



A Historical Assessment of the Economics of *Aso-Ebi* System among the *Yoruba* People of South-Western Nigeria

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Abstract

The term Aso-Ebi is a system commonly practised among the Yoruba people of the South-western region of Nigeria. This is a system of the same design/pattern of clothes worn during ceremonies by colleagues, family members and the community, among others. This system of buying, selling, sharing and distribution of clothes initially was restricted to family members alone. However, in contemporary times, this system has been extended to and practicable among the well-wishers and also serves as a means of identifying with family members and friends during celebrations of diverse kinds, such as religious and political affiliations, sporting and cultural activities, courtship and marriage, education, funeral and the like of such occasions that call for celebration. This system has been transformed into a means of economic gain for celebrants, organizers, and every other partaker or participant in the business and ceremony. Hence, this paper examines the economics inherent in this social identity bargaining as well as the commodification implications of Aso-Ebi (clothes) by celebrants with a view of advocating financial sanctity and networking in such practice. Furthermore, this paper also examines the effects of Aso-Ebi System on the economy of the Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria. In so doing, it provides more evidence to further the assertion that the economic dependency that resulted from colonialism was not an accident, but rather an intentional outcome. This article explores how current economic and social circumstances about Aso-Ebi cannot be fully understood without substantial knowledge of the past. The use of primary data generated through qualitative techniques, archival records and other secondary data to engage research issues through the lens of a historical approach to data collation and interpretation is adopted for this study. The paper concludes that the economic history of the Aso-ebi system cannot be undermined in the economic development and sustainability of the Yoruba people in the South-western Nigeria.

Keywords: Aso-Ebi System, Economics, Yoruba, South-Western, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Clothing theories are developed based on the use and growth of clothing. The four major theories of clothing are modesty, immodesty, adornment and projection theory.¹ For the Modesty Theory, the basic importance of clothing is to cover or conceal the private parts of the human body. For instance, leaves used around the waist and bust by Stone Age women as clothing. Immodesty Theory is derived from historical records on clothing as a means of attracting the opposite sex. According to this theory, the basic idea of clothing is attraction seeking using tight fitting pants and garments which expose body parts. Adornment Theory sees clothing as a means of beautification. It focuses on the inherent nature of mankind, people always trying to beautify themselves.² Clothing has always supported this idea and helped one to have a beautiful appearance. Wearing beautiful garments, such as decorated blouse with embroidery and stone work, gives an aesthetic appearance. Protection Theory believes that clothes have always been used for protection against extreme climatic conditions such as winter, rainy and summer. Exposure to dangerous materials and environments such as furnaces, boilers and thermal stations require special clothing. For *example*, woollen coats during the winter season, raincoats for the rainy season and boiler suits for people working in a furnace.³ In the light of the above theories, each of them has maintained a ground of its own by focusing on the concept of cloths (*Aso*) among the *Yoruba* people of the south-western Nigeria that constitutes the basis of this work.

The word '*Aso*' means cloth in Yoruba and '*Ebi*' denotes family, *Aso-Ebi* is a uniform, solidarity outfit of the family, which is being worn by family members, friends, well-wishers and associates to display solidarity, abundance, class consciousness, diffusion of wealth and to extol social bonding.⁴

Aso-Ebi (pronounced "*asho-aybee*") is a social communicative system that explores fabric and fashion dynamics for events such as weddings, funerals and parties generally, especially *Owambe* parties. Age-grades and *egbe* (association) members dress in uniform to assist the celebrant during important celebrations. The tradition originated from the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria.

Nigeria is known for its extraordinary diversity of textile traditions. The cultural trend of commemorating events with matching/identical fabrics (nicknamed *Aso-Ebi*) for a group and social solidarity in parties, housewarmings, weddings and funerals has developed from these rich textile traditions. The original purpose of *Aso-Ebi* was for social identification or affiliation with celebrating personalities, families among other human clusters and devoid of economic gains. This cultural practice represents traits interwoven to achieve specific objectives among groups. The first, introduced as *Aso-Ebi* printed wax was the '*Nana Prempeh*' design, dating from the 1st of October, 1920.⁵ This wax-print was ordered by the United Africa Company (UAC) to commemorate the

¹. https://www.brainkart.com/article/Theories-of-Clothing_35570/ accessed on 6/10/2021.

