

# **Aso Ebi : The Dynamics of Fashion and Cultural Commodification in Nigeria**

by

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, research and theory on socio-economic development have given rise to two contending schools of thought. One school emphasizes the convergence of values as a result of "modernization". This school predicts the decline of traditional values and their replacement with "modern" values depicted by rationality, tolerance, trust and participation. The other school of thought emphasizes the persistence of traditional values despite economic and political changes. This school assumes that values are relatively independent of economic conditions. Consequently, it predicts that convergence around some set of "modern" values is unlikely and that traditional values will continue to exert an independent influence on the cultural changes caused by economic development. One of the cultural traditions that have endured despite modernization among the Yoruba in Nigeria is aso ebi practice. Aso ebi originally refers to uniform dress worn by family members during social events in Nigeria. However, this practice now includes a larger network of unfamiliarity, transcended the Yoruba ethnic group and is gradually becoming an integral part of a national culture. Using archival records, books, journals, interviews, observation and oral tradition, this paper tests the thesis that socioeconomic development is linked with both massive cultural change and the persistence of distinctive cultural traditions. The paper critically examines the origin and functions of aso ebi as a social phenomenon for solidarity and identity among family and friends. It also explores emerging problems and benefits associated with cultural commodification in a rapidly changing society.

## Introduction

In recent years, research and theory on socio-economic development have given rise to two contending schools of thought. One school emphasizes the convergence of values as a result of "modernization". This school predicts the decline of traditional values and their replacement with "modern" values depicted by rationality, tolerance, trust and participation. The other school of thought emphasizes the persistence of traditional values despite economic and political changes. This school assumes that values are relatively independent of economic conditions. Consequently, it predicts that convergence around some set of "modern" values is unlikely and that traditional values will continue to exert an independent influence on the cultural changes caused by economic development. This paper adopts the latter perspective and critically examines the persistence of *aso ebi* practice as a cultural tradition that has endured despite modernization, among the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria. *Aso ebi* originally refers to uniform dress worn by family members during social events in Nigeria. However, this practice now includes a larger network of unfamiliarity, transcended the Yoruba ethnic group and is gradually becoming an integral part of a national culture. This practice is currently enjoying appreciable transformations in term of its contents and scope due to the dynamic nature of culture. Pelto, 1966 writing on cultural dynamism states:

*“each new generation reshuffles and changes the systems of ideas, meanings and rules so that the social tradition is never fixed and unchanging in any society”.*

In line with above assertion, a cursory look at the Nigerian contemporary social milieu reveals that while some cultural practices are declining and some even going into extinction, there are yet others that are experiencing increased acceptance and popularity with some level of modifications. These transformations, modification or actual rejection of some practices are predicated upon both external and internal exigencies.

Clothing has remained an integral part of everyday life. In human history, cloth has evolved from being an object designed to cover nudity among humans or as an article for 'looking good' to an instrument for the display of cultural identity and solidarity amongst families and friends. Through clothing, individuals establish their sense of self as well as their place in society. Despite the presence of a rich literature on dress appearing across the scientific and popular board and highly profile international conferences on themes ranging from clothing and imperialism to fashion and consumption show casing dress scholarship, clothing seems to be a neglected topic of sociology. Because of the importance of dress as a component of our daily lives, the connections between dress and both individual and collective identities requires a renewed attention of scholars and practitioners in the world of fashion and dress.

The topic of clothing is predominantly classified under ‘fashion’ in sociological literature and dealt with as ongoing scene of competition and struggle, as ostentatious consumption, which primarily indicates the social status of those buying, owning and dressing in specific garment (Bohn 2004). Fashion in Sombart’s (1902) theory of modern demand creation is an excellent example of luxurious consumption. Barber and Lobel (1953) give a rehabilitating account of the fashion habits of American middle-class women, calling it quite rational if interpreted as a representation of status considered in its latent functionality for the reproduction of the American social structure. For Bourdieu (1975, 1980) the fashion designers and their various brands are symbols of distinction in the magic of the social field of fashion where in a manifold struggle, primary positions, the definition of the rules of the game and the legitimate construction of reality are fought out (cited in Bohn 2004).

