

**PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE SPECTACLE OF *ASO EBI* IN LAGOS, 1960-2010.**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

*Asọ* in Yoruba means cloth while *ebi* in Yoruba means family. Literally, therefore, *asọ ebi* means ‘family cloth’. This meaning of *asọ ebi* is transcended in common usage where it simply means uniforms worn by a group of family members or friends as a solidarity dress to a social ceremony such as wedding, party, funeral, among others.

This research charts the political and visual economies of *asọ ebi* in urban Lagos from 1960 to 2010. Under political economy I address the politics of *asọ ebi* dress in Lagos: the contestations surrounding the use of *asọ ebi* among friends, family members, organizations, among others. Under visual economy I engage the role of photography and other visual cultural practices in the practice of *asọ ebi*.

From the 1960s *asọ ebi* began to be redefined in line with the cultural and socio-economic changes that came with late global capitalism. Within *asọ ebi* practice in the city of Lagos meanings of friendship, solidarity, camaraderie and wealth have undergone radical transformation as more people migrate to the city after Nigeria’s independence. From the 1970s through the 1980s, individuals were compelled by the economic conditions to adopt new modes of *asọ ebi* practice. For example new types of textile materials used for *asọ ebi* expanded to include cheaper textiles imported from China and elsewhere. Instead of offering *asọ ebi* free, individuals sold it to their friends and within such transactions, politics of exclusion and inclusion ensued.

From the 1990s through the 2000s, the rise of digital photography and the emergence of radical printing technology ushered a new mode of fashioning *asọ ebi*. In the process, photography and fashion magazines became a means of negotiating sartorial elegance and cosmopolitan modernity. In this thesis, therefore, the central argument resides in the contestations surrounding the use and meanings of *asọ ebi* within these transformations in the city of Lagos.

I argue that *asọ ebi* has become a phenomenon that is created within the contingent spaces of the city of Lagos. I show that *asọ ebi* is no longer a cultural practice of the Yoruba who were thought to have started it; rather it is a practice that has filtered into other ethnic groups in

Nigeria and other West Africa sub regions. In this process it became part of a city practice which helps individuals to negotiate status, wealth, salience, and visibility. In the process I examine the dynamics of *asọ ebì* cloth production, patronage, consumption and its visual and social significance in the city of Lagos. I show that *Asọ ebì* as an urban practice is key to the expression of culture both as an aesthetic product, as consumer goods, as status symbol, and as an evidence of style.



## DECLARATION

I declare that *Photography and the Spectacle of aso ebi in Lagos, 1960-2010* is my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Okechukwu Charles Nwafor



December 13, 2011

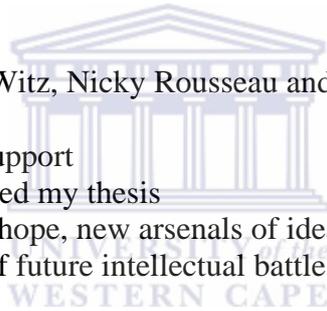
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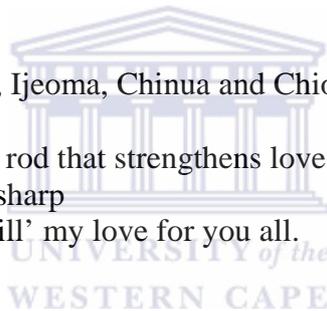
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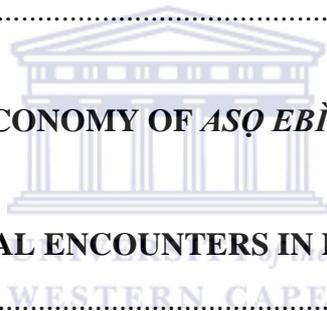
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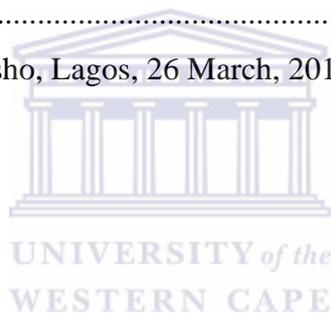
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## INTRODUCTION

It was always difficult for me to contend with the constant explanations I had to provide in the course of writing this thesis. Each time when someone asked, “what are you researching?” I grappled to provide what demanded a long explanation. I would always answer, “I am researching *asọ ebì*.” And the next question would be, “What is *asọ ebì*?” Not only does this sound strange to those not familiar with the Yoruba word, it also warrants a lecture, albeit very briefly, otherwise I might not convey the correct message to impatient interlocutors. To these numerous inquirers I would always answer, *asọ ebì* means ‘uniforms’ worn by Nigerians during weddings or other social events as a solidarity dress. In struggling with such a condensed explanation, most other people – who insisted that I take them further, down an elaborate historical lane – would always relish more information regarding my research.

In Yoruba, *asọ* means cloth while *ebì* means family. So literally, *asọ ebì* means family cloth. However, those who normally dress in the *asọ ebì* uniforms are also friends, family members or well-wishers of the celebrants. Again the *asọ ebì* dresses are local or imported textile materials sewn into a ‘traditional’ style by tailors and designers. This practice has become so entrenched in the urban areas of Nigeria that the time has come for one to undertake an in-depth study into some of the dynamics that shape it. In other words, while I engage with the phenomenon of *asọ ebì* as a recent cultural and social practice, the main argument of the thesis highlights the visual and political economy of this practice in urban Lagos. This practice, although believed to have started among the Yorubas in Western Nigeria, has spread across Nigeria and indeed the West African sub-region. *Asọ ebì* is seen mainly at social events such as weddings, burial ceremonies, naming ceremonies, parties, among other occasions, where it is invoked to mobilize family members and friends to chart a collective solidarity through uniforms.

The first segment of this thesis attempts to understand the changes in the meanings of *asọ ebì* over a period of time (1960-2010) in urban Lagos. Recently the meanings of *asọ ebì* have broadened to include larger networks of friends who could be co-opted by immediate friends of the celebrant. In other words, the celebrant may not be familiar with all the ‘friends’ in

*asọ ebi*. In fact, anyone in *asọ ebi* uniform who flanks the celebrant in a show of camaraderie is identified immediately in any social event. Again, *asọ ebi* has also made a transition into the political sphere where it is deployed to show support for political parties. Politicians also use it to lure supporters.

The second thing the thesis attempts is to chart the link between “photographic codes and dress codes.”<sup>1</sup> This is done by invoking the place of photographic practices in *asọ ebi* fashion and tracking the ways popular photographers in Lagos use *asọ ebi* photographs to advance the politics of visibility already in place in the actual practice of *asọ ebi*. It also attempts to identify the point at which the ubiquitous circulation of *asọ ebi* photographs in fashion magazines mark the emergence of a new level of cosmopolitan lifestyle in urban Lagos. I argue that this period is notably the 1980s during the era of economic crisis when the need for class re-invention occasioned the increasing demand for public visibility. The increasing spread of fashionable *asọ ebi* uniforms in both public ceremonial events and fashion magazines reached a climax in the 2000s with the explosion of new forms of printing devices, cheaper textiles, and digital technology. The *asọ ebi* photos in the fashion magazines also influence the way individuals read the look and the meaning of *asọ ebi*. This thesis suggests that both fashion and photography emerge as two inseparable aspects of modernity that Lagosians sought before and after colonialism in the 1960s, during the economic crisis of the 1980s, and during the height of the rise in digital photography and the emergence of radical printing technology in the 2000s.

### **Rationale for the study**

African scholars have explored the concept of fashion, clothing and dress<sup>2</sup> but few have veered into the dynamics involved in fashion and photography<sup>3</sup> especially in the manner in

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Rabine, “Fashionable Photography in mid twentieth-century Senegal,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 14 No.3, pp.305-330, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Elisha Renne, *Cloth That Does not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996); Elisha Renne, “Cloth and Conversion: Yoruba Textiles and Ecclesiastical Dress,” in Linda Arthur (ed), *Undressing Religion: Commitment and Conversion from a Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 7–24; Elisha Renne, “Visions of sacred textiles in a Yoruba Aladura Church,” in Elisha Renne, T Agbaje-Williams, (eds), *Yoruba Religious Textiles in Southwestern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Book Builders, 2004); Dale Idiens and K.G. Ponting, *Textiles of Africa* (Leeds: The Pasold Research Fund Ltd, 1980); Ila M. Pokomowski, Joanne Bubolz Eicher, Moira F. Harris, Otto Charles Thieme, *African Dress II, A Select and Annotated Bibliography* (Michigan: African Studies Center, University of Michigan, 1985); Judith Perani and Norma Wolff *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Phyllis Martin, “Contesting clothes in colonial Brazzaville,” *Journal of African History* vol.35 no.3, (1993), pp.401–26; Jean Allman, (ed.), *Fashioning Power: Clothing, Politics and African Identities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004a); Judith Byfield, “Dress and politics in Post-World War II Abeokuta (Western Nigeria)” in Jean Allman *Fashioning Power*, pp. 31–49; Laura Fair, “Remaking fashion in the Paris of the Indian Ocean: dress, performance and the

which I attempt to marry the political and visual economies in socially uniformed fashion known as *aso ebi*. This thesis is informed by a recognition of the fact that the study of fashion and visual culture in the postcolonial context needs new impetus, and renewed interrogation. This is because little attention has been focused on the mutual engagement of these two areas of fashion and photography. Seeing *aso ebi* as a form of postcolonial fashion with some historical originality therefore, has provided a good stimulus for the theoretical arguments that I advance in this research. Similarly, few efforts have been made to address the question of popular photography in Nigeria especially in the manner in which it is deployed to facilitate *aso ebi* in social events such as weddings, burial ceremonies, birthday parties, among others. The need to understand the relationship between the social life of *aso ebi* and visual cultural practices inform this research. This is, perhaps, the point at which aesthetics meet with social action.

This thesis seeks to understand the nature of the transformation that has attended *aso ebi* practice and the causes of this transformation. It seems that part of the causes lie in the abundant and dynamic visual traffic surrounding the dressed body in urban Lagos. For many years the intersections of these dynamics with the subject of *aso ebi* have not been adequately attended to by scholars. Such lacunae leave room for critical nuance and new historical

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cultural construction of a cosmopolitan Zanzibar identity,” in Jean Allman, *Fashioning Power*, pp. 13–30; Marrison Moorman, “Putting on a pano and dancing like our grandparents: nation and dress in late colonial Luanda,” in Allman, *Fashioning Power*, pp. 84–103; De Jorio R. “Gendered museum, guided he(tour) topias: women and social memory in Mali,” *Polar* 2002, vol.25 No.2, pp.50-72; Andrew Ivaska, “Anti-militants meet modern Misses: urban style, gender and the politics of ‘National Culture’ in 1960s Dar es Salaam, Tanzania” in Jean Allman *Fashioning Power*, pp. 102– 24; Deborah James, “I dress in this fashion”: transformations in Sotho dress and women’s lives in a Sekhukhuneland village, South Africa, in Hildi Hendrickson (ed.), *Clothing and Difference. Embodied Identities in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 34–65; Misty Bastian, “Female ‘Alhajis’ and entrepreneurial fashions: flexible identities in south-eastern Nigeria,” in Hildi Hendrickson, *Clothing and Difference* pp. 97–132; S. Scheld *The production and consumption of La Sape: researching fashion fever and writing teen fashion magazines in Dakar, Senegal*, paper presented at the Colloquium of the Women’s Studies Department., College University of New York, New York, 200; Deborah Heath, “Fashion, anti-fashion, and heteroglossia in urban Senegal,” *American Ethnologist*, 19(1) 1992:19–33; Jonathan Friedman, “The political economy of elegance: an African cult of beauty,” in Jonathan Friedman (ed), *Consumption and Identity* (Chur: Harwood, 1994a), pp. 167–88; Hudita Nura Mustapha, “Sartorial Ecumenes: African Styles in a Social and Economic Context” in Els van der Plas and Marlous Willemsen (eds) *The Art of African Fashion* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press), pp. 13–48; Joanna Grabski, “Making fashion in the city: a case study of tailors and designers in downtown Dakar,” presented at symposium on “The Cultured Body: African Fashion and Body Arts,” University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 2002; Victoria Rovine, *Bogolan: Shaping Culture Through Cloth in Contemporary Mali* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Inst. Press, 2001); Doran Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, Fowler Mus. Cult. Hist. Textile Ser. 1998), No. 2; Leslie Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Jean and John Comaroff, “Of Revelation and Revolution: Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier,” Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), among others.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Rabine has attempted this in her study of Senegalese dress known as Camisole and Pagne. She traced the emergence of these dress styles at a particular moment of fashion’s re-emergence after the War through photographic documentation of dress styles between 1939 and 1948. See Leslie Rabine, “Fashionable Photography in mid twentieth-century Senegal,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol.14 No.3, 2010, pp, 305-330.

inquiry. I suspect that the lack of scholarly research on *asọ ebì* might have been occasioned by its perception as an unproblematic subject, unworthy of scholarly inquiry and lacking in theoretical stakes. This prior lack of academic interest in *asọ ebì* both necessitates and validates this study within the dress, fashion and clothing scholarship in Nigeria.

I argue that what we have been lacking so far in most analysis of *asọ ebì* and visual cultural practices in Nigeria is not their general meaning, but the specific ethnographic nuances and underlying economy of their dynamics. This thesis then has two goals. On the one hand, I seek to understand the emergence of *asọ ebì* in Lagos and its principal lines of evolution over decades. On the other hand, I attempt to comprehend the rising power (and role) of visual culture – and in fact, the central, unprecedented place photography might occupy – in the spread and practice of *asọ ebì*. This is because I discovered that in Lagos there were many popular fashion magazines that were springing up in their dozens on a monthly basis. When I flipped through these magazines they were mainly filled with images of women in *asọ ebì* uniforms. I became interested in understanding why these magazines are proliferating and whether they have any link with the intensification of *asọ ebì* culture or vice versa. It seems, in my thinking, that popular photographers have embraced digital technology and are playing a key role in the whole process. It becomes necessary for me to engage this project to ascertain the role of these photographers in the whole business of *asọ ebì*. Viewing these magazines again, I asked why the ‘traditionally’ dressed body chose to constitute itself into what Deborah Poole calls a “public image world.”<sup>4</sup>

Dress, cloth and fashion are difficult to detach from the practice of *asọ ebì*. This is because while *asọ ebì* may figure as ordinary clothes or dress in burial ceremonies, it could be understood, by the locals, as fashion in weddings, birthday parties or other events. It is important, therefore, to mention at this point that the use of fashion in this thesis is restricted to people’s choice of dress or clothing practices and the changes within. It does not refer to the all-encompassing meaning of fashion that goes beyond dress or clothing practices. It precludes other articles that derive from ‘fads’ and ‘styles,’ the method by which they are produced, and the meaning which they generate.

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<sup>4</sup> See Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

## History as selective critique

Both *asọ ebi* and photography, I understand, have set out along the path of late capitalist production, popular culture and mass visual culture. A dominant feature of Nigerian society is precisely the extraordinary attention it pays to social events where *asọ ebi* practice has been extended to the visual spheres in a manner that once lay beyond popular imagination. In this thesis, therefore, I seek to offer a conceptual and interrogatory history of *asọ ebi* and photography: a history that is not governed by a desire to marshal the unlimited contents of *asọ ebi* and photography but one that is informed by a desire to present a critical interpretation of the phenomena and their metamorphoses over time. While I refrain from providing a chronological history of photography in Nigeria, I dwell on the defining moments and structural modulations that have determined certain historical trajectories of photography. This is done in recognition of the fact that what we have is histories and ‘photographies’. For example, in Chapter 5, a history of photography deviates from a linear progression to encapsulate the momentous, episodic aspects of the photographic narrative and its intersection with the political economy of colonial and postcolonial Lagos. In this way history is presented as a selective critique rather than a comprehensive methodology that builds into dominant epistemologies and existing parameters of historical meanings.

## Why Lagos

George Simmel has suggested that the city has a significant role to play in the way we envision self, the way we act and the way we live, such that he views fashion as developing in the city “because it intensifies a multiplicity of social relations, increases the rate of social mobility and permits individuals from lower strata to become conscious of the styles and fashions of the upper class.”<sup>5</sup> The choice of Lagos city derives from a need to recognize the role of Lagos in fashioning postcolonial modernity in Nigeria. As an important city in the African continent with its large population<sup>6</sup> and its role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European missionary and colonization exploits in West Africa, Lagos requires a historical study with regard to certain aspects of its life. Fashion or dress style obviously reflects the changing phases of cultural and social development in any city. And it would not be inappropriate to

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<sup>5</sup> David Ashley and David Michael Orenstein, *Sociological Theory: Classical Statements* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990), p.314.

<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that in less than in about 2015 Lagos will become the third largest city in the world with a population of about 25 million.

subsume visual consumption under the logic of mundane everyday practice that is reflected in the fashion business in Lagos. Basing my research on the fashion of the city, therefore, entails a study of the African city as “modernity outside the reactive ‘alternative’ to the West.”<sup>7</sup> This entails a recognition of Lagos as a modernity that emerged out of the postcolonial histories and global phenomena, but which also engaged different kinds of understanding of wealth, subjectivity, and the social sphere so taken for granted when approaching modernity and globalization.<sup>8</sup> Therefore in trying “to understand and describe how an African metropolis works,”<sup>9</sup> one need not “perpetuate an image of the city which is essentially Western”<sup>10</sup> especially when matters of culture distinctly delineate these two opposites. This distinction however sharply contrasts with Western paradigm of the rise of the city especially if seen in the light of the city’s progression from the rural to the urban.<sup>11</sup>

Photographers have attempted to see “the elements that make up the city in new and revealing relationships,” especially through the “perpetual and infinite collage of imagery and a repository of fresh signification.”<sup>12</sup> The province of most urban photographers is most often founded on the interconnectedness between urban spaces and their subjects and how everyday complexities have been resolved. In Lagos, for example, photographers have set out to represent their own visions of the city. Their experiences of the city are also often influenced by other means through which they encounter it - for example, how individuals navigate the social environment through ubiquitous celebrations and parties and how the city is narrated in Nollywood videos.

The role of Lagos as the center of commerce in Nigeria has attracted a peculiarly fashion-conscious populace from the hinterlands of Nigeria and other parts of the West African sub-region, at least since the nineteenth century. No doubt, the immigrants in their endless to and fro itineraries have engaged in the dissemination of popular dress styles from Lagos across the whole country and the sub-region. This has defined an area of study for dress history and

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<sup>7</sup> Okwui Enwezor et al. *Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* Documenta II Platform 4, (Munich, Senefelderstrasse, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p.20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>9</sup> Rem Koolhaas, “Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos” in Okwui Enwezor et al, *Under Siege*, p.175.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.175.

<sup>11</sup> A transition from a rural to an urban community in the mill towns of England continued into the first half of the nineteenth century. It was initially a gradual influx of people moving from the country into towns, becoming more rapid from the 1830s onwards. The urban areas expanded to accommodate the increased population, swallowing up large areas of the countryside. See Juliet Ash and Lee Wright, (eds.), *Components of Dress* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988), p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.p.155.

urban cultural forms. The need to understand the meanings of commodity culture in relation to *asọ ebì* might suggest that Lagos, as the greatest commercial center in the West African sub-region has produced demographic entities that engage in what Shaun Moores described as “the active construction of everyday cultures through consumption or appropriation of commodities.”<sup>13</sup> One of the commodities appropriated in the context of this study is the inestimable textile material that can be found in Balogun Textile market, one of the biggest textile markets in the West African sub-region and located in the heart of Lagos.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Yoruba-speakers are the largest constituency amongst all other population groups in Lagos makes Lagos a necessary city to engage this research, since *asọ ebì* is believed to originate from the Yoruba.

### **On Sources and Methods**

The major scope of this thesis lies in Nigeria with special reference to Lagos. The duration spans the postcolonial period, 1960-2010. Most of the data was collected in Lagos and a small proportion in the Lagos environs. Limitations on this research were posed by the relative paucity of literature (both scholarly and non-scholarly) on the subject of *asọ ebì*. These are highly exiguous. Accessing archival data was not without a major hindrance too. For example, on getting to the National Archives Ibadan in 2009, it became evident that, according to Henk Schulte Nordholt, “while colonial archives provide the historian with truckloads of data on administrative matters and ‘naked’ statistics, they offer less information on how the colony looked *and dressed*.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Nordholt, who worked on clothing in Indonesia, maintained that because of such an archival lacuna in the area of clothing history, he had to turn to other sources to gain an understanding of this subject. In other words, while Nordholt and his colleagues, for the want of archival data, turned to “travel accounts, old and new,”<sup>16</sup> I turned to the few private diaries of certain wealthy Lagos residents during the colonial era which I was fortunate enough to stumble upon when I visited the Nigerian National Archives in 2010. Through these diaries, I accessed information on *asọ ebì* although it was scanty. Each of these sources (as postulated in Nordholt’s model too) belongs to a specific genre and requires a contextualized reading.

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<sup>13</sup> Shaun Moore, *Interpreting Audiences: the Ethnography of Media Consumption* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), p.129.

<sup>14</sup> The largest textile market in West Africa is Kanti Kwari market in Kano, located in the northern part of Nigeria, Balogun is adjudged one of the largest. See Press Release, “The Kano Textile Market Inferno: One Fire Too Many,” National Association of Nigerian Traders, <http://www.nants.org/PressReleases.php?id=77>

<sup>15</sup> Henk Schulte Nordholt, (ed), *Outward Appearance: dressing state and society in Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997), p.5, (My italics).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.5.

Reading contextually, for me, therefore, became a task of extracting *asọ ebi* from a series of conversations and a concatenation of remarks. Clothing practices seem to be a personal thing, and lacked the traits needed to launch them into official archives. It is like studying the biography of individual players to understand the nature of their dynamics. To further prove the efficacy of this assumption methodologically, Nicola Thomas while undertaking similar studies in the historical subject of dress had only a few options open to her, namely to explore clothing practices in the life of Mary Curzon. She confessed to the virtual non-existence of any archival information outside the diaries and letters written by Mary to her family.<sup>17</sup> She, therefore, accessed the various ways in which Curzon presented her body and the way she described her sartorial self, albeit for a specific audience. Thomas remarks that the letters offered an opportunity to track the production and consumption practices, the emotions of choosing and buying them, of trying on garments, and of being disappointed, elated or excited by them. Again, Thomas looked at newspaper articles and cartoons from where she gained insight into other people's perception of Mary Curzon's performative practices.<sup>18</sup> Photographs also offered Thomas an alternative way of looking at clothes.

Similarly, Helen Callaway, in her study of dress as a form of British imperial authority largely relied on the use of prescriptive texts, advice manuals, novels, images, letters and memoirs to chart colonial clothing practices. Callaway was also apt to observe that working through the whims and caprices of historical archives is undoubtedly challenging, and even where she (Callaway) attempted to unearth the 'lived garment', and chart the interlinked biography of cloth and subject, unfamiliar stories of the colonial encounter emerged. It was clear to me that the above nuanced methodologies adopted by Thomas and others could become instrumental to my understanding of *asọ ebi* historically, and its intersections with visual cultural practices in Nigeria.

In other words, the primary site of information for this research eventually resided in the extensive interviews around Lagos, archival and contemporary newspaper sources and the historical texts that I managed to access in the Nigerian National Library and public online

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<sup>17</sup> Nicola J. Thomas, "Embodying imperial spectacle: dressing Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1899—1905," *Cultural Geographies* 2007, 14: 369.

<sup>18</sup> Helen Callaway, "Dressing for dinner in the bush: rituals of self-definition and British imperial authority," in Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher, *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts* (Oxford: Berg, 1993); pp.232–47.

forums on the internet. Most importantly, engaging in what anthropologists call ‘participant observation’ helped to distil fresh and contemporary information regarding the dynamics of *asọ ebi* practice.

### Literature review

By the early twentieth century *asọ ebi* had become popular as a ‘family uniform’ in Lagos. Since then its meaning continues to transmogrify with the passing years. It extended to a broader social arena to include remote relations. In these relations, friends and strangers wore uniformed fabric to chart solidarity in weddings, birthday parties, christenings, funerals, political rallies, among other occasions. One salient point that resonates across *asọ ebi*’s genealogies is the strong insignia of uniformity. As a uniform, *asọ ebi* has survived the vagaries of economic, cultural and social upheavals that came with what Hudita Mustafa calls the “postcolonial crisis.”<sup>19</sup> The potent force enshrined in this uniformed fabric of *asọ ebi* draws attention to Jennifer Craik’s observation that “uniforms shape who we are and how we perform our identities.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed Craik undertakes an ambitious project to prove that “uniforms prescribe a range of responses: identities are placed, values appraised, moods appreciated and attitudes anticipated.”<sup>21</sup> In the end Craik succeeds in exposing how uniforms are “strategically used to play the games of social life by allowing people to conform to groups they are part of (school friends, relatives, religious groups, ethnic groups, occupational categories and so on).”<sup>22</sup> These groups constitute the major area of my investigation in urban Lagos. As I investigate the tensions surrounding the activities of these groups as they deploy *asọ ebi* uniforms, I echo Craik’s question: “do people wear uniforms or do uniforms wear people?”<sup>23</sup> The answer rests in my continuous search, throughout this thesis, for the internal mechanisms and techniques of the human body in the “actualization of persona and habitus”<sup>24</sup> through *asọ ebi*.

Gilles Lipovetsky’s work, *The Empire of Fashion*, has unveiled some of the dominant influences that Western ideas of fashion have had on our local notions of clothing. In this

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<sup>19</sup> Mustafa, Hudita Nura. “Sartorial ecumenes: African styles in a social and economic context,” in van der Plas E, Willemsen M, (eds.), *The Art of African Fashion* (Eritrea, The Netherlands: Prins Klaus Fund, the Netherlands. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed, From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.5

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.7

book, fashion is seen as a vital means of cultural expression that is fraught with political valence. In other words, fashion for Lipovetsky is a “rising power” in contemporary society circumscribing not just clothing but all aspects of socio-cultural life, from television shows to sexual practices to scholarly interests. He defines "fashion" more broadly as "a sociohistorical reality characteristic of the West and of modernity itself" that opposes the power of tradition and endorses the obsession for novelty and change.<sup>25</sup> However, it is noteworthy that Lipovetsky while invoking the notion of fashion talks mostly about dress. He connects the identification of fashion with dress to the historical fact that up until recently, the fashion process was most obviously embodied in the clothing people wore. The book demonstrates the logic of inconstancy in fashion and how fashion has shifted from an embellishment of modern collective life to a force reshaping society itself in its own image. Framing his words in a rather fashionable way, Lipovetsky notes, "Fashion is in the driver's seat."<sup>26</sup>

It seems that from Lipovetsky's work one can infer that fashion has indeed been an Empire in itself, certainly because it upholds western notions of the individual. My work on *asọ ebì* perhaps charts a more divergent perspective regarding fashion, this time not from the notion of the individual but in terms of group commonality. Lipovetsky's work attempts a socio-political and/or historical analysis of cloth. However, it seems that even in its task to resolve the structural/agency problems that inhere in a more expansive, geo-cultural, fashion discourse, the work adopts an ethnocentric approach to social process. I think his history of fashion ultimately treats clothing as a superficial phenomenon.

While Western fashion, as argued by Lipovetsky, is structured by evanescence and aesthetic fantasy, I view *asọ ebì* fashion, in the Nigerian context, as that which is informed by a sense of enduring aspiration and aesthetic permanence. My conviction here appears to resonate with Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller's book, *Clothing as Material Culture*. Küchler and Miller's anthology marks a rupture in one major trend and constraint in textile and clothing scholarship, which in fact appears in Lipovetsky's work. Küchler and Miller's book demonstrates that clothing is intimately linked to the production and reproduction of culture –

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<sup>25</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.6.

and not as a “superficial” phenomenon, but rather something that weaves material culture into a deeper human engagement. My work on *asọ ebì* attempts to advance this logic.

Kaja Silverman rightly observes that fashion “makes the human body culturally visible,”<sup>27</sup> while Eugenie Lemoine-Lucciono remarks that “clothing draws the body so that it can be culturally seen and articulates it as a meaningful form.”<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Wilson and Amy de Haye note that “clothes, in all, are enormously meaningful and are entwined with our lives.”<sup>29</sup> Because it both borders on the body and confronts others outwardly, dress could be said to function in a dual capacity, perhaps in line with Terence Turner’s coinage in the notion of the body being “a social skin.”<sup>30</sup> This formulation invites us to explore the individual and social identities that the dressed body creates.<sup>31</sup> It is my belief that these individual and collective identities that the dressed body enables may actually reside in *asọ ebì* because of the manner in which it aspires towards a collectivity. The contingent dynamic that inheres in these individual and collective experiences of dress – in the case of *asọ ebì* – may sometimes manifest as “considerable ambiguity, ambivalence, and, therefore, uncertainty and debate over dress.”<sup>32</sup> Hansen rightly notes that dress readily becomes a flash point of conflicting values, fuelling contests in historical encounters, in interactions across class, between genders and generations, and in recent global cultural and economic exchanges.<sup>33</sup> Hansen’s observation seems suggestive if one links it to the interstitial engagement of *asọ ebì* and the evolving politics of its practice: ranging from its deployment in the anti-colonial struggle in Nigeria by women in the 1940s, its dilemmas in the fluctuating textile economy and the ensuing rhetorics of its group solidarity. These are some of the issues that I engage with in this thesis.

Juliet Ash and Lee Wright note that “to a large extent the dissemination of information which reaches the consumer about fashion and what is fashionable is achieved through visual

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<sup>27</sup> Kaja Silverman, “Fragments of a fashionable Discourse,” in Tanio Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1986), p.147.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Elisabeth Wilson and Amy de Haye, *Defining Dress as Objects, meaning and Identity* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999), p.2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>30</sup> Terence Turner, “The social skin,” in C.B. Burroughs, J. Ehrenreich, (eds.), *Reading the Social Body* (Iowa City: University Iowa Press, 1993 [1980]), pp. 15–39.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen, “Fashioning Zambian Moments,” in *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol.8, 2003, p.301.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.372.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

images.”<sup>34</sup> They further note that how a garment appears in a fashion feature in a magazine can lead to an increase in sales.<sup>35</sup> Since the unique case of Lagos may not involve the Western notions of ‘sale’ as these dresses are handmade, it could lead instead to an increase in the demands for such designs by both tailors and their clients. Similarly, Wilson observes that “since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, images of desire are constantly in circulation; increasingly it has been the image as well as artefact that the individual has purchased in these fashion magazines....” Fashion, according to Wilson, is “a magical system and what we see as we leaf through glossy magazines is ‘the look.’”<sup>36</sup> According to her, originally the purpose of women’s magazines was informational, but today what we engage in is no longer only the relatively simple process of direct imitation but the less conscious one of identification.<sup>37</sup>

The above observation implies that fashion consumption may have gone beyond mere emulation to self-identification. Again Wilson writes that “fashion resembles photography and that both are liminal forms on the threshold between art and non-art. Both are poised ambiguously between present and past: photography congeals the essence of the now, while fashion freezes the moment in an eternal gesture of the-only-right-way-to-be.”<sup>38</sup> It is necessary to explore this relationship especially in this era of explosion in media technology. In fact, given the nature of the digital photographic medium, one can assume that the ubiquity of the image in some Lagos fashion magazines may present a similar view to Wilson’s freezing of the moment. What Wilson calls a glossy magazine is what Lagosians call a ‘fashion magazine.’ And, although I do not wish to import her text wholesale into the Lagos scenario, I decipher a striking analogy to what I saw in Lagos and which provoked my interest in this research. Again, in studying *asọ ebì* I recognize another unique attribute of Nigerian society which resides in the advent of a society where social gatherings have been restructured by the double binds of repulsion and attraction of *asọ ebì* culture and where the logic of *asọ ebì* is strongly embedded in the rhetorical professions of love and friendship.

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<sup>34</sup> Juliet Ash and Lee Wright, “Manufacturing Images,” in Juliet Ash and Lee Wright (eds), *Components of Dress* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988), p.107.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Christopher Breward, *The Cult of Fashion: A New history of fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University press 1995), p.197.

<sup>37</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York, Henry Holt and Company 1998), p. 194.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams, Fashion and Modernity* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1999), p.vii.

Some studies have explored the place of exchange and appropriation in specific colonial contexts and the impact of such trans-cultural practices on colonial subjectivities.<sup>39</sup> Through such studies it is possible to understand first of all, the varying ways in which the maintenance of moral standards was encapsulated in the clothing practices of colonial subjects; second, the place of dress in colonial systems of power and control; third, the importance of prophylactic clothing in protecting the colonial body; and fourth the symbolism of clothing among nationalist movements.<sup>40</sup> However, what most of this literature does not do is try to fathom the local agency around uniformed dressing outside the dominating colonial discourse of official uniforms.<sup>41</sup> While I intend to build on the existing literature and go beyond it, it is important to recognize that central to some of the above is the debate that focuses on the use of clothing in the demonstrations of colonial power. For example, Helen Callaway explores the symbolism of colonial modes of dress as a means of displaying such colonial authority.

However, while Callaway draws the daily expressions of imperial domination that was exercised by individuals through the process of ‘dressing for dinner,’<sup>42</sup> she does not specify the juncture at which local agency manifested as a form of opposition or denunciation of the colonial sartorial style. I have set out to investigate this dialogue between the subject and the master in colonial Lagos and in doing so will offer a departure from the prevailing literature

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<sup>39</sup> Our understanding of such analyses – to be specific on my area of study which is clothing practices – can be enriched through studies on the global textile trade, See for example, cf. R. Crill, (ed.), *Textiles from India: the global trade* (Oxford, Seagull Books, 2006); M. Berg, “Asian luxuries and the making of the European consumer revolution,” in M. Berg and E. Eger, (eds), *Luxury in the eighteenth century: debates, desires and delectable goods* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 228–44; Christopher Steiner, “Another image of Africa: Towards an Ethnohistory of European Clothes Marketed in Africa, 1873–1960,” *Ethnohistory*, Vol.32, No.2 (Spring, 1985); Marion Johnson, “Cotton imperialism in West Africa,” *African Affairs*, 1974, Vol.73, No.291, pp178–87; Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen “Globalization and De-Industrialization: South-South Neo-Liberalism and the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry,” *The Global South*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2008), pp. 159–170, Published by Indiana University Press.

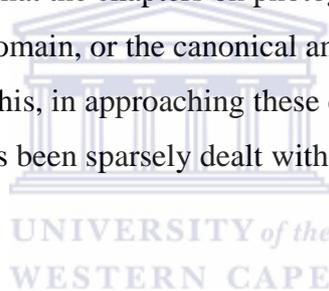
<sup>40</sup> The most relevant of these, but not limited to, include Jean and John Comaroff, “Of Revelation and Revolution: Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier,” Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Phyllis Martin, “Contesting Clothing in Colonial Brazzaville,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1994), p. 410; Emma. Tarlo, *Clothing matters: dress and identity in India* (London, Hurst and Company, 1996); B.S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 106–62; Dane Kennedy, “The perils of the midday sun: climatic anxieties in the colonial tropics,” in John M. Mackenzie, (ed.), *Imperialism and the natural world* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 118–40; N. Bhatia, “Fashioning women in colonial India,” *Fashion theory* 7 (2003), pp. 327–44; Leslie W. Rabine, “Not a mere ornament: tradition, modernity, and colonialism in Kenyan and Western clothing,” *Fashion Theory* Vol.1 No. 2, (1997), pp. 145–68; Carol Tulloch, “Out of many, one people: the relativity of dress, race and ethnicity to Jamaica, 1880–1907,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 2 No.4 (1998), pp. 359–82.

<sup>41</sup> Few of the only literature that dealt with uniforms did so within the ambits of a colonial official dress and Boys Scout Movement, see for example, Parsons, Timothy, “The Consequences of Uniformity: The Struggle for the Boy Scout Uniform in Colonial Kenya,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol.40, No. 2, Winter 2006, pp. 361–383.

<sup>42</sup> Helen Callaway, “Dressing for dinner in the bush: rituals of self-definition and British imperial authority,” in Barnes and Eicher, (eds), *Dress and gender*, pp. 232–47.

on clothing practices during the colonial period in Africa, which so far does not give much voice to the locals.

Hudita Nura Mustafa advances the theory of *sartorial ecumene* in her study of the fashion industry in Senegal. By *sartorial ecumene* she means the “incorporation of objects and images of global origins into practices and circulations involving dress and bodily adornment.”<sup>43</sup> She observes that “new media such as television and photography intensify the circulation of fashion.”<sup>44</sup> Mustafa’s study in Senegal offers a clue as to how one can track the equivalence of ‘sartorial ecumene’ in the city of Lagos. It is important to state that this study is not about a holistic history and practice of photography in Lagos, but it addresses a specific photographic genre which I call ‘popular photography’ in urban Lagos. It is within this genre that the group of photographers believed to be connected with the ‘fashion magazines’ are located. They also play an important role in the social events where *asọ ebi* is worn. However, it is again noteworthy that the chapters on photography do not broaden into the wider study of the professional domain, or the canonical and institutional borders of photography as art. Having said this, in approaching these chapters, the history of photography in Nigeria which has been sparsely dealt with in literature<sup>45</sup> is to some extent critically examined.



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<sup>43</sup> Huditan Nura Mustafa, “Sartorial Ecumene: African Styles in a Social and Economic Context,” in *The Art of African Fashion* (The Netherlands: Prince Claus Fund, African World Press 1998), p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Other literature which addressed similar intersection of fashion and visual culture include Joanna Grabski whose study titled, “Making fashion in the city: a case study of tailors and designers in Dakar, Senegal,” tracked the interface between fashion production and the visual experience associated with urban life in Dakar, Senegal. Grabski’s analysis underscores the imbrications of fashion in Dakar and the city’s conceptual and visual landscape, the street and the mass media, and finally dialogues within and beyond Africa. She concludes that not only do fashion makers select visual and conceptual elements from the urban ocular field rather by creating new propositions for visual consumption, fashion makers also constitute visual experience in Dakar; See Joanna Grabski, “Making fashion in the city: a case study of tailors and designers in downtown Dakar,” *Fashion Theory*, 13, No.2 June 2009, pp.215-228; Hudita Nura Mustapha, “Ruins and Spectacles: Fashion and City Life in Contemporary Senegal.” *NKA* 15 (Fall/Winter), 2001b, pp. 47-53; Suzanne Scheld, “Youth Cosmopolitanism: Clothing, the City and Globalization in Dakar, Senegal” in *City and Society* 19(2): 232-52; Karin Barber’s *A Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p.244; LaRay Denzer, ‘Fashion and Fluctuating Fortunes: The Nigerian Garment Industry under Structural Adjustment’, in Jane I Guyer, LaRay Denzer and Adigun Agbaje (eds), *Money Struggles and City Life: Devaluation in Ibadan and Other Urban Centres in Southern Nigeria, 1986-1996* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), pp. 93-114, p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> Few studies that have touched on photography’s history in Nigeria include, Christaud Geary, *In and out of focus: images from central Africa, 1885-1960* (Washington: National Museum of African Art and Smithsonian Institution, 2002); David Killingray and Andrew Roberts, “An outline history of photography in Africa to ca. 1940,” *History of Africa*, Vol. 16 (1989); Macmillan, Allister (ed), *The red book of West Africa: historical and descriptive, commercial and industrial facts, figures, and resources* (London: W.H. and L. Collingridge, 1920); Tam Fiofori, “History, Culture and Photography in Nigeria,” A paper presented at the Workshop: *On Independence and the Ambivalence of Promise* organized by the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos on Tuesday, February 16<sup>th</sup> 2010; Barthosa Nkurumeh, “Photography in the Nigerian Society,” Unpublished BA thesis, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 1987; Olu Oguibe, “Photography and the Substance of the Image,” in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 1998); John Amifor, “Seeing sense: new Nigerian photographers and new accents, 1980-2000,” in Ola Oloidi, (ed.) *Modern Nigerian art in historical perspective* (Abuja: Art Historical Association of Nigeria, 2004); Erica

Jean Allman, in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, gathers together chapters touching on power and politics of dress in a fast changing socio-political African environment. The work draws accounts from diverse disciplinary boundaries to shape a history of fashion in Africa. The book reveals a rather compelling survey of the mechanism of cultural assimilation through Western dress during the colonial and postcolonial periods. While the book opens up avenues for further analysis into the historical as well as contemporary manifestations of such assimilations, it provides little account of the processes through which Africans engaged the preponderant and rather global hegemonic trade around textile production and distribution. One would have expected the book to trace the role of the West or other economic super-powers in the economic life of these textiles in Africa and how local manufacturing agencies have been supplanted in the process. I have devoted time to track these changes in the textile economy between China and Nigeria and the impact they had on *asọ ebi* practice. Central to certain aspects of my investigation is the political and economic role of Africa's agency in negotiating industrial and cultural exchanges.

Karl Marx was critical of the styles of clothing of his day. Similarly, Thorstein Veblen saw extravagant clothes as part of the ways in which those who could afford to wear them demonstrated that they did not need to labour, and therefore belong to a particular class.<sup>46</sup> Robert Ross underscores how some existing sartorial regimes were historically marked by class struggle,<sup>47</sup> while Pierre Bourdieu highlights the ways in which particular societies have used clothing in the creation and the marking of social differentiation. This is, of course, a process which is in fact universal, and was never contested, although Mary Douglas notes that consumption was not necessarily competitive but could also be used to allow inclusion. It is possible to see such inclusions in the manner in which *asọ ebi* is deployed by the political class through the provision of free *asọ ebi* to their supporters. While this is not limited to the political class, my study unveils the social contest over uniforms, and shows how it has been used to ensure inclusion, exclusion and social differentiation among different segments of Lagos society.

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Nimis, Nigeria: The photographic Giant, on [www.africultures.com/anglais/articles\\_anglais/39nimis.htm](http://www.africultures.com/anglais/articles_anglais/39nimis.htm) visited on 20th September 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The theory of the Leisure Class* (London and New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956).

<sup>47</sup> Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 8.

Considering Joanne Entwistle's remark that dress "operates at the interface between the individual and the social world...the private and the public"<sup>48</sup> it is possible to explain the assorted manifestations of *asọ ebi* in terms of this interface between the individual and social world: how, for instance, sartorial individualism is subsumed under the rhetoric of social collectivism. Entwistle's approach attempts to merge a theoretical framework existing between the discursive aspects of dress and relations of power surrounding the dressed body. The approach also joins the analytical schemes between the embodied experience of dress and socializing experience of the dressed body. This approach is attractive as it reconciles the socially discursive world which regulates the dressed body, with the lived embodied experience of the dressed body which selects, feels and wears clothing.<sup>49</sup>

Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher maintain that students of dress need to examine themes about the body, beauty, clothing and fashion. They note that dress has been used to transform bodily appearance through the addition of some, or alteration of, existing materials. While Barnes and Eicher recognize the peculiar attribute of dress as protective, decorative and communicative of the wearer's position in society, their work highlights the usefulness of an inclusion of all kinds of body supplement and modifications that use a variety of materials and actions to create an appearance.<sup>50</sup> What Barnes and Eicher's work suggests is the need for a curious attentiveness as to how dress can invoke performativity in everyday encounters. It is worth reflecting whether *asọ ebi* could be explained in terms of performing the self. In *asọ ebi* this is an idiosyncrasy that is exemplified in what is known as 'posing well.' Furthermore, as Barnes and Eicher observe, dress is a potent index of identity, not only as a sign which links a group together, but also as a way for individuals within a group to distinguish themselves. In other words, dress becomes a way of constituting the 'social position of a person in society'<sup>51</sup> and thus can be used as a mechanism whereby inclusion and exclusion can be advanced. In order to adequately explore the instability, the constructedness and internal heterogeneity of identity categories as already pointed out by Barnes and Eicher, I insert *asọ ebi* – for the sake of an avoidance of epistemological ambiguity – into the city of

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<sup>48</sup> Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 6-7.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> See Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher, *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts* (Oxford: Berg, 1993); Joanne Eicher, *Dress and Ethnicity: Change across Space and Time* (Oxford: Washington D.C.: Berg, 1995).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.16; see also Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* (New York, London and Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1965).

Lagos not as a form of identity but as a phenomenon that defies any attempt to naturalize any group's practice as normative.

Doris Essah remarks that one is conscious of how one presents oneself and one has some control over the impressions that others receive. Other peoples' reactions toward a person's presentation of self are important for a person's sense of worth.<sup>52</sup> Essah's work in Ghana elaborately maps the political genealogies of fashion in nationalist discourse and shows the meanings of hairdressing in the everyday life of Ghanaians. This work foregrounds the nature of the everyday in Africa and suggests that the everyday is performative. This model provides a clue to my approach towards the understanding of similar everyday practice in Nigeria through *asọ ebi*. It is possible to view *asọ ebi* as performative, perhaps in the manner that Erving Goffman argues that a person's experience is related to that of an actor on a stage.<sup>53</sup>

In this thesis, I attempt to address the aesthetics and politics of dress through *asọ ebi*. Hildi Hendrickson identifies the discourse of dress as that which bears on one quintessential object sign: the human body. For Hendrickson, the body is a pervasive object dictating the debate around individual motives and group identities both of which are implicated in the "changing political, social and cultural world."<sup>54</sup> Building on Hendrickson's ideas, Margaret Lock believes that clothing the body involves a "bodily practice that mediates a personal realization of social values."<sup>55</sup> From Lock's and Hendrickson's views it means that clothing is subjective as well as socio-culturally determined and often involves a projection of a befitting persona.<sup>56</sup> However, Judith Perani and Norma Wolf observe that in many African contexts the projection of a befitting persona might be tied to group membership. They go further to note that "pride of family, political affiliation, social club association and even friendship can be demonstrated through wearing identical dress to show group affiliation (*asọ ebi*)."<sup>57</sup> Perani and Wolf refer specifically to Nigeria when they mention *asọ ebi*. The fact

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<sup>52</sup> Doris Essah, "Fashioning the nation: Hairdressing, professionalism, and the performance of gender in Ghana, 1900-2006," A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (History) in The University of Michigan 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & K Paul, 1966).

<sup>54</sup> Hildi Hendrickson, (ed.), *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>55</sup> Margaret Lock, "Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 22, 1993, pp.133-55, p.133.

<sup>56</sup> G.D. Berreman, *Behind Many Masks: Ethnography and Impression Management in a Himalayan Village* (Ithaca New York: Society for Applied Anthropology, 1962).

<sup>57</sup> Judith Perani and Norma Wolf, *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa full details required – place, publisher and date*

that Perani and Wolf mention *asọ ebì* in brief in their book underscores the urgency of my research. Most literature on dress in Nigeria does not mention *asọ ebì*. The few that do so include it in the manner of Perani and Wolf, either in passing or as part of a minor remark in the course of their major writings.

The few instances where one encounters *asọ ebì* are typically in informal discussions among Nigerians or other groups; public online forums in the internet; in the newspapers, and mainly among friends preparing for one form of social event or the other. These various manifestations accentuate the colloquial bearing *asọ ebì* practice has assumed in recent times and which, no doubt, makes it an important research area begging for attention. Apart from the above, *asọ ebì* has generated a significant amount of controversy in everyday debate among Nigerians at home and in the diaspora such that there is a common association of *asọ ebì* with Nigerian ‘culture’ and ‘tradition.’ All these manifestations underscore the urgency of this project in the dress and fashion scholarship in Nigeria and Africa.

Much literature on photography has shown the uses of photography in the everyday life of Nigerians and Africans.<sup>58</sup> I exemplify this dynamic further in this thesis by mapping the

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<sup>58</sup> Stephen Sprague, “How I See the Yoruba See Themselves.” *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* Vol. 5 No.1, 1978, pp. 9-28; Charles D. Gore “Commemoration, memory and ownership: Some social contexts of contemporary photography in Benin City, Nigeria,” *Visual Anthropology: Published in cooperation with the Commission on Visual Anthropology* Vol. 14, Issue 3, 2001, pp. 321 – 342; Flora S. Kaplan, “Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recovering Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin” *History in Africa*, Vol. 18 (1991), pp. 205-237; Flora S. Kaplan, “Some Uses of Photographs in Recovering Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria.,” *Visual Anthropology* Vol. 3, Nos 2/3, 1990, pp.317-41; Cory Kratz, *The Ones That Are Wanted: Communication and the Politics of Representation in a Photographic Exhibition* (California: University of California Press, 2001); Paul Landau’s book, *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* depicts how colonialism and post-colonialism shaped Africa visually. It also shows how indigenous artists and audiences appropriated imported pictures and genres for their own ends. The book provides a complex account of the relationships involved in the visual representation (of Africans or by Africans) during colonial and post-colonial Africa. See Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspin, (eds). *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Enwezor’s book, Okwui Enwezor, *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity: Contemporary African Photography from the Walther Collection* (London: Steidl, 2010); Okwui Enwezor’s book, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* presents an intersection of African aesthetics with Western influences in the visual cultural genre. The rise of photography in the decades of World War II and pre-independence struggles in Africa was a testament to Africans’ visual agency in spite of war and colonization. The book addresses African photography as a system of flux consistent with globalization, modernity and emerging independent and post-independent national identity. Africans’ quest for creative imagination is exemplified in their photographic representations of history, urban encounters, economics, social and cultural changes that came with the times. See Okwui Enwezor, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (London: Steidl, 2008); Gerald Matt, *Flash Afrique! Photography from West Africa* (London: Steidl, 2008); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1996); Okwui Enwezor and Alex Van Gelder, *Life & Afterlife in Benin* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005); Frank Vanhaecke, *A Useful Dream: African Photography 1960-2010* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2010); Tosha Gran, *Darkroom: Photography and New Media in South Africa, 1950 to the Present* (Richmond Virginia: Virginia Museum of

relationship between photography and fashion. For example, both are socially constituted categories: *asọ ebì*'s continual negotiation of elegance and beauty is a practice that is reproduced in the performativity enacted during the photographic poses of *asọ ebì* group. *Asọ ebì* photographs in fashion magazines, as well as acts of group photographing during important social events, emerge as contingent conditions that attend photography as a social practice; they also unveil a unique interplay of the struggle between personal beauty and public approbation. Since, in the context of *asọ ebì*, photography stands at the problematic edge of group glamour and personal beauty, photographing *asọ ebì* groups marks the point where uniqueness has to be defended against the commonplace, the 'beautiful' against the 'ugly'. To achieve this, when one's *asọ ebì* image appears in the magazines, photography becomes a means of validation, consolidation and consummation of unique dress styles.

Furthermore, photography's reproducibility is also a practice that is aligned with the tendency to reproduce *asọ ebì* images in the fashion magazines. This thesis is, therefore, geared towards a (re)consideration of photography's wider dissemination in the print media such as the magazine. It is based on the assumption that through photography and soft sell fashion magazines in Nigeria, sartorial workmanship commercializes glamour through dress. Lagos has been used to test the 'nature' of the mediations between these magazines, city dwellers, their tailors and the dress styles. Here I argue that the fashion magazine is an extension of photographs which have rather become democratized through circulation and copy and that the *asọ ebì* culture may have intensified through this means.

This attitude has shown how photography is interwoven with everyday life and emphasizes the need to explore what Jennifer Bajorek calls "different photographic corpuses."<sup>59</sup> In exploring different photographic corpuses, fashion magazines become a way of understanding the role of photography in the commodification of an urban artisanal economy and visual culture. This allows me to navigate away from the studio discourse in African

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Fine Arts, 2009). Erin Haney, for example, has shown how, in nineteenth-century Ghana, portraits constituted part of the inaugural ceremonial spectacles in political supremacy rites and other larger public performances. Haney's study reveals how the photograph – in its earliest manifestation in Ghana – was inscribed into the everyday lives of Ghanaians as an accustomed objects with complex meanings across a range of media, see Erin Haney, "Film, Charcoal, Time: Contemporaneities in Gold Coast Photographs," in *History of Photography*, Vol.34, Issue 2, 2010, pp.119-133; See also Erin Haney, *Photography and Africa* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010); Eugene C. Burt, "Mural Painting in Western Kenya," *African Arts*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (May, 1983), pp. 60-63, p.62.

<sup>59</sup> Jennifer Bajorek "Photography and National Memory: Senegal about 1960," in *History of Photography* Vol. 34, No.2 May, 2010, p.159.

photography, and move into street photography. In doing this I suggest that while the studio shot controlled the image, rendering the human figure almost anonymous, *aso ebi* photos shot in social gatherings launch the human figure into visual renown through the ubiquitous magazines. The subjectivity and gaze of the photographer are supplanted by what I call ‘group curating’ during popular photographing in Lagos social events.

### **Thesis Structure**

This thesis is divided into two parts: part one deals with dress in relation to the socio-political economy of Lagos while part two deals with dress in relation to the visual economy of Lagos. In part one, I deploy *aso ebi* in exploring clothing practices as it is encapsulated within the domains of power, economics, colonial relations, politics, and history. In doing this, I probe ways in which modifications of the body through *aso ebi* clothing have been used both to constitute and to challenge colonialism and notions of solidarity, oneness and friendship in Nigeria. This part foregrounds the power of clothing, the power of fashion as an incisive political language capable of unifying, differentiating, challenging, contesting, and dominating. Part two develops a link between visual culture and dress by exploring ways in which photography intersects with sartorial practices. The type of photography addressed in this section encapsulates popular photography as it is used in the genre that features in the magazines and in digital medium. In this section *aso ebi* is seen as building a circuit with various photographic formats which in effect aid its (*aso ebi*'s) intensification in the urban centres. The understanding of professional photographic practices in the postcolonial world such as that of Lagos does not preclude vernacular genres such as popular photographers who take photographs at weddings and other social gatherings. I argue that these photographers qualify as ‘professional’ photographers in their own capacities.

### **Chapters and theoretical formulations**

In the first chapter, while attempting a historicization of *aso ebi*, I have merged the socio-political economy of colonial Lagos with sartorial politics of the same period. In the chapter there is an apt articulation of the struggle that existed between members of Lagos society in terms of dress and the meanings it embodied during the colonial era. In approaching the critical intellectual debates around colonialism in this chapter, dress is used to invoke the psychology of resistance that eludes some literature on colonialism. If the role of dress in shaping decolonization process in Lagos is made clear here what is more pronounced is the

role of *aso ebi* in this decolonization process. The core of this chapter is its recognition, highlighting, and historicizing of *aso ebi* dress culture which up till now is still very much under-researched.

In Chapter 2 entitled, “*Aso ebi*: cheaper clothes in a fluctuating economy, 1960-1990,” there is an examination of the dynamics of *aso ebi* through textile production, patronage, consumption and their social significance in the city of Lagos. This chapter recognizes the inevitable impact of late global capitalism on *aso ebi* fashions. In recognition of the fact that new forms of mercantile networks have reinvented a web of histories and styles in most African cities,<sup>60</sup> this chapter investigates Lagos as a city where the discourse of ‘fake’ and ‘original’ is entangled in the transactions of Chinese and Nigerian textile economies. The devastating or gainful effects of late global capitalism, the chapter argues, have probably informed the nature of the new entrants into *aso ebi* culture. These new entrants and the textiles they adopt for *aso ebi* may have been cheapened by the impact of these mercantile networks. Interviews were widely conducted across a wide range of areas including traders of textile materials at the popular Oshodi and Balogun Textile Markets in Lagos and among certain older members of Lagos neighbourhoods who gave a graphic picture of the meanings of *aso oke* materials used as *aso ebi* during the early periods of Nigeria’s nationalism. The transformations in the textile industry, as well as the increasing pace of economic shifts, like the greater workings of industrial capital itself, proved difficult to predict or regulate in Nigeria since the beginning of the nineteenth century, thereby making *aso ebi* culture vulnerable to the maelstroms of the market.

In Chapter 3, the relationship which *aso ebi* has with the crowd is explored under the title, “*Aso ebi*: Of public salience, cheap crowd and wealth.” Here the presence of large numbers of people in *aso ebi* at a particular gathering demonstrates the wealth of the celebrant who is expected to clothe and feed such numbers. However, the provision of free *aso ebi* to such numbers was a propensity that reigned among the wealthy and few middle-classes between the 1920s and declined around the 1980s when the economic predicaments of SAP occasioned a decline in people’s sense of generosity.

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<sup>60</sup> Okwui Enwezor et al, *Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* Documenta II Platform 4, (Munich, Senefelderstrasse, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p.19.

In Lagos, solidarity and oneness have become the organizing slogan of *asọ ebi* practitioners. However, Chapter 4 argues that what these slogans try to achieve falls short of the meanings of oneness. Instead, the meanings become misguided and slide into mere rhetoric. I argue here that *asọ ebi*'s solidarity is devoid of any genuine mobilizing sense of collective, instead its purported claims as a unifying factor collapses potentially deep human relationships into a temporary recognition of uniforms. For example, long term friendships could be severed by mere refusal to buy and adorn oneself in a friend's *asọ ebi*. Friends could be denied access to their bosom friend's party for defying the uniform code. In this chapter *asọ ebi*'s claims as the spiralling movement towards the consolidation of relationships has been dismissed with indifference by those who cherished their individualism and who saw these claims as ephemeral rather than enduring. The spirit of *asọ ebi* solidarity has been substituted by shallow, bodily attire. In Lagos, therefore, the social and cultural valences of *asọ ebi* as gestures of group conviviality were overlaid by references to the politics of exclusion/inclusion therein.

To be able to explore the interrelationship between *asọ ebi* and photography, a historicization of photography in Lagos is necessary. This is what Chapter 5 attempts to do. In other words, photography's history is not approached through the traditional historical methodology such as could be seen in linear narrations. Rather, in this chapter, I see the history of photography in Nigeria as a series of disconnected events that must be brought together through a synthesis of the political economy of Lagos and 'photographies.' For, as I argue, what we have is not photography but 'photographies,'<sup>61</sup> a strategy that allows me to engage the subject of the history of photography in Lagos as a critique of colonial and postcolonial visual and political encounters. In doing this I engage a different kind of modernity in the postcolonial context by invoking a new theoretical model that addresses "the circulation of images in contemporary culture," what Paul Frosh calls "the image factory."<sup>62</sup>

In Chapter 6, by resituating postcolonial photography within the domains of the digital studios of Kingsley Chuks, I no longer view photography as the simple manifestation of a

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<sup>61</sup> See for example John Tagg, *Burdens of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Rosalind Morris, *Photographies East: the camera and its histories in East and Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> The circulation of images also includes *asọ ebi* photographs in fashion magazines. See Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory*, p.1.

spatio-temporal reality. Instead when Kingsley Chuks manipulates the surfaces of his *aso ebi* photographs on his computer screens, a photograph, for me, becomes a highly manipulative object and a techno-social reality characteristic of the present age. From this standpoint, photography is less a sign of the factual and the physical than a pathway into the world of fantasy. In this chapter, I attempt to examine ways through which photography is used to eliminate ‘undesirable elements’ that may interfere, hinder or ‘spoil’ the beauty of the uniformity to which *aso ebi* aspires. In this way, photography serves as an apparatus employed to further entrench the exclusion which *aso ebi* initiates. The schema of studio setting and analogue medium that have come to be viewed as the sovereign explanation for understanding postcolonial photography is fundamentally unable to account for the surface reconstructions of Chuks’ *aso ebi* photographs. This idea is the basis of the overall re-interpretation I propose in this chapter. By insisting on the idea of surfacism as advanced by Christopher Pinney<sup>63</sup> and as seen in Chuks’ works, theoretical reason invokes the immediate and ordinary logic embedded in the Photoshop software. It is time to detach analyses of postcolonial photography from the heavy artillery of Western intellectual canons, from the dialectics of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. I attempt to open up spaces for the investigation of the relationship between technological change and visual culture in the postcolonial city of Lagos. This is similar to Martin Lister’s exploration of the technological transformation of the image and its implications for city life.<sup>64</sup>

What is the place of snapshots in the photographic practices surrounding *aso ebi* in Lagos social events? Geoffrey Batchen notes that snapshots constitute a problem for the history of photography.<sup>65</sup> Does this also constitute a problem for the study of postcolonial photography especially given how the photographs of Sedou Keita and other early African photographers are incorporated into the postcolonial art historical processes? Were snapshots validated within the domains of art historical paradigm in the postcolonial context? It seems that the anthropological models of historical practice have defeated the logic of art history in postcolonial Africa. I address these problems in relation to the study of popular photographic practices and snapshots around *aso ebi* in weddings and other social events in Lagos.

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<sup>63</sup> Christopher Pinney, “Notes from the surface of the image: photography, postcolonialism and vernacular modernism,” in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, (eds.), *Photography’s Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p.203.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Lister, *The Photographic image in Digital Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, “Snapshots: art history and the ethnographic turn” in *Photographies*, Vol. 1 Issue 1 March 2009, p. 121.

Chapter 7 argues that different visual manifestations around the fashion magazines combine to evolve a certain elegance and sartorial style among *asọ ebì* wearers in Lagos. This is especially important considering Jennifer Craik's remark that "uniforms have equally shaped our ways of seeing and become central to the visual language and spatial conventions of photography."<sup>66</sup> This attitude reflects the *asọ ebì à la mode* of present-day Lagos residents. In other words, among other photographic prints, fashion magazines (where most of the *asọ ebì* photographs appear in Nigeria) have been used to investigate the transactions between *asọ ebì* wearers, the tailors, the photographers and the magazines. In this chapter, the appropriation of *asọ ebì* dress style to suit personality in social gatherings is investigated. It became clear that multiple copies of the fashion magazines offer visions of perfection which, though lifeless and object-oriented, provide individuals with unique models of appearances.<sup>67</sup> In this chapter, the use of fashion magazines contravenes the normative Western notions of fashion magazines as a classic high or middle class leisure culture. Rather in Nigeria the magazines circulate as soft-sell prints that inform the general public of latest styles (especially in clothes) through a homespun photographic documentation of social events. While this chapter studies *asọ ebì* as condition of what I call *Lagos cosmopolitanism* through the Owambe party,<sup>68</sup> a history of these magazines also underscores the unstable socio-economic dilemma that historically frames *asọ ebì*.

Again the practice of copying enacts the evolving uniqueness that sustains *asọ ebì* practice since it is observed that, in transactions that ensue, copying remains a central issue. It is my argument that this chapter provides the core aspect of this research: an understanding of the role played by fashion and photographic consumption in the development of cosmopolitan sensibilities and cultural identities such as *asọ ebì* in Lagos.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*, p.4.

<sup>67</sup> Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (USA: Basic Books, 1988), p. 85.

<sup>68</sup> *Owambe* is a Yoruba word that roughly translates as 'always attending'. It was a common term associated with the ubiquitous revelries in Lagos which thrived especially in the 1990s during the heydays of military dictatorships in Nigeria. These parties were predominantly defined by the large number of guests often dressed in *asọ ebì* and the parties usually happened on the streets where celebrants blockaded street entrances. The blockading of the street roads was against the law but the practice fed into the lawlessness of the military system. Recently it has been banned in urban Lagos in the event of a transition to democratic governance in 1999.

<sup>69</sup> Leslie Rabine has also studied the intersection of fashion and photography in the development of such cosmopolitan sensibilities in twentieth century Senegal. She notes that taking fashion as its subject matter that photographs cannot help but incorporate their ambiguity as well as their playful self-determination in fashioning identities that the conscious practice of fashion entails. See Leslie Rabine, "Fashionable Photography in mid twentieth-century Senegal," *Fashion Theory*, Vol.14, Issue 3, 2010, pp.305-330, p.314.

## PART ONE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF *ASQ EBÌ*

### Chapter 1.

#### *ASQ EBÌ* AND THE FASHIONING OF BODIES IN COLONIAL LAGOS, 1860s-1960s.

##### Introduction.

During the fifteenth century, people of the Awori branch of the Yoruba from the west, Egba Yoruba from the northwest, Ijebu Yoruba from the north and Bini (Edo) from the Benin empire to the east moved into the area which is now known as Lagos. These Yoruba peoples all competed with each other for supremacy in the new settlement. As the earliest settlers, the Awori claimed primordial rights to the land and chieftaincy. The Awori played an important part in the development of the city from the colonial period and into postcolonial time.<sup>69</sup>

By the fifteenth century the Awori political structures established the seat of the Oba (king) through contacts with the more powerful Oba of Benin. New categories of chiefs were established, not based on ownership of land, but on the wealth that came with trade deals. These chiefs formed a council which ruled the town until the nineteenth century.<sup>70</sup>

The Portuguese first landed on Lagos Island in 1472, led by Ruy de Sequeira who named the city *Lago de Curamo*. The Portuguese merchants eventually called the city 'Lagos' meaning 'lakes' in Portuguese. From the fifteenth century, trade developed slowly until the 1760s when the Portuguese had established a flourishing slave trade. Lagos' superiority as a port led to rapid growth of the slave trade. Buying and selling slaves brought considerable wealth to the city's rulers. The Oba (king) was remunerated with many articles of trade brought by the slave traders. Some of these articles included clothing materials which would eventually shape the Oba's wardrobe. As will be shown in subsequent discussions, this same article of clothing also constituted an object of political and cultural tension in colonial Lagos. While the Oba was not an owner of land, he was manifestly an 'owner of money', and drew his power and support from

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<sup>69</sup> A. B. Aderibigbe, (ed), *Lagos: The Development of an African City* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1975), pp.3-5; Sandra.T. Barnes, *Patrons and Power: creating a political community in metropolitan Lagos* (London: Manchester University Press for the International African Institute, 1986), p.38.

<sup>70</sup> Pauline H. Baker, *Urbanization and Political change: the politics of Lagos 1917-1967* (Berkeley: University of California,1974), pp.7-18; A. B. Aderibigbe, (ed), *Lagos: The Development of an African City*, pp.5-9.

it. ‘Money,’ superior access to consumer goods, and the ability to dispense material and political favours continue to be important factors in the power politics of Lagos up to today.<sup>71</sup>

By the early nineteenth century many liberated slaves who returned from Sierra Leone settled in Lagos and engaged in extensive trade. They were referred to as the Saros. There were other slaves (of Yoruba descent) repatriated to Lagos from Brazil after the 1826-35 slave revolts in Brazil. In Lagos, they were popularly referred to as the Brazilians. Some of the Brazilians became wealthy slave dealers themselves.<sup>72</sup> British attempts to suppress the slave trade in Lagos culminated in a naval attack in 1851 and the deposition of the then Oba Kosoko.<sup>73</sup> The slave trade continued until in 1861 when Lagos was made a British colony. 1861 would eventually mark a turning point in the social, political and cultural history of Lagos. By this time, more slaves began to return from different parts of the West African sub region and Lagos became more cosmopolitan.

The significance of this type of setting is crucial for an examination of the sartorial politics of colonial Lagos. For example, the slaves who came back from Brazil brought elements of particular dress styles. Those who came from Sierra Leone brought their own dress styles too while Christian missionaries who came to Lagos after the British annexation in 1861 attempted to enforce certain uniformed dressing for converts. Some local Lagosians were not amenable to sartorial changes and instead retained their so called ‘traditional’ attire. The colonial administrators and missionaries also brought sewing machines. The question I ask here is, how then did these changes impact dress and *asọ ebi* practice in colonial Lagos?

Given these developments this chapter addresses two important issues: first the politics of dress in colonial Lagos and second the origins of *asọ ebi* in Lagos. Under the politics of dress, I discuss how dress became a core argument among various groups in colonial Lagos including the returned Brazilians and Sierra Leoneans, the missionaries, Christianized Lagosians and those opposed to Christian conversion. Located within these contests are issues of conversion,

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<sup>71</sup> Patrick Dele Cole, *Modern and traditional elites in the politics of Lagos* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.31.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber, 1962), p.77.

<sup>73</sup> Oba Kosoko (1845-1851) was a powerful and recalcitrant Oba who became the Oba of Lagos in 1845 after plotting a coup against Oba Akitoye, his uncle, in 1845. His reign was warlike and was marked by incessant battles with his deposed uncle who went to exile in Dahomey. Kosoko believed he suffered injustice for not being appointed the Oba in the first place in 1841 when his uncle Oba Akitoye was appointed. He therefore plotted Akitoye’s overthrow in 1845. During his reign, the British came to him to sign a treaty to stop slavery but Oba Kosoko rejected the offer. In addition to his stubbornness and his refusal to sign the treaty, the British naval army bombarded Lagos in 1851 and conquered the city, sent Oba Kosoko to exile and re-installed his uncle Oba Akitoye as Oba of Lagos in 1851.

‘proper’ sartorial styles and expressions of identity by different groups. Here I argue that in approaching colonial literature one needs to recognize certain forms of resistance that came with dress.

Under origins of *asọ ebì*, I undertake a nuanced investigation of how Christian missionaries and colonial authorities may have aided the intensification of *asọ ebì*. The impact of colonial uniforms and Christian churches’ uniforms, I suggest, may have aided the spread of *asọ ebì* uniforms. However, it is important to mention that the sheer difficulty of synthesizing specific histories of *asọ ebì* is a topic I can raise rather than resolve in this chapter.

### **The politics of fashioning the body in colonial Lagos: 1860-1920s.**

A large majority of the Lagos population has always been Yoruba. This explains why the Yoruba have a lot of influence on the political and ‘cultural’ life of cosmopolitan Lagos. Although the present Lagos is cosmopolitan with people from other parts of Nigeria, the West African sub-region and elsewhere, politically the Yoruba still dominate present-day Lagos. It is also generally believed that they dominate the *asọ ebì* practice in Lagos.

Accounts from the nineteenth century affirm that being well dressed played a significant role in Yoruba social hierarchies, with much importance being attached to the size, colour, quality and quantity of fabric.<sup>74</sup> The Baptist missionary, William H. Clarke, during his sojourn in Abeokuta near Lagos, between 1854 and 1858 observed that the Yorubas attached much importance to dress and that their love of fine clothes was unmatched. Clarke, however, recognized the ubiquity and variety of stylish and colourful dress in Yorubaland and felt it could equal any part of ‘civilized’ society.<sup>75</sup> In terms of sartorial dressing the Yoruba may have exceeded Clarke’s expectations. We cannot however ascertain what Clarke’s expectations were, nor do we know precisely what might have occasioned his surprise at the Yoruba ‘stylish and colourful collection.’ Similarly, when the traveller and British consul Richard Burton visited the same Abeokuta in 1861, he noted that “people are tolerably well clothed. Dressy men wore *shogoto*, or loose cotton drawers fastened above the hips...and extending to the knee. The body was covered with a cloth gracefully thrown like a plaid over the shoulder.”<sup>76</sup> It must be noted that this same

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<sup>74</sup> Titilola Euba, “Dress and Status in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos,” Ade Adefuye, Babatunde Agiri, Jide Osuntokun, (eds.), *History of the peoples of Lagos State* (Lagos: Lantern Books, 2002), see also

<sup>75</sup> William H. Clarke (ed) *Travels and Exploration in Yorubaland 1854-1858s* (London. 1972), p.237.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Burton, *Abeokuta and the Cameroons Mountain: An exploration*, I (London, Tinsley Brothers, 1863), p.102, cited in Judith Byfield, *The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Dyers in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1890-1940* (Oxford, Portsmouth, NH, and Cape Town: James Currey, Heinemann and David Philip, 2002), p.3.

style of clothing was the bone of contention between the Christianized Lagosians and the non-Christian locals in the 1880s: the Christians rejected it outright. As will be shown subsequently, the contention was championed by some key newspapers of this period in Lagos.

Yoruba popular thought often expressed and continues to express the relationship between dress, social hierarchy and prestige. For example, the saying “*iri ni si ni isonilojo*” translates as “one’s appearance determines the degree of respect one receives.”<sup>77</sup> Another example, *Bi a ba rinrin iya, ti a woso ise wo lu, igbakigba ni won fi i boni fun ni mu* means “if we walk disorderly and dress raggedly into the town, an unwholesome calabash will be used to serve us drinking water.” Again the saying goes that *Eni to kan akanpo ewu ti kuro ni ile san tabi ko san* and translates as “The nobility of someone who is dressed in gorgeous garments is not in doubt.” Some of these sayings are reflected in the wardrobes of most Yoruba rulers who maintain status and seniority through conspicuous display of aesthetic forms including clothing.<sup>78</sup> For example, Euba observes the importance of sumptuous and expensive dress materials acknowledged by the Oba:

Respect for seniority, and for the prestige of kingship symbolized by dress, is demonstrated by the action of Oba Akinsemoyin who was on the throne at the arrival of the first Portuguese slave traders. When offered a dazzling piece of satin velvet, the astonished king promptly sent the material to the Oba of Benin as being worthy only of His Majesty. The king of Benin on his part encouraged the Oba of Lagos to continue his friendship with the slave traders.<sup>79</sup>

Aderibigbe notes that Losi ‘the traditional historian,’ describes this costly piece of velvet as “one which when placed in the king’s room made the room dark in the day and bright at night.”<sup>80</sup> Losi’s metaphorical allusion illustrates the importance attached to foreign clothes then. Again the encouragement by the King of Benin mentioned above suggests that the entrenchment of the slave trade in Lagos could have been facilitated by a mere piece of cloth.

Before the British take-over of Lagos in 1861, the ‘traditional’ dress of the Oba and his chiefs was a white wrapper worn toga-like in the Yoruba style and in the manner of Bini chiefs. The Oba and his chiefs were also distinguished by their white cap that continues to be the official symbol of the Lagos chiefs whose origin is Bini as opposed to those of Yoruba origin. With the

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<sup>77</sup> Babatunde Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), p.15.

<sup>78</sup> Euba observes that modes of dressing in Yoruba follow a hierarchical order which often established seniority with prestige and expensive outfits. See Titilola Euba, “Dress and Status,” p.140.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p.140.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in A. D Aderibigbe, “Early History of Lagos to About 1850,” in A. B. Aderibigbe, (ed), *Lagos: The Development of an African City* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1975), p.12.

return of the Brazilian slaves to Lagos, the Oba supplemented his status by appropriating the imported cloths brought by the foreigners – rich satins, velvets, damasks and silks, while the simple white cap of former times was substituted with the top hat and with the Admiral’s cocked hat. By this period more foreign attire found its way into the Oba’s wardrobe. Euba describes a photograph of Oba Akitoye thus:

The earliest photograph of Oba Akitoye shows him wearing a top hat covered with patterned damask with the design of a crown conspicuously in front. He wears a long-sleeved white shirt of obvious European inspiration, but the shirt is full length, and underneath it, though not visible, is a white wrapper, the *Gbarye*, which is worn as a compulsory token of the Oba of Lagos, traditional costume. The long shirt is covered with a damask wrapper the ends which are thrown over the left shoulder in the traditional style. A pair of socks adds a touch of class. Most important for historical purpose is his staff, very new at the time, for it was given to him by the British to mark the treaty that enabled him to regain his throne from his nephew Kosoko, the slave trader par excellence. Engraved on this staff, termed *opa adehun* is a promise to abolish human sacrifices, to end the slave trade, to promote legitimate commerce, and to protect Christian missionaries. It was signed on January 1, 1852.<sup>81</sup>

This style of dressing has implications for subsequent dress style in contemporary Lagos. For example, the present Oba of Lagos still retains most of the above named paraphernalia. The import of these Western dress materials into the Oba’s dress must be observed in the context of their meanings at the time (the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). By this period, according to Elizabeth Wilson, fashion became part of a more popular consciousness, and the mass manufacture of clothing happened at the same time as the individual status and uniqueness was being increasingly accentuated.<sup>82</sup> Although damask, seen in the subsequent Oba’s wardrobe, was already in vogue during the fourteenth century in Europe, it flourished at the height of Industrial Revolution between 1760 and 1815.<sup>83</sup> It is argued that the Industrial Revolution produced whole new ways of dressing.<sup>84</sup> The coming of colonialism in Africa in the nineteenth century could not but introduce a new culture of dressing to the colonized who adopted some of its elements. It is therefore not surprising that the Oba’s fashion, in the spirit of the new industrial and commercial age, was exercised most ostentatiously and conspicuously. And the outfit inadvertently signified, at the same time, the winding, disconnected historic and geographic route by which it arrived in Lagos. An eyewitness who saw Oba Akitoye in exile near Badagry in 1846 reports that “the apparel of the king was certainly very costly and his

<sup>81</sup> Titilola Euba, “Dress and Status in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos,” p.142.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dream Fashion and Modernity* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1999), p.157.

<sup>83</sup> David Jenkins, *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, “Adorned in Dream,” p.156.

splendour cast such a shade on the other chiefs that they looked like other common people.”<sup>85</sup> From the Oba’s wardrobe, one could easily conclude that creative combination of Western and local attire provided a new sartorial vocabulary with which to communicate in the modernizing, social environment of Lagos. Commenting on the same introduction of Western fashion elements in 1860s South Africa in almost the same period as the Oba Akitoye, Victoria Rovine argues suggestively that, “Western dress opened up a host of imaginative possibilities for the Africans and made available an expansive, experimental language with which to conjure new social identities and sense of self.” This, she proposes, was “a language with which to speak back to the whites.”<sup>86</sup>

When the British took over Lagos in 1861, the local hierarchies that placed the British officials, missionaries and traders on the aristocratic ladder were interchanged. The indigenous Lagosians were consigned to the lower rungs while the Brazilian returnees and other black immigrants were among the middle class. The Oba located himself among the esteemed bourgeoisie who made claims to a British connection. This new social grouping obviously did not augur well with the indigenous Lagosians who bore deep resentment for the Sierra Leonean immigrants and wondered why they should wear so much clothing as to compete with their Oba.<sup>87</sup> It is important to note that before this period, the Oba’s influence was close to assuming an autocratic dimension and as such no ordinary citizen would dare out-dress the Oba. The British, however, diminished the Oba’s influence and weakened his powers such that ordinary Sierra Leonean immigrants could now allegedly compete with the Oba in stylish dressing. In an article on the *Anglo African Times* one observer in 1862 was worried that the Sierra Leonean men frequently wore the Oba’s attire and wondered why it should be so.<sup>88</sup> It is important to stress that what this writer describes as the Oba’s attire was the English top hat, which had become the standard fashion in England from the early decades of the 19th century, and was the very hat favoured by the Oba as his crown. This symbolic usurpation of the Oba’s status no doubt contributed to the antipathy existing between the Sierra Leoneans and the Oba’s subjects. It is worthy of note that utter condemnation of the usurpation of the Chief’s dress symbol by ordinary people in Nigeria was not peculiar to the Yoruba. In Igboland the red cap or, in fact, any chieftaincy costume of the Chief and his councils was never to be worn by any ordinary citizen. It was also a taboo of great

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<sup>85</sup> C. A. Gollmer, Entry for 1845 CA 2/043, National Archives Ibadan, Nigeria.

<sup>86</sup> Victoria Rovine, *Bogolan, Shaping Culture through Cloth in Contemporary Mali* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), p.103.

<sup>87</sup> In an article in *Anglo African Times*, an observer had condemned this attitude and spoke harshly against it. *Anglo African Times* June 5, 1862.

<sup>88</sup> *Anglo African Times* June 5, 1862.

magnitude for any untitled individual in Igboland to put on a red cap, a practice which is still being enforced in certain communities today.

