

THE MYTH OF DECOLONISATION: AN EXAMPLE OF *ADIRE* YORUBA RELIGIOUS TEXTILES CLOTH

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Abstract

In religion, cloth of different kinds is acknowledged as an integral part of worship. Its importance cannot be farfetched as it underlines aspects of faith practices, which go beyond physical understanding in a belief system. This practice among Yoruba is evidence of identity communicated in the light of cloth usage. The display of cloth in Yoruba religion is significant to their religious consciousness, particularly in the area of experience and expression. Yoruba religious thought accommodates decorative symbols that communicate their feelings and nuances. The adaptation of cloth/dress/textile in Yoruba religion is thus seen as a major phenomenon that shields and promotes the spirituality of the people and also impoverishes the sensitivity of colonial mentality in African tradition. *Adire* textiles in this regard is an aspect of Yoruba cloth adored within the religious/cultural space of this context. It is a textile that carries relevant religious meaning with pure natural and dependent might of autonomy in its mythical narratives. Using semiotic analysis, it is therefore essential to engage in the understanding of its relevance as it claims a special space in the phenomenon of costume peculiar to Yoruba's understanding of decolonisation.

Introduction

Musa Dube (2012) identified African communities as the continent bounded by different cultural instincts that arise from various ethnic groups, regions and languages. This understanding thus keeps Africans aloof from describing them as a continent with one identity. Dube's explanation demonstrates that the cognomen "African" is a noun that allows for recognition while also emphasising

the tribal personality, which can only be determined through language, places, and groupings. Subsequently, the question arises: What constitutes the basis of African identity according to Dube? His model of African identity is not based on race or geography, but rather on national identity that reveals ethnic base names that identify them around tribal groups; Yoruba, Akan, Zulu, Tswana, Sotho, Igbo, etc. are examples of such names (Dube, 2012:146). The national identity model was obtained as a means of liberation to demonstrate pure African distinctiveness from colonial relegation; however, this medium doubles as a tool of decolonisation.

According to Betts (2012), decolonisation is a global-scale political change that was most intense and successful in the three decades following World War II. In his analysis, he quoted Hardgrave's submission that this concept has its central theme in the creation of self-governing nation-states. Betts also shows that it is a rejection of the civilisation of the white man. Betts claims that this is a diplomatic engagement between two contending parties, colonial and anti-colonial. Therefore, it is safe to say that decolonisation is a representation of Africa's position towards self-attainment of freedom which they acquire through different models.

Efforts made through the proclamation of decolonisation serve to be an eye opener towards self-independence thinkable and idealised in different dimensions of African mentality. The mentality of Africans to decolonise in some ways is culturally envisioned via their actions, arts, norms and values. The most ideal content which manifests decolonisation in its true content is the Yoruba example of *Adire* cloth. The mythical narrative of *Adire* makes a sincere case for African decolonisation in the importance of its oral understanding.

This narrative can be viewed through the semiotic method, which emphasises the importance of context. Yoruba lyrics (*oriki*) by Femi Ogunyemi express the

significance and recognition of Yoruba cloth in a viable vocal measure. The lyrics go thus:

Keke ta didun	The spindle has spun beauty
Asol'edidieniyàn,	Cloth beautifies a human being
Wonl'owu o so, unfruitful	The cotton plant was accused of being
Owu so so, o so eni,	Cotton bore so much fruit
Owu so so, owu so eji	Cotton bore one fruit; cotton bore two...
Owu so so, owu la lala,	Cotton bore so much fruit
Owu la eje kun erindinlogun,	It gave birth to epinrin [cloth],
Olaepinrin baba aso	The greatest of cloths (Renne& Agbaje-William, 2005)

This measure establishes the semiotic relevance of wool to the socio-religious activities of the Yoruba people. Textiles that are common to Yoruba social settings in some ways reflect the range of religious practices that showcase the experience and expression of the people either physically or spiritually. It is in this light that Idowu (1962) patterns the description of Olodumare in Indigenous Yoruba religion symbolically as the Supra deity that is recognised in white ornament without blemish. This, in a way, identified the white cloth used as a medium of totem that makes Him visible and present among people.

