

## **ASO ASIKO (FASHION FORWARDNESS): YORUBA TRADITIONAL TEXTILES AND CONTEMPORARY FASHION AESTHETICS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the near invisibility of non-western textiles in current mainstream (western) fashion and explores possible reasons for non-adoption of this wealth of resources. It suggests some alternative models based on the work of African designers, such as Ituen Basi. From the intricacy of Madagascan *lamba akotofahana*, through strip-woven *Kente* and *Aso-Oke* to various configurations of *Adire*, traditional African textiles have inspired and been appropriated for centuries. Yet, like other contemporary non-western resources, are generally positioned as “other”, trend or niche. Does this indicate intellectual and imaginative laziness among western designers to incorporate these sensibilities or is it industry ignorance as to their potential in contemporary fashion? Is it the role of “local” designers to interpret and mediate their culture as accessible for the western consumer—with the unsupportable responsibility of protecting its integrity? Even mainstream non-western designers rarely “carry their culture” with them, their ethnicity used merely as accent, embellishment or counterpoint to designs western in perspective, rather than built on the versatility of their cultural textile capital. Is it reluctance to expose self and culture to a hypercritical western eye, fear of appearing parochial, unsophisticated, branded exotic and of limited appeal?

Non-western apparel, including textiles, may be considered “anti-fashion” a la Proctor and Polhemus – unchanging, static, moribund. Asakitikpi posits ‘The tradition of aso-ebi serves a number of functions. The first and major one being that it ensures... new and innovative designs are developed’ (A. O. Asakitikpi, *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(1): (2007). We can observe the concept of “Aso Asiko” (“fashion forwardness”) especially *Aso-ebi* among the Yoruba in Nigeria, as driving the dynamics of style and design. contemporising traditional textile techniques, provide models which renew precarious knowledge in creative contemporary fashion.

This paper will use several visual examples to illustrate recent challenges and invention in this area.

“...I tell myself that fashion has no borders... Men have created borders, but God himself did not create borders... when you are an artist, you have to keep that in mind all the time, because when you create, you can't be blocked by any point or stop at any point. You have to go forward without stopping...” (Oumare Sy, African designer, 1995).

Fashion is apparel worn with intent – the intent to seduce, to intimidate, to stun, to announce the presence, the status of the wearer, to illustrate their relationship to their community and indicate who they are to the world around them.

This has always been the case, dating from pre-historic pre-textile eras, when the choice of leaf or penile gourd was carefully considered not just because it was a signifier of societal position, but was also an illustration of one's personal style within community conformity.

According to Rovine (2009, p.134), fashion “is the changing styles of dress and body adornment motivated by the social value placed on innovation, it's hallmark being change...”

Edwards referencing Polhemus and Procter, theorises that fashion can be described in terms of adornment of which there are two types: fashion and anti-fashion. Anti-fashion is fixed and changes little overtime. It is different depending on which cultural or social group one is associated with or where one lives but within that group or locality the style changes little and stays constant –in other words, traditional (usually non-western) dress. Fashion is the exact opposite of anti-fashion. However through the capitalization and commoditisation of clothing, accessories, and shoes etc. what constituted anti-fashion has now become part of fashion as the lines between fashion and anti-fashion are being blurred. (Edwards, 2011 p.21)

Despite Polhemus and Procter's labelling as anti-fashion however, traditional dress is anything but static, with both subtle and obvious changes demonstrated in design and fabric, including tread and colour.

“Contrary to the accepted view of African traditions as monolithic and unchanging, the evolution of dress practices and sartorial acumen confirms fashion's role as a potent visual expression of a continent in constant flux.” (Jennings, 2013 p.8)

Attracted by the sheer magnitude of natural resources, historically merchants, mountebanks and missionaries alike were irresistibly drawn to the continent of Africa, risking it's multitude of dangers for its treasures. From the delicate intricacy of Madagascan *lamba akotofana*, through magnificent strip-woven *Kente* and *Aso-Oke* and *ikat* to the various configurations of *Adire*, traditional African textiles have provided the inspiration for themes in the western fashion world for centuries. Despite this, there is a very real sense of African resources being seen or experienced as alien - 'the other', something outside of the mainstream, sidelined to 'trends', or 'niches' and it must be considered whether this mainstream perception as 'anti-fashion' is responsible for its relegation to 'costume' status. While there are the occasional forays into using 'african' fabrics by western mainstream designers – Yve Saint Laurent, Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, it appears mainly as mere spectacle, with the meaningless and condescending blanket label of 'tribal' cancelling any avenues for considered exploration or even intelligent discussion.

The question must then be asked - Is there an inherent intellectual and imaginative laziness among western designers to incorporate non-western, particularly African sensibilities into contemporary zeitgeist or is the lack of appreciation simply industry blindness to the potential in these design resources?

