

Cover Page



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Chapter Three

Yorùbá Dress in Pre-Colonial Period

3.0. Introduction

Having traced the provenance of dress among Yorùbá people in Chapter two, this chapter examines dress use in pre-1800 Yorubaland. By focusing on the pre-colonial period, the chapter specifically isolates Yorùbá indigenous dress culture before contacts either with Islam or Christianity. The succeeding chapters, most especially chapters four and five, examine how indigenous Yorùbá sartorial tradition identified in this chapter yielded place to sartorial hybridity, which is characterized by influences from Islam and Christianity or more precisely Arabs and European sartorial traditions. In these three chapters, emphasis is placed on the role of dress in the construction of individual and group identity of Yorùbá people.

3.1. Dress-Use in Pre-1800 Yorubaland

Describing the dress worn by the former Nigerian president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, at the 2003 G8 meeting of world leaders at Evian, France, Robert Ross noted that, like Prince Abdullah Ibn Abdul Aziz Al Saud who attended the same meeting dressed in (a) *‘flowing Bedouin robes’*, Chief Obasanjo *‘was in equally flowing Yorùbá costume’*. Ross then went further to wonder what a gathering of Obasanjo’s predecessors, for instance the Alaafin of Oyo, would have worn four hundred years before Obasanjo at such a gathering.¹⁷⁴ Although the time of Captain Clapperton’s journey through Yorubaland was not up to four hundred years, Clapperton’s description of *Alaafin* Adolee (Awole)’s dress could, to a large extent, serve as a possible answer to Ross. Clapperton described *Alaafin* Awole’s dress thus:

He was gorgeously arrayed in a scarlet cloak, literally covered with gold lace, and white kerseymere trowsers (sic) similarly embroidered. His hat was turned up in front

¹⁷⁴ Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History*, (Cambridge, 2008), 2.

*with rich band of gold lace, and decorated with a splendid plume of white ostrich feathers, which, waving gracefully over his head, added not a little to the imposing dignity of his appearance!... ..an umbrella was unfurled and held over his head, whilst a dozen of his wives stood round their lord and master with diverse-coloured fans, whose wind did seem to glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool.*¹⁷⁵

In addition to the king's dress, Clapperton's description of the king's representatives was also instructive:

*On his head he wore a cap and feathers, evidently of European manufacture, and he was clad in a scarlet jacket, fluttering in rags, with dirty yellow facings, and loose trousers of faded nankeen – a dress of which he was extravagantly vain.*¹⁷⁶

Clapperton, also describing the King's slaves, noted that they 'wore plain scarlet coats, with white collars and large cocked hats, tastefully trimmed with gold lace, which costly material all cases excessively admire'¹⁷⁷. On the dress culture of the masses, Clapperton went further to state that they were 'neatly dressed in cap, shirt (tobe), and trousers, and very cleanly in their personal appearance'.¹⁷⁸

The descriptions above, among other things, show that dress, in its broadest sense, has a long antiquity in Yorubaland. Although Yorùbá dress, as seen in Clapperton's and Ross' descriptions, derived essentially from different dress cultures, evidence however abounds to ascertain that the Yorùbá had their indigenous dress culture.

Samuel Johnson, writing at the close of the nineteenth century, gave a terse description of the kinds of cloth that were in use during the period. He noted that Yorùbá people, prior to contacts with either the Arabs or Europeans, clothed themselves in

¹⁷⁵ Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition to Africa*, (vol. 1, London, 1830), 46-47.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 53.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 47.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 78.

'a sheet of cloth three yards by two, which is thrown around the body for a covering and passing under the right arm-pit, and enveloping the left shoulder'.¹⁷⁹ R.A. Olaoye, on his part, noted that the description given by Johnson applies primarily to one of the ways through which Yorùbá people used *Kijipa*, which, as he claimed, was one of the products from women's broad looms.

While evidence abound all over Yorubaland attesting to the possibility that the first Yorùbá cotton cloth was *Kijipa*, it must be noted that in Yorubaland, the throwing of cloth around the body and or passing a strip of the same cloth under the arm-pit as described by Johnson, is called *Pipa Aso ni Kaja* (or simply as *Kaja*). *Kaja*, as Chief Onaolapo Shokenu noted, was one form of dress-use known to 'our great grand parents' before the coming of either Islam or Christianity.¹⁸⁰ Chief Elufidiya, speaking on *Kaja*, noted that its use was not gender sensitive, although more men than women used it. In addition, the use of *Kaja*, both by male and female, was not restricted to in-door, or private use, but also used out-door, or for public use. As shall be shown below, some professions (most notably, herbalists and seers), and socio-economic and political office-holders, use *Kaja*.

It must also be asserted that *Kaja*, both by male and female, was used either in private, as a wrapper or cover-cloth (*Aso Ibo'ra*) for warding off cold at night, or in public, as *Aso-Imur'ode*, cloths for important outings or occasions. However, except for herbalists and seers, *Kaja* usage in public arena by male and female usually signifies age and status.¹⁸¹

As Johnson also asserted, an alternative to *Kaja*, in ancient times, was for the male, especially married ones, to wear tailored gowns, vests (*Kukumo*), and a very free and ample kind of trousers called *Sokoto*, which were devoid of any embroidery and made from 'purely native manufacture'.¹⁸² The unmarried male adults also wore tailored cloths.¹⁸³ In the main, male tailored-dress

¹⁷⁹ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorates*, (Lagos, 2001), 110.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Chief Onaolapo Shokenu, Abeokuta, 23 June 2010

¹⁸¹ Interview with Chief Elufidiya, Ile-Ife, 1 June, 2010

¹⁸² Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorates*, (Lagos, 1920), 212.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 122.

comprised of gowns, vests, and trousers, all of which could be made into different styles and forms. Beside *Kukumo*, earlier mentioned, other styles and forms include *Ewu*, *Gbariye*, *Sapara*, *Oyala*, *Dansiki*, *Buba*, *Suliya*, *Dandogo*, *Girike*, and *Agbada*, and so on.

As there are styles and forms of gowns, so also are there different styles and forms of trousers. Knickers (*Sokoto Penpe*), *Bante*, *Digo*, *Ladugbo*, *Aibopo*, *Alongo*, *Kafo*, *Efa*, *Abenugbagada*, *Wondo*, *Agadansi*, *Latan*, *Abidan*, *Sooro*, *Atu*, *Kenbe*, *Kamu*, *Agbantara*, and *Nangudu*. In traditional dress-sense, a man's dress was regarded as incomplete or outdated without a cap. There are different styles and forms of caps: *Adiro*, *Labankada*, *Ikori*, *Abeti-Aja*, and *Fila Onide* are remembered. Hats were also of use in pre-colonial Yorubaland.

Below are some artistic illustrations of pre-colonial Yorùbá caps. This is followed by contemporary expressions or what survived of these caps from the pre-colonial through the colonial and to the present.

Artistic illustration of pre-colonial Yorùbá caps

Abeti-Aja



Adiro-Agbe



Fila Onide



Fila Onide



Adiro-Ode



Ik'Ori



(Sources: C.L. Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yorùbá*, Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press, Plc, 2005, 180)

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when these photographs were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are, oftentimes, lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, these photos aptly illustrate contemporary Yorùbá caps.

Contemporary Yorùbá caps



(I)



(II)



(III)



(IV)



(V)



(VI)

A cross section of Yorùbá Caps

(Sources: Except for Photo (V), which was obtained from President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's campaign programme, other photos are from my personal collections).

As far as evidence can show, females had fewer options in dress than males. Their dress comprised mainly of *Iro* (a wrap-around cloth), *Buba* (a blouse), *Gele* (head-tie/scarf), and *Yeri* (earrings) or *Tobi* (skirt). In addition to the three mentioned above was *Iborun*, a shawl, which was either wrapped around the neck and shoulder or used to cover the head. It must be asserted that the unmarried female could use two *Iro*, a bigger and a smaller one. The bigger one was wrapped tightly around the waist, while the smaller one was wrapped tightly above the breasts.

Captain Clapperton, earlier mentioned, described *Alaafin* Awole thus:

The monarch was richly dressed in a scarlet damask robe, ornamented with coral beads, and short trousers of the same colour with a light blue stripe, made of country cloth; with legs, as far as the knees, were stained red with hennah (sic), and on his feet he wore sandals of red leather. A cap of blue damask, thickly studded with handsome coral

*beads, was on his head; and his neck, arms, and legs, were decorated with large silver rings.*¹⁸⁴

Below are photos of different types of female head-gears (gele). As noted in Chapter One, details such as when these photographs were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are, oftentimes, lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, these photos aptly illustrate contemporary Yorùbá Yorùbá female headgears.

It must be noted that artistic illustrations of pre-colonial head-gears cannot be obtained, hence below are contemporary expressions of Yorùbá female head-gears, which are believed to have survived from the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

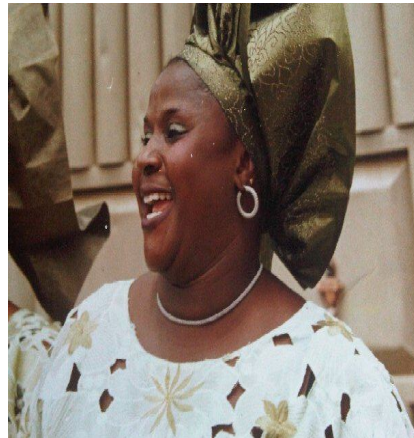
Contemporary Yorùbá female head-gears (Gele)



¹⁸⁴ Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton's*, 195.







A cross-section of contemporary Yorùbá female head-gears
(Sources: Personal collections)

It was noted further that the king's wives spent considerable time in making themselves presentable to the king by employing:

...their time in the adornment of their bodies, and beautifying their teeth and hair, in order to make themselves the more agreeable and fascinating to their imperious master – to whom they sing, in a kind of

*recitative, several times in the day, and whom they fan to sleep at night.*¹⁸⁵

Writing on Yorùbá dress, Clapperton limited his discussion only to cloths. He however noted that the Yorùbá male dress comprised primarily of ‘full trouser’, ‘not lower than the knees’; ‘a short sleeve tobe with large holes for the arms and head’. The above was completed with ‘a fantastically made cloth cap, and leather boots’. Besides noting that all of the above were made from ‘country cloth dyed’ into various colours, he also added that depending on wealth and status, Yorùbá people also made use of ‘red, yellow, and purple silk velvet, which they obtained from Europeans on the coast’. He went further to assert that in other parts of Nigeria that he visited, except in Yorubaland, only the rich and royal wore cloths; other, especially the ‘very poor people and slaves use no other wearing apparel than the skins of goats, sheep, monkeys, and other animals’.¹⁸⁶

Describing Yorùbá dress culture when he visited Alaafin Mansolah, Clapperton noted that:

*A womanish fondness for dress and admiration, and a childish vanity in the most trivial as well as more important concerns, were strikingly visible in the character of every prince we met with in Africa; nor did the monarch of the Yariba (Yorùbá) think these frivolities beneath him, any more than his royal neighbours; but in his case, there was mixed up with this weakness, a certain consciousness of the absurdity of it; which I never observed in the character of any other African whatever. Mansolah only conformed to the whims and fancies of his people, he said, when he attired himself so fancifully; for that they prefer a ruler with a smart and gorgeous exterior, even if he happened to be the most odious tyrant on the face of the earth, to a prince meanly dressed, although he were endowed with every amiable quality.*¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 197.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 212-213.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 111-112.



Indigenous Yorùbá Female Dress
(Source: www.delcampe.net)

Could the use of these items signal either the beginning or the peak of Yorùbá sartorial borrowing from European? This might be difficult to ascertain!

As far as evidence can show, just as the Yorùbá have greetings for all manners of circumstances, so also they have dresses for all manners of purposes, professions, times, and seasons. Although Samuel Johnson claimed that some of these styles and forms of dress were of Arabian origin, they however were in use all over Yorubaland before the coming of Islam. His explanation was that the Yorùbá actually migrated from somewhere in the East.¹⁸⁸ In all, male and female cloths were believed to have been made of *Kijipa*. All these styles and forms of gowns, blouses, trousers, wrappers, shawls, and caps were indigenous to the Yorùbá and, probably, were in use everywhere in Yorubaland before contacts with the Arabians, Christians and British Imperialists.

Although the above concerns dress culture generally, the wearing or using of cloth follows age and position. Johnson noted that in the pristine times, the Yorùbá dressed scantily, with boys and girls below age eight walking around “*in puris naturalibus*”.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Samuel Johnson, *The History*, 110.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 100.

From age eight to puberty; boys and girls used aprons to cover the lower parts of their body, while the girls leave their breasts bare. The male apron, as noted above, is called *Bante* while the female apron is called *Tobi*. In the *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition in Africa*, Richard Lander described the *Alaafin's* wives as 'half-dressed ladies', obviously and certainly not without covering their bosoms.¹⁹⁰ Not minding Johnson's sweeping generalization that boys and girls walked around naked, except for *Bante* and *Tobi* as their only items of cloth, *Bante* and *Tobi* are, in fact, work and play (casual) cloth. Other cloths used by females during this time include *Ilabiru* and *Yeri*, both were forms of skirts. There were two types of *Yeri*: the long and the short ones, with the long ones used as play cloth. The long one was customarily drawn-up high enough so as to cover the upper body. It however terminated a little above the breast. The short one was primarily worn under *Aso Imu r'Ode*.