Cloth has a tripartite function in religion, it creates, communicates and hallows links between human, spiritual and natural worlds. In this dimension, it is not only in indigenous religions that cloth performs these functions, in other religions like Christianity and Islam, the certainty of sacredness is also attached to cloth usage (Renne& Agbaje-William, 2005:2). For instance, the biblical fall of man, which led to their nudity, was symbolised by the all-powerful God's supply of an

animal garment when their eyes were opened and they saw they were naked (Genesis 3:21). The narrative traces the origins and evolution of textiles from animal hide to the current state of wool materials, which are utilised to make human textiles that are currently used in many contexts. The fabric may be interpreted as a conduit connecting the holy and the profane based on this tale. Additionally, the truth of the hallowing and communication that cloth gave is shown in the projection of this biblical event.

In Yoruba culture, there are different types of cloth like *etu*, *sanyan*, *kijipa* and *ofi* to mention but a few that are useful for social and ceremonial activities. However, *Adire* is common for its use in domestic adornments and interior decoration for homes and religious shrines. It is most important to underline the fact that in the Yoruba Indigenous religion, some of the textiles mentioned are used to protect the sacred character, demarcate sacred space, mark a spiritual presence and represent the identities of special deities or saints (Renne & Agbaje-William, 2005:2). Apart from the listed importance, the clothing styles especially *adire*, mark the cultural identity of the people with their fundamental self-appraised freedom. *Adire* is an identity initiator when it comes to ethnic recognition both at home and diaspora.

The discussion of this topic will use the semiotic method for analysis. This method takes cognisance of context, both the context of the situation and the context of culture, in reconstructing the meaning of a text. It views language as the embodiment of the social process in society through the use of symbols and signs (Adeosun, 2013:91). This method takes the perception of shared meanings among users of the signs and decodes such signs primarily from their worldview. The ideas and feelings perpetuated the understanding of *adire* in the context of its decolonising meaning.

Since the major focus in this discussion is *adire* textile, then, the projections listed above through semiotic evaluation will be used to showcase the relevance of the emblem of decolonisation as it applies to *adire* and Yoruba religion.

The Myth behind *Adire*

The myth relating to *adire* textile in Yoruba cosmology as given by Areo and Kalilu (2013:23-24) is encoded in *Ejiogbe* of the Ifa divination. This traditional history narrates the origin of patterned dying which Orunmila, the Yoruba deity involved in. This Ifa corpus identified how Orunmila was divinely inspired to produce patterned dyed cloths using the material technology of certain birds like, *agbe*, *aluko*, *odidere*, *akuko*, *lekeleke* and *agbufon*. In Yoruba cosmology, these six birds were at the period of their creation in primordial time, divinely inspired and permitted to respectively use indigo, camwood, palm oil, chalk and variegated colour pigment. The corpus is stated thus:

Ifa ni o di ogbonda	1
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni eye Agbe ni	
Won ni ki e wi fun Agbe ko fi 'ye ti e s' aro	5
Ifa ni o di o ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni eye Aluko ni	
Won ni ki Aluko fi iye ti e s' osun	10
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	

Won ni eye Odidere ni	
Won ni ki eye Odidere o fi iye ti e si epo pupa	15
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni eye Lekeleke ni	
Won ni ki Lekeleke fi iye ti e si efun yeruyeru	20
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni Akuko oyongoloto ni	
Won ni ki Akuko oyongoloto maa d'ade yanranyanran	25
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni Agbufon oyongoloto ni	
Won ni ki oun ma dade ori yetuyetu	30
Won ni k'eye k'eye ko ma ke magbo mon	
Opeere nikan lo ke magbo	
Won ni ki won ge ni' di ofiiri jape jape	
Awon lo se 'fa fun Orunmila	
Ifa n fi omi oju se rahun aje suurusu	35
Ebo ni won ni ko se	
O si gbe 'bo n be oru 'bo	
Nje bi okan yo a gb'ona wa,	
Atare atesa nwa mi bo wa o suurusu l	40

Translation

Ifa says it is primal and inimitable

1

I say it becomes imitable

It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creative Will

They said it is Agbe, *lamprotonis chalybaeus*, the Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starling

It was then decreed that Agbe be directed to dip its plumage in (indigo) dye.

