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## **Dress and identity in Yorubaland, 1880-1980**

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## Chapter Six

### The Politics of Power and Resistance in Yorùbá Dress

#### 6.0. Introduction

From the introduction, adoption, and diffusion of Islamic/Arabs' dress culture to the use of Christian/European dress, originally introduced to Yorubaland by returned ex-slaves and, later, as uniforms in the colonial native administration service and also in the church, emphasis is placed on the different dress cultures, which these different but mutually reinforcing socio-economic, political and cultural changes introduced into Yorubaland. The chapter examines how the Yorùbá people reacted to these 'new' dress cultures. For instance, while Oba Kosoko, among many others, was noted for wearing 'formal' European suit to high class Portuguese dinner in mid-19th century; Dr. Mojola Agbebi and Sapara Williams were icons in the agitation for Yorùbá dress and language during the same period.

As Chapter Four has shown, varieties of reasons drive dress-use. Generally speaking, dress-use could be for religious or secular reasons or the admixture of both. Whether for religious or secular use; Yorùbá dress possesses the innate quality of establishing, expressing, and reinforcing power both at the individual and group levels. Power, as this chapter will show, has been expressed in multiplicity of forms: power inherent in a particular dress, socio-economic and political power of dress-users, power associated with the especial circumstances necessitating the use of dress, etc. As far as the Yorùbá people are concerned, the totality of the above plays important roles in their personal conception and expression as individuals, and their collective expression and affiliation as a group. In this chapter, the study examines how Yorùbá people use dress to encapsulate and express power. The chapter looks at, among other things, how dress has become a locus of power through which individual and collective identities are expressed. It also examines how nudity, understood simply as state of 'not wearing cloth' has been used as a form of

protest 'dress', especially in politics and governance in Yorubaland.

Given the multi-layered changes orchestrated by Islam, Christianity and colonialism examined in the last chapter, this chapter looks the various ways Yorùbá people responded, especially as the responses contributed to how a people make meanings, develop consumption pattern, and make use of commodities as resources in the meaning making process. Two layers of responses were considered: political response, which was entirely dominated by the males, and the social, which was essentially dominated by the females. In all, the chapter not only show these various expressions of power symbolized by dress, but also the various ways the Yorùbá, as individual and as a people, have reacted to these varying expressions of power through dress.

### **6.1. Dress as Locus of Power**

For the Yorùbá, the spiritual and physical are intertwined. Events, phenomena, and everyday life are believed to possess both physical and spiritual components. Success or positive result in any of these is believed to have occurred either by luck or by the dominance of positive spiritual forces over the physical. Disease of any kind is believed to have both a physical and a spiritual component. While drugs and other physical care may result in a cure, it is believed that such cure only applies to the physical component of such ailment; only a spiritual solution can achieve a total cure and it is therefore prescribed and sought. More than anything else, spiritual cure is believed to be more efficacious than physical cure. For any physical cure to achieve a lasting result, it must be guided by the spiritual. It is believed that the spiritual controls the physical and, as such, getting a spiritual control of anything is a one-stop activity to attain success. Physical actions, for the most part, are regarded as mere palliative and not total actions that are capable of yielding tangible results.

Power, understood broadly as a person or a group's ability to carry out an action or a person or a group's ability to control other people or group and their activities, is both secular and spiritual in Yorùbá worldview. For the Yorùbá people, the greatest power is the spiritual power. Secular power, like those wield by political office-holders, is regarded as containing both a secular

component and a spiritual component. While the secular component is bestowed by communities; the deities, gods, and goddesses bestow spiritual power. Obas, chiefs, especially high chiefs, priests and priestesses, are believed to possess spiritual powers which are bestowed on them by the deities, gods, and goddesses. Others, who may have been appointed into office by the community, are believed to possess secular powers. More often than not, those that are regarded as holding spiritual powers often have hereditary offices, as the spiritual power associated with their offices are regarded as transferrable from father or mother to sons or daughters.

Some offices, such as those of kings, are believed to be both spiritual and secular. Kings, for instance, are members of all cults and esoteric bodies, whether open or secret. They are also patrons to all associations, clubs and guilds. Hence, the appellation, *Oba, oko ilu* - the king, the husband or father of the entire town – is a critical part of the kings' cognomen all over Yorubaland. Consequently, Yorùbá kings are, officially, members of all religions in Yorubaland even though they may have their personal religions.

In addition to the above, it must be emphasized that elaborate traditions and institutions exist everywhere in Yorubaland establishing and reinforcing this belief and ensuring its continuance. For instance, before a king is installed in Oyo, as in other Yorùbá communities, consultation and approval of the *Ifa* oracle must be sought and obtained. In addition, state gods, priests, and priestesses abound in all Yorùbá communities, and with the priests and priestess serving as media; the Obas and chiefs must consult these gods and goddesses on all important state affairs. In Ile-Ife, it is believed that deity-worship of different kind involving the *Ooni* takes place each day except for one day in a year. In addition to the above, the different deities, gods, and goddesses also inform the Obas and chiefs of any important oracular messages that may result occasionally or as the deities, gods, and goddesses may command. Hence, it could be said that there is a strong link between the secular and the religious in Yorubaland. This spiritual asset therefore affords and assures the Obas, chiefs, priests and priestesses' ready obedience of their subjects and devotees in all matters – religious and secular - as directives and

orders are taken as proceeding from the deities, gods, and goddesses.

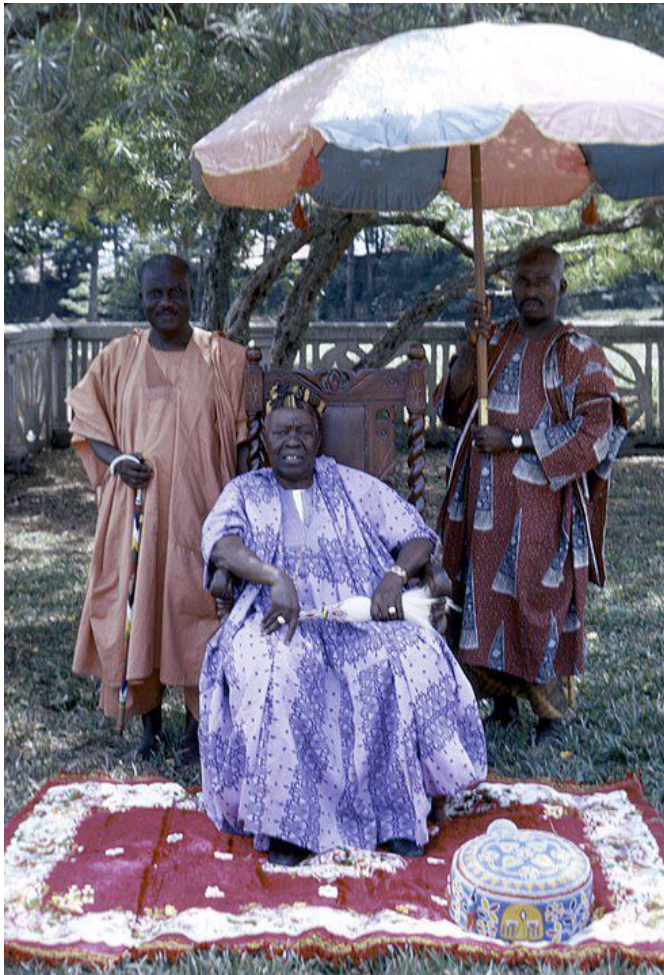
Intricately tied to the power of the Obas, chiefs, priests, and priestesses in Yorubaland is also their respective dress, as some of these items are regarded not just as dress items associated with their offices but also symbols of their authority, which aid their effective and efficient functioning as state officials. For the Obas, the crown is not just a head-dress with which a king is distinguished from other state officials, but also an instrument of office. The *Akun* beads decorate and beautify the chiefs just like the crown, but also serve the chiefs as an instrument of office without which a chief is not more than a mere commoner. As noted in chapter four, the role of an *Ad'osu Sango* is not solely to inter-mediate between worshippers and the deity, but also only an *Ad'osu* can stand before *Sango*. It must be re-emphasized that both farmers and hunters barb *Osu* hair style; hence, the strict adherence to *Osu* by *Sango* worshippers not only reinforces the belief in the deity, but also the primary importance *Sango* worshippers placed on the nexus between the deity, its worships, and its votaries.

This duality – spiritual and physical – manifests even in immaterial things. A hunter whose gun malfunctioned in the forest is expected to consult the oracle and to sacrifice to *Ogun*, the god of iron. When an apprentice driver is certified by his master to have mastered the skill well enough to be independent, such candidate is expected to sacrifice to *Ogun*. In contemporary Yorubaland, it is common to refer to dogs as *eran Ogun*, *Ogun's* meat, and also to sacrifice dogs to anything made of iron. The practice is premised on the belief that by giving *Ogun* his favorite meat, dog; good fortune is assured.

Similar belief is shared among the Yorùbá about dress. For the most part, the conceptualization of things, events and material things like dress not only recognizes this duality, but also respects it. In the specific case of dress, it must be asserted that while specific dress may be exclusively tied to the worship of specific gods, goddesses, and deities; others may be used simply in commemorating specific religious events. In most instances, dresses that are regarded as integral to religious worship are kept aside for just the religious worship. Whereas if a dress is just used

in religious ceremony, the same dress may also serve the individual or group as everyday dress.

Below is the photograph of a late King of Ile-Ife. 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 in the task of historical reconstruction are lacking. However, this criticism does not remove the fact that the photo illustrates different uses of Yorùbá dress.



**Ooni Adesoji Aderemi, 1971**  
(Sources: Palace Album, Enuwa, Ile-Ife)

In addition to the above, it must be noted that from cloth production to cloth usage; there are elaborate spiritual and secular ceremonies associated with the different stages or processes of dress-use. To illustrate this, the example of *ashigbo*, one of the five clothes use for funerary purposes in *Owo*, is considered below.

Although *ashigbo*, a cloth of black and white warp stripes of varying widths, is regarded as the most important funerary cloth in *Owo*, generally, the production of all the funerary cloths in *Owo* involves elaborate rituals, with specific demands and prescriptions placed on the cloth-weaver, his or her people, and the wearer. Soon after the death of the *Olowo* or any of the other important chiefs, funerary cloths must be commissioned. As part of the production processes; parts of the loom are carried shoulder-high by the women as (funeral) ceremonial accessories. In particular, the women carry the *apasaa*, beaters or swords, as they sing, dance, and parade around the city. Also as part of the production processes, the women's clothes are folded and, as they go along the street, the clothes are pounded rhythmically to serve as accompaniment for women's singing groups.

Historically, *Ashigbo* was brought to *Owo* by a slave woman captured by the *Ugwaba*, who was a sub-chief of *Sashere*, the war chief of *Owo*.<sup>427</sup> Today, both families - the families of the *Ugwaba* and *Sashere* - share ownership rights to *ashigbo*. Although other people in *Owo* may weave and use *ashigbo*, permission must be sought and obtained from the *Ugwaba* and *Sashere* families and the proper fees and rituals are performed.

