

**Beyond adornment: An Analysis of Fabrics of Ọwò Kingdom**

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**Abstract**

*For many centuries, diverse societies have used clothing for sundry purposes including the communication of distinctive features of their customs and traditions. Often, this is done through indigenous fabrics and accessories. Among the Yoruba ethnic group of southwest Nigeria, clothing is fundamental to culture. Ọwò Kingdom in the northern part of Ondo State is not exempt from this culture. In this community, cloth weaving is essentially women's craft and this industry has invented diverse fabrics (generally known as Aṣọ-Ọghò) of varying patterns, designs and colours for different purposes. This paper investigated six fabrics of Ọwò Kingdom, aṣìgbó, seghósẹ̀n (kéghójọ), gègè/eléwójòkólágha, ugbéèró, girijó and iyege, as well as their significance to their significance to sociology in Ọwò Kingdom. Additionally, the origin and observances in the production and use of some of the fabrics were investigated. Generally, the colours, patterns and designs of the fabrics were described. The methodology adopted was the qualitative research design, while a combination of ethnography and interview (Key Informant and In-depth interviews) were espoused. The study found that in Ọwò Kingdom, beyond adornment, status, and ranking, spirituality is elemental to clothing and in this instance, fabrics are purposively woven, deployed and stored under a number of ritualistic proscriptions. The study recommended the promotion of Ọwò's cloth-weaving industry through the exhibition of her fabrics in their festivals, as well as enabling capacity building of Ọwò weavers through tourism and export. Finally, academic focus should be redirected at this vibrant industry in Ọwò Kingdom.*

**Keywords:** Ọwò Kingdom, Cloth-weaving, Aṣọ-Ọghò, Fabrics, Yoruba

**Introduction**

In many parts of Yorubaland, clothing are purposively designed and deployed to meet the many demands of their culture. These often serve various mundane and purposive roles like adornment, rituality, theatrical and exhibitivite functions. These may be ostentatious, flamboyant and elaborate, while some may be moderate and modest, depending on the purpose for which they are deployed. In some instances, a number of them are conceptualised and designed to aid storytelling, interpret myth, project communal roles and responsibilities, hierarchy/status, define group relationship, as well as depict



age. To this end, Osuntokun<sup>1</sup> (2013: 12) observes that “the culture of the Yoruba particularly its cuisine, history, politics, art, music, religion, leisure, literature (both written and oral) cosmology, worldview and etiquette are shared by all the people speaking various dialects of the Yoruba language.”

One of the Yoruba-speaking communities that are observed for the production of indigenous textiles is Ọwọ Kingdom in Ondo State. Poynor<sup>2</sup>'s (1980) study of some of the costumes of the Ọwọ people, Yoruba dresses fall under social/political ranking, ritual and prestige categories. Poynor<sup>3</sup> (1980: 47) avers that the traditional textiles and costumes in Ọwọ are “significant for their roles as markers of social and political rank, indicators of ritual importance, and as symbols of wealth and prestige”. Yoruba is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria.

### Statement of the problem

Scholars like Udo (1970); Ojo (2007); Lyndersay (2011); Olutayo *et al.* (2012); (Badeji 2013; 2021; 2024), Ademuleya (2017); Olutayo (2017); Agoke (2017); Fadipe and Obiana (2021), Adediran-Olaide (2022) and Ajayi (2023), to mention some, have written extensively on indigenous Yoruba fabrics, fashion and body adornment from varying concerns, perspectives and paradigms. However, some of these studies on Yoruba cloth-weaving have gravitated towards Aso-oke. Beyond this, many of these studies generalise Yoruba indigenous fabrics woven on the loom as *aṣọ-òkè* or *aṣọ-òfí* and tend to attribute the craft and expertise of cloth-weaving to Yoruba communities like Ísẹyìn, Ọyó, Ìlorin and Ş akí, with little focus on the distinct weaves from other parts of Yorubaland, especially Ọwọ Kingdom in Ondo State where diverse fabrics for sundry purposes are deployed.

Additionally, many of the indigenously woven Yoruba fabrics are often discussed from the perspective of adornment, while aspects of rituality and ritualistic proscriptions and myths attached to weaving and deployment of some types of fabrics are often scantily addressed. Some of these studies, according to Olutayo<sup>4</sup> *et al.* (2011: 9) “suffer identical fate of excessively fragmented analysis and were tainted with gender sentiments, obsolescence and epochal disconnect”. While studies like Poynor (1980); Akinwunmi (2005); Olugbadehan (2006), Asakitipi (2007) and Onibode and Poynor (2023) have been carried out on studies on Ọwọ fabrics and cloth weaving industry, the vibrant cloth-weaving industry in Ọwọ Kingdom is yet to receive adequate scholarly attention, leading to a scant in literature, thereby creating knowledge gap.

<sup>1</sup> Osuntokun, A. *The place of the Yoruba in the ethno-political configuration of Nigeria* (6<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Public Lecture in honour of Chief Muritala Adebayo Akande in Celebration of the Splash 105.5 FM). 7-54. (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. (1980).

<sup>3</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88.(1980).