Authentic traditional African fabrics are practically invisible on the catwalks and the ateliers – instead, Dutch manufactured Vlisco-esque cotton fabrics are used as a cipher for African-ness – garishly loud and used in colour/print combinations that leave even the most ardent ‘Ankara’ enthusiast bewildered. The reason cashmere, silk and other such formerly ‘foreign’ prestige fabrics are still being produced is that they found a market outside their traditional milieu. Having been incorporated into the ‘western’ sensibility and these cultural icons have therefore transcended the ‘non-western’ niche and are now ‘normalised’, in a way **Aso-oke**, **Kente** or **Kpokpo** cloth are far from being.

There is still very much a sense of African designs, techniques and textiles as unknown, possibly even slightly outlandish, with a requirement for ‘special pleading’ or positive discrimination in order to feature in the mainstream.

Should the necessity for a conference like this, in 2013, not be considered a sad indictment on the fashion world?

There now exists two separate, parallel and as yet unequal fashion worlds, the ‘mainstream, western’ one and the African fashion scene, which is vital and exciting “...balancing contemporary fashion’s pursuit of the new with an appreciation of the ideals of beauty and adornment that are deeply rooted in Africa’s cultural and social consciousness.” (Jennings, 2013 p8)

The new wave of African designers attempting to make their presence felt on the international fashion scene especially on the continent, is concrete proof of a dynamic fashion and designer sector determined to engage with the ostensive “global village” and its sensibilities.

Hansen states

“the passion and cultivation of fashionable body display in Africa draws on a variety of apparel from numerous sources... but when it comes to the study of dress practice in Africa, we are confronted by a wide-spread scholarly tendency that privileges Western exceptionality and denies any non-western agency in the development of fashion.” (2013,p1)

Stuart Hall (1996 p.268) “a serious lacuna in the post-colonial episteme – the absence of studies linking culture to the workings of global capital”

I would posit that this privilege extends beyond the scholarly, and informs the wider social and ‘industry’ perceptions and engagement with ‘non-western’ dress across the diaspora, with Africa being the extreme of the continuum.

Even African designers who become global names – Duro Olowu, Ozwald Boateng - rarely ‘carry their culture’ along with them.

Most use their 'native' textiles merely as accents or embellishments to counterpoint designs that are still western in perspective, rather than capitalize on the magnificence and versatility of traditional textiles. One wonders whether this timidity/restraint is engendered by a fear of appearing 'parochial' – with the accompanying limitation of commercial appeal, a reluctance to be pigeon-holed as 'exotic' and thereby relegated into the 'costume' genre or whether it is a more fundamental concern - that of exposing one's cultural heritage to the harsh scrutiny of the judgemental western sensibility for fear of losing ethnic identity when traditional significance and usage is diluted or subverted.

“European designers choose certain colours or materials without necessarily understanding their value. Now, African designers have to be recognised for using their heritage in a way that contributes to the evolution of their culture, by creating contemporary versions of their traditional crafts. This is more interesting because it is relevant to young urban Africans who want to wear things that express their identity and also gives the diaspora a means of connecting with their homeland in a more authentic way.” Sudanese designer, Omer Asim.

Even though we are constantly assured that we live in a global village, it is obvious that the village being designed for and dressed, is more London than Lagos, given the euro-centrist sensibilities prevailing.

There does appear to be a great reluctance – or is it an inability, among many western designers to incorporate new sensibilities into the contemporary mainstream.

'Rele Peters of CGC Designs

“ the rest of the world do not seem to 'get' our traditional sense of style and colour – we are too much for them, they say our colours are too bold to wear every day, they don't know how to cut our fabrics – that's why when African designers make it big – crossover – they stop using our fabrics, colours and start to conform in order to tone things down... because they have to make money, and don't have time to re-educate the foreigners on our unique sense of style...”

Could this be the real reason why there have so far been no full collections in **Adire**, **Kijipa** or **Akwete** shown by Duro Olowu at London Fashion week, or why we won't be seeing Nzimiro Oputa sending impeccably tailored Aso-oke pin-stripes down the catwalk in New York?

Does the onus fall on 'local' (non-western) designers to interpret their culture and mediate its inter-face with the rest of the world in order to ensure its accessibility to western understanding – with the almost unbearable responsibility to safeguard that the integrity of their traditions are not mis-appropriated, degraded or subverted.

Designers such as myself, with my interpretation of traditional motifs, techniques and dyes onto very modern textiles and the late innovator Chis Seydou with his celebratory and unashamed contemporisation of **Bogolafini**, have endeavoured to factor this possibility into our presentation of our respective cultural heritages. Seydou was particularly interested in the potential of **Bogolafini** in the international fashion arena. “...I make all kinds of Bogolafini from many materials because I work in a different technical dimension than its originators.” (Chris Seydou, 1992.)

