

Functions of Hand Woven Textiles among Yoruba Women in Southwestern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Most scholars of Yoruba hand woven textiles have often concluded that the women wove merely for domestic purposes while their male counterparts wove as professionals. This paper proposes a contrary thesis by analyzing and discussing the functions of Yoruba women's hand woven textiles by submitting that the cloth produced by women went far beyond satisfying domestic needs and that the women's weaving activities were rather complementary to their men rather than subordinate. In contemporary Nigeria the women still dictate and influence fashion trends and at the same time ensure that the traditional hand woven cloth is always a part of the Yoruba fashion. It observes that despite Nigeria's colonial experience by importing cheaper foreign textiles women still kept traditional textiles alive through their production, use, sale, and marketing.

Keywords: Hand woven textiles, Functions, Yoruba women, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Yoruba women commanded great respect for their contributions to the social, economic and political growth of their society and their efforts were regarded as complimentary rather than subordinate to their male counterparts. Such complementariness is most dramatized in the Yoruba hand weaving industry, where women assisted men in planting and harvesting cotton, spun the cotton into thread and dyed the thread ready for the men to weave. In many areas of Yoruba land, women also wove but not on the same looms as their male counterparts. In some other parts men did not weave at all (as is the case in Owo) while in others their weaving was minimal (as is the case with the Bunu people of Kaaba). Wherever male weaving is low however, women's weaving is given much prominence. In areas such as Oyo, Saaki, and Iseyin where men's weaving is very prominent, the cloth produced, namely *aso-oke*, is often used as symbols of political and social prestige. In these areas, a small percentage of the

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women (when compared to their male counterpart) also weave and though some of the cloth so produced are used to mark important events in the life of the women (including marriages, birth of babies and other social functions), most of their woven cloths serve domestic purposes in the form of blankets, towels, and work clothes. In places such as Owo, and Kaaba (especially among the Bunu people) and to some extent, Ijebu-Ode, where men's weaving is not significant, women's weaving ascends prominence as their woven cloths do not only serve domestic functions but also assume social, political, and economic prestige. In these areas, cloth forms also serve as symbols of religious/ritual and social activities. It was once believed that some of the cloths produced by these women had spiritual and medicinal powers through which the wearer could be blessed, healed or protected.

In Yoruba land, though both sexes weave, a number of characteristics differentiate the cloth woven by men from that of women, chief among which is the loom type. Traditionally, men wove on a horizontal narrow loom that produced strips of cloth of few inches wide, while the women wove on a vertical broad loom that produced cloth wider in breadth but much shorter in length than those produced by men.

Scholars like Murray (1936) and Clarke (1938) working on Nigerian textiles regarded the textiles produced by the Yoruba men as art while those made by women were seen as craft. Their arguments were based on the assumption that Yoruba women were not professional weavers but primarily wove to meet domestic needs. The fact that the broad loom is immobile and weaving on it restricted the women indoors largely contributed to the silence on them in existing literature. Men employed the narrow loom, which can easily be dismantled and moved from place to place and consequently, their artistry and products were more visible and attracted more scholarly attention than those of women. The narrow loom needs a lot of space to enable the weaver to stretch out the warp threads thus weaving is usually done outside. Because of this, it is much easier to identify narrow loom weavers than the broadloom weavers. Western assessment of Yoruba women's weaving as a craft, in particular, affected the number and quality of researches done on their products. For example, one of the earliest writings on Yoruba women's hand woven textiles by Murray (1936) describes the weaving activities of women in Omu-aran in Ilorin province as a craft done mainly to serve domestic needs. In another article, Clarke (1938), writing on the weaving activities of the Yoruba in Ilorin notes that the broad loom and the narrow loom were employed in cloth production. In his opinion, the women's broadloom is primitive and slow, though it produces serviceable cloths. The narrow loom used by the men on the other hand was believed to be less primitive because it is mechanically operated by heddles, which, according to Clarke, makes the weaving on the narrow loom much faster.

