

## **The Social Phenomenon of Yoruba Hand-woven Fabric (Aso-Oke): A Re-Appearance of the Weaving Mechanism**

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### **Abstract**

The paper examines the social phenomenon of Yoruba hand-woven fabric (*Aso-Oke*): A Re-Appearance of the weaving mechanism in southwest states of Nigeria. The study examines fabrics woven with handspun yarns and socio-cultural impact of *Aso Oke* (the use of *Aso Oke*). The paper also examines the use of *Aso Oke* clothing (Socio-cultural perspective). Appropriate conclusion and recommendations were made.

**Keywords:** Social, phenomenon, Yoruba, Hand-woven Fabric, Weaving Mechanism

### **1. Introduction**

*Aso Oke* is the end product of the type of weaving made on horizontal and vertical looms in South-Western Nigeria. The loom, with accessories, is used with other workable equipment (Oyelola, 1976). The loom is used to apply any set of devices permitting a warp to be tensioned and a she I to be formed (Caxton, 1972). The World Book Encyclopedia made a classification of loom in two categories:

- (i) The handloom that is not motor or power-driven, such as floor loom.
- (ii) Power loom: It is motor-driven.

Nelson (1982) explained that the handloom is the simplest and most primitive type of loom with special variations. Lamb (1980) also averred that the horizontal loom has two forms. One based on poles set in the ground and the other on suspended lever According to Caxton (1972) the horizontal loom, which is a product of handloom, was refurbished to cater for domestic weaving activities. Hodge (1982) noted that the horizontal and vertical looms used in weaving came to Nigeria independently of each other and they remain separate despite their uses and co-existence in certain Yoruba towns. The fact that horizontal loom is used by men and vertical loom by women is no longer a valid statement in recent day developments. Surveys showed that women now work on horizontal loom more often than men do.

Eicher (1976) described the Nigerian type of horizontal loom as the one which uses the rafters of a shelter to suspend the essential cords. The preparation of yarn is the beginning of the warping activities in weaving on the horizontal loom. Some weaving activities take place in the open place, because the weavers need adequate ventilation. In this case the weaver will cover himself and his loom with shed. Each weaver possesses everything needed for the work. The warp yarns are carefully rolled up and tied to the drag stone, some distance away, with the weaver sitting behind the loom. Warps can be let out as weaving progresses, requiring for less space for the line of warp that would be the case if it had to be stretched to its full length. The basket containing spare, shuttles, bobbins, measuring stick, sword stick for warping up tie weaver ascertains that the count of the threads determines the size of the fabric.

Therefore, to start the process of warping up, the yam must first be with as many as ten times with up to ten bobbins mounted on the carrier, the weaver walks up and down along the row of posts between which the warp thread individually. Accuracy is important at this stage because the purpose of the cross is to fix, correct colour arrangement in the warp so that it can be maintained after the warp has been removed from the poles in the final stages of the warping. It is this ordering of threads that will be employed in threading the heddles on the loom. Threading up the loom is an essential aspect of weaving that requires much patience and skill.

The usual count is one thread through every alternate heddle to provide the materials for the background bobby weave. After both of heddles have been threaded up, the warp threads passed in groups of four between each pair of teeth in the beater or reed. When the weaver is threading up

heddles, he usually squats on the ground and holds the heddle being worked on firmly with his foot thus leaving his hands free to pass the threads through the leashes of the heddle. In the heddle the "eye" of the leash is formed by the intersection of two interlocking loops.

Once threading up is completed, the heddles are hung on to the beam by means of a pulley, one to each pair of heddles. To the bottom of each heddle is attached a card ending on a pedal, usually made from piece of calabash. The warp threads are now milled evenly through the beater and attached to the front or cloth beam of the loom.

Wikipedia.com (2005) noted that before man discovered the weaving process, which resulted in the production of fabrics used for clothing, the skins of animals and the inner bark of trees were used for cloths. These materials were carefully prepared to make them comfortable to wear. However, the Yoruba's of South Western Nigeria were no exception to this basic need of man. They wore hand woven fabric called *Aso-oke*, meaning literally "top cloth". (Reserved cloth) *Aso-Oke* is worn by the Yoruba (both men and women) in special occasions like wedding, naming, trial and religious festivals. Women wear cloth in the form of wrap-around skin called *Iro*, head tie (*gele*) and *Iborun*, a stripe of cloth that is worn over the shoulder or tied round the waist. Men wear suits of *Aso-oke* cloth consisting of a large gown (*agbada*) and trousers.

