

A History of Textiles  
and Fashion in the  
Twentieth Century  
Yoruba World

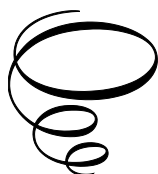


# A History of Textiles and Fashion in the Twentieth Century Yoruba World

By

Mutiat Titilope Oladejo

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

In colonial Africa, textiles were used to advocate national and political culture, and gendered practices. They were constant reminders for societies to return to their pre-colonial fashion to authenticate their national identities. Textiles and fashion in Africa are not universal. Each African society features specific meanings formed around the consumption of textiles, and they are often gendered. However, understanding the peculiarities of textiles and fashion among the Yorùbá women requires the engagement of factors beyond the political order, because the making and makers of textiles are motivated by many drives that are embedded in the decision to create, express, and sell, textiles. In essence, this book brings due attention to the Yorùbá women's interests in the textile and fashion industry. The cultures of textile production and fashion, as performed by women in contemporary times, make larger meanings in global communities and the digital space. Invariably, the roles of Yorùbá women as makers and consumers of textiles are profound in the translational and transformative dimensions, as portrayed in this book.



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

In a photograph taken by Eugene V. Harris in colonial Lagos, a group of six women are clad in the traditional Yoruba attire, in a combination of velvet, cotton, and *aso-oke* materials.<sup>1</sup> The picture is a portrayal of textile and fashion values among the Yoruba. The Yorùbá culture and customs in Southwest Nigeria are rich and elaborate in material practices. The distinctiveness of the Yoruba culture of textile and fashion is historical, globalized, and modernised. Concerning the 20th century, such a manifestation was noted by Delano in the 1930s, thus:

On Sunday following a burial, the members of the family concerned and their friends [...] and all those who can afford to buy them, no matter how remote the connection, they wear *aso-ebi*.<sup>2</sup>

*Aso-ebi* is the uniformed cultural dress that members of a social group adopt for a particular event. The adoption of *aso-ebi* materialises as a dynamic social, political, and economic, force in the historical milieu of the 20th century. The social sense of solidarity and communalism reflects in the adoption of *aso-ebi*, and, to increase patronage, most Yorùbá families have sustained the practice. The matrices of consumption are reflected in a model where families relate in a web of links that offers support and patronage to social group members who are celebrants in events. The cycle of relationships across the families means that, when there are celebrations, such as burial ceremonies, thanksgiving services, weddings, birthdays, housewarming parties, child-naming ceremonies and the like, an *aso-ebi* is chosen for each

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<sup>1</sup> See AGSL Collection, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries. I found the picture posted in the Nigeria Nostalgia Project on Facebook. The dressing of the women speaks a lot about Yoruba fashion values. The analysis in subsequent chapters explains what is beyond seeing the picture from a historical perspective.

<sup>2</sup> I. Delano, *The Soul of Nigeria*, (London: T. Werner Lauvie Ltd. 1937), 110

event, to signify solidarity with, and support for, the celebrant.<sup>3</sup> Yorùbá women are central to the process of trade and consumption of textiles. Their roles are multifaceted. This work objectifies textiles and explains the patterns of gendered relations and involvement in their production and consumption among the Yorùbá of Southwest Nigeria. The focus of this work aligns with Auslander's argument that textile production is profound in females' domestic socialisation.<sup>4</sup> In the Victorian age, in England and other European cultures, girls became women by spinning, weaving, embroidering, and sewing, and these signified their preparedness for married life. However, for a man, it was considered an affront to gender identity to knit, sew, or embroider.

### Overview of Dress and Textile in Pre-Colonial Yorùbá

In the pre-colonial era, precisely in the 19th century, culture influenced the dress of Yorùbá kings. The culture of Hausa/Nupe ethnic groups from the northern part of Nigeria manifested in the dress of Yorùbá kings, such as Qòni of Ifè and Aláké of Abèòkúta, who proudly wore embroidered silk garments. Their choice of textiles was a blend of European and Asian fabrics, passed through Timbuktu to Yorùbá societies. Most of these gowns were transported directly from Kano to Yorùbáland.<sup>5</sup> However, this assertion that fabrics were moved directly from Kano to Yorubaland may be faulty, because the Nupes had direct contacts with the Yorùbás through the North-South fringes of Nigeria in the 19th century.

Women dressed by wrapping textiles around their bodies, and that practice was obvious in the accounts of explorers. W. H. Clarke in *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland* describes the expressive cultures of

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<sup>3</sup> In contemporary times, Feyi Ijimakinwa described the culture of *Aso ebi* among the Yoruba in Diaspora, Canada. He emphasized how the familial and fraternal relationships have remained a cultural practice, which is a long historical process. The manifestation of this in Diaspora is discussed in subsequent chapters. See F. Ijimakinwa "Turn up in your Aso-ebi: The Dynamics of Identity Construction and Homeland Connection among the Yoruba in Canada" *Migration & (Im)mobility Magazine* Issue 11

<sup>4</sup> L. Auslander, "Deploying material culture to write the history of gender and sexuality, the example of clothing and textiles" *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 40 (2014): retrieved from <http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/716>