Although the concept of *aso ebi* has been reported broadly in the popular press and the internet blogosphere, there is thus far a dearth of scholarly research on the topic. Using archival records, books, journals, interviews, observation and oral tradition, this paper tests the thesis that socioeconomic development is linked with both massive cultural change and the persistence of distinctive cultural traditions. It interrogates the dialectics of stability and dynamism of culture in a rapidly changing world. Specifically, the paper examines the origin of *aso ebi* and its sociological relevance, and some trends in the growth of the practice which has necessitated its transformation from an ethnic dress culture into an emerging national culture among Nigerians both at home and in the Diasporas. To achieve these objectives, this paper is conceptualized in two broad analytical frameworks – cultural commodification and fashionalism.

## **Origins of Aso Ebi**

In Yoruba, *aso* means cloth while *ebi* means family. Therefore, literally, *aso ebi* means family cloth. It is noteworthy that the Yoruba hold dress and fashion in high esteem. Being well dressed played a significant role in the Yoruba class system; much importance attached to the size, colour, quality and quantity of fabric. Modes of dressing in Yoruba ‘traditional’ society followed a hierarchical order which often established seniority with prestige and expensive outfits. Social anthropological evidences via several photographs seen over the decades seems to suggest that the native Yoruba woven fabrics known as *aso oke* were the natural choice in *aso ebi* before the advent of imported fabrics. Apparently, lack of mechanising of these native fabrics and the inability to meet mass demand of the *aso ebi* phenomenon, particularly from the period towards the Nigerian independence, gradually gave rise to the demand for imported fabrics such as lace. However, whatever the embroideries such brands as *sanyan*, *alaari* and others in the *aso oke* family had, these imported lace fabrics attempted to equal.

There are two schools of thought on the origins of *aso ebi* among the Yoruba. First, is the one that views the dress practice as an ancient phenomenon and the second that linked its emergence with the unparalleled accumulation that came with the post-war I boom of 1918-20. While Olukoju (cited in Nwafor 2011) believes that *aso ebi* was part of a culture of 'conspicuous consumption, that was fuelled by the post-World War I boom, which has survived to this day as a national culture', William Bascom traced the origins of *aso ebi* to Yoruba age grade which used the uniformed dressing or *aso ebi* to mark fraternal bonds. He observed that both men's and women's clubs were characterized by uniform clothing by which their members could be recognized during religious or other ceremonies (ibid). *Aso-ebi* started with the family funeral activities or rites. Those required to have *aso-ebi* were children of the deceased or his siblings. For Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, the use of 'same fabric or colour of clothing, the same style of dress, or at least a similar head tie to demonstrate the size and standing of women in their associations known as *egbe*' (ibid). John and Margaret Drewal also attributed uniform dressing to the type of comradeship that has its origin in the pairing of Yoruba *Gelede* masquerades. They write: 'when two partners make a pact and adopt a common secret name, they often choose to dress alike and may be mistaken for twins'.

Whichever of these two schools we may wish to adopt, one thing that is worthy of note is that *aso ebi* has continued to attract attention as a major dress culture in Nigeria during social ceremonies such as weddings, naming ceremonies, birthdays, burial ceremonies, political gatherings, house warming parties, among others. There are three major reasons why the *aso ebi* phenomenon has continued to find social acceptance in contemporary Nigerian society. First is the fact most Nigerian communities enjoy a thriving associational culture as social life in many communities revolves around informal and semi-formal organizations. Many people depend on these associations, which often substitute for missing formal or state institutions and safety nets and tend to persist even during periods of repression, negligence or co-optation. This form of social life provides a good platform for the growth and promotion of this age long dress practice. Secondly, the need to construct their own meaning of self, social identity and social relations has gone a long way in fostering the acceptance and growth of *aso ebi* over time among the Yoruba and other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. In addition, a thriving urban life provides a fertile ground for the survival of this form of ostentatious consumption.

