



## Yoruba Women in Clothing: Textiles as a Bridge to Memories and Identity.

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**Abstract.** Yoruba women's clothing and fashion are not only artistic expressions but also living records of cultural heritage, communal identity, and social values passed from one generation to another. A theoretical approach was adopted for the study. This paper investigates the pivotal role of Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria in the cultural utilization of textiles as fashion items, emphasizing their significance as a medium for collective memory and cultural identity for future generations. Through a critical analysis of the continuous use of textile materials such as adire (resist-dyed fabrics including Adire Eleko, Oniko, and Alabere) and Aso Oke (handwoven cloths such as Etu, Sanyan, Alaari, and Shanishani) among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria, these textiles have become enduring cultural hallmarks. The paper also highlights their symbolic functions in fashion and ceremonies such as: funerals, naming ceremonies, traditional festivals, chieftaincy installations, and other social celebrations, where they signify status, spirituality, and communal values. Drawing from historical, ethnographic, and anthropological frameworks, the study explores the evolution of textile use in Southwestern Nigeria by tracing the intersection of textiles, fashion, memory, and identity. The study concludes that textiles are indispensable elements of material culture and symbolic cultural heritage, appreciated beyond local boundaries.

**Keywords:** Yoruba women, textiles, cultural identity, fashion, memory, material culture, heritage.

### 1. Introduction

Yoruba women have been custodians of rich textile traditions for centuries. Cloth serves as a medium of expression for Yoruba women, allowing them to display their individuality and communal ties. They

command a profound respect for their contributions to the social, economic, and political growth of their society. In Yoruba cultures, fabric is a major part of wealth, status, and cultural identity. Different patterns, colours, and types of cloth can signify various social status, roles, and affiliations. In the past, in some Yoruba communities, Ondo town as a notable example, Alaari hand-woven cloth has been long associated with royalty and high social status (Adepeko, 2009) Every colour and pattern combination has its own meaning and is used for different things. For instance, the Ikat and Omolangidi designs are writings that can be used to send messages and show social rank. Textiles are a big part of African culture, and Sylvanus, 2007 named it "Africanity" to show how the western perception of African textiles may be seen as a way of thinking about authenticity. Traditionally, textiles play a significant role in expressing cultural, social, and power status that is employed in the reinforcement of authority and unity as well as the commemoration of momentous events or identification of a group of people. Each piece of textile carries significance, with patterns and symbols that reflect Yoruba proverbs, societal values, and life experiences, thereby acting as visual narratives that bridge past and present (Ojo, 2007).

Throughout history, Yoruba women have played a significant role in the production and transmission of textiles, utilizing their craft as a means of economic empowerment and cultural expression. Clothing in Yoruba culture performs iconic and symbolic functions, Over the centuries, each locality where weaving is done in Southwestern Nigeria has reserved the right to produce its own style of clothing. The woven fabrics differ characteristically from one ethnic group to another. The general name for the type of fabrics they all produce is Aso-Oke

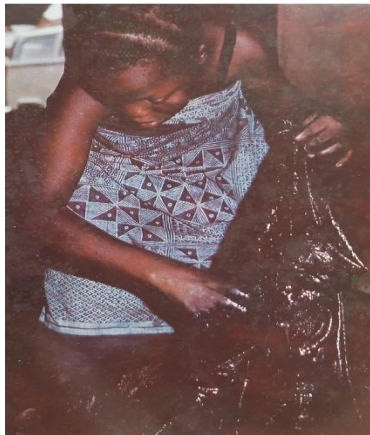
which is the traditional cloth of the Yoruba southwestern Nigeria. This study explores the intersection of roles of the Yoruba women in textile production and its cultural

application, focusing on how textile serves as a bridge to memories and identity, while maintaining essential connections to ancestral practices and knowledge.



**Figure 1** Adire eleko  
**Source:** Eicher 1976

This is an example of Adire Eleko, produced in the 70s as documented by Eicher 1976. It captures symbols of items used by Yoruba women. For example, the traditional wooden comb, used by women for combing and parting their hair while plating it. The half-moon is also drawn on the dyed fabric. It is pertinent to note that, then, months and years were counted as the moon appeared, thirteen Luna months makes a year. There are also pictures of leaves, baskets and birds depicting what was common in their environment and what they do for a living. These symbols and shapes were made on the fabric as recorded memories of their daily activities and preserving the memories for generations yet unborn.



