FASHION TRENDS, PRODUCTION PROCESS AND USAGE OF ASO-OKE IN YORUBA LAND

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolving production practices and socio-cultural usage of Aso-Oke, a hand-woven textile central to Yorùbá identity in southwestern Nigeria. Through visual ethnography and field interviews conducted in Oyo and Iseyin in 2021, data were collected via 24 photographic records and semi-structured interviews with 12 master weavers (8 male, 4 female; aged 28-72). Thematic analysis revealed three key trends: (1) significant material substitution - synthetic threads (e.g., Lurex) and dyes now supplement or replace traditional cotton, silk, and indigo; (2) continuity in core weaving techniques despite technological shifts; and (3) resilient ceremonial demand that is expanding beyond elite contexts to include birthdays, naming ceremonies, and modern weddings. While the classical types - Etu, Sanyan, and Alaari - retain symbolic prestige, their production increasingly blends heritage with market-driven innovation. The study concludes that Aso-Oke's survival hinges on balancing authenticity with functional adaptation. Recommendations include revitalising local cotton farming, supporting design innovation, and integrating Aso-Oke into national cultural and educational policy.

Keywords: Aso-Oke, Yorùbá textiles, Handloom weaving, Material innovation, Cultural heritage, Nigeria

Introduction

Aso-Oke ("top cloth" in Yorùbá) is more than fabric; it is a living archive of Yorùbá cosmology, social hierarchy, and aesthetic philosophy. Woven for centuries in southwestern Nigeria, it adorns kings, brides, and elders during rites of passage that mark the rhythm of communal life. However, in an era of fast fashion and global textile markets, this heritage craft faces unprecedented pressures. This study explores not decline, but adaptation: how Yorùbá weavers sustain Aso-Oke as a dynamic cultural practice through material innovation, intergenerational knowledge, and ceremonial relevance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite its cultural prominence, Aso-Oke weaving is in crisis. Historic centres like Iseyin, once home to hundreds of weavers, now count fewer than a dozen active practitioners. Local cotton farming has collapsed, wild silk (Anaphemoth cocoons) is scarce, and youth increasingly view weaving as economically unviable.[1] While Aso-Oke remains visible at weddings and chieftaincy events, its production increasingly relies on imported synthetic threads and chemical dyes, raising concerns about the erosion of indigenous knowledge. [2] Existing literature offers rich historical and symbolic accounts but lacks empirical, ground-level analysis of how contemporary artisans navigate these challenges. Without such understanding, preservation efforts risk being symbolic rather than sustainable.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how Yorùbá weavers in Oyo and Iseyin adapt Aso-Oke production techniques, material choices, and design practices in response to socio-economic and cultural changes in the 21st century. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Document current stages of Aso-Oke production, including tools, materials, and labour roles.
2. Identify innovations in fibre use (e.g., Lurex, synthetic dyes) and design (e.g., 'aso-oke eleya', commemorative embroidery).
3. Explore the evolving ceremonial and social usage of Aso-Oke beyond elite contexts.

This study focused specifically on Aso-Oke production and use in Oyo town and Iseyin, Oyo State, Nigeria, two historic weaving centres. The research was delimited to Oyo and Iseyin, excluding Osogbo, Ede, Ilorin, and diaspora communities. Data were gathered from January to March 202, focusing on recent 10–15-year adaptations. Thematically, the study covered production processes, material substitutions, and ceremonial use, without considering market economics, chemical fibre analysis, or comparison with other African textiles. Furthermore, qualitative visual ethnography and interviews were deployed. This focused group enables deep, context-rich insights without overgeneralization.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to multiple domains:

- Cultural Heritage: Provides empirical data for UNESCO-aligned efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.
- Academic Knowledge: Advances African textile studies by analysing innovation as cultural continuity, not loss.
- Artisan Empowerment: Offers evidence-based insights for weavers, NGOs, and policymakers (e.g., National Institute for Cultural Orientation).

- Education: Supplies curriculum material for Nigerian art, history, and vocational programs to inspire youth engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in "Practice Theory". [3] and Material Culture Studies. [4]

- Practice Theory explains how weavers' choices (e.g., using Lurex) reflect a 'habitus' - a practical logic shaped by training, economics, and cultural values. Tradition is not static but reproduced through daily action.
- Material Culture Studies treats Aso-Oke as an active agent of meaning. The shift from wild silk to synthetic fibre is not just technical - it signals changing relationships between people, materials, and identity.

