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Northern Nigerian garments and caps: Traditions and challenges

Abstract. Most of the garments and caps worn in Northern Nigeria, particularly among the Kanuri people, have their origin in the culture and traditions of the people. In very significant ways, these garments and caps depict the belief systems, political metaphysics, and the general consciousness of the people, including their creative impulses. But as more and more people move from rural areas to cities and travel abroad, and as more and more cultures intermingle, inevitable changes occur in the culture and traditions of the people. The cultural tradition of the Kanuri people wearing longer, voluminous, roomy garments, preferably with caps, has witnessed changes due to contact with foreign cultures.

One purpose in this research is to show that in spite of the Kanuri people's strong adherence to their beliefs and culture, which hardly encourages any changes, their use of traditional garments and caps have exhibited the flexibility of their beliefs, culture and traditions. The use of the garments and caps discussed in this paper are those observed among the Kanuri people of Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

This paper discusses the garments and caps in Northern Nigeria with particular reference to their originators and the changes that have occurred in their uses. The study is based on the Kanuri people, the most conservative people in Northern Nigeria, who traditionally accept hardly any changes in the customs according to which they live their lives. The Kanuri people, who are predominantly found in Borno and Yobe states, constitute the second largest ethnic group in Northern Nigeria. Besides farming, they engage in dying, weaving and making garments and caps (cf. Sheriff, 2004:86 and Ogboli, A. P. 2004). Before the advent of manufactured textiles,

the Kanuri people made garments by hand, and the original style of caps are still knitted by hand today.

The viability of the use of traditional attire, the social importance for one to preserve ones culture and tradition, and the need to produce living documents on the ways of life of the Kanuri people in particular were some of the questions that prompted this study. Since not much written material exists on this aspect, there is a need to add to the scanty body of literature that exists in this area. This additional literature could serve as a catalyst for renewed interest in fully understanding the origin and the historical significance and the socio-cultural import of the Northern Nigerian or the Kanuri people's garments and caps. The interest of Government agencies like the Ministry of Culture and Tourism might be awakened to better harness a treasure which is more or less waiting to be fully tapped. This study could also serve as a basis for comparison of the cultures on the use of garments and caps as it is practiced in the area of study and elsewhere.

Scope of the Study

The area under study is Maiduguri Metropolis and the adjoining villages. Our investigation covers both the older and the younger generations and their contributions to changes in the use of some of the traditional garments and the reasons for their preferences for modern garments and Western dress.

To gain information on our topic we participated in some Kanuri weddings in Maiduguri as friends of the grooms, during which we observed and interviewed some people on why they were not wearing traditional gowns and caps. The interviews included both older men and women, ranging between the ages of thirty-five and seventy-five and younger persons, between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five. We also participated with and observed people during the Muslims

daily prayer sessions in mosques and how people reacted to those in western dresses during the prayers. We visited some typical Kanuri villages like Chingoa, Kalizoram, and Lægøn in Magumeri Local Government area to observe the use of the traditional garments and caps there. Finally our information was reviewed with experienced persons familiar with the subject in these areas of the country.

There are several types of Kanuri garments and caps. Sheriff (2004) identified as many as thirty types of garments for the males and eight for the females. This paper is not concerned with female garments.

The Male Garments

Four major types of traditional Kanuri male garments are worn. These are the Kulwu, Gəmaje Dankiki (the Hausas have ‘yar ciki’ which is of the same type and use as the Kanuris) and Yange. Under each are several sub-types, some of which, as rightly observed in Sheriff (2004), are:

Kulwu Kajibe. Kulwu Kajibe is a type of hand made Kanuri gown made of strips of *gawaa*.



It is heavy and very strong.

Kororopci. The Kororopci type of Kanuri gown is black and shiny, and can be worn by all persons.



Kulwu Nashibe. A light blue gown. Any one who wears it notices his body, especially his arms, coloured by the indigo from the gown.



Tawuski. A type of gown with round neck and two pockets in front (above).

Kulwu indi dawu tiloa. This is a double gown with a single neck, worn on social occasions.



Kulwu Dawungasho. This type of gown derives its name from the style of dying. It is dyed to resemble the two-colour shape of the neck of a stork.



Several other types of Kanuri gowns exist. Some derive their names from the style of dying, some from the style of sewing and some from the style of embroidery.