## **Sociology of Aso ebi**

Beyond the glamour and fun fare attached to uniformed dressing at parties, *aso ebi* is first and foremost a form of identification with communal ethos, with the collective. According to Familusi (2010):

*a distinguished feature of Africaness is the spirit of oneness manifesting in "we feeling", live and let live, serious concern for others and fraternity. This is born out unavoidable interaction with other members of the society. In other words, no man is an island.*

Among the Yoruba and by extension, Nigerians, *aso ebi* as a dress practice serves as a means of reinforcing social identity and solidarity among group members. Social identification is the process by which we define ourselves in terms and categories that we share with other people. In contrast to characterizations of personal identity, which may be highly idiosyncratic, social identities assume some commonalities with others. “Identity” is a term that is widely used and, as a consequence, can mean many different things to different people. Identity is sometimes used to refer to a sense of integration of the self, in which different aspects come together in a unified whole. However, “social identity” refers specifically to those aspects of a person that are defined in terms of his or her group memberships. Although most people are members of many different groups, only some of those groups are meaningful in terms of how we define ourselves. In these cases, our self-definition is shared with other people who also claim that categorical membership, for example, as a woman, as a Muslim, as a marathon runner, or as a Democrat. To share a social identity with others does not necessarily mean that we know or interact with every other member of the designated category. It does mean, however, that we believe that we share numerous features with other members of the category and that, to some degree, events that are relevant to the group as a whole also have significance for the individual member. Many forms of social identity exist, reflecting the many ways in which people connect to other groups and social categories. These include: ethnic and religious identities, political identities, vocations and avocations, personal relationships, and stigmatized groups. Each of these types of social identification has some unique characteristics that make it somewhat different from another type (Deaux 2001).

*Aso ebi* has continued to serve as a means of identification as the wearers at social events are implicitly demonstrating that they are proud to be identified with the celebrant (Familiusi 2010). And in case there are many celebrants and each of them has chosen different fabrics, it will not be difficult to identify the friends, colleagues or well-wishers of a particular celebrant (ibid). In many instances, the adornment of *aso ebi* attracts special recognition. The need to construct their own meaning of self, social identity and social relations has gone a long way in fostering the acceptance and growth of *aso ebi* over time among the Yoruba and other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Close to the issue of social identity is the principle of reciprocity. An individual who buys one when somebody is celebrating an occasion expects others to buy when it is his or her turn to celebrate. Buying and wearing of *aso ebi* at social events is an indication of support for a group member and thus ensures group’s survival and stability. In traditional Nigerian society, the principle of reciprocity operated in both social and economic transactions. According to Dopamu and Alana (2004):

*Co-operation and mutual helpfulness are virtues among the Yoruba. There is limitation to what a single individual can achieve all alone. The co-operation of others is highly important in achieving most goals. It is believed that when two hands join in washing each other, one will have a truly clean hand ... It is also taught that while it is easy to break a broom- stick , it is not easy to break a full bunch of them.*

Equally evident is the trans-class dimension of *aso ebi*. It is a practice that has transcended class barriers: both the rich and the poor have access to the democratic agency of *aso ebi*. It is a practice that accommodates all.

Some people have claimed that *aso ebi* eliminates hitherto existing class differences as nearly everyone wearing *aso ebi* on an occasion are identified as the same regardless of social status. Albeit temporarily, it gives the poor a sense of fulfilment and relief from a feeling of financial inadequacy (Sofola in Familusi 2010). However, this role as a social leveller is being defeated because at a single party, there could be as many as five *aso ebi*: while some people wear the not so expensive ankara fabrics, some may be gorgeously dressed in another set of expensive *aso ebi* thereby creating a sense of discrimination between the rich and the poor.