<sup>5</sup> For details of these, see Dani Lyndersay, *Nigerian Dress, the Body Honoured: The Costume Arts of Traditional Nigerian Dress from Early History to Independence* (Ibadan: BookBuilders Africa Edition)

singing, dancing, and artistic composition among the Yorubas.<sup>6</sup> The impressions of the arts formed the basis of engaging Africa in the 20th century. In the account of W. H. Clarke, the Yorùbás believed in strict rules to govern public life, and clothing was a vital factor in social life. Clothes were valued for their colours and qualities, and also determined social classifications. The European interest in importing textiles to Africa was strategic; it was to fulfil the normative cultural demands. Dani Lyndersay's *Nigerian Dress, the Body Honoured: The Costume Arts of Traditional Nigerian Dress from Early History to Independence* shows the typologies of dress that portray the kind of fashion cherished by Yorùbá women in the colonial era. Yoruba women dressed in *iro*, (wrapper) *buba* (blouse) and *gele* (head tie).

Colours of dresses differ, but the textiles were a combination of imported cotton materials and hand-woven ones. The Yorùbá colour preferences initially manifested in the choices of dresses for events. The colour preferences encoded tradition, symbolism, and temperament. Red and orange were linked with aggressiveness, blood and war; white, silver and pale grey signified calmness, which was associated with age and wisdom; black, green, and blue signified moderation and mediation.<sup>7</sup> Lander's observation on the grooming of Yoruba kings' wives in the 1830s shows that they wrapped their bodies with *iro* but wore tops (*buba*) and had head ties.<sup>8</sup> This dress is similar to that observed of the Timbuktu women around the 13th century. The origins of how Yorùbá women adopted *iró* and *bùbá* as a major dress style remain controversial. One account attributed the origin of *bùbá* (the blouse) to the missionaries. It was introduced in the 19th century to cover the upper part of women's bodies, as they were used to tying wrappers around their bodies. However, another account attributed the introduction of *bùbá* as a dress influence from the trans-Saharan trade. The women from Timbuktu wore longer *bùbá*, but the missionaries designed the style by shortening it to fit into the culture of wrapper-tying among the Yorubas.

Christianity played a huge part in the importation of dresses. Even before the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, English and European ladies sent garments to the coast of West Africa.<sup>9</sup> The preference for European dressing styles was inculcated through colonial rule. Arab and European

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<sup>6</sup>See W. H. Clarke, *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland*, ed. J. A. Atanda (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press 1972)

<sup>7</sup> Lyndersay, *Nigerian Dress*, 315-316

<sup>8</sup> Richard Lander, 1830, Vol 2:197 dressing records of Clapperton's last expedition

<sup>9</sup> Lyndersay, *Nigerian Dress*, 171

dresses became prominent gradually in Yorùbáland, as Christians<sup>10</sup> and Muslims adopted dress cultures based on their religious affinities. However, traditional worship practices also influenced the development of hybrid fashion styles in the 19th century. John Thabiti Willis in the book: *Masquerading Politics: Kinship, Gender and Ethnicity in a Yoruba Town*, elaborates the meanings ascribed to the masquerade practices in the Yorùbá culture. Here, the town of Otta is used as an example.<sup>11</sup> In the explanations of the regalia of masquerades, reference was made to the role of the trans-Atlantic trade in the supply of textiles used as costumes for the masquerades.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century supply flows of textiles aided the modernisation of masquerade practices. The merchants of the textiles used for masquerade regalia were women. Willis makes a specific reference to a certain Osugbayi who was a wife in a masquerade-owning family, and whose work in textile trading in the late 19th century favoured the power politics of retaining the tradition of masquerade within the family. By implication, several women had been involved in the textile trade, even in the 19th century. The convergence of indigeneity and modernity gradually made meaning. In the main, textile designs were determined by the preferences of the Africans. The importance the Africans gave to the environment and indigenous worship systems was reflected in the way the Europeans designed the textiles.

Festivals are part of African culture, and European explorers found this out before the 20th century.<sup>12</sup> The way that Africans express life and the natural environment through artistic impressions becomes evident in their festivals. Their profound creative expressions were taken to Europe, defining the needs of Africans in the age of modernity, as perceived by the Europeans. Therefore, textiles were stylised for African consumption and linked to international trade over time.

In the 1960s, *Nigerian Magazine* reported performances of *Alatawngana* dances. In the comments on the dancers' costumes, it was observed that the women wore *iro* and *buba*, and the dance performance to

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<sup>10</sup> An appraisal of the CMS Female Institution photo collection of 1888 showed women dressed in European-style garments such as gowns and hats. The group photograph of African female students signifies the acceptance of European style dresses among African women, as available in the Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan. It also depicts class and status in the society, especially to distinguish the culture of Christianity. Religion also influenced fashion as the textiles imported were patterned to the new religious dressing expected of women.

<sup>11</sup> See J. T. Willis, *Masquerading Politics: Kinship, Gender and Ethnicity in a Yoruba Town* (Indiana: Indiana University Press 2018).

<sup>12</sup> See Clarke, *Travels and Exploration in Yorubaland*



commemorate the ‘The Coming of Life and Death’ at the Ori Olokun Cultural Centre, *Ile-Ife*, was European.<sup>13</sup> Hence, its performance by Africans, and the dressing of women in the performance showed an imitation of the European dress worn by Peggy Harper.

