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Abstract

Going by the socio-economic development theories, in which two theories have been derived, one which placed so much emphasis on the way the western art and culture has led to the decline of the rich and valued traditional arts and culture. The other theory emphasizes the persistent nature of the traditional art and values despite the many modern changes. These two theories applies in most cases to most ancient towns and cities as they all have their valued norms and culture, the Yorubaland is not left out in this and specifically the Oyo alaaḥin. There have been certain works of art (dress) of the Oyo people which have continue to occur and recur over time. Though according to some scholars, clothes are seen as special and unique trajectories of tastes, fashion, culture, group definitions and development, which make the man, or the woman, broadcast information about socioeconomic categories, personality, and values of certain society, therefore it should be added that these features does not just stop at clothes, but dress has major roles it plays in it. Dress here includes cloth (textiles and styles), used to cover the body. Through explication of an analytical and historical narrative research methodology, this paper will critically examine an aspect of the Oyo art, in which has to do with the art of Yoruba dressing from the Oyo alaaḥin case study. The work will analyze the position of dress in the traditional Oyo art, and look expressly at the importance of dress as a piece of art to the Oyo people. The paper's contribution rests in extending previous work on Oyo arts, particularly the aspect that deals with dress.

Keywords: Art, dress, culture, Oyo, Yoruba

Introduction

The topic of art is such that might not be completed when limited to a scholar's definition, because art on its own encompasses various attributes and in which these attributes often depend on the dimension each scholars see it from. Though the general attributes has been, the expression and communication of a represented culture. What this mean in essence is that, art in most cases expresses the beauty of a particular culture. The Yoruba people in this case are not left out as this ethnic group is duly represented when it comes to art, and such arts also included specifically textiles and clothing styles. When discussing about the Yoruba art, the Oyo Alaaḥin cannot be left out, because there are various arts that represent the Oyo people including textile art, and in which the feat performed in production and use of art in the Old Oyo was probably unparalleled by other Yoruba Kingdoms. Though in the past, there have been series of wars fought by Oyo and counter wars against the empire between eighteen and the nineteen centuries which left the Old Oyo in ruins and made



the art to be greatly affected, some major aspect of the art were still retained by the people till date, part of which was the production of textiles known as *aso-oke*, which has been one of the major traditional occupation of the Oyo people. This study, has therefore attempted a research on the art of the Oyo Alaafin as pertaining to dress. Dress generally has to do with clothing or textiles and other materials used to adorn the body, such as beads, shoes, body makeup and makeover, body tattoo, hairdo, nail painting among many others. Though all other body adornments apart from clothing/textiles form parts of an art, this study majorly focus on textiles/clothing. Textiles here entail just the production of *aso-oke/aso-ofi* by the Oyo people, even though there are other productions such as weaving, and tie and dye. In essence this study will look at the art of dress from this perspective and also look into how the *aso-oke* has been of use in Oyo Alaafin, also to be considered is the effect colonialism and western cultures have had on the production and use of this particular art of the Yoruba people through Oyo Alaafin. Significantly, the study is articulated to evaluate the development of art and craft as pertaining to dress in the present day Oyo. In doing this, the outcome probably may inspire conscious effort and be an eye opener in the development of the art dress in Oyo Alaafin, towards self-reliance of individual textile artists, and glorification of the Oyo culture and tradition, and of the Yoruba and Nigeria in general. However works on Oyo art as pertaining to dress has not been done, though there have been some scholarly work on the art of oyo, all what is seen of most of these works are mainly limited to crafts and sculptures, such as calabash carving, wood carving, painting among others. What is often done is to mention and list cloth/textile weaving as part of the art, but a comprehensive explanation have not been given to it. This therefore is a more reason why this study is important in historical work. Such art work as dress is not a part of people's history that should be neglected or taken as unimportant.

