

# THE YORUBA CLOTHING CULTURE, ITS FORMS AND CONTENTS

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## Abstract

*Nigeria is endowed with abundant human, natural and material resources, which could be used in different vocational practices. Most practitioners of art have consistently laid emphasis on uniqueness, high quality forms, style and content. Methods of production have revealed the high level of creativity such as in raw materials blend with the synthetic and natural yarns which often result into uniqueness, high quality forms, styles and content they are recognised. Each of these various people has dress forms by which those of the children are different from the adult and dress form forms of adult's males are also different from their adult females. Although there are differences in the dress forms obvious similarities are notice in them.*

In the beginning when God created (Adam and Eve) and placed them to head all other creatures. Man and Woman were created nude. Thus from the biblical perspectives the clothing of our fore fathers started with the use of fig leaves from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:7).

Ogunduyile (2005) notes that; the first assignment of man after he ate from the tree of knowledge was to cloth himself with the available material within the environment to step out shame. Elizabeth (1989) is of the opinion that body covering is a type of modification, such as an arrangement of hair, altering of the surface and shape of the body and that clothing is a kind of body modification, that is peculiar to human being while other mammals delight in decorating themselves with flowers or other objects which happens to be within the environment.

According to Gyumpoh (2004) cited in Ogunduyile (2005); fabric replaces the use of leaves and textiles became a strong and major factor in economic history of many

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nations. Clothing is not a random or totally individual affair, but it is a social activity that is the overall pattern of our dress which could be skirts or tailored clothes.

Ojo (2000) submits that; the clothing habit of the Yorubas is like many other cultures of the world, which are meant to protect the body from the atmospheric conditions; and that the study of clothing could be referred to as the study of mankind. Clothing which has been noted as third of man's necessity after food and shelter; is an integral part of living and interior decoration than any other utilitarian materials.

The use of textile for clothing must have been spontaneous within cultures of the world. Ogunduyile (2005) also states that the production of textiles has been described as one of the oldest industries created for the fundamental needs of individual in the aspect of clothing, protection and decoration carried out within the family environment. And Ojo (2000) submits that the Yoruba cloth culture originated with the contacts of the Yoruba and the Arabs through trading. The professional practice and technical skills which led to the developmental stages and changes in Arabian styles to Yoruba cloth which in term of sewing, constructions matching and fitting with references to tradition and functions.

### **Development of Yoruba Cloth**

The development of Yoruba cloth can be noticed from the everlasting trade which transpired between the Nigeria and Arabian traders. Ogunduyile (2005) observes that the productions of cloth were carried out within the family environments, which were laborious in technique but a dynamic, social and cultural activity. This always resulted to unique, beautiful and high quality fabrics. Though the traditional craftsmen were not tutored in the rudiment of Arabian design principles, with their versatility, they produced unique fabrics based on asymmetry and irregular shapes with African motif. The Yoruba cloth manufacturers enjoy the occupational satisfaction in cotton growing, dyeing, spinning, weaving and fabric embellishments, and are all together dedicated in demonstration of skills.

The Yoruba cloth were originally woven to serve as underwear and waist wrappers which were designed for hunting, farming and manual labours. Negri (1976) cited in Olowookere (2009) states that the influence and development of Yoruba cloth is based on the trade contact between Nigeria and Arabian country where by the first traders were facilitated by the Arabian embroidered fabric, as well as the women headgears and accessories, which inspired the traders to return and settle down at Ile – Ife in order to open their shops. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World war some of the tailors were trained to sew shirts and trousers for the military. After the war, most of them returned

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home and settle down. This led to the introduction of a new style of dress which was being referred to as western dress and the beginning of modern Yoruba design. The Yoruba clothes began to carry out embroidery and the invention of sewing machine contributed immensely to the new development where by the cloth can now be sewn within few hours thus the fabric began to wear new looks.

Ojo (2000) observes that the remarkable development of Yoruba clothing styles was recorded during the 1977 festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) where many cultures of Africa were brought together, displayed and exhibited with different costumes, dresses and accessories.