Whether Yorùbá women really wore dresses as they were before trans-Atlantic trade is not absolutely clear, but some scholars opine that the contemporary culture of dressing is non-evident in the Yorubas’ past, and that Islam and Christianity introduced and entrenched the cloth-wearing culture.<sup>14</sup> The Yorùbá women’s dresses were described as ‘flowing’ in the early 20th century.<sup>15</sup> Unofficially, styles of dress adopted from the Arabian styles were common. On the other hand, the early Christians used European/English dresses. Artistic impressions of the sources used in Dani Lyndersay’s book indicate the flowing nature of the garments wrapped around the body used by Yorùbá women.

Dani Lyndersay further identifies the purposes for grooming among Yoruba women, as follows:

- \* protection against, or encouragement towards, unknown (spirits);
- \* physical barriers from weather conditions, harmful insects, and diseases;
- \* a sign of belief in some gods or goddesses;
- \* a symbol of ethnic identification;
- \* visible demonstration of the completion of puberty or age-grade rites;
- \* a symbol of status;
- \* aesthetic desires to satisfy ego;
- \* attraction of the opposite sex;
- \* sexual or gender identity; and/or a sign of possession, ownership or allegiance.<sup>16</sup>

Anthropologists have investigated the origins of Yorùbá women’s use of *iro* and *buba* as dress; and *gele* and *iborun* as complementary components.<sup>17</sup> This is associated with culture, and influenced by the globalisation of technology. Archaeologists such as Thurstan Shaw analyse

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<sup>13</sup> *Nigeria Magazine*, March 1965, No. 84; See also ‘African and European Dance’ in *Nigeria Magazine* March 1967.

<sup>14</sup> See E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press 1974)

<sup>15</sup> Delano, *The Soul of Nigeria*, 216; See also J. Plessis, *Thrice through the Dark Continent* (London: Longmans 1937), 52.

<sup>16</sup> Lyndersay, *Nigerian Dress*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> See *Nigerian Chronicle* 1982

the artefacts from Igbo Ukwu as evidence of the rich social organisation that existed in Southern Nigeria in the 11th century. The analysis of the textile fragments excavated in the burial chamber indicates that:

...the textile fragments are not of cotton, but vegetable fibres. Some of these, made from a spun material displaying fibre bundles, resemble those of cloth manufactured today in Southwest Nigeria where the fibres were obtained from the bark of a tree [...]. The biggest of the fragments consists of leaf fibres, probably a sort of raffia. It is of such fineness and regularity that it is difficult to believe that it was made by hand.<sup>18</sup>

The discoveries indicate that textile consumption in contemporary times may be influenced by modern technology, but in the past, indigenous techniques were used to produce woven cloths to cover nudity. From analysis, the weaving of textiles predates African exposure to the trans-Saharan or trans-Atlantic trades. In this regard, accounts that European explorers taught Africans weaving in the 15th century are not entirely factual.<sup>19</sup> Africans had some indigenous techniques which could have been reinforced by the Europeans. Hence, the exchange of commodities in the transatlantic and trans-Saharan trades exposed the Africans to the international economy, but the indigenous techniques of weaving predated the European contact. The flow of trade was noted as voluminous by Ifemesia.<sup>20</sup> The European influence cannot be ruled out in the type of dresses worn in Yorùbáland, because the sculptures available before the 20th century showed some dress styles that are distinct from those which followed.

While the Europeans influenced the technology of textile production, the trans-Saharan trade through North Africa impacted the dress culture of the Yorubas, especially the costumes for masquerades. John Thabiti Willis examines the changing patterns of masquerades' costumes.<sup>21</sup> It is revealing that the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan trade influenced the dress styles of masquerades and the fashion sense of women. The long flowing gowns which women wore were attuned to the Islamic culture of dressing; the textiles were imported into Nigeria, and women were the

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<sup>18</sup> Thurstan Shaw, *Igbo-Ukwu: An Account of Archaeological Discoveries in Eastern Nigeria* Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 243.

<sup>19</sup> J. Bardot, "A Description of the Coasts of North and Southern Guinea; and of Ethiopia Inertia, Vulgarly Angola," in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* Vol. V, eds. Awnsham and John Churchill (London: A & T Churchill, 1732), 23.

<sup>20</sup> C. C. Ifemesia, "States of Central Sudan: (i) Kanem-Bornu (ii) the Hausa States" in *A Thousand Years of West African History*, eds. J.F. Ade-Ajayi and I. Espie (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965), 46

<sup>21</sup> See Willis, *Masquerading Politics*

merchants. The Islamic clothing culture penetrated through Sudan to the Southwest of Nigeria. Lyndersay simultaneously complicates and simplifies the reasons for men's use of *agbada* and women's use of *buba*. The design of women's *buba* is patterned after Arabian garments such as the Sudanese *tobes*. The pattern of the *tobes* shown in Tilke's work<sup>22</sup> suggests that the Yorùbá *buba* is its adaptation. The enduring culture of dressing, and its historicity, are indications of the trans-Saharan influence. Hence, in this work, the adaptation of fashion styles from other cultures by Yorùbá women is a manifestation of modernisation. The international economy saw the importation of textiles and styles into Yorubaland as a business strategy. According to Hodder, the European merchants also penetrated the Saharan routes, thus, a number of clothing styles were fashioned after those from Europe, particularly Italy.<sup>23</sup>

The pattern presented by Davidson links to the way Yorùbá women dress. Perani and Wolff identify the way Yorùbá people bought Hausa slaves.<sup>24</sup> Given the historical process that brought the Hausa people to Yorùbáland, it is easier to contend that the indigenous technologies of weaving and embroidering from the North also influenced the dress culture adopted by the Yorubas. Inter-regional movements, mostly towards the forest region of West Africa, brought about the change in fashion styles in Yorubaland; as Islam was embraced in Yorubaland, imported dressing culture became an everyday habit.