To ask for the permission, the cloth-weavers must bring their beaters or swords with elaborate dancing to the *Sashere* family. All those who will participate in the weaving must accompany the head of the household to the *Sashere* house, dancing and singing. In addition to these, the family of the deceased must present the *Sashere* family with 200 each of the following items: plantains, bean cakes, sticks of sugar cane, eggs, kola-nuts, and numerous other things.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Historically, Chief *Sashere* was one of the greatest war chiefs in ancient *Owo*.

<sup>428</sup> Frank Willett, 'On the funeral Effigies of *Owo* and *Benin* and the Interpretation of the Life-size Bronze Heads from *Ife*, *Nigeria*', *Man*, 1:1, (1966), 34-35.



At the Sashere house, the deceased family would inform the *Sashere* family that: “*In seventeen days’ time I shall be using ashigbo.*” This would be repeated three times and positive answers must be received three times before permission is believed to have been granted. If the response to the request was positive three times, then, the family head of the deceased’s household presses his palms against the wall of the Sashere house saying: “*As the wall stands, so must I stand with Sashere and Ugwaba.*” By so doing, the family has pledged their loyalty and (political) support for these two chiefs.

After obtaining the consent of the Sashere family head or chief, the thread to be used in making the cloth is divided among the several generations of weavers in the family. It is after this is done that the actual weaving of the cloth can begin. In total, the work must be done over a nine-day period. During these nine days, the weavers must be clean, spiritually and physically. To be clean spiritually and physically, they must avoid sexual intercourse with their husbands; must not menstruate, must always bathe before touching the cloth, must ensure that the courtyard where the weaving takes place is scrubbed daily, etc.

All through the nine days, the deceased family must ensure regular supply of food to the weavers. Foods regarded as *sine-qua-non* to *ashigbo* production include yams, plantains, corn, sugar cane, antelope meat, bean cakes, etc. All food must be freshly prepared and foods that were prepared the previous day must not be eaten by the weavers. In addition to these requirements, the weavers must stage daily processions around the town, singing and dancing.

To ensure conformity to standard, the females of the house of Sashere must visit the house of the deceased and the weavers on the seventh day. If the weaving does not meet the required standard or if any of the ritual prohibitions have been violated, the Sashere women may slash the fabric from the looms. If it meets their approval, they return to the Sashere, who gives the final approval for the use of the *ashigbo*. Once the final approval to use the cloth has been given by the Sashere, the women, once again, take to the streets rejoicing, dancing, and singing.

Where permission is not given for the cloth production (or where the weaving fails to pass the test of standardization), and the

deceased family decided to proceed with the cloth production or where no attempt was made to seek and obtain the permission of these two families before the cloth was made, the family of *Sashere* reserves the rights to deal with the culprits as they see fit and the cloth may be confiscated. Given the above production procedure and rituals, wearers of *ashigbo* are treated with veneration, and no *ashigbo* wearer may prostrate before another person, not even before the *Olowo*.<sup>429</sup>

Another dimension of power of dress deals with belief that major centers of dress production are imbued with spiritual essence and that the very act of dress making is controlled by the deities, gods, and goddesses. As such dress is considered to have shared in the spiritual powers and qualities of the various deities, gods, and goddesses associated with these centers. For instance, tie-and-dye, which is the major craft in Abeokuta and Oshogbo, and through which most of Yorùbá dress is made, is believed to be controlled by *Orisa Osun*, *Iya Mopo*, and *Obalufon*. These two goddess and deity are believed to be behind the dexterity in crafts and dress-making by men and women all over Yorubaland.

Oshogbo's eponymous name, *Oshogbo ilu aro, oroki asala*<sup>430</sup>, reveals two important things about Oshogbo. One, it is believed to be the birthplace of tie and dye and it could be argued that the production of tie and dye spread from Oshogbo to other Yorùbá towns and cities, especially as no other Yorùbá towns and cities is given similar appellation. The second thing in the eponymous name is Oshogbo's place as a city of refuge, especially for displaced people, fugitive and criminals.

The story of the founding of Oshogbo is also illustrative of the role of Oshogbo in dress-making in general. The story was told that a certain Laro, accompanied by the hunter, Timenyin, set out from Ile-Ife to find water for their people at a time of great drought and they came to a lush river surrounded by much vegetation and many trees. Laro and Timenyin considered the place an ideal location to settle their people and began clearing the bush and cutting down the trees. One of the trees fell across the river and, as

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>430</sup> Joni L. Jones, 'Performing Osun without Bodies: Documenting the Osun Festival in Print', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 17 (1997), 73.

it fell, a voice rose from the river, the voice of Osun, saying, among other things, “*You bad people! You have broken all my pots of dye! You have spilled them all!*”<sup>431</sup> Osun therefore warned them to move away from her territory to a not too distant place near the river. She promised to reward them with abundance and protection should they do this. She argued that they would be disturbing her solitude should they stay at the river bank. She ordered that, in turn for protection and abundance, they have to worship her yearly at the river bank. Laro and Timeyen agreed and Oshogbo was born.<sup>432</sup>

It was believed that tie and dye was first introduced to the Oshogbo women by Osun after their settlement, and that the spread of the craft was as a result of trade relations, labour migration (in and out of Oshogbo), and craft training.<sup>433</sup>

In yet another account, *Iya Moopo*, the ancient supreme trinity of the female, which bore the totemic features of *Iyamowo*, *Iyaloode*, and Nana Ibukun, was believed to be the patron goddess of all female’s crafts and trades. Represented by the *Edon*, the sacred bronze casting, *Iya Moopo*, holds one child close to her breast while tying the other one on her back with a sash and with the child’s head downward and the feet pointing upward. *Iya Moopo* is a potter woman, reputable for moulding forms around pre-existing holes or spaces. The story is told about Orisa Ajagemo, whose core ritual takes place in Ede. Ajagemo was said to have seen a potter woman at work and painfully asked: “*Which is older, the pot or the hole inside it?*” The simple answer given by the potter woman was: “*Don’t ask what you know: it is the hole.*”<sup>434</sup>

To *Iya Moopo*, all bodies are pots and form is a latter addition. In Yorùbá cosmogony, the potter-wheel, which is represented by the navel, stands still while the potter woman circles round it with all her body in controlled relaxation preserving the idea of form. *Iya Moopo* is also in-charge of all women’s trades, childbearing and birth. She is consequently a sister to another deity, *Iyemowo* and close to *Odu* with thought and

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid, 75.

word formation. She is a cotton spinner and weaver (cloth and hair) as she also cooks (black) soap and palm-oil. In addition and more absurd, she is also the patron goddess of robbers and thieves as she is the owner of the indigo dye, which is black and obscure in darkness.<sup>435</sup>

Far and above *Osun* and *Iya Moopo* is *Obalufon*, the legendary early ruler of Ile-Ife who is credited with the invention of brass-casting. *Obalufon*, in consonance with the *Ogboni*, are the principal patrons of the arts in Yorubaland, especially brass-casting, bead-works and cloth-weaving. *Obalufon*, who ruled Ile-Ife briefly before he was deposed, resumed his rule after intense battle with Oranmiyan. The peace that characterised his second tenure and his death was so eventful that it not only gave the inhabitants the enabling environment to practice their crafts, but also enabled the *Ogboni*, which was believed to have been founded under *Obalufon*, to flourish and gain legitimacy and considerable power at the palace. Their arts – bronze-casting, weaving (hair and cloths) and bead-works – flourished during this period that there is no mentioning of any of these without any reference to *Obalufon* and the *Ogboni* in Yorùbá history.

*Obalufon*, like other kings in Yorubaland, was deified at his death. Idowu noted that *Obalufon* is one of the divinities worshipped at Ile-Ife and all over Yorubaland, but that rather than being a god, *Obalufon* began as an ancestor.<sup>436</sup> Although Ile-Ife remains the most important center for the worship of *Obalufon*, however the dispersal of *Obalufon* worship, unlike *Osun* and *Iya Moopo* which followed trade, was as a result of dispersal from Ile-Ife. In the first place, when *Obalufon* was dethroned during his first reign in Ile-Ife, he fled to the Ekiti areas where he is referred to and worshipped variously as *Obalifon*, *Abalufon*, *Abalifon*, etc. After his death, his descendants were believed to have migrated from Ile-Ife to many other places, where they set-up shrines for the worship of their father. Among many other places, places where they settled and where *Obalufon* is worshipped today include Ido-Osun, near Oshogbo; Isesa, Igbokiti, Igbo Oyao, Ido Osun, Ijebu, Sagamu, etc.

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid, 75.

Although *Obalufon* is known majorly as the divinity in-charge of war and peace; he is however the patron gods of bronze-casters, bead-makers, and weavers (cloth and hair) all over Yorubaland.

From the above, it can be argued that from Oshogbo to Ekiti, Ondo to Ilorin, *Osun*, *Iya Mopo*, and *Obalufon* are believed to be the goddesses and deity in-charge of tie and dye, bronze-casting, bead-works, weaving, pottery making, etc. Invariably, the worship of these goddesses and deity is common in the major center for the production of *Adire*, *Ofi*, *Alari*, *Ide*, etc.

It must be added that the worship of gods, goddesses and deities associated with dress-production is not limited to these three; elaborate worship is offered to *Olokun*, *Sango*, *Ogun*, *Oya*, among many others. Robert Farris Thompson, writing about the relationship between *Obalufon* and bead-making, noted that like other men desirous of being noticed, *Obalufon* invented the beads and strung them in different colours on bracelets and necklaces so that gods, and men who follow them, might stand in proud distinction in a crowd. Although *Obalufon* is credited with bead-making, it must be however noted that beadwork is often associated with *Olokun*.<sup>437</sup>

One of the factors determining which of the gods, goddesses, and deities is deserving of worship in relation to any dress is the relationship between these god, goddesses, and deities and the implements or tools used in the production of such dress. For instance, *Ogun*, earlier mentioned, is important not only to hunters and blacksmiths, but also farmers, weavers, and bronze-casters. This is so because all the implements or tools used by these professions depend on iron tools. As such, each centers of dress production have gods, goddesses and deities associated with their crafts and these divinities enjoyed daily and periodic worship in return for success and dexterity in the production of the different crafts.

The Yorùbá people also believe that there is a tenuous link between individuals' spirituality and his or her physical materials. Oba Oyewale Matanmi III described it in these words:

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<sup>437</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art at UCLA*, (Los Angeles, 1976), 1-8.