². https://www.brainkart.com/article/Theories-of-Clothing_35570/ accessed on 6/10/2021.

³. https://www.brainkart.com/article/Theories-of-Clothing_35570/ accessed on 6/10/2021.

⁴. Ajiginni, M. I. 2019. The Social and Economic Values of African Commemorative Fabrics in Nigerian Society, *International Journal of Development Strategies in Humanities, Management and Social Sciences* p-ISSN: 2360-9036 | e-ISSN: 2360-9044

⁵. Akinseye I. 2009. *Aso-Ebi: reinvented*, *True Love Magazine*, Nigeria.



funeral figure of the Ashanti king, Nana Prempeh. Ewe Chief, Fiaga of Peki, dated 10th March 1931. A Mummy cloth design dating from 28 September 1928 is depicting a woman who was presumably a market trader, and also from records,⁶ *Iya Owodunmi aso-ebi* was the first commissioned wax print by a wealthy Yoruba patron to mark the funeral of Madam A. B. *Shonowo*, a senior family member in the 1930s.

The Yoruba People and Early Cloth-Making

Yoruba people are endowed with a rich cultural heritage, mirrored in their acute taste for fashion. A major tribe in Nigeria, a multi-cultural country in West Africa, they inhabit the South-western part of the country.⁷ Also, they are structured in large subgroups such as *Egba*, *Ekiti* and *Ijebu*. They are one of the most sophisticated groups in Nigeria, with a rich culture and a relatively long period of recorded history. They extend to the southwest, and north-central Nigeria, as well as southern and central Benin.⁸ As sociable people, they have historical records of clothing and fashion that distinguish them from other cultures.⁹ Research further reveals that their main cash crop is cocoa, while many of their crafts like cloth weaving - industry, spinning and dyeing have translated to widespread cottage industries. Many of these industries are organized on a compound basis and are generally carried on in the veranda or courtyard of houses owned by workers who are often also the proprietors. Generally, both Yoruba men and women are very fashion-conscious. Styles, colours and their names, as well as cloth - both locally woven or imported from other West African countries, or further afield - change with the times, political situations, the economic health of the country, new imports and/or availability of new items. Cloth and its accoutrements are comfortably carried and incorporated into the non-verbal language of the Yorubas.¹⁰

Economics of *Aso-Ebi* in Yorubaland

Economically, *Aso-Ebi* culture has become a source of social wealth creation for celebrants and state economy by supporting growth, employment opportunities, stimulating commerce for the textile industry, textile distributors, fashion designers, and cultural tourist expenditure. Apart from income generation benefits, long-lasting, more sustainable socioeconomic benefits are derived from extolling bonds in communities by increasing integrative functions and social connections. Also, it is the social impact that leads to the arts of having a socio-economic impact.¹¹ Nevertheless, *Aso-Ebi* culture has the ability to contribute immensely to the dynamics of the socio-economic milieu, it is a means of demonstrating group solidarity, and social identification and it has become an important dress vogue in many social ceremonies in Nigeria. *Aso-Ebi* fashion is, therefore, a crowning achievement of textile traditions that reflects an individual's culture, personality,

⁶.Aremu, P. & Asakitipi, O. 1982. Yoruba traditional Weaving: Kilipa Motifs, Colour and *Symbols Nigeria Magazine*, 140.

⁷.Crowder, M, Cootes R.J, Snellgrove, L.E. 1934. *Ancient Times: A Junior History for Africa*, London: Longman Group Limited.

⁸.Crowder, M, Cootes R.J, Snellgrove, L.E. 1934. *Ancient Times: A Junior History for Africa*, London: Longman Group Limited.

⁹.Crowder, M, Cootes R.J, Snellgrove, L.E. 1934. *Ancient Times: A Junior History for Africa*, London: Longman Group Limited.

¹⁰.Crowder, M, Cootes R.J, Snellgrove, L.E. 1934. *Ancient Times: A Junior History for Africa*, London: Longman Group Limited.