One of the earliest scholars to acknowledge Yoruba women as professional weavers on the broad loom is Aremu (1982) who tried to fill gaps in existing literature on Yoruba cloth weaving traditions. Though he mentions a number of

textile forms produced by men on the narrow loom, his major focus is on the *Kijipa* cloth produced by women on the broad loom. In the past *Kijipa* served more than a domestic function as it was used for social, religious, ritual, medicinal as well as domestic functions. Other studies that have been able to highlight cloth-weaving traditions done by women in specific Yoruba towns include the studies of Murray (1936), Clarke (1938), Bray (1968), Poynor (1980) and Renne (1995), amongst others.

1. FUNCTIONS OF YORUBA WOMEN'S HAND-WOVEN TEXTILES

Yoruba women's hand-woven cloth was produced in large strips which Lamb and Holms (1980) have referred to as panels to distinguish them from the narrow weaves of the narrow loom. These panels of cloth woven on the broad loom are used in a variety of ways within and outside the society in which they were produced. The panels of cloth woven by women on the broadloom are wider than the strips of cloth produced by men on the horizontal loom, but they are not as long. The way the panels of cloth are used depends on the number of strips sewn together.

A single panel of cloth may be used as *oja*, (a piece of cloth used by Yoruba mothers to strap their babies to their back), *gele* (head ties) *iborun* (a type of shawl) *osuka* (cloth rolled into a bun and placed on the head for loads to be set on) and towels. In the contemporary period, a single panel of cloth may even be worked into a wooden chair to serve as the backrest as well as the seat. Two or more panels joined together may be used as a wrapper by both sexes for different ceremonies. Such wrappers may also be used as a cover cloth for protection against cold and mosquitoes. In the past, the panels of cloth produced on the broadloom were often used in the form in which they were removed from the loom. It was not the norm to cut and sew the panels unlike the strips of cloth produced on the narrow loom, which were usually sewn together.

Lamb and Holms (1980) identify four major functions of Yoruba women's traditional hand woven textiles namely: (1) Basic cloth (these are cloth used for everyday use); (2) Ceremonial cloth of traditional design (these are cloth used for specific ceremonial occasions such as marriage, chieftaincy etc); (3) Cloth replicating *aso oke* (these are cloth forms woven on the broadloom in smaller strips than the normal wide panels produced on the broad loom. Such cloth forms were usually used for ceremonial occasions) and (4) ritual cloth (these are cloth forms made specifically for ritual purposes for example, sacrifices).

In this present study, three major functions of the broadloom woven cloth are identifiable and these are discussed below.

1.1 PRESTIGIOUS AND CEREMONIAL CLOTHS

These are cloth forms, which reflect social status because only the leaders and the rich can afford to wear them. Such cloth can be used for important ceremonies such as chieftaincy, initiation ceremonies, weddings, and funerals of important individuals within the society. These cloth forms reflect leadership, prestigious, and religious or cultural status. Some of these cloth forms are discussed below.

Sanyan: Among the Yoruba this cloth form is regarded as the king of cloths and exemplified in the saying '*Sanyan baba aso*' (*Sanyan* is the king of cloths). The fibre used for making this cloth is obtained from the cocoons of the *Anaphe* silk worm. The silk fibres are processed; hand spun into silk threads, washed and soaked in cornstarch. The colour of the silk gives *Sanyan* a natural beige colour. This cloth form is particularly associated with chiefs and kings and its use is widespread in Yoruba land.

Etu is a unique Yoruba cloth that is dyed repeatedly in traditional indigo blue dye.² At intervals, during the dyeing process, the cotton threads are brought out to the sun for proper drying and stretching. *Etu* is also a prestigious cloth worn mainly as a social dress throughout Yoruba land.

Alaari is a Yoruba cloth form that was originally made from *Sanyan* dyed in red camwood solution. Today most producers of *Alaari* use machine spun cotton thread of red colour. According to Lamb and Holms (1980), *Alaari* is used by kings and chiefs to receive visitors into their palace while the former cloth forms mentioned namely, *Sanyan* and *Etu* are used for official functions or ceremonies (for example, harvest festivals, weddings, installation of chiefs).

