

Yoruba Textiles, cloth and tradition in West Africa

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University of Leeds International Textiles Archive

Panel text

Yoruba Textiles

The Yoruba textile artists of South Western Nigeria are well known for being amongst the most prolific and creative artists in Africa. This exhibition explores that creativity in both woven and printed textiles. It aims to show the different traditions of making and also the ways in which those traditions have been influenced by and also incorporated and influenced other traditions.

The word tradition derives from the Latin *Tradere*, meaning to hand over or to pass on. This exhibition explores the way in which traditions have been handed on, creatively changing and bringing new elements into the textiles used and manufactured in South Western Nigeria. Rather than an exhibition of “traditional” forms this is an exploration of developing traditions and innovation.

With few exceptions all the cloth on display in this exhibition was purchased or derived from South-western Nigeria from the region that is commonly associated with people who call themselves Yoruba, and was made for purchase in the Yoruba market. Not all of this cloth is, however, Yoruba in origin.

The Yoruba

The people who define themselves as Yoruba are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. The Yoruba language is spoken by about 30 million people in Nigeria, and there are substantial groups of Yoruba speakers around the world. The history of the Yoruba is a complex weaving together of separate identities. Historically Yoruba identity developed from a group of loosely aligned kingdoms (based on towns such as Ife and Oyo) that through war; invasion (including that of the British) and politics came to regard social and cultural similarity as a mark of common identity.

The cultural heritage of the Yoruba is based on a shared myth of origin in the city of Ile Ife, which flourished between 1100AD and 1700AD. It was believed that the world was created at Ile Ife and the town remains at the centre of Yoruba religious belief based on a group of gods known as the *Orisha* (although most Yoruba are now either Christian or Muslim). Most Yoruba towns make claim to foundation by the sons of the first king of Ile Ife - Oduduwa.

Between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth centuries many of these towns found themselves incorporated into the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo. Oyo enjoyed a cultural dominance that was

only destroyed in the Nineteenth century by the Northern Islamic empire of the Fulani. The Nineteenth century was a time of turbulence; Oyo re-established its power base in the town of Ibadan and attempted to conquer much of South Western Nigeria. In 1898 the British occupation of Lagos forced a widespread peace across South Western Nigeria. The Twentieth century witnessed growing Yoruba unity as well as incorporation into the state of Nigeria.

Cloth and Yoruba Society

Cloth is an integral part of Yoruba identity. It is celebrated in Yoruba verse (*Oriki*) and is the most obvious mode visible cultural expression, celebrating the wealth of both individuals and Yoruba culture. Cloth is at the centre of Yoruba belief, often associated with ritual, used to dress celebrants, but also to wrap and enclose important bodies, shrines and sites of significance. Even as it reveals, wrapping with cloth also conceals.

Cloth is used to hide powerful things and substances, and is integral in the costumes of masquerades – ancestral spirits that visit the living. Cloth, and the thread from which it is woven, can carry colour of significance. The importance of plain white cloth should not be underestimated, but also significant are the combinations of blue and white thread, often wrapped around powerful substances, and the combination of red and white associated with the deity Shango. These combinations both dazzle the viewer and activate powers.

The visual effect of cloth is also crucial in celebrating the individual. Prestige cloth and clothing enlarges the physical presence of the wearer, but also gives outward expression of character, wealth and wellbeing. Cloth is also used to mark group identity. Often participants at festivals, weddings or graduations dress in clothes made from identical cloth (*aso-ebi*).

From the early Twentieth century an increasing sense of Yoruba identity developed aided by the creation of common grammar, the publication of an historical narrative that encompassed all Yoruba speaking people and a movement for freedom from colonial rule. Textiles and clothing were integral to this developing cultural identity, marking a difference from formalised colonial dress codes and giving full play to Yoruba expressions of identity and creativity.

Gowns

The *Agbada* is the formal garment of the Yoruba man. It is a flowing, wide sleeved, gown; the extra sleeve length is folded back and worn over the shoulders. Fine gowns, made from hand woven cloth and intricately embroidered, are worn by important men at ceremonial occasions.

The *Agbada* is a Yoruba borrowing from the Hausa robe known as a *Riga*, which was in widespread use in the Islamic empires of West Africa. Amongst the Yoruba the *Agbada* became a favoured form of prestige wear in the Eighteenth century as the Northern Hausa–Fulani empires became more important in Yoruba politics.

Important trade developed between the Yoruba, Hausa and Nupe peoples supplying demand for these robes. Different groups of workers would often make individual elements – thus the indigo dyeing of thread became the preserve of Nupe peoples. Amongst the Yoruba the Emirate of Illorin became the most important centre for the weaving of cloth.