The Yoruba Creoles<sup>89</sup> loved fine clothes and this tendency was manifested in the ladies who wore crinoline and high-heeled boots. *Anglo African Times* of 1862 reported that the Creole ladies were beautifully dressed and that “their love of high heeled boots was an evidence of their urge to be civilized.”<sup>90</sup> It seems that ‘civilization’ was tied to Western tastes and attitudes. For this reason most of the immigrants saw it as a duty to use their foreign dress as a means of differentiating themselves from pagans, and this very attitude became the target of their critics. On the one hand, the Europeans deeply resented the competition posed by this class of ‘upstarts,’ and on the other, indigenous residents equally hated the rivalry of those who placed themselves outside the jurisdiction of the established order.

Most Christian Yorubas and Saros (Sierra Leoneans) imitated middle class Europeans in their dressing. The returning Brazilians also did the same especially with regard to letting their hair grow and parting it in imitation of the whites, whose long hair was a symbol of their social standing. In Yoruba social practices long hair and shoes were prerogatives of the kings, the one symbolizing his sacred power, the other his control of wealth and prestige. Shoes were among the things seen as the ‘inspiration of civilization’ which, according to Samuel Johnson, came with northern trade.<sup>91</sup> In 19th century Lagos, a fit dressing for a typical Yoruba Lagosian consisted of a ‘loin’ cloth reaching to the ground, a large wrapper ending on the shoulders, and one or other of a large variety of hats. Subsequently, under Muslim influence, a pair of short trousers and “a kind of vest” became part of the wardrobe. The women wore the usual wrapper known as *iro* in Yoruba and headtie known as *gele*. I shall return to *iro* and *gele* in subsequent discussions.

Suffice it to say that dress was a bone of contention in 19th century Lagos and it was also a symbol of identity among all the diverse groups that made up Lagos. Among all these groups it was the Saros that carved a niche for themselves as those immediately following the whites in the ladder of ascending to the bourgeoisie. The *Anglo African Times* of the 1860s gives many insightful revelations into the lifestyle of the members of the elite group among whom were the

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<sup>89</sup> The Yoruba Creoles were the descendants of African American and Jamaican immigrants.

<sup>90</sup> *Anglo African Times*, July 8, 1862.

<sup>91</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos: C.S.S. Limited, 2001), p.14.

Saros who strove “to imitate the Europeans in their dressing and make up.”<sup>92</sup> Euba remarks that “the Saros were more or less unanimous in their passion to be civilized,” and that their “literacy and access to a European-based economy gave them the high status of understudies of the white ruling class.”<sup>93</sup> By now it was almost common knowledge that the Saros’ penchant for European articles and lifestyle was manifested in their dressing, food and social activities. In the competitive bid to achieve elevated status and high social standing and thus free oneself from the detestable lowliness associated with ‘the natives,’ the Brazilians held onto their Catholicism which gave them a sense of equality with their former masters.

By the time Christianity started making strong incursion into most groups during the colonial period, the idea of dress code became a contentious one in the administrative and local settings of these colonial spaces including in Nigeria.<sup>94</sup> Intertwined here is a desire on the one hand by Christian converts to emulate a Western style of dress, and on the other by the so-called pagans to retain their ‘traditional’ style of dressing. However, it seems that the Bible and the tie appeared simultaneously and missionaries claimed that the dress of the Christians would be a “badge of distinction” that would set converts off from the rest of African society. ‘African’ attire was seen as a barrier against conversion.<sup>95</sup> Emmanuel Ayandele observes that during the mid-nineteenth century, many missionaries believed that converts who did not drink tea or wear European clothes could not be genuine Christians.<sup>96</sup>

The *Lagos Observer*, in an editorial comment of May 7, 1887, wrote sarcastically of “the broad cloth thrown over the left shoulder and passed under the right arm as worn by the *gens togata* of the Gold Coast and of the Eastern fashion as worn by the Mohammedans around us.”<sup>97</sup> This repudiation by the *Observer* came as a result of the tensions arising between educated and

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<sup>92</sup> *Anglo African Times* June 5, 1862.

<sup>93</sup> Titilola Euba, “Dress and Status in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos,” p.147.

<sup>94</sup> For more on the sartorial altercations between missionaries and ‘the natives’ see for example, Kirsten Ruther, *The power Beyond: Mission Strategies, African Conversion and the Development of a Christian Culture in the Transvaal* (Munster, Lit Verlag, 2001), p.108; Alan Lester, *Colonial Discourse and the Colonization of Queen Adelaide Province, South Africa* (London: Historical Geography Research Series no. 34, 1998), pp.44-54; J. Tyler, cited in Norman Etherington, “Outward and Visible Signs of Conversion in Nineteenth-Century KwaZulu-Natal,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32, 2002; Birgit Meyer, “Christian Mind and Worldly Matters: Religion and Materiality in Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast,” *Journal of Material Culture*, 2, 1998, pp. 311-37; Hildi Hendrickson, “The Long’ Dress and the Construction of Herero Identity in Southern Africa,” *African Studies*, No. 53, 1994; Hildi Hendrickson, “Bodies and Flags: The Representation of Herero Identity in Colonial Namibia,” in Hildi Hendrickson (ed.), *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham: NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp.213-44.p.435; Serge Tcherkezoff, “Of Cloth, Gifts and Nudity: Regarding some European Misunderstandings during Early Encounters in Polynesia,” in Colchester (ed.), *Clothing the Pacific* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p.72.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 125.

<sup>96</sup> Emmanuel A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis* (Essex, UK, 1981), p.36.

<sup>97</sup> Editorial, the *Lagos Observer*, May 7, 1887.

Christianized Lagosians (who had embraced European dressing habits) in the late nineteenth century and their non-Christian and illiterate countrymen (who would not accept the European model of dress).<sup>98</sup> In one of the editorials in the *Lagos Record* entitled “A sartorial battle,” there was a clear manifestation of a sartorial contest that was at the heart of colonial/ missionary expansionism. The writer observes that “choice of dress would remain a disturbing issue between the local people and the missionaries,” and wondered why the missionaries would coerce people to abandon their native wear “for the purposes of conversion.”<sup>99</sup> It seems that even among the so-called elites and educated Christian converts who championed the adoption of European dress, there was also some opposition.

When the historic phenomenon of European domination is taken as the single most defining moment in history, it means that colonialism takes credit for structures, events, and processes. Colonial discourse becomes even more pronounced when the story of expatriates in the social and political economy of most colonized states occupies a larger-than-life space in the cultural imagination of the ‘Other’. The result of which could be, in this context, the trivialization of the non-Christians and illiterate Lagosians’ role in the forging of a sartorial agency during the colonial period in West Africa. By highlighting the resistance and interventions of these groups I wish to recognize a localized complex of social and political structures and processes at play in Lagos that is simultaneous with British domination, and could have paved the way for the emergence of a dress culture such as *aso ebi*. In this instance, I suggest that passive submission under colonialism might not be taken as the singular historical logic for the genesis of ‘culture.’ In approaching the politics of fashioning the body in colonial Lagos, it would also be reasonable to recognize the significant role played by the dress debates between various groups in Lagos. These debates were most pronounced in the editorial columns of the *Lagos Record* and the *Lagos Observer* of late nineteenth century. While the *Lagos Record* maintains that “millions of genuine Africans on the continent have not found it necessary to adopt the European attire...,”<sup>100</sup> the *Observer* spoke very harshly and contemptuously of those who were championing the cause of native fashions.<sup>101</sup> Apart from the *Lagos Record*, *Lagos Standard* also vigorously championed these native fashions.<sup>102</sup> Both the *Record* and the *Standard* instituted a staunch campaign not only against the rejection of Western fashion but also in favour of cultural consciousness through

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<sup>98</sup> See also Michael J.C. Echerou, *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth Century Lagos Life* (London: Macmillan Educational Press, 1977), p.38.

<sup>99</sup> *Lagos Record*, August 6, 1887, p.6.

<sup>100</sup> *Lagos Record*, August 6, 1887.

<sup>101</sup> *Lagos Observer*, September 10, 1887.

<sup>102</sup> See Judith Byfield, ‘Dress and politics’, 34.

which they attempted to stimulate greater interest in African history, language, and culture.<sup>103</sup> On the contrary, O.E. Macaulay, Bishop Crowther's grandson and Editor of the pro-government *Eagle* and *Lagos Critic*, argued for the abandonment of "the easy and free native cloth toga and sandals" and an adoption of the "costly and inconvenient dress, boots, shoes and hats" of the superiors. This was viewed as a politically charged argument that was meant to bolster the English fashion business of Mrs Crowther (the Editor's aunt-in-law).

The "inconvenient dress" to some Lagosians was a visible indication of a creeping identity crisis that worked to undermine the mental power and psychological dignity of the Black African.<sup>104</sup> However, influenced by the dress reform movement that began in Sierra Leone in the late 1870s, some Christians discarded their dress and European names.<sup>105</sup> One of these was Reverend Mojola Agbebi, the acclaimed demagogue of the Baptist church in Lagos. In fact, in 1896, Rev. Mojola Agbebi, in a commentary in *Lagos Standard*, argued that European names and dresses were concrete reminders of Africans' ambivalent cultural and social positions: "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."<sup>106</sup> Another author in the *Lagos Standard* of the same year dismissed European dress as unsuitable for the African climate and a symbol of mental bondage.<sup>107</sup> Other factions who championed the cause of African dress were led by Otunba Payne, the conscientious registrar of the Supreme Court, who declared that "the unanimous opinion of intelligent Africans is that health in West Africa is impaired, and lives shortened by the adoption of European tastes, customs and forms of dress."<sup>108</sup>

By 1880, Richard B. Blaize, the wealthy Egba Saro merchant and the publisher of the anti-government newspapers, the *Lagos Times* and *Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* had already, through his local attire, influenced his daughters, Charlotte, who later became Mrs. Obasa (the famous Sisi Obasa), and her younger sister, Mrs. Gibson.<sup>109</sup> In 1890, Mrs. Gibson's wardrobe was already adorned with various combinations of 'traditional' attire such as *adire* (tie dye) wrapper and differently patterned prints such as the buba-like overblouse, headtie, and shawl. An enthusiast known as Emokpea, who had championed the promotion of indigenous dress, praised

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<sup>103</sup> Fred I. A. Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria, 1880-1937* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), p.107.

<sup>104</sup> *Lagos Record*, August 6, 1887, p.6.

<sup>105</sup> Titiola Euba, "Dress and Status in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos," p. 155.

<sup>106</sup> Rev. Mojola Agbebi, "The Spiritual Needs of the Africans," *Lagos Standard*, July 31, 1895, p.8.

<sup>107</sup> "Outward Adornment," *Lagos Standard*, March 11, 1896.

<sup>108</sup> Jean Herskovits Kopytoff, *A preface to Modern Nigeria. The "Sierra Leoneans" in Yoruba, 1830-1890* (Madison 1965), p.86.

<sup>109</sup> Titiola Euba, "Dress and Status in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos," p. 155.

Mrs. Gibson's attire in *Lagos Times* of 1891 in the following terms: "she was an epitome of a true Yoruba woman."<sup>110</sup> Her sister, even more stylish, combined hand-woven cloths, *aso oke*, and European prints, but this was only later in her life and apparently to distinguish herself from "rascals." The importance of *aso oke* at this moment cannot be overemphasized and its influence on - and historical connection to - the sartorial development of *aso ebi* in twentieth century Lagos will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

But what the foregoing discussion suggests is a kind of socio-political resistance of emerging Lagosian culture under colonialism. There has been a general scholarly inattentiveness to such resistance, with the result that analyses remain enmeshed within a narrow explanatory framework that misses the links with the socio-political climate surrounding (for example) Mrs. Gibson's 1890s. In fact, a review of the roots of Nigeria's colonial encounter with dress coupled with the social and political history of Lagos from the 1890s unveils a number of convergences, which indicate that choice of dress was not materially dependent on colonialism but flourished in spite of it.

In investigating further a visceral resistance to the colonial system between the 1800 and 1891, Emmanuel Ayandele asserts that the Ijebus, one of the first settler groups in Lagos, pursued a policy of "splendid isolation" in which they treated British agents, missionaries, and non-Ijebu Yoruba as strangers.<sup>111</sup> So complete was their distaste of Europeans and their way of life that in 1852, the Awujale (ruler of Ijebu nation) promulgated a new immigration policy instructing the Remo, on the borders of Ijebu proper, not to allow any missionary into their part of Ijebuland.<sup>112</sup> This hostility to European cultural influence was so unrelenting that the Ijebus would not even admit Ijebu Saro as members of their community. In their eyes, the latter "had betrayed their fatherland by adopting European religion, manners and clothing."<sup>113</sup> From the above it could be observed that the psychology of resistance was something that extended to anything deemed to have the slightest contact with European culture including dress. And within these forms of resistance there is also a struggle for distinction. The struggle for this distinction gave rise to a deference towards existing sartorial attitudes of which *aso ebi* was a part. This attitude was initiated by the Saros. It was recorded that during weddings Saro family members would wear

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<sup>110</sup> Emokpea, *Lagos Times*, June 4, 1891, p.8.

<sup>111</sup> Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria*, p.90.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p. 94.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p.91.

the same uniforms as a symbol of their solidarity and to differentiate themselves from other members of the public.<sup>114</sup>

While some authors of colonial history and fashion alike have argued that dress practices were central to colonial rule and to postcolonial anxiety,<sup>115</sup> it is necessary to note that, towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, dress was deployed as a weapon of imperial denunciation in Nigeria. This became more intense after 1895 such that dress became part of the tools deployed in the struggle against incipient signs of racism instituted by British imperial rule in Nigeria. Some of these racist manifestations were dwelled on by Byfield who notes that “after 1896, segregation increasingly became the custom, while in colonial hospitals separate wards were

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<sup>114</sup> William Bascom, “Social status, wealth and individual difference among the Yoruba,” p.492.

<sup>115</sup> For a selection of work on this theme, see for example, Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and identity in India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Dale Idiens and K.G. Ponting, *Textiles of Africa* (Leeds: The Pasold Research Fund Ltd, 1980); Blenda Femenias, *Gender and the Boundaries of Dress in Contemporary Peru*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 184-230; Mina Roces, “Gender, Nation and the Politics of Dress in Twentieth-Century Philippines,” in Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (eds), *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the America* (Brighton, Sussex UP, 2007); Margaret Jean Hay, “Western Clothing and African Identity: Changing Consumption Patterns among the Luo,” *Discussion Papers in the African Humanities*, 2, African Studies Centre, Boston, 1989; Margaret Jean Hay, “Changes in Clothing and Struggles over Identity in Colonial Western Kenya,” in Jean Allman (ed), *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Atieno Odhiambo, “From Warriors to Jonanga: The Struggle of Nakedness by the Luo of Kenya,” in Werner Graebner (ed.), *Sokomoko: Popular Culture in East Africa* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), p.15; Margaret Jean Hay, “Hoes and Clothes in a Luo Household: Changing Consumption in a Colonial Economy, 1906-1936,” in Mary Jo Arnoldi, Christraud M. Geary, and Kris L. Hardin (eds), *African Material Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press 1996), p.251; Agneta Pallinder, “Adegboyega Edun: Black Englishman and Yoruba Cultural Patriot,” in P.F. de Moraes Farias and Karin Barber (eds), *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, 1990), p.13. To buttress further the politics of colonial encounter with dress, Adegboyega Edun, according to Farias and Barber, had changed his name from Jacob Henryson Samuel and only wore Yoruba dress when in England and remained in European suits while in Nigeria. The article, interestingly, includes a wonderful photograph of the Alake of Abeokuta, in full ethnic dress, next to the Governor of Lagos colony, Sir William MacGregor (who was the Governor of Lagos colony from 1899 to 1904) also in full ethnic dress, with kilt, sporran and tam o’ shanter. However, Edun’s, and indeed other self-avowed, interests in indigenous culture and rejection of Western ways should not be taken as a given rather should again be inserted into a more political context. Emphasizing this further, Craig McLuckie cautions of the problem of taking the likes of Pallinder’s research at face value and remarked that “Edun’s interest in the Yoruba Language and his adoption of it as a language of instruction in the Methodist Boys’ High School can be construed as a cynical ploy to attract new students to regain a lost government grant because of low enrolment. Again that he spoke only English to his own children seems to underscore this point.” See Craig McLuckie’s review of *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa*, pp.215- 225 in Dieter Riemenschneider, Frank Schulze-Engler, (eds) *African Literatures in the Eighties, Matatu*, No. 10 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi, 1993). This is an encapsulation of the nature of politics that existed between the colonialists and the locals over struggle for dress; Nurad C. Chauduri, *Culture in the Vanity Bag, being an Essay on Clothing and Adornment in Passing and Abiding India* (Bombay: Jailo, 1976), pp.161-2; Nira Wickramasinghe, *Dressing and the Colonized Body: Politics, Clothing and Identity in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003); Justine Cordwell and Ronald A. Scharz (eds), *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979); Phyllis Martins, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Phyllis Martins, “Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” *Journal of African History*, 35, 1994, pp.818-9; Doran Ross, *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Fowler Museum Cultural History Textile Ser. No. 2, 1998); Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, Carla Jones (eds.) *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Katherine Lucy Norris, *The life-cycle of clothing: recycling and the efficacy of materiality in contemporary urban India*, (PhD thesis. University College London, 2003); Hudita Nura Mustafa, “Sartorial Ecumenics: African styles in a social and economic context,” in van der Plas E, Willemsen M, (eds.), *The Art of African Fashion* (Prins Klaus Fund, the Netherlands. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998); Elayne Zorn, *Weaving a Future: Tourism, Cloth, and Culture on an Andean Island* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004a); Skov Lise, “Fashion-nation: a Japanese globalization experience and a Hong Kong dilemma,” in Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkovich, Carla Jones (eds.), *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress* (Oxford: Berg 2003), pp.215-242, among many others.

built for European patients and nurses.”<sup>116</sup> The Church Missionary Society, which was then the leading missionary group in Lagos, abandoned its early goal of developing an African-led church, increased the number of white missionaries in Nigeria, and placed less trained Europeans in supervisory positions over Africans. Furthermore, white missionaries’ disapproval of Samuel Ajayi Crowther’s appointment as bishop in 1891 has clear racist overtones. These developments contributed significantly to the creation and expansion of independent African churches. By this period, Nigerians in the civil service began to face a colour bar. In a number of instances, less qualified Europeans were promoted over Nigerians, and there were disparities in salaries and benefits. There were also attempts to create racially segregated residential communities and churches.<sup>117</sup>

Educated Nigerians were especially outraged by these developments, because they had agitated for more vigorous colonial expansion during the 1880s and 1890s, expecting to be Britain’s partners in progress. They had not anticipated the heightened racism that accompanied colonial expansion.<sup>118</sup> As a result, educated Nigerians began to re-evaluate their enthusiasm for European culture. There was a renewed enchantment for African institutions and practices that had been hitherto denigrated by the Europeans. This re-evaluation was not unique to Nigeria. The ideological shift in Britain instigated similar rethinking in other colonies. For example, in Sierra Leone, the Creoles, descendants of African American and Jamaican immigrants launched a dress reform movement in the late 1880s. Dress reformers saw the eradication of European dress as the first important step in bringing about a gradual independence from all European customs. They did not, however, adopt the dress styles of the indigenous communities in Sierra Leone. They invented a new wardrobe that served to distinguish them from Europeans and from the communities in the hinterland, people they also considered “barbarian aborigines.”<sup>119</sup> The importance of this dress movement cannot be overemphasized. It is evident from the above that dress was a critical response, and was also a dimension never envisaged by the colonialists. Again this is not a condition that is exceptional to Nigeria but also played out in other African nations.<sup>120</sup> Subsequent discussions attempt nuanced explorations of certain historical circumstances that suggest the rise and intensified use of uniformed dressing such as *aso ebi*.

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<sup>116</sup> Judith Byfield, “Unwrapping Nationalism,” p.9.

<sup>117</sup> Emmanuel Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria*, pp. 267-49.

<sup>118</sup> Kristin Mann, *Marrying Well: Marriage, Status and Social Change among the Educated Elites in Colonial Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.23.

<sup>119</sup> Leo Spitzer, *The Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp. 117-19.

<sup>120</sup> Jean and John Comaroff, while investigating the nature of modernity in Southern Africa, locate clothing and dress at the center of the “long conversation” between Africans and Europeans. They argue that colonialism in nineteenth century

## **The rise of uniformed dressing and the impact of European merchants and Christian missionaries.**

In pre-colonial Yoruba, the family units are known as *ebi*.<sup>121</sup> The *ebi* had various household units within it. According to the normative picture depicted by Falola and Adebayo, the household comprised the man, his wife or wives, and their children, relatives, and dependents. The man organized and coordinated the labour of the family. He also clothed and fed the family. It was within this family system that *aso* (cloth) came into being. Again, according to such norms, the man clothed the family in most social events. However, what is significant is that by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *aso ebi* had transcended the family and was adopted among age grades and other groups among the Yoruba. Most of the age grades that wore *aso ebi* might have aimed to achieve fraternal bonding using dress.

One cannot underestimate the institutional power and social legitimacy embodied in the notion of uniform, especially during colonialism in Africa and other parts of the world. The values and ideals that the colonial authorities assigned to official clothing and decorations need to be studied more carefully in order to ascertain whether these have any influence on the rise of such attitudes as *aso ebi* uniformed 'culture' in Nigeria.

Uniforms became a particularly contested category of clothing under British rule as Africans donned a wide variety of formal and semi-formal uniforms in the service of the colonial regime.<sup>122</sup> Although Africanist scholars have paid close attention to the contested meanings of

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Southern Africa was aided by Western clothes. The British missionaries enforced what the Comaroffs call "conquest by consumption" by persuading the Bachuana to adopt Western commodities. Phyllis Martins observes that in order to impose a psychology of discipline, humility and servitude, the missionaries dressed their converts in simple clothes, while shorts and rude tunics were the near universal clothing of unskilled labourers. Karen Tranberg Hansen notes that in Zambia, second hand clothing "played pivotal roles in the political economy of the West's expansion and in the triangular North Atlantic slave trade." Again Leslie Rabine remarks that "the Kikuyu in Kenya, find that their own indigenous dress was forbidden to them as English missionaries had them adopt European clothing." Rabine suggests that fashion becomes a means for the Kikuyu, known for their early and fierce struggles against colonialism, to express their anti-colonial feelings. See Jean and John Comaroff, "Of Revelation and Revolution: Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier," Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), see especially p. 222; Phyllis Martin, "Contesting Clothing in Colonial Brazzaville," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 35, No. 3, (1994), p. 410; Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp.24 and 52; Leslie Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African fashion*, p.75.

<sup>121</sup> Toyin Falola and Akanmu Adebayo, *Culture, Politics and Money among the Yoruba* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2000), p.14.

<sup>122</sup> In Nigeria, during the colonial period, robe-giving by the politically powerful had long been a means of marking and maintaining hierarchy. Uniformed robes were given to Northern House of Assembly officials as gifts for special occasions. Renne remarks that uniformed gifts of a gown or a cloak were offered to persons selected for an important Native Authority appointment or traditional title. This gift of a cloak, which may be the traditional kayan sarauta (literally 'load of the chief'), was always paid from the Native Authority Funds. Such acts of robe gifts, Renne observes, had always existed in pre-colonial times among local rulers. During colonial period, it is also possible that, by restraining the distribution of uniformed robes and connecting the few that were given with state funding, colonial officials sought to restrict the political power of high-ranking chiefs that derived from such forms of patronage since pre-colonial times. See Robert Ross, p.101; Elisha Renne,

clothing in the past three decades, the meaning of uniforms in colonial society remains largely unexplored.<sup>123</sup>

Although it is possible that *asọ ebi* was already practiced before the nineteenth century in Yorubaland, one can suggest that the arrival of colonial masters and the missionaries intensified it. By the 1840s and 1850s Christianity was introduced in Lagos through the efforts of liberated Africans returning home from Sierra Leone as well as through the endeavors of missionaries of various denominations. Notable among these denominations were the Methodists and the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), who were later joined in the field by the Baptists and the Roman Catholics.<sup>124</sup> The C.M.S. opened its first house in Lagos in October, 1852 and built its first school in 1853. By 1855 their missions had spread throughout Yorubaland and beyond.

The introduction of Christianity came with occasions for public outings which increased the demand for clothes. The mission schools and colleges initiated school uniforms. Tailors were employed by the missionaries in some cases to sew uniforms and dresses for the students and workers in their institutions.<sup>125</sup> Tailoring and dressmaking were taught in some of the vocational schools run by missionaries.<sup>126</sup> Remy Onyewuenyi notes that “for some Christian Yoruba, besides ‘Sunday dresses’ their wardrobe included, at least, a pair of school uniforms or colonial uniforms sewn in European style.”<sup>127</sup> Not only did the missionaries impose uniformed dress sewn in European style, they also, at some point, enforced uniforms made of wax print fabrics. For example, Tunde Akinwumi’s study shows a certain primary school in Bonny in 1909 where

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“From Khaki to Agbada: Dress and Political transition in Nigeria,” in Jean Allman (ed), *Fashioning Africa: power and the politics of dress* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 133.

<sup>123</sup> The emergence of *asọ ebi* as a form of uniform needs to be interrogated, not just from the point of view of Yoruba cultural life but also in terms of a colonial legacy of uniformed dressing. This is necessary because an imposition of colonial uniformed code of dressing upon the subjects as a form of domination and rule could be helpful in understanding why the subjects have transformed uniform into high fashion in the postcolonial context. Although such a direct link has not been substantiated in the literature so far, it is worth pursuing to see whether it has any relation to a possible emergence of *asọ ebi*. One of the major articles that touched on uniforms in this context is, Elisha Renne, “From Khaki to Agbada: Dress and Political Transition in Nigeria,” in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington, IN, 2004), p.130.

<sup>124</sup> The first European missionaries to work in Nigeria were Wesleyan missionaries who visited Badagry and Abeokuta in 1841, and members of the Church Missionary Society (C. M. S.) who landed at Badagry in 1842 and reached Abeokuta in 1846. In 1846 the Presbyterians began work at Calabar, and two years later a Baptist mission was started at Victoria, which is now included in the Republic of Cameroon. See Alan Burns, *History of Nigeria* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p.269; See also Taiwo Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History* (Ibadan: The Caxton Press, 1980).

<sup>125</sup> The new morality preached by these religions repudiated the scanty dressing habit of the locals and advocated and encouraged the wearing of clothes and the full covering of the body especially when in public or at religious ceremonies. This desire for proper dressing inspired the idea of uniformed dressing among the colonial administrators and the missionaries. See Remy N. Onyewuenyi, “The evolution and spatial diffusion of informal sector activity in Nigeria: A case study of informal tailoring industry in the Oyo State Metropolitan Areas,” PhD Thesis submitted to The School of Graduate Studies and Research, University of Ottawa, as a partial fulfillment for an award of a Doctorate degree in Geography, December 1990, p. 160.

<sup>126</sup> J.K. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1844-1891* (London: Longman, 1965).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p.160.

pupils dressed in uniforms sewn in wax print.<sup>128</sup> What is striking, from a photograph of the uniformed pupils in Akinwumi's study, is the manner of sewing which deviated from the European styled shirt and shorts. The sewing seems to reflect local preferences and dynamic, embodied in their style of wax print wrapper and blouse.<sup>129</sup> This is remarkable, and strongly resonates with the ubiquitous use of similar wax prints and perhaps styles of sewing for present-day *asọ ebi*. Similarly, Akinwumi observes that in 1950 the Sunday uniform of St. Andrew College Students were *Oyala* and *Sapara*, indigenous Yoruba hand printed textiles. Akinwumi remarks that "the students' regular appearance in the dress during their visits to the townships influenced the spread of the uniformed fashion among Yoruba youths."<sup>130</sup> By the early twentieth century, according to Akinwumi, the Anglican churches in Lagos and its environs commissioned uniformed fabrics for members during important church events such as anniversaries.<sup>131</sup> One can surmise that there is a strong relationship between the spread of *asọ ebi* and a growing ethos of modernity amongst converts. This might have encouraged the spread of *asọ ebi* among friendship associations that emerged in early twentieth century Lagos as I will show subsequently.

In the 1950s William Bascom traced the origins of certain types of dress materials to the Yoruba age grade system that used the fabric known as *asọ ebi*.<sup>132</sup> He observed that "a Yoruba gentleman dresses well and keeps good company, and men and women's club have their own distinctive clothing by which members can be recognized."<sup>133</sup> Euba remarks that the wearing of *asọ ebi* by age grades signifies the solidarity and sense of purpose of those age grades that forge a common front in the service of their community and for individual progress.<sup>134</sup> The Drewals also attributed uniformed dressing to the virtue of comradeship that has its origin in the pairing of Yoruba Gelede masquerades.<sup>135</sup> They write: "when two partners make a pact and adopt a common secret name, they often choose to dress alike and may be mistaken for twins."<sup>136</sup> It

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<sup>128</sup> See Tunde Akinwumi, *Persistence and Change in Yoruba Costume: A case study of Oyo*, A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment for the award of master's Degree in Industrial Design (Textile) Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, 1981, p.187.

<sup>129</sup> For this photograph, see *ibid*, p.188.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p.178.

<sup>131</sup> Tunde M. Akinwumi, "The Commemorative Phenomenon of Textile Use Among the Yoruba: A Survey of Significance and Form," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1990; see also Tunde M. Akinwumi and Elisha Renne, "Commemorative Textile and Anglican church history in Ondo Nigeria," *Textile*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, pp. 126–145.

<sup>132</sup> William Bascom, "Social status, wealth and individual difference among the Yoruba," *American Anthropologist* Vol.5, 1951, pp.490-495.

<sup>133</sup> Cited in Titilola Euba, "Dress and Status in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos," p.141.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, p.141.

<sup>135</sup> Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among The Yoruba* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp.134-136.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*. p.136.

should be noted that in Yorubaland brotherly love describes a twin-like intimacy between two individuals as if they were born to the same mother.<sup>137</sup>

The European merchants and missionaries played an important role in the spread of sewing machines and tailoring businesses in Lagos. Some of the earliest available evidence suggesting the existence of tailoring activities in Lagos is a descriptive analysis of the social and economic life of Yoruba society by W. H. Clarke during his visit to Yorubaland between 1854 and 1858. Clarke describes the craft of dressmaking thus: “The females never cut or sew garments but sell all articles of merchants...conversely the males use the needle entirely but never or at least, very seldom engage in the art of selling.”<sup>138</sup> From this, it does not seem as if Clarke is referring to sewing machines, but the dressmaking activities that immediately predated them. The sewing machine was invented in Europe in 1830, and the first sewing machines were designed for factory use. It was only in 1851 that the first Singer Home sewing machine was patented in England, and it could not have spread to Yorubaland as soon as 1854 when Clarke was writing.<sup>139</sup> However, by 1867, the first Yoruba trained tailors were beginning to return from abroad to practice in Lagos and other Yoruba towns. Citing Walsh and Ajayi, Remi Onyewuenyi recalls the case of the first twenty boys brought to Wydah after their capture by Dahomey in 1862 and 1865, who returned to Lagos from Bouffarick near Algiers where they were trained in tailoring, carpentry, shoe making and iron works.<sup>140</sup>

By 1889, the tailoring innovation had become wide-spread in Lagos colony.<sup>141</sup> In 1891, there were as many as 524 tailors and thirty seamstresses in the colony of Lagos.<sup>142</sup> By 1908 sewing machines had become popular among missionary schools and training centers in Lagos where they were used in training seamstresses and for the sewing of uniforms.<sup>143</sup> The time and labour saving advantages of the sewing machine made its adoption very attractive even in the interior and hinterlands of Yorubaland. Again the concentration of a large number of missionary, colonial administrative personnel and traders in Lagos may have ushered in an auspicious time

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<sup>137</sup> Angelo Micheli, “Doubles and Twins: New approach to contemporary studio photography in West Africa,” *African Arts* Vol. 41, No.1, 2008, (Los Angeles: UCLA International Institute), p. 70.

<sup>138</sup> Clarke cited in Remi Onyewuenyi, “The Evolution and Spatial Diffusion of Informal Sector, Activity in Nigeria: A Case study of Informal Tailoring Industry in the Oyo State Metropolitan Area,” Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research, University of Ottawa, Canada, as a partial requirement for an award of doctorate degree in Geography, December 1990, p. 159

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159.

<sup>141</sup> Colonial Annual Report : Lagos 1889.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Colonial Annual Report : Lagos 1909; Talbot 1926; Murray and Hunt-Cooke 1936.

for the tailoring business in Lagos. This obviously could have facilitated the use of more fashionable dresses by Lagosians for social events. The missionaries distributed uniforms sewn by the seamstresses among church members.

### ***Asọ ebi*: of disparate histories and friendship networks, 1840-1980.**

The examples cited in this section are by no means comprehensive. They do however provide some historical pointers as to the ways *asọ ebi* was used among Yoruba organizations. Since, to the best of my knowledge, there is no systematic documentation of *asọ ebi* use among friendship associations in pre-colonial, colonial or postcolonial periods, I attempt to piece together disparate records that may help articulate the importance of *asọ ebi* over time. What I attempt here is like a seamstress trying to stitch together odd pieces of cloth in order to form something akin to a complete and well-sewn robe.

Historically in Yoruba society, friendship was usually invoked in age grades and associations in the form of what is known as *egbe*. *Egbe* literally translates as ‘association’ in Yoruba. Marjorie Keniston McIntosh traces the history of particular Yoruba *egbe* to the nineteenth century. She remarks that in the nineteenth century many *egbe* included both women and men, with separate officers for each, but during the colonial period some became single-sex associations.<sup>144</sup> For example, according to McIntosh, in Ikaaland, an eastern Yoruba community, women’s *egbe* emerged in 1900 under the auspices of the Christian churches while in Aiyede, another Yoruba province in the present Ekiti State, female *egbe* merely organized dances at festivals in the 1930s.<sup>145</sup>

By the late colonial era, however, women’s associations were found throughout Yorubaland. However, McIntosh specifically states that *egbe* was formed in Ikaaland in 1900. It is possible that the provenance of other *egbes* might date before 1900 following Deji Ayegboyin’s record in his study of the Baptist Women’s Missionary Union (BWMU) in Ogbomoso the 1850s.<sup>146</sup> Ayegboyin demonstrated how the Baptists deliberately used the traditional institution of *egbe* (association) to create similar female age-grade associations in their churches.<sup>147</sup> In Ogbomoso, the centre of Baptist mission activity from the 1850s onwards, there were five women’s groups:

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<sup>144</sup> Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p 210.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, p.210.

<sup>146</sup> Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, "Women in Missions: A Case Study of the Baptist Women's Missionary Union in Nigeria" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan, 1991), pp. 50-58.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 50-58.

the Egbe Iya Sioni, Egbe Iya, Egbe Esteri, Egbe Mimo, and Egbe Irawo Kekere, comprised of the grandmothers, the mothers, the young married women, the young girls, and the infants, in that order.<sup>148</sup> Ayegboyin notes that in the breakaway African churches, however, such adaptations manifested themselves even more strongly. The United Native African Church, founded in 1891, represented the first deliberate effort of Yoruba Christians to construct a theology justifying the retention of important indigenous customs within the Nigerian Christian setting.<sup>149</sup> Its main debate centered on polygamy as a necessary basis for a peaceful, conservative and stable society. During the 1930s, women played important roles in the foundation and leadership of the Aladura churches that sprang up in Yorubaland in the 1930s.<sup>150</sup> Syncretic ideas and institutions characterized the worship of such sects, as evident in their role of catering for their members' needs.<sup>151</sup> It is possible that if the Baptists could import the traditional institutions of *egbe* into the church as far back as the 1890s, it means that *egbe* could have dated back before the nineteenth century. That no record existed in this regard shows a need for further research. What is not made clear is whether these *egbe* in the churches made use of *asọ ebì* as at that time (1891). Identifying whether such associations made use of *asọ ebì* has always been one of the most difficult tasks in tracing a history of *asọ ebì*.

Taye Ayorinde of Oyo, Ibadan, argues that *asọ ebì* began in Yorubaland as a funeral uniform worn during the funeral rites of a family member. During the funeral rites anyone seen in uniform was immediately identified as a member of the deceased family. On certain occasions it was only the children of the deceased who were required to put on the uniform.<sup>152</sup>

John Nunley traces the use of *asọ ebì* among members of Ode-lay Society in Freetown, Sierra Leone, during the mid twentieth century. Ode-lay, according to Nunley, emerged from the Yoruba-based hunting, *Gelede* and *Egungun*, traditions.<sup>153</sup> Most activities of *Gelede* and *Egungun* are retained by the Ode-lay to this date. Nunley remarks that the most important contribution of Ode-lay society was their street parades which were held in the morning before weddings of members and upon the return of member-hunters from the bush. Their use of *asọ ebì* in these parades, Nunley suggests, must have occasioned the preponderant deployment of

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p.55.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, p.55.

<sup>150</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London, Oxford University Press for International African Institute, 1968).

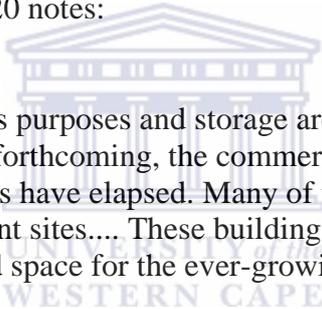
<sup>151</sup> LaRay Denzer, "Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1994), pp. 1-39

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Taye Ayorinde, Ibadan, December 12, 2010.

<sup>153</sup> John W. Nunley, *Moving with the Devil, Art and Politics in urban West Africa* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), P.61

the same type of uniforms in the wider societies in Sierra Leone.<sup>154</sup> The interesting thing about Nunley's book is that it traces Sierra Leonean 'ashobi' to Yoruba masking traditions and also charts the link between Ode-lay costumes with urban life and the textile economy in Freetown. A similar dynamic will be dealt with in the context of *aso ebi* in Lagos in subsequent chapters.

However, it is possible to trace the origins of *aso ebi* to early twentieth century Lagos. In doing this, Ayodeji Olukoju demonstrates the connection between culture and economic vicissitudes in his article on the post-World War I maritime economy and society of Lagos.<sup>155</sup> In this paper he argues that "the *aso ebi* culture (as distinct from *aso egbe*, pioneered by Egbe Kila) in Lagos and Nigeria started only in the context of the stupendous and unprecedented accumulation occasioned by the post-war boom of 1918-20."<sup>156</sup> In effect, he debunked received wisdom of a distant antiquity of this 'wasteful practice' with verifiable evidence that it did not exist before 1920. Writing on the influence of maritime trade in Lagos in the aftermath of the First World War, *West Africa* magazine in 1920 notes:

  
New buildings for business purposes and storage are springing up all over Lagos. Judging from the number of plans forthcoming, the commercial centre of the island will almost be renewed before many years have elapsed. Many of the large, new merchant houses are being rebuilt in their present sites.... These buildings are being rebuilt upon the old roadway leaving little road space for the ever-growing motor traffic.<sup>157</sup>

Ayodeji Olukoju observes that this "sudden prosperity also ushered in a new culture of dress. The new fashion was *aso ebi*, a uniform dress that had been traditionally worn as an indication of co-operation on festive occasions."<sup>158</sup> It seems that now *aso ebi* was worn frequently. This novelty was roundly condemned by the *Nigerian Pioneer* because "it is not the custom as handed down to us by our forefathers."<sup>159</sup> The newspaper stressed the "waste and debt which are associated with it" as sufficient reason for opposing the practice. The recklessness with which the wealth that accrued from the boom was spent became a source of concern to perceptive observers of the time. The *Lagos Weekly Record* stated in a thought-provoking editorial entitled "Whither are we going?" that:

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, p.137.

<sup>155</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, "Maritime Trade in Lagos in the Aftermath of the First World War," *African Economic History*, 1992. Vol. 20, pp.119-135. See also Ayodeji Olukoju, "Ports, hinterlands and forelands," an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Lagos on Wednesday, 21st June 2006.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> *West Africa*, 18 September 1920.

<sup>158</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, "Maritime Trade in Lagos in the Aftermath of the First World War."

<sup>159</sup> *Nigerian Pioneer*, 11 March 1921.

Very few thoughtful people will view with anything but alarm the rate at which we are spending. No doubt the increased prosperity occasioned by the greater demand and higher price paid for produce of late years is responsible for this.... Do we realize that whatever money we got now on our palm oil and palm kernels is our capital and that in spending it outright we are spending our capital?... We are frittering away with hopeless want of foresight, rather characteristic of our people that capital which alone can give us economic liberty in the future.... The feverish desire to make a show of our wealth has got a firm grip on our people.<sup>160</sup>

Such pleas for prudence fell on deaf ears and it required the depression of 1920-22 to curtail the spend-thrifts. *Asọ ebi* was therefore seen as part of a culture of conspicuous consumption fuelled by the post-World War I boom, which has survived to this day as a national culture, and deplored by only a handful of critical Nigerians.<sup>161</sup>

Tunde Akinwumi observes that *asọ ebi* seems a corrupted version of *asọ-ti-ebi-da-jo* meaning the various clothes contributed by family members as grave goods for the dead. Akinwumi's findings indicate that "asọ ebi is a Lagos concept which came into being only in the early twentieth century."<sup>162</sup> Citing one of his informants, Akinwumi notes that a certain type of Yoruba cloth known as *ashigbo* was deposited on the grave of the deceased and also worn as uniforms by members of Sashere and Olowo families. These clothes were apparently never named *asọ ebi*, as conceived by the Lagos people. In *Lagos Daily News* of 1930, *asọ ebi* was interpreted as "uniform mourning outfits which many people strove to have and wear as a mark of respect for the dead." This source further indicates that *asọ ebi* is associated with funerary events such as "Third Day", "Sitting Sunday" and "Church Going". Basing his judgment on this and other indices, Akinwumi seems to connect *asọ ebi*'s origins with funeral services in Lagos churches in the early twentieth century.

Again while Tunde Akinwumi and Elisha Renne observe that the Anglican church in Ondo state was "one of the earliest churches in southwestern Nigeria to make use of the Yoruba practice of wearing identically patterned *asọ ebi*, or family cloths for cloth worn by church members,"<sup>163</sup> they also note that the 1925 cloth was the first church commemorative cloth in

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<sup>160</sup> *Lagos Weekly Record*, 17 September 1919.

<sup>161</sup> Fred-Adegbulugbe, Chinyere.. "Menace of *asọ ebi*," *The PUNCH*, 4 October, 2005 p.46.

<sup>162</sup> Tunde Akinwumi, "The Commemorative Phenomenon of Textile Use among the Yoruba: A Survey of Significance and Form," Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1990; Venice Lamb, and Judith Holmes, *Nigerian Weaving* (Hertingfordbury: Roxford Books, 1980).

<sup>163</sup> Tunde Akinwumi and Elisha P. Renne, "Commemorative Textile and Anglican Church History in Ondo, Nigeria" in *Textile: the journal of cloth and Culture* Jul2008, Vol. 6 Issue 2, p126-144, p. 129.

Ondo and it coincided with the introduction of the new fashion of wearing *asọ ebi*.<sup>164</sup> They note that *asọ ebi* fashion was encouraged by the importation of cheap, mass-produced dress materials produced in England at that time. Reverend Sodake proposed that the Anglican Church should have its own *asọ ebi* cloth, to be used as a church anniversary cloth (050 *odun*) that would be worn by all church members. This was unilaterally accepted by the church members. This innovative use of cloth to mark a church anniversary was the first of its kind in Ondo.<sup>165</sup> The cloth he decided upon was *luboleguneitan*, a cloth handwoven in Ondo, which was considered to be among Ondo's finest cloths.<sup>166</sup> That the Reverend Sodake advocated its use, and then the women decided to use it in their own right, would suggest that *asọ ebi* was not imposed from above, as it were. It is likely that colonialism and/or mission influence probably had little influence on the emergence of the popularity of *asọ ebi*. While colonialism may have informed other kinds of uniformed dress in administrative contexts, this was far from the social contexts in which *asọ ebi* emerged in Nigeria. Since the nineteenth century, these social contexts continued to expand in new forms of Yoruba *egbe*.

From the above there is strong indication to pitch the origins of *asọ ebi* to twentieth century Lagos. *Asọ ebi*'s importation into 1920s Christian churches, as suggested by Akinwumi and Renne, needs to be historicized as part of a new wave of *egbe* that emerged in Lagos in the early twentieth century. It also needs to be understood, as suggested by Olukoju, as part of the economic transformation that came with the post World War 1 boom and importation of textiles from abroad. Indeed, through further investigation, it may be possible to prove that trade in imported cloth during the 1920s served to intensify the practice of *asọ ebi* by introducing certain forms of textile materials from Europe and Asia.

By the 1920s there was an increasing importation of clothes from Britain and also an increasing interest in the money economy, with Britain de-emphasizing the barter trade. This process stimulated a great interest in the social uses of cloth by Nigerians. Improved transportation also served to stimulate economic growth and led to concentration of commercial activity and progressive differentiation between port sites with respect to their suitability for land/sea interchange. By the First World War the first phase of railway construction in West Africa had

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<sup>164</sup> Tunde Akinwumi had remarked elsewhere that "*asọ ebi* custom started in the 1920s with few bereaved members who were using the uniform hand-woven fabrics for easy recognition in church congregation," see Tunde Akinwumi, "The Commemorative Phenomenon of Textile, p. 172; Tunde Akinwumi and Elisha P. Renne, "Commemorative Textiles," p.131; Ajayi Kolawole Ajisafe, *Abeokuta Centenary and its Celebration* (Lagos: Ife-Olu Printing Works, 1931).

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, p.21

<sup>166</sup> Tunde Akinwumi and Elisha P. Renne, "Commemorative Textiles," p.131.

been completed. Indirect European contact had been replaced by well defined colonial territories which were increasingly called upon to be economically self- supporting.

After the First World War the rail link with the Niger River had extended to the hinterlands and this stimulated economic growth between Southern Nigeria and Lagos. From 1926 onwards the port facilities were greatly extended particularly to handle the ever increasing cloth import. The first port the British gained in Nigeria was Lagos, in 1861. It was through this port that the majority of the textile materials were imported and this draws attention to the importance of Lagos in the practice of *asọ ebì*.<sup>167</sup> It is possible that this increasing textile trade must have propelled a widespread interest in *asọ ebì* among *egbe* in early twentieth century Lagos. However, *egbe* in the late twentieth century took a different turn and so does its accompanying *asọ ebì*.

Important functions which the *egbe* provided in the nineteenth century included assistance to members during burial ceremonies.<sup>168</sup> McIntosh notes that when a family member died, a woman would be assisted by the rest of the *Egbe*. They helped her perform tasks that needed to be done as well as to make the occasion grand with dancing, singing, feasting.<sup>169</sup> During the colonial period, the *egbe* and other women's associations were based upon various sorts of common interests.<sup>170</sup> Though they sometimes termed themselves "clubs," "societies," or "unions," they combined sociable activities with other functions, and they had a basic *egbe* organizational structure and uniform.<sup>171</sup> This uniform is called *asọ ebì*.

By the 1950s, associations had become unlimited and could in fact be based on women engaged in any form of work including market women, craft women, and other church associations. McIntosh observes that "even organizations whose functions were primarily economic remained important in social terms too."<sup>172</sup> She notes that in 1956, Mabel Aduke Williams of Lagos was delighted when her fellow Obalande market women turned up for the party she threw for her 50<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> The next port the British gained was Akassa, the base of the Royal Niger Company. The promulgation of the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1890 brought all the other ports on the Nigerian seaboard under British control. The headquarters of the Protectorate was at Old Calabar, and vice-consulates were established at Old Opobo, Bonny, New Calabar, Brass, Forcados, and Benin River. See Babafemi Ogundana, "Oscillating Seaport Location in Nigeria" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 1972, pp. 110-121, p.115; David Hilling, "The Evolution of the Major Ports of West Africa," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 135, No. 3, 1969, pp. 365-378; p.370.

<sup>168</sup> Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, p.210.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, p.210.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, p.211.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, p.211.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, p.211.

birthday, complete with several live bands.<sup>173</sup> The women were all dressed in “raki raki – a type of purple woolen wrapper and headties... and how impressive they looked while dancing!”<sup>174</sup> That all the women were dressed in a similar type and colour of dress needs further exploration, as this could only imply the uniformed code known as *asọ ebì*. It suggests that the friendship network of Williams already had an *asọ ebì* dress code that identified members.

Moloye remarks that members of an *egbe* association come together during celebrations, be it a funeral, a naming, a chieftaincy or a house warming, and that it is a common feature for members of an *egbe* to dress uniformly on such occasions. The wearing of similar clothing or *asọ ebì* apparently served to heighten the positive good-feeling of individual association.<sup>175</sup> For example, Bayo Adetunji remarks that members of an *egbe* believe in the spirit of love and togetherness and this is always pursued through *asọ ebì*.<sup>176</sup> “During the end of year party of Ijebu Union in Lagos in 1962, all of us dressed in *asọ ebì* and we pursued a single mission of love and unity.”<sup>177</sup>

Likewise, during the birthday celebration of Chief Olufemi Akerele of Lagos Island in 1957, “there were more than 4 sets of *asọ ebì* groups who had attended.”<sup>178</sup> The first set according to Johnson Okediji was worn by his immediate family, the second and third by his first and second wife’s families, while the fourth was by friends and well wishers. Okediji observed that Chief Akerele provided all these *asọ ebì* uniforms free to everyone. This was a means of demonstrating his magnanimity in being able to afford both the cloth and food for all who attended the birthday ceremony. As will be argued in Chapter 4, this practice of providing free *asọ ebì* for most public events by the rich tended to decline in the 1980s and 1990s due to economic hardships occasioned by the Structural Adjustment Programme.

From the 1940s onwards certain women were members of organizations based upon waged employment. When Mrs. Bolaji Odunsi was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Lagos in 1946, “a long and solemn procession, led by members of the Lady Worker’s Union,” went from her residence to the church. Some nurses joined unions, while in Ekiti North, midwives and nurses

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p.211.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, p.211.

<sup>175</sup> Moloye, O. “Traditional High Fashion in Transition” in S.N.Lawal, M.N.O.Sadiku, and A. Dopamu, (eds), *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture* (Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc., 2004).

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Bayo Adetunji, Lagos, February 10, 2011.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Bayo Adetunji, Lagos, February 10, 2011.

<sup>178</sup> Johnson Okediji, “A worthy Celebration,” *Fame Magazine*, Lagos, 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1957, p.10.

had local “councils” that protected their interests. It is possible that in most of these friendship organizations the use of *aso ebi* might have already been popular then. For example, a show of solidarity was seen among the friendship networks of Miss Mojisola Olowu of the Bata Shoe Company in Lagos during her (Olowu’s) 23rd birthday anniversary. A photograph of the party – which took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1966 at 68, Tokunboh Street Lagos – shows that Olowu and her colleagues were dressed in the same design and colour of *aso ebi* uniform.<sup>179</sup>

Furthermore, on Saturday 16 August, 1965, officers and other members of the Oshodi Tapa Descendants Union gave a party in honour of Mr. Abiola Oshodi, on his appointment as Director in the Federal Ministry of Housing and Surveys. A photograph published on page six of the *Daily Times* newspaper on August 21 1965, shows that guests were dressed in the same uniform.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore on page 20 of *Daily Mirror* Newspaper of April 20, 1957, Dele Oluwa commenting on the weekend celebration of the newly wedded couple Bunmi and Mathew Smith, notes that Bunmi’s colleagues in the Ibuza Progressive Club, Lagos Branch, wore a red velvet *aso ebi*.<sup>181</sup> They “were so gorgeously attired in the red *aso ebi* that they became the cynosure of all eyes.”<sup>182</sup> Similarly, in *Daily Mirror* of May 5, 1957 Keyinde Dim reported that a wedding between one Mrs Kemi and Yinka Folawiyo was marked by a dazzling and colourful celebration that included “*aso ebi* uniformed friends and well wishers.”<sup>183</sup> Dim praised this group for “their unique uniformed dress styles.”<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, “it was already becoming fashionable to dress in such unique *aso ebi* if one desired one’s ‘celebration’ to appear in some of the few Dailies as at the 1950s. That was when people competed with such attires as *aso ebi*.”<sup>185</sup>

By the 1950s, Lagos had become a nexus of mobility and social and cultural changes were brought about by its new status as the capital of Nigeria. Western education and increasing levels of Christianisation were prominent aspects of these changes. Colonial administration supported the activities of the missionaries and helped them establish primary and secondary schools based on government guidelines. The “mission schools intended to use education primarily to advance the course of Christianity, and thus initially focused on training men for services in the ministry

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<sup>179</sup> See *Daily Times* Newspaper, Monday, Lagos, April 25, 1966, p.8. See the photograph published on page 8.

<sup>180</sup> *Daily Times* Newspaper, Tuesday 21 August 1965, Lagos, April 25, 1966, p.8.

<sup>181</sup> Dele Oluwa, *Daily Mirror*, Monday, April 20, 1957, p.15; For further reportage on *aso ebi* see *Daily Mirror*, May, 5 1957, p.10; May 25 1957, p.12; June 7, 1958, p.17 and July 10, 1958, p.23.

<sup>182</sup> Dele Oluwa, *Daily Mirror*, Monday, April 20, 1957, p.15.

<sup>183</sup> Keyinde Dim, *Daily Mirror*, Monday, April 20, 1957, p.15.

<sup>184</sup> *Daily Mirror*, Lagos, May, 5 1957.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with Pa Ademola Aderemi (89 years old) 31 Herbert Macauley Street, Yaba, Lagos, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

as catechists, lay readers, Sunday school teachers, with modest government input.”<sup>186</sup> By this period, sartorial politics were becoming intertwined with anti-colonial nationalism. In the early 1950s “cultural nationalists displayed their critique of colonialism by shedding Victorian dress and recommitting to ‘traditional’ Yoruba dress.”<sup>187</sup>

What was happening throughout British West African colonies, including Nigeria, “was of course the assumption of African styles of clothing as ceremonial formal wear – and later the incorporation of African cloth and dress styles into the repertoire of fashion designers.”<sup>188</sup> The only way I have been able to garner evidence of the use of *asọ ebì* among associations during this period is through some of the photographs in newspapers and the mention of ‘uniform dressing’ by the authors who do not necessarily identify the name of such uniform dressing as *asọ ebì*. For example, one of these numerous women’s associations whose photographs reflected the use of *asọ ebì* in the early twentieth century was the Abeokuta Women’s Union (AWU).<sup>189</sup> Formed in 1946, AWU’s president was Mrs. Ransome-Kuti who had by then imbibed a nationalist consciousness that made her dress only in Yoruba attire since the 1940s.<sup>190</sup> Judith Byfield notes that Ransome-Kuti’s position did not affect her sartorial attitude; instead she sought equality with the people she represented through dress and language. Her dress was always made up of Yoruba style, consisting of *gele* (head-tie), *iro* (wrapper), and *buba* (blouse). During her dealings with colonial authorities on behalf of AWU, she spoke in Yoruba and her words were translated into English.<sup>191</sup> The AWU’s policy on dress suggests that its leadership wanted to visually reflect internal unity and oneness,<sup>192</sup> two qualities to which *asọ ebì* wearers

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<sup>186</sup> Dele Oluwa, p.15.

<sup>187</sup> Judith Byfield, “Dress and politics.”

<sup>188</sup> Robert Ross, “Clothing: A Global History,” p. 128.

<sup>189</sup> See the photograph in Judith Byfield’s article, “Dress and politics in Post-World II Abeokuta (Western Nigeria),” in Jean Allman (ed), *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p.36-43. Another organization similar to AWU in Lagos was the Lagos Women’s League (LWL, founded 1901), the Women’s Part (WP, founded 1944), and Lagos Women’s Market Association (LWMA). G. O. Olusanya observes that Madam Alimotu Pelewura, leader of the LWMA gained the support of both the LWL and WP in a campaign protesting the imposition of price control measures during the Second World War. The LWL was led by Charlotte Obasa, which promoted health education, more employment opportunities for educated girls, better conditions for female nurses and government workers, more girls’ schools, and a better standard of living for Africans in general, see G.O. Olusanya, “Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa” in Bolanle Awe, (ed.), *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* (Lagos and Ibadan, 1992), pp. 55, 72.

<sup>190</sup> Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti belonged to a new generation of the intelligentsia that emerged in the early twentieth century Nigeria. Mother of the Late Afro Beat legend, Fela Onikulapo-Kuti, she channelled her energies towards the insipient call for nationalism and independence in the fourth decade of the twentieth century Nigeria. A strong advocate of the attainment of Western education as a criterion for liberation of the Nigerian nation from the colonialists, she was educated at the Abeokuta Grammar School and the Wincham Hall School for Girls in England. She, together with her husband, Rev. I. O. Ransome-Kuti, was founding member of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the leading nationalist organisation in the 1940s. Judith Byfield observes that “as a well travelled part of the new intelligentsia that emerged in early twentieth century Lagos, she was equally comfortable in Yoruba attire.” See Judith Byfield, “Dress and politics in Post-World II Abeokuta (Western Nigeria),” in Jean Allman (ed), *Fashioning Africa: power and the politics of dress* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp.36-43.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, p.42.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, p.42.

aspire. It was the organisation's policy to use a cheap uniform of ordinary white cotton, stipulated for everybody to use as *asọ ebi* uniform.

The aim of this cheap material was to discourage elaborate and expensive clothes, and it would not require added expenditure. Byfield remarks that photographs of women at AWU gatherings show that all of them wore the same article of Yoruba dress.<sup>193</sup> She observes that the aim for moderate dressing through cheap uniforms helped to achieve certain levels of uniformity. Again in addition to imbuing the women with a sense of sartorial equanimity, it also “rendered the diverse group of women into visual equals.”<sup>194</sup> In this context *asọ ebi* could be seen as something that is imposed when an organization decides to adopt a particular style, and the sewing of a uniform was an antidote to social class and divisions instituted through Western dress during colonialism.

Commenting on this gesture by AWU, Phyllis Martin remarks that “during the colonial period, some women might wear European dress in public but developing a uniform dress code among the association's members was one way in which women blurred divisions and helped to empower themselves collectively.”<sup>195</sup> It does not mean that the same thing applies to other friendship associations or other organizations. Indeed the manner of usage varies as an organization or association might choose a particular colour, and allow members to buy different textile materials and sew the uniforms in their different styles. One major pitfall in Byfield's article (which has continually recurred in most other studies on Yoruba social issues) is an obvious circumvention of the phrase “*asọ ebi*.” This has no doubt contributed to a process of dehistoricization of a crucial aspect of Yoruba dress history that we refer to much more widely now as *asọ ebi*. The fact that the photo to which Byfield refers had hundreds of members of the AWU clothed in the same colour and fabric of head-tie and dress material, and yet this fails to get mention, again suggests that authors do not recognize *asọ ebi* as worthy of study.

In the AWU, it is important to recognize a new dimension to the use of *asọ ebi*. In this context, *asọ ebi* is underlined by a sense of equality through a compulsory enforcement of the same quality and design of dress materials for everyone. In this way, moderation helped the members

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>195</sup> Phyllis Martin, ‘Afterword’, in Jean Allman (ed), *Fashioning Africa: power and the politics of dress* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 228.

not only to nurture unity but also to remind them of their shared goals and aspirations.<sup>196</sup>

Contrary to this, the present usage of *asọ ebi* allows members, in most instances, to invent their own designs. In doing so, differentiation, inequality and competition are now increasingly invoked.

What can be observed from the above records is that *asọ ebi* was more manifest among women's organizations or *egbe*. It almost seems that it was an exclusive practice for women and not men. Familusi observes that buying *asọ ebi* is not essentially gender driven but it does seem that women are more predisposed to appear in uniform than men.<sup>197</sup> However, there is a little evidence of men's age grades adorned in *asọ ebi* as can be seen from Robin Poynor's 1980 study of the use of traditional textiles in Owo, a Yoruba community in Western Nigeria. According to Poynor, "The *ugbama* is that age group just under those who have reached retirement age. They play the most noticeable and active role in the *Igogo* festival, performing public dances and rituals at intervals during the seventeen-day period."<sup>198</sup> I was able to identify the use of *asọ ebi* by the *Ugbama* from Poynor's remark that "they often wear identical outfits of modern imported fabric." However, at the climax of the festival, when the entire age group silently marches in single file from the palace and across town to the sacred forest of *Oronshen*, they are dressed in a variety of black, blue, and white striped *Ipanmeta*, large pieces of traditional women's weave composed of three broad strips sewn together (Figure 1). These are draped across the body and over one shoulder in a toga effect.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>197</sup> O.O. Familusi, "The Yoruba Culture of *asọ ebi* (group uniform) in Socio-ethical Context," *Lumina*, Vol. 21, No.2, October 2010.

<sup>198</sup> Robin Poynor, "Traditional Textiles in Owo, Nigeria" *African Arts*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Nov., 1980), pp. 47-51, p. 88.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, p. 88.



Figure 1. Men of the Ugbama age group wear *aso ebi* (uniform) and file through town on the next-to-last day of the seventeen-day Igogo festival, 1980. Source: Robin Poynor.

It is important to note that in the early twentieth century membership of *egbe* (age grades) such as Ugbama in Yoruba society was not coercive, yet failure to join would be regarded as unusual and even suspicious.<sup>200</sup> It follows that there could have been some elements of subtle compulsion attached to it. N. A. Fadipe comments in support of this that “although membership in an *egbe* was not compulsory in traditional Yoruba society, it was the rule and not the exception to belong to one.”<sup>201</sup> During preparations for marriage, male *egbe* members accompanied their fellow candidate on formal visits to his father-in-law and offered him gifts and assistance during the marriage. Such gifts and help were also expected to be reciprocal when other members had similar events.<sup>202</sup> This confirms Marcel Mauss’ assertion – as will be echoed in subsequent chapters – that every gift is governed by a law of reciprocal transaction.<sup>203</sup> When a woman is married it was “members of her *egbe* (childhood friends) who join her in chanting the *ekun iyawo* (bridal chants)... and who accompany her to the house of the groom.”<sup>204</sup>

<sup>200</sup> Ade Fajana, “Age group in Yoruba traditional society” *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 98 (September-November, 1968), 232-39, p.232.

<sup>201</sup> Cited in Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 210.

<sup>202</sup> Ade Fajana, “Age group in Yoruba traditional society,” p.237.

<sup>203</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. The form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (NY, WW Norton, 1990 1954).

<sup>204</sup> Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, p.210.

Subsequent chapters in this thesis will explore how such childhood friendships have been transformed in present-day settings in the city.

By the 1970s, one can argue that friendship was beginning to be shaped by a more indeterminate structure of human interactions, and increasingly influenced by an amorphous city arrangement. Under the umbrella of *asọ ebi* there emerges an undefined friendship network that has defied the type of categorization ascribed to the eighteenth or nineteenth century Yoruba *egbe*. Through an evolving sociality, and made more complex by migration, urbanization and ‘globalisation,’ the city has moulded and redefined concepts of friendship such that the old traditional models of *egbe* have been dismantled. In the face of such dismantling however, Ade Fajana identifies the emergence of a new form of friendship network in the twentieth century, with the decline of the traditional age grade (*egbe*) system. Such forms of friendship include youth organizations, co-operative societies and church *egbe* (associations).

Jeremy Seymour Eades, writing on *egbe* in 1980, notes that “the age grades, title associations and traditional religious cults have in most towns either gone into decline or disappeared and their social functions taken over by the more recently-formed *egbe* which are found in nearly every town.”<sup>205</sup> In the two Yoruba towns of Igbeti and Ogbomosho, the most important of these *egbe* are based on religion, and a large proportion of the people in the town belong to one or other of them.<sup>206</sup> Eade’s mention of *egbe* based on religion again recalls earlier accounts by Akinwumi and Renne and Olukoju of the origins of *asọ ebi* among early twentieth century churches in Yorbaland. This parallel suggests that indeed *asọ ebi* might have been a practice that was popularized by the church. Although speculations point to its origins among pre-colonial age grades and traditional religious cults, it is also possible that this might have influenced its import into the early churches established by the locals themselves rather than the missionaries. Further research is needed on this.

In the late 1970s, an *egbe* usually started as a small informal group of friends from the same neighbourhood, of the same age, sex and religion.<sup>207</sup> Some of these developed into more formal organizations with a name, a larger membership, and elected officials. They hold regular

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<sup>205</sup> Jeremy Seymour Eades, *The Yoruba Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.61; for more on Yoruba *egbe* see also Kenneth Little, “Some Traditionally Based Forms of Mutual Aid in West African Urbanization,” in *Ethnology*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April, 1962), pp. 197-211.

<sup>206</sup> Jeremy Seymour Eades, *The Yoruba Today*, p.61.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid*, p.61.

meetings, arrange dances and choose a particular type of cloth as their uniform (*asọ ebi*) during religious festivals and rites of passage.<sup>208</sup> A person's closest friends are often members of the same *egbe*.<sup>209</sup> By the late 1970s, increasing urbanization occasioned by the oil boom gave rise to what was known as “*occupational egbe*.”<sup>210</sup> By this period in Ogbomoso, for instance, there are over thirty of these, covering both market trade and the crafts, and ranging from tailors' and photographers' associations to cloth-sellers and the makers of local soap.<sup>211</sup> It is within this new emergence of *egbe* that McIntosh again identifies forms of what she calls “contemporary *egbe*” (association) in the cities. Like Eades, McIntosh recognizes the use of *asọ ebi* in these associations. Although her book mentions “uniformed dressing”, it does not emphasize their precise role. She writes: “When an *egbe* went out as a group, its members generally wore distinctive attire – the same fabric or colour of clothing, the same style of dress, or at least a similar head tie – to demonstrate the size and standing of their association. (See the cover illustration for a recent example).”<sup>212</sup>

It is remarkable that McIntosh directs readers to her cover page (see Figure 2) which has a photograph of women dressed in *asọ ebi*, but does not even use the common Yoruba name for such practices. While her book entitled *Yoruba Women, Work and Social Change* is an elaborate exposition of the historical and contemporary development of Yoruba women, and recognizes uniformed dressing as an essential aspect of Yoruba women's social life, it thus does not highlight *asọ ebi* as an ultimate culmination of such sartorial uniformity in the women's organization. However, the contemporary signification of her study shows how the *egbe* provided an “outlet for the Yoruba love of sociability, eagerness to gain group identities, and pleasures in wearing fine clothing on special occasions.”<sup>213</sup>

Under the new conditions of *asọ ebi* practices today, such notions as a “Yoruba love of sociability” might not be appropriate if imported into the modern city phenomenon of *asọ ebi*. I have explained elsewhere how the practice of *asọ ebi* is identified more closely with Nigerian culture as a whole than with ‘Yoruba culture’ per se in contemporary Nigeria. Again I shall seek to clarify my use of terms such as ‘Yoruba’ in this study. The present practice of *asọ ebi* in urban Lagos has transgressed ethnic boundaries. While I deploy the concept of ‘Yoruba’ in tracking

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid, p.61.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, p.61.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, p.61.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, p. 211.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, p. 210.

the *aso ebi* genealogy in some ways, I do distance it from older anthropological frameworks of ethnicity in approaching a much more widespread city practice.

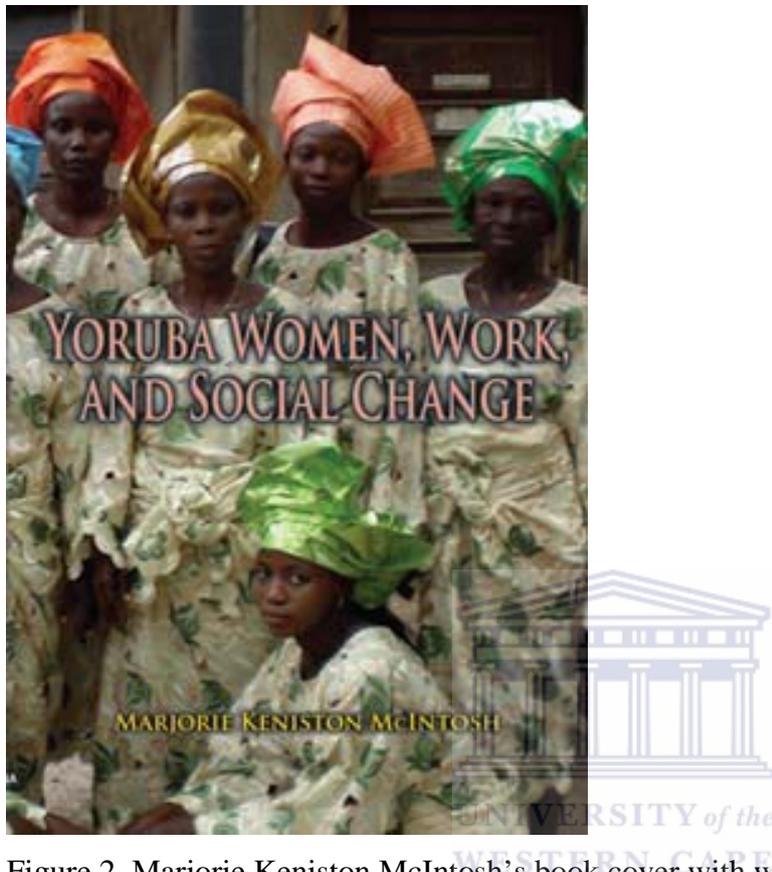


Figure 2. Marjorie Keniston McIntosh's book cover with women dressed in *aso ebi* (uniform), 2009.

It is important to observe that as at the early twentieth century that there are other forms of associations where *aso ebi* was employed. They were formed by extended family members, and town or ethnic groups who have moved to the city. The latter are commonly known as “Hometown” associations.”<sup>214</sup> Joseph Babalola identified the use of *aso ebi* in some of these hometown associations such as Otan-Ayegbaju Town Union and the Fiditi Progressive Union in the 1930s.<sup>215</sup> Otan-Ayegbaju is a town of approximately 125, 000 residents, 2023 miles northeast of Oshogbo. The union was founded in 1930 by a man who was a railway clerk in Lagos, together with other first-generation Lagosians from Otan,<sup>216</sup> but differed from other urban ethnic organizations in that its primary purpose was the development of the 'hometown' rather than the

<sup>214</sup> Lillian Trager, *Yoruba Hometowns: Community Identity, and Development in Nigeria* (Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, Inc.2001), p. 3.

<sup>215</sup> Joseph Babalola, *The Challenge of Egbe in Oyo Hometowns: 1900 – 1970* (Ibadan: The University Press, 2000), p.50.

<sup>216</sup> Olusanya also made this point that hometown associations were first organized by educated migrants in Lagos and the other large towns, from where they have gradually spread to other smaller towns, see Olusanya, "Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa" p. 58.

provision of burial, credit, and/or other services to new migrants.<sup>217</sup> Barkan et al remark that while the founding members of Otan-Ayegbaju Town Union were not part of an elite, they were geographically and socially mobile, being among the first Nigerians from their region to obtain missionary primary education, and subsequently among the first to migrate to Lagos.<sup>218</sup> During their 1930s end of the year meeting all members dressed in an *asọ ebì* uniform which has been purchased by and sewn by the leaders of the organization and distributed to members.<sup>219</sup> Bababola remarks that such uniforms were made available through a monthly levy charged to members for the upkeep of the organization.<sup>220</sup>

There is a very interesting observation made by Babalola among members of the Fiditi<sup>221</sup> Progressive Union (FPU) concerning the use of *asọ ebì*. Their pattern of *asọ ebì* use differed from that of Otan-Ayegbaju Town Union in that members are made to contribute a certain amount of money specifically for *asọ ebì*, unlike Otan-Ayegbaju Town Union where *asọ ebì* was bought with the members' monthly contribution. Babalola notes that in 1938, a few members of the Fiditi Progressive Union refused to pay for the *asọ ebì* levy for their end of year of party in Lagos. Their grievance was that the price was too exorbitant. These few members were ostracized from the group during the party.<sup>222</sup>

### Conclusion.

The image of Lagos which emerges from this chapter might differ from the image put forth in certain literature of nineteenth and twentieth century explorers, missionaries, colonial administrators and anthropologists. Whereas the latter might offer (albeit with a few exceptions) the popular mental images of colonial domination and native submission, the chapter presents far more complex relationship evident from the sartorial stylistics of Lagos life.

In this chapter, cloth is manifested as a form of politics in colonial Lagos. It has also served as a critical commodity of an emerging modernity. For example, by the nineteenth century, the Oba's

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<sup>217</sup> Joel Barkan, Michael McNulty and M. Ayeni cited in Joseph Babalola, *The Challenge of Egbe* p. 49.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, p.49.

<sup>219</sup> Joseph Babalola, *The Challenge of Egbe* p.50.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid*, p.52.

<sup>221</sup> Fiditi, a community of about 70,000 residents, is about 35 miles north of Ibadan. FPU was founded in 1934 by literate males from Fiditi who had been educated at missionary schools in the 1920s, and who had migrated to Lagos and other cities yet maintained contact with the town. (Compare this with previous remarks of how hometown associations were first formed by immigrants of Lagos). Most of these men held minor white-collar positions in the colonial civil service, the railways, hospitals, and other public institutions. As in Otan-Ayegbaju, the founding fathers of the union evolved into a close group of local notables which controlled the organization for the next four decades, See Joseph Babalola, *The Challenge of Egbe*.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*, p.52.

wardrobe had become supplemented with foreign elements such as satins, velvets, damasks and silks. These fabrics came in the event of the trade deals between the Oba and European merchants. Jane Guyer's and Eno Belinga's remark that "in the eighteenth and nineteenth century a great deal of imports in the slave and 'legitimate trades' came in uniform manufactured goods in large lots [including clothing materials],"<sup>223</sup> is suggestive of why the subsequent Oba's wardrobe became neither 'African' nor 'Western.'<sup>224</sup> While the Christians emulated the Europeans in dressing, the non-Christian locals expressed their repudiation of Christian influence by retaining their local dress. Thus there is varied sartorial agency, with some locals retaining their 'indigenous' robes, and the returned Brazilians and Sierra Leoneans inventing a new wardrobe through imitation and borrowing.

An identification of *aso ebi* use among Lagosians during different periods in the twentieth century provides a fresh vantage point for the subsequent investigation of *aso ebi* in Lagos. Whereas written texts are few on the subject of *aso ebi*, I have attempted to maximize these and other potential sources for uncovering its past. Few possibilities come to mind. For example, from the 1920s through the 1950s and 1960s *aso ebi* had already become so influential that it formed a subject of contention on the pages of such newspapers as *Nigerian Pioneer*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Times*, among others.

By the mid twentieth century, *aso ebi* cloth was deployed as an instrument of nationalist struggle by the AWU. Again, different Yoruba *egbe* (associations) had, by the early twentieth century, adopted *aso ebi* as their dress code. In an attempt to (re)construct *aso ebi*'s history, one suggestion points to the impact of Christian missionaries (as suggested by Akinwumi and Renne) and colonial administrators through uniforms. Another suggestion points to the 1920s post World War 1 accumulation that opened importation and consumption opportunities for textiles as suggested by Olukoju.<sup>225</sup> These textiles, in addition to faster sewing methods with sewing

<sup>223</sup> Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1995), pp. 91-120

<sup>224</sup> It is evident from the Oba's wardrobe that the idea of 'cultural authenticity' is no longer defined by what is African or Western. Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima propound the theory of 'cultural authentication' as a useful approach towards understanding the process of change in dress. They argue that 'cultural authentication' does not only presuppose an act of borrowing but an act of making a borrowed artifact culturally relevant to the borrower. Subsequent chapters might suggest that cultural authentication in *aso ebi* emerges when foreign textiles are made to assume new social role and meaning in the practice. See Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima, "Why do they call it Kalabari? Cultural Authentication and demarcation of Ethnic Identity, in Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima, *Dress and Ethnicity, Change across space and time* (Oxford and Washington, D.C.: Berg 1995).

<sup>225</sup> Laurens van der Laan also remarks that in the 1920s some Indian companies began to buy real textiles in India for shipment to West Africa. The business flourished such that in 1929 through European networks, Indian and West African trade were combined to form one organization, thus linking madras textiles with Lagos, Freetown, and some other major cities in West Africa. Van der Laan argues that if Indian firms had not pioneered the direct textile trade link between Asia

machines, probably might have facilitated the production and use of *asọ ebi* among increasing friendship networks in the rapidly urbanizing Lagos. However, while this chapter merely opens up these possibilities for possible (re)consideration in approaching the history of *asọ ebi* in Lagos, the next chapter undertakes a detailed and specific genealogy of how the textile economy has intensified the spread of *asọ ebi* in Lagos.



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and West Africa in the 1920's, "Europe" might never have combined the Indian and West African trade. See H. Laurens van der Laan "A Swiss Family Firm in West Africa: A. Brunnschweiler & Co., 1929-1959," *African Economic History*, No. 12, Business Empires in Equatorial Africa (1983), pp. 287-297.

## Chapter 2.

### ***ASO EBÌ*: CHEAPER CLOTHES IN A FLUCTUATING ECONOMY, 1960-2010.**

#### **Introduction.**

The political changes in Nigeria after the Second World War were accompanied by socio-cultural as well as economic changes. The urbanization that had accompanied colonial rule exploded in the 1950s to unprecedented levels. Lagos, which had an estimated population of 126,000 in 1931, expanded to over 274,000 by 1951, and by 1963 to over 675,000 people. Lagos was at the center of the urbanization dynamic that attended post-war Nigeria. As in previous decades, people flocked to cities for employment and other economic activities. But cities offered more than just hope for jobs: cities became cosmopolitan centers where transnational influences impacted on cultures, human lives and experiences. New migrants came to the city of Lagos and participated in the many aspects of the city's life.<sup>226</sup> Urban experience was beginning to be encountered in more self-aware terms. People became conscious not only about their family, social and friendship networks but the corresponding sartorial outlook that accompanied these. There is no doubt that *aso ebi* was at the core of this sartorial sense.

However, while Nigeria gained her independence in 1960, she needed to confront a range of economic challenges. The development planning initiatives of the post-war era did not enable progress to the level of achieving sustainable development for Nigeria. Very little industrial development had been undertaken, and the industries that did exist were still largely owned by European companies. In 1962, as part of the attempts to counter neo-colonial economic policies, the government introduced the First National Development Plan (FNDP) designed to run until 1968. This plan focused on investment in agriculture, indigenous manufacturing industries and education. Whereas colonial development plans were overwhelmingly interested in increasing agricultural output to boost the export economy, the independent government of the 1960s was far more concerned with the development of manufacturing industries. This was the basis for the establishment of Kaduna Textile Industry (KTI) in 1964. Until its demise, this industry was adjudged to be the biggest textile industry in Africa. Before its establishment, the cottage textile

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<sup>226</sup> Toyin Falola and Mathew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.155.

industry provided minimal textiles for the large number of people that engaged in *aso ebi* practice. This was the period when *aso oke*, the locally, hand-woven textile dominated *aso ebi* practice.

