

BOOK REVIEW

**Yoruba Religious Textiles; Essays in Honour of Cornelius Adepegba,
Edited by Elisha P. Renne and Babatunde Agbaje-Williams**

Ibadan: BookBuilders, 2005; 258 pgs, 16 coloured plates, 80 b/w plates, ₦1,500.00

This festschrift for Cornelius Adepegba is a collection of essays on a not-very-common scholarly subject, Yoruba religious textiles. The argument of the book, and the evidence in its support, are so persuasively presented, that it comes as a surprise that this is one of the first books on the subject, although there have been important articles on the theme. An article on the same subject published in 2003 by Renne and Adepegba himself, appears to be the primary inspiration for this collection. Some of those who have not read this book might believe that textiles are little more than materials for personal comfort and social respect. After reading the book, it should be clear that clothes are as essentially religious in origin and use, as they are fundamentally social. Just as we cannot ignore the role of textiles in the evolution of human society, so we may not ignore its contribution to religious practice, especially among the Yoruba. For just as we can date the beginning of human consciousness precisely to that moment when Adam and Eve knew that they were naked, and so sought to clothe themselves, so do we learn from Yoruba myth that Olodumare earned his immortality and invisibility by enveloping himself in white cloth. This human conception of the nature of divine being arises out of his own deep-seated psychological and spiritual need. Like language, it is clothing that defines our identity and sets us apart from all other creatures. What is a human being without clothes? A “naked ape”, according to a twentieth-century best seller. A “poor, bare, forked animal”, according to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.

This collection of scholarly essays by ten hands is significant in one other respect. It pays scholarly attention to the study of African textiles as a major art form. Rowland Abiodun argues in his Foreword that “(t)extiles and clothing are important forms of African art which rarely receive the kind of serious attention art-historians normally give to sculpture and painting” (xi) Pat Oyelola had similarly argued in a 2004 article that “the international study of *aso oke* by art historians, as of other African textiles, is relatively recent”, dating back to the early 1970s. We are thus invited to look for some of those aesthetic norms by which the authors of this book have established the status of Yoruba religious textiles. I should emphasize that quite a few of the contributors examine what Abiodun calls “the design consciousness” of the producers and consumers of Yoruba textiles. But I should also briefly comment on two other criteria.

First, the authors quite rightly focus on the social contexts and functions of textiles. Textiles do not satisfactorily fulfill the essentially decorative functions of many other art forms, especially the visual and plastic arts of painting and sculpture, because the dynamics

of textiles transcends such limitations. These other forms serve their own autonomous identity, whereas textiles are destined for a social or psychological purpose- to cover a nakedness or bridge an emptiness. Secondly, while decorative textiles may evoke the awe of the numinous – around a sacred tree or over an altar – its other major destiny lies in movement. Fashion designers know that it is better to send models out on the catwalk than hang their clothes on dummies in the display window. What cold print cannot recapture, even with lavish illustrations, is the beauty and excitement of clothes in motion – the dancing of a masquerade, an oba or a priestess, and the elegance of a bride. The inner clothing of the masquerade, illustrated in some of the colour plates of this volume, hints at this potential expressiveness of textiles, as Laoye acknowledges in his tribute to Sango ritual textiles.

What this collection brings out quite clearly, is not this expressiveness of clothes in motion, but their key role in the evolution of culture and the formation of identity. The editor's introduction explores the historical working out of these two themes in the three main religions, including Islam, which is not covered by any of the chapters. The chapters are themselves placed in groups of related themes, although this structure does not in any way affect the unique perception of each author's subject. An introductory review of these chapters guides the reader through the book.

Given the scope and variety of the collection, which covers the use of textiles by different religious institutions and groups from Owo to Lagos, I can only highlight a few key issues and representative themes in this review. The themes are identity, and the related theme of the transformation of culture.

Nearly all the contributors in this volume are engaged by the effective use of textiles for creating new images or personalities, for extending or perpetuating existing identities, or as instruments for challenging existing power structures or negotiating alternative sources of power and identity. The mythical origin of the *egungun*, and the reenactment of this origin every time an ancestral spirit materializes as an *egungun*, are tributes to the almost infinitely creative possibilities of the rich visual and tactile qualities of textiles. These artistic qualities are discussed in the essays by Aremu, Olaoye, Filani and Ademuleya who describe the mythical and social origins of the *egungun*. There is an indirect connection between this tradition of clothes as materializations of the spirit world, and the Aladura use of textiles to recreate their visions of heaven. The prophetess, in Renne's article, who experiences the separateness of body and soul in a physical way, had no difficulty fashioning clothes as material forms of spiritual existence. That is why she appears, spirit-like, in full shining splendour, in one of the most striking colour photographs in the book, especially if we compare it to the photograph of the down-to-earth, playful mood of the Osun devotees immersed, clothes and all, in sheer enjoyment of the water resources of their deity.

