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Mariam Oladepo-Ajagbe is a textile artist, designer, and educator with a background in Clothing and Textile Science. Currently pursuing her MFA in Textile Art and Design, she explores the intersections of cultural heritage, emotional memory, and material storytelling. Her work draws inspiration from African visual traditions, using bold colors, organic motifs, and symbolic patterns to address themes of identity, separation, and healing. Mariam is particularly interested in the future of functional and medical textiles, where she envisions design as a tool for reconnection, memory enhancement, and sustainable innovation. With a Postgraduate Diploma in Education, she is also passionate about creative learning and cultural preservation through design-led research.

Woven Sovereignty: Aso-Oke as Archive, Art, Identity and Reclamation

by

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There is a fabric in Nigeria that not only cloths the body but also tells stories, preserves culture, and celebrates identity. It sparks creativity in its existence and imagination. That fabric is **Aso-Oke**, the indigenous woven textile of the Yoruba people. Also known as 'Aso-Ofi' or simply 'Ofi'. 'Aso' means cloth, while 'Oke' (shortened), refers to the region of origin, Oke-Ogun (Iseyin area), hence meaning Cloth from Oke-Ogun. Furthermore, Ofi' means loom, hence called loom cloth. Aso-Oke is more than material; it is a vibrant, colorful outburst of heritage, artistry, and pride. Among the many cultural artifacts that define the Nigerian aesthetic, Aso-Oke stands out as a woven embodiment of excellence, heritage, and self-expression. It sparks creativity speaking of lineage, resilience, social identity, and even national pride.



Figure 1 photocredit: lacivictrends

ORIGIN

Nigeria is a country located on the western coast of Africa with a diverse geography, with climates ranging from arid to humid equatorial, and with the most diverse people. Hundreds of languages are spoken in the country, including Yoruba, Igbo, Fula, Hausa, Edo, Ibibio, Tiv, and English. Within this set of diverse people are the Yoruba Communities. Originating from the southwestern Yoruba communities, Aso-Oke is traditionally woven by hand on narrow looms. The result is a

luxurious, often heavy fabric, rich with intricate patterns, shimmering threads, and deep symbolism. The weaving itself is a rhythmic dance of color and precision, where every thread is chosen to command presence. Each strip carries intention, telling a silent story of royalty, strength, unity, or love.



Figure 2photocredit; Owanbe community



Figure 3 photocredit; Divinem Clothings

CREATIVITY IN PROCESS

The artistry of Aso-Oke lies in its process. Traditionally woven on narrow horizontal looms by skilled artisans, often passed down through generations, the fabric involves painstaking attention to detail. Weavers expertly blend cotton, silk, and metallic threads, creating layered patterns with intentional symbolism. Different styles of Aso-Oke like Alaari (deep red), Etù (dark blue), and Sanyan (beige with a natural silk sheen) each carry specific meanings tied to royalty, wisdom, purity, and power. The process is slow, deliberate, and inherently sustainable, representing not just physical labor but a commitment to preserving traditional knowledge systems in a world increasingly driven by automation. This process is deeply intergenerational: elders pass down not only the technique but also the philosophies of design, what certain motifs mean, which colors carry prestige, and how to harmonize form with occasion. The narrow loom, often operated in open-air compounds or family verandas, becomes both a tool and a canvas. Each line of color, each tension in the thread, is a moment of decision. the weaver's rhythm becomes meditative, their body aligned with the loom, echoing ancestral motions. The material resists sometimes, it teaches patience.

Weavers may improvise, combining traditional patterns with innovative structures, adapting to contemporary taste while preserving integrity.



Figure 4 Photocredit: excellinco photographs, adunniwoven fabrics

CREATIVITY IN CULTURE AND TRADITION

Traditionally, cotton was locally grown, hand-spun, and dyed using indigenous materials like indigo, camwood, and kola nuts. This imbued the fabric with a tactile link to land, labor, and locality. Today, while industrial threads are often introduced, many artisans still blend traditional and modern materials to maintain quality and authenticity. The vibrancy of Aso-Oke is most visible during celebrations, for it is more than a garment; it is a ritual object and symbol of belonging. It plays a central role in life's most sacred milestones, such as naming ceremonies, weddings, festivals, and even funerals. The fabric acts as a bridge between the spiritual and the

social, used in traditional rituals, masquerades (*egungun*), and as heirlooms passed through generations. Its role is integrally tied to Yoruba identity, encapsulating values such as pride, dignity, and continuity.

Critically, Aso-Oke is also a form of resistance against the erasure of traditional craft by fast fashion, against monocultural aesthetics, and against the commodification of African identity. It is a wearable manifesto. At traditional Yoruba weddings, the couple's attire often features matching Aso-Oke in customized hues and styles, symbolizing unity and familial honor.



Figure 5 Photocredit; Kinetic Photography

One of the most recent wide displays of Aso-Oke is at the Ojude Oba Festival in Ijebu. Ojude Oba is an annual festival celebrated by one of the Yoruba Kingdoms, known as 'Ijebu'. Ojude oba in English means 'The King's Forecourt'. This festival is celebrated to honor the traditional ruler of Ijebuland, called 'Awujale'.