<sup>4</sup> Olutayo, *et al.* Aso-oke (hand woven textiles) of Southwestern Nigeria A compact examination of a resilient artifact. *American Journal of Sociological Research* 1.1 pp9, 9-17. (2011).

### **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this study was to further examine the categories of fabrics that are produced in the weaving industry of Ọwọ Kingdom in Ondo State . The objectives were to identify six types of fabrics woven in Ọwọ Kingdom, analyse their colours and designs, examine their origin and importance to their sociology. Additionally, the study investigated the observances involved in their production and deployment of some of the fabrics. This study also filled knowledge gap and adds to the existing body of literature in African cultural studies.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted qualitative research design. However, an eclectic methodology; a combination of ethnography and interviews was espoused. Data were collected through interview (key informant and In-depth). This included the Ọlọwọ , three Ọmànwangwẹ, two high chiefs/ Èró participants, one cloth-weaver, two Ọwọ culture enthusiasts and an Ọwọ culture scholar . For ethnography, the researcher conducted field work (Ọwọ Kingdom ) over a period of six weeks, between July and September, 2020.

This period was utilised by the researcher to familiarise with the culture sites of Ọwọ Kingdom, as well as the sociology of the community. The researcher also utilised the period to conduct some interviews (Key Informant and In depth Interviews), as well as interrelate with some of the indigenes, which enabled her to familiarise with, and understand their dialect. The interviews were conducted live, written and recorded; while additional information was gathered from participants through voice notes, Zoom, phone calls, WhatsApp messages, Emails and other social media platforms . The interviews were conducted in English and where necessary or unavoidable , in Standard Yoruba and the Ọwọ dialect of Yoruba . These were transcribed, and the non-English interviews were translated into English. The data were content-analysed. Additionally, the data were analysed through thematic mapping of contents.

Research ethics were conformed to, in relation to informing the participants about the purpose of the interviews and their consent were obtained before they engaged in the study. Having done this, they were requested to willingly supply information and so doing, they were informed on how the data collected would be utilised, as well as the latent benefits the outcome of the research to knowledge.

### **Overview of Ọwọ Kingdom**

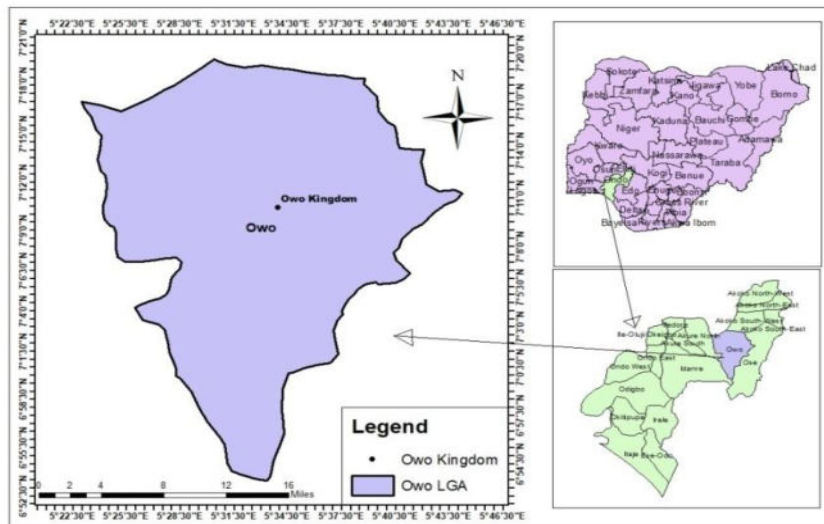
Ọwọ Kingdom , a town situated at the southern edge of the Yoruba hills at elevation 1,130 feet [344 ml] sits at the intersection of roads from Akure, Kabba, Benin City and Siluko (*Encyclopedia Britannica*<sup>5</sup>, 2009). It is a distance of

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<sup>5</sup> Britannica, T.. Editors of Encyclopaedia. *Owo. Encyclopedia Britannica.* (2009, January 9). <https://www.britannica.com/place/Owo>

48 km east of Akure and 400 km north of Lagos, with a land mass of about 636 km<sup>2</sup> (*Facts and Figures about Òwò Local Government*<sup>6</sup>, 1993: 1) and it is positioned at latitude 7.1962 and longitude 5.58681 and lies in the northern hemisphere of Africa (Geodatos<sup>7</sup>, 2021).

**Plate 1:** The map of Ondo State showing the study area, Òwò Kingdom



**Source:** Department of Geography, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, 2024

According to some informants in Òwò Kingdom, corroborated by Oloidi<sup>8</sup> (2004) Òwò Kingdom is one of the original sixteen crown -wearing kingdoms in Yorubaland. Its origin is credited to Prince *Omalaiyé Ojúgbélú Arère*, popularly referred to as *Òma-Òwò*, a descendant of Odùduwà, around 1019 AD., who migrated from his ancestral home in Ile-Ife to a place called Ufafa, some kilometres to Òwò. However, due to the malevolent weather conditions in that area (thunderstorms) his son, *Imadè*, relocated his people to the present day location of Òwò after his father's death.