Definition of art

The concept and definition of art has been a major subject of discussion among scholars both in the past and present, scholars such as George Dickie, William. E. Kennick and Morris Weitz among others have argued that a conclusion on the definition of art cannot be arrived at, due to the very expansive, adventurous comprehensive nature of art. While some even go to the extent of saying that it is not just that it's difficult to give a comprehensive definition of art, but rather that it is impossible. And in other cases these scholars often depend solely on criteria of art such as beauty, "esthetic quality," and expression to simply define what art is, though as time goes on, there have been addition to the criteria of art, but a definite concept have not been given to the definition of art.¹The question 'what is art?' is perhaps one of the most debated yet most difficult questions to answer, there is no short, simple answer and it often varies depending on the context in which the question is asked.²The study of Art informs us, that an artist should bestow his labor on those portions of his work which he; desires to have most carefully studied, and which he has made, in fact,

¹The Definition of Art, By Torres & Kamhi, What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand, ch. 6

²Dress and Fashion as a Form of Art, by HENRICA LANGH BACHELOR'S THESIS NOVIA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES 2013 Juvenes Print. Pg 8

centers of attraction.³Art, according to other researcher, can be described as the 'sum total of a man'; art can be seen in language, costume/dress, food, myths, norms, beliefs, values, architecture, dance and music, musical instrument, physiques, religion, even in different geographical locations. It is also a language of expression and a means of communication; it requires inventiveness, method, mastery, imagination, knowledge, creativity and skill and brings the cultural manifestation of the people to reality.⁴ Art in the Yoruba culture is created for ceremony and ritual, a means of engaging the daily yet sacred relationship to the Earth and the spirits of the greater universe. Over the decades, Yoruba art has expanded considerably to include fine examples of textiles and beadwork.⁵For the sake of this study, the definition of art which combines beauty, esthetic quality, expression, artifact and a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution, will be of use. This is because, from this definition of art, dress which is one of the main subthemes of this study is seen as an epitome of beauty, esthetic quality and a kind of expression which make a candidate to be appreciated by acting on behalf of his or her social institution or culture.

Definition of dress

Dress serves as a discursive daily practice of gender and in which dress practices tend toward elaborate, carefully cultivated styles for hair, makeup, and dress. The concept of dress is one in which so many literary works done on it, only look at it from the aspect of clothing. When looking at dress in the real sense one can say it has gone beyond clothing, it has gone as far as including into it other forms of fashion in which dress or dress style is closely related to fashion. Dress just as fashion is a visual form of expression that requires skill and creativity like any other creative work, but when commonly talking about making dress we define it as a mass-produced and commercial product. Dress today has gone beyond the narrow perspective to define dress as 'an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body'. This conceptualization includes things like 'coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements'. Some scholars have also gone further by conceptualizing dress as a process of beautification as well as everything involved in this process, which includes cloth, tattooing, facial marking, jewelry, hair-dressing, including barbing.⁶Though dress goes beyond just clothing to other forms of body adornments and scarification, this study will only limit itself to dress as cloth and textiles. Cloth/clothing/textiles which has remained an integral part of

³The Art of Dress. W. X STILLMAN & J. DURAND, *The Crayon*, Vol. 1, No. 25 (Jun. 21, 1855), pp. 385-386

⁴Art, Symbol and Royalty: A Case Study of the Yoruba Speakers in Nigeria. Folabalogun, Morenike. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)* Bahir Dar- Ethiopia Vol. 6(1), S/No 20, January, 2017: Pg 163

⁵Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art. By Babatunde Lawal Kean University Karl and Helen Burger Gallery Maxine and Jack Lane Center for Academic Success 2012, the Newark Museum. New Jersey. Pg 7

⁶Oyeniya, B. A. 2012. Dress and Identity in Yorubaland, 1880-1980. Ph.D. Thesis. Dept. of History. Leiden University. 31-33

everyday life, is a very important one also in the life and activities of Oyo people. In human history, cloth has evolved from being an object designed to cover nudity among humans or as an article for 'looking good' to an instrument for the display of cultural identity and solidarity amongst families and friends. Through clothing, individuals establish their sense of self as well as their place in society.⁷

The art of dress/dress as an art

The topic 'art and dress' is a frequently discussed theme and there is a clear relationship between the two. Art and dress are, however, often seen as two completely different things and when dress is approached as an art it is defined as applied or decorative art. The weaver/dress maker who could also be known as dress-artist is not considered to be creating something in order to earn money without the need of self-expression and to create a unique work of art, just as the previous definition of art states. Often what people commonly understand as art is created for commercial purposes in the same way as design, while unique dress can be created without links to mass production. The painters who produced what was known as 'high art' were commissioned to paint portraits or historical paintings and it was a trade like any other.⁸