Broadening creative sensibilities to normalise the use of non-western textiles therefore also serves in preserving ancient textile-making techniques on the verge of dying out, to the benefit of all.

Although non-western apparel including textiles appear to be considered 'anti-fashion' ala Proctor and Polhemus – unchanging, static, moribund, very often this purely is due to an inability to look beyond traditional usage, and techniques and a lack of knowledge of how traditional textiles could be contemporised

This dynamism can be demonstrated by observing the concept of '**Aso Asiko**' (trend-setting, fashion forwardness) among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, both at home and the diaspora, which propels the constantly changing trends in traditional styles and design, especially **Aso-Oke**.

**Aso-Oke** (fig. 1) is the most culturally important Yoruba prestige textile and is traditionally hand-woven on a horizontal narrow loom that produces strips of cloth of few inches wide. The strips are usually about 14-15cm inches and are usually stitched together to make an outfit, with the number of strips needed dependent on the type of cloth and design, but usually about 22 strips of **Aso-Oke** are required to make a 'complete' traditional female attire.(fig.2)

There are three basic **Aso-Oke** types; **Sanyan**, **Alaari** and **Etu** with many variations.

**Sanyan**: Among the Yoruba, this textile is regarded as the king of cloths and exemplified in the saying '**Sanyan baba aso**' (**Sanyan** is the king of cloths). The fibre used for making this cloth is obtained from the cocoons of the Anaphe silk worm which are processed, hand spun into silk threads, washed and soaked in corn-starch. The natural colour of the silk gives **Sanyan** its distinctive beige colour. It is particularly associated with chiefs and kings.

**Etu** is dyed repeatedly in traditional indigo blue dye. At intervals, during the dyeing process, the local wild silk fibres are exposed to sunlight for strategic drying and stretching. **Etu** is worn mainly as a formal dress throughout Yoruba land.

Finally, there is **Alaari**, crimson in colour, it was traditionally woven with locally spun silk yarns dyed in red camwood several times to achieve permanence in colour fastness but today most producers of **Alaari** use pre-dyed machine-spun cotton thread. According to Lamb and Holms (1980), **Alaari** was used by kings and chiefs to receive visitors into their palace while **Sanyan** and **Etu** were used for official functions or ceremonies such as harvest festivals, weddings, installation of chiefs. (Asakitipi, 2009).

**Aso-oke** is therefore reserved for special occasions where formal and dignified dressing is required. (Asakitipi, 2007, pp101-115, Oyelola, 2004, p132)

A co-opting of traditions such as '**aso-ebi**', has become one of the major drivers in the evolution of **Aso-Oke** as an increasingly relevant '**aso-asiko**'. The concept of **aso-ebi**, a peculiarly Yoruba tradition in which family members wear matching outfits on special occasions, and which has now been exported to other cultures in almost every part of the world, is based on familial closeness. It was originally a way to distinguish the celebrant/host and family from the guests. However, as kinship ties in Yoruba society extends far beyond the nuclear unit, into long-standing friendships and even originating from the same

geographical area, **aso-ebi** in its complicated gradations of familial intimacy enables one to gauge (with some accuracy) the degree of kinship to the host by the **aso-ebi** worn by guests. It is considered a privilege to be asked to 'take' **aso-ebi** with a celebrant, but also an honour for the celebrant to have their request accepted.

Judith, (1999, p.180), and Aremu (2006, p.18) explain that **aso-ebi** is seen as a strong expression of communal solidarity and love.

"The tradition of **aso-ebi** serves a number of functions. The first and major one being that it ensures... new and innovative designs are developed" (Asakitikpi, 2007)

In a social milieu with a geographical range spanning the entire globe, where one may be required to attend as many as three events in a week-end, the almost frenetic dynamism of the social scene and its constant search for innovation among Nigerians and the Yoruba in particular, coupled with the tradition of commissioning bespoke designs to be woven for every important occasions – weddings, investiture of chieftaincy titles, funerals – have fuelled an emphatic re-surgence in the adoption of **Aso-Oke** among the young middle class and a re-establishment of its centrality as a prestige fabric.

The elements of a full Yoruba woman's outfit (fig.3) are wrapper (**iro**), blouse (**buba**), head-tie (**gele**) and a stole (**ipele**) or shawl (**iborun**) which is usually hung on the shoulder of the user, with an optional girdle (**oja**) for nursing mothers to strap their babies on with. A man's 'complete' would consist of trousers (**sokoto**), tunic (**buba**), (**agbada**) a large embroidered flowing over-gown and cap (**fila**). (fig.4)

Just as the mysterious idea of what is 'in' suddenly appears in the great design houses of Paris, Rome, London, New York, with hemlines being raised or lowered (sometimes concurrently), with shoulders padded or collars exaggerated, so too with **aso-ebi** led fashion across the world.