*I found it difficult to separate the two. The physical materials enhanced the spiritual and the spiritual is deepened by the physical materials. Traditional religion is also your culture. It is a synthesis of culture and religion. The physical is one continuous though physical materials melds culture and religion or the physical materials and spiritual ones together; thereby making physical materials and spiritual ones inseparable.*<sup>438</sup>

Owing to the above, it is believed that individuals' dresses are imbued with their spiritual essences and, as such, the Yorùbá would rather burn an old cloth than give such cloth out to other people, especially when these are not members of the same immediate family. Religious votaries, herbalists, seers, and diviners believe in the potency of their dresses so much so that the presence of the dresses is believed to confer potency on any action being undertaken and also confirm the presence of specific deities, gods, and goddesses in any event. In most cases, kings and chiefs are believed to be physically present not because they may have one or two person representing them at a ceremony, but when one of their instruments of office, such as the staff, the crown, or the king's wife, is in attendance.

Another dimension to this is that the different deities, gods, and goddesses have specific colour and other dress items that are culturally assigned to them. While red colour is regarded as Ogun's colour, black is considered as Sango's colour. White belongs to *Osun*, *Olokun*, *Obatala*, etc. While devotees of any of the deities, gods, and goddesses may use any colour for their secular enterprises, they are duty-bound to use the colour of dress that is associated with their specific deities, gods, and goddesses for religious ceremonies. However, in secular existence, black is synonymous with death, sadness, and sorrow. Red is synonymous with life and vitality while other bright colours are also imbued with different other meanings. Notwithstanding this, black and red are regarded as also symbol of age. So, it is common to find in some Yorùbá communities red and black dress been venerated.

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<sup>438</sup> Joni L. Jones, "'Performing Osun without bodies', 83-84.

In some cases, diviners, seers, and herbalists often prescribed the use of certain dress by worshippers to propitiate the gods and goddesses. Black dress is used mainly for funeral, although cults and secret societies also use black dress. Funerary rites, especially of members of secret societies and cults, involve the wearing and displaying of dresses of different colour, with black as the predominant colour. In this way, the Yorùbá differentiates between religious dress and secular dress. Religious dress is believed to have imbibed the spiritual power of the deities, gods, and goddesses and is, as such, treated with reverence.

Among the *Ogboni*, *Oososi*, and other secret societies and cults in Yorubaland, specific dress is regarded as exclusive to the societies and cults. For instance, no other person can use the *Itagbe*, no matter how highly placed or wealthy. In addition to the above, it must be noted also that some dress are forbidden to people on account of religion. For instance, beads, such as *kele*, *sese-efun*, and many others are exclusively used by Sango and Osun worshippers. While these may not have been codified, they were mutually intelligible cultural norms among the Yorùbá.

From the above, power is located in dress in two distinct ways: power inherent in a particular dress due to its close association with a particular deity, gods, and goddesses; or power associated with exclusive utilization of certain dress. While priests and priestesses of deities, gods, and goddesses may use dress that are exclusive to their deities, gods, and goddesses and therefore are separated from other worshippers and believers; both the votaries and the worshippers may use dress that are considered as laden with spiritual powers.

Although no written sumptuary laws existed anywhere in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Yorubaland, however, there existed culturally imposed sumptuary laws, which aimed at controlling excessive dressing. Adages such as '*Ibere osi, bi oloro ni ri; ti wo aso ile r'oko*' (It is poverty that forces a poor man to wear his best cloths to the farm); '*Eni ti ko se bi alaarú l'Oyingbo, ko le se bi Adegboro l'Oja Oba*' (He that would not labour at Oyingbo market, would not purchase anything at King's Market); '*O wu imado ko se bi elede, iwo ori re ni koje*', '*Dandogo ko ja abi nu da*', etc. are pointers to the need to dress according to one's station in life and according to societal bounds of decorum. However, it

must be noted that in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ibadan, *Are Latosisa*, (also spelt as *Latosia*) the ruler of Ibadan of the period, attempted to introduce sumptuary laws by forbidding every other person except himself from using velvet and some other costly items of clothing. The story is told of a certain aberrant Ife soldier, also at Ibadan, who defied *Latosisa* and was, consequently, banished. It must be pointed out that this lone example can be arrogated to the confused state of things necessitated by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Yorùbá civil wars and the military nature of Ibadan itself.

Custom forbids irresponsible dressing in Yorubaland, as the above adages have shown. As noted in the previous chapter, the use of dress during ceremonies also reflects the power dynamics associated with dress. For instance, the use of *Aso Ebi* and *Aso Egbe 'Joda* may serve the purpose of differentiating the celebrants, his or her immediate nuclear and extended families, as well as his or her circle of friends; it also shows what power individuals wield as members of groups.

## **6.2. Nudity as Dress in Yorubaland**

Common to almost all groups and peoples in Africa is the fact that nudity is also regarded as dress and it is employed, most especially by the females, as a counter-check to male's socio-political dominance. Nudity, understood simply as the condition of being nude or being semi-nude, is used sometimes as a form of protest dress deployed as a tool of last resort in engaging with political power dominated by the male-folks.

Nudity as dress takes two forms: (i) as a political tool, usually wielded by the females, to ensure that the political class accede to a particular request, not necessarily requests made by the female folks, but those made by the generality of the society, especially when there is a stalemate between popular demands and political class' preferences; (ii) as a sign of sacredness of the human body. Here oath-taking and other (sacred or) religious activities, which placed unflinching importance on honesty, chastity, truthfulness, and absolute loyalty on the females are involved. For the most part, in establishing cases of adultery, a woman may be compelled to dance naked before a shrine. This often occurs when material evidence points to the woman as being guilty. So, in order to establish her innocence, such a woman may



be asked to dance naked before the shrine. In some instances, women have, uncompelled, strip naked before the deity, gods, or goddesses as a way of establishing their innocence. At yet another level, parents often threaten to or actually strip before their children, most especially when such children are incorrigible and behave, almost inconsolably, errantly. This is regarded as a curse in Yorubaland. The essence of such a practice is to force the erring children to adjust.

Historically, Yorùbá women have traditionally used access to and denial of their bodies as a form of protest for generations. In some cases, many used the threat or actual act of nakedness/undress or denial of sexual/conjugal relation as a form of tool for effective political engagement with the male.

In traditional Yorùbá society, it is a vote of no confidence passed by the female folks on the male folks and not just the wielders of power in the society; hence, the wielders of power are expected to vacate the throne. Other males in the society must ensure that this is done within seven days of the nude protests.

In pre-colonial Oyo Empire and prior to Bashorun Gaa's death, women of Oyo-Ile protested naked to show their rejection of Gaa's bestial rule. Bashorun Gaa, it must be noted, was not the Alaafin; he was the Head of the Oyo-Mesi, the seven most powerful chiefs who were responsible for installing and removing the Alaafin. Gaa's emergence as the head of the state was associated with his power and political influence. He manipulated his ways such that no Alaafin was installed and he acted as the Alaafin until his death. Gaa was a veritable terror, as such even after the nude protest by Oyo women; no one could face him to ask him to abdicate the throne. It took the young Alaafin-designate, Prince Abiodun and outside helps to rid the state of Gaa and ensure his coronation, as the people will.

In order words, nude protest was one of the extreme checks and balances put in place by the indigenous people to check arbitrary rule by the king in Old-Oyo. It must be noted that it is not in all cases where nude protests were carried out that the king must abdicate the throne. In most cases, the women themselves expressed the focus of their protests and agitation. The king is expected to ensure fulfillment of these desires, if not, he is expected to abdicate the throne, as the mothers of the state have, by

their action, pronounced the king as enemy of the state. So, it would be foolhardiness to allow any issue to degenerate into a situation whereby nude protests had to be staged before any Yorùbá king would know the general will. The state intelligence mechanism must be alert to state affairs and how the people are responding to them. Hence, the saying: '*Eti Oba, ni Ile, Eti Oba l' Oko; Eniyan lo nje be*' or '*Oba, abi eti lu kara bi ajere*' (state intelligence is insidious).

Nude protest as a measure to de-legitimize state power is not common in African history. In fact, no state could bear it, as it was considered a thing of shame and a taboo. As gathered in Ekiti, nude protest derived from a cultural milieu which regarded woman's nakedness as a virtue not only of the woman or her husband but also of her community. Hence, virginity is celebrated to the highest degree not only by brides on their wedding nights but also by the bride's immediate relations – parents, brothers, sisters, and community. Consequently, nude protest is treated as rape and sexual violence, an insult or assault not only on the woman but also on the community where she came from.

To illustrate with another example, in Apomu, a market town bordering Ile-Ife, a disagreement over the price of alligator pepper between one Owu man, Akogun, and an Ijebu female trader degenerated into an open fight. In the process, the trader's clothes loosened and she was stalk naked in the market. Other Ijebu persons in the market rose up to defend the naked Ijebu woman, as the act was translated as an insult not only on the woman but also on the Ijebu State. The fight was fierce and long. The Ijebu woman, who was pregnant, sustained mortal injury and died. On realizing that the woman was dead, other Ijebu people in the market abandoned their wares and fled to Ijebu Ode to report that the Owu were killing Ijebu people in Apomu. A war was raised not only by the Ijebu but by the entire Yorubaland against Owu. Owu was consequently sacked and an interdict was placed on it never to be inhabited again. While it could be argued that other issues added-up to the cause of the war against the Owu, it must be noted that Owu would have escaped punishment for its earliest actions if not for the case of the woman. Hence, the unwrapping of female body under abnormal circumstances deviates from the established

norm that such action is regarded as an aberration, which, if it involves another group, wars are usually declared.

In the 1930s, members and supporters of the Abeokuta Women's Union in Yorubaland walked naked in protest of the Alake of Abeokuta's political actions. Consequent upon this action, the *Oba* was forced to abdicate the throne and went on exile.

Between 1920 and 1936, Abeokuta, like other Yorùbá towns and cities, was integrated into the international economy both as an exporter of cash crops and an importer of manufactured products. It became one of the primary producing areas of cocoa and kola nuts in western Nigeria.<sup>439</sup> Abeokuta's integration into the international economy had a profound effect on its local textile industry. As weavers gained access to European threads and dyers gained access to European cloth, relations of production were transformed. Both sets of producers became dependent on European trading firms for their raw materials and were thus brought squarely into the nexus of international trade. Dyeing, which was predominantly a women's industry, benefited substantially from this economic relationship. Dyers' access to cloth as well as credit from the European firms allowed them to become autonomous producers of tie-dyed cloth, *adire*, which was in great demand across Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Senegal and the Belgian Congo.