Together, these frameworks reject the false dichotomy between "authentic" and "inauthentic," showing that cultural resilience lies in responsive practice.

Conceptualising Fashion and Textile in African Contexts

The term "fashionable" is used to illustrate whether someone or something aligns with current trends or popular modes of expression.[5] Fashion is often associated positively with style, glamour, and beauty, yet it also carries critiques of materialism and waste under capitalist systems. Nevertheless, many embrace the diversity that changing trends offer, seeing them as opportunities to experience novelty and creativity. [6] In traditional African societies, clothing transcends aesthetics - it is believed to possess protective spiritual functions, shielding the body from evil forces[7]. Fashion, in this context, reflects the mutations of taste within a cultural environment and serves as a mirror of its time. While national costumes are preserved as heritage, what is fashionable today may appear outdated tomorrow. [8] Fashion encompasses not only clothing but also accessories, body art, and even architecture. It is inclusive of style, cuisine, literature, and art - any domain where collective taste shifts over time. In Nigeria, Aso-Oke has emerged as a fabric of national and international vogue, worn at marriages, naming ceremonies, festivals, coronations, and global cultural events. Designers continuously refine their skills, creating increasingly sophisticated patterns. The competitive nature of contemporary Aso-Oke fashion means that artisans who fail to innovate risk becoming irrelevant. [9]

Textile as Applied Art and Cultural Practice

Textile design is an applied art that involves creating patterns and structures on fabric through techniques such as weaving, knitting, printing, and dyeing. [10] [11] It balances aesthetic appeal with structural integrity—how yarns are combined affects a fabric's look, feel, function, and durability. The term "textile" derives from "fibre," which may be natural (e.g., cotton, silk) or synthetic. Traditional Nigerian textile practices also include batik, tie-dye, block printing, and hand weaving. [13/14]

Also, it was emphasised that textiles permeate nearly every aspect of human life. Textile production spans from ancient handicrafts to modern technological processes. [15/16] Early textile structures originated from basketry and net-making, with woven fabrics likely evolving from interlaced flexible materials. [17] (All woven fabrics, especially Aso-Oke, are produced on looms where warp threads are held under tension through three principal movements: shedding, picking, and beating. [18]

Aso-Oke: Meaning, Types and Production

Aso-Oke production is a traditional textile industry in Yorùbáland with deep historical and cultural roots. Yusuf (2014) notes that weaving is a universal human practice that evolved from early use of animal skins and vegetation for protection, later refined through civilisation and technology. Textiles are defined as the interlacing of warp and weft yarns, a process central to Aso-Oke. There are three original types of Aso-Oke, distinguished by colour and fibre. [19]

Figure 1: Etu cloth, Year, 2021, Photograph, Yusuf Kazeem Kunle, Location, Oyo town.

- Etu: A deep blue, almost black, indigo-dyed cloth with thin light-blue stripes, resembling the plumage of the guinea fowl (etu). It is prestigious and worn widely across Yorùbá land.

Figure 2: Sanyan Cloth, Year, 2021, Photograph, Yusuf Kazeem Kunle, location, Oyo town

Sanyan: Made from wild silk of the Anaphemoth, naturally beige or pale brown. Revered as "the king of cloths" (Sanyan baba aso), it is associated with chiefs and kings.

Figure 3: Alaari Cloth, Year, 2021. Photograph, Yusuf Kazeem Kunle, location, Oyo town.

Alaari: Originally woven from Sanyan dyed red with camwood; today, most use magenta machine-spun cotton. It is used by royalty to receive guests, while Sanyan

and Etu feature in official ceremonies like harvest festivals and chieftaincy installations. [20]
These cloths reflect leadership, prestige, and religious status and are reserved for significant life events such as chieftaincy rites, weddings, initiations, festivals, and funerals of prominent individuals.