### **The Yoruba Standard Dress Form**

Biobaku (1999) notes that Yorubas are fashionable people and therefore change their forms with times. Their titled and influential men use dress forms that suit their social standings and their dresses usually in expensive dress materials and forms are more for prestige than for function. However, financial strength determines the quantity and quality of one's dress forms especially the ones used for occasional purposes. This is corroborated by their adage -“*Dandogo rekoja abinu da*” meaning - one has to be financially prepared or has a long term investment before one can own a dandogo.

The present-day Yoruba dress forms are different and varied from those of other groups and could be classified according to the parts of the body they cover. For the head – there are caps/ *fila*, for men, headgear/ *gele* for women and for both men and women the garment for the upper part of the body, from the neck down to below the knees is *ewu* or *buba*. Then from the waist downward are “*Sokoto*,” the trousers, for men and “*iro*”, the wrapper, for women.

### **The Caps**

A well-dressed, Yoruba man completes his outfit with a cap. Rubinstein (1995) mentioned *fila* and *fila abeti aja* as the two caps used by them while. De Negri (1976) opines that ‘*adiro*’, ‘*ikori*’, ‘*yoti*’ or ‘*labankada*’ and ‘*onide*’ are the Yoruba cap types. also mentions beret and *Sekou-Toure* in addition to *onide* and *labar inkada*.

### **Traditional Yoruba caps can be classified into two groups:**

*Labankada* (*labarinkada*) or ‘*abeti aja*’ which is similar to *yoti*. It has triangular shape to cover the ear. It is also known as *labankada*. Johnson(1987) describes it as an ear-covering cap, shaped like the sector of a circle with the pointed ends to cover the ears in cold weather. However, when used otherwise, the pointed ends are turned fore and after, the point on the fore-head titled up in a sporting manner to show the under surface

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prettily done up with cloths of other colours. It is usually worn with *dandogo*, *gbariye* or *agbada* upper body garments.

### **The Cylindrical Types**

The cylindrical cap can be grouped into three sub-types as noted by Rubintein (1995) as follows:

- (i) The very long type      (ii) The medium type and      (iii) the '*Peregi*' type

**The Very Long Type** can be bent backwards, forwards or sideways. Cap found in this category is the '*adire*', whose end drops behind to rest on the wearers back. It is an occasional cap for head-hunters, and its dropping end is for keeping charms. '*Adiro*' caps are also said to be common among Yoruba chiefs such as the otunbas in Ijebu-land.

**The Medium Type** is neither as long as the very long type nor as short as the '*peregi*' type, but can be bent in the various directions as the very long type also. Caps found in this category are the common caps found today among men,

**The Peregi Type** derived its name from the old traditional measure for grains, a measure similar to the present-day plastic for selling raw rice or beans. Its height makes it difficult to be easily bent in any direction.

Onide which is used by kings, chiefs, the affluent and other distinguished personalities in the society, is simply a cylindrical cap embroidered with brass buttons on the rim and body. Some of such caps are as long as the '*elo*' cap while others are just the size of '*peregi*'. '*Elo*' cap is cut obliquely such that when it is turned inside out, it appears twisted. Its name connotes twisting. Elo cap is also called '*agantan*', for it is hand-made and the top is usually completely closed. '*Ikori*' is a version of that; it has its cloth and lining cut length-wise. Elo is used with most upper dress forms such as '*agbada*', '*gbariye*', '*sulia*', '*oyala*' and '*sapara*' that are mentioned below.

### **The Upper Garments**

#### **The Closed Side Dress with Narrow Sleeves**

According to Muhoniya (2010) '*Buba*' is a light upper dress of the Yoruba male. It could have long or short sleeves. The short sleeve type reaches the elbow area, while the long sleeve one reaches the wrists. The width, which could depend on the size of the person, is usually about knee or twelve inches from the left or right side of the body. The length of the dress is a little below the buttocks and could have either two side pockets, or a left chest pocket.