For as long as we have information, from puberty to marriage, while the male may dress scantily, wearing, for the most part, their *Bante* and *Aso Ise*, except during a ceremony or an outing; the female used the long *Yeri*, which, depending on weather condition, may be drawn to cover, or not, the torso. This scanty dress culture, which Johnson inadvertently attributed to 'extreme poverty of the people in those early times',¹⁹¹ was more of an environmentally induced culture than extreme poverty, as the rich and the powerful in Yorubaland during this period also dressed in the same manner.¹⁹² More over, it can be argued that the pervasive use of *Aso Ise*, *Aso Isere*, and *Aso Iwole* rather than *Aso Imurode* owes solely to the fact that Yorubaland, being an agrarian society, was not as clean as today's urban, office, and clean environment. The people worked and lived on the farm. The following Yorùbá adage negates the position that extreme poverty necessitated scanty dressing among the Yorùbá: "*Ibere osi, bi oloro ni ri; ti mu won wo Aso ile r'oko*" (Poverty compels a poor man to wear his best to the farm). When this is applied to pre-eighteenth century Yorubaland, it could be argued that the nature

¹⁹⁰ Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton's*, 191.

¹⁹¹ Samuel Johnson, *The History*, 100.

¹⁹² Interview with Baba Fatimoh, Sagamu, 12 June 2010.

of work or job at hand would necessarily determine what manner of cloth one wears. Every profession in Yorubaland has its own work-cloth; with farming being the predominant occupation, work mostly entailed going to the farm unlike work in the present day in an urban setting which involves going to an office. This requires clean formal clothes unlike work on the farm which required cloths that did not have to be the best. So, it could not have been poverty, as Johnson claimed.

It is important to state that evidence showed that all Yorùbá cloths were dyed in indigo. Styles and fashion were reflected in the depth and variance of the dye used.

Beside cloth and clothing tradition, other forms of dress in Yorubaland includes scarification, tattooing, and care of the head, which of course includes barbing; care of ear and eye-care; beautifying or ornamenting the neck, waists, and hands.

Evidence showed that there were, at least, five forms of body scarification and tattooing in Yorubaland before contacts with either the Arab/Muslims or the Europeans. These were facial marking (*Ila-Oju*), stomach or torso marking (*Ila-Inu*), incision (*Gbere*), tattooing (*Soju*), the use of antimony (*tiiro*), and the use of henna (*lile-laali*). In most literature, circumcision was mentioned as part of body scarification and tattooing. While this might be misleading, as circumcision has its ritual significance among Yorùbá people, which cannot be grouped together with body beautification. In fact, one could get his head broken for calling another boy an *alatoto* – an uncircumcised! Notwithstanding this, circumcision is left out in this discussion because it relates more to health and hygiene as well as being private to individuals and cannot be known simply by seeing or looking at an individual.

Torso scarification, although similar to tattoo has been described in some literature as a type of tattoo; however, torso scarification involved cutting or making an incision into the skin, which when it heals, leaves behind a permanent scar. Tattoo's impermanency, therefore, makes it different from torso marking. Importantly, it must be asserted that, of the five mentioned forms of body marking, facial marking and torso marking symbolize ethnic identity while incision, tattooing, and the use of henna are

matters of fashion and therefore could overlap in their various designs.

There are different types of facial marks: *Keke*, *Gombo*, *Pele*, *Abaja*, *Baramu*, *Ture*, *Mande*, *Jamgbadi*, and so on. This popular saying serves to illustrate the pervasiveness of facial marks among the Yorùbá: “*Pele oju kan l’ o ko; Abaja oju kan l’ o bu, E ko r’aye oni Gombo!*” (He was marked *Pele* on one cheek and *Abaja* on the other; what a life for them that have *Gombo*!)

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when the photograph below was taken, where it was taken, who took it and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, the photo aptly illustrates contemporary Yorùbá facial marks.



**In this picture, the two women and the man in the front row
have facial marks**

(Sources: Personal collections)

As evidence showed, there were two basic classifications of Yorùbá facial marks: *Abaja*, which predominated in Oyo and all other communities under Old-Oyo’s socio-cultural and political influences, and *Pele*, which originally began as a lone-some mark and predominated in eastern Yorubaland. *Pele*, as shall be shown in the next chapter, has undergone enormous changes with the

incoming and influence of Islam on Yorubaland. From the above, it could be argued that except for Ile-Ife where facial marking was discontinued between the tenth and eighteenth centuries, Yorubaland and Yorùbá people could be divided into either Abaja axis or Pele axis, with Abaja axis stretching from Old-Oyo towards the coast and Pele axis stretching from the eastern direction towards Benin Kingdom. Notwithstanding these two broad classifications, various types of facial marking existed in different parts of Yorubaland. A few of these are examined below.

Abaja, ostensibly the most important and famous facial marking among the Yorùbá, was exclusively reserved for the Oyo royal family and a few of the chiefs, especially the *Basorun*. *Abaja*, contrary to Johnson who maintained that *Abaja* consists of three or four parallel lines, describes between six and twelve geometrical lines placed either vertically or horizontally on the two cheeks. *Abaja* are of four kinds: *Abaja Omo Oba*, *Abaja Basorun*, *Abaja Olowu* and *Abaja Oro*. Of these four, *Abaja Omo Oba*, which contains six geometrical lines cut horizontally into the two cheeks, remains the most famous. Unlike *Abaja Omo Oba*, *Abaja Basorun* contains three horizontal lines on the right cheek and four vertical lines on the left cheek. *Abaja Olowu*, also known as *Abaja Mefa*, contains on each of the cheek, three geometrical lines placed horizontally on a set of three vertical geometrical lines.

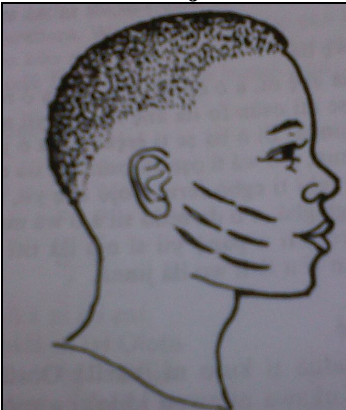
Abaja Oro (vertical *Abaja*), as the name implies, is a set of three perpendicular lines that is set in an upright position and cut into the two cheeks. This was common among the Egba people and differed from *Pele* only in length. While *Pele* is short, *Abaja Oro* is longer. While *Abaja Omo Oba* and *Abaja Basorun* were popular in Oyo, *Abaja Olowu* and *Abaja Oro* applied only to the Egba people of Abeokuta, Egbado, Owu and their environs. *Abaja Omo Oba* is also called *Mefa-Mefa* or *Mefa-Ibule*, which describes both the number (six) and the horizontal positioning of the six geometrical lines. In addition to these three types of *Abaja* are four others: *mejo-mejo*, *merin-merin*, *merin pelu Baramu*, *mokanla-mokanla* and *meje-meje*. These forms of *Abaja* were commonplace in eastern and western Yorubaland, especially in places like Ofa, Ilorin, Ajase-Ipo, and so on. Although all these forms of *Abaja* were used by many families in Yorubaland, *Abaja Omo Oba* was

the most respected because of its being Oyo royal family's facial marks.

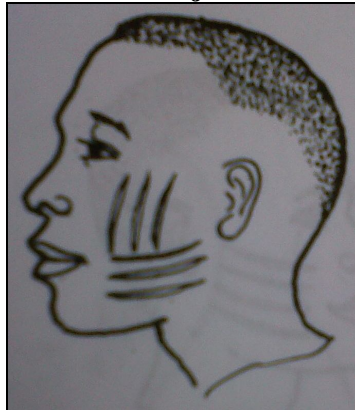
Although *Abaja Omo Oba* was also given to slaves born in the royal household, it must be however stated that three broad marks, called *Eyeo*, were cut, both on the arms and thighs, of the sons and daughters of the *Alaafin* in order to differentiate them from others in the royal family. Only those with *Abaja Omo Oba* and *Eyeo* could ascend the throne. It must be noted that all the *Alaafins* that have ruled Oyo have both the *Eyeo* and *Abaja* facial mark. The above totally differs from Olatunji Ojo's claim that even slaves born in the royal families also receive *Eyeo*.¹⁹³

Below are artistic illustrations of pre-colonial Yorùbá facial marks. Although the use of facial marks has declined considerably in contemporary Yorubaland, it must be noted that in most rural areas, the practice is still in place. Therefore, following the artistic illustrations are contemporary expressions of facial marks.

Abaja Omo Oba

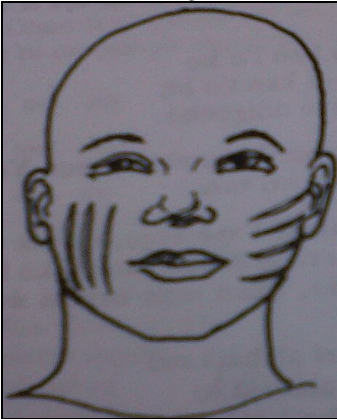


Abaja Olowu

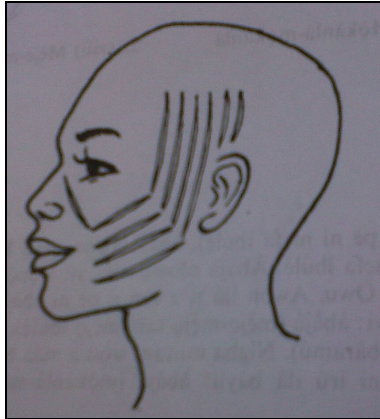


¹⁹³ Olatunji Ojo, 'Beyond diversity: women, scarification, and Yorùbá identity', *History in Africa*, 35:1 (2008), 369.

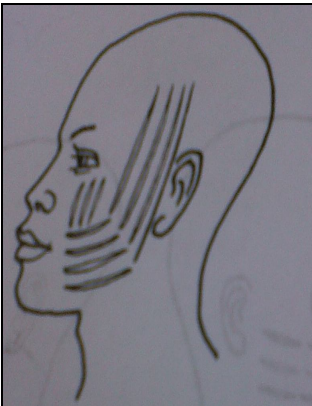
Abaja Basorun



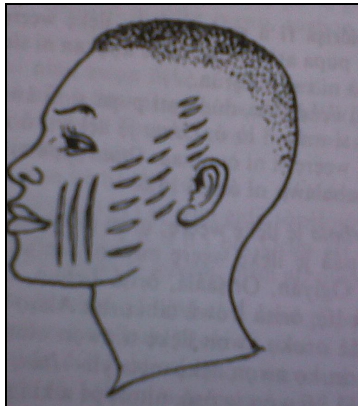
Gombo Pelu Baramu



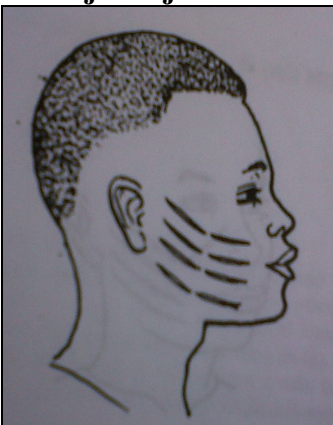
Gombo



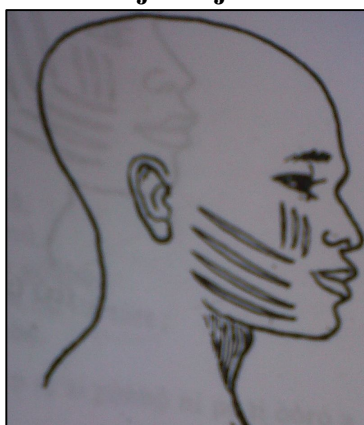
Keke



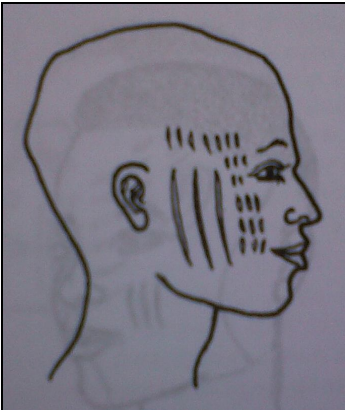
Mejo Mejo



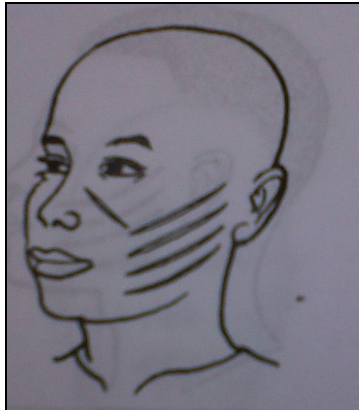
Meje Meje



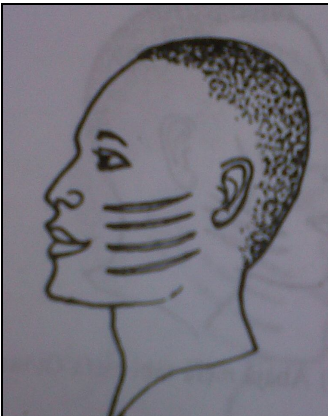
Ture



Merin Pelu Baramu



Merin Merin



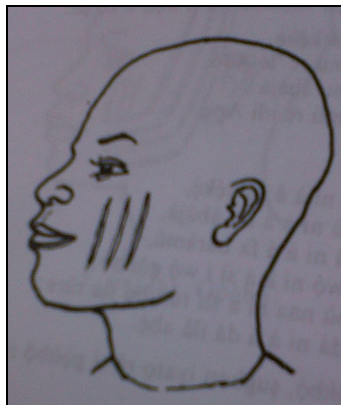
Mokanla-Mokanla



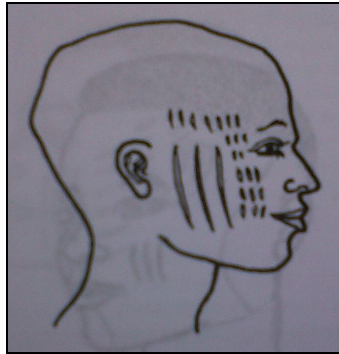
Pele Egba



Pele



Ture



Sources: C.L. Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yorùbá*, Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press, Plc, 2005, 180.