**Figure 2**  
**Source:** Eicher 1976



**Figure 3**  
**Source:** Author

The young lady in Figure 2, dyeing a fabric was an attestation that textile dyeing was a traditional craft passed down from one generation to the other. Then as a family craft, the younger generation were involved both in the production and use of Adire. No wonder the craft endures till now and has become a major source of income for those who engage in it. Abeokuta and Osogbo Adire dying centres attest to this fact (Saheed, 2013).

Figure 3 captures another young lady in the production of Adire, a visual essay of how the craft continues to be passed down from one generation to the next ensuring the continuity of a valued cultural heritage, even in contemporary times. Her work reflects the preservation of cultural memory and identity, as adire remains a significant marker of

Yoruba womanhood. By learning this skill, young women not only sustain an important heritage but also gain economic empowerment, enabling them to build their own livelihoods.

Figures 2 and 3 both depict young ladies engaged in the art of dyeing, yet their appearance clearly shows that the photographs were taken decades apart. In Figure 2, the young lady is dressed in the typical style of the 1970s. She wraps an Adire Eleko cloth around her chest, without a blouse, revealing the strap of her bra. Her hairstyle also reflects traditional grooming practices for young girls of that period. By contrast, the l in Figure 3 is dressed in contemporary clothing, a pair of jeans and an Adire top.

The dyeing methods also highlight changes over time. The woman in Figure 2 immerses the fabric directly into an indigo dye pit with her bare hands, a common practice in the past when natural dyes were used. However, the woman in Figure 3 works with synthetic dyes, which are more corrosive, and so she wears protective nylon gloves and works on a spread of nylon placed on the floor instead of in a dye pit.

The adire itself demonstrates evolution in style and technique. Earlier forms of tie-dye typically appeared in single colours such as deep blue from indigo. Contemporary Adire, as seen in Figure 3, comes in a wider range of colours: red, blue, pink, green, reflecting modern experimentation and expanding aesthetic preferences.

Together, the two images document significant changes in fashion, technique, and cultural practice within Yoruba dyeing traditions. They preserve memories of how young ladies once went to work simply wrapped in cloth, compared to the widespread use of trousers and more elaborate tops among today's younger generation. These photographs therefore serve as visual records of changing identities, evolving practices, and the continuity of the cultural heritage of adire production across generations.

### Context of Yoruba Textiles.

The Yoruba are heavily concentrated in the settlement of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, and Ondo states of Southwestern Nigeria. Big Yoruba groups also live in Kwara and some parts of Kogi state. Beyond Nigeria, Yoruba are found, much in similarities, in other West African countries such as: Benin Republic, Port-Novo, Togo, Ghana, Sierra-Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. These states have a rich Tradition of weaving, and each is home to a different group of Yoruba which has maintained unique features of dialect and culture. The making of the fabric, like other traditional crafts, has been of both economic and cultural value among the Yoruba people all over the world. Aso-Oke has been popular both at home and abroad, and it has been the main source of apparel for numerous events. The prescription of Aso-Oke has long been integral to the visual language of Yoruba sociocultural events.

With the colonization and touch with Western life through increase in travel and social media in contemporary times, Yoruba women use other forms of synthetic fabrics like: lace, damask, velvet etc., to sew iro, buba, gele and are also lavishly used for the commendation of both social and traditional events.



**Figure 4**  
**Source:** Author

The woman in Figure 4 created some memories with her outfit. Her outfit was made of Damask and lace. Damask for iro and gele, and lace for buba, all three were tied in a style called Oleku. Oleku style is a shortened form of iro and buba, worn in contrast to the longer traditional versions. The mini wrapper is tied above the knee instead of the usual long Yoruba wrapper. The woman in the picture likely took the photograph to preserve memories of how fashion looked in the 1970s. Her accessories: the earrings, necklace, handbag and even the wristwatch complement her beautiful attire. This was how young ladies, especially those considered ripe for marriage, often wore their iro and buba within Yoruba communities.

There has been a resurgence of the Oleku style in contemporary times. Without the above picture, it would have been difficult to fully appreciate that Oleku existed, flourished, and was a dominant fashion trend in the 1970s. In recent years, young ladies have been seen wearing the Oleku style at different occasions. This corroborates the fact that textile is a bridge between generation in terms of fashion and material culture.



**Figure 5**  
**Source:** Author

Figure 5 is a photograph of five ladies taken at a wedding ceremony. These ladies served as bridesmaids. The bride chose them and requested that they dress in Yoruba attire because a wedding is a memorable occasion. As a Yoruba woman who cherishes her tradition, she asked her bridesmaids to

appear in the Oleku outfit. These bridesmaids are wearing gele made of synthetic fabric and lace blouses in the same white colour, also made from synthetic material. The iro is made of African print (Ankara), tied in the Oleku style, reflecting the popular fashion trend of the 1970s. The ladies appear radiant and joyful in their outfits, visibly proud of their identity as Yoruba women.