Across the Atlantic, Griebel describes African-American women's use of head wraps as a culture taken from Africa.<sup>25</sup> This kind of fashion is similar to the way women in Timbuktu, and other women involved in the trans-Saharan trade, wore head ties before the advent of the slave trade. And the head-wrap in America symbolised the reduction in the self-worth of African female slaves. African female slaves then took head-ties as what fashion ought to be, and it was a way of keeping up appearances. Back in Africa, the culture of the head tie persisted until the 20th century. Samuel Johnson's account of the headgear of women affirms the traces of cultural

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<sup>22</sup> See Costume Patterns and Design Plates 22, 23, in M. Tilke 1956. *Costume Patterns and Designs of All Periods and Nations from Antiquity to Modern Times* (London: A Zwemmer, 1956)

<sup>23</sup> B. W. Hodder, "Indigenous Cloth Trade and Marketing in Africa" *Textile History* (1980): 204

<sup>24</sup> J. Perani and Norma H. Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa* (New York: Berg, 1999), 108.

<sup>25</sup> Helen B. Griebel, "The African American Woman's Headwrap: Unwinding the Symbols". See [char.txa.cornell.edu/Griebel.htm](http://char.txa.cornell.edu/Griebel.htm)

adaptation based on contacts with other cultures through the transatlantic trade. He states:

Female headgear consists of a band of about 6 to 10 inches wide and 5 feet long (more or less). This is wound round the head and tucked in on one side. It may be plain cloth or costly, as she can afford. Well-to-do ladies use velvet cloths.<sup>26</sup>

Such descriptions answer to the perceptions Europeans had about African women, which ultimately influenced their production of textiles to fit such appearances. The head tie as a component of women's dress was found among women from Timbuktu who traded in textiles in the trans-Saharan trade.<sup>27</sup>

### **Towards an Exposé**

It is insightful to understand women's consumption of textiles from a gendered perspective, because men's employment in the formal sector drew the lines that made women the major consumers and traders in the informal economy. Second, men were socially constructed as symbols of authority who should be engaged in more formal economic sectors, and the textile sector was regarded as an informal one which women should naturally dominate. Thirdly, scholarly writings focused more on men. Thus, little attention has been paid to the meanings women made from dresses and textiles.

By the 19th century, an anti-European stance on fashion and textile choices had already developed. Papart submits that, as women arrived in cities during World War II, various fashion sensibilities evolved.<sup>28</sup> Within the African societies of the 20th century, trade in textiles bonded commercial relations. And with a blend of modernity, textiles were a commodity that informed new state relations. In the colonial society of Yorùbáland, dress was a method of expression for power and resistance. This explains some patterns of social transformation. The colonial state utilised the commercial management of textiles to recreate Africa, and Africans responded through various forms of affirmation and identity formation. What constitutes these transformations runs through the analysis

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Johnson, *History of Yorubas* (Lagos: CSS Ltd, 1912), 112.

<sup>27</sup> Basil Davidson, *Old Africa Rediscovered* (London: Victor Gollancz 1961), 10

<sup>28</sup> Jane L. Parpart "Where is Your Mother? Gender, Urban Marriage, and Colonial Discourse in the Zambian Copper belt, 1924-1945" *International Journal of African History Studies* 27, no. 2 (1994): 250-254

in this book. Jean Allman agrees that notions of dress in Africa were constructed by Africans in such a way that social and political transformations were appropriated in the indigenous understanding of power and cultural nationalism.<sup>29</sup> This work also counts on Colleen Kriger's study of the history of textiles in West Africa, which emphasizes paying attention to textiles as a way of understanding how local, regional, and global processes are shaped.<sup>30</sup> The statistical backup to the textile designs registered as Class 10 (printed fabrics) had about 875,000 samples printed between 1893 and 1991, all meant for sale in Africa.

The nationalistic and identity formations that Yorùbá women form through grooming, feature symbols and embodiments of morality for the family, community, and nation. However, an editorial in *Feminist Africa*, titled "The Politics of Fashion and Beauty in Africa"<sup>31</sup> analyses how women's dress is burdened by misogynist attacks. It is agreed that women's grooming in Africa is rooted in the invocation of African culture, black pride, and nationalism, and influenced by Christianity and Islam. Hence, this work places the narratives of African textile consumption *vis-à-vis* Yoruba women's interpretation of modernity in the context of African traditions. Such feminist formations rooted in the Yorùbá culture are characterised by the depiction of empowerment in public spaces of the colonial and post-colonial eras. The technologies of weaving found among the Yorùbá were supported by European and Arab influences. It was from the production of the indigenous textiles that colour choices evolved. The indigenous forms of textile consumption subsist as a means of sustenance, and survived into the era of globalisation.