Due to the strong cultural tie of this festival, Aso-Oke is usually the go-to fabric for participants, guests, and visitors of the festival. Color, light, and movement are the languages Aso-Oke speaks fluently. With the expansion of the festival in each successive year, it is amazing to see different ways that Aso-oke brings honor to the Yoruba culture and Nigeria as a whole. Aso-oke is, entire

family's parade of their legacy through stunning displays of Aso-Oke, wrapped, draped, and tailored into breathtaking forms such as gele headwraps sculpted like crowns, and agbada cloaks floating like capes.



Figure 6 PhotoCredit; Niyi Fagbemi



Figure 7photocredit; Niyi Fagbemi



Figure 8 Photocredit; Niyi Fagbemi

CREATIVITY IN SELF IDENTITY AND RECLAMATION

However, Aso-Oke is not bound by tradition alone. Today, it moves boldly into modern spaces. Contemporary Nigerian fashion blends Aso-Oke with lace, chiffon, or denim, giving rise to corporate chic and streetwear looks that speak both heritage and innovation. Designers use it in interior design, accessories, handbags, shoes, and even journal covers, proving that this fabric is alive and evolving, infusing everyday life with a sense of tradition. It has moved beyond its ceremonial roots to claim space on global runways and red carpets. This global visibility is not just aesthetic, it's political. Aso-Oke has become part of a broader Afropolitan movement, where Africans and the diaspora assert their cultural identity through fashion, art, and design. When worn outside of Nigeria, Aso-Oke becomes a statement of heritage, resistance, and reclamation, a response to centuries of colonial erasure and a celebration of African brilliance.



Figure 9 Photo Credit; Fowosire Damilola



Figure 10 Photo Credit; Didi Creations



Figure 11 Photo Credit; Beckishi Couture



Figure 12 PhotoCredit; Definura



Figure 13 Photo Credit: Penny Worrall

Furthermore, artists like Pelumi Ponnile are also vital role in redefining Aso-Oke as both representation and identity. His artistic interventions foreground Aso-Oke as a vessel for reclaiming fractured identities across continents. By repurposing the fabric in multimedia assemblages and performative installations, he stages acts of return, memory, and imaginative reconstruction. This makes Aso-Oke a living tool of cultural insurgency and spiritual homecoming.

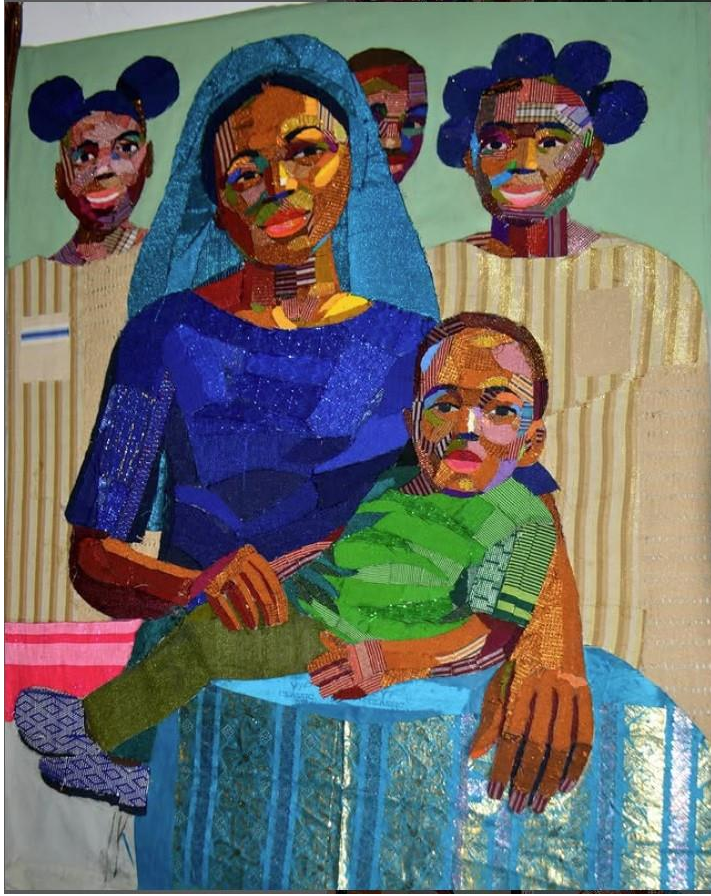


Figure 14a. IYANIWURA b. by Pelumi Ponmile



Figure 15artist: Pelumi Ponmile

To celebrate Aso-Oke is to celebrate Nigerian excellence. It is a reminder that our roots are strong, our stories are valuable, and our traditions can remain timeless while still adapting to the future. Through Aso-Oke, the Yoruba people and Nigerians at large continue to wear their culture with confidence, color, and undeniable elegance. This creative resurgence is not merely decorative; it signals a shift in cultural ownership. Young Nigerians and African creatives globally are repositioning Aso-Oke as not just a traditional artifact but a futuristic medium. One that carries their story forward while honoring the past, commands presence, and speaks volumes about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

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