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## Cultural affinity of 'Aso-oke' among the Yoruba of Nigeria

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### Abstract



Culture is an all-embracing phenomenon, encompassing knowledge, beliefs, arts and other capabilities which are acquired by man as a member of a society. Culture integrates and binds every members of the society together through shared ideas and standards. More importantly, it must be made visible and reflected through food, occupation, clothing including other seemingly unnoticed aspects of arts and culture. This may include fabric choice, motif and colour. Textile constitutes an area which reflects the culture of a people who settle in a particular location and have their cultural characteristic features that differentiate them from others around. Hence, this study investigates the cultural affinity of Aso-Oke among the Yoruba of Nigeria. The study revealed that Aso-oke is important to Nigeria's

history and culture. It also serve as a means of job creation and economic empowerment while its production bring about several other tertiary industries like marketing and fashion. It recommends that the school curriculums of textiles oriented educational institutions must be redesigned to accommodate the study of indigenous art and culture including Aso-oke weaving tradition so that the nation can develop materially and culturally.

**Keywords: Cultural, affinity, Aso-Oke, weaving, Yoruba, Nigeria,**

## Introduction

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Aso-Oke is a short form of Aso Ilu Oke, also known as Aso-Ofi, meaning clothes from the country highland area. Aso-oke is an important item of clothing worn by Yoruba men and women in the western Nigeria, Africa, especially on special occasions and social gatherings like weddings, house warming, burial ceremonies, naming ceremonies, chieftaincy, coronation and religious festivals. Women wear it in form of a wrap-around skirt called *Iro* with a *Gele*, (head tie) and *Iborun*, a shawl of the same material worn over the shoulder or tied round the waist, while men wear an ensemble of the Aso-Oke consisting of a large gown *Agbada* and trousers, *Sokoto*.

The beauty of Aso-Oke comes out more when it is taken as Aso-Ebi (uniform for a group of people e.g. friends and families). Aso-Oke weaving started centuries ago amongst the Yoruba predominantly the Iseyin (Oyo-State). It is also practised in Ede (Osun State), Okene (Kogi State), and some areas in Ghana. In terms of designs, great ingenuity is usually brought to play by the creators of the Aso-Oke fabrics. They work relentlessly behind the loom, spinning different colours of the wool together to fashion unique designs that are the toast of the users. The woven designs on Aso-Oke cloth vary from town to town. Some designs are coined from the writing boards used especially by the Hausa to practice writing verses from the Qur'an. In fact this design is said to have a Hausa origin. This study investigates the cultural affinity of affinity of the Aso-oke fabric to the Yoruba people; socio-economic benefits of Aso-oke production and its basic production processes.

## Concept of culture

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Culture is a complex, all embracing phenomenon which include knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, customs and other capabilities acquired by individuals as a member of a society. Culture binds human and integrates them together in their common ideas and standards. It is passed down from one generation to another through the process of socialization.

It is important to know that culture has to be made visible; it has to be reflected both in life, occupation, food, clothing and even to the insignificant aspect of their uses and production. The choice of clothing of a group of people speaks volume about their culture. Culture can therefore be reflected even in the seemingly unnoticed aspects of the choice of motifs, colour and fabric. Textile fabrics constitutes an area which reflects the culture of people who settled in a particular location and have their cultural characteristics feature which differentiates them from others around

The culture of the Yoruba society is rich and appealing. It extends beyond the South-Western part of the country across the continent as far as North America in Brazil and Cuba. Till now, they maintain some of these cultures to an extent. The variation or social changes were scars modification left behind by the reception and influence of the Western and religious cultures. The inhabitants of the South-West of Nigeria are referred to as the Yoruba. They constitute the largest cultural homogeneous group socio-linguistically within Nigeria. They include the Oyo, Ijebu, Ijesa, Ekiti, Egba and Ondo. They enjoy a very rich cultural history. The multi faceted fabric of their history is a direct reflection of the various accounts of their origin and the interrelationship they have with other groups in Nigeria (Babasoji, 1999).