Scholarly works have addressed clothing textiles and fashion by examining their continuity, and paradigmatic shifts across space and time. This work analyses the historical process in the production and consumption of textiles to establish the changing patterns among the Yorùba in Southwest Nigeria. Hansen, in a review of scholarly works on clothing and fashion cultures, concludes that researches have focused more on the West. Yet, there are copious discourses revealing clothing and fashion in non-Western societies, including Africa.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Jean Allman (ed.), *Fashioning Africa: Power and Politics of Dress* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2004), 6

<sup>30</sup> Colleen E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Oxford: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>31</sup> S. Dosekun (ed.), "Feminist Africa, The Politics of Fashion and Beauty" in *Africano*, Vol 21 (2016).

<sup>32</sup> K. T. Hansen, "The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 370.

## Nuances of Textile, Dress, and Gender

Textiles are profound objects in human social systems. Cox underscores this, thus:

Textiles are unique items of trade. They are at once an art form and a form of economic commodity. Textiles stand out as having an inordinate number of designing, producing, and marketing variables.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of women's identity constructed in the process of textile consumption is explained along the realities pointed out by Cox. This work contextualises the economies of textile consumption around Francis Fukuyama's assertion that:

The economy constitutes one of the most fundamental and dynamic arenas of human sociability. There is scarcely any form of economic activity, from running a dry cleaning business to fabricating large-scale integrated circuits, that does not require social collaboration.<sup>34</sup>

The sense of social collaboration for textile consumption manifested in Southwest Nigeria in 1937 when the colonial state called for a conference of Yorùbá Chiefs in Oyo.<sup>35</sup> Mostly, the chiefs did not have Western education. Thus, they made little contributions to the deliberations, but they were conscious of the material culture, as they appeared in a uniform.<sup>36</sup> The reasons for wearing the uniform fabric, and the complementary makeup, in the social construct of the Yorùbás, are hinged on the concept of respectability. While there are various reasons philosophically guiding consumption, fabrics communicate different meanings when worn, based on class and style. The performance of appearance in a uniform fabric represents the collective philosophy that the Yorùbá Chiefs believe in, and it explicates how tradition is embodied in modernity. Accounts of meetings and conferences rarely made references to how women were involved in the consumption and performance of this material culture. Yet, Yorùbá women formed agencies and institutions around the use of textiles, as consumables and objects of trade. Cloth is a marker of identity, and it creates the nexus

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<sup>33</sup> R. Cox, *The Marketing of Textiles* (Washington D.C.: The Textile Foundation 1938), 225

<sup>34</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and Criterion of Prosperity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 6

<sup>35</sup> KDL OP/48. 1937, 31 March. See also Ruth Watson, *Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan: Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yorùbá City* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2003), 158-159.

<sup>36</sup> NAICSO 26/35943.

between the self and the society. Women make and remake their images through textile use. Yorùbá women loudly made meanings of local and imported textiles. The constructed identities conform to the theorised context of consumption in Yorùbá culture. Identity formation by Yorùbá women fits into the theorised concept of consumption and trade two-fold; the process of identity formation encompasses the art of consumption and the art of commerce. The former poses the quest for the place of fashion in the construct of identity.

The explanations shed light on the capitalist orientations attached to the Yorùbá women's making of textiles as markers of identity that recycle and reproduce themselves. Invariably, cultural tendencies on the consumption of textiles account for the consumerist ideology displayed by those who use them. In the history of the textile, clothing, and fashion industry, scholarly works are structured to answer questions about gender. Historians have analysed the feminine forms and norms in textile production and consumption, to unravel how women make and appropriate requisite skills, such that it is complicated to draw the lines between domestic and industrial labour.<sup>37</sup> Mostly, this work broadens the analysis to inquire how women make skills, practice them, and transmit them for sustainability. They also examine how the Yorùbá identity is constructed in consumption patterns.

Critical frameworks have been used to analyze body ideals and dresses. In some cultures, women's dresses signify submission and morality. But in the case of the Yorùbá women, dress signifies power, and the ability or freedom to engage the public space. This emphasis was what informed the marketing decisions of the colonial state to seek the viability for industrial expansion. Aesthetic choices and culturally-induced gender appearances among the Yorùbás determine the choices of textiles and styles. It is agreed that dress and gender are not fixed, but researching the gendered aspects of fashion consumption explains the notions of historical processes that change or remain. Dress is webbed in the analysis of politics and gender. The shifting place of time and space changes the features of dressing, and industry players also influence fashion trends.

