

**SYMBOLS AND MEANING IN ASO-OKE AND ADIRE DESIGNING
PATTERNS FOR CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY**

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BENIN CITY.**

OCTOBER, 2025

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE
ARTS, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE AWARD OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS
[BA] HONORS DEGREE IN THEATRE ARTS**

OCTOBER, 2025

DECLARATION

I, AJISEBUTU, GLORY GIFT hereby declare that this research project was undertaken by me in the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, for the sole purpose of acquiring a Bachelor of Arts [B.A.] Degree in Theatre Arts.

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this research study was carried out by AJISEBUTU, GLORY GIFT in the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, under the supervision of Dr. Mrs. Owens. P. Eromosele.

Dr. Mrs. Owens P. Eromosele
[Project Supervisor]

Date.

DEDICATION

I dedicated this project to God, Almighty, the covenant keeper, lifter of my head, my source of strength, light and provisions. And also to my parents [Mr and Mrs. Josephine Ajari, Mr. and Mrs. Blessing Ajisebutu] thank you.

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Migwo

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ABSTRACT

Fabrics are far more than clothing especially in indigenous culture and this is same for the Yoruba people. This study investigate the meaning of Aso-oke and Adire Fabrics and it importance to the Yoruba people, showing that that fabric designs are expressions of artistry, the people's beliefs, custom and tradition. The problem addresses the loss of design, Symbols and motif original meaning over time and globalization. Using a qualitative research approach with interview with seller, dyers and observation, this research project shows how the Aso-oke and Adire Fabrics express cultural identity. The research findings shows that the Aso-oke and Adire Fabrics are far more than just attractive clothing, but are communicators of identity, status, unity and cultural heritage. After all research and findings, this study recommend documentation, cultural education, and government support to ensure the preservation and sustainable transmission of these fabric traditions to future generations.

KEYWORD

- Aso-oke
- Adore
- Cultural sustainability

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Fabric designs are a reflection of cultural aesthetic and identity of a people and this is no different from the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Fabrics are expressions of artistry and the belief of a people. These fabrics and their pattern are not just adornment of aesthetics, but their intricate designs are expression of the people's belief, customs and traditions, they are imbued with cultural, historical, social and symbolic significance including the Aso-oke and Adire fabric of the Yoruba people.

Aso-oke (Aṣọ-Oke) which means “top cloth” or “prestige cloth” dates back centuries with its root deeply embedded in the Yoruba culture and history, originally woven by men using narrow strip looms and often dyed with natural pigments extracted from local plants, the tradition has been passed down generations.

Aso-oke is more than just a fabric, it is a cultural statement, an expression of belief with each specific colour and design representing the wearers status, age, cultural heritage, occupational affiliation or the wearer's community or origin. The Aso-oke holds cultural significance among the Yoruba people and has become a means of identification of the Yoruba people globally and this is no difference when it comes to the Adire of the same Yoruba people.

Just like the Aso-oke, Adire holds its importance and significance among southwestern Nigerian, when translated means "tie and dye" dates back to the 19th century, the indigo-dyed resist cloth created by Yoruba women, presents a vibrant visual language through its diverse patterns and motifs are inspired by proverbs, natural elements, and everyday objects, communicate cultural knowledge, and personal expressions, with each motif potentially holding a specific message.

Though over the years, times have evolved with new technical and incorporation of new material the foundational patterns still retain connections to their original symbolic meanings. This study seeks to delve into the intricate patterns adorning these fabrics, exploring their original meanings and the cultural symbolism they embody.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The Aso-oke and Adire fabrics are not just fabrics but cultural artifacts of expression and communication of the Yoruba people famous for their intricate designs and deep visual attraction, these designs are not just ornamental or aesthetics but they function as visual languages, conveying distinct meanings and representing cultural symbols based on proverbs, values, belief, traditional and perceptions of their spiritual and natural environment.

However, with the passing of time, civilization and increasing revolution and globalization, the original meanings of these intricate designs, symbols and motifs have been lost.

This project aim to address the gap by exploring and documenting the meanings and symbolism associated with the patterns, motifs and colours found in Aso-oke and Adire fabrics . This study seeks to preserve and illuminate the rich symbolic heritage embedded within these significant forms of Yoruba artistic expression.

