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# African Lace

A History of Trade, Creativity and Fashion in Nigeria



An Exhibition of the Museum für Völkerkunde Wien–Kunsthistorisches Museum  
and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria  
With the Support of the Austrian Embroidery Industry

Edited by

Barbara Plankensteiner and Nath Mayo Adediran

# African Lace

A History of Trade, Creativity and Fashion in Nigeria

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## Preface

Many Austrians might already have had an opportunity to admire the brightly coloured or snow-white lavish lace dresses worn by people of Nigerian descent. They might have noticed them in the media, or caught a glimpse of Africans on their way to church or to a festive occasion. Only a few however know that the textiles of which these fascinating garments are created, are in fact industrial embroideries that are manufactured in Vorarlberg in Western Austria since the 1960s specifically for the Nigerian market. To me personally, the elegant appearance of African women is quite familiar from my youth: not because I ever travelled to Africa, but because Nigerian businesswomen are a frequent sight on the streets of certain towns in Vorarlberg. They visit the area regularly to order new collections and cultivate contacts with embroidery companies in Lustenau and surroundings.

I am very pleased that we have been able to organize this exhibition on *African Lace* in collaboration with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria. For various reasons this is an exceptional exhibition: it surpasses the classical themes of ethnography by exploring a history of dress and fashion and integrates the perspective of contemporary artists.

*African Lace* is devoted to a recent, still unexplored, chapter of African fashion history. It is entirely based on research carried out by the curator of the exhibition and her partners in Nigeria, who have conducted interviews and field studies both in Lustenau in Vorarlberg and Lagos with surroundings. For the first time the subject is illuminated both from a historical and cultural perspective. With the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue we are able to present the results of this research to a broader public. The project therefore demonstrates once more the important role of museums as centres of research on material culture, conveying innovative approaches and findings worthy of international recognition.

The project further complies in a special manner with the central aims of museum work in preserving cultural heritage and communicating knowledge. As part of the preparatory research, collections of lace attires dating from the 1970s to the present were assembled for both the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna and the National Museum in Lagos, with a view to permanently document the subject in the official institutions of both countries. The embroidery textiles connect Nigeria and Austria in a special way: as a result of a lively exchange that has endured for over half a century they can be clearly asserted as an Austrian-Nigerian product. A product, that defines the appearance of Nigerians around the world, and contributes in keeping a thriving Austrian industry alive.

The timing for the exhibition could not have been more appropriate. On October 1, 2010 Nigeria celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of independence from colonial rule. The story of these textiles is also indirectly related to this special historical moment. We hope that the exhibition will also attract the interest of Nigerian residents in Austria, who represent one of the largest African communities in our country. We trust that the project contributes in introducing the Austrian public to a fascinating aspect of Nigerian culture and life, beyond the usual tendentious headlines.

I am greatly indebted to Barbara Plankensteiner for suggesting and curating this extraordinary exhibition. I also like to express my gratitude to the embroidery companies in Lustenau whose generous support, both financial and through the donation of textiles, have enabled to invite four renowned designers from Nigeria's fashion capital Lagos to create designs from embroidery textiles. Their ingenious and elegant creations offer a fascinating insight into the country's contemporary culture of fashion and dress styles. I also like to thank the Austrian Commercial Section in Lagos for coordinating this fashion project and for its generous assistance.

Sabine Haag — Director General, Kunsthistorisches Museum  
mit Museum für Völkerkunde und Österreichischem Theatermuseum



## Preface

Thinking about lace and its multi-faceted fabric, texture, color and general form, one conceives a unique material that radiates beauty and elegance and adds overall glamour. Lace in Nigeria constitutes an art form that evolved over time and is still evolving. Lace attire in Nigeria has come to acquire a distinctive character which expresses a certain level of wealth and position. It also confers prestige on activities and events.

It conveys supreme elegance and value, and can be regarded as a symbol of high prestige. The level of prestige is commensurate with the cost of the material. The discourse in this catalogue is multi-spectral and is seen from the perspective of producers and users of lace, academics and merchants, as well as those who are concerned with design, aesthetics and fashion. Another perspective is also interesting: that of journalists who specialize in reporting on celebrities and party culture, the domain where the use of lace is more pronounced.