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<sup>37</sup> See Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Mary Breaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); See also M.D. Goggin and Tobin B.F. (eds.), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); M.D. Goggin and B.F. Tobin (eds.), *Women and Things: Gendered Materials Strategies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); M. Goggin (ed.), *Material Women, 1750-1950: Consuming Desires and Collecting Practices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009)

With a focus on how Togolese women wax cloth, Nina Sylvanus regards textiles as markers of identity and power. She traces the 19<sup>th</sup> century history of the wax cloth.<sup>38</sup> In the context of taste, aesthetics and history, this work finds Sylvanus' expositions valuable to study the perspectives of Yorùbá women. Within West Africa, focus on Yorùbá women's consumption and trade in textiles has received little attention. Paulette Young's explanation on Ghanaian women as textile consumers and traders asserts that, instead of rejecting capitalism, the women adopted it.<sup>39</sup> Integrating into the capitalist trends in Young's analysis shows that women played a key role in the creation of knowledge that produced the textiles. Such knowledge was an invention that aided the capitalists' cycle of demand and supply in the colonial years. Hence, this is an aspect in the history of Africa which became entrenched through Atlantic globalisation,<sup>40</sup> and aided new flows of export and import. However, the framework of capitalism upheld here holds that textile consumption among Africans evolved and sustained itself as an indigenous type of economic attitude. The process of assimilation of the imports defines the trends of fashion and style in Africa, and the assimilatory process depends on consumers' tastes and desires. Issues in African consumer tastes in textile and fashion, from the perspective of women, are vast and complex within the milieu of African culture, politics, economy, and society. Boeku-Betts<sup>41</sup> describes Africans' tastes in textiles as being interested in gaudy colours, such as scarlet red, canary yellow, sky blue, and parrot green. The specificity of these colours attests to the consideration of textile designs imported into Africa by foreign textile makers, to contemporary times. The creation of an agency for African women in the context of textile consumption is understandable.

While it is established that most of the dress cultures before colonial rule were products of historical processes, Africans resented the imposition of European dress cultures. What is African about textiles in the context of the historical processes in trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic trade is the creation of designs that suited the tastes of African consumers. An

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<sup>38</sup> See Nina Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation; Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2016)

<sup>39</sup> See Paulette Young "Ghanaian Woman and Dutch Wax Prints: The Counter-appropriation of the Foreign and the Local Creating a New Visual Voice of Creative Expression," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 51, 3 (2016), 305-327.

<sup>40</sup> S. Amin, "On Delegitimising Capitalism: The Scourge of Africa and the South" *Africa Development* 37, no. 4 (2012), 15-72.

<sup>41</sup> J. Boeku-Betts "Western Perceptions of African Women in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries" *Africana Research Bulletin* 6 no. 4 (1976), 86-113



excerpt of a comment in the *Record* of March 1896 reads: “The Europeanised African is a nondescript, a libel on his country”.<sup>42</sup>

Another comment from Burns (1929) expresses the following opinion:

“to some the ‘trousered native’ is an abomination”.<sup>43</sup>

The resentment expressed above influenced the designs of textiles imported into Africa. As Echeruo notes, Africans protested the European dress culture and preferred to stick to the indigenous African dress culture which already existed.<sup>44</sup> While the notions of anti-European dress were constructed in the early 20th century, Brazilian and Sierra Leonean women migrants fashioned their dresses after European gowns and turbans; they became acceptable as Africanized versions, and the women were the initial dressmakers who mainly served the middle class in Lagos. Brazilian and Sierra Leonean expatriates, as well as European women in Lagos, worked in the fashion industry as couture tailors. The women blended the European styles of dress with Yorùbá fashion culture, and they were the first to open modern shops and hang ready-made dresses as a way of advertising to their customers.<sup>45</sup> Studies on textiles and their uses in Africa have been approached from varying perspectives. Anthropologists such as Jean Allman examined the patterns of textiles and fashion across Africa. Historians of gender and women’s studies have advocated an in-depth analysis of textiles and fashion in Africa. Perani and Wolff’s analysis has significantly articulated the intersections of cultures and clothing traditions of societies in West Africa.<sup>46</sup> Textiles as an art among the Yorùbá was emphasised as a profound tradition in differing socio-cultural contexts. This explanation made textile production and consumption a form of social reproduction that aligned with the constant projection of textiles as an art form. Thus, as it was among the Yorùbá, the narratives of textiles were aesthetic and cultural expressions. Textiles among the Yorùbá signify what Erving Goffman describes as an essential part of appearance necessary for self-representation, positionality,

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<sup>42</sup> Editorial, *Record* March 1896

<sup>43</sup> A. C. Burns, *History of Nigeria* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929), 69.

<sup>44</sup> Michael J.C. Echeruo, *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life* (London: Macmillan, 1977) 39.

<sup>45</sup> B. O. Adewumi “Inter-Racial Relationship in Nineteenth Century Nigeria: A Case Study of Brazilians in Lagos” (BA Thesis, Department of History, University of Ibadan, 2002), 29

<sup>46</sup> See J. Perani and N.H. Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa* (New York: Berg, 1999)

and status validation.<sup>47</sup> In line with Goffman's position, Barnard affirms that cultures and beliefs matter, and they are influenced by age, nationality, class, and gender.<sup>48</sup>

The debates about modernity influence the consumption of textiles in Africa. While cities sprawled and business districts emerged, the routes to modernity became multifaceted and new values replaced the old ones, as indigenous African philosophies changed. In the consumerist cultures that emerged, European trading firms became reference points that shaped gender relations, wealth generation, and consumption patterns, that mainstreamed the notion of African modernity in the global economy. The historical process that mainstreamed African women into the textile industry is found in Frank Trentmann's explanation that the consumers did not just emerge, they emerged as products of multiple agents.<sup>49</sup> The new consumer identities which formed impacted on the social and political spheres.<sup>50</sup> The spaces created within the Nigerian cities for the consumption of textiles in the colonial era survived into the postcolonial era. Spaces for textile consumption were organised in the cities, and the identities of the consumers were formed. The markets that sprang up in the cities became centres of convergence for the display of consumers' purchasing powers. Such spaces enable this work to investigate the evolution of the consumer culture in the textile industry, and its practice by Africans.