The following are contemporary expressions of Yorùbá facial marks. As noted in Chapter One, details such as when these photographs were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are, for the most part, lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, these photos aptly illustrate contemporary Yorùbá facial marks. In addition to the above, it must be noted that despite change, the shapes, sizes and patterns of facial marks remained the same over the years.

A cross section of Yorùbá facial marks



(I)



(II)



(III)

(Sources: Photo (I) Oba Lamidi Adeyemi, the Alaafin of Oyo and (II) Late Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola, Premier Western Region were obtained from an almanac from the Alaafin of Oyo's palace, while photo (III) Mr. Adediwura Kabiru, a friend, is from my personal collections).

Besides *Abaja*, there was also *Keke* and *Gombo*. These are four or five perpendicular and horizontal lines placed at an angle on both cheeks; the design of which fills the entire human cheeks. There were three types of *Gombo*: *Gombo*; *Gombo and Towoboju*; and *Gombo and Baramu*. The first comprises of four horizontal lines, serving as base, and four vertical lines that appear as continuation of the horizontal lines that break at a right angle, projecting vertically a little close to the ear-lobes. Three more vertical lines are cut into the bumps linking the nose with the eyes. The second differs only in the addition of two vertical, but smaller geometrical lines above the ear-lobes that are parallel to the original four lines. The third has, in addition to the second and in place of the three vertical lines on the bumps linking the nose with the eyes, as described in the first, a lonesome parallel projection that terminates on the ridge of the nose.

Keke, on the other hand, differs markedly from *Gombo*, as it comprised of three long vertical lines, placed beside fifteen horizontal lines. Altogether, eighteen lines were cut into each cheek. Given the nature of these facial marks, *Gombo* and *Keke*, many Yorùbá people were wont to taunt those who have them “*Mo sa Keke, mo mu re ‘le Ado; Mo bu Abaja, mo mu re idi Ape*” (Keke

is synonymous with Ado people and Abaja, with Idi Ape people).¹⁹⁴

In addition to the above, there was also *Mande* and *Jamgbadi*, both being exclusively used by non-Yorùbá who had naturalized among the Yorùbá. Two other facial marks of importance were *Pele* and *Ture*. Discussions about these two facial marks would be taken up in the next Chapter, as they are tied to Islamic influence on Yorùbá dress culture.

It must be noted that the above is not the totality of facial markings in Yorubaland, but the most important ones. In fact, variations of the above abound in different parts of Yorubaland. Although both males and females were given facial marks, facial mark is nevertheless patrilineal, as children were given facial marks that were peculiar to their fathers. By implication, married women are likely to have facial marks that are different from the rest of the family. However, where royal marriages are involved, two patterns of facial markings ultimately evolved. Where marriage involved a royal family and family of either a warrior or a powerful man, the facial marks of the royal family were cut into one cheek and that of the husband was cut into the other cheek of children from such marriages. Where royal marriage involves the commoners, it is the paternal facial mark that was given to the “fruits” of such marriages. When this example happens (i.e. where royal marriage involves the commoners), the Yorùbá are wont to say “*Jemureke! Olowo pade omo olola*” (Stop press! the powerful have collided with the royal).

For as long as we have information, facial marking among pre-eighteenth century Yorùbá people was comparable only to a national passport, a kind of insignia, a badge of identity, or a uniform for all individuals of the same group, village or lineage and therefore differed markedly from one community, group, and sub-ethnic group to another.¹⁹⁵ As citizenship badge, facial marking was given either between ages six and seven as a signifier of membership of a particular family, lineage and community or given to adult non-members of a particular family as a symbol or a mark of naturalization into a particular family, lineage, and town.

¹⁹⁴ Idi Ape, is the part of Oyo where the Alaafins are buried.

¹⁹⁵ Olatunji Ojo, ‘Beyond diversity, 368.

Irrespective of what time it was given, uniqueness and differences were added to it through length, positioning, and numbers of strokes. Beauty was added to it by adding pigment to the scarification's opening to give it a shining black colour and, invariably, to translate a certain ethno-political object into a thing of fashion and beauty. As noted above, facial marks differed from community to community, group to group, and family to family. It must be added that beautification of markings through pigmentation also reflects wealth, beauty, and status, as the following Yorùbá folksong suggests: *Ko r'Owo ko 'la; O gbe bembe eke R'Oshogbo* (He cannot afford the cost of procuring marks, he therefore went plain-faced to Oshogbo).

In general terms, body markings (especially facial), were strong citizenship and identity markers. And, as already noted, when given to adults, especially plain-faced adults from another land, not Yorubaland, or those who missed out on the initial conferment of citizenship or slaves; it allowed for the incorporation of strangers or foreigners into a family, a lineage, and a community. The cases below help to illustrate the saliency of body marking, as it related to identity in pre-eighteenth century Yorubaland.

On 18th March 1898, one Okolu, an Ijesha man, accused Otunba of Italemo ward, in Ondo, of seizing and enslaving his sister, Osun, and his niece – mother and daughter. Osun and her daughter had been enslaved by the Ikale in 1894 and had, in 1895, escaped and fled from their master, but as they headed towards Ilesha Otunba seized them. As the mother claimed, Otunba forced her to become his wife, hoe a farm, and gave her daughter one deep, bold-line (Ondo facial markings) on each cheek. At the trial, Otunba and his witness, Itoyimaki, denied only the enslavement charge, but proudly asserted that he prevented Osun and her daughter from being taken away as slaves by Soba, another slave dealer, and also that he took Osun as his wife and the daughter was given the Ondo mark to bestow on her Ondo identity.¹⁹⁶ Obviously, Otunba was an Ondo man. While it must be admitted that the event took place in the nineteenth century, it however

¹⁹⁶ Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan (NAI), Ondo Division 8/1, Albert Erhardt, *Journal*, 18 and 22 March 1898.

reflected the general trend of things, especially the place of marriages, identity, and aesthetics in ethnic configurations across pre-colonial Yorubaland.

Another example is the case of Osundina, a 1892 baptismal candidate in Ondo whose mother had been enslaved at Ile-Ife, where Osundina was born. Because he was born far away from Ondo, he was plain-faced as a result of his stay at Ile-Ife. With the end of the Yorùbá civil war and the eventual incorporation of Yorubaland into the vortex of colonialism in 1893, domestic or internal slavery was abolished and many who had been enslaved in different parts of Yorubaland and Nigeria became free, and many returned home, Osundina's mother returned to Ondo, but Osundina stayed behind at Ile-Ife.

When in 1894, Osundina rejoined her mother in Ondo; he was daily treated as a slave and not as an Ondo citizen for the simple fact that he had no facial mark. So, to "*remove the scandal that he is a slave*", Osundina was given the Ondo facial mark.¹⁹⁷ It must be asserted that Osundina's plain face symbolized his 'alien' origin and reduced him to the status of only a slave.

Owing to widespread displacement and dislocation of peoples as a result of the Yorùbá civil war, peoples – refugees, slaves, and defeated soldiers – converged on Ibadan, Ijaye, and Abeokuta to continue the war, especially to curb the menace of the Fulani Jihadists from Ilorin, at another theatre of war. This development brought about the mixing of peoples from different families, lineages, and communities into Ibadan. This medley or motley of peoples formed the nucleus of the Ibadan army. One of the implications of this was that facial markings would not serve to identify and differentiate the various individual soldiers. At the campaign of Osogbo where Ibadan recorded a resounding victory over the Jihadists in 1843 and later in 1878 at Ikirun where another Ibadan victory was also recorded, Ibadan had to invent a password or a code, which was known only to the soldiers involved in the civil war and not to any other person, even if they have the same

¹⁹⁷ Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan (NAI), Phillips 3/5, *Names of Baptismal Candidates, Ondo, 1892*. See also; Paul Lovejoy, "Scarification and the Loss of History in the African Diaspora," being text of a paper presented at York University, Toronto, (7 July, 2005), 14.

facial marks as the Ibadan warriors. When there is the need to differentiate between the real Ibadan soldier from a 'suspicious' character who might want to infiltrate the Ibadan camp for purposes of attacking or escaping with the Ibadan soldiers, the question asked was "*Elo ni owo Odo?*", which means 'How much is the fare to cross the river?'. The invention of this code was strictly tied to what the Ibadan warlords paid to ferrymen who brought Ibadan soldiers across the Osun River. It was therefore impossible for anybody not involved in the campaign to know that the Ibadan warlords paid two thousand cowries to the ferrymen.

The import of the above is that the mixing of people occasioned by the nineteenth century conflict-induced displacement rendered identity or citizenship based on facial marking difficult for the Ibadan and, one can guess, for most communities that received displaced Yorùbá peoples during the period. Therefore the Ibadan warlords had to issue a special password known only to the soldiers involved with specific campaign. It must also be noted that Ibadan, owing to its policy of assimilating and integrating slaves and foreigners into its city during this period, made it a kind of melting pot where facial marking, as a symbol of citizenship, was not recognized.

On the use of facial marking to confer citizenship by naturalization, the example of the Egba nobles is illuminating. Rev. James Johnson of the Christian Missionary Society recorded widespread practice of adoption and outright purchase (for the purpose of adoption) of thousands of child slaves by rich and childless Egba nobles and chiefs immediately peace was reinstalled in Yorubaland. A similar situation was reported of rich and childless Owo nobles and chiefs. In the case of the Egbas, it must be noted that the practice was for each rich and childless Egba noble and chief to give such an adopted child the facial mark of his or her family. In the case of Owo, David O. Asabia and J.O. Adegbesan argued that the prevalence of Ijesha facial marks in Owo towns was as a result of sexual liaisons between Ijesha soldiers and Owo women following a decade of Ijesha military campaigns in northeastern Yorubaland in the 1870s. Invariably, this evidence points to command sex or sex-for-safety problem, which is common, even, in modern wars and conflicts.

However, these adopted children, in as far as they bore the facial marks of their new families, lineages, and communities, were bestowed with the same status as given to home-born slaves. They also enjoyed fairly good treatment, as they could own properties in their own right; a leverage that non-home-born slaves did not enjoy.¹⁹⁸

As a badge of citizenship, scarification imposed great liability on the various Yorùbá peoples during the nineteenth century Yorùbá civil wars. As noted by Rev Richard Henry Stone, the Baptist Pastor of Abeokuta between 1859 and 1861 who introduced and mandated that all Yorùbá converts must wear European dress, noted that facial marking, owing to its visibility and ease of identification of where the wearer was from, made it:

*...impossible for strangers to conceal their identity and slaves rarely escape to the interior. The fugitive is compelled to follow the roads leading through the towns and the gatekeepers recognize them by their face marks and their scanty outfit, and they are captured and returned to their masters...Gatekeepers are thoroughly posted in this kind of lore and they know the nationality of every one passing through their gates.*¹⁹⁹

It must be noted that Rev. Stone, who served in Yorubaland during the nineteenth century Yorùbá civil war era, compiled an eye-witness account of Yorùbá cultures and customs as well as what he witnessed in Yorubaland during the late 1850s and again during the first years of the American Civil War. He was an intelligent, self-reflective, and reliable observer, making his works important sources of information on Yorùbá society before the intervention of European colonialism. In *Africa's Forest and Jungle* is a rare account of West African culture, made all the more complete by the additional journal entries, letters, and photographs collected in this edition. In addition to this negative effect of facial marking noted by Stone, facial marking was also used as a form of

¹⁹⁸ Olatunji Ojo, 'Beyond diversity', 370.

¹⁹⁹ Richard Henry Stone and Betty Finklea Florey, *In Africa's Forest and Jungle: Six Years Among the Yorùbás*, USA: Religion and American Culture, 2009, 30-31.

punishment not only for erring slaves, as the case of *Alaafin* Sango, noted in Chapter Two, demonstrates, but also to punish warriors, as the example of Chief Ogedengbe, the famous Ijesha warrior, illustrates. Ogedengbe, who was captured by the Ibadan forces at about 1860, was accused of violating his oath not to attack Ibadan warriors after the truce of Iperu. When he was captured in 1860 by the Ibadan, Chief Ogunmola of Ibadan ordered that Ogedengbe be given rough facial marks, which formed a broad patch and gave him an appearance of a Bunu man, which many writers noted when they met him in the 1880s.²⁰⁰ With this branding, which can never be erased, Ogedengbe quit being a native of Ijeshaland, and was looked upon as a ‘*mark of scorn*’. He was expected to die; unpitied and unknown in a foreign land.²⁰¹

Invariably, scarification, especially when it was ‘meted’ out as a form of punishment, became some kind of a tracking device worn by all and through which, depending on who captured whom, friends were differentiated from foes. When this happened, Olatunji Ojo argued, the punishment amounted to disenfranchisement of the individuals concerned. In the case of Ogedengbe, it would therefore mean that Ogedengbe, although not an Ibadan man and could therefore not be disenfranchised by Ogunmola’s action, but had his “citizen’s passport” defaced or re-branded from being a Yorùbá man of Ijesha extraction to that of a Bunu man.

In addition to the above, Clapperton described that facial markings and tattooing were also used to punish criminals and offenders. When a Yorùbá person perpetrated a crime, the tattoo mark of his nation was so crossed by other incisions, inflicted upon him by the ministers of justice that it became utterly undistinguishable, and the impression of another people was substituted on the other side of the face in its stead. With this brand, which can never be erased, the offender was disenfranchised and must therefore quit his native country, as he was constantly looked upon even by a toddler as ‘*a mark of scorn*’.

