moss green. Black (*dudu*) is associated with devil (*Esu*) in Yoruba culture. However, Yoruba associate *Orunmila* with black also. According to Idowu (1962), *Orunmila* is considered as divine omniscience, wisdom and eternal cosmic order. The devil (*Esu*) is the messenger of *Orunmila* on divine and men matters. He is believed to be confusionist therefore the Yoruba tradition holds it with great respect. Its symbolic presence can be seen at the crossroads, with black pieces of stones, woods or pots. Abimbola (2006) strongly believes that *Orunmila* and *Esu* work together. *Esu* symbol is always present at the shrine of every *babalawo* (which doctor) where palm oil is always sprinkled on it. He further explains that at times, *Esu* serves as a messenger to *Orunmila* (*Ifa*) or one who gives power to *Orunmila*. It is a thing of note that colours in Yoruba culture do not only connote danger and other horrific ideas but also as pigment that beautifies and transforms. Colour honours the living and



the dead with beauty. The paintings of *Orisa* shrines honour, evoke the best attributes and character for the wellbeing of human society. In the Yoruba culture, colour gives the sense of completeness that forms an aspect of conception, beautification, presentation and appearance of Yoruba divinities (Bolaji, 2008).

### **The Use of Colour in the Yoruba Contemporary Society**

Colour is still a strong element in the traditional Yoruba culture, however, its symbolic meaning is diminishing because of globalisation and western religion- Christianity and Islam. Also, the preference of English language over Yoruba language has made its true connotation disappearing. Exposure to new fashion trend has made dressing less attractive in line with Yoruba colour culture. The source of local colour is fast disappearing due to modern industrial colours which are more durable and handy in the market. Today, members of celestial church dress in whites just like the *Osun* worshippers with no meaning attached.

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown that colour is very important in Yoruba culture just as seen in other societies. Yoruba culture reveals her colour wheel, which exhibits three primary colours with either mixtures of two or all colour just like the western culture. Colour is very symbolic in Yoruba culture and it holds a strong interpretation, which is often seen in their religion, ceremonies, royalty and used as healing therapy. The sources of colours examined show that the Yoruba traditional culture have definite colour scheme. The study also revealed that to understand Yoruba culture in full, one must have the knowledge about their colour usage and its relevance within the context of their traditional setting. It is concluded that the relevance of colour in the Yoruba traditional ethos goes beyond its physical appearance; therefore, there is need for an in-depth understanding in its applications. Owing to modernisation, the meaning and the relevance of Yoruba colour symbolism is fast changing due to foreign religion particularly Christianity and Islam. Again modern technologies have made it easier hence the source of colour, which has its own aesthetics is fast disappearing. Therefore, there is need for standard tenet theories on which the Yoruba colour identity could be preserved.

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