¹¹.McDonald, F. (2011). *Textiles: A history, South Yorkshire*. England: Pen & Sword Books Limited.



preference, innovation and creativity that create socioeconomic value for the celebrant and the society.¹²

***Aso-Ebi* and Cultural Heritage in Yorubaland**

Accordingly, Yoruba people's rich cultural heritage is often exhibited in social events such as christening/naming ceremonies, engagement/marriage ceremonies, chieftaincy titles, conferment/coronation ceremonies, funeral rites and ceremonies, graduation, the rite of passage, house-warming and many others. To commemorate these events, extended family members are obliged to participate in one aptitude or another. Many of these events called for expressly selected fabrics, selected by the chief host, to be worn by his/her kinsmen; a confederation of people who are related by blood, known as "extended family".¹³

Many utterances that denote the importance of kinship recurrently feature among the Yorubas. This includes *Agbo ile-nla-* (a large family compound); *Olori-Ebi* (Head of the Family) and *Molebi* (Extended Family), to mention a few. Indigenous proverbs and idioms are also used to portend the magnitude of kinship, for instance, *omo to so ebi e nu so apo iya ko*, translated as "a man who deserts his kinsmen straps on his shoulder a satchel of misfortune."¹⁴ This amplifies the Yoruba's fervour for the indispensability of kinsmen. This significance is accentuated throughout the life of an individual in the Yoruba society, which is supported that:

No matter how homogeneous a group may be, whether large or small, the individual interprets the cultural pattern he learns, throughout his life in terms of his personality or idiosyncratic needs, and terms of his own experience and immediate social group.¹⁵

The essence of kinship is distinguished in the various aspects of Yoruba life and it is articulated in sundry ways, physically, psychologically, vocally and through other tangible and intangible means, one of which as earlier mentioned is the *Aso-Ebi* culture, whose inception dates back to pre-colonial Yoruba society.¹⁶ During this period, kinsmen festooned themselves in fabrics specially selected to be sewn and worn as a uniform for celebration. It was originally premeditated for cohesion, unanimity, amity and incorporation among people of mutual ancestry, to set apart a principal host of a social event and members of his/her family from other members of a community. During this era, it was prestigious to hail a family with a large number of kinsmen, as this was tantamount to prosperity and affluence. It is to this end extrapolated that:

¹²McDonald, F. 2011. *Textiles: A history, South Yorkshire*. England: Pen & Sword Books Limited.

¹³Badeji, S.O. 2021. *Aso-ebi* Custom among the Yoruba People of Southwest Nigeria: An Assessment of Trend, Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* 34(5): 14-22; Article No.JESBS.49975 ISSN: 2456-981X.

¹⁴Badeji, S.O. 2021. *Aso-ebi* Custom among the Yoruba People of Southwest Nigeria: An Assessment of Trend, Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* 34(5): 14-22, Article No.JESBS.49975 ISSN: 2456-981X.

¹⁵Cordwell, J. M, Ronald, A. Schwartz. 1979. *The Fabrics of Culture: The anthropology of clothing and adornment*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.

¹⁶Familusi, O.O. 2010. The Yoruba Culture of *Aso-ebi* (Group Uniform) in Socio-Ethical Context. *Lumina*:21 (2).



A distinguished feature of Africans, is the spirit of oneness manifesting in "we feeling", live and let live, serious concern for others and fraternity. This is born out of unavoidable interaction with other members of society. In other words, no man is an island.¹⁷

Economic Development of *Aso-Ebi* in Yorubaland

Furthermore, a cogent premise for the development of *Aso-Ebi* is in the 1920s post-world economic boom that was triggered by higher prices on products such as Oil-palm.¹⁸ During this period, *Aso-Ebi* became a novelty, and the need to communicate and announce social worth among groups helped to boost its growth and acceptance. This period, therefore, marks the beginning of the contemporary trend of *Aso-Ebi*, which derives apparently from the interface of *Ankoo* (Uniformity); *Aso-Egbe* (Group attire) or *Egbejoda* (Uniform of a Group).¹⁹ Also, it was disclosed that extended family members, and social groups in communities in many parts of Yorubaland wore uniform attires for social events to institute and reinforce unity and mutual sense of purpose.²⁰