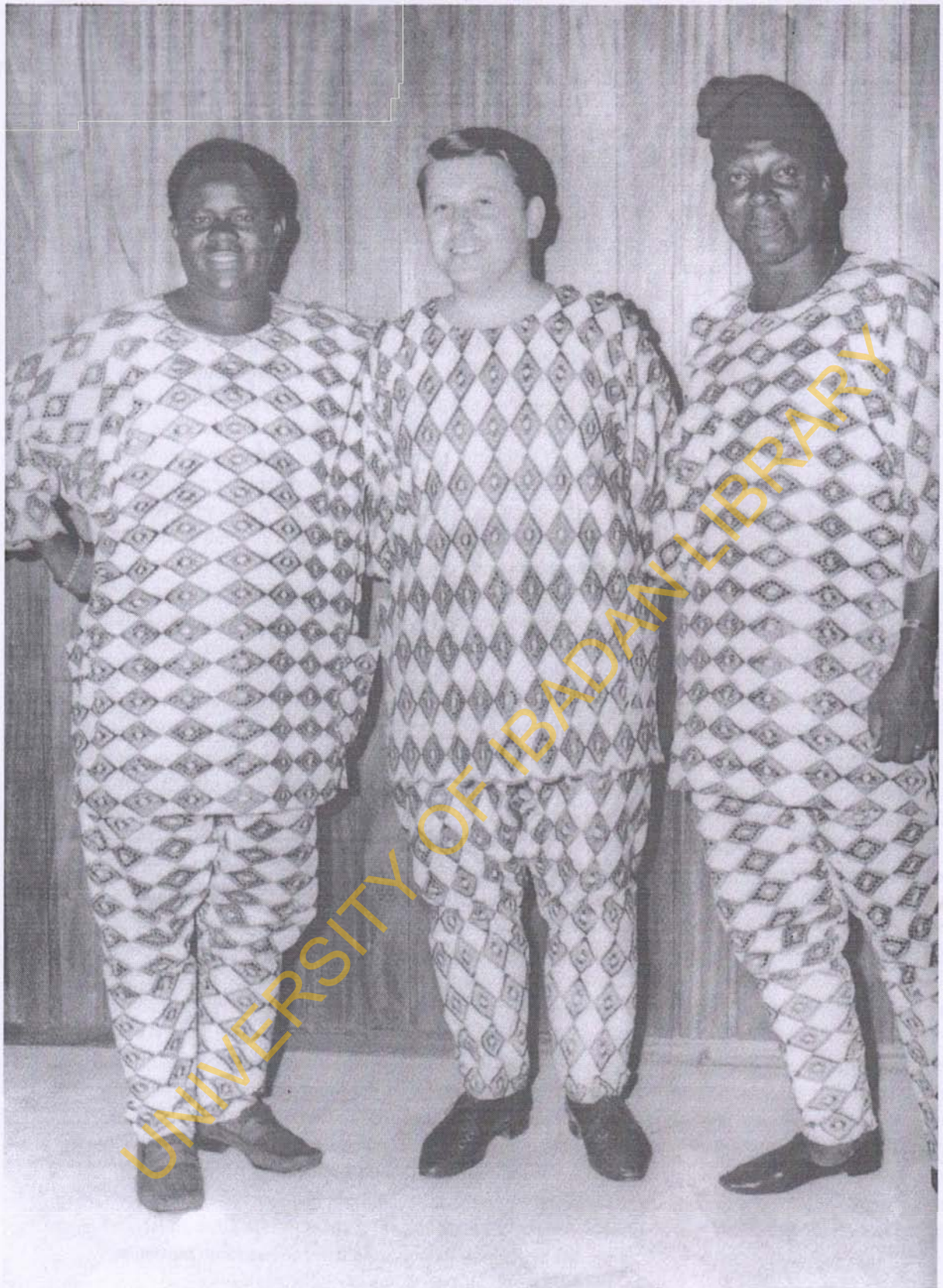
It is indeed rewarding to present this subject to the European and the Nigerian public, where it has acquired different meanings in different segments of the society. It also denotes different value at various stages of life.

The catalogue presents a number of stimulating aspects of lace. These include African lace, lace in Nigerian fashion, the lace culture, and of course Nigerian lace materials. This exhibition explains why lace is of importance in Nigerian society by presenting various forms of lace materials. These reflect their rich cultural heritage and social significance and also highlight the enduring relationship between Nigeria and Austria.

This exhibition will surely be rewarding for all those who are interested in textiles, fashion and cultural heritage.

Yusuf Abdallah Usman — Director General,  
National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria

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## Foreword

"Clothes make the man", or, as the Yoruba say, *aso ledidi eniyan* ("attire makes the man"). Nearly everywhere in the world what humans wear as their second skin on top of their first one (and be it only pigments painted on their bodies) serves to mark individual or collective identities. Gender, age, status, affiliation with local, regional, or ethnic communities, as well as attitudes and personal situations of the wearer may be reflected by the shape and workmanship of garments, which in turn are affected by the often contradictory influences of social conventions, governmental interventions, changing fashions, and the desire for self-representation.

But it is also people who make the cloth and the most important material used today for this purpose are textiles, which owe their triumphant advance to the rise of manufacturing and industrial production in association with a process of globalization that has assumed ever greater momentum since the early modern period.

An exhibition like *African Lace*, which exemplarily deals with decorated textiles and fashions in Nigeria in particular since the country gained independence in 1960, thus almost necessarily speaks not only of bales of cloth and dress patterns, but first and foremost of people and their need for identity, of markets, and of contradictory interests in the wake of globalization. The exhibition unfolds to the observer an impressive image of a process of cultural appropriation – that almost magic course of events by which the Foreign is transformed into the Domestic: in the case in question, products of the textile industry of Vorarlberg into garments for the rich and beautiful in Nigeria.

In the public perception, globalization is frequently equated with an increased levelling of differences due to the dominance of multinational companies. At the same time many contemporaries are worried about the mounting multiculturalism of their social environment, which emphasizes the persistence of cultural differences, but at the same time dislocates them from a comforting distance to a proximity felt to be alarming.

*African Lace* illustrates that the world-wide exchange of goods and ideas and the possibilities of global communication and mobility do not necessarily result in a McDonaldization of the world, but on the contrary may contribute to satisfying the desire to articulate local or regional distinctions. This leads to openings in the market better served by smaller businesses with greater flexibility and adaptability than large corporations. The economic success of a small country like Austria on world markets is significantly due to its ability to adapt to the specific demands of these openings.

The high degree of discretion required to protect market positions may be one of the reasons why this important and positive aspect of Austrian-Nigerian relations has so far hardly been noted or even seriously appreciated by the public. This makes it even more pleasing to note that the exhibition *African Lace* has been conceived and developed in cooperation between the Commission of Museums and Monuments Nigeria and the Museum of Ethnology Vienna. Thus, this "secret" chapter in the relations between the two countries and their respective cultures will now be unveiled both in Austria and Nigeria.

This ambitious project would never have come to pass without the active interest of the textile industry of Vorarlberg, for which we would like to express our most heartfelt gratitude. Special thanks are also due to the curators of the exhibition, Barbara Plankensteiner and Nath Mayo Adediran, and their collaborators in Austria and Nigeria, who have approached the yet unwritten history of "Austrian lace" in Nigeria, especially through the stories those involved in its making were willing to tell.

At present an exhibition like *African Lace* may still be regarded as rather unusual for an ethnographic museum, but it also highlights the possibilities of such institutions to make and convey to the public important contributions to a better understanding of the world.