Figure 6  
Source: Author

In April 2016, when the creation of Ondo State clocked 40 years, it was a grand celebration. This picture captures the ushers who officiated at the event. They are all dressed in a synthetic type of Ankara, tied in the Oleku style. It was a beautiful way to celebrate culture and to showcase what the people of Ondo State represent in terms of material culture, fashion and clothing. All the ushers were young girls. Their iro and buba were also styled in the Oleku fashion. Even their shoes were of the same colour, and their earrings were identical in shape. It was indeed a significant celebration in Ondo State; one that future generations will see and appreciate. The display of the Oleku style by the ushers at the ceremony further demonstrates how clothing remains an integral part of Yoruba culture. Yoruba women continue to dress in expressive and elaborate ways to record memories and mark important events.



Figure 7  
Source: Author

This Yoruba woman in Figure 7 wearing a traditional attire looks gorgeous and elegant. She was celebrating a memorable event, her 60th birthday. The picture reflects her happiness and pride in her complete traditional outfit. She wore a matching buba that complemented her wrapper, gele, and iborun. The fabric, known as Alaari, is a handwoven Aso-oke traditionally worn by Yoruba women during significant occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and festivals. Her beautifully arranged neck beads further enhance the outfit, adding a touch of cultural grace and sophistication.



Figure 8  
Source: Author

Yoruba women have a culture of encouraging the younger generation to embrace their traditions. The picture of the young girl in Figure 8, fully dressed in Yoruba attire, confirms this. It was taken during a wedding ceremony where she followed the example of the elderly Yoruba women. She is wearing iro and buba, with a gele and iborun. The gele and iborun are made from damask, a prestigious fabric among the Yoruba people, often used to celebrate important and memorable events. The iborun is tied in a stylish manner that was fashionable at the time of the celebration. These clothing traditions represent material culture being passed down from one generation to another. Despite her young age, she already understands the importance of dressing traditionally for memorable occasions such as weddings.



Figure 9  
Source: Author

This is another Yoruba woman in Figure 9, dressed in iro and buba made from fashionable Adire fabric. The Adire features a contemporary design created with synthetic dyes. The picture was taken during a housewarming celebration, serving as a keepsake of the joyous occasion. The woman is seated comfortably in her living room, radiating the satisfaction and pride of owning a new home.

Such occasions are often marked with Yoruba cultural expressions, as memories are intentionally preserved for future generations. Notably, the throw pillows on the floor are also made from Adire, further emphasizing the owner's deep appreciation for this indigenous textile. This scene demonstrates how Adire continues to function not only as a symbol of Yoruba identity in clothing but also as a material for home decoration and interior aesthetics.



Figure 10  
Source: Author

This is a beautiful Yoruba woman relaxing at her daughter's wedding reception. Although other guests can be seen in the background, she stands out as an elegant icon at the event. She is dressed in exquisite lace adorned with matching Aso-oke, iborun, and gele. Her accessories: the necklace, hand beads, bag, and wristwatch are tastefully coordinated to complement her attire. Yoruba women often dress beautifully for memorable

occasions such as weddings, which hold great cultural significance within the community. This photograph was taken as a keepsake, allowing the bride's children to one day see how their grandmother appeared on their mother's wedding day. In Yoruba culture, women's fashion and the preservation of memories are deeply intertwined acts that reflect pride, identity, and continuity.



Figure 11  
Source: Author

The picture shows an array of women in woven fabrics during a wedding reception. They are all clad in Alaari and other hand-woven textiles. Here Alaari was used as aso-ebi which literally means 'clothing for family' originally symbolising unity within family on special occasions. However, aso-ebi has evolved into broader cultural and societal makers, now adopted by various social classes and age groups across Yoruba communities (Olugbamigbe, 2023) Most of them are wearing the traditional iro, buba, gele and iborun. Alaari, as mentioned earlier, is a favourite among the Ondo people. Since the wedding took place in Ondo, the use of Alaari reflects a sense of solidarity and cultural identity within the Yoruba community. It also affirms the fact that during memorable events, Yoruba women consistently appear in their traditional attire as a way of showcasing and preserving their cultural heritage.