Traditionally, Òwò was known as *Òghò*, but due to difficulty encountered by non-indigenes in its pronunciation, it came to be known as Òwò. At present, Òwò is the headquarters of Òwò Local Government Area in the northern part of Ondo State. With a population of 222,262 (NPC<sup>9</sup>, 2006), it was originally covered with dense tropical rain forest and was a major collecting centre for cocoa and a vibrant market for food and cash crops, like rice, cassava, palm oil, maize and kernels.

<sup>6</sup> *Facts and Figures about Òwò Local Government*. pp1. (1993).

<sup>7</sup> Geodatos. Owo Geographic coordinates. (2021). Accessed 6 October 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Oloidi, S. Sir Olateru Olagbegi IIKBE: The legendary king. Lagos: Mednet Limited. (2004).

<sup>9</sup> (NPC, 2006).

### Concepts of costume

For any kind of performance, costume is essential. It is sometimes used interchangeably by some scholars as dress, cloth and adornment, is one of the oldest and most important human phenomena. Schwarz<sup>10</sup> (1979) opines that it may have evolved through a combination of environmental, socio-cultural and psychological factors. It “evolved in response to the demands of climate, historical events, the varying degrees of civilisation of different peoples, their moral laws and their aesthetic sensibilities” (*The New Caxton Encyclopedia*<sup>11</sup>, 1969).

Costume must be functional, meaningful and aesthetic (Cohen<sup>12</sup>, 2003). Costumes serve as device for cultural expression. This is besides its functions of promoting cultural identity and identification. It exhibits aesthetics and projects the material culture of a people by reflecting their ethnicity and ethnic values, as well as their arts and crafts. The kinds of dress people wear often betray them more than their words (Brody-Johansen<sup>13</sup>, 1968). What people wear is very much a part of who they are. It is therefore one of the most ubiquitous and dynamic cultural agents for self-expression, transmission of values and cultural identity within and across ethnic divides (Onibode and Poynor<sup>14</sup>, 2023). Kuutma<sup>15</sup> (1998: 4) observes that “one conspicuous celebration of ethnicity is rendered while identifying oneself by costume –the performers and some of the audience wear traditional costumes originating in the majority of cases from their local districts.”

Among the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria, a major material culture that is often showcased by them is their dress culture. Badeji<sup>16</sup> (2021: 16) observes that “Yoruba people are endowed with a rich cultural heritage, mirrored in their acute taste for fashion”. The Yoruba people dress the occasion. Ademuleya<sup>17</sup> (2017: 290) substantiates this view with the explanation that “To dress the body of the Yoruba is to *múra* (*body adornment*)”. Aransi<sup>18</sup> (2017: 215) also observes that “The Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria are highly sociable . . . Men and women’s use of various body adornment and cosmetics to beautify the

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<sup>10</sup> Schwarz, R. A. Uncovering the secret vice: Toward an anthropology of clothing and adornment. *The Fabrics of Culture*: R.A. Schwarz and J.C. Cordwell. Eds. The Hague: Mouton Publishers. 23-46. (1979).

<sup>11</sup> Workman, B.A. Ed. *The new caxton encyclopedia*. London: The Caxton Publishing Company Limited. pp1457. (1969).

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, R. *Theatre: Brief version*. 6th ed. Boston: McGraw Hill. (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Brody-Johansen, R. *Body and Clothes: An Illustrated History of Costume*. London: Faber and Faber. pp30. (1968).

<sup>14</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Seghoşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp1. (2023).

<sup>15</sup> Kuutma, K. Festival as communicative performance and celebration of ethnicity. *Electronic Journal of Folklore* 7:1-5. pp4. (1998).

<sup>16</sup>Badeji, S.O. Aso-ebi custom among the Yoruba people of Southwest, Nigeria: An assessment of trend, challenges and prospects. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* 34.5, 14-22. pp16. (2021).

<sup>17</sup> Ademuleya, B. Textiles and dresses. *Culture and Customs of the Yorùbá* T. Falola and A. Akínýemí. Austin: Pan-African University Press. pp290. (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Aransi, *Culture and Customs of the Yorùbá*. T. Falola and A. Akínýemí. Austin: Pan-African University Press. pp215. (2017)

body plays a significant role in sustaining their inheritance culture.” To them, clothing or wearing clothes is further than a measly putting on of cloths to shield nudity, but it is fundamental to their custom, distinctiveness and spirituality and its objective is not just “putting on a dress’ but ‘dressing the body” (Ademuleya<sup>19</sup>, 2017: 290). Additionally, Ademuleya<sup>20</sup> (2017) observes that “One of the major aspects of Yoruba creative culture is the clothing tradition which involves the design, production and use of textiles. The clothing tradition of the Yoruba has a long history buried in antiquity and has evolved through technical processes over a long time. When and how it started remains unknown.”

#### Dress culture among the Ọwò people

Olugbadehan<sup>21</sup> (2006: 112) points out that since the early 18th century, it became a norm for “daughters and slaves (for those who have any), to assist women to gin, card and spin cotton”.