This chapter addresses the practice of *aso ebi* from the standpoint of the economics of the textile industry in Nigeria. The main aim is to understand the effects which the fluctuations in the Nigerian textile industry had on the practice of *aso ebi*. It also aims to understand the more recent impact of China on the Nigerian textile economy and the chain reaction this might have had on people's choice of *aso ebi* dress materials. As I explore the broader context in which the economy has affected *aso ebi* practice, an account of the experiences of some textile merchants in Oshodi and Balogun textile markets in Lagos might serve to illuminate some of the interstices in these dynamics.

I track, firstly, the production and use of locally-made textile materials – such as *aso oke* – and secondly, the impact of imported foreign materials such as *Ankara*,<sup>227</sup> *lace*, *George*,<sup>228</sup> among others, on *aso ebi*. In doing so, the chapter explores the relationship between culture and commerce and argues that the reason for the spread of *aso ebi* may not be explained only in

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<sup>227</sup> *Ankara* is another name given to 'African' wax prints. These wax prints were first hand-made in Indonesia before the nineteenth century and were eventually mass-produced by the Dutch in the nineteenth century. A long history of Dutch wax print fabric is discussed in subsequent sections of this thesis. In the 1990s, there was an adoption of *Ankara* as the name for these wax prints. The name *Ankara* must have been made popular especially when the Turks and China began making cheaper versions and imitations of the wax prints for a massive African consumption.

<sup>228</sup> 'George' is the square cotton Madras 'handkerchief' of about a yard long in stripes and checks made in South India in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries for the West African market and are traded by both Adeni Jews and West African women. Madras was of two categories; 'Real Madras' and 'Imitation Madras'. However 'Real Madras' was very popular in Lagos during the early twentieth century as a prestige cloth particularly among the Igbos and the Niger Deltans. During the fifteenth century, ship captains had conveyed cloths to West Africa along the Cape route but after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 a second route became available. By the 1890s, Madras cloth was exported to London and auctioned at the Cotton Exchange. Indian producers sold Madras to British trading firms with branches in West Africa. In the nineteenth century, European textile manufacturers, on recognizing the increasing market prospects of the Madras, began to produce similar Indian Madras on power looms. Some of the patterns produced by some European manufacturers in Germany and elsewhere were eventually known as 'imitation Madras'. In the late twentieth century 'George' or Madras were sold mainly in London side street shops and targeted at West African clientele. This is very similar to the imitation of the Java wax prints by the Europeans textile producers as will be shown in subsequent discussions. For more on 'George' See Sandra Lee Evenson, *A History of Indian madras manufacture and trade*, Unpublished PhD thesis, (University of Minnesota, 1994); Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima, "Kalabari funerals: celebration and display", *African Arts*, Vol. 21, 1987, pp.138-145, pp.87-88; Joanne Eicher, Tonye Erekosima, Martha Anderson, Philip Peek, *Fitting farewells: The Fine Art of Kalabari Funerals. Ways of the Rivers: Arts & Environment of the Niger Delta*. Los Angeles (UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History); Hazel, A. Lutz, "Design and Tradition in an India-West Africa trade Textile: Zari-Embroidered Velvets," Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Minnesota 2003); Hazel A. Lutz and Joanne Eicher, "Gold Embroidered Velvets: cultural aesthetic connections between Indian embroiderer's frame and West African dressed body" unpublished paper presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin, October, 1996; H. Laurens van der Laan. "A Swiss Family Firm in West Africa: A. Brunnschweiler & Co., 1929-1959," *African Economic History*, No. 12, Business Empires in Equatorial Africa (1983), pp.287-297.

terms of expressions of agency. One may need to take cognizance of the ubiquity of cheaper textile materials from China in this context, a result of late global capitalism.

### *Aso oke.*

*Aso oke* is one of the earliest forms of hand-woven textiles among the Yorubas of South western Nigeria and is used, among many other things, for *aso ebi*.<sup>229</sup> John Picton defines weaving as a simple process of interlacing a set of thread (warp and weft) at right angles to form a web or fabric.<sup>230</sup> The *Aso oke* fabric can be either warp or designed in weft-faced patterns. Many factors go into the design and weaving of *Aso- Oke* which, although not within the scope of this research, depends upon three variables: the nature and colour of fibers employed, the kinds of relationship between warp and the weft, which may be affected by the loom, and the possible methods of embellishing a fabric after manufacture.<sup>231</sup>

Basically, there are three major *Aso-Oke* types: *etu*,<sup>232</sup> *alaari*<sup>233</sup> and *sanyan*<sup>234</sup> with many variations, which are achieved with the use of extra weft brocading techniques. These variations are, however, identifiable by their patterns and colour which in effect inform their uses at a designated 'traditional' ceremony. Especially among Yoruba women, *aso oke* is generally held to be clothing material that is reserved for special occasions where dignified dressing is required.<sup>235</sup> Yoruba women use *aso-oke* in a number of ways: as a girdle (*oja*) to strap babies; wrapper (*iro*); head-tie (*gele*); blouse (*buba*) and shawl (*ipele*) or *iborun* which is usually hung

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<sup>229</sup> Most literatures could not identify the actual date of origin of *aso oke* but P.S.O. Aremu, has traced the history to the pre-colonial period before the introduction of any form of modern weaving technology in Nigeria. See P.S.O.Aremu, "Yoruba Traditional Weaving: Kijipa Motifs, Colour and Symbols," *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 140. 1982.

<sup>230</sup> John Picton, *Tradition, Technology and Lurex: some comments on Textile history and Design in West Africa* (Washington DC, National Museum of African Art, 1988), pp. 99-102.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, p.16.

<sup>232</sup> *Etu* is a special narrowband finely woven type of *aso oke* from indigo-dyed cotton which is deep blue-black in hue and dyed over a period of three years. For more explanation this see Joanne Bubolz Eicher, *Nigerian Handcrafted Textiles* (Ile Ife: University of Ife Press, 1976), p. 41.

<sup>233</sup> *Alari* is silk fibre dyed deep red and woven into narrowband strips to sewn into wrappers and *agbadas* for weddings and other festive occasions. See Joanne Bubolz Eicher, *Nigerian Handcrafted Textiles* (Ile Ife: University of Ife Press, 1976), p. 41.

<sup>234</sup> *Sanyan* is a type of khaki coloured *aso oke* weave of the Yoruba made from wild silk yarn known as *Anaphe*. Sometimes *sanyan* has lines of white mixed with it. Joanne Eicher notes that in some places the wild silk (*Anaphe*) is used for both warp and weft yarns and that Iseyin, Oyo, and Ondo specialize in weaving *sanyan* cloth. See Joanne Bubolz Eicher, *Nigerian Handcrafted Textiles* (Ile Ife: University of Ife Press, 1976), p. 41.

<sup>235</sup> See for example, P.S.O. Aremu, "Yoruba Traditional Weaving: Kijipa Motifs, Colour and Symbols," *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 140. 1982, pp. 3 and 6; A. Asakitikpi, "Function of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in south-western Nigeria," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* Vol. 16(1), 2007, pp. 101-115; Pat Oyelola "Everyman's guide to Nigerian Art," Lagos, *Nigerian Magazine*, 1980, p.132.

on the shoulder of the user. In Figure 1, for example, Mrs M.E. Alao, the social secretary of Osun State Union wore a complete *aso oke* ensemble to the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala Nite of Osun State Union in the United Kingdom and Ireland, in 2005. All the above uses of *aso oke* could be seen in her *aso oke* attire including *gele*, *buba* and *ipele*.

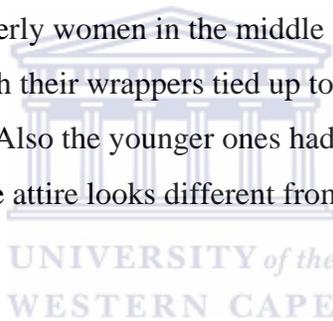


Figure 1. Mrs M.E. Alao, 2005.  
(Courtesy of Mrs M.E. Alao).



Figure 2.  
Bolaji Okoya's mother and other family members in *aso ebi* sewn from *aso oke* fabric. 2003.  
(Courtesy of Mrs Okoya, Lagos, 2009).

Yoruba men used *aso oke* in more distant times as work dress on their farms, besides social, religious and traditional ceremonies.<sup>236</sup> They wore a complete dress consisting of *sokoto* (trousers), *buba* (top), *agbada* (large embroidered flowing gown) and *fila* (cap). In the 1960s and up until the 1990s, *Aso-oke* was valued both as a wedding gift, and as a special gift for dignified people.<sup>237</sup> *Aso oke* has also been used for *aso ebi*. An example of this use in the early 1960s and more recent use is given in Figures 2 and 3. While Figure 2 shows the use of *aso oke* as *aso ebi* during the early 2000, Figure 3 shows its use as *aso ebi* in early 1960s. Figure 2 depicts the wedding of Bolaji Okoya and Pipolola on Thursday, 25 April, 2003, at the Muson Center, Lagos where the groom's mother and other family members wore *aso oke* as *aso ebi*. In this photograph what must be observed in their *aso oke* outfit is that everyone has all the complete parts of the attire, namely, *gele* (head-tie) *buba* (blouse) and *ipele* (shawl) without which it is usually assumed that *aso oke* is incomplete.<sup>238</sup> It could also be observed that the style of sewing differs according to age: while the elderly women in the middle and at the right-hand side of the image had more elaborate sleeves with their wrappers tied up to their abdomen, the younger ones had their sleeves sewn differently. Also the younger ones had a different collar and blouse with an abbreviated sleeve. Their entire attire looks different from those worn by the more elderly women.



The photo in Figure 3 again shows *aso oke* worn as *aso ebi* by Lagos women in 1960. Their style contrasts with the ones shown in Figure 2 and bears some parallel to J'D'Okhai Ojeikere's 1960s *aso ebi* photo in Figure 4. Both photos depict a uniformed group that was apparently responding to the fad of the 1960s miniskirt popularised by Mary Quant, among others. Ojeikere's photo also indicates that lace was in popular use as *aso ebi*. The women's blouses are made of lace materials. The connection *aso ebi* has with fashion at this point cannot be overemphasized. One can suggest that although *aso ebi* is seen as a form of 'cultural' practice, its miniskirt styles, nonetheless, might also suggest that fashion was loosening this "grip of culture which *aso ebi* has on the body."<sup>239</sup> What must be observed in these photos is the nature of

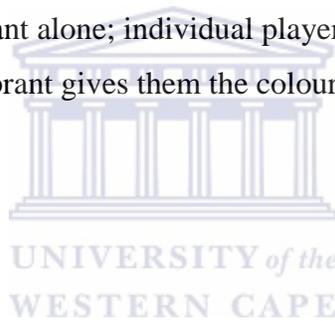
<sup>236</sup> P.S.O. Aremu, "Yoruba Traditional Weaving".

<sup>237</sup> See Clapperton and Amubode, cited in Ibid, p.133.

<sup>238</sup> Interview with Sade Omolara, a textile dealer at Oshodi Textile Market, Lagos, 23 April, 2010.

<sup>239</sup> Note my deliberately chosen italics from this statement which was used by Susan Bordo and cited in Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Dressing dangerously: Miniskirts, Gender Relations, and Sexuality in Zambia," in Jean Marie Allman, *Fashioning Africa: power and the politics of dress* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p.167.

their sewing which is very important for subsequent discussions in this thesis. There is still a rigid adherence to *asọ ebi*'s uniformity of colour and style. A strong obedience to this formal homogeneity perhaps shows that sartorial individualism was still in check. The dresses do not differ in hue; neither do the nature of dress materials and styles of sewing alter. The uniformity here is not in doubt. In Figure 4 not only the headscarves are the same, but the shoes, the bangles, and the necklaces are also similar. In subsequent chapters one might notice that in more recent *asọ ebi* practice these elements have changed and even the colours sometimes may no longer assume such strong uniformity in terms of the precise hues. The reason for this may be explained in terms of how the media has redefined contemporary life and living. Friends arrange for *asọ ebi* even in the internet and suggest the colours of the dress to be bought through email, Facebook, phone and other means.<sup>240</sup> While during the 1960s the only way to get *asọ ebi* colour code is for the celebrant to purchase it by her/himself, in recent times the purchase of *asọ ebi* is no longer limited to the celebrant alone; individual players buy separately, and sew their styles differently, as long as the celebrant gives them the colour code.<sup>241</sup>



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<sup>240</sup> Interview with Theodora Dike, Ojuelegba, Lagos, December 2010.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3.  
Unknown photographer, Lagos women in *aso ebi* sewn with *aso oke* material in 1960.  
(Courtesy of Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture).



Figure 4.  
 J.D'Okhai Ojeikere *aso ebi* photos, Lagos, 1960.  
 (Reproduced with permission of the photographer).

*Aso oke* is also used for religious purposes as *egungun* costume. *Egungun* is a type of masquerade attributed to an ancestral ritual among the Yoruba, which, in local perception, refers to 'masked men' who represent the spirits of the living dead.<sup>242</sup> *Egungun* costumes vary among communities. Some communities like the Oyo use *aso-oke* in elaborate costumes that fall in a long trail behind them. A new strip of *aso oke* is added to the *egungun* costume to enhance its beauty every year which implies that the age of an *egungun* can be calculated from the strips. *Aso-oke* is also used as a sacred cloth by the *Ogboni* society among the Ijebu-Yoruba. It is referred to as *itagbe*, an insignia of the cult of *Ogboni* people. It is used to cover some religious objects such as *ere-ibeji*, *osanyin*, *edan* and used as shrine decoration. The process of

<sup>242</sup> See Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare-God in Yoruba belief* (London: Longmans, 1962).

manufacturing *aso-oke* has been well documented and the consensus is that it followed a well-orchestrated pattern, while its usage is laced with honour and finesse.<sup>243</sup>

The attainment of Independence in Nigeria in 1960 was marked by a rising urban middle class which had its major concentration in Lagos. By this time also, encouraged by the nationalist consciousness, the local fashion industry such as *aso-oke* became associated with the rise of this new ‘middle-class’ elite that accompanied the late colonial expansion of cash incomes and increase in population and standard of living. Clothing from handwoven cloth – *aso oke* in particular – was adopted by wealthy urbanites as visible symbols of prosperity, status and pride in ethnic heritage.<sup>244</sup> The *aso oke* industry benefited from the self-motivated patronage of these wealthy urbanites.<sup>245</sup> Marion Johnson observes that the demands of such wealthy urbanites depends “partly on fashion, partly on political and religious attitudes and very little on price; indeed, any attempt to reduce prices might prove self-defeating, since part of the demand depends on the expensiveness of the product.”<sup>246</sup> Such prices, according to Ademola Adeyemi, determined the nature of *aso oke* used for *aso ebi* among individuals in urban Lagos:

By 1961 I had my child dedication at St Dominic Cathedral, Yaba Lagos and what I and my family wore as *aso ebi* then was an expensive *aso oke* made by my neighbor Iya Bose (now late) who was the only specialist around my neighbourhood in Yaba then. We contracted her and she took the measurement of my family, (my wife, myself, my little daughter, my son) and then my Mum and my Dad (both of them late) and then two of my sisters and then three of my friends. It was only few Lagosians who could afford to sew *aso oke* for *aso ebi* then for such number of people because *aso oke* was one of the most expensive dress materials. Again contrary to what is obtained presently the celebrants sew *aso ebi* free of charge for all the guests.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> J. Clarke, “Ilorin Weaving,” *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 14, (1938), pp.119-121; Kenneth C. Murray “Women’s weaving among the Yoruba of Omu-Aran in Ilorin province,” *Nigerian Field* Vol. 5(4): (1936), pp. 182-183; J. Bray “The organization of traditional weaving in Iseyin, Nigeria,” *African Arts* 35(3), (1968), pp. 271-280; J. Bray, “The economics of Traditional cloth production in Iseyin, Nigeria,” *Econ. Dev. Cult. Change*, Vol. 17, No.4, (1969); R. Poynor, “Trading textiles in Owo Nigeria,” *African Arts* Vol. 14, No.1, 1980, pp. 47-51; Elisha Renne, “The Decline of women’s weaving among the North East Yoruba *Textile History*. (1992); Elisha Renne “Traditional Modernity and the Economics of Handwoven cloth production in south-western Nigeria,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*. 45(4), 1997, pp. 773-792; E. B. Ojo, “Printing contemporary hand-woven fabrics (*aso-oke*) in south-western Nigeria,” *Design Issues* 23(2), 2007, pp. 31-39.

<sup>244</sup> Perani and Wolf, p.171.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid*, p.171.

<sup>246</sup> Marion Johnson, 1978, p.267.

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Pa Ademola Aderemi (89 years old) 31 Herbert Macauley Street, Yaba, Lagos, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

From Pa Adeyemi's comment it was obvious that as at the 1960s, notions of wealth were already being defined, to some extent, in sartorial terms. It shows that while the prestige realized during such occasions lay in the provision of free *asọ ebì* to guests, expensive *aso oke* resonates as a key symbol of the crisis between individual achievement and the definitions of wealth.

This draws us to the importance of *aso oke* during the 1960s. It also reminds us of how *aso oke* was associated with wealth among Lagosians then. It is possible to argue that, for many aspiring middle-class consumers as that time, the aesthetics and symbolic practices of *aso oke* embody desires for a future social rise through *asọ ebì*. It is evident that using *aso oke* as *asọ ebì* seems to weave together a set of desires for socially acceptable forms of prestige and for much-anticipated prosperity on a personal level.

J.D. Ojeikere's wedding photographs in Lagos and Ibadan in the 1960s show that *aso oke* was used as *asọ ebì* in just a few of his wedding photo archives. He said, "in some weddings and other activities that I photographed in the 1960s and 1970s rich people wore mainly *aso oke* as *asọ ebì*." Pointing to Figure 3, Ojeikere continues:

You can see that in this photo this type of *aso oke* was more preferred for *asọ ebì* in most Yoruba weddings. But it was mostly worn by the rich as the poor could not afford it because it is very expensive. Other ethnic groups did not like it so much as the Yorubas who incidentally associate it with wealth and class because of its exorbitant price.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Interview with J.D. Ojeikere, Lagos, March 10, 2010.



Figure 5.  
 J. D’Okhai Ojeikere *aso ebi* photos, Lagos, 1967.  
 (Reproduced with permission of the photographer).

The use of *aso oke* for *aso ebi* started declining through the 1980s and the 1990s because of the increasing influx of foreign textile materials. Again the negative impact of the economy made this decline more pronounced among city dwellers. However this decline did not erase the mark of wealth and prestige which people attach to *aso oke*. Most people I interviewed in Lagos consider the celebrants who use *aso oke* for *aso ebi* as rich, although they are believed to be ‘old fashioned.’ Akande told me that *Aso oke* is, in fact, seen as an ‘important cloth’.<sup>249</sup> ‘Important cloth’ is expensive, prestigious and culturally significant. As an important cloth *aso-oke* has no equivalent in the Yoruba textile inventory. It is the ultimate visual statement of family and ethnic pride. To wear *aso ebi* made of *aso-oke* strips, particularly the older patterns, is to proclaim links with the rich indigenous culture of the Yoruba.<sup>250</sup>

<sup>249</sup> Interview with Shola Akande.

<sup>250</sup> Interview with Olabisi Oluremi, 4 Lawanson Street, Surulere, Lagos, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

Olutayo and Akanle have established that, in present day Nigeria, *aso-oke* is, at best, surviving at the margins.<sup>251</sup> Similarly, Sade Omolara notes that by the early 2000s, *aso oke* became less popular as *aso ebi* instead it was replaced by lace materials imported from China.<sup>252</sup> What caused this decline, however, is worth investigating because it (*aso oke*) *ab initio* constituted the major dress used for *aso ebi* since the 1960s.

### **Decline of *Aso oke* use as *aso ebi*.**

The policies of the colonial government which sought markets for British goods at the expense of the indigenous textile industries in 1904 marked the beginning of the decline in the production and patronage of indigenous textile industries.<sup>253</sup> As enforced by Lord Lugard's legislation, from 1904 the monetization of trade conducted by barter became a widespread exercise.<sup>254</sup> The policy affected the pre-eminent value attached to textiles as a medium of barter. As the emphasis on bartered cloth waned, there was a major decline in the growth of the indigenous textile industries.<sup>255</sup> This decline was also abetted by smuggling activities along Nigeria coastal towns and land borders. Moreover, the introduction of cotton cloth and European-style garments in the early years of the 1900s changed the consumption patterns and created stiff competition for the indigenous textile industries.<sup>256</sup> The date of this stiff competition, although placed at about 1900 by Okeke, can actually be traced back to an earlier period. According to Folorunso Alakija, "during the last half of 1800s, export of locally woven fabrics to other parts of Nigeria and other countries were reduced by the large imports of printed cotton cloth from England which could be purchased more cheaply than hand-woven fabrics."<sup>257</sup> In addition, availability of fairly used cloth, known as *Okirika* or *aso Oyinbo* (White man's cloth) among Nigerians at large, had a negative impact on the indigenous textile production and dress traditions. Elisha Renne observes that factory printed cloth has extensive ranges of colours and designs; their weight is usually lighter, less cumbersome to sew, wear, and care for.<sup>258</sup> Because of this, imported textile materials

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<sup>251</sup> A. O. Olutayo and O. Akanle, "Aso-oke (Yoruba's hand woven textiles) usage among the youths in Lagos, South-western Nigeria," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* Vol. 1(3) pp. 062-069 July, 2009 Available online <http://www.academicjournals.org/ijasa>.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> C.S. Okeke, "Distinctiveness in West-African Textiles," *Nigerian Journal of Art*, Vol 4 nos1&2, 2005

<sup>254</sup> Marion Johnson, "The Cowrie Currencies of West Africa," *Journal of African History*, 11, 1 (1970), pp.17-49; Vol. 11, No. 3 (1970), pp.331-53.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, p.17.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, p.21..

<sup>257</sup> Folorunso Alakija, *Fashion: The African Connection* (Lagos: Rose of Sharon, 2001), p.20.

<sup>258</sup> Elisha Renne, "The Decline of women's weaving among the North East Yoruba," *Textile History*, Vol.1 No 5. (1992).

such as damasks, velvets, lace, satins and silks gained currency as highly-esteemed cloth while locally made textiles were abandoned.<sup>259</sup> In addition, the local technology of handspun fibre manufacture was unfavourably affected by the launch of foreign yarns for use in the indigenous textile production. This also impacted on the social and economic life of the weavers.<sup>260</sup> From 1965 onward, *aso-oke* became softer with a lustrous look, which was actually missing in the traditional ones. *Aso oke* was thus injected with new designs, which encouraged weavers to imitate them, creating lace designs by making holes and weft flow on woven fabrics as demanded by their new patrons.

In support of Judith Perani and Norma Wolff, Bankole Ojo remarks that from 1990 to the present date only a few weavers of *aso oke* produced the *etu* and *sanyan* type of *aso oke* using traditional hand-spun yarn.<sup>261</sup> For instance, *alaari* types of *aso-oke* are no longer produced in 'Iseyin,' the acclaimed home of *aso-oke* because the vegetable dyes are no longer processed.<sup>262</sup> Although a few traditional weavers of *aso oke* were quick to adapt to the new change in modern weaving technology by accepting the fibre and industrial dyes introduced by the British trading firms during the colonial era, this did not however salvage the declining interest in *aso oke*. Perani and Wolff note the attitude of people towards the use of *aso-oke* at ceremonies as negative while some educated elites among the Yoruba refer to this tradition of *aso-oke* use as 'old, local, and uncivilized.'<sup>263</sup> By the 1990s, this declining interest in *aso oke* had affected its use as *aso ebi*, and there emerged an attempt by tailors to inject a new repertoire of designs in line with contemporary dictates and innovation in both fashion and patterns. Despite this effort, however, the wearing of what Perani and Wolff call 'anti-fashion' cloth and clothing is associated with *aso oke* and reserved for events of cultural importance, such as marriages and funerals, and is worn by those people who value their 'Yorubanness.'<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Elisha Renne, *Cloth that does not die. The meaning of cloth in Bunu Social life* (Seattle: University of Washington.1995), pp.18:12.

<sup>260</sup> Ojo, B "An appraisal of weaving cottage industry in South-Western Nigeria," in *Potentials of Visual Arts and Creativity*, (Lagos: CCAF Publication, 2006), p.112.

<sup>261</sup> Ojo, B "An appraisal of weaving cottage industry in South-Western Nigeria," in *Potentials of Visual Arts and Creativity* (Lagos: CCAF Publication, 2006), p.112; See also, Judith Perani, Norma Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and art Patronage in Africa* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1999), p.179.

<sup>262</sup> Judith Perani, Norma Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and art Patronage in Africa* , Ibid, p.179.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, p 174.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, p.175.

By 2000, in some parts of Lagos, *etu*, *alaari* and *sanyan* which adhere to the older patterns of caliphate cloth, continue to be worn by kings, chiefs, priests of the indigenous cults, and by individuals who appreciate the traditions of the past.<sup>265</sup> Fashionable cloth and dress, on the other hand, is linked to social mobility and the rapid social change that threatens the retention of indigenous values. To be fashionable in *aso oke*, an *aso ebi* group can wear tailored *aso oke* clothing sewn in the style of European dress; distinctive creations from fashion designers using a combination of *aso oke* dress materials and recently imported textiles. The individuals who wear fashionable *aso ebi* style are marked as those who fully participate in the modernising society. This society is one that has fully integrated into the cosmopolitan culture seen in the combination of local textile material of *aso oke* and imported textiles.

Interestingly, therefore, the importation of the modern yarns did not have a completely negative effect on *aso oke* because a number of the local producers (and consumers) have embraced the new technology. This has impacted on the structure, visual and textural qualities of *aso oke*. Babalola Ojo however identifies three main problems confronting the use of *aso oke*, which include the exorbitant price of raw materials, and the limitation in traditional and contemporary uses and modernization.<sup>266</sup> The limitation in fashion use is probably due to the hard, stiff and heavy nature of the fabric compared to the factory printed 'Ankara' fabrics. The effect of this decline was visible on *aso ebi* practice as most people who were using *aso oke* switched to the more ubiquitous, cheaper imported textiles. As A. O. Olutayo and O. Akanle observe, "the use of *aso-oke* declined following the acceptance of *ankara* as *aso-ebi* in place of *aso-oke* which was traditionally used among the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria."<sup>267</sup> The new *Ankara* (African wax print) differs technically from *aso-oke* due to the following: it is mass produced, it can accommodate portraits and graphics as motifs in the surface design, and in addition it is also cheaper than the locally produced *aso-oke*.

In a sociological study carried out on the use of *aso oke* among the youths in Lagos in 2009, A. O. Olutayo and O. Akanle showed that *aso oke* was no longer popular. Instead their findings showed that it has been replaced by *Ankara* imported from China and other places. According to them:

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid, p.175.

<sup>266</sup> Ojo, B. "An appraisal of weaving cottage industry," pp. 103-112.

<sup>267</sup> A. O. Olutayo and O. Akanle, "*Aso-oke* (Yoruba's hand woven textiles)," p.12.

From the distribution of responses, it is deducible that *aso-oke* is not popular within the fashion matrix of the youths. An attempt was made to explore reasons for this. Patterns of responses reveal a potpourri of factors that were informative. Popular reasons given by the youths about their unimpressive level of usage of *aso-oke* are heaviness, expensiveness, colour vastness, obsolescence, lack of/insufficient advertisements and outright negative sentiments based on weak textile knowledge. While some of these findings -heaviness and colour vastness/variety, for example - are not new, together with others, they shed new lights on the current fate of the artifact.

Although the above study records low usage among the youths in Lagos, according to *aso oke* merchant Shola Akande, it is equally noticeable that “even among the elderly population *aso oke* does not command much patronage.”<sup>268</sup> Since 2000, its usage as *aso ebi* has recorded minimal patronage even among the rich at social events because most of them do not consider it fashionable any longer.<sup>269</sup> Oluwafemi Olawoyin recollects, “Our family made use of *aso oke* as *aso ebi* during my mum’s 50<sup>th</sup> year birthday in 1990 but during her 70<sup>th</sup> year birthday in January 2010 none of us accepted to use the *aso oke* again, partly because it is expensive and also we don’t seem to like it again.”<sup>270</sup> Olawoyin, a textile merchant in Balogun, Lagos, speaks further: “what you must observe is that during the 1960s up to late 1990s *aso oke* was almost like one of the greatest indicators of wealth in most ceremonies, so you discover that even the poor aspired to use it as *aso ebi* even though it is beyond their financial reach.”<sup>271</sup> A.B. Agbadudu and F.O. Ogunrin remark that during the late 1990s friends, close acquaintances and relatives purchase and hand over *aso-oke* to individuals as *aso ebi* towards up-coming ceremonies, with a tacit understanding that those whom they give would pay for the *aso-oke* whenever they can.<sup>272</sup> “Even where they do not pay, a celebrant enjoys having large crowd turn out in her chosen *aso-ebi*; at times she has to pester them for payment, months after the event.”<sup>273</sup> Again Agbadudu and Ogunrin’s observation runs contrary to the earlier remark by Pa Adeyemi where *aso oke* was distributed free to guests in the 1960s. A possible suggestion for this development could again be given in economic terms. Perhaps, the shrinking of Nigeria’s economy in the wake of the military dictatorship in the late 1990s severely affected people’s gestures of generosity.

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<sup>268</sup> Interview with Shola Akande, 4, Adeniji Adele Street, Lagos Island, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2011.

<sup>269</sup> Interview with Oluwafemi Olawoyin, Textile merchant, Lagos, April 4 2010.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> A.B. Agbadudu, F.O. Ogunrin, “Aso-Oke: A Nigerian classic style and fashion fabric” *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, Vol. 10 Issue 1, pp.97-113.

<sup>273</sup> A.B. Agbadudu, F.O. Ogunrin, “Aso-Oke: A Nigerian classic style and fashion fabric.” This statement is a testament to my further inquiries on the reasons why individuals desire large crowds to adorn *aso ebi* during their events. Such attitudes will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 3 of this study.

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the decline in the use of *aso oke* as *aso ebi*, *aso-oke* was retained only as a cap (for men), and blouse called *buba* in Yoruba, head tie called *gele*, and shawl called *ipele* in Yoruba, (for women). From the late 1980s also, people began to sew English-styled dresses from *aso-oke*: skirt suits for ladies, trousers with short-sleeved jacket for men and a host of other atypical styles.<sup>274</sup> By 2004, the fabric was dropped from being used as a complete garment for *aso-ebi* and even for the cap, head tie (*gele*) and shawl (*ipele*), and was replaced by damask and Swiss nylon head-ties (the latter specifically for women).<sup>275</sup> By incorporating English-styled dresses one can say that this is a point where *aso oke* evolves as fashion. It is no longer seen as a static, unchanging practice but something that alters and transforms with the changing times.

Further decline in *aso oke* use for *aso ebi* was observed during particular ‘traditional’ performances. For example, Olutayo and Akanle note that “from the year 2000 masqueraders who were the traditional patrons of *aso-oke* in Ogbomoso area of western Nigeria shifted their interest to factory printed fabric known as *Ankara* which they use as *aso ebi* thus constituting a great loss to the home weavers of *aso oke*.”<sup>276</sup> From this one can assert that through the adaptation of the newly imported textile material of *Ankara* for *aso ebi*, these masqueraders ensure some continuity of their tradition by circumventing the upheavals and economic burdens which characterize *aso oke* through the appropriation of the new elements of the contemporary age. Masquerading, in this instance, could be described as an embodiment of the Ogbomosho identity which, faced with the transforming influences of consumer culture, mercantile and capitalist networks, refuses to give up the *aso ebi* culture and instead incorporates these new textile elements such as *Ankara*. At this juncture it becomes necessary to understand how *Ankara* has had an impact on the decline of *aso oke* and the practice of *aso ebi* in general.

### **Of imported textiles and *aso ebi* practice.**

There is every reason to suggest that *aso ebi* practice has been cheapened by the foreign textile material known as *Ankara*. “Now almost anyone can solicit for an *aso ebi* group and get

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, p.19.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>276</sup> A. O. Olutayo and O. Akanle, “*Aso-oke* (Yoruba’s hand woven textiles),” p.20.

immediate response because almost everybody can afford *Ankara*,”<sup>277</sup> remarked Ogbonna Chidimma, a textile dealer on *Ankara* at the Balogun textile market in Lagos (Figure 6). Ogbonna’s assertion conforms to an understanding that life itself could have been cheapened by a proliferation of mimetic commodities; a logic quite supported by Leslie Rabine who rightly notes that “corporate mass-production and mass-distribution in the new global economy make fashionable clothing cheaper and more accessible to more people.”<sup>278</sup> *Ankara*, which is now imported mainly from China and sometimes Europe, offers a text that subscribes to Rabine’s description of ‘mass-production.’ The new age of globalization has aided the expansion of capital thereby blurring the relations of culture and commerce.<sup>279</sup> There is no gainsaying that the power of corporations has been expanded by mass-consumerism and this has created subversion in terms of the meanings of culture to the consumers. If the majority of the textiles used for *asọ ebi* in present-day Nigeria come from China then one could argue that the *asọ ebi* economy has defied the meanings of culture (in Lagosians’ perception) and branched out into the signifying logic of an industrialized economy. This is, perhaps, in line with Karen Tranberg Hansen’s observation that:

While clothes are among our most personal possessions, they are also an important consumption good. Their worldwide production, export, and import circuits have altered the availability of apparel both on high streets in the West and in open-air urban markets in the third world. This accessibility not only facilitates individualism but also pushes the diversification of tastes in numerous directions, turning local consumers into arbiters of stylistic innovations that are contributing to the breakdown of fashion’s Western hegemony.<sup>280</sup>

Hansen underscores the reality of consumption goods as transcending the boundaries of culture and geographic space. Cloth, in this sense, is a text that is subject to multivalent readings. It is also a text that is no longer the business of the West to determine its trajectory. I argue that if local consumers contribute to breaking down Western hegemony in fashion through stylistic deviations as Hansen argues, they at the same time contribute to the reinforcement of this hegemony through economic acquiescence. Indeed, there could be an interesting analogy to draw

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<sup>277</sup> Interview with Ogbonna Chidimma, Balogun market, Lagos, November 30, 2010.

<sup>278</sup> Leslie Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion*, p.176.

<sup>279</sup> See Sarah Anderson, John Cavanagh and Thea Lee *Field Guide to the Global Economy*; pp.18-25, 30, 52-57; and David Harvey *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.27-28.

<sup>280</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen, “The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2004. 33, pp.369–92

from Hansen in approaching the *aso ebi* textile economy especially its revelation of more ‘hip’ stylistic innovations in women’s sewing. There is a sharp deviation in the 1960s style of tailoring *aso ebi* to the most recent style (see earlier discussions). Hansen’s work is significant for its attempt to connect the local and the global in the bid to invent a universal language for clothing. However, tracing some of the brief mercantile exploits of Baba Ekiti in Lagos may explain how imported textiles such as *Ankara* have had an impact on *aso ebi*.

Baba Ekiti is a retired textile merchant at the Balogun textile market in Lagos. He came to Lagos from Ekiti a few years after the Second World War, precisely in 1948, at the age of 18. By then, according to him, Lagos was still peopled by a few civil servants, merchants and expatriates.<sup>281</sup> He served as a foreman for colonial administrators who engaged in the construction and building of houses and roads in Lagos. By 1959, he saved some money and decided to enter into private cloth entrepreneurship. He joined one Ade Bashorun, an *aso oke* merchant who had migrated from Abeokuta to Lagos in the early 1950s. He was apprenticed to Bashorun for 5 years and left after learning the intricacies of textile merchandising. He became a merchant and sold, among many other textiles, a type of cloth known as *Aso lati Mekkah* ‘cloth from Mecca.’ This cloth was made with machine-spun thread to celebrate the hadj of the Muslim king of Oyo in 1950. According to him, “because of the popularity of this cloth, it was expensive and only few rich people could afford it. I remember vividly one rich family in Ekiti who bought large quantity from me as *aso ebi* during their grandfather’s burial.”<sup>282</sup> The motif of the cloth embodied tan machine-spun thread dyed to resemble *sanyan* and it possessed the look of authority required to adorn the king. By the 1970s, Baba Ekiti sold *aso oke* type known as *Ododo Murtala* (‘the flowers of Murtala’). This *aso oke* cloth according to Baba Ekiti canonizes General Murtala Muhammed, the Nigerian Head of State who was assassinated on 13 February 1976 in an abortive coup attempt by Lt. Col. Buka Dimka. Other *aso oke* patterns he sold include ‘Keep Right’, another famous design in the 1970s which commemorates the changes that witnessed national road laws. Baba Ekiti however explains the sudden change in *aso ebi* as something arising from the change of dress materials from *aso oke* to *Ankara*:

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<sup>281</sup> Interview with Baba Ekiti, Lagos Island, 30 February 2011.

<sup>282</sup> Interview with Baba Ekiti, Lagos Island, 30 February 2011.

I can tell you that as at the 1960 only a handful of people (mainly the rich) in Lagos engaged in *asọ ebi* because ‘traditional cloth’ of *aso oke* as at then was in vogue and extremely expensive and only few could afford it. Again for some unknown reasons *asọ ebi* was not very popular. These days everywhere you go, you find almost everyone doing *asọ ebi* using *Ankara* materials which are very cheap and not also of good quality.<sup>283</sup>

Most recently, as noted earlier, foreign textile material known as *Ankara* is the ubiquitously used cloth for *asọ ebi*. A historical study of how foreign textiles came into Africa may help one articulate whether the clothes used for *asọ ebi* – or even the so called ‘traditional cloths’, following Baba Ekiti, in the general Nigerian context – had a colonial mediation or whether they are ‘authentic cultural artifacts’ as believed in certain quarters.

Foreign textile materials have a long history of Western trade that was also tied to colonialism and imperial hegemony. European textiles have been traded in West Africa since at least the 15th century.<sup>284</sup> One of the earliest accounts of this trade was in 1469, when Benedetto Dei, a representative of the Portinari firm in Florence, arrived at Timbuktu, where he aspired to barter his Lombardian cloth for the gold of the Sudan.<sup>285</sup> From this period henceforth, and up till the next five centuries, textile became an important trade commodity in the ‘trade by barter’ for gold, kola nuts, and even slaves.<sup>286</sup> Antony G. Hopkins remarks that during the 17th century, the Dutch West India Company, the Royal African Company, and the Compagnie du Senegal aided the commercial circuit that linked the European textile market and Africa.<sup>287</sup> The use of the forts of the coast of Guinea as ports for the Dutch fleets of the East India Company in the course of the European trade necessitated another form of informal trade transaction.<sup>288</sup> This transaction was mainly in the “exchange of Indian and Javanese textiles from the East Indies, such as batik cloth, the ancestor of the wax-print.”<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Christopher Steiner, “Another image of Africa: Towards an Ethnohistory of European Clothes Marketed in Africa, 1873-1960,” *Ethnohistory*, Vol.32, No.2 (Spring, 1985); See also Nina Sylvanus, “The fabric of Africanity : Tracing the global threads of authenticity” *Anthropological Theory* 2007, 7, pp.201-216.

<sup>285</sup> Hodder cited in Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>287</sup> Antony. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press. 1973), p.92.

<sup>288</sup> Nina Sylvanus, “The fabric of Africanity: Tracing the global threads of authenticity” *Anthropological Theory* 2007, 7, pp.201-216, p. 207.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, p.207.

By the nineteenth century, thousands of slaves who had served in Java and were freed from the Dutch East Indian Army returned to Africa dressed in batik cloth.<sup>290</sup> This period was also characterized by a period of trade scramble – in Africa – between the British manufacturers of coarse-grained fabric with dull colours and the Indian companies which produced the glitteringly colored, weightless materials. African textile consumers during this scramble period preferred the lighter and brightly coloured Indian prints. Because of this preference Manchester textile producers became especially interested in meeting the aesthetic and practical demands of their West African clientele.<sup>291</sup> By the 1870s, European manufacturers were “well aware of regional preferences...to which they paid careful attention.”<sup>292</sup> The European-African textile market had already become established and it was believed – contrary to some speculations – that Africans had a taste for high quality fabric just as (if not more than) the Europeans did.

The issue of quality of the print was one of the most important determinants of the textiles produced for the African market in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>293</sup> There was more control on the quality of manufactured cotton goods in Britain and this was occasioned by the growth of the British cotton industry in the formative years of the Industrial Revolution in England. From the 1780s, a sense of finesse and pure taste among the consumers – made up mainly of the British middle class – was concomitant with the Industrial Revolution and this impacted on the creative output of textile manufacturers.<sup>294</sup> And almost a century later this taste and refinement was reflected in the textile business between Europe and Africa. In 1885 Governor Alfred Moloney, who was governor of Lagos from 1886 to 1890, was specifically interested in addressing trade issues in the cotton market among the Yoruba and West Africans.<sup>295</sup> He remarked that durability, quality

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid, p. 207.

<sup>291</sup> Ruth Nielsen, “The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire,” in Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz, (eds), *The Fabrics of Culture: the Anthropology of clothing and adornment* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), pp. 467-98.

<sup>292</sup> Anne Spencer, *In Praise of Heroes: Contemporary African Commemorative Cloth* (Newark, N.J.: The Newark Museum, 1982).

<sup>293</sup> Christopher Steiner, “Another image of Africa,” p. 93.

<sup>294</sup> Michael Edwards, *The Growth of the British Cotton Trade, 1780-1815* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly 1967), p. 47.

<sup>295</sup> Marion Johnson notes that it was part of the colonial strategy to cripple indigenous industries in order to establish Western capitalist interest in Africa. Quoting Lord Lugard (the then high Commissioner of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria) Marion observes that: “reduced to its crudest expression, the desire of the importing merchant [of British goods to Nigeria] would no doubt be to see native industries other than the production of raw material for export, crushed, in order that they may be superseded by imported manufactures.” (See Marion Johnson, “Cotton imperialism in West Africa,” *African Affairs*, Vol.73, No.291, 1974, pp.178-87). Judith Perani and Norma Wolff observe that in the event of British colonial control over areas of West Africa, the cotton mills of England sought to increase their export market while increasing importation of cotton from Nigeria. In 1889 the Governor of Lagos, Alfred Moloney, suggested that Manchester cottons should replace indigenous cloth and fresh weavers to work in cotton production; he reasoned that

and solidity should all be of paramount importance to the British manufacturers if they aimed to transcend the competition posed by the native weaving industry.<sup>296</sup> The native weaving industry which Moloney refers to includes, among others, the *aso oke* industry which I addressed above. Moloney was more concerned with the importation of tawdry goods from England into the colony and he envisaged a possible consequence of African cloth beating these tawdry European goods out of the market.<sup>297</sup> It became established that the quest for quality materials could not be compromised in the Euro-African textile trade and this attracted wide interest in European textiles. The wax prints from Europe were increasingly becoming preferred by African consumers and were replacing indigenous African cloths. This is because the environmental conditions of Africa which include high temperatures, dust from the dry landscapes and the dirty sludge after rains, made dry cleaning of African indigenous cloth cumbersome. During laundering process dyes in African clothes are washed off while wax prints from Europe retained the dyes longer.<sup>298</sup>

There is a need to understand a deeper dynamic surrounding the changing consumption pattern of wax prints by comparing the nineteenth century and the present times. What was initially pointed out from my interviews with textile merchants in Lagos was how a greater number of their present customers preferred a cheaper wax print imported mainly from China. While in the nineteenth century many of the African consumers preferred high quality wax prints imported from Europe, in the twenty first century many of the same African consumers prefer cheaper wax prints imported mainly from China. This is perhaps because of its affordability. This juxtaposition seems to suggest that many of the twenty-first century African consumers care less about quality, but does not foreclose the possibility that a few prefer high quality wax prints.

In making sense of these two instances, the ubiquity of *aso ebi* practice in the present time becomes understandable: more people are able to afford the cheap textiles from China and therefore are able to partake in the *aso ebi* practice. A juxtaposition of the two preferences and

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their wages would allow them to buy reasonably-priced cloth imported from England. See Judith Perani, Norma Hackleman, Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and art Patronage in Africa* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), p.179.

<sup>296</sup> Cited in Marion Johnson, "Cloth on the Banks of the Niger," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol.6, No.4, pp. 353-63. 1974, pp.181-82.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, p. 182.

<sup>298</sup> Justine M. Cordwell, "Appendix: the Use of Printed Batiks by Africans," in Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz, (eds.), *The Fabrics of Culture* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), p.495.

the two centuries underscores the significance of the changing times and shows the obvious consequences of late capitalist expansion on social life in twenty-first century Lagos. If the effect of such expansion is to maximize profit, it is also aimed at cheapening the cost of living and its attendant social realities.<sup>299</sup> One can argue that this type of capitalist expansion has its origins and analogy in the Industrial Revolution in Europe during which economic activities had an adverse effect on the quality of human life. By the time humans surged towards the cities – in the wake of Industrial Revolution– where the majority of the working class witnessed poor living conditions, labour was very cheap.<sup>300</sup> It is possible that China exploits cheap labour for its profit margins such that the constant pressure for profits grinds away at the quality of life, thereby impacting on the quality of textiles imported into Nigeria. I would argue in line with Peh Shing Huei that “for a long time, the adjective ‘cheap’ often came hand in hand with ‘Made in China’ products.”<sup>301</sup>

It seems the Chinese capitalist expansion requires *cheap labor* as well as *cheap capital* to produce *cheap goods* and a *cheap cost of living*. Such cheap living found ready expression in the cost of the textiles used for *aso ebi* practice in recent times.<sup>302</sup>

By 1895, many observers felt that imported cloth had successfully displaced African textiles, that African weavers were rapidly being "crushed" by the impact of the European textile trade, and that indigenous cotton production had been limited to the cultivation of a few irregular and sparse patches of *Gossypium punctatum* - the principal species of indigenous cotton.<sup>303</sup> Writing to the Governor General of French West Africa in a letter dated 2 November 1895, L. Mouttet, who was the Director of the Interior, summarizes this perspective quite well:

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<sup>299</sup> John Kozy, “The Collapsing Western Way of Life,” GlobalResearcher.ca, Centre for Research on Globalization, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=19782>

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Peh Shing Huei, “Days of Cheap Labour Numbered,” asiaone Business, <http://www.asiaone.com/Business/News/Story/A1Story20100609-221156.html>

<sup>302</sup> This cost has been summarized by Chidinma Oguchi, a textile dealer at the Balogun Textile market in Lagos: “I came to this market in 1987. By then what we sell were mainly George and hollandis and the prices were around 300 Naira per yard as at 1987. By 1990, I started selling *Ankara* because of its high demand. We went to Cotonou to buy it and as you know because it was banned we had to settle a lot of people including customs. Despite that it was not as expensive as ‘hollandis’ and ‘george.’ By 2000, a yard of *Ankara* is quite affordable ranging from 100 Naira, 300, 400, and so on. But the good thing is that anybody can afford it because the prices differ. But the cheapest ones are not good but when you wear it to occasion no one would discover.” Interview with Chidinma Oguchi, Balogun Textile Market, 2010.

<sup>303</sup> Christopher Steiner, “Another image of Africa,” p. 96.

The introduction of European-manufactured cloth, as similar to the most beautiful textiles of the country [Senegal] as possible, has led to a decline in native cloth production; a decline which has rapidly prompted the extension of our [Euro-African] trade. .... At present, weavers produce exceedingly few fabrics made of indigenous cotton. Cotton fields are neither vast nor regular; they occupy insignificant corners of village perimeters.<sup>304</sup>

As the prices of imported cloth rose rapidly with the establishment of *ad valorem* taxation in the early 1900s, Mouttet's portrait of a colonial utopia for French commercial endeavors began to change.<sup>305</sup> A mere two decades after the Director of the Interior reported the above situation, M. Levecque wrote in his *Rapport politique du Senegal*:

Since the increased price of textiles, which render our fabrics almost inaccessible to the natives of the interior, the latter have taken to cultivating cotton once again; a task which they neglected while they were able to purchase inexpensive textiles in our shops. Around the villages today, we notice numerous fields of cotton, and the weaver's loom has reappeared in many marketplaces. Indigenous cloth, which [for a time] was considered too expensive, has come into favor once again, and business is now idle in the shops of our merchants who are well stocked with imported European goods.<sup>306</sup>

Underlying the economic competition between African weavers and European textile manufacturers is a more subtle, less easily measured form of rivalry or competition between traditional African aesthetics and hybrid Eurocentricism. This historical investigation might help one come to terms with the impact of foreign textile trade on *asọ ebi*. Perhaps, in studying this textile trade, the activities of Nigerian textile industries under the economic instabilities of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) need to be examined as this might have contributed to the new forms of *asọ ebi* practice witnessed in urban Lagos.

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

### **The textile economy, Structural Adjustment and *asọ ebi* since 1960.**

By the time of independence in 1960, Nigeria had a moderately thriving commercial class which had developed since the late nineteenth century, despite discriminatory colonial policies.<sup>307</sup> In a dominant retail and wholesale commerce dominated by European, Lebanese and Indian firms, Nigerian indigenous merchants and traders managed to sustain a remarkably fair competition. They formed business associations to represent their interests and challenge European economic hegemony. By 1960, some factors however increased the growth of the Nigerian commercial and industrial bourgeoisie, one being the rising economy.

Nigeria's economy expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, powered by the discovery and export of rising volumes of oil whose price soared by 1973, a period that was commonly referred to as the 'oil boom era.' Kraus observed that during this period there was huge growth in the government physical infrastructure, commercial service and industrial bourgeoisie as Nigeria's rapidly rising oil exports made forex freely available for imports.<sup>308</sup> This was the period when the textile industry grew with increasing imports from Europe, Asia and other parts of the world. Judith Perani and Norma H. Wolff, in *Cloth, Dress and Art patronage in Africa*, remark that "from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s during Nigeria's oil boom, the Yoruba's fashion world was tied to global markets."<sup>309</sup> Most wealthy people patronized famous designers of Europe such as Christian Dior, Nina Ricci and Gucci.<sup>310</sup> Expensive materials imported from the West were appropriated in the production of most locally worn apparel including the 'wrapper.'<sup>311</sup> In the 1970s 'Lace'<sup>312</sup> and 'George' – important cotton/synthetic clothes imported from Indonesia and

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<sup>307</sup> John Kraus, "Capital, Power and Business Associations in the African Political economy: A tale of two countries, Ghana and Nigeria," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Sept. 2002) p. 398.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, p. 399.

<sup>309</sup> Judith Perani and Norma H. Wolff, *Cloth Dress and Art patronage in Africa* (Oxford and New York: Berg 1999), p 174.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid*, p.174.

<sup>311</sup> Misty Bastian noted that, among many other forms of clothing, the preferred form of female attire during 1987-88 in Eastern Nigeria was the wrapper and blouse combination. Her study of dress styles in Eastern Nigeria shows that Southeastern Nigerian women wore a combination of the wrapper and blouse using matching fabrics or contrasting ones. Sometimes the wrapper involved two pieces made of "George" (an expensive, embroidered and/or painted cloth from South India). See Misty Bastian, "Female 'Alhajis' and entrepreneurial fashions: flexible identities in Southeastern Nigeria clothing practice" in *Clothing and difference. embodied identities in colonial and post-colonial Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp 104-106. p.106.

<sup>312</sup> The history of lace as a fashion fabric in Nigeria is well explored in the exhibition titled "Austrian Lace – Nigerian Fashion" held in Museum of Ethnology, Vienna, Austria in October 2009. The exhibition encapsulates the genealogy of the lace fashion in Nigeria. It shows how lace metamorphosed from a fabric used throughout Nigeria as a contour cloth for underwear, curtains and for blouses in the Niger Delta and Eastern Nigeria into Yoruba high fashion. Interestingly, before the 1960s lace was considered a low class fabric. Its momentous incursion into the realm of sartorial opulence and class in the 1960s is rather paradoxical. Its ubiquitous use in the 1970s suggest a response to the high import trade that came with the oil boom era. A quick resort to foreign goods in the 1970s corresponded with the high import in lace also. Lace played an

England/India respectively – became the high point of elite fashion. For lower income people, damask, brocades and wax prints were substituted for the exclusive cloth of the rich. In 1978, the increasing remittance of cash out of Nigeria caused the federal government to put an embargo on lace importation and other exclusive clothes and goods materials. This caused the foreign textile producers to partner with their Nigerian colleagues, and production shifted from the outside to Nigeria. By the late 1980s the Nigerian textile industry could boast about 200 textile industries. Indeed, by then it was the second largest textile industry in Africa, second only to that of Egypt.<sup>313</sup> At its peak, the textile industry employed close to one million Nigerians. It was the second largest employer of labour in Nigeria after the federal government, and was in the 1980s generating more than N1 billion revenue to the federal government.<sup>314</sup> This became a major economic sustenance for millions of Nigerians such as food sellers, cloth sellers, cotton farmers, dependents of textile workers, and many others.

By the 1990s, the predominant brand name of wax print textiles made by the Nigerian textile industry came to be known as *Ankara*. However, *Ankara* eventually became a collective name that could be given to any of the multi-coloured wax print fabrics, cotton or synthetic textile material. The importation of foreign textiles in the post 1980s indigenisation policy was marked by the adoption of *Ankara* as a common name for all imported prints. However, this name was adopted for all wax prints including those made in Nigeria. As observed by Ogbonna Chidimma (Figure 6), some customers know the difference between the *Ankara* made in Nigeria and the ones made in China and can make specific requests for either foreign or locally-made *Ankara*.<sup>315</sup>

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important role in the *aso ebi* practice especially with its combination with *aso oke*. See Chapter one, for J'D'Okhai Ojeikere photos for a combination of lace and *aso oke*.

<sup>313</sup> Perani and Wolff, *Cloth Dress and Art Patronage in Africa*, p.180.

<sup>314</sup> Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen "Globalization and De-Industrialization: South-South Neo-Liberalism and the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry," *The Global South*, Volume 2, Number 2, (2008), pp. 159-170, Published by Indiana University Press.

<sup>315</sup> Interview with Ogbonna Chidimma, Balogun Market, Lagos, November 30, 2010.



Figure 6.  
Ogbonna Chidimma, Balogun Textile market, Lagos. November 29, 2010.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

Within the first twenty five years of its inception, the United Nigeria Textile (UNT) Plc, which was established in Kaduna in 1964, grew astronomically to become the largest textile company in Nigeria and indeed the biggest textile industry in Africa.<sup>316</sup> Playing a leading role in the Nigerian export promotion initiative, the company sold more than 25 percent of its product abroad by the early 1990s and it maintained a prominent position in the employment sector. By the 1990s, the company had an employment capacity of over 20,000 persons; an integrated mill with a capacity of over 30,000 spindles, more than 2,000 looms and 360 rotor spindles.<sup>317</sup> The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), an initiative of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, coupled with globalization and its attendant *laissez-faire* economics in Nigeria however led to the practical collapse of the onetime vibrant textile industry in Nigeria.<sup>318</sup>

Significant depreciation of the Nigerian currency in the 1980s precipitated the restriction of imported and smuggled high quality clothes to only the rich. Following the implementation of SAP in 1986, there was, again, a shift in consumption patterns: instead of the previous high demand for Western cloth (which had been banned) there was increased demand for handcraft

<sup>316</sup> Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen "Globalization and De-Industrialization," p. 166

<sup>317</sup> Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen "Globalization and De-Industrialization," p. 166.

<sup>318</sup> Bade Onimode, *Africa and the Challenge of the 21st Century* (Ibadan: University Press, 2000), pp. 100-155.

clothes. This broadened the possibilities for self-employment. The effect of SAP was so adverse that even a significant number of elite women switched their professional careers for the local garment industry.<sup>319</sup> By 1987 the federal government, as part of efforts to boost job creation through self-reliance, developed the National Open Apprentice Scheme (NOAS).<sup>320</sup> It developed craft production programmes through apprenticeship in cloth weaving, dress-making and tailoring. These opportunities were made available to individuals after leaving primary or secondary schools.<sup>321</sup>

Tailoring attracted an unprecedented number of apprentices. In the early 1990s and in an attempt to cushion the effects of SAP, Nigeria's textile industry attracted foreign partnership. The major textile companies were co-owned by Nigerian and Indian companies and during this period, and United Nigeria Textile Plc (UNTPLC), a Kaduna-based company that was established in 1964, was bought by CHA Textiles, a Chinese company.<sup>322</sup> This boom in the textile industry resulted in a huge increase in the number of tailors – also known as “fashion designers” – in Lagos by the early 1990s. The ban on imported textiles, according to Denzer, galvanized the local garment industry such that established designers ‘Nigerianized’ their fashion collections by utilizing local fabrics.<sup>323</sup>

The tailors that emerged in 1990s Lagos strove to meet the demands of weekly *aso ebi* uniforms used for the regular weekend parties. They also struggled to meet the needs of the increasing number of Nigerians who have turned to the use of the so-called ‘traditional’ dress in almost all social activities. The use of these ‘traditional’ outfits, however, was not only noticeable in social gatherings, but could also be seen in official settings such as the Nigerian parliament where a typical session could reveal as much as ninety percent of members dressed in “traditional attire”, often known as *agbada*.<sup>324</sup> But much more attention was paid to how the urban tailors

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<sup>319</sup> LaRay Denzer ‘Fashion and fluctuating fortunes: the Nigerian garment industry under Structural Adjustment’, in Jane I. Guyer, LaRay Denzer, Adigun Agbaje (eds), *Money Struggles and City Life: Devaluation in Ibadan and Other Urban Centers in Southern Nigeria, 1986-1996* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002), pp.93-114, p.97.

<sup>320</sup> Perani and Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and Art patronage in Africa*, p 174.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid*, p 174.

<sup>322</sup> Olumide Abimbola “Awakening the giant,” *TradeInvest Nigeria* [http://www.tradeinvestnigeria.com/feature\\_articles/568000.htm](http://www.tradeinvestnigeria.com/feature_articles/568000.htm) accessed 15 June 2010.

<sup>323</sup> Denzer, “Fashion and fluctuating fortunes,” p.95.

<sup>324</sup> Elisha Renne has also exposed the relationship between the Nigerian politicians and *Agbada* in her work. A strong resonance between the Nigerian politicians during the shift from military dictatorship to civilian rule enacts a fruitful link

disseminated the styles of these dresses by using popular magazines as their sources of inspiration. (This is dealt with in Chapter 3).

By 2008, burdened by the economic vagaries imposed by globalization, over 170 textile companies in Nigeria went under.<sup>325</sup> In 2008, only about 10 companies with an estimated staff of 18,000 survived while capacity utilization in the industry shrunk to about 20%.<sup>326</sup> According to J.P Olanrewaju, the former Director-General of the Nigeria Textile Garment and Tailoring Employers' Association, the severity of the economic reforms of the Federal government which commenced in the first quarter of 2000 was most evident on the textile industry as more than 500,000 textile employees were relieved of their jobs.<sup>327</sup> The chain reaction of this scenario became more pronounced between the period of SAP and 2005 when more than two million Nigerians associated with the textile industry (including contractors, cotton farmers, textile traders, and dependents of textile workers) became economically demobilized due to the collapse of the Nigeria textile industry.<sup>328</sup> While, according to Akinrinade and Ogen, official reports by the Nigerian Textiles Manufacturers Association estimated the death toll of the dismissed workers at 60% by 2005, the remaining 40% grappled with depression, acute poverty, joblessness, dwindling status and proclivity towards crime.<sup>329</sup> While lamenting their piteous fate, the Nigerian Labour Congress has identified this figure of the sacked textile worker as constituting the greatest number of Okada (acronym for the commercial motorcycle) riders.<sup>330</sup>

The degeneration witnessed in the textile industry according to stakeholders in the industry was caused by a number of factors, some of which are the virtual breakdown of Nigeria's refineries and the consequent importation of Low Pour Fuel Oil (LPFO) also known as "Black oil," an industrial fuel for powering the industrial machines in textile firms.<sup>331</sup> Along with the unceasing rise in the cost of production occasioned by the hike in the price of LPFO, there was also a

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between politics, power and *Agbada* dress. See Elisha Renne, "From Khaki to Agbada: dress and political transition in Nigeria," in Jean Allman, (ed), *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), See also Misty Bastian "Female Alhajis and entrepreneurial fashion", pp 97-132.

<sup>325</sup> Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen "Globalization and De-Industrialization," p.168.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid, p.168.

<sup>327</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Cited in Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen "Globalization and De-Industrialization".

<sup>329</sup> Cited in Layi Adeloje, "Textile Sector's Collapse and Burden Bearers," *The Punch*, Saturday, October 27, 2007, pp.2-3.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, p.2.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, .12.

declining infrastructure, the difficult operating environment and the impact of China. The stakeholders and observers hold the common view that the importation of the cheap fabric known as *Ankara* from China contributed to the downfall in the sector.<sup>332</sup> On October 23, 2007 *The Guardian* newspaper reported that among all the various fabrics shipped from China to Africa (including wax print of about 40 million meters), more than 40 percent are illegally brought into Nigeria.<sup>333</sup> It was also reported that about 80% of Nigeria's textile market has been conquered by the Asian textile import. The reason often given for this is that the Asian textiles are cheaper than locally produced ones by more than 20%.<sup>334</sup> Uche Onyemata, a textile dealer in Balogun Textile Market, central Lagos, argues that:

about 80% of the local textile market were lost to importers of fake foreign materials due to institutional dysfunction, closures and redundancies of the local industries, imitation of company labels, and massive smuggling. The greatest challenge of the market is the influence of China which has almost taken over the entire market through the use of fake labels and production of poor and cheaper materials which most customers prefer.<sup>335</sup>

Onyemata's submission has been confirmed by the former Deputy Chief executive of Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) Senator Walid Jibrin, who ascribed the precise statistics of a mere 20 percent of the indigenous textile consumption to Nigerian industries.<sup>336</sup> It became glaringly obvious that the colossal influx of textiles from China into Nigeria had brought local production almost to a standstill. The genesis of this crisis could be traced to the implementation of SAP during the mid 1980s. During this period, cotton which is the most important raw material used for the production of textile was scrapped by the cotton commodity boards. To lessen the heavy impact of this policy on manufacturers, the government introduced the Approved User Scheme (AUS) to give manufacturers easy access to important raw materials such as viscose and polyester yarns. This was not also an easy task for the firms.<sup>337</sup> In fact, less than a decade after the introduction of SAP by the Nigerian government, the textile sector became largely moribund.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen "Globalization and De-Industrialization".

<sup>333</sup> *The Guardian*, editorial, October 23, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>334</sup> *The Guardian*, editorial, October 23, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>335</sup> Interview with Uche Onyemata, Balogun Textile Market, Lagos, April 6, 2010.

<sup>336</sup> Cited in Segun Olatunji, "UNTL Shuts Down, Sacks over 4000 Workers." *The Punch*, Tuesday, October 9, 2007, p.2.

<sup>337</sup> *The Guardian*, Tuesday October 23, 2007, p.14.

<sup>338</sup> Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen "Globalization and De-Industrialization".

But, while the Nigerian textile sector became almost moribund, *aso ebi* practice seems to have flourished. One way of understanding this growth might be through some accounts of individual merchants who sold textiles in large quantities in Balogun textile market. For example, according to Shuaibu Danjuma, a merchant in the market, in 2003 he sold 500 yards of London wax for *aso ebi* in the month of November to more than 20 customers who came on different days to buy them for either a wedding, funeral, party or other event. At the same time he sold 5,000 yards of *Ankara* materials in December of 2009 to about 100 customers who used the materials for *aso ebi* in just weddings alone.<sup>339</sup> Danjuma's daily record book of his business transactions reveals that the number of people who bought *Ankara* for *aso ebi* in weddings alone in just one month in early 2009 equals the total number of all those who bought other materials for *aso ebi* in more than six months in 2003. Yet one needs to explain the rationale behind the astronomical rise in *aso ebi* practice, despite the fact that the Nigerian textile industries which produced the wax prints used for *aso ebi* were almost grounded by 2008. Danjuma, however, confirms that the Nigerian Textile industry produced an original wax if compared to the imported ones.

For Chidi Ibenegbu, another textile merchant in Balogun who came to Lagos in 1999 to trade in second hand clothes before switching to wax prints in 2000, he sold *Hollandis*<sup>340</sup> first and told me that on the average, two people came every week to buy *Hollandis* from him as *aso ebi* in the year 2000. But by 2009, more than 15 people came every week to buy *Ankara* textile for *aso ebi* for their weddings and other ceremonies. Ibenegbu recalled that in the late 1990s people bought only small quantities because Nigerian textile prints were regarded as 'original', vibrant and thus barely affordable by the lower class members of society. By 2008/2009 Ibenegbu notes that "many people were buying when cheaper wax print textiles were being smuggled into the country from China."<sup>341</sup> From such accounts, it is evident that while the collapse of the textile industry was a misfortune to the employees and their dependents, it was a positive development for those engaging in *aso ebi*. For example, Busayo Olajumoke notes that Nigerian wax print is of a higher quality but more expensive, while the Chinese wax print is cheaper but of less

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<sup>339</sup> Interview with Shuaibu Danjuma, Balogun textile market, 4 March 2011.

<sup>340</sup> Wax *Hollandais* is one of a brand names for the wax prints mass produced by the popular Dutch textile manufacturer, Vlisco for West African clientele. *Hollandais* was very popular among Igbo women in the 1980s when it was a mark of wealth. In an interview with Maria Nneka Nwafor, a retired school teacher, "in the 1980s among Igbo women, the measure of a good, loving and wealthy husband was the number of *Hollandais* in his wife's wardrobe and which she was able to flank in various public events." Interview with Maria Nneka Nwafor, Texas, USA, November 2011.

<sup>341</sup> Interview with Chidi Ibenegbu, Balogun Textile Market, Lagos, 25 February, 2011.

quality. He complained that Nigerian businessmen go to China and influence the production of cheaper wax prints which they import for excessive returns, at the expense of the Nigerian peoples.

***Asọ ebì, Chinese textile exports and the logic of economic necessity.***

At this point we need to investigate the activities of Chinese entrepreneurs in the Nigerian textile market. This may help us understand how and why *asọ ebì* practice is intensifying in urban Lagos. As noted earlier, it has been estimated that textile materials from China account for more than 80% of the textiles in the Nigerian market by 2010.<sup>342</sup> Again, the emergence of other Asian centers of production such as Pakistan and Hong-Kong primarily devoted to the imitation of the European patterns, caused the shutdown of many European factories that produced wax-prints.<sup>343</sup> Presently, only two factories have survived in Europe: Vlisco in the Netherlands and the Chinese-owned A.B.C. in England.<sup>344</sup>

Before the introduction of neo-liberal policies such as open access to foreign investors in Nigeria in the 1980s, the industry engaged in foreign export of its superfluous returns. By 1994, President Bill Clinton introduced the African Growth Opportunities Act (AGOA) which ushered in the preferential textile quota for Africa. This development occasioned a radical shift in the Nigerian textile market with much impact being felt by the emergence of certain Chinese firms into the industry. For these Chinese firms the onus lay in the exploitation of the auspicious business opportunities in Nigeria and other African countries offered by the American government through AGOA.<sup>345</sup> AGOA, under the preferential textile quota, therefore, was the basis for the establishment of Chinatown, “an ultramodern Chinese shopping mall in Lagos.”<sup>346</sup> Chinatown started full operations in 1998 and within a few years criticisms were being levelled by the Nigerian textile workers and other groups. One such group is the Manufacturing Association of Nigeria (MAN) which along with Nigerian textile workers levelled allegations of misconduct against Chinatown’s management and its cohorts. One of these allegations includes

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<sup>342</sup> Segun Olatunji, “UNTL Shut Down, Sacks over 4000 Workers.”

<sup>343</sup> Nina Sylvanus, “The fabric of Africanity,” p. 208.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>345</sup> Obiorah, Ndubuisi. “Who is Afraid of China in Africa? Towards an African Civil Society Perspective on China-Africa Relations,” Manji, Firoze. And Marks. Stephen., (eds), *African Perspectives of China in Africa* (Cape Town: Fahamu, 2007).

<sup>346</sup> Ibid, p.7.

fraudulent copying of local designs which were taken to China for mass production.<sup>347</sup> The accusation did not end at the level of mass production. The Chinese were also accused of stamping the textiles with stolen Nigerian labels, printed in China and imported back into Nigeria. Not only that, these textiles were also re-exported from Nigeria to the United States in order to derive optimum benefit from the US preferential textile quota for Africa.<sup>348</sup> In a nutshell, China was seen as reaping the fringe benefits accruing to an indigenous manufacturing firm in Nigeria when, ostensibly, the manufacturing firm was located in China. Within this system, it is assumed that China was engaged in illicit exploitation, and that their rhetoric of business collaboration under the neoliberal policies of Nigeria was only a hoax.

Chinatown thus became notorious for contraband and fake textiles, and for the large-scale importation of cheap, low quality Chinese textile into the Nigerian market.<sup>349</sup> It is necessary to take cognizance of two key accusations here: mass production and the supply of cheap and low quality textile into Nigeria. This is important in subsequent discussions especially in providing an explanation for the ‘mass’ of people that embraced *asọ ebì* in recent times. Both ‘mass production’ and ‘cheap textile’ might become apt metaphors for the ‘mass’ of people that engage in *asọ ebì* and the cheapening of *asọ ebì* practice itself.

On 6<sup>th</sup> December 2010, Chidi Ogbu, a butcher in the popular Lagos butchery located at Egbeda, a sprawling suburb in Lagos, came to Balogun textile market to buy *asọ ebì* for his oncoming wedding. Ogbu, an Igbo who had lived in Lagos for most of his life and now was regarded by his Yoruba friends as one of them, had been planning for his wedding which was due to take place on 31<sup>st</sup> December at the CKC Catholic Church Egbeda. My relationship with Ogbu started around early December 2010, after we had a long conversation during one of my visits to his butchery. I had bought some meat from him and in the course of the conversation I learned he would be getting married in December. I engaged him in some discussions regarding his *asọ ebì* and my research on the subject. He told me that he would do *asọ ebì* during his wedding and that his wife had given him the colour of the textile to be bought. When I demanded to accompany

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>348</sup> See Idun-Arkurst, Isaac and Laing, James, (eds), *The Impact of Chinese Presence in Africa* (London: African Practice, 2007), pp.18–19.

<sup>349</sup> Obiorah, Ndubuisi. “Who is Afraid of China in Africa,” p.38.

him to the market on the day he would buy the material, he agreed. We arrived at one of the shops that displayed a retinue of textile materials. The owner brought out different types of materials with different prices. First, Ogbu, being a low income worker demanded the cheapest ones. The seller brought out one light material she called *Ankara* and which she said is ‘China *Ankara*.’<sup>350</sup> When I demanded to know the difference between ‘China *Ankara*’ and ‘Nigerian *Ankara*,’ she told me that Nigerian type is stronger in terms of the quality and therefore more expensive. But Ogbu, inevitably for economic reasons, went for the China *Ankara*. Part of the reason why Ogbu went for the China *Ankara* is because the price will afford him opportunity to purchase enough for the ten friends of his wife that would be wearing it for *asọ ebì*. The logic is that if Ogbu had opted for the more expensive Nigerian *Ankara* then his money would not have been enough for the ten persons he intends to clothe in *asọ ebì*.

On another market outing I came with another friend, this time Ola Oguntade who is a banker and who had been my school friend at the University of Nigeria in the 1990s. Oguntade was also preparing for his wedding on January 8<sup>th</sup> 2011. He however had decided to come with his proposed wife so that she could select the colour that suits her and her friends. What transpired between Oguntade’s wife and the cloth seller exemplifies the fact that originality and uniqueness can inspire the economically buoyant to go for expensive textiles for *asọ ebì*. She said “I don’t want all those useless Chinese textiles that don’t last.” The seller confessed that different categories of buyers demand different qualities and that Oguntade’s wife belongs to those who desire good and expensive quality. She went for the Nigerian *Ankara*. But for the not-so-rich like Chidi, the quest to engage in *asọ ebì* can invoke an expedient desire to go for fake textiles. Considering the latter, in the cultural codes of commodified sartorial practice such as *asọ ebì*, authenticity and a sense of belonging can be attained only by imitation and fake and the very idea of originality comes from copy.

Could this argument be made for the generality of human existence in the wake of the twenty first century capitalist economy? One could also argue that since the advent of China, *asọ ebì* as an institution, in order to function as a semiotic system, produces ambivalence by invoking the crisis of fake/original among different groups within the city. By bringing into sharp relief these

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<sup>350</sup> Conversation with Ogbonna Chidimma, Balogun Textile Market, Lagos, December 1, 2010.

paradoxes, the quest for an *aso ebi* outfit, in all its historical and contemporary particularities, vividly illustrates the double bind of fashion as an institution foundational to the rise of capitalism.<sup>351</sup>

Again, it is possible to argue that while the Chinese exploits in the Nigerian textile industry offer some consumers the democracy of aesthetic self-expression, it offers others the bondage to the consumerism that fuels expansion of an economic system beyond people's control.

In October 2007, in an attempt to resuscitate the dying textile economy, the Nigerian Senate summoned the Federal Government to revisit the current import privileges on the polyester filament yarns that are manufactured locally. The request by the Federal Government urging the Senate to approve that the Nigerian Customs Services commence an extensive anti-smuggling campaign and invoke the import prohibition list of 2004 was rejected.<sup>352</sup> This move by the Federal Government and rejected by the Senate marked a setback towards expedient measures to checkmate the excesses of the Chinese merchants. And the significance of the above move affects this analysis here of the nature of textile materials used for *aso ebi*, because more than 80 percent are imported from China.<sup>353</sup> When I spoke to traders in the popular Oshodi textile Market in Lagos, they said that in the early 2000s, cheap imitations of *Ankara* textiles were being produced and imported from China to West Africa. Some would even be labelled "Made-in-Nigeria" and then sold in Nigeria.<sup>354</sup>

This explains why in recent times, Chinese *Ankara* textile materials flooded the Nigerian market and by at least the year 2000, are preferred by most Nigerians for *aso ebi*.<sup>355</sup> It afforded the not-so-rich an opportunity to participate in the *aso ebi* because of its cheapness.<sup>356</sup> "As at the late 1990s when I started selling in this market," remarked Jumoke Shubayo (see Figure 7),

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<sup>351</sup> See for example Arjun Appadurai "Commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.32-33; Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>352</sup> Jimoh, Azimazi Momoh. "Senate Seeks Measures to Revamp Textile Industry," *The Guardian*, Monday, October 29, 2007, pp. 1-3.

<sup>353</sup> Interviews with more than 10 textile merchants in Oshodi textile market proved this.

<sup>354</sup> Interview with Jumoke Shubayo, Oshodi textile market, Lagos, 10 May, 2010.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid. See also *234Next* Newspapers, Nigerian Fashion, 50 Years Later, October 3, 2010.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

the number of people that come to buy these materials are always very few because then you see we only sell lace, damask, velvet, and Hollandis, but since this *Ankara* started coming in large quantity my brother I can tell you that in a week people come in groups to buy in bulk. For example, just yesterday two groups came and bought five hundred yards from me because they are preparing for a wedding and a lot of people are going to wear it as *aso ebi*. In fact, even most other people who used to sell other brands have switched to *Ankara* because many people come to buy it for *aso ebi*.<sup>357</sup>



Figure 7.  
Jumoke Shubayo, Balogun Textile Market, Lagos. April 9, 2010.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

The above statement clearly attests to the fact that Chinese goods have been instrumental in the spread of *aso ebi*. Therefore, it could be said that majority of all clothing material used for *aso ebi* are imported from China. But most often the popular narrative lexicon surrounding *aso ebi* uniforms are framed under the term, ‘traditional’ dress. Frank Osodi attributes the ubiquity of multiple textile materials in Nigeria to the common weekend celebrations where *aso ebi* is the dominant dress style.<sup>358</sup>

<sup>357</sup> Interview with Jumoke Shubayo, Oshodi textile market, Lagos, 10 May, 2010.

<sup>358</sup> Frank Osodi cited in Esther Onyegbula, ‘The *Ankara* Revolution and the Nigerian Aso-ebi Culture’, in *MyNAIJA News*. <http://www.mynaijanews.com/content/view/1441/46/2009>, accessed May 10, 2009.

In this respect, it is important to recognize that there is a system of bricolage taking place in Nigeria; a re-signification as imported textiles are re-configured to suit local demands.<sup>359</sup> In terms of stylistic choice in dress, Karen Tranberg Hansen observes that “contemporary anthropological work has moved beyond the idea of emulation to embrace notions of bricolage, hybridity, and creolization.”<sup>360</sup> In a sense, the understanding of capitalism may compel one to see this practice in terms of the relationship between culture and commerce as suggested by John Fiske. The appropriation of imported textiles for *asọ ebì*, if I may borrow from Fiske’s paradigm, means that “users don’t simply passively consume commodities; they actively rework them to construct their own meanings of self, social identity and social relations.”<sup>361</sup> So while one can argue that there is a continuing economic base in the capitalist mercantile network of imported textiles, there is also a rival cultural economy in the circulation of commodities in terms of “meaning and pleasures.”<sup>362</sup> The meanings attached to these imported textiles have been largely located within the dexterity of the urban tailors and designers who merge “tradition” and “modernity” while their end products are interpreted by the locals as “traditional.”<sup>363</sup> Although the quotidian garments in urban Lagos may be comprised of “Western” dress, important public occasions like parties or church services are seen as moments for the display of one’s latest style in ‘traditional’ attire.<sup>364</sup> A new kind of growing clientele also desires clothing sewn in the local style to be worn as everyday dress too.

Several informants I spoke with in Lagos in 2009 discussed *asọ ebì* dress styles in terms of ‘traditional’ national or ethnic identity. None felt that the blending of *asọ ebì* dress style with Western dress materials in any way diminished the impact of the meanings of ‘traditional’ and the characteristics it possessed. I would argue that ‘traditional’ is a popular slogan that explains the wider implications of post-structuralism in the use of language – this time one can speak of popular production of meaning – as seen in a postcolonial context. The use of the phrase ‘traditional dress’ possibly alludes to a constant rejection of Western prescriptions of dress styles

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<sup>359</sup> Okechukwu Nwafor, “The Spectacle of *asọ ebì* in Lagos: 1990-2008” in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 14, No.1, pp.45-62, p.51.

<sup>360</sup> Karen Tranberg Hansen, “The World in Dress: Anthropological perspectives on clothing, fashion, and culture” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2004. 33:369–92, 372.

<sup>361</sup> John Fiske cited in John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: a Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), p 171.

<sup>362</sup> Fiske in Docker, p 160.