The *Aso-oke* hand woven cloth industry of the Yoruba in Nigeria in South Western part is an indigenous craft tradition, which remains vigorous in the world of rapid change. The *Aso-Oke* phenomenon demonstrated how indigenous knowledge is structured and yet is ever expanding to integrate new. More so, the capacity of the craft people to integrate old and new traditions into a single classification system was a hallmark of the research carried out in Ojo (2004). After few interviews with the Yoruba weavers on the attributes of different *Aso-Oke* styles, the weavers distinguish between the two basic types of narrow stripe cloth based on the materials used in weaving:

- Handspun yarn which referred to the older types of stripe cloth made with handspun thread is called *Aso-owu riran*.
- *Aso-owu oyinbo* (foreign yarns) which refers to the newer types of stripe doth made with machine-spun thread (Clerke, 1976).

## 2. Fabrics Woven With Handspun Yarns

The textile types included in the category of *Aso-oke* is historically older and has a deep cultural significance. Kings, chiefs, priests of the indigenous cults, and individuals who, value the traditions of the past regularly wear garments of this category. They are still considered the most appropriate choice to express *Yoruba* identity on occasions of great importance. Family rites of passage such as marriages, naming ceremonies for infants, and funerals for the old provide opportunities for people to wear *Aso-oke*.

When asked to enumerate, traditional textile types of three labels appeared on the list of every weaver and the marketers made mention of *Aso-oke*, *Sanyan*, *Etu*, and *Alaari*. The colour of the yarn is of great importance in identifying these subtypes. *Sanyan* is the natural colour of wild silk, *etu* and yarn is dyed deep blue with indigenous indigo dyes, and the red of *alaari* can be produced with *camwood* or other local vegetable dyes. Although, there is little evidence that indigenous red dye is being used nowadays. While thin strips of additional colours may be added, the base colours of beige, dark blue and red are constant. Once the yarn is woven into stripes, these colours take primacy in the identification of these three cloths by both weavers and consumers. The colours run parallel to the three basic colour terms of the Yoruba language and the indigenous belief are thought to possess moral as well as aesthetic qualities. (Ojo, 2005 and Ogunduyile, 2005).

To wear garments of *Sanyan*, *elu* and *alaari*, which display these colours, is the ultimate visual statement of ethnic pride and self-worth for many Yoruba. However, the time honoured *Aso-owuriran* made with handspun thread slows down the weaving process. It is more difficult to work with because it is not as strong as machine-spun thread and is commission and sold at significantly higher prices than the cloth made with machine-spun thread.

Despite the decline in production, people still demand for *Sanyan*, *etu* and *alaari* for clothes to be worn on occasion where individuals want to express their pride. In weaving centres such as the towns of *Iseyin* and *Ondo*, weavers now produce *Aso-Oke* in the familiar colours, sometimes even using natural dyes, but using machine-spun cotton thread. These clothes sell as *Sanyan*, *etu* and *alaari*

in the markets, where few consumers are concerned about differences in thread. In the popular mind, the colour takes precedence over the materials used in production. However, the weavers distinguish between the two when discussing cloth types and indicate the differences on their mental templates - the internalized rules of production associated with particular types of *Aso-Oke* which are part of the weavers' craft knowledge system. For example, a cotton cloth of machine-spun thread dyed with vegetable colours to resemble the natural colour of the native silk of *Sanyan* is called kugu.

Like *Sanyan*, *kugu* is used to make clothing for important social events and because of its colour, projects the same culturally important message. *Sanyan* made from wild silk and *kugu* made from dyed cotton are of a distinctive colour, which has a cultural significance quite unlike any of the colours used in more modern *Aso-owu oyinbo* cloth types. The similar colour and function override consideration of materials, so that in the classifications *kugu* has become a kind of *Sanyan*.

According to Wikipedia.com, the second major category of hand-woven cloth, *Aso-owu oyinbo*, made with pre-dyed machine-spun thread. This is made in a variety of colours. However, thread, not colours are the prime attribute used to identify the different types. Three major categories are distinguished, each with a distinctively different surface texture depending on the kind of type of thread used. *Aso-olowu*, made from cotton thread has a finishing similar to the older hand-spun types, but smoother. *Olowu* may be a plain weave with stripes, or it can be made with weft float designs on one surface or double-sided patterns incorporated into the weave Olona (Clerk, 1996).

*Aso-shain-shain*, made with lurex and cotton thread is characterized by a reflective, slightly rough surface that reflects the light and sparkles. *Aso-siliki* is a hemmed cloth made with rayon or silk thread, which produces a smooth lustrous surface. Note that the threads used in the weaving begin to vary significantly from the native cotton and indigenous silk. English borrowed words are used as labels. In contemporary Nigeria, the use of English indicates that a person has chosen to be linked with the modern world. Thus, we have textile types whose very labels appeal to this desire for modernity *shain-shain* (shine-shine) and *siliki* (Silk) (Clerk, 1996).