1.3 Research Methodology

This research project employ the use of qualitative research approach to explore and document the symbolism and meanings embedded in the patterns, motifs and colours of Aso-oke and Adire fabrics as it's best for understanding the historical, cultural interpretation of these fabrics, with some method/sources utilized.

Primary sources; this entails the recruitment of interviewees from Practicing weavers in Abeokuta.

Secondary sources; the review of existing selected books, journals and articles relevant to the research to create a theoretical knowledge and background of the topic.

1.4 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to carry out research on symbols and meaning in Aso-oke and Adire fabrics designing pattern it shall therefore establish these objectives ;

- To study the concept of fabrics in Nigeria.
- To study the cultural significance of Nigeria fabric.
- To carry out an ethnographic Study of the Yoruba people.
- To study the Yoruba Fabrics and types.

- To Study Adire Fabrics and Aso-oke Fabrics.
- To study the symbols and meaning in Adire and Aso-oke Fabrics.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study focus on symbols and meaning of patterns, motifs and colours embedded in the Aso-oke and Adire fabrics of the Yoruba people. Though there are other fabrics associated with the Yoruba, the core of this study will be on Aso-oke and Adire, also focusing on their historical and cultural context of production and use.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study is constrained in the following areas;

Access to historical data and interpretation; with the passing of time and Civilization, accessing the definite meaning of some motifs and colours can be challenging and even when obtained, the interpretation of these patterns may vary across different Yoruba sub-groups, families, or even individual weavers and dyers interpretation.

Language barrier; while conducting an in-depth interview some meaning of these symbols can be lost in translation, maybe with no adequate words to translate their meaning or not being fluent in Yoruba causing a misinterpretation.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in the following ways

- As a medium for the preservation of cultural heritage, helping safeguard the values and indigenous knowledge of the fabrics.

- A contribution to the academic body of existing works with its specific aspect of fabric and potentially enable future research
- It will also be significant as a way to empower cultural identity inform contemporary art and design and promote cultural appreciation

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Fabric in Nigeria

Fabric in its simplest form, can be any piece of cloth or material that is created through weaving, knitting, or some form of intricate interlacing of fibers. It is an essential aspect of human existence, woven into the fabric of our daily lives. From birth to death humans are touching, using, wrapping, wearing, sleeping and sheltering themselves with, ceremonially using, and having their identities tied to fabric. It would be difficult to find a rational person who does not somehow use fabric. Oddly enough, sometimes a person who is mentally unstable or displaced or homeless can also use fabric, it's still the basic human covering of dignity, and sometimes, a person can use it as a symbolic expression. In short, fabric is not just a commodity of the textile industry; it is an element of human civilization that has lasted over time and space.

Historically, fabrics dates back to the primitive times, where early humans sought ways to shield themselves from harsh environmental elements by using natural resources such as animal skins, leaves, tree barks, and grass to cover their bodies for warmth, protection, and modesty. These primitive coverings were essential survival tools, offering insulation against cold and heat. Over time, humans developed more advanced methods of processing natural fibers. The earliest evidence of woven fabrics dates to around 7000 BCE in regions such as Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, where flax was spun into linen

and wool was derived from domesticated sheep (Kadolph 5). In ancient Egypt, linen became widely used for both clothing and ceremonial purposes, reflecting its importance in daily life and spirituality. Similarly, in the Indus Valley and China, early civilizations developed sophisticated weaving techniques using cotton and silk, respectively. These advancements marked a transition from rudimentary coverings to crafted textiles, laying the foundation for the global fabric industry we know today.

In many African societies, particularly Nigeria, fabrics quickly became more than utilitarian objects as they evolved into symbols of identity, heritage, and status. Nigerian traditional textiles such as Aso Oke, Adire, and Ankara represent more than clothing, they are visual narratives. Eicher and Roach-Higgins note that “dress, which includes fabric, is a form of non-verbal communication” and a “visual language of culture” (15). These fabrics are central to rites of passage and ceremonies such as wedding, birthdays and lots more. For instance, Aso Oke is worn during Yoruba weddings, signifying marital unity and cultural pride, while Adire, with its resist-dyed patterns, reflects creativity and regional identity. The methods of making fabric also vary in cultural depth and complexity.