<sup>363</sup> Okechukwu Nwafor, “The Spectacle of *asọ ebì* in Lagos,” p.51.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid*, p.51.

by the locals who hanker for a word that would carry the baggage of ‘tradition’ as a constant reminder of their ‘Nigerianness.’<sup>365</sup> However, it is more convenient in Nigeria now to speak of ‘traditional dress’ in popular understanding and discourse, as dress style devoid of external mediation. As something that has entered into a popular language mainstream in Nigeria, ‘traditional’ dresses could approximate an anti-language and could also translate to a “culturally contingent code.”<sup>366</sup> However, if the ubiquitous market established by the Chinese textile network in Nigeria could be described as hegemonic, then the appropriation of these textile materials for *aso ebi* can be seen as an opposition to the influence of Western dress culture which is evident in a rejection of European suits and style of garments for most public outings by Nigerians.<sup>367</sup>

Considering the impact of *Ankara* fabric in the expansion in *aso ebi* practice, Pius Adesanmi, believes that “the democracy of *aso ebi* is evident in its trans-class dimensions.”<sup>368</sup> It seems that what Adesanmi refers to when he mentioned ‘trans-class dimension’ is the fact that there is an impartial and ultimate democracy of sartorial uniformity which pays no heed to the class of individuals who wear it. “Rich or poor, people are united by the debt of weekly appearance in *aso ebi* in weekend celebrations.”<sup>369</sup> While Adesanmi seems to suggest that uniforms might become a good metaphor for dissolving class boundaries, he might have also ignored the costs of individual uniforms as another means of enacting class division. The next chapter deals with this.

What may have come out of Adesanmi’s point however is the need to interrogate more critically the history of subjectivity in the postcolonial context. There is need to question certain postcolonial attitudes such as the switch, by Nigerians, to the use of *Ankara* for *aso ebi* in the 1990s. This attitude may be seen as something that was not informed by the singular desire to assume sartorial agency. Instead it could be articulated within the broader context of the economics of Chinese textile exploits in Nigeria. That Nigerians abandoned the use of Western dress which before the SAP constituted more than 70 percent of clothing materials worn in

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid, p.51.

<sup>366</sup> Chris Barker, and Dariusz Galasinski, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis: A dialogue on Language and Identity* (London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), p 11.

<sup>367</sup> Okechukwu Nwafor, “The Spectacle of *aso ebi* in Lagos,” p.52.

<sup>368</sup> Pius Adesanmi, “*Aso ebi* on My Mind (Part One)” Keynote lecture delivered at the African Textiles Exhibition of Carleton University’s Arts Gallery, February 16, 2011.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

weddings and other social events, may be seen as a clear manifestation of the logic of economic necessity. Not only did the market expansion in the textile industry destroy the indigenous manufacturing firms, it also gave rise to a redefinition of the *asọ ebi* practice in accordance with new economic realities of *Ankara* fabric.

### **Conclusion.**

In this chapter, the decision by a growing number of the Lagos urban populace to embrace the *Ankara* textile fabric for *asọ ebi* might support Georg Simmel's idea of fashion as a "sense of stylistic change ... of the increased tempo of urban life created by a capitalist mass consumption economy."<sup>370</sup> In a different and postcolonial context from Simmel's time, the emergence of China as an economic superpower continues to shape the cultural and political economy of the world especially Africa in several significant ways. As a leading economic power in Africa and as the most populous Black nation on earth, Nigeria seems to be an appropriate country to assess the nature of 'culture' and capital especially through the impact of China's commercial and economic ties. It could be said, therefore, that capitalism intensifies culture. If one accepts the argument that capitalism might have succeeded in reorienting all of human existence to its own ends,<sup>371</sup> then the current notions of *asọ ebi* as an unmediated cultural phenomenon may be questioned.

This chapter challenges one to rethink the processes of consumption under late capitalism, and then to ponder Vincent Miller's concerns regarding consumer culture and its impact on the concrete practice of life,<sup>372</sup> or even the French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre's fears of the devastating effects of capitalism on everyday life.<sup>373</sup> This chapter has demonstrated that colonial encounters affected the textile economy and that the vicissitudes witnessed in the Nigerian economy have been major contributors to the historical evolution of *asọ ebi* practice. It shows that culture could be defined by market forces and that there is a need to refrain from taking certain cultural practices as a given.

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<sup>370</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Philosophy of Fashion," in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), pp.187–206.

<sup>371</sup> Michael J. Thompson, "Capitalism Resurgent," *State of Nature 2, an online Journal of Radical Ideas*, <http://www.stateofnature.org/capitalismResurgent.html>

<sup>372</sup> Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian faith and practice in a consumer culture* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2005), p.32.

<sup>373</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1, Introduction*, J. Moore (transl.), (London: Verso, 1991).

Thus, I conclude by arguing that *asọ ebi* fashions represent a somewhat organic expression of market desires. This chapter attests to the masking effects of commercial and global industrial capitalist networks. In particular, China's textile invasion into the Nigerian market reveals an essentially complex dynamic in the unstable process called *asọ ebi* tradition. While this chapter might have demonstrated that the influx of cheaper textile materials explains why a greater number of people, and indeed lower class members of society, have joined the *asọ ebi* 'culture', in the next chapter I seek to investigate why both the middle class and other members of Lagos society desire to dress large numbers of people in *asọ ebi*. It seems that their desire for large number of people requires us to explore a range of additional factors, beyond the cheaper prices of certain textile materials.



### Chapter 3.

#### *ASO EBÌ*: OF PUBLIC SALIENCE, CHEAP ‘CROWD’, AND WEALTH.

##### **Introduction.**

The second democratic governance phase after independence, Nigeria's Second Republic which commenced on October 1, 1979 under the presidency of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, was born amid great expectations. Oil prices were high and revenues were on the increase. It appeared that unlimited development was possible. Unfortunately, the euphoria was short-lived, and the Second Republic did not survive its infancy. By 1981, there was an end to the economic prosperity that was ushered in by the oil boom era.<sup>373</sup> Declining oil revenues, disequilibrium in the balance of payments, growing unemployment, an increasing rate of inflation and political instability were already signs that the promise of a virile democracy beginning in 1979 was unsustainable. The GDP which rose at 10.5 percent in 1971, declined by 4.8 percent in 1981. The country slid into recession, went borrowing on the Euro-dollar market, and succeeded in economically disempowering the middle class. The environment was already conducive for the military to justify their entry and in 1983 they seized power for the second time since independence in 1960.

It seems to me that in an attempt to protect their deteriorating class positions the declining urban middle class sought various outlets to re-inscribe their presence in the public space that in Nigeria is linked to economic consumption. For this middle class, large gatherings with an eye-catching *aso ebi* crowd served as expedient sites for financial re-affirmation and class re-invention. It is likely that increased signs of desire for the *aso ebi* crowd would re-assure the public of their salience in the affairs of things. The question I ask in this chapter, then, is how does this explain the desire for large numbers of people dressed in *aso ebi* by the wider society? While I seek answers to these questions, it seems that the desire for large followership was also true of the elites of early twentieth-century Lagos. In this chapter, therefore, I explore the possible reasons for the desire for increasing numbers of people in the embrace of *aso ebi*

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<sup>373</sup> The oil boom era in Nigeria was the period between 1971 to 1977 when there was an embargo on Arab oil supply to the United States. Nigeria's oil became the most sought after and highly priced by the United States. That was a period when the economy abandoned its initial Agricultural sector and oil thus constituted about 90 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange.

culture starting from the early twentieth century. The aim of the chapter lies in understanding how a large followership dressed in *asọ ebi* could build a public image of well-being, amidst personal economic instability and postcolonial urban crisis.

Before examining the relationship between the crowd and *asọ ebi*, I investigate the historical relationship between cloth and public visibility in Yorubaland. This is done through a study of nineteenth century Yoruba oral tradition and popular culture in which investing one's body with expensive cloth marks public visibility and wealth. This might help us find some connections between the past and these contemporary practices of *asọ ebi* in urban Lagos and its relationship with public visibility. This might also help to understand the *raison d'être* behind the phenomenon of a large followership in *asọ ebi* clothes. Using *asọ ebi* as a point of departure, this chapter explores the concept of 'wealth in people' as advocated by earlier studies in African history.



### ***Asọ ebi* and public salience.**

Jane Guyer's observation of wealth as "the things people imbue with value"<sup>374</sup> can be a useful tool in approaching cloth as one of the things the earlier – and even recent – Yoruba society have imbued with value. *Asọ ebi* is concerned with clothing and there are some aspects of Yoruba popular culture that suggests that cloth is used to achieve public salience. Karin Barber in her study of the personal oriki<sup>375</sup> of nineteenth-century 'big men' in the small town of Okuku, in the present Oyo state of Nigeria, shows how in the Yoruba socio-economic worldview, the concept of buying clothes amplifies an individual's visibility and grandeur. Although Barber's analysis of popular culture was located in the nineteenth century, she also warns of the problem of assigning any unitary "belief system" to any single "historical period."<sup>376</sup> For according to her, "there were and are multiple discourses circulating, some older than others, some more

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<sup>374</sup> Jane Guyer, "Wealth in people, wealth in things," Introduction, *Journal of African History*, 36 1995 pp. 83-90.

<sup>375</sup> Oriki is an inspirational literary chant of the Yoruba. It is usually declamatory and takes the form of poetry and praise songs. Some of the settings in which this happens is at traditional wedding ceremonies, chieftaincy coronations, masquerading arenas etc. In the case of traditional marriage ceremonies, some women will be chanting praise poetry to inspire the bride, and the bride bursts into emotional expressions of joy often exhibited through 'tears' (of joy). For the purpose of inspiration, the Yoruba people employ the use of praise poetry, songs and sacred invocations, as well as inspiring names. Even as the name shows, oriki is a name or a praise poetry that "opens up" or "expands" a person's head. The etymology of the Yoruba word for inspiration reflects the belief of the people in Ori, i.e., the head.

<sup>376</sup> See Karin Barber, "Money, Self-Realization and the Person in Yoruba Texts," in Jane Guyer, (ed), *Money Matters: Instability, values and social payments in the modern history of West African Communities* (Portsmouth and London: Heinemann and James Curry, 1995), pp.210-211.

valued than others, encoded in different genres according to different conventions.”<sup>377</sup> The ideas these discourses embody may even be different and incompatible. Barber’s argument is that it would rather be too reductive to claim that some of these belief systems represent what “the Yoruba” really “believed” at a particular moment while others did not. She, however, believes that it is necessary to recognize the pervasiveness of alternatives in the discourse of ideological changes in the case of the Yoruba. The following examples, which I give in relation to cloth and public salience therefore, only serve as a pointer to the existence of such a belief system in some aspects of Yoruba culture. And my employment of such an analogy is only to demonstrate especially its relationship to particular contemporary happenings such as *aso ebi*.

In the study, Barber observes that in Yoruba, “a big man’s money was manifested in bodily display and conspicuous expenditure which attracted more people to his entourage.”<sup>378</sup> A famous man from Okuku known as Gbangbade, – well known for his trading activities down to the coast, and for his part in the Ilorin-Ibadan wars – was saluted, *Ogiri daso ma le gbe* (“Sprightly fellow bought a cloth so huge he could hardly wear it”).<sup>379</sup> Barber also observes that cloth is a well-established metaphor for people: Oba Oyekanbi (1861-77) was saluted as *Alamu labuta ore/ Lanihun baba lo waa regbe bora bi aso* (“Alamu possessor of many friends/Lanahun the father has companions to wrap himself with like a cloth”).<sup>380</sup>

A transcribed version of one of the *oriki* reads:

The masquerade (Eku) costume buys cloth with which to sweep the market like an *Isobo*. One who wears costume after costume; who wears cloth like an Egun. Mother of Wuraola bought cloth, bought cloth with which to sweep the market on her outings, *Ponle* child of the rich person who foams up like soap.<sup>381</sup>

In the above lines what stands out is the evocation of a process of self-investment through clothes. The masquerade, *eku* – the sack-like costume that makes up the body of an *egungun*<sup>382</sup> – also expands its own prominence by buying and wearing its own costume. The metaphor, “sweep the market,” is used to convey the impression of prestige, into public space, embodied

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid, p.210.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid, p.214, pp. 205-224.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid, p.214.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid, p.214.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid, p.214.

<sup>382</sup> Egungun is a type of Yoruba masquerade.

through elaborate and sumptuous attire by both the masquerade and “Mother of Wuraola” who is also described in terms of “layers upon layers of fabric.” She has as much cloth as the *egun* – a coastal people from Porto Novo who had good access to imported goods. It is assumed that dignified clothes magnify the grandeur of the rich person who “foams up like soap” – the black indigenous soap that is used in preparing good-fortune medicine.<sup>383</sup> The three subjects mentioned in the above *oriki*, namely: the masquerade, “Mother of Wuraola” and *Ponle*, are seen as framing their own social selves through a process of sartorial embodiment: “the rich woman creates a magnificent persona by investing her body with gorgeous material. The ultimate goal is to build a visible self, a persona that will attract the gaze and adherence of others – others whose presence is already alluded to in the image of layers and layers of cloth, also, a metaphor for ‘people.’”<sup>384</sup> Barber remarks that the most intense images of human greatness that she has come across in *oriki* are all images of bodily intensity, in which the physical body is transformed by investiture with costume, high esteem, social sufficiency, “honour.”<sup>385</sup> Each of the above named subjects is represented as investing (and investing in) himself or herself through purchase. This idea admits the fact that every individual has the capacity for inventiveness and an aversion for invisibility and sartorial inadequacy; an indication that everyone has the potential for self-aggrandizement in the social spaces in which they find themselves.<sup>386</sup>

There is a somewhat similar occurrence in present day Lagos of how expensive *asọ ebì* cloth could be used to signify wealth and public visibility. In an article entitled “Adenuga’s daughter’s wedding: *Asọ ebì* goes for N350, 000,” Jide Ogunleye states:

Billionaire and chairman of telecom giant Globacom, Dr. Mike Adenuga is a man known for not doing his things in half measure. The forthcoming wedding of his daughter, Bella, is no doubt promising to be another trail blazer. Apart from the distinguished personalities from Nigeria and abroad that will grace the occasion, preparations for the wedding has been frenetic. One of the uncommon features of the wedding is the *Asọ ebì*. An insider hinted that the *Asọ ebì* goes for as much as N350,000 for the Adenuga’s family and their guests, while that of the groom’s family goes for N180,000, about twice the amount for that of the bride’s family. The rush for the fabric has been described as being very impressive. Source further disclosed that, both *Asọ ebìs* have been bought which he said shows expression of love for

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<sup>383</sup> Karin Barber, “Money, Self- Realization and the person in Yoruba Texts,” p. 214.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid*, p. 215.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid*, p. 212.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid*, p. 213.

both families. Bella, an Executive Director of Globacom and a graduate of International Relations and Political Science, University of Massachusetts, USA will be tying the knots to Mr Jameel Disu. Jameel is a Lagosian, with business interest in Lagos and Cairo. He is a major player in communication business. His father, we gathered is a banker in Cairo, Egypt. You are about to witness the superlative wedding of the year... *Asọ ebì* is for the select few, not just family but anyone who can afford to buy it.<sup>387</sup>

What is remarkable in this article is how individual and group realization is achieved through the purchase of *asọ ebì* cloth. In the last sentence of the passage the author remarks that “*asọ ebì* is for the select few and not just for the family but anyone who can afford it.” In other words, while *asọ ebì* is an expression of fraternal love and solidarity it also figures as a means of negotiating public salience or even social mobility through ‘buying’. It could be seen as a case of one buying oneself onto a social ladder. My argument here is that if the craving for public visibility (as identified in Barber’s text) is epitomized by a strong attachment to the artifact of expensive cloth, then the culmination of such desire might be through a large followership dressed in expensive *asọ ebì* cloth. There is a remarkable resonance between Barber’s study and what happened during Dr. Mike Adenuga’s daughter’s wedding. In the wedding, it is evident that purchasing expensive *asọ ebì* clothes is seen as a marker of wealth and a means of being visible in the society. The cost of the *asọ ebì* cloth is N350, 000, which is equivalent to two thousand three hundred and fifty dollars (2, 350 USD). In Nigeria, this sum of money is a price too exorbitant even for the rich especially for a piece of *asọ ebì* cloth. It appears even more excessive because the piece of cloth serves only one person in a wedding that lasts for just few hours.

The *asọ ebì* unveils a fruitful interplay between the social conspicuousness of the ‘big man’ and the surrounding gaze of eulogizing adherents. This is also a very good paradigm of social mobility, albeit temporary, with cloth serving only as a symbolic form of such mobility. First the celebrant sees money as something that can bestow prestige upon the wedding and expensive *asọ ebì* is a means through which this money can be exhibited. It follows therefore that the ability to afford such expensive apparel launches one into the rich social network of Dr Adenuga, just for that occasion. The fact that human bodies become sites of possible pecuniary

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<sup>387</sup> Jide Ogunleye in his article titled “Adenuga’s daughter’s wedding: *Asọ ebì* goes for N350, 000” 3 April 2010, Jide Ogunleye’s blog <http://www.jideogunleye.com/blog/?p=690>

investment – in the form of expensive *asọ ebi* – by the ‘big man’, might compel one to think of Barber’s remark, that “a big man’s money was manifested in bodily display and conspicuous expenditure which attracted more people to his entourage.”<sup>388</sup> However, such pecuniary investments rather than translate into purely economic remunerations may satisfy socially acceptable assumptions of aggrandizement in the current context. Despite the high cost of Bella’s *asọ ebi*, Ogunleye in the above article observes that “the rush for the fabric has been described as being very impressive.” Could it be assumed, in this instance, that less people would have purchased Bella’s *asọ ebi* if it was cheap?

In line with Barber’s argument that “money is seen as a central image in the discourse of self-realization,”<sup>389</sup> – and given the fact that cloth as noted earlier is seen as wealth – it is possible to argue that in “a society whose dynamic is driven by the self-aggrandizement of the big man,” the individual, Adenuga, might have invested his personhood with an image of money using expensive *asọ ebi* cloth. This investment surely begets recognition of his self-worth by his supporters who bought expensive *asọ ebi* dress. There seems to be a certain contextual ambiguity in Barber’s concept of individual largesse. Her employment of the terms ‘recruit’ and ‘attract’ is quite indicative of Adenuga who seems to have ‘attracted’ supporters instead of recruiting them. Although Barber’s earlier observation that “people and money are inseparable and were in fact the joint constituents of social well-being”<sup>390</sup> could still hold, there is a suggestion of something particular at work in her use of the word, ‘recruit.’ Since she did not contextualize the simultaneous use of both words ‘recruit’ and ‘attract’ in her text, I believe the use of ‘attraction’ is appropriate in Adenuga’s case. In other contexts such as the case of the politician (as will be explained subsequently), the ‘big man’ may need to ‘recruit’ supporters to wear *asọ ebi* because people may not be willing (unlike in Adenuga’s case) to partake in his solidarity. Adenuga being a billionaire businessman, those who constituted his followership could have been drawn mainly from the rich or middle class of society. For this reason one needs to understand how – and whether – class positions determine *asọ ebi* practice.

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid, p. 215.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid, p. 213.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid, p. 213.

### ***Asọ ebì* cloth and class.**

In Nigeria it could be said that, in the cities, social mobility is coterminous with public salience. And one of the ways to demonstrate this public salience is dress. It is possible to identify some aspects of class display specifically through *asọ ebì* dress. But the nature of contemporary Nigerian society makes it a difficult task to pursue such arguments around class. Given the nature of late capitalist commodification, it is rather a tough undertaking to discuss the explicit theoretical implication of ‘class’ as an analytical category in the study of dress in contemporary Nigeria. Writing on Nigerian Video films in 2000, Jonathan Haynes and Onokome Okome have observed that the “essential heterogeneity, fluidity, and unboundedness of social groups in Africa makes it difficult to talk of fully formed classes in the European sense at all.”<sup>391</sup> They note that in Nigeria the class situation is further destabilized because of extreme underlying economic instability, the possibility of rapid mobility for a limited few, and nearly universal aspirations for individual advancement which tend to inhibit the formation of class consciousness.<sup>392</sup> Haynes and Okome recognize one of the signs of the incomplete process of class formation as the aspiration by almost everyone to rise socially and imagining there is some prospect of doing so, however slim the chances really are, so that the dream vision of an elite lifestyle is in some sense common property.<sup>393</sup> It is possible to identify some parallels in the Nigerian video films and the practice of *asọ ebì* because the “images of lavish wealth”<sup>394</sup> which are paradigmatic of the videos, might in some cases have become one of the motivations for the spectacular display seen in the *asọ ebì* dress. These images of the video films and of the spectacular *asọ ebì* crowd are sometimes interpreted as “expressions of a stable middle-class vision of itself, and sometimes desired dream by and for the masses.”<sup>395</sup> However, while Haynes and Okome’s observation applies to a great extent in this study, the relationship which *asọ ebì* has with class and status in Nigeria is worthy of study in order to understand clearly the context in which *asọ ebì* is being used in certain quarters in Nigeria.

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<sup>391</sup> Jonathan Haynes and Onokome Okome, “Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films,” in Jonathan Haynes (ed), *Nigerian Video Films* (Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), p. 78.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79.

In the event of Nigerian independence in the 1960s, *aso oke* was often used as *aso ebi*, especially in Western Nigeria, to distinguish the rich from the poor.<sup>396</sup> *Aso oke* was eventually phased out because of the impact of Chinese textile market which also affected the nature of *aso ebi* practice. In recent times *aso oke* is still being used but on very few occasions and it is still seen as a mark of class (for an historical and contextual analysis of *aso oke*, see Chapter Four).

While it is important to acknowledge the existence of a huge literature on class in Nigeria spanning the sociological, historical and political disciplines,<sup>397</sup> it is important to stress that for

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<sup>396</sup> *Aso-oke*, considered as prestige cloth, is usually worn by Yoruba men and women throughout south-western Nigeria which basically includes contemporary Ekiti, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Lagos states. People of Yoruba stock in parts of Kwara, Kogi and Edo States also wear this type of cloth. Common fashion styles often used for *aso-oke* are *buba* and *iro* (top and wrapper), *gele* (head gear), *agbada* (large gown) and *buba and sokoto* (top and trousers). See Chapter 4 of this present study for a complete analysis of *aso oke*.

<sup>397</sup> During the 1950s, a few scholars identified the emergence of an African 'middle class' as the primary source of nationalist assertion. See for example Martin L. Kilson, "Nationalism and Social Classes in British West Africa," in *The Journal of Politics* (Gainesville, Fla.), xx, 2, May 1958, pp. 368-87. A symposium sponsored by the International Institute of Differing Civilizations reached this conclusion: "the driving force in nearly all the nationalist movements has come from the middle class"; see *Development of a Middle Class in Tropical and Sub-Tropical Countries* (Brussels, 1956), p. 453. See also Thomas Hodgkin, *African Political Parties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), pp. 27-9; and the survey by Immanuel Wallerstein, "Class, Tribe, and Party in West African Politics," in Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (New York, 1967), pp. 497-518. Some other studies have also researched class in relation to political party formation in Nigeria, see for example, Richard L. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 480-1; Richard L. Sklar "The Nature of Class Domination in Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Dec., 1979), pp. 531-552, p. 534. In the post-1960 period, a political party in Nigeria known as *The Action Group* based its political re-emergence on the formation and growth of social classes in contemporary Nigeria. A large portion of the 1960 *Action Group* manifesto entitled "Democratic Socialism" is devoted to an analysis of existing and emerging classes. Exhibiting an unrefined Marxist orientation, it asserts: The manifesto notes three distinct incipient classes in Nigeria: (1) the 'self-employed', the bulk of the people; (2) the 'workers', those earning wages and salaries; and (3) the 'employers', which includes the state, private and public corporations, industrialists, merchants, and contractors. Although it calls for more Nigerians to join the employer class, the manifesto urges the Action Group, as a 'political party of the common people', to 'project and protect the best interests of the first two classes ... and reflect their true aspirations.' The manifesto anticipates class realignments and predicts that the uncharted development of the capitalist system of production, distribution, and exchange, as allegedly fostered by the Northern Peoples' Congress (N.P.C.)- (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) N.C.N.C. Government, will tend to destroy the small self-employed businessman and increase the strength of the working classes. This, it is thought, will "deepen the class antagonisms" between the rich and the poor. The Action Group concludes that to survive it must throw its support to the growing political and economic force in the country-the working class. See Action Group Bureau of Information, *Democratic Socialism: being the manifesto of the Action Group of Nigeria for an independent Nigeria* (Lagos, 1960), pp. 5 and 7. Viewing Nigerian society along class lines is not a recent addition to Action Group thought. Obafemi Awolowo, the party's leader since its inception, wrote in 1945 that there were three classes in Nigeria. At that time, however, he differentiated between: (1) the 'educated classes consisting of the professional men and women, teachers, and clerks'; (2) 'the "enlightened" classes consisting mainly of traders and artisans'; and (3) 'the ignorant masses'. He went on to discuss them in some details and specifically their actual and potential roles in Nigerian politics. See Obafemi Awolowo's book, *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (London, 1947), pp. 3I-2. But the 1945 categories of class were based largely on educational differences; those of 1960 were founded on economic divisions. This was a fundamental innovation. See "Democratic Socialism," pp. 6-7 and 8-10. There is also a huge literature on social stratification in Nigeria. The references cited here are but a small part of the literature, see, for example, Peter Lloyd, "The integration of the new economic classes into local government in western Nigeria," *African Affairs* 52 (1953), pp. 327-334; P. C. Lloyd, Akin I. Mabogunje and Bolanle Awe, (eds), *The elite, the city of Ibadan* (Cambridge, 1967) : 129-150; Hugh H. Smythe and Mabel M. Smythe, *The New Nigerian Elite* (Stanford, 1960); Richard I. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* (Princeton, 1963); B. J. Dudley, "Marxism and Political Change in Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Economics and Social Studies*, 6 (2) (1964); Gavin Williams, "The Social Stratification of a Neo-Colonial Economy: Western Nigeria," in Christopher Allen and R. W. Johnson, (eds), *African Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge

the convenience of this study, class will be considered only in relation to *aso ebi* cloth. The question is how does *aso ebi* cloth mark social class? Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi has recognized that in Nigeria, “class is often exhibited in events such as burials, weddings, birthdays and so on through the use of such symbolic displays as *aso ebi* cloths.”<sup>398</sup> Lawuyi’s study which focused on 1960s Nigeria, maintained that among the Yoruba, expensive *aso oke* or lace materials are subtle distinctions which mark status.<sup>399</sup> In burial ceremonies, according to Lawuyi, rare and elaborately produced garments are the insignia of social and political achievement. These materials “symbolically distinguish the elite from the poor, the person of higher from those of lower rank or accomplishments.”<sup>400</sup> Again Barber in her study of Yoruba popular culture in the 1980s, also remarked that cloth is used to distinguish the elites in social events in Nigeria. According to Barber, the ceremonials which include funeral ceremonies, chieftaincy title conferment festivities and social parties where praise-music is played, are contexts characterized by the use of special type of dresses often employed to mark status.<sup>401</sup> Lawuyi and Barber’s studies were situated in the 1960s and 1980s Nigeria respectively before the proliferation of cheap textile materials in the Nigerian market. However (as discussed in the previous chapter), recent studies on *aso oke* use in present day Lagos suggest that the use of *aso oke* for *aso ebi* has been replaced by a cheap textile material known as *Ankara*. Perhaps the issue of class was more pronounced before the era of late capitalist commodification. This is recognized by Justine M. Cordwell who remarked that ostentatious amounts of clothes as a symbol of status and wealth in Yorubaland appeared on chiefs and wealthy men long before capitalist networks availed the commoners of such exclusive opportunities.<sup>402</sup>

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University Press, 1970), pp.225-250, p. 258. Kristin Mann studied class formation in colonial Lagos and identified a section of the society she described as the elites. She defines elite men in colonial Lagos as “including all professionals (doctors, lawyers, ministers, headmasters, surveyors and engineers), first-class clerks or above in the colonial service, and educated import-export merchants.” Also included in her list are members of a few other occupations, such as planters and newspaper publishers, who clearly belonged to the elite but do not fit neatly into one of these three major occupational categories. Thus defined, elite males according to Mann, grew in number from 54 in 1880 to 117 in 1915, totaling 200 throughout the period. More than 80 per cent of these men had attended secondary school, and roughly 30 per cent had received advanced education in England. She, however, explained that “a clearly bounded group of elite women proved difficult to identify, because of the greater historical invisibility.” See Kristin Mann, “Marriage Choices among the Educated African Elite in Lagos Colony,” 1880-1915, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1981), pp. 201-228.

<sup>398</sup> Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi “The Social Marketing of Elites: The Advertised Self in Obituaries and Congratulations in Some Nigerian Dailies” *Africa, Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1991), pp. 247-263, p.257.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid*, p.257.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid*, p.257.

<sup>401</sup> Barber cited in *Ibid*, p.257.

<sup>402</sup> Justine M. Cordwell , “The art and aesthetics of the Yoruba”, *African Arts*, Vol.16 No. 2, February 1983, pp. 56-59.

Outside *aso oke*, there are similar instances in certain African countries where cloth is used to depict class and status. For example, Joseph K. Adjaye has observed that, in Asante, Ghana “particular textile types have cultural value such that the wearer is immediately associated with possession of great wealth or status.”<sup>403</sup> Acquisition of kente by the Asante aristocracy marked a significant distinction in purchasing power and social status between the elite and ordinary citizens.<sup>404</sup> The similarity kente has with *aso ebi* might become clearer from the fact that in the words of Bowdich, “the chiefs and their cohorts wore Ashantee cloths of extravagant price from the costly foreign silks which had been unravelled to weave them in all the varieties of colour as well as patterns.”<sup>405</sup> Perhaps the notions of ‘King’ in Asante society may approximate the concept of ‘big man’ in contemporary Nigeria. For the mere fact that kings hold such position, they (kings) were not expected to wear the same cloth as the commoners.<sup>406</sup> Again, Judith Perani and Norma H. Wolff note that “leadership attire is calculated and manipulated to project great political as well as spiritual power through emphasis on ‘bigness.’” Writing further they remark that the amplification of a sense of bigness in leadership dress requires frequent wrapping and a costume of immense physical magnitude. This did not only serve as a consolidation of the aggrandized image but is also emblematic of strength and wealth, becoming a visual metaphor of the leader’s power.<sup>407</sup> According to Perani and Wolff, a good example was offered by the Oba of Benin in Nigeria at the annual Ugie-Erha ceremony to commemorate the Oba’s father and the Oba’s reception of Britain’s Queen in a 1956 visit to Nigeria. The Oba wore a coral-bead costume including crown, collars, tunic and slippers.<sup>408</sup> A Benin chief once explained that “when the king is wearing this heavy beaded costume, he does not shake or blink but stays still and unmoving.”<sup>409</sup> Emphasizing this phenomenon further, Arhin notes that the social position of the higher orders was established by their wealth of which clothing was a marker.<sup>410</sup> In Niger, Adeline Masquelier unveils how, in Mawri society, “displaying an impressive array of clothing and parading in expensive looking outfits are

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<sup>403</sup> Joseph K Adjaye, “The discourse of Kente cloth: From Haute Couture to Mass Culture,” in Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrienne Andrews (eds), *Language, Rhythm and Sound, Black popular cultures into the twenty-first century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), p.31.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>408</sup> Judith Perani and Norma H. Wolff, *Cloth Dress and Art Patronage in Africa* (New York: Berg, 1999), p. 91.

<sup>409</sup> Ben Amos, in Ibid, p. 180

<sup>410</sup> Cited in ibid, p.31; see also Colleen E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Oxford: Altamira Press, 2006), p.173.

primary indicators of a person's wealth."<sup>411</sup> She notes that putting on different layers of cloth is not so much a matter of modesty as of dignity and that padding the body with voluminous cloth denotes prestige.<sup>412</sup> Likewise, Susan O. Michelman and Tonye Erokosima have emphasized how in 'traditional' Kalabari society of Nigeria, dress was used to demonstrate social and political achievements.<sup>413</sup>

Most of the above named examples are also reflected in what these scholars say about *aso ebi* practice. For example, Gerald Iworima remarks that "in any ceremony you attend you can always tell how rich a man is through the cost of his *aso ebi* group. Very rich people adorn expensive lace or *aso oke* with their family members while the not-so-rich would wear cheap Chinese products as *aso ebi*."<sup>414</sup> Iworima's point has been explored in Chapter Four especially in the context of how late capitalism has influenced *aso ebi* practice.

What can be inferred from the above examples is that there is a similarity observed in the case of *aso ebi* of the billionaire, Adenuga, especially concerning investing himself and his guests with expensive *aso ebi* attire as a demonstration of wealth. There could be some elements of prestige and class attached to how people put value of expensive *aso ebi* cloths. Obviously, the similarity could be easily noticed in Barber's study of how the "rich woman invests her body with expensive and gorgeous robes," a practice that could parallel the above examples as a mark of wealth.

### **Large followership as a marker of class in *aso ebi*.**

Beyond the use of expensive clothes as *aso ebi* to mark class and status, the large crowd is also conceived as a signifier of status and wealth. What is important here is a need to ascertain why certain individuals hanker for large numbers of people to adorn *aso ebi*. Ibe Imagun noted that between the 1950s and 1960s in Nigeria, *aso ebi* was distributed free in most public functions

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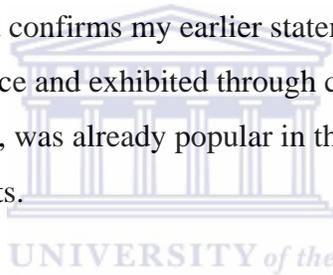
<sup>411</sup> Adeline Masquelier, "Mediating threads: clothing and the texture of spirit/medium relations in Bori (Southern Sudan)" in Hilde Hendrickson (ed.), *Clothing and Difference. Embodied Identities in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), see especially pp. 67-93, and pp. 76-77.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>413</sup> Susan O. Michelman and Tonye Erokosima, 'Kalabari Dress in Nigeria: visual analysis and Gender implications', in Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (eds) *Dress and Gender: making meaning* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997), p.179.

<sup>414</sup> Gerald Iworima, "Social events and the culture of the rich," *Saturday Sun* 16 October, 2010.

by Ekiti kith and kin and that *aso oke* was their special preference.<sup>415</sup> He notes that it was easy to identify the rich through their social events because since *aso ebi* was distributed free it was mostly the rich who clothed large numbers of people. The not-so-rich could only distribute a few free *aso ebi* clothes to a few people. Imagun observes that this practice started declining around the 1980s when the economic crisis of the Structural Adjustment Programme compelled even the rich to re-think their free gift of *aso oke* as *aso ebi*. Instead of *aso oke* now, cheaper textile materials were distributed as free *aso ebi*. According to Imagun, “in March 1956, during the burial ceremony of Chief Dele Alabi of Ekiti, one of his children, Oloye Alabi, proudly claimed that they commissioned more than 1000 *aso ebi* to be distributed freely to guests during the burial.”<sup>416</sup> Oloye made this statement in a speech he delivered on one of the occasions he was addressing guests at the burial ceremony apparently to demonstrate how they did not spare their wealth to give their deceased father a befitting burial.<sup>417</sup> Oloye’s mention of how many people were clothed confirms my earlier statement that social mobility is synonymous with public salience and exhibited through clothing a large number of people; a practice which, from the above, was already popular in the 1960s. This is a clear display of wealth and class in social events.



The distribution of free *aso ebi* as a demonstration of one’s largesse may have a certain relatedness to particular practices of ‘giving away goods’ to show wealth and status in other parts of the world. For example, a very striking analogy here may have been provided by Vladas Griskevicius *et al* to explain this behaviour in Northwest American Kwakiutl tribal practice of potlatching, where “local chiefs compete to give away – or sometimes even publicly burn – enormous quantities of their own possessions, often going into great debt to do so.”<sup>418</sup> The chief who is able to give away or waste the most resources, and thus is able to bear the highest costs, is regarded as the highest status member in the group.<sup>419</sup> While this analogy may seem related to the above *aso ebi* practice, Conrad Phillip Kottak has offered a different interpretation of potlatching as that which served to prevent the development of socioeconomic

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<sup>415</sup> Ibe Imagun “The Rise and Fall of Ekiti Porapo” in *Lagos Weekend Review*, No.3, 1990, pp. 20-26.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid*.

stratification, a system of social class.<sup>420</sup> He argues that wealth relinquished or destroyed was converted into nonmaterial item: prestige. Under capitalism, we reinvest our profits (rather than burning our cash), with the hope of making an additional profit. However, the potlatching tribes were content to relinquish their surpluses rather than use them to widen the social distance between themselves and their fellow tribe members.<sup>421</sup>

While this argument may seem relevant for *asọ ebì*, where the lavishing of wealth is seen in the free distribution of clothes, one may need to re-examine the practice in line with arguments advanced by the ecological anthropologists Wayne Suttles (1960) and Andrew Vayda (1961/68). These scholars see potlatching not in terms of its apparent wastefulness, but in terms of its long-term role as a cultural adaptive mechanism. I am inclined to apply this view to *asọ ebì*, for not only does it help one to understand the dynamics of *asọ ebì* ostentation, it also offers insight into similar patterns of lavish feasting in many parts of Nigeria. This is in accordance with an ecological interpretation of potlatching offered by Kottak that customs like potlatch – much as customs like *asọ ebì* – are cultural adaptations to alternating periods of local abundance and shortage.<sup>422</sup> In the case of *asọ ebì* local shortage could be a temporary period witnessed in occasions where the celebrant offers free food and free clothes to those invited to the feast.

Understanding class in relation to *asọ ebì* again brings the notions of the ‘elite,’ in the Yoruba context, to the fore. The definitions of the elite, in traditional Yoruba thought, according to Olufunke Adeboye, emphasized the possession of *ola*.<sup>423</sup> *Ola* translates as ‘honour’ and while the ultimate in individual social advancement in pre-colonial Yorubaland was to attain a position of *ola*, there were several mediating social categories in between the masses and *Olola* (possessor of *ola*).<sup>424</sup> These categories included the *Borokinni/Gbajumo* (celebrities), *Oloro/Olowo* (men of wealth), *Ologun* (powerful warriors who came into limelight in the nineteenth century), and *Oloye* (titleholder).<sup>425</sup> Karin Barber has observed that in terms of

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<sup>420</sup> Conrad Philip Kottak, *Anthropology: the exploration of human diversity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), p. 448.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid*, p. 448

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid*, p. 447.

<sup>423</sup> Olufunke Adeboye “Elite lifestyle and consumption in colonial Ibadan” in Adebayo Oyeboade, *The Foundations of Nigeria: Essays in honour of Toyin Falola* (Trenton and Asmara: African World Press, Inc. 2003), p. 283.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid*, p. 283.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid*, p. 283.

individual social advancement in the traditional Yoruba society, what men hoped to achieved was:

Not wealth as such or power as such, but a total state of sufficiency and command over their social environment, a state called *ola*. *Ola* is [a] complex, composite, shifting and sensuously realised concept... [It] is ultimately the capacity to attract and retain the gaze of other people.<sup>426</sup>

While Barber identifies the elements of self sufficiency, social command, and public acknowledgement in *ola* she leaves out an important aspect which is the splendour that is in *ola*. *Ola* is a greatness of splendour that transcends all that is mean, poor, obscure, or inadequate, and above the inhibition of powerlessness or low esteem. It is simultaneously self-assured and magnificent. The essential point here is that in certain respects, the concept of elite in Western philosophy corresponded to the notion of *olola* (and *ola*) in traditional Yoruba thought. Underlying both concepts are the same principles of high class, social influence, social superiority, and public acknowledgement. Due to the dynamism of the elite category, values associated with it are often modified and appropriated within its limits as a response to changing times. In the case of the Lagos elites many changes were foisted on it, not only in the realm of values but also in lifestyle and consumption.<sup>427</sup>

In colonial Lagos, those who constituted the elite comprised several categories. There were the chiefs whom we could call the traditional elite, wealthy individuals who corresponded to the commercial elite, and the first generation educated intelligentsia whom we could call educated elite.<sup>428</sup> During the decolonization period, a new set of individuals acquired elite status. These were the politicians.<sup>429</sup> Although educated, their ticket to elite status was more attributed to the leadership role they played through modern political parties in the country. There were also elites among religious leaders in traditional religion, Islam, and Christianity. In terms of status symbols, Adeboye notes that one outstanding feature of the Lagos elite is the clothing of large

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<sup>426</sup> Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (London: International African Institute, 1991), p.203.

<sup>427</sup> Kristen Mann. *Marrying Well: Marriage, Status and Social Change Among the Educated Elite in Colonial Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.284; see also P.D. Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 63, 170, 199.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid*, p. 284.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid*, p. 284.

number of people in *asọ ebi* during ceremonies, special outings and festivals.<sup>430</sup> The meanings of *ola*, therefore, for the elites in colonial Lagos involve the flamboyance that accompanied the *Olola* (possessor of *ola*) very much evident in the *asọ ebi* groups. In part, their *ola* derives from the dignity bestowed upon them by the presence of these groups. Many of the prominent individuals in Lagos had numerous wives and thus children whom they had an obligation to robe in *asọ ebi* at every special social occasion.<sup>431</sup> Although polygamy was a common practice in traditional Yorubaland, it acquired a wider appeal to the *nouveau riche* in the twentieth century. According to Okediji:

Although polygamy was valued in traditional Yoruba society for social and economic reasons, it did not appear to be the preferred form of marriage for many except those who were relatively affluent, and hence, were in a strong position to maintain a big household.<sup>432</sup>

Part of the maintenance of a big household involves clothing them during important events to form a visual impact of *asọ ebi*. In his diary, recorded on January 12, 1923 Bola Ajibade – a prominent and wealthy Ijebu business man residing in Adeniji Adele Area of Lagos – remarks that he never experienced any financial constraint when it concerned clothing his twenty five children in *asọ ebi* during any ceremony that demanded the use of *asọ ebi*.<sup>433</sup> And an occasion for such ceremony eventually occurred when on March 5 of the same 1923 he celebrated his official reception into the Lagos Club. What marked an important step towards his climb to the ‘high’ society, in Ajibade’s own perception, was the public salience that attended the spectacular emergence of his family in green *asọ ebi* which made him believe that he has achieved a place on the social ladder.<sup>434</sup> Similarly, on October 5, 1940, Chief Amodu Tijani had a party in memory of his late father who had passed on two years earlier.<sup>435</sup> During this party his family members and other members of the extended family were attired in blue green

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid, p. 284.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid, p.285.

<sup>432</sup> F.O. Okediji and O.O.Okediji, “Introduction, ” in N.A. Fadipe (ed), *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: University Press, 1970), p.19.

<sup>433</sup> Nigerian National Archives located at the Kenneth Dike Library houses a significant number of elite diaries purportedly donated by the children of these men. Bola Ajibade, papers, box 70: Diary 1923, Entry for September 20.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Chief Amodu Tijani papers, NAI, Box 11 Diary 1940, Entry for December 5.

velvet *asọ ebi*.<sup>436</sup> To underscore the sense of prestige Chief Tijani attached to this uniform, he records in his diary:

I never envisaged that my people could be so beautifully dressed in the expensive velvet as to attract such public attention. I had spent an enormous amount of money on more than 100 pieces of these clothes for everyone that wore it. And I am sure all the guests could see the level at which I had gone to give my late father a befitting remembrance.<sup>437</sup>

In one of the commendations, Chief Tijani confessed that Chief Obanikoro whispered into his ear that he loved the dresses.<sup>438</sup> It shows that what Chief Tijani might have considered as public attention was the presence of certain elite figures who had commended him for investing so much on the clothes of his people. The implication is that elite belonging begets high spending, and a desire to live up to such spending. In other words, by clothing a sizeable number of people in *asọ ebi*, Chief Tijani considered himself (and was considered by his elite guests) as generous and rich. Through these means, he maintained his *ola* and attracted and retained the gaze of other people.

People engage in conspicuous consumption as a means to signal their wealth, which in turn, confers social status.<sup>439</sup> Status provides society with its hierarchical structure and has an intimate role in corporate charity, housing, luxury goods, branding strategies, marriage markets and career outcomes. In general, the implications of social status are profound.<sup>440</sup>

Along the same lines, Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that the Nambikwara chieftains of the Brazilian Amazon proved their chieftainship through generosity. According to Lévi-Strauss, “by distributing food and other goods the big man retained and increased his power.”<sup>441</sup> It is evident that anthropologists, for a long time, have observed this habit of generosity by the ‘big man’ among certain groups at different historical epochs. My study however, highlights rather a different meaning of such generosity in urban Lagos. In this meaning, expressions of generosity seem to reside in the distribution of *asọ ebi* cloth; a practice that resonates with

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<sup>436</sup> Chief Amodu Tijani papers, NAI, Box 11 Diary 1940, Entry for December 5.

<sup>437</sup> Chief Amodu Tijani papers, NAI, Box 11 Diary 1940, Entry for December 5.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

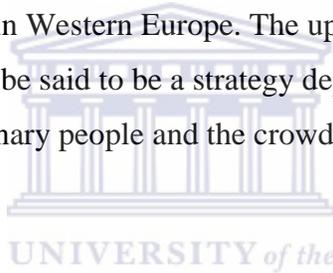
<sup>439</sup> Francis Bloch, Vijayendra Rao and Sonalde Desai, “Wedding Celebrations as Signals of Social Status in Rural South India,” *Journal of Human Resources* (University of Wisconsin Press, Vol 39, 2004), Issue 3.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss cited in Frederick Kaufman, “Let them eat cash! Can Bill Gates turn hunger into profit?” <http://frederickkaufman.typepad.com/harpersmag/Let%20Them%20Eat%20Cash!.pdf> visited 10 August 2010.

strong political and economic implications across different classes of people in contemporary Lagos.

On February 16, 2011 the Nigerian academic Pius Adesanmi delivered a keynote lecture at the African Textiles Exhibition of Carleton University's Arts Gallery, Canada. The title of the lecture was "*Asọ ebi* on My Mind." In this lecture which centered on the practice of *asọ ebi*, Adesanmi explored, among other things, the genealogy of the crowd in the Western as well as the African social contexts. According to Adesanmi, European intellectuals, going all the way back to the legacy of Nietzsche, despised crowds and the masses as polluters of culture.<sup>442</sup> While Adesanmi's treatise opens up more spaces for the interrogation of this concept of the crowd in intellectual terms, John Carey provides an intriguing explanation of the epistemological resentment meted out on the crowds and the masses by the architects of modernist intellectual thought in Western Europe. The upward progression of culture and the arts from 'low' to 'high' could be said to be a strategy deployed by the European intelligentsia to exclude the masses, the ordinary people and the crowds in the wake of the rise of Western modernist sensibilities.



Adesanmi's lecture bemoans the indifference ascribed to the masses by the cream of European thinkers such as Jose Ortega y Gasset, T.S.Eliot, Hermann Hesse, Flaubert, Andre Gide, H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Evelyn Waugh, D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats, among others.<sup>443</sup> The dismissal of the masses by these groups, again, also targeted the vehicles of mass enlightenment such as newspapers, radio, literature and anything that could elevate the intellect above the commonplace. John Carey writes that "the early twentieth century saw a determined effort, on the part of the European intelligentsia, to exclude the masses from culture. In England this movement has become known as modernism while in other European countries it was given different names, effectively advanced using the visual arts and literature."<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Pius Adesanmi, "*Asọ ebi* on My Mind (Part One)" Keynote lecture delivered at the African Textiles Exhibition of Carleton University's Arts Gallery, February 16, 2011.

<sup>443</sup> More recent work could be seen from Pierre Bourdieu's class-based explanatory model of differentiation in *Distinction* which accentuates distinctions between mass and high culture. See Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Transl. R. Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>444</sup> Cited in Ibid.

The future of the arts and culture seems to anchor upon a further polarization of the European public along two incompatible groups: “those who can understand and those who cannot. Naturally, those who can understand art belong in the category of the chosen few; those who cannot belong in the category of the inferior mass.”<sup>445</sup> John Carey again believes that as an element in the reaction against mass values that the intellectuals brought into being the theory of the avant-garde, according to which the mass is, in art and literature, always wrong.<sup>446</sup> What is truly meritorious in art is seen as the prerogative of a minority, the intellectuals, and the significance of this minority is reckoned to be directly proportionate to its ability to outrage and puzzle the mass. Though it usually purports to be progressive, the avant-garde is consequently always reactionary. That is, it seeks to take literacy and culture away from the masses.<sup>447</sup>

Adesanmi notes that modernist and avant-gardist arrogance met their cultural nemesis in Africa, for Africa had a different way of looking at crowds and the masses. This different way could be seen, according to Adesanmi, in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* through those communal celebrations and ritualistic feasts in the novels. He asks: How do you separate the people from all of that? How do you elevate the new yam festival above the people? How do you begin to rewrite the peoples of Africa as impediments to all the cultural enactments that the continent is famous for?<sup>448</sup> Seen within Adesanmi’s long harangue is a point at which *asọ ebi* marks a disjuncture in Euromodernism’s concept of the crowd and the masses.

The crowd as could be seen in Yoruba *asọ ebi*, Adesanmi argues, is a perception of the African masses as custodians of culture especially in its more expressive aesthetic, and performative dimensions of “miliki,”(dancing) “faaji,”(eating) and “arriya”(revelry).<sup>449</sup>

The above analysis of the crowd underscores the underlying aim of this section which is to understand the nature and meaning of the crowd and the masses in *asọ ebi* practice. The message which Adesanmi’s lecture communicates is that *asọ ebi* is already well articulated as

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<sup>445</sup> Pius Adesanmi, “*Asọ ebi* on My Mind (Part One).”

<sup>446</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Pius Adesanmi, “*Asọ ebi* on My Mind (Part One).”

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

an ethos of culture in which the people are progressively accorded the prestige tantamount to the 'high culture' ascribed to Euromodernist aesthetics.

While one may argue that Adesanmi's analysis does not provide an alternative interpretation of 'high' and 'low' culture in the African model, and while he makes little attempt to identify the recognized mechanism through which such paradigms work in the African context, one can understand that his analysis is, to some extent, relevant to Yoruba concepts of *asọ ebi* and the crowd. His exposition in fact attests to the profound making of the crowd in *asọ ebi* and might resonate (in the course of my discussion) with the conviction – and the approbation – expressed by many Lagosians that the crowd is indeed the driving force of *asọ ebi* culture. In spite of the bravura assurance of his analysis, Adesanmi closed his essay by admitting that *asọ ebi* is a befitting space to articulate the concept of the crowd as owners of 'culture' both 'high' and 'low' in the African context.

By investing in large numbers of people most rich entrepreneurs in early twentieth century Lagos flaunted their wealth and maintained public visibility. Writing about the early twentieth century elites in Lagos, Cole remarked that “the more followers a rich man had, for instance, the richer he was considered to be by the populace.”<sup>450</sup> For example, the burial ceremony of Chief Adetokunbo Giwa's father on March 9, 1938 was the most expensive feast Chief Tijani had ever witnessed, as he recorded in his diary:

This burial was indeed a great feast....The number of guests which numbered in their thousands attest to this. I have never seen where money was so generously dispensed as this. Again, I could not have compared his retinue of children, wives, relations and friends who all wore the same uniform with mine. Indeed Chief Giwa was the greatest benefactor of us all.<sup>451</sup>

Tijani's emphasis on 'number of guests' and the clothing of his retinue of dependents in the same uniform is a clear suggestion of the meanings of wealth to him. The greatness of the feast lay in the number of thousands of guests and those clothed in *asọ ebi* uniform. Tijani's sense of admiration and reverence for Giwa's benefaction also invokes a sense of comparison with his own family. It is suggestive of the fact that for Tijani, the significance of Giwa's

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<sup>450</sup> P.D. Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.63.

<sup>451</sup> Chief Amodu Tijani papers, NAI Box 11 Diary 1940, Entry for December 5.

wealth connotes a value judgment of followership in his own immediate family and outside supporters.

It is possible to rephrase the ‘crowd as wealth’ to mean ‘wealth in people.’ These two phrases could be used to encapsulate the nature of studies of wealth in pre-colonial African societies. Some studies on wealth in pre-colonial Africa have touched on “the techniques by which pre-colonial war-lords built up, motivated and remunerated their followings,” especially given the fact that the concept of followership is broad enough to apply to, for example, “wives, children, clients, political followers, religious acolytes, titled associates, occupational apprentices and so on.”<sup>452</sup>

Guyer remarks that the concept of wealth-in-people was developed in the 1970s mainly by Kopytoff and Miers as a less theoretical, more anecdotal and random (and therefore more open) concept to epitomize undisputed annotations such as the explicit evaluation of human beings in material terms in Africa. Kopytoff’s and Miers’ wealth-in-people concept is also about procuring and fortifying direct dominion over people in cases where “indirect controls through land, capital and the threat of superior force are either absent altogether or only intermittently realizable.”<sup>453</sup>

Kopytoff and Miers applied the idea to slavery and other relations of dependency. Caroline Blensoe was one of the first to use it prominently to describe marriage and social networks in Sierra Leone. While Berry does not invoke wealth-in-people as a concept, she does outline the logic of ‘investment in social relations’ as a means of dealing with uncertainties in the accumulative process in West Africa.<sup>454</sup> Miller and Vansina both invoke wealth-in-people as an uninterrupted standard in the social theory of Equatorial African societies in the centuries-long interface with new environments and new neighbouring polities on the one hand and European trade on the other. In short, the neo-Marxist inspiration has been generally assimilated as offering a powerful series of lines of inquiry and interpretation. Guyer suggests

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<sup>452</sup> Jane Guyer, (ed), *Money Matters*, p. 89.

<sup>453</sup> Jane Guyer, (ed), *Money Matters*, p. 86.

<sup>454</sup> Cited in *ibid*, p.107.

that the users of wealth-in-people abandoned the Marxist intellectual agenda while preserving some of its armature, in particular the focus on control and accumulation.<sup>455</sup>

Indeed this concept of wealth-in-people, I must say, is considered in my present context of *asọ ebì* as a symbolic show of clout, wealth and control. My present use of wealth-in-people in *asọ ebì* (as will be shown subsequently) could actually serve as an allegorical import of Kopytoff and Miers' form of control. That a lot of people don a uniform and follow a particular individual demonstrates a symbolic form of dominion. And this gives the individual an illusory sense of control. On the contrary, earlier peoples of the Equatorial Africa possessed real control.

In order to track further resonances in the concept of wealth-in-people, I attempt here to historically trace this practice of viewing people as significant markers of wealth from a period of individual entrepreneurship in early Yorubaland. This might help to assess whether the present practice of *asọ ebì* was actually influenced by – or related to – any such practices. These individual entrepreneurships are illustrated through, for example, a few extracts from the activities of Daniel Conrad Taiwo (1810-1901) (a.k.a. “Taiwo Olowo” – “Taiwo the Rich”) in Lagos, whose lifestyle is an apt example of the concept of ‘big man’ in Yorubaland. Taiwo’s compelling epitaph in a Lagos newspaper provides a vivid account of how money attracts respect and influence for the ‘big man’ from areas far beyond his locality:

Chief Taiwo ...unquestionably wielded a greater influence than any other individual member of the community....[He] was a true type of African “big man.” *With him money became wealth in the fullest sense of the term, for he ... utilized it ... and the result was that his name was a household word in all the surrounding country, while he was respected and revered far and wide.*<sup>456</sup> (Italics added for emphasis).

Understanding how Taiwo utilized his money brings his ostentation to the fore. D.C. Taiwo (“Taiwo Olowo”) was a true archetype of an accomplished homegrown entrepreneur, if viewed from the position of the British colonialists.<sup>457</sup> Undoubtedly Taiwo’s hobnobbing with the

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>456</sup> *Lagos Weekly Record*, 23 February 1901. This is a clear indication of popular perceptions and definitions of (the means and ends of) money, affluence and influence, and what it was to be a “big man”.

<sup>457</sup> See Kristin Mann, “The Rise of Taiwo Olowo: Law, Accumulation, and Mobility in Early Colonial Lagos,” in Richard Roberts and Kristin Mann (eds.), *Law in Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1991), pp.85-102.

British officials and his broad links with local political elites distinguished him as the most influential individual in Victorian Lagos.<sup>458</sup> He came to Lagos in the early nineteenth century from Isheri, a small town of about fifteen miles from Lagos Island, and achieved fame through accumulation of wealth from commerce, people and land.

He availed himself of the opportunity of the land tenure policy imposed by the British colonialism to build a business concern that spanned land acquisition, trade, real estate and money lending. The transition to the supposed legitimate trade created an auspicious time for Taiwo such that between the 1840s and the time of his death in 1901, he had acquired land in strategic locations in Lagos Island and elsewhere. Capitalizing on his contacts with the British and local elites, he mobilized credit advanced by European traders to develop an appreciable export trade in palm produce and an import business in textiles, especially during the 1890s, a harrowing period in commercial activities.

During the Kiriji war,<sup>459</sup> Taiwo was known to have supplied Ibadan with weapons of war. Yet, like the traditional Yoruba entrepreneurs in Ibadan and Ijaye, Taiwo was careful to invest in people to maintain their loyalty and support. Such 'extension of influence' in the community consumed valuable resources.<sup>460</sup> The major part of these valuable resources included "money spent on expensive personal and group costumes which according to Olukoju 'attracted a mammoth crowd to him during many important ceremonies.'"<sup>461</sup> My major point of interest in

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<sup>458</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, "Entrepreneurship, Accumulation, Consumption and Societal underdevelopment: Western Nigeria in historical and comparative perspective," paper for WCFA/IIAS conference on "Understanding African Poverty over the longue durée", Accra, July 15-17, 2010.

<sup>459</sup> The Kiriji war marked the grand finale of all Yoruba wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The war which was largely based on a test of might and supremacy started on Monday, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1877 and lasted for sixteen years. 1877 was the year when Ibadan declared 'a war to end all wars' on the Egba. The Egba are a Yoruba sub-group living in the present day Abeokuta. The escalation of the Kiriji war happened when the Ijebu, another sub-group of Yoruba ethnic group – who live in the present day Ijebu Ode and Oshogbo – joined the war. The war continued to escalate towards the east of Yorubaland in 1878. This time more Yoruba sub-groups, the Ekiti and Ijesa joined. In fact the Ekiti and the Ijesa united and forged a common front known as *Ekitiparapo* which translates as the 'formidable merger of Ekiti and Ijesa.' This merger was spearheaded by one Ogedengbe of Ilesha. More Yoruba groups from Ife and Ilorin also joined the war. All these groups had one intention: to vanquish Ibadan whose imperial instrumentality subdued and undermined the rest of Yoruba sub-groups. For more analyses on this war see Tunde Babawale "The Outbreak of the Kiriji/Ekitiparapo War, 1877 – 1886: A Re-Assessment of its Cause" in *Journal of Teacher Education*, 1988, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1988, pp. 43 5-0; J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Ibadan: CUP, in association with the Institute of African Studies, 1971); Akin Mabogunje and J. D. Omer-Cooper, *Owu in Yoruba History* (Ibadan University Press, 1971); S. A. Akintoye, *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840- 1893: Ibadan expansion and the rise of Ekitiparapo* (Ibadan: Longman, 1971); Peter C. Lloyd, *The Political Development of Yoruba Kingdoms in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, Occasional Paper No. 31, 1971).

<sup>460</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, "Entrepreneurship, Accumulation, Consumption and Societal underdevelopment," p.6.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

Taiwo's lifestyle lies in how he extended his influence through ostentatious expenses on valuable resources which included money spent on expensive personal and group costumes. It seems that his influence would have diminished or stultified if he had avoided clothing a "crowd of supporters which would hang around him every time he went on public outing."<sup>462</sup>

However, one may need to investigate more deeply whether the same motivations for the mammoth crowd that informed Taiwo also informed the present-day rich in Lagos in terms of their desire for a large crowd. Of course both might have different motivations: a possible suggestion is that while Taiwo might have had a genuine intention of investing in the masses for their real loyalty and support, the present-day rich in Lagos may have been motivated to seek symbolic prestige and loyalty through temporary human expansion. There is a reversal of the old order. The reality of this reversal could be a consequence of late capitalism which has most recently resulted in the new kind of 'crowd.' Late capitalism has cheapened and crowded human beings into the sociological abstraction of 'mass' such that human differences, conflicts and eccentricities are suppressed in order to make them fit the theory of 'mass culture'.

However, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Lagos, the middle class have refused to accept the fate assigned them by this mass culture and constantly seek to break the categories into which they have been lumped. In an attempt to do this they re-invent and re-produce themselves by symbolically increasing the number of people in their networks. Take for example the case of Chief Maduka Okafor who in the year 2003 had organized a birthday party to mark his 70 years anniversary. This ceremony took place in a playground, by kilometer 3 of Oshodi Ilasamaja Road Lagos, where the playground was converted into the reception venue. More than 3,000 people attended since the invitation was open to all. There was an abundance of food and drinks to cater to the huge crowd that attended and there was a free distribution of *asọ ebì* uniforms to almost everybody that attended. Reporting on this party, a Lagos soft sell magazine known as *Famous People* notes:

Chief Maduka Okafor's birthday party was attended by all and sundry. But the most remarkable aspect of his birthday was the visual impression made by *asọ ebì* in the ceremony. More than 2,000 people were clothed in the same Ankara uniform by the

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

Chief. They include his immediate and extended families and members of his employees at the Madiks Oil Limited. Although one could notice that these people are gathered in the name of one man, no one complained of not eating or drinking to one's fullness.<sup>463</sup>

But what could be suggested from the above is that there is a desire (on the part of the present-day rich) to command a large crowd through *asọ ebì*, since “society has built a myth around the image of the rich as one who does not pass unnoticed without large *asọ ebì* followership.”<sup>464</sup> Speaking further on this tendency, Cole observes that the elite's outlook tended towards materialism, provoking their culture of keeping hangers-on; more than any other thing, more emphasis was placed on an individual's ability to dispense of wealth on the retinue of followers.<sup>465</sup>

The largesse was a step above the general display of hospitality expected of all in the society and also went beyond the usual demonstration of generosity. It was given by a socially superior person to others below his social category in order to maintain goodwill. The recipients of such benefaction more often than not constituted the followers of the big man and they were useful in the process of social advancement. Their support and admiration for the individual in question bred more support for him from a wider populace.<sup>466</sup>

Issues of accumulation, wealth, large crowd, ostentation and gender were among some of the central elements that revolved around the careers of the prominent entrepreneurs of nineteenth-century Lagos. Among these people were Kurunmi, the military autocrat of the short-lived state of Ijaye,<sup>467</sup> the Ibadan war chiefs and prominent women entrepreneurs,

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<sup>463</sup> *Famous People Magazine*, Vol. 2, Number 2, November 2003.

<sup>464</sup> See Gerald Iworima, “Social events and the culture of the rich.”

<sup>465</sup> P.D. Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.199.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid*, p. 292.

<sup>467</sup> Ijaye, a small Yoruba town in the outskirts of Lagos, was founded about the same time as Ibadan. It was founded by refugees from the Ikoyi area of Lagos, led by Kurunmi, whom Samuel Johnson described as the 'greatest soldier of his age'. Ijaye town became an important communications centre, and under strong leadership it prospered. By the 1850s Ijaye probably had a population of 40,000 or more. Initially, relations with Ibadan were good, but rivalry between the two gradually developed. An issue for a final confrontation was provided by the death of Alafin Atiba, the prominent Ibadan Chief, in 1859. He was succeeded by the Aremo Adelu, and Kurunmi refused to recognize the succession. Ijaye and Ibadan were already at loggerheads over the control of the Upper Ogun towns around Saki. In any case, Ibadan sided with their new Alafin (King) and war broke out. Kurunmi died in 1861, before the final capture and destruction of his town. Kurunmi was indeed a deviant Yoruba military despot, who refused to share power with chiefs who represented lineages and quarters as was the norm in other Yoruba kingdoms. His manner of accumulation was complemented by that of Ibadan war chiefs of the nineteenth century whose wealth came from slaveholding, large-scale farming, control of trade, levying of tolls, tributes and court fines. Balogun Ibikunle, the Commander-in-Chief of the Ibadan army in the 1850s was reputed

Efunsetan Aniwura<sup>468</sup> and Madam Tinubu.<sup>469</sup> Tinubu, a charismatic *Iyalode* (woman leader) was quite influential in her own right and she also supported the military structures of Ibadan, Abeokuta and Lagos. Kurunmi, the despotic ruler of Ijaye and his cohorts amassed tremendous wealth through agriculture and trade. According to Henry Townsend, a British missionary, Kurunmi's sole plantation approximates about 100 acres of land.<sup>470</sup> Again, the Reverend S. H. Clarke, another British observer, noted that Kurunmi's farmlands extended some ten to twelve miles beyond the city walls, encroaching into the direction of the Upper Ogun River. That he usually rode on horseback for an hour through his farmlands could give a clear insight into the vastness of his land.

Kurunmi's agricultural activities in Ijaye were massive. And it had a far-reaching effect in providing food for an emerging population at Ibadan and Abeokuta. Many communities in Ibadan and Abeokuta had by this time recorded a huge number of displaced peoples as a result of the incessant wars. Many people in the communities busied themselves with the production of farm produce such as yam, palm oil, cassava, vegetables amongst other things. Other activities such as carving, pottery, breeding of stock, hunting and cloth dyeing became supplementary to farming. In fact, the local market at Ijaye was visited by about 20,000 people and caravans three times a week, the majority of whom came from the coast. This singular feat is attributable to the business acumen of people like Kurunmi whose agricultural

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to be a rich man with extensive farmlands beyond the city walls, much like Kurunmi at Ijaye. Bolanle Awe observes that "one of the distinctive [attributes] ... of any (Ibadan) war chief of repute was [the ability] ... to fight, farm and trade. This was how they were able to sustain the large body of men under arms and maintain large households in the metropolis. See Bolanle Awe, "Militarism and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Yoruba Country: The Ibadan Example," *Journal of African History*, XIV, 1, 1973, p.67.

<sup>468</sup> Efunsetan Aniwura (1820s-74), the *Iyalode* (leader of the women), is notably extraordinary for her exceptionalism. She was the richest and most influential woman entrepreneur of her age, rivalled only by Madam Efunroye Tinubu (c.1805-87) of Lagos, Badagry and Abeokuta fame. Both women were of Egba origins, amassed wealth in the context of warfare and were deeply involved in the power politics of their era, a male-dominated sphere in which they were given short shrift.

<sup>469</sup> In addition to being a central figure in the power politics of Lagos, Madam Tinubu also vested her influential political and business stakes in the affairs of her native homeland of Abeokuta. Her prominent role in defending Abeokuta against the invasion of Dahomey gained her the admiration of her people and an investiture of the first *Iyalode* (women leader) of Egba. Most significant is her flourishing business empire of arms, ammunitions and other businesses that were administered by more than 60 slaves and one lettered clerk. It was recorded that her marriage to a one time prince and eventually Oba (king) of Lagos lasted from 1835-37. It is remarkable that Tinubu's wealth culminated into a generational bequest that remains even in the present Lagos. This bequest however, may have been inherited by her descendants since her children died as minors. Having survived the vagaries of turbulent pasts, her great wealth and extensive lands in Lagos islands and mainlands and Abeokuta could only attract minimal competition from any of her contemporaries as at 1855. Her biographer, Oladipo Yemitan remarked that in 1856, she was ousted from Lagos and that brought huge indebtedness to her credit oriented Business Empire. Her indebtedness was however estimated at about \$5, 000, which as at then was an enormous amount of money. See Oladipo Yemitan, *Madame Tinubu: Merchant and King-Maker* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1987).

<sup>470</sup> Toyin Falola, cited in Ayodeji Olukoju, "Entrepreneurship, Accumulation, Consumption," p.8.

produce catered to huge local and provincial needs. Among the beneficiary communities were Ibadan, Ogbomosho, Abeokuta, Ilorin, Lagos, and Oyo, all neighbouring towns.<sup>471</sup>

One of the most significant points to note here is the idea of how wealth was utilized, and the way in which most chiefs of nineteenth-century Yorubaland put their wealth in human and material resources.<sup>472</sup> Despite his authoritarianism, Kurunmi was not so myopic as to abandon the large crowd which he used his wealth to sustain for political reasons. This implied “a grandiose style of lifestyle” and a mobilization of excess largesse to “placate the public.”<sup>473</sup> Such gestures, seen as befitting of a typical ‘big man’ in society, already approximated a convention at that time. And Kurunmi had to live in accordance with such prevailing conventions and expectations. Ayodeji Olukoju observes that “his conspicuous consumption and opulent lifestyle found expression in his vast compound which covered all of eleven acres, his harem of 300 wives and holdings of 1,000 slaves.”<sup>474</sup> During most social outings, Kurunmi’s entourage appeared in expensive outfits that gave them a dignified impression. Such scenarios evoked ‘big man’ as a phenomenon and assured the ‘big man’ of his exalted position in the social hierarchy. His crowd was immediately distinguished through their profuse costume and he needed no further introduction.<sup>475</sup>

In his study of consumption during the Victorian Age, Thorstein Veblen speculated that, for the particular individuals he studied, “Consumption is evidence of wealth, and thus becomes honorific, and ... failure to consume a mark of demerit.”<sup>476</sup> This notion that an aim of consumption was to demonstrate one’s economic position to observers was dubbed “conspicuous consumption.” Following Veblen, a large theoretical literature in the social sciences has focused on the idea that individuals care about their status in society.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>472</sup> Bolanle Awe, “Militarism,” and Toyin Falola, *The Political Economy of a Pre-Colonial African State: Ibadan, 1830-1900* (Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1984).

<sup>473</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, “Entrepreneurship, Accumulation, Consumption,” p.20.

<sup>474</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, “Entrepreneurship, Accumulation, Consumption,” p.7.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>476</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London and New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), p.60.

<sup>477</sup> See also Adam Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969).

It is important to state at this point that Veblen's formulation was centred around a Marxist conceptual framework, and there was some doubt as to whether it could be applied to African societies. The latter's interface with capitalism raises certain problems.<sup>478</sup> It was eventually thought, however, that such comparison might be possible if put differently. That is, that accumulation in Marxist terms differs significantly from traditional African societies, for while the one may always incorporate power and does not presume largesse, the other may, in most instances, incorporate power and largesse at the same time.<sup>479</sup> Granted that these classic sociological theories did not connect conspicuous behaviour directly to any African model at that time. But they might, in fact, become useful in thinking about such lavish displays of 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos entrepreneurs who could, in the words of Rebecca Bird and Adam Smith, "view public displays of luxuries and magnanimity as a form of social competition, in which the most generous, self-sacrificial, or wasteful individuals gain the most prestige."<sup>480</sup>

It is possible to relate a similar public display of luxuries – as is the case with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos entrepreneurs – to the present-day practice of *aso ebi* displays in Nigeria. In present-day Lagos, there seems to be a general belief by the people that any social event that attracts huge numbers of *aso ebi* wearers demonstrates the wealth of the celebrant (as will be shown in subsequent discussions). And it is also thought to be a way of exhibiting one's largesse since a celebrant is expected to feed such numbers of people dressed in *aso ebi*. Imogun's earlier remarks in the case of Ekiti concerning how a large number of people in *aso ebi* signifies wealth, suggest that a close analogy with present day Lagos may be possible. However, one can also argue that that the indices for assessing the wealthy today in Nigeria are not only through the number of people who wear *aso ebi* but the presence of other material factors such as cars, the type of food and drinks, and the nature of gifts used (see Chapter Four for an analysis of gift giving).

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<sup>478</sup> See for example Guyer's nuanced interpretations of such analogy in "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History* 36 1995 pp. 91-120, p.107.

<sup>479</sup> For more on the theoretical analysis of accumulation see Ibid, p.108.

<sup>480</sup> Rebecca Bird and Adam Smith, cited in Vladas Griskevicius, Joshua M. Tybur, Jill M. Sundie, Robert B. Cialdini, Geoffrey F. Miller, Douglas T. Kenrick, "Blatant Benevolence and Conspicuous Consumption: When Romantic Motives Elicit Strategic Costly Signals" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by the American Psychological Association, 2007, Vol. 93, No. 1, pp. 85–102,

Going back to early Lagos entrepreneurs, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura flaunted her indisputable wealth through her affluent lifestyle made more pronounced by her expensive wardrobe and ornaments. Olukoju notes that her wardrobe overflowed with the most expensive ceremonial cloth (*alari*, *sanyan* and *etu*) and the enduring, quotidian wear known as *kijipa*,<sup>481</sup> with a large collection of various types of expensive beads, silver trinkets and brass bracelets.<sup>482</sup> Her affluence also enabled her to fund the Ibadan war and to establish a strong and extensive political network deserving of her status as the female leader (*Iyalode*) of Lagos.<sup>483</sup> Again her position as the *mogaji* (head) of her lineage (Basorun Oluyole's lineage) bestowed her with the responsibility of sustaining a large entourage and many adherents, and the funding of weddings, child naming and funeral ceremonies in the compound. In the course of such profuse exhibition of largesse as *Iyalode*, her concerns included the entire community, upon which she showered her opulence and generosity.<sup>484</sup> Furthermore, the large entourage such as that 'sustained' by Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura continues to hover around the rich, and there is a need to take cognizance of this attitude around *asọ ebì* in subsequent discussions. In Lagos, it is observed that even the poor also desire a large number of people to wear *asọ ebì* despite the fact that they may not afford to feed this number during the event. What distinguishes the rich from the poor, in these instances, is the number of people who wear the *asọ ebì* uniform: while the rich command more crowd the poor have fewer numbers of people.

For both Kurunmi and Efunsetan, therefore, political power in their communities was coterminous with self-gratification and profligate spending on large numbers of people. However, it was observed that much of their accumulation was vulnerable to massive plunder on the orders of the political establishment of the time in a bid to destroy any potential competitor. In such cases, the wealth built up could not be passed on. On the other hand, the weight of cultural values proved too heavy for sustained accumulation. For instance, societal expectations often made it too difficult for the entrepreneur to accumulate or act solely according to the profit motive. The situation in nineteenth-century Lagos is fairly representative of the Yoruba conception of true wealth, entrepreneurship and the ideal

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<sup>481</sup> *Kijipa* is a prototype for *adire*, the tie-dyed textile of the Yoruba. *Adire* was regarded as the quotidian dress and was only used for *asọ ebì* occasionally during less important ceremonial gathering.

<sup>482</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, "Entrepreneurship, Accumulation, Consumption and Societal underdevelopment," p.8.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

entrepreneurs. Taiwo's epitaph cited at the beginning of this paper confirms the resilience of such views in colonial Lagos.

As illustrated above, the community expects the wealthy to share their good fortune with the less privileged and to display their wealth on public occasions and other forms of conspicuous consumption.<sup>485</sup> However, this would not be acceptable to a few twentieth-century Ibadan entrepreneurs, one of whom is Salami Agbaje. It is remarkable that Agbaje brushed aside his unpopularity which came from a public disaffection with his supposed lack of generosity. Ignoring such public sentiments, and instead choosing to exhibit 'unbigmanly' attitude, Agbaje proceeded to expand his business and invest in the education of his children. According to his biographer, he "used his power derived from the modern economic sector without subjecting himself to the claims of tradition to which others bowed with the largesse of the big man."<sup>486</sup>

Cole remarks that "any important personality who refused to acknowledge popular support by bestowing the largesse made himself liable to charges of selfishness, of being tight-fisted, and of being miserly. This could go a long way to undo a big man in a society where socio-political advancement depended heavily on public acknowledgement and support."<sup>487</sup> Agbaje was a victim of this. In 1949, when he was almost at the peak of his political career, Agbaje suffered a setback when agitation which lasted till 1951 erupted against him. He was accused of 'selfishness', 'ambition', 'avarice' and a host of other 'vices', all in a bid to stop his further rise in the chieftaincy hierarchy. In a petition supporting such allegations filed with colonial authorities, the author states, among other things:

Adebisi Giwa we loved because he used his money to entertain, to dazzle, to clothe, to sustain the best elements of our population. We have nothing but contempt and ridicule for Chief Agbaje whose sole aim for piling up earthly treasure is to constitute his children into an everlasting pampered Herenvolk (sic).<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Olufunke Adeboye, "Salami Agbaje: The Life and Times of an Indigenous Entrepreneur in Colonial Nigeria," *Lagos Historical Review*, vol. 1, 2001, 1-15.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> P.D. Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 293.

<sup>488</sup> Petition against Chief Salami Agbaje by junior chiefs and mogajis to the Olubadan-in-Council, Dec.27, 1949, in H.L.M. Butcher, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Allegations of Misconduct made against Chief Salami Agbaje, the

The emphasis by this petitioner on clothes indicates that the rich man's largesse must not terminate at the level of provision of entertainment (food and drinks), but must extend to the physical appearance of recipients such as clothing. Such clothing, according to Ademola Aderemi also included *asọ ebì* during large ceremonies.<sup>489</sup> It is assumed that the provision of free *asọ ebì* outfits by some of these big men could certainly go a long way towards alleviating the 'clothing' needs of the people who even after such celebrations still retained such uniforms as everyday wear. For especially the poor, such clothes might constitute a major part of their wardrobe worn even on other special occasions.

Agbaje's title of 'Otun Balogun' may have been a misnomer in the perception of his people, for he did not live up to the claims of tradition that came with such titles. Such claims were often concealed in the form of demands within the 'largesse culture.' That was why the agitations against him which were ignited by the junior chiefs enjoyed the tacit support of senior chiefs and some opportunistic elements among the city's politicians. They all wanted to defend tradition, while a few of the elite tried unsuccessfully to mediate.<sup>490</sup>

It was Butcher's commission of inquiry into the dispute set up by the colonial authorities that eventually cleared Agbaje of all these charges in 1951. Although Butcher, in a rather simplistic manner, dismissed the charges made against Agbaje as being flimsy – how a man could be tried for being selfish? – the issues involved were much more fundamental, the most important of which had to do with societal equilibrium which was a function of a balance between privilege and obligation.

Agbaje enjoyed the privileges of his title as Otun Balogun but was not ready to meet the obligation of 'largesse' that accompanied such titles. What this demonstrated was that the elite category was far from homogenous. Again it revealed that values, outlook, and attitudes of the elite were not sacrosanct. They were liable to redefinitions and reappraisal. Agbaje died two

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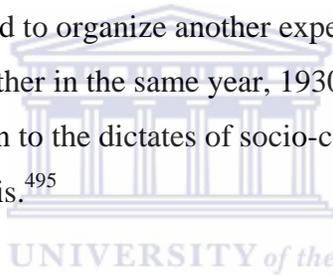
Otun Balogun of Ibadan, and Allegation of Inefficiency and Maladministration on the part of the Ibadan and District Native Authority, (Lagos: Government Printer, 1951).

<sup>489</sup> Interview with Pa Ademola Aderemi (89 years old), 31 Herbert Macaulay Street, Yaba, Lagos, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>490</sup> P.D. Cole, *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.293

years after this commission exonerated him.<sup>491</sup> His lifestyle contrasts with the main thrust of anthropological theory that is inclined towards a belief that “traditional societies emphasized group identification, group structures and processes.”<sup>492</sup> Although some studies in law in the past have also shown the interplay between individual and collective responsibility,<sup>493</sup> Guyer and Belinga found little work in anthropology to prove lifestyles like that of Agbaje suggesting personal singularity and individuality amidst the imposition of social and cultural values of largesse on the big man.

