

50 YEARS OF ASO OKE
THE F. ADETOWUN OGUNSEYE COLLECTION
A RESEARCH NOTE

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Lovingly folded and packed in tin trunks lined with cloth and classified by decade, the *aso oke* collection of Professor F. Adetowun Ogunseye is comprised of approximately 74 sets spanning 50 years. She learnt the importance of careful storage of cloth from her mother who traded in *aso oke* woven in Ijebu-Ode. This lesson was emphasized by her subsequent professional training as a librarian which stressed the importance of the methodical classification and preservation of materials. As a result, the F.A.O. Collection is perfectly preserved and forms an important archive for the study of Yoruba *aso oke*, worn as prestige clothing by both men and women for centuries.

Although the aesthetic properties of *aso oke* have always been appreciated and valued within the producer culture, the international study of *aso oke* by art historians, as of other African textiles, is relatively recent.¹ Textiles were relegated to the lowly realm of "craft" whereas African sculpture inhabited the rarefied atmosphere of "art" and was described and analysed by many a distinguished scholar.²

Aso-oke is not a fabric for casual wear. It is reserved for special occasions such as weddings, chieftaincy ceremonies and funerals when formal, dignified dress is required. It

¹One of the first major exhibitions of African textiles was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1972-73. It was accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue written by Roy Sieber: "African textiles and decorative arts". Other major international exhibitions with accompanying catalogues include:

1979. "African Textiles" at the Museum of Mankind, London, with catalogue by John Picton and John Mack.

1995. "Au fil de la parole" at the Musée Dapper, Paris, with catalogue by Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau et al.

1995. "The art of African textiles" at the Barbican, London, with catalogue by John Picton et al.

²This imbalance is now being redressed. African textiles have now become the object of scholarly attention and are collected and displayed as art. In Nigeria, textiles are arguably the most innovative, popular and socially significant modern art form.



F. A. Ogunshye with samples of her *aso oke*

is woven in narrow strips on a horizontal loom usually by men.³ The strips are then sewn together and made into garments for both men and women. The F.A.O. Collection to be exhibited in November 2004 at the Museum of Unity in Ibadan comprises women's garments only, although Professor Ogunshye also has *aso oke* garments belonging to her late husband and a magnificent hand-embroidered *etu*⁴ *agbada*, meticulously preserved, which was worn by her late father.

The collection is classified according to the decade in which the pieces were acquired. A full *aso oke* ensemble for Yoruba women's dress consists of three pieces: a wrapper (*iro*); shawl (*iborun*) and head-tie (*gele*).⁵ These pieces are not tailored but draped by the wearer to create a wrap-around skirt (*iro*) and a shawl (*iborun*) worn on one shoulder. The third piece

³Formerly the narrow-band horizontal loom was used exclusively by men whilst women wove on the vertical broad loom. Women took up weaving on the narrow loom from 1975 because of the profitability of the cloth it produced.

⁴*Etu* is one of the most deeply respected forms of Yoruba *aso oke*. It is deepest indigo with hair-fine warp stripes of pale blue.

⁵Elderly women also used to wear an *ipele*, a mini-wrapper draped around the waist on top of the *iro*. This has recently come back into fashion for women of all ages but the fabric used is rich damask in jewel-bright colours. It is worn with a matching damask *gele* in combination with lace *buba* and *iro* and seems to have temporarily supplanted *aso oke*. However, we can be sure that the *aso oke* weavers will soon come up with beautiful new designs to re-capture the market—they always do!

is swathed around the head to form a turban (*gele*). The *aso oke* ensemble was worn with a wide-sleeved, scoop-necked blouse (*buba*) of lighter weight imported fabric, often white lace. In the late 50's, *aso oke* was also used for the *buba*, sometimes embellished with machine embroidery. From the 1980's, when the *aso oke iro* went out of fashion, lace fabrics used for the *buba* and *iro* became increasingly elaborate. Sequin-encrusted lace is very fashionable today. The F.A.O. collection contains a three-piece set of each type of *aso oke* purchased and worn by the owner.⁶

The *aso oke* of the early 50's was woven of hand-spun cotton thread dyed in mellow, muted colours such as maroon, indigo and beige. Decorative effects were achieved by variations in the width, colour and intervals of the warp stripes.

Ikat stripes with alternating light and dark sections were achieved by resist-dyeing the warp thread before weaving. Rayon silk (*siliki*) was used for coloured warp stripes and weft floats. By the 1960's, hand-spun thread had been replaced by imported, machine-spun coloured thread which expanded the colour range available to weavers who also made increasing use of decorative effects such as *eleya* (open work sometimes referred to as "Spanish lace") and *onjawu* (carried-over threads on the surface of the fabric). The 1970's saw the introduction of metallised plastic threads or lurex, known locally as "shine-shine", the most common colours being gold and silver. It was initially used for discreet warp stripes among cotton yam, but the use of lurex became ever more lavish until it dominated the entire cloth. This fashion was short-lived, however, as such cloth was not durable and tended to split. Consequently there was a return to *aso oke* made predominantly of cotton yam.