In Owo, *Senghosen* is a highly valued cloth form. It is the most expensive traditional cloth produced in Owo hence its name *Senghosen* which according to Akinwunmi (1992) means 'the cloth that takes all the money' implying its high cost. It is used on joyous occasions such as marriage, chieftaincy and in the installation of kings among other social events. The wearer of the cloth is usually a wealthy and highly placed person thus a lot of respect and honour are accorded him. *Senghosen* is highly valued and in the past a number of taboos were made to prevent young girls from weaving the cloth. The aim of the taboos was to ensure the quality of the cloth and to maintain a high standard of production. It was believed that the younger girls would not be able to meet these standards as they are normally impatient to acquire the necessary skills to weave the cloth which takes older women years to master. It was feared that younger girls would rush to complete weaving the cloth instead of observing the painstaking process involved in its production thereby destroying the prestigious value given to the cloth. *Senghosen* may even become accessible to sundry users if there are many weavers who specialise in its production. The taboos have

² According to Mrs. Shittu an informant at Akungba, it takes an average of 240 hours of soaking the cotton yarns inside mature dye before the colour is fixed on the yarn.

somehow relaxed today as many young women in Owo now weave this cloth in disregard of the taboos.

Igbero is a cloth also woven in Owo for men who are about to graduate into the *Ero* age group³. The graduation into the *Ero* age group involves a festival also known as *Ero*. The graduating group of men wear *Igbero* as a uniform on the day of the *Ero* festival. The cloth is woven as a wrapper, which is worn, gathered under the armpits and tied at its end as a knot on the left shoulder of the wearer. The cloth is commissioned by the daughter of the *Ero* candidate

Gege is a woven cloth that Owo women use as wrapper. It is mainly deep blue in colour with thin and wide stripes of various colours ranging from white, brown, red, green, and blue. Those who cannot afford more expensive cloths like *Senghose* wear it during special social events. Over the years new designs have changed the look of the cloth and based on these designs, new names have been given to the cloth including *Olowojokosaga* and *Kowojo*.

1.2 RITUAL CLOTHS

Yoruba women produce a number of ritual cloths for the use of traditional cults within the society. These cloths may be used in worship, to perform rites, sacrifices or as an object of prayer. Sometimes medicine men or heads of cults, pray on the cloth or add other substances, and subsequently give the cloth to their patients or followers for protection against evil spirits. Women who are having problems with child conception may be given specially woven cloth to wear on their bellies after prayers or incantations have been said over them. Some of these cloths are also woven for the use of masquerades with the belief that once they wear the cloth, the ancestral spirits will possess them. *Egungun* and *Gelede*, two very important masquerades in Yoruba land, are examples of masquerades that use traditional cloth woven by women for covering. Some of these ritual cloth forms are discussed below.

1.3 RITUAL CLOTHS OF THE OWO

Among the Owo, there are certain cloth forms, which are associated with certain cultural and social festivals, and have been in existence for generations. A number of taboos govern their use and production. First, there is the taboo, which bothers on the physical cleanliness of the weaver. The weavers of these

³ The *Ero* age group is made up of men who are between sixty and sixty-five and are considered the elders of the land. Their primary function is to give advice to the paramount ruler on matters that involve the community. Based on their position, they are not expected to do any hard labour and thus neither go to the farm nor to war. It is an age group every Owo man looks forward to attaining hence the day of the next festival is not publicly announced to discourage evil men from preventing the next set from getting to this esteemed position.

ritual cloth forms are women and they must be physically, spiritually as well as morally clean. Physically, the women must bathe before they start to weave. They must not be menstruating nor are they allowed to have sexual relationship with any man during the time the cloth is being woven. The environment in which the weaving is done must also be swept and scrubbed daily while the weaving is going on. It is a taboo for such ritual cloth forms to be woven in a room that was swept or cleaned the day before. The weaving of such cloth usually starts and ends between seven and nine days depending on the cloth. During that period, the weaver is not allowed to eat the food prepared the day before. She must eat meals that are prepared fresh, each day. During the process of weaving, men and children (especially boys) are not allowed into the room. Only women who are not menstruating are allowed to visit the weavers. Only items such as, bitter kola, kola nut, alligator pepper, sugarcane, roasted plantain, smoked fish and meat, garden egg are allowed and are often placed at the weaver's feet while the female visitors help themselves with the food and engage in singing as the cloth is being woven.