²⁰⁰ Johnson, *The History*, 377. Among other writers who reported Ogedengbe’s rough patch and its contorted identity is Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton’s*, 217.

²⁰¹ Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton’s*, 217.

In most cases, offenders, thus treated, normally leave their communities, as their immediate family members usually reject them out of shame. They therefore wandered to another, but far communities where they could not be traced and lived quietly till they died; unpitied and unknown.²⁰²

As already noted, not all Yorùbá people had facial marks. The predominance of facial marking waned considerably during the nineteenth century Yorùbá civil wars, as many suffered untold hardships during the wars. From the 1850s, the number of plain-faced Yorùbá people increased, as the end of the war made certain ethnic identity only fashionable. Social change occasioned by British Imperial rule in Yorubaland reduced the allure of facial marking, as being plain-faced became synonymous with modernity, civilization and Christianity; while to wear facial marks was regarded as being conservative, backward, and encrusted in the past.

As evidence showed, tattooing (*Ara-fifin*), among the Yorùbá, was for aesthetics and health reasons. Incisions of different kinds were common among the Yorùbá and health care involved not just the oral use of herbs of different kinds to cure diseases, but also the rubbing of concoctions of different kinds into incisions cut into the body with sharp objects. Incision use varied widely with class, age, gender, and fashion.

Customarily, as part of the initiation rites of kings and chiefs in Yorubaland, hundreds of incisions were cut into the head, arms, body, and so on of kings and chiefs and herbal concoctions were rubbed into the open wounds for the veins to drain and absorb the vital ingredients in the concoctions. During the installation of the *Are-Ona-Kakanfo*, the Field Marshal of the Oyo army, 201 incisions were said to have been cut into the head of the candidate and charms of different kinds were rubbed into the open wounds to make him fearless, courageous and impervious to iron weaponry and bullets.

Olatunji, earlier cited, described the scars of the wounds from these numerous incisions as '*living symbols*' and also noted that tattoos, citing Landers and Peter C Lloyd, that were strictly

²⁰² Ibid, 217.

tied to fashion moved with time based on generational and fashion preferences.²⁰³

Cutting and plaiting of human hair, another items of dress in Yorubaland, are both for identity and aesthetics. In fact, both could be regarded as forms of care of the head. However, the focus here would be limited to identity and aesthetics. Johnson, among others, argued that the Yorùbá people always “*shaved or have a strip of hair running from the forehead to the occiput along the top of the head..., which is sometimes made into circular patches*”²⁰⁴. This description, it must be emphasized, is too simplistic and regionally specific to be applicable to the entire Yorùbá people about whom Johnson claimed to have written. For instance, many years before Samuel Johnson, Clapperton noted that among the Yorùbá, the king’s wives were distinguished by having their hair cut and shaved into a number of patches, like the ace of diamonds, but larger; and that of the wives of the humbler classes was cut entirely off, leaving the head as bald and bright as a barber’s basin.²⁰⁵

It was customary in Yorubaland to shave the heads of children clean, say from a day old to age 8. This was mainly for hygiene sake. Besides children, aged people also shave their heads clean. Logically, it could be reasoned that this deals with beauty, as, for the most part, their hairs are either grey or they are partly bald. Beside these classes of people, it was not customary, as Johnson had erroneously stated, for the Yorùbá to shave their hairs. However, it must be noted that of all groups in Yorubaland, the people of Ile-Ife were notable for shaving their heads. As the following praise-names (*Oriki*) of the Ife people clearly shows, if at all it was customary for any group in Yorubaland to shave their hair, it is most probable that the group was Ile-Ife:

Omo Olu Ife Ooni,
Omo bante Jogina,
L’omu Ife Ooni wumi,
*Ori fífa kodoro l’ o mu ibe su mi!*²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Olatunji Ojo, ‘Beyond diversity’, 367.

²⁰⁴ Johnson, *The History*, 101.

²⁰⁵ Richard Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton’s*, 219.

²⁰⁶ Adeoye C.L., *Asa ati Ise Yoruba*, (Ibadan, 2005), 163.

(Worthy children of Ife Ooni,
Worthy Jogina Apron wearers,
This endears Ife Ooni to me,
I am, however, repelled by their head-shaving.)

Omo oju r'abe sa,
Omo bante Jogina,
L'o mu Ife wu mi
Omo ori kodoro
*L'o mu be su mi!*²⁰⁷

(Worthy children devoid of facial marks,
Worthy Jogina Apron wearers,
This endears Ife Ooni to me,
Worthy Head-shaving children,
However, that repels me!)

The youths, for different reasons, barbered their hair into different hairstyles most notably *Aaso*, *Fi fa'ri Apakan*, *Osu Dida*, *Jongori*, and so on for the males. As shall be shown shortly, religions and professions also had their peculiar hairstyles.

From puberty, a growing male child could barb his hair into either *Jongori* or *Aaso*. *Jongori*, barbered even today, was mainly for children and young adults. To barb *Jongori*, the entire head, except for the middle region from the front to back, was shaved clean. The middle region was however kept short. This style, like others, was simply for aesthetics. *Aaso*, it must be noted, was of two types: *Aaso ewa* or Ordinary *Aaso* and *Aaso Oluode*. The ordinary *Aaso*, which differs markedly from that of the *Oluode*, was the style for boys from the age of puberty. All parts of the head were shaved clean, except for the crown of the head, where there are patches of hair – one to the front, another in the middle and the last towards the back; thereby making the head look like it was harbouring three moons on a clear sky.

Aaso Oluode differed markedly from the ordinary *Aaso* in terms of number and the location of the *Aaso*. Rather than three

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 176.

hair-patches, *Aaso Oluode* has just one mould and, rather at the crown of the head, it was situated a little to the side of the head and is usually left to grow longer, while efforts were made to keep other parts of the head bare. *Aaso Oluode* was an exclusive preserve of the head-hunter of a town or city. To be made an Oluode, such a hunter needed not be the oldest hunter in the group, but mainly the most powerful, the boldest and such a man with demonstrable quality of having the most potent charms. Such a man was not only saddled with the responsibility of ensuring internal peace, but also to lead others in battle, in case of external aggression.

A little different from *Aaso Oluode* were *Osu Dida* and *Ere*. *Osu Dida* was religious in character. The two deities (*Orisa*), Sango and Sanponna, insisted that their votaries and, in special instances, their worshipers should “*da Osu*” or barb their hairs in *Osu* style. Outside these two categories, it was customary for the Mogba family members to appoint an *Ad’Osu* (Osu appointee) who not only presided over religious worships, but also served as a chief representing the Mogba family in the local administration of the community.

Herbalists and diviners can also mandate individuals, especially when plagued by incessant infant mortality, who were not from Mogba family to sacrifice to Sango or to pledge their wards and children to Sango so as to prevent continual and untimely decimation of their children and wards. In such situations, the children’s hairs were cut into *Osu* (*won da Osu*). Also where thunderbolt struck or affected a household, the people must appoint a person who would *d’Osu* in order to appease Sango or Sanponna.

Another hair-style was *Fi fa’ri Apakan*. Of all hairstyles in Yorubaland, this was peculiar to two groups of people: the *Ilari* and *Aagberi* (or *Iragberi*) people. The Ilaris were the Oba’s representatives and by shaving one side of their head, they were easily recognizable, especially as they normally wear no cap. The Ilaris were accorded the same respect as the king because they represented the king. It must be noted that not all kings in Yorubaland had Ilaris, but the great ones like the *Alaafin* of Oyo. So, for the Ilaris, their peculiar hairstyle was a mark of identity and status not for aesthetics.

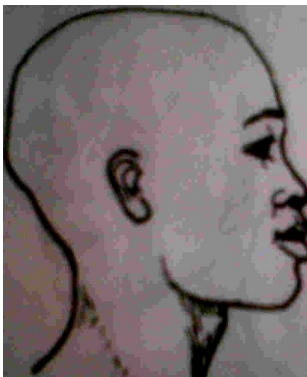
Aagberi people are a group in Yorubaland, who were said to be related to *Aresa*, one of the ancient kings of lore. Unlike the *Ilari*s, the representatives and slaves of the *Aagberi* people could cut their hairs in any form, but not *Fi fa'ri Apakan*, which was exclusive to the bonafide *Aagberi* people themselves. While for the *Aagberi*, a bit of ritual was involved to *fa'ri Apakan*, the case of the *Ilari* was completely secular.

Similar to *Aaso Oluode* was *Ere*. Like *Osu*, *Ere* also had religious connotations, as it was exclusive to *Esu*, the deity of opening and closing doors; intersections, etc., which symbolized human choice; votaries and worshipers. Unlike *Aaso* and *Osu*, *Ere* was usually at the back of the head. During the offering of sacrifices and other forms of *Esu* worship, it was the *Ad'Ere* i.e. those votaries and worshipers who barbered the *Ere* hairstyle, that led the procession.

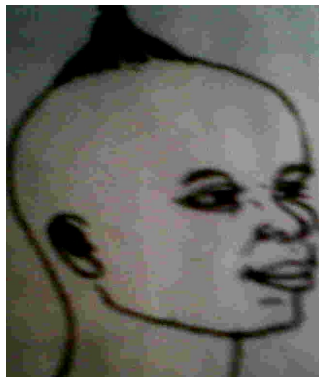
Just as clean-shaven head was common, so also was bushy hair. *Kannankanbu*, as this was known among the Yorùbá people, described the art of leaving the hair uncut and patterned a little stylishly along the sides to the ears. When *Kannankanbu* grows so long as to link up with the beard, it was considered as the height of filthiness.

Below are some artistic illustrations of the various barbing or hair styles in pre-eighteenth century Yorubaland.

Afari Kodoro



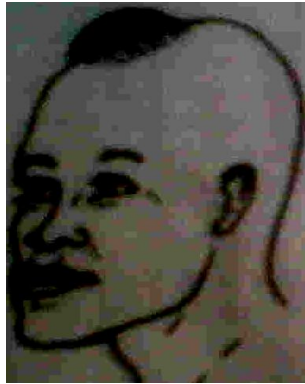
Aso Oluode



Afari-Apa ‘Kan



Osu Dida



Hair styles in pre-eighteenth century Yorubaland

(Sources: C.L. Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yorùbá*, Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press, Plc, 2005, 180).

On the other hand, the females, from birth till about age eight, also kept clean-shaven heads. It must be noted that shaving and barbing of hairs were not common for females in Yorubaland. They were usually reserved for males. Rather than shaving and barbing, as the females grow and mature, say from age 8 and above, they either plaited or weaved their hairs into different forms or styles such as *Kolese*, *Ipako Elede*, *Suku*, *Moremi*, *Ogun Pari*, *Layipo*, *Koju-S’oko*, *Kehin-S’oko*, *Onile Gogoro*, and so on.²⁰⁸ Johnson, like Adeoye and Fadipe, confirmed that between age 8 and 15, females could do just anything with their hairs. However, from the age of marriage, females adopted other forms of aesthetic and ornamental hairstyles.²⁰⁹

On barbing, facial markings, and other dress forms, Stone noted that:

*...woolly heads are never seen among the men, who shave not only the face, but also the head and even the eyebrows and nostrils. Some leave a strip of hair from the forehead over the head to the back of the neck. Others leave little patches as marks of devotion to some particular deity.*²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 164-174.

²⁰⁹ Samuel Johnson, *The History*, 101.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 30.

Below are artistic illustrations of pre-colonial Yorùbá female hair styles. Although modern hair styles have displaced this pre-colonial hair styles, the culture still remains, most especially in the rural areas. Following the artistic illustrations are contemporary expressions of Yorùbá female hair styles.

Kolese



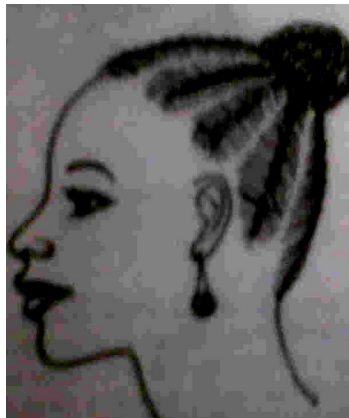
Osu Dida



Ipako Elede



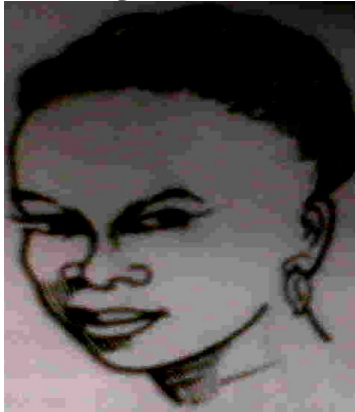
Suku



Moremi Ajansoro



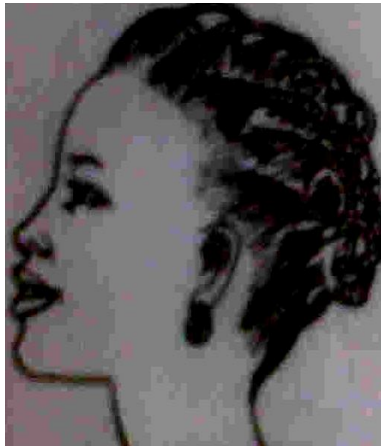
Ogun Pari



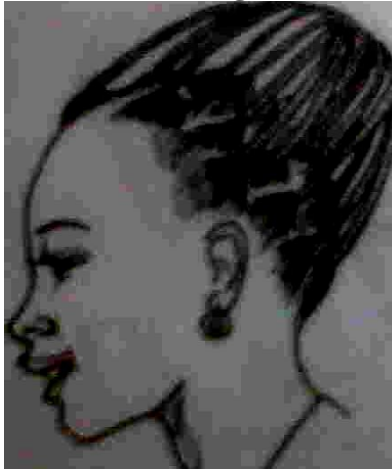
Layipo



Kehin S'Oko



Onile Gogoro

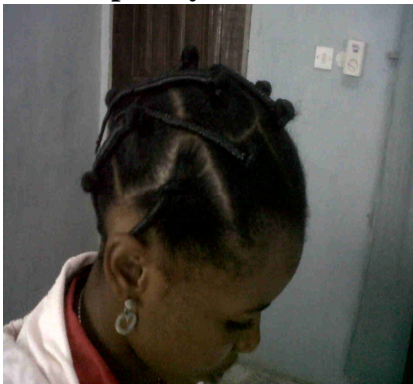


Pre-colonial Yorùbá female hair styles

(Sources: Adeoye C.L., *Asa Ati Ise Yorùbá*, Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press, Plc, 2005, 180).