Textiles also help to establish two different forms of identity. In an interesting study of the insignia of office of two secret societies among the Ijebu, Adesanya describes the distinctive identities of these Ijebu cults, drawing on a comparative interpretation of visual as well as equivalent verbal icons. Her approach lets the fresh air of social thought into the dry atmosphere of formalism. But it is also a challenging venture because, in some situations, formal analysis can also open a path to meaning, especially when the available verbal icon has a primarily playful rather than semantic purpose – like the tongue-twister about the frog population, *Opolopo opolo*. An alternative question could be, why are reptiles and amphibians so common in these textiles? Because the medium more readily accommodates straight lines, sequences, triangles and rectangles than circles and curves. Her study is important in one other respect. It is not only an account of two gender-based societies expressing their identities by drawing on the iconography of their culture, it is itself a novel attempt at eliciting meaning in the face of the gender-induced reticence of secret institutions.

The relationship of clothes and identity takes on a less-settled, more dynamic connection with gender power and social structure in the studies of Owo textiles by Akinwumi and Asakitipi. Akinwumi shows how clothes, as indicators of status and achievement, could infiltrate the traditionally open age-grade system and make it exclusive. He recognizes an analogous development in urban Benin, where the village-based *otu* or age grade became a system of clubs for social advancement, although he also cites the erroneous view that there are no age grades among the Edo. Asakitipi's study reveals the power structure implicit in the interaction of art, religion and the indigenous textile industry – a relationship that is also evident in Akinwumi's essay. The Owo women in Asakitipi's study effectively challenge their marginalization by their control of significant, industry-related aspects of Owo society.

All the essays in this collection document the extent to which textile are intimately interwoven with the psyche of the Yoruba. The nature and form of this mutually transforming relationship is clearly evident in the essays by Agbaje-Williams and Geteloma. Agbaje-Williams' statistical mapping of the Yoruba practice of clothing trees documents the symbolic expression of the interaction of man and environment and the culture's attempt to master and humanize the environment. Religion and technology are the two main instruments of environment control. As a product of technology, textiles reflect human ingenuity and resourcefulness. Technology is a radical attempt to alter the materials and processes of nature. In a transitional or largely pre-industrial context human beings have been constantly awed by this resourceful challenge to their environment, and have constantly sought to appease nature in the face of this hubris. The clothing of trees can thus be read as a form of preemptive appeasement, or an attempt to humanize the environment.

In Geteloma's study of the relationship of traditional textiles and Catholic liturgy, the Catholic churches' recent patronage of Yoruba textiles has influenced both the nature of

Catholic church vestments and the artistic production of Yoruba textiles. But there has also been a far-reaching change in the nationalist consciousness and identity of a significant and influential section of the Catholic clergy.

The evidence of the importance of cloth to the Yoruba psyche is quite strong. The Ifa verse about the deathlessness of cloth is often quoted in Yoruba scholarship on the subject (first by Bolaji Idowu and, in this volume, by Abiodun and Adesanya). One does not need a rational explanation of the saying, that no one hears of the death of cloth, to feel its emotional truth. For example, nothing is as redolent of the loss of loved ones than their clothes: articles of clothing are strongly perfumed by the memories of their presence, and these are more powerful memorials than marble, since they evoke images and narratives of the past.

Like the cloth in the Odu verse, a festschrift for a dead teacher or academic associate never dies, but remains an enduring memorial to his presence.

I would like to end on a more subjective note. I have reaped intellectual pleasure from this collection; but I have read it with two academic prejudices. First, I expected more of the essays to make a greater concession to the significant influence of material resources and technical processes on art production, with less attention to the rationalizations of myths of origin. But then I come with the biases of an outsider. Second my reading was destabilized by having to read Yoruba in the old biblical orthography without tone marks or diacritics. The omission stands out in an age when such technical details are taken for granted.

—Dan Izevbaye