Indigenous Nigerian dyeing and weaving processes such as tie-and-dye (Adire) in Abeokuta and hand-loom weaving in Ilorin and Iseyin demonstrate continuity in craftsmanship. Okeke observes that “these techniques do not merely serve functional purposes but are art forms that represent a community’s relationship with nature, tradition,

and symbolism” (88). Among the Igbo, fabrics like Isi Agu and George are worn during chieftaincy events and cultural festivals to denote prestige and masculinity. These textiles are not mass-produced garments but symbolic artefacts embedded with meaning. However, technological development has overtime expanded the concept of fabrics far beyond traditional uses. Horrocks and Anand describe technical textiles as “engineered fabrics created to fulfill specific functions such as moisture control, microbial protection, fire retardancy, and thermal insulation” (9). Such fabrics are used in the production of space suits, bulletproof vests, medical implants, and sportswear. This shows a shift from the perception of fabrics as solely aesthetic or cultural to materials of high functionality and performance.

The contemporary fabric industry also faces the challenges of environmental sustainability. Due to the increasing awareness of the environmental damage caused by synthetic textiles and fast fashion, there is a return to biodegradable and organic materials. Uzoigwe emphasizes that Nigerian designers are blending eco-consciousness with traditional practices by reviving natural dyeing techniques and promoting local fabric industries (74). This movement not only fosters environmental sustainability but also revives lost heritage and promotes economic independence. Fabrics have long played a role in global trade and cultural exchange. From the Chinese silk trade routes to the colonial imposition of Dutch wax prints in West Africa, the journey of fabric is deeply intertwined with histories of conquest, resistance, and identity formation. As Ogunyemi

argues, “fabrics are performed; they narrate stories of struggle, adaptation, and transformation” (112). The concept of fabrics from the foregoing, has been a gradual journey from survival to symbolism, from utility to innovation. Whether as animal skin in prehistoric Africa or as smart textile in modern clothing, fabric remains one of humanity’s most enduring inventions, an ever-present thread in the civilization process.

2.2 Significance of Nigeria Fabrics

The significance of Nigeria fabrics cannot be overemphasized, this is because its importance cuts across different spheres of the society beyond just being fashion or a tool for body covering. This segment of the review views a few notable significance of Nigeria fabrics.

Hierarchy and Prestige in Culture

Nigeria fabrics help tell stories about peoples economic and social status in the society. Fabrics like Aso-Oke, which literally means “cloth from above” or “high cloth,” is traditionally considered a symbol of pride and hierarchy. According to Aremu, “Aso-Oke is more than attire, it is a representation of lineage, honour, and communal aesthetics” (30). The fabric, often bright and intricately patterned, reflects Yoruba royalty and is commonly worn during rites of passage such as marriages or chieftaincy installations. In precolonial times, Aso-Oke was woven in towns like Ìjẹ̀ṣà-Igbó, Ìṣẹ̀yìn, and Ìbàdàn and worn by chiefs and dignitaries. Similarly, the Igbo George fabric, with its luminous texture and ornate embroidery, graces the wardrobes of brides and is customary

for family gatherings, festivals, and masquerades, showcasing wealth and elegance. Families like the royal families in different cultures around the country also wear fabrics that distinguish them from an ordinary member of the society.

Economic Empowerment

Nigerian fabric industries empower communities through economic engagement, especially women. In Abeokuta for example, women have historically led the craft, handing down skills and building cottage industries. Today, Nigerian fabrics have found new life in global fashion markets. Designers like Lisa Folawiyo and Mai Atafo have introduced Ankara and Aso-Oke to international runways, blending tradition with innovation. As Bamisaye notes, “Modern interpretations of traditional attire not only preserve identity but also export it, making culture a commodity” (44). This fashion evolution fuels a vast textile economy comprising weavers, dyers, tailors, designers, and distributors, especially in cities like Lagos, Ibadan, and Aba. The industry provides employment, fosters entrepreneurship, and contributes to Nigeria’s non-oil GDP, aligning with national strategies for diversification (Isola 56).

Cultural, Religious, and Political Symbolism

Fabrics in Nigeria go beyond fashion, they are woven with layers of meaning. The use of fabrics in religious ceremonies, from Christian women’s uniforms to Yoruba deity festivals, reflects their deep spiritual role. Aso-Oke and Adire are often worn by traditional priests and priestesses as symbols of ancestral veneration. According to

Maduka-Duru, “Naming, dressing, and ritual performance are all entangled in the web of identity construction” (29). Similarly, Igbo textiles incorporate cultural symbols like mpi-enyi (ram’s horn) and mbor, embedding wisdom and ancient knowledge in their designs. Wearing such textiles helps keep traditions alive and fosters a sense of belonging and continuity across generations (Chinwe, Kehinde and John 39). Politically, traditional attire has served as a statement of nationalism since independence, with many postcolonial leaders choosing indigenous garments over colonial Western styles (Afolayan 73). In the 21st century, programs such as “Buy Naija to Grow the Naira” emphasize local fabrics as emblems of economic patriotism and pride.