**Plate 2:** A cloth-weaving loom in Owo Kingdom



**Source:** Owo Kingdom, May, 25, 2019

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<sup>19</sup> Ademuleya, B. Textiles and dresses. *Culture and Customs of the Yorùbá*. T. Falola and A. Akinyemí. Austin: Pan-African University Press. pp290. (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Ademuleya, B. Textiles and dresses. *Culture and Customs of the Yorùbá*. T. Falola and A. Akinyemí. Austin: Pan-African University Press. pp290. (2017).

<sup>21</sup> Olugbadehan, O. J. Owo: A frontier Yoruba kingdom. Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD. Union Institute and University ProQuet Dissertations Publishing. ii-370 (2006)..

Like other Yoruba ethnic groups, Òwò people have their customarily woven fabrics, both for prestige and rituals. These are generally referred to as *asò-òghò*. These fabrics however have distinct names, designations and roles. These include *aṣìgbó*, *seghósèṣen* (*kéghójò*), *gègè*, *eléwójòkólágha*, *ugbéèrò* and *giriájó*, *iyegbe*, *àgò*, *ebolo*, *elégheghè*, among others. These fabrics derived their names from the roles they perform or their cost or colours, which can be predominantly black, blue, red, coral, orange and green. They can also have stripes and patterns. The production and use of some of these fabrics is not frivolous, and are guided by ritual observances.

Customarily, Òwò men use different fabrics, ranging from light weight to densely-woven materials in diverse colours, for the traditional three-piece attire of Yoruba male –*bùbá*, *sòkòtò* and *agbádá* (traditional shirt, trousers and flowing gown), with caps that are made from materials like *aṣò-òkè*, damask, velvet or any plain or patterned material, and which could be embroidered in different designs. Accessories like specially designed red coral beads are typically worn by titled men, especially for special occasions.

The traditional dress of women on the other hand is a four-piece attire that could be made from fabrics like lace, Ankara, Guinea brocade, *àdirẹ* and other natural or synthetic fabrics in various colours. Their traditional style is *iró* (wrapper), *bùbá* (a large-sleeved blouse), *gèlè* (headgear/head-tie), which could be made from the primary fabric, *aṣò-òkè*, damask, *sego* and other stiff materials in monochrome or with patterns, and *ipèlè* (stole), which typically completes the dressing of a Yoruba woman. This is often made from the same fabric with the head-tie and draped across the left shoulder, tied over the primary wrapper, or stylishly tied around the waist. Accessories among the Òwò women include coral beads, fashion beads and gold or silver accessories. Furthermore, the rich myth that pervades Òwò's cultural history is often displayed in their elaborate use of *àkún* and *iyùn* (coral and jasper beads) often worn around the neck, wrists, ankles and hair by men and women. However, some designs, qualities and styles are only customarily allowed for use by title-holders, both traditional chiefs and honorary ones (Olugbadehan<sup>22</sup>, 2006)

In many indigenous ceremonies and festivals in Òwò Kingdom, costumes play significant roles as markers of socialisation, rituality and spirituality. Here, costumes are observed to have a fundamental interplay with culture, thereby acting as signifiers of myths and ritual observances. Beyond aesthetic and prestige, costumes are perceived as part of the functioning of their rituality. So, their production, use and preservation are guided by many considerations. This is perhaps to imbue them with spiritual efficacy and awe, which have come to be associated with many of their costumes.

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<sup>22</sup> Olugbadehan, O. J. Owo: A frontier Yoruba kingdom. Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD. Union Institute and University ProQuet Dissertations Publishing. ii-370. (2006).

### Weaving craft in Ọwò Kingdom

One of the oldest crafts in Ọwò Kingdom is cloth-weaving. For centuries, various types of traditional clothing of diverse designs and colours have been produced on their local looms, for different functions and purposes, some of which are conceptualized to bear ritual restrictions. The craft of cloth-weaving on the traditional loom is mainly a women's occupation and, at some point, most of the Ọwò women, old and young, were versed in the art. (Poynor<sup>23</sup>, 1980: 47) reiterates that, "It is assumed that every woman in Owo is capable of weaving, and their looms are found in almost every courtyard." Olugbadehan<sup>24</sup> (2006: 112) substantiates that "In this predominantly women industry, cooperative or group methods parallel to the Aro system of farming among men also developed among the women, by which steady and adequate supply of thread for dyeing and weaving was ensured". Onibode and Poynor<sup>25</sup> (2023: 1) observe that "almost all cloths of ritual significance in Owo are woven by women."

Such cloth is purposely produced and woven with special observances, sacredness and proscriptions from beginning to the end. As Poynor<sup>26</sup> (1980: 47) elucidates, "women's weave is recognized as being extremely important in both traditional dress and in ritual. Some types are limited to certain titles or lineages. Some are owned by titles or lineages, but the right to weave them or to use them may be bought". This is not to posit that there are no clothes that are worn for mundane purposes in Ọwò Kingdom. Olugbadehan<sup>27</sup> (2006: 112-113) observes that some of the clothes produced in the Ọwò indigenous weaving industry includes *olorofun* woven in broad stripes of white and black, generally worn as everyday clothes. Other forms of informal clothing include *alaisa* and *olorimejin* are woven to endure domestic usage.

However, it is expedient to take an in depth look at some of these fabrics in order to understand the meanings ascribed to, as well as the myths attached to some of them in Ọwò culture. It is also imperative to examine some of them, particularly from the perspectives of their unique demands and interdictions imposed on them, their weavers, uses and users.