Usually, the wearers of such ritual cloth forms, whether male or female, are expected to adhere strictly to some taboos, which surround their use. A major taboo, which seems to cut across the wearing of most Owo ritual cloth form centers around the wearer bathing and avoiding sexual contact with the opposite sex before and during the wearing of the ritual cloth. For the women, menstruation is regarded as a state of uncleanness and thus menstruating women are strictly forbidden from wearing or even touching a number of the ritual cloth forms of Owo.

Another major sash woven by Owo women is known as the *Ebolo* Sash. The *Ebolo* sash is a special cloth woven in strips and used for funeral purposes in Owo. *Ebolo* is very similar to the *Ashigbo* sash because it too is composed of black and white warp stripes but the stripes are of equal width. According to Akinwunmi (1990), the cloth belongs to the *Alale*, the traditional ruler of Alale and it is worn in Alale (a neighbouring town) in honour of the son of an early *Alale* who died without a child. In remembrance of him, a special ceremony known as *Agwe* is done. The *Ebolo* sash is draped over the shoulder and tied at its ends at the waist and it is highly revered and respected by the weavers, wearers and indigenes as a whole. They are both reserved for the funeral ceremonies of kings and highly placed family members who claim ownership of it. During the weaving of the sash, women of the area come to sing praises to the cloth and eat of the food items placed at the weaver's feet.

Another major ritual cloth woven in Owo is called *Girijo*, which is produced solely for the *Ero* festival where men who were formerly in the *Ugbama* age grade graduate into the *Ighare* elder age grade. The transition is significant and once made, the men are exempted from military service and from manual labour. The *Ero* festival takes place every nine calendar years but in relation to Yoruba cosmology, it is counted to be eight. The actual day in which the festival is to actually start is not announced because the intended candidate may become apprehensive that he may not witness the day. The root of this fear is based on

the long time span between each *Ero* festival. According to an informant, Professor Lagundoye, for the *Ero* festival, four major cloth forms are made: the *Igbero*, *Nkpan Meru* (a waist cloth), *Iketa* (used as a shawl or cover cloth) and *Girijo*. Of the four cloth forms, *Girijo* is the most important. Because the cloth is essential for the *Ero* festival, it is woven once in nine years and never woven for sale.

The first daughter of an *Ero* candidate often commissions the *Girijo* cloth for her father in preparation for the festival. If the man does not have a daughter, his mother or sister may commission it for him. Whoever commissions the cloth, must be a female member of his family. After the festival, the celebrant returns the cloth to the person who commissioned it for him and acquires *Senghosen* to replace it.

Girijo, a dark indigo blue cloth beaten to give it a smooth shiny appearance, has thin as well as wide white stripes along the length of the cloth. *Girijo* is the major cloth worn by the candidates during the *Ero* festival. The cloth is tied in a special way which only men who have participated in the *Ero* festival know its process.

As with other ritual cloth forms in Owo, the weavers of *Girijo* must be physically and sexually clean likewise the environment in which the cloth is woven. The cloth must be woven within seven days and the taboos that surround its production and use must be abided by. The major taboo being that the cloth must not be used to secure a baby boy unto the back of a woman nor can it be used as a cover cloth for any Owo man. It is the belief that if these taboos are broken, it will lead to the death of the boy or the man. When the graduate of the *Ero* festival returns the *Girijo* cloth to the woman who commissioned it for him, the woman can either use it as a cover cloth or as a wrapper. As with the previous two cloth forms discussed songs of praise are rendered to the cloth during the weaving process.