Historical Development of the *Aso-Ebi* System

The Aso-Ebi system has been extensively translated by extant studies as 'Family Uniform'; "Group Uniform"; "Cloth of the Family"; "Social Uniform" and "Group Attire" among many other concepts construes that *Aso-Ebi* is a dress practice that functions in reinforcing social identity and solidarity among group members.²¹ It further submits that it originally refers to the uniform dress worn by family members during social events in Nigeria. The emphasis here is the process by which family and friends fraternize at social events for the establishment and reinforcement of solidarity, friendship and amity, especially when attired in uniform. In such events, communication is non-verbatim, while the uniform dressing engineers inclusion, integration and interaction.²² Also, *Aso-Ebi* as a system is popularly used today, as a fabric that is selected, made into garments of various styles and worn by groups of people who are correlated to one another in various ways such as families, friends or comrades.²³ Such uniforms are worn for social jamborees like marriage, birthdays, child naming, funerals, etc. For these parties, guests are anticipated to dress in the same fabric especially when such celebrations are elaborate and loud, much like a grand spectacle that is being put on to show wealth, unity and flamboyance. *Aso-Ebi* is worn on such occasions to represent a social identity that reflects the culture, social status, rank, and professional affiliation, among other

¹⁷.Familusi, O.O. 2010. The Yoruba Culture of *Aso-ebi* (Group Uniform) in Socio-Ethical Context. *Lumina*.21 (2).

¹⁸.Olukoju A. 1992. "Maritime Trade in Lagos in the Aftermath of the First World War. *African Economic History*"; 2:119-135.

¹⁹.Ajani, O. A. 2012. *Aso Ebi: The Dynamics of Fashion and Cultural Co-modification*. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 5(6):108-118.

²⁰.Ajani, O. A. 2012. *Aso Ebi: The Dynamics of Fashion and Cultural Co-modification*. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 5(6):108-118.

²¹.Orimolade, D.O. *Aso Ebi: Impact of The Social Uniform In Nigerian Caucuses, Yoruba Culture And Contemporary Trends*. Submitted in Accordance with the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Visual Arts at the University of South Africa; 2014.

²². Orimolade, D.O. *Aso Ebi: Impact of the Social Uniform in Nigerian Caucuses, Yoruba Culture and Contemporary Trends*. Submitted in Accordance with the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Visual Arts at the University of South Africa; 2014.

²³.Abdulhamid, S. The Relevance of '*Aso Oke*'. *Uir.Unisa.ac.za*; 2018.



indicators.²⁴ The *Aso-Ebi* system is a unique fabric worn in special ceremonies by family members and friends to symbolize unity and support.

Similarly, an urban online dictionary defined *Aso-Ebi* as “outfits made by matching the fabric to be worn by a group of people to parties like weddings, or funerals as a uniform”.²⁵ Furthermore, the *Aso-Ebi* system is social uniform attire that is inextricable from the *Owanbe* spectacle of the *Yoruba* culture, which in itself is a social performance (or simply a party or celebratory occasion). Its definition is however contentious because the word “inextricable” connotes that celebration cannot take place without *Aso-Ebi*. Also, a fashion commentator on fashion considers *Aso-Ebi* as “a popular Ankara or lace uniform worn during social functions in Nigeria.”²⁶ This is also erroneous since the concept of *Aso-Ebi* is uniform dressing, irrespective of the fabric. The archetype, though, may have shifted from mutual ancestry to purchasing power and the compliance to be part of a social event, uniformity is still the norm. This hereby leads to social cohesion and breaks barricades of tribal and ethnic sentiments. It is so extensively conventional in many parts of Nigeria, some parts of Africa and among Nigerians in the diaspora that its planning, coordination and execution have taken a professional turn.²⁷

The Significance of *Aso- Ebi* in South-Western Nigeria

Aso-Ebi is obviously a means of identification as all wearers are implicitly demonstrating that they are proud to be identified with the celebrant. Where there are many celebrants and each of them chooses a fabric of his or her choice, it will not be difficult to identify the friends, colleagues or well-wishers of a particular celebrant. This further explains the fact that such an individual matters in the society to the extent that others are concerned about him or her.²⁸