Frank Trentmann<sup>51</sup> further explains the emergence of consumers and products as agents of specific historical processes. The discussions in the book corroborate Hopkins'<sup>52</sup> perspectives on women's textile consumption which offers insights into the structure and organisation of economies in West Africa. His assertions clearly explain the status of African consumers. The context of Hopkins' explanation is evident in Nina Sylvanus' book, *Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender and Materiality in West Africa*.<sup>53</sup> Through the colonial to the postcolonial eras, the study treats the exchange

47 E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1956), 13.

48 Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 1996), 139.

49 See Frank Trentmann, *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in Modern World* (Oxford and New York: Berg 2006)

50 Bianca Murillo, "The Modern Shopping Experience: Kingsway Department Store and Consumer Politics in Ghana" *Africa* 82, no.3 (2012), 368–92

51 See Frank Trentmann, *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in Modern World* (Oxford and New York: Berg 2006)

52 A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Longman: London, 1973)

53 See Nina Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation; Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press 2016)

and value of production. Similarly, Paulette Young analyses the nexus of local and global issues in the use of Dutch wax prints by Ghanaian women.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Rovine's article, "Viewing Africa through Fashion", clearly engages the features of textile consumption by examining the intersection of the local and the global in the demand for fashion.<sup>55</sup> Rovine's position lends credence to the conception of women's use of textiles in African history.

From these scholarly works, it is evident that culture features as an integral factor that drives the consumption of textiles. Thus, Manthia Diawara's *The Sixties in Bamako: Malick Sidibe and James Brown* narrates the memories and meanings of fashion through photographs. The photographs depict the milieus that intersected dress fashion within the political economy of Mali in the 1960s. However, this research sets to unravel the implications of the consumption of textiles on women's dress fashion and its influence on the statuses of women in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria.

John Picton concludes that textile productions took into cognizance African tastes, and these determined the nature of the textiles.<sup>56</sup> The wishes of the Africans remained the material formulation of consumption. Inspirations on designs were drawn from African objects and symbols as well as indigenous designers.<sup>57</sup> Beyond the individual, the African nation-states keyed into the consumption trend by entering into production partnerships with textile firms in Holland, Britain, Switzerland, Japan, India, and China.<sup>58</sup> Most of these textiles were taken from handmade designs and aesthetically

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<sup>54</sup> See Paulette Young, "Ghanaian Woman and Dutch Wax Prints: The Counter-appropriation of the Foreign and the Local Creating a New Visual Voice of Creative Expression" *Research Article* (2016)

<sup>55</sup> Victoria L. Rovine, "Viewing Africa through fashion" *Fashion Theory* 13, no. 2 (2009): 133 -140.

<sup>56</sup> J. Picton, *Technology Tradition and Lurex: The Art of Textiles in Africa* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 25, 29.

<sup>57</sup> R. Nielsen, "The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles" (1985); "Another Image of Africa: Toward West Africa and Zaire", in J. M. Steiner 1985. "An Ethnohistory of European Cloth Marketed to West Africa, 1893-1960" *EthnoHistory* 32(2) 91-110; Cordwell and R.A. Schwarz (Eds) *The Fabrics of Culture; The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* The Hague: Mouton 1987, 467-98 (Unclear)

<sup>58</sup> P. C. Beauchamp, "A Gay Garb for Ghana," *West Africa* 41, no.2081 (1957), 209; J. Picton, "Colonial Pretense And African Resistance or Subversion Subverted: Commemorative Textiles in Sub-Saharan Africa" in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, (ed.) Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel Verlag 2001), 159-167.

appealing environmental features. The designs were documented in the British Museum as belonging to those merchants involved in the West African textile trade.<sup>59</sup>

Prestholdt pays attention to the historiography of textile consumption in 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa.<sup>60</sup> He offers a refreshing perspective into the subject by setting out to unbundle the notion of African modernity in the consumption of textiles with a specific focus on East African societies. His summation is apt, and fits into the argument that Africans chose to domesticate and naturalize foreign textiles, and not necessarily define them as ‘un-modern’. Interestingly, this study focuses on the notion of textile consumption in West Africa, using the Yoruba women as a case in point, because Yorùbá women formed and made varied meanings of textile consumption. The work, *African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations and Ideas you can Wear*, gives an insightful analysis of the impact of globalisation on fashion in Africa.<sup>61</sup> Here, the ideas of fashion and modernity, and the transformations therein, open up the discussion on the notions of being African that are embedded in textile consumption. The constructions of fashion give off methodologies that engage debates on how to interrogate African modernity. The textile trade aids the internal flow of capital within Africa, and is a focal point of discourse in international relations. David Mills analyses the features of relations between Egypt and Sudan, with textiles as the nexus, since the 1930s.<sup>62</sup> Egypt's interest in Sudanese commerce was to promote the sales of textiles, and within the network of competition was Japan, whose paramount interest was also monopolising the textile trade in Africa. The discussion about Nigeria's status in the network of trade is expanded in the subsequent chapters.