Christian Feest – Director, Museum of Ethnology Vienna

Essays

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## Lace Fashion as Heteroglossia in the Nigerian Yoruba Cultural Imaginary

*Ebi kii p'eniyan de'di leesi.* ('Lace is not a destination for the impoverished', or, more literally, 'The poor do not hunger for lace'.)<sup>4</sup>

A contemporary Nigerian Yoruba aphorism

*Aso nla ko leyan nla.* ('The dress does not make the man', or, more colloquially, 'Your big dress will not make you big'.)

A traditional Yoruba proverb

'... as a rule, the makers of fashion have imposed upon humanity through the ages an intolerable burden of superfluous and cumbersome covering ...'

Robins Pennell 1927: 392

Many routes, says the Yoruba cultural imaginary, lead to the market. And by appropriation, this researcher proposes the same dictum for fashion discourse. Or, if you would prefer, fashion admits of many potential modes of interpretation. So also does, and particularly too, the lace fashion culture (Fig. 194). Even more, it could be said that the multiple discourses made possible by fashion seem encouraged by both the specific nature of the fashion event, such as the lace culture in Nigeria, and the broad theoretical possibilities that can attend the fashion debate in general.

As a generic term, lace admits of types and modes as material culture, and in the Yoruba reading it also allows for a perceptual interpretative diversity in relation to its wearers as well as commentaries on its wearing. The Nigerian lace culture enthrones a plethora of social commentaries such that we can say, in the final analysis, lace is implicated in a galaxy of signifiers; lace, in this sense, is 'heteroglossia' – to co-opt the insight of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). For emphasis, I hint at two moments of this claim. One is to note that the fabric and styles of lace are diverse, and these have invited an equally varied range of casual societal responses. The second is at the level of a more formal nature of discursive practice in dress and fashion culture. This would imply the varied insights that can be derived and deployed in interpreting the lace event; and these could include cultural relativist theories

ranging over the entirety of structuralism – including semiotics, Marxism, and feminism, besides post-structuralism and deconstructive criticism, even the post-modern! Yet, how can we discuss the Nigerian lace phenomenon without drawing insights from conceptual hegemony and shades of the power and ideology matrix? While drawing references from all these strategies of reading, I am inclined to examine the embedded heteroglossia and communicative ability of lace fashion in Nigeria in a mode of cultural criticism that intends to show sensitivity to ethnographic details in the Nigerian Yoruba cultural imaginary.

By and large, this piece will explore the theoretical foundations of identity in relation to the cultural consumption of clothing and dress, besides seeking to interpret in ethnographic terms a dress form like lace as a kind of non-verbal communicative text. Furthermore, the chapter will highlight contextual factors operating to define the dress form and identify the same factors in social terms among the Nigerian Yoruba, where lace is a pre-eminent fashion item and event. We hint at this by recognizing, as Caroline Evans (1997: 231) notes of Malcolm Barnard's work, that fashion and dress are intrinsically linked in a mode of socially agreed communication, and one indeed 'imbued with power and ideology'.

In identifying the sample population as Nigerian Yoruba, I seek to limit my observations to those of that extraction within the country, and even excluding such immediate neighbours as the Beninois Yoruba. But even Yoruba, as with other socio-cultural identities, is a construct. It is this element of wishing into being and constructing into textual discourse that Benedict Anderson (1983: 15) dwells upon in *Imagined Communities* by observing that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.'

Yet, I merely aggregate the most common habits in contemporary social rituals of the group, but these are also rituals that buttress broad affinities in respect to clothing, dress, and the lace culture as an aspect of a diffused identity continuum. This has also been supported by the researcher's unfolding observations over the last three decades, within the region, of a persistent expression of dress and lace culture through proverbs,

<sup>4</sup> Fig. 193: Detail, men's suit, Fig. 194.



Fig. 194: Men's suit | Nigeria, early 1990s | Cutout voile with floral all-over embroidery (rayon yarn) and appliquéd Swarovski stones | *Boba* shirt:

L. 118 cm, *sofuro* pants: L. 115 cm | Museum für Völkerkunde Wien, Inv. No. 187.520 a, b.

aphorisms, songs (traditional and popular), panegyrics, literary exegesis, radio and television programming, among others. This background has equally been complemented with primary references from field study among lace enthusiasts, wearers, and traders, and the broad literature on the fashion industry. All these have helped to shape an understanding that straddles cultural templates, as ontology of fashion, its manifest realization in dress performance by cultural actors themselves, and their theorizing of the self in this intricate web.

Lace has been an important item in Nigerian trade exchange since the colonial era, and even earned its code of prestige with the emergent elite of this period. In the

post-independence era it became a symbol of arrival among the *nouveaux riches*, and a target to meet in social climbing among other excluded groups. Two other factors came to popularize lace among the Yoruba lower classes: the patron-client social structure and the communal ethos of the *aso ebi* (kinship communal dress), aspects that would be buttressed much later. It suffices to note for now that explaining fashion as a communicative text requires acknowledging 'the role of subjectivity, desire and fantasy in the act of dressing, the wearing of fashion' (Figs. 195 and 196; Evans 1997: 231).



Fig. 195. Three-piece men's suit | Nigeria, 1990s | Cotton voile with industrial all-over embroidery in rayon. The neckline of the gown is bordered with machine-embroidery | *Agbada* gown: W. 187 cm, *buba* shirt: L. 107.5 cm, *sokoto* pants: L. 109 cm | Museum für Völkerkunde Wien, Inv. No. 187.521 a, b, c.