The *Ago* cloth is another interesting ritual cloth produced by Owo women. According to Adegoroye (1984) and Akinwunmi (1990), this cloth is made for women who have three male or female children in sequence. For the cloth to be woven for the woman, the three children must be alive and healthy. According to local weavers interviewed, it was a slave woman (*eru*) who introduced the tradition of weaving *Ago* into Owo. Oral tradition states that she gave birth to three children of the same sex consecutively. Where she came from was not stated, but it was recalled that she had a nasty mistress who maltreated her despite the fact that the *eru* had added into the community three children of the same sex. The slave woman felt that because she had been able to contribute significantly to the population of her mistress household and so should have been rewarded. The unhappy *eru* at the point of her death cursed all the women in the community stating that if any of them were to give birth to three children of the same sex consecutively as she did, then they must produce the *Ago* cloth and undergo a ritual ceremony. If this is not done, it is believed that the children will die soon after their mother.

The weaving of the *Ago* cloth has subsequently attracted various rituals and taboos. As in the production of *Ashigbo* and *Ebolo*, the environment and the weaver must be clean during the weaving process. However, unlike *Ashigbo* and *Ebolo*, there is no singing or praising of the cloth during its production. The atmosphere is usually solemn and sober, devoid of joy and reflecting the bitterness and unhappiness of the *eru*. The number of days it takes to complete the weaving of the cloth depends on the sex of the children: for girls it takes seven days and for boys, nine days. During the weaving process, the woman must make daily offerings for the cloth.

After the cloth has been woven, ritual, as specified by the *eru* must be performed. Specified items for the ritual must be bought in sets of twos. Part of this includes special beads known as *omo nemuonen*, which are either made or bought also in two sets. The woman must keep all the items used for the rituals because they will be used to bury her when she dies. The woman herself must go through a ritual process part of which includes her sitting on a mortar that has been placed upside down. She must also wear the *omo nemuonen* beads around her waist during the ritual process. The number of days in which the woman will undergo the ritual ceremony depends on the sex of her children: for girls seven days and nine days for boys. During each of the days in which the ceremony is performed, there must be daily cooking and the food cooked each day must be consumed on that day.

The *Ago* cloth itself is of great importance to the woman not only because it serves as an insurance against the premature death of her children, but also because she will be buried in it. Those who could not acquire the cloth before their death would have their burial delayed until the cloth is woven and the rituals performed. If the woman dies before she is able to acquire the cloth, her children must pay for the *Ago* cloth to be woven and the rituals and sacrifices are done on behalf of the deceased in order to prevent calamities that may befall them due to the delay. It must be noted that it is only women who are married to Owo men that are mandated to weave this cloth. An Owo woman who marries a non-indigene is free from the rituals.

Bunu ritual cloth forms: Renne (1992: 110) identifies a cloth form produced by Bunu men and women known as *Aso-Ipo*, which literally means 'red cloth'. *Aso-Ipo* cloth forms are five in number woven on a special single heddle loom similar to the broadloom except that its structure is not as broad as the single heddle loom used by women in other parts of Yoruba land. Renne describes *Aso-Ipo* group of cloth as red and tan in colour with striking geometric patterns, a distinctive woven structure that involves a special technique for combining a warp faced plain weave foundation with supplementary weft patterning on top. *Aso-Ipo* cloth forms are woven in strips of about eight inches, which are eventually sewn together to give a carpet-like thickness. The thread used in weaving the cloth is obtained from red hospital blankets bought in Okene.

Aso-Ipo serves ritual and political functions within the society. Its variants are used at the death of an important chief or king and are hung in front of the deceased's house as an expression of his/her political status while alive. A

number of things distinguish the five forms from each other. These include the size, which depends on the number of the strips sewn together, the price and the spiritual attributes accrued to the cloth. The five *Aso-Ipo* forms are:

Aponuponyin (Abaro): this is displayed only for those who have been awarded the title of *Olu*. Such individuals hold three titles and this is the highest-ranking king/chief in the society. After the funeral ceremony, the cloth is buried with the deceased. The weaving of this cloth is done on the traditional broadloom used by women but the weaving is restricted only to certain men. These men are believed to possess the spiritual powers needed to weave what they believe to be a very dangerous cloth. The cloth is woven in the bush.