Creativity and Cultural Resistance

This significance will be explained using the Adire fabric, Adire which means “tie and dye” in Yoruba, is an indigo-dyed cotton fabric historically crafted by women in Abeokuta and Ibadan. The dye patterns on the fabrics is an expression of creativity. As Akinwumi notes, “the motifs often convey proverbs, religious beliefs, or societal values, making each cloth a medium of cultural storytelling” (45). Unlike Aso-Oke, which is woven by men, Adire represents a female-centered craft and historically served as a means of economic empowerment for Yoruba women (Ojo 80). During the colonial period, Adire became a source of financial independence and resistance, especially for women who used it to challenge colonial pricing systems and male-dominated trade networks (Ojo 82). Although the production is no longer restrained to women as it used

to be in the past. In recent years, younger generations of artists and designers have revived Adire by integrating its motifs into modern garments, thus preserving both cultural heritage and female agency (Maduka-Duru 27). Despite the cultural erosion in recent times, local fabrics have continued to project Nigeria cultures, thereby preserving its existence.

Modernity, Unity, and Popular Expression

Despite influence from western fashion trends, Nigerian fabrics have adapted new concepts to thrive and preserve their culture. Fabrics like Ankara which have foreign origins have been fully indigenized in Nigeria. This fabric was initially introduced through colonial trade from Europe, Ankara has evolved into a popular and accessible textile that transcends ethnic lines. According to Isola, Ankara is now “a pan-Nigerian fabric whose patterns are continuously reinvented to suit contemporary tastes” (53). It is commonly used in Aso-Ebi, the practice of uniform dressing at ceremonies, which creates a sense of shared identity and solidarity (Bamisaye 42). Ankara is also politically and commercially symbolic. Politicians use customized prints bearing their portraits for campaign purposes, while religious and social organizations adopt it for events and uniforms. The fabric’s affordability and versatility make it a key tool for economic and social interaction, especially for tailors, traders, and textile entrepreneurs (Okeke 25).

Traditional Nigerian fabrics are more than woven threads; they are strands of cultural history, economic strength, and communal identity. Aso-Oke, Adire, and Ankara

each bear unique histories and symbolic significance, yet all converge in their continued relevance to modern Nigeria. They enable Nigerians to express who they are, ethnically, spiritually, politically, and economically. As the proverb goes, “We greet the cloth before we greet the person” because in Nigeria, fabric speaks first.

2.3 The Yoruba Fabrics and Types

Among the many cultural treasures of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, textile artistry holds a prominent place. Yoruba fabrics are not merely items of clothing but are rich in historical, social, and symbolic meaning. They serve as visual texts that convey identity, gender roles, social status, spirituality, and aesthetics. Yoruba fabrics come in diverse types, each with distinct production techniques, motifs, and cultural functions. The most prominent include Aso-Oke, Adire, Ofi, Kampala, and Etu, each tied to different uses and occasions.

Aso-Oke

Aso-Oke, perhaps the most celebrated Yoruba fabric, is a handwoven cloth usually made on narrow-strip looms. Worn during weddings, chieftaincy ceremonies, and festivals, Aso-Oke symbolizes dignity, prestige, and heritage. The term Aso-Oke means “top cloth” or “prestige fabric.” According to Aremu, “Aso-Oke serves not just as a decorative item but as a bearer of history and status within the Yoruba sociocultural system” (31). Aso-Oke exists in several varieties; Sanyan (woven from beige wild silk and cotton), Alaari (usually red, woven with magenta or burgundy threads), and Etu (a

dark indigo-striped version traditionally worn by men) (Aremu 33). The following sections give an elaborate discussion on the major types of Aso-Oke and their cultural relevance within Yoruba society. Other less common types of Aso-Oke include Opa aro (dark blue with green stripes), Ifun or fu (light brown and navy blue combination), and Waka (black with red warp stripes). Patterns often include geometric, floral, and symbolic motifs woven into the cloth, each carrying cultural stories or meanings (Brialec; Wikipedia).