Some of the fabrics identified to be the indigenous weaves of the Ọwò people include, *aşigbó*, *seghóşen/kéghójo/kówójo*, *girijó*, *ugbééró/igbéró*, *gègè/eléghójókólága*, *iyege*, *elégheghè*, *ebolo* and *àgo*. These are often woven in strips or panels and sewn together in panels of three or five and wound around the waist by men and women, or draped across the left shoulder like a toga.

<sup>23</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp47. (1980).

<sup>24</sup> Olugbadehan, O. J. Owo: A frontier Yoruba kingdom. Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD. Union Institute and University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. ii-370. (2006).

<sup>25</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Şeghoşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp1. (2023).

<sup>26</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp47. (1980).

<sup>27</sup> Olugbadehan, O. J. Owo: A frontier Yoruba kingdom. Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD. Union Institute and University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. ii-370, (2006).



However, it is observed that some fabrics, especially *seghóşen* are being used to make outfits like *agbádá* (men's flowing gown), *bùbá* (native shirt) and *sòkòtò* (pants) and women's fashion styles. On the other hand, *aşigbó* has maintained statusquo as a stole (*òjá*) that is draped on the left shoulder of its wearers to as a social marker.

In this study, the fabrics that shall be discussed include *aşigbó*, *seghóşen/kéghójo*, *girijó*, *ugbéèró/igbéró*, *gège/eléghójókólága*,

### ***Aşigbó* (Ọwò's funerary costume)**

Poynor<sup>28</sup> (1980: 47) avers that "there are textiles whose use is confined to funeral celebrations...." As substantiated by some informants that the ownership of *aşigbó* belongs to the *Sàşéré* dynasty of *Òke-ọjà* in Ọwò Kingdom. It is exclusively woven by the women of the *Ùwangwẹ Sàşéré* family and it has panels of black and off-white horizontal patterns, but sometimes, the white stripes often have a greyish hue.

This costume has been the heirloom of the *Ùwangwẹ Sàşéré* family for centuries. Poynor<sup>29</sup> (1980) observes that the *aşigbó* can be used in only two ways: for the second burial ceremony of a deceased person, when *aşigbó* is draped over an empty coffin and carried around particular ritual spots in town, and for *ako* ceremony. Informants from the *Sàşéré* family, however, pointed out that it is also worn for the performance of the obsequies (*Àjàbuẹ*) of a deceased member of the family. The *Sàşéré-Ùwangẹ* dynasty bolsters their ownership of *aşigbó* with their family cognomen (*oríki*):

<i>Ọma Sàşéré Olówu Àkàtàmbà</i>	The progeny of <i>Sàşéré Olówu Àkàtàmbà</i>
<i>Ọma l'aşigbó òkè ọjà</i>	The progeny of the owner of <i>aşigbó</i> residing at the heart of the market
<i>Ọma a jà, ma jẹbi...</i>	One who fights a blameless fight...

For the use of *aşigbó* to extend beyond the confines of its owners , but formal permission must by sought and obtained by other families in Ọwò Kingdom before they are used.

<sup>28</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47–51+88. pp47. (1980).

<sup>29</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47–51+88. pp47. (1980).

Plate 3: An *Omawàngwẹ* draped a black and white stole (*aşigbó*) over his attire



Source: Chief Bukola Adetula, April 10, 2022

Permission must be sought from the head of the family or elders, with certain objects and an amount of money. Poynor<sup>30</sup> (1980) continues that , while obtaining permission, the person must state the proposed date for its use to *Sàşéré*. He must repeat this process three times before he gets a nod. If he gets the go-ahead, the family head of the deceased person must press both palms on the wall of his residence and declare or reinforce his allegiance that, "as the wall stands, so must I stand with Sashere and Ugwaba, thereby pledging his political support for these two chiefs" (Poynor<sup>31</sup>, 1980: 49). Failure to obtain permission or receive a nod from *Sàşéré* before making use of *aşigbó* puts an erring family at the risk of punishment.

Some *Omawàngwẹ* (2023) substantiated that using *aşigbó* without the permission of the head of the *Sàşéré* family incurred the wrath of the family. In such situations, emissaries from the *Sàşéré* family are often dispatched to warn erring family or families to halt further use of the *aşigbó*, but if recalcitrant, they were often threatened with the impending dooms like death which have often proven effective. Obtaining permission for the use of *aşigbó* attracts some

<sup>30</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp47. (1980).

<sup>31</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp47. (1980).

customary rites and restrictions. Poynor<sup>32</sup> (1980: 49) claims that, “in asking permission, the family of the deceased must present the Sashere with 200 plantains, 200 bean cakes, 200 sticks of sugar cane, 200 eggs, 200 kola nuts, and 200s of numerous other things.”