Below are contemporary Yorùbá female hairstyles and as noted in Chapter One, details such as when these photographs were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are lacking. However, this criticism cannot remove the fact that these photos aptly illustrate contemporary Yorùbá female hairstyles.

Contemporary Yorùbá female hair styles



Plaited Hair



Weaved Hair



Weaved Hair

(Sources: Persoanl collections)

Weaving (*irun didi*), unlike plaiting (*irun biba*), was the vintage way females, irrespective of age, status, and all over Yorubaland, adorned their hairs. Culturally, Yorùbá people consider any woman who barbered or shaved her hair as unfashionable (*alailafinju* or *obun sio-sio*). Therefore when a woman plaited her hair into between one and three, it could be as a result of inability to find time out of a busy schedule to weave the hairs, as weaving takes more time than plaiting. When women plaited their hairs, it was usually for a few days before the hair was weaved into any pattern of their choices.

Hair-weaving, as noted earlier, involved time and resources. Structurally, weaving takes different forms; however, the following were the most popular hair styles during the pre-eighteenth century period. *Kolese*, also called *Panumo*; *Ipako Elede* and *Suku* are the major ones. Others were mere variations of these three. *Kolese* is weaved backward, with the forehead serving as the starting point and the various ends of the weaved-hairs bounded into a knot at the base of the neck at the back. *Ipako Elede* is the inverted version of *Kolese* with the other difference being that instead of bounding the end into a knot, the inverted end is spread along the forehead with each group of strands having its respective knot.

Suku differs from the two in that the hairs are weaved from all sides of the hairline into a knot at the crown of the head. Except in the case of *Ipako Elede*, *Kolese* and *Suku* give the females a rather prominent and bold face, which, among other things, added to their beauty by emphasizing their faces and other beauty accessories added to enhance these faces.

Prior to contacts with either the Arab or European, the use of raffia (*iko*) to tie female hairs into standing stocks, which were fashioned into different styles was common, although this was later substituted with the use of long, thin strand of rubber and black thread. Prior to the use of rubber, the following styles were common: *Koju S'Oko*, *Kehin S'Oko*, *Onile Gogoro*, *Moremi*, *Ogun Pari*, *Layipo*, and so on. To achieve any of these styles, the hairs are gathered into heaps of few strands and finely treated raffia are weaved tightly and closely around the heap of hairs till the heaps are turned into a few standing stock of hairs. These stocks are then turned and twisted into different shapes to achieve any of the above-named styles. *Layipo*, for instance, is achieved by twisting and bending the stocks of hairs and directing the mass of hairs into a round heap at an angle towards the left ear. The right side of the head is done up in such a way that only the bent stocks, protruding to the crown of the head, are visible. *Layipo* therefore described the twisting of the stock of hairs from the right to the left side of the head. Like the other forms of female hair styles, thread weaving also added to females' beauty by emphasizing their faces and other accessories used to enhance their beauty.

In addition to hair, the Yorùbá also took special care of their ears and teeth. Shortly after birth, the Yorùbá people pierced their female children's ears for the purpose of beautification. When a female child's ears were pierced, a knotted thread was inserted to keep the holes after the wounds might have healed. Between the times the wound was healed and to about age one, a piece of bead, most especially white beads, *Sese Efun*, was tied to a thread and inserted into the hole as a form of earring. From age one to age eight; all manners of ornamental things were used as *Yeri Eti* or *Yeti* (something that fits or decorates the ears or earrings).

Adult females, from the age of puberty and above, could use all manners of *Yeti* ranging from beads to precious stones. *Yeti* was regarded among the Yorùbá as part of a female's dress and

enormous resources were spent in acquiring them. Characteristically, a woman must have two kinds of *Yeti*: *Yeti Awosere* or *Awoyile* and *Yeti Imurode*. *Yeti Awosere* was for everyday use while *Yeti Imurode* is mainly used for occasions. The best of *Yeti* are on display during occasions and, at that point, the preciousness of any *Yeti* distinguishes its wearer as a daughter or wife of a man of status, dignity, and wealth. Hence, *Yeti Imurode* also serves as a mark of identity.

For as long as we have information, it can be argued that it was neither a part of Yorùbá culture nor a part of Yorùbá tradition to leave the neck, waists, and hands, especially of females, bare. Although economic and socio-political considerations played fundamental roles in the above qualification, it was however considered a breach of Yorùbá dress ethics to leave the neck, waists, and wrists bare, especially when engaged in any social outing. Culturally, it was only during great calamity or periods of bereavement that the human neck, waist, and hands were not decorated and beautified with either precious beads or ornamental chains. There were different types of beads and necklaces made from precious metals; however, while beads were used to decorate and beautify the wrists, waists, and necks; ornamental necklaces were limited to wrists and necks. Although there were great varieties, it must be noted that they were determined by age. While some were for children, others were for adults. There was also the class distinction, which, for the most part, was premised on costs. The most precious of these ornamental beads and chains were used by the rich, powerful, and royal families. The cheapest were for the commoners and children. In fact, depending on the parents' wealth, children could also use precious and costly ornamental beads and chains.

Another important dimension to the above is that some of these ornamental beads and chains were used for religious purposes, so it was not unusual to see both costly or extremely cheap ornamental beads and chains on adults, especially votaries of deities.

Beginning with decorative beads for children, there are different kinds: *Jojo*, usually made of rubber; *Erogan*, *Ileke Okun*, *Sipef'ori*, *Gbinjinni*, *Eleeru*, and so on. For the most parts, these beads are of different colours, and could be either small or big. The

small ones are used to decorate and beautify the wrists and necks, while the big ones are used to decorate and beautify the waists. From the examples above, it must be noted that while *Gbinjinni* was exclusively used for the neck, *Eleeru* was exclusively used for the wrists and *Lagidigba* for the waists.

It must also be noted that powerful and wealthy individuals could give gold earrings and neck chains or costly ornamental beads to their wards and children. In this instance, family wealth determines what children wear or use. In a sense, merely seeing a Yorùbá child's dress, one can easily decipher what sort of home such a child comes from, as parents tend to use their children to express their own riches, influences, and power.

As a general practice, from the age of puberty, especially for a betrothed, the use of ornamental and decorative beads and chains were of utmost importance. In the folksong that compares any Yorùbá female that has no fashionable dress with a wingless dove, Yorùbá people use dress to describe a whole gamut of things, including ornamental and decorative beads and chains. It must also be noted that whether a woman is newly married or has been married for a many years, there is an unending competition among females in the use of ornamental and decorative beads and chains in Yorubaland. This unending competition is illustrated in yet another Yorùbá adage: "*Gbongan ko ju gbongan; iyawo ti ko so l'eke mo'di, yo so ikarawun*" (Jingling of beads or bangles are the same; a wife who could not afford to use beads, must use snail-shells). On a wedding day, it is also customary, almost as a rule, for drummers to ask the wife, albeit with their talking drum: "*Se o wa n'be: Ileke Idi?*" (Are they there: Waist beads?).

Just as females used waist beads, so they also used wrists beads and chains. In fact, it was a critical part of the tradition of daughters of chiefs and kings to use (*lo Ileke*) or wear (*wo Ileke*) a large number of beads, especially on their wrists, at their weddings. It marked them out as daughters of the rich and powerful as well as showed their noble parentage. A few of the types of beads used by this category of females are: *Iyun*, *Segi*, *Lapade*, *Okun-Wewe*, *Lagidigba*, *Enla*, *Ankara*. Of these, *Iyun* is the most precious. The importance and high regard which the Yorùbá placed on this bead was demonstrated by liking it to

having a child: *Omo ni Iyun, Omo ni Ide* (A child is like Iyun and bronze).

Iyun was used as wrists and necks decorative ornament and has never been used on the waists. Next in rank to *Iyun* is *Segi*. The importance of *Segi* is aptly demonstrated in the Yorùbá prestigious name for wealthy and royal personages such as “Segilola”, a person who has so much of the *Segi* beads like money. Another dimension to the importance of these two beads lies in the fact that they remained the only beads that were sought after by the rich and royal. They were costly and taken as wealth itself, as only the wealthy can buy and use them.

Of the examples of beads mentioned above, it must be noted that *Lagidigba*, a thick and black bead, was worn only on the waists. When they were mass-used on a waist, they were collectively called *Bebe*.

Although, women of any age could use any of the aforementioned beads, it must be noted that aged women, used ornamental beads and decorative chains sparingly. The following beads were used by elderly women in Yorubaland *opoto*, *oyadokun*, *kagi*, *dangbongbon*, *kokoro*, *kundi*, *koko-aro*, *lakuta*, *oju-aguntan*, *moni-moni*, *enu-eye*, *opa-aro*, among many others.

The chiefs and kings in Yorubaland also used beads and their bead-use cannot be said to be solely ornamental and decorative, but also as symbol of office, as the following Yorùbá adage suggests: “*Ade Ori ni ti Oba; Ileke niti awon Ijoye*” (Kings are known by their crowns, and chiefs by their beads). For the chiefs, *Akun* was the main bead. In all parts of Yorubaland, only chiefs use *Akun* and for them, *Akun* was not for decorative and ornamental purposes, but more like a uniform and an insignia of office, as chiefs were removed from their offices when the king demanded for their *Akun*. Also, the procedures from installing new chiefs involved that the king must offered individual candidate *Akun*, without which such candidate was not considered as a validly made chief. While the use of *Akun* as symbol and insignial of office was common in Oyo, Ilesha, Ondo, Ekiti, and Akure; in other parts of Yorubaland, *Segi* played this role. The following folk-song is illustrative and instructive on the role of beads as a symbol of office in places like Ile-Ife, Ekiti, Ila, Oyo, Tapa,

Beriberi, Gogobiri and Igbomina. In addition, the insignias of office are underlined in the song:

*Oba o! Oba Alase Oba,
Oba to de ade owo,
Oba to wo bata ileke,
Oba to te opa ileke
Oba o! Oba Alase, Oba.*

(All Hail the King, the Supreme King!
The king who wears a crown of cowries,
The king who wears shoes of beads,
The king who dons a staff of beads,
All Hail the King, the Supreme King!)

In Owo, one of the ancient Yorùbá towns, the use of beads was somewhat different from its use in other parts of Yorubaland. While in other parts of Yorubaland, the commoners, chiefs and kings used or wore beads; in Owo, beads denoted and differentiated the different chiefs. As Robin Poynor noted, of the 850 chiefs whose power differed within a hierarchy called ‘*Edibo Olowo*’, the easiest and most distinguishing symbol was the ceremonial dress of the Owo chiefs.²¹¹ The crust of this Owo traditional ceremonial dress was *Okun* beads. In fact, the more beads a chief used, the higher was his rank among fellow chiefs. Beside the *Olowo*, the king of Owo, the next in rank was the *Ojomo*, whose ceremonial dress comprises of *Agokun*, *Orufonran*, *Udaigha*, *Akonka*, *Patako*, and so on. Although all Owo chiefs wore coral anklets, but not all of them were granted the constituent elements of *Agokun*, which consisted primarily of accumulations of coral and jasper beads worn with a wrapper of white cloth, a band of beads around the neck – the *Akonka* -, a band of beads around the forehead, *Udaigha*; a band of beads worn diagonally across the chest, *Patako*; and anklets, *Akondo* or *Akonke*.

²¹¹ Poynor, Robin. “If the Chiefs Are Like This, What Must the King Be Like?: Chieftancy Garb as Indicators of Position in the Owo Court.” in *Man Does Not Go Naked*, Basel: Ethnologisches Seminar der Universität und Museum für Völkerkunde, in Kommission bei Wepf, 1989, 133-148.

Orufonran, unlike the *Agokun*, was worn by a smaller number of chiefs. The jacket-like dress was worn over a wrapper or embroidered trousers or both and was decorated with ivory and brass sculptural ornaments. Attached to this jacket were lots of ornamental objects that symbolize power and were made from precious articles. The jacket was finished with different types of coral beads. As the wearer walked or danced in procession, the beads and the various attachments to the jacket cannot but make eerie noise, which were considered as the hallmark of the foremost Owo chiefs. Of the numerous Owo chiefs, only the *Olowo* and the holder of the *Ojomo* title had the rights to wear both the most elaborate *Orufonran* and *Agokun*.²¹²

Votaries and worshipers of deities (*orisha*) also used beads and chains. Like the chiefs and kings, their beads and chains were not for ornamental or decorative purposes, but symbols and insignia of their offices. Deities such as Osun, Ooba, Sango, Ogiyan, Orisaala, Orisa Ijehun, Orisa Adaatan, and Ifa used beads. The most notable of these kinds of beads was *Kele*, which came in two different forms: white and red. *Kele* are smaller beads and worn mainly by *Sango* worshipers.

During Sango worship, it was mandatory for devotees to use *Kele*. Failure to do so, it was believed, would incur the wrath of the deity. The following Sango worship song attests to this.