Fig 1:Aso-oke.Source:Owanbe community. Date:Nov 22. 2021

Adire

Another iconic Yoruba fabric is Adire, which refers to indigo-dyed cloth produced through resist-dye techniques. Adire, meaning “tie and dye,” emerged prominently in the city of Abeokuta in the 19th century and became a thriving industry among Yoruba women. It uses methods such as adire oniko (tied cloth), adire eleko (starch-resist), and adire alabere (stitch-resist). As Akinwumi observes, “Adire designs serve as visual metaphors, often encoding proverbs, folklore, and religious themes” (47). Historically, Adire functioned as a form of storytelling, and its motifs often reflected Yoruba cosmology and communal values. The cloth was a vital medium for women’s economic independence, empowering them through dyeing, designing, and trade (Ojo 79).



Fig 2:Adire design. Source: Afrothread. Date: 2019

Ofi

Ofi, often considered synonymous with Aso-Oke, refers to traditional handwoven fabrics generally associated with the town of Ìsẹ̀yìn in Oyo State. Though used interchangeably with Aso-Oke, Ofi is the generic term for Yoruba woven cloth, and it includes a wide variety of styles used for everyday wear or festive occasions. Some Ofi fabrics are lighter and more utilitarian than the ceremonial Aso-Oke (Bamisaye 43).



Fig 3: Ofi Aso-oke. Source: Aroko design Date: 2025

Kampala

It is a more recent adaptation within Yoruba textile arts, referring to a vibrant multicolored version of tie-and-dye, often influenced by Ghanaian batik or modern dyeing techniques. Though not indigenous in origin, Kampala has been embraced by Yoruba tailors and wearers for its bold expression and affordability. It is often confused with Adire but differs in its brighter colors and synthetic fabrics (Isola 55).



Fig 4: Kampala. Source: Anka marketplace Date: 2025.

In essence, Yoruba textiles are not simply materials; they are repositories of identity, heritage, and artistry. Whether in royal palaces or bustling markets, their presence continues to affirm the Yoruba people's sense of pride, community, and continuity.

2.4 Adire and Aso-Oke Fabrics

Adire Fabrics

Adire, which means “tie and dye” in Yoruba, is a traditional textile dyeing method that produces patterns using various resist techniques on cotton fabric. Adire emerged in Abeokuta, Nigeria, largely in the early 20th century, and was traditionally made by women. Over time, Adire came to have multiple distinct types based on technique and aesthetic complexity. Adire comes in different variations, these variations will be examined in the following paragraphs.

Adire Oniko (Tied Resist Dyeing)

Adire Oniko is created by tying sections of the fabric with raffia or cotton thread into intricate knots before dyeing it in indigo. The tied areas resist the dye, resulting in circular or linear patterns. This method is time-consuming but produces beautiful, organic motifs. Designs may include circles, spirals, and grids. As Akinwumi explains, “Oniko is an example of a physical resist technique and is often passed down from mother to daughter” (45). It reflects Yoruba beliefs in continuity and symbolism, with some motifs named after proverbs or folktales. Oniko is one of the earliest and most widespread forms of Adire.



Fig 5: Tied resist dyeing. Source: Indigo art gallery.

Adire Alabere (Stitched Resist Dyeing)

Adire Alabere involves stitching the fabric with a needle and thread to create designs before dyeing. After the dyeing process, the stitches are removed, revealing intricate patterns. This method allows for more precise and controlled designs compared to Oniko. Patterns often include floral, animal, or geometric motifs. According to Ojo, “Alabere techniques reflect a higher level of artistic control and are often used for premium cloth” (82). Alabere is labor-intensive and typically used for special occasions. The technique

shows how Yoruba women elevated utilitarian fabric into symbolic and ceremonial textiles.