Aponuponyin is the only cloth form, of which its weaving, is restricted to a special group of men in the Bunu society. Besides these two cloth forms namely *Aponuponyin (Abaro)* and *Aponuponyin* the other cloth forms mentioned below can be woven by either male or female members of the Bunu society. The other forms of *Aso-Ipo* include:

Abata – This is for chiefs who hold two titles. It is a large cloth made of eleven strips

Ifale – This is for chiefs who hold one title and this includes women. This cloth is made up of seven long strips sewn together

Oja – This is for chiefs with high-ranking titles. It consists of a very long single strip

Ebe – This form of *Aso-Ipo* is displayed at the funeral of all chiefs regardless of their rank in the society. The cloth consists of a single short strip of about eight inches woven on the day of the funeral.

According to Renne (1995), three major cloth forms are still produced by Bunu women because they serve cultural functions within the society. These are: white cloth, which is used as one of the ingredients in solving spiritual and health problems; hunter's shirt used by the hunters who are the ancestors of the Bunu people (the hunters use this cloth as a form of protection while out on hunting expeditions); and marriage cloth which are the cloth new a bride takes to her husband's house.

1.4 IJEBU RITUAL CLOTHS

At Ijebu-Ode, the women weave various cloth forms, which serve different functions within the society. One of these cloth forms is Itagbe, which is used as a symbol of political power. According to oral tradition, Itagbe was a covenant between Orunmila and a woman called Poroyen when the former fell into a deep pit and could not come out. After seven days and nights without any food or water he began to sing and this attracted Poroyen to the side of the pit. She offered to get him out of the pit only if he would marry her. Orunmila agreed and she used her wrapper (which is similar in form to *Oja*) to pull him out. Orunmila kept his promise, and married Poroyen who eventually bore him a son.

She is said to have used the wrapper, which she used to pull Orunmila out of the pit to strap her baby on her back.

Traditionally, the weaving of the *Itagbe* is done on the broadloom. Today, women use an improved traditional broad loom to weave the cloth. The cloth is not woven to the end; the weaver leaves a length of thread unwoven at the two ends of the cloth. The unwoven ends are tied together into seven pieces forming the 'ears' of the cloth. The tied ends must number seven at each end of the *Itagbe*. Various images, which have ritual meanings to the wearer, are woven on the *Itagbe*. In modern day words of prayers are woven on the cloth. The cloth can therefore be used as a visual equivalent of prayer. Aronson (1992) notes that the use of *Itagbe* is indicative of a highly personalised status symbol and thus owners can present it to their various deities as symbols of gratitude or prayer. Mainly members of the *Ogboni* or *Osugbo* fraternity wear *Itagbe* (Mr. Solanke, personal communication, 2000), the International Vice President of the Aborigine *Ogboni* Fraternity (AOF), gives an account of the origin of this fraternity, which he traced to *Irosun-Ose*, an Ifa verse. These sacred verses, record a time of great crisis in the history of creation, characterized by bitterness, hatred and barrenness in the land. *Olorun* the Supreme God of the Yoruba did not like this, so he sent *Orunmila* with a staff of authority known as the *Edan* (a long, thin metal staff) to quell the crisis. Through the *Edan*, peace and unity were restored and to ensure that peace lasted, the *Ogboni* or *Osugbo* fraternity was created, which subsequently made the *Edan* and the *Itagbe* symbols of the cults' authority.

