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Dress and Identity in Yorubaland, 1880-1980

Bukola A. Oyeniya

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OBA

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PREFACE

Combining extant literature with archival and archaeological evidence, photo albums and oral interviews, eponymous names and witty sayings, folksongs and participant observation; this study, covering from 1880 to 1980, wrote a history of Yorubaland as seen through dress. Also subsumed in this study was a history of Yorùbá dress, especially its place in the construction of Yorùbá ethno-national identity. Dress, among the Yorùbá, was conceived as an assemblage of modifications and/or supplements to the human body, which included coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other items added to the body as supplements. Also included in this conceptualization were tattoo and facial marks, body painting and decorations, shoes and umbrellas, purses and bags, etc.

Underlying Yorùbá conceptualization of dress was the requirement of being an *Omoluabi*, an ethical category defined as a conglomeration of moral principles such as being lofty in spoken words and respectful, having good mind towards others and being truthful, possessing lofty character and being brave, hardworking and being intelligent, including having a good dress sense. All these formed Yorùbá individual and group identity (Yorùbáness) as well as what Yorùbá dress was all about. To be a Yorùbá man or woman was therefore to dress well and to dress well was to be a Yorùbá man or woman. Understood in this way, Yorùbáness therefore was impossible without Yorùbá dress and Yorùbá dress was impossible without Yorùbáness. From this conceptualization, the function of Yorùbá dress therefore transcended the biological functions of protecting the human body (from the elements) and covering the human body from unsolicited and unwanted visual intrusion to include expressing the existential value of being an *Omoluabi*.

As the study showed, the history of Yorùbá dress is a history of change and continuity. Yorùbá indigenous sartorial culture arose, on the one hand, as a response to the environment in Yorubaland. During this period, bark-clothes developed into thick

cotton-cloth, *Kijipa*. Other sartorial traditions such as ornamental beads and jewelry, facial marks and body arts, etc. played fundamental roles in determining and identifying different categories of Yorùbá men and women, their estates in life, religious and occupational affiliations, as well as social standing. On the other hand, the changes were orchestrated by external influences, in particular, contacts with Islamic/Arabic sartorial culture and later with Christian and European sartorial tradition.

Where comfortable accommodation cannot be ensured, force was deployed. Originally through trade relations and without necessarily seeking to supplant Yorùbá indigenous sartorial tradition, Islam later forced itself – religion and sartorial tradition – on Yorùbá people. The alternative to this was death. Christianity, which started peacefully in Yorubaland in the 1840s, soon began to assert itself; forcing its sartorial tradition on converts. The alternative to this was denial of two important Christian rituals, Baptism and Holy Communion.

Colonialism is something of a paradox. On the one hand, it brought out the differences in the different colonized peoples and, on the other hand, created new layers of differences among them. From 1919, colonial rule in Yorubaland vis-à-vis Nigeria introduced colonial uniforms, thick uniforms originally made for British troops during the First World War. Despite its incommodious nature, especially for wear in the tropics; colonial administration imposed these as official uniforms and dress on different categories of staff in the colonial and native administration. Signs and symbols, colours and epaulets, etc. indicated ranks.

No small reactions followed these developments. To the effect that Euro-Christian sartorial tradition aimed at supplanting Yorùbá sartorial tradition, educated Yorùbá elite rejected it. Islamic sartorial tradition became the sole beneficiary of this fight, as its dress-materials, unlike those of the Euro-Christian sartorial traditions, could also be used to evince the kernel of Yorùbá sartorial tradition – being an *Omoluabi*. What is today regarded as Yorùbá dress is therefore an amalgam that derived from a pristine Yorùbá indigenous dress, upon which Islamic/Arabic and Euro-Christian sartorial traditions constructed their respective dress culture over the years.

As this study showed, although there has been a flowering of studies on Yorùbá people and Yorubaland, little or nothing has been written on Yorùbá dress. Despite its importance in identifying Yorùbá people, previous studies on Yorùbá people and Yorubaland have focused on politics and economy, warfare and diplomacy, gender and culture, among other themes. This study therefore is a pioneering study not just on Yorùbá history using dress as a tool of analysis, but also on Yorùbá dress history.