The Gəməje. This is a kind of dress (mufti) that covers from the neck to the shin. Like the Kulwu or gown, Gəməje are also of different types in Kanuri. Some of these are: gəməje ambuka, gəməje diwadiwa, gəməje sərə, etc. Both Gəməje ambuka and Diwadiwa have long sleeves covering the wrists. Their difference lies in the end of the sleeves. For the ambuka, the end of the sleeve holds tightly to the wrist with buttons or clips, while the sleeve of the Diwadiwa is flat.

The sare is a double garment. It has one neck. Preferably, the inner one could be plain cloth and the one on top a decorative fabric.



Diwadiwa



Diwadiwa



Gəməje (mufti)

The Dankiki. Described as a sleeveless Kanuri traditional garment. It is distinguished from other Kanuri garments by its sides always being half open, like a window without cover. Like the Kulwu and Gəməje, Dankiki are seen in several types, some of which are Dankiki kumbam and Dankiki janaaa. They are distinguished by their decorations and style of sewing (below).



The Yange

The word Yange is generally translated as ‘trousers’. Traditional Kanuri trousers are exceptionally large. They are made up of at least four to six yards of a fabric and worn without pants. Two types of trousers are identified, namely yange dərwali and yange cirtanaa, which are distinguished by the type of embroidery used on them. The cirtanaa type has beautiful embroidery made on the lower end of the leg with a thread called cirtana, while the dərwali type has no embroidery made on it. It is a plain and flat trouser.



Yange Dərwali



Yange Cirtanaa



Yange kəmo indiya



Yange diwadiwa

The present generation of Kanuri youth and middle aged men only occasionally wear the Kulwu (gown) and other traditional garments even during important occasions, such as are captured in the portraits that follow:



The Term Kulwu

Many scholars have described Kulwu as a gown (cf. Bulakarima 2003). Others translate the word Kulwu as robe (cf. Sheriff 2004:87). On the etymology of the term Kulwu, some Kanuri Islamic

scholars opine that it is derived from the word Kəlawun, which literary means ‘shroud’. The believe is that as death comes without notice, the Kanuri man is always prepared and ready for it and so he is in his kəlawun, so in the event that he dies in any circumstances where a shroud could not be found or easily obtained, he could then be buried in his Kuluwu. As most of the Kanuri people were caravan traders, they could encounter problems during their journeys and the Kulwu could solve that problem.

There is a strong contention among the Kanuri people that when one is in Western dress, he is as good as naked. Most Western, or as it is sometimes called, English, dress exposes parts of the body. Many types of garments are tighter and smaller compared to the Kulwu, Gəmajə and Dankiki of the Kanuri people. According to our informant, Baba Liman Amsami, who is about eighty five (85) years old, if a man is not completely dressed in his Kulwu, Gəmajə or Dankiki, Yange, and Zawa, he is considered deviant in Kanuri society. Furthermore, (1) he is not a trustworthy person, (2) he is not allowed to lead people during the five daily prayers, or any activities for that matter, and (3) such a person is not even allowed to stand in the front row when performing the five daily prayers. If a person in T-Shirt or a shirt stands in the front row, elders would quickly drag him out or order him back to the last row. One could hear the elders saying: **gəmajənəm ngurnenəmma zaksənyi**. *‘Your shirt has not even covered your wrist’*. And some often says: **Kazəmunəm anyi datəbewonya ngutəbe gənyi. Abinəmma gəraata bade**. *‘Your clothes are not for you to just keep standing but for prostration. Your whole body is exposed*. Our observations in a mosque situated in Mairi village, near Gate Four, University of Maiduguri, for a good nine calendar months ‘Between’ 28th January, 2009 to 2nd October, 2009 have confirmed such an attitude among the Kanuri people. In fact, it is the uniqueness of the Kanuri people in this respect that motivates us to conduct the present research and discover a great change, the

trend away from the use of the traditional garments and caps. Many factors are responsible for this. Few among which are outlined below.

Factors Responsible for the Changes in the Kanuri Mode of Dressing.

1. Science and Technology
2. Cross Cultural influence
3. Office work
4. Economy and Expenditure
5. Society, Attitudinal Change and Civilization
6. Compatibility
7. Other factors

Science and Technology

It is no longer a new belief that science and technology have directly affected the weather of the whole world. In any case, weather conditions all over the world are changed. This has affected even the ways people dress. The traditional garments and caps no longer make their users comfortable because of the terrible heat. The invention of machines has shifted the attention of the users of traditional garments and caps to the use of more readily available clothes, Western garments, and from the highly competitive dress, in this case the traditional garments and caps. Similarly even our traditional barbing system, that accords wearing a gown, is no longer compatible for the man in a gown.