From the mid-1920s onward, the *adire* industry experienced a dramatic decline which was largely shaped by falling commodity prices and the cycles of recession and depression that characterized the years between the First and Second World Wars. The prolonged economic crisis redefined the social and economic world of dyers and dyeing. Competing social groups, such as European traders and Egba men, used privileges based on class and gender to enhance or protect their economic position. As a result, dyers were left vulnerable and the gains they

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<sup>439</sup> B. A. Agiri, "Kola in western Nigeria, 1850-1950: A History Of the Cultivation of Cola Nitida in Egba-Owode, Ijebu-Remo, Iwo and Ota Areas" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1972), and Sara Berry, *Cocoa, Custom and Socio-Economic Change in Rural Western Nigeria* (Oxford, 1975).

had made as producers and women since the end of the nineteenth century became increasingly threatened. Conflicts also surfaced among dyers as those who shared the privilege of age and wealth tried to assert their control over the industry.

The most far-reaching initiative was the incorporation of new technologies, caustic soda and synthetic dyes, which had a dramatic impact on the dyeing industry. It exacerbated old tensions and created new ones while allowing dyers to increase production and cut costs. As the crisis deepened, many realized that these efforts did not improve their economic situation and called on the local government to intervene. Even without the dyers' encouragement, the Alake, the head of the local government, was motivated to take action because of consumer complaints about the quality of Abeokuta's *adire*.<sup>440</sup>

As the crisis deepened and the industry floundered, it became clear that individual approaches were hurting more than they were helping. As early as 1925, some dyers turned to the Alake, requesting help to regulate the industry.<sup>441</sup> The European firms also approached the Alake at the same time to encourage him to intervene in the industry. In the matter, the king was helpless, as he had to do the biddings of not just the European traders but also those of the colonial government, both of which ran counter to the wishes of the Abeokuta women. The Alake could not take action against the trading firms, but he could take action against the dyers. He, at the urging of the Resident, banned the use of caustic

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<sup>440</sup> In 1898, the Lagos governor helped restructure the Egba political system and centralized power in the Alake, one of the town's four senior kings. The Alake in theory ruled in consultation with a Council comprised of the other senior kings, military and non-military titled men. This structure was largely retained when Abeokuta lost its independence in 1914. See Agneta Pallinder-Law, 'Government in Abeokuta 1830-1914: with special reference to the Egba United Government, 1898-1914', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Goteborg University, 1973). For more on the pre-colonial Egba political structure see Saburi Biobaku, 'An Historical Sketch of Egba Traditional Authorities', *Africa*, vol. XXII (1952), 35-49, and Saburi Biobaku, *The Egba and Their Neighbours, 1842-1872* (Oxford, 1957).

<sup>441</sup> No copy of the minutes of this meeting exist anymore, however, mention was made of it in the public meeting with the Adire dyers on 29 July 1927. Report of the Public Meeting of the Adire Women, 29 July 1927, Egba Administration Bulletin, 31 August 1927, 106.

soda in an attempt to regulate the trade. The ban, rather than alleviating the pains of the traders, exacerbated it and the women refused to obey the ban. Desirous of enforcing his rule; the Alake summoned a meeting with the women, with the Resident in attendance. The Alake not only insulted and cajoled the women to obey the ban, but also went as far as calling the women stubborn and lazy, 'unlike our industrious mothers of old'.<sup>442</sup> He likened them to a son who refused to heed his father's direction and was therefore on the road to ruin. The Resident, who was also present, compared the adire industry to the goose that laid the golden egg, and suggested that dyers were like the town's people in the fable who, overcome by their greed and selfish interest, killed the goose.<sup>443</sup>

Despite all the intimidation and cajoling, the women refused to obey the Alake. In reaction, on 12 February 1936, police began to arrest the dyers in large numbers and confiscated their cloths. On the following day, 1,500 dyers marched to the palace. During their confrontation, the Alake ordered the women to comply with the law and stop holding meetings about the issues. Yet, once again they ignored his orders. They continued to meet, and to do so without the senior chiefs from their quarters. Instead, they hired several male letter-writers and lawyers to represent them.<sup>444</sup> As these men began the process of publicizing the dyer's grievances, the Chief Secretary of the Government tried to downplay the dispute, but his efforts were hampered by the numerous letters and petitions the dyers' lawyers sent to each branch of government and the press.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), ECR 1/1/42, vol. II, Extract from Egba Native Authority's Minutes of Council Meeting, 8 Aug. 1935, 1.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>444</sup> Their representatives are Oladipo Somoye, a former clerk for UAC; M. A. Egberongbe, a former clerk for one of the Native Courts and John Holt and Co.; J. K. Doherty, a disbarred lawyer from Abeokuta; and William Geary, an English lawyer practicing in Lagos. See National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), ECR I/1/46, Letter from Resident to Secretary, Southern Provinces, 24th Apr. 1936.

<sup>445</sup> National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), CSO 28400, vol. 1, Letter from Somoye to the Chief Secretary to the Government, 6 Mar. 1936; see also National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), CSO 28400, vol. 1, Letter from Geary to the Chief Secretary to the Government, 20 Apr. 1936.

By April, it was quite clear that the dyers were not going to abide by Alake's ruling. In order to resolve the conflict, one side had to shift ground for the other. Either the Alake had to accept the women's claims that the new technologies were not the problem and lift the ban, or the women had to accept the Alake's rights to act unilaterally. Once it was obvious that the Alake was not ready to yield, the women took to the street naked; demanding that the Alake should abdicated the throne, as he had become not just ineffectual, but a stooge of a foreign power, which made him to rule against the wishes of his people. Although protected by the colonial government, the Alake however understood that his reign had ended, as the women had deployed the sacred, traditional tool against him.

The most recent women's involvement in political protest and struggle in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigeria is the Ekiti Women for Peace nude protest of 29<sup>th</sup> April 2009. Following the nullification of the electoral victory of Mr. Segun Oni of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party at the Electoral Petition Tribunal, the Ekiti people were set for a re-run election in ten wards. Few weeks to the election, politicians from different parts of Nigeria converged on Ekiti to ensure adequate preparation for the re-run election. As the day of the re-run drew closer, the atmosphere became tense, as the ruling party and its main contender, the Action Congress Party, jostled for support. Midway into the election, the Resident Electoral Officer, Mrs. Aduke Adebayo, disappeared and the process was halted. Government initially reported that she took ill. Later, she sent in a resignation letter purporting that she was not ill but that she went underground as she was being forced to declare an unpopular candidate, which was against the wishes of Ekiti people, as expressed in the voting, and her conscience, as a Christian. For resigning and going underground; the police declared her wanted.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2009, half-naked Ekiti women marched on the streets of Ado-Ekiti and other parts of the state to protest an alleged attempt to subvert the electoral will of the people. They deplored the delay in announcing the winner of the April 25 governorship election rerun. They invoked the spirits of their ancestors against those "*who planned to announce the loser of the*

*election as the winner.*”<sup>446</sup> The peaceful protest by the placard-carrying women, under the aegis of Ekiti Women for Peace, paralyzed traffic on the major streets of Ado-Ekiti. Some of their placards read: “INEC, Announce Election Result Now”, “Prof Iwu, Be Warned”, “We Salute Mrs. Ayoka Adebayo’s Courage”, “Dr. Fayemi Won, No Magomago”, “Iwu, Stop Your Antics”, “VP Jonathan, Stop Your Imposition”, “Ayoka Adebayo, Heroine of Democracy” and “Prof Iwu, Fear God”<sup>447</sup>, among others.

The women, numbering about 300, and comprising of young mothers, school girls and aged women, also sang:



### **Nude Protest in Ekiti**

(Sources, *The Nation Newspaper*, 30 April, 2009)

*“Magbe, magbe o,  
Ibo Fayemi ko see gbe,  
Magbe, magbe”*

(Don’t steal it, don’t steal it,

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<sup>446</sup> ‘Women Protest’, *Nation Newspaper*, 30 April, 2009, 1, 2.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

Fayemi's votes cannot be stolen,  
Don't steal it, don't steal it.)

*"Mayi, mayi o,  
Ibo Fayemi ko see yi,  
Mayi, mayi"*

(Don't manipulate it, don't manipulate it,  
Fayemi's votes cannot be manipulated,  
Don't manipulate it, don't manipulate it.)

Majority of the protesters wore white apparel and held white handkerchiefs, and their hair was uncovered. They said the Action Congress (AC) candidate, Dr. Kayode Fayemi, won the election and demanded that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should declare him as the winner.

The nude protest was organized by a group comprising of women from all the 16 local government areas in Ekiti State. They were led by the President of Ekiti Women for Peace, Mrs. Ronke Okusanya, herself. Also in the group was the wife of the AC candidate, Mrs. Olabisi Fayemi and the Governorship candidate's running mate, Mrs. Funmilayo Olayinka. According to Mrs. Okusanya, the women decided to go half-naked to press home the demand for the sanctity of their votes.<sup>448</sup> She added that the protest was a warning to election riggers and manipulators of the electoral will of the people that they could no longer get away with fraud.

While the outcome of the election is of secondary concern to this paper, it must be noted that Mrs. Aduke Adebayo later resurfaced, recanted her earlier position and declared the PDP candidate as the winner of the election. Notwithstanding this development, the Ekiti women's nude-protest re-enacted an age-old practice of unwrapping as a form of (en) gendering civil protest in Nigeria. While many people have berated these women as over-sentimentalizing the issue, others have argued that such action portends great danger for Nigeria and democratic growth in the nation.

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<sup>448</sup> Interview with Mrs. Okusanya, Ado-Ekiti, 30 April, 2009.



In June 2002, hundreds of women, whose ages ranged between 20 and 90, overran oil producing facilities in Nigeria's Niger-Delta to demand for safer environment and development in the region. Similarly, in 2006, female South African prisoners staged a naked protest to prevent prison authorities from relocating them to another prison facility. On May 7, 2009, female pensioners in Oyo State, Nigeria also planned a naked protest against the Oyo State government's continual refusal to pay pensions and gratuities.

As these representative examples have shown, Yorùbá women have traditionally used their bodies as a tool deployed in protest for generations. Wrapping and unwrapping of human bodies has been used as unconventional tools in the expression of dissents among Nigerians, especially women.

Among the Yorùbá, nude protest is also regarded as a form of sexual violence. The perpetrators are both the people whose actions or inactions might have caused the women to embark on such decision and the onlookers. Traditionally, the onlookers are also guilty by association. Customarily, they were expected to also go naked in solidarity with the women's course. Hence, the streets and markets in Ado-Ekiti were quickly deserted, as no one wants to be considered as a perpetrator of such heinous crime against, most of all, aged mothers. In the same way as the prison facility in South Africa and laboratory in Kenya were abandoned. For the women, therefore, nude protest is an asymmetric strategy aimed at forcing the target of the action to accede to their wills as well as forcing onlookers to compel the powerful to accede to the wills of the powerless. Nude protest happens only in a mutually intelligible cultural milieu that values women sexuality as a property, which must be cherished and upheld. Failure to accede to the demands of the nude protesters is regarded as rape and sexual assault whose imports are not limited to the actual victims, the women, but also the entire communities whose values are brought into disrepute.