The best robes were, and are, made of hand woven cloth of the type known as Aso-Oke. Three types of cloth are known to have enjoyed eminence for Yoruba kings and chiefs:

Etu – made from a dark indigo dyed cotton or silk, offset by thin warp (sometimes weft) threads of white. The word *Etu* actually means “Guinea Fowl” and the cloth is said to resemble the speckled appearance of that bird. *Etu* remains the most prestigious of all Yoruba cloth.

Sanyan – A beige coloured cloth, woven either from wild cotton or more importantly from a form of wild silk.

Alaari – Cloth made from a magenta coloured silk or cotton. Originally this was silk imported across the Sahara and was thus very expensive and prestigious. Increasingly the colour has been adopted as an indicator of rank status.

Eshu and the Yoruba hat (*Fila*)

Eshu is a Yoruba deity (Orisha). His main role is as a messenger between the gods (especially the god of divination - Orunmila) and humans. Eshu loves to play tricks and cause trouble. One story relates how he wore a cap (*fila*) that was red on one side and blue on the other. Walking down the road between two farmers he caused confusion and argument when each asked the other if they had seen the man in the red / blue hat and they could not agree that such a man had passed. Eshu turned the cap around and walked backwards between them – the two friends came to blows! The sculpture here indicates the differences in Eshu’s hat colour by different carving styles.

Aso-Oke

The premier cloth of the Yoruba is woven on the double heddle narrow strip loom.

While the three forms used for gown making remain important Aso-Oke has evolved to embrace a diverse range of colours, patterns and new materials. Aso-Oke is associated with Yoruba identity around the world.

Embroidery

Embroidery on gowns may have developed as a method of strengthening seams and other areas of weakness. However elaborate stitched work became a sign of prestige and wealth. Most robes follow variants of two classic designs. These are known as Eight knives and Two knives. The designs refer to the points that project below the neckline. Designs were inspired by Koranic motifs as well as Hausa folk designs. Embroidery designs spread over a wide area in West Africa and it is clear that motifs and patterns were developed in the

interaction between Yoruba, Nupe and Hausa embroiderers. One such design is the *Yar Ilori* (daughter of Ilorin) design, a reference to Ilorin, the Yoruba town where the design originated.

The embroidery of a large gown was often done by a group of men using hand spun cotton or wild silk. Hand embroidery has now been superseded by machine embroidered work, and while the classic designs remain popular machine work has allowed innovation and development within the design tradition.

Aso-Oke

Aso-Oke is the common name for the predominant form of hand woven cloth found amongst the Yoruba. *Aso Ilu Oke* (it's full name) translates as "cloth from the town on the hill" or alternatively "cloth from the hill" (*Oke* a high place –the top of something = high status cloth). In the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century most *Aso-Oke* was woven away from the major metropolitan centres – the most dominant centre of manufacture being the town of Iseyin within the Oyo Empire.

At the turn of the century *Aso-Oke* became tied to Yoruba (and Nigerian) cultural identity. Yoruba intellectuals (often from slave returnee families) rejected the formal wear of the British Empire in favour of this local cloth. The Twentieth century witnessed an increasing surge in demand for *Aso-Oke* which has meant that its production is widespread throughout South Western Nigeria. It has become synonymous with Yoruba identity and the cloth is used for the manufacture of garments associated with prestigious moments such as weddings, graduations, religious festivals (of all beliefs) and other important events.

The Double Heddle Narrow Strap Loom

Like much cloth in West Africa *Aso-Oke* is woven on a horizontally mounted double heddle narrow strip loom. The cloth is woven in an extremely long strip that is usually four inches wide. Once complete the strip is then cut and sewn edge to edge to form cloth for garments.

In general the warp is the predominant feature, the pattern of stripes is determined by laying the threads out, and using a roller to create alternate stripes. The warp threads are then bundled and threaded through suspended heddles (*Omu*) which are also attached to pedals which the weaver can manipulate with their feet, leaving their hands free to manipulate the weft. Heddles operate as a pair forming the shed and countershed. The weft is passed through the opening and closing heddles to form the cloth.

Weft embellishment is a common feature of *Aso-Oke*. In general this takes two forms, openwork and the supplementary floating weft. Openwork is a technique that consists of creating holes in the cloth by tying bundles of warp threads together with an extra weft thread, which is left on display adding to the design of the cloth.

The supplementary floating weft refers to weft threads that are not woven straightforwardly into the cloth, but rather "float" across two or more warp threads. Often threads of a different material – silk and rayon – are used to create these patterns. In this fashion

various designs can be added to the cloth – often these are abstract but also commonly combs, prayer boards or stylised figurative designs are created.