Agbaje’s lifestyle however, stands in sharp contrast to the Dawodu family of Lagos for example. James Patrick Dawodu and William Akinola Dawodu,<sup>494</sup> both successful businessmen of the Dawodu family of Lagos, died in 1929 and 1930 respectively. However, the family had, despite the economic hardship of the 1930s organized a spendthrift burial ceremony for both of them and afterwards went ahead to organize another expensive burial, albeit for the second time, for their long dead forefather in the same year, 1930. This is a clear case of the capitulation of economic reason to the dictates of socio-cultural burdens, notwithstanding the effects of global economic crisis.<sup>495</sup>



The undoing of Yoruba entrepreneurship became certain in the face of the reckless display of wealth and affluence. The increasing societal demands from the rich – to fritter away their accumulation on the crowd – did not augur well for some wealthy individuals. Quoting a concerned observer in the *Nigerian Pioneer* in its editorial of June 6, 1930, Olukoju notes:

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid, see p.1-15.

<sup>492</sup> Jane Guyer and Samuel, M. Eno Belinga, “Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 36 1995 pp. 91-120, p 104.

<sup>493</sup> S. Moore cited in Ibid, p.104.

<sup>494</sup> As a successful automobile entrepreneur, William Akinola Dawodu almost dominated the auto sales and repairs sector of the Lagos economy during the first half of the twentieth century. During the period, many Southern Nigerian cities unlike some European cities made use of motor cars for transportation instead of horses and carriages. Under his establishment known as W.A. Dawodu and co, William Akinola Dawodu met the clientele needs of the automobile industry in the country. His numerous and expansive stores around Lagos were filled with various accessories for auto repairs and other machineries including sewing machines and typewriters. However, before his death in 1930, the business suffered considerably and was later liquidated. William Dawodu, born in 1879, to a prominent family attended C.M.S. Grammar School for his secondary education and later attended the Hussey Institution where he learned the mechanics of auto repairs. In 1905, he established his firm at Marina, Lagos. Due to heavy demand, he re-located to a larger site. By 1910, he was the sole agent for Firestone tyres, Dogde, Chevrolet, and Rio motors. He was also the principal promoter of numerous Ford vehicles in the country.

<sup>495</sup> *Nigerian Pioneer*, 6 June 1930.

Do we realize that whatever money we get now on our palm oil and palm kernels is our capital and that in spending it outright we are spending our capital? ... [We] are frittering away with a hopeless want of foresight, rather characteristic of our people, that capital which alone can give us economic liberty in the future... We sound the grave warning that our future position in this country will depend on how much of our own capital is invested in its development.<sup>496</sup>

From the above few accounts, it is possible to identify some instances in nineteenth century Lagos where the concept of 'big man' and wealth conflated notions of the large crowd as supporters. Again what could be seen, at least from few of the above entrepreneurs, is that there is a desire to cater for a huge crowd through an exhibition of one's largesse. Such largesse was extended to clothing, on a few occasions. But it is difficult to conclude, and of course prove, whether such clothing was an adornment in the form of *asọ ebi* as there is no clear-cut, specific mention of such. This, obviously, demands a more critical investigation although in Chapter Six, I trace instances where *asọ ebi* was used to depict wealth in such displays among large groups of friends in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Lagos. As the above examples underscore the nature of the big man's largesse in nineteenth and early twentieth century Lagos, it is possible to investigate how such gestures relate to the practice of *asọ ebi* in present day Lagos and to ask whether both were fired by the same motivations. Demonstrating this interesting analogy further, I present a few local instances here to give a vivid idea of how the conception of *asọ ebi* parallels wealth and the crowd.

First this takes me back to February 21, 2009 during the *Igu Aro*<sup>497</sup> of Igwe (King) Onyeso of Agukwu Nri in Anambra State of Nigeria. The American Ambassador to Nigeria was one of the selected dignitaries due to receive a chieftaincy title that very day. My friend's sister, Mrs. Goziem Udemezue, was the leader of the committee delegated to prepare for the ambassador's visit. Two weeks before this day, Mrs. Udemezue met with the ambassador on a number of

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<sup>496</sup> *Lagos Weekly Record*, 27 September 1919, editorial: Whither are we going? There was an undercurrent of economic nationalism in this remark. A recent study is also seen in Ayodeji Olukoju, "Economic Nationalism and Decolonization: West Africa in Comparative Perspective," *Hagar*, 10, 1, 2010, p.26.

<sup>497</sup> Agukwu Nri is a town in Anambra State of Nigeria. Their chief is known as Igwe or Eze. The *Igu Aro* festival (counting of the year) was a royal festival the *eze* Nri used to maintain his influence over the communities under his authority. Each of these communities sent representatives to pay tribute during the ceremony to show their loyalty. At the end the Eze Nri would give the representatives a yam medicine and a blessing of fertility for their communities. The festival was seen as a day of peace and certain activities were prohibited such as the planting of crops before the day of the ceremony, the splitting of wood and unnecessary noise. *Igu Aro* was a regular event that gave an opportunity for the *eze* to speak directly to all the communities under him. In recent times the chief used this opportunity to confer chieftaincy titles to the deserving members of various communities who have served their people well. The 'tradition' has been criticized such that the chiefs are seen to use the occasion to confer titles to any one (including undeserving members) who gave him money.

occasions to take the measurement of her *asọ ebì* dress after which she went ahead to recruit an entourage of women and a few men who would usher in the ambassador on the day of the ceremony. I was part of the *asọ ebì* group. When that day came only those of us wearing *asọ ebì* were allowed to usher the ambassador in. Thus, we were allowed entrance into the venue because we wore the same *asọ ebì* uniform as the ambassador. By virtue of our identical uniforms (*asọ ebì*), we were seen as the ambassador's entourage – the big man's crowd. We entered with her, despite the fact that the ambassador did not know any of us, except Mrs. Udemezue. The ambassador has also recollected this incident and made reference to it in her own website which reads:

As part of my efforts in reaching out to the rich diversity of the Nigerian people, it was important for me to learn and understand the rich cultural heritage and tradition of the people. I visited thirty six states of Nigeria to interact with people from the various geopolitical zones of Nigeria. During my historic visits, I was conferred with *many traditional titles from many states of Nigeria one of which is* the “Ada Nri of Nri Kingdom in Anambra State - First Daughter of the King” which I consider an honor.<sup>498</sup>

This conferment mandates the ambassador, from henceforth to permanently pre-fix the title of ‘chief’ to her name and this gives her the full privileges of such a chief. She has the right to preside over any of the king's numerous activities without any official invitation. The interesting feature of this conferment episode is that of course it must include an *asọ ebì* entourage. There is a societal expectation that is befitting of any prospective chief. The whole village of Agu-ukwu Nri, already seated in the village square, waited anxiously for the prestigious entrance of the next would-be chief who, this time, was the ambassador. Expectantly, the ambassador and the *asọ ebì* group arrived to the admiration of the entire village. Any would-be chief arriving in such *asọ ebì* grandeur would be seen as a real ‘big man’ because of his/her ability to pull, and clothe, the crowd in *asọ ebì*. This crowd removes the insignia of ordinariness from the aspiring chief and places him/her within the realm of the kings. In this manner, diminution of number and fewness are seen as marks of deficiency in the discourse of the big man's status.

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<sup>498</sup> “Nigerian Titles” See BlogIt-rrs: The African Post: dialogue on issues related to Food security, Education, Environment, Economics, Democracy and Self-help (FEEEDS) - By Ambassador Robin Renee Sanders and other contributors <http://blogitrrs.blogspot.com/p/nigerian-titles.html>

Judith Irabor is a society lady who loves to party and she also patronizes Akerele Fashion Center on 23 Adeniran Ogunsanya Street, Surulere Lagos.<sup>499</sup> While many corporate and casual dresses adorned her wardrobe, she remarks that *asọ ebì* dresses almost doubled the number of the rest of her clothes, and this according to her has become “a very big issue to contend with in the face of an increasing network of friends.” This is because “my friends demanded that I invite my own friends not known to them to buy *asọ ebì* for the purpose of increasing the number of people in *asọ ebì* during the ceremony.” While critical of this practice, Irabor believes that “*asọ ebì* makes the occasion rich and gives a false impression of a wealthy celebrant.”<sup>500</sup> Chioma Okoye remarks that “people are just interested in attracting a lot of crowd to their party through *asọ ebì*, whether these people are their friends or not.”<sup>501</sup>

A very significant point that runs through the above narratives is the propensity to increase the number of *asọ ebì* wearers. In these cases, the criterion for inclusion into *asọ ebì* is no longer familial but a desire to expand the crowd. Inclusion is no longer driven by true friendship or family network but by a socially imposed competitiveness that borders on sheer ‘number.’ It therefore follows that inclusion has been redefined to accommodate expressions of wealth shown through clothes and large followership.

Adeyemi Adegaju, in an analysis of the symbolic setting of the *Abule Oloke Merin* soap opera remarks that the characters touched on issues such as “marriage, burial and coronation ceremonies and the usual flamboyant attitude of the Yoruba people lavishing wealth on such occasions partly with the use of *asọ ebì* for the celebrants’ relatives and well-wishers.”<sup>502</sup> For Adegaju, wealth is not simply lavished on a few individuals, rather he identifies the connection between *asọ ebì* and wealth through ‘lavishing’ itself.

In his article on a prominent Action Congress (AC) senatorial aspirant in Ado-Ekiti, the Ekiti state capital, Toyin Anisulowo, notes how a mammoth crowd adorned in expensive *asọ ebì*

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<sup>499</sup> Interview with Judith Irabor, Lagos, 15 February 2010.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Interview with Chioma Okoye, Lagos, 20 February 2010.

<sup>502</sup> Adeyemi Adegaju, “Dramatic and Persuasive Techniques in the Dissemination of HIV&AIDS Messages in Abule Oloke Merin Radio Soap Opera of South-western Nigeria,” *The International Journal of Language Society and Culture*, URL: [www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/tle/JOURNAL/](http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/tle/JOURNAL/) ISSN 1327-774X, Issue 30.

outfits, ushered the politician Mr. Dele Alake into the state. Mr. Alake, who had just declared his ambition to contest the Ekiti central senatorial seat in 2011, pulled a crowd which gave him the grandeur and splendour needed to boost his prestige and elevate his status. The crowd is seen here as a very strong force in the image of a politician who is also a big man. Not just the crowd, but a crowd that wore expensive *aso ebi* outfits. Among this crowd are party supporters and leaders drawn from all the 52 wards that constitute the Ekiti central senatorial district. The crowd even obstructed traffic movement as they sang and danced to the admiration of the passengers and onlookers.<sup>503</sup>

This relates to Mariene Ferme's observation that "*aso ebi* could be one of the many processes through which the 'big persons' visibly extend themselves beyond their bodily boundaries by organizing the acquisition and distribution of *aso ebi* fabrics for their followers."<sup>504</sup> Ferme's observation may also be seen in relation to a Yoruba saying which goes thus: "*Bo lomo ogun boo lomo ogun wehin re wo* - if a leader looks back, he will know whether or not he has followers."<sup>505</sup> In this context, the celebrant may not be a leader of any kind but is understood to be leader of the moment by virtue of being the one celebrating an event and who has requested people to buy the fabric that is meant for the occasion.<sup>506</sup> In fact, when it is time to dance, he or she leads while well-wishers follow. This implies that any celebrant who, despite the fact that he/she has chosen a group uniform, experiences a refusal by people to buy and identify with him or her could be seen as a social misfit. Therefore there is a sense of esteem on the part of celebrants who are so honoured.<sup>507</sup> This point is buttressed in another Yoruba saying "*Eniyan laso mi, bi mo ba boju wehin timo reni mi, inu mi adun ara mi a ya gaga*- my people are clothes."<sup>508</sup> Although people cannot be worn, their presence or willingness to identify with a celebrant by virtue of wearing *aso ebi* is a cover for him or her. This suggests that not being identified with a large number of people is synonymous with nakedness.<sup>509</sup> Also it is usually

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<sup>503</sup> Toyin Anisulowo, "Dale Alake for Senate," June 23 2010 Dale Alake for Senate: an action congress candidate, <http://www.alakeforsenate.com/>

<sup>504</sup> Mariene Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (London, Los Angeles and Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2001), p. 171.

<sup>505</sup> O.O. Familusi, "The Yoruba Culture of *aso ebi* (group uniform) in Socio-ethical Context" *Lumina*, Vol. 21, No.2, October 2010, p. 2.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid, p.2

said “*karin kapo lo yeni*”, meaning that moving in a group is befitting, or the more the merrier.<sup>510</sup>

Bunmi Oke, a textile merchant in Lagos, informed me that she personally buys the *asọ ebi* but does not wear it to occasions. She wonders if she would get “supporters for her own wedding.”<sup>511</sup> Likewise, Elizabeth Badejo remarks that “in recent times, *asọ ebi* has become too expensive and unrealistic; an expression of wealth and class to outdo the other party, neglecting its original purpose.” Badejo believes that “the mother of the bride and her best friends are adorned in expensive fabrics to outdo the in-laws, just to prove that they are wealthier and more sociable.” Her conclusion is that “weddings would be less stressful and marriages more successful if mothers realize that their daughter’s wedding is not all about their wealth and status but a celebration of the children they have brought up into adulthood.”<sup>512</sup>

The above expressions enunciate the importance of uniformed clothes in the form of *asọ ebi* and its ensuing followership. They underscore also the relevance of wealth in the conceptualization of clothes and people in Nigeria. Possession of wealth alone does not elevate one socially, but a display of such wealth through clothes and the people who wear it does. If traced historically to the previous biographies of nineteenth century Lagos entrepreneurs, then the significance of clothes becomes even more evident in the contemporary Nigeria socio-cultural milieu. The people often commonly known as the ‘big man’s crowd’ may provide ample room for a further critical interrogation of the concept of crowd and wealth. In other words, studying *asọ ebi*, a significant contemporary dressing habit in Nigeria, may not differ markedly from a similar dressing habit among the peoples of earlier Yorubaland from where it originated. From the above few case studies it shows that *asọ ebi* is popularly perceived in terms of wealth, status and the crowd.

Earlier studies may have demonstrated this even more convincingly. For example, William Bascom’s study of early Yorubaland deals with, among other things, the issue of clothes, wealth, and ownership of property which as he argues “are not in themselves sufficient enough

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<sup>510</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>511</sup> Interview with Bunmi Oke Lagos, 10 March 2010.

<sup>512</sup> Elizabeth Badejo, “Mum and *Asọ ebi*,” *Punch Newspaper*, 10 October 2009, p. 8.

to win prestige and social status.”<sup>513</sup> Those “aspiring to such exalted positions must not only possess wealth and own properties but they must also spend the money (*na owo*) on clothes and people.”<sup>514</sup> Bascom notes that the person must “spend on his clothes so that he can be well dressed.” He remarks further:

A person spends money so that people will know him and so as to attract a large number of followers. One of the important measures of social position is the number and rank of the individuals who associate with him and particularly who accompany him when he goes about town. No man of high rank would be seen in the streets alone, while an ordinary individual invites the members of his club (*egbe*) to his house for food and drink at the time of a religious ceremony, funerary, wedding, or any other important event, so that he may have a large crowd dressed in fine clothes following him when he goes in the streets.<sup>515</sup>

Bascom notes further that both men’s and women’s clubs have their own distinctive clothing by which their members can be recognized, and one of the typical features of Yoruba religious ceremonies are the groups of about forty to sixty men and women, dressed alike in *asọ ebi* who are honouring one of their members as his or her guests.<sup>516</sup> My interviews across Lagos with different respondents who have used *asọ ebi* in one way or the other resonate with Bascom’s account and the very notion of ‘purchasing *asọ ebi*’ as a criteria for visibility in most social outings.

Another motivation for the increasing demand for *asọ ebi* is imitation. Supporting this claim Abiola Ogunlana remarks that her parents visited him in Lagos from the village just to ensure that a particular type of colour and fabric was chosen for *asọ ebi* for his wedding in Lagos in 2005. Ogunlana claims to have incurred a huge debt on *asọ ebi*, more than any other aspect of his wedding, because of his parent’s insistence that he should adopt a particular *asọ ebi* colour and style that they saw their rich neighbour use during their son’s wedding. In light of Ogunlana’s parent’s actions, Jennifer Craik is correct when she says that “uniforms are acquired by prestigious imitation of those we admire.”<sup>517</sup> Again, in order to imitate their neighbour’s *asọ ebi* colour, Ogunlana claimed that his parents forced him to provide different

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<sup>513</sup> William Bascom, “Social status, wealth and individual differences among the Yoruba,” in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 490—505, 1951, American Anthropological Association, p.8.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid*, p.8

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid*, p.8

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.

<sup>517</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed, From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p.7.

colours and materials of *asọ ebi* for different age groups and affiliations: his family, his wife's family, younger members of his immediate family, older members of his immediate family and his wife's. "They all had different *asọ ebi* colour and material and contributed to my huge debt,"<sup>518</sup> remarks Ogunlana.

Ogunlana confirms that his wife believes that his parent's action accords them "social status and class."<sup>519</sup> Previous discussions on the concept of the 'big man' parallel this belief of *asọ ebi* and its connections with 'social status' and 'class.' Therefore, within mainstream social understandings, it is possible that *asọ ebi* now enacts conceptions of class construction and a means of exhibiting wealth. Such beliefs place emphasis not just on the *asọ ebi* but on other things that come with it such as people, colour, and type of dress materials. Ogunlana's mention of colour might prove this point. His parent's emphasis on colour shows that the processes undertaken to arrive at *asọ ebi* involves a more complex procedure than merely the simplistic view of people dressed in *asọ ebi* on the day of the event. It suggests, according to Craik, that "there can be complex forces at work in the performance of uniform codes."<sup>520</sup> My interview with Rose Oyelami in Yaba, Lagos revealed instances where friends and family members disagree over colours of *asọ ebi* dress. "Sometimes my friends invite me to the market where we select the colour of the *asọ ebi* dress and I can tell you that is always one of the most difficult times for me during the preparation for *asọ ebi*,"<sup>521</sup> Rose said. Ogunlana's wedding was marked by an array of different colours for different stages of the wedding. For example, during Ogunlana's engagement ceremony gold and brown *Ankara* was chosen for the guests, while the same colour but different textile material (of lace) was chosen for himself and his wife.<sup>522</sup> During the wedding day proper another type of colour and dress material was selected. This time an amber brown and gold and sky blue lace materials for the wedding in the morning, while white *aso oke* dress material was selected for the wedding reception in the afternoon.<sup>523</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Interview with Abiola Ogunlana, December 16, 2009.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed, From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p.11.

<sup>521</sup> Interview with Rose Oyelami, Yaba Lagos, 30 March 2010.

<sup>522</sup> Interview with Abiola Ogunlana, December 16, 2009.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

This suggests that the ability for one to change into multiple, colourful *asọ ebi* dresses made of different dress materials (multiplying *asọ ebi*) is part of the connotation of wealth and prestige. This could, again, be seen during the court case of Olabode George. Olabode George, who was a former chairman of the board of the Nigerian Ports Authority in Nigeria, was dragged to court by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission of Nigeria (EFCC) for alleged misappropriation. During the court trials George's supporters wore *asọ ebi* to the court premises as a form of solidarity (see Figure 1).



Figure 1.  
Olabode George's Supporters in *asọ ebi* during the court trial. October 27, 2009.  
(Courtesy of 234Next Newspaper).

Pius Adesanmi remarks that “one correspondent counted four different sets of uniform worn by about twenty women in just one day ranging from yellow and green laces to blue and mint green headdresses. They would sing his praises and change attires each time there is a sitting.”<sup>524</sup> In just one day the women changed into four different sets of colourful *asọ ebi* uniforms. The visual image of women changing into different *asọ ebi* attires during George's trial indicates that a big man was undergoing trial or that a big man was simply around the court premises.

While Ogunlana lamented his “displeasure at having to spend huge sums of money in buying gifts for numerous people who wore *asọ ebi*,” his parents were very happy that, in their thinking, the party was expensive and thus the best among the recent wedding parties they had

<sup>524</sup> See Pius Adesanmi, “Little ends: *Asọ ebi* and the carnival of corruption” *Next Newspapers*, March 28 2009, p. 5.

attended.<sup>525</sup> The paradox of *asọ ebi* plays out here in a very interesting manner. A suggestive way of explaining this could be that Ogunlana's parents were able to enjoy the attendant glamour because they had no financial commitment to Ogunlana's *asọ ebi*, while Ogunlana abhors the glamour because of the high expenses he incurred.

### **Conclusion.**

This chapter has argued that *asọ ebi* dressing is conceived, at some points, in terms of a large followership as a yardstick for measuring wealth. The chapter demonstrates that a large followership manifests in *asọ ebi* through particular individuals in the city, who believe that prestige and wealth do not lie in just getting people dressed in *asọ ebi* but getting a sizeable number of people. This number of people, in order to become noble, must approximate a crowd. While opening up issues around *asọ ebi* and notions of hierarchical ordering of society in certain social events in Nigeria, the chapter shows that *asọ ebi* is a sumptuous paraphernalia employed for the objectification of rank and the elaboration of class. Almost approximating a social convention, *asọ ebi* employs its material accoutrements to construct a discourse of the haves and the have-nots in social events in Lagos. In other words, in the process of the whole public display, it invokes imitation and a desire to multiply the number of people who wear *asọ ebi*, which can in its turn, be multiple. In this chapter, while I might have shown why individuals desire a large number of people dressed in *asọ ebi* for their social events, in the next chapter I investigate the consequences of this large number. It seems that this number have, instead of championing the cause of friendly solidarity which is the aim of *asọ ebi* group, only succeeded in thwarting it. In the next chapter I seek to understand, in finer details, what transpires among individual lives in this number dressed in *asọ ebi*. Are they all friends? Or are they polarized groups playing solidarity as a game that is riddled with the politics of exclusion and inclusion? The question then arises as to whether the solidarity of large *asọ ebi* gatherings might only amount to mere rhetoric.

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<sup>525</sup> Interview with Abiola Ogunlana, December 16, 2009.

## Chapter 4.

### ***ASỌ EBÌ* ‘CROWD’ AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF *SOLIDARITY* AND *ONENESS*.**

#### **Introduction.**

While the previous chapter explored the apparent desire for large numbers of people in the practice of *asọ ebì*, this chapter interrogates the impact of such increasing numbers in contemporary practice. One cannot divorce these questions from the issue of the fluctuating Nigerian economy, which to some extent redefines the meanings of friendship in *asọ ebì* practice. This is because, by the year 2000, it became obvious that in order to effectively contain the huge expense of catering for large numbers of people in *asọ ebì*, one needs to possess enough financial resources. *Asọ ebì* became highly commercialized. Celebrants now buy textile materials intended for use as *asọ ebì* and sell them to their friends at exorbitant prices. As this chapter might suggest, the proceeds from the sale of the textile materials help celebrants to offset the expenses incurred from hosting a large crowd during a party. While it is assumed that the crowd at some points constituted themselves as friends and forged solidarity for the celebrant, the argument I advance in this chapter is that such solidarities might not be genuine. Friendship might moreover have been cheapened in an effort to belong to this solidarity. I seek to problematize prevailing views of *asọ ebì* that place emphasis on solidarity and conviviality. By challenging the moral economy of intimacy, I show that *asọ ebì*'s solidarity is constructed along bodily attire rather than along its purported belief in 'real' friendship. The chapter also shows that *asọ ebì*'s type of solidarity is indirectly forceful and exclusionary. Its exclusionary tendencies may well have been informed by a social convention that recognizes uniform as the only yardstick for measuring solidarity, friendship and oneness.

In this chapter therefore, I firstly address the issue of the 'oneness' that *asọ ebì* wearers profess. The question that I ask is how oneness manifests itself through the artificial bodily signifier of uniform (*asọ ebì*) among people of different cultural, ideological and sometimes political affiliations. Secondly, the meaning of friendship is interrogated as a discourse among groups of friends (in the city) who use *asọ ebì* to show support to their friends in events such as weddings, birthdays, naming ceremonies, amongst other things. The definition and

redefinition of friendship among these groups prompts my analysis of whether all those who wear *asọ ebi* are really friends. Finally, the chapter makes use of Marcel Mauss' 'the logic of gift' to raise questions about the gift that is meant to accompany *asọ ebi*.

### **Interrogating *asọ ebi*'s oneness.**

*Asọ ebi* symbolises togetherness and a sense of solidarity.<sup>526</sup>

Robert Ross has remarked that "of all the forms of clothing that men and women have put on, uniforms are those whose message is the least ambiguous and they are also those in which the efforts of those with power to impose their will through dress are most plain."<sup>527</sup> Remarking further Ross notes that one of the most distinctive features of uniform is its ability to distinguish between "them" and "us".<sup>528</sup> The functions of uniforms, according to Ross, are also contradictory. In certain quarters such as schools, in the nursing profession and in many other institutions, "uniforms simultaneously enforce uniformity and demonstrate difference."<sup>529</sup> Although Ross refers to institutional aspects of the use of uniforms to enforce difference, it is possible to see how such paradigms have also manifested in the social use of *asọ ebi* uniforms to enforce difference among friends in Nigeria.

Craik argues that "body techniques inscribed in uniforms contain a series of oppositional attributes: discipline versus spontaneity; group identity/conformity versus individuality/expressiveness; formality versus informality; compulsion versus choice..."<sup>530</sup> In the everyday deployment of the body techniques of solidarity among *asọ ebi* wearers in Nigeria, differences are constantly enthroned. The circulation of assumptions about friendship among particular groups of friends has brought about an enforced conformity in dressing and behaviour during social events in Nigeria. This has contributed to ruptures in relationships that ordinarily would have been kept intact without *asọ ebi* uniforms. In her study of the Mande people of Sierra Leone, *The Underneath of Things*, Mariane Ferme explores the aesthetics of

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<sup>526</sup> Moloye, O. "Traditional High Fashion in Transition" in S.N.Lawal, M.N.O.Sadiku, and A. Dopamu, (eds), *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture* (Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc., 2004), p. 18.

<sup>527</sup> Robert Ross, *Clothing: a Global History: Or, The Imperialists' New Clothes* (Cambridge, Polity, 2008), p. 102.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid. p. 102.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>530</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed, From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p. 7.

power through *asọ ebì* dress. She observes that the word *asọ ebì* that the Mande in Sierra Leone corrupted in their version of *ashobi* originated from the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, and that styles of *asọ ebì* uniform are used to “embody valued social principles of unity and consensus.”<sup>531</sup> According to her: “During major social and political events, such as a national party convention or a wedding in an important family, followers of a chief, members of parliament, or relatives of the groom and bride would attend dressed uniformly in matching clothes, or *ashobis*, commissioned especially for the occasion.”<sup>532</sup>

Although, according to Ferme, the “visual impact of the *ashobis* at large gatherings is striking,”<sup>533</sup> it cannot resolve the notions of difference that inhere in *asọ ebì* uniformity. In Lagos, for example, such differences are manifest in the design stylistics of individual dresses. Sophistication in “designs of clothes and quality of textile materials used for each *asọ ebì* distinguishes women whose clothes were sewn by professional tailors from those whose clothes were sewn by amateurs.”<sup>534</sup> Ferme also identifies such differences among the wealthy who add expensive embroidery and extra layers of cloth to distinguish themselves “within the general colour uniformity of *asọ ebì*,” and from others who cannot afford a whole outfit and who add only matching tops and head coverings.<sup>535</sup> Apart from this type of difference which is scripted on individual dresses, other forms of differences extend to broader human relations, which I address below.

One of the participants in a chieftom celebration confided to Ferme that *ashobis* are worn “so that people will know that we are one.”<sup>536</sup> “We are one” is a phrase that needs to be understood under the construction of ‘we’ and ‘one.’ Jodi Dean has remarked that this way of conceiving solidarity recognizes the fact that the term ‘we’ does not require an opposing ‘they,’ and that ‘we’ also denotes the relationship between ‘you’ and ‘me.’ She notes that “once the term ‘we’ is understood communicatively, difference can be respected as necessary

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<sup>531</sup> Marianne Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (London, Los Angeles and Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2001), p.169.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>534</sup> Okechukwu Nwafor, “The Spectacle of *asọ ebì* in Lagos: 1990-2008,” in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.14, No.1, 2011, pp.45-62, p.52.

<sup>535</sup> Marianne Ferme cited in Nwafor, *ibid*, p.52.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid, p.169.

to solidarity.”<sup>537</sup> However, in the subsequent arguments that I make here, the only communicative understanding in certain social networks in Nigeria is the *asọ ebì* uniform – which is not amenable to any form of difference – and does not represent ‘real’ friendship. A few of the examples I give may suggest that to refuse to dress in *asọ ebì* is translated as dissent, questioning and disagreement, all of which are seen as tearing the ‘we’ apart. My arguments will show that in some social events in Nigeria the above participant’s ‘we’ is constructed in such a way that accommodates mainly material adornment. I show that ‘we’ can only become ‘one’ within artificial constructions of uniformed dressing despite individual differences.

A lexical derivative of ‘one’ as used by the above participant could either be oneness, solidarity, or uniformity. However, a sense of oneness and solidarity which the participant hopes their *asọ ebì* conveys has never been subject to more controversy than is now happening in contemporary Lagos social events. Below are some indices which suggest incipient threatening signs to the oneness which *asọ ebì* aspires to in early twentieth century Lagos and which offers space for my subsequent interrogation of ‘we-ness,’ ‘solidarity’ and ‘oneness’ in the practice at present.



Before 1930, *asọ ebì* had started attracting what appears to be the first wave of condemnation from well-meaning Yoruba.<sup>538</sup> This condemnation became so ubiquitous that the church management in Lagos convened a Christian inter-denominational committee in 1930 on the issue of *asọ ebì*.<sup>539</sup> The committee which met at the Lagos C.M.S. Girls Seminary in Lagos was spread across the Methodist, Catholic, Baptist and Anglican Missions. According to Johnson, one of the Anglican delegates to the committee:

the committee after their deliberations agreed that the craze for *asọ ebì* in many homes was on the increase; that many married women unreasonably participate in *asọ ebì* thereby worsening the financial crisis of their various families. The women also destabilize the peace of their families by constantly extorting clothing allowances from their husbands who barely manage to feed the family. Some of them also got *asọ ebì*

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<sup>537</sup> Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers, Feminism after Identity Politics* (California: University of California Press, 1996), p.8.

<sup>538</sup> Tunde Akinwumi, *The Commemorative Phenomenon of Textile*, p.174.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid*, p.174.

on credit from the celebrant who usually distributed the cloth to well wishers expecting their husbands to pay eventually.<sup>540</sup>

The committee's unilateral resolve was that "*aso ebi* was a threat to the unity of the church and families. Incessant *aso ebi* debts stretch the husbands beyond their financial reach as these women participate in an average of four *aso ebi* per month and incur the corresponding bills."<sup>541</sup>

The findings also observed a contributing factor to this vice as the "cloth traders who introduced credit facilities for the purposes of attracting more women to buy *aso ebi* thereby perpetuating this ugly practice."<sup>542</sup> The findings indicate that the church would not be held responsible for this mad rush for *aso ebi* and recommended that while *aso ebi* 'tradition' should not be banned they advised practitioners to demonstrate moderation. Moderation in all aspects of the Christians' life including *aso ebi* seemed to form the core of the churches' subsequent sermons.

Some further criticisms of *aso ebi* appeared in 1940s newspapers where, for example, one critic alleged that the church encouraged *aso ebi* patronage during its harvest and bazaars and the children who attended the Church Mission Schools were compelled to pay for festival cloth levies.<sup>543</sup> This critic argued that as long as *aso ebi* was associated with Christian religious worship, the solution will lie with the church.

Ayodele Oketunji was a member of the Ishan Progressive Women Association, Lagos branch, where *aso ebi* was used in most of the important activities.<sup>544</sup> Her photograph below shows her in front sitting third from left during a burial ceremony of one of their colleagues in 1970. According to Oketunji, in Ishan Progressive Women Association,

It looks as though it is mandatory for members to buy *aso ebi* during any of our colleague's event. At a point I had to borrow money to buy my own and sew it. If you

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid, p. 174.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid, p. 174

<sup>542</sup> Ibid, p. 175.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid, p. 175.

<sup>544</sup> Interview with Ayodele Oketunji, 9 December 2010.

don't buy it members will make mockery of you and you would be made to look like an outcast. Most people were shy to declare that they did not have money to buy it. So for me the uniform may not always depict oneness but just a way of ripping people off because sometimes they sell it at a higher price than they bought it.<sup>545</sup>



Figure 1. Ishan Progressive Women Association, Lagos Branch, 1970.  
(Courtesy of Ayodele Oketunji)

For Oketunji, borrowing money to buy a uniform does not convey a feeling of oneness in the context of a social club, especially money meant to cater for families. In other words, the dismissive tone that characterizes her remark does not favour the enforcement of a uniform for a social organization.

In the *Nigerian Outlook* of June 13 1960, Jude Reke remarks that *asọ ebì* is threatening to tear the unity of families apart.<sup>546</sup> A similar sentiment is echoed in the *New Nigeria Newspaper* of December 28, 1975, that “*asọ ebì* has never been a good aspect of our culture. Instead of the unity it was supposed to foster it separates families because husbands and wives battle over *asọ ebì* money. I know extended families who have become enemies because one did not provide the other with *asọ ebì* during an important ceremony.”<sup>547</sup>

<sup>545</sup> Interview with Ayodele Oketunji 9 December 2010.

<sup>546</sup> Jude Reke, “*Asọ ebì*, Culture or Crisis” *Nigerian Outlook*, June 13 1960.

<sup>547</sup> Clement Uwem, “Is it our culture?” *New Nigeria Newspaper*, December 28, 1975.

The same opinion of division did not stop at the family level but extended among friends who did not favour the manner in which *asọ ebi* was becoming an object of discord among friends. For example, Edith Thomas narrated how she became her friend's most despised enemy because she could not afford to pay for her *asọ ebi* during her wedding in 1999. "It is not just about friendship," Thomas remarked, "it is about making money from *asọ ebi*. I can tell you that you can only know your true friends when it comes to *asọ ebi*. If you tell your friend you don't have money to buy her *asọ ebi* you can become her permanent enemy. And you must buy it at her inflated price."<sup>548</sup> Some of these statements are earlier forms of opposition that were beginning to reshape the spaces of sociality around *asọ ebi*. They set the precedents for articulating subsequent forms of discord that would threaten *asọ ebi*'s aspiration towards oneness.

From the 1960s it was obvious that *asọ ebi* was already becoming a fabric textured by complex and controversial social relationships. It is no surprise therefore that in expressing present-day solidarity in *asọ ebi*, friends and family members sometimes show conflicting interests and strong emotional reactions that may result in enmity.

There is a suggestive article on *asọ ebi* by an anonymous writer posted on a blog known as *My Pen and My Paper* on 20 August 2010. This article employs a subtle and witty diction to defeat the logic of solidarity in *asọ ebi* practice. According to this writer:

One of the reasons I do not like attending weddings is because of "Asọ ebi". In fact, I intentionally ask anyone who invites me to his/her wedding if *Asọ ebi* would be a major issue...Worse, I would not want to wear the same *asọ ebi* with some mad guys who attend events making indecent jokes or some ladies who dress in offensive manner. I have seen some *Asọ ebi*'s around town worse than extra-miniskirts. I think an average person would get a very wrong impression about me if they find me wearing *asọ ebi* with such a person, considering we all seem to identify with the same person. Still worse, I've observed in some weddings that anyone who doesn't show up in an *Asọ ebi* is treated a little different – as in different. I have observed that in some particular wedding, gifts are not usually extended to those who don't wear *Asọ ebi*. It looks to me like a mild cult, because these gifts are usually counted and given exactly / only to those *Asọ ebi* wearers...some wedding organizers even announce it openly that the gifts are meant for *Asọ ebi* wearers – making those of us who don't wear *Asọ ebi* a little out of place. My most pissed off wedding attendance was 2-months ago. I didn't

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<sup>548</sup> Interview with Edith Thomas, Mushin, Lagos, 2 December 2010.

go in an *Asọ ebi*, and here came one of the servers. I and my friends who weren't in *Asọ ebi* were given white-rice and chicken; while those who wore *Asọ ebi* had choices between Pounded Yam, Amala, Semovita with either Egungun / Vegetable soup, with either Fish / beef / friend chicken. I got so pissed, I refused to eat anything, just sat down there until the event was finished. A week after, I called the groom, who was my friend and explained the unfortunate incident to him. According to my guy, he didn't like the decision but couldn't do anything about it. He said it was his wife's family that made the decision and perpetrated the act. Yes, he was all apologetic, but the deed was done.<sup>549</sup>

The seriousness of this author's ignoble experience seems to be tempered by a flair for hilarious writing. In other words, appreciating his funny tone might trivialize the gravity of his unworthy experience. And what sounds like parody here is actually a reality in the present practice of *asọ ebi* in Nigeria. In the same vein, and narrating a similar ordeal during a traditional marriage ceremony in Lagos, Obodimma Oha remarked that those who distributed food and drinks avoided the guests who did not have the particular regime of *asọ ebi* that featured on the occasion:

The food came and went and did not recognize us. The drinks came and went and still did not recognize us. One woman who could not bear it went directly to the food distributors and carried one plate of rice. I dare not describe the shameful struggle that ensued. Well, she got the food eventually, which was really not enough compensation for all the trouble. One other fellow who sat near me simply got up, wiped his ass and left with his well-wrapped gift. I bet he cursed under his breath.<sup>550</sup>

In the above complaints, what comes out clearly is that the first speaker did not see himself as constituting a 'oneness' by dressing in the same *asọ ebi* uniform with some scraggy-looking individuals who exhibited cranky mannerism. As a self-styled gentleman, it would presumably be a slight on his self-worth to adorn himself in the same uniform as supposed rascals. Again it was demeaning for him to wear the same uniform as other ladies who exhibited indecency. His sense of decency prevented him from joining a uniformity that lacked moral comportment in dress. That is the first issue that necessitated defiance against *asọ ebi* from the first narrator. The second contentious issue – which was a consequence of his defiance – has to do with food. Both the first narrator and the second were excluded from the food because they had disagreed with the social imposition of solidarity by their friend's *asọ ebi*. Their personal

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<sup>549</sup> 'Asọ ebi', *My Pen and My paper*, 20 August 2010, <http://mypenmypaper.wordpress.com/>

<sup>550</sup> Obododimma Oha, "Asoebi politics," *234Next Newspapers*, 15 September, 2009, p 6.

assertiveness and sense of individuality earned them a severance from the notion of ‘we-ness’ that *aso ebi* solidarity encodes. Therefore as a punishment for their negation they had to be treated as misfits and *persona non gratae* in these events.

In the case of the first speaker and his friends, they were not given any option to choose from the list of menu as expected of those who wore *aso ebi* rather they were categorized under the umbrella of a contemptible collective: an infinitesimal group of ‘outsiders’ who did not deserve anything better than white rice and chicken, while those in *aso ebi* could make a choice from “pounded yam, Amala, semovita with either egusi / vegetable soup, with either fish / beef / fried chicken.” For Obododimma Oha, the second narrator, and his friends, the disrepute extended to them sounds more severe than the first group: they did not deserve any food at all for their social sin of not dressing in *aso ebi*. The sad side of the drama is that the real celebrants are ignorant of any disgrace their friends might have encountered or been subjected to during the event.

This is a manifestation of the preponderant centrality of an exclusionary pact – among friends and families – as an inevitable accompaniment of *aso ebi* in social events in Nigeria. These manifestations and incidents are revealing and quite indicative of the inherent controversy that attends *aso ebi*’s solidarity. The statement by Aafke Komter is suggestive here: “solidarity is not predominantly or exclusively the warm and friendly category we usually assume it to be,” such that “the risks of interpersonal solidarity are selectivity and exclusion.”<sup>551</sup> Further confirmation of this exclusionary dynamics comes from ‘Leo and Pisces’, “Like my mum said, without the *aso ebi*, you don’t belong; you may be an invited guest to the wedding, but when it comes to any intimate family related activities, you would be swiftly marginalized in the subtly condescending manner of the Yorubas.”<sup>552</sup> According to ‘Leo and Pisces’ one is relegated to mainly watching festivities from one’s seat, “and of course you miss out on the ‘*haa’d*’ goodies (translation; free gifts given to those who wore the *aso ebi*).”<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> Aafke Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p 207; See also Aafke Komter “Reciprocity as a principle of exclusion,” *Sociology*, Vol. 30, 1996, pp. 299–316.

<sup>552</sup> Leo and Pisces, “*Aso ebi* and the essence of Nigerian weddings,” <http://leoandpisces.blogspot.com/2010/10/aso-ebi-and-essence-of-nigerian-wedding.html>, accessed 17 October, 2010.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*

Here, the only interpretation of solidarity claims is the group's own self-understanding of themselves, not as friends connected by a common pursuit or endeavour, but as friends bounded by a uniform known as *asọ ebì*. Any other criterion outside this seems inconsequential. The possibility or probability of the celebrant's best friends not wearing *asọ ebì* on that particular occasion on account of some inhibiting factor, does not seem to come up for consideration. Familusi elucidates further how people who do not turn up in *asọ ebì* are treated in most social events: "Should he or she grace the occasion, nobody will freely interact with him or her. The seriousness attached to *asọ ebì* sometimes compels friends, relatives or well wishers to purchase the chosen uniforms for those who are financially handicapped."<sup>554</sup> This interpretation focuses on bodily signs and visible insignia of dress as vehicles of recognition, affirmation, oneness, solidarity and uniformity.

When Jumoke Adesanya attended the wedding reception of her friend she observed: "There were more than seven different types of uniformed groups and I did not fit into any one of them,"<sup>555</sup> Adesanya was denied food because she was not in any of the *asọ ebì*. "Other people around me were eating and drinking but I was left without any food except a bottle of malt, so when I demanded the reason, one of the guests behind me said it's because I did not wear the *asọ ebì*."<sup>556</sup> "I was also not offered any gift. The gift sharers ignored me. It is unfortunate that *asọ ebì* is becoming a big issue in Lagos weddings these days."<sup>557</sup> Wana Udobang observes that "*asọ ebì* is the only item that can authenticate your affiliations with either bride or groom." Udobang, a regular columnist in *234 Next newspaper*, recounts a personal experience in one wedding reception she attended without dressing in *asọ ebì* :

We sat there, without any food hoping someone would stop to ask us what we would like to eat. We watched as different women in *asọ ebì* marshalled the waiters to different tables whilst we roved our eyes around the hall hoping to find a familiar face amidst the sea of orange fabric<sup>558</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> O.O. Familusi, "The Yoruba Culture of *asọ ebì* (group uniform) in Socio-ethical Context," *Lumina*, Vol. 21, No.2, October 2010, p. 3.

<sup>555</sup> Interview with Jumoke Adesanya, Lagos, 26 March 2011.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

While Udobang's frustration for being ignored because she did not appear in *asọ ebì* was something of concern, she was even more disturbed by the fact that even among those who wore *asọ ebì*, there was also differentiation and discrimination: "there were higher grades of *asọ ebì* which determined the level of VIP treatment available."<sup>559</sup> And she realized how important this uniform was when the Chinese family who wore *asọ ebì* and who joined them on their table were served Oriental medley (according to their choice) while they were left without anything to eat or drink.

Antonia Nweke and her friend, Bunmi Oke were expected to join a colleague of theirs for her father's 70<sup>th</sup> year birthday celebration. Both Nweke and Oke and their friend work at a shipping company in Lagos. The birthday party was in Ilupeju area of Lagos. Meanwhile they had no idea of an initial plan by their colleague's family to sell *asọ ebì* to any interested guest. This is because their colleague did not inform them of any such plans. The occasion, according to Nweke,

was like a carnival and almost all the guests were dressed in one colour of *asọ ebì* or the other except us. Our friend was busy inside the inner room and we could not see her. We discovered that the people sharing the food never wanted to come to our table. As one of them carrying some plates of food and drinks came across our table I called him but he ignored me. Another guy came and when I asked him to give us food he said that all food has finished and that the only thing remaining is coke. In fact he gave us the coke. But lo and behold we saw some other waiters carrying food and passing us. I think they instructed them not to give food to those not dressed in any of the *asọ ebì*. The waiters had clearly been instructed not to serve us. Some women on a table beside us didn't find this funny and were raising their voices at the waiters. Saying loudly in Yoruba 'What kind of party is this'<sup>560</sup>

This means that the exclusionary narratives of *asọ ebì* are not about boycotting friends or family members per se, but those (whether friends or not) who do not adorn themselves in *asọ ebì* uniform. This concept offers one a space to see uniforms as a disciplinary construct that admits, permits and allows one to develop a sense of security and confidence among a group. This is not applicable only to *asọ ebì*, but uniforms in a wider sense: military uniforms, security organization's uniform, police uniforms, among others.

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>560</sup> Interview with Antonia Nweke, Apapa Lagos, 3 February 2011.

We can understand such expressions of solidarity, according to Jodi Dean, “as a set of shared expectations that constitute a context of meaning central to a group’s self-understanding.”<sup>561</sup> If one may question further why the first writer and Oha were excluded then it may be helpful to understand the implications of Familusi’s further remark: “a system of mutual obligation is established by the use of *asọ ebì* in the sense that an individual who buys one when somebody is celebrating an occasion expects to be reciprocated when it is his or her own turn to have cause for celebration.”<sup>562</sup> Familusi notes that the mutual obligation cannot be broken by anybody who does not want to be treated with ostracism.<sup>563</sup> In line with Familusi’s statement, the first writer, Oha and Udobang, violated the mutual obligation of not appearing in *asọ ebì*. We could qualify this however by saying that this violation might be happening for the first and last time, and might not need any reciprocity from the celebrants at that moment. In other words, the celebrants did not wait to reciprocate their friends’ non-compliance. Instead their friends’ type of ostracism came on the spot by way of denial of food among the rest of the guests.

The above tensions rightly confirm Jennifer Craik’s point that “enforcement of uniform practice is central to the social life of the uniform.”<sup>564</sup> She also notes that “enforcement involves both rewards and punishment for transgression.”<sup>565</sup> The rewards and punishments are clearly spelt out in *asọ ebì* in the form of remuneration and denial respectively. They further re-enforce my analysis of *asọ ebì* as exclusionary rather than inclusionary. They link *asọ ebì* to more intangible and amorphous – but equally powerful – anxieties about attending social events in Lagos as a *persona non grata*. What comes out from the above is that for some people of urban Lagos interested in attending these social events, the meanings of *asọ ebì* – as a gesture of oneness and friendship – are ineluctably imbued with the opposite, articulated as an abiding sense of ostracism, unfriendliness and division.

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<sup>561</sup> Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers*, p. 15.

<sup>562</sup> O.O. Familusi, “The Yoruba Culture of *asọ ebì* (group uniform),” p. 2.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4

<sup>564</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed, From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

Wedding gifts have also been used, according to the first speaker, to enforce difference. Underlying this attitude is the fact that solidarity operates within a notion of membership that is both exclusionary and repressive. It shows that in line with Judith Butler's point, solidarity is an "exclusionary norm."<sup>566</sup> *Asọ ebì* solidarity seeks to shore up the unity of the group in advance through the buying of the dress from the host days before the event, sewing it and dressing in it during the actual event. Whoever lays his/her hands on the dress before that day, and by whatever means, receives the gift on the day of the event.

In exposing such contradictory power of uniformed solidarity Joseph Nathan argues that "uniforms are also open to appropriation and modification by outsiders who manage to lay their hands on them."<sup>567</sup> This system forbids any attempt to challenge existing defective concepts of uniformity in *asọ ebì* solidarity on the day of the event. This is because there is a common assumption that it is only close family members and close friends who are allowed to have access to the *asọ ebì* uniform of a celebrant. But as will be shown in subsequent discussions, this is not always the case. Such types of close relationships in certain instances may not always exist, and they could be flexible and porous. These relationships may well be indirectly forceful, and reveal lines of alienation and exclusion in friendship. I am suggesting that such solidarities seem to demand more from people than people can give. It is possible that some people might restrain their differences and abandon their self-understandings or esteem (as in adorning in the same *asọ ebì* uniform even though they may not like it) for the sake of a larger group. Therefore, this sort of solidarity requires people to sacrifice their differences by conforming to the rules of uniformity that are sometimes coercive and totalizing.

However it must be noted that within the imposed solidarity of uniforms, there are divergent twists to the plot. Much is hidden under the façade of uniformity: foes masquerade as friends and vice versa. The difference that inheres in *asọ ebì* uniformity lies in the fact that uniforms may not change the character of an individual; rather it can only serve to level everyone under the rhetoric of solidarity. This is very evident from Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's metaphor

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<sup>566</sup> Cited in Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers*, p. 15

<sup>567</sup> Joseph Nathan, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing* (Westport, CT, 1986), pp. 65–68, p. 74.

to explain this difference. Ogunyemi analyzed a 1910 picture of two identically dressed women used in the front cover of the book, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, and observed how both women mirrored each other and yet manifested intricately hidden differences. The genealogy of this practice of uniformed style of dressing, according to Ogunyemi, could be traced to the Nigerian *aso ebi*.<sup>568</sup> *Aso ebi*, according to Ogunyemi is “important to the Yoruba psychosocial consciousness.”<sup>569</sup>

While remarking that *aso ebi* “engenders group identity, solidarity, and a sense of being special,” her observation equally revealed differences and individuality in the *aso ebi* uniformity. This is often expressed through the distinctions of each person’s style of sewing, choice accessories, and poise of carriage.<sup>570</sup> This statement is also confirmed by Leo and Pisces in their analysis of the *aso ebi* dress in Figure 2. They observe that the colour and material of the dresses are the same, but the styles of sewing are different.<sup>571</sup>



Figure 2.  
*Aso ebi* designs by Leo and Pisces, Lagos, 2011.  
 (Courtesy of Leo and Pisces).

<sup>568</sup> Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa wo/man palava: the Nigerian novel by women* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.10.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid*, p.10

<sup>571</sup> Leo and Pisces, “*Aso ebi* and the essence of Nigerian weddings.”

Difference (and status) are the connotative languages spoken through most uniforms, including military uniforms which ordinarily do not offer any uniformity within their insignia of ranks. Timothy Parsons' makes it clear that,

In theory, all members of a uniformed group wear exactly the same clothing and face sanction if they alter it to express personal or political views. In practice, however, there are always individual variations in uniforms. Even military organizations, which strive for near total uniformity in dress, use medals and symbols of rank to indicate status and power within the unit.<sup>572</sup>

What can be inferred from Parson's observation and Ogunyemi's study is that within the terminology of uniformity, class differentiations are enacted through individual styles. In *aso ebi*, the establishment of social class often manifests in the real ceremony where women display their styles of *aso ebi* dress. Sophistication in designs of clothes and quality of textile materials used for each *aso ebi* distinguishes women whose clothes were sewn by professional tailors and those sewn by amateurs. Again, Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi remarks that within such perceptions of uniformity among *aso ebi* groups, *aso oke* is sometimes used to mark status.<sup>573</sup> Such practices unveil the ambivalence of oneness especially when the space of the ceremony is used to distinguish the 'elite' from the poor "through viewing some lace materials as rich while some are seen as poor."<sup>574</sup>

Considered in this light, there is always, according to Lawuyi, a show of symbolic solidarity that also speaks of dominance and hostility among social ranks during the ceremony. There could be no 'oneness' also in their manner of conspicuous consumption in which, quoting Lawuyi again, "food and drink are supplied in accordance with status while the rank of the receivers is granted recognition according to a minutely scrutinized order of precedence."<sup>575</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that women walk the nooks and crannies of the city searching for

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<sup>572</sup> Timothy Parsons, "Consequences of Uniformity: The Struggle for the Boy Scout Uniform in Colonial Kenya," in *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2006, pp. 361-383, p. 365.

<sup>573</sup> Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi, "The Social Marketing of Elites: The Advertised Self in Obituaries and Congratulations in Some Nigerian Dailies," in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1991), pp. 247-263, p. 259.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid*, p. 259.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid*, p. 259.

an adept who could invent a unique design. Metaphorically one can liken communal solidarity to the colours of *asọ ebì* dress, which are usually matching. And then liken disagreements in *asọ ebì* practice to individual designs which usually differ.<sup>576</sup>

The protestation of some friends who refused to adorn themselves in *asọ ebì* produced an inverse reading of *asọ ebì*: a reading whereby friends were denied both food and wedding gifts because they refused to don *asọ ebì*, and enemies who dressed in *asọ ebì* may have received food and wedding gifts. In other words, it shows that subversion is embodied in *asọ ebì* uniformity itself. It also suggests that uniforms transform foes into friends and friends into foes. It has become evident that *asọ ebì* is a mechanism used to transform potentially distant relations into relations of illusory amicability. It shows that *asọ ebì* solidarity is based on thin ephemeral robes rather than thick resilient bonds.

In Yoruba hometown associations notions of 'love' and 'friendship' are evoked as a way of showing people's affinity. Trager notes that "An Ilesa chief, A. O. Lamikanra, once stated in an interview that "we love ourselves abroad more than we do at home."<sup>577</sup> Studies in several African countries and among a variety of ethnic groups have emphasized the importance of social networks among families and kin, spanning multiple locales; they also note the reliance on such networks both for those at home and those who migrate.<sup>578</sup> Although links to family and kin networks play an important role in the migration process in some parts of the world, connections to the home community as a community could be much more important in West Africa than elsewhere.<sup>579</sup> What may be necessary to identify here is how some of these social connections deploy notions of oneness that may be rhetorical and have far-reaching objectives in the ways they invoke *asọ ebì*.

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<sup>576</sup> Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa wo/man palava*, p. 10

<sup>577</sup> See chapter one of this study for an analysis of Yoruba hometown associations in the context of *asọ ebì*. Joseph Babalola, *The Challenge of Egbe in Yoruba Hometowns* (Lagos: Idu Press, 2000), p.3.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid, p.239. See for example, Kenneth Little, "Voluntary Associations and Social Mobility among West African Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Special Issue: The Roles of African Women: Past, Present and Future (1972), pp. 275-288; Joan Aldous, "Urbanization, the Extended Family, and Kinship Ties in West Africa," *Social Forces*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1962), pp. 6-12; Kenneth Little, "Some Traditionally Based Forms of Mutual Aid in West African Urbanization," *Ethnology*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1962), pp. 197-211; Andrea Cornwall, "Of choice, chance and contingency: 'Career strategies' and tactics for survival among Yoruba women traders," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* (2007) vol.15, No.1, pp. 27-46; LaRay Denzer, "Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1994), pp. 1-39, among others.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid, p.230.

### **Interrogating *aso ebi*'s friendship.**

It is common these days to discover, as Adaobi Okoye has pointed out, that “people are not close friends, neither do they have anything in common yet they wear the same *aso ebi* uniform to weddings.”<sup>580</sup> Shifts of meanings that redefine solidarity in *aso ebi* are seen through differences occasioned by fluid constructions of friendship in present-day social networks in Nigeria. For example, Ifeyinwa Umunna remarks that “most people who cherish *aso ebi* these days would recruit any stranger – whether friend or not – because they want to sell the fabric materials they bought at an exorbitant price and make more money, and that they are not interested in whether you are their friends or enemies.”<sup>581</sup> Uju Udoye believes that people have turned *aso ebi* into a money-making venture and that is the reason why she does not “attend functions anymore.”<sup>582</sup> “The last time my friend did her traditional marriage, I declined to buy her *aso ebi* because it was 20, 000 Naira and I didn’t have such money. I later heard from my other friends that she bought the material for 10,000 Naira and sold it to them at 20,000 Naira each. You can imagine the gain she must have made.”<sup>583</sup> Ronke Akerele notes, “one of my friends had once offered an *aso ebi* of her friend’s friend to me to buy. I told her that I don’t even know the celebrant and they still wanted me to be part of the *aso ebi* ladies. Moreover I hate the idea of selling a cheap fabric to people at an exorbitant price. So I rejected it.”<sup>584</sup>

In a popular Nigerian site called Bella Naija, a 2009 article by an author simply named as Ness attracted more comments than most other articles in the site over a long time. The article among other things addressed the issue of *aso ebi* and its problems. According to the author:

...So imagine my discomfort when I reluctantly decided to attend the wedding of an old school friend and she mentioned that she would send her driver to drop off the *aso ebi*. Aso- Ebi literally means clothes of the family and I concede that it has evolved to include close friends as well, but I mean, I was not one of her close friends anymore and I felt and still feel that *aso ebi* should be for your inner-circle of friends. Anyway, I decided to buy it to support her and since she mentioned that it was Ankara and Aso Oke, I figured it wouldn’t cost me much. I couldn’t have been more WRONG! After

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<sup>580</sup> Interview with Adaobi Okoye, Lagos, December, 15, 2009.

<sup>581</sup> Interview with Ifeyinwa Umunna, Lagos, 12 December, 2010.

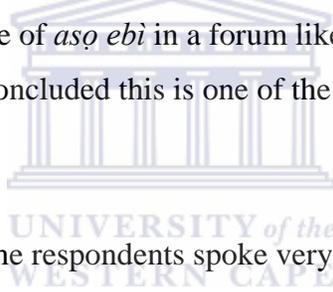
<sup>582</sup> Interview with Uju Okoye, Awka, 20 December, 2010.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

<sup>584</sup> Interview with Ronke Akerele, Lagos, 22 December, 2010.

her driver dropped it off, I called to find out how much it cost so I could send the money over and she said “Ah just 17 k, I didn’t want to pick expensive asoebi like other brides I know”. I was dumbfounded. 17,000 Nigerian Naira for ankara and aso oke? What really baffled me was that she thought it was cheap. I returned her *aso ebi* and explained that I couldn’t make the wedding anymore because of family commitments but I did use part of the 17,000 I would have spent to get her a gift....*Aso ebi* ...is not a money making scheme. Remember, not everyone in a family can afford exorbitant prices for clothes but it takes away from the whole point when you see two levels of asoebi in one family; one for the rich folks and one for the poorer relatives. I am not referring to situations where there is aso-ebi for young people and one for the older folks; I’m talking about when your cousin Shola or Nneka’s mum is wearing the aso-ebi you picked for members of your staff because the one you chose for so called “family members” is too expensive for them.<sup>585</sup>

The respondents to this article numbered a total of 50. Their tones were convincing enough to make one believe that *aso ebi* urgently deserves attention. Most of the respondents were unanimous that the article was a very good one with some expressing their gratefulness to the author for throwing up the issue of *aso ebi* in a forum like this. Some of the respondents – including Nando and Mary – concluded this is one of the best articles they have read on Bella Naija site.



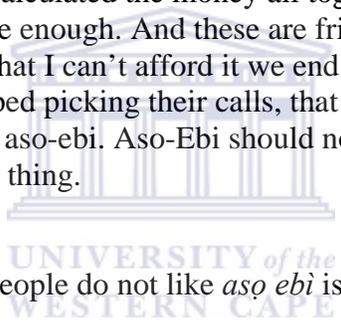
Since about ninety percent of the respondents spoke very harshly against *aso ebi*, why do so many people embrace the practice? Why would *aso ebi*’s popularity intensify in present day Lagos? It seems the increasing participation could be born out of an imposed social obligation that hinges more on the fear of ostracism than a fascination or passion for the practice. From the tone of the article and the ensuing responses, it seems that most people are not satisfied with the turn *aso ebi* is presently taking. Their statements suggest a predisposition towards abandoning the practice or rather reviewing it. These are some of the responses:

1. Flaky says: You hit the nail right on the head. Not only is the *aso ebi* price hiked but they use the profit to buy gifts which they give out to guests, so u are also paying for take home gift. we live in a very fake country where couples are trying to out to do each other so that their wedding will be the most talked about for just a few days. Anytime I watch Bisi Olatilo or Newsline I get tired of the show off of affluence in a country where basic health, roads, water and electricity is not available.

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<sup>585</sup> “*Aso ebi* Madness, a personal encounter,” published on Saturday March 9 2009 at <http://www.bellanaija.com/2009/03/28/aso-ebi-madness-a-personal-encounter/>

2. Konye says: True Talk!.....to worsen matters, it appears that those who buy the aso-ebi sometimes receive preferential treatment at the reception/after parties.....some receive ‘special’ gifts.....eeeeeeessshh.....as if the gifts will change the price of fish in the market....lol
3. Kelendra says: Finally someone is addressing this issue. I just paid 17,000 naira for asoebi and I feel completely ripped off. I am getting to a point where I don’t even want to hear bridesmaid or aso-ebi near me. People forget the essence of things. I have warned my mother, any aso-ebi more than 10,000 naira makes no sense, when I get married- nothing more than that, I don’t need anybody to go hungry because they want to buy my *aso ebi* . There is beauty in simplicity.
4. Mary says: As a regular commentator on Bella Naija this is one of the best articles I have read, its real! well written. You addressed a lot of issues in this short piece. Nigeria is a society to show off. We want to keep up with the joneses yet basic necessities of life are missing. We want to say I am better off yet....
5. Oyenike Alliyu writes: This article is really brilliant and in fact it came at the time I was going through a lot, I have been invited by four of my friends for their sister cousin’s wedding ,in fact people I have never met in my life and they want me to buy aso-ebi for all, when I calculated the money all together I realized my salary for the month of June cannot be enough. And these are friends that I cherished so much, each time I explain to them that I can’t afford it we end up quarrelling, since they refused to listen to me I then stopped picking their calls, that was how i lost my friendship of 7 years all in the name of aso-ebi. Aso-Ebi should not be imposed on friends and family it should be a voluntary thing.



One of the main reasons why people do not like *aso ebi* is because many cannot afford the exorbitant prices their friends tag on it. Even when Ness decided to accept her conscription into the close friendship network of her friend, she suddenly discovered that her participation would be hampered by the exorbitant price of the *aso ebi*. She backed out not because of a sense of aloofness she envisaged among the group but because of economic reasons. While some people have other reasons why they do not like uniforms, it seems the above complaints are tied to a common denominator of the high price tag.

The question that may arise here borders on how such categories as ‘friends’ and ‘family members’ are construed in the present context of *aso ebi* practice. The puzzle of *aso ebi* friendship lies in the fact that Alliyu was invited by four of her own immediate friends to buy *aso ebi* for their own sister cousin’s wedding who is unknown to Alliyu, nor has she any affiliation with her. While this takes the discussion of the dialectics of friendship into a wider perspective, it begs a critical inquiry into how, and why, friendship is constituted in the *aso ebi*

practice. That *asọ ebì* is premised on people's belief in the institution of friendship begs a critical interrogation of the concepts of friendship in academic scholarship. As an interstitial institution,<sup>586</sup> friendship offers new avenues through which to explore the nature of sociality in *asọ ebì* practice.

In modern Western scholarship, Michel de Montaigne is regarded as one of the earliest most influential proponents of an ideal position on friendship. In his essay, "Of Friendship" he regards emotional attachment as an essential constituent of friendship.<sup>587</sup> His emphasis on 'real' friendship is, however, drawn from particularities expected of friendship from Euro-American societies. However, an exploration of such friendship features might provide a prefatory footing and an overview of initial formulations of concepts of friendship in academic scholarship. While it may not relate directly to my case, it could still offer an insight into my further interrogation of various models of friendship construction in *asọ ebì*.

According to Montaigne, "friendships are voluntary relationships based on choice and free will; they are personal rather than social affairs; unlike other relations, friendships are totally unselfish; they entail a kind of intimacy and informality seldom found in any other type of relationship; and they flourish among equal, though not necessarily identical, persons."<sup>588</sup>

Measured against the above discussed *asọ ebì* parameters, Montaigne's relationships would be found somewhat wanting. Ness was not a close friend of the above celebrant yet she received an invitation like every other close friend to wear *asọ ebì*. This attitude removes friendship from Montaigne's view as a "personal affair" to a social affair. In *asọ ebì*, Montaigne's theory is defeated by what Ada Obiekwe told me, "These days in *asọ ebì* you don't really get to know everybody. And even though it is for your friends alone these days what people do is that they buy the cloth and give their friends to sell to anyone who would want to participate and attend."<sup>589</sup> Again in *asọ ebì*, friendship at times is not voluntary as proposed by Montaigne. Friendship, at times, could be subtly coercive and a lot of societal impositions remove the trait

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<sup>586</sup> Gerald Suttles, "Friendship as a social institution," in George McCall, Michal McCall, Norman Denzin, Gerald Suttles and Suzanne B. Kurth (eds.) *Social Relations* (Chicago: Aldine, )pp. 95-135. See also Eric Wolf, "Kinship, friendship, and patron-client relations in complex societies," in Steffen Schmidt, James C. Scott, Carl Lande, and Laura Guasti, (eds), *Friends, Followers, and Factions: a Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 167-77.

<sup>587</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays of Michel de Montaigne* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Interview with Ada Obiekwe, Lagos, 1 April 2010.

of voluntariness from *asọ ebì* friendship. However, Alliyu suggests that, “*Aso-Ebi* should not be imposed on friends and family. It should be a voluntary thing.” The type of oblique imposition of friendship which pertains to the present day practice of *asọ ebì* might have been an import from similar occurrences among earlier age grade organisations in Yoruba society.

### ***Asọ ebì* friendship and the ‘logic of the gift’.**

In Chapter 1 where I traced the antecedents of friendship associations which use *asọ ebì*, there was no mention of gifts in any of the uniformed groups mentioned. In other words, gifts are possibly a recent manifestation among *asọ ebì* wearers. There is still a need for deeper historical inquiry regarding when gift-giving was introduced in *asọ ebì* practice. In recent times gifts are offered as a form of compensation to those who bought *asọ ebì* from the celebrants. Most often, during the event, the sharers of such gifts are given standing instructions not to offer gifts to anyone not dressed in *asọ ebì*, especially when the gifts are counted.<sup>590</sup> Such gifts normally range from little household objects such as metal plates, cups, plastic bowls to expensive items like wrist watches, umbrellas, trinkets, phones, among others. However, it is always assumed that only rich people can afford expensive gifts especially when their *asọ ebì* is very expensive.

It therefore logically translates that the cost of *asọ ebì* either parallels the costs of the gift – or contributes to the buying of the gifts. This comes with an increasing public criticism that the gifts are mere trivialities compared to the cost of the *asọ ebì*. Furthermore, Wana Udobang noticed that the cost of the *asọ ebì* fabric determines the brand of gifts or souvenir one receives. She establishes a gift hierarchy as follows: “a fifteen thousand naira lace equals a rechargeable lamp; a five thousand naira fabric attracts a thermal cup or laundry basket while a three thousand naira Ankara begets a branded pen and a handkerchief smeared the faces of the bride and groom.” However, a very expensive *asọ ebì* could even attract “electric kettles and even iPods, depending on the amount of wealth on display.”<sup>591</sup> From Udobang’s gift hierarchy it is evident that each *asọ ebì* guest received a gift commensurate with the price of

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<sup>590</sup> Interview with Theodora Dike, Ojuelegba, Lagos December 2010.

<sup>591</sup> Wana Udobang, “*Asọ ebì* Wahala,” *234 Next* Newspaper, January 8, 2011, p.20.

the material he/she bought. In this vein, it is assumed that *Ankara* which received the least valued item of pen and a handkerchief remains the most low-priced.

When I visited Theodora Dike at her residence in Ojuelegba area of Lagos, she showed me numerous gifts which she has accumulated from the many *asọ ebì* events in which she has participated. Theodora, a tailor, who has also been active in the *asọ ebì* fashion business, has sewn a lot of *asọ ebì* for numerous clients through which she has built her own network of friends. She said it is difficult for her to recount how many *asọ ebì* she has participated in. She took me into her kitchen where she showed me different kinds of gifts she received while participating in *asọ ebì* and which, according to her, now constitute her kitchen and household utensils (Figures 3a and 3b). However, Dike told me that one of the expensive gifts she received was an electric pressing iron (Figure 4). The iron gift was distributed to only friends who bought the particular *asọ ebì* that was shown in her photo in Figure 5. According to Theodora,

This photo was taken at a wedding of one of my friends whose husband is rich. I had opportunity to appear in one of the soft sell fashion magazines because the husband invited the members of *Today's Fashion Magazine* who photographed and interviewed some people of which I happened to be one of them. But the *asọ ebì* is very expensive, about 25 thousand naira and it was about 10 of us who bought it that received pressing iron. Others who bought a cheaper *asọ ebì* were given trays and plates.<sup>592</sup>

She said her happiness was unbounded when she saw herself in *Today's Fashion Magazine* and that she felt like a celebrity (see Figure 5). The magazine gave her the opportunity to also speak about her fashion business. This will be dealt with in Chapter 6. However, expensive gifts mark a rupture in the solidarity which *asọ ebì* purports to uphold. From Dike's statement, it shows that the economy that underlies the *asọ ebì* gift is a complex one such that a transaction would have taken place prior to the day of the event. On the day of the event, the idea of the 'gift' only manifests itself as the outcome of a behind-the-scene transaction.

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<sup>592</sup> Interview with Theodora Dike, Ojuelegba, Lagos, December 6, 2010.



Figure 3a.  
Theodora Dike's *aso ebi* gift items.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor, Lagos, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.



Figure 3b.  
Theodora Dike's *aso ebi* gift items.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor, Lagos, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.



Figure 4.  
Theodora Dike with her iron gift item, Lagos, December 6, 2010.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

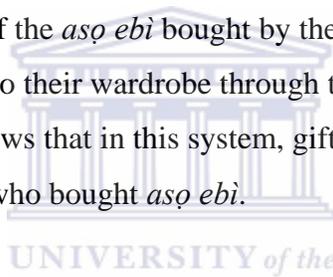


Figure 5.  
Theodora Dike, *Today's Fashion Magazine*, April, 2005.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

'Gift' as a word does not offer any semantic ambiguity when read from its simple dictionary definition as "something given voluntarily without payment in return." Even within its

nanced exegesis one does not discover any situation where this meaning has been supplanted with a contrary view. It is against this apparent straightforwardness that I interrogate the notion of the gift as offered in *asọ ebì* transactions.

There is a growing feeling among Nigerians that *asọ ebì* is gradually dissolving into a system of reciprocal transaction between the guests and the hosts with ‘gifts’ and ‘*asọ ebì*’ as two contingent fragments of such transactions. In other words, there seems to be a mutual correspondence existing between the two parties of guests and hosts. While the guest bought *asọ ebì* from the host, the host compensated the guest with a ‘gift’ in return. However, such correspondence has been attacked by some critics who believe that the gains are weighted towards the hosts who sell the *asọ ebì* at a higher price and use parts of the proceeds to purchase cheap ‘gifts.’ The hosts have been criticized for offering ‘gifts’ that are in no way commensurate with the price of the *asọ ebì* bought by the guests. A counter argument holds that the guests gain by adding to their wardrobe through the *asọ ebì* while at the same time getting a gift. It therefore follows that in this system, gifts are not offered as ‘gifts’ but as a form of recoupment for those who bought *asọ ebì*.



Perhaps in the everyday language use of such words as ‘gifts’ one may need to invent a new term - other than ‘gifts’ – for such transactions. In most events in Nigeria celebrants believe they exhibit forms of altruism by extending a gift gesture to people who wear *asọ ebì*, but on the other hand, the denial of gift to those who did not purchase *asọ ebì* may have found empirical validation in the statement that “reciprocity in itself is a principle of exclusion.”<sup>593</sup> The signifying contradiction here, therefore, is that the quest for gift-giving seems to destabilize the notion of unity for which *asọ ebì* friendship yearns.

The gift as offered in ‘primitive societies’, argues Marcel Mauss, transcends its purported gesture of generosity. Mauss contends that “although gifts are fundamental to friendship connections, they are informed by a sense of obligation and economic self-interests.”<sup>594</sup> In his

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<sup>593</sup> Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption* (London: Allen Lane, 1979), p. 152.

<sup>594</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift, The form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York, WW Norton, 1990), (1954), p. 1, 73.

discovery of the 'logic of gift,' Mauss maintains that expectations of a return (conscious or unconscious) underlie every gift.

In most events in Nigeria celebrants believe they exhibit forms of rational action by extending an ostensible gesture of friendship to people to wear *aso ebi*. However, at the same time, and according to popular criticism, their choices are often guided by deeper predispositions towards enrichment. It means that social life is structured along an underlying logic of 'give-and-take.' Mauss' focus on the principle of reciprocity in the logic of the gift explains exactly what transpires in *aso ebi* and its accompanying gifts. Mauss' definitive stance on gift-giving in traditional societies allowed him to engage a theory of solidarity built around reciprocal obligations. Under this, he pursued the complex nature of gift-giving across cross-cultural forms. He observes that while the gift ritual helps to strengthen social relationships, it guarantees social consanguinity and ensures peace among members of particular groups.<sup>595</sup> The gift, according to Mauss, betrays "all the threads of which the social fabric is composed – religious, legal, moral, economic, aesthetic and morphological."<sup>596</sup> The gift, Peter Verhezen argues, becomes a "total social fact" that embodies social interplay, interdependence and duty as *sine quo non* to amicable existence in 'traditional' societies.<sup>597</sup> As a "total social fact," Verhezen continues, "the gift brings together tribes and members of those tribes, drawing them into a network of relations, neutralizing or clearing up confrontations."<sup>598</sup> While it is established that gifts essentially contribute to solidarity<sup>599</sup> it is also recorded that "the more familiar one is with the recipient of the gift, the more a form of reciprocity is to be expected."<sup>600</sup> Again Mauss believes that, in reality, gifts conform to basic moral dictum that is

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<sup>595</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>597</sup> Peter Verhezen, *Gifts and Bribes: an essay on the limits of reciprocity*, unpublished PhD Thesis, Hoger Instituut Voor Wijsbegeerte Catholic University of Leuven, 2005.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>599</sup> Mary Douglas, "Foreword to Marcel Mauss," *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge 1990), pp. vii–xviii; David Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 40; R. E. L. Roberts, L. N. Richards, and V. L. Bengtson, "Intergenerational solidarity in families: Untangling the ties that bind," *Marriage and Family Review*, Vol. 16, pp 11–46. 1991.

<sup>600</sup> Aafke Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p 124; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," in *The Works of R.W. Emerson: Essays* (London: Grant Richards, 1902 [1844]), pp.302–306; Peter Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: Wiley, 1964); For more on the economy of gifts, see but not limited to, Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift, Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988); Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift, Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

premised on repayment. He refutes any established practicality in voluntary gift exchanges; rather he prefers to see it as mere daydreaming:

Just as (pure) gifts are not freely given, they are also not really disinterested. They already represent for the most part total counter-services, not only made with a view to paying for services or things, but also maintaining a profitable alliance, one that cannot be rejected...It is one that is both mystical and practical, one that ties clans together.<sup>601</sup>

Mauss was no less influenced by Bronislaw Malinowski whose own research reveals the rule of 'give-and-take' or reciprocity as the bedrock of social order in the Melanesian societies he researched. This encouraged Mauss to establish the foundational framework of traditional ceremonial gift exchanges.<sup>602</sup>

Mauss' gift economy has opened a lot of debates around the actual motives of friendship. Yahudi Cohen questions the underlying assumption that friendships are voluntary rather than drafted or imposed. He shows that in many societies friendships are socially constructed and cannot be revoked without severe social and/or ritual penalty.<sup>603</sup> Mauss' remarks are very striking in what is obtainable is *asọ ebì* which, following Mauss, is 'socially constructed' and comes with severe social exclusion penalties.

As observed earlier, Montaigne conceptualizes friendship along a particular paradigm espoused by nineteenth-century romantics and which obviously detaches friendship from social, economic and political incentives. This type of friendship paradigm has, to some extent, persisted in some industrial and post-industrial societies.<sup>604</sup> Contrasting with this view, anthropologists maintain that inasmuch as homologues of friendship exist in nearly all human

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<sup>601</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift, The form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York, WW Norton, 1990), (1954), p. 73.

<sup>602</sup> Malinowski, Bronislaw, "The Principle of Give and Take", in Schifft, Alan D. (ed), *The Logic of the Gift. Towards an Ethics of Generosity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p.15-17, See also Malinowski, Bronislaw, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific. An account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1978). Malinowski's study reveals the significance of ceremonial gift exchange among the Trobriand Islanders. He found that among the Islanders the economy of gift exchange played important roles in strengthening social networks, intensifying interpersonal communication, and enunciating reverence for the transcendental forces of 'sacred' objects.

<sup>603</sup> Yahudi Cohen. "Patterns of friendship," in Yahudi Cohen, (ed.), *Social Structure and Personality: a Casebook* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston 1961), pp. 351-86.

<sup>604</sup> Cucó Giner cited in Fernando Santos-Granero "Of fear and friendship," pp.1-18.

societies, archetypes of friendship differ significantly, thus posing a challenge to any proposition of a marked, all-embracing definition of friendship with a capital F.<sup>605</sup>

Anthropologists have impugned all of Montaigne's five instrumental stances in friendship showing how they fail on the grounds of cross-cultural analyses. Closely linked to these criticisms is Bell and Coleman's warning that Western presumptions of affections, seclusions, and emotional attachments should not be taken as a universal benchmark to measure friendship.<sup>606</sup> Montaigne's position that friendship flourishes among equal persons again is refuted by Yahudi Cohen, Eric Wolf, and Eliot Deutsch who contend that friendships can also be established between people of unequal social, economic, or ethnic backgrounds, provided they are characterized by balanced exchange and exclude any kind of dominance of one party over the other.<sup>607</sup> It is possible to argue against this view and see friendship as that which could sometimes involve a form of social dominance of one party over the other.

Often seen as a product of modernity,<sup>608</sup> friendship in Euro-American societies has been the object of important historical and sociological works.<sup>609</sup> For example, Graham Allan, in a series of books and expositions over a period of about two decades has greatly elucidated and validated positions that favour the sociology of friendship. His findings attack views that support friendship "based primarily upon individual feelings, choice and commitment." Instead he argues that friendship is essentially constituted along, a rather, flexible constructions that are based on contingencies and contexts.<sup>610</sup>

In addition, Allan holds that relationships that are frequently introduced as free-willed, unconventional, easygoing and individualistic still function within the limitations of age, class,

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<sup>605</sup> Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (eds), *The Anthropology of Friendship* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 4.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>607</sup> Yahudi Cohen, "Patterns of friendship"; Eric Wolf, "Kinship, friendship, and patron-client relations," p. 173; Eliot Deutsch, "On creative friendship," in Leroy S. Rouner, (ed), *The Changing Face of Friendship* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University Press, 1994), pp.15-27, p. 20.

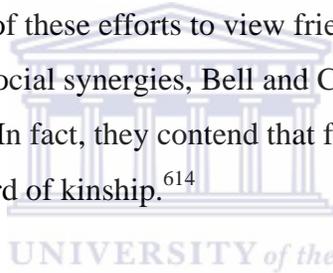
<sup>608</sup> Eliot Deutsch, "On creative friendship;" Guichard *et al*, Friendship, kinship and the bases of social organization, p. 7-17; Gerald Suttles, "Friendship as a social institution," pp. 90-135.

<sup>609</sup> Graham Allan, *Friendship: Developing a Sociological Perspective* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989); See also Graham Allan, *Kinship and friendship in modern Britain* (Oxford: University Press; Gurdin, J.B. 1996).