Naked protest derived from the general belief that women's bodies, most notably those of aged-women, young and old mother, are to be revered. As such, it is a taboo for a woman, and particularly a married or older woman, to choose to disrobe in public in reaction to a social/political situation. As already shown, Aba Women protested naked in 1929, so also members and

supporters of the Abeokuta Women's Union, who walked naked on the streets of Abeokuta in protest of the Alake's political actions and forced him into exile in 1949. Essentially, the practice is not peculiar to Nigeria alone, as in 2001, a team of scientists abandoned their research after naked Kenyan women descended on their facility. In another development, female politicians called on Kenyan women, most especially wives to deny their husband access to their bodies until certain political actions were taken. This "sex ban" also extended to commercial sex-workers, as the wife of Kenya's Prime Minister also consented to the ban and women's groups paid prostitutes to turn down clients. Similarly, in 2006, female South African prisoners staged a *setshwetla* - naked protest - to prevent their relocation to another prison facility. It goes without saying that bodies, whether wrapped or unwrapped, hold particular meanings to Africans. What does nude-protest and breast-barring mean to Nigerians and under what context must it be understood? Under what circumstances did women, prior to the Ekiti case, use nudity to express political preferences and why? In this section, the study shall attempt to answer all these and other questions as well as put together African's belief about naked protest.

Nude protest, whether in Ekiti or Nairobi, signifies women's voice, especially in the face growing denial in the political process. Hence, it could be described as the weapon of the weak in the face of continued injustice by/of the powerful. Women, as it is generally believed, can unwrap either when bathing or in the inner recesses of their homes with their husbands, as part of their conjugal duties to their husbands. Hence, only insanity and conquest associated with war would warrant a sane woman to unwrap in the public. Under any other circumstances, unwrapping by women in full public glare could therefore be an indirect protest against an imposed situation. Among the Yorùbá, it is the worst form of protest, as it signifies that the state is perpetrating a war against its own people and the people, by protesting nude, they are declaring themselves as being captured as in a situation of war and molested in the full glare of the public by making public what should remain in the private domain. It signifies absolute lack of confidence in the state and whoever holds power in the state is expected to abdicate the throne. As noted by

Mrs. Fayemi, the recent nude protest in Ekiti State derived from the need to let the women's voices be heard, it is premised on people's belief that it is a "*taboo to see the naked body of an old woman in the public. These women are protesting against the injustice in the land and they are insisting that their votes must count*".<sup>449</sup>

Nude protest, without doubt, is an ancient culture that is not restricted to Yorubaland or Nigeria alone. However, its re-enactments, whether in Nigeria, Kenya or elsewhere, in contemporary Africa is premised on the fact that political accountability is lacking in most countries in Africa. In pre-colonial Africa, kings derived their powers from the consent of their people. Hence, nude protest was one of the ways through which a pre-colonial polity could be delegitimized. Other measures abound, but nude protest was considered shameful and a taboo. Its power lies on what could be termed its 'shame-value'. It was considered a thing of shame and moral irresponsibility to be deposed. As such, no king could endure, let alone, survive nude protest. Hence, kings, more often than not, ensured that any decision that could elicit such response are withdrawn or reversed with immediate effect.

As the Yorùbá puts it:

*Oba to je, ti Ilu tu;*

*Oba to je, ti Ilu toro;*

*Oruko won ko ni parun.*

(The King, in whose reign the city is in disorder;  
The King, in whose reign the city is peaceful;  
His name shall never be forgotten.)

The import of the above is that any king in whose time disorder reigns would not only be deposed, but his generations would also be prevented from ruling again. As a people, the indigenous Yorùbá people were conscious of their place in history and, as such, placed so much value on how history would remember them.

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<sup>449</sup> 'Women Protest', *Nation Newspaper*, 30 April, 2009, 1, 2.

### 6.3. Dress in Nigeria's Nationalist Discourse

As noted in Chapter Five, the Christian mission imposed European culture, most especially in dress and language, on the Yorùbá vis-à-vis other Nigerian peoples. In Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan, missionaries imposed European dress on the converts, arguing that any convert who still wore his or her native dress, is not a genuine Christian. So, the likes of Pastor R. H. Stone mandated converts in his church to wear shirt and trousers as marks of Christianity and civilization. Almost as this was happening, the colonial administrators also introduced the use of uniforms for both government and native administration staff.

Therefore, in their agitations for independence, Yorùbá elite, especially those in Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan, began to agitate for a cultural renaissance both in language and in dress. As noted earlier, many of them who were given Christian names at conversion reverted to their old, Yorùbá names. They also began to wear Yorùbá dress in public and private ceremonies. In addition, they agitated for the teaching of Yorùbá language and culture in schools as well as the use of Yorùbá dress in public and private functions. Notable individuals championing this cause include Mojola Agbebi and Sapara Williams who both reverted from their Christian names to their old, Yorùbá names.

Although the converts were not denied membership in their various churches, they were however regarded as 'counterfeit' Christians for not wearing European dress; they were however denied Baptism and the Holy Communion.<sup>450</sup> Dr. Mojola Agbebi, who, upon converting to Christianity, was re-christened David Vincent Brown, decried the imposition of European dress and European culture on Africans. "*The introduction of the usages and institutions of European life into the African social system,*" Agbebi contended, "*has resulted in a disordering and dislocation of the latter which threaten to overthrow the system altogether and produce a state of social anarchy.*" Some of the major ill effects of such an introduction of European usages and institutions included the "*total breakdown of parental control*" and the "*advent of a life of wild license mistakenly taken to mean the rightful exercise of the*

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<sup>450</sup> Gbadamosi T.G.O. and Ade Ajayi J. F., 'Islam and Christianity in Nigeria', in Obaro Ikime (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, (Ibadan, 1980), 358.

*rights and prerogatives of individual liberty, as defined and permitted under the customs and usages of European life.*"<sup>451</sup> In short, Agbebi argued that contact with European culture resulted in the abnegation of African social laws by Europeanized Africans and a transfer of the contempt of African customs from the Europeans to the Europeanized Africans.

These Yorùbá ethno-nationalist Christian converts therefore posited that '*every African bearing a foreign name is like a ship sailing under false colours, and every African wearing a foreign dress in his country is like the jackdaw in peacock's feathers*'.<sup>452</sup> In reaction, Dr. Agbebi, for instance, denounced his Christian names – David Vincent Brown – and reverted to his original Yorùbá names – Mojola Agbebi. Besides Dr. Agbebi, others like Sapara-Williams, E. M. Lijadu, Theophilus A. J. Ogunbiyi, J. T. Leigh, A. J. Sapara-Williams, Thomas Ige George, Nyamgbi Tete Alamayong, Prince of Little Popo and Kwara, Charles W. George, M. Euler-Ajayi, A. N. Cole, S. Saguwa Davies, S. P. Johnson, L. Walton-Lumpkin, A. D. William Shitta, D. Macaulay, E. A. Caulcrick, Jacob Bajulaye, S. Peters, O. T. Somefun, T. Lloyd Harrison, Joseph D. E. Z. Macauley, Ayodeji Oyejola, E. Bamisele Agbebi, G. O. Kufeji, H. O. Otolorin Williams, G. Adebayo Agbebi<sup>453</sup>, and the daughters of Richard Blaize, Carrie Lumpkin, and Charlottee Blaize, to mention a few, took to wearing a combination of *adire* (tie and dye) and European prints.

Agbebi challenged the missions' rights to name particular tune, language, drums, dress, and songs which would be conducive to worship in another culture.

*... The joys are one, Redemption is one, Christ is one, God is one, but our tongues are various and our styles innumerable. Hymn-books, therefore, are one of the non-essentials of worship. Prayer-books and hymn-books, harmonium-dedications, pew constructions, surpliced*

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<sup>451</sup> Akinsola Akiwowo, 'The Place of Mojola Agbebi in the African Nationalist Movements: 1890-1917', *Phylon*, 26:2 (1965), 122-139.

<sup>452</sup> Judith Byfield "'Unwrapping" Nationalism: Dress, Gender, and Nationalist Discourse in Colonial Lagos', *African Humanities*, Occasional Publication No. 30, (Boston University, 2000), 11.

<sup>453</sup> Akinsola Akiwowo, 'The Place of Mojola Agbebi', 137.

choir, the white man's style, the white man's name, the white man's dress, are so many non-essentials, so many props and crutches affecting the religious manhood of the Christian African.<sup>454</sup> (Emphasis added)

He argued that dress, tunes, and songs depended on “*the frame of mind, breadth of soul, experiences of life, attitude of faith, and latitude of love of individuals...*” and therefore Yorùbá culture should be permitted to dictate dress, songs, language, etc. of Yorùbá Christian experience. He averred that English/European harmonium, organ, and piano musical instruments were unknown to the Israelites of old who used their own native musical instruments in their religious worships. Therefore Yorùbá converts should be allowed to use “*our Dundun and Batakoto, our Gese and Kerikeri, our Fajakis and Sambas*” which “*would serve admirable purposes of joy and praise if properly directed and wisely brought into play.*”<sup>455</sup> He went further to advocate that “*in carrying out the function of singing therefore, let us always remember that we are Africans, and that we ought to sing African songs, and that in African style and fashion.*”<sup>456</sup> By African style and fashion, Mojola Agbebi excluded the use of “*surplices, European dress, and structures for sitting during religious worship*”, which he described as non-essentials of religion.

Comparing Christianity to Islam, Agbebi noted that while Islam accepted African culture, Christianity sought to denationalize and degrade it:

*The African Moslem, our co-religionist, though he reads the Koran in Arabic and counts his beads as our Christian brother the Roman Catholic does, and though he repeats the same formula of prayer in an unknown tongue from mosques and minarets five times a day throughout Africa, yet he spreads no common prayer before him in his devotions and carries no hymn-book in his worship of the Almighty. His dress is after the manner of the Apostles and*

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<sup>454</sup> Rev. Mojola Agbebi, ‘Inaugural Sermon’, in Ayo J. Langley, *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856-1970*, (London, 1979).