## **Cultural Commodification**

This presentation is anchored majorly on the commodification hypothesis within the popular or mass culture theories and fashionism. *Commodification* is used to describe the process by which something which does not have an economic value is assigned a value and hence how market values can replace other social values. It describes a modification of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships in everyday use. Cultural commodification is packaging culture for sale (e.g. establishment of a value, in terms of labor or real monetary value) for any number of markets. This is a transformation that has occurred to the *aso ebi* dress practice over time. Crook, Pakulski and Waters (1992) identified three main characteristics of modern culture: differentiation, rationalization and commodification. According to them, commodification of culture involves turning cultural products into commodities that can be readily bought and sold. With the widening of the participants of *aso ebi* to include family, friends and acquaintances, the practice is more than just a uniform but it is fast becoming a form of economic transaction. Depending on the calibre of people involved, the cost of *aso ebi* differs. While some take affordable clothes, some go for the high classic expensive fabrics. There are *aso ebi* purchased by the social class among the *crème de la crème* that cost as high as 150,000 naira and above while the middle class may go for between 13000 naira and 15,000 naira, then the lower class use those between 1500 naira to 5000 naira. Crook et al allude to this when they wrote that the development of taste is a key feature of modern culture. According to them taste develops when people have enough resources to make some choices about what they consume. In early modernity, only the highest classes could do this, but as modernity progresses the possibility of choosing what to consume spreads to all classes. This does not undermine the hierarchies of taste. The taste of higher social classes is still valued above that of lower classes.

The current dimension of *aso ebi* practice also attach a bit of compulsion as in some instances, the *aso ebi* is the gate pass for the guests. In many instances, the amount paid for *aso ebi* determines the kind of souvenirs a guest receives and even the quality and quantity of food served. Close to this is the issue of financial extortion. Some people now use their *aso ebi* as a means of exploiting those who purchase them as relatively cheap fabrics are sold for outrageous prices. Some people also claimed that *aso ebi* is sometimes used as a fund raising strategy to offset the cost of their celebration.

From the viewpoint of mass culture theories, commodification undermines aesthetic values and threatens the purity of high art (Haralambos and Holborn 2004). The current trend and pattern of *aso ebi* practice has continued to undermine the values of this age long practice of solidarity and social integration. Stephen Gills (1995) argues that the commodification of social relations within modern capitalism has deepened. He sees this as a sociological counterpart to the growth in the power of capital relative to states and to labour. Gills defines commodification as the popensity of capitalist society to define and to quantify social life in market terms. Thus, elements which were previously integrated into the fabric of society before the rise of capitalism now become subject increasingly to the laws of the market place. In this sense, the structure and language of social relations is more systematically conditioned by market forces and practices. This means that capitalist norms and practices increasingly pervade the repeated gestures of everyday life: in sports, in leisure, in play, in the process of consumption more generally. At the same time, the process of commodification is increasingly monitored, aggregated and controlled by the use of surveillance.

It is underlined that culture nowadays performs a double role; on the one hand supporting society's collective memory and identification, and on the other hand being a source of wealth and economic development (Richards 2007:304). Commodification needs to be balanced in relation to other important aspects of cultural assets like education (Douglas, Douglas and Derrett 2001:190) and authenticity (McKercher and du Cros 2002:76). In the word of Tore Einar Johansen, revitalization of cultural expression has two sides. The first is to make the old cultural symbols acceptable in the modern society, without the stigma from the acculturation period. The second part is to renew the old cultural expressions to fit in the modern society, and be acceptable to young generations. In the commodification process the cultural expressions get an economic value, and in a society where money talks this becomes of greater importance for the indigenous society.

Concerns about mass culture emerged in the 1950s with the work of Dwight Macdonald. He distinguished between folk art, high culture and mass culture. He saw folk art as the 'culture of the common people' in pre-industrial societies. It was spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people shaped by them. High culture is seen as the product of great individuals who are able to produce work that appeals to a minority who can appreciate work of this calibre. However, mass culture is very different from either folk or high culture. It does not express a genuine culture in the way that folk art does, nor does it achieve the intrinsic value of high culture. Macdonald said:

*“Mass culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians, hired by businessmen; its audiences and passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying or not buying. The Lords of kitch, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses to make a profit and /or to maintain their class rule” (Macdonald 1957).*