5

Ifa says it is primal and inimitable

I say it becomes imitable

It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will

They said it is Aluko, *merops nubicus*, the Carmine Bee-eater

Aluko was directed to put its own plumage in the camwood paste.

10

Ifa says it is primal and inimitable

I say it becomes imitable

It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will

They said it is Odidere, *Psittacus Erithacus*, the African Grey Parrot

They said Odidere should put its tail feathers in the (crimson-coloured) palm oil.

15

Ifa says it is primal and inimitable

I say it becomes imitable

It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will

They said it is Lekeleke, *ardeola ibis*, the Cow Egret

Lekeleke was asked to dip its own plumage in the immaculate and powdery white chalk. 20

Ifa says it is primal and inimitable

I say it becomes imitable

It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will

They said it is Akuko Oyongoloto, the big and majestically gaited Cock

Akuko Oyongoloto was granted the privilege of donning the glittering red crown. 25

Ifa says it is primal and inimitable

I say it becomes imitable

It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will

They said it is the big Agbufon, *balearica pavonina*, the big Black Crowned Crane

Agbufon Oyongoloto was permitted to wear fluffy variegated crowns.

30

It was thereafter forbidden of any other [bird(s)] to authoritatively boom

And appear distinctively,

Only Opeere, *microscelis amaurotis*, the Brown-eared Bulbul, chirped

And attempted uniqueness

And it was ordered that its tail be clipped very short

These were the priests that divine for Orunmila

When Ifa (Orunmila) was profusely weeping in desperate need of earnings

35

He was advised to offer a sacrifice

He offered the prescribed sacrifice

And so whenever Okan, *combretum erythrophyllum*, the River Bushwillow emerges (sprouts) it comes in ornate patterns. Both good (novel) and uniqueness shall seek me profusely

40

The above corpus shows a unique narration of colour combinations instituted by Orunmila from natural accessories available within the human environment. The uniqueness is about his artistic passion that make up the desire of the *orisa* to create a patterned cloth which is recognised today as *adire*. This narration therefore underlines the major spiritual link that *adire* textile has within the cosmology of Yoruba culture. The myth also testified to the earlier textile development of Yoruba technology as a means through which evidence of decolonisation was established. The evidence can be seen from the mythical understanding of colour combination as well as the Yoruba interaction with nature in the production of *adire*. The activities involved were devoid of a Western view of textile production which is evidence of decolonisation.

Adire and the Yoruba Decolonised Identity

There is always an identity associated with a clan or ethnicity. Identifying a society or clan with a particular figure or emblem underlines the reference to rites and rituals encumbered in such images. The image may seem to be used to display several stages of life associated with community celebration. The celebrations most time are linked with religious values that govern family and society. This celebration therefore goes with an encoding dress that speaks the cultural mind of the people. In the case of the Tiv in Benue, the white-blue linen encodes cultural clothing that showcased both the religious and social outfits of the community. This is seriously respected as it prioritises their identity and status. Among Yoruba people, *adire* cloth is the trademark that signifies this

identity. This identity purely established the tone of Yoruba tradition with the ultimate target of ethnic symbolism in line with the propagated tribal sentiment against the colonial mentality of western fabrics that the foreign wears came to Africa to promote.