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**Kaftan (Kafutaani)** is like buba, but it is longer than buba as it is usually longer than the knees. The neck style is round with a slit of about 30 centimeters from the neck in the front. The neck and the chest areas of this dress could be embroidered with shining silver or golden threads. Its sleeves are long, reaching the wrists. Generally, '*kafutaani*' has slits at the two sides; a modification of this dress type is the present –day Senegalese dress style with ankle long sleeves longer and wider than those of *kafutaani*. Senegalese dress type is now common to most of the ethnic groups in the Guinea Coast.

### **The Wedge-free, Non Flaring Bottom Garments**

Ogunduyile (2005) observed that '*Sapara*' is a dress which derives its name from the Lagos Medical Doctor, '*Sapara*' Williams who first used it. This gown is like '*agbada*' but has no wedge on the back and front. The chest area carries a rectangular patch pocket like the *agbadas*. But the pocket is smaller, with its mouth to the right side while embroidery (*jakan*), is made round the neck,. In some designs, no pockets is put in order to avoid the unpleasant bulge that could result from keeping materials in it. '*Sapara*' is usually worn for ordinary occasions and the materials used for them could be light materials usually made of industrial textiles, such as printed cotton, Ankara. The underwear for this dress is '*buba*' or '*dansiki*'. '*Soro*' and '*atu*' are the trousers that go with *Sapara* dress.

'*Oyala*' is sewn like '*sapara*', only the neck makes the difference. There is no embroidery (*jakan*), around the neck which could be round with or without a slit down the front of the neck. Without the slit, it is described as *eleri*. *Oyala* is also different from *sapara* in its having no wide chest pockets but a small breast pocket. It is called '*onikanni*', meaning that which has buttons, when its chest slit has buttons. '*Soro*' is the usual pair that goes with it.

### **The Open Wide Garments with or without Slits but Heavy Wide Sleeves**

'*Agbada*' is a large wide-sleeved gown. The pocket is on its chest and the neck opening is rectangular with diagonal embroidery that spreads to the chest and back. In the past, it used to be made of dyed or coloured material to reach as far down as the ankle. It also use to have elaborate embroidery at the neck and breast. It opens at the sides and quite covers the arms. The materials used for this dress are found in '*sapara*'. The undergarments for this dress are '*buba*', '*dansiki*', or small '*gbariye*'. '*Soro*' or '*Kamu*' trousers are used with it.

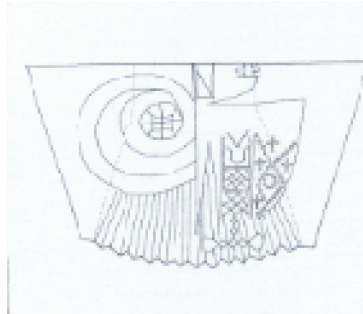
### **The Open Side Garments with Wedges, Round Necks with or without Big Sleeves**

'*Dansiki*' is another Yoruba light upper dress which has four, six or eight triangular wedges at the front and back, depending on how wide the wearer wants it. The

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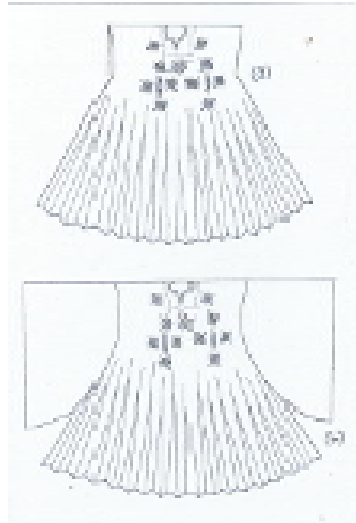
length is equivalent to that of the 'buba' and it has two neck styles- the round one (*eleri*) and the slit one (*onilila*). Embroidery may be made round the neck and its two side pockets, 'Buba' and 'dansiki' can be worn alone or as undergarment. When worn as undergarments there are bigger outer garments such as 'agbada', 'sapara', 'gbariye' and 'dandogo'. As already indicated, the common 'dansiki' of today is much wider and longer than the type worn in the past. This size makes it big enough to be worn alone.