Informants further highlighted that *aşigbó* was originally conceptualized as a funerary costume, but nowadays, men of the *Sàşéré* family are changing the narrative, as it is also used as cloth of prestige. They disclosed that it is prestigious to drape a one-panel *aşigbó* across their right at social events as a mark of honour and prestige. Whenever it is draped, prostrating oneself to anyone, no matter his status or position, is proscribed. They would not prostrate themselves to even the *Ọlówò* when they drape *aşigbó*. This stance is substantiated by Poynor<sup>33</sup> (1980: 47): “Undisputed respect is accorded ashigbo, a cloth of black and white warp stripes of varying widths. Anyone who wears it must be treated with veneration, and no one, while wearing ashigbo, may prostrate himself before another person, not even before the Olowo.”

The ritualistic restrictions placed on weaving *aşigbó* are similar to those on *girijó*, used in *Èró* performance. However, while *girijó* must be woven within seven days, it is nine for *aşigbó*. While weaving the later, the weaver (who must be a member of the *Sàşéré* lineage) must not sleep with a man or menstruate. Also, only freshly cooked food must be eaten by the weaver, while personal and environmental hygiene must be of utmost consideration.

Some *Ọmawàngwẹ* however disclosed that in the olden days, only virgins were permitted to weave *aşigbó*. And these were often isolated in a special room where they did the weaving kneeling down. As further noted by Poynor<sup>34</sup> (1980), to weave *aşigbó*, some standard rules are laid down. For instance, if any of the proscriptions is violated by a weaver, or the quality falls short, the cloth is cut from the loom. Also, if a weaver dies before weaving is completed; the task must be taken over by another weaver. Nine days weaving period are considered “dangerous” by weavers of *aşigbó* and its completion and acceptance by the client was often celebrated by the women of *Sàşéré* family by singing and dancing through the streets of *Ọwò* (Poynor<sup>35</sup>, 1980)

### ***Şeghóşen* (the luxury fabric of *Ọwò* Kingdom)**

This is the foremost cloth of prestige in *Ọwò* culture. Its use is purely aesthetic and prestigious without being associated with ritual. Asakitipi<sup>36</sup> (2007) points out that it is a cloth that is owned at a high cost, and the wearer is usually a highly revered person of royalty or high social and economic pedigree.

<sup>32</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp49. (1980).

<sup>33</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp47. (1980).

<sup>34</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. (1980).

<sup>35</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. (1980).

<sup>36</sup> Asakitipi, A.O. Functions of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16.1: 101-115 (2007).

Akinwumi<sup>37</sup> (1992) cited in Asakitipi<sup>38</sup> (2007: 104) refers to as “the cloth that takes all the money”. This view is corroborated by Onibode and Poynor<sup>39</sup> (2023: 1) as “the cloth that eats money”.

It is clearly one of the most esteemed fabrics in Ọwò, and has become a significant material culture and identity of these people across the globe. Poynor<sup>40</sup> (1980: 51) substantiates that “The sheghoshen is a luxury cloth that distinguishes a man as an elder of wealth. In order to make the ipanmeta, or large cloth, of sheghoshen, at least three strips and often more are sewn together to be worn as a toga”.

Like most fabrics produced in Ọwò Kingdom, *şeghóşen* is woven by women and comes in a variety of primary colours (red, green, blue, brown, orange and so on), but they are often interlaced with contrasting colours that seem to be peeping through the primary colour, giving it its hue and intricately embossed patterns.

**Plate 4:** *Şeghóşen* is composed of intricately embossed patterns and vibrant colours



**Source:** Posted on Facebook by Bàami Aluyo, Sep. 6, 2021

<sup>37</sup> Akinwumi, T. Taboos and ritual textiles among Owo Yoruba of Nigeria as instruments for controlling social roles and textile quality. *Yabatech Academic Journal* 2.2: 7-10 (1992).

<sup>38</sup> Asakitipi, A.O. Functions of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16.1: 101-115. pp104. (2007).

<sup>39</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Şeghóşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp1. (2023).

<sup>40</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp51. (1980).

*Şeghóşen* is an antique design of Òwò weavers, and due to its fine, tight weave, is usually denser than many of other Òwò clothes. Its smooth weave often gives it the illusion of a silky, glistening and glossy façade (perhaps, it is woven with silky yarn), which often gives the impression of its worth. It can be sewn into various styles, like *agbádá*, *sòkòtò* and *bùbá*, or used as headgear, stole (*ìborùn*), or draped on the shoulder like a toga. Onibode and Poynor<sup>41</sup>(2023: 1) give an instance of *şeghóşen* being made into “*ewu egha* (shirt/tunic) and *efa* (trousers)”. Furthermore, a prolific cloth-weaver in Òwò asserted that *şeghóşen* is luxurious and pricey, making it a fabric of choice for the wealthy, since it designates affluence, class and status. According to Onibode and Poynor<sup>42</sup>(2023: 7) “its great cost assured that it would be limited to those who could afford it”. Therefore, the expense that goes into owning one is the reason it earned its name, which many consider derogatory (the cloth that wastes money); but now, it is given a more admirable one, *kéghójo* (to gather money) and it was a fabric conceptualised to denote class, rank and status. Onibode and Poynor<sup>43</sup> (2023:7) further note in that in contemporary time, this fabric is being used for other purposes:

...construction of purses, handbags, briefcases, backpacks, and shoes. It is not just the use of *şeghóşen* that has expanded, but the visual appearance and process of production have changed as well. A greater range of color combinations has been introduced, and the manufacture of cloth is no longer limited to older Òwò women as it was in the past, since younger women and those of other ethnicities have been allowed to weave cloths previously considered out of bounds for young weavers.