Gender, Technology, and Regional Production
In Yorùbá land, Aso-Oke is woven on two main loom types. Men traditionally use a horizontal narrow loom, producing long, narrow strips (4-5 inches wide). Women use a vertical broadloom, yielding shorter, wider carpets.[21/22] Historically, men wove full-time as a vocation, while women wove part-time, often processing fibres rather than operating looms. [23] However, there exist, such as full-time female weavers in Akwete, and recent trends show women increasingly adopting horizontal looms. Major production centres include Iseyin, Oyo; Ibadan (Oyo State); Ede and Osogbo (Osun State); Ilorin (Kwara State); and Okene (Kogi State). However, many of these towns report declining output due to economic, social, and material challenges. [24/25]

Gaps in Existing Research
While scholars such as Makinde et al. (2009) and Fadeyi (1994) document Aso-Oke's decline and recommend creative adaptation, few studies empirically investigate current production practices, material substitutions, or weavers' perspectives. Most accounts remain descriptive or historical. This study addresses that gap by grounding analysis in field observation, visual documentation, and artisan narratives from Oyo and Iseyin.

Research Design
Qualitative visual ethnography combining photography and interviews.

Setting and Participants
a) Sites: Oyo and Iseyin, Oyo State
b) Participants: 12 weavers (8 male, 4 female), aged 28–72, selected via purposive sampling

Data Collection
a) 21 field photographs documenting production stages (Figs. 1–24)
b) Semi-structured interviews (30-45 mins), audio-recorded and transcribed
c) , Field notes on materials, tools, and workshop dynamics

Data Analysis
Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using codes: 'material substitution', ceremonial expansion, and knowledge transfer.

Ethical Considerations
Verbal consent obtained; participants anonymised; photo permissions secured.

Results
Material Innovation

a. Figs. 1-2: Cotton bobbins are still used, but 9/12 weavers blend with imported synthetics.
b. Fig. 3: "Lurex thread" adopted for bridal 'aso-oke eleya' ("Young brides want shine," Weaver
c. Figs. 4–5: Synthetic dyes dominate; only two weavers use natural indigo.

Continuity in Craft

a. Figs. 8–9: Apprentices (primarily boys) wind weft bobbins - evidence of knowledge transfer.
b. Figs. 12–15: Loom mechanics (reed, shaft) unchanged from historical accounts (Eicher, 1976).

Expanding Ceremonial Use

a. Figs. 16–24: Aso-Oke worn at birthdays, graduations, and naming ceremonies, not just elite rites.
b. 100% of weavers report demand for commemorative fabrics with names/portraits.

Discussion
Innovation as Continuity
Material substitutions (Lurex, synthetics) are pragmatic adaptations, not cultural loss - aligning with Bourdieu's habitus.

Democratisation of Prestige
Aso-Oke's use in everyday celebrations reflects "cultural democratisation" - expanding symbolic capital beyond elites (Bourdieu, 1984).

Policy Imperative
Dependence on imported threads underscores the need to revive Nigeria's cotton sector to ensure material sovereignty.

Conclusion
Aso-Oke is not fading. It is transforming. Weavers in Oyo and Iseyin sustain this heritage not by freezing it in time, but by weaving tradition into the fabric of contemporary life. The classical triad - Etu, Sanyan, Alaari - endures, now shimmering with Lurex and personalised with names. To honour this resilience, stakeholders must support weavers as cultural innovators, not relics.

The study recommended encouraging local cotton and silk production through government agricultural subsidies. It also supports design innovation (e.g., Lurex, embroidery) as a legitimate cultural expression and documents elder weavers' knowledge via digital archives and apprenticeship grants. Furthermore, the paper suggested promoting everyday Aso-Oke fashion (shirts, bags) to expand its use beyond ceremonies and called for integrating Aso-Oke into national curricula to inspire youth engagement in heritage crafts.

Figures


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Appendix: Figure Captions

- ✓ Fig. 1–2: Cotton threads on bobbins prepared for warping.
- ✓ Fig. 3: Lurex thread used for warp and weft in contemporary Alaari.
- ✓ Fig. 4–5: Dyed cotton yarns in varied colours for patterned Aso-Oke.
- ✓ Fig. 6–7: Starch preparation and drying of sized warp yarns.
- ✓ Fig. 8–9: Apprentice boys winding weft yarn onto bobbins.
- ✓ Fig. 10–11: Warping process on the floor and winding onto the warp beam.
- ✓ Fig. 12: Reeding process of warp yarns threaded through the reed.
- ✓ Fig. 13: Weaver producing striped Aso-Oke on horizontal loom.
- ✓ Fig. 14: Weaver creating ‘Aso-Oke eleya’ (openwork Alaari).

- ✓ Fig. 15: Close-up of loom components: reed and shaft.
- ✓ Fig. 16–24: Aso-Oke worn at contemporary ceremonies: birthdays, naming, weddings.

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