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THE POLITICS OF POWER AND RESISTANCE IN YORUBA DRESS

Introduction

This study examines how Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria express power and resistance to power through dress. Although scientists have not come up with a single definition of power that is capable of any systematic use, most people however have an intuitive understanding of what power is.¹ The word power and its synonyms such as authority, influence, control, etc., which are sometimes used interchangeably in most literature, connotes the ability a person exercises over others by making them do his or her will, request or command against their wills. Conceived in this way, power therefore cannot exist in a vacuum except in relation to humans. Although power is also used in relation to inanimate things, the objective conceptualization of power is only measurable in human relation. A pack of lions may demonstrate or show recognition for a fellow lion as a leader within the park; however we may never know whether or not this demonstration of recognition constitutes power for the recognized lion or if such lion actually exercises any power or influence over others. Similarly, we may never know whether or not others in the park obey the lion with or without their consents. The same applies to when a lion easily overpower a deer. In such a case, we may never know if the overpowered deer surrenders freely or willingly in recognition of the lion's power. Invariably, power is immeasurable only in human community.

As a concept, especially in Politics and International Relations, power has been classified into two broad categories – hard and soft power.² Hard power describes the influence a particular actor (and this could be an individual, a group or a nation) exerts on others in order to obtain the other party's obedience. Essentially, this involves coercion, which could be either the threat to use or actual use of military might or economic sanction. Soft power, on the other hand, describes obedience obtained

via diplomacy, culture and history.³ Unlike military action, which is overtly or covertly aggressive, economic power oftentimes involves the threat to use or actual use of economic sanctions. Such sanctions can be in the form of trade embargoes, offer of inducements or aid as well as withdrawal of aid, etc.

As shown in the literature, power, whether soft or hard, must have (i) a source, domain or base; (ii) the means or instruments of its expression, (iii) amount or extent of its influence over others, (iv) and a range or scope.⁴ Even in primeval times, individuals and groups derived their powers from different sources. This could be their societies or a segment thereof. It could also be cultural capitals such as societal ethos, cultural practices, religious beliefs, etc. Individually and collectively, these sources give legitimacy to power. As of necessity, legitimate power must not only have ways through which it is used, expressed or exercised, but also have an extent to which it could be deployed. In addition to the above, power has a bound, which could be spatial or otherwise. No matter how powerful an actor is, its power is limited to where it derives legitimacy. However, this last part or characteristic of power demonstrates that power differs markedly from some of its synonyms, especially influence. For instance, while the power of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence policy may be limited to India, its influences stretch to different parts of the world.

Among the Yoruba, power has variety of meanings; ranging from strength (*agbara*) and position (*ipo*) to command (*Aase*). *Agbara* differs markedly from *ipo* in the same way as it differs from *Aase*, another English equivalent of which is "Amen". Power when used to describe strength, concerns brute force, another synonym of which is "*ipa*". When used as position, you often heard "*won n lo ipo*" – a show or demonstration of power that is associated with an office. When used to denote a command or an "Amen", "*Aase gun*" is the usual statement. In Yoruba cosmology, power can be divided into two: secular and esoteric. This conceptualization differs from what obtains in Politics and International Relations. Whether as strength or position, Yoruba believe that all forms of power have both the esoteric and secular components. As *Aase*, power becomes a command, which can be esoterically or secularly-mediated. As position, a member of a king-in-council may deploy his power to avail himself or his or her supporter the good wishes of a government. While this exemplifies secular use of power, a seemingly innocuous gadfly may use esoteric power to obtain what a chief may never obtain. What appears as a seemingly innocent three year old girl may, at the same time, be a sixty year old witch in the spiritual realm

and could also be a leader in a coven. Such a kid is usually described as *Emere* and *Abiku* or, at the very best, as "*Alagbara omo*" – a powerful kid. Extremely fair-in-complexioned young girl is often thought of as a witch or *Emere* while an exceptionally witty, gifted or a talented fellow is also believed to be imbued with powers of different kinds.

For Yoruba people, powers are either derived from spiritual sources or from secular sources. Yoruba people also believe that an overlap of one into the other is also possible. Hence, powers are either invested on individuals by the gods or by the society or by the combination of both. Twins, for instance, are believed to have been invested with powers by the gods on account of being born twins. When a newly born baby displays any special physical appearance or characteristics, for instance, having dread-locked hairs, unconventionally positioned in the mother's womb, etc; they are often regarded as powerful. To demonstrate this, special names that reflected these special attributes are given them. Deformities are also seen in the same light; hence an albino is regarded as not just powerful, but also specially selected by the deities either for their worships or as special sacrificial materials to appease the deities. Some communities, for reasons that may be associated with geography, are also believed to have been imbued with special powers by the gods and these powers were believed to be reasons behind some of the special features associated with them. Dexterity in making or performing a task is also seen in this light and it is common to see exceptionally talented ones as endowed with special powers by the gods. Sango, to consider another example, was reputed to be an irritable terror and that when he was in a feat of rage, he belched smoke and sometimes fire. Besides been a king in Old Oyo, he was, on account of his exceptional powers, deified in death.

Societies also invest people with powers. Kings, chiefs and other office holders are either carefully selected on mutually comprehensible criteria or are believed to have been specially ordained by the gods for their secular or religious roles in society. Kings, like priests and priestesses, may be selected among other equally qualified candidates; they were however regarded as specially "selected" by the gods for their offices. The same applies to priests and priestesses, as most of them were believed to have been specially selected, sometimes before birth.

Generally, Yoruba believe that all human beings possess one form of power or another; however it is not in all cases that individual realizes and deploys these powers. Even where individual realizes his or her powers, he or she is still required by the society to be discrete, as these adages make

clear: "*Alagbara ma mo ero, Baba olee*" and "*Ile n yo; alagbara ro ra se*". As a measure of control, excesses of power are curtailed, first, through individual's discretion, and secondly, through other means and measures put in place by society. In most cases, sources of power also prescribe the means and measures through which office holders are checked against arbitrary or abuse of power. This also applies to esoteric or spiritual powers.

As a measurable objective value, power is tutelary and is often reposed in individuals such as kings and chiefs, priests and priestesses, police and tax-collectors, judges and queens, etc. Although the Oyo-Mesi, a body of seven chiefs headed by the Bashorun, is the kingmaker in Oyo, it also functions as an effective check on the excesses of the king, Alaafin. Given this example, it can be argued that not only power is tutelary, but so also resistance to power. Collectively or singularly, power and resistance play fundamental roles in the day-to-day administration of Yoruba societies.

Given this eclectic conceptualization, Yoruba people tend to be tactful in their use of power in relating with themselves and with strangers. This is because everybody is believed to be powerful and those who may appear powerless may, in reality, turn-out to be most powerful. Without great caution, one can find himself or herself at the wrong end of the stick.

Resistance to power described in the literature as how individuals or groups within a particular space (source of power) resist authoritarian use of (legitimate) power by a constituted authority, is often seen as disobedience to power, which could be on natural and legal rights, self-defense, or religious grounds. In Yorubaland, resistance is a form of negotiation, which, like power, could also entail the use of aggression, cohesion, or overt violence. In this way, resistance is associated with change and, like power; it could be soft or hard.

As the following adages make clear, the use of symbolism for identity is commonplace among Yoruba people: "*Ade la fi n mo Oba, ileke ni ti awon Ijoye*" (kings are known by their crowns and chiefs by their beads), "*Ori Ade a gbe o*" (You are blessed by the power of the crown). The above also tie to sayings such as *Ijoba Alagbada* and *Ijoba oni Khaki*. While the first describes civil rule, the other describes military autocracy. The symbols – Agbada, a flowing gown commonly used by Yoruba males, and Khaki, a military uniform, are used to denote so many things. Agbada, as used here, encompasses not just governmental procedure that thrives on deliberations and elections, but also free market and open choices. Khaki describes force and brutality, death and pains, command economy and restrictions. In these examples, "crowns" and "beads" "Agbada"

and “Khaki” are objective representations or symbols of state power, as expressed by the political class and state actors. In themselves, these items are mere signs and symbols (staff of office, dress and uniforms); however they denote not just the offices of their users, but also their powers, their essences, especially as state-actors. The use of icons and symbols to express objective categories is not limited to power alone, but also to different other things, resistance to power inclusive. Using oral interviews and archival documents, archaeological excavations and photographs, this study explores these different ways through which Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria have expressed power and resistance (to power) through dress. This is important given the role of dress in the construction and establishment of Yoruba individual and group identity.