'Gbariye' is made from any material, including traditional textiles. Triangular wedge pieces that narrow up in the sewing make it to have flare at the bottom. The pockets on it are like those of 'dandogo' and so also are its embroideries round the neck, chest and pockets. A design on the back brings the number of embroidery designs to twelve. 'De Negri' groups 'gbariye' into two-'alapa-adan' (bat-wings\_ and 'alapa-apo' (pocket-wings). They have enormous sleeves, with openings of corresponding length for the armholes that reach to within a few inches of the hem-line. Who adds that many strips of hand-loomed cloth from natural fibres go into the making of one of these and often the fabric is woven specially for the individual. It could be natural with white stripes, black with white flecks, purple or multi-stripped in various brilliant colours. 'Gbariye' could be worn as an outer garment with 'dansiki' as its under garment or alone as it is presently the case, 'Kamu', trousers with embroidery designs round the bottom and sides of the trousers as well as 'atu' are worn with it. Arueyingho (2002).



**Plate I (Girike)**

'Suliya' is like 'dandogo', but it is not as big. It usually has four or eight wedges, and sleeves like those of 'dandogo'. The neck style is like that of 'dansiki' or 'oyala' and the neck, chest and sleeves are embroidered. According to Johnson (1987), 'suliya' which is the smallest, plainest and lightest when compared with 'girike' and 'dandogo', used to be made of white material that reaches much below the knee. The sides are open while the sleeves reach the wrist.



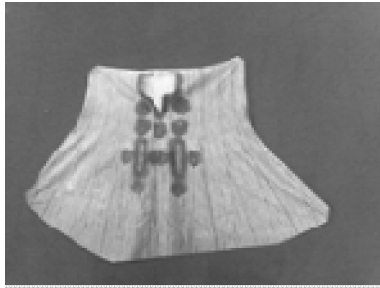
**Plate II (Dandogo)**

**'Dandogo'** meaning a tall child in Hausa, is a big dress that distinguishes itself from other gowns, of the Yoruba males. It is sewn like *'gbariye'*, with small strips, but has sleeves like that of *'agbada'* sewn to the main body. Embroidery designs are made on the neck, (front and back). Some dandogo have very large patch pockets, about 24inches high by 18inches wide and a vertical slit at the middle of its right side. The pocket area is heavily embroidered. Woven materials like *'alaari'*, a local fibre dyed red and woven into strips or *'sanyan'*, the traditional silk, could be used in making the dress. The amount of material and style account for its weight. During the colonial period, expensive materials like *'alagba'*, damask or *'aran'*, velvet were also used for it. Big dresses such as *'gbariye'* and *'dandogo'*, made of either velvet or indigenous textiles, are used for very important occasions. The traditional trousers that match it could be *'kamu'* or *'atu'*.

Among the Yoruba elders, especially when relaxing at home or on casual visits to the neighbourhood, there is a wrapper which comprises of a large cloth measuring about three metres by two metres, draped around the body like a toga. This style is draped so that the wrapper passes under the right armpit and falls over the left shoulder. It is a style that is common to men in the Gold Coast. It is used as standard dress for special occasion among the Akan as already indicated, while it is a dress for relaxation among the other ethnic groups. Another style that could still be found, especially among young men in villages, is the wrapper style that has both ends of wrapper passing under

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both armpits from behind, to, across the chest, with the tips knotted behind the neck. Olugbenga (2008).



**Plate III (Gbariye)**

**Some Upper Body Vest of the Past**

The information on the dress forms of the Yoruba males of today shows that there are a lot of differences between what is worn now and in the past.’ For instance, in ancient past, ‘*dansiki*’ and ‘*buba*’ were undergarments for ‘*sapara*’, ‘*agbada*’ and other bigger garments. But today these undergarments are worn as complete garment over traditional trousers, ‘*Sokoto*’. Then some of the male casual dresses that are no longer common include ‘*kukumo*’, ‘*togo*’, ‘*alukinba*’, and ‘*girike*’.