<sup>455</sup> Ibid.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

*Prophets, and his name, though indicating his faith, was never put on in a way to denationalize or degrade him.*<sup>457</sup>

(Emphasis added)

Agbebi therefore declared that “*European Christianity is a dangerous thing*”; that “*Islam is the religion of Africa*” and finally that “*Christianity lives here by sufferance*”. He then asked:

*What do you think of a religion which holds a bottle of gin in one hand and a Common Prayer in another? Which carries a glass of rum as a vade-mecum to a ‘Holy’ book? A religion which points with one hand to the skies, bidding you ‘lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,’ and while you are looking up grasps all your worldly goods with the other hand, seizes your ancestral lands, labels your forests, and places your patrimony under inexplicable legislations?*<sup>458</sup>

Dr. Agbebi noted further that the effects of intercultural contacts upon the African, “*whose mode of life is entirely dissimilar to that of the European, if not actually opposed to it*” must be evaluated. Agbebi saw the collision of European and African cultures as bound to have far-reaching and disturbing effects of great dimension upon the moral and social arrangement of the Africans, especially upon “*the foundation and vital parts of African life.*”<sup>459</sup>

The ordinary Yorùbá converts also found the dress policy abnormal and lampooned the missionaries in no small measure. T.A. Ladele picked on this development in his book, *Esin Igbagbo wo Ilu Owo*, and noted that a Yorùbá convert, John, while taking his leave of the church, wrote to intimate the Pastor that he was no longer interested in Christianity, as he was compelled to pay for almost every considerable thing under the sky – *owo ore, owo idamewa, owo oju iwe, owo opin ose*, etc. - and that above all, he was not allowed to bear his own name, but ‘*Joonu san pan na*’

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<sup>457</sup> Rev. Mojola Agbebi, ‘Inaugural Sermon’.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Akinsola Akiwowo, ‘The Place of Mojola Agbebi’, 135.

(just ordinary and meaningless John).<sup>460</sup> Through John's characterization, Ladele also lamented the dress policy.

Perhaps nothing reflected the general mood of the people towards the imposition of European dress on Yorùbá converts like the words of its most vocal critics, Dr. Agbebi who, himself was a Baptist pastor like R.H. Stone. Dr. Agbebi challenged the missionaries' right to name the particular tune, language, drums, dress, and songs which would be conducive to worship in another culture. He argued that dress, tunes, and songs depend on the frame of mind, the breadth of soul, the experiences of life, the attitude of faith, and the latitude of love of the individual within a socio-cultural space. After recognizing the secular and profane origin of many "sacred" hymns in the famous collections of hymns by Ira D. Sankey, which were used in many West African Protestant churches, Dr. Agbebi quoted Biblical verses in support of his suggestion that individual culture should be permitted to dictate the dress, songs, language, etc. of Yorùbá Christian experience.

Like others, he went further to advocate that "*in carrying out the function of singing therefore, let us always remember that we are Africans, and that we ought to sing African songs, and that in African style and fashion.*"<sup>461</sup> By African style and fashion, Mojola Agbebi excluded the use of "*surplices, European dress, and structures for sitting during religious worship*", which he described as non-essentials of religion:

*...Prayer-books and hymnbooks, harmonium, dedications, pew constructions, surpliced choir, the white man's style and white man's names, the white man's dress, are so many non-essentials, so many props and crutches affecting the religious manhood of the Christian African.*<sup>462</sup>

The initial acceptance of European culture, values, and religion soon gave way to socio-political protests of different kinds. The resultant re-evaluation of European values was not peculiar to Yorùbá people alone, as it covered the entire West

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<sup>460</sup> Ladele T.A., *Esin Igbagbo Wo Ilu Owo*, Nigeria: Longman, 1975, 56.

<sup>461</sup> Lloyd Gwam, 'Pioneers of Modern Professions: No. 3-Letters: Mojola Agbebi"', *Sunday Times*, (Lagos, November, 1964), 8-9.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid*, 9.



African sub-region, most especially Sierra Leone where the Creoles had also launched a dress reform movement in the late 1880s. Therefore, from Lagos to Abeokuta, Ibadan to Oyo, and Oshogbo to Ile-Ife; Yorùbá elite and nationalists, most of whom were based in Lagos, instituted a vigorous linguistic and cultural campaign, which aimed at stimulating greater interest in Yorùbá culture in dress and language as well as in ‘...*African dress, polygamy, the education of women, and Yorùbá secret societies*’.<sup>463</sup>

So, as forms of protest, the wearing of native dress and the speaking of Yorùbá language became icons “*in this ideological rejection of colonialism*”. Many educated Christians made the wearing of native dress and the speaking of Yorùbá language significant ways of expressing support ‘*of the cultural movement and critique*’ of the time. As they argued, native language and dress ‘*spoke of the ‘traditional’, the truly African, uncontaminated by Western mores and materialism*’.<sup>464</sup> The agitators argued that Yorùbá dress not only allowed for a cultural rebirth and a renewed affinity to those who still lived by ‘traditional’ values, but also became a wearable text, described by Chatterjee as existing in ‘adversarial relationship’ to the discourse of colonialism.

As noted in Chapter Five, the campaign led to a number of developments: the development therefore contributed to the formation of African independent churches, including Native Baptist Church in Lagos and the Aladura churches, where emphasis was on worshipping God and not cultural hegemony; the establishment of the Lagos Native Research Society in 1903; Yorùbá men and women began dropping their European names and adopting Yorùbá names; some also dropped European dress and began wearing “native” dress; the development of a more critical Lagos newspaper editorials most of which characterized European dress as unsuitable for African climate, a symbol of mental bondage, and a concrete reminder of European ambivalent cultural and social position, etc. Through this, nationalists of different hues and colours questioned the veracity of the colonialist knowledge, disputed their arguments, pointed out the

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<sup>463</sup> Judith Byfield, “Unwrapping” Nationalism’, 10.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid, 2.

contradictions in their arguments, and rejected the moral basis of them.<sup>465</sup>

#### **6.4. Traditional Dress versus European dress: The Good versus the Bad**

There has been an increasing fascination with traditional and indigenous dress in contemporary Yorubaland in recent times. This development cannot be dissociated from the general tendency among the Yorùbá, most especially in the rural areas, to regard indigenous and traditional dress as the 'good' dress, which is befitting and honourable, while European dress, for the most part, is regarded as bad, unbecoming, and dishonourable. Historically, the development emanated from the colonial era when the Yorùbá elite and nationalists were agitating for cultural renaissance in dress and language. As noted earlier, the agitation was not limited to dress and language alone, but also incorporated a spirited defense of polygamy and Yorùbá secret societies, as well as the education of women and girls.

The education of women and girls in Yorubaland was not without its socio-economic consequences. In the first place, many women became educated and many began to work outside the home; a development which invariably necessitated their wearing of dress originally regarded as male dress. In addition, more exposure to economic benefits of colonialism led to a change in social status as more women began to play active roles in both colonial and church matters. This increasing latitude led to accumulation of wealth, which, for the Yorùbá women, manifested in many ways including dress.

Serving as impetus for the development was also the fact that most missionaries' wives were unemployed except in helping their husbands and maintaining the mission house. Some of these women took to sewing, which they taught many Yorùbá women converts. Hannah Hinderer was reputed for her tailoring and teaching skills in Ibadan and so also many other missionaries' wives across Yorubaland during this period. With advancement in education and a little training in sewing and stitching, women and children who had little choice of what to wear during the pre-1800

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid, 2.

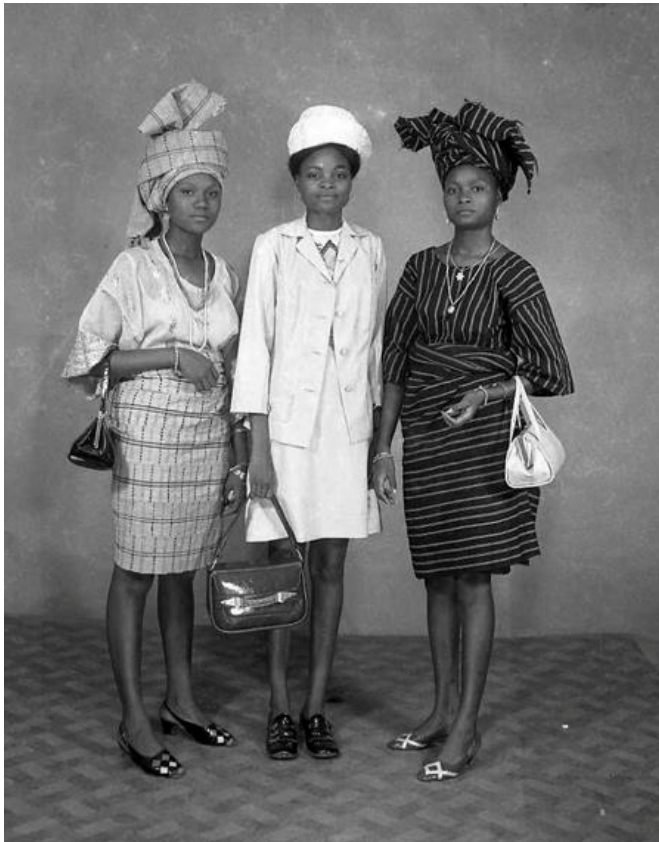
period suddenly have more than enough styles and designs depending on the dexterity and imagination of the seamstress and tailors. Education and tailoring thereby provided not just employment to women but also gave them ample choice on what to wear.

Despite spirited defense mounted in support of polygamy, it must be stated that Christianity and colonialism eschewed polygamy, and therefore would not bulge. Although resounding successes were recorded by the nationalists in the areas of education and women empowerment through tailoring; the social fabric of the society is being torn away in other areas. Education and Christianity eroded the traditional political authority both in the urban and rural areas. Change in social status of hitherto lowly-born and therefore poor people changed with increasing employment opportunity in the colonial enterprise and also in the unfolding political economy and its emphasis on material acquisition. Consequently, two developments followed: on the one hand, the power of the elders collapsed while, on the other hand, the glamour and lure of European culture was demystified and also collapsed, as Yorùbá elite and nationalists were able to show the cultural ambiguity of the Europeans. Christians and educated elite turned to 'traditional' dress and reconnected to Yorùbá culture. Women and girls began to experiment with the combination of indigenous and European dress; just as locally-woven cloth gradually became a prestige item. The resultant dress culture, owing to its hybrid nature, has since become traditional.

While the Yorùbá elite and nationalists savored their victories in the areas of language and dress; they however decried the fact that most of the female dress that emerged from the hybridization of indigenous and European dresses heavily accentuated women's features, most especially their curves, with much nakedness around their waists and shoulders. This was completely unlike the indigenous dress, which places emphasis on age, status, and occupation. The period, for the women, was characterized by increasing latitude in dress, as different styles of dress were introduced. As Mrs. Fry, earlier mentioned, noted, the period also witnessed increasing creativity in women's dress, as tailors and seamstresses began to combine indigenous, traditional Yorùbá dresses with European dress to create and make different

designs and styles of dress. Teaching and nursing, the two most common opportunities for women during the period, were almost always, synonymous with the wearing of *Kaaba* (a long flowing gown) and *Bonfo* (a short, above-the-knee gown), two of the most popular styles of the period.

As noted in Chapter One, details such as when these 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. However, this criticism does not remove the fact that these photos illustrate the different dress used during the period under discussion.