#### Outcome from the Field

Request a discussion on lace and the tongue waxes; ask for a definition and it wanes. Strangely, my field experience indicates that there seems to be no unanimity on what constitutes lace among wearers and traders of the product! Responses range over a sense of lace as texture of fabric, design on fabric, specific fabric type, mode and motif. An immediate parallel to this is the manner in which native speakers could use language but without necessarily having an understanding of the working principles of its grammar or syntax – something of an assumed immanent knowledge. While Microsoft Encarta (2008) describes lace as a 'Delicate fabric with patterned holes: a delicate fabric made by weaving cotton, silk, or a synthetic yarn in a pattern that leaves small holes be-

tween the threads', the Merriam Webster's (2008) Dictionary identifies it as 'an openwork usually figured fabric made of thread or yarn and used for trimmings, household coverings, and entire garments'.

Quite often interviewees were more comfortable describing lace in market taxonomies: 'dry lace', 'cotton lace', 'voile lace', 'double voile lace', 'satin', 'wonyasi', etc. In especial moments, a product could be named after a successful trader such as the Ibadan brand that came to be known as Alhaja Wositat Ikeolu lace. They also list the sources of importation as Switzerland, Bangkok, Austria, and China, among others. There is unanimity on the fact that Switzerland and Austria produce the best grade of lace, and China ranks high on imitation products. Yet, importation from China seems to be soaring, owing to competitive pricing. Import-export relations



have equally been affected by the crests and troughs of the Nigerian economy, such that the most difficult period for traders was the mid-1980s, with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP).<sup>3</sup> Prior to this period, there was some measure of confidence in the market and the exchange partners, traders, and suppliers could operate on a payment after sales basis. However, with SAP, the industry began to experience high indebtedness among traders and this system was scrapped for a cash-and-carry model. What is more, many local textile factories such as Shokas, Five Star, Empee, and Daltex were badly affected by SAP and this led to the laying off of workers, and to some closures.

The popularity of the trade has also spawned under-hand methods among many apprentices who, in order to make extra income, resort to trickery in the scaling and measurement of bundles. The apprentice is obliged to learn the formal trade and graduate in between 6 months and 2 years. This training would include ability to identify varieties of the product, judge market trends, travel to sources of purchase, and even learn spin-doctoring. But with go-betweens (or unofficial market facilitators) known as *baranda*, you hardly have the option of not learning confidence-trickery. The *baranda* usually has no shop of his own in the marketplace, but hustles to bring the new arrival in the market environment to designated shops. He is knowledgeable about product types and prices and conducts negotiations without being hindered by the shop owner. For his efforts he returns to get a cut from the sale, his labour having been factored into the final cost price. Unable to earn an income in the same way (apprentices pay the shop owner for the privilege of learning), the apprentice resorts to the *apade-alude* trickery of systematic taking inches off customers' fabrics in the hope of reselling the off-cuts or sewing something for themselves after amounting a sizeable measure.

Lace's main context of exhibition is generally celebratory: initiation, victory, promotion, and a joyous *rite de passage*, for example. Indeed the wearing of lace would usually invite the query, 'what's the occasion?' This use-fixation informs, perhaps, the only non-context-free con-

dition of its wearing. Although lace has remained popular among the Yoruba from the 1960s, even achieving something of fashion default for prestigious outings and ceremonies, the high lace era was pegged in the post oil-boom period of the mid-1970s (Fig. 197). It was at this point that it became the undisputed market leader and fashion fabric of choice.



Fig. 196: Lady's suit | Nigeria, 1980s | Cotton voile with industrial all-over embroidery in rayon and added border with lurex embroidery | Iro wrapper: L. 124 cm; buba blouse: L. 65.5 cm | Museum für Völkerkunde Wien, Inv. No. 187.515 a, b

Fig. 197: Lady's suit | Nigeria, c. 1975 | Industrial guipure embroidery with cotton yarn | Iro wrapper: L. 190.5 cm; buba blouse: L. 50.5 cm | Museum für Völkerkunde Wien, Inv. No. 187.358 a, b

## Cultural Subsoil of the Proverbial, Song-Text, and Literary Rendering

Equally, it was at the height of this fashion's popularity that an intense discourse emerged in popular music and literary practice as would be demonstrated in this chapter. There is a sense in which the performance of the lace fashion could have been informed by cultural pretexts anchored to three critical Yoruba fashion concepts: *aso*, *oge*, *ipe'de*. Simply put, *aso* is cloth, *oge* is fashion, and *ipe'de* – making a statement. While both *aso* and *oge* could be related to a trend and even a fad, specific types of *aso*, such as *saki*<sup>5</sup> of the Ogboni fraternity, could be locked in grand narratives of use-value such as ritual, thereby acquiring a sacred or near-sacred accretion. The sense of *ipe'de*'s statement making is usually not a verbal mode of communication. The verb *pe'de* in this context implies an overarching sense of non-verbal figuration, a metaphor of implying and showing without saying, a depiction of something in emblematic form. This need not be restricted to cloth fashion: a new family car could stress hierarchy within an extended family unit or within a neighbourhood, while the *aso ebi* (kinship communal dress worn at ceremonies) could stress communality, family unity, or group-bonding experience. It is in this regard that Margaret Drewal (1992: 22–23) interprets the extended embroidery of the Egba *Parikoko* mask as denoting a semiotic of power in the same sense that skyscrapers in New York would constitute corporate power. From the point of view of Yoruba hermeneutical practices, these could be described as exercises in statement making at an extra-normative level or, as rendered in the culture, *ede pipe*<sup>5</sup>. In addition, these practices are charged from a force field that gestures at other levels of discourses of dominance and marginality, filiation and affiliation, inclusion and exclusion, and a myriad other such binaries. Yet, implicit in this cultural practice is the dual, but apparently contradictory, rendering of the cloth metaphor; it constructs as well as deconstructs itself in the manner of the Yoruba *Ifa* hermeneutical narrative.<sup>6</sup> We commence progressively with proverbs, song-texts, and a literary rendering.