Structurally, the study is divided into four sections, with this introductory section as the first. The second section briefly traces the provenance and purposes of dress among Yoruba people. Using examples drawn from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Yorubaland, the third section looks at different uses of dress and how these relate to power and resistance. Also included in this section is the politics associated with the use of symbolism for identity, especially in Yorubaland. The fourth section, which concludes the study, draws out the basic arguments in the study.

Yoruba Dress: Origins and Purposes

Yorubaland, with a southern boundary along the Bight of Benin, which extends from the eastern limit of Republic of Benin on the west to the Western border of Edo kingdom and the Niger River up to Etobe in the east, at about 7.3⁰, “... lies between the parallels 5.36⁰ and 9.22⁰ north, and between 2.65⁰ and 5.72⁰ east”. From this point, the boundary is in a north-westerly direction, along a straight line drawn rather arbitrarily to meet 9⁰ of latitude immediately due south of Jebba.⁵ Falola, using Nigeria’s colonial inherited map as a reference, described the same areas thus: *to the south of this map is a coast, followed by a dense equatorial forest that stretched west for about fifty miles, and also broadening eastward. And there is the savanna to the north.* He noted further that “the Yoruba are located within the long stretch of the river Niger in the east and the river Mono in the west, which is bigger than the representation in the modern map”.⁶

The peoples who found themselves within the above geographical areas include the Egbado, Awori, Ijebu, Ilaro, Igbokoda, etc. of Abeokuta

and Ijebu divisions; the Gbongan, Ife, Oyo, Ijesha, Ekiti, etc. of Oyo division; the Otun, Ado, Ikole, Efon, Ikale, Ondo, Idoko, Ilaje, etc. of Ondo division; the Yagba, Igbomina, Ilorin, etc. of Ilorin and Kabba divisions.⁷ Traditional accounts have mentioned the Edo people as also a stock of Yoruba, especially those collected by Jacob Egharevba.⁸ Also included in the list of Yoruba areas are the territories of Kaba, Bunu, Owe, Igala, and Nupe peoples. In fact, Saburi Biobaku argued that it was from Nupe that the Yoruba spread to the southwestern parts of Nigeria.⁹ Other areas included are Ebira (Igbira), Egun, the Ewe, the Aja or the Arada (all in the Republic of Benin), the Gaa, the Krobo and the Adangbe (all in Ghana).¹⁰

Although Fadipe, earlier cited, noted that this geographical boundary is not absolute and that there are many Yoruba peoples in different villages and towns outside these geographical areas, this study limits its scope to Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria.

To this Yoruba people, dress is conceptualized as an assemblage of modifications and/or supplements to the human body. This includes coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as garments, jewelry, accessories, and other items. Also classified as dress are cloth and clothing traditions, tattooing and facial marking, hair-dressing and barbing.¹¹ As this folksong shows, Yoruba people regard dress as a *sine qua non* to living itself:

<i>Adaba ti ko l'apa; kini yo fi fo?</i>	A wingless dove; with what will it fly?
<i>Olomoge ti ko l'aso;</i>	A lady without dress;
<i>Kini yo fi lo'gba?</i> ¹²	How will she survive the season?

In addition to folksongs, Yoruba cultural practices such as eponymous names (*Oriki*), chants, and other customs demonstrate the importance of dress in the construction and establishment of Yoruba individual and group identity. For instance, integral to *Opomulero* family's eponymous names are these lines:

<i>Keke ta didun;</i>	The spindle spurns beauty;
<i>Aso l'edidi eniyan,</i>	Cloth beautifies the human body,
<i>Bi ko si Aso, Bi kosi egbigba</i>	If not for cloths, If not for the big
<i>Ileke;</i>	beads;
<i>Oniruru Idi la ba ri.</i> ¹³	We would have seen varying sizes
	of Buttocks.

Almost as a paradox, Yoruba people also say; “*Aso Nla, ko ni Eniyan Nla*” i.e. a well-dressed person is not necessarily a well-placed or highly remarkable person. Without prejudice to the first sayings, which emphasize the place of dress in establishing and constructing individual identity, the second serves as a caveat that the reality dress espouses may differ markedly from an objective reality of an individual and, as such, individuals should separate a person’s paraphernalia from his or her objective identity. Compared to the earlier position, the second subsumes a paradox, if not a contradiction. This paradox or contradiction is made more pronounced in contemporary Yoruba society, where clerics of religious organizations loudly admonish their followers to “dress the way you want to be addressed”.

Unarguably, Yoruba society makes distinctions between identity and dress. In the praise-names of Obas, the political heads of Yoruba kingdoms and states, Yoruba revered the Oba’s dress in the following words: *Kabiyesi, Alase Ekeji Orisa, Ki Ade pe l’Ori, ki Bata pe l’Ese*.¹⁴ In this instance, the Oba’s personality is fused with his dress, as symbols of authority and units of identity. The mere presence of the Oba’s staff (or any of his instruments of office) in any occasion signifies not just the Oba’s approval of such occasion, but also his presence.

In addition, Obas are regarded as the reflection of their kingdoms’ wealth. Hence, the dress, behaviour, and carriage of an Oba must reflect the richness or riches of his kingdom. Invariably, Obas, chiefs and notable individuals in Yorubaland are usually clad in dresses that reflect their positions, statuses, and wealth. The commoners, in the same vein, also dress to reflect their stations in life, as can be seen in the following witty sayings; “*Ibere Osi, bi Oloro lori; ti nwo Aso Ile r’Oko*” (The commencement of poverty is usually like wealth, which compels a poor man to wear his best cloth (dress) to the farm) and also “*Aifi Eni p’Eni, ai f’Eniyan p’ Eniyan, lo mu Ara Oko san Bante wo’lu*” (It is sheer incontinence that makes a peasant to dress poorly into the town). In these two sayings, Yoruba’s conceptualization of dress is such that dress must not only suit the occasion and fashion of the time but also be commensurate with one’s status or estate in life.

It is difficult to trace the origin of dress among Yoruba people. This difficulty cannot be dissociated from the temporal nature of dress, especially cloth and clothing tradition. The sheer fact that not until the closing periods of the nineteenth century, Yoruba people were orally literate also made reconstruction for eras where no written record exists difficult.

Samuel Johnson, author of the first seminal book on Yoruba, said nothing about the origin of dress. N.A. Fadipe, who wrote on Yoruba sociology, equally said nothing on the origin of dress. Today, reconstructing events and phenomena associated with periods before written records is made all the more complex because early historians failed to engage witnesses to periods before the advent of writing on matters such as dress. Attesting to this difficulty, T.M. Akinwumi noted that despite increasing interests in dress study, “not much is known about the pre-twentieth century period on its form, use, and production in many African communities...beyond glimpses from travelogues”.¹⁵ In his attempt to reconstruct dress history, he suggested the use of photo albums (of succeeding generations), eyewitness accounts (as found in diaries, memoirs, calendars, etc.), *Ifa* corpus and oral traditions. Besides not using all of these, he also focused primarily on praise poems and *Ifa* corpus without as much as checking correspondences of these sources with others, even those that he recommended. Notwithstanding this and other inadequacies, Akinwumi’s reconstruction of “women’s bosom coverings, the introduction of certain Arab-styled men’s robes and trousers, and the development of characteristic dress items associated with certain political and religious leaders such as Obatala and Osun”¹⁶ is informative.