In the Twentieth century Aso-Oke weaving has seen a remarkable level of creative innovation. New threads and materials have been rapidly incorporated, and nowadays while there are a few rare examples of weavers still using wild cotton most Aso-Oke is made with machine spun cotton, utilising an array of threads including rayon, viscose and importantly Lurex (a shiny plastic coated thread imported from Japan). In the past the horizontal loom was strictly reserved for male weavers, but nowadays it is often young women who produce this cloth, and there are numerous apprenticeship “schools” catering for the demand of women for this employment.

Women’s Weaving

While Aso-Oke has grown in popularity throughout the Twentieth century, the weaving of cloth on an upright broadloom, the preserve of women, has declined. As a technique it is almost non-existent amongst contemporary Yoruba, although it continues to thrive in Okene and Akwete to the East.

In the past the tradition flourished and, especially in areas such as Ekiti (a region of Yoruba speaking Nigeria) most households had a loom and most young girls learnt to weave from their mothers. In Ekiti, this form of weaving was a major form of trade. It is remembered in the praise songs of Ekiti towns such as Ikole Ekiti:

Ikole ko ri nkan mu aso, a ta ala b’ose

Ikole has so much cloth they could not find anything to do with it than tie it around the baobab tree. The tree in question is regarded as the place of origin for the three parts of Ikole that came together to make the town. Every year the cloth is renewed.

The Upright Single Heddle Loom

The upright single heddle loom is of extremely basic manufacture, consisting in essence of four poles lashed together to form a structure around which a warp can be strung. The weaver works with the loom between herself and the wall of the house it is set up in. In places a distinctive pit within older houses can still be seen, indicating where the weaver would sit in front of her loom. Much more complex, however is the laying of the warp. Threads are wound onto large spindles. The yarn is then tied to the lower horizontal beam and passed between the two horizontal beams. A shed is formed by passing the thread to one side or another of three shed sticks. Once this is completed a heddle is tied to individual threads, which is then operated by manually pulling the warp threads and opening a space between them with a shed stick allowing a weft to be passed between them, which is beaten into place using a “sword” (*apasa*).

The process of weaving is, in comparison to the narrow strip loom, laborious. The shed has to be made by hand and passing the weft between the warp threads is a slow procedure. While the width of the cloth can be much wider than that of the strip loom, the length is set by the frame of the loom and the cloth produced is warp faced.

As well as being the standard cloth woven for domestic use, types of cloth woven on the single heddle broadloom could have a number of significant uses. One of these is known as *Kijipa* which is widely used in ritual contexts.

Adire

Adire cloth is perhaps the most distinctive and, outside Nigeria, the most well known of Yoruba cloth types. *Adire* textiles are immediately recognizable with their distinctive deep blue colour and intricate patterns. Although the production is now limited, its history is an integral part of the development of the modern Yoruba identity.

The cloth develops from a tradition amongst Yoruba women of dyeing old cloth with Indigo in order to strengthen and prolong its useful life. In order to elaborate these re-dyed cloths, simple patterns could have been formed by tying pebbles into the cloth before dyeing. The expansion of this basic process into the *adire* industry depended on a number of developments in the late Nineteenth century.

Two cities are known for *adire* production; Ibadan and Abeokuta. Both sit within the indigo growing belt, both were created as refugee camps and maintained an openness to strangers and trade, which from the later part of the Nineteenth century included a number of former slaves returning from Freetown and Brazil. Both were centres of early missionary activity in the later Nineteenth century. It has been suggested that this combination of factors may have led to experimentation with the basic processes of indigo dyeing. However it was the importation of European manufactured cloth that allowed the development of more detailed design and pattern.

There are two distinct styles of *adire*. *Adire Onioko* is a technique of pattern making that utilizes raffia stitched and tied into the cloth, resisting the dye. The second form uses cassava starch (*eko*) as the resist. This form of *adire* is known as *Adire Eleko*. There are two types of *Adire Eleko*. In Abeokuta a process of manufacture developed that utilized zinc stencils. The zinc for these stencils came from the internal lining of European packing cases (tea chests) that were arriving in Nigeria in increasing numbers at the turn of the century. Only Abeokuta developed this form. In Ibadan free hand painting of the starch onto the cloth was dominant although it is likely that much of the freely painted imagery is an attempt to reproduce the formal designs of the stencils.

Adire is a product of a Yoruba engagement with the modern world. Designs were inspired by the changing worlds of Ibadan and Abeokuta. The technique learnt itself to inventiveness and flexibility, and as well as illustrating local proverbs and using established motifs, designs often refer to topical events, and make reference to everyday life.