### Proverbial rendering

The *aso* (cloth), as bodily embodiment and *oge sise*, the performance of fashion, require some more explanation in relation to the layers of connotative attributions in the culture. The cloth in this sense is only partly material culture. The cloth buttresses aspects of Yoruba ontology,

archetypes, and other systems of valuation, just as well as it stresses different layers of social relations. It does this sometimes through a strict adherence to non-verbal cues, but at other times with verbal complements by reiteration, substitution, and even contradiction.

Social context and the agency of the Yoruba cultural actor inform the direction in which the cloth metaphor is deployed. The layers of apparent contradictions in the cloth metaphors examined further buttress the heteroglossia and a residual hermeneutical ability in the culture. Hence, on the one hand the Yoruba say, *Baa ti rin ni ankoni* ('Your appearance informs the reception you get'), as cautionary, yet on the other hand this quickly revises itself to, *Aso nla ko leyan nla* ('The dress does not make the man' or 'Appearance can be deceptive', something in the mould of 'The hood does not make the monk'). Social stratification is buttressed in the saying, *Kini oruko aso re ni le alaro*, with the implication that the wealthy are identified with distinguishing apparel at the pit-dyer's. It gets even a little more intense with cross-referential suggestions between wealth and dignity in *Aiyasowo lo nje mofe de beun ni were* ('Dignity and self-assurance comes from not borrowing your apparel'). This perspective on proverbs bears deep implications for the attitude to treating the Yoruba, and many other African cultures,

Fig. 198: Record: *Emperor Pick Peters and his Seidomatic System* | Nigeria, 1976 | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

Fig. 199: Record: General Prince Adekunle | Nigeria, 1980 | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

Fig. 200: Record: Alhaji Fatai Adio, *The Fuji Wizard* | Nigeria, 1978 | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

Fig. 201: Record: Segun Adewaja, *Rawo Tiwa Lo Dode* | Nigeria, 1980 | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

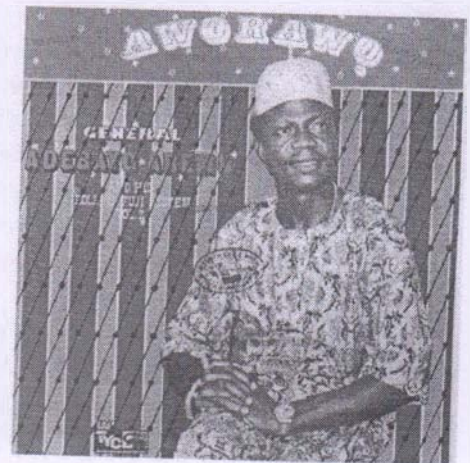
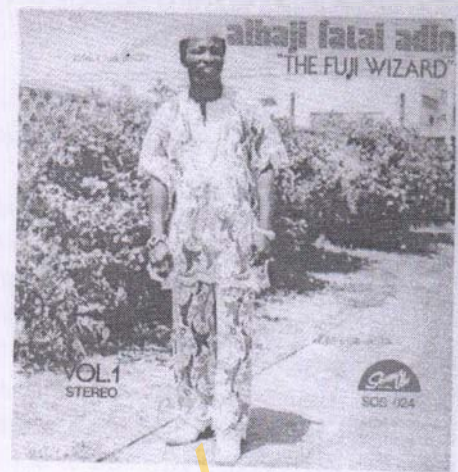
Figs. 202–204: Records: *Uncle Tayo Ayagun and his Diurno Sound Makers*, vols. 3, 4, 5 | Nigeria, 1976, 1977, 1977 | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

Fig. 205: Record: Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey, Nigeria, 1970s | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

Figs. 206 and 207: Records: *General Adebayo Aremu and his Rolling Fuji System*, discs 2 and 5 | Nigeria, 1979, 1980 | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

Fig. 208: Record: *Osefatu Adebisi and her Waka Group* | Nigeria, 1970s | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.

Fig. 209: Record: *Sunny Ade and his African Beats*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary special, Nigeria, 1970s | Coll. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC), Nigeria.



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as monolithic and merely communal, thereby denying critical insights on the nature and dynamics of internal class polarities and the wealth of counter-discursive strategies within it/them. Even the opening epigraph of this chapter goes beyond insinuating hierarchy of access to lace: its unspoken admonition to the lower rungs of society cannot be missed by the Yoruba speaker. And yet that opening proverb, as has been demonstrated, yields itself to a subversive reading that turns the tables on the arrogance of the dominant class.

Thus, this is only one strategy of reading, as the entire exercise above could be revised. If read in the context of a dysfunctional elite, the entire punning of proverbs backfires on the upper classes. Sometimes the cloth proverb informs on hierarchy and social roles. In the proverb *Otun ni omoba nge fila si*, we learn that a prince is expected to slant his cap rightwards. But there is even a potentially metonymic import of this claim among the Ookun-Yoruba of Northeast Yorubaland, where Eva Krampf-Askari (1966: 3) had identified a 'triadic pattern of classification which underlies the political organisation ... [and one that has shown] a remarkable persistence through time'. In slanting his cap rightwards, we get an abridged semiosis of an ascendancy pattern in the monarchical system as the 'left', 'right', and 'centre' are symbolically tagged.

The metaphoric scope of the cloth image stretches beyond fashion into the realm of ethics. This kind of extension is exemplified in the saying *Eni tia daso fun ni l'orunre laawo* ('We have to assess the apparel of the person who is making a donation of clothes to another'), which implies the need to go beyond precept and show by example. All said and done, proverbs, aphorisms, songs, and panegyrics shift in layers of meaning, thereby denoting the potential adaptive and transformational character of even formal ritual as a re-creation of myth. Margaret Drewal (1992: 27) captured this dynamism when she delineated a broad spectrum of ways in which improvisation could change ritual through 'psychic transformation ... spontaneous interpretations, recontextualisation, reconstitution of conventions and individual interventions into the ritual event'. This observation captures the instability of the rhetoric of the Yoruba proverb, and the potential for its textual interpretation – even destabilization – such as we have found here. Over a decade ago, Remi Raji-Oyelade (1999) had explored the persistent rupture in emergent post-proverbial enunciations among the Yoruba.