Artist around the world and overtime have understood that dress helps to tell the story of their subject, often without the benefits of words. Details about identity are conveyed by the style, colour, and make of dress and how it is assembled into an ensemble. As such, dress is an important part of the arts worldwide. Like dress, art can describe both the process and the end result, the end result which then can be assessed according to how skilfully the artist has used the elements and principles of design in a way that has significance to the viewer. Dress can therefore be considered as an art form in itself.⁹

It must be noted that art does not just limit to wood carving, calabash carving, moulding clay, sculptures, gourd carving, leather work, pottery, wood carving, iron smelting, wrought iron work, bronze casting, but the production of cloth in a community is a major aspect of the art of such place, this is what will bring us into studying the art of dress in the Oyo Alaafin of South-western Nigeria, even when there are cloth weaving lineages in Oyo, such major aspect cannot be erased in the history of Oyo Alaafin. Though there have been various work and comprehensive literatures which talks about the art of Oyo, but has overlooked the aspect of cloth production/cloth weaving which was a major occupation among the people of Oyo, and which by one way or the other it could have contributed to the rich economy which resulted in a strong kingdom that existed in Old Oyo. Textile art is still practiced in Oyo in their various forms and methods; this according to research is evident in certain families/lineages that still practice such work, such that will be mentioned in preceding paragraphs. Although Areo and Kalilu (cited in Akintonde and Areo 2013) observed that

⁷ Ajani, O. A. 2012. Aso-Ebi: The dynamics of fashion and cultural commodification in Nigeria. *Journal of Pan-African Studies* 5.6: 108-118

⁸Dress and Fashion as a Form of Art, by HENRICA LANGH BACHELOR'S THESIS NOVIA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES 2013 Juvenes Print. Pg 1-8

⁹Dress in Art: Worldwide, by Sandra Lee Evenseon. Berge Publishers. India. 2012. Pg 109

traditional *Adire* centers are less concentrated in Oyo in this recent time, however, textile as exquisitely expressed with traditional motifs in tie-dye, batik and appliqué combined printing.¹⁰ Much of the art of the Yoruba included court dress, bead work for crowns among many others.¹¹

The feat performed in production and use of art in the Old Oyo was probably unparalleled by other Yoruba Kingdoms. Yet it is said that Africa is greatly endowed in art, but no other ethnics group is as prolific in art as the Yoruba. However, as a result of the consistent Yoruba wars, which Oyo participated mostly by fighting wars and counter wars, the art as well as other socio-political sectors were greatly affected. Aside the wars, the impact of colonialism and westernization invariably affected the art historical discuss on Oyo art, as pertaining to the art of dress. In which as a result, the factors which motivate production of dress art work and creativity (and other major art work) have reduced, at least in scope but not in intent.¹² Cloth weaving was part of the art and craft of the Oyo people which was generally made for domestic purposes.

The Aso-oke as an art of dress in Oyo Alaafin

The Yoruba art of dress depict the use of accouterments which include loin cloth, cap, sashes badge, hats and others, in which the materials used for the manufacture of these clothing are derived locally, which resembled today's traditional Yoruba hand woven strip cloth, known as *Aso-Oke*.¹³ Yoruba traditional dress as a piece of art (for instance, the Yoruba traditional wedding dress can be regarded as a piece of art in the sense that such dress has its features which include colorful, full of embroidery and ornaments. Such dress are ceremonial and totally hand-made by the Yoruba people, the process ranging from weaving to sewing, to painting of the cloth, which the people often referred to as *Aso-Oke*.¹⁴ Although the origin of textiles productions and usage in Nigeria, most especially among the Yoruba remain unknown, there are evidences of Yoruba's long use of textile as apparel as reflected in ancient sculptures, which has been dated back to the 10th and 12th century A.D.¹⁵ *aso-ofi* is one of the major art work in Oyo Alaafin and worn by the Yoruba people