Cross Cultural Influence. Today, people envy other people's ways of dressing. This can be seen from our students. Nowadays many of them prefer Western/English dress'. They no longer admire their traditional garments and caps. They have abandoned them in favour of the English or Western mode of dressing.

Office Work. These days, office workers and professionals, such as bankers, engineers, architects, doctors, lawyers, etc., do not wear gowns and garments during professional engagements. The various professions have their corporate and in-line-with-duty dress. In fact, no profession encourages the use of traditional garments and caps. Even drivers are not quite compatible with gowns. The gown may hook the steering wheel while negotiating a bend, while gowns can disturb teachers during classroom teaching and hinder demonstrations.

Economy and Expenditure. Roomy garments and caps are now considered the property of those who are economically buoyant. The economy of the Nigeria is bad; many people no longer have money to spend on garments and caps. They are looking for what to eat rather than wearing flamboyant garments and caps, and, it is cheaper to buy Western clothes. The amount of money one could spend in the production or purchase of a single traditional garment and cap is greater than the amount one would spend for the purchase of an outfit of modern dress. Hence people opt for the simple and modern dress, which costs less than traditional garments.

Society, Attitudinal Change and Civilization. Today's society rates gowns and caps for certain classes of peoples. They are mostly for traditional rulers, politicians and bourgeoisie. They are no longer for the poor man. Wearing voluminous garments even invite thieves or even armed robbers who believe that the man wearing them is wealthy. Similarly, attitudes have changed. The younger generation now sees one in gown as either an aged man or married man. Gowns and caps are now mostly worn during occasions and ceremonies. Hence, College and university students copy the European mode of attire. Some see the use of their traditional garments and caps as uncivilized.

Compatibility. Some garments like the Kulwu kajibe is so heavy that people no longer wear them. Now, it is only courtiers, title holders, and slaves of the Shehu who wear them, and even in

these cases they are used on rare occasions.

Other Factors. For some garments like the Kororopci, people feel it is a gown for the Ulama or *malamwa* (traditional teachers) and so people no longer wear it as before. In earlier days Ulama wore it when coming to the palace of the Shehu for moduwu. (cf. Sheriff 2004). Moduwu is a praise singing of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) conducted for some days before the celebration of Id EL- Maulud. Today one can hardly see anyone, even the Ulama, in Kororopci gowns. They are heavy and expensive. Modern clothes that are lighter and less expensive have taken the place of Kororopci and this is a challenge to Kanuri culture and tradition.

The materials used for making some of the gown like the Kulwu dawungasho are old fashioned, so that people no longer appreciate and wear it as casual dress. Today only some Kanuri dancers like the Dumas dancers use it, but only during the dance to depict the Kanuri culture and tradition.

The hand-woven gowns that are made of materials called gawaa are also heavy and expensive that today people buy them only as gifts for their parents. Younger people see most traditional Kanuri garments as old fashioned and only for the elderly people. So they opt for the modern gowns and garments.

Ordinarily, the Gəmje and Dankiki are worn as underneath wear. But today one could hardly see people wearing the Dankiki form. However, one could see the people in the village particularly among the Koyam (a nomad Kanuri ethnic group). The Dankiki is now a dress of the village people. Formerly, school uniforms for primary school boys were mostly made in the form of Dankiki both in the villages and the cities. But today, people hardly use Dankiki even as a school uniform, even less for casual dress.

The Yange ‘trousers’ on the other hand, which were ordinarily bigger and made of up at least four to six yards of material, are today reduced to a mere tight trousers made up of only two to three yards of material, to reduce their cost. These modern trousers are mostly used with pants. The use of such trouser and pants is discouraged in traditional Kanuri culture. Kanuri culture encourages the uses of the big Dərwali trousers to allow enough air to pass between the legs. For them this would provide a good environment for the male organs to grow healthier and stronger. Most Kanuri elders today consider the younger generation as weaker and less able to perform sexually, compared to the elders, because many people today wear fewer loose trousers and pants; the tighter ones keep the male organs tight and shrunken, an act even medically discouraged.

The Cap (Zawa)

The cap is generally called Zawa in Kanuri Language. Caps are held in great esteem in Kanuri society. Caps are ordinarily used for protecting the head against the harsh sun and dust by the Kanuri peoples (cf. Ogboli, 2004). However, it is unfortunate to state that the origin of how the use of caps began among the Kanuri peoples and the etymology of the term was not tentatively known to any of our informants. Some of our informants traced the origin to Saudi Arabia, Karachi, Islamabad, etc. This information agrees with other information who traced the origin to North Africa and Middle East. (cf. Nachtigal 1869).