In the 1980's the *aso oke* wrapper— but not *aso oke* itself— went out of fashion. Instead, fashionable ladies wore a *gele* and *iborun* of matching *aso oke* with a *buba* and *iro* of lace, usually white. In the 1990's changes were introduced into the width of the strips and the texture of *aso oke* due to influences from Senegal and Ghana which entered Nigeria through Lagos, the fashion capital of Nigeria.⁷ Instead of the long-established 4" width, weavers began to produce strips of *aso oke* 5.5" wide.⁸ They also incorporated supplementary warps to produce a ribbed effect in the weave. Rayon silk became increasingly popular and was often used for the entire cloth in brilliant colours further enriched by surface float designs, also in silk.

The F.A.O. Collection reflects all the developments and changes that have taken place in

⁶The modern sets in the F.A.O. Collection comprise just two pieces—*gele* and *iborun*.

⁷Duncan Clarke, Creativity and the process of innovation in Yoruba *aso oke* weaving, *The Nigerian Field*, vol. 61, parts 3-4, Oct., 1996.

⁸The narrow 4" strips have now been supplanted by the wider strips.

aso oke since the 1950's, from simplicity to elaboration, from mellow, muted hues to the vibrant colours of today. The weavers' ability to introduce innovations within the parameters acceptable to their clientele has assured the survival and continuing popularity of *aso oke*. Women cloth traders and their clients often commission *aso oke* from the weavers, giving detailed specifications for colour and design. The production of *aso oke* is very much client-driven, thus ensuring its acceptability. Textiles are a major living art form in Nigeria today. Whilst few people will buy a picture or print to hung on the wall, most Yoruba people will invest in *aso oke* to enhance their appearance at ceremonies marking important mile-stones in their own lives or the lives of their friends or relations.

For Professor Ogunseye, the pieces of *aso oke* acquired over the years represent part of her life, each one linked to a person or event. She appreciates the restrained, mellow colours, of her vintage cloths but this does not blind her to the bolder cloths of today. Her latest acquisition (2003) is a set of *gele* and *iborun* in vivid turquoise silk embellished with peach silk geometric motifs with touches of gold lurex bought at a cost of ₦5,000 as *aso ebi* (group fabric) for a wedding. F.A.O. does not indulge in the purchase of *aso ebi* as a regular habit. She only buys it if so requested by a close friend—and then only if she likes the design.

Other brilliant cloths dating from the 2000's in her collection include a turquoise silk *gele* and *iborun* completely covered with bright yellow silk circles, some open, some solid, arranged in lines and an *eleya* (Spanish lace) design where the fabric is composed entirely of open-work creating a grid of rich crimson and golden yellow. There is also a set comprising *buba*, *iro*, *gele* and *iborun* which F.A.O. commissioned especially for her 70th birthday in 1996. This fabric is regal purple silk with pale gold lurex stripes and a surface completely encrusted with pale yellow surface threads (*onjawu*).

Although F.A.O. now wears *aso oke* in the dazzling colours which are fashionable today,⁹ she has great regard and affection for the vintage textiles which were once in fashion in the days of her youth. Sometimes she will wear her vintage *aso oke* at an important social occasion when its restrained aesthetic still elicits admiration. In Ondo, *aso oke* dating back two or more generations is held in high esteem, even though it may be faded and showing the signs of wear.¹⁰ F.A.O. can remember carefully darning a piece of vintage *aso oke* which her late husband, an Ondo State man, wanted to wear. Her mother, an Ijebu woman, could not understand her son-in-law's attachment to old cloth, regarding the use of cloth

⁹There are fashions in colours started by pace-setters in Lagos which filter down. Wedding invitations often specify the "colour code" for the event i.e. the colours to be worn by the supporters of the bride or groom.

¹⁰B. Ademuleya wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the fabric preferences of the Ondo people for the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

that had been repaired as shameful!

Two pieces from the F.A.O. Collection are particularly precious to her because of their associations. It is the Yoruba custom for a young man's family to present *aso oke* to his fiancée at the betrothal ceremony. Sometimes the young woman herself will choose the *aso oke* to be presented to her later by her fiancé. Such was the case with the young Miss F.A. Banjo in 1952 when she went to Oje Market in Ibadan to choose her *aso oke* for her betrothal. She selected two time-honoured designs. One cloth had alternate strips of deep, wine-red *alari* and deepest indigo criss-crossed by narrow white stripes. The other, predominantly indigo with a narrow green silk stripe, bore a prayer woven in green and white silk floats on an indigo and white background: MA BAYO MI JE OLUWA (do not spoil my happiness, O Lord). On the day of her betrothal, when the cloth was presented, Miss Banjo's family voiced their loud disapproval—such cloth was old-fashioned and unworthy of their daughter!¹¹

The loving care with which F.A.O. has preserved her *aso oke* reflects the value she places on this fabric. For her it is a symbol of her culture and a souvenir of past years.



Aso oke elegance

¹¹Sometimes the family of the girl will protest about the quality of the gifts presented to their daughter at the betrothal ceremony, to assert her importance and dignity. Yams usually feature among those gifts and must be the largest and soundest available. The same applies to kola-nuts.