When identity is being unfolded, several projections as earlier said will come into play. Textile in a way is used to identify this projection. Certain projections will be focused in this discussion. First, the sacred character is always attached to textiles. Certain religious significance is created through textiles sometimes. The prevalent use of textiles as dress as indicated by Fakunle (2022), in its use as altar cloths and sacred objects in religious worship is expressive of the character (*iwa*) in the Yoruba language of a person and objects associated with them. So, in most cases, certain textiles stand in the position of connecting the sacred with the profane. It makes the profane to display the virtual character of the sacred during worship by wearing such clothes. This may allude to the fact of *adire* which is seen as a ritual cloth, mostly used as spirit-protected covering among the Yoruba and even worn in the spirit realm. The use of *adire* as the ritual cloth is an indication of spiritual awareness of the Yoruba people and the truth of this manifests what their belief system is. Accordingly, *adire* makes a good case for African religion against the Western position that Africans are savage and incapable of framing God. This popular observation was championed by foremost scholar Emil Ludwig (Kayode, 1984:1). The indication of *adire* as a ritual cloth and means of spiritual identity is a manifestation of decolonised efforts on the part of Yoruba people for African religious rights.

Secondly, the projection of the social power of women is established in certain textiles. Aretha (2005) in this line makes a strong case for women's social power against male-dominated religious and political activities. She identifies a female essence that generates female solidarity in activities and ritual practices revolving around cloth production and use. *Adire*, in this regard, is seen as a female-

dominated product because its production is majorly a women's affair. The indication this shows is that women are highly relevant in the religious space of the Yoruba when *adire* textile is considered. This is because *adire* cloth is keenly associated with orisa worship and the dominant makers are the women. Christianity is seen as a religion that failed to give women the right opportunity to operate. This view is a calculated method of colonisation that relegates women's rights to society. The outstanding value *adire* attached to women is that it is a women's profession and this paved the way for feminine dependency from the side of the Yoruba religious system. Since *adire* is keenly associated with the cult of the orisa, women therefore are also recognized with the position of priesthood within the cult of *orisa*. This ultimately indicates the supremacy of women when it comes to religious practices among Yoruba people. It is therefore keen to note that *adire* cloth serves as a symbol of decolonisation in the light of women's rights in the Yoruba religion.

Thirdly, Communication is deeply enshrined in most textiles. Textiles are means of communication through their colour, styles in which it is made and symbols engraved on them. Colour symbols in which a textile is made in Yoruba tradition dictate the type of deity or orisa that is recognised. Like red is used for Sango and Ogun, white is used for Obatala and river divinities like Osun and Oya, their colours significantly decode the feelings of victory, power, peace and freedom. The flexibility of such colour in *adire* textiles indicates the statement and intended expression meant when wearing such in an occasion or festival. In another manner, several artistic drawings made on *adire* textiles are a means of communication. The semiotic analysis of designs in *adire* in Yoruba worldview is made to explain the cosmic realms of the world and the great beyond (Areo & Kalilu, 2013:27). The designs made on *adire* will sometimes give the meaning of transmigration and processes of reincarnation as understood by the Yoruba people in their religion. The object of signification in *adire* therefore explains

many cosmic mysteries which Yoruba people believe (Areo & Kalilu, 2013:27). The reality of colonisation was achieved through the Western belief system. The focus of the religion brought a new mentality in which African ideology, most especially their activities and practices were given opprobrious names like savage, primitive, heathenism, magic and mana (Idowu, 1973). All these names were meant to destroy African understanding of the cosmic mysteries, especially the knowledge of the Supreme God. This effort was seen as an established method of brainwashing that Africans were made to follow. Since this happened to be the efforts of colonial supremacy, the worldview of *adire* from Yoruba cultural background has eradicated this feeling against Africans and thus decolonise them from such mentality.

Conclusion

The vivid exploration of *adire* textiles in Yoruba religion in this discussion discloses the importance of the cloth as a visual material that showcases the identities of Yoruba people and their religion. It shows that the material is a metaphorical representation of classified messages involved in the religion of the Yoruba people. Apart from the cultural ideology of the Yoruba which it explains, it also serves as figurative insignia in the religious practices of the people through which they display an attitude meant for decolonisation. The saying goes that “action speak louder than voice”, the action disseminated through the insignia and cultural metaphor of Yoruba *adire* cloth is an understanding of the struggle for liberation from every arm of colonisation.

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