<sup>610</sup> Graham Allan, *Kinship and Friendship in Modern Britain*, p. 86.

gender, ethnicity and geography - and this questions the idea that friendship is a text read by choice.<sup>611</sup>

In contrast, there is a paucity of major studies on the subject of friendship in postcolonial societies where kinship is made to encompass the entire field of sociality. Here friendship appears as a subsidiary relation. Some authors argue that friendship would barely thrive in societies that are still inhabited by strong kinship networks.<sup>612</sup> In keeping with Montaigne's views, these authors maintain that kinship and friendship embody various kinds of social communication. The authors are opposed to any fixed contrast between friendship and kinship, believing that many societies are structured after imbricate rather than rival kinds of relationship. Supporting this view, Guichard *et al* argue that friendship affinities should not be treated in isolation; instead they should be integrated into kinship discourses as forms of social assimilation.<sup>613</sup> In spite of these efforts to view friendship and kinship as two spheres of divergent yet related areas of social synergies, Bell and Coleman strongly hold that friendship is subordinated under kinship. In fact, they contend that forces of all social relations are enunciated under the watchword of kinship.<sup>614</sup>



Two models of friendship traits have been defined by both Yahudi Cohen and Eric Wolf as inalienable and instrumental friendships respectively. The difference between these two authors lies in the social contexts in which these models of friendship thrive. According to Cohen, inalienable friendships tend to manifest in closed societies, mainly collective lineal groups, where deeply organized kin groups, physical closeness, and domestic life engender notions of strong social togetherness.<sup>615</sup> In contrast, according to Wolf, instrumental friendships flourish in open communities, where people can mobilize ties of both kinship and friendship to widen their spheres of social relations.<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>611</sup> Ibid.

<sup>612</sup> Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (eds), *The Anthropology of Friendship*, p.6.

<sup>613</sup> Guichard, M., P. Heady & W.G. Tadesse, *Friendship, Kinship and the Bases of Social Organization. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Report 2002-2003*, 7-17 (Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2003), p.10.

<sup>614</sup> Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (eds), *The Anthropology of Friendship*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>615</sup> Yahudi Cohen, "Patterns of friendship," See especially pages 354 and 314.

<sup>616</sup> Eric Wolf "Kinship, friendship, and patron-client relations in complex societies," (1977: p.174),

Even though multifarious friendship models exist, friendship may be determined by erratic social structures and circumstances. It is regrettable that many authors have neglected what Gerald Suttles describes as the “situational elements of friendship.”<sup>617</sup> Undoubtedly, greater philosophical<sup>618</sup> and sociological<sup>619</sup> approaches have often accepted friendship as a given, especially when they juxtapose the dynamics of friendship with other social relationships. Their descriptive analyses of models of friendship in many societies suggest likely emotive and expedient obligation expected of friendships but they ignore the social situations that have informed particular forms of friendship.

In the postcolonial context, especially Africa, formations of friendship networks in the city have not been adequately explored by authors because as I mentioned earlier, kinship relations are still thought of as the underlying bedrock of affinities in Africa. Cities in Africa have not yet been thought of as reconstituting a change in African kinship systems. I suggest that in *asọ ebì*, forms of friendship are established beyond the boundaries of one’s own family and immediate friendship groups and even beyond the boundaries of visible human sociality. There emerges a context informed by social situations of ‘imitations.’ It is this imitation that engenders constructed friendships with their peculiar characteristic of importance attached to bodily markers of uniform rather than any real essence of friendship.

*Asọ ebì* models of friendship unveil a stasis between free-will and obligation, individuality and generalization, altruism and malevolence, responsiveness and aloofness. *Asọ ebì* friendship resembles what Eric Wolf describes as ‘instrumental’ friendships.<sup>620</sup> In this manner they are generally entered into as a system of fluid constructions, sometimes as eminently social relations, often governed by artificial sanctions. They are not totally altruistic but fulfil unrealistic societal objectives: acquisition of dress materials, fake solidarity and competitive show-off. Despite their instrumental character, however, uniformed solidarity continues to be an important ingredient in the relation, so much so, that if this trait is absent it must be feigned lest a celebration is thought less important.

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<sup>617</sup> Gerald Suttles, “Friendship as a social institution,” p.100.

<sup>618</sup> A. Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); See also Leroy Rouner, (ed.), *The Changing Face of Friendship* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University Press, 1994).

<sup>619</sup> Graham Allan, *Friendship*; see also Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (eds) , *The Anthropology of Friendship*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>620</sup> Eric Wolf, “Kinship, friendship, and patron-client relations in complex societies,” p.172.

Liz Spencer and Raymond E. Pahl remark that “ties of friendship are inherently social rather than personal and friendship is not a fixed, universal relationship, but takes its shape and form from the specific context in which it develops.”<sup>621</sup> For example, Allan Silver observes that new forms of friendship emerged during the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century instigated by the rationalisations of a pecuniary commercial society. He posits that earlier forms of friendship relied more on a rigid judgement of gratification rather than amicability.<sup>622</sup>

In line with this model *asọ ebì* could have also produced a different kind of friendship that is informed by economic reasons whereby some celebrants actually intend to raise money through conscription of non-existent friends. *Asọ ebì* has proved that the terms ‘family’ and ‘friends’ do not have shared or stable meanings and that any explorations of contemporary social life must take account of the basis of different kinds of solidarity rather than simply rely on categorical labels.

#### ***Asọ ebì*: Dressing political support and the rhetoric of solidarity.**

On 19<sup>th</sup> October 2010, a crisis erupted between the supporters of Alhaji Olasunkanmi Salami, the chairman of Oluyole Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria and some few members of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in the Local Government Area. The trouble started at the motor park when supporters of the PDP, of which the Chairman is also a member, gathered at the motor park for a trip to Abuja to visit the President. Attempting to enter the bus procured for the trip, some few members were denied entry for not wearing the *asọ ebì* uniform prescribed for the trip. Those denied entry into the bus accused the Chairman of giving the cloth only to those within his camp, ostensibly to deny them access to the Abuja trip. Ademola Babalola reports the incident further, “according to a reliable source, all the party supporters were said to have been directed to wear the *ankara asọ ebì* uniform as the ticket for the trip, but many suspected to be opposed to Salami’s leadership style were

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<sup>621</sup> Liz Spencer and Raymond E. Pahl, *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>622</sup> Allan Silver, “Friendship in commercial society: Eighteenth century social theory and modern sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 1990, p. 95: 1474-1504.

allegedly denied the attire.”<sup>623</sup> Some of the people who were denied the *aso ebi* were not only refused entry into the bus, they were also beaten up at the motor park by thugs believed to be loyal to the president and who believed that they were working against the interest of the president’s re-election ambition.

The above scenario aptly captures the nature of politics that has invaded *aso ebi*’s solidarity. The activities of the politicians, according to Pius Adesanmi, could be the point at which *aso ebi* is most vulnerable, most subject to abuse. The politicization of *aso ebi*, from the above case, indicates the manner in which Nigeria’s depraved politicians prey on that fundamental assumption of fraternity to bastardize the culture of *aso ebi* by transforming it into one of the items used to win support in the context of our prebendal political culture.<sup>624</sup>

In another similar event, a meeting convened by the Nobel laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka to resolve the lingering crisis between the Governor of Ogun State, Otunba Gbenga Daniel, and the former president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, witnessed a situation where *aso ebi*’s purported solidarity was only a hoax and a political tool. The supporters of the governor had hired a group of women and students and dressed them in *aso ebi* for the sole purpose of disrupting the meeting. This is because they had perceived the conveners of the meeting as anti-Governor elements. The women were purportedly lured into this with a promise of a handsome reward in cash. The *aso ebi* was therefore bought and sewn many days before the meeting and kept while attempts were being made to gather a considerable number of women to wear it.<sup>625</sup> When a good number of women were gathered they were given the *aso ebi* with specific instruction to disrupt the meeting.<sup>626</sup>

The meeting which took place at the Henry Townsend Hall of St. Peter’s Cathedral, Ake, Abeokuta, Ogun State on 18 December 2010 was well attended by important personalities in Nigeria. Debo Adesola says that Soyinka attempted to berate all parties involved in the crisis

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<sup>623</sup> Ademola Babalola, “Pandemonium as thugs sack Ibadan council over Jonathan’s *aso ebi*,” *Nigerian Compass*, Wednesday, October 20, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>624</sup> Pius Adesanmi, “*Aso ebi* on My Mind (Part One),” Keynote lecture delivered at the African Textiles Exhibition of Carleton University’s Arts Gallery, February 16, 2011.

<sup>625</sup> Interview with Debo Adesola, Lagos, March 5, 2011.

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*

of the State. However, when Soyinka turned attention to the Governor's party, these groups of women and students numbering more than 200 in *asọ ebì* became unruly and rancorous. They were uncontrollable and caused chaos which brought the event to an abrupt end.

To demonstrate the ambivalence of solidarity implicit in *asọ ebì*, Adesola says that hours after the meeting, the women were seen a small distance from the venue in an unruly encounter with the Governor's party. They held the governor's kingpin hostage for not paying them the exact amount promised to them for wearing *asọ ebì*. The process was marred by a series of violent clashes that left a number of the women heavily battered.<sup>627</sup>

This is a remarkable incident that serves to illustrate the nature of solidarity that attends *asọ ebì* not just in the political arena, but in other aspects of Nigerian existence. It suggests that there is an increasing trend of dressing political support in *asọ ebì*. To outsiders, the women and students in *asọ ebì* appeared as genuine supporters of the governor while to the likes of Adesola, the *asọ ebì* had become a necessary tool needed to woo support for a governor whose influence might have dwindled among the people. Again the implication is that the crowd would not have made such a powerful impression if they had appeared in their ordinary different dresses. I am suggesting that there is an assumption that *asọ ebì* has a driving force, an intimidating impact conveyed through its colourful uniformity, an imposing presence that frightens the opposition. It could have been these hidden qualities that have contributed to its growing deployment by political groups, and others, in Nigeria.

It seems that any group, be it political or social, which does not adopt *asọ ebì* during its functions is seen as a deviation from the norm. To illustrate this, before the official commissioning of the newly constructed electricity project in Olorunsogo Abule-eko area of Lagos State by the governor, some of the local inhabitants had engaged the local organizing committee in a dispute over their decision to sew *asọ ebì* only for a limited number of individuals seen as their cohorts. Threatening to boycott and thwart the impending commissioning by the governor, these inhabitants chanted a slogan: *Ti o baa ni asọ ebì, o gbodo wa* meaning 'no *asọ ebì*, no attendance'. The chairman of Ikorodu Local Government

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<sup>627</sup> Ibid.

went ahead and purchased *Ankara* materials and made *asọ ebì* which he distributed to these people a few days before the arrival of the governor. It was observed that two sets of *asọ ebì* uniforms were visibly present during the commissioning.<sup>628</sup> Femi Awusa, a member of the organizing committee told me that he never knew that *asọ ebì* could become such a big issue in this event.<sup>629</sup>

Observing the above scenario, perhaps one can interrogate the *asọ ebì* construction of solidarity in terms of Herbert Blumer's notions of social movements and their adoption of *esprit de corps* – feelings of devotion and enthusiasm for a group that is shared by its members. In Blumer's definition, *esprit de corps* might be conceived as the coordination of feelings on behalf of a group or movement.<sup>630</sup> In itself, it is the understanding which people have of belonging together and of being recognized with one another in a mutual endeavour. In developing feelings of intimacy and closeness, people have the sense of sharing a common experience and of forming a select group.<sup>631</sup>

I would argue, considering the above PDP scenario, that in the case of *asọ ebì* this intimacy is only temporary and short-lived as long as the uniform is still worn on the bodies of members and at the venue of the event. In other words, it is assumed that there is a false sense of intimacy that inhabits members, one that is predicated upon a contingent need to expand fake friendship, albeit temporarily for that occasion. Blumer, however, insists that *esprit de corps* serves to reinforce the new conception of collectivity that the individual has formed as a result of the movement and of his participation in it.<sup>632</sup> According to Blumer, "*esprit de corps* is important to the social movements in three different ways. First, it creates the in-group-out-group relation. Second, it forms an informal fellowship which develops sympathy and solidarity. Third, mass meetings, rallies, parades, demonstrations, and ceremonies give to an individual participant an experience of being part of something big and important."<sup>633</sup> One can

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<sup>628</sup> Interview with Femi Awusa, member of organizing committee, Electricity project commissioning Ikorodu, Lagos, March 6, 2011.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

<sup>630</sup> Herbert Blumer, "Collective Behaviour," in A.M.Lee (ed), *Principles of Sociology* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1953), p. 205.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid, p. 205.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid, p. 205.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

as well, in line with Blumer, say that *asọ ebi*'s *esprit de corps* creates the "in-group-out-group relation," as long as the "in-groups" have reached a compromise to don the uniform and not based on any other criterion. However, one can still argue that *asọ ebi*'s *esprit de corps* is not totally constructed, rather there are constant and systematic re-modifications that make it difficult to grasp the 'real' essence of comradeship professed by the friends.

That *asọ ebi*'s gift economy and *esprit de corps* is not totally constructed might recall Levi-Strauss criticisms of Maus' 'phenomenological' approach to gift giving. This approach makes a complete break with native experience and the native theory of that experience. It suggests that it is the exchange as a constructed object which "constitutes the primary phenomenon, and not the individual operations into which social life breaks down."<sup>634</sup> Pierre Bourdieu equally argues that 'phenomenological' analysis and objectivist analysis bring to light two antagonistic principles of gift exchange: the gift as experience, or, meant to be experienced, and the gift as seen from outside.<sup>635</sup> Bourdieu argues that the temporal structure of gift exchange, which objectivism ignores, ensures a deeper understanding of the truths that define the gift. Bourdieu's thesis attempts to distinguish between the act of gift-giving, swapping and lending. This he does by suggesting that the "operation of gift exchange presupposes (individual and collective) mis-recognition of the reality of the objective 'mechanism' of the exchange, a reality which an immediate response brutally exposes."<sup>636</sup>

Bourdieu's theory of mis-recognition of the gift as a symbolic capital might have argued against my *asọ ebi* rules and techniques of regulating the social body. Bourdieu calls for urgent recognition of the fact that brutally materialist reduction is liable to make one forget the advantage that lies in abiding by the rules of gift.<sup>637</sup> He goes on to argue that perfect conformity to the rules of gift brings both primary and secondary benefits. These include the prestige and respect which almost invariably reward an action apparently motivated by nothing other than pure, disinterested respect for the rule of gift.<sup>638</sup> It seems that there is a

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<sup>634</sup> Cited in Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.5.

<sup>635</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.5.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

disinterested respect for the rule of conformity in *asọ ebi* played out through buying *asọ ebi* and receiving a gift.

However, especially important are Blumer's notions on *esprit de corps*, morale and ideology. They all emphasize that a friendship network is not only constituted of its structures or opportunities but that the internal mechanisms are the clues that bind a group together. Such internal mechanisms can be recalled when *esprit de corps* is, for example, invoked in individuals dressed in military uniforms. In terms of *asọ ebi* uniforms, sometimes there seems to be no prior internal mechanism binding friends together as some 'friends' are being conscripted for the purpose of wearing the uniform for a particular event. Some friends do not like *asọ ebi* as a form of solidarity but sometimes are compelled by fear of social exclusion to buy it and participate in it. To outsiders (those not wearing *asọ ebi*) therefore, the *esprit de corps* seems to be visibly alive and existing in a 'real' sense but to insiders (those wearing *asọ ebi*) it is only a fulfillment of a call to temporary social duty. *Esprit de corps* calls for the studies of how emotions are aroused in the friendship networks. Typical methods for researchers to do this, according to Fernando Santos-Granero, should be in excursions, parties, cultural happenings, services, emotional speeches.<sup>639</sup>

David Snow *et al* identify two main attributes of solidarity embodied in *esprit de corps*: a corpus of associates that can be classified as a collectivity and a spirit that is enmeshed in feelings of identification with that group. They remark that solidarity requires the "identification of" and "identification with": the identification of a collective entity and participant's identification with a body of affiliated actors.<sup>640</sup>

Placed alongside people's use of *asọ ebi* as a form of solidarity, it shows that solidarity is only perceived as "identification of" membership through uniform and that the second concept of the individual's "identification with" the group through feelings of comradeship is not always manifest. According to David Snow *et al*, this "identification with" relates to "an

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<sup>639</sup> Fernando Santos-Granero "Of fear and friendship: Amazonian sociality beyond kinship and affinity," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* Royal Anthropological Institute 2007, pp.1-18.

<sup>640</sup> David A. Snow, Sarah Anne Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), p. 80.

understanding of solidarity as a collective consciousness which gives rise to social cohesion and depends upon an awareness of and identification with a collectivity.”<sup>641</sup> Emile Durkheim refers to a collective consciousness – a set of “collective perceptions” – that precedes and transcends the individual and which drives humans to behave in certain ways.<sup>642</sup> This definition seems to clarify the fact that by transcending the individual, collective consciousness institutes regimented comportment, grants reciprocity, and enables individuals to relate in terms of shared morals and goals and not through matters around the physical body as seen in *asọ ebì*. However, a related line of scholarship that favours *asọ ebì* suggests that “because the physical body is the vehicle for experiencing reality, it is an essential component of personal and social identities.”<sup>643</sup>

However since collectivities do not literally have a distinct, homogenous, bodily form, collective identity depends upon the ‘identification of’ a body associated with a group.<sup>644</sup> For some groups the ‘identification of’ a body of players requires projection of a figure of a concrete physical entity.<sup>645</sup> Military organizations, for example, convey such a notion by wearing uniforms and marching in formation as a homogenous mass. Other groups, such as social movements, use other methods to mark membership boundaries, relying on decals, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and other “tie signs.”<sup>646</sup>

## Conclusion.

The popularity and contested meanings of *asọ ebì* uniforms in Nigeria both confirm and qualify Phyllis Martin’s powerful statement that “clothing matters and dress is political.”<sup>647</sup> *Asọ ebì* uniforms are tangible but malleable archives of social reality that enable their wearers to imagine, if not create, new identities and realities. They are indeed “social skins”<sup>648</sup> that influence how members interact with themselves. Solidarity and oneness are slogans that

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<sup>641</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>642</sup> Emile Durkheim cited in Peter Verhezen, *Gifts and Bribes*, p. 25.

<sup>643</sup> Erving Goffman *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Prentice-Hall, 1963; see also Mary Douglas, (ed), *Rules and Meanings: The Anthropology of Everyday Knowledge* (Harmondsworth : Penguin 1973).

<sup>644</sup> David A. Snow, Sarah Anne Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi *The Blackwell Companion*, p. 87.

<sup>645</sup> Ibid.

<sup>646</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma* pp. 188-237.

<sup>647</sup> Phyllis Martins, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 165.

<sup>648</sup> Terence Turner, “The social skin,” in Catherine B Burroughs, Jeffrey David Ehrenreich, (eds.), *Reading the Social Body* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993) pp. 15–39.

people who wear *asọ ebì* usually hold at the back of their minds. This chapter might have suggested that solidarity and oneness may be something close to a utopia if seen in the manner in which they are deployed by groups who wear *asọ ebì*. Again the meanings of friendship are also questioned and it could be understood at least that *asọ ebì* friendship is constructed flexibly on the shallow surfaces of uniformed dresses. This suggests, in line with Jennifer Craik, that “the enforcement of appropriate rules and manner of conduct codified in uniforms is more important than the elements of uniforms themselves.”<sup>649</sup> In *asọ ebì*, outside this construction, friendship is presented as something that is exclusionary.

This chapter has tried to suggest that gifts as they are offered in *asọ ebì* are also mute gestures of reciprocal transactions. It could be seen that gifts and *asọ ebì* are two aspects of an inevitable responsibility that confronts particular people who plan for social events in Nigeria. The one goes with the other, such that any failure to adorn oneself in *asọ ebì* attracts no gifts. This chapter may have suggested that commodification has become the bane of late capitalist sociality, and it seems *asọ ebì* has given in to this form of existence. It suggests that life could be a commodity traded on a shallow surface of material adornment. Perhaps this idea might, in a remote sense, remind us of what the French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre calls “a false world”<sup>650</sup> in his nihilistic articulation of the effects of capitalism’s visibility upon humankind. If this ‘false world’ is worth interrogating then this chapter has tried to pose a critical question. Here, the body is presented as a political entity upon which varying signs of sartorial contests are played out through the phenomenon of *asọ ebì*.

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<sup>649</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed, From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), p.7.

<sup>650</sup> Henri Lefebvre, cited in Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (Routledge: London and New York, 2000), p.84.

## PART TWO: THE VISUAL ECONOMY OF *ASO EBI*

### Chapter 5.

#### OF HISTORY AND POLITICAL ENCOUNTERS IN LAGOS PHOTOGRAPHY: 1880-2000.

##### Introduction.

The late 1980s marked a shift in the history of photography in Nigeria. There was an increasing interest by photographers in the dressed body. Some of the factors responsible for this growing interest were the spread of new, cheaper photographic technologies. Again it seems that the ubiquity of cheaper textile materials, as suggested by previous chapters, afforded more dressed bodies the opportunity to be seen and snapped. Other factors include new forms of economic capital which were beginning to reshape the contours of city life in very many ways.

This period marked the emergence of what Tam Fiofori calls “the kpa kpa kpa brigade” in Lagos.<sup>651</sup> This ‘brigade’ constituted the disinherited young schools leavers who embraced street photography as a means of survival. Driven by an urgent need to survive the economic fluctuations of the late 1980s, these young school leavers migrated to Lagos. For some of them, photography became a means of survival. With little or no money to set up studios in Lagos, they armed themselves with the disposable cameras made popular by Kodak and Fuji in the mid 1980s and hit the streets.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the city was becoming a meeting place for people who are increasingly interested in public visibility. The dressed body became a critical site of attraction. In weddings, birthday parties, funerary events, among others, *aso ebi* defined the increasing taste around glamour. It also affected Lagosians’ “habit of seeing and judging the

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<sup>651</sup> Interview with Tam Fiofori, Lagos, December 10, 2009.

aesthetics”<sup>652</sup> of sartorial presentation. These social spaces, however, promised some sort of livelihood for the young photographers.

While this chapter attempts to open the second segment of this thesis which is centered on the intersections of photography, fashion and *aso ebi* in urban Lagos, this will not be possible without addressing the history of photography in Lagos. This history forms the core of this chapter. The first segment of this chapter addresses a history of photography in colonial Lagos while the second segment leads into the postcolonial period. This is the period when an investigation into other forms of ‘photographies’<sup>653</sup> will enable an appreciation of how *aso ebi* has evolved into its present visual regime. This strategy allows me to engage with photography’s histories in Lagos as interwoven elements of colonial and postcolonial visual, socio-economic and political encounters.

It could be said that many histories of photography in Nigeria abound, without any acceptable universal verdict on the chronological accuracy and conclusiveness of such histories. In other words, what we have are cluttered, disjointed histories of photography in Nigeria with each making a singular claim in terms of temporalities. In this chapter, I attempt a history of photography in Nigeria not in the manner of previous histories but in the style of retrieving history from remote possibilities. It is quite pitiable that the chequered history of photography in Nigeria is in itself a victim of the institutional dysfunctionalities which have their origin in the political dilemmas of Nigeria, a situation which has engendered the erosion of institutions that might have housed the potential visual archives. The chapters attempts to contribute to an already scarce literature in the field of history of photography in Lagos. It also attempts to open up debates around the meanings of various types of photographs in the social and political economy of Nigeria since colonialism.

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<sup>652</sup> George Dikie and R.J. Sclafani (eds), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1977), p.607.

<sup>653</sup> Nonetheless, part of the aims of this chapter is to argue for what have been called ‘photographies’ in certain visual scholarship. See, for example, John Tagg, *Burdens of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Rosalind Morris, *Photographies East: the camera and its histories in East and Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry* ( New Technologies/New Cultures Series) (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003).

### **Photography in Colonial Lagos.**

Before the British annexation of Lagos in 1861, a burgeoning cultural center had begun to develop with the influx into Lagos of numerous Christian missionary groups, Sierra Leonean immigrants (or Saro), self-emancipated Africans from Brazil (Agudas or Assimilados, as they were known), Egbas from Abeokuta, Oyos, Ijebus from the Yoruba hinterland, Akans from the Gold Coast, and European (English, German, Austrian and Italian) merchants of different trading missions. Yorubas traveled back and forth between home and in the hinterland (Ake, Ibadan, Ilorin, Oyo, Ilesha, Ondo, and Ekiti), and the coast. Families like the Assumpcaos, who were originally from Ikeja, returned from Brazil and settled in Ake, and changed their name to Alakija.<sup>654</sup> Shortly after 1861, more ethnic groups – Efiks, Ibibios, Igbos, Nupe, Hausa – arrived from eastern and northern Nigeria, bringing with them diverse social, cultural, and artistic values. The presence of this diverse multiethnic, multicultural population gave cosmopolitan Lagos a vibrancy and independence at odds with the picture of passive subjugation we regularly encounter in colonial literature. Such independence sometimes reverses the colonial trope in certain local overtures. For example, Emmanuel Ayandele reveals that Governor Freeman complained in a report to the Colonial Office in 1863 about the hostility of the Lagosian elite, whose motto was “Africa for the Africans,” and who wanted the British “either swept from the coast or subjected to the dominion of the blacks.”<sup>655</sup> Despite the fact that such expressions became overt insinuations among the locals, it receives little mention in most well-known colonial texts.

In this mixture of Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Portuguese, and English speakers, predominantly Orisha-worshippers, Christians, and Muslims, photography thrived. The first professional studios opened in Lagos as early as 1880 run by Sierra Leoneans, Liberians, or “Brazilians” (freed slaves or their descendants). Amongst them were H.S. Freeman, Emmanuel Rockson, Alfred Mamattah, G. S. A. da Costa, N. Walwin Holm, among others.<sup>656</sup> N. Walwin Holm, who was born in 1865 and had an English grandfather, started his photographic business in

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<sup>654</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, “The Concept of Modernity in Contemporary African Art,” in Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, Ali Mazrui (eds.), *The African Diasporas: African Origins and New World identities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 34.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>656</sup> Erica Nimis, Nigeria: The photographic Giant, on [www.africultures.com/anglais/articles\\_anglais/39nimis.htm](http://www.africultures.com/anglais/articles_anglais/39nimis.htm) visited on September 20, 2008.

Accra, Ghana in 1882 but moved to Lagos in 1892 where he established a photography studio.<sup>657</sup> He was a great beneficiary of the then colonial administrators. For example, in 1891 he accompanied the then acting Governor of Lagos Colony, George C. Denton, during the expedition to annex Ado, a nearby suburb, to Lagos. Among many other jobs, he photographed the raising of the British flag in parts of Southwestern Nigeria in the late nineteenth century.<sup>658</sup> He enrolled in the membership of the Royal Photographic Society in 1897 and in the same year photographed chiefs during the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. He was a recipient of many prizes at the Sekondi Agricultural Show in 1907. In 1910, Holm travelled to England for health reasons and eventually studied Law there and was called to the Bar in 1917. He returned to Lagos and practiced as a barrister. His son, J.A.C. Holm, who was born in 1888 in Accra and grew up in Lagos, joined the family photography business in 1906.

George S. A. da Costa, whose Portuguese name indicates that he came from a cosmopolitan background, was born in Lagos in 1853 and educated at the C.M.S. Training Institution. From 1877 onward he managed the well-known C.M.S. bookstore in Lagos until, in 1895, he became a professional photographer.<sup>659</sup> In 1920, da Costa's studio was at Oke Popo, 18 Ricca Street, Lagos.<sup>660</sup> Another interesting photographer of this period was Hezekiah Andrew Shanu (1858-1905). Shanu, a Yoruba man was born in Otta, near Lagos but later migrated to the Congo during the reign of King Leopold II.<sup>661</sup> Like da Costa, Shanu attended the C.M.S. Grammar School and Training Institution for Native Teachers in Lagos.<sup>662</sup> When Shanu migrated to the Congo in 1884 he became very useful to the civilizing mission of King Leopold's *Force Publique*.<sup>663</sup> He later defected into the opposition who fought against the

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<sup>657</sup> Christaud Geary, *In and out of focus: images from central Africa, 1885-1960* (Washington: National Museum of African Art and Smithsonian Institution, 2002), p. 103.

<sup>658</sup> David Killingray and Andrew Roberts, "An outline history of photography in Africa to ca. 1940," *History of Africa*, Vol. 16 (1989), p.201.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid*, p.103.

<sup>660</sup> Macmillan Allister (ed), *The red book of West Africa: historical and descriptive, commercial and industrial facts, figures, and resources* (London: W.H. and L. Collingridge, 1920).

<sup>661</sup> At about the 1880s, King Leopold II formed the International Association of the Congo to safeguard his interests in Central Africa. He enlisted the help of many educated Africans especially those from the British protectorates. Many of these men in addition to providing King Leopold with expertise in many areas developed interest in photography while also populating the non-officer ranks in the *Force Publique*. Hezekiah Shanu was among those who were enlisted from Nigeria into the *Force Publique*. See Christaud Geary, *In and out of focus* p. 104.

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid*, p.104.

<sup>663</sup> Geary notes that upon his arrival in Boma in 1884, Shanu assisted the Belgians to recruit soldiers for the *Force Publique* from the English-speaking realms, a job which he combined with an administrative job of a clerk and translator for the governor. Having learned the photographic skill from the C.M.S (which trained and employed African photographers in Lagos), he exhibited immense devotion to photography in the Belgian Congo. After nine years, he founded a series of

atrocious reign of King Leopold II. His oppositional involvements were later uncovered and he was eventually frustrated by King Leopold's government, forcing him to commit suicide in 1905. Again, in 1907, Carrie Lumpkin, daughter of Dr. Charles Lumpkin, set up a photography studio in Lagos.<sup>664</sup>

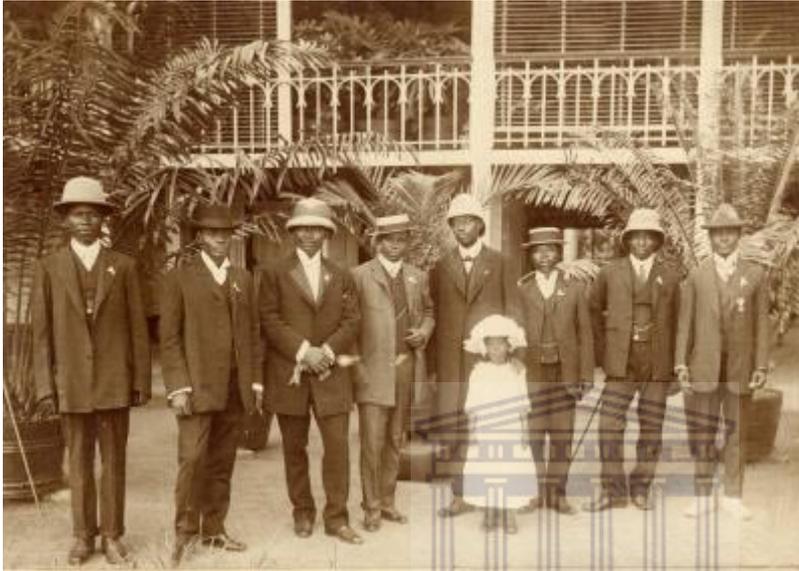


Figure 1. Hezerkia Shanu, Group of African people in western clothing (1912-1913). (Courtesy of the Bodleian library, University of Oxford).

Some of Shanu's photographs depict evidence of colonial activities while some others evidence the type of mimicry that came with colonial domination. For example, in Figure 1 there is evidence of apparent assimilation of European clothing tradition by this group of

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businesses by which time he had risen to the rank of an assistant district commissioner. One of his businesses – a small store trading in common items – was a relatively fair contender with other stores by the European merchants on both sides of the Congo River. His conglomerate later expanded to include a tailor's shop, laundry, restaurant and two small hotels in Boma and Matadi. Combining a general store with photography as a sideline was common for many of the first photographers of all origins along the African coast. In 1896, Samuel Verner, then a missionary from the American Presbyterian Congo Mission, encountered Shanu in Boma and described him, in his memoirs, as "an African, who is a local celebrity for his wealth, education and intelligence – a Mr. Shanu, who came from a British colony as a clerk in the employ of the earlier governor, and is now a merchant owning considerable property and enjoying a wide reputation." Some of Shanu's studio self portraits bore testament to the above description as he was bedecked in accessories and props indicative of Victorian and aristocratic wealth. Shanu's acquaintanceship with various Belgians, in addition to his wealth, established him as one of a few influential Africans on the shores of the Belgian Congo in those early periods. In 1906, he contacted Edmund Morel, who spearheaded the anti-Leopold campaign, to obtain some of Morel's writings. He subsequently became active in the Congo Reform Movement, providing critical information about labour abuses in the Congo. His life ended in tragedy when his association with Morel was revealed and the administration of the Congo Free State prohibited all government employees from doing business with him. Bankruptcy, insolvency and financial ruin left him a shattered man and he committed suicide in 1905. See Christaud Geary, *In and out of focus: images from central Africa, 1885-1960* (Washington: National Museum of African Art and Smithsonian Institution, 2002).p. 105.

<sup>664</sup> Judith Byfield, "Dress and politics in Post-World II Abeokuta (Western Nigeria)," Jean Allman (ed), *Fashioning Africa: power and the politics of dress* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 14.

Africans. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha has identified mimicry “as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge.”<sup>665</sup> In this view mimicry is “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite.”<sup>666</sup> In this photograph these Africans looked almost the same as white men, but not quite the same. It is important to note that the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.<sup>667</sup> Although Bhabha’s focus was on text, his analysis could be central to an understanding of this colonial photograph. In this photo, Shanu presents a picture at the intersection of a double vision of mimicry, presenting no ‘authentic’ vision of Africa, nor of colonialism, but a glimpse of the interaction between indigenous peoples and colonialism. Their dressing is typical of the dress of white colonial masters during the era of colonialism in Nigeria and other colonies. These Africans through their suits, hats, walking sticks and pose connected colonial power, photography and the ‘White’ man’s style of carriage into an attitude quite in contrast to many photographic depictions of Africans in 1912. Even as late as the 1930s and 1940s, most colonial ethnographic photographs of Africans by Europeans never showed Africans in the manner in which Shanu portrayed them in this photo. However, the appearance of these men in suits conjures notions of sartorial uniformity quite reminiscent of the uniformity discussed in previous chapters. The difference is that *asọ ebi* uniformity embodies exuberant diversity: while those dressed in *asọ ebi* have differing styles of tailoring and headdresses, the men in this photograph dress exactly the same as each other.

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<sup>665</sup> Cited in Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Photography at the heart of darkness: Herbert Lang’s Congo photographs (1909-15)” in Tim Barringer and Tom Hynn (eds.), *Colonialism and the Other: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.178.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid, p.178

<sup>667</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse “ in Annette Michelson et al (eds), *October: The First Decade* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

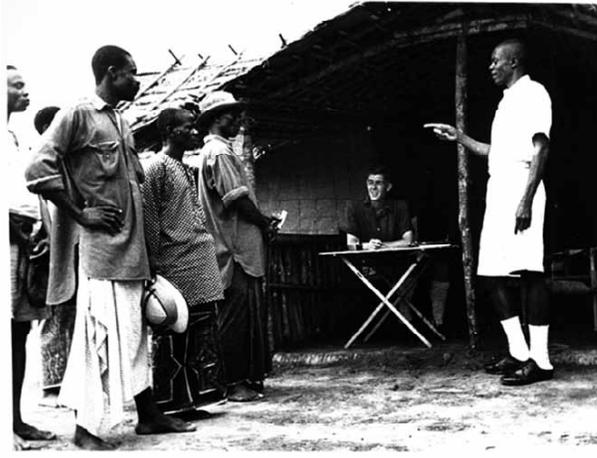


Figure 2. Hezekiah Shanu, A colonial assistant district officer hearing complaints (1912-13). (Courtesy of the Bodleian library, University of Oxford).

Perhaps Shanu might be among the few photographers during the colonial period in Nigeria who captured the realities of unrestricted, raw observation, reminiscent of colonial power relations and administration. For example, Figure 2 could be interpreted as a product of interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. The photograph tells us about colonial administration and how disputes were settled. The white district officer presides over a dispute brought by the locals before him. The location of the case suggests that it could have been a make-shift tent used during administrative tours. The headman, who dresses in white shirt and shorts, with white socks to match, mediates between the white district officer and the locals.

This process of colonial mediation was the subject of another layer of mimicry in Nigeria in the 1980s through a television drama series known as *Ichoku*<sup>668</sup> which was rendered in the Igbo language. The drama invokes colonial administration in dress, structure, and characterization and aims to highlight the atrocious role of the locally trained translators, mediators or court clerks during the colonial period in Nigeria. In *Ichoku*, the court clerk known as Williams (an Igbo trained translator) often translated in court cases, the white district officer's English to the locals who lacked knowledge of the English language. The high point of court clerk William's job – exemplified in its most witty and parodying manifestation – reveals a deliberate misinterpretation, on his part, that portends ominous

<sup>668</sup> *Ichoku*, Video (Lagos: Nigerian Television Authority, 1986).

catastrophe to the local population. Any English language word or sentence by the White district officer difficult for Williams to translate into Igbo to the intended subject is appropriated for his personal aggrandizement. For example, in one of the cases, the white man indicted the accused and referred to him as being cantankerous. Williams, ignorant of the right way to convey the meaning of cantankerous, deployed the onomatopoeic effect of the Igbo word 'Nkanka cross' (which means 'useless cross' in English language) to interpret it. In other words, in Igbo, the English word, cantankerous, according to Williams, translates as useless cross. He, however, refers to a local catechist present in the court who wore a cross and asked him that the district officer has ordered him (the catechist) to throw away the 'cross'. This is William's translation of cantankerous. Again in another case where the district officer had advised one of the Chiefs in a proverb that 'a stitch in time saves nine', court clerk Williams, also lacking the knowledge of such proverbial translation, told the accused that the White man said he should bring a He-goat to his house (court clerk William's house) at night so that he can take it to the Whiteman.

Shanu's photographs are reminiscent of these dramatizations and one could see that from the naive posture of the locals there could not have been any careful framing in the photograph as could be seen in some colonial ethnographic photographs. In Figure 2, the dress of the locals showed that by 1912 foreign clothing had become common in Nigeria. The locals standing in front of the assistant district officer wore wrappers made of imported textile materials and hats brought by the colonial masters. They are all barefoot except the interpreter who wore shoes. While many writers have worried over the tendency of the colonial photographic archive "to seal off more ambiguous or alternative readings of older images,"<sup>669</sup> one is apt to still offer a range of suggestions regarding the use of dress in colonial period. Many have not recognized the wider political innuendos implicated in the discourse of colonialism and dress. While Patricia Hayes suggests that the history of photography 'has no unity' and that "photography should not be studied in isolation"<sup>670</sup> one may need to ascertain the reason why some colonial ethnographic photography depicted certain groups of Africans as still naked even as at the

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<sup>669</sup> Patricia Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A short history of South African photography," in *Kronos*, vol. 33 2007, p. 143.

<sup>670</sup> Patricia Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A short history of South African photography," in *Kronos*, vol. 33 2007, p. 141.

1912 when Shanu took some of these photos. The political conflicts generated through colonial ethnographic photography may unveil reasons for the sanctioning of certain kinds of dress by the colonial administrators, ethnographers and Christian missionaries, each pursuing a different single-minded agenda. If the ethnographer wished to capture the image of the villager in native dress, it could be for a reason different from the ones given by the colonial administration for imposing western dress codes. If the Western tourist decided to take the photo of the local in a traditional robe contrary to the wish of the native to appear in Western dress, then one can conclude that archival photographic study should be inserted into the dialectic of diverse institutional fields and interpretation. It highlights the political economy of archival visual representation in a broader context which can hint to what Jeremy Sylvester et al call the “colonial connotation of photography and the photographic connotation of colonialism,”<sup>671</sup> through which I now engage in the objective connotations of Shanu’s colonial photographs.

In Figure 3 it is possible to facilitate a radical reframing of the contexts within which the history of colonial ethnographic photography has been articulated. In the first instance, the photograph, I suggest, represents Nigeria as a changing political environment in which the norms of British Administrative law, governance and progress were being introduced. Second, the presence of the Chiefs in Western attire underscores the symbiotic and synergetic interaction between local and Western values. Third, the photograph recoups into analysis the existing social and cultural influences that shaped photography outside the one-sided norms of colonial ethnographic visibility. Framed in this critical manner, a theoretical reconstruction of photography’s history in Nigeria subverts the vision of rustic nativity and semi-nude local inhabitants – seen in, for example, G. I. Jones’ 1930s photos (as will be discussed subsequently) – and shifts the focus of interpretation to the socio-political concerns, issues and objectives of the time. The shifts enable us to recognize the specific concerns of localized visibility (this time Shanu’s) and sites of engagement of colonized visibility (this time G. I. Jones, as will be shown subsequently). A juxtaposition of this dual visual concern might suggest that Shanu must have given agency to the black subject. If, as suggested by Fredrick

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<sup>671</sup> Jeremy Sylvester, Patricia Hayes and Wolfram Hartmann, “This ideal conquest: photography and colonialism in Namibia,” Hartmann et al (eds.), *The Colonizing Camera* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1998), p. 10.

Douglass, Negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hand of white photographers during the nineteenth century,<sup>672</sup> Shanu, as a ‘Negro’ must have offered his fellow ‘Negroes’ this subjectivity. Michael Stevenson’s observation that in the African continent, it was only in West Africa that black photographers were active from the nineteenth century<sup>673</sup> might have justified the reason why photographers like Shanu had the opportunity to “overcome the barriers of colour and class.”<sup>674</sup>

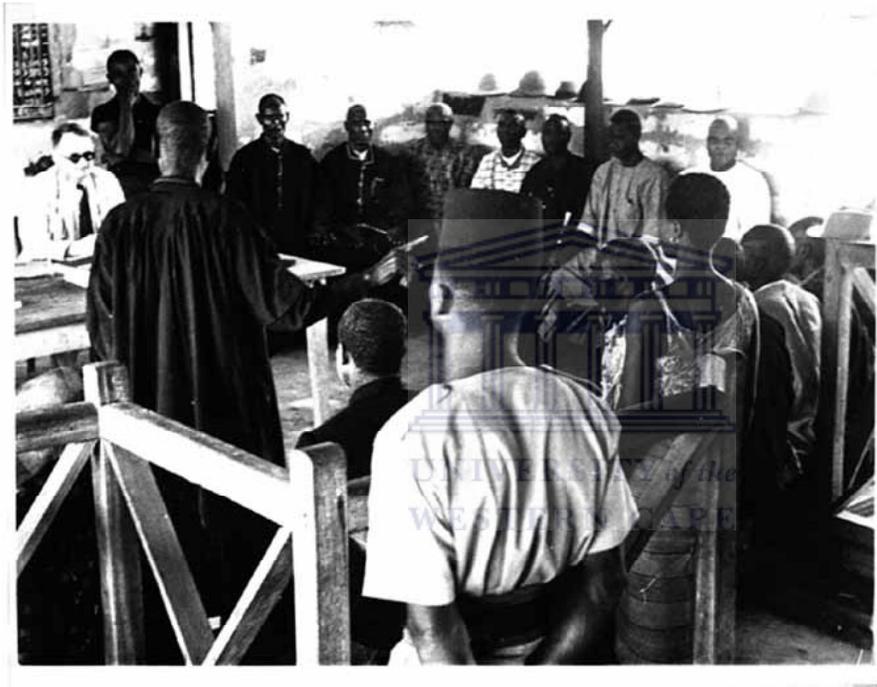


Figure 3. Hezekiah Shanu, Chiefs sitting in court with a district officer (1912-13) (Courtesy of the Bodleian library, University of Oxford).

One of the most important early innovations in photography was the development of the gelatine dry-plate negative in the late 1870s. Gelatine was substituted for collodion on the glass negative. The gelatine was sensitive enough for faster exposure times and did not have to be processed immediately after exposure. Negative plates could now be purchased already sensitized and then stored in light-tight boxes until needed. Cameras were becoming smaller and more portable, and by 1889 the first snapshot cameras were available to the general

<sup>672</sup> Fredrick Douglass cited in Michael Stevenson, p.73.

<sup>673</sup> Michael Stevenson, *Surviving the Lens: Photographic studies of South and East African people, 1870-1920* (Fernwood Press in association with Michael Stevenson and Michael Graham-Stewart, 2001), p.73.

<sup>674</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

public. In Lagos the increasing population was already resulting in the influx of more of these portable cameras and a high demand for photography. According to the 1881 census Lagos had a population of 37, 000: Brazilians 3,221; Sierra Leonans 1,533; Europeans 111, and the rest were made up of the natives and others. Of all the population, thirty and half percent were engaged in commerce as merchants, traders, agents, clerks, and shopmen; 5,173 were tradesmen, mechanics, manufacturers and artisans; 1,414 were farmers and agricultural labourers. Among this population also a total of 3,195 were classified as civil servants, professionals and students. This could constitute the core of the literate public on whose support the photography industry depended for their business.<sup>675</sup> In 1871 only nine and half percent of the population were in commerce, five percent in agriculture. In 1881 the percentage of agricultural workers dropped to three and half while that of commercial workers jumped to thirty and half percent. Lagos was therefore, predominantly a commercial city. Most of the population were defined as ‘animist’ in 1868, 14,797 as opposed to 8,422 Muslims and 3,970 Christians.

In the 1880s there were four distinct groups in Lagos – the Europeans, the educated Africans (Saros), the Brazilians and the indigenes. The town was physically divided into four quarters corresponding to these groups. The Europeans lived on the Marina, the Saros mainly west of Europeans in an area called Olowogbowo, the Brazilians behind the Europeans – the quarters was known as Portuguese Town or Popo Aguda or Popo Maro – and the indigenes on the rest of the Island, behind the three. Given that the top social class of Lagos in the 1880s was dominated by the Europeans – merchants, missionaries and civil servants – it could be inferred that the living proximity of the Saros and the Brazilians to the Europeans suggests that they tried to gain admission into this stratum. For, as P.D. Cole observes, “the Saros were culturally closer to the Europeans than to either of the two other groups, and the criteria for membership into the European class were education and wealth. In this sense the educated elite, both Black and White could be considered as members of the same social group.”<sup>676</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the Saros and the Brazilians brought photography to Lagos in the 1880s might explain

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<sup>675</sup> Fred I. A. Omu “The Newspaper Press in Southern Nigeria 1880-1900,” in Boniface Obichere (ed), *Studies in Southern Nigerian History* (London: Frank Cass and Co.Ltd, 1982), p. 105.

<sup>676</sup> P.D.Cole, “Lagos society in the nineteenth century,” in A.B. Aderibigbe, (ed), *Lagos: The Development of an African City* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1975), p. 43.

their early closeness to the Europeans and the colonial administrators who patronized them – as evidenced from N. Walwin Holm’s photographic itinerary with the then colonial administrator (see page 2 of this chapter). Prior to 1897, Governors Glover locally known as Goloba, (1864-72), Molony (1886-90), and Carter (1891-97), had undertaken major rezoning and re-planning of the spatial environment of Lagos, further complicating and obscuring the assumed spatial and architectural distinction between ‘traditional’ life and ‘modern’ life. Construction had commenced on the railways, Five Cowries Creek, Carter, and Denton bridges, and Lagos had been connected to the United Kingdom by telegraph (1886). Soon after, the introduction of telephones and electricity in 1898 increased Lagosians’ sense of participation in the larger world. Concomitant with these developments is the progress recorded in the area of photography which was among the technological devices that aided colonial expansion. Virginia-Lee Web remarks that “as was true everywhere on the continent, colonial expansion intensified the need for photography.” A parallel development in photography complemented the spatial reconstruction of Lagos by the above three mentioned Governors. Pictures recording the building of roads and railroads, mining, and factory production dominated.<sup>677</sup> For example, G.S.A. da Costa was commissioned to photograph the railway-building in Jebba and Kaduna in 1909-11.<sup>678</sup> Shanu’s photographs are a good testament to the manner in which photographs were used for the purposes of documenting colonial activities. Again, missionary societies used the medium as a propaganda tool; before-and-after photographs attempting to prove their successful conversion of non-believers.<sup>679</sup>

Most of the above mentioned photographers were already professionals meeting the demands of both local and foreign audiences. The growing hub of Lagos’ business conglomerates and an influx of international merchants brought a thriving business for most photographers. Trading firms began to use photographs for promotional purposes: the United Africa Company (UAC) has a collection of West Africa that dates back to 1880s. Early colonial penetration was also recorded by several officials who may be regarded as serious amateur

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<sup>677</sup> Virginia-Lee Webb, “Fact and Fiction: Nineteenth-Century Photographs of the Zulu,” *African Arts*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Jan., 1992), pp. 50-99, p. 52.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid*, p. 201.

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52.

photographers. Among them was the Lagos surgeon J.W. Rowlands who together with N. W. Thomas used photography to undertake tasks in physical anthropology in Lagos.

The First World War affected trade and development in Nigeria adversely. By 1914, as a result of shortage of shipping, Nigeria's import trade decreased tremendously. Revenue from customs declined and consequently economic and social development projects were halted for a time.<sup>680</sup> On the other hand, efforts were made to develop certain local industries to produce some of the items that could not be imported because of the war. By 1916, there was a sharp rise in the price of Nigerian export goods as goods were in great demand in Europe.<sup>681</sup> The resulting post-war boom brought prosperity to numerous people, and with the greater demand for economic and social development, it is possible that more people may have patronized the few photographers in Lagos at the time. In fact, the money economy was introduced in 1916 and the West African Currency Board supplied 1 pound, 10 pound and 2 pound denominations to replace the old commodity currency such as cowries, manilas, brass rods, copper wires and cases of gin which had hitherto prevailed in Nigerian trade. With the introduction of a money economy, trade by barter came to an end and commercial banks began to emerge in West Africa: notably the Colonial Bank (now Barclays Bank) which started in 1917. The significant effect of this economic boom was not only that it created a small middle class that could have taken an interest in photography, it also initiated a lot of government projects which in effect offered the few photographers opportunities to expand. For example, there was a photographic documentation of the dredging of the Lagos harbour in 1916, and another photographic documentation of the building of Jebba bridge in 1916. In fact the interval between the First and the Second World War was very significant in the history of Nigeria as the period of an increasing scale of government projects, laying down important modernist infrastructure.

The pivotal role played by Lagos in the history of photography in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. However, there seemed to be an undue attention given to Lagos which tends to foreclose the significant photographic activities simultaneously taking place in other parts

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<sup>680</sup> K.B.C. Onwubiko, *History of West Africa, 1800 - 1973* (Onitsha: Africana Publishers Ltd, 1973), p. 322.

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid*, p. 322.

of Nigeria. Such research bias has given Lagos a somewhat jaundiced prominence quite detrimental to a wholesome visual historical research picture of Nigeria. For example, outside many colonial ethnographic photographers that practiced in Nigeria, one does not often see a figure like one Violet Cragg, the wife of a district officer, engaged in documenting traditional ceremonies in northern Nigeria.<sup>682</sup> Neither does one expect that G.I. Jones, by the 1930s, would undertake a photographic record of masks and masquerades during festivals in Eastern Nigeria.

G. I. Jones was born in South Africa in 1904 to an Anglican clergyman. He spent his early childhood in Chile before returning to England in 1915. He was educated at St John's, Leatherhead where, despite the school's classical tradition he insisted on studying history. In 1923 he won a scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford where as an undergraduate he achieved a distinction in History and played rugby on the wing for London Welsh. He joined the colonial service in 1926 and served as an Assistant District Officer in Eastern Nigeria, later becoming a District Officer in Bende and adjacent divisions of Owerri Province. His realization that the cultures of Eastern Nigeria were undergoing dramatic changes, particularly with regard to traditional ritual, led him to take a course in photography. His training became instrumental in shaping his vision of Eastern Nigeria during his stay as a district officer. Some of his photographic archive of Igbo and Ibibio masquerades, well depicted in Figures 4, 5, 6, 7 provide a unique record of a central institution in the life of Eastern Nigeria in the 1930s.

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<sup>682</sup> Andrew Apter, "On Imperial Spectacle: the dialectics of seeing in colonial Nigeria," in *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, 2002, p. 568.

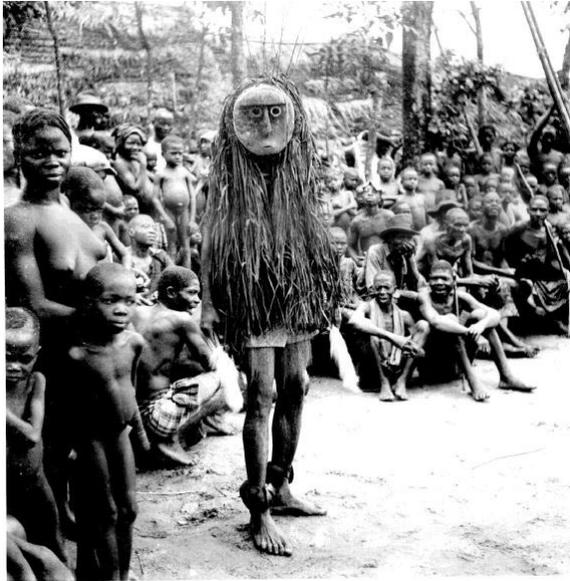


Figure 4. G. I. Jones, Ote Iri Mask, 1930.  
(Courtesy of The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at University of Cambridge).



Figure 5. G. I. Jones, The Dibia Obia (Visiting Witch Doctor) revives another Dibia (witch doctor) after their battle of medicine, 1930.  
(Courtesy of The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at University of Cambridge).



Figure 6. G. I. Jones Ohafia War Dancer with headboard (Oyaya), 1930.  
(Courtesy of The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at University of Cambridge).

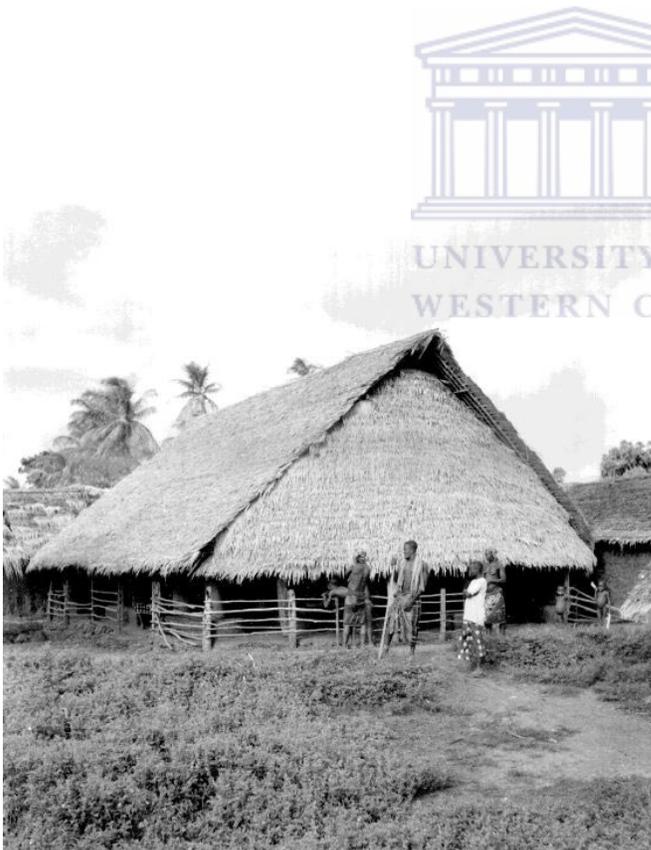


Figure 7. G. I. Jones, Obu House, 1930.  
(Courtesy of The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at University of Cambridge).

It was in the 1930s that Christianity was at its trial period in Eastern Nigeria. During this period, the festivals associated with various communities, often based on religious rites, were still held, although the zeal of some converts to the Christian religion, and the resistance of adherents to the old traditions, sometimes met in conflict.<sup>683</sup> However, at the intersections of these conflicts was the philosophy of war against paganism (by the missionaries) and the desires (of the imperialists) to acquire and photograph masks and masquerades. This contradiction was revealed even before the twentieth century, precisely in 1889 when, Alex Braham of Birmingham, an executive of The Royal Niger Company through ethnographic espionage obtained, by trickery, photographs of pagan practices which his Company strongly condemned and fought against. Braham remarks that:

These photographs were obtained by trickery. Accommodated with a tent, I previously pegged the ground whereupon the dance was to take place. I focused [sic] the lens of the camera through a concealed slit in the tent, and worked with two foot of tubing bulb being in my hand. My boy (a missionized individual) was trained to change the slides every time he heard the camera click.<sup>684</sup>

Andrew Apter notes that Braham's photographic ruse symbolizes the optical violence of colonial appropriation as a form of visual abstraction.<sup>685</sup> His pictures recount a common anecdote of how superstition capitulates to reason, heathenism to Christianity and the African to the Englishman as darkness gives way to light.<sup>686</sup>

This draws attention to the obvious conflict generated in most colonial photographic endeavours by the fact that the Royal Niger Company's policy at that time was geared towards "destroying idols" by burning sacred groves and juju houses to eradicate cannibalism and

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<sup>683</sup> Ezenwa Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe* (Oxford, Bloomington & Indianapolis: James Currey and Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>684</sup> Andrew Apter, "On Imperial Spectacle: the dialectics of seeing in colonial Nigeria," in *Society of Comparative Study of society and History*, 2002, p. 566.

<sup>685</sup> *Ibid*, p. 566.

<sup>686</sup> Such optical violence extended throughout other parts of Nigeria in varying contexts. A special case in point was the British punitive expedition of 1897 where photographic snapshot consummated the conquest of Benin City thus signaling the fact that conquest is bifurcated along the angles of 'conquest of the natives and their artworks' and 'conquest in photography.' In this instance, one can argue that conquest is also 'photographic' for the punitive expedition indicates that the last war that was fought on the Benin side of the divide was 'photographic.' For the absence of the photograph could mean that a lacunae exists in the intense war, the photograph symbolizing the bridging of a gap and the triumph of the British over the stubborn locals. See Patricia Hayes, "Northern Exposures: the photography of CHL Hahn, Native Commissioner of Ovamboland, 1915-1946" in Hartmann et al (eds), *The Colonizing Camera* (Cape Town: UCT Press), p.177; Annie Coombes, *Re-inventing Africa: Museums, material culture and popular imagination in late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 224.

promote “free” trade, and yet the company’s European employee had a predilection for photographing idols. His photographic mission again violated and negated the aspirations of his company through the use of ‘a missionized’ boy who, by the endorsed Christian standards, was prohibited from partaking in any idolatrous act.

G. I. Jones, during his photographic mission in Eastern Nigeria noted that the Garrick Braide revival in 1915 destroyed most Kalabari sculptures except for a few pieces salvaged by the District Officer.<sup>687</sup> This is also what led him (Jones) into the photographic documentation of African sculpture “before,” according to him, “it disappeared for good.”<sup>688</sup> However Jones’ statement, ‘before it disappeared for good’ draws attention to Allan Sekula’s article ‘The traffic in Photographs’ where he touched on “colonial enterprises and the archival chores of zealous and famous scholars and artists attached to the army of the Orient.”<sup>689</sup> Sekula specifically makes reference to the widely held anecdote (by the West) that the natives of the Orient (and perhaps, Africa) could not preserve their pasts as a result of lack of technological devices and ignorance. In this instance therefore Jones’ statement could be likened to the French physicist Francois Arago’s proclamation (in the wake of the discovery of Daguerreotype) that “had photography been discovered in 1798 during the expedition of Egypt we would possess today faithful pictorial records of that which the learned world is forever deprived by the greed of the Arabs and the vandalism of certain travelers.”<sup>690</sup> Arago and Jones’ statements demonstrate that the Western invention of photography strove to “collapse all teleology into sheer ponderous immanence of technological development.”<sup>691</sup> While Arago’s speech is not only reminiscent of Edward Said’s Orientalist discourse, it shows that (in Jones’s own terms too) that ‘traditions’ could be technologically rescued by photography. In other words, both statements demonstrate that rational progress and positive transformations are inextricably tied to Western technical innovations. Within the larger ideological context of a unified technological progressivism, imperialists therefore forged a logic of preservation. Similar statements (attributed to Arago and Jones) recur in most literature during colonial conquests.

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<sup>687</sup> G.I. Jones, “A Memoir of Early field photography” *African Arts*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1984, p.64.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>689</sup> Allan Sekula, “The traffic in photographs,” *Art Journal* Vol.41, No.1, Photography and the Scholar/Critic 1981, p. 17.

<sup>690</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

<sup>691</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

Jones was delighted on arrival to Nigeria to see that the masks and figures he had seen in museums and illustrated in coffee-table picture books in Europe were still being used in masquerades or as decorations for spirit shrines and community meeting houses.<sup>692</sup> Based on this statement, I suggest that what could be perceived from Jones' photographic expedition in Eastern Nigeria is a construction of a cultural geography of colonialism in a specific time and place. Nicholas Mirzoeff remarks that "the cultural geography of a place is not quite the same as its physical geography." Imperialism was never removed from a pursuance of an agenda that reflects the colonizers' prejudices and conforms to a certain colonial grammar.<sup>693</sup> This vision may not always detract from "an imagined geography" such as that which identifies France by the Eiffel Tower and New York by the Statue of Liberty.<sup>694</sup> Similar metonyms might have informed Jones' consistent recordings of masks and masquerade performances in Eastern Nigeria. Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 connote Jones' sense of a place (this time Eastern Nigeria) regardless of other urban geographies that existed in his other travel experiences. If, as observed by Mirzoeff, the Eiffel Tower in film and photography indicates not just Paris but France as a place of romance and elegance,<sup>695</sup> then in the cultural geography of imperialism created by this process, Eastern Nigeria might have informed a specific imaginary as a place of primitive masks and masquerade performances envisaged by Jones long before his arrival to Nigeria. It is possible that Jones might have been guilty of what S. Ryan calls colonial inscription in the manner in which he had 'geographically' inscribed the people of Eastern Nigeria in his photographs. Ryan remarks that the "process of colonial inscription begins even before the arrival of the explorer."<sup>696</sup> Again one could say that Jones fits into Johannes Fabian's description of the ethnographic writer's knowledge of the Other which involves setting the Other in the distant past tense, fixing them in time and space (to a primeval or exotic past period) which means existing outside, or denied, what he calls "coevalness."<sup>697</sup> It is possible that Jones did not see the rapid development in the urban centers taking place in

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>693</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Photography at the heart of darkness: Herbert Lang's Congo photographs (1909-15)" in Tim Barringer and Tom Hynn (eds.), *Colonialism and the Other: Empire, material culture and the museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 170, 169.

<sup>694</sup> Ibid, p. 170.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid, p. 170.

<sup>696</sup> S. Ryan, "Inscribing the Emptiness: Cartography, Exploration and the Construction of Australia," In C. Tiffin and A. Lawson, (eds), *De-Scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.115-130.

<sup>697</sup> Johannes Fabian, "Presence and representation: the Other and Anthropological writing," *Critical Inquiry* 16, 753-772, p.1.

Eastern Nigeria as at then rather he has set his photographic mission outside this dialogue and thus posits the locals and the countryside as the temporal perspective of Eastern Nigeria in the 1930s. In doing this he seems to banish other forms of temporalities and contingencies.

In Figure 4, Jones captures the masking tradition of the Ohafia people known as *Ote Iri*. The manner in which the mask and the spectators faced the camera exemplifies the level of consciousness they attached to the camera lens. It could also suggest their curiosity at such a strange object. However, in photographing masking tradition in the 1930s in Eastern Nigeria Jones might have resolved a puzzle of the photographic impenetrability of such traditions by people perceived as ‘strangers’ by the locals. This impenetrability was made clear by Sam Ibe, an Ohafia local who told me that “even in its present state of bastardization it is almost an impossible task to photograph *Ote Iri* mask.” Ibe also maintains that “again women were forbidden from standing in front of *Ote Iri* even as late as the 1990s before the masking tradition started giving in to rapid development and transformation.”<sup>698</sup> Andrew Apter also notes that the camera was prohibited in the “leopard dance” of the Ibibio. Given the fact that Ibibio is just a neighboring town to Ohafia where Jones also took the *Ote Iri* photograph, there could have been a similar photographic restriction, as pointed out by Ibe, on the *Ote Iri* mask. The only clue as to how Jones achieved this photograph might be through some tricks (in the manner in which Alex Braham photographed the ‘Leopard dance’ through trickery).<sup>699</sup> It is also possible that within an emerging field of visual production, *Ote Iri* might have been “taken out of ritual seclusion and subjected to public gaze,” through Jones’ persuasion. I offer this suggestion because the presence of women (as seen in Figure 4) around masks and masquerades in the 1930s in Eastern Nigeria could not have been sanctioned.

In Figure 5, the emphasis on Dibia (witch doctor) and ‘battle of medicine’ is a clear indication of Jones’ predilection for ‘traditional’ beliefs and dichotomies. What informs this performance is obviously not made clear in the photograph. And the question that lurks behind critical minds is what prompted the ‘battle of medicine’ in the presence of all the villager-spectators. One possible hint towards resolving the hidden stories behind the photograph could be that in

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<sup>698</sup> Conversation with Samuel Ibe, Awka, 28 February, 2011.

<sup>699</sup> See Andrew Apter, “On Imperial Spectacle: the dialectics of seeing in colonial Nigeria,” in *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, Vol.44, No.3, 2002, pp.564-596.

his bid to achieve a visual rhetoric of 'tradition' Jones might have enacted this scene and thus concealed the conditions of its production. Nothing was revealed in the photograph: whether it was a staged performance or a 'real' battle of medicine. It is likely that Jones might have assimilated the real onto a picturesque frame obviously for consumption outside the colonial borders. The real might have been inverted, refined and abstracted for the imperial world.

In Figure 6 of the Ohafia War Dance Jones enacts the traditional War Dance of the Ohafia Igbo in eastern Nigeria. Ohafia is a town situated in the east of Nigeria and populated by one of the Igbo-speaking groups. Their war dance is also known as *Iri agha*.

It is necessary to point out that most of the photographs taken in West Africa in the late nineteenth century did not survive because of the technical difficulties associated with preservation and weather conditions. In her study of photography in Sierra Leone, Vera Viditz-Ward noted that the survival of Daguerreotypes from northern and southern Africa is attributed to climatic conditions of the region which is of average humidity contrary to Freetown's location in a tropical environment, where moisture caused bacteria to grow between the layers of glass thereby destroying any daguerreotypes from Freetown.<sup>700</sup>

Similarly, during his photographic practice in Nigeria, Jones remarks that "the damp heat of the African tropical forest ensured that a film deteriorated from the moment it left its airtight container, producing on any print made from it a black and gray pointillism effect that the photographers called grain."<sup>701</sup> He further notes that there was no silica gel or other chemicals available to keep the film dry while in the camera, and no facility in Nigeria for developing it. And considering the enormous tasks involved in transporting the film to England for development, Jones concluded, "I now knew why all the travel books on West Africa had such lousy plates."<sup>702</sup> He however confirmed that the only non-grainy photographs he saw in Nigeria had been taken by African professional photographers using huge antique cameras with ten by eight or larger plates that they developed and printed themselves.<sup>703</sup> The pioneer

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<sup>700</sup> Vera Viditz-Ward, "Photography in Sierra Leone, 1850-1918," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 57, No. 4, Sierra Leone, p. 511. 1987.

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid*, p.64.

<sup>702</sup> G.I. Jones, "A Memoir of Early field photography," p.64.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid*, p. 65.

of this photography according to Jones is J.A. Green of Bonny in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria.<sup>704</sup>

J.A. Green was a relatively unknown photographer in Nigeria and could be said to be a victim of the jaundiced visual historical record that, as mentioned earlier, favoured Lagos and resulted in an unjustified diminishing of other parts of Nigeria. One of the scanty accounts of Green's activities available in an academic space (and which demands proper historical placement and discourse) was through a paper presented by the Nigerian photographer, Tam Fiofori, during the art workshop titled "On Independence and the Ambivalence of Promise," organized by the Center for Contemporary Art in 2009 in Lagos. In this paper Fiofori, a septuagenarian Nigerian photographer who, like Green, comes from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, decries the dearth of "published research yet on the activities of Nigerian photographers in Eastern Nigeria, particularly the Niger Delta."<sup>705</sup> He went further to declare that "photography and the work of Nigerian photographers had taken root in Bonny, in now Rivers State in the Niger Delta, at about the same time as in Lagos."<sup>706</sup> Unknown to many, Fiofori states that Bonny by the 1850s had the largest population of Europeans in Nigeria and was also a great centre of international commerce and British colonial administration.<sup>707</sup> He recognizes J.A. Green as "the 'Grandfather' of Nigerian professional photographers and, Nigeria's first Master Photographer whose body of work undoubtedly has also qualified him as a great master photographer of his generation across the world!"<sup>708</sup> Quoting Martha G Anderson and Lisa Aronson, Fiofori notes that "for more than a century J.A. Green was hidden in plain sight!"<sup>709</sup> This statement is not only true about J.A. Green but also of numerous other Nigerian photographers of Green's generation who eventually became victims of the archival institutional dysfunction and colonial plundering which evacuated most archival photographs to the erstwhile colonialists' countries. After more than two decades of intense research and many visits to private collectors, educational institutions, libraries and museums like the Maritime Museum, Liverpool and Unilever Archives, London, where most

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<sup>704</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>705</sup> Tam Fiofori, "History, Culture and Photography in Nigeria," A paper presented at the Workshop: *On Independence and the Ambivalence of Promise* organized by the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos on Tuesday, February 16, 2010.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid.

<sup>707</sup> Ibid.

<sup>708</sup> Ibid.

<sup>709</sup> Ibid.

of Green's works are in collection, Anderson and Aronson have emphatically established the fact that Green, who was initially thought to be a white, was actually Jonathan Adagogo Green, an Ibani Ijaw, born and bred in Bonny in now Rivers State.

However, Fiofori's statement that "Green was in such demand between 1890 and the early 1900s that he photographed for the British colonial administrators, British and European merchants and, travelled from Bonny to different parts of the Niger-Delta, Warri and Calabar,"<sup>710</sup> may suggest that he was only a contractor to the imperialists.

The emergence of the Rolleiflex camera in the early twentieth century helped many photographers to come up with better quality photographs. For example, G.I. Jones eventually countered some of the technical difficulties he encountered in Nigeria in the 1930s when he purchased a Rolleiflex and also decided to develop his films locally. More improvement also came from his course in photography at the then famous Reimann School of Art, which the Nazis had forced to leave Berlin and which moved to London. Jones remarked that the lecturers knew nothing about tropical photography but taught him how to use an enlarger. He took one enlarger back to Nigeria and ran it off in his car battery. Through this means he countered some of his earlier technical problems.

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 found Nigeria in what seemed at first to be in a much better position than in 1914 when the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria were amalgamated. By 1939, there was no hostile German colony on the eastern frontier. But the fall of France in 1940 changed the situation. The French Cameroons remained faithful to allied cause, but to the North and West of Nigeria there lay French territories which had thrown in their lot with Vichy.

Until the successful landings in North Africa destroyed Vichy influence in French West Africa, these territories remained a potential danger which could not be ignored, although in fact no hostilities occurred. The War itself helped to further strengthen Britain's resolve to pursue actively the policy of trusteeship in which the general welfare of Lagosians became

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<sup>710</sup> Interview with Tam Fiofori, Lagos, December 10, 2009.

one of her main policy goals.<sup>711</sup> The unflinching support which Britain received throughout the War from her subjects (except Malaysia where her downfall was treated with indifference by the indigenous population) instigated her to rethink her colonial policies. However, it could be argued that Britain's defeat by Japan greatly undermined the strength of her military and also encouraged, to an unprecedented extent, the growth of nationalistic sentiment throughout the colonized territories. As A. P. Thornton remarks, "a damage had been done to the white man's prestige that no political reconstruction, no constitution-making was able to erase."<sup>712</sup>

As a result of this political instability, Britain realized that the maintenance of a peaceful colonial regime called for concessions on their own part. Having been weakened by the war, Britain was therefore not in a strong position to face colonial unrest in many parts of her colonized territories, including Nigeria. Even if she had attempted to use force to maintain her hold on the colonies, she would have received little support from the British public. Britain had become much more democratic by this time, and there was sympathy for the nationalists based on this view. This was due to the tendency to believe that all nationalists were democrats. Again with the coming of the Labour Party to power in 1945, with its most sympathetic attitude towards the colonized subjects, it was obvious that a change in policy and attitude was underway. In heralding this new mindset, Attlee in a speech to the West African Students Union in 1941 stated that:

We in the Labour Party have always been conscious of the wrong done by the white races with darker skins. We have always demanded that the freedom which we claim for ourselves would be extended to all men... We fight this war not just for ourselves alone, but for all people... I look for an ever-increasing measure of self government in Africa and for an ever-rising standard of life for all peoples of Africa.<sup>713</sup>

After 1945, the aftermath of the war gave a new importance to photographs of Africa as instruments of propaganda. Colonial administrations which had previously employed commercial studios as 'government photographers' began to form information departments with their own studios, which rapidly generated quantities of photographs intended to instruct

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<sup>711</sup> G. O. Olusanya, "The Nigerian Civil Service in the Colonial Era: A Study of Imperial Reactions to Changing Circumstances" in Boniface I. Obichere, (ed), *Studies in Southern Nigerian History* (London: Frank Cass and Co Ltd, 1982), p. 187.

<sup>712</sup> A. P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and its Enemies* (London, 1959), p. 327.

<sup>713</sup> *Daily Herald*, Lagos, 16 August 1941.

or mould opinion. By the 1940s, the progressive concentration of administrative, commercial, and industrial activities in Lagos, combined with a permanent influx of migrants and improved health conditions increased the population of Lagos dramatically.<sup>714</sup> All these, among many other factors, occasioned the emergence of a decolonization process.

The end of the War, therefore, saw the beginning of the working out of various development programmes for the colonies. In Nigeria, a Ten-Year Development Plan involving a total sum of 6 million Pounds was introduced, about half that amount coming from British grants. The plan concentrated on general and technical education, agricultural research, construction of roads and railways. These were identified as high priority projects. The processes of these developments were well documented through photographic booklets which came as part of the government blueprint. One can hardly overemphasize the role of photography at this period as evidentiary indices of colonial policy implementation. The civil service came now to be involved in the whole process of improving the social conditions of the people by raising the level of development. A Nigerian university college, the Ibadan University College, made its appearance in 1948, followed by the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, with branches in Ibadan, Enugu, and Zaria. The period saw the emergence of photographers in the art departments of these institutions with an aim to reshape colonial policies and ideologies. The appointment of Africans to replace the British who had *ab initio* pursued a racist policy – that favoured the British to the detriment of African professionals – must not be seen as an expression of love for these African professionals. Instead there was a need to replace British expatriates who had entered the armed forces. Moreover, with the end of the war, Britain herself needed her trained manpower at home and so there was no great surplus to send overseas. The remaining British photographers left Nigeria after the war and the local photographers replaced them in the ministries. In order to enforce the development programme, there was an urgent need for local human resources. In addition the British government, now firmly committed to a policy of decolonization than it had been before the war, realized that for this to be successfully implemented, the colonial peoples themselves must be actively associated with the task of administration so that they could take over from

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<sup>714</sup> The Southern and Northern Nigeria was amalgamated in 1914 with Lagos as the capital. See Laurent Fourchard, "Lagos and the invention of juvenile delinquency in Nigeria 1920-60" *Journal of African History*, Vol. 47, No.1, 2006, pp.115-37. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

the British civil servants whenever independence became a reality. Narrating social life in Lagos in the post-war era, Wolfgang Bender remarks

In the Nigerian capital of Lagos, social life in the post war period was basically determined by the growth of political representation and by a booming economy. The metropolis gave its residents the feeling of being at the center of a historic transformation. It was free, liberated of many of the restrictions of traditional life. There were new forms of partnership between women and men. There was money, mobility, and cosmopolitanism. The atmosphere was electric, and the hope of an independent Nigeria mobilized unforeseen creative powers in all fields.<sup>715</sup>

One of such fields was photography. Despite the notable advances in photographic techniques between the wars, newspapers were “incredibly slow to adapt themselves to the photo age”<sup>716</sup> which was why postcards continued to perform a documentary-cum-propaganda function. However, Barthosa Nkurumeh observed that the introduction of the press is very important to the history of photography in Nigeria.<sup>717</sup> Starting from the establishment of the first newspaper in Nigeria at Abeokuta in 1859 till the end of the Second World War the industry had grown as part of the nascent anti-colonial struggle that provided many photographers in Lagos with the opportunity to expand their practices and to gain greater exposure and respectability.<sup>718</sup> Nkurumeh remarks that “in the 1930s new style of photo journalism emerged, ushered in by the demise of the ponderous Victorian photographs.”<sup>719</sup> By the late 1940s, there were serious attacks on professionalism regarding the loyalty of Nigerian photographers to the British flag.<sup>720</sup> Anti-colonial sentiments had risen and many governmental projects employed the services of local photographers who now operated on a commercial level. Again much as the *Lagos Weekly Times* relied on the services of African photographers since its establishment in 1889, other newspapers such as the *West African*

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<sup>715</sup> Wolfgang Bender, “Independence, Highlife, Liberation Wars: Lagos 1950s and 1960s,” in Okwui Enwezor, (ed), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (Munich, London and New York: Prestel Verlag, 2001), p.279.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

<sup>717</sup> Barthosa Nkurumeh, *Photography in the Nigerian Society* Unpublished BA thesis, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 1987, p.21.

<sup>718</sup> Olu Oguibe, “Photography and the Substance of the Image,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), (London and New York: Routledge 1998), p. 559.

<sup>719</sup> Barthosa Nkurumeh, “Photography in the Nigerian society,” p. 24.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

*Pilot*, the *Trade Journal*, *Nigerian Teacher* and the London-published *West Africa Magazine* also made use of African photographers.<sup>721</sup>

### **The post-1960s era.**

At independence in 1960, Lagos had become the largest city in Nigeria and West Africa (665,000 inhabitants in 1963). Some scholars have suggested that the rate of immigration decreased between the wars as the pace of economic development slowed,<sup>722</sup> and more thorough research on the matter has demonstrated that without migration the population of Lagos would have decreased after the First World War due to the influenza epidemic of 1918 and the bubonic plague outbreaks from 1924 to 1928.<sup>723</sup> The very high percentage of the population born outside Lagos (59 percent in 1931, 63 per cent in 1950) indicates that, almost since the 1920s migrants have contributed significantly to the growth of the city's cultural life.<sup>724</sup>

Jackie Philips, Billy Rose and Dotun Okubanjo emerged on the Lagos scene in the late 1950s as the three most important young photographers. By the 1960s Peter Obe had become one of the most successful photographers who combined professional photography with photo-journalism. Peter Obe's photo-journalism encapsulates a narrative summary of Nigeria's political challenges from independence in 1960 to the military solution of the Biafran secession in 1967-70. Obe worked with the *Daily Times* of Nigeria, a national daily newspaper before the Nigeria/Biafra civil war which started in 1967. He worked on the side of the Nigerian government soldiers fighting to quell the secessionist Biafran militias and he was able to cover the war considerably. Other important photographers of this period were Mathew Faji of the West African *Drum* Publications, J. D'Okhai Ojeikere of Lintas-Lagos Advertising Ltd.<sup>725</sup> There was Paramount Photos whose owner and operator Olunloyo studied photography

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<sup>721</sup> Olu Oguiibe, "Photography and the Substance of the Image," p. 569.