The term, 'Yoruba' was the Hausa designation for the Oyo dialect speakers only, and it was only from the nineteenth century that it came to be extended to the other groups by Christian missionaries. A common origin and language, as well as common political and religious cultures made the Yorubaa nation long before any contact with Europeans and, the advent of colonialism. Idowu (1996) accounts that the name 'was fixed on us by our northern neighbors and later popularized by colonial publications.' Before then, the 'Anago' to which some Yoruba in the present Benin Republic and others in the new world still use to refer to them, was used to refer to most of the people called Yoruba today (Babasoji, 1999). The general language of the people is Yoruba though there are some variations as related to the different local and interior groups. The language is complex and deeply rooted in tradition. The origin of the Yoruba language is quite obscure and there really is no conclusive evidence proving where exactly it did originate. The most conclusive evidence, however, does lend itself to predicting that the Yoruba adopted their unique language somewhat from the language of the Egyptians, hundreds of years ago. Evidence supporting this theory is found primarily in the way a vast number of Yoruba words seem to be very similar to their Egyptian counterparts. There really is no explanation of how the Yorubas got their language back to Nigeria, though. The Yoruba alphabet is quite similar to the English alphabet. The main differences that separate the

two are that the Yoruba alphabet contains nasal vowels in addition to regular vowels. The other major difference is that the Yoruba language is pronounced a little differently.

However, these different Yoruba speaking groups share a common tradition of Ile- Ife origin and sees Oduduwa as the progenitor of the race. One political variation records that the Yoruba'sprung from Lamurudu, one of the Kings of Mecca whose offspring was Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yoruba; the Kings or king? of Gogobiri and Kukawa'. Who left Mecca due to a revolt and travelled eastward for ninety days before settling in Ile- Ife where they met the incumbent founder of ifa oracle, Agbonmiregun. (Johnson, 1973; Oduwobi & Iwuagwu, 1998).

From the statement above, there was a pre-existing civilization at Ile-Ife prior to its invasion by a group led by Oduduwa. They came to Ile-Ife, fought and conquered the pre-existing Igbo (unrelated to the present day Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria) inhabitants led by Oreluere (Obatala) (Olusanya, 1999). The second version which is more of a myth believes that Oduduwa (sent by sky God- Olorun) descended from heaven via a chain to create the earth after his elder brother has failed by bowing to too much palm wine drinking. Where he first landed was Ile -Ife. This myth describes how God let down a chain at Ile Ife by which Oduduwa-the ancestor of the Yoruba and, indeed, of all men descended, carrying a cock, some earth, and a palm kernel. He threw the earth into the waters, the cock scratched it to become land, and the palm grew with sixteen branches-representing the sixteen original kingdoms. Thus in several versions of these myths one finds themes of creation and conquest. But every town and lineage and every deity has its own origin myth (Babasoji, 1999).

Obviously, there is a connection between the two versions of the story. The political one may be the authentic story of the founding of the Ife kingdom through conquest. Nevertheless, in all of them, Ile Ife is regarded as the center from which all Yoruba dispersed to their present abodes. What is crucial in both variants of the story is the role of Oduduwa as the founder of the Yoruba nation, which is why the name cannot be forgotten. Oduduwa is the symbol of the nation, the rallying point for all those who subscribe to the Yoruba identity (Adeoye, 1980; Olusanya, 1999).

## **Types of Aso-oke in Nigeria**

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Makinde, Ayiboye and Ajayi (2009) observe that there are basically three major Aso-Oke types; *etu*, *alaari* and *sanyan* with many variations, which is achievable with the use of extra weft brocading technique which are identifiable by their patterns and colours to inform their uses at designated traditional ceremonies. First, *Etu* is a type of traditional Aso-Oke with blue and white stripes in the warp direction with a light blue checkerboard with a pattern weave structure. The strips are woven using local wild silk fiber, thus *Etu* is dyed repeatedly in traditional indigo blue dye, which is brought out at intervals for drying and stretching. In the ancient times, *Etu* was used as important social dress by chiefs and elders among the Yoruba. Second, we have *Alaari*, crimson in colour. It is traditionally woven with locally spurned silk yarns dyed in red cam wood solution