Omo kekere, mo so Kele
Agbalagba, mo so Kele;
Sango, ma so mi l'okun l'ofun,
Mo so Kele.

(Children, I wear Kele,
Elders, I wear Kele;
Sango, don't strangle me,
I wear Kele.)

It must be noted that *Ooba*, also used smaller white or red beads. Besides *Kele*, there was also *Otutu-opon*, which came in black, red, or green, and was usually worn by diviners. *Oyinde* and *Ebolo* were two smaller beads usually worn on the necks by *Osun*

²¹² Ibid, 148.

votaries. *Sese-efun*, another white small bead, was used by votaries of *Ogiyan*, *Orisa-ala*, *Orisa Ijehun*, *Orisa Adaatan*, *Obalufon*, *Orisa Ife*, *Orisa Irowu*, and *Orisa Alaso-funfun*.

In addition to the above, *Itun*, *Ifa*, and *Abere* were also three important beads, although they were not worn to adorn the waists, necks, or wrists, but were used for Ifa ritual purposes only.

Beside beads, other types of jewelry were also used in Yorubaland, and like beads, they were both for aesthetics and religious purposes, as the following Yorùbá popular song shows:

Ide wewe ni t'Osun
Oje gbongbo ni t'oorisa
Sekeseke ni t' Ogun
E ba mi sipe fun Baale
Ko fun wa l' Ododo pa kaja
Gbogbo wa l' Ogun jo bi
Hepa! Eru wa le.

(Small brass is for Osun worship,
Huge bronze figures are for the deities,
Chains are for Ogun,
Please, warn the head chief;
To allow us our colourful dress.
We are all worshipers of Ogun.
Hepa! A slave has returned home.)

From this song, it is incontrovertible that brass was part of the religious dress of Osun worshipers as bronze were used by worshipers of deities such as *Obalufon*, *Ogiyan*, *Orisa-Popo*, *Orisa Ikire*, *Orisa Ife*, and *Orisa Adaatan*. However, cast chains were used for charms, which were used as leg and wrist chains for spirit-children, *Abiku*. The Yorùbá used brass, bronze, and copper to cast wrists, legs, and neck chains prior to contacts with the Arabs and Europeans. It must be noted also that cast chains were also worn by warriors, hunters, and elderly people.

Tattooing and the use of henna and antimony were also part of Yorùbá dress culture. While this was limited to females, it must be noted that males also indulged in tattooing and the use of henna and antimony. The Yorùbá believed that only lazy and fashion-freak males have the time and pleasure to indulge in tattooing and

using henna and antimony. However, both were popular among Yorùbá people, especially those from Ilorin, Ofa, Tapa, Oyo, and Ekiti.

R.H. Stone noted that the use of antimony, by which “*both sexes blacken the margin of the eyelids with pulverized sulphuret of antimony, and the women dye their finger nails, their feet and the palms of their hands with pulverized camwood*”²¹³ was commonplace in Yorubaland before colonial rule, a residue of which he met. Antimony, used in tandem with other items, as the following statement from Stone shows, was also used in religious rituals:

*...when about to take part in some sacrifice, they frequently give the entire person a pinkish tinge. Beads, nose-jewels, and bracelets of gold, silver, brass and carved ivory are the principal jewels of the women. The rings are often worn on the ankles as well as the arms. Men also wear necklaces of coral and bracelets of metal. Tattooing in blue is practiced to a limited extent and is so well done that it resembles a covering of figured cloth.*²¹⁴

In addition to the above, indigenous Yorùbá people also use creams. These include shear-butter (*Oori*), palm-oil concuction (*Eebe*), roasted palm-kernel oil (*Adi-eyan* or *Yanko*) and cocoanut oil (*Adi-agbon*). These assortments of creams served both aesthetic and health functions. While *Adi-agbon* and *Oori* were used after bathing, *Eebe* and *Adi-eyan* are used in treatment of fever, skin-diseases, measles, ring-worm and enzema. For Yorùbá people, the use of *Adi-agbon* as a component of dress is mandatory. However, it must be asserted that the poor who cannot afford *Adi-agbon* uses palm oil as cream.

From the foregoing, it can be observed that dress in Yorubaland before contacts with either the Arabs or Europeans comprises of all of the above. It is therefore simplistic to argue that Yorùbá people dressed sparingly until their contacts with either the Arabs or the Europeans, as what forms dress among the Yorùbá is not only limited to cloths and clothing tradition but to a whole lot

²¹³ Ibid, 32.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 31.

of things far removed from the simple conceptualization of dress as cloth and clothing tradition.

As far as evidence showed, the use of clothes, before these contacts, can therefore be divided into four categories: *Aso iyile*, (daily or casual wears) *Aso ise* (work clothes), *Aso imurode* (occasional or ceremonial wears), and *Aso asiko* (fashion clothes). In addition to these four categories, Yorùbá people had (and also wore) different clothes for different life cycle events: birth, puberty, marriage, procreation, eldership and death.

It must be asserted that the description of Yorùbá dress, given by Samuel Johnson, primarily describes Yorùbá casual clothes, which were worn in and around the house and, in the case of children, to run errands.

Work clothes, for the most part, were vocation-determined. For instance, hunters traditionally wore *Gberi Ode* and *Digo* trousers. These they wore both for hunting and during celebration of the annual Ogun festival. In addition to these two events, it must be noted that whenever any member of the hunting guild or hunting community died, it was customary for other members to set aside a special day when the hunting community would fete the departed colleague. On such a day, the hunters, irrespective of age and experience, would don their *Gberi Ode* and *Digo* trousers, armed with their guns, and proceeded to where the celebration and rite of passage (*Ipa Sisi* or *Isipa*) would be held.

The story is told of a certain great hunter, Erinmina, whose spirit was tormenting his children for not giving him a proper burial. After some months of visiting his house, Erinmina visited his closest friend and asked that all his work-clothes be taken out of the house and buried outside the village. He went further to state that:

Oku onigbagbo ko sun 'le ahoro
Oku Imale ko gbodo sun gbongan Orisa
Orite nile Onigbagbo
Oju gbangba la a sin 'Male
Egun ko, epe ko,
Bode ba ku ninu ile,
Ti a ba sinku re, sinu ile tan
Afi ka yara kaso kewuu re
Ka ko o lo sehin odi ilu

*Nitori pe ajeje ode ki i wonu igba,
Apo Ode ki i denu agbon
Atajeje, atapo ode
Ojo to ba wonu agbon lo dipa ode.*²¹⁵

(No Christian is buried in the hut
No Muslim is buried at the shrine
Christians are buried at cemetery
Muslims are buried in open-spaces
It is not a curse
When a hunter dies at home,
After burying him at home
We must take all his dress
Outside the town gates
Because no hunter is buried in a calabash
Hunter's bag is never put in a basket
Both the hunter's essembles and bags
It is forbidden for these to happen.)

Much as hunters would like to ascertain that feting dead colleagues was an ancient practice among the Yorùbá and would cite the practice to have started with the burial request of Erinmina, the above *Iremoje* (hunters' song) made it clear that the song was of recent provenance. For instance, both Islam and Christianity, which featured prominently in the song, must have been firmly entrenched in Yorubaland before the Erinmina saga occurred.

As another song, usually sung at the burial of hunters, would show, many things such as basket, bags, pots, hoes, cutlasses, swords, etc. were considered as part of a hunter's dress.

*Ewu ode re e o, motiele
Sokoto ode re e o, motiele
Agbon ode re e o, motiele
Fila ode re e o, motiele
Apo ode re e o, motiele
Oru ode re e o, motiele
Ada ode re e o, motiele*

²¹⁵ Lawuyi Ogunniran, "Ise ti Awon Yorùbá Nse" in Oludare Olajubu (ed.), *Iwe Asa Ibile Yorùbá*, (Ibadan, 1981), 135.

Eruko ode re e o, motiele
Ako ode re e o, motiele
Odo ode re e o, motiele
Ikoko ode re e o, motiele
*Ado ode re e o, motiele.*²¹⁶

(This is the hunter's shirt, motiele.
This is the hunter's trousers, motiele.
This is the hunter's basket, motiele.
This is the hunter's cap, motiele.
This is the hunter's bag, motiele.
This is the hunter's water-pot, motiele.
This is the hunter's cutlass, motiele.
This is the hunter's hoe, motiele.
This is the hunter's sword-sheath, motiele.
This is the hunter's mortal, motiele.
This is the hunter's cooking-pot, motiele.
This is the hunter's medicine-gourd, motiele.)

In the case of farmers, although *Gberi Agbe* and *Digo* trousers were also worn, there was however major differences in the ways the farmers' *Gberi* and *Digo* trousers were made. For the hunters, the *Gberi* and *Digo* trousers must have pockets in-front and at the back. Like hunters, farmers also have their own association or club, the *Egbe Alongo*.

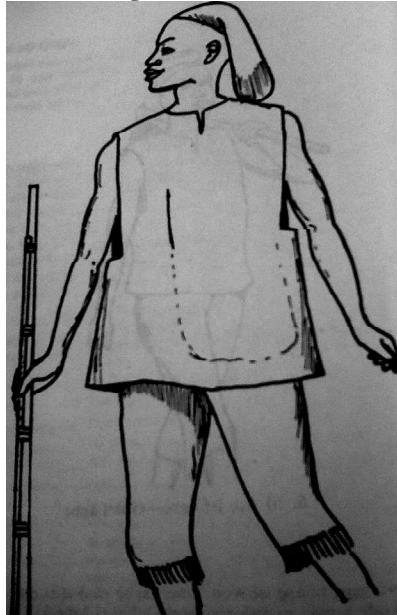
However, whether for hunters or farmers; *Gberi Ode* or *Gberi Agbe* and *Digo* trousers were work clothes. As already noted, the pervasive use of *aso ise*, *aso Isere*, and *aso iwole* rather than *aso imurode* owes solely to the fact that Yorubaland, being an agrarian society, was not as clean as today's urban, office and clean environment. The people worked and lived on the farm. Both farmers and hunters have other clothes that can be worn for and on different occasions; however, where a member of either *Egbe Olode* or *Egbe Alongo* died, it was mandatory for members to wear their *Gberi* and *Digo* trousers. Another important component of farmers and hunters' work clothes was a cap and a fly-whisk (*Apa-Iru*) for hunters. One notable characteristic of *Gberi* and *Digo*

²¹⁶ Ibid, 136.

trousers was smartness. Given the nature of hunting and farming; the work-clothes for both professions must be close-fitting and not loose. Blacksmiths, like farmers and hunters, also use close-fitting clothes.

Below are some artistic illustrations of hunters and farmers' dress used in pre-eighteenth century Yorubaland.

Gberi-Agbe, Gberi-Ode, and Digo Trousers



(Sources: C.L. Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yorùbá*, Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press, Plc, 2005).

Occasional clothes or wears are used in the celebration of life cycle events such as birth, puberty, marriage, procreation, eldership and death. As 'Tunde M. Akinwumi noted, these events *'are accompanied by a variety of ritual celebrations in which participants dance, sing and perform...'*²¹⁷ Dress, owing to these qualifications, therefore played an important role in these events. Taking birth and death as representative examples, it must be asserted that these events involved people in the same house, compound and community as well as their relatives and kin who may be living in another segment of the community or in another community entirely. Since birth, at least for nine months, is known ahead, unlike death that could come suddenly; birth and naming ceremonies are, depending on individuals' economic circumstances, well planned in Yorubaland. Before delivery, the couples either sewed new clothes or used their old but very good clothes on the christening day. Usually, prior to the christening day, the decision on what cloths to wear by the mother of the new baby usually falls on the wife or her mother. Characteristically, the new mother typically wears the most elaborate dress not only to *'make the occasion exhilarating and memorable'*²¹⁸, but also to show her family's wealth, status, and prestige on the day of the event. The husband, although equally well dressed, cannot in any way compare to his wife, as the Yorùbá consider excessive dressing on the part of males as idleness.²¹⁹

Christening ceremony, depending on the wealth and status of the husband and/ or his extended family, can be an elaborate ceremony. Circumstances surrounding the birth of a child can also play significant roles in the nature of the ceremony involved on the christening day. Where the parents are rich, royal, or important in the community; christening or any ceremony for that matter is usually elaborately celebrated. In such cases, the parents of the couple, if they are alive and able, are in attendance with their

²¹⁷ Tunde M. Akinwumi, 'Ero: A Celebration of Eldership in the Indigo Cloths of Owo', in Elisha P. Renne and Babatunde Agbaje-Williams (eds.), *Yorùbá Religious Textiles*, (Ibadan, 2005), 49.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 49.

²¹⁹ Interview with Mrs. Oluwafunmilade Hannah Akande, Iresi, Osun State, 13 November 2010.

friends and dependants. Friends of the couple are also present, as well as those of their older children.

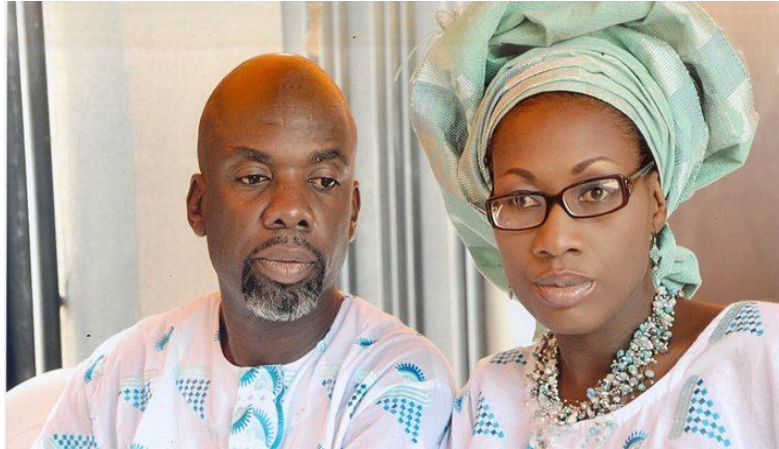
During such occasions, depending on the status and wealth of the couple, two categories of clothes are involved: *Aso Ebi* and *Aso Egbe J'oda*. These two categories of clothes differ markedly from what the couple would wear on the day of the ceremony. *Aso Ebi* is a cloth used exclusively by members of the immediate (extended and nuclear) family of the couple. *Aso Egbe J'oda*, which may be many and of different types, are worn by friends and club members, not just of the couple, but also of the parents. The wife, during the course of the ceremony, is expected to change her clothes, depending on the wealth and riches of the family, as many times as possible. While this is aimed at showing-off the family's riches, it is also aimed at showing her own (paternal) family that she is well taken care of and provided for by her husband.