## Cultural Economy of Song-Text Rendering

For the purpose of stressing the art-society commentary on the lace fashion of the 1970s and 1980s, I will presently allude to two song-texts and one play. The song-text of Ebenezer Obey's *Juju* and one Ilorin *Awurebe* music genre, and Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* have quite immediate bearing on the lace fashion of the era. As regards the musical genre, it is crucial to understand the cultural economy of the Yoruba *ariya* (funfair), and how the general constitution of the patron-client relationship of the country's political economy affects it.

The Yoruba *ariya* in the post-colonial aftermath is at once a revue and performance of sociability and kinship. In the particular context of its oil-boom enactment, the Nigerian celebratory almost came to denote the Yoruba *ariya* writ large. For a while it seemed that any excuse could be contrived to occasion social revelry and fun-fair. And the primary vehicle of such carousing was *Juju* music. It could hardly be otherwise because, as noted by Christopher Waterman (1990: 14), '*Juju* portrays a traditional hierarchy mitigated by the generosity of the wealthy.' Unlike *Juju*, a genre like Fela's Afrobeat music critiqued the tendency to 'naturalize' social dominance and subservience through cultural reproduction. Overall, the Afrobeat musical genre queried the tendency towards supplanting critical cultural insight by elite voyeurism as normative value in society. Beyond this, it called attention to the contradictions of the social production of wealth and its private consumption by the elite. That elite, including its civilian and brass extractions, was the lace class of that era, at least as far as the Yoruba group was concerned. And it was in this sense that *Juju* music served the lace class in perpetuating its hegemony (Figs. 198–208).

The Nigerian elite has been variously characterized, and Richard Joseph's (1991: 1) perspective is quite instructive. Describing the nature of the emergent state, Joseph contends that any fruitful discussion about Nigeria must take into account the 'nature, extent and persistence of a certain mode of political behaviour, and of its social and economic ramification', and suggests a conceptual notion of 'prebendalism' to explain the 'centrality in the Nigerian polity of the intensive and persistent struggle to control and exploit the offices of the state' (Joseph 1991: 1). According to him, the historical association of the term 'prebend' with the offices of certain lords or monarchs, or with the outright purchase by supplicants, who administered them to generate income for themselves, arose in ancient Greece. Hence, the

adjective 'prebendal' is used to refer to 'patterns of political behavior which rest on the justifying principle that such offices should be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of the office holders as well as of their reference or support group' (Joseph 1991: 8).

The patron-client ties reflect a social relationship which has become a crucial element – perhaps even the defining form – of governmental process in Nigeria

under which lies an economic stratum that has been variously described as a 'government by contract' and a 'rentier' state, in which revenues derive from taxes or rents on production, rather than from productive activity. Nigeria's oil revenue, its economic mainstay, was the issue at stake here. The centrality of the state in deciding who becomes the patron – since state power confers the ability to control enormous economic resources and access to oil revenue – has turned Nigeria's politics into a state of warfare. This period reached an apogee in the early and mid-1970s. And it brewed a most consumptive import habit in the country. In furtherance of this habit, the Yoruba variant of this bizarre elite diverted its unearned surplus to a frenzy in the *ariya* event.

Ideological cultural moderators served the purpose and style of living of this elite. For instance, while successive Nigerian governments kept censoring the Afrobeat musical form, it paved the way for the popularization of other forms of music such as *Juju*. Not only was *Juju* considered non-threatening to the status quo, but the height of *Juju*'s official endorsement also coincided with the height of the assault on Afrobeat, indeed culminating in the physical destruction, in 1977, of the headquarters of the latter's most popular exponent, Fela Kuti. *Juju* would usually be allotted generous air time and patronage, mainly because, unlike Afrobeat, it hardly challenged the elite's ideological attempt to reproduce what Waterman (1990: 14) describes as a 'structure of dominance'. Even when *Juju* sometimes located society's sense of place, time, and event, it fell short of challenging the patronage structure on all these fronts.

Shortly after the 1971 armed-robbery incident in which Babatunde Isola Folorunso was executed at the Lagos Bar Beach while clad in his *wonyosi* lace, a rash of cultural interpretations was triggered. As with the embedded polysemy of the lace discourse itself, there was a variegated response. This was evident in the press and the general media just as in musical renditions, rupturing post-proverbials, and dramatic interpretations by playwrights.

Ebenezer Obey, one of the leading exponents of *Juju* music, was trenchant in rebutting the tendency in the

popular imagination to make lace an index of armed robbery. In the track titled 'Oro nipa lace', the musician dwells fairly extensively on the subject matter

Vocal:

*Ewo ni ka laso ni'le, k'ama le wo jade*

(How come being clad in one's dress becomes difficult in the public glare?)

*Ewo ni ka laso asiko, k'ama le wo jade*

(How come wearing one's most trendy cloth becomes difficult?)

*T'okunrin ba wo leesi, w'ani Folorunso*

(A man who wears lace is labelled [the armed robber] Folorunso)

*T'obinrin ba wo leesi, w'ani aya Babatunde*

(A woman who wears lace is labelled wife of [the armed robber] Babatunde)

*Ema f'oju buruku wo ni leesi*

(Do not stereotype the wearer of lace)

*Eni t'o jale iyen lo ye k'abawi*

(Only the proven thief deserves admonishment)

*Elegbe m'egbe, Elegbe m'egbe*

(Everyone should be mindful of his rung in the class hierarchy)

*Ajumo mi wo leesi, Elegbe m'egbe*

(Increasing opportunity in wearing lace does not obviate class polarity)

Chorus:

*Elegbe m'egbe, Elegbe m'egbe*

(Equals and peers know one another, or One should be mindful of one's rung in the class hierarchy)

*Ajumo mi wo leesi, Elegbe m'egbe*

(Among kin everybody wears lace, but equals and peers know one another)