severally to achieve permanence in colour fastness. The use of *alaari* is not limited to a particular ceremony but traditionally used for all events among the Yoruba of Nigeria. And third, *Sanyan*, an expensive Yoruba hand-woven fabric, grayish in colour with white strip running through the middle of the cloth; traditionally produced from fibers made from the cocoons of the anaphe silk worm (Figure 1). Hence, the silk fibers are hand spun into silk threads, washed and soaked in corn-starch to strengthen the yarn for fabric production in the ancient times. In addition, *sanyan* is regarded as the most expensive of all Yoruba woven fabrics, thus, the Yoruba refer to it as *baba-aso*, the ‘father of fabrics’.



Figure 1. Various Aso-Oke colour schemes. Courtesy, Germaine Michael, 2017

## Methodology

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This qualitative study used descriptive research design in delving into the cultural affinity of Aso-Oke fabric and its production. Using purposive sampling technique, ten (10) respondents were selected, comprising of weavers four weavers and six users of Aso-Oke fabrics. Semi-structured interview and direct observation was used to collect data for the study while descriptive analysis constituted the data analysis plan.

## Implements used in hand woven Aso-oke

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Before colonial contacts, four types of loom existed in the Yoruba traditional weaving scene, for example among the people of Ado-Ekiti there existed the "bush loom" (*ofi oko*) which was found to be ideal for simple weaving. The twilling loom (*ofi elejo*) was confirmed to have existed among the people of Ilorin which was said to have shared the same properties with that of Ado-Ekiti. The traditional strip loom was found among the people of Iseyin, Oyo, Saki, Ibadan, Ede, Abeokuta and other former Oyo province (Lamb and Lamb, 1976; Dodwell, 1955). The fourth type of loom that existed before colonial contact is the vertical loom, the construction and operation of which was said to be the same in all Yoruba communities. This type of loom is particularly suitable for weaving *kijipa*, *itagbe*, *oja* for example. Of particular interest is the fact that various looms in the Yoruba societies reflect environmental and cultural adaptation and the ability to develop a range of choices suitable for products' manufacturing in the industry.

The origin of the horizontal looms in West Africa is unknown but it may have come from Asia through Arabia (Gilroy, 1987). This view corroborates the submission of Dodwell (1955) that although the origin of weaving among the people of south-western Nigeria is obscure it is thought to have been brought down along the Trans caravan routes from the Northern part of Nigeria. The chief feature of the Yoruba weaving is the narrowness of the cloth made on the loom which is usually in strips (Lamb and Lamb, 1973). The traditional strip looms were constructed in a house manner (rectangular form) with an open end. It was built with mud and bamboo sticks (Fadipe, 1970). Apart from the loom, instruments used in (traditional) weaving industry includes; yarn pegs (*Odaada*), shuttle (*oko*), pattern divider (*Ooya*), thread sorting equipment (*Akata*), *Kokogun*, Heddle (*Omu*), *Agbonrin*, weighted sledge (*Okuku*) and *Sanrin* (long iron for warping process). Consensus exists among scholars that the instruments used in the (traditional) weaving and production process were made, mainly, from iron, wood, bamboo, raffia palm and calabash and these instruments were sourced from the local environment and were mostly fabricated by carpenters, blacksmith and forebears of the industry themselves -master weavers for instance-(Lamb and Lamb; Dodwell, 1955).

The colonial policy made various attempts at the 'popularisation, and modernisation of the loom. In this connection, broad loom and the establishment of Textile Training Centre as part of the Textile Development Scheme (Renne, 1997) where training on



broad loom was organized for the young ones and ex-service men but it was largely unsuccessful due to the lack of proper understanding of the associated socio-cultural factors (Renne, 1997). On the modifications that have come to the instruments of weaving, that modifications mainly came to two implements; *Ofi* (loom) and the *asa* (reed). It was discovered in the course of investigation that the loom (weaving shed) as referred to by some respondents is now moveable unlike the fixed olden days built in form of a house. Also, it was found that in the old loom (traditional); the loom was made to accommodate an average of fifteen to thirty weavers while in the present horizontal loom (modern) weavers weave alone in the single movable loom.