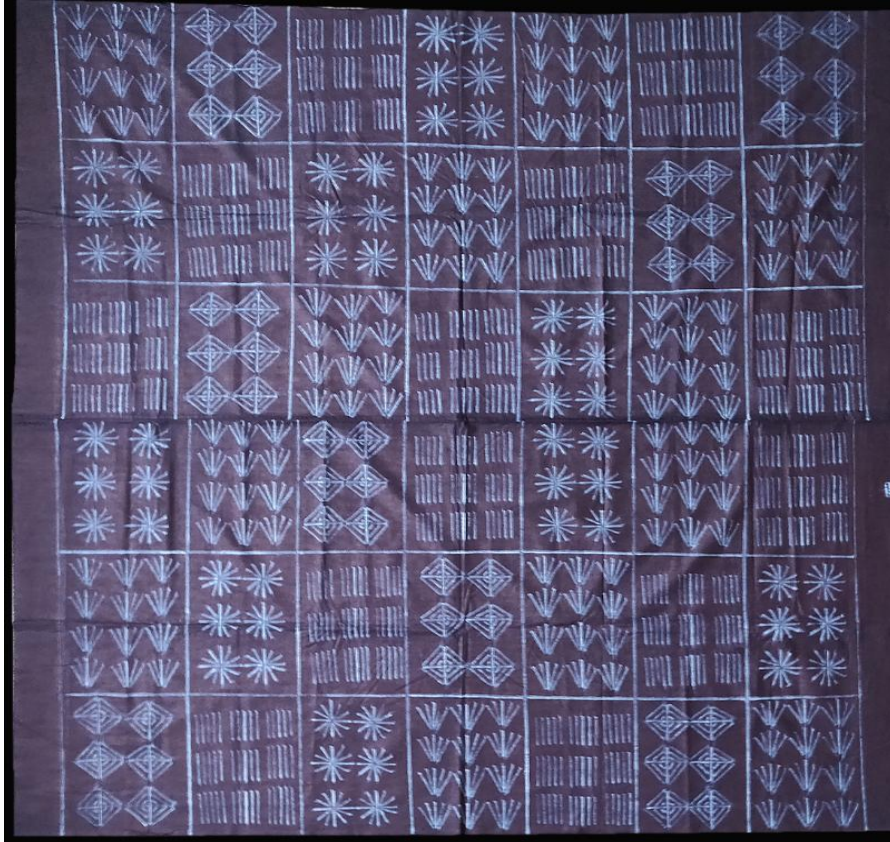


Fig 6: Stitched resist dyeing. Source: Adire African textile. Date: 2025

Adire Eleko (Starch Resist Dyeing)

Adire Eleko is perhaps the most distinctive variant, involving the application of cassava starch paste to the cloth using feathers, combs, or stencils. The starch blocks the dye from penetrating, allowing artisans to paint scenes, symbols, or proverbs directly onto the fabric. After dyeing and rinsing, the designs remain in the undyed areas. This

method allows for detailed narrative and abstract designs. Aremu notes, “Eleko reflects the intellectual and cultural sophistication of Yoruba women artisans” (36). Eleko clothes are often used as visual storytelling mediums, commemorating historical events or conveying social messages.



Fig 7: Starch dyeing. Source:Adire African textile. Date: 2025

Adire Onibudo (Folded Cloth Technique)

This lesser-known technique involves folding and binding the cloth with sticks or wooden clamps before dyeing. The resist created by the folded parts produces striped or grid-like patterns. Though less intricate than Eleko or Alabere, Onibudo offers a fast and effective way to generate modern-looking designs. It is often used in mass production. As

noted by Bamisaye, “Onibudo demonstrates the Yoruba adaptability in cloth-making, balancing speed with cultural motifs” (42).

In addition, block-printing and stencil methods using metal cutouts were introduced in the 20th century to accelerate production and variety, while more modern adaptations include multi-colored wax-resist techniques inspired by but distinct from original methods (Adire African Textiles; The Guardian Nigeria).

Traditionally, Adire fabric was made from handspun, locally woven cotton cloth. However, by the early 20th century, imported plain white shirting cotton became preferred due to its smoothness and affordability, allowing finer dyeing detail. The main dye used is indigo, either natural or synthetic. The resist agents vary by method: tying or stitching with raffia thread in Oniko and Alabere variants, and applying cassava starch paste in Eleko (Bellafricana; Adire African Textiles; Encyclopedia.com). The process generally involves preparing the white cotton cloth, applying resist patterns by tying, stitching, or pasting, then immersing the fabric repeatedly in dye vats—traditionally indigo, to achieve deep blue backgrounds with contrasting white or lighter designs. After dyeing, the resist materials are removed, revealing the patterns. Over time, innovations included block printing with metal stencils for efficiency and the use of hot wax in place of cassava paste in some contemporary productions (Bellafricana; The Guardian Nigeria).