Ibadandun

Particular adire designs have come to be well known and lend their names to entire cloths. One such is *Ibadandun* (the town of Ibadan is sweet – ie: good to live in). The design that gives the cloth this name is a series of columns that represent the pillars of Mapo Hall, built by the British as the City Hall and which dominates the city skyline. The columns alternate with the pestles that are used for pounding Yam. Other panels in this cloth vary according to the tastes of the maker but commonly show a Qur'an writing board, an umbrella together with the leaves used in chiefly installation, the tree that marks the Ibadan market place, and an assortment of birds, reptiles and insects which may have proverbs associated with them.

Jubilee / Oloba

One of the best known *adire* designs is commonly called Jubilee although it is locally referred to as *Oloba* (literally 'it has king').

At the centre of each half length of the cloth is a medallion with images of King George V and Queen Mary. These representations were derived from souvenirs of the 25th anniversary of their coronation, in 1935.

To either side is *Al Buraq*, the horse that carried the Prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem, and up into heaven in the Night Journey. Other motifs such as the hunter are also used. There is no necessary "meaning" to these designs.

The original stencils identified the figures as King George and Queen Mary; but in 1936 the king died and was succeeded by Edward VIII, and new stencils were cut in Abeokuta now identifying the king as *ediwodu*. Edward's abdication in favour of his brother Albert, who took the name George at his accession, meant that the original design regained its usefulness. There are two versions of this design, the stencilled version produced in Abeokuta and freehand-painted versions in Ibadan.

Kampala and Dutch Wax

By the mid 1970s adire production was in sharp decline. A combination of a flooded market, poor commercial dyes and a lack of interest in what was, for most Yoruba, a common cloth (in relation to the more popular Aso-Oke), meant that adire became less attractive.

Other forms of dyeing had become popular during the late 1960s onwards, using techniques generally known as *kampala* (apparently so named after the publicity given to Idi Amin's offer in 1974 of Kampala as a venue for a peace conference intended to sort out the Northern Ireland conflict).

Kampala makes use of simpler forms of tied pattern, as well as candle wax, either spattered or printed using specially made stamps. The cloth also makes use of factory made dyes

that can be used without either staining one's hands or the specialist knowledge needed for the local preparation of indigo.

Dutch Wax

The name "Dutch wax" nowadays covers a range of cloths, but the identifying feature is a wax resist ground upon which printed designs are block printed. The highest grade prints are still manufactured by hand block-printing, but the demand for this cloth means that cheaper versions are mechanically produced.

The Yoruba name for these is *ankara*, which is how the capital of Ghana, Accra, is pronounced in the Yoruba language. It was in the trading cities of the colonial Gold Coast (modern Ghana) that the West African taste for Indonesian-derived patterning was first established, leading to the late Nineteenth century replication of these designs by Dutch and English (particularly around Manchester) cotton-printing factories.

Twenty First Century Textiles

It is almost impossible to encompass the range and diversity of cloth currently available in Nigeria. What is apparent is that alongside the availability of Laces, brocades, damasks as well as European fashions, Yoruba weavers and dress makers maintain their lively engagement in the modern world. New designs and fashions are disseminated in many media and seamstresses and tailors will work up many individual styles. More recently the Nigerian market has faced competition from Chinese producers, who flooded the market with fake wax prints.

Nethertheless, the textile and fashion industry in Nigeria is a creative industry that continues to operate at many different levels, from the seamstress working at home to multi-million pound enterprises.

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For the University of Leeds International Textiles Archive

Further reading

There are many books and articles on Yoruba textiles. Those listed below have been especially influential and helpful in putting this exhibition together:

- Mack, John and Picton, John. (1989) *African textiles*. London, British Museum Press.
- Picton, John. (2004) What to wear in West Africa: textile design, dress and self-representation, in Tulloch, Carol [ed.] *Black Style*. Victoria & Albert Museum.
- Picton, John *et al.* (1995) *The Art of African textiles: technology, tradition and lurex*. London, Barbican Art Gallery.
- Perani, Judith. (1999) *Cloth, dress and art patronage in Africa*. Oxford, Berg.
- Lamb, Venice. (1975) *West African weaving*. London, Duckworth.
- Barbour, Jane and Simmonds, Diog [eds.] (1971) *Adire cloth in Nigeria*. Ibadan, Institute of African Studies.
- Agbaje-Williams, Babatunde and Renne, Elisha. (2005) *Yoruba Religious Textiles*. Ibadan, Bookbinders.

A useful website is edited by Dr Duncan Clarke:

Adire African Textiles : <http://www.adireafrican textiles.com>