Conversely, it will be a sheer embarrassment if an individual on account of his or her attitude is not identified with on such occasion. This could be shocking as the personality he or she is made of will be revealed. A Yoruba saying goes thus “*Boo lomo ogun, boo lomo ogun, wehin re wo.*” This literally means that if a leader looks back, he will know whether or not he has followers. In this context, the celebrant may not be a leader of any kind but is understood to be a leader of the moment by virtue of being the one celebrating an event and who has requested people to buy the fabric that is meant for the occasion. In fact, when it is time to dance, he or she leads while the well-wishers follow.

This implies that any celebrant who even though he has chosen a group uniform and yet people refuse to buy and identify with him or her, could be a social misfit. Therefore, there is a sense of esteem on the part of celebrants who are so honoured. Such people, no doubt are thought to be men and women of integrity or who are loved in their communities, and as they bask in the euphoria of their being honoured by other members of the society, celebrants on the other side of the divide i.e. those not identified with will bury their heads in shame. This point is buttressed in another saying

²⁴.Orimolade, D.O. *Aso Ebi: Impact of the Social Uniform in Nigerian Caucuses, Yoruba Culture and Contemporary Trends.*

²⁵.Abdulhamid, S. The Relevance of ‘*Aso Oke*’. *Uir.Unisa.ac.za*; 2018.

²⁶.Amaka Niholas: Fashion Designer Commentator: Oyo; 2018

²⁷.Amaka Niholas: Fashion Designer Commentator: Oyo; 2018

²⁸.Sofola, J.A 1978. *African Cultures and the African Personality: What makes and African Person.* Ibadan: African resources Publisher Co.



“*Eniyan laso mi, bi mo ba boju wehin timo reni mi, inu mi adun ara mi a ya gaga.*” This is translated as my people are my clothes. Of course, people cannot be worn however their presence or willingness to identify with a celebrant by virtue of wearing *Aso-Ebi* is a cover for him or her.

This suggests that not being identified with it is synonymous with nakedness. Also, it is usually said, “*Karin lopo lo yeni*” meaning moving in a group is befitting or the more the merrier.²⁹ *Aso-Ebi* serves to distinguish not individuals from one another, but one group from another. *Aso-Ebi* symbolises togetherness and a sense of solidarity. It is alluded to by the *Ifa* corpus in *Olodu Ogunda meji* that the excellence of unity of purpose and of solidarity with people lies in the functional strength conferred on people who observe them. This is discussed in the story of three friendly hunters on a hunting expedition. Each of the three *Akoko*, *Amere* and *Fowomokuu* equipped himself with different hunting gadgets, *Akoko* with an arrow, *Amere* with a bow-string and *Fowomokuu* with arrowhead poison; on getting to the forest, they found an elephant to kill, but each of them thought of being able to kill the elephant alone, this, however, was impossible. They were beset by the anxiety of losing the booty accruing from the big game, then they realised that it was necessary to combine all their three gadgets to attack the elephant. This they did and it was killed.³⁰ The lesson that can be learnt from this story is the imperativeness of unity and solidarity; that is why the issue of *Aso-Ebi* is treated with seriousness. This is buttressed by *Dopamu* and *Alana* that:

Co-operation and mutual helpfulness are virtues among the Yoruba. There is limitation to what a single individual can achieve all alone. The co-operation of others is highly important in achieving most goals. It is believed that when two hands join in washing each other, one will have a truly clean hand... it also taught that while it is easy to break a broom stick, it is not easy to break a full branch of them.³¹

In the same vein, the practice is a way of demonstrating goodwill towards fellow men, especially the celebrants. Thus, the blunt refusal of an individual to buy *Aso-Ebi* for no justified reason is synonymous with nursing ill-will towards one’s fellow man and the person concerned will be regarded as such. Should he or she grace the occasion, nobody will freely interact with him or her. The plight of those who are financially handicapped is understandable and in some cases, the chosen material could be bought for them by friends, relatives or well-wishers, or purchased on credit. People can go to this level because of the serious importance that is attached to group unity.