¹⁰Moses AkintundeAkintonde and Margaret OlugbemisolaAreo, Art and Craft of Old Oyo: It's Manifestation in the Present Oyo *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 15, Issue 5 (Sep. - Oct. 2013), PP 58*

¹¹Adande, Joseph; Siegmann, William C.; Dumoudelle, Kevin D. 2009, African Art a Century at the Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum (u.a) P. 106

¹²Moses AkintundeAkintonde and Margaret OlugbemisolaAreo, Art and Craft of Old Oyo: It's Manifestation in the Present Oyo *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 15, Issue 5 (Sep. - Oct. 2013), PP 58*

¹³Aso-oke production and use among the Yoruba southwestern Nigeria, by MakindeD.OlajideAjiboye, Olusegunjide& Ajayi Babatunde Joseph. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.3, no.3, September 2009, 55-60

¹⁴Abigail Fidelis, What are Yoruba native dress style? July, 2018-
<https://www.naija.ng/amp/1179502-best-yoruba-native-dress-styles.html>

¹⁵Aso-oke production and use among the Yoruba southwestern Nigeria, by MakindeD.OlajideAjiboye, Olusegunjide& Ajayi Babatunde Joseph. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.3, no.3, September 2009, 55-60

both with and outside Oyo on special occasions.¹⁶The traditional Yoruba (Oyo) hand woven cloths *aso-ofi* popularly called *aso-oke*“ meaning cloths from the hinterland” as it is referred to on the coast, are made of spun yarn either derived from cotton or the cocoons of *fanaphe*, a species of wild moth. The spun yarns are usually woven on a loom. The Yoruba name for loom is *ofi* hence; the cloths made on loom are called *aso-ofi*. Looms used by Oyo weavers are of two types; the vertical (broad) loom used mostly by women and the horizontal (narrow) loom, traditionally used by men.¹⁷ The term *aso-oke* though refers generally to products of the two looms, it is however, more and closely associated with the weaves from the horizontal loom and cloths made of it.¹⁸The *aso-oke*is also divided into certain types which the *etu*, *alaari*and *sanyan* with many variations, these are the major types which originally made up the *aso-oke* as produced in the pre-colonial era.

The Oyo Alaafin is also noted for this specific piece of art of the Yoruba. These clothes comes with accessories such as the *ileke* made of gold with different precious stones made to form earrings, bracelets, rings, pendants among others.¹⁹Though this study mainly focus on dress as clothing. The Oyo women generally use *Aso-Oke* in a number of ways which can be casual or ceremonial, which was reserved for special occasions where formal and dignified dressing is required. These women used *aso-oke* as girdle (*oja*) to strap babies, wrapper (*iro*), head-tie (*gele*), blouse (*buba*) and (*ipele*) or shawl (*iborun*) which is usually hung on the shoulder of the user. While the Oyo men used *Aso-Oke* in the ancient times as work dress on their farms and they also use it for social, religious and traditional ceremonies. They wear a complete dress consisting of trouser(*sokoto*), top(*buba*),*agbada* (large embroidered flowing gown) and cap (*fila*). *Aso-oke* is highly valued as special gift for dignified people, there was an example as recorded by Clapperton (cited in Makinde, Olusegun& Ajayi, 2009) when he reports that he collected a gift of *aso-oke* from Alaafin Abiodun in old Oyo in 1920. The Oyo people attached so much importance to the *aso-oke*, which they offer as wedding gift for the bride’s family in Yoruba land in addition to being used to placate the witches.²⁰

The Yoruba art work could also be seen from the aspect of ceremonial or festival clothing or costumes worn on special occasions, such as the ones worn by masquerades at different festivals in Oyo, in which displays the art work of the people. As for art, in Oyo Alaafin, dress materials were made into costumes

¹⁶Dress culture in Oyo Town. Temidayo, Isaiah O. [googleweblight.com/i?u=http://www.academia.edu/2775724/DRESS_CULTURE_IN_OYO_TOWN&hl=en-NG](http://www.googleweblight.com/i?u=http://www.academia.edu/2775724/DRESS_CULTURE_IN_OYO_TOWN&hl=en-NG)