Besides Akinwumi, Colleen Kriger¹⁷ also attempted a narrative on the history of cotton textile production in pre-colonial and colonial West Africa. Although Kriger focused on cotton textile, her work proved to be far more useful than Akinwumi in shedding useful lights on the origin of cloth in Yorubaland. Perhaps the most comprehensive and scientific work on provenance of Yoruba dress and dress history in Yorubaland is done by Oyeniyi, who combined photo albums, eyewitness accounts, *Ifa* corpus, oral traditions, archaeological sources and early Muslim and European trade accounts to weave a narrative that traces not just cloth, but other forms of dress.¹⁸ In this work, Oyeniyi used archaeological remains such as stone images, terracotta heads, brass and bronze life-size figures, which were excavated first by Leo Frobenus, Thurstan Shaw, Bernard Fage and others between 1910 and 1945, and dated through radio-carbon dating system to between 900 to 500 BC to show that dress and dress-use among Yoruba people can be dated to periods before 900BC.

Oyeniyi, depending on archaeology, and Kruger, citing slave trade records, argued that bark-cloth was perhaps the first cloth to be used across West Africa. This, both argued, was replaced by *Kijipa*, a type of cotton cloth. As far as Yorubaland is concerned, Oyeniyi traced the use of *Kijipa*

to Ila-Orangun, also known as Akoko, in the Igbomina province.¹⁹ He argued that *kijipa* cloths were imported from this area into other parts of Yorubaland, both by inhabitants of the area and traders from other parts of Yorubaland, thousands of years ago. Among Oyo people, this earliest Yoruba cloth, because they were made by Akoko women, was known as “Akoko cloth”.²⁰ Among the Egba and Ijebu, the cloth was known as *Egbedi Aso Ila*²¹ while among the Igbomina, from where the cloth emanated, it was called *Kijipa*.²²

In addition to *Kijipa*, other Yoruba clothes include *Ofi*, *Sanyan*, *Etu*, *Alari* or *Petuje* all of which, as Adeyinka Ajayi argued, originated from different parts of Yorubaland.²³ For instance, *Ofi*, known today as *Aso-Oke*, originated from Iseyin, Oyo-Ile, and Ilorin. *Alari*, as noted by Osaro Edo, originated from Ondo.²⁴ It must be emphasized that *Sanyan*, *Etu*, *Alari* and *Petuje* are different kinds of *Ofi*.

Olaoye asserted that cloth-use and production developed at different times in Yorubaland but that peoples from Ijebu, Owo, and Osogbo have distinguished themselves as good cloth weavers before the European intrusion. The Ijebu communities produced high quality and durable textile, which from the seventeenth century were exported to Benin where they were bought by the Europeans. Hugh Clapperton recorded concerning Owo in the 1820s that

we have observed several looms going here: in one house we saw eight or ten – in fact – a regular manufactory. Their cloth is good in texture and some very fine.²⁵

Osogbo dyers were particularly famous for their varied and intricate techniques; Iseyin had been known as an important center of men’s weaving in Yorubaland. In Shaki, Kishi, Igbeti, and Igboho the art of cloth making was elaborately known long before 1800. In Okene, Yagba, and Oyi, cloth weaving and therefore cloth-use, were in use as early as the 1500 AD.²⁶ Despite that various centers have emerged as cloth-weaving centers, some of which are notable for specific cloth-production, it must be stated that *Kijipa* is regarded generally as the first Yoruba cloth.

Origins of other items of dress abound in different literature and this study, for constraints of space, shall spare itself any discussion of them. As C.L. Adeoye had noted, dress is an important part of Yoruba people’s life and Yoruba people would stop at nothing in order to dress well.²⁷

Earliest explorers (and later the missionaries and colonial administrators) attested to the rich dress culture of Yoruba people. Sir Richard Burton, one of the earliest explorers, noted that Yoruba people

are tolerably well clothed...men wore shogoto (Sokoto), or loose cotton drawers fastened above the hips...and extending to the knee. The body was covered with cloth gracefully thrown...over the body.²⁸

William Clarke observed that in Yorubaland, which he visited between 1854 and 1858, men and women took great care to dress and were very proud of their dress. He noted that among Yoruba, dress is not just a collection of cloths and accessories but that men and women exercised great care in selection of styles and colours.²⁹

Yoruba dress, in pre-colonial, pre-Christian and pre-Islamic periods, served two important purposes: to protect the human body from vagaries of nature and to project individual and group identity. The first, which includes covering human nakedness from unwanted and unsolicited visual intrusion or gaze, is perhaps the most visible and could be termed the biological function of Yoruba dress. The second, which deals with the existential values of identity formation and reinforcement, projects age, status, sex, occupational, socio-political and religious affiliations. This is the social function of dress.

All over the world, the need to protect human body, especially from nature necessitated the use of different dresses for different weathers. During dry season, Yoruba people wore light cloths, which were often flung across the body. Essentially, these cloths were made of very light materials and were usually wrapped around lower body, leaving upper body bare in order to allow air to go around the body. In wet season, cloths were mostly thick, so as to give warmth.

Based on their functions, Yoruba cloths could be classified broadly into four: work or professional cloth, casual cloth, ceremonial cloth, and fashion cloth. This classification is for analytical purposes and has nothing to do with style, mode, design, material, and seasons.

Irrespective of functions, Yoruba dress aims at projecting the value of being an *Omoluabi*. *Omoluabi*, described by Abimbola as “to exhibit and demonstrate the inherent virtue and value of *iwapele*”,³⁰ where *iwapele*, a contraction of two words – “*iwa*”, character or behaviour, and “*pele*”, gentleness – means a gentle person with lofty character. Oluwole defined an *Omoluabi* as “a person that is given to deep knowledge, wisdom, and

self-discipline"³¹, a combination of which gave such individual a high sense of responsibility, which showed in his or her private and public actions and which earned the individual moral and social integrity and socio-political personality, in the society. To Abiodun, "an *Omoluwabi* is someone who has been well brought up or a person who is highly cultured".³²

Oyeniya, earlier cited, noted that Yoruba ethical value of being an *Omoluabi* is the underlying principle behind Yoruba dress and whether as office holder or an ordinary member of community, Yoruba people strive to be or appear as *Omoluabi*. This is premised on the fact that only such a person can function in any office without bias, let or hindrance.

As a basic requirement, only *Omoluabi* can aspire to office, whether secular or religious. The following popular sayings make clear the importance of being an *Omoluabi* in Yoruba culture: "*iwa rere l'eso eniyan*" (the pride of any human being is a lofty conduct) and also "*iwa l'ewa omo eniyan*" (the beauty of any human being is a lofty conduct). Among the Yoruba, a rich and well-dressed person with questionable character is usually described as wearing "*aso ete*" (ridiculous dress) and "*aso abuku*" (contemptuous cloths) as against "*aso iyi*" (glorious cloths) and "*aso eye*" (cloths of honour) of a poor man with lofty character. In support of the above is also the saying that underscores the values of an *Omoluabi*, even in a state of penury: "*b'eniyan ja'le l'ekan, bo ba d'aran b'ori; aso ole lo da bo'ra*" (no matter how richly-dressed is a thief, he remains a thief).

From the above, it has been argued that Yoruba social and political thoughts revolved around being an *Omoluabi*, which combined strict moral qualities with being urbane. The combination of all these constituted what Yoruba people considered as their very essence, the soul of their peoplehood. Therefore, to be a Yoruba man or woman is to be well-behaved, to be well-behaved is, among other things, to be well-dressed. A poorly-dressed Yoruba man or woman, not minding if he or she dwelt in the city or farm-village, was regarded as a second-rate citizen; hence, the saying: "*Aifini pe ni, aif'eniyan p'eniyan; lon mu Ara-Oko san Bante wo'lu*"³³. With respect to the above saying, it was not uncommon for parents to scold or ask a child rhetorically: "*Bawo lo se mu'ra bi ara oko yi?*" (Why are you dressed like a country bumpkin?) This can only happen when such a person dresses poorly. Immodest dress, most especially body-revealing or body-hugging cloths, was frowned at completely. In such instances, Yoruba were wont to say: "*Omoluabi kan ki mura be yen*" or "*Omo Yoruba kan ki mura be yen*" (no cultured Yoruba man or woman would dress that way). So, by implication, one can reason that

while dwelling in the city is believed to be associated with knowing and using new fashion trend, behaving in a cultured or civilized manner; a city dweller may lack these refined and much-sought characteristic and a village dweller may possess them.