‘*Kukumo*’ is sleeveless and without a collar. It has a short slit from the neck to the chest and may be made with any kind of local material.

Johnson (1987) noted that vest was made of ‘*alaari*’ (crimson dye) or of ‘*sanyan*’ (rough silk) and it was the most expensive and ‘*Digo*’ is a hunters pair of trousers. Its length is a bit below the knee. It was not usually worn at ordinary times except by hunters. In the past, the fabric for making it was ‘*kijipa*’, the indigenous work suit material. The hunters of today, however, use ‘*kaki*’ (khaki). ‘*Latan*’ in its own case is an ankle-long pair of trousers with a slightly narrow leg-hole. It is good enough for outing, but the shorter type could be used by farmers. Fabric used for this, used to be ‘*kijipa*’.

Work suits for Yoruba men are classified according to professions. The farmers dress (*gberi*), comprised a sleeveless, collarless dress, with a wide arm-hole for comfort. There is a short slit from the front neck-line with its length reaching the hip area. This is accompanied by a knee-long pair of trousers, ‘*digo*’, and an ‘*ikori*’ cap, which is a cylindrical, cloth cap that could be styled to either side of the head.



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The work suit of the hunter differs from that of the farmer because the former upper dress (*gberi*) usually has a pocket each, at the front and the back, while the farmers has none. It is important to note that hunters need the pockets for keeping their charms and other paraphernalia for hunting and small animals killed. '*Adiro*' cap completes the attire. Togo is a sleeveless dress like '*kukumo*' and '*gberi*' but smaller and simpler; it was the soldiers dress and often worn with turban wrapped round as a belt.

The dress forms for blacksmiths are a tight *buba* and a tight pair of trousers, Sokoto. This dress has a pocket at its chest area, while a pocket each is sewn to its sides, in order to provide places for keeping small working materials. A locally woven broad weave material of '*kijipa*', used to be made into this dress form, just like those of farmers. It is important to note that this dress is not free on the body to prevent the cloth catching fire when working. '*Digo*' knickers are worn with it also.

The dress form of the native doctors comprises a wrapper draped over the waist and with a part draped over the left shoulder.

'*Latan*', a pair of trousers or '*bante*', is worn underneath and '*adiro*' cap could be worn on the head.

'*Alukinba*' which is not a standard dress of the Yorubas, is a muslim religious dress that is sleeveless with a cap. There is a central split in front from neck to the bottom, while the neck and the edges of both sides of the split are embroidered. In the past, it was used by horse riders especially for sport.

### **The Trousers**

The different Yoruba trousers are similar in how they are secured to the waist by draw-string and the wedges under their legs, '*idan*'. Johnson describes them as being kept round the waist by a strong cord and worn below the vests. But they differ in the sizes of their leg mouths.

Today, the nearest in description to what was worn in the past are '*soro*', '*kembe*' and '*kamu*'. '*Soro*' is used with '*sapara*', '*suliya*' and '*agbada*', '*kembe*' and '*kamu*' are used with the bigger garments.

### **'*Soro*' or '*Agadansi*'**

It is an ankle-long pair of trousers that tapers towards the ankles, consequently making it to have narrow leg mouth. Ordinarily, industrial materials are now mostly used for making it.

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It extends from the waist to the ankles and it is very free throughout except the ankles where its legs terminate. Often two or three yards of cloth (sometimes more) are used to make it so that when the feet are thrust in at either end, and the string at the waist level is drawn, it gathers into a large volume between the legs. In Johnson's view, they were adopted from the Nupes, who had used them in the past. He did not substantiate this assertion with enough evidence.