¹⁷Aso-Òkè and Its Social and Economic Significance among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria Adémúlèyá, Babásèhíndé. Journal of Culture, Society and Development, Vol.14, 2015. Pg17

¹⁸Dress culture in Oyo Town. Temidayo, Isaiah O. [googleweblight.com/i?u=http://www.academia.edu/2775724/DRESS_CULTURE_IN_OYO_TOWN&hl=en-NG](http://www.googleweblight.com/i?u=http://www.academia.edu/2775724/DRESS_CULTURE_IN_OYO_TOWN&hl=en-NG)

¹⁹Abigail Fidelis, What are Yoruba native dress style? July, 2018- <https://www.naija.ng/amp/1179502-best-yoruba-native-dress-styles.html>

²⁰Aso-oke production and use among the Yoruba southwestern Nigeria, by Makinde D.Olajide Ajiboye, Olusegun Jide & Ajayi Babatunde Joseph. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.3, no.3, September 2009, 55-60

for religious purposes in which the masquerade (*egungun*) wears it. Oyo used *aso-oke* in elaborate costumes that have a long trail behind them. A new strip of *aso-oke* is added to the *egungun* costume to add up to its beauty every year which implies that the age of an *egungun* can be calculated from the strips.²¹ The costumes vary considerably. Some have carved headpieces on top, but others called *Egúngún-àgbà*, *Egúngún-alábala*, or *Pàràká* conceal or eliminate them altogether, showcasing their elaborate appliqué costumes, part of which consist the *aso-oke*, whose panels flare out during the dance.²²

Colonialism, westernisation and their effects on the Oyo art of dress

Yoruba culture has been undergoing unprecedented transformations since the turn of the twentieth century owing to the impact of mass conversion to Islam and Christianity, Western education, modern technology, and increasing urbanization. Yet many Yoruba have not totally abandoned their ancient customs, synthesizing the old with the new in the attempt to cope with the dynamics of change.²³ The colonial and post-colonial period saw a wave of innovations in the production of *aso-oke* textiles, which became available in variety of colours and with the introduction of imported lurex yarn offered an attractive, modern alternative to the embroideries. The so-called *shain-shain* variant which became a huge success and commonly sown and worn at this time, and the *aso-oke* textiles with decorative open work (*eleya*) became in high demand.²⁴ All these imported materials were therefore used to replace the old ones, which originally were materials derived locally and they resemble the traditional Yoruba hand woven strip cloth '*aso-Oke*', and there also were differences in looms, and machines have now replaced the hand woven textiles which totally made the *aso-oke* different from how it used to be.

Conclusion

there are lineages who have taken up this as an occupation in the Oyo locality. It is a form of art which to a large extent has pronounced the identity of the Oyo people amidst other arts. This study has therefore been able to look at dress in Oyo Alaafin from the aspect of art. Art as noted has not only to do with carving or paintings, but also the making/production of dress has a long way to go in identifying the art of a people. The Oyo as a case study becomes important when art such as the *aso-oke* is involved. The *aso-oke* production and use is a major aspect of the art of Oyo, while looking into other art such as wood carving, calabash carving, paintings, clay molding and other forms of crafts, the art of dress is such that cannot be ignored. Dress as a form of art communicates;

²¹Aso-oke production and use among the Yoruba southwestern Nigeria, by Makinde D. Olajide Ajiboye, Olusegun Jide & Ajayi Babatunde Joseph. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.3, no.3, September 2009, 55-60

²²Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art. By Babatunde Lawal Kean University Karl and Helen Burger Gallery Maxine and Jack Lane Center for Academic Success 2012, The Newark Museum. New Jersey. Pg 20

²³Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art. By Babatunde Lawal Kean University Karl and Helen Burger Gallery Maxine and Jack Lane Center for Academic Success 2012, The Newark Museum. New Jersey. Pg 23

²⁴Plankensteiner, B. and Adediran, N. M. 2010. *African lace; a history of trade, creativity and fashion in Nigeria* Gheru/Kortrijk: Snoeck Publishers.

it enables people to be able to know the identity of where such dress is coming from, to the extent that