Embedded in the material transformations is an associated alteration of the primordial communal mode of organization, processing and social relations in the *aso-oke* industry as individuals now work on the products without necessarily socializing with others. While this may enhance efficiency and optimal utilization of the production time, it may hold implications for the dynamics of oneness of the weavers especially as the production process is more often located within the family system. Particularly important from the foregoing is that familial and informal arrangements are known to be valuable in the sub-Saharan African setting with weak modern institutional arrangements. The social exclusion/extrication of the hand ginnery and spinning process made the concentration of weavers in a place less meaningful as weavers can now get thread for weaving wherever provided s/he can afford it.

The changes in the loom make it easier to weave (i.e. physical comfort) than the old loom and it was generally gathered that the old traditional strip loom no longer exist. Inquiries further revealed that the reed (*asa*) has also received some modification. The modification in the dents which yarn passes through during weaving. It was gathered that the reed in the traditional *aso-oke* industry was made from spine of the raffia palm tree which form the frame and the strings from the peel of bamboo stick while the modified one is made of wood plank and iron strings. It was evident in the course of the interviews that both the traditional and modern ones are still very much in use. The new reed is commonly in use because imported threads form the major bulk of thread used in the industry today. It was however gathered some customers prefer weave of traditional reed and that some clothes like *sanyan* cannot do well on the metal string reed. With the existence of the horizontal loom in the modern *aso-oke* industry, it was gathered from interviewees that the two reeds have been adapted into the horizontal (modern) loom. Hence, the loom can now weave cloth in the width of six to seven inches. The big, new reed (string made) can produce cloth wider in size and appear to be an adaptation of the broad loom introduced during the implementation of the Textile Development Scheme.

## Preparation and production process of Aso-oke

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In the traditional aso-oke industry of the Yoruba, the fundamental conviction of human society about the concept of work existed as all within the society and family partake in one degree or the other. As generally revealed, in all the discussions and interviews, the end product of the production process *aso-oke* in the traditional form start with the farmers. The process begins with the planting of local cotton (*owu tutu*). It takes three months for the cotton to reach harvesting stage when it becomes fully white. Inquiries revealed that harvesting was mostly done by the women and children. It is processed by the women or sold out for processing into yarns. Important in this finding however is that this role is merely for division of labour and complementarily to enhance optimal productivity and does not suggest gender segregation, mainstreaming or outright subjugation as usually inferred by previous studies.

On the input material processing, investigation revealed that seed cotton was indigenously processed by hand. Getting the cotton prepared for weaving starts with the removal of seed cotton from the cotton which is termed *ginning*. To remove the seeds, ginning usually involves placing cotton balls on a block of wood and rolling an iron rod over them. The pressure exerted on the moving cylindrical object pushes the seeds out of the cotton fibres. After the seeds are removed, the fibres must be aligned. The ginning process as gathered during the study was done indigenously through a bow type device called *Okure*. The device is used to fluff the cotton and straighten the fibres. This process produces the fluffy product which is ready to be spun into yarn.

Spinning is done traditionally manually. The spinner pulls and twists enough fibres to secure it to a spindle. Though it was gathered that spinning can take two major forms, but in this case the spindle is weighted by a clay whorl. The spinner sets the spindle in motion, draws fibres into a thread and winds them on the spindle. This instrument is called *akowu*. Inquiries into the origin of this instrument was gathered and it was revealed to have come from a tribe called *Ibariba* over a very long time ago and which was modified to suit their purpose. The spun yarn is wound into a skein called *akate ekowu* as seen in Figure 3. When asked on how knowledge about cotton sare usually located within the family or compound (*agbole*) as it is customary among the Yoruba's for every family to have a known handiwork/craftsmanship aside been farmers in most cases. In the case of a respondent, she opined that she learnt the skill when she was barely nine years old: "I got to know about thread making (yarn spinning) when I was young my grandmother taught us because she performed this task before her death and we (i.e. all young children) have to learn how thread is made because it our trade"