### ***'Kembe' or 'Abenugbangba'***

Another wide-mouthed pair of trousers, which reach the ankles is '*atu*'. In the past, it was made from narrow strip hand woven material and it has some variants, such as '*oyo-lan-gbe*', '*tojugungiri*', '*kenbe*', '*efa*' and '*abenu-gbangba*'. In the past, the *Alafin's* messenger preferred *oyo-la-n-gbe* because of its wide leg-mouth, which gives him an added advantage of using it to wipe his face either when dancing or when sweating. The leg-mouth of '*tojugungiri*' is not as wide as that of '*oyo-la-n-gbe*', while '*kembe*' is a bit longer than the others.

The names '*Kembe*', or '*Abenugbangba*' meaning wide-mouthed, gives a clear description of the nature of these trousers. The legs are very free and they stop a little below the knees. Both industrial and hand-woven textiles are used in making them. Johnson (1987) description of '*efa*' is parallel to what Adeoye (2008) refers to as '*atu*'. However, some informants appear to be familiar with only '*soro*' and '*kembe*', which they see as equivalent to '*efa*'. De Negris also noted that *kembe* is similar to Adeoye but different from Johnson. Today's trousers of the knickers-burger look like a revival of '*kembe*'.

### ***'Kamu'***

'*Kamu*' has a large buttock with the legs and fork reaching about the knee area. They taper down to narrow, embroidered ankles, sometimes extended to reach the knee area. The upper legs of this pair of trousers are so bogus, that it is speculated that the materials used for each would be enough to make a pair of '*soro*'.

Traditional trousers not common today include '*ladugbo*', '*aibopo*', '*alongo*', '*kafo*' and '*latan*'. Johnson (1987) describes '*Ladugbo*' is pair of trousers as the commonest type worn by young men, somewhat free but tight at the knee where it terminates. '*Aibopo*' was also common and worn by all. It is also free and tightened towards the knee where it also terminates. '*Alongo*' is tight throughout and looks like a bishops gaiters. This dress reaches below the knees and it was used mainly by sportsmen. A tight-legged dress like '*alongo*' that reaches as far down as the ankles is '*Kafo*'. It was a common dress among warriors and ruffians.

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**‘Bante’**

It is an under-wear, which is actually a triangular piece of cloth with strings attached to its three edges or apices. The two strings at the base of the inverted triangular cloth are used for attaching or fastening the cloth piece to the waist, while the third string at its apex is passed between the thighs, covering the groin and finally fastened to the string tied round the waist. There are ‘*bante*’ for professionals like warriors and hunters, just as there are others for elders and youths. Generally it is believed that *bante* is the earliest dress form used by the people in Southern Nigeria. It appears that there are some slight differences between ‘*bante*’ and ‘*tobi*’ according Negri, but Johnson describes ‘*bante*’ as a triangular piece of cloth whose base is tied round the waist with a string, while its apex passes between the thighs and over the string, behind the waist where it is held in position, while de Negri describes it as a piece of cloth worn as apron for underwear and as loin-cloth. It seems that the two types are different stages of development of loin-cloth.

**Conclusions**

Clothing has been a non- verbal aspect of culture which is a simpler spoken language. It is a sign that carries message and conveys meaning in the same way and the significance of particular distances varies from culture to culture.

The present civilization has made Yoruba clothing witness a sense of modifications. Women’s clothes are governed by what is called the seduction principles that is, they are sex conscious clothes, while men clothes are governed by hierarchical principles that is they are class – conscious clothes.

Generally, The Yoruba clothing has witnessed series of modifications and innovations in our major traditional dresses such as *Iro, buba, gele, sokoto*, based on the new development of fabrics.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made to preserve textiles industry in our society:

- ✓ Government should set up institutions that will serve as training (on the job) for textiles designers in order to update their knowledge and skills.
- ✓ Textiles designer must also be trained in the contemporary method and production.
- ✓ Government and society should encourage the textiles designer by patronizing them.

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- ✓ Interested individuals should encourage learning this art of textiles so that the tradition will remain forever.

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