<sup>722</sup> See Pauline H. Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917-1967* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p.32.

<sup>723</sup> Ayodeji Olukoju, 'Population pressure, housing and sanitation in West Africa's premier port-city: Lagos, 1900-1939', *Journal of the Australian Association for Maritime History*, 15 (1993), 92-3.

<sup>724</sup> Contrary to most literature that the Yorubas dominated the population of Lagos till 1931 it was recorded that more than 59 per cent of Lagos population were foreigners as at 1931. See Laurent Fourchard "Lagos and the invention of juvenile delinquency in Nigeria."

<sup>725</sup> John Amifor, "Seeing sense: new Nigerian photographers and new accents, 1980-2000," in Ola Oloidi, (ed.) *Modern Nigerian art in historical perspective* (Abuja: Art Historical Association of Nigeria, 2004).

in England and wrote a column on photography in the *Daily Times*. The standard props in the early studios were a mirror and talcum powder. Then came the era of vanity, with the use of airbrush techniques to remove blemishes. And now we have Photoshop software, all to achieve the ‘fine-face-no-pimple-effect.’<sup>726</sup>

By the 1980s there was a major shake-up in the economy of Nigeria and more emphasis was laid on petroleum products. By this time petroleum accounted for 87 percent of export receipts and 77 percent of the federal government’s current revenue. GNP per capita per year decreased 4.8 percent from 1980 to 1987, which led the World Bank to classify Nigeria in 1989 as low-income country (based on 1987 data). This report was the first of its kind since the inception of annual World Bank Development Report in 1978. In 1989 the World Bank again declared Nigeria poor enough to be eligible (along with countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Chad, and Mali) for concessional aid from an affiliate, the International Development Association (IDA). The economic collapse in the mid and late 1980s contributed to substantial discontent and conflict between ethnic communities and nationalities, adding to the political pressure to expel more than 2 million illegal workers (mostly from Ghana, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad) in early 1983 and May 1985. This economic crisis was mainly the result of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in effect from 1986 to 1990 which left numerous school leavers with no jobs.

This period witnessed the emergence of street photographers who were mainly drawn from the crop of these unemployed school leavers. According to Tam Fiofori, “the 1980s ushered in the first phase of young radical street photographers who embraced photography just for survival and in the process became professionals.”<sup>727</sup> A new form of street portraiture evolved: particularly in Lagos, in the form of street-side photographers with wooden-box cameras and the operator covered with a black cloth like a masquerade, taking mostly passport photographs and “wait-and-take” portraits.<sup>728</sup> Then came the Polaroid camera-carrying photographers who specialized in portraits taken around famous landmarks and buildings. Out of these have grown the “‘kpa kpa kpa’ brigade; a new wait-and-take generation of photographers usually

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<sup>726</sup> Interview with Tam Fiofori, Lagos, December 10, 2009.

<sup>727</sup> Interview with Tam Fiofori, Lagos, December 10, 2009.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid.

armed with 35mm SLR cameras; and who are found, usually uninvited, at parties, weddings and social gatherings or at landmarks, beaches and public parks.”<sup>729</sup> Within minutes they come back with colour photographs which they hawk for as little as one hundred naira each. In many ways they have eroded the lower end of the business of fixed-studio photographers as they are much cheaper and faster. They also raise the question of whether the average Nigerian cares or has any taste for quality in photography?

This period saw the emergence of such photographers as “Sunmi Smart-Cole, Ibi Sofekem, Philip Trimnel, Ginselle Adetona, Ade Idowu, Pat Olear, Demola Odukoya, Jide Adeniyi Jones and Don Barber who arrived on the scene to cause photography to align with the dictates of the period.”<sup>730</sup> Between 1970 and 1980, designers began a conscious effort to use photography in place of hand illustration, which had been in vogue since the inception of West African Publicity in 1928.<sup>731</sup> In fact, a noticeable development in photography in Lagos of this period was the inseparable link between photography and the media such that most professional photographers that emerged first started as photo-journalists. Most of them were connected to other vehicles where photography was utilized such as magazines, newspapers, social events, among others. One of these photographers who also bridged the gap between professional demands and popular demands is Sunmi Smart-Cole.

Sunmi Smart-Cole was born in Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria on 25 September 1941. Smart-Cole is mostly self-taught and at the age of 15 he became a primary school teacher. At 17 he began to train as an architectural draughtsman and subsequently designed, among other buildings, “the country home of former Sierra Leonean Prime Minister, Sir Albert Margai.”<sup>732</sup> He was also a professional jazz percussionist in the 1960s and was the founding member of the ‘Soul Assembly Jazz Club’ where he still performs to date at the popular Lagos jazz spots. In 1968 he owned one of the best Barber shops in Yaba area of Lagos. Known as ‘Sunmi’s Place’, the Barber’s shop was, according to him, “a place where I exhibited my diverse talents which marveled many people.”<sup>733</sup> Smart-Cole trained at Foothill

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<sup>729</sup> Ibid.

<sup>730</sup> John Amifor, “Seeing sense: new Nigerian photographers and new accents, 1980-2000,” p.106.

<sup>731</sup> Ibid, p.106.

<sup>732</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, 10 March 2011

<sup>733</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, 10 March 2011.

College, Los Altos, California in 1976 and “was instrumental in bringing art-photography to Nigeria particularly as a visual art form.”<sup>734</sup> He also added reference points to reportage as well as documentary photography. Through his engagement with material technique and skill, his creative thought process and visual production bridged the gap in creative photography that was denied Nigerians as a result of colonial educational policies which did not support such training.

In 1983, Smart-Cole became the first photo editor in the newly established *Guardian* newspaper. *Lagos Life* which was a subsidiary of the *Guardian* was under Smart-Cole’s editorship and he brought his art-photography experience to bear on the contents and formal qualities of the tabloid. It was in *Lagos Life* that Smart-Cole published some of his wedding photographs which according to him, “became a weekly publication.”<sup>735</sup> As Elizabeth Edwards argues, photographs are “relational objects”, and “it is only by engaging with the mundane and taken-for-granted that we can see what photographs actually do in social terms.”<sup>736</sup> Edwards’ words exemplify what Smart-Cole’s photographs did in the social life of Nigerians in the 1980s. And it was not surprising that according to him, people relied on his “weekly photographic publication to see colourful dresses and new designs of Lagos fashionable ladies.”<sup>737</sup> In fact, Smart-Cole was instrumental in influencing the younger generation of Lagos photographers. Jide Adeniyi Jones in an interview with me admitted to have been influenced by Smart-Cole.

By the early 1990s, wealthy Lagosians had started, more magnanimously, to patronize photographers such as Smart-Cole and others. Events such as title-taking, wedding ceremonies, child christening, funerals, birthday parties, memorial ceremonies, hometown anniversaries, political rally campaigns, among others were attracting more photographic patronage than in previous years. Most of these occasions were beautifully marked by different *asọ ebì* groups. Some of the celebrations were also shown on television news programmes. What were more commonly noticeable were frequent television commercial

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<sup>734</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, 10 March 2011.

<sup>735</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

<sup>736</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, (2005:27).

<sup>737</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

advertises of the deceased. This was also seen in the newspapers where photographs of the dead outnumbered other visual images. By 1985, “my photographs of the dead and people dressed in different *asọ ebì* uniforms were almost a regular feature in *Sunday Times*,”<sup>738</sup> remarked Smart-Cole. “I was hired almost on weekly basis to attend weddings or funeral ceremonies where I photographed family members in different forms of uniforms.”<sup>739</sup>

For many people in Lagos, confrontation with the image of the deceased persons, the politicians, church plenipotentiaries, on private and public walls, and in virtually every space in the street, became influential in the flows of the city’s visual traffic. Family albums became a means of negotiating status among the middle class and the aspiring poor. “The first thing you offer your visitor is your family album and from that your visitor can tell whether you belong to a rich social club or other enviable class.”<sup>740</sup> Jide Adeniyi Jones notes that:

In the early 1990s the first thing that also demonstrates a sense of class and belonging is the manner in which photographs are placed on the walls or on the blind stands of most sitting rooms. And the way to recognize an elite family is through the family genealogy of the photographs on the walls. For example, if you see a framed photo of one’s grandfather placed on the wall you immediately know that the family belongs to the elites or middle class as it was only grandfathers of such families who could afford photography in those days.<sup>741</sup>

Jones’ explanation is apt in foregrounding the compelling roles of photographs as mediums for negotiating social class. By the 1990s photography had become an integral part of city life serving both practical purposes and in the expression of individualism, collective ethos, and personal achievement. According to Jones, studio visits boomed in the 1990s and most professional photographers made quick money. However, towards the late 1990s, digital cameras emerged and studio visits dropped.

By the year 2000, the role of photography had widened. In burial ceremonies photography played an important role in announcing and registering the status of the dead. With the ubiquity of digital cameras, the number of photographers taking photos in weddings and other

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<sup>738</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

<sup>739</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

<sup>740</sup> Interview with Sunmi Smart-Cole, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

<sup>741</sup> Interview with Jide Adeniyi Jones, Lagos, December 1, 2010.

social events increased. As a consequence, people became more conscious of their dress while attending social events. While the number of photographs a celebrant commissioned became a marker of wealth, the ability of the celebrant to give out photographs as gifts to those who participated in the wedding became another marker of the individual's level of largesse, sociability, networks and association. By this time *asọ ebi* was already becoming an important practice which attracted photographers to weddings and other social functions. Most celebrants documented their retinue of friends through photographic record of their *asọ ebi*. In this way *asọ ebi* formed an integral part of photography in social events. Smart Cole observes that, "in most weddings I covered, *asọ ebi* groups were never treated like ordinary guests. They were always set apart from the rest of the guests." Smart Cole confirmed that "in burial ceremonies, the celebrants usually demanded that special attention be paid to those in *asọ ebi* considering them as more important than other guests." What was very noticeable was that family albums were beginning to decline and instead it was replaced by the more open display of photographs in public through such avenues as the magazines.<sup>742</sup>

### **Conclusion.**

This chapter has examined the history of photography in Nigeria starting from the colonial period. It was obvious that photography was both an instrument of colonial expansion as well as a socially transformative device in the postcolonial period. What this chapter has tried to outline is a visual genealogy of different types of 'photographies' and their consequent impact on individuals and institutions. This is necessary for our subsequent understanding of the wider applicability of photography in the print media and in the present-day Lagos social contexts, where *asọ ebi* is on the rise. In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, photography is intertwined with political establishments, social performances, forms of resistances and negotiations of modernity, cosmopolitanism, gender relations and power. Through a clearer grasp of these historical movements, we can therefore engage *asọ ebi*'s engagement with most recent photographic practices in Lagos, which subsequent chapters address.

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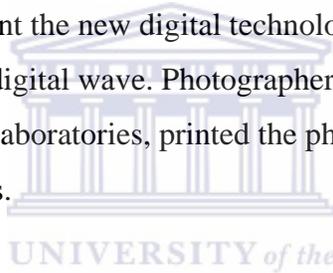
<sup>742</sup> Conversation with Sumni Smart Cole, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

## Chapter 6.

### PHOTOGRAPHING *ASO EBI*: OF SURFACISM, DIGITALITY AND SNAPSHOTS.

#### Introduction.

By the year 2000, digital cameras and devices had become ubiquitous in Lagos. An increasing visual agency was beginning to manifest among city dwellers through such devices as camera phones. Similarly, there was an explosion of other cheaper digital devices and technologies among professional and amateur photographers. What distinguished professional photographers in the city was their ability to exhibit expertise with this new digital photographic media. Most photographers made use of digital cameras and bought digital printers for quick passport photographs across the side streets. Others equipped their work places with computers and learnt the new digital technology of Photoshop. Social events were again integrated into this new digital wave. Photographers attended weddings, took photographs, rushed to digital laboratories, printed the photographs and delivered them back to the owners in swift moments.



The intersections of sartorial practices with this new digital movement cannot be overemphasized. Instant picture-taking and the act of dressing up for occasions were intertwined. The central element of most social events oftentimes revolves, not around food or any other item, but around *aso ebi* fashion.<sup>743</sup> The importance attached to *aso ebi* also influences its relationship with the digital medium. A politics of exclusion seen in the physical practice of *aso ebi* was extended into the digital realm. Photographers manipulated the *surfaces* of their *aso ebi* photographs on the request of the customers for the purposes of exclusion or inclusion of certain elements and props. Glamour was not only fashionably impressed on the physical bodies through *aso ebi* and other textile paraphernalia, it was also symbolically inscribed on the fabricated bodies through digital Photoshop.

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<sup>743</sup> As already shown in Chapter 4, in some social events, *aso ebi* determined whether a celebrant received food or not .

In recognition of these digital shifts, this chapter engages with *aso ebi* group photos in Nigeria to highlight the aesthetic implications of ‘popular’ postcolonial digital photography. The chapter suggests that the study of postcolonial photography in the 21st century needs to be understood within a rapidly developing techno-social context that includes a consideration of the digital mode in popular photography. I challenge photographic discourse and historiographical canons that are based upon, and privilege, the use of the analogue camera. I argue that in the digital studios of Kingsley Chuks in Lagos, through digital editing and Photoshop, the surface treatment of *aso ebi* group photographs elevates them to artworks. I also argue that the surfaces of the photographs are altered in such a way that the old genre of the studio portrait in Africa makes a fundamental shift from the palpable mechanical surfaces of studio props to the screen surfaces of computers. I attempt to address issues that border on the substantiality of the surface in photography as initially proposed by Christopher Pinney in relation to Indian practices. In this chapter, by looking at *aso ebi* photographs – those I personally took at weddings in Lagos and those taken by Kingsley Chuks – I take Pinney’s notion of surfacism into a broader set of cultural issues in Lagos. The approach to this chapter which draws on ethnography, art-historical models of visual studies and literary theory is my attempt to explore how combined methods of analysis can raise research questions beyond conventional theories of visual analysis.

### **The visual economy of surfacism.**

In Animasaun digital studio in Lagos the role of the computer operators is to ask each customer whether he or she would want a special surface treatment in the photos. This goes with a higher monetary negotiation. A special surface treatment requires the computer operator to use Photoshop to enhance the beauty of the photo through surface effects so as to make the faces or backgrounds glow and shine. In employing the Photoshop digital software to alter bodily accoutrements in photography, it is assumed that there is a visual language that is being invented with the development of the new electronic capital such that the embellishment of the human figure attracts more money. This could be seen as an effort to render the physiological effect of this form of photography, to bring out the optical impact of shine. Photographers such as Kingsley Chuks in Lagos – and computer operators in

Animasaun digital studio –play with the surface quality of photographs and in the process fashion a visual language that is tied to the new capital of computer and digital technology.

Krista Thompson has described surfacism as “a concentration on the materiality or visual texture of objects within or of the picture plane.”<sup>744</sup> Surfacism refers to both the “elaborately wrought and highly finished representation of objects that are themselves elaborately wrought and highly finished.” Artists and photographers have used surfacism to emphasize the materiality and haptic quality of objects.<sup>745</sup> John Berger attributes the development of surface aesthetics in the visual economy of European art to two historical developments: the invention of oil painting as an art form in the sixteenth century and the formation of new wealth and new moral economies surrounding capital.<sup>746</sup> He remarks that oil painting allowed artists like German-born Hans Holbein the Younger – who stands at the beginning of this tradition – to develop “the language of tactile sensation” and attain a sense of illusionism, tangibility, texture, luster, and solidity in what they portrayed.<sup>747</sup> Through the medium of oil painting, Holbein peopled his entire picture plane with objects, scrupulously detailing the surfaces in such a way as to convey “a sense of touch.”<sup>748</sup> In Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), two statesmen, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, are adorned in exquisitely and highly embroidered garments in the court of Britain’s King Henry VIII. Their elegance, majesty and pose serve to direct the eyes around the surface areas of the painting which is inhabited by a collection of material possessions, including objects symbolic of the sciences and arts. In the work, with the exception of the merchants’ skin, “there is not a surface in this picture which does not make one aware of how it has been elaborately worked over,” from the ambassadors’ sumptuous fur-lined clothes to the well-crafted instruments and patterned textile that creates a background surface in the painting.<sup>749</sup> Berger relates this new tactile rendering of the material world in oil paint to the “new power of capital” and “new attitudes to property and exchange.”<sup>750</sup> In art historical terms, this painting is reminiscent of a visual antecedent of the

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<sup>744</sup> Krista Thompson, “The sound of Light: reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop,” in *The Art Bulletin: a quarterly published by the College Art Association*, December 2009, Vol. XCI, No. 4. P.485.

<sup>745</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>746</sup> See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Cooperation; New York: [Penguin Books, 1972), p. 84.

<sup>747</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>748</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>749</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

fashioning of power and prestige through material possessions. Surfacism from its earliest inception in European art, Berger argues, gave visual form to a way of seeing that was confined to the market economy, new forms of self-fashioning, and the optical effects achievable specifically through oil painting.

While Berger traces the origins of surfacism to the sixteenth century, some art historians connect surfacist practices with aesthetic pursuits that flowered in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Svetlana Alpers, for example, identifies a preoccupation with the surface characteristics of things among Dutch painters of the sixteenth century. In what she calls “the art of describing” Alpers notes that artists anxious to depict the world naturalistically treated the “picture as a surface (like a mirror or a map, but not a window) on which words along with objects can be replicated or inscribed.”<sup>751</sup> There are numerous instances of surface representations in the Western visual world. Christine Buci-Glucksmann makes an argument with regard to a stylistically complex form of artistic production, the Baroque, in which artists embellished, excessively so, the surfaces within and beyond their painting with overflowing, ornamental detail.<sup>752</sup> She asserts that surfacist aesthetics furnished an “anamorphosistic mirror, either concave or convex, that distorts the visual image – or, more precisely, reveals the conventional rather than natural quality of normal specularly by showing its dependence on the materiality of the medium of reflection.”<sup>753</sup> She posits that Baroque surface aesthetics, by offering this counter approach to vision and representation, reflected on normalized models of visuality in such a way that their means of construction, particularly through the medium of reflection, were made visible.

It is important to look at surfacism within a broader historical perspective of colonial and postcolonial visual culture. George Lau notes that the intensive modification of exterior surfaces in Recuay culture was a strategic field for negotiating status and identity. The style’s principal media (pots, buildings, sculptures, textiles) formed parts of political programmes,

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<sup>751</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), xxv.

<sup>752</sup> Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), p. 17.

<sup>753</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann cited in *Ibid*, p.17.

both modest and grandiose, of chiefs and their close relations.<sup>754</sup> Citing Gibson, Lau notes that “at the interface between mediums and substances, surfaces are where the “action is.”<sup>755</sup>

Lau’s surfaces invoke resemblances between objects, different media and materials in which he argues that surfaces can be more than inert bearers of images. They can have their own agentive qualities.<sup>756</sup> In a much broader expansion of these agentive qualities of surfaces, many authors have explored the sensorial properties of surfaces such as colour, brilliance, sharpness, size and suggest how these qualities can embody and engineer cultural patterns in extraordinary, unpredictable ways.<sup>757</sup> As will be shown in subsequent discussions the surfaces of Chuks’ photographic works, their colours, their tactile materiality and flatness of the shapes engineer the local cultural forms of *asọ ebì* visuality.

Elucidating the historical conditions under which surface aesthetics figured in the past may offer insight into their production in the visual economy of postcolonial photography.

Christopher Pinney observes that ‘surfacing’ has characterized much popular small-town Indian photographic practice. Again one could argue that surfacing can be seen in the use of backdrops and the creation of photographic mise-en-scene by West African studio photographers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>758</sup> In this manner, surfacing becomes an engagement with the superficial accoutrements of the image rather than a “narrativized indexical depth.”<sup>759</sup> To explain this further, Pinney’s subsequent arguments on photographic surfacing identify the

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<sup>754</sup> George F. Lau, “The work of surfaces: object worlds and techniques of enhancement in the ancient Andes,” *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol. 15 No.3, September 2010, pp.259-286.

<sup>755</sup> *Ibid*, p.264.

<sup>756</sup> *Ibid*, p. 264.

<sup>757</sup> For more on this, See for example, Mary W. Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Christopher L. Miller, and George R. Hamell, “A New Perspective on Indian–White Contact: Cultural Symbols and Colonial Trade,” *Journal of American History* 73: 311–28, 1986; Nicholas J. Saunders, “Biographies of Brilliance: Pearls, Transformations of Matter and Being, c. AD 1492,” *World Archaeology* 31: 243–57, 1999; Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>758</sup> Christopher Pinney, “Notes from the surface of the image: photography, postcolonialism and vernacular modernism,” in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, (eds.), *Photography’s Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p.203.

<sup>759</sup> Pinney explains narrativized indexical depth as the discourse of photography that borders on early European travel. He explains this as a photographic system that mapped the world as a picture. Using Samuel Bourne’s 1866 “Narrative of a Photographic Trip to Kashmir” Pinney unveils this “paradigmatic text of the normative practice” whereby photography was understood as a view of the world in spatio-temporal certainty. This view of the world also involves forays in which lives became measured in terms of their ‘exploits’ and the exploitation of the world as perspectivalized picturesque entity. According to Pinney, this system negates contemporary African and Indian postcolonial photography which is concerned with a realm of the denarrativized, deperspectivalized surface effects that operate in a zone of tactility quite different from the detached viewpoints advocated by early European practitioners such as Bourne. See pp. 207-208.

surface not as a layered phenomenon, but rather as a practice that negates the chronotopic parameters of earlier European photographic exposures. These earlier photographic exposures include those linked to early European travel and the much-discussed ‘ethnography’ in colonial states. Pinney has argued that the implication of colonial depth practices implies a surface that was constantly rendered invisible.<sup>760</sup> In this manner it is assumed that photography is a spatial-temporal phenomenon that must follow a narrative sequence, rather than an object that is bounded by a flat pictorial space. Such photographs being an index of peregrination and ethnography are opposed by the reworked photographs in Animasaun digital studio in Lagos that I discuss here, which are taken in a time-bound space but are transformed into ‘achronotopic’ spaces through the digital medium. Unlike Berger’s sixteenth century paintings, the naturalism and realism in the picture plane of these photographs are replaced with a flat pictorial surface that does not convey a specific sense of time and space.

### **From analogue to digital.**

When I visited Shegun Adekoya in his studio on No. 5 Adetola Road in Surulere, Lagos, he told me that he bought a digital camera in 2003 and a computer and small digital printer in 2005. According to Adekoya, “I use my printer to print only passport photographs but I go to commercial digital printing laboratory to print bigger sizes of digital photos.”<sup>761</sup> In Adekoya’s studio there were no studio props or other paraphernalia to show that photos were being taken in the studio. Instead he informed me that most of his photographs were taken at ‘events.’

You see many of the customers stopped coming to the studio so you discover that most of the photographs I work on were taken outside especially in weddings and other functions. I edit them with photoshop and make them beautiful so that the customers will like them. The problem is that many photographers rework their photos and people normally look more beautiful in the reworked photos so it makes them believe that you are a good photographer and they think they actually look like that, not knowing that we rework the photos with photoshop.<sup>762</sup>

He makes use of Photoshop software in working over the surfaces of the photos, re-contextualizing some of them in a way that gives them the impression of a studio setting

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<sup>760</sup> Ibid, p.203.

<sup>761</sup> Adekoya Shegun, Author’s interview, Lagos April 12, 2010.

<sup>762</sup> Ibid.

before taking them to Animasaun digital lab for printing. It is obvious that “the shift to the digital has shown that photographs are simply raw materials for an endless series of digressions.”<sup>763</sup>

Dayo Oketola notes that “social events in Nigeria are thought to be incomplete without photographers who take pictures that are later sold to guests.”<sup>764</sup> Oketola believes that “the mobile photo business has become faster and better with the digital revolution making it possible for them to print shots taken with both analogue and digital cameras on digital printing machines.”<sup>765</sup> He notes that in Lagos, the digital revolution influenced photography and photo printing business in no small measure forcing many analogue printing laboratories to go digital.<sup>766</sup> Today, many photo printing houses in Nigeria either combine digital units with their old analogue facilities or go fully digitalized. With millions of affordable digital cameras and mobile camera phones, the digital colour laboratory has become a goldmine for aspiring investors with requisite funds because of its capital-intensive nature.<sup>767</sup>

Dennis Attah, director of Fotoronics Digital Lab in Lagos, said in a personal interview with me:

In Lagos digital colour photo printing laboratory is a profitable business. It is particularly profitable in Nigeria because of the way digitalisation is embraced. We actually make more money from editing the photos in the lab because the price doubles more than ordinary printing. Although many have subscribed to digital photo production, there are still some people who still prefer analogue printing due to pricing. At Fotoronics, we have a complete analogue machine that looks like a digital machine displaying photographs on the screen except that you cannot edit the pictures on the machine. Social events never end in Nigeria and photography can never end too. So, any good digital photo laboratory can make much more than 30 million Naira in six month and after.<sup>768</sup>

Fred Akinola Erinkulu owns a photography studio in Lagos known as *Eikonworld*. When I visited him in his studio in March 2010, he directed me to his website which according

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<sup>763</sup> See Run Bunnnet, *How Images Think* (London and Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>764</sup> Dayo Oketola, “Digital colour photo laboratory as goldmine” *Daily Sun*, Thursday, 8 Apr 2010, p. 20.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>767</sup> Ibid. P.20.

<sup>768</sup> Dennis Ettah, author’s interview, Lagos, March 20, 2010. In 2010, 30 million naira would be an equivalent of hundred and eighty thousand US Dollars.

to him will offer me more information regarding his digital photography outfit. In this web site it is interesting that a section known as “frequently asked questions” pays more attention to the description of the digital styles of picture presentation to customers.

Below are some excerpts from the site:

**Will I be getting my digital negative files?**

No! I don't give out digital negatives. What we do give out is *Pics-To-Web CD* of all the shots taken. You can then use this to book your reprints and also email your pictures to friends and family.

**What is Destiny Style Album?**

This is our new premium picture album service and it is so different from the normal picture arrangements. It is a creative picture composite with lovely layout which comes in 6 by 8 and 8 by 8 inches sizes. A sneak preview will be available online soon but for now do call us for a hard copy portfolio.

**What is Pics - To - Web CD?**

Pics to web cd is a digital collection of all the good shots taken during your event. They are usually more than the actual pictures printed. The digital quality is great for viewing onscreen and if you want, you can still print lovely passport size pictures from them. They are solely for emailing to friends and family after your event and can also be used to book your reprints and enlargements. For reprints, you don't need to come to me. All you have to do is to use the image numbers to select the ones you want and either send them in a text or better still, you could mail them to us at [reprints@eikonworld.com](mailto:reprints@eikonworld.com) but please do notify us (by calling) about your mail.

**I wish to make extra copies of my pictures, how can I do that?**

You will have to use the Pics-To-Web CD provided with your package. Each image is carefully label to follow the shooting sequence of your event. Identify the image and state the numbers of prints you want. It is that simple. You can then call or text me or send mail to [reprints@eikonworld.com](mailto:reprints@eikonworld.com)<sup>769</sup>

In fact almost all the photographers I met during my fieldwork in Lagos work with digital cameras. From the above scenario it becomes evident that photography in Lagos is becoming integrated into the digital revolution.

Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis observe that “during the first years of the ‘digital revolution,’ digital technology was largely inserted into the framework of existing traditional

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<sup>769</sup> Eikon World, <http://www.eikonworld.com/faq.htm>

photographic practice.”<sup>770</sup> Globally, the 1990s was characterized by a radical change from analogue technology (darkroom tradition, chemical processing and film) to digital technology of image treatment.<sup>771</sup> The colour printer and Photoshop displaced the photo lab and darkrooms.<sup>772</sup> It was more convenient for many photographers to replace their photo lab with digital apparatuses given the possibility of making prints without a home darkroom, and also given the restorative ability of the digital mode. Rubinstein and Sluis note that “the advent of affordable, consumer-orientated digital cameras introduced amateur photographers to several technological innovations which contributed to dramatic changes in popular photographic practices.”<sup>773</sup> In 1995, the first digital consumer camera with a preview screen was invented and it became possible to preview an image before it was taken.<sup>774</sup> Two remarkable achievements of the screen and the delete button was the lessening of the time in taking a picture and viewing it on the screen.<sup>775</sup> This introduced some flexibility into picture-taking and aimed for perfection in the process.

Corey Dzenko argues that digital technology facilitates traditional photographic processes and theoretically ruptures old assumptions that there is an indexical link between photographic images and “reality.”<sup>776</sup> In this argument, digital photography thus undermines the belief that photography is representative of reality. One still needs to ascertain how far the perceptions and understandings of postcolonial photography in Africa have shifted from the discourse of analogue photography into a more radical digital manipulation such as seen in the computer images of Kingsley Chuks that I shall discuss further below. While digital technology affects the theoretical notions of the photographic index, scholarly writings on contemporary African photography have not yet seriously engaged with the impact of digital media in photography. The notion of the photograph as index relies on the physical and chemical processes that constitute the medium. In analogue photography where film is used, light rebounds from an

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<sup>770</sup> Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis “A life more photographic: mapping the networked image” in *Photographies*, Vol. 1 Issue 1 March 2009, p. 11

<sup>771</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>772</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>773</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>774</sup> Kimio Tatsuno, “Current trends in digital cameras and camera-phones.” *Science and Technology Trends* 18 (2006): 36-44 24 Sept. 2007. <<http://www.nistep.go.jp/achiev/ftx/eng/stfc/stt018e/qr18pdf/STTqr1803.pdf>>

<sup>775</sup> Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis “A life more photographic, p.12.

<sup>776</sup> Corey Dzenk, “Analog to Digital: The Indexical Function of Photographic Images,” *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Media Literacy Special Issue (Sept/Oct 2009): 19-23.

object and is registered in the silver salts of the film's emulsion. This process depends on the presence of the object in front of the camera in order to record its image through projected light. A likely similarity that has been established between this method and digital photography is that image sensors read the intensity of light thereby acting as – and replacing – the role of film in analogue photography.

There are about 10 digital printing studios in Egbeda area of Lagos alone and there are always about one thousand photographers that use a particular studio in a day. When I visited Animasaun Digital Studio, I saw there are about 10 computers and each one is manned by an operator who attended to a particular photographer at a time. Each photographer directed the operator regarding a particular background to use and in this way the photographs are reconstructed to make them more lively and interesting. Physical backdrops similar to those used by such early photographers as Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe in Mali, and J. D'Okhai Ojeikere in Nigeria – who worked with analogue cameras – have been replaced by non-material backdrops of the digital computers such as those of the Animasaun digital lab. Technology thus shifts the manipulation of the physical, tangible photographic mise-en-scene to manipulation of the intangible digital surfaces. Daniel Downes notes that the lack of physical connection between a digital photograph's subject and image theoretically causes digital images to function as pure iconicity.<sup>777</sup> An example might illustrate this. In 1993 Andre Magnin visited Seydou Keita's studio, and Magnin was happy to handle Keita's film negatives most of which he eventually took to France and printed. If one compares Magnin's experience with my visit to Kingsley Chuks' studio in Lagos where I did not have to touch any negative but instead demanded that Chuks sends his images to me through the email, then it becomes clear that during Magnin's era the indexical film needed physical contact for one to make meaning out of it. My own case is different in that I did not need to touch anything since the digital image facilitated my work through the computer.

The argument advanced here is that the discourse of postcolonial photography in Africa may have shifted from an identification with the indexical claims of authenticity in the film

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<sup>777</sup> See Daniel Downes, *Interactive Realism: The Poetics of Cyberspace* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), pp. 60–61.

negatives to the iconicity of the digital mode which marks the absence of a sign, although this assumption is still debatable. The index, Mary Ann Doane argues, justifies its affiliation to reality through a privilege of contact, of touch, and of a physical connection. This exclusivity is absent in the digital medium, which, without any physical contact like the film is defined as a denial of reality. However, it has been argued that digital photographs still fulfil photography's indexical role. Tom Gunning argues that the rows of numerical data produced by a digital camera and the image of traditional chemical photography are both indexically determined by objects outside the camera. Both photographic chemicals and the digital data must be subjected to elaborate procedures before a picture will result.

Thus the very strong claim that digital images can be manipulated in ways analogue photographic images could not has been increasingly debunked. For example, film-based photography can also transform appearances, whether through retouching, use of filters or lenses, selection of angle of photography, exposure time, use of specially prepared chemicals in the developing stage, or adding elements through multiple printing. Traditional photography, therefore, also possesses processes that can attenuate, ignore, or even undo the indexical.<sup>778</sup> It is therefore established that the much-heralded malleability of the digital image does not contrast absolutely with analogue photography. The only difference being that the ease, speed and quality of digital manipulation represent an important new stage in the technology of imagery. No doubt digital processes can perform these alterations more quickly and more seamlessly, but the difference between digital and film-based photography cannot be described as absolute.<sup>779</sup>

Digital media appears as an apparent unveiling of an impelling system of dematerialization, such that "it is difficult," argues Mary Ann Doane "not to see the very term *digital media* as an oxymoron."<sup>780</sup> Dzenko observes that on a theoretical level, digital photographs present a challenge to the indexicality of photographic media. No longer does light bounce from an

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<sup>778</sup> Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," *NORDICOM Review*, vol. 5, no.1/2 (September 2004), p. 41.

<sup>779</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>780</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality and the Concept of Medium Specificity," in Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, (eds.), *The Meaning of Photography* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 9.

object and cause a physical and chemical reaction of the silver on the photographic emulsion; instead, the image is converted into data, which is seemingly not physical.<sup>781</sup>

Most reactions to the new technology of digitality came as a response to its apparent non-materiality and loss of tangibility. There was a growing display of doubt surrounding its reliability in relation to the 'real' because of its manipulability (the editing and creation of images from non existing object). Sarah Kember quotes Fred Ritchin's reactions to digital image-making in the early 1990s, where Ritchin called computer-imaging practices "the end of photography as we have known it," and laments that subjects have been asked to smile, photographs staged, and further manipulations have occurred such that the viewer must question the photograph at the basic physical level of fact.<sup>782</sup>

Ritchin's reactions coupled with a growing body of theoretical argument on this loss of physical connection, do not adequately explain the social function of photographic images. One can easily argue that many digitally constructed or distributed images "resemble" analogue photographs and are inserted into the same social discourse as their analogue predecessors. The ideological premise of the digital image therefore may depend on how one understands the dynamics of analogue photography. In this regard, Damian Sutton has de-emphasized the loss of indexicality of digital technology in his essay "Real Photography." He explains: "Digital photography, and especially its apparently invisible manipulability, destroyed the photograph's privileged connection to the object."<sup>783</sup> Beyond any evocations of vestiges of reality, the semiotic relationship appeared disproportionately inclined towards the iconic and the symbolic—i.e. representation. In spite of the above, such technological devices that came in the 1990s which linked digital photography to erasures and skepticism may not

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<sup>781</sup> For a discussion of "transcoding" see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp.45–48.

<sup>782</sup> Fred Ritchin quoted in Sarah Kember, "'The shadow of the object,' photography and realism," *Virtual Anxiety: Photography, New Technologies and Subjectivity* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 18–20.

<sup>783</sup> Damian Sutton, "Real Photography," in Damian Sutton, Susan Brind, and Ray McKenzie, ed., *The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2007), 165. Sutton cites Peter Lunenfeld, "Art Post-History: digital photography and electronic semiotics," in Hubertus von Amlunxen, ed., *Photography after Photography: Memory and representation in the digital age* (Munich: G&B Arts, 1996), p. 95.

totally be exclusive to the digital medium alone. It is assumed that analogue has similar devices also.<sup>784</sup>

Sutton argues that the assumed connection of analogue photographs to reality is an ideological function of photographs based on their indexicality. There is little change since the switch from analogue to digital, if these are seen in terms of the ideological underpinnings inherent in the analogue and its perceived connection to reality. There may be insignificant changes if seen in terms of the functions of digital photographs. But viewers expect “photographs to embody transparency and objecthood” in precisely the same way, whether viewing an analogue or digital photographic image.<sup>785</sup>

### **Digital ‘snapping’ as group curating.**

At 10 am on June 15, 2010, I went to All Souls Anglican Church in Lekki, Lagos, which was the venue for the wedding between Longfellow and Nkechi. I was invited by a friend who happened to be among the *asọ ebì* ladies attending the wedding. I had already made my intentions clear to this friend of mine that I was coming with a camera to photograph the occasion. At 10 am when I arrived, none of the guests had arrived. I was seated outside the church premises with a couple of few photographers who had come along uninvited to do ‘photography business’ (as is usually the norm in most public functions in Lagos).<sup>786</sup> At about noon the couple arrived escorted by a group of *asọ ebì* ladies including Chinyere who had invited me. As soon as they alighted from the car, Chinyere summoned her *asọ ebì* friends and they positioned themselves in a group and invited me to snap them. After the first snapshot they all swarmed around me – already aware that I work with a digital camera – to view the pictures from the screen of my camera. Uju, one of the ladies complained of how she positioned her head in the photo and insisted that I delete it and snap another one. Not wanting the rest of her friends to repeat the same act, I then decided to take several shots and then select from the best. After this round of snapping, again Obioma complained of her eyes – that

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<sup>784</sup> Ibid, p. 95.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>786</sup> This type of photographic business is sometimes referred to as *kpa kpa kpa* in Nigeria and it involves street photographers who gatecrash into public events and take photos randomly and making the printed copies available for the guests before the end of such events. Sometimes skirmishes erupted among the photographers in a bid to win prospective clients such that the first photographer to print the photos and rush back on the scene makes more money, and gets paid by the clients, to the detriment of the rest.

she looked away from the camera unlike her friends who were gazing at the camera – in one of the photos and demanded that I delete it. In fact, she asked me to print from one of the numerous photos I had taken where she felt she looked beautiful. As I watched some other friends of the celebrant snapping each other, the same process that I underwent with the *asọ ebi* ladies was being enacted. Some friends snapped while others swarmed around them to check what the photos looked like.

My photographic experience here is informed by a constant intervention of the photographed because of the digital camera I was using. There was an interactive forum between me and the ladies. Such interactions re-enact, enhance and alter body gestures and poses during photographing. The sense of aesthetic is heightened by viewing the image through the screen of my digital camera. And the competitiveness invoked around glamour is such that when all the ladies saw themselves in my camera screen, some believed they were less beautiful and wished the photo to be deleted and the whole process repeated. In this manner, deleting becomes the forte of the digital mode as opposed to the analogue camera. Rubinstein and Sluis argue that the delete button constructs the logic of a photographic rectitude and infallibility.<sup>787</sup> During the process of my ‘snapping,’ the screen of my digital camera served only as an arena for the instantaneous invention of personal beauty within group expressions of glamour. The screen of my digital camera became a tangible surface that offers immediate creative "insight" about images that are already visually accessible. This is where the surface becomes an index of group glamour and romaniticization.

In Pinney’s understanding, the surface entails “the dialogical spaces of face-to-face encounter.”<sup>788</sup> Unlike the studio where the face-to-face encounter is between the photographer and the photographed, in the digital mode during social events the face-to-face encounter is transferred to the digital screen where it becomes a process of engagement between the photographer, the referents and the digital screen.

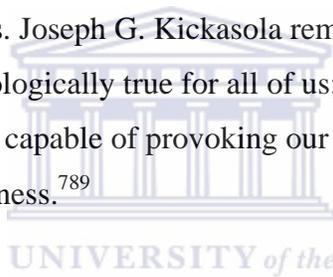
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<sup>787</sup> Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis “A life more photographic,” p.13.

<sup>788</sup> Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, (eds.), *Photography's Other Histories*, p. 205.

Again those photographed are not interested in the space-time conjunction of the image. Rather the focus is on the surface of the image itself, and how it can be a site for possible reconstruction. In the group digital photo sessions in which I participated as ‘photographer’ (unlike the analogue world where the photographer retains independence), photos are not just passively allowed to inhabit the camera but are acted upon on the spot, actively created, posed for and reconstructed. The photos are revised to form or illustrate surface narratives, re-visualized and set into animated dialogue with people. In this instance one could see that the first journey of the photo’s creative process begins on the screen of the digital camera. Instant viewing on my screen is akin to the immediacy of vision which the analogue camera could not afford.

Immediacy, a term employed in film theory, also applies to the way in which digital cameras provide instant vision of events. Joseph G. Kickasola remarks that ‘immediacy’ represents a modest term that is phenomenologically true for all of us; it is a term with a refreshingly consuming, sensational quality capable of provoking our “sense” of the indexical, without engaging that faculty in its fullness.<sup>789</sup>



Digital photographing could actually pose for a true apotheosis of art because of its capacity for intense and participatory meaning-making. In digital snapshots agency is offered on the screen of the camera which is the immediate arena of engagement for the subject to discuss the layers of meaning contained within the photograph. It is, therefore, experiential in such a way that offers the photographed an opportunity to ‘curate’ the photographic process. An important feature of this mode is that (as against the analogue camera) it no longer affords the photographer a dominant voice in the curation of the photographic process, nor does it offer him room to impress a singular, personal narrative upon group displays. Rather, by looking through the screen of the camera and commenting, photographing becomes an active process of group participation and interaction. During my photography session, the fact that Obioma wanted to position her face in the same manner that her friends did reflects Batchen’s view that “as a collective activity of picture-making, snapshots show the struggles of particular

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<sup>789</sup> Joseph G. Kickasola, “Cinemediacy: Theorizing an Aesthetic Phenomenon” <http://www.avila.edu/journal/kick.pdf> visited 28 July 2010.

individuals to conform to the social expectations, and visual tropes, of their sex and class.”<sup>790</sup> In this *aso ebi* photo I took, everyone simultaneously desired to adhere to the popular notions of ‘looking beautiful in the photo.’ Could digital snapshots be described as odes to conformist uniformity, in the manner in which Obioma and her friends desired to conform to conventional practice of being ‘photogenic?’ That Obioma and her friends wished to look beautiful and insisted on deleting the supposed ‘ugly’ photos perhaps shows that there is a sense of conformism prevailing in perceptions that one must look beautiful in the photo.

### **Altered surfaces: what is a snapshot?**

Kingsley Chuks took me to his studio where he had reworked some of the photos he took at the wedding. Most photos he took were of people in *aso ebi* uniform since in present-day Lagos (and as seen in previous chapters) a great percentage of guests who attend parties dress in *aso ebi*. However, the celebrants requested that he treat the photos very well before making an album for them. He actually informed the celebrants that he would alter the photos to create variety. He started by altering the backgrounds of some of them. Certain ladies in *aso ebi* were given a different background that utterly changed the photos, making it difficult for one to identify the original context under which the photographs were taken. More than six of the photos were given backgrounds with the use of Photoshop (Figures 3, 4, 6, 8). The original photos retained the original background. Viewing Chuks’ photos allowed me to arrive at the conclusion that he – as well as many other photographers in Lagos – is an artist-photographer in the eyes of his clients. Indeed, Chuks might well have attained a certain level of ‘renown’ in his professional generation. This does not mean he is validated by any cultural institutions such as galleries and museums in that celebratory manner which formally qualifies a practitioner as an ‘artist-photographer’. But what he does with Photoshop allowed me to discover new areas of engagement with contemporary post-colonial photography, especially photographers not validated within the ideological, institutional precincts of art orthodoxy.

This photographing attitude did not exist in 1960s Nigeria when, according to Pa J. D’Okhai Ojeikere, “most weddings usually had one commissioned photographer hired most of the

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<sup>790</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

times by the bridegroom.”<sup>791</sup> Pa Ojeikere, who owns a photo studio along Ogubanwo Street in Ketu area of Lagos, achieved international acclaim through a book written about him by Andre Magnin. Ojeikere narrated to me how he had covered weddings in the 1950s and 60s and actually showed me some photos of the weddings he covered. “I used to be the only photographer in most weddings I covered,” he said. These days there are usually innumerable photographers during most social activities. Figure 1 shows an *asọ ebi* group photograph during a wedding which Pa Ojeikere covered in 1969 and he actually said the total photos he took that day were not more than 30. In recent weddings in Lagos almost everybody has a camera – either hand cameras, camera phones, or automatic analogue cameras. A question then arises: could this photographic ubiquity aptly fit into what Geoffrey Batchen describes as the ‘boring pictures’ and ‘snapshots’ category? This constitutes another area of scholarly engagement.

There is a growing recognition among photography theorists of essentialist postulations of a history of photography that is ideologically tied to categorization. These theorists have also worked to open up this historical canon to embrace further sundry classifications such as the ‘snapshot.’<sup>792</sup> For example, James Elkins has unveiled the inherent divisions and tensions of disciplinary boundaries – in ‘high art’ and vernacular practices – among art history scholars. In recent times through the efforts of these theorists, there is an increasing validation of the historical premise of snapshot aesthetics but this is only based on the self-referential investigation of snapshot aesthetics’ influence upon ‘fine art.’<sup>793</sup>

Snapshots have come to be part of the “ethnographic turn” that tended to displace art history with visual culture.<sup>794</sup> Snapshots have been described as the most “ubiquitous and familiar of photographic genres”<sup>795</sup> capable of provoking a desire for alternative histories of photography. But because snapshots are the most numerous and popular of photographic forms, they

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<sup>791</sup> Interview with Pa J. D. Ojeikere, Ketu, Lagos, 15 March 2010.

<sup>792</sup> For more discussions on Snapshot Aesthetics see Geoffrey Batchen, “Snapshots: art history and the ethnographic turn” *Photographies* Vol Number p. 121. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2002); Michel Frizot, (ed.), *A New History of Photography* (Cologne: Konemann, 1998).

<sup>793</sup> See James Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>794</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, “Snapshots”, p.121.

<sup>795</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121.

represent an interpretive problem absolutely central to any substantial scholarship devoted to the history of photography.<sup>796</sup>

However, the argument I advance here is an identification or perhaps incarnation of ‘art-photography’ within the precincts of popular photography. Kingsley Chuks, a popular photographer in Lagos might have taken his photography beyond ‘snapshots,’ considering the creative processes surrounding their ‘snapping’ and eventual production through the special attention given to the surfaces. Unlike other photographs where the snapping is done on-the-spur-of-the-moment, without much work, most *asọ ebi* photographs which Chuks took underwent painstaking, imaginative processes during snapping and their final production, a practice resembling art-photographic conventions.

The fact that Chuks’ clients appreciate his creative input – demanding that he reworks the surfaces – shows that there is an elevation of the ‘snapshots’ and vernacular, everyday genre of photography to the level of aesthetic objects. Indeed the argument one may need to advance here is that Chuks’ photographs may no longer be seen as banal pieces of visual consumption because they satisfy popular demands and inhabit private spaces. Chuks’ effort is rather a deviation from the normative and institutionalizing assumptions of postcolonial photographic practice. He has highlighted the importance of the surface located on the image and the various invented contexts it undergoes in the digital studios of the photographer. It also shows that the very materiality of the digital object is not the mechanical and the physical.

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<sup>796</sup> Geoffrey Batchen in his essay, “Snapshots: art history and the ethnographic turn,” p. 121.



Figure 1. *Asọ ebì* group Photograph  
Photo: J D'Okhai Ojeikere, Lagos, 1969.



Figure 2. *Asọ ebì* women  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.



Figure 3. Asọ ebi women against a Photoshopped plain background  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.



Figure 4. Asọ ebi women against a Photoshopped textile background.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.



Figure 5. *Asọ ebi* woman in red.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.

  
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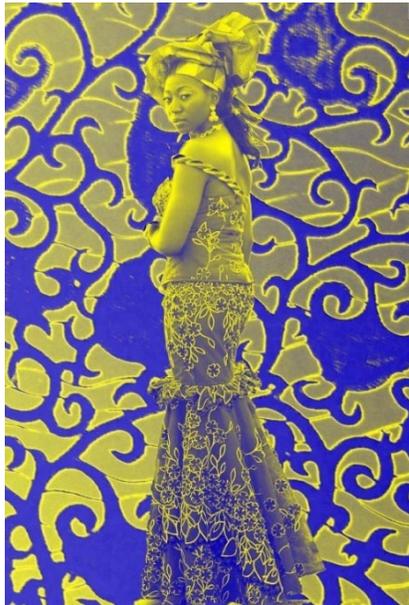


Figure 6. *Asọ ebi* woman on a Photoshopped textile background.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.



Figure 7. Family members of the Bride in *aso ebi*.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.



Figure 8. Family members of the Bride in *aso ebi* against a Photoshopped textile background.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009



Figure 9. Family members of the bride in *aso ebi*.  
Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.



Figure 10. Family members of the Bride in *aso ebi* with a textile background with lady on blue in Figure 9 Photoshopped out.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks, Lagos, 2009.

In a vivid description of Seydou Keita's photographs, Kobena Mercer observes that "with various props, accessories and backdrops, the photographer stylizes the pictorial space, and

through lighting, depth of field, and framing, the camera work heightens the mise-en-scene of the subject, whose poses, gestures and expressions thus reveal a self not as he or she actually is, but ‘just a little more than what we really are.’”<sup>797</sup> This comment recognizes the fact that the pictorial space is located in the real studio of the photographer where real clothes and backgrounds and props are used to reveal a self that is not very real. In the present context of my discussion regarding Kingsley Chuks’ *asọ ebì* photographs, the pictorial space is most often located in the digital studio of the computer which allows him room to perform all the decorative activities on the surface of the photograph. The pictorial surface of the photograph becomes more surreal than real. The surface is shifted from the factual, concrete exploitation of the physical body and space in the studio of the photographer to the manipulation of non-physical body and spaces of the computer. In other words, by de-linking the physical sites of wedding ceremonies, Chuks’ photographs emphasize a new kind of geography, privileging immobility and stasis over what Stephen Groening calls “place-loyalty”.<sup>798</sup>

Thus on these surfaces, the context and location of the digital object are manipulated, allowing for relationships and juxtapositions that were previously not possible. Chuks has shown that the nature of digital photography, therefore, is not presence and history but translation and modification. Separated from the presupposition of truth, Chuks’ digital image is no longer bound by the conventions of truth. It is free to be as expressive as a painting. The photos live up to what Pinney describes as “refusal of the realist chronotopes,”<sup>799</sup> by stripping away all the “organizing principles of Cartesian perspectivalism or the surface arts of describing”<sup>800</sup> seen in Figures 2, 5 and 7. I suggest that Chuks’ deliberate obliteration of the Cartesian perspectivalism amounts to what Poole describes as “hiding what lays hidden underneath the untidy surface details.”<sup>801</sup> It could also mean excluding from view what Elizabeth Edwards

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<sup>797</sup> See Kobena Mercer, cited in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, (eds.), *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p.78.

<sup>798</sup> ‘Place-loyalty’ is Groening’s metaphor for the new spatial categories promised by travel which connects one to the physical spaces of one’s own surrounding as one travels through such modes as the bus. This according to Groening is destabilized by air travel for example. I use this metaphor in this context to mean the physical spaces connecting one to one’s memories. See Stephen Francis Groening, “Connected Isolation: Screens, Mobility, and Globalized Media Culture,” a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, December 2008, p. 24.

<sup>799</sup> Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, (eds.), *Photography's Other Histories*, p.218.

<sup>800</sup> Krista Thompson, “The sound of Light” p.498.

<sup>801</sup> Deborah Poole, “An Excess of Description: Ethnography, Race, and Visual Technologies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 34 (2005), pp. 159-179, p.164.

calls “visual excess” of context and the “off frame.”<sup>802</sup> Thinking through Edward’s phrases further suggests that this “visual excess” begets the surface details that threaten to undermine the very subjects Chuks aims to pronounce. This creative subversion functions as an erasive medium and closely reflects what historical oil paintings did with the pictorial surface of the image. Norman Bryson has argued that historical oil paintings first erase the surface of the picture-plane: visibility of the surface would threaten the coherence of the fundamental technique through which Western representational image classically works the trace, of ground-figure-relations....<sup>803</sup> Chuks, by placing figures against a monochrome bright grey background (Figure 3), literally pulls the ground from the representation, highlighting the organizing structure, the erasive illusion, of Photoshop editing.

In Figures 4, 6, and 8, Chuks’ employment of such textile-like background extends into a broader engagement with the history of post-colonial photography, which foregrounds the historic relation between photography and textile commodities in the African context. An interesting metaphor to tinker around with especially in the visual loudness of textiles in West Africa is what Krista Thompson calls “the visual scream of the commodity,”<sup>804</sup> in which the fascination with the visual appeal of textile resonates across both fashion and photography. The attraction that textiles possess as a form of personal adornment and visual representation may be seen as a means of articulating visual subjectivity in Africa outside of Western economies of vision: it is no longer an anti-fashion to appear in public photographs dressed in ‘traditional’ textile materials. His digital treatment of the pictorial space in the *aso ebi* photos is in keeping with surfacist aesthetics’ revelatory potential. It brings into focus alternative ways of seeing that dominant forms of postcolonial photographic representation conceal from view, by foregrounding the creeping consciousness of digital technology in Africa.

Considering the nature and stylistics of Chuks’ surfaces (often through textiles), one may need to invoke Lau’s argument that the role of surfaces extends to “covers for the human body and forms that are likened to the human body, personal ornaments, attires and their essential role

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<sup>802</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, “Beyond the boundary: a consideration of the expressive in photography and anthropology,” in Banks M, Morphy H, (eds.) *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press 1997), pp. 53-80.

<sup>803</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The logic of the gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 111-117.

<sup>804</sup> Krista Thompson, “The sound of Light” p. 499.

for personal and collective identity.”<sup>805</sup> From this one can identify a striking homology in Chuks’ attempt to (re)construct the surface of the photographic ‘spaces’ using textiles, through which he fashions both personal and collective visual identities, and the fact that the same textiles are employed to fashion *asọ ebi* bodies in the figures. For Lau, there are parallels that suggest cognate expressions of a cross-media style based on enriching surfaces – by perceiving and rendering design through background space. The background space constitutes the arena where time and space experience a dramatic reconfiguration. And for this reason there is a need to reflect on Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope in relation to time and space.

Mikhail Bakhtin describes the chronotope as a site within a narrative where time and space “thicken” and merge, assuming each the qualities of the other.<sup>806</sup> Bakhtin goes to great lengths to categorize these various chronotopes, such as “the chronotope of the road,” “the chronotope of the drawing room or salon,” “the chronotope of the idyll”, etc. To this list, I would add the “chronotope of the photograph” as the surface where the magical emanation of the image comes into confluence with the surreal pictorial space. This surface becomes the site in which time and space are made to undergo achronotopic transformation such that the image and its referent are on equal terms.



The notion of real time has changed since digital languages have been present in our everyday lives. Time is no longer perceived as the passing of a continuous action, confronted with the logic of the analogical pointers of a watch or the time-space fixer of the analogue camera. In the informational-flow society in which we live the notion of time is now digital, of discontinuous and ubiquitous character (omnipresent). The notion of displacement and of intervals (as it was) is gone, and time acquires a different dimension, that is arbitrary, intensive and diverted from traditional parameters. The spatial-temporal changes introduced by Chuks are in line with Lev Manovich’s observation that “the digital object presents a new functioning of space and time, info-subjectivity, new dynamics of cultural production and consumption.”<sup>807</sup> In this regard, time in Chuks’ photos is never existent in the pictures. Time

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<sup>805</sup> George F. Lau, “The work of surfaces,” p.263.

<sup>806</sup> Bakhtin, M.M., “Forms of Time and the Chronotope of the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin, Texas:University of Texas Press, 1981), reprinted, p. 202.

<sup>807</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 45–48.

has been blotted out – in Figures 2, 5 and 7 – and replaced by a surface that is only timeless – in Figures 3, 4, 6 and 8. The spatial-temporal relations in the image have been frozen into a digital reconstruction and which is only possible on the surface of the photos.

As could be seen in Chuks' photographs, the extant perception of space-time in photography is becoming connected to the constant manipulations propitiated by the digital mode. Chuks reminds us that through Photoshop editing, we live within a logic of an indefinitely present time that constantly subverts our relation with the past and the future, with memory and forgetfulness. In this sense, new circumstances of temporal apprehension are established through digitality that stretches and subverts the logic of realist times.

Surfaces have been theorized as extensions of body and mind, intended to be layered and networked.<sup>808</sup> I would add that some surfaces are meant to relate to other similar surfaces. Such a proposal helps to explain Chuks' widespread distribution of surfaces across the figure-space boundary. Close examination of Chuks' creative resources reveal a subversion of the rigid determinism of spatial-temporal surfaces into a process that incorporates the fictional processing mechanism of the digital system. Contrary to Bakhtin's view, time and space are no longer equal and interdependent. One can exist without the other. These photos could be read in terms of 'achronotopic' surfaces that do not allow the viewer to interpret construction through space and time simultaneously, such that there is no revelation of any layeredness and interdependency. A logical argument here is that in Chuks' digital system, the viewer can no longer be immersed in the photograph; neither can they pierce their ways through any wedding context. In Figures 2, 3, 5, and 7, the discarding of formal photographic structures of linear-perspective and decisive moments during the events photographed – as seen in Figure 1, 4 and 6 – foregrounds a tendency to dislodge the spatio-temporal flow in favour of a creative enterprise in the Photoshop medium.

My further enquiries about the people Chuks photographed and the circumstances surrounding the digital photographs yielded some interesting results. The women in Figure 8, according to

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<sup>808</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Carl Knappett, "Beyond Skin: Layering and Networking in Art and Archaeology," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 16: 239–51, 2006.

Chuks, are members of the Egbeda Social Club who asked him to remove them from the occasion.<sup>809</sup> So the assumption here is that there is a quest for detachment or, put differently, a desire to be removed from an occasion by the clients. The discovery made here is that most people whom Chuks photographed do not care whether their space is invaded by intruders during the actual process of photographing. Chuks told me that some *asọ ebi* groups he photographed did not ask intruders to stay away from the photo, knowing fully well that these individuals would eventually go away during editing. He said that some of his clients demanded that those who did not appear in *asọ ebi* be Photoshopped out of the group. In some of my chapters, I have addressed the issue of exclusion in *asọ ebi*. In some wedding parties those who did not appear in *asọ ebi* uniform were denied food and some other wedding gifts. Now a similar exclusion is being imported into photography. According to Chuks,

Those who did not dress in *asọ ebi* sometimes did not fit into the group photograph. For example, during the photo session in some weddings, when a call is made for a group photograph of friends of the bride, everybody comes out dressed in *asọ ebi*. You would notice that the group would not be happy to allow anyone not dressed in similar *asọ ebi* as them to join the photograph because the person, according to them, will spoil the photo.<sup>810</sup>

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This statement may be understood if one looks at Figure 8, for instance. Everyone appears in *asọ ebi* and one would imagine that anyone who dresses differently wanting to join the group would be vehemently rejected. To demonstrate this further, the people in the background in Figure 8 have been removed. It is assumed therefore that in Figure 8, the couple demanded this exclusion. It can be established that the art of surfacism achieved through Photoshop editing plays many roles therefore: first, it lives up to the aesthetic expectations of clients, second it excludes undesirable elements, and finally, it invents the studio space. And again it could be argued that in some instances it is informed by a sense of exclusivity: a need to ward off invaders.

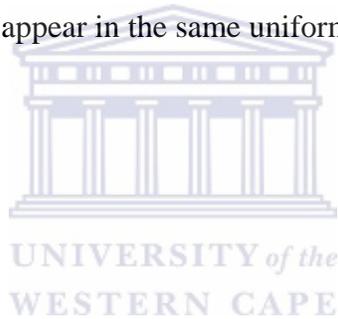
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<sup>809</sup> Kinglsey Chuks, email conversation with author, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion.**

In this chapter, I have suggested that *asọ ebi* may have informed the revolution seen in digital Photoshop editing among Lagos photographers. The urge to appear in fashionable *asọ ebi* dresses has influenced the surface reconstruction of most wedding photographs. I have shown that the proliferation of photographers in social events in Nigeria is a trend that came with the new technological capital of digital cameras and the digital photo lab. Photographing now offers a creative platform to alter surface qualities of many photos taken at weddings and other social events, thus removing them from the time and space of such events to an invented time and space. In this chapter, it is assumed that what obtains in recent times in Lagos popular photography, and as such certain postcolonial photographic practices, is a mobile studio where the props and studio spaces have been replaced by the digital technology of Photoshop studio spaces. The Photoshop software has aided certain *asọ ebi* groups to possess their own spaces and exclude those who did not appear in the same uniform as theirs.



## Chapter 7.

### OF MUTUALITY AND COPY: FASHIONING *ASO EBÌ* THROUGH FASHION MAGAZINES IN LAGOS.

#### Introduction.

It seems that by the 1980s, most Lagosians had carefully studied the requirements for visibility and effective integration into the cultures, and the declining economy, of the postcolonial city. Perhaps, in crafting strategies for economic survival in the city, Lagosians at the same time devoted time to improvising means of social survival. And it seems that to be able to effectively reinvent themselves for the exceptional challenges of these survivals, expressions of aspirant affiliation became tied with forms of visibility through what is known as the *Owambe party*. In the *Owambe party*, elegance and social belonging became critical terrains for negotiating material and symbolic power. *Aso ebi*, being a veritable expression of elegance, was at the heart of this social contestation, aspiration and power. This, in addition to the emergence of cheaper and faster methods of printing, gave birth to an explosion in the publication of what is known as ‘fashion magazines’ in Lagos.

In the light of the above, therefore, I argue in this chapter that while *aso ebi* is a condition of Lagos cosmopolitanism through *Owambe* and new artisanal economies that introduced cosmopolitan elements into *aso ebi* fashioning, *aso ebi* also flowered through a mutual dialogue among other players in the city. These players include the photographers, the fashion magazines, individuals, vendors and tailors in urban Lagos. This also foreshadowed a broader cultural turn toward ‘modern’ fashionability. Finally, while the language of *aso ebi*, both in its socializing message and dress codes, are framed around notions of uniformity, the practice of *copying* also enables the individuals to transcend the burdens imposed by *aso ebi* uniformity.

### ***Asọ ebì* as a condition of Lagos cosmopolitanism.**

Many authors have acknowledged the historical and geographic contexts that give rise to certain types of cosmopolitanisms.<sup>811</sup> These contexts are underlined by a common verdict that “no single conceptualisation is adequate” in understanding cosmopolitanism.<sup>812</sup> I recognize these numerous texts and, while I do not wish to engage them individually, I acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which it is possible speak to difference.<sup>813</sup> Through this I chart a specific description of what I call *Lagos cosmopolitanism*. While there is nothing new about cosmopolitanism in Africa,<sup>814</sup> in Lagos the conditions created by urbanisation, visual and social transformation are producing a new cosmopolitanism that is not based on the spread of modern education and the development of knowledge and ‘refined culture’. This

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<sup>811</sup> See, amongst others, Steven Vertovec and Joshua Cohen, "Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism," in Steven Vertovec and J. Cohen, (eds) *Conceiving cosmopolitanism : theory, context and practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ulf Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and Locals in a World Culture," *Theory, Culture and Society* June, 1990, pp.237-51, p. 233; Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational connections : culture, people, places* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996); Zlatko Skrbis, Gavin Kendall, and Roger Waldinger, "Locating Cosmopolitanism," *Theory, Culture & Society* vol.21, no. 6, pp.115-36, 2004; Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry, "Cultures of cosmopolitanism," *The Sociological Review* Vol. 50, no.4, pp. 461-81, 2002; Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanisms," in P. Cheah and B. Robbins, (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998a); Bruce Robbins, "Introduction: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanisms," in P. Cheah and B. Robbins, (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998b, 2); Daniele Archibugi and David Held, *Cosmopolitan democracy: an agenda for a new world order* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press 1995); David Held, "Cosmopolitanism: globalisation tamed?" *Review of International Studies* Vol.29, No. 4, pp. 465-80, 2003; Pheng Cheah, "Introduction, part II: The Cosmopolitical – Today," in P. Cheah and B. Robbins (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Pheng Cheah, Affiliation University of California at Berkeley, "Cosmopolitanism," *Theory, Culture & Society* Vol. 23, No. 2-3, pp. 486-96, 2006; Stuart Hall, "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities," in Steven Vertovec, and Joshua Cohen, (eds), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Michele, Lamont, and Sada Aksartova, "Ordinary Cosmopolitanisms: Strategies for Bridging Racial Boundaries among Working-Class Men," *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol.19, No. 4, pp. 1-25, 2002; Arjun Appadurai, "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai," in C. a. Breckenridge, S. Pollock, H. K. Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, (eds) *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002); Victor Roudometof, "Transnationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Glocalization," *Current Sociology* Vol.53, No.1, pp.113-35, 2005; Mike Featherstone, "Cosmopolis: An Introduction," *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol. 19 No. (1/2), pp.1-16, 2002; Bryan Turner, "Cosmopolitan Virtue, Globalization and Patriotism," *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol. 19 No. (1-2), pp. 45-63, 2002; Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* Vol.23 No.3, 1997, pp. 617-9.

<sup>812</sup> Steven Vertovec and Joshua Cohen, "Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism," in Steven Vertovec and J. Cohen, (eds) *Conceiving cosmopolitanism : theory, context and practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>813</sup> See for example Daniele Archibugi and David Held, *Cosmopolitan democracy: an agenda for a new world order* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press 1995); Breckenridge et al., and Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanisms," in P. Cheah and B. Robbins, (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998a).

<sup>814</sup> Hudita Nura Mustafa, "Sartorial ecumenes: African styles in a social and economic context," in *The Art of African Fashion* (Eritrea, The Netherlands: Prince Claus Fund and Africa World Press, 1998), p.20; Long histories of trade and appropriation were already evident in Nigeria from the fifteenth century (being a period of slave trade) down to the Independent years (see chapter 2). Michael Echeruo notes that by 1880, the cosmopolitanism of Lagos was already inevitable and that in the early nineteenth century the political organization of the entire British West Coast recognized only one single administrative unit and Lagos was only a port and trading centre. Since Nigeria was not in existence as at then Lagos was not thought of as the capital of any homogenous and independent territorial entity. The 'negro' community of Lagos saw itself as an extension of the larger 'negro' world that, among other places, included Liberia and the United States. They came to see themselves as an embodiment of a cosmopolitan black ethos that is not overshadowed by any provincial character. See Michael J. C. Echeruo, "Nnamdi Azikiwe and Nineteenth - Century Nigerian Thought," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 1974), pp. 245-263 p.247.

new cosmopolitanism is evidently disseminated through the new technological capital as seen in the Nigerian home video known as Nollywood, cell phones, internet, the print media, among other things. However, in the ensuing postcolonial urbanism witnessed in Lagos since the event of Independence in 1960, sartorial elegance and desire for visibility became forces of the ‘modern’ city. By the 1980s neo-liberal reforms had almost disempowered the middle class. For this middle class, the need for class revival and status consolidation was coterminous with public visibility. In Lagos, this scenario was played out in what is known as *Owambe* parties.

The practice of *Owambe* party in addition to a combination of the above visual elements and the instabilities in the textile economy within the commercial city of Lagos provide an unstable space for the material expressions of cultural ideals, individual excellence and the collective tradition embodied in what I call *Lagos cosmopolitanism*. *Asọ ebì* is, however, an essential part of this cosmopolitanism. Cyprian Ekwensi, one of Nigeria’s foremost novelists notes the importance of *asọ ebì* in this type of cosmopolitanism in Lagos. He suggests that the women are attracted by the “glitter of the fast life of the city and that most have been restricted too severely by the provincial mores of home.” He narrates the desires of Aina for Lagos thus:

It was a way of life she liked. The glamorous surroundings, the taxis, the quick drinks. This was one reason why she had come to the city from her home sixty miles away: to ride in taxis, eat in fashionable hotels, to wear the aso-ebi, that dress that was so often and so ruinously prescribed like a uniform for mourning...<sup>815</sup>

Aina’s aspiration to wear fashionable *asọ ebì* was only a practice that was validated within the networks associated with the ubiquitous Lagos *Owambe* parties. In other words, it is assumed that her desire for *asọ ebì* could only be realized through her connection with, and attendance in, *Owambe* parties.

*Owambe* is a term associated with the ubiquitous revelries in Lagos. And these revelries are constantly invoked on every modest occasion such as “your first job, your first car, college

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<sup>815</sup> Cyprian Ekwensi, *People of the City* (London: Heinemann, 1963), p.72.

graduations or your house opening.”<sup>816</sup> Reminiscing on her past experiences in Nigeria after fifty years of Independence Rukky Ladoja captures the spirit of *Owambe* thus:

The word is a Yoruba one that roughly translates as ‘always attending’. These parties are predominantly defined by the large number of guests – ten of whom you’ll know and seven hundred that came in off the street. Other key factors are the quantity and quality of the food, a musician or band, endless hours of dancing and mass uniformity of *aso ebi* fabric.<sup>817</sup>

Ladoja goes further to identify the circuit that revolves around *Owambe* which include the “exorbitant amount spent by partygoers on a weekly basis sewing new styles of *aso ebi* for every event they attend; the event planner; headgear specialists and party photographers.”<sup>818</sup> Ladoja aptly crafts the Nigerian photographers ‘Nigerazzi,’ a term she borrowed from Paparazzi and remarks that “they have created a niche market for themselves by making photos available for sale, mere moments after high-spirited shots are taken.”<sup>819</sup> Ladoja seems to have provided a succinct account of this section in her summary. Her last words, ‘uniformity of fabric,’ capture this. This supports my further argument that *Owambe* is synonymous with *aso ebi* and photography. From the number of guests Ladoja quotes (inclusive of seven hundred anonymous guests) one expects that the number of *aso ebi* wearers would have soared at every *Owambe* party. And these are the numbers that the photographers struggle to ‘cover.’

The increasing demand for this type of social gathering on the streets of Lagos became more pronounced during the late 1980s when the then military government encouraged a culture of corruption and profligate spending.<sup>820</sup> By the late 1980s Nigeria had already slid down the economic ladder and the standard of living had declined in such a way that many young school leavers cared less about securing government jobs. Indeed, the minimum wage was so poor that the civil service attracted minimal applications from graduates and others. What happened instead was a propensity to be drawn to schemes to get rich quick. The massive

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<sup>816</sup> Nona David, ‘Bend down, shake to the beat’, *Top Traveller*,

<http://toptraveler.groups.vox.com/library/post/6a11017b8a484860e0110167cd374860d.html>, 2005, accessed 1 October, 2009.

<sup>817</sup> Rukky Ladoja, “Spirit of Owambe” in *Time Out*, Celebrating Nigeria at 50, October 2010, p.34

<sup>818</sup> *Ibid*, p.35.

<sup>819</sup> *Ibid*, p.35.

<sup>820</sup> Interview with Pa Johnson Omoregbe, Mushin, Lagos, December 20, 2010.

corruption that was encouraged by the then military government of Ibrahim Babangida occasioned a system of fraud known as 419 (named after a section of the Nigerian criminal code known as 419). Ill-gotten wealth was openly displayed on the streets of Lagos which was very notorious for such spending because of its location as the centre of commerce. The embargo on the importation of cars was lifted and more 'posh' cars found their way into Nigeria. Weekly celebrations of ill-gotten wealth by the cabals close to the corrupt military regime were carried out on the streets of Lagos. Most of the cabals were uneducated and because of the stupendous amount of wealth they controlled young people were discouraged from enrolling into schools, instead they were lured into the fraud of 419. The weekly *Owambe* came with *aso ebi*, which, again, was another open space of generosity, since there was always a provision of free food for poor uninvited guests. Bunmi Darling recollects the 1980s thus:

In the 1980s as a child in Nigeria, I can still recall a time my mother was dressing up for an *Owambe* Party [...] when it comes to *Owambe* parties, she does make an effort to look beautiful. I would sit quietly in my mother's bedroom and watch her Pancake her face with Make Up. The results were often very stunning when she combines it with her *Aso Ebi*. A typical *Owambe* party in Nigeria would mean having to disrupt a whole street; the parties would take place on the streets without permission from local authorities. Tables and Chairs would be set on the streets, with no consideration of their neighbours, furthermore, their neighbours are never forewarned, in that aspect, we can be quite lawless and insensitive to the needs of our neighbours. These parties promise calamities: they carry on till the next day. If it's a Wedding, they will have the Engagement party on a Friday, then the wedding party the next day, which means, there will be a road blockage for two days, however, they can be quite enjoyable as the atmosphere is always a joyous one to behold. It is an occasion to exhibit fashionable *aso ebi* for one can change into more than six different *aso ebi* dresses. Although, things have changed immensely, we are now enlightened to rent Halls and Hotels for social functions.<sup>821</sup>

It becomes clear from the above that in the *Owambe* party the realization of cultivated beauty, the erasure of any questionable demeanor, the negotiation of symbolic power, became an index of public approbation. *Aso ebi*, no doubt, was at the heart of these struggles. What is surprising is the seriousness with which *Owambe* was pursued by Lagosians then and how it

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<sup>821</sup> Bunmi Darling, "Owambe party, would you?" In *Bunmi's Blog* <http://bunmidarling.com/bunmiblogs/?p=68> accessed 9 September, 2011.

fed into the lawless system of the military era. This is where one needs to analytically extract some of the factors that contributed to the entrenchment and fashioning of *asọ ebì* in urban Lagos. It is clear that *asọ ebì* was not ensconced by the corrupt practice of the system, rather it was nurtured by the system.

Johnson Omoregbe remarks that under the leadership of Ibrahim Babangida, Lagos in the 1990s was a haven of the open display of ill-gotten wealth. “Many fraudsters who were aided by some government officials sought public relevance through open parties known as *owambe* organized on the streets of Lagos. During these periods most streets on the Lagos Mainland were blockaded on weekends during *Owambe* parties.”<sup>822</sup> The reason for this according to Omoregbe was that people wanted to show themselves, especially their *asọ ebì* clothes, friends, and what they possessed through these parties. Referring to his street on number 14 Akerele Street in Mushin, Lagos, Omorogbe recalls:

This street was always blockaded during that period and I had to park my car on the other street most Fridays because they usually blocked ours around 6 pm every Friday till the next morning, and sometimes till Sunday. During this period individuals take laws into their hands and this attitude was encouraged by the military system which had no regard for the rule of law. Even though it was wrong to block these public roads, you discover that these people were aided by the police whom they bribed to look away.<sup>823</sup>

What is significant from Omoregbe’s description of Lagos in this period is a system that thwarted the normality and formalities of western modernity and represents what Tejumola Olaniyan calls the “postcolonial incredible.”<sup>824</sup> Quite indicative of the lawlessness of the military era in Nigeria, *postcolonial incredible* admits the unimaginable, authorizes the disorderly, embraces the defiant and thus engenders the crisis that would bedevil the postcolonial more generally. By 1999 however, Nigeria had become a democratic nation and the democratic institutions in Lagos State aspired towards a recuperation of infrastructural and social sanity that had eluded the city. In this regard, Lagos State government prohibited the

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<sup>822</sup> Interview with Pa Johnson Omoregbe, Mushin, Lagos, December 20, 2010.

<sup>823</sup> Ibid.

<sup>824</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the music! Fela and his rebel art and politics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 2. See also Akin Adesokan, “Anticipating Nollywood: Lagos circa 1996,” *Social Dynamics*, Vol.37, No.1, pp.96-110.

blockading of public roads through *Owambe* in 1999<sup>825</sup> during the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, although the full implementation of this law was not effective until 2007 when the incumbent governor Raji Fashola (who incidentally is an attorney) took over. According to Shedrack Okoro, “By 2007 when Governor Fashola outlawed *Owambe* in the streets, most photographers like me followed the celebrants to designated party centers across Lagos.”<sup>826</sup> As noted by Ladoja earlier, it is in response to these ubiquitous celebrations that one finds the growing number of photographers like Okoro who hung around the streets to meet the demands.

The importance of *Owambe* party in the promotion of the *aso ebi* fashion in urban Lagos is further underscored by Marris, who emphasizes the importance of family parties in the city of Lagos. These parties have created a space where “the foregathering of relatives and friends has become more important than the rituals that mark the phases of life.”<sup>827</sup> Marris observes how funeral parties serve as spaces of *aso ebi* display and how such situations evoke visual impact in some public spaces in Lagos.<sup>828</sup> Marris is specific in emphasizing only funerals, which suggests that other parties such as wedding parties, birthday parties, house warming parties, chieftaincy parties, child naming parties among many others, also make an important visual impact. It is crucial to note that this practice has also penetrated the diasporas and Nigerians all over the world seek every trivial moment to invoke the euphoric and nostalgic reminiscences of a typical Lagos *Owambe* party. Nigerians in the diaspora now forge a common cultural identity by invoking *aso ebi* at every *Owambe* which happens at the slightest opportunity. Reporting on a typical *Owambe* party in far away Baltimore, United States, Innakoya writes:

At 10 o'clock on a Sunday night, the Nigerian music was thumping and the party, on the outskirts of Baltimore, was still churning. The remnants of a feast - goat meat, plantains, fried fish, moin-moin and jollof rice - littered rows of tables. Some of the hundreds of Nigerians, who had gathered to honor a friend, still swirled in circles on the dance floor in colorful, embroidered African outfits ‘(aso ebi)’ with head ties that regally swept up

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<sup>825</sup> Lagos State Ministry of Information Year Book 1999 (Lagos: Lagos State Government Press, 1999).

<sup>826</sup> Interview with Shedrack Okoro, Lagos, April 5, 2010.

<sup>827</sup> Peter Marris, *Family and Social Change in an African City: a Study of Rehousing in Lagos* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p 31.

<sup>828</sup> Marris, ‘*Family and Social Change in an African City*’.

toward the ceiling. A cloud of paper money, which Nigerians traditionally throw to express appreciation while dancing, fluttered and twisted to the floor.<sup>829</sup>

If a typical *Owambe* party is an occasion to exhibit affluence and ebullient jocularity, it is equally an occasion to display fashionable *aso ebi* dresses. The spectacular display has often been misinterpreted by non-Nigerian observers as reckless overindulgence and wasteful consumption, especially with its concomitant high spending and spraying of money in *Owambe* parties.<sup>830</sup> ‘Diva Elegante’ attended an *Owambe* party in London where *aso ebi* had enkindled nostalgia and yearning for home. Even while he was trying to make his way out of the party he got caught “in yet another web of *aso ebi* invitation for another wedding party coming up next weekend.”<sup>831</sup> These parties are potential opportunities for people to appear in any of the omnipresent fashion magazines in Lagos. And with the expectation of “one’s dress style being viewed in public spaces through these magazines, one is considered important and fashionable and almost a celebrity.”<sup>832</sup> Some people, therefore, see these occasions as a space for competitive *aso ebi* fashion display.