The *Osugbo* fraternity was given the power of installing the Oba or king and the symbol of this power is the *Itagbe*. According to Solanke, *Itagbe* itself is a form of power created from the foundation of the creation of Ife. It was therefore given only to powerful and influential people. Thus, anybody wearing the *Itagbe* could not be disobeyed and his words were law. The *Oba*, his chiefs, and members of the *Ogboni* fraternity depending on their ranks, wear the *Itagbe* on their head or on the left shoulder except during the funerary procession of an *Osugbo* member.

1.5 BASIC CLOTH

Basic cloths are those produced for everyday use. They can be made with traditional hand spun thread or with industrial threads to produce lighter cloth that can be used as cover cloths, casual wrappers to be worn to markets, baby ties, work and play clothes among others. Cloth under this category include; *Kijipa* or *Ikale*, *Oja* and *Ala*.

Kijipa was one of the most common cloth woven by women on the broadloom. It served a number of social as well as religious functions in the society. Women used it mainly as wrapper to be worn to various places ranging from the market to religious or festive occasions. Aremu (1982) lists a number

of other functions it served in the lives of the Yoruba women. According to him, *Kijipa* could perform a number of functions including; prevention of miscarriages or cure for barrenness. *Ifa* priests usually prescribe the cloth for childless women or women who experience constant miscarriages. *Kijipa* is also believed to attract to the wearer blessings, protection, prosperity, victory and health. *Kijipa* is also part of the cloth forms, which makes up the costume of the Yoruba *Egungun* Masquerade. It should be noted that it is not the plain woven *Kijipa* cloth that cures or empowers but the magical charms that have been infused in it that empower the cloth and its wearer. Anyone who goes to the priest for spiritual assistance is usually told to bring *Kijipa* woven in a prescribed way for the ritual exercise.

Oja is another basic cloth form woven by Yoruba women. It is similar to the *Itagbe* mainly because of the tufts of thread, which are left on it as a decorative method when it is woven. Women use the cloth to secure their babies on their backs.

Ala or Ogbo is a white cloth that is generally used as a cover cloth against the cold and mosquitoes. It also serves as a wrapper for elderly men. It is wrapped under the armpit and thrown over the shoulder. According to an informant, the cloth is used in the traditional context as an evidence of a new bride's virginity. It is on this cloth that the new bride and her husband will sleep on, on the first night of their wedding. If the cloth is stained, this means that the bride was a virgin upon marriage and the parents of the couple celebrate this. If, on the other hand, the cloth is not stained, this implies that the new bride was promiscuous before her wedding day and this usually brings shame on the bride's parents and the bride herself.

Ologba Meta, another basic cloth form produced by Yoruba women is used for making *buba* and trousers for men. It is also used to make hunter's outfit. Later with the introduction of formal education, the cloth form was used to make uniforms for children.

2. PRESENT DAY FASHION TRENDS

Today, new innovations in terms of style, texture and colour can be seen in Yoruba hand woven textiles. This is especially so in terms of the cloth forms produced on various loom types introduced into Yoruba land during the colonial experience. Some of these looms include the standard and plain looms. The traditional broad loom has also been improved upon, as it is now carpenter made in areas like Ijebu-Ode and Owo. Due to the influence of some Yoruba women who trade in cloth across the Nigerian border with countries such as Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast, the traditional narrow loom in areas like Lagos have added on to them extra heddles and peddles. In addition to the new looms and the modification of the traditional looms is the use of imported threads of various colours. This has made the hand-woven textiles of today more colourful

than the traditional forms of old. Imported threads also help to reduce loss of time and materials during the weaving process. This is because when the weaver is using traditional hand spun cotton threads, the frequency of thread breakage is high. Once the thread breaks, the weaver has to stop and tie the threads together again. Thread breakage during weaving is drastically reduced when imported threads are used. The result is that the hand woven cloth is not only more colourful but also much stronger than the traditional cloth forms woven with hand spun threads. Another major advantage is that the owner of the hand woven cloth can wash the cloth without the fear that the colours will run out thereby leaving the cloth faded or that the cloth will disintegrate because of the weak hand spun threads.