Some other changes have also affected the material. Onibode and Poynor<sup>44</sup> (2023: 7) assert that “not only has time relaxed many of the restrictions on weaving and wearing cloths, but fewer older Òwò women weave today than in the 1970s and earlier.”

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<sup>41</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Şeghóşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp1. (2023)

<sup>42</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Şeghóşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp7. (2023)

<sup>43</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Şeghóşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp7. (2023)

<sup>44</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Şeghóşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp7. (2023)

### *Ugbèèró/Igbéró*

This is one of the costumes that are used for È ró performance in Òwò kingdom, which marks the wearer as one who has attained the status of a stately elder. But unlike *girijó* which is a one-time fabric used for *Ùsánşo* performance only, *ugbèèró/igbéro* is a cloth that an *Eléro* can continue to use for as long as he lives. Also, informants disclosed that unlike *girijó*, it is not woven or used under strict ritualistic interdictions. Onibode and Poynor<sup>45</sup> (2023: 1) consider *ugbèèró* as “cloths woven to mark the Èró celebrations marking the retirement of a man from public responsibilities”.

#### **Plate 5: An *Eléro* adorned a variant of *Ugbèèró* as a third-piece (*ikèta*)**



**Source:** Muyiwa Olawolu, 2021

A veteran Òwò cloth -weaver explained that *ugbèèro* is not the main costume that is used for Èró performance. She reinforced that it is one of the wrappers, not bigger than a woman's wrapper which can be fastened around the waist like a towel by the *Eléro* (Èró performer) every morning or tied over regular outfits at social events as a social marker. An informant further substantiated that *ugbèèró* is usually used by the *Eléro* for the performance of *Oko-Èró* (Èró farm) during which he will dance with his relatives to the farm. On getting there, he will hang the cloth on a tree, which he will be pretending to climb.

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<sup>45</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Şeghoşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. pp1. (2023).

***Eléghójòkólaga***

This is a combination of stripped navy and pale blue-black, with a hint of robin blue fabric. It is a cloth of prestige often woven in five panels (*ipanmèèrún*) can be tied or draped for a special occasion, by men or women. According to Asakitipi<sup>46</sup> (2007), this cloth, which she refers to as *kowojo* is an offshoot of *gègè*, the name it bore at its inception.

**Plate 6:** Hon. Femi Gbajabiamila draped a version of *Eléghójòkólaga* in a ceremony in Ọwò (2016)



**Source:** Posted on Facebook by the Admin, Owo Kingdom, 2017

This is however refuted by Onibode and Poynor<sup>47</sup> (2023) with the assertion that the new name for *Seghóşen* is *kówójo* or *kéghójo*. Asakitipi<sup>48</sup> (2007:105) describes *gègè* as “A woven cloth that Owo women use as wrapper. It is mainly deep blue in colour with thin and wide stripes of various colours ranging from white, brown, red, green and blue.” She continues that in the instance that one is unable to afford pricey ones like *Seghóşen*, variants of *gègè* come to mind as an alternative.

However, just like its name, the designs have evolved into various patterns, but as observed, the main colour remains deep blue. The fabric can also be used as a changing cloth during Èró Festival, or presented as gift to an Èró celebrant .

<sup>46</sup> Asakitipi, A.O. Functions of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16.1: 101-115. (2007).

<sup>47</sup> Onibode, B. and Poynor, R. The cloth that eats money: *Seghóşen* as a symbol of prestige. *African Arts* 56.3:20-33. (2023).

<sup>48</sup> Asakitipi, A.O. Functions of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16.1: 101-115. (2007).

Sometimes, the children of the *Eléro* wear it in honour of their father during processions. This often portrays them as close family members of the *Eléro* during procession around *Ọ̀wọ̀* town.

### ***Girijó* (The ritual costume of Èró Festival)**

Poynor<sup>49</sup> (1980: 50) argues that “igbero or girijo, is not of a fixed design.” It is primarily woven in indigo-blue colour with white horizontal lines. Informants explicated that in the olden days, it used to be woven as a large wrapper of five panels (*ipanmèjèrú*) which was customarily fastened to the waists of Èró candidates during the festival. However, due to the density and weight, which caused waist and back-pain for its users, draping it across the left shoulder like a toga came into being.

The use of *girijò* for Èró perform ance came into existence during the reign of *Ọ̀lọ̀wọ̀ Ọ̀màsàn* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was prescribed by *Ojùmú Bàbá Àkète*, a migrant from *Ì jùmú* (in the present day Kogi State). He recommended the freedom of aged men from communal labour, as well as a rite of passage (retirement) festival to celebrate this. Additionally, he prescribed a costume for this purpose, and this was implemented, in conjunction with the *Ìlórò* chiefs for the performance of Èró rituals . The process of weaving this fabric has a sequence beginning with its commissioning to a female weaver by the first daughter of an *Eléro* (Èró candidate), who must complete its weaving in seven days, no more, no less. During the weaving period, many ritualistic proscptions are placed on the weaver. However, if the candidate has no daughter, the task would invariably fall on his sister or other female relatives.