Today, in the twenty first century, *shain-shain* is the most fashionable of the *Aso-owu oyinbo* cloth types. Around the 1960s, shiny lurex thread began to be incorporated into cotton *Aso-oke olowu* in the form of thin stripes. Initially, Muslim weavers who had gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca brought small amounts back from Egypt. The amount of lurex thread available gradually increase until the shiny thread dominated the surface of the cloth, leading to the production of a new cloth type, *Aso oke, shain-shain*. Considered a lightweight modern cloth, *shain-shain* is popular for its connotation of modernity; when tailored in indigenous clothing styles, it remains distinctly Yoruba. It is produced in endless varieties; fashions in colour and stripe combinations come and go. Novelty is prized and innovation rewarded. Clerk, 1996).

The speed of change in fashionable textile types is demonstrated by the emergence of yet another *shain-shain* type; *Jakadi satin*, (*Jacquard*) which has larger areas of metallic patterns, made its appearance in 1994. This was in response to the growing popularity of machine-woven satin jacquard, an even more prestigious and expensive imported cloth can only be afforded by the rich. Attaching the labels of *jakadi* and *jakadi satin* to *shain-shain* cloth types called the consumers attention to a form of popular prestige cloth, which is cheaper and more widely available (Clerk, 1996 and Ojo, 2004).

The labels attached weavers to their newer doth types such as *shain-shain*, *jakadi* and *sating* are evidence of the degree to which the crafts people understand their market. Contemporary Yoruba are very much attuned to fashion, and this is reflected in a never-ending variety of textiles available for clothing. The markets and shops throughout Yoruba land stock both imported and indigenous fabric, and machine and hand-crafted textiles. Experimentation with new materials and labeling the products of such innovations are indicative of the adaptive strategies that characterize the production behaviors of the Yoruba weavers of *Aso-oke*. The labels play a role in keeping their products competitive, in imports and the products of Nigeria's textile industry.

Fashion names aid in merchandising cloth by linking it to local events, but are very much a phenomenon of the here-and-now. The fashion name 'keep right' was a reference to a change in national road laws till the early 1970s. Local popularity is reflected in the label 'Calendar, a reference to a cloth that became popular in the early 1990s after it was seen in the portrait of a local dignitary on a calendar. 'Abuja', a reference to the new Nigerian capital city built in the 1980s at great expense, is

used to label an extremely expensive double-sided reversible cloth with weft-float patterns (*Itona oju meji*). Fashion names not only pinpoint certain patterns in time, they are also evidence of the fleeting nature of the patterns of *Aso-owu oyinbo*, which come and go, as fashion dictates. In contrast, there are no fashion names for these represent kind of anti-fashion textile whose unchanging attributes are prized for their timeless quality and deep cultural significance. (wikipedia.com)

Furthermore, by the mid of the twentieth century *Aso Oke* was worn by the Yoruba only at major life-cycle events such naming ceremonies for babies, engagements, weddings, important birthdays, chieftaincy title ceremonies, and funerals, as well as the major festivals and Christians or Islamic holy days.

### 3. Socio-Cultural Impact of *Aso-Oke* (The Use of *Aso-Oke*)

*Aso-Oke* is mainly used for clothing. Two theories underline the clothing history in Nigeria. One is the spontaneous theory and the theory of trade contact. No scholarly essay seems to attribute the origin of clothing to a particular culture of the world. The spontaneous theory is derived from essay by Diop (1973) who stated that the European Navigators, even at the end of middle ages, had found the West African clothing themselves in colourful attires they had woven themselves (Diop, 1973). Negri (1976) also stated that the first European visit to Nigeria recorded the account of inhabitants growing and spinning cotton for weaving and making garments and preparing them for sale in the market. Archeological research in Benin in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century also revealed that cotton cloth had been used. Eicher (1976) observed that the ancient Ife figures of AD 700 were adorned with woven cloth worn around the waist with a sash tied on the left.

Eicher (Ibid) also wrote "the clothing worn by these bronzed figures is evidently of cloths with hems sewn round, whilst in some cases embroidery is represented".

Lamb & Holmes (1980) gave an account of a Yoruba poem dedicated to *Oluyole* of Ibadan who decorated *Etu* scarlet in 1847. The other social theory stated that a wide range of indigenous Yoruba clothing was originated by trade contacts with Arabs and Tuaregs (Negri, 1976). The pre-European trans-Saharan trade brought a lot of ideas in clothing and their influences were noticeable in the development of *Yoruba* garment industry. Negri (Ibid) stated that Lagos had early contact with Europeans in 1472 with the missionaries encouraging the indigenes to match creative crafts with Christianity.