Yoruba women over the years have been very active in promoting the use and sale of the hand woven textile forms produced by them. One of the ways in which they do this is through what can be referred to as the middleman role. This in itself has its foundation in the popularised use of traditional group uniforms, known as *aso-ebi*. This tradition involves the use of *aso-oke* to display unity and support with celebrants during special occasions such as weddings, naming ceremonies or installations. The celebrant selects an *aso-oke* pattern, which family members buy and wear as a uniform on the day of the celebration. Well-wishers, club members and other social groups related to the celebrant will collectively choose an *aso-oke* pattern to distinguish themselves from others on the day of the celebration. The various *aso-oke* patterns to be worn on the day of celebration are contracted out to Yoruba female 'middle men' or suppliers who serve as a link between the celebrants and the weavers.

The tradition of *aso-ebi* serves a number of functions. The first and major one being that it ensures continuity in relation to the use and production of *aso-oke*. In between the celebrant, the supplier and the weaver, new and innovative designs are developed. Secondly, it helps visitors to identify the celebrant's family members or those who belong to the same social or religious group with the celebrant. This tradition totally revolves around women (except for the weavers who may be men), which has helped to keep the tradition of *aso-oke* alive. Thirdly, through the tradition of *aso-ebi*, Yoruba women now use more of *aso-oke* than their men. A Yoruba woman's traditional dressing is not complete without an *Ipile* and *Gele* made from strips of *aso-oke* while her husband needs just a strip of the cloth to make a *fila* or cap to complete their traditional dressing. The *fila* is obtained through the good will of the men's spouses who extract a strip for them to use.

Clarke (1996) has also shed more light on the activities of women who played the middleman role between the family celebrating an event and the weavers. He states that between these women and the weavers, innovative designs are usually produced. Clarke particularly mentions a new trend whereby Yoruba women using Ghanaian and Togolese weavers, have been able to produce new and dynamic designs. Through the efforts of these women, *aso-oke* now has a new look in terms of designs and even width. Clarke observes that the

more recent *aso-oke* forms are much broader and may be up to seven inches or more in width.

3. CONCLUSION

The above discussion has brought to the fore that contrary to what has been said about women weaving in traditional Yoruba societies, the women folk, just like their men counterpart, did not only actively participate in the production of hand-woven cloth, but their cloth production was also equally as important as those of the men. They can be regarded as important repository of knowledge, skill and power especially as it pertains to cloth production and in enforcing its perpetuity. Yoruba women were therefore not just active participants in the production of mundane cloth but were also fully active in the production of highly qualitative and significant cloth forms that the society as a whole recognizes as valuable and ascribes social, political, and religious importance to. In contemporary times women have become the dominant force in the production of hand-woven textiles. But they do not just stop at reproducing what they had learnt from their grandmothers, they initiate some new dynamics in the designs and defining new forms of utilizing the cloth so woven. The Yoruba society, although patriarchal in structure, nevertheless gives ample room for women to develop their own distinct groups and social networks, which have far reaching consequences on their economic activities. It is this unique permissive atmosphere that encouraged the Yoruba women to thrive in their economic adventure, which contributed significantly to the growth of their societies. Of importance too is the role Yoruba women still play today to ensure the continuity of the hand-woven textiles. The concept of *aso-ebi* has greatly ensured that most women who want to show solidarity with their friends, engage the services of other women who are skilled in hand-woven cloth to produce bundles of the selected form for production. By so doing, the cloth production is not only sustained but more women are still encouraged to engage in this old cloth production.

Consequently, traditional Yoruba women can be said to be professional weavers who weave various cloth forms to serve various occasions. In some areas, their cloth forms served mainly domestic and social purposes while in other areas they wove cloth that served political, social, and ritual purposes. This paper has been able to identify some of these cloth forms and their importance to the overall development of the Yoruba people. The paper has also been able to identify the various roles Yoruba women have played in ensuring the continuity of the hand weaving tradition through their activities in production, use and sale. Through their innovative efforts, hand woven textiles now have a new and improved look, which conform to present day fashion trends.

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