Essentially, being well-behaved entails also being well-dressed, as material expression of being an *Omoluabi* is not limited to manner of speech, lofty conduct, and a high sense of moral rectitude alone, but also to bodily expression such as gait and dress. The emphasis on bodily expression was premised on Yoruba's belief that the outer person mirrored the inner one, as makes clear in these sayings: "*ara la mo, a o mo inu*" (the body is visible, not the mind) and also "*b'inu se ri, ni obi nyan*" (oracular divination usually tallies with one's inner man). On the face value, these Yoruba sayings appear to run counter to the English aphorism that appearance is deceptive and misleading (same as "not all that glitter are gold"), it must however be noted that the Yoruba also say that "*Oju ba'ni re, ore o de'kun*", which is the same as the aforementioned English aphorism. From the above, it can be argued that the symbolism of dress, as expression of power and resistance, derives from this essence – the value of being an *Omoluabi*.

Politics of Power and Resistance in Yoruba Dress

For the Yoruba, both the spiritual and physical components of power are intertwined. However, Yoruba people believe that the greatest power is the spiritual power. Secular power, such as those wield by political office-holders, is regarded as having a secular component and spiritual components. While the secular component is bestowed by communities; the deities, gods, and goddesses bestow spiritual power. In addition, individuals can also seek spiritual powers through magic. Obas, chiefs, especially high chiefs, priests and priestesses, are believed to possess spiritual powers which are bestowed on them by the gods and goddesses. Others, who may have been appointed into office by the community, are believed to possess only secular powers. More often than not, those that hold spiritual powers often have hereditary offices, as the spiritual power associated with their offices are believed to be transferrable from father or mother to sons or daughters.

Intricately tied to the power of Obas, chiefs, priests, and priestesses in Yorubaland is their respective dress, as some of these items are regarded

not just as dress, but also symbols of authority, which aid effective and efficient functioning of state officials. For the Obas, the crown is not just a head-dress with which a king is distinguished from other state officials, but also an instrument of office. The *Akun*, beads worn by chiefs, decorate and beautify the chiefs just like the crown, but also serve as an instrument of office without which a chief is no more than a mere commoner. The role of an *Ad'osu Sango* – Sango Priest – is not solely to inter-mediate between worshippers and the deity, but also only an *Ad'osu* can stand before *Sango*. It must be re-emphasized that both farmers and hunters barb *Osu* hair style; hence, the strict adherence to *Osu* by Sango worshippers not only reinforces the belief in the deity, but also the primary importance placed on the nexus between the deity, its worships, and its votaries by *Sango* worshippers.

Although this duality does not apply to all dresses, dress that are exclusively tied to the worship of specific gods, goddesses, and deities are believed to have secular and spiritual components. In most instances, dresses that are regarded as integral to religious worship are set aside only for religious worship, while others serve as everyday dress.

In addition to the above, there are elaborate spiritual and secular ceremonies associated with the production and usage of some clothes. For example, *ashigbo*, a cloth of black and white warp stripes, and one of the five clothes use for funerary purposes in *Owo*, has an elaborate rituals associated not just with its production, but also its use. *Ashigbo* is perhaps the most important funerary cloth in *Owo*. Generally, the production of all funerary cloths in *Owo* involves elaborate rituals; but *ashigbo* requires more specific rituals and more prescriptions are placed on the cloth-weaver, his or her people, and the wearer. Soon after the death of the *Olowo* or any of the other important chiefs, funerary cloths must be commissioned. As part of the production processes, parts of the loom are carried shoulder-high by the women as (funeral) ceremonial accessories. In particular, the women carry the *apasaa* (beaters or swords), as they sing, dance, and parade around the city. Also as part of the production processes, the women's clothes are folded and, as they go along the street, the clothes are pounded rhythmically to serve as accompaniment for women's singing groups.

Another dimension of power of dress deals with belief that major centers of dress production are imbued with spiritual essence and that the very act of dress making is controlled by the gods. As such, dress is considered to have shared in the spiritual powers and qualities of the gods associated with these centers. For instance, tie-and-dye, which is

the major craft in Abeokuta and Oshogbo, is believed to be controlled by *Orisa Osun*, *Iya Mopo*, and *Obalufon*. These two goddess and a deity are believed to be behind the dexterity in crafts and dress-making by men and women all over Yorubaland.

Oshogbo's eponymous name, *Oshogbo ilu aro, oroki asala*,³⁴ reveals two important things about Oshogbo. One, it is believed to be the birthplace of tie and dye and it could be argued that the production of tie and dye spread from Oshogbo to other Yoruba towns and cities, as no other Yoruba towns and cities is given such appellation. The second thing in the eponymous name is Oshogbo's place as a city of refuge, especially for displaced people, fugitive and criminals.

The story of the founding of Oshogbo is also illustrative of the role of Oshogbo in dress-making in general. The story was told that a certain Laro, accompanied by the hunter, Timenyin, set out from Ile-Ife to find water for their people at a time of a great drought and they came to a lush river surrounded by much vegetation and many trees. Laro and Timenyin considered the place an ideal location to settle their people and began clearing the bush and cutting down the trees. One of the trees fell across the river and, as it fell, a voice rose from the river, the voice of Osun, saying, among other things, "You bad people! You have broken all my pots of dye! You have spilled them all!"³⁵ Osun therefore warned them to move away from her territory to a not-too distant place near the river. She promised to reward them with abundance and protection should they do this. She argued that they would be disturbing her solitude should they stay at the river bank. She ordered that, in turn for protection and abundance, they have to worship her yearly at the river bank. Laro and Timenyin agreed and Oshogbo was born.³⁶

It was believed that tie and dye was first introduced to the Oshogbo women by Osun after their settlement, and that the spread of the craft was as a result of trade relations, labour migration (in and out of Oshogbo), and craft training.³⁷

In yet another account, *Iya Moopo*, the ancient supreme trinity of the female, which bore the totemic features of *Iyamowo*, *Iyaloode*, and Nana Ibukun, was believed to be the patron goddess of all female's crafts and trades. Represented by the *Edon*, the sacred bronze casting, *Iya Moopo*, holds one child close to her breast while tying the other one on her back with a sash and with the child's head downward and the feet pointing upward. *Iya Moopo* is a potter woman, reputable for moulding forms around pre-existing holes or spaces. The story is told about Orisa Ajagemo,

whose core ritual takes place in Ede. Ajagemo was said to have seen a potter woman at work and painfully asked: "Which is older, the pot or the hole inside it?" The simple answer given by the potter woman was: "Don't ask what you know: it is the hole."³⁸

To *Iya Moopo*, all bodies are pots and form is a latter addition. In Yoruba cosmogony, the potter-wheel, which is represented by the navel, stands still while the potter woman circles round it with all her body in controlled relaxation preserving the idea of form. *Iya Moopo* is also in-charge of all women's trades, childbearing and birth. She is consequently a sister to another deity, *Iyemowo* and close to *Odu* with thought and word formation. She is a cotton spinner and weaver (cloth and hair) as she also cooks (black) soap and palm-oil. In addition and more absurd, she is also the patron goddess of robbers and thieves as she owns indigo dye, which is black and obscure in darkness.³⁹

Far and above *Osun* and *Iya Moopo* is *Obalufon*, the legendary early ruler of Ile-Ife who is credited with the invention of brass-casting. *Obalufon*, in consonance with the *Ogboni*, are the principal patrons of the arts, especially brass-casting, bead-works and cloth-weaving in Yorubaland. *Obalufon*, who ruled Ile-Ife briefly before he was deposed, resumed his rule after intense battle with Oranmiyan. The peace that characterised his second tenure and his death was so eventful that it not only gave the inhabitants the enabling environment to practice their crafts, but also enabled the *Ogboni*, which was believed to have been founded under *Obalufon*, to flourish and gain legitimacy and considerable power at the palace. Their arts – bronze-casting, weaving (hair and cloths) and bead-works – flourished during this period that there is no mentioning of any of these arts without any reference to *Obalufon* and the *Ogboni* in Yoruba history.