The response of Olohun Iyo, an *Awurebe* musician, was quite different; his lyrics simply denounce the lace-wearing armed robber. He even somewhat turned aesthetic prosecutor, providing the date, manner, and context of a burglary and an armed-robbery event. In the first instance: *Won lo fo'le ni Surutere, ni'le Athaja/ won ba*

*pade oun tio je won!* [For sure the home of an Alhaja was burgled in Surulere [district of Lagos], but robbers met their Waterloo]. The self-crusading prosecutor goes further: *Babatunde Folorunso, sibia nan ni/ ise kan ko ni won jo se/ Iyen lo da'na ni ti e gedegbe ni ... o yo ibon si the owner/ oni ko f'erege kóbe ku'gbo* [In the case of the civilian Babatunde Folorunso, his operation was slightly different. He was an outright armed robber, halting a driver at gunpoint, and ordering him out into the wild].

### Literary Rendering

'Swaggering and scabrous, at once a verbal spree and a fierce assault on totalitarianism' is the way the London *Observer* described Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* (1984). A deeply punning parody on the African and Nigerian elite, Soyinka's play nonetheless takes a sarcastic swipe at both the high and low of society, in the same tradition as John Gay's 1782 *The Beggar's Opera*. Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill later created a popular new musical adaptation of the work in Germany entitled *Die Dreigroschenoper* [*The Threepenny Opera*]. However, the organizing motif that powers Soyinka's adaptation is the lace fashion, most beloved as an index of upward class mobility by the Nigerian Yoruba elite and society. And the consecration of this textual fair is led by the lace merchant, Mack-the-Knife, an amoral, anti-heroic, criminal character.

Soyinka commences this intertextual engagement right from the first word of the play's title, 'Opera' – this time manipulating the tonality of 'opera' in Yoruba to effect a double entendre realized as a form of spendthrift! And in the tricky multivocality that the tonal system allows in the culture, many – including literary scholars – came to read it as an oblique reference to the Nigerian elite, whose Head of State at the height of the petro-dollar oil-boom economy had been quoted as boasting: 'Money is not Nigeria's problem but how to spend it!' Even when the play soothes and stings, jests and jibes, it mobilizes the imagery of dress, conceptual fashion, and the cultural consumption of lace clothing to hone its point. The lace type, *wonyosi*, that Soyinka alludes to was eventually banned in the list of possible imports, but its prestige merely rose, and led to a dangerous smuggling (or *F'aya wo* in Yoruba) spree for a consumptive elite.

The ironic prestige of lace could not be better buttressed than in the suppressed sarcasm of *De Madam* in response to her husband, Anikura, who had insinuated that her visiting the Octopus Disco smacks of her being in lowly, seedy company. She retorts: 'It's a respectable place. And the gentleman [Mack-the-Knife] never

*laid a hand on me or Polly* [their daughter who eventually marries the scum] *except with his lace gloves on*' (emphasis mine). Elsewhere in the play *De Madam* dreams of a contact in the Middle East from whom, ostensibly, lace and gold are brought to the country for elite legitimation. Even when dialogue drifts to their daughter going out with the lace merchant, a suggestion of the wily spendthrift is connoted. The comment gets more caustic at a metonymic level with 'The Song of Ngh Ngh Ngh' when Anikura and *De Madam* sing in unison about the differential treatment meted out to crooks in the country. They enthuse that the long arm of the law misses the big crook, 'while your small-time bandit earns lead perforation', a particularly disturbing imagery of volleys of bullets pumped into the body of convicted armed robbers through public execution as was the practice in the 1970s, bringing to mind the case of the aforementioned Babatunde Folorunso, who got shredded along with the perforated *wonyosi* lace he donned at the stake. Both the action of this incident and the recurrent motif of perforations in lace became cross-referentially linked in the Nigerian public discourse of this period. The gory and morbid portrayal of the 'Bar Beach Show', the venue of this execution event in Lagos, is further heightened with the flurry of attendees at the occasion, which included, at the height of this absurdist moment in the drama, a woman divorcing her husband, who had dared suggest she could not attend the gory 'picnic' with the children, and a blood-drip drooping patient who self-discharges from his hospital ward – and with his nurse in hot pursuit – all in the bid to see the 'lace'-merchant-robber! All through, the lace motif is deployed in weaving the plot structure of a decadent society, and with lace fashion sometimes acquiring the status of an emblem of this decadence.

This motif powers the play to the end, even as Mack-the-Knife faces his executioners at the stake. Asked to make his last prayers as the soldiers take their aim, the play slips into a naturalistic, absurdist tone with Mack-the-Knife blurting out: 'I shall be brief. Tell your men to take positions and take aim. When I have finished I shall raise my lace handkerchief like this and say "So long"' (Soyinka 1984: 401; emphasis mine). But suddenly after this, a *deus ex machina* sets in, and an unrestrained parody of a happy ending in the Brechtian mode, suggesting that the final theatre of confrontation with social decay and the lace class is out there – beyond the round, beyond the proscenium – in the streets!



Fig. 210: Women at a wedding in Benin City dressed in ase ebi up and down ensembles of imported lace fabric. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner, 2007.

### Lace across Time

Drawing from personal observation, there is no evidence of a marked shift in the couture of lace in the last five, but one, decades. Add to this outcomes from interviews, observations from a broad range of family albums, newspaper and magazine photo-reports, the mode of pattern cutting and sewing of lace has followed the simple neo-traditional styles of *buba*, *soro*, *agbada* (for men), and the *iro* and *buba* top (for women). With increasing sophistication in fashion houses, however, and the adventurism of models, lace is gradually being reworked and is receiving less restrictive interpretations (Fig. 210). And this is particularly true of female couture in the last decade.