Figure 12  
Source: Author

The woman on the right in Figure 12 is dressed in a matching lace buba paired with Aso-oke, with her

iboron tied around her waist, a distinctive and traditional way of styling it. She also wears another iboron on her shoulder, showcasing the versatility of Yoruba fashion. Her beaded necklace adds to her regal appearance, as beads remain important accessories in Yoruba women's dressing. The woman on the left wears a beautifully woven aso-oke adorned with intricate motifs that reflect both traditional and contemporary design elements. This photograph captures how Yoruba women's clothing continues to embody cultural pride, artistry, and continuity through ceremonial dress. The horse-tail held by the woman on the right attenuates the situation they are celebrating-chiefancy ceremony, a remarkable traditional event among the Yoruba people.



Figure 13  
Source: Author

The woman in this picture is fashionable, moving with current trends in style. In the near future, the image will remain as a memory to show the younger generation that, at one time, a style like this was in vogue. It is both contemporary and traditional. The outfit could perhaps be used for ceremonial purposes, due to its combination of modern trends and traditional fabric- aso-oke. The Aso-oke itself is over ten years old, while the African print (Ankara) is more recent. This represents a blend of past and present. In this way, the photograph serves as a means of documenting memories for future generations.

## 2. Reviewed Literature

Scholarly opinions hold that the origin of textiles is unknown. Archaeological evidence suggests that cotton cultivation and weaving technologies have existed in Yoruba land since at least 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. Ojo, 2007 explains, "The development of weaving among the Yoruba can be traced to at least the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, with evidence suggesting that textiles were closely tied to political authority and spiritual practices. "Archaeological findings from Ancient Ile-Ife reveal that textile production was already sophisticated by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, with distinct patterns and Techniques indicating social stratification and specialised guild structures. By

the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Yoruba textile centres had established extensive trade networks that facilitated the exchange of raw materials and finished textiles across west Africa (Byfield, 2002). The city of Oyo emerged as a prominent textile production Hub, with specialized quarters dedicated to spinning, dyeing, and weaving.

In many places in Yoruba land, both sexes weave, several characteristics differentiate the cloth woven by men from women, but women's weaving is giving much prominence. Traditionally, men wove on a horizontal narrow loom that produced a strip of cloth of a few inches wide, while women wove on a vertical broad loom that produced cloth wider in breath but much shorter in length than those produced by men. 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 a symbol of political and social prestige. In these areas, a small percentage of the women also weave (Lamb and Holmes, 1980).

For Yoruba women, weaving textiles isn't just functional; it carries deeper meanings. Previous academic beliefs suggested that Yoruba women's weaving was limited to the household, but in truth, they produced textiles for important ceremonies, economic activities, and spiritual rituals. According to Asakitikpi's 2007 study, women's weaving efforts play a crucial role alongside men's labour, resulting in textiles that are essential to the fabric of Yoruba social life, marking significant moments like marriages and funerals.

### 2.1 Textiles as a Medium of Memory and Identity.

The concepts of memory and identity are closely linked, influencing how a community understands its cultural and historical roots. In Yoruba land, textiles play a significant role as expressive mediums that help shape, maintain, and showcase both shared memories and social identities. When we talk about memory in a cultural sense, it is not just about what one person remembers; it is really about the collective stories, symbols, and rituals that help people connect with their history and maintain ties to their forebears (Assmann, 2011). For the Yoruba, memory is inscribed materially and symbolically into cloth, particular in traditional fabrics like Aso-oke (woven cloth) and adire (indigo-dyed textiles) which embody historical references, spiritual meaning, and ancestral wisdom (Aero and Kalilu, 2013). However, Assmann, 2011 defines memory as a faculty that enables the formation of self-awareness that enables us to live in groups and communities, and living in groups or communities enables us to build memory. These are two forms of memories, including cultural memory

and communicative memory. Cultural memory is based on imprecise recollections of the past that are normally unpreserved but cast in symbols and convey a collective cultural identity history, meanwhile, communicative memory is non-institutional that lives in everyday people's interactions and communication.

Identity, on the other hand, is understood as a socially constructed sense of self, shaped by history, culture, kinship, and language. It encompasses both individual identity and one sees oneself and group identity and how individuals align with larger cultural or ethnic communities (Hall, 1996). Identity is dynamic and performed, often communicated through dress, symbols, and rituals.

In contemporary Yoruba society, the memories of the past have been presented to the next generations using textiles that are different archived of diverse cultural memories crucial in shaping cultural identity. Stuart Hall (1996), in his theory of cultural identity, notes that identity is both rooted in historical experiences and constantly in process, formed through memory, language, and representation.

