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Aso-Òkè and Its Social and Economic Significance among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria

Adémúlèyá, Babásèhìndé A. Ph. D
Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obáfémi Awólówò University, Ilé-Ifè

Abstract
The paper examined the place of Aso-Òkè among the Yoruba. It viewed the use of aso-òkè and its economy, which has been enhanced by the cloth's prestige status over time. It observed that the elevation of aso-òkè as the symbol of Yoruba national identify has been a strong factor in the sustenance of its usage thus making it essential to the social, political, economic and cultural life of the people. The study noted the nationalist renewed appreciation of interest in African culture in their struggle for political independence led to their search for cultural emblem. It viewed that the search led the Yoruba elite, like their other educated Nigerians from the main ethnic groups to consciously identify themselves with cloths and mode of dresses peculiar to their areas. It concludes that as long as aso-òkè remains a material of value and prestige and more importantly an identity of the typical Yoruba person(s) home and abroad, it shall continue to be a relevant binding factor among the Yoruba and of a strong social and economic significance.

1. Introduction

The traditional Yoruba hand woven cloths - *'aso-òfî'*- popularly called *'aso-òkè'* "meaning cloths from the hinterland" as it is referred to on the coast, are made of spun yarn either derived from cotton or the cocoons of *anaphe*, a species of wild moth. The spun yarns are usually woven on a loom. The Yoruba name for loom is '*òfî'* hence, the cloths made on loom are called *'aso-òfî'*. Looms used by Yoruba weavers are of two types; the vertical (broad) loom used mostly by women and the horizontal (narrow) loom, traditionally used by men. The term *'aso-òkè'* though refers generally to products of the two looms, it is however, more and closely associated with the weaves from the horizontal loom and cloths made of it (Ademuleya 2014).

The three major '*aso-òkè'* types are: *'etù', 'àlàárì',* and *'sányán'*. *Sányán* is usually of pale greyish-brown colour, sometimes divided by longitudinal white warp stripes. It is traditionally made of yarn derived from the cocoons spun of *anaphe* caterpillars. *Àlàárì* is crimson in colour, originally made from a mixture of *sányán* dyed in red camwood and imported *alharini* thread (Lamb & Holmes 1980). Not all *àlàárì* are pure red, some are combined with dyed cotton of various colours. *'Etù'* is predominantly dark blue (indigo) with fine light blue in the background. It is usually made of indigo dyed cotton. The earliest ones are said to have contained a considerable proportion of *sányán* silk (Lamb & Holmes, 1980). Very close to *etù* is '*petùje'*. It is often called junior *etù*. It has small checks of light blue on a dark indigo background. When and how the three major traditional narrow loom strip cloths as well as *petùje* occupied the centre of the Yoruba rich dress culture remain unknown. Yet, we have found in the cloths, continuing and evolving traditions, which have for centuries remained essential to the social, political economic and cultural life of the people.

2. 1 Economic Significance of *Aso-òkè* among the Yoruba

The most documented aspect of the hand woven cloth tradition in the recorded history of the Yoruba is perhaps its place in the region's economy. The cloth in its variety of forms has been a major marketable commodity since the traditional times. It has long been the subject of extensive trade within and beyond the boundaries of Yoruba speaking groups. It was reported to have been an important commodity of trade with the British as early as the 17th century (Ryder 1965). Perani (1998) informed of the involvement of Yoruba weavers, cloth merchants and patrons in interregional trade with the Nupe and other towns to the north of Oyo-Ile since the early part of the 19th century. She particularly mentioned, the trade routes from Oyo-Ile via Nupe and Borgu, joining up in Kulfe and extending north to Hausa land and Bornu, through which woven cloths were marketed.

Apart from being a major Yoruba contribution to a complex system of interregional trade, the manufacture of *aso-òkè* also revolved round complex working interactions among people of specialties involved in production and distribution within the Yoruba country. The industry, which perhaps parades more specialists than any other Yoruba art or craft, comprises spinners, dyers, tailors embroiderers and cloth beaters with the weavers at the centre. Its production also involved farmers and hunters who supply cotton and the *anaphe* cocoon for the making of silk yarn. Field investigation has shown that apart from the spinners who may be of the weaver's family, most of the associating specialists belong to different families or guilds. The relationship between them and the weavers may well be of significance since working together provides means of livelihood to all involved.