It is clear from the above that large gatherings with money-spraying barons and spectacular *aso ebi* crowds became possible channels for class legitimation and social belonging. Expressions of urban modernity became largely determined by public ceremonial displays and large networks of friends mainly dressed in *aso ebi*. By the year 2008, new forms of status and wealth had occasioned the desire by a few Lagosians to develop new kinds of artisanal services that would also launch *aso ebi* practice into a more cosmopolitan modernising project. These service providers, popularly referred to as ‘event organizers’, engage in the tailoring, distribution and delivery of *aso ebi* to prospective clients.<sup>833</sup> Some examples of these include the *Aso ebi Planner* and the *Aso ebi Gallery*. Olusoga, the founder of *Aso ebi Planner*, said that in 2009 they organized ‘*Aso ebi* Bridal Exhibitions’, “which recorded a

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<sup>829</sup> Imnakoya, ‘Nigerian Owanbe Party: is it custom, craze, or curse?’ *Grandiose Parlor* <http://grandioseparlor.com/2005/11/nigerian-owambe-party-is-it-custom-craze-or-curse/> 2005, accessed 1 October, 2009.

<sup>830</sup> Imnakoya, ‘Nigerian Owanbe Party’.

<sup>831</sup> Diva Elegante, *9jers & Owanbe!* <http://divaelegante.blogspot.com/2007/08/9jers-owambe.html> 2007, accessed 2 October, 2009.

<sup>832</sup> Conversation with Nnenna Nwike, Lekki Peninsula Lagos, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

<sup>833</sup> Elisha Renne has tracked similar economies in her work of ‘Contemporary Wedding Fashions in Lagos, Nigeria,’ where she remarks that ‘this proliferation of shops in Lagos specializing in bridal gowns, hats, and associated wedding items and services (*of which aso ebi is one of them*) began in the mid-1990s and was fostered by another development, namely fashion shows that specialized in bridal fashions,’ (my italics).

great turnout of fabric merchants, bridal houses, event planners, make-up artists, caterers, etc”. The second show organized in 2010 was at “Silverbird Galleria in Lagos and lasted for five days.” Olusoga claims to have risen “from planning *aso ebi* to organizing an international fashion show which brings together international photographers, fashion designers, tailors, dignitaries, cultural icons, artistes, fun-seeking Lagosians and everyone who believes in the unity of family which *aso ebi* symbolises.”<sup>834</sup> He said the third show was held between 7 -11 February 2011 and it encapsulated “Bridal Exhibition, Fashion Show and Royalty Pageant and was well attended by renowned indigenous fashion designers, supermodels, fabric merchants, cloth weavers, wedding planners, event managers and many more who assisted families in creating that sense of love that is uniquely *aso ebi*.”<sup>835</sup> The show presented to the public a formidable “line-up of fabric merchants and bridal vendors displaying award winning designs, services and fabrics, also introducing vendors from the UK, USA and other African countries.”<sup>836</sup> Figure 1 shows some of the *aso ebi* designs at the event.



Figure 1.  
Scene from “*Aso ebi* Bridal Exhibition.”  
Courtesy of *Aso ebi* Planner, Lagos. March 10, 2011.

Another organization, known as *Aso Ebi Gallery*, is located at 3A Block G, Frank Komodo Street, Abraham Adesanya Estate, Ajar, Lagos state. The owner, Mrs Habiba Sani Adapoyi,

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<sup>834</sup> Interview with Babalola Olusoga, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

<sup>835</sup> Interview with Babalola Olusoga, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

<sup>836</sup> Interview with Babalola Olusoga, Lagos, March 10, 2011.

describes the outfit as “an event management, planning and marketing outfit for both corporate and personal events.”<sup>837</sup> She said that they “take the stress of people’s occasion through packaging *asọ ebì* and souvenirs and delivering them wherever they want.” Their work includes also “selecting and distributing *asọ ebì* to guests” by managing the dialogue between the textile suppliers and guests. According to her, all the customers have to do is “to relax.” She said they have “well trained and experienced photographers and camera crew who are professionals and well versed with the new photographic technologies.”<sup>838</sup> Adapoyi is a tailor who has devoted over six years to promoting *asọ ebì* as a cosmopolitan fashion style. She combines elements of western style dress and local fashion ideas to adapt *asọ ebì* into an entirely new context of high fashion. According to her, “we create miniskirts *aso ebi*, trousers, and headscarves” and in this way she has shown that *asọ ebì* is no longer encumbered by ‘tradition’. Figure 2 illustrates some of Adapoyi’s *asọ ebì* designs.



Figure 2. Women in *asọ ebì*  
Courtesy: Habiba Sani Adepoyi, Lagos, February 15, 2011.

The activities of *Asọ ebì Planner* and *Asọ ebì Gallery* already corroborate the tensions that define fashion categories. Such tensions could be seen in discourses about a fashion system

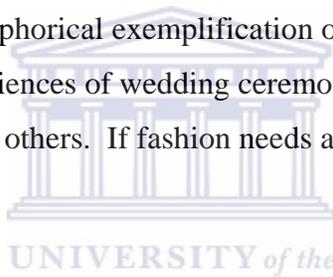
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<sup>837</sup> Interview with Habiba Sani Adepoyi, Lagos, February 15, 2011.

<sup>838</sup> Interview with Habiba Sani Adepoyi, Lagos, February 15, 2011.

that is neither truly ‘African’ nor entirely ‘Western’.<sup>839</sup> *Asọ ebì* is adapted into miniskirts and other cosmopolitan fashion styles, while the fashion shows seem to have localized versions of metropolitan fashion shows seen in cities such as Paris, London or Milan. One can therefore view *asọ ebì* in Lagos within this juxtaposition or intersection of multiple social and economic relations that absorb cosmopolitan influences.

Lagos has served as a city of fashion, providing ideas for various trends that people in the hinterland and others in the West African sub-region emulate. The landscape of *asọ ebì* practice therefore is mediated by the dynamics of a visual matrix of local and global elements. Some of these elements are represented by the *Asọ ebì Planner* and *Asọ ebì Gallery* enterprises, both of which have taken *asọ ebì* practice from the enclosed spaces of conservative tradition and launched it into indeterminate spaces of urban practice. *Asọ ebì Fashion Show* serves as a metaphorical exemplification of the archetypal *asọ ebì* practice itself which is performed for the audiences of wedding ceremonies, child dedication parties, street parties, political rallies, among others. If fashion needs a stage,<sup>840</sup> then Lagos is the stage for *asọ ebì* fashion.



No doubt, in the enterprise of global image commodities and cultural hegemonies, Lagos visual culture assumes a central place. It is impossible to navigate the street for five minutes without confronting sights such as public Nollywood viewing centres where the plebeians converge, photography studios, tailoring shops, artists’ shops, a public ceremonial event besieged by amateur and professional photographers looking for prospective clients, among others. The exceptionalism of Lagos lies in its unprecedented social ceremonials that promise diverse display opportunities of elegance and fashion, performed for multiple gazes including that of the camera. *Asọ ebì Fashion Show* therefore may have contributed to shaping avant-

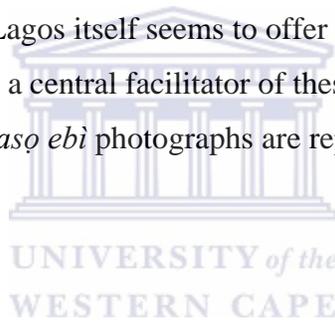
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<sup>839</sup> Hudita Nura Mustafa, “Sartorial ecumenes: African styles in a social and economic context,” in *The Art of African Fashion* (Eritrea, The Netherlands: Prince Claus Fund and Africa World Press, 1998), p.20; Hudita Nura Mustafa, “Intersecting Creativities, Oumou Sy’s Costumes in the Dakar Landscape,” in Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran (eds), *Contemporary African Fashion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p.127; Leslie Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion* (New York: Berg, 2002); Hudita Nura Mustafa, “Ruins and Spectacles: Fashion and City Life in Contemporary Senegal,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Arts*, 15: pp.47-53, 2002, p.28; Karen Tranberg Hansen, “The World in Dress: Anthropological perspectives on clothing, fashion, and culture,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2004, 33:369–92, 372).

<sup>840</sup> Hudita Nura Mustafa, “La Mode Dakaroise, Elegance, Transnationalism and an Africa Fashion Capital,” in Christopher Breward and David Gilbert, *Fashion’s World Cities* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), p. 195.

garde sensibilities. Again, “while making *aso ebi* ‘hip’ in Lagos, this show might have also contributed to the intensification of photographic representation of various styles of *ase ebi* dress designs in Lagos fashion magazines.”<sup>841</sup>

If the cosmopolitan city is a cluster and an aggregate of invisibility and, as Jonathan Raban puts it, a “province of anonymity,”<sup>842</sup> then one can argue that being seen is a proclivity that redefines the veil of anonymity around an individual’s persona. Furthermore, if new ways of consuming are linked to new ways of seeing,<sup>843</sup> then new ways of consuming *aso ebi* practice may be linked to new ways of seeing social events in Lagos, where *aso ebi* is worn, including *Owambe*, *Aso ebi Fashion Show* and their entangled circuits.<sup>844</sup> From the above evidence it is possible to suggest that *aso ebi* is a condition of Lagos cosmopolitanism. One can assert that the city may provide reasons why the practice of *aso ebi* continues to gain currency in contemporary Nigeria. While Lagos itself seems to offer its own reasons for some of these changing dynamics,<sup>845</sup> I locate a central facilitator of these dynamics in Lagos in the ‘fashion magazines’ where most of the *aso ebi* photographs are reproduced.



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<sup>841</sup> Okechukwu Nwafor, “The Spectacle of *aso ebi* in Lagos: 1990-2008” in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.14, No.1, pp.45-62, p.51.

<sup>842</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, p.28; Elizabeth Wilson also remarked that “although anonymity was central to city life, dress subtly subverted it.” It suggests that one’s relevance in the city, therefore, must be located in one’s ability to resist the city’s continuous tendency to hide the individual’s persona which *Owambe* might have achieved. See Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1995), p.156.

<sup>843</sup> See for example, John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York and London: Penguin, 1972), p.131. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.196; See also Juliet Ash and Lee Wright, (eds.), *Components of Dress* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988); Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1998); Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion, a New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.197; Margaret Ferrand, Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1939), p.113; Karin Barber, *A generation of Plays: Yoruba popular life in Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 244; Birgit Meyer, “Tradition and colour at its best”: ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ in Ghanaian video-movies” in *Journal of African Cultural Studies* Vol.22, No.1, 2010, pp.7-23; p.8.

<sup>844</sup> In some sense these new ways of seeing might have given impetus to newer forms of dress styles in Nigeria towards the end of the twentieth century, as many Nigerians abandoned Western styled dresses in favour of the supposed ‘African styles’. Elizabeth Hackspiel notes that “since the 1980s West African fashion has turned away from the readymade clothes in Western style” towards ‘African’ fabrics. See Elizabeth Hackspiel, “Modernity and tradition in a global world: fashion in Africa,” Exhibition review, *African Arts*, Summer 2008, Vol. 41, No.2. p.90; for the *Aso ebi Fashion Show* which took place in February 2010 at the Civic Centre, Victoria Island Lagos visit, for more information, ‘The *Aso ebi* fashion show 2010’ Santiago, <http://santiagopad.blogspot.com/2010/02/aso-ebi-fashion-show-2010.html>.

<sup>845</sup> Compare Grabski’s observation that “the city offers unparalleled creative and human resources” that has established fashion making as a quintessentially urban phenomenon. See Joanne Grabski, “Dakar’s Urban Landscapes: Locating Art and Artists in the City,” *African Arts* Vol.36, No. 4, pp.28-39, 2003.

### **Fashion magazines and the print media.**

By the year 2000, *asọ ebì* had come to dominate the pages of most fashion magazines in Nigeria. However, tracing the history of fashion magazines in Nigeria sheds light on why *asọ ebì* has dominated these pages and has flowered through this process.

In Nigeria, the ‘event’ or ‘fashion’ magazine is a common term used to refer to some homespun, soft-sell publications that are produced by individuals who masquerade as publishers. Some of these magazines operate on the banal level but occasionally publish a few good quality photographs. Sometimes their texts are marred by grammatical errors. They also defy certain ethical practices and are composed of photos of people (especially women) dressed in mainly ‘traditional’ costumes. Some of the publishers are barely educated people who care less about the quality than the financial benefits they will accrue. In Lagos alone, there are more than seventy magazines of this type and making a detailed inventory of their names seem a futile endeavor. The format is either eight inches by ten inches or twelve inches by fifteen inches, with glossy, color photos of women, mostly dressed in *asọ ebì* uniforms; the magazines are priced between one and two dollars or more.

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While one of the earliest print cultures in Nigeria started in Lagos with *Lagos Times* which was first published in 1880, an active print media flourished by 1920 through the publication of *The Lagos Daily News* which ran until 1936. *The West African Pilot* also began in 1937 as a nationalist project for the campaign against colonial rule. By the 1960s, Nigerians had cultivated the habit of publishing photographs of their ‘events’ and ceremonies in the newspapers. By then, although there was virtually no advanced printing technology - and the cameras were still not available as they are today to engender the kind of radical proliferation of publications seen today in Lagos - one could occasionally spot a few photographs in the daily newspapers of people who had celebrated one ceremony or the other. For example, on Tuesday August 10, 1965, the *Daily Times* of Nigeria reported, beneath a family photograph, “Mr. Godwin Anih of No. 40 Babani Street, Ajegunle, Apapa Lagos and his wife celebrated the naming ceremony of their newly born baby. Their child received the name Juliana Nwakaego Anih. Picture shows Mr. and Mrs. Godwin Anih and little Juliana Anih on her

mum's arms." Similar reports, in fact followed a weekly routine in the *Daily Times* and certain individuals looked forward to it.

This was probably the only way most photographs of private 'celebrations' came into the public view and it was a significant achievement for those whose photos were published. One of the reasons for this, I suggest, could be that since newspaper viewership was one of the indications of a 'bourgeois' pastime during the early nationalist period, for one's photograph to appear in the few newspapers then was regarded as a remarkable feat and a sign of modernity. Modernity was often tied to elitist belonging and lifestyle, and appearing in the newspapers formed an important part of this. Lawuyi remarks that by the 1950s and 60s almost all newspapers in Nigeria advertised the elite especially through their social events and obituaries.<sup>846</sup> This period witnessed the establishment of many government newspapers such as the *Nigerian Outlook* (1960), *Morning Post* and *Sunday Post* (1961), *Daily Sketch* (1964) and *New Nigerian* (1966). It was an era that also saw the introduction of radio and television into the community.<sup>847</sup> Those who dominated the media advertisements were government officials and the politicians canvassing for electoral support or inveigling people to demonstrate their backing for ethnoregional interests and development. It was clear that:

not only does the ruling elite make the news, it is the news as endless verbatim reports of politicians' speeches, accounts of elite weddings and birthday parties, and the pages and pages of expensive obituaries testify. And if the poor are invisible, the very poor are a downright nuisance - some regimes have treated them literally as rubbish.<sup>848</sup>

In the 1970s through the '80s, sponsorship and financing of newspapers, radio, and television was done by the government through their political activities and actors. "The patrons of advertisements expanded, though, with the oil-boom of the 1970s and the upward mobility fostered by it."<sup>849</sup>

Between 1973 and 1977 there were a few magazines that published photographs promoting fashion. These include *Drum*, *Spear*, *Trust*, *Lagos Life* and *New Breed*. In *Spear*, for example,

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<sup>846</sup> Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi, "The Social Marketing of Elites: The Advertised Self in Obituaries and Congratulations in Some Nigerian Dailies," in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1991), pp. 247-263, p. 251.

<sup>847</sup> *Ibid*, p. 251.

<sup>848</sup> Karin Barber, 'Popular arts in Africa', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 30 No.3, (1987), pp.1-78, p. 261.

<sup>849</sup> *Ibid*, p. 251.

a regular column known as ‘Traditional African Life’ allowed some *asọ ebì* photos to appear in its pages. These *asọ ebì* photos are seen among photographs of wedded couples and birthday parties. Again *Drum* (1977) had two pages known as ‘Photo Page’ and ‘People in Pictures,’ *Lagos Life* (1974) had ‘Lagos Pictorial’, *Trust* (1973) had ‘People in Pictures’ and ‘Fashion Page’. During the early period of the Structural Adjustment Programme in Nigeria (SAP), in the mid 1980s, there was intense activity in the print media in Lagos. In 1983, during the height of the military dictatorship of Major General Muhamadu Buhari, the *Guardian*, a new daily catering to elite interests, emerged with a column that published stylish photographs of women. By the 1990s, there were glossy magazines such as *Society*, *Metro*, *Channelle*, and *Chic*, targeted at the emerging female elites. Others include *Black Orpheus*, *TSM* (The Sunday Magazine), *Quality*, *She*, *New Spear*, *Eko*, *Classique*, and *Climax* all of which appealed to a more general public.<sup>850</sup>

*Everywoman*, another popular magazine, appeared but went under shortly afterwards. The weekly magazine, *Poise* eventually emerged as one of the most successful of all. With a detailed publication of women in various styles of *asọ ebì* dresses and other stylish designs, *Poise* replaced the popular monthly *Woman’s World*, published by the *Daily Times* group from 1964 to 1990, the longest running woman’s magazine in Nigeria.<sup>851</sup>

These increasing activities in women’s print media might have echoed new efforts towards global women’s empowerment initiated in the 1970s. However, by 1994, a national fuel scarcity in Nigeria forced most of the magazines to go under. Undoubtedly, the magazines constitute the foundations of a popular orientation in fashionable clothing during the period between the mid-eighties to early nineties. What was apparent in the 1980s was a growing propensity by most newspapers to publish dress styles and other activities of fashionable women and the elite class. While this practice, as noted earlier, may have been informed by the deepening global interest in women’s issues, its intensification under the economic crisis of the IMF Structural Adjustment Programme in Nigeria in 1986 is paradoxical. However,

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<sup>850</sup> LayRay Denzer “High Fashion and fluctuating fortunes: the Nigerian garment industry under Structural Adjustment,” in Jane I. Guyer, LaRay Denzer, and Adigun Agbaje (eds), *Money Struggles and City Life* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), p. 95.

<sup>851</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95.

while SAP impoverished the poor and demobilized the middle class and the rich, the struggle for economic and class reinvention by the distraught middle class may have found justification in public visibility. Again with the profligate corruption engendered by the military which cast an ambiguous veil around the image of those connected with the ruling cabal, positive image laundering became inevitable through the print media. For example, the politicians, the wealthy, the celebrities, traditional rulers, high government officials, policy makers, generals, and influential leaders in every field sought public acceptance of their already questionable image (especially their questionable connection with the military cabal) through the print media. Their interest traversed fashion such that successful fashion designers and publishers of these print media emerged as the iconic champions of Lagos vibrant popular culture under SAP. Furthermore, many local tailors and dressmakers benefited from the government ban on foreign clothing. For these tailors, the challenge was to meet the increasing demand for weekly *asọ ebì* uniforms, a demand which at that period was almost unparalleled.

In the 1980s, *Woman's World* featured a “Designer of the Month” page, and its successor, *Poise*, regularly celebrated the achievements of designers. Although most newspapers ran a weekly fashion page, some of them also had other popular features devoted to style and women achievers: “Women in Business” and “Elegance Is” in the *Sunday Vanguard*, “Style” in the *Guardian*, and “Meet a Designer” in the *Nigerian Tribune*. These developments mark the precursors of the later emergence of the magazines I discuss here. And one could also reason that the ubiquity of such magazines in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might have been occasioned by late capitalist production. The logical connection of late capitalist production with *asọ ebì* is further underscored by the fact that by the 2000, the importation of cheaper textile materials used for *asọ ebì* coincided with the emergence of cheaper and less cumbersome means of printing technology. This enabled the so-called publishers to engage in the production of these magazines.

By the mid-2000s most of these magazines had become fully reduced to mere photo catalogues of new styles in *asọ ebì* uniforms. The reason for this is the discovery that “many people in Lagos want their shows to appear in one magazine or the other [which] makes this

tendency more pronounced among the publishers.”<sup>852</sup> Not only that, it was also observed that “for you to sell these magazines there must be unique designs of ‘traditional’ dresses in it and these designs could only be seen among those wearing *aso ebi* in weddings and other social activities.”<sup>853</sup>

Further reasons could be that “people believe that once your wedding or party appears in the magazine that you are rich or a celebrity.”<sup>854</sup> Through magazine viewership, therefore, one can assume that notions of wealth and celebrity prototypes might have entered into the visual economy of the city as a fashionable, socially prestigious indulgence. While the magazines could be described as products of the fraught dialogue between cosmopolitan modernism and postcolonial crisis, they also seem to promise a fashionable utopia and an imagination capable of sustaining the city’s power of magnetism. In fashioning *aso ebi*, therefore, one encounters a vivid intersection of multiple socio-economic relations, crystallizing into a mutual engagement based on the circulation of the fashion magazines. The quest for unique *aso ebi* fashion is fired by this mutual dialogue, a spirit of co-existence and trans-economic relations among different players in urban Lagos. As I discuss this mutual dialogue, I suggest that, perhaps, they may have constituted part of the aesthetic and visual seductions of the modern city.

### **Framing mutuality in *aso ebi*.**

By the year 2008, the above mentioned magazines had succeeded in establishing a certain visual repertoire of ‘traditional’ attire that were emulated by the general public. However, such emulation was effectively consolidated in a mutual operation existing between photographers, fashion magazines, vendors, textile merchants, tailors and their customers. Perhaps, this mutual deal serves as a suitable index to articulate the city of Lagos as a melting pot of cultures and transactions.

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<sup>852</sup> Interview with Akin Williams, Ikeja, Lagos, December 22, 2009.

<sup>853</sup> Ibid.

<sup>854</sup> Interview with Joy Ujam, Lagos, December 15, 2010.

### a. The photographers and the photographed.

Images in fashion magazines have become a model from which people design themselves.<sup>855</sup> Many authors have studied the different ways in which images have travelled across space and time and are thus incorporated into peoples' daily lives in Nigeria and Africa.<sup>856</sup> However, the question for Lagos might be how do these images get into the fashion magazines? The activities of popular photographers provide a ready answer. And it seems that, indeed, popular photography is a practice fundamental to the survival and expansion of fashion magazines in Nigeria. In Lagos, popular photographers travel to different venues of weddings or other events, searching for people dressed in unique *asọ ebi* dresses to photograph. For example, I followed the photographer Okoro (who claims to be an employee of *Treasure Life Magazine*) to a wedding ceremony in Lekki Peninsula of Lagos. I watched Okoro as he approached one of the *asọ ebi* girls, and introduced himself as a photographer of *Treasure Life magazine*. Not caring for a detailed explanation from Okoro, the *asọ ebi* girl whose name I later found is Nnenna Nwike, posed for the camera while Okoro took a 'snapshot' that would eventually appear in the next edition of *Treasure Life Magazine* (Figures 3 and 4). Afterwards Okoro showed me his photos that were published in *Treasure Life Magazine* and confirmed that many of them were taken at weddings for women in *asọ ebi* uniforms. According to Okoro, "I like the *asọ ebi* thing because it has allowed me to still remain an employee of *Treasure Life Magazine*." <sup>857</sup>

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<sup>855</sup> Quoted in Alan Tomlinson (ed), *Consumption, Identity, and Style* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990). p. 34; Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1995), p.156; Joanne Grabski, "Making fashion in the city: a case study of tailors and designers in Dakar, Senegal," *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 13 No. 2, 2009, p.215.

<sup>856</sup> Charles D. Gore "Commemoration, memory and ownership: Some social contexts of contemporary photography in Benin City, Nigeria," *Visual Anthropology: Published in cooperation with the Commission on Visual Anthropology* Vol. 14, Issue 3, 2001, Pages 321 – 342; Again Flora Kaplan noted how in late Nineteenth-century and early twentieth Benin, Nigeria, photographs became important not only for display in various contexts, but as a medium of exchange, see Flora S. Kaplan, "Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recovering Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin" *History in Africa*, Vol. 18 (1991), pp. 205-237; Flora S. Kaplan, "Some Uses of Photographs in Recovering Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria.," *Visual Anthropology* Vol. 3, 1990, pp.317-41; Stephen Sprague, "How I See the Yoruba See Themselves." *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* Vol. 5 No.1, 1978, pp. 9-28; For example Haney has shown how, in Nineteenth-century Ghana, portraits constituted part of the inaugural ceremonial spectacles in political supremacy rites and other larger public performances. Haney's study reveals how the photograph – in its earliest manifestation in Ghana – was inscribed into the everyday lives of Ghanaians as an accustomed objects with complex meanings across a range of media, see Erin Haney, "Film, Charcoal, Time: Contemporaneities in Gold Coast Photographs," in *History of Photography*, Vol. 34, Issue 2, 2010, pp.119-133; Eugene C. Burt, "Mural Painting in Western Kenya," *African Arts*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (May, 1983), pp. 60-63, p.62.

<sup>857</sup> Interview with Shedrack Okoro, Lagos, April 5, 2010.



Figure 3. Shedrack taking a side view of Nnenna Nwike's *aso ebi* style. Lagos, April 5, 2010. Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.



Figure 4. Shedrack taking a back view of Nnenna Nwike's *aso ebi* style. Lagos, April 5, 2010. Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor

My interrogation showed that an ethical dialogue between the photographer and the photographed is virtually non-existent. Both have silently conceded to a mutual understanding which Okoro elucidated further: "We don't charge them any money but they appear on the fashion magazines free of charge."<sup>858</sup> And when I questioned what the photographed stand to gain, Okoro said, "they are happy to be seen in the magazines."<sup>859</sup> Thus with the expectation of one's dress style being viewed in the public space, one is considered important and fashionable and almost a celebrity.<sup>860</sup>

My interview with Nnenna Nwike, a student and a friend of one of the wedded women, and with more than 30 other women who appeared in some of the fashion magazines, confirmed that they were comfortable with their photos appearing in these magazines. For example, in Figure 6 through Okoro I contacted about 5 women who appeared in the red *aso ebi*, and their statements were in tandem with Nkemakonam's statement:

<sup>858</sup> Ibid.

<sup>859</sup> Ibid.

<sup>860</sup> Interview with Nnenna Nwike, Lekki Peninsula, Lagos, April 5, 2010.

When I saw myself in the magazine I was very happy and after two days some of my friends started calling me on phone telling me that they saw me. There are many people dressed in *asọ ebì* that very day but the photographers select those whose dresses are unique. So for me it is good and I love *asọ ebì* because without it I might not have appeared in the magazine.<sup>861</sup>

Nkemakonam, second from top left in Figure 6 is also a fashion designer who has built a network of friends through her tailoring outfit. Most people whose parties she attended were her clients who invited her to wear the *asọ ebì* for them. Some people, therefore, see these occasions as a space for competitive *asọ ebì* fashion display. The nature of these public displays again speaks to the mode at which visual economy operates in the city.



Figure 5. Peter Iriah. Lagos, November, 2010.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

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<sup>861</sup> Interview with Nkemakonam Udentia, Lagos, March 7, 2011.



Figure 6.  
Poise Fashion magazine. Lagos, August 2010.  
Photo: Peter Iriah.

Again Peter Iriah of *Poise* fashion magazine (Figure 5) whom I contacted in Lagos through a phone number placed in *Poise* fashion magazine (Figure 6) told me that most of his photos were *aso ebi* women taken at wedding receptions where the subjects posed with the expectation that their photos will be seen in public through *Poise* fashion magazine. Peter showed me some of the photos he took which were supposed to be published in the next edition of *Poise* fashion magazine at the time of conducting this research (Figures 7, 8, 9).



Figure 7. Front view of woman on *aso ebi*.  
Photo: Peter Iriah. Lagos, August, 2010.



Figure 8. Back view of woman on *aso ebi*  
Photo: Peter Iriah. Lagos, August, 2010.



Figure 9. Front view of woman on *aso ebi*  
Photo: Peter Iriah. Lagos, August, 2010.



Photographers encourage the intensification of *aso ebi* practices through their engagement with people at the venue of the events. This has also led to an invention of various performativities around *aso ebi*. On November 30 2009, I attended a wedding party at the Sonya area of Lagos. The venue of the wedding was a vast expanse of empty land which approximated the size of a football field located at the Sonya vicinity along the Oshodi - Apapa expressway in Lagos. The wedding ceremony was between Uju and Tony, Tony being the younger brother of the owner of Capital Oil Limited in Lagos who actually owns the space of the wedding ceremony. My reason for attending this party was, among many things, to understand how fashion magazine photographers operate in such a society gathering where dressing is always taken seriously. A total of more than ten photographers were present at this

wedding. Some of the photographers wore uniformed black T-shirts with ‘Crew’ inscribed on the back and most of them searched for guests who dressed in a unique style. There were many guests dressed in different forms of *aso ebi* uniform. Benson Uchendu was among those who wore the T-shirt with the ‘Crew’ inscription. He told me the ‘Crew’ means photographers from a fashion magazine known as ‘*Poise* fashion magazine’. Uchendu said his target was to deliver fifty good pictures of women in *aso ebi* uniforms to the publisher of *Poise* fashion magazine.<sup>862</sup> In the bid to meet this target, Uchendu photographed everyone including those who did not demand photos. When I asked Uchendu whether people did not feel embarrassed when he photographed them against their wish, he confirmed that most often people want to be photographed believing that they will appear in the fashion magazines.

From the above it means that the ‘Crew’ T-shirts make it easier for these photographers to attract clients. It seems people already knew them and did not decline their requests to be photographed. This goes to prove the importance of the fashion magazine photographers at Lagos social events.

One particular posing convention common in some of the weddings I attended in Lagos is the style of putting or raising one leg forward among the *aso ebi* groups. I witnessed this during the wedding ceremony of Kemi and Olumide at St Dominic Cathedral, Yaba, Lagos on May 1, 2010 (Figures 14 and 15). One of the women in the group told me that the convention is one way of ‘posing well’ for the photographers among those in *aso ebi*. This style of posing well also seen in some of the fashion magazines around Lagos seems to have been imitated, elaborated and popularized by certain groups. Kingsley Chuks confirms that he first saw it in *City People* fashion magazine in 2007 and since then he had applied it in his photography business.<sup>863</sup> Chuks showed me some of his photographs which fall within this category of ‘posing well’ (Figures 10, 11, 12, 13) and which he directed.

According to Chuks, by dramatizing a scene one breaks away from the humdrum commonality of *aso ebi* posing convention. And he said any photographer can actually direct

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<sup>862</sup> Interview with Benson Uchendu, Lagos, 30 November, 2009.

<sup>863</sup> Interview with Kingsley Chuka, Lagos, November 25, 2009.

his/her own style of 'posing well.' In Figure 10 what seemed a serious wedding ceremony transforms into a ludicrous theatricality and thus offers a seemingly comic dimension to the serious photographic business.

'Posing well' seems to be one of the avenues where the young people's fantasies regarding *asọ ebi* and its concomitant drama is enacted. Though the images delight in artifice and eschew the very notion of authentic representation of experience, they seem to be authentically meaningful for the couples because engaging in the act could, itself, be a lived experience.



Figure 10.  
'Posing Well.' Lagos, November 2007.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks.



Figure 11.  
'Posing Well.' Lagos, 2001.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks.



Figure 12.  
'Posing Well.' Lagos, 2001.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks.



Figure 13.  
'Posing Well.' Lagos, November 2007.  
Photo: Kingsley Chuks.



Figure 14.  
'Posing Well' at St Dominic Cathedral Yaba. Lagos, November, 2010.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.



Figure 15.  
 ‘Posing Well’ at St Dominic Cathedral Yaba, Lagos, November, 2010.  
 Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

I discovered that ‘posing well’ simply means engaging in one performative act or the other during the photography session. It could be raising one leg up, answering a call or some other act, and it is usually seen among the *asọ ebì* group. Again, ‘posing well,’ according to Lagos photographer Uche Agodi, “seems to be a practice restricted to *asọ ebì* in weddings. *Asọ ebì* in burial or other events does not seem to favour ‘posing well.’”<sup>864</sup> However, in wedding photos, no other group could be seen performing this except the younger women in *asọ ebì* and perhaps a few men. In what could again be described as an act of ‘posing well,’ this group in Figures 14 and 15 asked me to count three numbers starting from one such that at the last count of three they all raised their legs up for me to take a quick snap. This group’s attitude however, confirms Beloff’s “rules of poses” which “must allow us to show ourselves in some socially correct manner.”<sup>865</sup> In Figures 10 and 11 ‘posing well’ involves an open display of romantic love and a fictitious expression of utter surprise by the *asọ ebì* ladies. In the photo,

<sup>864</sup> Interview with Uche Agodi, Egbeda, Lagos, December 5 2010.

<sup>865</sup> Halla Beloff *Camera Culture*, p. 211; Hudita Mustapha has also remarked that “posing, whether in the mirror, during a ceremony, or for a portrait involves a positioning, both material and representational,” while Roland Barthes however substantiates this notion: “I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing.” “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one others want to think I am, the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.” See Hudita Mustapha, Hudita Nura Mustapha, “La Mode Dakaroise, Elegance, Transnationalism and an Africa Fashion Capital,” in Christopher Breward and David Gilbert, *Fashion’s World Cities* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), p.188; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 13.

'posing well' expects the couple to express romantic love through body language and through the variously orchestrated poses by the *aso ebi* women. The women and the two gentlemen express shock at the open display of affection by the couple.

I suggest that 'posing well,' a momentary performance, is beginning to affect the posing conventions of some younger groups of *aso ebi* ladies. It is a spectacular performance that gives primacy to visual senses and is part of the things to be seen in *aso ebi* that appeals to the eye of the public. This experience occurs at the space of sensory threshold that is neither self nor presentation of self, but rather group-performative and an episode of group-encounter. In this instance, the gaze is no longer considered a facilitator of one's own agency. Rather, it is an external instrumentality that prompts individuals to re-invent themselves, which is ultimately the experience that is buried in photographic form.<sup>866</sup> This challenges the concept of reality in photographic portraiture such that viewing a posed photograph amounts to viewing constructed identities and group-identities.

From the above, one can suggest that the mutuality surrounding *aso ebi* fashioning is framed around Benson Uchendu's statement, as mentioned above: "to deliver fifty good pictures of women in *aso ebi* uniforms to the publisher of *Poise* fashion magazine." The question is what could have driven Uchendu towards taking fifty photos of 'only' women in *aso ebi* if the fashion magazines were not there? This question gives one ample room to interrogate this concept of mutuality which I suggest sustains the fashioning of *aso ebi*.

### **b. Fashion magazines.**

Okoro, Peter, and Benson took their photographs to the publishers of *Treasure Life* and *Poise* fashion magazines respectively who paid them off. Because *aso ebi* has become the central

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<sup>866</sup> I suggest that this photographic form has intensified the desire for *aso ebi* in Lagos and must be articulated, in addition to many other reasons, around notions of seeing and being seen. It seems that in the city "the observer who is in return also the observed apprehends his own specularity by the discovery that he has his foundations outside himself." It becomes logical to interpret the other's unseen gaze as a major determining factor in the framing and constitution of the subject. At the back of the subject's mind is the other's gaze. It seems the other's gaze is a subconscious gaze or, put differently, a gaze gazing in the subject's subconscious. This subconscious gaze could be what Kaja Silverman means when she states that "when we feel the social gaze focused upon us, we feel photographically 'framed'". I tend to attribute Silverman's concept of 'feeling the social gaze' to the 'other's subconscious gaze buried beneath the minds of those who participate in *aso ebi*. This suggests that a good social event is dependent on outsider validation using the criterion of 'posing well' as a benchmark for assessing its *aso ebi* display. See Fulya Ertem, "(BIZ [US], Looking Productively to the representation of the "self" in Photographic Portraits," *Photographies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 2010, p.72.

component of fashion in parties and social events, the publishers advise the photographers to target those aspiring to hold these ‘parties’ or ‘events.’ Again the magazines emphasize these parties in their captions. For example the caption on page 30 of *Today’s Fashion* says: “want your party covered? Call Femi on 08055273211, Sunday on 08029119773, Shola on 08062336685” (Figure 16) and on page 18 of *Style Royale*: “your event needs coverage? Call Udo: 08066738663, Emma, 08028979482” (Figure 17). This is also observed by *Top Style* magazine (Figure 18): “*Top Style* was at the wedding celebration of Oby and Ebere Nnanyelugo; Ifeoma and Dubem Aroh recently. See the full story in pictures. Do you have a special event or celebration coming up this season? Call our team of professional photo journalists on 08036565474 today, and see your event featured in full colour in our next edition.” While captions as these serve as useful sources for viewing the marketing tactics of photographers it also offers a perspective perhaps more representative of the general Lagos ‘fashion magazine’ scene. Much effort is geared towards the promotion of sartorial elegance.

This brings me to the use of the term photojournalism, which underscores the level of understanding of the publishers regarding the meanings of the photograph. I suggest that their understanding of photography is devoid of any substantiality. There is a limit to creative possibilities when the term, ‘photojournalist’ is deployed. This is because the publishers perceive the photographers as mere suppliers of ‘raw materials’. This goes to confirm my submission that there is a surface effect to the overall transaction. If the publishers believe that they have a mandate to supply the public with a journalistic account of ‘latest’ fashion styles, then their deployment of the term ‘photojournalism’ may be justified. It is possible to interpret this statement as part of a growing business pursuit by the editors wishing to expand the marketability of their magazines. But ultimately by emphasizing ‘people’s event appearing in full colour’ it might show that these editors also understand the increasing potential photography possesses in adding ‘colour’ to an event. This affirms the mutual transactions existing between the magazines and other actors. This is also uncovered in the manner in which the statement, *your events need to be covered...*, is crafted on top of photos of ladies dressed in *aso ebi* in Figure 18, and one might suggest that the ‘covering of one’s event’ is not far from covering one’s *aso ebi* styles in the events. The captions are based on the assumption

that Nigerians' penchant for 'events and celebrations' and their demands for the services of the photographer are perhaps expediently linked together.



Figure 16.  
*Today's Fashion* Vol.2, No. 06, 2009, page 7.



Figure 17. *Style Royale*, Issue No. 7, 2009, page 8.



Figure 18.  
*Top Style*, Vol. 1, 2007, No. 2.

In line with the perceptions of such magazines that there is already a public acceptance of an overt visual showmanship, sartorial glamour and display, the publisher of *Trade Fashion and Events* magazine, Akin Williams, remarked that most people want to see themselves in public places and that this practice has commercialized photography.<sup>867</sup> Many publishers have resorted to this type of publication because they have seen that through pictures in these magazines people have become increasingly interested in being seen in fashionable dresses in society magazines. “People call us on phone and ask us to come and cover [photograph] their events and they demand the photographs to be published in even two editions. We sell our magazines and sometimes charge these people for covering their events.”<sup>868</sup>

Through a creative combination of textual and photographic information, the publishers offer a luminous framework through which the viewers might negotiate a more complex relationship between clothing, identity, image and desire. For example, in featuring Mrs Oniru’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party in Lagos, *Ovation* magazine seems to use its caption to emphasize the dresses of people they show in their magazines. The caption that reads: “what society people wore at Mrs Oniru’s 50th birthday party” (Figure 19) draws the attention of the viewers to the dresses of Mrs Oniru’s friends in their solidarity *asọ ebì* uniforms. What one must observe in Figure 19 is that the use of *asọ ebì* is restricted to only the headscarves and shawls. This is exactly a creative method of using *asọ ebì* which does not, in any way, downplay its importance. It is often common to see women on weekends in Lagos attending occasions dressed only in matching *asọ ebì* headscarves. It is possible that this restriction to headscarves could be a means of ensuring greater freedom in individual creativity around *asọ ebì* dress designs on the rest of the body.

The captioning in Figure 19 contrasts with that of say Chief Akindele’s family (Figure 20) which *Ovation* did not deem necessary to caption in such a way. From this it is assumed that the publisher believes that the viewer’s interest lies in the more fashionable clothes worn by Mrs Oniru’s friends as against that of Chief Akindele’s family. In other words, it seems that photography and dress sloganeering overlap in the messages the magazines wish to convey.

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<sup>867</sup> Interview with Akin Williams, Ikeja, Lagos, December 22, 2009.

<sup>868</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore it seems that this slogan has more potentiality to attract buyers than any other birthday message. Photography is used to present a world that is both enviable and nostalgic and to attract the viewer into the desirable lived experiences of others.

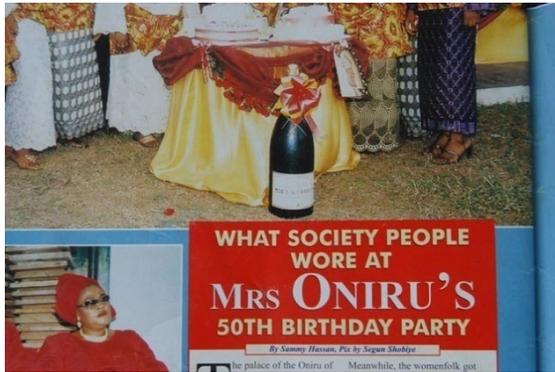


Figure 19. *Ovation* magazine, Issue 60, 2003, page 80.



Figure 19b, detail. *Ovation* magazine, Issue 60, 2003, page 80.

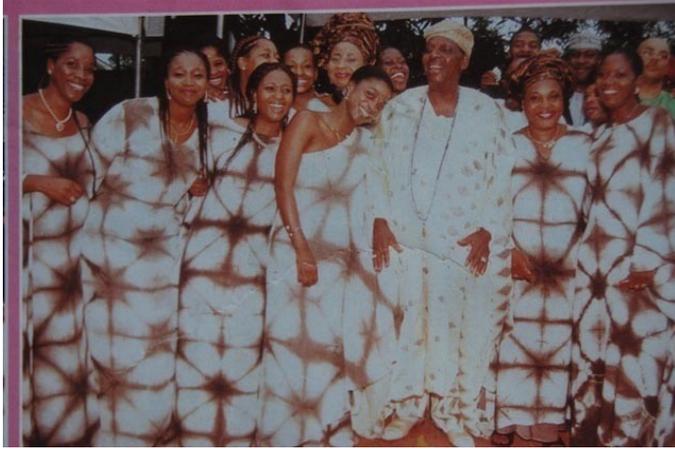


Figure 20. *Ovation* magazine, Issue No. 60, 2003, page 26.

Unlike photos of women, men's photos were less visible in magazines, and they were usually not seen in *aso ebi*. Masculinity could hardly afford such visualization and subsequent objectification. It is possible that women's affinity to photography and *aso ebi* contrasted sharply with the uneasiness shown towards the medium by many males.

What happens if the women were not celebrating in their different *aso ebi* uniforms? Will the fashion magazines still exist? The continuous reference by the magazines to people's events indicates an interdependence that ensures greater expansion, consumption and creativity in *aso ebi*.

### c. The vendors and customers.

The mutuality that exists in *aso ebi* continues through the vendors and their customers who stand to benefit from the photographic endeavors of Okoro, Peter and Uchendu and then the efforts of the publishers of the magazines. This is seen among the vendors' stands in Lagos. For example, Johnson Uzoeche (Figure 21), a vendor whom I met along Tejuosho Road in Yaba, Lagos, told me that many women come to buy the fashion magazines from him. Some buy it because their *aso ebi* photos appeared in them while others intend to use them as a fashion catalogue for their 'traditional' dresses. He confirmed that his greatest sales as a vendor come from the so-called fashion magazines.<sup>869</sup> Chiagozie, whom I met in Uzoeche's shop buying the magazine, remarked that a 'copy' of the fashion magazine allows her to get

<sup>869</sup> Interview with Johnson Uzoeche, Lagos, April 6, 2010.

the best designs for her tailor and that gives her an opportunity to be voguish. Chiagozie was flipping through a copy of *ThisDay Style* magazine and she showed me a page which reads, “The Aso Ebi: Family Pride or Commercial Gimmick?” (Figure 22). She said one of the *aso ebi* ladies inserted in the middle of the article is her friend and that she bought the magazine for that reason. Ayo Obese, another vendor in Lagos, remarks that among all the people coming to his news stand that “many would prefer to view the *aso ebi* images in the fashion magazines and they prefer to buy those magazines that contain more photos with unique designs which they intend to copy.”<sup>870</sup> In other words, one could conclude that the consumption of these magazines is anchored on a tendency to copy *aso ebi* dress designs.

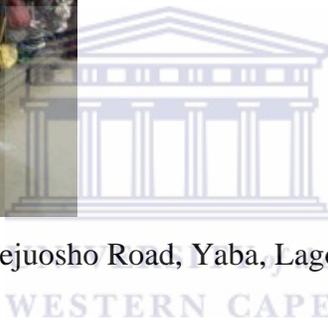


Figure 21. Johnson Uzoeche, Tejuosho Road, Yaba, Lagos, March, 2010.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.



Figure 22.  
*Thisday Style* Magazine, Vol. 14 No. 5145, May 24, 2009. p. 69.

<sup>870</sup> Interview with Ayo Obese, Surulere, Lagos, December 10, 2010.

#### d. Customers and textile merchants.

From the vendor the magazines continue their journey. This time, Uche Okoye took some fashion magazines to Ifeyinwa Oguchi's textile shop in Balogun market from where she hoped to copy colours of her *aso ebi* dresses for her forthcoming marriage ceremony (Figure 23). She showed Ifeyinwa the colour of a particular *aso ebi* dress she wanted in the magazine and Ifeyinwa helped her to locate it. However, Ifeyinwa remarks,

sometimes when I don't have the particular colour they want, I go to my colleagues to search for it, but some of these women just see a particular *aso ebi* colour and a particular material in these magazines and feel that they can get it in the market but the truth is that these materials are what we call 'stock materials.' They come once and disappear. When you explain to these women some of them would not understand. Some who understand would just request for something close to that while some would insist on getting that particular one they saw in the magazine.<sup>871</sup>



Figure 23.

Taking the fashion magazines to Ifeyinwa Oguchi's Textile Shop to copy colour. Lagos, November 29, 2010.

Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

This affirms the multiple roles the *aso ebi* dresses in the magazines play especially in relation to fashioning *aso ebi*. The *aso ebi* photos in the magazines therefore determine the trajectory of visibility around dress and styles.

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<sup>871</sup> Interview with Ifeyinwa Oguchi, Balogun Market, Lagos 30 November, 2010.

### e. The Tailors.

The magazines' circuitous itinerary did not terminate at the textile merchant's shop. They continued to the tailor's workshop where they served both utilitarian and aesthetic purposes between the tailors and customers respectively. This is a remarkable interdependence. However, while some customers took the magazines to the tailors to copy from, the tailors personally acquired and stocked loads of the magazines for other customers who may not have any particular design in mind. However, it is important to note that before the 1990s the major source of clothing designs for these tailors derived from foreign style catalogues, published by the major international dress pattern companies, such as *Simplicity*, *Butterick*, and *Vogue*.<sup>872</sup> But by the mid-1990s devaluation of the Nigerian currency kept the cost of these magazines out of the reach of most tailors and they started looking inwards for local fashion ideas. As at the 1990s, popular sources of design include some Lagos magazines such as *Ikebe Super* and *Super Story*, which featured between ten to twelve designs per week.<sup>873</sup> Other magazines include *Fashion Focus* and *Dessence Fashion Catalogue* which featured between forty to sixty drawings or photographs per month.<sup>874</sup> My fieldwork in Lagos in early 2010 revealed that more than 70 types of such magazines presently flood the Lagos popular newsstands.



Figure 24.  
Felix Ofeimun, Tejuosho, Lagos, April 6, 2010.  
Photo: Okechukwu Nwafor.

Felix Ofeimun, a tailor along Tejuosho Road in Yaba (Figure 24), Lagos, showed me two magazines: one from where he copied and the other where his tailored dress appeared. He pointed at the second magazine and said, “I made this *asọ ebì* clothing this girl is putting on

<sup>872</sup> LayRay Denzer “High Fashion and fluctuating fortunes,” p. 98.

<sup>873</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

<sup>874</sup> Ibid, p.98.

and she appeared here because the design of the dress is good and the photographers took her and published her in the magazine.”<sup>875</sup> Ifeoma Nwokoye, owner of Ifez Fashion Center, a tailoring outfit on No. 4 Ademola Street Surulere, Lagos, also narrated to me how she showed her clients fashion magazines from where they chose designs.<sup>876</sup>

**f. Others.**

After I met Adaobi Onwuchekwa in Balogun Market in November 2010 in Lagos, she narrated how images of *aso ebi* dress designs circulated between her and her friend in the United States. In November 2010, Onwuchekwa said she scanned some copies of photos of women dressed in *aso ebi* which she culled from *Elite* fashion magazine and sent them through email to her cousin living in Texas, United States, who would soon come back for a ‘traditional’ marriage in Nigeria in December. She was requested by her cousin to send her many copies of different *aso ebi* styles from many fashion magazines from where she could choose the colour and design for her *aso ebi* in her forthcoming marriage. The interesting thing is that Onwuchekwa was one of the women who would wear her cousin’s *aso ebi* and she had to send copies to her cousin to approve, before she could buy the clothes in large quantity in readiness for other people to purchase from her. The arrangement according to Onwuchekwa was that her cousin would send money from the US and she would begin the initial preparation by co-opting friends who would wear the *aso ebi*. By the time her cousin comes back from the US the whole *aso ebi* arrangement must have been done. Chiamaka Udenwa, notes: “when my friend who live in Abuja did her traditional marriage in November 2009 she sent me a colour and design of the *aso ebi* she wanted me to wear through her handset. Because we were staying far apart from each other I had to buy the design in Lagos and sew it before the wedding. The wedding took place in the village so I just came back with my *aso ebi* to the wedding.”<sup>877</sup> Such statements are also a clear picture of circulation and the importance of new electronic technology and media in the dissemination of such *aso ebi* designs.

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<sup>875</sup> Interview with Felix Ofeimun, Tejuosho, Lagos, April 6, 2010.

<sup>876</sup> Interview with Ifeoma Nwokoye, Lagos, April 3, 2010.

<sup>877</sup> Interview with Chiamaka Udenwa, Lagos, December 17, 2010.

### ***Copying and Copies: transcending the burdens of aso ebi uniformity.***

It is interesting that while ‘copying’ has historically framed the transaction in African textile economy starting from the eighteenth century as suggested above, it has also shaped the dealings among the above groups. Hillel Schwartz argues that on the one hand, copying makes us what we are.<sup>878</sup> While cultures cohere in the faithful transmission of rituals and rules of conduct, Schwartz argues, copying gives meaning to the original rather than the other way round. For example, through a constant awareness and copying of variously inflected visual matrices in the city of Lagos, tailors invent the language of originality. One can, therefore, argue that there is an absence of originality in an interwoven network of inspiration and ideas constantly evoking the new. The mutual dialogue I have described above foregrounds the *copying* concept. This commences with the photographer who copies the image of the ‘original’ *aso ebi* dress of Nnenna Nwike. While the critique of originality might also problematize the ‘originality’ of Nwike’s *aso ebi* dress, this photographer, through this means, extends the language of *copying* by making ‘copies’ of the photos available for the magazines to reproduce. Okoro actually informed me that he sold multiple copies of his photos to different magazines. Okoro’s action therefore is validated by Rosalind Krauss that:

By exposing the multiplicity, the facticity, the repetition and stereotype at the heart of every aesthetic gesture, photography deconstructs the possibility of differentiating between the original and the copy, the first idea and its slavish imitators. The practice of the multiple, whether one speaks of the hundreds of prints pulled from the same negative or the hundreds of fundamentally indistinguishable photographs that could be made.... It has been taken to undermine the very distinction between original and copy.<sup>879</sup>

Benjamin’s essay published in 1936 would add that the nature of photography is to destabilize the very notion of authenticity in the original through ‘copy’.<sup>880</sup> Schwartz attempts to make sense of our fascination with replicas, duplicates and twins. He charts the repercussions of such entanglements with copies and fakes of all kinds, whose presence alternately sustains us and disrupts notions of authenticity, identity, and originality.<sup>881</sup>

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<sup>878</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimilies* (New York: Zone, 1996).

<sup>879</sup> Rosalind Kraus, “A Note on Photography and the Simulacra,” *October*, Vol. 31 (Winter, 1984), pp. 49-68

<sup>880</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction.” *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt (ed), Trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 217-251.

<sup>881</sup> Compare Baudrillard’s theorization of the postmodern condition whereby the distinction between reality and representation vanishes in the historical emergence of mass-reproducible copies of items, turning them into commodities that threaten originality. Again this is further reinforced by the rise of contemporary media including print media, television, film,

Copy, as Terence Cave has indicated, is both imitation and plenitude: it is the one and the many, through replication and profusion.<sup>882</sup> We inhabit a world of copies without fixed points of originality to coordinate the copies: it is within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of originality.<sup>883</sup> Copies proliferate, spreading from their point of origin and in this process things fall into the realm of mutability and illusion.<sup>884</sup> If, in this instance, Nnenna Nwike in *asọ ebì* becomes the point of origin and the original, which Okoro copies with his camera, then the realm of mutability is seen in the unending reproductions Nnenna's images suffer in the hands of the fashion magazines. In this instance, and in recognition of Krauss' statement, one can argue that while the reproductions in the magazines might have little relationship to real-life performances, they nonetheless blur the distinction between original images and copies while in circulation. They have been uprooted from their origins (the real wedding and other social events) and inserted into another context of endless appropriation and consumption, yet individuals appropriating them never contest their originality. At the level of social engagement, individuals await the emergence of new styles of *asọ ebì* dress designs from the copies in the magazines. Through this reproducibility, new visual languages are invented which produce the rich repertoire of *asọ ebì* fashion.

While copies may be dismissed as banality, I argue that they have achieved some levels of success in their efforts to assist individual women in fashioning elements of singularity in design stylistics. The desire for uniqueness, to stand out in the uniformed collective of *asọ ebì* is visibly noticeable in each individual woman. While the colours of the *asọ ebì* dresses may be the same, the design styles often vary. The ubiquity of these styles has enhanced viewership among the urban populace who are incited by the photos to seek individuality of design. In this way, copies thus appear to resolve the dilemma of group-representation, group-dressing and group-image embodied in *asọ ebì* uniformity. This is achieved in the magazines through multiple isolation of individual women from their groups through the fragmentation of spaces.

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and the Internet, which are responsible for blurring the line between goods that are needed and goods for which a need is created by commercial images. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* Transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1981).

<sup>882</sup> Cited in Nick Groom, "Original copies; counterfeit forgeries," *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 43, Issue 2, 2003.

<sup>883</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy*.

<sup>884</sup> Jeffrey Malkan, "What is a copy?" *Cardoza Arts and Entertainment, Law Journal*, 2005.

What this suggests is that copies may have intensified the rate of circulation of the dress styles. In their effort to advertise the uniqueness of each individual's *aso ebi* style, the magazines conceive individual dresses outside the collectivity imposed by the *aso ebi* groups. These magazines, I suggest, project enticements among viewers and at the same time give the photographed a sense of sartorial individualism and elusive sense of independence.

At the same time this heightens the popularity and uniqueness of *aso ebi* beyond its rejection by some sections of the public as banal uniformity. To prove this, Chioma Okoye notes that since she started watching the ubiquitous fashion magazines she no longer attends any party in Lagos looking casual (unless the dress code is specifically given as casual), "because it is almost a norm for most people to put on *aso ebi* and these parties are perfect spaces to show-off one's expensive and unique *aso ebi* dresses, jewellery, bag and shoes."<sup>885</sup> By this statement, one could assume that in the city, there is a sense in which these magazines have redefined some public spaces as spaces of fashion display. What happens now is – in line with Okoye's remarks – a situation in which most people, especially women, who have accepted the uniformity imposed by the *aso ebi* 'tradition,' invoke exceptionalism in their designs in order to stand out among the humdrum colour uniformity of *aso ebi* wearers. Fashion competition becomes a popular phenomenon, enacted around an aspiration towards design singularity and sartorial agency and performed within the aesthetics of individual tailoring. In other words, there is a transcending of *aso ebi*'s imposition of equality through uniformed dress colour. Due to this, there is a competition of creative expertise which has a multiplier effect on the tailoring business of Lagos. The tailors put considerable skill into garment production from the multiple copies of various designs available in the magazines.

### **Conclusion.**

This chapter has shown that a visual culture has emerged in Lagos in which *aso ebi* images help produce the fabric of everyday life. This is, perhaps, in line with Douglas Kellner's statement that "in our social interactions, mass-produced images guide our presentation of the self in everyday life, our ways of relating to others, and the creation of our social values and goals."<sup>886</sup> While shaping collective views about fashion in general, and sartorial behaviour

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<sup>885</sup> Interview with Chioma Okoye, Lagos, March 20, 2010.

<sup>886</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture, Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 18.

around *aso ebi* fashioning, the fashion magazine images may have provided the materials out of which people forge their various subjectivities. The chapter has offered insight into the importance of circulation of visual images in the conversation that takes place between *aso ebi* wearers, photographers, vendors, and the fashion magazines. New forms of *aso ebi* dress designs are no doubt a development that has been spread by, among many other factors, the emergence of fashion magazines and their photographers in Lagos. In this chapter, it is evident that Lagosians, especially women, have become conscious of their *aso ebi* dress designs each time they attend social events.

*Aso ebi* as a condition of *Lagos cosmopolitanism* reflects the historical conditions that enact the crisis of the postcolonial city as seen in *Owambe* party. It also manifests in the incorporation of both local and foreign elements in the process of fashioning *aso ebi*. This includes new forms of modern capital seen in *Aso ebi Planner* and *Aso ebi Gallery* through which various spectacular fashion shows in urban Lagos are enacted. This helps the *aso ebi* performers to articulate new styles of fashions.

Through a process of mutuality around the circulation of *aso ebi* images there is a redefinition of the borders of the city's visual economy: the magazines depend on photographers who take photographs of *aso ebi* in weddings and other events to market their magazines; the *aso ebi* wearers depend on the magazines for new and unique designs; the tailors depend on the magazines for unique designs of *aso ebi* to satisfy their clients, and the photographers depend on the *aso ebi* wearers to keep their jobs.

While the acts of *copying* and *copies* help the individuals to overcome the uniformity imposed by *aso ebi*, the emergence of fashion magazines lends itself to the plurality of images in the city, fills the void of obscurity, and helps the individuals to invent new forms of *aso ebi* fashion, on which their individuality also depends.

## CONCLUSION.

In concluding, this dissertation set out to investigate the meanings of *aso ebi* in urban Lagos, its historical trajectory and its visual constructions. The dissertation has pursued questions as to why and how it is intensifying, and the nature of this intensification. Overall it has been ascertained that *aso ebi* has journeyed through a maze of social, visual, cultural and political paths, practically arriving at an indeterminate space that is neither culture nor tradition. It has become obvious that what is called *aso ebi* is a practice that is defined by the politics of everyday life, and the impact of commercial culture and visual traffic in the city of Lagos.

The parameters of this research were restricted to an exploration of the political and visual economies of *aso ebi* in Lagos between 1960 and 2010. However in the course of the research it became obvious that a backward step into the colonial period was unavoidable if one was to gain a sense of any genealogy. I therefore took a leap into the colonial history of Lagos through which a hopefully nuanced interpretation of colonial sartorial practices emerges. Initially *aso ebi* was historically located within the domains of family networks, then age grades and eventually hometown and church organizations. Through these networks, I charted a genealogy of *aso ebi* to suggest how this genealogy re-invented its meanings in line with contemporary changing realities.

The choice of Lagos city derived from an understanding that *aso ebi* has virtually become a city affair. This is not to dispute the fact that *aso ebi* is a ubiquitous phenomenon in Nigeria but to show that Lagos as the fashion center of Nigeria possesses some unsurpassable scale and force in the constitution of novelty and glamour. Victor Lewis might well have supported this assertion in his contention that “In Lagos the *Aso ebi* event is the fashion show that disseminates new ideas and new ways to look at fashion and sartorial presentation.”<sup>887</sup> Again my assertion is supported by the emergence of complex efforts aimed at promoting *aso ebi* culture and dress styles. Through this axis, this research unveils why certain individuals in the city have historically attached importance to *aso-ebi*. What emerges is an attempt by various

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<sup>887</sup> Victor Lewis, Discussion on Fashion shows, Haute FashionAfrica.com, <http://www.fashionafrica.com/features/ankara-the-rebirth/> Visited 13th May. 2009 at 10 am. <http://www.fashionafrica.com/features/ankara-the-rebirth/> Visited 13<sup>th</sup> May. 2009 at 10 am.

individuals towards commercializing *aso ebi*. In this way *aso ebi* severed bonds with ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’ and became a practice that spoke the language of hybridity and bricolage through modern fashion. This redefinition is also momentous when some scholars, in the course of twentieth century Nigeria, identify a shift away from the emulation of ‘foreign culture’ to a reaffirmation of the ‘indigenous cultural heritage,’ with dress as a significant element of such a shift.<sup>888</sup> While this dissertation may have traced the trajectory of this shift through *aso ebi*, the redefinition of *aso ebi* from core ‘traditional’ elements to ‘high’ fashion serves as an important space to rearticulate the meanings of ‘indigenous cultural heritage.’

It has become obvious that the discussion of *aso-ebi* became enmeshed in a history of ‘traditional’ dress that has prevailed at social events in Lagos, starting from at least the first half of the twentieth century which is prior to the period I study here. The work of Christopher Steiner points out that “imported textiles had become, by late 1920s, so tightly woven into the fabric of African life,”<sup>889</sup> such that what is known as ‘traditional dress’ in Nigeria today has a long history of European capitalist mediation. This history from Chapter 2 dates to the fifteenth century. However, because *aso-ebi* dress is often regarded as ‘traditional dress’, one question that I address is the issue of how traditional *aso-ebi* actually is, which as I argued mapped authenticity as a contentious issue into the analyses of ‘traditional dress.’ This has been also been elucidated in Leslie Rabine’s work on the Senegalese textile industry and is akin to my tracking of Chinese mercantile networks in Lagos. In Dakar, Senegal, Rabine observes that “designers who work for an Indian-owned British company create ‘traditional’ patterns that are derived from Indonesian batiks that were imitated in French, Dutch, and British factories to serve the African market.”<sup>890</sup> While the same designers invent patterns to be sold as distinctively African, Rabine concludes that “what is ‘African’ about the fabric is not a particular image of authenticity imprinted on the cloth, rather it is mobile social history and an open geography that produce the cloth.”<sup>891</sup>

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<sup>888</sup> Betty Wass, “Yoruba Dress in Five Generations of a Lagos Family,” in Justine Cordwell and Ronald Schwarz (eds), *The Fabrics of Culture* (New York, Mouton Publishers 1979), p.332.

<sup>889</sup> Christopher Steiner, “Another image of Africa: Towards an Ethnohistory of European Clothes Marketed in Africa, 1873-1960,” *Ethnohistory*, Vol.32, No.2 (Spring, 1985), p. 105.

<sup>890</sup> See Victoria Rovine, “Review of Global Circulation of African Fashion,” in *The American Ethnologist*, Vol. 31, No.2, May 2004.

<sup>891</sup> Leslie Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

While the conclusions of this dissertation support Rabine's submission, it is however noted that there is a constitution of postcolonial agency that is occasioned by the quest to embrace the imagined notions of 'traditional dress.' Again this postcolonial agency is ostensibly promoted by the vicissitudes seen in the textile economy. I therefore assert that late global capitalism has re-defined the contours of sartorial practices in *aso ebi* in postcolonial Lagos. In discussing consumer taste, I give some attention to textiles as commodities and the ensuing economic network between China and Nigeria.

I arrived at the conclusion that *aso ebi* is being fed by the underlying visual and consumerist hype that underpin the late capitalist system as it unfolds in Nigeria. The tenor of the argument that resonates across the chapters suggests that human life has become largely determined by the economics of mundane living under late capitalism. These economics are reflected in Chapter Two through the textile economy; in Chapter Three through notions of wealth and large followership, in Chapter Four through commercialization of *aso ebi* friendship, in Chapter Six through computer software and in Chapter Seven through further commercialization in fashion magazines and photography. In the process, individuals who practice *aso ebi* seem to have lost the sense of a 'precolonial humanism' (for want of a better phrase) with which *aso ebi* was originally identified: there are no longer free *aso ebi* gifts. Instead what obtains is a fetishization of various forms of commodity culture ranging from the textile economy, personality cults through mass followership, the negotiation of symbolic power through mass-produced images in the magazines, exchange value in human relationships through gifts, and a form of exclusion achieved through the surface effects of digital photo editing. It seems, for *aso ebi*, there is no escape from the endless crisis of what Hudita Mustafa calls 'postcolonial ruin.' Instead, it becomes an essential part of what I call *Lagos cosmopolitanism*.

The study of *aso ebi* became necessary at a period of Nigeria's journey through conscious nationalism and a time of ambivalent discourse around the postcolonial. Since 1960 after Nigeria's independence, most political parties have switched to the use of *aso ebi* during their national conventions. Sometimes these conventions are fraught with a feud that exposes an insider/outsider politics of *aso ebi*. It is obvious that *aso ebi* can be used to create a boycott

among political opponents, just as it can also be used to rally supporters among politicians and individuals in the larger society. That *aso ebi* is a product of a fraught dialogue between defective colonial bequests and postcolonial devastation is undeniable. This is exemplified by the unresolved economic crisis through SAP, endemic corruption and social insecurity, all of which have been fructified by the military and political maladministration of Nigeria. The failure of the nation state could not but portend a dangerous struggle by her citizenry to regain the psyche of putative lost or dying statuses. Individuals must therefore re-invent themselves through whatever means available. *Aso ebi* became one of these means. It fed into the lawlessness of the military (*Owambe* under the military readily comes to mind), ate into the putrefaction of degenerate politicians (Olabode George, for example), nurtured the lost glory of the dwindling middle class and glided through the emptiness of the social systems (see Chapter 4).

While clothing and fashionable consumption take their place within the context of mass leisure as it is interpreted by Bailey and cited in Christopher Breward,<sup>892</sup> this dissertation has portrayed clothing not just as a simple utilitarian, everyday object but also as something that defines a person's status in society.<sup>893</sup> Defining this status in the context of Lagos is prefigured in – among many other manifestations – a common association of the crowd dressed in *aso ebi* with a celebrant's prestige, and wealth. This is a politics of numbers which is also expressed in the image of the politician who must attract large numbers of people so “that he may have a large crowd dressed in *aso ebi* clothes following him when he goes in the streets,”<sup>894</sup> a demonstration of his public acceptance. Again the ubiquity of *aso ebi* practice also resides in the ready availability of cheap textile materials known as Ankara.

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<sup>892</sup> Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New history of fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University press 1995), p.21.

<sup>893</sup> Henry John Drewal dwelled on this in his study, “Pageantry and Power in Yoruba Costuming,” where he specifically states that “substantial amount of money are devoted to *aso ebi*,” through a mobilization of uniformed membership used to indicate the stature of an individual or group in the society. See Henry John Drewal, “Pageantry and Power in Yoruba Costuming” in Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz, (eds), *The Fabrics of Culture: the Anthropology of clothing and adornment* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), pp. 189-229.

<sup>894</sup> William Bascom, “Social status, wealth and individual differences among the Yoruba,” in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 1951, pp. 490—505, American Anthropological Association, p.8.

Particular points raised in this dissertation have made it possible to come to terms with the issue of how “our own visions of the city are acquired and represented,”<sup>895</sup> and how what I call ‘fashionable images’ may have influenced the city dwellers’ understanding of culture and the meanings of ‘tradition.’ The choice of *aso-ebi* in Lagos, therefore, has shown that traditions<sup>896</sup> are ‘invented’ and that this process of invention is as a result of the changes in the visual and political economies of *aso ebi*. In Nigeria, photographs of *aso-ebi* dresses in what is known as fashion magazines have become a norm, such that viewing a social event in such magazines without *aso ebi* now seems unlikely. In this sense, it is obvious that some people who attend social functions feel the constant surveillance of their public selves by photographers attached to these fashion magazines, bearing in mind the publicity images they would create in the pages of the magazines. This dissertation has studied the role of photography and these magazines in the construction of *aso-ebi* dress culture in social gatherings of Lagos. It has shown that through a tripartite conjoining of photography, fashion magazines and Lagos tailors, group glamour and sartorial workmanship are commercialized through *aso ebi*.

I have argued that the fashionable image has become democratized through acts of copying, and copies of, photographs of *aso ebi*. It has become clear in the course of this research that many people wish their social events and their attendant *aso ebi* dress styles to appear in these fashion magazines. Popular photographers who ‘copy’ these images from social events also played a key role between the people, the tailors and the magazines.

Judith Perani and Norma Wolf have remarked that in Lagos and other large cities in Nigeria, each weekend is marked by lavish celebrations and ceremonies, to which people are expected to wear their most fashionable ensembles.<sup>897</sup> In fact, Perani and Wolf note that people see these occasions as opportunities to exhibit the newest trend in clothes or launch new cloth

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<sup>895</sup> William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, “From ‘Great Town’ to ‘Nonplace Urban Realm’: Reading the Modern city” in William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock (eds.), *Visions of the Modern City* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>896</sup> Hobsbawn’s and Ranger’s position justifies the claim that both tradition and modernity are invented, but this time, could be represented through *aso ebi* which, to some extent, has been modernized to suit changing realities of urban social life in Lagos. See Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>897</sup> Judith Perani, Norma Hackleman Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and art Patronage in Africa* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1999), p. 179.

patterns.<sup>898</sup> It is however instructive that Perani and Wolf locate the exhibition of fashionable dressing within social gatherings in Nigeria but do not discuss the nature of these fashionable dresses, although they mention *aso ebi* in passing. This dissertation has expanded on this hint in Perani and Wolf: in the end it becomes clear that each weekend in Lagos did not just come with fashionable ensembles as remarked by Perani and Wolf, but that the key element of these fashionable ensembles was the *aso ebi* uniform. Inherent in these *aso ebi* uniforms however are altercations that no outsider may have imagined among the supposedly harmonious *aso ebi* groups. This dissertation has attempted to elucidate these altercations, and the supposed causes and the consequences they have on *aso ebi*.

*Aso ebi* is fraught with internecine discord which engenders a constant invention and reinvention of meanings in the practice. Through a nuanced interpretation of the meanings of wealth in urban Lagos, the social borders of *aso ebi* practice are constantly reshaped. When notions of family solidarity, political camaraderie, friendship, gifts, and love are invoked by *aso ebi* users, life becomes entangled within ambivalent, equivocal, internal politics. Firstly, the gift which one would ordinarily assume to be a gift becomes a negotiation coloured with reciprocity, with a stringent fine of social exclusion if breached. Secondly, a strong attachment to the artifact of material adornment defines the intimacy of love to which *aso ebi* makes claim. Thirdly, in its bid for financial recouping, *aso ebi* friendship expands, beckons to strangers, and threatens the essential ingredients that bind 'real' friendships together.

Interviews conducted around Lagos show that many people who engaged in *aso ebi* did so, not because of their avowed commitment, altruism or professed friendship to their *aso ebi* group, but because it has become a convention and social obligation. Any deviance to this sartorial commitment has attracted exclusion. Therefore, for some people, participation in *aso ebi* was a practice that came with indifference, subtle compulsion and indisposition all of which were subsumed under the rhetoric of friendship and solidarity. There was always a visible fear of exclusion. By definition, such exclusions, it was discovered, did not extend to the boycott of friends or family members but simply those (whether friends or strangers) who

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<sup>898</sup> Ibid, p. 179.

failed to appear in *aso ebi*. In other words, there may not be any real family membership or friendship in *aso ebi*, and one can only become a friend if one appears in *aso ebi*.

A recurring thematic thrust in this dissertation was the issue of dress style, sartorial presentation and group-fashioning in *aso ebi* and how it depicted the nature of friendship, group affiliations and conviviality in Lagos society.<sup>899</sup> Here the dissertation was able to narrate the story of the textile economy as a metaphor for understanding the social, economic and aesthetic sensibilities of individuals and groups in Lagos.<sup>900</sup> I have attempted to develop further the idea of the anthropologist William Bascom who, in 1951, studied about 354 photographic samples of a locally manufactured cloth in Nigeria known as *aso oke*. He linked the popularity of these textiles to their use as *aso ebi* by some social clubs in Lagos.<sup>901</sup> The question that was missing in Bascom's research was how these clubs popularized the textile fabrics, especially for use as *aso ebi*. However, what I have tried to show is the way *aso ebi* was popularized from the 1960s through advertisements of the rich in the newspapers and magazines, from which it became obvious that *aso ebi* clothing constituted a public image. This, I suggest, may have given rise to the emergence of fashion magazines in Lagos through which *aso ebi* dress styles were circulated.

The question, I suppose, is why did I do this? The strongest and shortest answer is that *aso ebi* is virtually absent in any academic investigation, with about ninety books I consulted mentioning it just in one word! Again, with more than three hundred thousand internet discussions by Nigerians (amongst whom we can include popular masses and academics); I asked why there was this research gap? The search for an answer amounts to this project.

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<sup>899</sup> Lagos being originally a Yoruba settlement, it was necessary for me to look at Elisha Renne's study of the meaning of clothes in the social life of a Yoruba community called Bunu. She notes that cloth was used to represent social unity and harmony and that it expressed ambiguous and contradictory messages in Bunu life whereby conflict coexists with general social ideals. In what George Simmel calls an "awareness of dissonance" in social life, I liken Renne's study to the emerging conflicts that attend modifications in the modern use of *aso-ebi* of which a further explanation will help to provide an in-depth understanding of the research theme. See Elisha P. Renne, *Cloth That Does Not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995).

<sup>900</sup> Anne Spencer echoed this idea when she noted that much can be learned about West African history, values, and aspects of daily life through a study of photographs of people in different outfits. She made this statement in her study of the photographs of over one hundred and seventy-five Nigerian textile materials collected in the 1970's by Joanne Eicher who lived in Eastern Nigeria in the 1970's. I have extended this research by looking at the photographs of *aso ebi* textiles in this respect. See Anne Spencer, "Of Polomints and Alphabets: The Eicher Collection of African Wax Printed Cloths" in Susan Torntore, (ed.), *Cloth is the Center of the World: Nigerian Textiles, Global Perspectives* (Minnesota: The Goldstein Museum of Design, Department of Design, Housing and Apparel, University of Minnesota, 2001), pp. 43-64.

<sup>901</sup> Marilyn Horn and Lois Gurel, *The Second Skin* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 182.

My dissertation offers an exposition of *aso ebi* as a signifier of cultural identification and urban nationalism. It shows how *aso ebi* created debates and discourses around the notions of solidarity and belonging in Nigeria. It is a study of how, through *aso ebi*, Nigerians built, imagined and (re)interpreted social groups and networks. Thus, in addition to contributing to literature on visual cultural practices in Africa and especially in Nigeria, the dissertation contributes to social and cultural history that focuses on dress to ascertain the nature of changing urban practices in Nigeria. Looking at the practice of photography in relation to *aso ebi*, the work is a visual history that focuses on *aso ebi* to discuss how, at different epochs, Lagosians as actors were attentive to dress in their participation in social activities which in turn served active economic needs at some points. The historical works, contemporary analysis and ‘participant observation’ methods I focus on help to explain the ways in which men and women in Lagos have shown agency in their actions and reactions to local and global events.

This research has accentuated the plight of Lagos as an African city in dire need of visual cultural analysis and fashion studies. That Lagos provides a microscopic lens into the labyrinths of an African urban world have further justified a research of this nature. In recognition of the fact that new forms of urban cultural and mercantile networks have reinvented a web of histories and styles in most African cities,<sup>902</sup> it became interesting that this study exposed Lagos as a city of fashion and a “modernizing exemplar”<sup>903</sup> of urban ‘identities’ in Nigeria.

The research helped to understand the role played by fashion consumption in the development of cosmopolitan sensibilities and cultural identities in Lagos. This is evident through the politics inherent in the historiography of clothing and the practice of everyday life in urban Lagos. I have reviewed materials drawn from a range of critical and conceptual paradigms through which I forged a fresh analysis of theoretical, historical and contemporary consumption habits in *aso ebi* among Lagos residents. Again given the fact that “there is still

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<sup>902</sup> Okwui Enwezor et al, *Under Siege: Four African Cities Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* Documenta II Platform 4, (Munich, Senefelderstrasse: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 19.

<sup>903</sup> Odiya Ofeimun, ‘Imagination and the City’ in *Lagos: a City at Work* (Lagos: Glendora Books, 2005), p. 118.

little done on the visual culture experience in Africa”<sup>904</sup> especially Nigeria, this project became very imperative. This, no doubt, helped to “accumulate a body of knowledge on the history of clothing and visual cultural practices in Africa.”<sup>905</sup> In this vein, not only does this dissertation try to present ‘a history’ of photography in Nigeria through a specific, contextualized reading of colonial ethnographic and postcolonial photography, it also underscores the urgent need to transcend the abiding literatures on the analogue medium in postcolonial photography. It beckons scholars to view postcolonial African photography through the prism of the digital age. This will help in forging a preliminary base for its theorization.

Finally, in this dissertation, all the chapters are united by their common concern with *aso ebi*. Underlying this dissertation, therefore, is my argument that *aso ebi* is a hybrid cultural phenomenon that is acted upon by many factors. A central facilitator of these factors is the commercialization that has become the bane of late capitalism. I argue that photography and other visual manifestations in urban Lagos form part of these commercial cultures. This, among many other factors, is crucial to understanding the evolving meaning of *aso ebi* culture in urban Lagos.

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<sup>904</sup> Olu Oguiibe, “The Photographic Experience: Towards an understanding of Photography in Africa” in *Flash Afrique: Photography from West Africa* Kunsthalle Wein Steidt (ed.), (London: Penguin, 2001), p.9.

<sup>905</sup> Ibid, p.9.

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Interview with Antonia Nweke, Apapa Lagos, February 3, 2011.

Interview with Ayo Obese, Surulere, Lagos, December 10, 2010.

Interview with Ayodele Oketunji, Retired textile merchant, Lagos, December 9, 2010.

Interview with Baba Ekiti, Retired textile merchant, Lagos Island, February 30, 2011.

Interview with Babalola Olusoga, Owner of *Aso ebi Planner*, Lagos, March 6, 2011.

Interview with Bayo Adetunji, Lagos, February 10, 2011.

Interview with Benson Uchendu, photographer, Lagos, November 30, 2009.

Interview with Bunmi Oke, Lagos, March 10, 2010.

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Interview with Chidi Ibenegbu, textile merchant, Balogun Textile Market, Lagos, February 25, 2011.

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Interview with Chioma Okoye, student, Lagos, March 20, 2010.

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Interview with Ifeyinwa Umunna, textile merchant, Lagos, December 12, 2010.

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Interview with Jide Adeniyi Jones, photographer, Lagos, December 1, 2010.

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Interview with Nkemakonam Udentia, student, Lagos, March 7, 2011.

Interview with Nnenna Nwike, student, Lekki Peninsula, Lagos, April 5, 2010.

Interview with Samuel Ibe, Awka, February 28, 2011.

Interview with Ogbonna Chidimma, textile merchant, Balogun Textile Market, Lagos, November 30, 2010.

Interview with Olabisi Oluremi, 4 Lawanson Street, Surulere, Lagos, January 26, 2011.

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