**Buba** appear with necklines deepened or embroidered, sleeves fitted or flared, **iro** tied as minis one season, floor-length the next....

Are the men wearing **Gbariye** (fig 5), or **buba** and **soro**, **ole nte l'afa** or full **agbada**... ankle length **sokoto** or are the young fogies sporting **Kembe** ... are they going retro with their **fila** in the **ab'eti aja style**?

The traditional 'big three' of **aso-oke** - **Sanyan**, **Alaari** and **Etu** have also been deconstructed and re-interpreted to suit contemporary taste, while still maintaining their status and usage as prestige wear.

Modern day adaptations have produced a textile which is light and comfortable to wear and **aso-oke** has undergone such contemporising that it is possible to satisfy any design requirement. **Aso-oke** is enlaced, embroidered and embellished in more ways than would be thought possible... there are different categories, including special evening designs woven with metallic thread and sequins. The new generation **aso-oke** designers are also not above turning the tables and appropriating some western motifs resulting for example, in the craze a few years ago for Burberry-like plaid designs.

Wit, fun elegance – these are all incorporated into the '**aso asiko**' ethos and far from being staid and moribund, **aso-oke** designers are combining the international perspectives of

young, well-travelled **aso-ebi** wearers with traditional aesthetic inspirations to produce a renaissance fashion textile while developing a uniquely African 'home industry' into a global trend, with **aso-oke** now being worn from Atlanta and Accra to Calgary and Cardiff.

Africa is having its moment – actually, it is having a rather sustained and extremely formidable one, with successful, vibrant and exciting fashion events being held across the continent and beyond, where the African aesthetic sensibility is unashamedly celebrated, and stimulating discourses on the African aesthetic narrative and its future are being conducted – and it is a shame that rest of the world is missing it due to the complacency of the prevailing euro-centrist perspectives of the mainstream fashion establishment.

It must be argued therefore that the inability of the western fashion industry to meaningfully engage with African perspectives and sensibilities on an equal footing underscored by mutual respect and to recognise the opportunity to participate in the development and possibly capitalise on this movement, is not just indicative of a colossal lack of imagination and forward thinking, but also a monumental loss to the wider population of fashion consumers.

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## GLOSSARY

**Ab'eti aja** - a style of **fila**. So called as the ear flaps mimic a dog's ears.

**Adire** – Yoruba cotton resist-dyed textile.

**Agbada** – the full and flowing gown worn by Yoruba men on formal occasions.

**Akwete** – hand-woven textile from south-eastern Nigeria.

**Alaari** – a type of **aso-oke**, traditionally, crimson coloured.

**Ankara** - Nigerian term for Dutch- wax cotton textiles. A corruption of 'Accra' from where they used to be imported.

**Aso asiko** – fashion, fashion forward, trend-setting.

**Aso-ebi** - uniform dressing to show kinship and/or support at important or significant social events like weddings.

**Aso-oke** - a traditional Yoruba hand-woven prestige textile.

**Buba** – the simply cut 'blouse' to a Yoruba woman's outfit. Also used for the male tunic

**Etu** - A type of **aso-oke**, traditionally indigo coloured.

**Fila** – male cap

**Gbariye** – a style of **agbada**. Less full, but with a distinctive flare. Sleeveless.

**Gele** – female head-tie, an integral part of formal dress.

**Iborun** – a shawl, part of the complete Yoruba female attire

**Ipele** - a stole, smaller than an **iborun**

**Iro** – a length of fabric, wrapped like a skirt around the lower part of the body. Part of female attire.

**Kembe** – archaic style of **sokoto** with extremely wide mid-calf length legs. Currently enjoying a re-surgence.

**Kente** – ceremonial prestige cloth of the Ashanti of Ghana

**Kijipa** – Yoruba hand-woven cloth made exclusively by women.

**Kpokpo** – prestige cloth of the Mende of Sierra Leone

**Oja** – length of cloth specially woven for cradling a baby on its mothers' back.

**Ole ntel'afa** – a style of slim-line, floor-length tunic with long sleeves, worn by men.

**Sanyan** – the most prestigious type of **aso-oke**, beige coloured.

**Sokoto** – traditional draw-string trousers for men, loose-fit, tapering to a tight embroidered ankle.

**Yoruba** – large ethnic group from south-western Nigeria, with one of the most wide-spread populations in the diaspora.

**ILLUSTRATIONS**



Aso-Oke (fig.1)



Aso-Oke weaver (fig. 2)



Complete' female Aso-oke aso-ebi (fig.3)



Agbada (fig 4)



Gbariye (fig.5)