Furthermore, a system of mutual obligation is established by the use of the *Aso-Ebi system* in the sense that an individual who buys one when somebody is celebrating an occasion expects to be reciprocated when it is his or her turn to have cause for celebration. This however goes with sacrifice as individuals will have to buy the cloth no matter how difficult it may be financially because whoever fails to do so is stigmatised and when such a person has anything to celebrate, no one would turn up. At this juncture, it can be adduced that *Aso-Ebi* depicts African altruism and it is integrative,

²⁹.Moloye, O. 2004. “Traditional High Fashion in Transition” in Lawal S.N., Sadiku, M.N.O and Dopamu, A. (eds) *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture*, Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc.

³⁰.Akintola, A. 1999. *Yoruba Ethics and Metaphysics*, Ogbomoso Valour Publishing Ventures Limited.

³¹.Dopamu, P. A. and Alana E.O. 2004. “Ethical Systems” in Lawal, N. S., Sadiku, M.N.O and Dopamu, A.(eds) *Understanding Yoruba life and Culture*, Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc.



thereby ensuring stability. The mutual obligation cannot be broken by anybody who did not want to be treated with ostracism and there is assurance that while identifying with a member of the community; one is simply investing into the future. This is system corroborated by this adage “*Adiye irana kiise ohun ajegbe.*” An *Adiye Irana* is a fowl that is slaughtered and eaten by those who participate in the burial of a departed fellow. This proverb holds that whoever partakes in the eating is already indebted as other people will do the same when he dies. Though this practice no longer subsists, the proverb is still of much relevance. This is to say that a celebrant that feels honoured today will face the reality of honouring another celebrant in future whether it is convenient or not. On the system in Yoruba society, Akintola opines that:

The law of nature which stipulates that we should do unto others what we in our own self would want others to do unto us. Also implies the complimentary injunction to render selfless help to others. That is altruism or helpfulness in terms of service or help we render for no reason other than for giving ourselves to help one another or to elevate humanity at large. Such acts of helpfulness as we are saying must be undertaken, not for any expectation of gain or reward of any kind, but only for the sake of a person or situation needful of help. Nonetheless, altruism is not without its own reward.... Altruism or helping others selflessly is a manifestation or practical expression of love for humanity.³²

Another significance of *Aso-Ebi* is that it is a leveller of status no matter how temporary this may be. As affirmed by *Sofola*:

Aso-ebi levels the gap between persons of higher status and those of lower one and thereby eliminates, if only temporarily, the built-in antagonism between the haves and have-nots. All wearers of the *Aso-ebi* by this common uniform are equal- at least for the occasion on which the *Aso-ebi* is worn. The poor man (*talaka*) feels that he is at least equal to the rich man (*olowo*) because he wears an identical dress with him. Such a feeling, albeit for a brief moment purges him of his previous feeling of financial inadequacy. He may also feel so honoured by its temporary levelling of his status that he seeks accord with the rich man. The effect of this in terms of social control in the community is important. The individual may become less inclined to commit criminal acts against the society, particularly where property destruction is involved.³³

Conclusion

With the above discussion on the socio-economics of the *Aso-Ebi* system among the Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria, one can rationally claim that the system contributed to the economic growth and development of the people in that part of the country and the country at large. Furthermore, this System has been transformed into a means of economic gain for celebrants, organizers, and every other partaker or participant in the business and ceremony. Hence, this paper

³².Akintola, A. 1999. *Yoruba Ethics and Metaphysics*, Ogbomosho Valour Publishing Ventures Limited.

³³.Sofola, J.A 1978. *African Cultures and the African Personality: What makes and African Person*. Ibadan: African resources Publisher Co.



exposes more on the economics inherent in this social identity bargaining as well as the commodification implications of *Aso-Ebi* clothes by celebrants with a view of advocating financial sanctity and networking in such practice. Furthermore, this paper also examines the effects of the *Aso-Ebi* System on the economy of the Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria. In so doing, it provides more evidence to further the assertion that the socio-cultural history of the Yoruba people can not be divorced from the economic dependency that resulted from colonialism. This article serves as an excellent example of how current economic and social circumstances cannot be fully understood without substantial knowledge of the past.