Furthermore, the manufacture and the distribution of *aso-òkè* have also been of great importance to commerce within the Yoruba country. Long before the close of the 19th century there were in existence some

large and vibrant *aso-òkè* wholesale market centres, across the Yoruba land (Clarke 1972). Some of these markets operate on a seventeenth or sixteenth day cycle. There are also several retail markets, which operate on a seventh or ninth day cycle. They are often located within prominent towns and villages in the interior while the large market centres are located in the capital towns of Yoruba kingdoms. High Chief *Sàréré Lóbùn* of Ile-Oluji (personal communication, October 15, 2001) attempted a description of the distribution pattern of commodities between the two types of market thus:

> "…Our mothers used to go to Ibadan, Iseyin and Ede and sometimes as far as Ilorin on foot to buy *aso-òkè*. They often go with mat and *àílèé* (local broom) to sell and in-turn buy *aso-òkè* from the markets to be re-sold at the local markets in Ondo, Ile-Oluji, Idanre and other nearby markets.

Today the existing major wholesale markets are Ojá Oje in Ibadan, the Ede market, and Ojá Araromi in Oyo. Apart from the exchange of goods at these major markets, weavers also seize the opportunity of meeting with other weavers to exchange ideas, designs, techniques, innovations and experiences thus making *aso-òkè* market an instrument of unity and cultural integration. Alhaji Kazeem Ajadi (personal communication, November 8, 2001) noted that certain weaving materials which include raw cotton, spun cotton and silk cocoon pods and some other needed items as well as loom parts are also often brought to the market to be sold to weavers. The traders involved also act as middlemen between the weavers and the patrons, who are the final consumers.

The interregional cloth trade has also contributed to the wide spread of the Iseyin and the Ilorin clothiers (particularly weavers) into the interior. While the *aso-òkè* traditions of manufacture and practise may seem to be confined to a section of the Yoruba people in the traditional times and even up-to-date, the traditions of significance and value, of patronage and usage, cut across the entire Yoruba kingdom.

2.2. Social Significance of *Aso-òkè* among the Yoruba

Though, it may be difficult to tell the dress mode of the ancient Yoruba people, the primary use of hand woven cloth, according to a Yoruba mythology that tells of its origin, is to cover man's nakedness[1]. When and how the ancient Yoruba may have started covering their nakedness with woven cloth remains unknown. Nevertheless, a study of the bronze and terracotta sculptures excavated at various points in Ile-Ife which have been dated between the 12th and 16th century (Gillion 1984) has shown that as at the 12th century and possibly some five to six centuries before it, the Yoruba people particularly the kings and nobles, and even peasants as represented in the sculptures were already using tailored wrap around, and garbs. By the close of the 18th century, it is most certain that, the use of robes such as *agbádá, dándógó, gbárìyè* and *trousers* with *fìlà,* as well as *ìró* were already in use. The Richard Lander's 19th century description of the king of the Old Oyo he saw firmly establishes this. According to Lander in Lamb & Holmes (1980), the King was "richly dressed in a scarlet robe and a pair of trousers made of country cloth with blue strips".

The use of hand woven cloths, or country cloths (as it is sometimes called), of both vertical broad loom and horizontal loom among the Yoruba people can generally be classified into three; (i) cloth of daily use, (ii) cloth of specific use and (iii) cloth of prestige value. The cloths of daily use include; the women's *ìró* - "wrapper" and men's *aso ìbora* – 'covering cloth'. Both are usually dyed dark indigo blue with white warp strips of light blue in varying width. Some are left in their natural unbleached cotton colour. They are all made of hand spun cotton and woven on broad loom. They are fondly called *kijipa*. Among the Ijebu where the dyed type called *Ìkàlè* is worn by women, Aronson (1992) informed of its use to elicit blessing from the gods for a healthy birth. Aremu (1982) also added that it may be used to ensure prosperity, protection and victory over enemies. Among the Yoruba of Iseyin, Oke-ho, Oyo and their suburbs, there are series of the dyed types that have different names such as *òkun, òparó* and *olòówú-dúdú,* depending on the composition of the warp strip and the depth of the indigo dye. They are variously used as bride gifts at marriage. It is good to also note, that there are horizontal loom versions of the cloths used for marriage rites or as bride's gift among these people. They include *òparó, ijó-àárò, kókó-eléko* and *mátesùn- awo- erin.*