From the above, it can be argued that all over Yorubaland, *Osun*, *Iya Mopo*, and *Obalufon* are believed to be the goddesses and deity in-charge of tie and dye, bronze-casting, bead-works, weaving, pottery making, etc. Invariably, the worship of these goddesses and deity is common in major centers of production of dress such as *Adire*, *Ofi*, *Alari*, *Ide*, etc.

It must be added that the worship of gods, goddesses and deities associated with dress-production is not limited to these three; elaborate worship is also offered to *Olokun*, *Sango*, *Ogun*, *Oya*, among many others. Thompson, writing about the relationship between *Obalufon* and bead-making, noted that like other men desirous of being noticed, *Obalufon* invented the beads and strung them in different colours on bracelets and necklaces so that gods, and men who follow them, might stand out with

pride and distinction in a crowd. Although *Obalufon* is credited with bead-making, it must be noted that beadwork is also associated with *Olokun*.⁴⁰

One of the factors determining which of the gods, goddesses, and deities is deserving of worship in relation to any dress is the relationship between these spiritual beings and the implements or tools used in the production of such dress. For instance, *Ogun*, god of iron, is important not only to hunters and blacksmiths, but also farmers, weavers, and bronze-casters. This is so because implements and tools used in these professions depend on iron. As such, each centers of dress production have gods, goddesses and deities associated with their crafts and these divinities enjoyed daily and periodic worship in return for success and dexterity in the production of the crafts.

Yoruba people also believe that there is a tenuous link between individuals' spirituality and his or her physical materials. Oba Oyewale Matanmi III, the late Ataoja of Oshogbo, described it in these words:

I found it difficult to separate the two. The physical materials enhanced the spiritual and the spiritual is deepened by the physical materials. Traditional religion is also your culture. It is a synthesis of culture and religion. The physical is one continuous though physical materials melds culture and religion or the physical materials and spiritual ones together; thereby making physical materials and spiritual ones inseparable.⁴¹

Owing to the above, it is believed that individuals' dresses are imbued with their owners' spiritual essences. As such, Yoruba people would rather burn an old cloth than give such cloth out to other people, especially when these are not members of the immediate family. Religious votaries, herbalists, seers, and diviners believe in the potency of their dresses so much so that the presence of the dresses is believed to confer potency on any action being undertaken and also confirm the presence of specific deities, gods, and goddesses in the event. In most cases, kings and chiefs are believed to be physically present not because they may have one or two person representing them at a ceremony, but when one of their instruments of office, such as the staff, the crown, or the king's wife, is in attendance.

Another dimension to this is that the different deities, gods, and goddesses have specific colour and other dress items that are culturally assigned to them. While red colour is regarded as *Ogun's* colour, black is considered as *Sango's* colour. White belongs to *Osun*, *Olokun*, *Obatala*, etc. While devotees of any of the deities, gods, and goddesses may use any colour for

their secular enterprises, they are duty-bound to use the colour of dress that is associated with their deities, gods, and goddesses for religious ceremonies. However, in secular existence, black is synonymous with death, sadness, and sorrow. Red is synonymous with life and vitality while other bright colours are also imbued with different meanings. Notwithstanding this, black and red are regarded as also symbol of age. So, it is common to find some Yoruba communities venerating red and black dress.

In some cases, diviners, seers, and herbalists often prescribed the use of certain dress by worshippers to propitiate the gods and goddesses. Black dress is used mainly for funeral, although cults and secret societies also use black dress. Funerary rites, especially of members of secret societies and cults, involve the wearing and displaying of dresses of different colour, with black as the predominant colour. In this way, the Yoruba differentiates between religious dress and secular dress. Religious dress is believed to have imbibed the spiritual power of the gods, and is, as such, treated with reverence.

Among the *Ogboni*, *Oososi*, and other secret societies and cults in Yorubaland, specific dress is regarded as exclusive. For instance, no other person can use the *Itagbe* (Ogboni's shoulder cloth), no matter how highly placed or wealthy. In addition to the above, some dresses are forbidden to people on account of religion. For instance, beads, such as *kele*, *sese-efun*, and many others are exclusively used by Sango and Osun worshipers. While these may not have been codified, they were however mutually understandable cultural norms among the Yoruba.

From the above, power is located in dress in two distinct ways: power inherent in a particular dress due to its close association with a particular deity, gods, and goddesses; or power associated with exclusive utilization of certain dress. While priests and priestesses of deities, gods, and goddesses may use dress that are exclusive to their deities, gods, and goddesses and therefore are separated from other worshippers and believers; both the votaries and the worshippers may use dress that are considered laden with spiritual powers.

In spite of the above, it must also be emphasized that nudity, understood simply as the condition of being nude or being semi-nude, or a state of not wearing cloth, is also a form of dress and this is highly venerated among Yoruba people. Although this practice is not limited to Yoruba people alone, as it is a common practice across Africa, however, in Yorubaland, nudity is a form of protest dress deployed as a tool of last resort in engaging with political power.

Nudity as dress takes two forms: (i) as a political tool, usually wielded by the females, to ensure that the political class accede to a particular request, not necessarily requests made by the female folks, but those made by the society, especially when there is a stalemate between popular demands and political class preferences; (ii) as a sign of sacredness of the human body. Here oath-taking and other (sacred or) religious activities, which placed unflinching importance on honesty, chastity, truthfulness, and absolute loyalty on the females are involved. For the most part, in establishing cases of adultery, a woman may be compelled to dance naked before a shrine. This often occurs when material evidence points to the woman as being guilty. So, in order to establish her innocence, such a woman may be asked to dance naked at the shrine. In some instances, women have, uncompelled, strip naked before the deity, gods, or goddesses as a way of establishing their innocence. At yet another level, parents often threaten to or actually strip before their children, most especially when such children are incorrigible and behave, almost inconsolably, errantly. This is regarded as a curse in Yorubaland. The essence of such a practice is to force the erring children to adjust.

Historically, Yoruba women have traditionally used access to and denial of their bodies, the threat or actual act of nakedness/undress, and denial of sexual/conjugal relation as a tool for effective political engagement with the male.

Undoubtedly, nude protests had a long history in Yorubaland. The examples of the Abeokuta Women Riots and *Ekiti Women For Peace* clearly illustrate this. The import of these examples is primarily to examine what nude-protest connotes to the Yoruba and how Yoruba women have used nudity to express resistance to power.

Between 1920 and 1936, Abeokuta, like other Yoruba towns and cities, was integrated into the international economy both as an exporter of cash crops and importer of manufactured products. It became one of the primary producing areas of cocoa and kola nuts in western Nigeria.⁴² Abeokuta's integration into the international economy had a profound effect on its local textile industry. As weavers gained access to European threads and dyers gained access to European cloth, relations of production were transformed. Both sets of producers became dependent on European trading firms for their raw materials and were thus brought squarely into the nexus of international trade. Dyeing, predominantly women's industry, benefited substantially from this economic relationship. Dyers' access to cloth as well as credit from the European firms allowed them to become

autonomous producers of tie-dyed cloth, *adire*, which was in great demand across Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Senegal and the Belgian Congo.

However, from the mid-1920s, the *adire* industry experienced a dramatic decline which was largely shaped by falling commodity prices and the cycles of recession and depression that characterized the years between the First and Second World Wars. The prolonged economic crisis redefined the social and economic world of dyers and dyeing. Competing social groups, such as European traders and Egba men, used privileges based on class and gender to enhance or protect their economic positions. As a result, dyers were left vulnerable and the gains they had made as producers and women since the end of the nineteenth century became increasingly threatened. Conflicts also surfaced among dyers as those who shared the privilege of age and wealth tried to assert their control over the industry.