Though it is said that males exclusively make and embroider caps, our investigation shows that many young girls and women are also involved in cap embroider. It has, however, been reported that it is a taboo for a woman to embroider the crown of a cap. This is not unconnected with the belief that it is belittling for a woman to design the crown or dome of an object that will sit on the head of a male in Kanuri tradition. But today no one bothers to know who embroiders the crown. Here an important aspect of Kanuri culture has faded out. Though influences of

modernization have little effect on the use of caps, we have observed increasing numbers of people going about bareheaded. Their reason is not unconnected with personal health problems. For some youth, it is for fashion. They copied the Senegalese and Gambian style where one can see people in complete garments or Kaftan but bareheaded. One could admit that these people are culturally regressing to the 18th century style where the Kanuri, the Kanumbu, and the Makari for the most part went about bareheaded (cf. Nachtigal 1869). According to Kanuri culture and tradition, these people are also exposing their head to health hazards. This is captured in the following Kanuri popular teaching.

If one knew the hazardous effects that the sun pours on the human head, one would not go bareheaded in the daylight, and likewise, if one knew the dangerous effects of the sun that the human head releases in the night, one could not wear a cap in the night.

The above remonstrations teach that one should wear cap at least for protection in the day and remove it for relief in the night. This is extended also to the use of kulwu, gəmaje and yange. Long ago people dressed in a complete set (kulwu, gəmaje, yange and zawa) throughout the day, and removed all but Kulwu once the sun set for relief. Today many people have no respect for these cultural traditions and when one wears only a gown in the night, he becomes an object of mocking. His image could be painted and addressed with all sorts of ill habits and characters. What a challenge and ill attack on Kanuri culture and tradition.

From the information we gathered, slaves of the Shehu of Borno were not allowed to wear caps a long time ago. This attitude also has now faded because most of the slaves have now gained economic, political, and social freedom, nearly competing with the Shehu himself. These slaves remove their caps as mark of respect only when coming closer to the Shehu in the same manner *ulama* remove caps as mark of respect to their superiors.

However, in the course of this study, it was discovered that some Kanuri people are known for their unique and strict adherence to the use of complete garments and cap. For the past forty years, Alhaji Muhammad Mustafa II Al Amin El-Kanemi now the shehu of Dikwa is known for his outstanding adherence. No one has ever seen him in incomplete dress. Even in the midnight when you knock at his door, he will appear in his complete garments and cap on his head. Females of equal calibre have remained largely anonymous. As such, female participation in maintaining culture and tradition is fertile for further research.

Although no serious sanction has been meted out for not wearing a dress in the society, it was established that at times women embrace men during some occasions, particularly in wedding ceremonies, they would refuse to attend to those men who are not in complete dress. We have observed such case in Fezzan ward, Maiduguri, during a wedding ceremony of a friend in which we served as participant observers in November 2009. The bride's sister, Ya Falmata Amsami, aged about 42 years old, and her friends refused to attend to the groom's friends. Her reason was that no one among the groom's friends appeared in complete dress (gown and cap). Some were in Kaftan and not even wearing caps. The women suggested that the groom's friends should please go back and wear gowns and caps or at least one or two in gowns and caps should lead them. This experience revealed women's attitudes toward complete dressing in Kanuri society. These women feel that any one in incomplete dress is irresponsible and not trustworthy.

Conclusion

The above discussion on the Northern Nigerian garments and caps has provided an opportunity to exposes the flexibility and dynamisms of the Kanuri culture, traditions and belief regarding garments and caps. What this discussion reveals is a movement from the use of traditional garments and caps to modern attire. This movement hinders the continuity of the Kanuri tradition

on one hand and signals the endangerment of the Kanuri people's cultural traditions on the other. The traditional gowns or garments and caps depict the Islamic pre-occupation of the people. They provide clarifying data that portray the belief and the culture of the people. What we observed demonstrates how the Kanuri people respond to changes that typify their pastime. Studying the uses of garments and caps provides insights into the richness of the people's culture, tradition and values. Though the slight changes bring into unity several issues of intercultural interest among peoples of different linguistic background, culture, and geographical settlements, the situation is a challenge to the culture of the Kanuri people in particular and the Northern Nigerian people overall. Garments and caps serve as an undeniable artistic, social, cultural, historical, and religious medium of preservation and transmission of the people's culture and consciousness. Yet it is very clear that the Kanuri people are experiencing a change with regard to the use of traditional garments and caps.

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