On the dyeing process, investigations gathered reveals that the desired colour of the thread is obtained with particular leaves and plants depending on the colour. In the case of blue colour, dyeing starts with the collection of *eluu* leaves (*Indigofera*) which produces indigo blue. The leaves are fermented and dried in balls. The indigo cakes are then placed in a perforated pot (*elekiti*) which contains ash (as source of soluble alkaline). Water is poured into the top filter through the perforated holes into the



bottom pots to obtain dye (*omi aro*). Preparation of dye in other colours however demands more specialized skills. The finesse with which the Yoruba produce dye has led so many researchers to the conclusion that indigo dyeing probably originated from south-western Nigeria. Apart from the findings that bark, roots and leaves are used in making dye stuff in the traditional *aso-oke* industry, it was further revealed that these plants formed the source of numerous dyes (colours) produced. As recounted by an interviewed dyer: "In those days [pre-colonial era] we used to produce red colour from leaves of guinea corn (*ewe oka baba*), bark and roots of African rosewood (*aga tree*)... black from physic nut tree (*opo owon*) beige from bark of mango tree (*epo igi mongoro*)."

It was gathered that during patterning, the cotton reels are hung upon the hangers on the sets of the metallic pegs on the ground. The reason for this is to make the cotton into bundles, after which the actual weaving starts. The rolled cotton will be neatly inserted into the striker through the extenders. The weaver will tie Iro (filler) on his seat. There are two or more holes on the staff in which a small peg is tagged. On the upper hand of the Omu (Extenders), there is Okeke (Wheel or Axle) for pulling the Omu up and down. There are two step pedals under the extenders (Omu) which the weaver presses down interchangeably during weaving. The pedal when pressed enables the cotton to open and the reeler put through to one side while the Striker knocks the reel to and fro to another side. This Striker allows the reel to be finely set interchangeably. The weaver handles the Oko (Shuttle) throws it inside the open cotton to be received by his other hand, movement of the Motor continues and faster as if the weaver is not touching it at all as seen in Figure 2. The whole process feels mechanically automated.

As the weaver continues this way, the cloth is woven and gradually extends forward. The weaver uses the cloth beam to pull the cloth towards himself and the carrier obeys the force and moves towards him while weaving continues. Aso-Oke weaving is indeed a beautiful sight to behold and that's why it is such a wonder how, as cottons in few minutes become Aso-Oke. However, the clothes goes by different names depending on the type, texture and quality. This process which predates modern history still exists till date. Weaving tools include the following:

Akata (Propeller)	Iye (Long Wheel)
Akaro (shortwheel)	Gowu and kokogun (Rollers)
Aasa (Striker)	Omu (Extender)
Sanrin (Metallic Peg)	Odada/Itese ( Pedals)
Ikeke (Extender Roller)	Okeke (Wheel or Axle)
Okuku (Strain Holder)	Sofi (Perforator)
Sugudu (Propeller Hanger)	Oko (Shuttle): Canoe Shape
Agbonrin (Staff)	

It is of important to note that the earlier process discussed from the aspect of cotton growing and spinning that existed in the traditional industry has been largely modified. This alteration led to a massive shift from the production of cotton to the production of other cash crops such as cocoa particularly favoured by the colonial development

policies. According to Olutayo and Omobowale (2007), "Cocoa in particular became so entrenched in the socio-economic structure of south-western Nigeria. It became a predominant product and was referred to as Nigeria's cocoa belt". Hence changes in the tastes and styles of current users to cope with the dictate of contemporary socio-economic remain trendy even in traditional attires, especially among the youths who are the major trend setters also necessitated the modification of the end products. This summation was sustained by a respondent (a user and industry observer) when she opined that:

Aso-oke is still very much in use. The fact is that it is being modified to meet the present expectations of trend. I think this is fine and the modification is mainly in terms of adding silk to the raw materials to make it lighter and finer. However, some people even still prefer the original (traditional) type because they last longer and they are made of original cotton. Also, when you wear the original (traditional) type with to match (good colour combinations) people fall in love with it and they give you compliments that this your cloth is fine o o.