The most far-reaching initiative was the incorporation of new technologies, caustic soda and synthetic dyes, which had a dramatic impact on the dyeing industry. It exacerbated old tensions and created new ones while allowing dyers to increase production and cut costs. As the crisis deepened, many realized that these efforts did not improve their economic situation and called on the local government to intervene. Even without the dyers' encouragement, the Alake, the head of the local government, was motivated to take action because of consumer complaints about the quality of Abeokuta's *adire*.⁴³

As the crisis deepened and the industry floundered, it became clear that individual approaches were hurting more than they were helping. As early as 1925, some dyers turned to the Alake, requesting help to regulate the industry.⁴⁴ The European firms also approached the Alake at the same time to encourage him to intervene in the industry. In the matter, the king was helpless, as he had to do the biddings of not just the European traders but also those of the colonial government, both of which ran counter to the wishes of Abeokuta women. The Alake could not take action against the trading firms, but he could take action against the dyers. He, at the urging of the Resident, banned the use of caustic soda in an attempt to regulate the trade. The ban, rather than alleviating the pains of the traders, exacerbated it and the women refused to obey the ban. Desirous of enforcing his rule; the Alake summoned a meeting with the women, with the Resident in attendance. The Alake not only insulted and cajoled the women to obey the ban, but also went as far as calling them stubborn and lazy, "unlike our industrious mothers of old".⁴⁵ He likened them to a son who refused to heed his father's direction and was therefore on the

road to ruin. The Resident, who was also present, compared the adire industry to the goose that laid the golden egg, and suggested that dyers were like the town's people in the fable who, overcome by their greed and selfish interest, killed the goose.⁴⁶

Despite all the intimidation and cajoling, the women refused to obey the Alake. In reaction, on 12 February 1936, police began to arrest the dyers in large numbers and confiscated their cloths. On the following day, 1,500 dyers marched to the palace. During their confrontation, the Alake ordered the women to comply with the law and stop holding meetings about the issues. Yet, once again they ignored his orders. They continued to meet, and to do so without the senior chiefs from their quarters. Instead, they hired several male letter-writers and lawyers to represent them.⁴⁷ As these men began the process of publicizing the dyer's grievances, the Chief Secretary of the Government tried to downplay the dispute, but his efforts were hampered by the numerous letters and petitions the dyers' lawyers sent to each branch of government and the press.⁴⁸

By April, it was quite clear that the dyers were not going to abide by Alake's ruling. In order to resolve the conflict, either the Alake had to accept the women's claims that the new technologies were not the problem and lift the ban, or the women had to accept the Alake's rights to act unilaterally. Once it was obvious that the Alake was not ready to yield, the women took to the street naked; demanding that the Alake should abdicated the throne, as he had become not just ineffectual, but a stooge of a foreign power, which made him to rule against the wishes of his people. Although protected by the colonial government, the Alake however understood that his reign had ended, as the women had deployed the sacred, traditional tool against him.

The most recent women's involvement in political protest and struggle in 21st Century Nigeria is the Ekiti Women for Peace nude protest of 29th April 2009. Following the nullification of the electoral victory of Mr. Segun Oni of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party at the Electoral Petition Tribunal, the Ekiti people were set for a re-run election in ten wards. Penultimate week to the election, politicians from different parts of Nigeria converged on Ekiti to ensure adequate preparation for the re-run election. As the day of the re-run drew closer, the atmosphere became tense, as the ruling party and its main contender, the Action Congress Party, jostled for support. Midway into the election, the Resident Electoral Officer, Mrs. Aduke Adebayo, disappeared and the process was halted. Government initially reported that she took ill. Later, she sent in a resignation letter

refuting government's claim that she was ill but also that she had gone underground as she was being forced to declare an unpopular candidate, which was against the wishes of Ekiti people, as expressed in the voting. For resigning and going underground; the police declared her wanted.

On the 29th April, 2009, half-naked Ekiti women marched on the streets of Ado-Ekiti and other parts of the state to protest an alleged attempt to subvert the electoral will of the people. They deplored the delay in announcing the winner of the April 25 governorship election rerun. They invoked the spirits of their ancestors against those "*who planned to announce the loser of the election as the winner.*"⁴⁹ The peaceful protest by the placard-carrying women, under the aegis of Ekiti Women for Peace, paralyzed traffic on the major streets of Ado-Ekiti. Some of their placards read: "INEC, Announce Election Result Now", "Prof Iwu, Be Warned", "We Salute Mrs. Ayoka Adebayo's Courage", "Dr. Fayemi Won, No Magomago", "Iwu, Stop Your Antics", "VP Jonathan, Stop Your Imposition", "Ayoka Adebayo, Heroine of Democracy" and "Prof Iwu, Fear God"⁵⁰, among others.

The women, numbering about 300, and comprising of young mothers, school girls and aged women, also sang:

<i>Magbe, magbe o,</i>	Don't steal it, don't steal it,
<i>Ibo Fayemi ko see gbe,</i>	Fayemi's votes cannot be stolen,
<i>Magbe, magbe</i>	Don't steal it, don't steal it.
<i>Mayi, mayi o,</i>	Don't manipulate it, don't manipulate it,
<i>Ibo Fayemi ko see yi,</i>	Fayemi's votes cannot be manipulated,
<i>Mayi, mayi</i>	Don't manipulate it, don't manipulate it.

Majority of the protesters wore white apparel and held white handkerchiefs, and their heads were uncovered. They said the Action Congress (AC) candidate, Dr. Kayode Fayemi, won the election and demanded that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should declare him as the winner.

The nude protest was organized by a group comprising of women from all the 16 local government areas in Ekiti State. They were led by Mrs. Ronke Okusanya, the President of Ekiti Women for Peace. Also in the group was the wife of the AC candidate, Mrs. Olabisi Fayemi and the Governorship candidate's running mate, Mrs. Funmilayo Olayinka.

According to Mrs. Okusanya, the women decided to go half-naked to press home the demand for the sanctity of their votes.⁵¹ She added that the protest was a warning to election riggers and manipulators of the electoral will of the people that they could no longer get away with fraud.

Another expression of the politics of power and resistance as expressed through dress is the equalization of European/western dress with Christianity, which played out in Yorubaland during the colonial period. To achieve this, Christian missions in Nigeria, ably assisted by the colonial administration, attempted an imposition of European culture, most especially dress and language, on Yoruba people. In Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan, as in other cities, missionaries mandated Yoruba converts not only to speak English language, but also to wear European shirts and trousers as marks of Christianity and civilization.

While Yoruba converts accepted this quietly, especially from the 1840s, protests of different kind however followed as from the 1860s and by the 1900s, agitation for cultural renaissance both in language and in dress coalesced into agitation for self-rule, which received substantial boost after the World War II and led to independence in 1960. Yoruba elite, especially those in Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan spearheaded this agitation. Not only were they wearing Yoruba dress in public and private functions, but were also dumping their Christian names given to them at conversion and reverting to their original Yoruba names. In addition, they agitated for the teaching of Yoruba language and culture in schools. Two notable individuals championing this cause include Mojola Agbebi and Sapara Williams who both reverted from their Christian names to their old, Yoruba names.

Although these converts were not denied membership in their various churches for not wearing European dress, they were however regarded as “counterfeit” Christians. New converts who would not wear European dress were denied Baptism and, including the old ones, were also denied the Holy Communion.⁵²

Among many others, Agbebi (formerly David Vincent Brown), decried the imposition of European dress and European culture on Africans. “The introduction of the usages and institutions of European life into the African social system”, Agbebi contended, “has resulted in a disordering and dislocation of the latter which threaten to overthrow the system altogether and produce a state of social anarchy”. Some of the major ill effects of such an introduction of European usages and institutions included the “total breakdown of parental control” and the “advent of a life of wild

license mistakenly taken to mean the rightful exercise of the rights and prerogatives of individual liberty, as defined and permitted under the customs and usages of European life".⁵³

These Yoruba ethno-nationalist Christians posited that "every African bearing a foreign name is like a ship sailing under false colours, and every African wearing a foreign dress in his country is like the jackdaw in peacock's feathers".⁵⁴ Like Agbebi, others also denounced their Christian names and reverted to their original Yoruba names. In addition, majority took to wearing of Yoruba dress and there also emerged a curious combination of Yoruba dress with European ones.⁵⁵

Agbebi, leader of the agitators, went further to challenge missionaries' rights to name tunes, language, drums, dresses, and songs which should be used in worshipping God in Yorubaland; noting that choice of dress, tunes, and songs should depend on "the frame of mind, breadth of soul, experiences of life, attitude of faith, and latitude of love of individuals..." He averred that Yoruba culture rather than English/European should be permitted to dictate dress, songs, language, etc. of Yoruba Christian experience. He asked if the Israelites of old who used their own native dress, songs, and musical instruments in their religious worships ever knew European dress, harmonium, organ, and piano musical instruments and why were these being imposed on Yoruba people as the only and best dress and instruments for serving God. He insisted that Yoruba converts should be allowed to use "our *Dundun* and *Batakoto*, our *Gese* and *Kerikeri*, our *Fajakis* and *Sambas*" which "would serve admirable purposes of joy and praise if properly directed and wisely brought into play".⁵⁶ He went further to advocate that "in carrying out the function of singing therefore, let us always remember that we are Africans, and that we ought to sing African songs, and that in African style and fashion".⁵⁷ By African style and fashion, Mojola Agbebi excluded the use of "surplices, European dress, and structures for sitting during religious worship", which he described as non-essentials of religion.