This work articulates how the economic, business, social, and political, history of Africa shaped women's consumption of textiles. This study manifests how Africans are caught up in the intrigues of the global economy. A similar work from this perspective is Bianca Murillo's work,

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<sup>59</sup> See Julie Halls and Allison Martino, “Cloth, Copyright, and Cultural Exchange: Textile Designs for Export to Africa at The National Archives of the UK”, *Journal of Design History* 31, no. 3 (September 2018):236–254.

<sup>60</sup> Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the genealogies of globalization* (Berkeley California: University of California Press 2008)

<sup>61</sup> See V. Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations and Ideas You Can Wear* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> David E. Mills, "A Failed 'Nationalist' Endeavour: Egyptian-Sudanese Textile Trade, 1935-1945" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no.2 (2004), 175-194.

*Market Encounters: Consumer Cultures in Twentieth-Century Ghana.*<sup>63</sup> Though she focuses on textile consumption in Ghana, the experiences are similar to those in Western Nigeria, and the variations are insignificant enough to debar them from the understanding of the dynamics of textile consumption studies in Africa. Fashion and textile choices are considered important to African women. This work examines the consumption of textiles, and its intersection with culture and modernity in 20th century Yorubaland. African women use fashion to define their self-worth and their roles in the public space. Consumption of textile commodities shaped the socio-political and economic construction of the Yorùbá women, and reconstructed thoughts on them in African modernity. Auslander states that fabrics and clothing are psychologically loaded, and are useful for the construction of gender and sexual identities.<sup>64</sup> Hence, the concerns about Yoruba women revolve around the following questions:

1. How did Yorùbá women engage in textile production and designs to make a living?
2. How did Yorùbá women use fashion and textiles as modes of sociability?
3. What are the related perspectives on Yoruba women in the textile trade?

The practice of wearing uniform fabrics by the Yoruba on specific occasions transcends physical space and ethnic affiliation; it is even prominent among the Yoruba diaspora. The evidence of this prominence is reflected in the wedding videography of the other West African communities in the diaspora. The typical *aṣo-ebí* practices which started in the colonial era to maintain the Yoruba communal heritage are part of a process in continuity. *Aṣo-ebí* practices are no longer isolated. The development of virtual spaces to record events where there is the use of *aṣo-ebí* plainly portrays how information and communication technologies have broadened such use. With Lagos being a city that has reflected global changes since the colonial era, media entrepreneurs have evolved the virtual space to project pictures

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<sup>63</sup>Bianca Murillo, *Market Encounters: Consumer Cultures in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Ohio: University Press, 2017)

<sup>64</sup>L. Auslander, "Deploying Material Culture to Write the History of Gender and Sexuality: The Example of Clothing and Textiles" *Clio, Women, Gender History* 40 (2014), 157-180.

and videos of events where *aṣo-ebi* cultural practice is performed.<sup>65</sup> The growth of African textile retail stores in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (US), and the making of fashion trends in virtual space, imply the globalisation of African textiles as art, and explain the emergence of certain lucrative entrepreneurial models for it.

## Methodology

This work uses the historical method, and integrates a multidisciplinary orientation into it. Researching any fashion from the historical perspective entails the explanation of the trends of its consumption. Therefore, patterns and colours of textiles, technologies of textile production, and related matters, were introduced to Africa. International textile trading firms used various marketing orientations to shape the interests of Africans to drive their textile consumption habits. This study, in its explication of Yoruba women's fashion and textile consumption, intersects the social, cultural, business, and political, history of Africa. Therefore, the study investigates a neglected aspect of research in African history. The literature for the study integrates studies in sexuality, advertising, politics, nationalism, entrepreneurship, and other relevant areas of study. With insights from the requisite literature, this study critically contextualises beauty and fashion practices among the Yoruba women, and their influence on their textile consumption.

The Yoruba women's dress culture and appearances represent them as African and modern. Media representations of them in newspapers, such as the *Nigerian Daily Times*, *Southern Nigerian Defender* and *Nigerian Tribune*, were mostly published in the 1940s, and they contained vivid accounts of everyday life, and advertisements, for African consumers. The visual representations of women in the newspaper advertisements became sources of inspiration for the Yoruba women who wanted to look modern. The narratives in the newspapers and fashion magazines created an avenue for projecting modern fashion and promoting its consumption.

The fashion consumption patterns of women gendered the motives for the purchase of textiles imported from European firms. The politics of

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<sup>65</sup> In this category, I consider Bellanaija's online magazine reportage as a manifestation of these changes. Bellanaija's collections are volumes on *aṣo-ebi* published weekly to showcase the newest fashion made from all forms of fabric available in the markets. The pictures presented are mostly those of women's model dresses made by fashion designers and worn for occasions. For the contemporary generation of women, 'Aṣo-Ẹbi Bella' is an online repository for the reproduction of fashion that constantly aids textile consumption.