Asakitipi<sup>50</sup> (2007: 107) reinforced that “As with other ritual cloth forms of Owo, the weavers of Girijo must be physically and sexually clean...” A cloth weaver in *Ọ̀wọ̀* substantiated that “*girijó, aṣọ tí ó lágbára ni ...* (*girijò* is a spiritually powerful cloth) that a weaver must be ready to observe many ritualistic proscptions for, and it must be woven within seven days. All informants emphasised that is a taboo for a man who has not performed Èró to handle *girijó*. Informants disclosed that such manhandling is believed to incur consequences like impotence. It is usually woven in indigo-stripped blue colour with diminutive white horizontal lines. It is also a taboo for *girijó* to be used to fasten a male child on the back (Asakitipi<sup>51</sup>, 2007). It can only be owned by elderly men that have performed Èró (*Bàbá Eléro*) and an Èró candidate . It is typically draped and fastened on the left shoulder of the candidate at a ritualistic ceremony known as *Ùsánṣọ*.

<sup>49</sup> Poynor, R. Traditional textiles in Owo, Nigeria. *African Arts* 14.1:47-51+88. pp50. (1980).

<sup>50</sup> Asakitipi, A.O. Functions of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16.1: 101-115. pp107. (2007).

<sup>51</sup> Asakitipi, A.O. Functions of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16.1: 101-115. (2007).



**Plate 7:** *Girijó* is a striped indigo blue fabric with diminutive white horizontal lines



**Source:** Múyìwa Òláwòlú, Oct. 2021

An *Eléro* must have *girijó* because it is a mark of identity and it must be taken to a designated place according to his quarter. It is customarily done at *Arigidi*, for those from *Ìlórò* quarter or in the *Eléro's* family compound, where it would be tied for him by an elder who has done his own performance, earlier. After it has been draped on the candidate, he would dance back to his house with it. On getting home, he must not untie the knot made on his left shoulder while it was fastened, because it is a taboo to do so before seven days. He must carefully pass the wrapper above his head and hang it on a wall for seven days, or more, (depending on his position in the community) before taking it back to the elder (*Baba Eléro*) with gifts for the unknotting rituals. Possession or use *girijó* confers on the *Eléro* the right of a stately elder, who must never prostrate to any human, carry load on his head or perform any communal labour and other forms of physical works till he dies.

As earlier mentioned, after *Èró* Festival, *girijó* may be returned to the first daughter or female relative (in the event that the performer has no female child) who commissioned its weaving in the first place. She might use it as a covering cloth or wrapper, but she must not adhere to some taboos in its use. However, informants disclosed that if an *Eleéro* decides not to return it, it must be consciously kept where unauthorised use or contact must be avoided. At the demise of such *Eléro*, it is usually buried with him. After his body has been washed, it must be draped on his body before his burial garments are worn over it.

***Iyegbe*: Ọwọ's healing costume**

Another ritual costume in Ọwọ Kingdom is *Iyegbe*. According to Poynor, in his post on Facebook (Sep.6, 2022), and also shared with the researcher on is one of the products of Ọwọ Kingdom that is woven with 20<sup>th</sup> century imported cotton, but mentioned by Chief Michael Aṣàrà, an informant he interviewed in 1973 in Ọwọ. In Ọwọ, this costume is referred to as medicine-cloth that is believed to cure diseases and promote healing.

**Plate 9:** *Iyegbe* was believed to be a medicine/healing cloth in Ọwọ Kingdom



**Source:** Robin Poynor: Posted on Owo Kingdom, Facebook, Sep 5, 2022

*Iyegbe* was woven by old women and slaves over a period of nine days and the tradition was that once she finished it, she would die. This was woven in two panels and thereafter conjoined to form a large wrapper, usually wound around the body, while its use was restricted to high chiefs alone. In the note made available to the researcher in August, 2022, on Facebook Messenger, Poynor stated that “*Iyegbe* I saw only once... It was said to be for healing. To me it seemed that imported cotton cloth was used and worked so that some of the surface was open work.” He further described *Iyegbe* as “chenille-like with colored threads and open weaving...” A wrapper of that description was later showed to him by Chief Ojo *Elérewè*, many years ago. However, some informants could not ascertain the authenticity of the existence and use of this fabric, while some believed it was one of the fabrics of Ọwọ Kingdom in the olden days.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, indigenous fabrics in Ọwò Kingdom are diverse and their purposes are not delimited to adornment. Some are believed to possess mystic powers due to the ritualistic proscriptions observed during their weaving as well as in their use and storage. Therefore, the generalisation of all Yoruba indigenous fabrics as Aso-oke, which has come to be associated with fashion, is erroneous. It is therefore recommended that more academic searchlight be focused on distinct fabrics of the various Yoruba communities in order to understand their significance to the sociology of diverse communities. Finally, the integrity of some of these fabrics should be promoted through cultural exhibition during indigenous festivals, while the state government should empower prolific Ọwò weavers to expand their industry through export of their fabrics, capable of being a panacea to poverty alleviation and unemployment.

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