The cloths of specific use include; *òjá* – it is a one-panel wide strip cloth used for fastening babies to their mothers' backs. Another is *aso-olónà* - 'patterned cloth' a preserve of the Oshugbo secret society of the Ijebu. The one panel strip version of it called *ìtàgbé* is tufted and worn over the shoulder to serve as the society's emblem of identity. Its wrapper version is also used as toga. Both ò*já* and *aso olónà* are weaves of the broad loom. *Òbó,* another cloth of specific use is the plain white hand spun cotton weave of the horizontal loom. It is commonly used among the Muslim Yoruba of Iseyin and Oke-ho where it is considered as *aso-ìkehìn* 'burial cloth'. According to Alhaji Kazeem Ajadi (Op cit.), *obo* is the Yoruba substitute for the "*Aramin* cloth" which he claimed is used for wrapping the dead for burial in Mecca.

The cloths of prestige values are the three major weaves of the horizontal narrow loom, namely, *etù, sányán* and *àlàárì.* Traditionally, *etù* and *àlàárì* are made of hand spun cotton, *òwú èlútú* or *òwú èkèsé*, while *sányán* is made of hand spun silk of the *anaphe* cocoon – *òwú èwùkù*. The three cloths are easily discerned by

their colours. *Etù* is predominantly dark blue with fine light blue stripes. Very close to *etù* is *petùje* "the junior *etù*". Its checks of light blue differentiate it from the real *etù*. Though some are combined with dyed cotton of various colours and patterns, *àlàárì* is crimson in colour. *Sányán* is of pale grayish brown in colour. It is often times combined with longitudinal warp bound. *Etù*, *àlàárì, sányán* and even *petùje* are worn at life cycle events such as naming, marriage and funeral ceremonies as well as at some other important and ceremonial occasions. As Sieber (1972) rightly noted, the cloths are worn as high prestige costume, and the richness and variety are a clear indication of the great value traditionally placed on them.

Although none of the three cloths is specifically used for a particular event, it is however suspected that the colours of the cloths may have made them serve some specific functions in addition to their general (ceremonial) usages. Igbaro in Obisesan (2002) observes that colours have both social and spiritual connotations in traditional African setting. In his analysis he stressed that, socially, among the Yoruba, white symbolizes sacredness or purity, black, sadness or strength and red, productivity. This analysis seems applicable to the specific use of these cloths. *Sányán* and *etù* are believed to be used for burial rites in recent times because of their colours. Mama Adeduro (personal communication, September 21, 2001), an informant from Ondo, believed that the closeness of *sányán* to white may have informed its being considered pure enough to be used for the traditional 'lying-in-state' of the dead, especially if he or she had been a person of substance and had lived to old age. It is also used for wrapping corpses of the (aged) dead for burial. Relatives and mourners may put on *etù* during the final burial ceremony to express their sadness at the lost of the departed. However, any of the types could be used for the "outing" ceremony as well as the *Ìní*, a symbolic rite that signifies lineage participation as solidarity with the (immediate) family of the departed in Ondo. The practise, as rightly noted by Akinwumi (1990), is similar to the use of *aso ipo, ifale* and *arabata* tapestry fabrics among the Owe, Abinu and Ikiri communities. A strap of the cloth is usually kept as memorial and evidence of participation. Another use of the prestigious *aso-òkè* for burial in the traditional past was in the custom of burying the dead along with valuables, which include cloth of quality to be enjoyed in the life after (Lamb & Holmes1980).