Figure 2. Aso-oke weaving in progress. Source: Ayo Ogunseye.



*Figure 3, Cotton Preparation. Source: Ayo Ogunseye*

## **Influence of the use of aso-oke on Yoruba cultural sustainability and development in 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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To sustain Aso-Oke production and use among the Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria today requires a total change of attitude towards its uses as an occasional dress for traditional ceremonies and local festivals. The love and acceptance of Yoruba youths for anything foreign as a mark of modernity does not help matters. This attitude must be discouraged while youths should be encouraged to patronize homemade textiles. During the field studies carried out (2006), an octogenarian weaver Pa Adepoju of Fedegbo Compound, Isale Afon quarters in Ogbomoso reveals that, Yoruba youths prefer trendy foreign materials to aso-oke due to its flexibility, adaptability and suitability because of their flexibility, adaptability and suitability for English type of dress which is now in vogue. Hence, Yoruba weavers must change the structure of aso-oke to be adaptive to these modern dress forms. The Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria are traditionally sociable people who love to celebrate their successes with remarkable parties. Such moments often attract very large crowds where commemorative uniformed dressing is often required. This Yoruba dress tradition is also cited by Akinwumi (1990). Therefore, adapting the structure of Aso-oke and increasing the colour range that make the colour more appealing. This will help in promoting it for modern use. Flexibility in the colour range and mix will further promote its use and empower it to compete with other materials used for such occasions while increasing weavers' creativity.

The possibility of using Aso-oke as school uniform will be very high when it becomes adaptive to modern usage. Since Aso-oke manufacture comes in various colours and textures, the school proprietors/proprietresses and other school administrators only

need to select the appropriate type of aso-oke in terms of colour, pattern and design. The weavers in this regard must ensure that, the quality allows for a smooth, durable and washable texture. If these can be guaranteed, the use of Aso-oke as school uniform will be ensured by government policy. To start with, the seven southern Yoruba states of Nigeria can introduce it as their school uniforms. This will go a long way in endearing the fabric to the youth thereby facilitating its sustenance.

Obviously, science, technology and colonization have had a negative impact on Aso-oke use and production among the Yoruba. They gradually replaced the traditional technology of hand spun cotton and silk fibres used in the production of these handcrafted textiles (Aso-oke) among the Yoruba. With them went the knowledge of dye extraction (indigo dyeing) which was replaced by synthetic dyes. It is evident that, the introduction of foreign textiles brought innovations that resulted in the creation of new Aso-Oke types; it is not without implications as imported clothes became regular daily wears while Aso-Oke became very occasional. The arrival of the Christian and Islamic religions which encourage new dress cultures further ensured the near extinction of Aso-Oke. The love of foreign wears has made imported machine produced fabrics to replace Aso-oke's use as aso ebi (Identical dress) and commemorative fabrics at traditional festivals and occasions among the Yoruba. Dressing in complete Yoruba traditional attires has now been left for the politicians and few important personalities at occasions. The modern Yoruba women now prefer trousers, bikinis, and second hand clothing from Europe, which reveals their vital parts sometimes to embarrassing level.

## **Conclusion**

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From the study, it could be observed that Aso-oke is important to Nigeria's history and culture. It also serve as a means of job creation and economic empowerment. The focus on the production could also bring about several other tertiary industries like marketing and fashion. To encourage the use of aso-oke, school curriculums need to be redesigned to accommodate the study of indigenous art and culture so that the nation can develop materially and culturally. The society at large should be encourage to embrace the use of hand-woven Aso-oke and decline towards the use of foreign imported textiles. Government should raise a campaign to make aso-oke a commemorative fabric, significant indicator of self-expression and of cultural identity. Scholars should pay close attention to a more elaborate way of documenting trends in Aso-oke and its observable trends. Diversification of the Aso-oke for other purposes such as interior decoration should be encouraged.

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