... The joys are one, Redemption is one, Christ is one, God is one, but our tongues are various and our styles innumerable. Hymn-books, therefore, are one of the non-essentials of worship. Prayer-books and hymn-books, harmonium-dedications, pew constructions, surpliced choir, the white man's style, the white man's name, the white man's dress, are so many non-essentials, so many props and crutches affecting the religious manhood of the Christian African.⁵⁸(Emphasis added)

To the extent that Christianity and Imperial rule sought to supplant Yoruba culture, Agbebi compared Christianity to Islam and declared:

The African Moslem, our co-religionist, though he reads the Koran in Arabic and counts his beads as our Christian brother the Roman Catholic does, and though he repeats the same formula of prayer in an unknown tongue from mosques and minarets five times a day throughout Africa, yet he spreads no common prayer before him in his devotions and carries no hymn-book in his worship of the Almighty. His dress is after the manner of the Apostles and Prophets, and his name, though indicating his faith, was never put on in a way to denationalize or degrade him.⁵⁹ (Emphasis added)

Agbebi further declared that “European Christianity is a dangerous thing”; that “Islam is the religion of Africa” and finally that “Christianity lives here by sufferance”. He then asked:

What do you think of a religion which holds a bottle of gin in one hand and a Common Prayer in another? Which carries a glass of rum as a vademecum to a “Holy” book? A religion which points with one hand to the skies, bidding you “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven”, and while you are looking up grasps all your worldly goods with the other hand, seizes your ancestral lands, labels your forests, and places your patrimony under inexplicable legislations?⁶⁰

Conclusion

Dress, in Yoruba belief, has power. It takes on power either from the processes of production or when it is used. The major centers of dress production were also believed to have special favour of the deities, gods, and goddesses and that these supernatural beings also infuse these centers with special powers. Dexterity in dress production, it is believed, is one manifestation of these powers. The king’s staff of office or his crown is conceptualized as embodying the power and essence of the king himself in much the same way as the maze, say of a National Assembly, embodies the power of the nation’s National Assembly and the constitution embodying the power of a state. Dress, conceptualized in this way, could therefore express individual’s power, e.g. that of a king, or that of a group, e.g. a chorister’s robe.

With colonialism and the introduction of European dress came another layer of dress and power. Offices and positions had their respective dresses with various insignia of office and power. Although the imposition of European dress by both the church and the colonial administrators on Yoruba people vis-à-vis other Nigerians, as a measure of modernizing Yorubaland and Nigeria, was initially received by the Yoruba and other Nigerian peoples, however, when European cultural superiority and hegemony began to take the center stage in dress, religion, and government administration; European sartorial culture was resisted.

This resistance can be understood in two ways: (i) hegemony or power and (ii) its failure to exemplify the kernel of Yoruba dress culture, the value of being an *Omoluabi*. On the first, the initial acceptance of European religion, culture, and values among Yoruba people gave way to socio-political protests of different kinds across Yorubaland because Christianity presented European sartorial tradition and language as superior to other traditions. So, as forms of protest, the wearing of native dress and the speaking of Yoruba language became icons “in this ideological rejection of colonialism”. Many educated Christians who did not change their names however made the wearing of native dress and the speaking of Yoruba language significant ways of expressing support “of the cultural movement and critique” of the time. As they argued, native language and dress “spoke of the <<traditional>>, the truly African, uncontaminated by Western mores and materialism”.⁶¹ The agitators argued that Yoruba dress not only allowed for a cultural rebirth and a renewed affinity to those who still lived by “traditional” values, but also became a wearable text, described by Chatterjee as existing in “adversarial relationship” to the discourse of colonialism.

By their actions and words, Yoruba elite argued that that European dress has nothing to do with Christianity and colonial administration. A closer look at this argument however shows some fault lines. As shown above, Yoruba sartorial tradition exemplifies values, identity and power; why cannot European tradition do same? To the Yoruba, one can be a Christian or work in colonial establishment wearing Yoruba or any other dress. This position turns logic on its head and therefore is faulty. Yoruba elite and nationalists were denying to Christianity what they allowed their indigenous religion and socio-political articulation. In my view, this reasoning lacks depth and, by all intents and purposes, it is simply a nationalistic agitation that has nothing practical to do with any existential value of Yoruba dress. A clue to this is that no sooner than Nigeria gained

independence that Nigerians, most especially Yoruba people, took to European dresses more than any other groups in Nigeria.

On the existential value of being an *Omoluabi*, it can be safely argued that the underlying principle behind symbolism of power and resistance to power through dress is the need to assert the kernel of Yoruba dress, i.e. the establishment and projection of the value of being an *Omoluabi*. From the examples of nude protests in Abeokuta and Ekiti, dress not only shows power, but also resistance. It can be argued that being an *Omoluabi* in dress also applies to being same in expressing power. Wrapping and unwrapping of human bodies derived from the general belief that human bodies, most notably those of aged-women, young and old mother, are to be revered, another form of expressing the value of being an *Omoluabi*. As such, it is a taboo for a woman, and particularly a married or older woman, to choose to disrobe in public in reaction to a social/political situation. As already shown, although the Ekiti example did not lead to abdication, but the Abeokuta case forced the king into exile. From these examples and others across Nigeria and Africa, it goes without saying that bodies, whether wrapped or unwrapped, hold particular meanings to Yoruba people. However, unwrapping is an unconventional tool in the expression of dissents among Yoruba people. While dress may embody power, unwrapping signifies resistance to power and, in its own right, constitutes another layer of power. Hence, this study considers it as a weapon of the weak, especially in the face of continued injustice by/of the powerful. Women, as it is generally believed, can unwrap either when bathing or in the inner recesses of their homes with their husbands, as part of their conjugal duties. Hence, only insanity and conquest associated with war would warrant a sane Yoruba woman to unwrap in the public. Under any other circumstance, unwrapping by women in full public glare is an indirect protest against an imposed situation. Among the Yoruba, it is the worst form of protest, as it signifies that the state is perpetrating a war against its own people and the people, by protesting nude, are declaring themselves as victims in a situation of war and molested in the full glare of the public by making public what should remain in the private domain. It signifies absolute lack of confidence in the state and the king is expected to abdicate the throne. As noted by Mrs. Fayemi, the nude protest in Ekiti State derived from the need to let the women's voices be heard, it is premised on Yoruba belief that it is a

taboo to see the naked body of an old woman in the public. These women are protesting against the injustice in the land and they are insisting that their votes must count.⁶²

As a measure to de-legitimize state power, nude protest is not commonly used in Africa, as it was considered a thing of shame and a taboo. It derives from a cultural milieu which regarded woman's nakedness as a virtue not only of the woman or her husband, but also of her community. Hence, virginity is celebrated to the highest degree not only by brides, but also by the bride's relations and community. Consequently, nude protest is treated as a rape and sexual violence, an assault not only on the woman but also on the community.

By using the metaphor of dress, whether its actual usage or its lack of it, Yoruba people emphasize that being an *Omoluabi* is a *sine qua non* to being a Yoruba man or woman and that Yoruba people are expected to abide by this moral and ethical requirement not just in politics, but also in religion and other aspects of their social lives. Therefore, for Yoruba people, Yoruba sartorial tradition bespeaks of good governance, uncorrupted and undefiled religious devotion and personality while other sartorial traditions bespeak of a lack of the internal value of being an *Omoluabi*. European dress, as far as the Yoruba are concerned, is seen as emphasizing sensuality and sexuality. Yoruba culture would rather restrict these features, especially in females, to the private space or private domain. Hence, with increasing number of women wearing European dress, European sartorial tradition was daubed as immoral and the wearers are considered as morally bankrupt and religious apostates.