**A cross section of female popular dress mode of the colonial period**

**(Sources: Onile-Ayo Photo, Mokola, Ibadan)**

The argument was captured succinctly in two of John Akintola Ademuwagun (who went by the stage name Roy Chicago)'s songs *Onile Gogoro* and *Obinrin Nbe L'Eko*. In the first, he lampooned women's dress, which he represented with their head tall gear, of the period as deceptive: when a young one dresses, she is alluring; and when an old woman dresses, she becomes younger and alluring. He cautioned concerning the new dress culture noting that irrespective of the age and status, the dress made the female-folks younger, finer, and more alluring. In the second, he criticized the various dresses as so revealing that one makes no effort to know the various sizes and shapes of their breasts and backsides.

The criticism is better appreciated when taken alongside the general consideration of the role of women in Yorùbá society in general. Women are not just mothers and daughters, but the upholders of customs, culture, and traditions of the society. The change in dress culture, which for the most part, accentuated the female sexual features, therefore exhibits a general erosion of Yorùbá customs, culture, and traditions. The argument is made stronger by the fact that while the males were agitating for cultural renaissance in dress and language, among other things, the very people who were expected to protect, uphold, and transmit Yorùbá indigenous culture and traditions have capitulated under the influences of European culture.

While the argument was not so much against women emancipation, but against the erosion of Yorùbá traditions and culture, the development arising from the introduction of the Colonial or Native Court system cannot be dissociated from protesting women's financial emancipation as such. Although colonial rule was introduced to Yorubaland since the 1890s, it was not until the 1914 that the pre-colonial justice administration system was substituted for the Colonial or Native Court system. Before 1914 there were three grades of courts in Yorubaland: the *Ile-Ejo Baale* (Baale's Court), *Ile-Ejo Ijoye Adugbo* (Compound Chief's Court) and *Ile-Ejo Oba* (King's Court). In a village where the Bale ruled, the last court was the *Ile-Ejo Bale* (Bale's Court). Greater flexibilities existed in these courts that were alien to the Native Court system.

The Native Court system collided in almost all areas of life with the indigenous societal values and, in all cases, the natives had no alternative than to acquiesce in the matter. Divorce, for instance, remains one key issue that fractured the society most during the period. As must be noted, sense of nationhood or statehood in traditional African society was fostered on kinship. Hence, the family was regarded as sacred and anything that was capable of breaking the union of the kin or family ties was treated with utmost caution. Under the new court system, as soon as a woman indicated her desire to break the union between her and the husband, the Native Court system allowed such women, having paid the necessary summon fees, the right to single-handedly dissolve the union. In fact, under the Native Court system, the head chief of the community must reserve a room for such women to forestall any family intervention. This was known as the *dipomu* (holding-the-post) system. Under this kind of arrangement, the court was concerned not with the societal harmony but with generating revenue through fees and fines from such cases. Consequently, divorce cases became rampant and this upset the societal scale that men became apprehensive that they might return home after a laborious day at the farm and discovered that their wives had gone 'to hold the post'. If and when such happened, the society could achieve nothing, especially as the associated fees and fines required of the complainant were paid.

So while spirited efforts were being made to get the church and colonial administration to see the socio-cultural and economic benefits of polygamy; the Native Court system ensured that as many women who wanted a break from such unions, had their freedom once the associated fees are paid.

The current interest in Yorùbá dress, although different in motivation from the colonial period, also shares many things in common with that of the colonial period. Economic and social problems associated with political instability since independence and, most especially, the economic downturn and change in fortune orchestrated by the structural adjustment years led many people to seek spiritual solutions to almost all things. Beginning therefore from the later 1980s, radical and fundamental religious groups sprang-up almost everywhere in Nigeria adducing the nation's woes to sins and ungodliness, especially since the nation

held the Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977. Many televangelists since the 1980s have described the pan-African conference as fetish and a celebration of idolatry. They therefore claimed that the prostrate state of the country was retribution from God for the nation's apostasy. In most tertiary institutions in Nigeria today, it is common to find billboards conspicuously located within different parts of the institutions admonishing students, most especially female students, about indecent dressing. Joseph Ayo Babalola University, like other privately-owned universities in Nigeria, instituted a dress-code for the students. In the introductory section of the dress-code, it was argued that:

*As Christians, whatever we do must be to the glory of God our creator. This is more particularly so in the way we dress. In many decided rape cases, judges have ruled that, the victims were accomplices, having induced (sic) their assailants by their mode of dressing and general appearances. The Yorùbás also agree that the way one dresses generally, reflects on the way others perceive one – either with respect or disdain. A person who dresses like a hooligan is seen and treated as such; while a lady who dresses like a prostitute is seen and treated as such. When a woman dresses with half the breast bare and uncovered; when the stomach down to the abdomen is uncovered or when a skirt is so short that it leaves little or nothing to the imagination; or when sitted (sic), exposes her underwear; all these amount to invitation to the opposite counterpart to buy sex for money or other favours such as marks.<sup>466</sup>*

From the above, indecent dressing simply refers to any cloth that is body-revealing either in part, to include issues like short or mini-skirts, shoulder-revealing blouses, and jumpers or as a whole, to include any seductive or provocative dress entirely. While there are dress-codes in public institutions, there were no strict attempts at enforcing the laws. In private institutions, lecturers and hall officials “*are empowered to prevent students*

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<sup>466</sup> Joseph Ayo Babalola University, *Dress Code*, available at <http://jabu.edu.ng/index.php/student/dress-code> 2011/04/22; accessed on 23/04/2011.

*who fail to meet the... dress code from attending lectures or participating in other activities*”<sup>467</sup>.

It can be argued that imposition of dress codes, especially for females as the above quotation from Joseph Ayo Babalola University Dress Code shows, are ways through which males generally attempt to put females in check and also to deny female sexuality, etc. This becomes important as dress code was enforced in the case of females while males were only prohibited from wearing fez caps. It is ironic that there has not been any protest from the females against this gender-biased dress code.

The pastor and founder of the Benson Idahosa Outreach, Archbishop Benson Idahosa, was famous for the statement: “*dress the way you want to be addressed*”. Underlining this statement is not simply the need for members to communicate their status in the appearances, but also to demonstrate their moral and spiritual values in their dressing. Recently in Den Haag, the Netherlands, I was invited to a religious gathering, *Eurocon*, a biennial programme of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Mainland Europe, by Mr. and Mrs. Odiase. As we approached the venue of the programme, an argument ensued between the husband and wife over the latter’s trouser, which the husband considered as too tight and therefore revealing the wife’s ‘*sexual appeal*’ for public consumption. Although the wife insisted that the trouser was not as tight and body-hugging as the husband presented it, the husband maintained that “*dress such as this, easily leads other people into sinning, as they will most likely want to see what your shape looks like without cloth of any kind. It is just not okay and I don’t like it at all*”. When I probed the husband closely on why he had to prescribe what sort of cloth his wife should wear, he was point blank:

*Look here; don’t think I don’t know what I am saying. All these Europeans you see around walking about almost nude do not have any culture. See, how bad their family system has become! Is this the kind of thing my wife will*

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid.



*teach my children? No, I won't take that. It is a sin not just before man, but also before God*<sup>468</sup>.

A similar position is held by the authorities of Joseph Ayo Babalola University, as seen from the introduction to the university's dress code, already quoted above.

For the most part, European dress, except formal dress, is regarded as bad by many in Yorubaland. On the one hand, many still regard European dress as emblematic of European culture and values. So, their rejection of European dress was not only out of moral consideration but also of nationalistic sentiment. On the other hand, we have those who decried European dress on moral and religious principles. This class of people argued that European dress emphasizes female's sexuality not only in design, but also in style and materials of make. For both groups, European dress is regarded as 'bad' dress and these are the prime agitators for the use of (Yorùbá) 'traditional' dress in both private and public spaces.

For the most part, these agitators desired "*decency in dressing and appearance*", as this "presents the image of a cultured, educated person". They argued further that moderation in dressing is a sign of good religious and cultural upbringing, while extravagance in dressing is outward evidence of vanity. "It is capable of leading youth astray especially when parents are unable to afford them. The insatiable love of extravagant and flamboyant attire, which cannot be supported, would lead male students to stealing and gangsterism, while female students are lured into prostitution and even stealing!

As far as the mission-owned universities are concerned, the Bible enjoins Christians to avoid ostentatious and extravagant dressing. So students, whether they are Christians or not, must focus on internal and external adornment of purity and love, which takes dressing and other body adornment beyond outward extravagant adornment. Therefore, dressing in the mission-owned universities is the same as dressing to the place of worship; hence, for both male and female students, formal dress, whether native or European, is recommended. Ajayi Crowther University succinctly

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<sup>468</sup> Interview with Mr and Mrs Harrison Obayuwana Odiase, 40 Zuiggerstraat, 2561KL, 'S-Gravenhage, the Netherlands, 22 April 2011.

puts it thus: "...the University attaches great importance to Modest and Good Dressing. Your dressing adds values to your personality, self-confidence and self-worth. Hence, Dress the way you would like to be addressed".<sup>469</sup>

The crust of anti-European dress argument is that it symbolizes colonialism as well as promotes indecency and adultery; especially the transparent, body hugging, and body shape revealing ones. It must be conceded that society reserves the rights to determine what it considers right and wrong at any given time, it must be noted however that such rights must not interfere with personal and group rights of others. Hence, while tenuous link may exist between indecent or immodest dressing and seduction; there is no justifiable reason to support the argument that indecent dressing and promiscuity are linked. Hence, the moral and religious bent of the argument, is, to say the least, preposterous and self-serving.

Notwithstanding this, it must be noted that in most part of Nigeria today, the wearing of European dress is synonymous with the possession of three things: Western education, being from Southern part of Nigeria, and being a Christian. While this is not to say that the use of European dress is peculiar only to the south, but to underscore that the generality of southern Nigeria wear European dress while traditional dress is most popular in the North and Central Nigeria. This could be linked to colonialism and the concentration of Christianity and Western education in the south during the colonial period.

In Southern part of Nigeria, however, the use of European dress, even for formal uses, is, almost as a rule, limited to four days (Mondays to Thursdays) in a week. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays are set aside for the wearing of traditional dress not only in Yorubaland but also across the Southern Nigeria and the Federal Capital, Abuja. In government establishments, as in banks, insurance companies, oil and gas facilities, etc., Friday is recognized and regarded as a day of worship for the Muslims; hence, the wearing of traditional dress is popular on Fridays, especially in Southern part of Nigeria. Owing to the economic

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<sup>469</sup> Ajayi Crowther University, *Students Life*, available at <http://www.acu.edu.ng/studentlife.asp>; accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

system handed down to independent Nigeria by Imperial Britain, Mondays through Fridays are set aside for work of different kinds, while Saturdays and Sundays are set aside for rest and religious worship, especially Sundays for the Christians. So, like Fridays, Sundays are used for worship while Saturdays are set aside for important ceremonies like wedding, funeral, house-warming, etc. ceremonies. Ceremonies such as the aforementioned, for Christians and Muslims, are important occasions where all manners of indigenous and traditional dresses are on display. Even in churches, where fascination with European dress still endures, all ceremonies attract the use of traditional Yorùbá dress, except marriage. Even during wedding ceremonies, once the couples are out of the church, they, almost as a rule, return home to change into traditional Yorùbá dress. In general, Fridays through Sundays are days of the week when it is permissible and common for people - male and female, old and young - to turn out in their indigenous and traditional Yorùbá dress.