Besides lace, this new thinking is evidently trans-generic across other fabrics appreciated by the Yoruba, as Pat Oyelola (2010) has demonstrated in her recent

*Nigerian Artistry*, showing that in the hands of contemporary artists like Nike Okundaye, pattern dyeing becomes quite adventurous, exhibiting fresh creativity in forms like the modern wax batik *adire*, stencilled *adire eleka*, and patchwork on denim. The outcrop couture, especially with the admixture of *aso oke*, *akwete*, and hand-woven fabric, has found space along the diverse social rungs among the Yoruba. It has received endorsement from royalty as seen in regal garb, yet at social engagements such as weddings, graduation ceremonies, casuals, and interior decoration, the embroidered cloth has acquired added meaning.

Although not anticipating a solely Yoruba readership, a 2009 *élan* magazine pullout of the *Next* newspaper, entitled 'Sheer Delight', helps to capture a critical swing. 'It's mysterious' is the sense of shift with which the editor of the fashion page, Adaobi Nwanbani, flags the edition.

And in a tone anticipatory of current research, the pullout announces: 'There's something about lace. It covers up and shows off at the same time'; and, with this, it gently evokes Roland Barthes' propositions of '*plaisir*' (pleasure) and '*jouissance*' (bliss), even if only meekly tendentious unlike Barthes' articulation of the second-order of semiology in *Mythologie* (1990) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1976). For sure, the pattern cutting exhibited in the magazine has gone beyond the anticipation of the neo-traditional; it would sit more comfortably with the avantgarde. Playing on suggestive phrases like 'Lace looks that will leave them wanting for more', the edition exhibits a variety of styles and colours.

The covergirl is wearing an at-once broad and fixated view-range, in the mould of the entrapping Mona Lisa-look. Her eyeballs are prominent and her pupils dilated. She is a play in contrast: her light skin emerging from a turtleneck top under a shimmering amethyst neckpiece, black long-sleeved lace dress, capped with a mini hat clip, and lips coloured red. The edition's motif extends the lace metaphor, as the editor announces: 'conceal and reveal'. She continues: 'There is something about lace. It conceals but still leaves a little something for the eyes.' She then takes the reader through a *tour de force* of some lace looks, and in the hope that it will 'leave people looking, wanting to see more'. She might as well have been egged on in the sensuous by the most popular of our contemporary lexicographers – Microsoft Encarta, 2009, which, as noted above, defines lace as a 'Delicate fabric with patterned holes ... a pattern that leaves small holes between threads'. All through the exhibit, the *Next* pull-out dwells on the operational texture and eyelid phrases: delicate fabric; patterned holes!

The following pages right after the inside cover simply run off. First is a sleeveless lace mini dress, set off by slim, taunting, long legs hugged to a stop by leopard-print heels. Some panther!? You hold your breath and next emerges a teenage model in a more provocative sleeveless grey satin top with lace details on the neck over a black lace dress in full perforation, see-through and revealing immaculate white petticoat, and with her gesture she seems to challenge the normative female pose as inscribed in puritanical public preachments in Nigeria!

### Conclusion

By and large, this chapter has teased out the many potential uses and abuses to which lace fashion could be put and which it can be made to serve. In many ways, lace could also be an abstracted agency as well as an object, very much like the broad rubric of the fashion industry itself. We have managed to show the specific and general contexts of the fabric, and the several layers of social accretion that have been embossed on it, and how it has come to serve, somewhat, as a semiotic overload in relation to other fabrics in the Yoruba cultural imaginary, particularly of the oil-boom era in Nigeria. In the final analysis, the more sure-footed way of understanding the lace phenomenon among the Yoruba may be to locate it in the context of the broader perspective of its utility-values, aesthetic and performative preferences, and the particular inclination to make-believe in the culture.

- 1 Homage to the energy of The Market, where all paths criss-cross; West African markets where our mothers cook the seed of quiet rebellion and socio-economic independence. Specifically, I pay tribute to all the markets of my youth and adult experiences: through Djenne, Muokola, and Adjame in Mali, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively. And in Nigeria: Gusau, Makurdi, Kano, Zaria, Ilorin, Kabba, Aiyegule-Gbedde, Okene, Ibadan, and Lagos. More specifically, I lose words of appreciation for the mothers between Gbagi in Ibadan and Tejuoso Market in Lagos. I also lose count of individuals in all these markets, but risk intellectual fraudulence not to mention the following: Mrs V.O. Ajibade, Mrs Atinuke Adekoya, an anonymous Mrs at Tejuoso Market, Mrs Tawa Isola, Miss Jumoke Olayiwola, and Mrs Yinka Olanimoye, my colleague from the Department of Anthropology at the Lagos State University (LASU). And to three anthropologist friends of mine at the University of Ibadan: Benson Eluma, Yomi Ogunsanya, and Jide Olofajulo IPh.D., with their penchant for the ethnographic, umm!
- 2 However, this same proverb can be interpreted in a way that undermines the dominant reading thus: 'Hunger does not afflict a person to the extent of (i.e. in regard to) lace'; or, averted still, 'One cannot be too hungry as not to desire lace'. This second reading empowers even the poor to hunger for lace, which is a fabric that has come to be counted as *de rigueur* in the material culture of the Yoruba.
- 3 The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was an economic measure initiated by the military government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (1985-93). The government encouraged the servicing of external debt to the detriment of stimulating local economic growth, and this led to the winding down of many industries, to job loss, and public protests in response to the SAP policy.
- 4 The *saki* (or more traditionally *ifagbel*) is a piece of cloth manually woven on the loom, and used by the *Ogboni*, a group of male elders who played both judicial and legislative roles in the pre-colonial social structure of many Yoruba communities.
- 5 Literally, "ede" means language, while "pipe" means calling. However, in popular use, the semantic field of "ede pipe" is expanded to imply communicating or signifying with/or beyond language.
- 6 The *ifa* corpus of the Yoruba serves, among other functions, as an interpretative medium. It exhibits a narrative temperament that is intensely polysemic and self-revising.

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