NOTES

- 1 Dahl A. R., "The Concept of Power", in *Behavioral Science*, vol. 2, No. 3, 1957, p. 201.
- 2 Nye S. Joseph, *The Power to Lead*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.
- 3 Nye S. Joseph, "The Future of American Power", in Chari Chandra, (ed.) *War, Peace and Hegemony in a Globalized World: The Changing Balance of Power in the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge, UK, 2008, Pp. 36-49.
- 4 Dahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-03.
- 5 Fadipe N.A., *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 1991, p. 21.
- 6 Falola, T., "The Yoruba Nation", in Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (eds.), *Yoruba Identity and Power Politics*, University of Rochester Press, USA, 2006, p. 29.
- 7 Fadipe, *ibid*, p. 29.
- 8 Egharevba, J., *A Short History of Benin*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 1960.
- 9 Akinjogbin, I.A., *Milestones and Concepts in Yoruba History and Culture*, Olu-Akin Publishers, Ibadan, 2002, p. 10.
- 10 *Ibid*, 10.
- 11 Adeoye, C.L., *Asa ati Ise Yoruba*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 2005, pp. 179-218.
- 12 Just as a wingless dove cannot fly, so a young lady without dress cannot survive a season.
- 13 It must be noted that every Yoruba person has *Oriki*. The one used above belongs to the Opomulero family, which could be found in different parts of Yorubaland, most notably amongst the Oyo, Ilorin, Oke-Ogun, Ijesha, etc. in Western Nigeria.
- 14 Kabiyesi, the Commander and the Vice-Regent of the gods; May the crown and the royal shoes stay long on the king's head and legs. This is generally a prayer for longevity for the king and his kingdom.
- 15 Akinwumi, T. M., 'Oral Tradition and the Construction of Yoruba Dress', in Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (eds.), *Yoruba Identity and Power Politics*, Rochester University Press, USA, 2006, p. 49.
- 16 *Ibid*, p. 50.
- 17 Kriger, C., *Cloth in West African History*, AltaMira, Oxford, 2006.
- 18 Oyeniyi, B. A., *Dress and Identity in Yorubaland, 1896-1986*, Carolina Academic Press, USA, 2012.
- 19 Oyeniyi, *Ibid*.
- 20 Johnson, S., *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, CMS, London, 1921, p. 110.
- 21 Interview with Baba Fatimoh, Sagamu, 12 June 2010.
- 22 Interview with Oba Lamidi Adeyemi Olayiwola, Oyo, 12 April, 2010.
- 23 Ajayi, A., *The Economics of Cloth Weaving in Eastern Yorubaland in the 20th Century*, unpublished Ph. D thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 2005, p. 45.

- 24 Interview with Osaro Victor Edo, Ibadan, 13 November, 2010.
- 25 Adepegba, C., "Yoruba Art and Art History" in Ogunremi, D., and Adediran, B., (eds.), *Culture and Society in Yorubaland*, Charles/Connel Publications, Ibadan, 1998, p. 6.
- 26 Olaoye, R.A., "The Traditional Cloth-Weaving Industry in Nigeria Before 1800", in G.O. Oguntomisin and S. Ademola Ajayi (eds.) *Readings in Nigerian History and Culture*, Hope Publications, Ibadan, 2002, pp. 196-201.
- 27 Adeoye, C.L., *Asa ati Ise Yoruba*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 1979, p. 162.
- 28 Burton, R. F., *Abeokuta and the Cameroons Mountain: An Exploration*, (vol. 1), n.a. London, 1863, p. 102.
- 29 Clarke, W. H., *Travel and Explorations in Yorubaland, 1854-1858*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 1972, p. 243.
- 30 Abimbola, W., "Iwapele: The Concept of Good Character in Ifa Literary Corpus", in "Wande Abimbola (ed.) *Yoruba Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance, and Drama*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 1975, p. 389.
- 31 Oluwole, B. S., "Who are (we) the Yoruba?" A Key Note paper delivered at Pre-World Philosophy Day Conference, June 12, at the National Theatre, Lagos, 2007, Pp. 12-15.
- 32 Abiodun, R., "Identity and the artistic process in the Yoruba aesthetic concept of Iwa", in *Journal of Cultures and Ideas*, vol. 1, no.1 , 1983, p. 14.
- 33 It is crass incivility that makes a country bumpkin enter the City in his *Bante*. Bante is a covering around the waist made from either cloth or leather.
- 34 Jones, J. L., "Performing Osun without Bodies: Documenting the Osun Festival in Print", in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 17, 1997, p. 73.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 40 Thompson, R. F., *Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art at UCLA*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1976, Pp. 1-8.
- 41 Jones, J. L., *op. cit.*, Pp. 83-84.
- 42 Agiri, B. A., "Kola in Western Nigeria, 1850-1950: A History of the Cultivation of Cola Nitida in Egba-Owode, Ijebu-Remo, Iwo and Ota Areas" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1972), and Berry, S., *Cocoa, Custom and Socio-Economic Change in Rural Western Nigeria*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975.
- 43 In 1898, the Lagos governor helped restructure the Egba political system and centralized power in the Alake, one of the town's four senior kings. The Alake in theory ruled in consultation with a Council comprised of the other senior kings, military and non-military titled men. This structure was largely retained when Abeokuta lost its independence in 1914. See Pallinder-Law, A., "Government in Abeokuta 1830-1914: with special reference to the Egba

- United Government, 1898-1914", (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Goteborg University, 1973). For more on the pre-colonial Egba political structure see Biobaku, S. O., "An Historical Sketch of Egba Traditional Authorities", in *Africa*, vol. XXII, 1952, Pp. 35-49, and Biobaku, S. O., *The Egba and Their Neighbours, 1842-1872*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1957.
- 44 No copy of the minutes of this meeting exist anymore, however, mention was made of it in the public meeting with the Adire dyers on 29 July 1927. Report of the Public Meeting of the Adire Women, 29 July 1927, Egba Administration Bulletin, 31 August 1927, p. 106.
- 45 National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), ECR 1/1/42, vol. II, Extract from Egba Native Authority's Minutes of Council Meeting, 8 Aug. 1935, p. 1.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 47 Their representatives are Oladipo Somoye, a former clerk for UAC; M. A. Egberongbe, a former clerk for one of the Native Courts and John Holt and Co.; J. K. Doherty, a disbarred lawyer from Abeokuta; and William Geary, an English lawyer practicing in Lagos. See National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), ECR I/1/46, Letter from Resident to Secretary, Southern Provinces, 24th Apr. 1936.
- 48 National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), CSO 28400, vol. 1, Letter from Somoye to the Chief Secretary to the Government, 6 Mar. 1936; see also National Archive Ibadan, (NAI), CSO 28400, vol. 1, Letter from Geary to the Chief Secretary to the Government, 20 Apr. 1936.
- 49 "Women Protest", in *Nation Newspaper*, 30 April, 2009, pp. 1-2.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 51 Interview with Mrs. Okusanya, Ado-Ekiti, 30 April, 2009.
- 52 T.G.O. Gbadamosi and J. F. Ade Ajayi, "Islam and Christianity in Nigeria", in Obaro Ikime (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980, p. 358.
- 53 Akinsola Akiwowo, "The Place of Mojola Agbebi in the African Nationalist Movements: 1890-1917", *Phylon*, vol. 26, No.2, 1965, pp. 122-139.
- 54 Byfield, J., "'Unwrapping' Nationalism: Dress, Gender, and Nationalist Discourse in Colonial Lagos", in *African Humanities*, Occasional Publication No. 30, Boston University, Boston, 2000, p. 11.
- 55 Akiwowo, A., *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 58 Agbebi, M., "Inaugural Sermon", in J. Ayo Langley, *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856-1970*, Rex Collins, London, 1979.
- 59 Agbebi, M., *op. cit.*
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 62 "Women Protest", in *Nation Newspaper*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

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