The use of *Aso Ebi* and *Aso Egbe J'oda* are, in many ways, tied to identity construction and reinforcement. While *Aso Ebi* clearly enables the concerned party to be clearly distinguished, *Aso Egbe J'oda* clearly and unmistakably shows their relatives and friends. The sheer fact that the couple is not bound to wear either of these makes it possible for families, friends, and well-wishers to distinguish them from other family members.

When the ceremony involves death and its associated passage-rites, the differences from christening or any other ceremony are expressed, not in the solemnity involved, but in the colour of cloth and elaborateness involved. In a burial, for instance, of aged parents, which the Yorùbá usually describes as *Oku Eko* (death involving the eating of pap), the difference from christening may never be seen by non-Yorùbá who may not pay closer attention to the various dresses put on by the various parties. Where the celebration involves a young man, the ceremony is usually not elaborate and the colour of clothes and other dress ensembles used is black. In Yorubaland, as in most indigenous African communities, a widow and, sometimes, other members of the family of the deceased, is expected to be clad in black. The metaphors and associated meanings of dress, as Aderonke

Adesanya argued, '*expressed in their forms and colours...are signifiers of moods and events*' among the Yorùbá.²²⁰

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when the photographs below were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are, lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, these photos aptly illustrate Yorùbá *Aso Ebi*.



A couple in Aso Ebi
(Sources: Personal Collection).

Adesanya, citing personal communication with Ademola Dasyilva, noted that the garment and mien of traditional religious leaders during the burial ceremony of Chief Obafemi Awolowo in 1987 was not only spectacular, but also amusing and provocative, as they '*wore garments embellished with an assortment of charms, cowries and small gourds,*' substances of varying colours were also painted on their body and garments and '*some left mucus oozing out of their nostrils to the extent that the accoutrement and demeanour were laughable*'.²²¹ Yet the metaphor and associated meanings of their dress, provocative and fearful as they were, is so

²²⁰ Aderonke Adesola Adesanya, 'A Semiotics of Clothing Insignia of Indigenous Secret Societies among the Ijebu Yorùbá', in Elisha P. Renne and Babatunde Agbaje-Williams (eds.), *Yorùbá Religious Textiles*, (Ibadan, 2005), 27.

²²¹ Aderonke Adesola Adesanya, *ibid*, 27.

known to the people that no one dared to deride them. The metaphors and associated meanings of colours as signifiers of moods and events are carried further by Yorùbá people to times of war. In such occasion, red flags were hoisted in Yorùbá towns or in areas dedicated to such war, as Yorùbá people do not fight where people live or have their living but in bushes and dedicated areas so as to avoid death and injuries to non-combatants. In such areas, red and black flags were hoisted on poles and trees to signify the prevalent moods and events – death and war. At the termination of a war, white flags were not only hoisted in dedicated places, but also in the city centers and king's palace. The same is carried forward to the use of white dove as signifier of peace and owl as signifier of war and death.

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when the photograph here was taken, where it was taken, who took it and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are lacking. Nevertheless, the photo aptly illustrate Yorùbá secret society garb.



Chief Hubert Ogunde in a typical Awo (secret society) garbs
(Source: Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria).

Aso asiko (fashion clothes) are usually of bright colours, as they signify peace of mind, riches, and fashion. The Yorùbá believe that dressing to suit the prevailing fashion and societal dictates is good. Hence, both males and females are expected to dress fashionably, although they frown at excessive dressing, especially by men. T.M. Akinwumi described the following Yorùbá dress as prestige (fashion) clothes: *Dandogo*, *Gbariye*, *Girike*, *Kembe*, *Bombata*, *Guru*, and *Gogowu*.²²² He went further to argue that their decline, especially from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, owed, in part, to the ‘*astronomical cost and, most importantly, their anachronism...*’ As C.L. Adeoye argued, fashion was considered by the Yorùbá as women’s forte and any man, although there were many of them, who devote much attention to his personal appearance is regarded as a lazy man.²²³ Paradoxically, a man that paid scanty attention to his personal appearance was regarded as a filthy man, an *Obun*, who will serve the chic (*Obun sio sio, ni yo ru eru Afinju wo’le*). For females, an excessively dressed woman was regarded as *Onifaari*, and the Yorùbá were wont to say: *Faari aseju, oko olowo lo ran won lo* (excessive dressing or fashion leads to bankruptcy and, invariably, pawnship). Consequently, it could be argued that for both sexes, the Yorùbá place emphasis on moderation in dressing and outward appearance.

The photo below shows a cross-section of Yorùbá women wearing indigenous Yorùbá *Aso Asiko* (occasional dress) of the pre-colonial period. The place and date when the photo was taken are unknown. Immediately after this picture are three other photos of contemporary expressions of Yorùbá occasional dress.

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when these photographs were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, these photos aptly illustrate Yorùbá pre-colonial *Aso Asiko*.

²²² Akinwumi T. M., ‘Oral Tradition and the Reconstruction of Yorùbá Dress’, in Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (eds.) *Yorùbá Identity and Power Politics*, (Rochester, 2005), 63.

²²³ Adeoye, *Asa ati Ise*, 56.





A cross section of Yorùbá contemporay Aso Asiko

(**Sources:** except for the first photograph, which was obtained from Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan, others are from my personal collections).

In addition to the above, clothes were also used in religious worships. Aderonke Adesanya noted that clothes, following the dictates of the Ifa oracle, could be used to appease the gods. Cloths were, in such situations, sacrificed to the gods²²⁴; to placate witches, wizards, and deities²²⁵; and so on. While, in some cases, such sacrifices may be simply honorific, for the most part, the intention was to court the favour of the gods or other spiritual entities.²²⁶

In rites of passage such as death, clothes played an important role. Among the Yorùbá people of Nigeria, black cloths are worn. Among the Asanti of Ghana, red clothes are worn. Notwithstanding colour-differences in different parts of Africa, it must be emphasized that in religious observances relating to death and bereavement, widows and, sometimes, relatives, were clad in black dress. The red colour, to consider another instance, implied

²²⁴ Aderonke Adesanya, 'A Semiotic', 26.

²²⁵ William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, (Bloomington, 1969), 23.

²²⁶ Aderonke Adesanya, 'A Semiotic', 26.

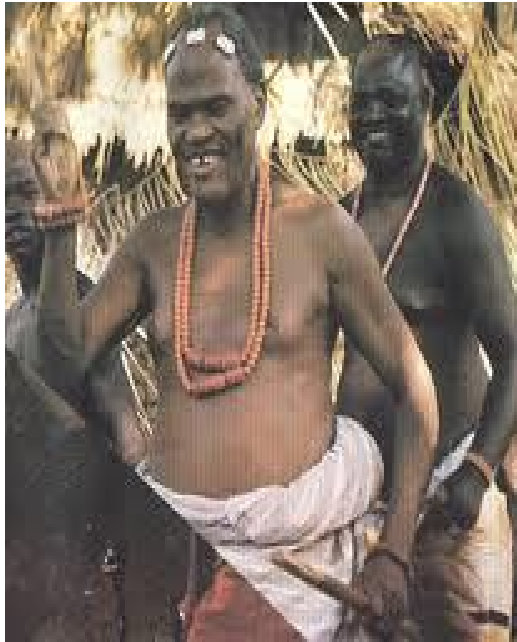
certain spiritual state for *Sango* and *Ogun* worshipers. White, so also water, was important to *Osun* worshipers. The use of water is complemented with the use of white dress. Both relate to the virtue of colour and the spiritual quality of water. White cloth, *Aso ala*, was used in shrines and sanctuaries. In most shrines and sanctuaries, for instance *Imole* shrine, white cloths, white cowries, and other items formed the bases of shrines and sanctuaries. In most cases, a devotee or worshiper who was seeking the favour of the Orisha for anything usually brought sacrificial items, among which were white cloths, to the deities. At an *imole* shrine in Sagamu, Ogun State, a middle-aged woman brought a wrapper and hand-woven baby-tie, *Oja*, to the shrine. She claimed that she had asked the deity for a child and mainly brought the two items to the shrine for sanctification so that when she eventually had the child, the two items would be used in carrying the baby.²²⁷

In addition to its use as sacred items in shrines and sanctuaries, white cloths were also worn by votaries and worshipers, especially when performing important rituals. White cloths were also used to mark the abode of particular spirits in natural sites such as trees, rivers, stones, and so on. Where this was the case, the cloth itself could be appeased. For instance at Ile-Ife, like in so many other places in Yorubaland, trees such as *Ose* and/or *Iroko* (baobab) trees were regularly wrapped in white cloths to signify and distinguish them as abodes of the spirits.

Babalawo, head priests, as well as masquerades also wore white cloths as insignia of their offices or professions. In Lagos, *Eyo*, the traditional masquerade of the Eko people, so also *Agemo*, wore white cloths. Other masquerades in Yorubaland, before wearing any other costume, wear an inner white cloth, called *Jepe*, which underscored the closeness of the white cloth with the secret knowledge of the masquerade.

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when these photographs were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are, oftentimes, lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, these photos aptly illustrate Yorùbá religious dress.

²²⁷ Interview with Mrs. Raliat Adeola, Sagamu, Ogun State, 10 October 2010.



Atypical Yorùbá Aso Ala, with beads and cowries signifying a religious presence

(Sources: National Institute for Cultural Orientation, Iganmu, Lagos, Nigeria).



Eyo Festival in Lagos, 2011

(Sources: National Institute for Cultural Orientation, Iganmu, Lagos, Nigeria).

It must be asserted that all masquerades must wear *Jepe*. Writing on the importance of *Jepe* in masquerade's costumes, Robert Faris Thompson noted:

*Yorùbá sacred body-covering with netted viewing-shields are death-connected sacred objects. We pierce or lift up their lapped structures at our peril. The danger lies in the fact that, for the Yorùbá, such 'masking' philosophically keeps secret the distinction between the spiritual world and the world of the living. Therefore we are not talking about the mere wearing of cloths and lappets. We are talking about the ritual wearing of thresholds.*²²⁸

Jepe, without doubt, was therefore the very essence of the masquerade's costumes; hence, the outer, exposed cloths may be

²²⁸ Thompson, R.F., 'Recapturing Heaven's Glamour: Afro-Caribbean Festivalizing Arts', in J. Bettelheim (ed.), *Caribbean Festival Arts*, (Los Angeles, 1988), 17-37.

beautiful, but they were expendable. Elisha Renne and Agbaje-Williams, citing Lawal, associated this with '*inner goodness in constituting beauty*'.²²⁹

From the above, it is clear that Yorùbá religious expression manifests in their dress. This include variety of religious dresses, ranging from plain white cloths to embroidered, appliquéd, and beaded cloths, from ragged and faded cloths to brightly coloured, elaborately pieced cloth. These cloths featured in shrines, sanctuaries, and altars; they were used in sacrifices; in masquerade costumes; in traditionalist rituals; as a way of identifying disjuncture and continuities in the formal qualities, iconography, and meanings of Yorùbá dress tradition over many years. In religious uses, Yorùbá dress projected the sacred character of individuals wearing or using them, demarcated sacred places, marked a spiritual presence or space, represented the identities of special deities, and indicated particular forms of dedication to the deities and to God (*Eledumare*).

Cloths used in religious worship – as altar cloths, sacred objects, covering for sacred objects, and so on – demonstrate the expressive character of persons and objects associated with the deity. In the same vein, the Yorùbá's used of cloths to drape dead bodies and to line coffins. These acts or practices anchored on the belief that dress, once it touched the body, became a second skin, which united the material and spiritual qualities of the wearers or users with those of the deities. Invariably, dress, when used for religious purposes; suggested a link between the world of the living with those of the dead or of the spirit.

Embedded in this kind of belief system is the notion of secrecy. For instance, most Yorùbá cloths are opaque in colour and may, symbolically suggest mystery. In relation to religion, Bolaji Idowu asserted that the idea of mystery was an important element of Yorùbá religious belief. This idea is expressed in terms of the secret (*awo*) – that which cannot be known, seen, or understood by the un-initiated. Hence, shrine objects (including cloths) were regarded as repositories of power, '*ase*'. This belief was carried further into '*eku egungun*' (masquerade's costume), which

²²⁹ Elisha P. Renne and Babatunde Agbaje-Williams (eds.), *Yorùbá Religious Textiles*, (Ibadan, 2005), 14.

concealed the identity of the person wearing the masquerade and projected the presence of the spirit being.

At yet another level, Yorùbá cloths, because they were made of *Kijipa* or *Ofi*, are thick and therefore a fit material for dyeing and printing of messages and icons, which, in its modern use, carry more spiritual messages and icons than ordinary cloths. In the pre-1800 periods, Yorùbá religious cloths were usually soaked in herbal and medicinal concoctions to strengthen and protect the wearer, who also contributed his or her sweat, and therefore reinforcing the connection between the wearer and the cloths.