### 4. The Use of *Aso- Oke* as Clothings: (Socio-Cultural Perspective)

The use of *Aso-Oke* in the ancient times was based on three classifications originated by Lamb & Holmes (1930) and propagated by indigenous writers like Aremu (1983). In their views, Yoruba woven cloths are used as:

- (a) Cloths of prestige value;
- (b) Cloth used for rights and ceremonies; and,
- (c) Cloth worn for daily use.

The social-cultural impact of *Aso-Oke* is displayed in Yoruba clothing. The use of *Sanyan*, *Alaari* and woven cloths for social activities takes precedence among other brands of clothing.

*Alaari* is used as a material for garments for *Obas* and Chiefs in Yoruba land. The *Ewuare* of Benin in 472, *Oluyole* of Ibadan in 1847, *Aseyin* of *Iseyin* in 1970 were all referred to as front liners in the use of *Aso-Oke* (Lamb and Holmes, Ibid). Since *Aso-Oke* remained a prestige cloth, the use of *Alaari*, *Etu* and *Sanyan* as cloths of prestige are daily being admonished as a cultural heritage. For example, *Sanyan* is christened *Oba-Aso* (king of cloths) for its special reservation for *Obas* as well as the rich in the society, and was even used to distinguish between the rich and the poor in the past. Although the correlation of rank and dress has been much weakened by emerging trends, the cost of real *Sanyan* cloths ensures that it is still very much the preserve of persons of substance. *Sanyan* cloth also plays an important role in burying the elderly. When the corpse is wrapped in *Sanyan* fabric, it marks signal of goodwill to the world beyond. *Etu* and *Petuje* were woven in *anaple* silk until when the use of silk almost go into extinction.

Robes of *Etu* are worn during traditional ceremonies and are extremely the favorites of the people of *Ondo*. It is worn during "*Ogun*" festival and at funerals. The uses of *Aso- Oke* for religious sacrifices and medicinal purposes are still very much part of Yoruba culture. Cloths woven for such

purposes must be made with hand spun thread because imported thread makes it unacceptable or less powerful. The weaver is instructed by the client not to use imported thread. In some cases, clients do not always disclose to the weavers the purpose to which they want to use these' clothes for (i.e. cloth). For example, there are types of Aso-Oke used to create flaps of Ede, the elderly masquerade and garments of other powerful masquerades. The woven shawl of *Ogboni* fraternity is commissioned to weavers who are non-members. This is why many people refuse to disclose the uses of their demands, to the weavers, as there are no special weavers for their demand.

Plain-woven clothes with no design may be used for sacrifices and protection against attacks. A customer may also request plain cloth and then have it dyed in *Igbo Igbale* for masquerades and sacred purposes (secret bush). Once dyed and treated with native powerful medicine, the cloth can be worn when there is tribal war, riots and in hunting spree. The cloth, attached with other medicinal charms is meant to serve as *Ayeta* (that which protect against bullet. (Aremu, 1993 and Ojo, 2004).

*Alaari* is worn during coronations, marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies and other society-induced social carnivals. During marriage ceremonies for instance, it is necessary in Ondo town to cover the bride's head with *Alaari* cloth. The bridegroom also presents two additional sets of complete locally woven *Alaari* cloths of different patterns to the bride. As a socio-cultural material, *Aso-Oke* is used as *Aso-Ebi* or peer-group uniform during occasions and carnivals.

Frequently, family group, close friends and associates commission weavers to make special patterns of *Aso-Oke* for occasions such as wedding, funerals and naming ceremonies. The notion for uniform clothing as encouraged by *Aso-Oke* is acknowledged by writers when they wrote that the positive self-feeling of the *Yorubas* is enhanced by having scores of their fellows dressed alike. Despite the competition from high quality expensive imported fabrics like satin lace, *Aso Oke* remains the most valuable among the *Yorubas*. To attend notable occasions without *Aso-Oke* is considered as a disregard for cultural heritage. For men, it may be a form of cap and women a shoulder shawl known as *Ipele* or *Iborun*. The worth and psyche of a person are measured by the quality of *Aso-Oke* garment worn. Such garments have been used for almost half a century and being passed from one generation to another. Age of the fabric seems to portend the regard given it.

Woven cloths are sewn with sewing machine, which still remain one of the best discoveries in human especially during the industrial revolution. *Aso-Oke* is sewn in different traditional attires for male and female. The uses of these dresses have now gone beyond Yoruba royalties to politicians and music stars.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The sustainability culture of using Aso-oke as occasional wears should complement its use for casual wears. This will encourage continuity in production and provide regular means of livelihood for the craftsmen. The social status of *Aso-Oke* fabrics should also be encouraged to strive by patronage from indigenes and foreigners. Patterns should be recreated and upgraded for the purpose of attracting patrons and local users in Nigeria and Overseas.

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