The term popular culture is often used in similar way to the term mass culture. Popular culture includes any cultural products appreciated by large numbers of ordinary people with no great pretensions to cultural expertise. However, while mass culture is usually used as a pejorative term, this is by no means the case with the term popular culture. Crook et al advocates the claim that contemporary societies are moving towards post modernity. In this light, we will adapt two of Dominic Strinati (1995)’s five main features of post-modern analysis of popular culture. First is the “breakdown of the distinction between culture and society’. This involves the development of a ‘media saturated society’. In such a society, the mass media are extremely powerful. Rather than reflecting reality the media become so all-consuming that they create our sense of reality. Computer technology helps to create virtual realities which ‘potentially replace their real life counterparts. Increasingly, economic activity is concerned with buying and selling media images rather than physical products. The mass media: television and fashion magazines have continued to define the Nigerian fashion trend.

The second main feature of postmodernism is ‘an emphasis on style at the expense of substance’. Thus particular products become popular because they have designer labels which evoke an attractive lifestyle, rather than because they are useful. Society develops a ‘designer ideology’. Surface qualities assume more importance than anything deeper.

Global economic capitalism promotes profit making above any other considerations. The major promoters of *aso ebi* are cloth merchants and celebrants. The cloth sellers wish to make sales while the celebrants use part of the proceeds to procure gifts and special entertainment for the buyers. Other actors in the economic transactions are printers who emboss on souvenir items, photographers, tailors and owners of fashion magazine outfits.

## **Aso ebi and Fashionalism**

Closely linked to the issue of popular culture is fashionalism. The birth of the word fashionalism was coined by combining fashion and nationalism. It is a popular culture trend blending patriotism with fashion. It marks the emergence of popularity of local brands. The term is attributed to Italian educated Filipino fashion designer, Rhett Eala who created a collection of collared shirts and polos for the brand Collezione C2 in 2006, strategically using the Philippine archipelago for its main design.

One issue that has come to prominence in the understanding of transnational relations is the identification of the human body as an important contact zone where the foreign and the domestic meet, and where national identities emerge in direct response to and in collaboration with transnational influences.

The *aso ebi* phenomenon crossed the cultural boundaries of the Yoruba world a long time ago and was mainstreamed as one of the key elements of Nigeria's national culture. In the past five decades *Aso ebi* and its associated cultural practices did not stop within the borders of Nigeria, it has spread to other parts of west Africa, taking on local inflections and adaptations from Ghana to Liberia, Gambia to Zambia. It has also spread to the diaspora. Hence, the ability of *aso ebi* to transgress ethnic boundaries and be practiced among the *Igbo*, *Hausa* and other ethnic groups in Nigeria represents a sign of national unification through dress. These days, *aso ebi* is seen more as a Nigerian culture than as a Yoruba cultural phenomenon (Nwafor 2012). This harmonization is seen also in the spelling and written derivatives of the word used by the *Igbo* who pronounce and spell it as *ashebi*. *Aso ebi* is also common in northern Nigeria, where it called *Yaye* (vogue), *Anko* or *aso ebi*. All these are indicative of the fact that the practice is a borrowed culture from the Yoruba. In today Nigeria, apart from the game of football, *aso ebi* has played a significant role in the constitution of an imagined belonging in the Nigerian state. The practice has become a major impetus for the promotion of 'traditional dress' culture in opposition to the influence of Western dress culture, seen in the rejection of European suits and style of garments for most public outings in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

In this paper cultural commodification and fashionism are treated here as adaptive responses to global economic capitalism. At the onset of the practice, *aso ebi* was originally meant to be a family uniform, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, to enable the guests to identify members of the family during an occasion. However, in recent times, it has become a medium of economic transaction and diffused into other groups in Nigeria. *Aso ebi* practice is a popular trend that has taken over the Nigerian fashion scene. Dresses are made by from *aso oke*, java, ankara, silk, george, and guinea materials. *Aso ebi* as a national culture has enjoyed a number of misapplications by corrupt politicians who appropriate it as tool of political patronage. With the continued expansion of the global cash nexus economy and the need to create a distinct Nigerian identity, the *aso-ebi* dress practice will no doubt continue to be relevant in a fast changing world.

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