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when these photographs were taken, where they were taken, who took them and why, which could help any researcher in the task of historical reconstruction are lacking. Notwithstanding this criticism, these photos aptly illustrate Yorùbá indigenous clothes.







A cross section of Yorùbá indigenous cloths

(Source: National Institute for Cultural Orientation, Iganmu, Lagos, Nigeria).

Socially, Yorùbá society can be calibrated either by wealth or by status. By wealth, Yorùbá community could be divided into four distinct classes: *Olola* (the royals and nobles, which includes the chiefs, kings and others from the royal family), *Olowo* (the rich, also called *Oloro*), *Talika* (the poor or a middle class person, in today's parlance), and *Akuse* (the dreg of the society). By status, three distinct classes can be recognized: *Omo* (free-born children), *Iwofa* (pawns), and *Eru* (slaves). For control and administration, the different individuals in these categories were, first and foremost, members of one family or the other. As members of families, they were under the tutelage of their different family heads. The family heads submitted themselves to the Compound Chief (*Ijoye Adugbo*), and together with the king, the Oba-in-council is formed. These different categories were therefore ruled by the *Oba*, whose seemingly boundless power, as the appellation - 'Alase, Ekeji Orisha' - suggested, was, in turn, controlled and checked by an extra-judicial or extra-legal body, the *Ogboni*. This body was known in different Yorùbá communities by different names. For instance, among the Ijebu, it was called the *Osugbo*. No matter the nomenclature, this body comprised of men and

women of note and membership of the body is predicated on so many things, including riches and good behaviour. Because the body was saddled with the responsibilities of trying the king in any matter involving him and his chiefs, as well as in any matter involving life, membership in the *Ogboni* was usually kept secret.

Among the Ijebu, like in other Yorùbá communities, membership of the *Osugbo* may be secret but that was not to say that they, indeed, were unknown. Dress played an important role in the identity of the *Osugbo* members. While the *Osugbo* could be identified by their use of *Itagbe* shag cloth, a cloth that sets them apart from other *Ogboni* and other cults in Yorubaland. Cadre within the *Osugbo* was also reflected in the various insignia weaved into the *Itagbe* of members of this cult. The iconography on each member's *Itagbe* was not only a study in hidden knowledge but also the seven knots at the bottom of the *Itagbe* represented the king – the Awujale – and his six chiefs. The *Itagbe* and its iconography clearly distinguished members of the *Osugbo* from any other cults in Ijebu Ode as well as other cults, *Ogboni* inclusive, in Yorubaland.²³⁰

In Owo, as in Ikere-Ekiti, Iyere, Ipele, Emure, Isuada, Upenmen (also called as Epinmi), Idashe, Ute, and Okeluse *Ero* eldership festival clearly underscored the importance of dress in the establishment and maintenance of Yorùbá identity. Like in other Yorùbá communities, pre-colonial Owo society comprised of five age-grades: *Ugbama* (0-30), *Kaya* (30-40), *Eleteta* (40-50), *Elehe* (50-60) and *Ero* (60-65). While the nineteenth century Yorùbá civil war and, later, colonialism rendered the use of age-grade in societal engineering obsolete, they however failed in consigning both *Eleteta* and *Ero* into the dustbin of history. Of the five age-grades, it must be emphasized, *Ero*, which marks transition from youthful age to adulthood, is the most celebrated in Owo.

One striking feature of the *Ero* celebration was the use of specially commissioned *Ero* cloths by its members. While, in some literature, the origin of the practice is attributed to Edo influence on Owo; it must however be noted that, as Talbot argued, while there were five age-grades in Owo, only four existed in Benin and

²³⁰ Aderonke Adesanya, 'A Semiotic', 23-48.

these four were more of caste systems and not age-grades. In addition, Chief J.B. Ashara noted that the age-grade system was brought from Ile-Ife by Ejugbelu, the first Olowo of Owo.²³¹ *Ero*, no matter its provenance, is a celebration of eldership, which marked a transition from youthful and active working life to that of retirement and it is marked by commissioning and the use of identical hand woven indigo blue *Girijo* and *Igbero* cloths during the celebration. Two other indigo blue cloths associated with *Ero* are the *Ashigbo* and *Ebolo* cloths. All these and many more were specially commissioned and used in the celebration of *Ero* festival.²³²

Common to *Ero* cloths is the beautiful combination of nuanced shades of white, gray, blue, and blue-black indigo stripes, which, together, distinguish *Ero* cloths from ordinary, everyday ceremonial cloths. *Girijo* cloths, unlike *Igbero*, were usually small and therefore used as waist-wrapper while the *Igbero* was quite large and was worn, draped over the body. Members of the five different quarters of Owo made their choices of *Girijo* and *Igbero* designs independently of one another. There were elaborate rituals associated with the making of the *Ero* cloths. They were commissioned and were made by women, especially the first daughter of the *Ero* candidate, who customarily commissioned the production of *Ero* cloths for her retiring father. In case the man had no daughter, other women could be made to perform the same task. The daughter must provide the ritual and symbolic materials and must ensure that the *Ero* cloth was completed within the stipulated seven days. The weaver, during the entire seven days of weaving the *Ero* cloths, must be in a state of purity; hence, must not be menstruating or engaged in any sexual and unclean activity. To ensure that these ritualistic requirements were met, *Ero* cloths were usually woven by older women who had passed their menopausal age.²³³

On the day of the celebration, *Ero* candidates were clad in their *Girijo* and *Igbero* cloths and danced, first from their homes to

²³¹ Tunde M. Akinwumi, 'Ero: A Celebration', 50-51.

²³² Ibid, 50.

²³³ Ibid, 49-70.

the shrine, and later to the Olowo's palace. Usually, *Ero* festival is usually followed by the Igogo festival.²³⁴

Among the Bunu, west of the Niger River in present day Kogi State, Nigeria; *Aso Ipo*, a generic name given to five types of indigenous red-and-tan patterned cloths, were used by this and other Yorùbá peoples in funeral rituals. As Elisha P. Renne noted, *Aso Ipo* mirrored the Bunu political hierarchy, with the five cloths ranked according to size and use in funerals. The first, *Aponupoyin*, was displayed only for *Olu*, also known as *Obaro*, who are the highest ranking chiefs, comprising also of kings, who were holding three traditional titles. The second, *Abata*, was displayed at the funeral of chiefs with two titles, while *Ifale* cloths were used or displayed at the funeral of chiefs with one title. Although women and men of great riches and influences may also have *Ifale* cloths displayed for them, the last two – *Oja* and *Ebe* – were used at the commemorative funerals of all chiefs, irrespective of rank. Technically, these five cloths, among the Bunu, were used cumulatively, so that a lower ranking chief could have three cloths (*Ebe*, *Oja*, and *Ifale*) displayed at his funerals. High-ranking chiefs, including the kings, may have between four or five cloths displayed at their funerals.²³⁵

These cloths, except for *Aponupoyin*, are patterned on one side with red and tan geometric motifs, while on the other side, the cloths are plain white. In the case of *Aponupoyin*, both sides of the cloth are made red and tan; hence the name *Aponupoyin* - red on both sides. Characteristically, *Aso Ipo* was made from one or more cloth strips, so they are excessively thick. In making *Aso Ipo*, strips of cloths are hand-sewn together in cross-stitch variation. Geometric shapes are added by supplementary weft patterning anchored to the foundation cloth by regularly spaced warp threads. This is similar to how Akwete and Ebira (in Central Nigeria) and Ijebu, another Yorùbá group in present day Ogun State, Nigeria, made their *Aso Olona*.

Aso Ipo was usually not worn. Its use was limited to burial and funerary purposes. *Aso Ipo* was used not only by the Bunu, but

²³⁴ 'The Igogo Festival', *Nigerian Magazine* 77, (Lagos, 1963), 91-104.

²³⁵ Elisha P. Renne, 'Aso Ipo, Red Cloth from Bunu', *African Arts*, 25:3 (1992), 64-102.

also by the Ijumu, Owe, Ebira, Okun, Okpella, and Oworo peoples. Besides commemorative funerary use, it was used by masquerades in these areas, especially at the funeral of the king. It must be noted that *Aso Ipo*, besides being a funerary cloth, it was also fortified such that the cloth breathes, a phenomenon that made many, especially the Ijumu to call it *Aso Gbingbin* -the cloth that breathes.²³⁶ Moreover, among all Yorùbá groups, the communities listed above remained the only ones who utilize red cloths for funeral purposes. Among other Yorùbá groups, white cloths were used in burying the dead while black was worn by the bereaved widows and family members.

Closely tied to cloth's use in religious milieu is the conception of religious or fortified cloths as measure of protection. For example, Daniel Okanlawon Afolabi, as corroborated by the Nigerian Police, Ajaawa Division, successfully warded-off bullets with his 'thick-cloth' when a niece ordered her thugs to shoot Mr. Afolabi during a land dispute. Mr. Afolabi, who claimed to be ignorant of the presence of intruders on his farm on 5 October 1993, was plucking oranges when he heard a gun shot and noticed that his 'thick-cloth' had saved him from death at such a close range as ten meters away from where he was standing.²³⁷ Police records corroborated Mr. Afolabi's claim of being shot at and the Police were equally perturbed that the bullet had no effect on him.

From the above, dress, especially their flexibility, texture, myriads of colours, patterns, absorbency and weight, along with their association with the wearers' belief systems, combine to define not only the identity of the wearers, but also the socio-economic, religious, and political contexts and contents in which dress was used. At the macro-level, dress, more generally, dealt with the general purpose of covering the human nakedness from unwanted and unsolicited gaze as well as protecting the body from the elements. At the micro-level, dress was understood among the Yorùbá as dealing essentially with symbols, particular insignia, emblems, offices, meanings, and so on, which are mutually

²³⁶ Interview with Prof. Z.O. Apata, Ikeji-Arakeji, Osun State, 12 June 2011.

²³⁷ Interview with Mr. Daniel Okanlawon Afolabi, Otamakun, Ogbomoso, 12 November 2010.

intelligible only between the wearer and the socio-cultural, religious and political space where such dress belonged.

3.2. Omoluabi in Yorùbá Pre-colonial Dress Culture

From the above analysis of pre-colonial and pre-Christian Yorùbá sartorial tradition, it is clear that whether in secular or religious matter, Yorùbá people ensured, as much as they can, that the individual and group social requirement of being an *Omoluabi* reflected in their dress. From caps to head ties, facial marks to clothes, body arts to other additions and/or supplements to the human body; Yorùbá sartorial tradition went beyond the need to cover human nakedness to include the need to reflect the existential values of being urbane, gentle, wise, intelligent, and being well brought up as well as being highly cultured.

Whether a Yorùbá man or woman lived in the city or in the village, he or she is expected to demonstrate, in his or her dress, good breeding, as representative of his or her family, community, and race. He or she must possess items of dress that exhibited the inherent qualities of an *Omoluabi*, and also exhibited his or her intellectual refinement by ensuring that his or her dress conformed to this acceptable social standard. At home, using *Aso Isere*, or at work, using *Aso Ise*; every Yorùbá man and woman must exhibit not just her sex, age, and religious affiliation, but also family's social status. In social gathering, using *Aso Imurode*, which could be either *Aso Egbe'Joda* or *Aso Ebi*, he or she must adhere strictly to the expectation of Yorùbá people, which he or she was taught and brought up with.

Although item of dress such as facial marks and body arts were permanent, others such as hairstyles, beads, ornamental chains and rings, antimony, shoes, and bags were not. While those that were permanent were not subject to occasional change in fashion, others, irrespective of change in fashion, must conform to acceptable ethical and moral standard encapsulated in the concept of *Omoluabi*.

3.3. Conclusion

Although the provenance of dress in Yorubaland may be difficult to ascertain, it is however not subject to any debate that dress, whether narrowly or broadly conceived, had a longer antiquity in

Yorubaland and the view, many and varied in popular literature, that Yorùbá people, prior to the European contacts, dressed semi-nude is but wrong. As this chapter has shown, dress of different forms existed in Yorubaland before Euro-Asian contacts. *Ifa* corpus as well as many of the earliest European explorers, traders, and missionaries copiously recorded the splendor of Yorùbá indigenous dress that they found when they first came to Yorubaland.

The different professions, socio-political offices, and religions among the Yorùbá had dress that were specifically tied to them. While some of these have changed in forms and shapes today due to contacts, first, with the Arabs, through Islam, and later with the West through slave trade, Christianity, Western education and colonialism; some have remained marginally unchanged as shall be shown in the next two chapters.

As the analyses have shown, before contacts either with Islam or Christianity, indigenous Yorùbá dress, for males, comprised essentially of an *Agbada*, *Buba*, *Fila*, and *Sokoto* or a short knickers and a wrapper tied across the shoulder as a *Kaja*. For the females, a simple wrapper, which may, depending on age and status, cover the breast or not. These could be complemented with neck and wrists beads; antimony, henna, haircuts (for males) or plaited/weaved hair (for females). On the head, a cap (for males) or a shawl (for females) completed what can be termed 'indigenous' Yorùbá dress.

In addition to the above, it can be argued that, in pre-colonial times, Yorùbá dress, whether conceptualized narrowly to mean cloths or broadly to include other attachments, modifications, and supplements to the human body; aimed at presenting the dressed body (to both the self and others) in ways that evince pride in being a Yorùbá man or woman; established and reinforced individual and corporate identity of the Yorùbá people; and, above all considerations, outwardly projected an inward state of being an *Omoluabi*, where *Omoluabi*, the soul of Yorùbá peoplehood noted in Chapter Two, was essentially being well-behaved, well-dressed, lofty in speech and conduct, fashionable, urbane, etc.