Adire holds profound cultural importance in Yoruba society. It functions not only as attire but as a medium of storytelling, symbolism, and social identity. The patterns often

represent proverbs, natural elements, tools, animals, and spiritual meanings, passed down matrilineally, making the cloth a cultural repository (Maagaret and Razaq 22).

Asoke-Oke Fabrics

Aso-oke is a broad name for items woven on a horizontal loom as well as clothing created from it (Ademuleya 21). The origin of the name Aso-oke can be traced to the late 19th century when Lagos merchants called residents of the Iseyin region by the name Ara-Oke (i.e. people from Oke Ogun or Yoruba hinterland). People in Lagos referred to the cloth as Aso awon ara oke when it was brought to Lagos for sale from Iseyin. Its name “aso-ofi”, refers to the method of production, notably the loom. The word for cloth in Yoruba is aso, and the word for the loom used to weave this kind of garment is ofi (Diyaolu & Omotosho 3).



Fig 8; representing the Sanyan Aso-oke. Source: Bidsquare. Date :2019

Sanyan: The Silk-Cotton Prestige Cloth: Sanyan is one of the oldest and most prestigious forms of Aso-Oke, woven traditionally from the beige silk fibers of the Anaphe moth mixed with cotton. Its soft texture and colour give it a unique elegance, making it a fabric of nobility and ceremony. Historically, Sanyan was worn by Yoruba chiefs, kings, and elders during important events such as coronations, traditional weddings, and ancestral festivals. The fabric symbolizes age, wisdom, and royalty. Today, while wild silk is scarce, cotton substitutes are used, yet Sanyan still retains its cultural importance as a marker of refined taste and elder authority (Aremu 32).

Alaari: Alaari is a vibrant, red or burgundy-colored Aso-Oke variant, traditionally woven with magenta-dyed threads. It is most often associated with festive and joyous occasions such as weddings, naming ceremonies, and cultural festivals. Its bold colour represents happiness, wealth, and vitality in Yoruba symbolism. Alaari is particularly popular for bridal attire and is often paired with richly embroidered blouses or gele headwraps. It reflects not only social status but also a deep connection to Yoruba aesthetics and femininity. In contemporary fashion, Alaari is being revitalized by designers blending it with lace or chiffon to create African centred wear (Ojo 81).



Fig 9: Alaari Fabric. Sources: Bella Africana. Date :2021

Etu: The Indigo Cloth of Nobility: Etu, from the Yoruba word for guinea fowl, is a dark blue or indigo-stripped variant of Aso-Oke named for its colour resemblance to the bird's feathers. It is traditionally reserved for men, especially during chieftaincy or elder ceremonies, Etu is a symbol of dignity, solemnity, and ancestral lineage. It is commonly worn during important religious rites, funerals, or cultural festivals. Paired with a matching Fila Etu cap, the cloth exudes an aura of masculine grace and responsibility. Today, Etu still remains significant in traditional Yoruba male fashion in honoring ancestors and preserving masculine cultural heritage (Isola 54).



Fig 10 : indigo Aso-oke. Source:Bella Africana. Date:2021

Etu-Serin and Alaari-Oniyan: Contemporary Hybrids: Modern fashion has birthed hybrid variants such as Etu-Serin and Alaari-Oniyan, which blend traditional Aso-Oke colors with metallic or synthetic threads. Etu-Serin, for example, incorporates silver lurex yarns into the deep indigo weave of Etu, giving it a shimmery, celebratory twist, while retaining its dignified tone. Similarly, Alaari-Oniyan modernizes the traditional Alaari with brighter shades and enhanced durability, making it more versatile for urban fashion. These hybrid styles are part of a broader Afro-urban aesthetic, promoted by contemporary Nigerian designers who reinterpret cultural symbols through fashion.

Despite their innovations, these fabrics remain rooted in Yoruba weaving traditions (Afolayan 74).

The raw materials for Aso Oke production traditionally come from locally sourced cotton and wild silk fibers, supplemented in modern times by imported silk and synthetic yarns. The cotton fibers are spun into yarns, often dyed with natural dyes such as indigo or colored using synthetics, then wound onto bobbins for weaving. The weaving process employs hand-operated looms, which come in two main types in Yoruba communities: the vertical single heddle loom, often used by women, and the horizontal double heddle loom, typically used by men. Weavers interlace threads running vertically (warp) and horizontally (weft), using tools such as heddles, treadles, shuttles, and beaters to create intricate, symbolic patterns. The narrow strips produced are sewn together to form wider cloths suitable for garments or ceremonial use (Owanbe Community; Wikipedia).