Given the fact that Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays are usually crowded with all manners of ceremonies in most towns and cities; Thursdays are being gradually incorporated into what can be called ceremony days in Yorubaland. Interviews conducted at the registries of the various local government council in Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Kwara states reveal that a sizeable number of people prefer to marry on Thursdays than on Saturdays, as was previously the norm. This recent development can be adduced to the crowded nature of streets and event centers on most Saturdays and Sundays. Hence, to ensure free passage on the roads and to avoid the competition for space and its attendant high costs, many have begun to consider Thursdays as also a ceremony day. In other words, weddings are held in registries on Thursdays and church weddings are done on Saturdays.

Taken together, the above developments are important to our understanding of the dynamic ways in which dress have interfaced with (i) power; (ii) individual; and (iii) group identity among the Yorùbá. On the one hand, contemporary interest in Yorùbá dress is premised almost entirely on the same premise as the earliest Yorùbá nationalists, who agitated for cultural renaissance in language and dress during the colonial period. While the earliest Yorùbá elite and nationalists quickly reverted to

European dress almost immediately after independence, contemporary Yorùbá people are increasingly reverting back to traditional dress. On the other hand, contemporary metaphor of arrogating power to dress signifies the growing importance and conceptualization of traditional dress as good, unsoiled, and virgin; while at the same time conceptualizing European dress as bad, soiled and dishonourable. The most eloquent expression of this development is the metaphor of 'Agbada' (traditional Yorùbá flowing gown) and 'khaki' to signify civilian rule and military rule in Nigerian political parlance. Agbada is regarded as traditional, indigenous, and therefore good and unsoiled; while Khaki is regarded as foreign and soiled.

#### **6.5. Men versus Women: Resistance versus Adaptation**

Customs, traditions, and culture are, for the most part, created by men. Women, irrespective of age and time, are simply regarded as the carriers and transmitters of these customs, traditions, and culture. As far as the history of dress in Yorubaland is concerned, both men and women have played significant roles in its growth and development. During the colonial period, and even before this time, men were dictating the direction of what should constitute a 'good' dress. The agitation for cultural renaissance in language and dress witnessed men actively engaging imposition of European culture on the Yorùbá vis-à-vis other Nigerians. Women, and invariably their children, were like mannequins, on whose shoulders the agitation is to be displayed, tested and inspected. They, women, were not only expected to wear traditional dresses, as a measure of the tradition and culture they are carrying and transmitting, but also to ensure that their children reflect these customs, traditions, and culture wherever they went.

In a sense, the British imposition of European culture on the Yorùbá and the consequent resistance benefited Yorùbá women in a number of ways. In the first place, it ensured their freedom from practices such as forced marriages and polygamy. On the other hand, it gave them more options on what they could wear. As noted in the previous chapter, British colonial administration not only opened Yorubaland and Nigeria to the global economy but also ensured a justice administration that frowned at practices such as enslavement, scarification, pawnship, and forced marriage. On

its part, the church was vehemently opposed to polygamy and idolatry. Successes recorded on all fronts, except on polygamy and idolatry, were such that women became freer and better engaged than in the pre-1800 periods. Although polygamy and idolatry continued in the hinterland, it was hoped that increasing education and the reach of evangelism would snuff out these practices with time. In general, these cultural practices were regarded as not just only against God, but also anti-civilization and backward. Hence, at the initial stages of both Christianity and colonization, every Yorùbá man and woman was doing everything to rid their community of the practices. Genuine attempts were made at imposing European civilization on Yorubaland not only by the Europeans but also by the Yorùbá elite themselves.

Notwithstanding the revolution that the resistance of the later period symbolized, women's dresses increased tremendously from what it used to be during the pre-1800 period when it was comprised mainly of *Ilabiru*, *Tobi*, *Iro*, *Buba*, *Osun*, *Laali*, *Ileke* (worn on the legs, wrists, neck and waist), *Egba* (worn on the wrists and neck), *Irun sise l'oge*, etc. By the time the agitation for cultural renaissance in dress and language was afoot, women's dress witnessed a dramatic turn around, especially with the development in the importation of European-manufactured African prints. In a way, the resistance and the development in tailoring, which was initially limited to the missionaries' wives at the mission house, made it possible for women not only to break the shackles of customs and culture that had kept them at the lower end of the economy, but also enabled them, for the very first time, to express their new found freedom, especially in their individual expression of self and in their expression of belonging as a member of a group.

Women began to experiment with different styles of dress, and were sooner combining indigenous Yorùbá dress with European dress and also to sew indigenous Yorùbá fabric in European styles and vice-versa. While all these were going on, male dress was slowing down and, with time, became fixated in the ideological debate over the supremacy of Yorùbá culture over European culture. Men's dress, depending on age, status, and position, has since remained simple. Today, female dress, while retaining some of the indigenous styles, can be said to be

‘modern’, and traditional while male dress have remained, except from change in material, indigenous, fixated, and encrusted in the past.

### **6.6. Omoluabi, Politics, Power, Resistance and Yorùbá Dress**

From the analysis in this chapter, it can be argued that the underlying principle behind politics and power in Yorubaland still remains the value of being an *Omoluabi*. By using the metaphor of dress, whether its actual usage or its lack of it; Yorùbá people emphasize that being an *Omoluabi* is a *sine qua non* to being a Yorùbá man or woman and that Yorùbá people are expected to abide by this moral and ethical requirement not just in politics, but also in religion and other aspects of their social lives.

For contemporary Yorùbá people, Yorùbá sartorial tradition bespeaks of good governance, uncorrupted and undefiled personality while other sartorial traditions bespeak of a lack of the internal value of being an *Omoluabi*. As current expressions of Yorùbá sartorial tradition reflects, it can also be argued that this view to Yorùbá sartorial tradition masquerade Yorùbá’s expectation about what they have always considered as the ideal - the value of being an *Omoluabi* – and not an actuality.

In addition to the above, it can also be argued that using dress, contemporary Yorùbá people, unlike their counterparts in the colonial period, succeeded in exporting their internal value of being an *Omoluabi* into the larger arena. However, this importation was limited only to how political power is used.

### **6.7. Conclusion**

Dress, in Yorùbá belief system, has power. It takes on power either from the processes of production or it is imbued with power when it is worn. The major centers of dress production were also believed to have special favour of certain deities, gods, and goddesses and that these supernatural beings infused dress with their special powers. Dexterity in dress production, it is believed, is one manifestation of these powers. The king’s staff of office or his crown is conceptualized as embodying the power and essence of the king himself in much the same way as the maze, say of a National Assembly, embodies the power of the nation’s National

Assembly and the constitution embodying the power of a state. Dress, conceptualized in this way, could therefore express individual's power, e.g. that of a king; or that of a group, e.g. a chorister's robe.

With colonialism and the introduction of European dress came another layer of dress and power. Offices and positions had their respective dresses with various insignia of office and power. Although the imposition of European dress by both the church and the colonial administrators on Yorùbá people vis-à-vis other Nigerians, as a measure of modernizing Yorubaland and Nigeria, was initially received by the Yorùbá and other Nigerian peoples, however, when European cultural superiority and hegemony began to take the center stage in dress, religion, and government administration; European sartorial culture was met with stiff opposition and open resistance. The crux of the resistance was that European dress has nothing to do with European religion and government and that one can be a Christian or work in colonial establishment, wearing Yorùbá or any dress as well. This position, in so far as Yorùbá believed that dress expresses power, turned logic on its head. The Yorùbá elite and nationalists were denying to Christianity what they allowed their indigenous religion and socio-political articulation. It is to this level that the agitation was nationalistic and it was as a result of this lack of depth that led to a resurgence of European dress in Yorubaland immediately after independence.

European dress, as far as the Yorùbá are concerned, is seen as emphasizing sensuality and sexuality. Yorùbá culture would rather restrict these features, especially in females, to the private space or private domain. Hence, with increasing number of women wearing European dress, European sartorial tradition was therefore regarded as indulging in over-emphasizing female sensuality and sexuality and therefore daubed as immoral and the wearers are considered as morally bankrupt and religious apostates.

As the Yorùbá elite and nationalists were protesting cultural abnegation being foisted on them by the colonial government and the European missionaries, the Yorùbá women were, in turn, protesting the invisibility foisted upon them by Yorùbá culture, customs, and traditions. These resistances paved the way for sundry developments in Yorubaland: on the one hand,

it ended years of females' socio-economic and political suppression, as females now had more options on what to wear; and the increasing number of women in gainful employments, whether in the colonial administration or in the European trading concerns, ensured that women gained more visibility and independence, especially in their purchasing power. Eradication of polygamy and other practices also played fundamental role in the above. On the other hand, the developments in tailoring, importation and sales, in Africa, of African prints, as well as the adaptation of African prints into different styles and designs by the females, captured the power dynamics that dress has come to encapsulate over the years.

During the colonial period, especially while the nationalist agitation for cultural renaissance was on course, men were resisting change in their dress ensemble while women were adapting, modifying, and integrating indigenous and European dress, a development that led to the emergence of sartorial hybridity, which is today regarded as traditional Yorùbá dress. This negotiation of power, especially over dress, as encapsulated by dress, has, on the one hand, gave women ample choices over what to wear, and, on the other hand, placed women at the lowest rung of the ladder in the areas of carrying and transmitting Yorùbá culture and traditions, as females dress are today more modern than their male counterparts. Women's increasing choices on what to wear made them more dominant and ubiquitous on matters of fashion; and men's decreasing choices on style and design other than *Agbada*, *Buba*, and *Sokoto*, made them less dominant and fashionable than women. Consequently, it can be argued that contrary to the general assumption that Yorùbá women are the bastions of Yorùbá cultural expressions, the reality is that men express more of an encrusted Yorùbá sartorial cultural tradition, understood (even) pejoratively as stale, unchanging, and encrusted in the past, than the females.

There is no doubting the fact that Yorùbá sartorial tradition has changed, as the above analysis showed. Resistance mounted against change could only metamorphose into yet another development, which led to sartorial hybridity. The essence of Yorùbáness was however changed from being an *Omoluabi* to emphasis on material wealth. This development not only shifted



the balance in the resistance, discussed in this chapter, in favour of Islamic and Western sartorial traditions, but also endangered Yorùbá internal standard of moral or civic virtue against which the Yorùbá had measured personal esteem and individual's qualification. For contemporary Yorùbá, *Omoluabi* may remain a common human instinct, which is created out of the daily habits of social intercourse and material labour; wealth rather than being an *Omoluabi* has become fundamental to religious, economic, cultural and political lives.