At important and ceremonial occasions, which may involve families and groups, all the three *aso-òkè* types are usually worn except where the celebrant or the celebrating group-requested a particular type to be used as *Aso-ebí* - commemorative attire. *Aso-ebí* is the practise of adopting a particular cloth as commemorative attire for group of celebrants of life cycle events. According to Akinwumi (1990) the practise was made popular in the 1920s with the formation of new social associations - *egbé* by the new set of Yoruba elites of the early 20th century. He noted that the practise was derived from the custom of 'grave deposit' for the dead. As he puts it:

> *Aso-ebí* as it is now used, is a misnomer, its original concept is *aso-tí-ebí-dá-jo* meaning the various cloths contributed by family members as grave goods for the dead (171).

Today *aso-ebí* also known as *ànkóò* "lineage uniform" is used to express group solidarity or family unity and for easy recognition at functions. Although the period of its emergence in the 1920s coincided with the era of the influx of imported fabrics and the fabrics chosen could be any of the imported wax prints, *ànkárá*; velvet, *àrán* or lace, Clarke (1998) observed that the choice most often was *aso-òkè*"

The social significance and function of Yoruba traditional hand-woven cloths, particularly the weave of the narrow loom, goes beyond its covering of man's nakedness and the ceremonial or commemorative functions. It particularly indicates the role and status differentiation in various Yoruba social structure. Before the European contacts and the eventual importation of machine spun yarns, which brought about some changes in manufacture and patronage, of hand-woven cloths, tradition had it that *etù, àlàárì* and s*ányán* have been widely used as cloths of prestige value among the Yoruba. Until recently, these three major traditional cloths are known, even as cloth of everyday wear, as the preserve of kings, princes and nobles, who made up the persons of substance in the traditional times. Ayorinde (1973) established this in the *oríkì* of *aso* saying:

Kíjìpá aso òle	*Kíjìpá* is the cloth of the lazy
Òfì aso àgbà	*Òfì* is the cloth of the elders
Àgbà tí ko ba r'ówó rò'fì	An elder who cannot afford to buy *Òfì*
ko ra Kíjìpá	Let him buy *Kíjìpá*
Nitoripe sányán ni baba aso	For *sányán* is the father of cloths
Etù baba èwù	*Etù* the father of dresses
Àlàárì lo te lee...	*Àlàárì* is the next…

This *Oríkì* - praise song, though, accorded the least position to *àlàárì* among the other three, it is however said to be the favourite of the new generation of elites of the 19th and the 20th centuries (Clarke 1998). Among the Ondo people *àlàárì* is also considered the most precious which Ademuleya (2011) described as the 'king of cloths'. This reflects in Ondo folk song that goes thus:

Mà má'yà gbe	-	I will wear with dignity/pride
Ma má'yà gbe	-	I will wear with dignity/pride
Àlàárì 'lori aso	-	*Àlàárì* the best of clothes

Ma má'yà gbe - I will wear with dignity/pride

Being the cloth of prestige, *aso-òkè* serves as element of social stratification in Yoruba social structure. It has been used in the past as a deciding factor to distinguish a noble from a peasant, a prince or princess from a commoner or slave. While the broad weaves which includes white dyed *Kíjìpá* and some other patterned weaves of broad -loom may have been considered the cloth of women and men of honour and humble background as well as commoners, the narrow strip *aso-òkè* must have been the everyday wear of the notables. Ayorinde (1973) makes reference to Bashorun Oluyole as "a man who used scarlet to out shine the erstwhile well-dressed man on horseback". This was meant to place Bashorun above another distinguished man who apart from being "well dressed" possessed a horse, another status enhancing belonging of his time.

Another significance of *aso-òkè* in the traditional times was its use as a major item of diplomatic exchange or gift between many Oba and war chiefs of the time. Johnson recorded the significant use of the woven cloth along with slaves and wives as gifts from one Oba or Head chief to the other in order to allure such kings or chief into friendly relations and support at war times (Johnson, 1921).