Textiles such as Aso oke and adire functions as mnemonic and identificatory tools that merge memory and identity into visual, tactile, and wearable forms. These fabrics function as cultural script: they preserve oral histories, spiritual narratives, and genealogical ties, while also signalling social belonging or family identity. As Aero & Kalilu 2013 explains, the visual motifs of adire cloth are deeply semiotic, communicating Yoruba proverbs, cosmology, and generational knowledge. These textiles are not passive objects; they are living archives through which the Yoruba people narrate who they are, where they come from, and what they remember.

Both Assmann and Dodnar's conceptualisation of memory is important in the understanding how memory is constructed, unpacked, and transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of symbols or text embedded in artifacts including textiles to substantiate cultural memory and identity.

Textiles, as semiotic artefacts and mnemonic devices, function as a potent mediator of collective memory and identity construction with the Yoruba cultural praxis. By inscribing memory onto cloth, the Yoruba textile tradition materializes identity as both performative and situated, affirming Hall's (1996) concept of identity as a fluid, dialogue process. Thus, textile becomes not just a medium, but an active agent in the preservative and articulation of cultural subjectivity.

According to Perani and Wayne as cited in (Akinbileje, 2014), clothes are mirrors of local cultures as they possess the potential to unpack various information embedded in weaving about self and personal worth, occupation, social status, and standard of economic value, as well as political power. In some societies, clothes are communicative tools used to display class distinction and strength through which elites establish, maintain, and reproduce positions of power and dominance over the weak and poor, which Assmann, 2011 referred to as communicative memory; with patterns and motifs telling stories of folklore, daily life, individuals, ruling class and proverbs.

In essence, as each thread binds past and present, Yoruba women's textiles stands as a perfect example of how artistic expressions and cultural memory and identity can coexist and in doing so, bring people together in celebration of a shared and renewing heritage. This phenomenon validates Assmann's understanding of cultural memory as a living, evolving system and supports conceptualisation of identity as processual and performative. As each thread continues to bind past and present, Yoruba textiles remain powerful examples of how artistic expression can simultaneously preserve cultural heritage and facilitate contemporary identity formation.

## 2.2 Contemporary Relevance and Adaptation

Today, Yoruba textile traditions continue to evolve while experiencing appreciation. Contemporary Nigerian designers are reinterpreting traditional techniques from modern contexts, creating innovative fashion that bridges traditional craft and contemporary design. New innovations in terms of style, texture and colour can be seen in the Yoruba Clothing and Textiles. Meaning the traditional weaving style has been improved upon. New innovations in terms of style, texture, and colour combinations are increasable visible. In Yoruba clothing and textiles, demonstration that traditional weaving methodologies have been significantly enhanced and modernized (Adebayo, 2021). This evolution reflects what (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) term "invented tradition" practices that appear traditional but are actually recent adaptations to contemporary circumstances. This cultural transition among the Yoruba is deeply rooted with apprenticeship and lineage, which continue as cornerstone of knowledge transfer even in contemporary settings.

As the world becomes increasingly globalized, Yoruba women continue to innovate while honouring their traditions. Contemporary designers are merging traditional fabric with modern styles, appealing to younger generations who seek to

connect with their roots while embracing new fashion trends. This intergenerational dialogue ensures that traditional knowledge remains dynamic rather than static, allowing for creative reinterpretation without losing essential cultural meaning. This fusion of traditional textile knowledge with global fashion trends not only preserves the cultural significance of Yoruba cloth but also ensures its relevance in today's fashion landscape.

### 3. Conclusion

In this study, The Yoruba textile tradition demonstrates the profound capacity of material culture to preserve memory and identity across generation and geographic boundaries. The contemporary Yoruba textile renaissance exemplifies successful cultural preservation through creative adaptation rather than static conservation. By embracing both traditional significance and contemporary expression, younger generations ensure the continued validity of Yoruba textile traditions while establishing new forms of cultural memory for future generations. This is captured in the thirteen pictures displayed in the text.

This phenomenon validates Assmann's understanding of cultural memory as a living, evolving system that conceptualizes identity as processual and performative. As each thread continues to bind past and present, Yoruba textiles remain powerful examples of how material culture can simultaneously preserve cultural heritage and facilitate contemporary identity formation.

In addition, the study highlights how Yoruba clothing traditions have evolved while still retaining core culture significance. Future investigations might examine how diaspora communities and global influences are reshaping and reimagining the symbolic meaning traditionally encoded in Yoruba clothing.

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