Furthermore, in the traditional times and even up to the early part of the 20th century, according to Alhaji Kazeem Ajadi (Op. Cit.), *aso-òkè* was considered an important heritable property, – *dúkìá,* in Yoruba land. Ever before the possession of houses, cars and large firm-lands became "standards" of measuring 'material wealth' *dúkìá* and success of a person in his life time, the number and varieties of *aso-òkè* the dead left to be inherited by his wives, children and possibly relatives was a measure of how sociable and prosperous he was.

Aso-òkè also, is known to have served an important backup investment or rather insurance for the rich and the family of the rich at difficult moments. Mama Aduni (personal communication, November 18, 2001), an Ijebu clothier, who deals in used old *aso-òkè* has noted that most (if not all) of the old *aso-òkè* types that have been sold at various major markets since the 1970s are inherited materials of some people. She stated that they were brought to the markets by the *aláròóbò* "itinerant traders" who bought them from the owners who were possibly in dire need of money[2]. Alhaji Kazeem Ajadi (Op. Cit) corroborating Mama Aduni's claim gives reasons for disposing of such valuables. He observed that most of the cloths already sewn into garments, being the only auction-able property, either acquired or inherited at that time, were used to be sold by the owners to enable them send their children to school. Some, he noted, were sold by those who turned bankrupt, to settle their debts. This practise still persists. Most of the resold aso-òkè are of the old types – *etù*, *petùje, sányán* and *àlàárì* types that are no longer woven. They are already sewn into garments i.e. *agbádá, dànsíkí, dándógó, gbárìyè sòkòtò* and *fìlà* while some are in women's wrapper -*ìró,* shawl- *ìborùn* and head-tie *gèlè.*

3. Conclusion

Elevation of *aso-òkè* as the symbol of Yoruba national identify has been a strong factor in the sustenance of its usage thus making it essential to the social, political, economic and cultural life of the people. By the 1950s, the call for return to African names and styles of dress as part of the nationalist struggle, which Clarke noted to have actually started in the 1890s, by the *Saro* – the slave returnees from Sierra Loene (Clarke 1998), had reached its climax. The development got to its peak with the nationalist renewed appreciation of interest in African culture in their struggle for political independence. This led to their search for cultural emblem. Before and after Nigerian independence in 1960 (Odutokun 1989), educated Nigerians from the main ethnic groups began to consciously identify themselves with cloths and mode of dresses peculiar to their areas. The result of this, among the Yoruba, was the adoption and recognition of complete set of *agbádá*, *bùbá, sòkòtò* and *fìlà* attire for men and *bùbá, ìró, gèlè* with *ìborùn* for female. Although, recognition is given to the attires if made in any fabric, on the other hand, the stamp of Yoruba 'national' identity is more firmly placed on such attire when it is made of *aso-òkè.* This is meant to retain its traditional place as prestige cloth for important and ceremonial occasions. It probably informed its wide use between the 1960s and 1980s as wedding out-fits in place of the English wedding dress.

That aso-òkè has always been a material of value and prestige since traditional times is of no doubt. Beyond its strong place in the peoples' culture, today, even in its variety of re-modified versions, either as *aso-òkè*-lace or embroidery-patterned *aso-òkè*, it remains the only known identity of the typical Yoruba person(s) home and abroad. This explains why *aso-òkè* has continue to be relevant in spite of the radical bombardment of foreign dress culture and the consequent abandonment of our dress 'sense' and value in the contemporary time. This is an indication that the cloth of the strip loom shall for long remain a strong socio-economic binding factor among the Yoruba and most importantly an undisputable symbol of Yoruba national identity.

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Notes:

1. The Yoruba Mythology as recorded in an Ifa corpus had it that Obatala was the first to weave and he did it for the concealment of man's nudity.
2. Mama Aduni a frequent "itinerary" aso-oke 'exchange' trader at Oje Market also informed that disgruntled children do sell their parents' *aso-òkè* to raise money, which their parents may not be willing to give them. Also some aláròóbò do encourage some aged people to sell out their *aso-òkè* to raise money for themselves.