Aso Oke weaving is a meticulous and skillful art form involving the manipulation of thread colors and patterns to communicate Yoruba social values, histories, and philosophies. Geometric and abstract motifs woven into the fabric tell stories, convey identity, or represent Yoruba beliefs. The fabric's vibrant colors and symbolic designs are more than aesthetic, they embody messages passed down through generations, with specific colors and patterns often reserved for particular rites of passage or societal roles (Wattkaf; Wikipedia).

Culturally, Aso Oke holds immense significance. It is a marker of wealth, respect, and cultural pride worn primarily at life's milestone events such as weddings, naming ceremonies, and chieftaincy titles. The fabric is often fashioned into traditional Yoruba attire, such as agbada robes for men, iro and buba (wrapper and blouse) for women, gele head-ties, and fila caps, which are used to visually communicate identity, social status, and communal affiliation. The art of creating, wearing, and interpreting Aso Oke transcends fashion, serving as a living repository of Yoruba cultural heritage and artistry (Wattkaf; Meekono; Ahmedabad). In contemporary times, Aso Oke continues to be relevant both within Yoruba society and internationally, with its intricate designs inspiring fashion designers worldwide. It also promotes economic development by sustaining traditional weaving craftspeople and artisans in local Yoruba communities. Institutions such as universities in southwestern Nigeria even advocate for Aso Oke as a cultural fabric for academic gowns, recognizing its role in cultural preservation and identity reinforcement (Ajayi 2006).

CHAPTER THREE

EXPLORING THE YORUBA TRADITION

3.1 Historical Origin of the Yoruba People/Yoruba Worldview

According to Yoruba mythology, the creation narrative positions Oduduwa (or Odua) as the founding ancestor and divine figure who created the earth and settled in Ile-Ife, the spiritual and cultural heartland of the Yoruba people. Oduduwa's descendants are said to be the founders of important Yoruba city-states, such as the Oyo Empire, illustrating the intertwining of myth with political history. Oduduwa is believed to have descended from the heavens to establish human civilization (Ogunremi 17). This mytho-historical narrative has often been treated with skepticism by Western scholars, but its consistency across various Yoruba subgroups suggests a deeply ingrained cultural memory. Samuel Johnson, a renowned historian, asserts that "Oduduwa was the progenitor of the Yoruba people and the first ruler of Ile-Ife" (Johnson 5). This historical account of Johnson remains a foundational text that blends oral history with early colonial accounts. Furthermore, Archaeological research supports the antiquity of Ile-Ife. Excavations have uncovered sophisticated terracotta and bronze sculptures dating as far back as the 12th century, suggesting the existence of a highly organized society with advanced artistic and metallurgical skills (Willet 48). These findings corroborate the oral tradition that positions Ile-Ife as an ancient urban center.

However, alternative theories propose a more complex historical origin. Some scholars suggest that the Yoruba are indigenous to the region and developed over millennia through the interaction of different ethnic groups. Ogundiran posits that the Yoruba identity evolved from a mixture of indigenous communities and migrating groups, with Ile-Ife emerging as a political and religious center by the first millennium AD (Ogundiran 62). According to him, the idea of a single point of origin may obscure the diversity of experiences that shaped Yoruba identity. In contrast, others emphasize external influences. Obayemi argued that the Yoruba may have had connections with Nubia or Egypt based on cultural similarities and linguistic traces (Obayemi 94). Though this “Hamito-Semitic” theory is largely discredited today, it reflects the broader search for African historical agency beyond colonial narratives.

Despite these debates on their precise origin, the Yorubas have developed a distinctive worldview that integrates myths, religion, and social values. Central to the Yoruba worldview is the belief in Olodumare, the supreme being who governs the universe. Olodumare is omnipotent and remote, often approached through a pantheon of deities known as Orisha. These Orisha, such as Sango, Ogun, Esu, and Yemoja, embody natural forces and human characteristics and serve as intermediaries between humans and the divine (Abimbola 43). Each individual is believed to possess a spiritual essence called Ori, which influences destiny. According to Yoruba belief, before birth, each soul selects its destiny in the presence of Olodumare. This concept underscores the Yoruba view of

life as a journey guided by pre-ordained choices and spiritual responsibility. As Abimbola explains, “The Yoruba believe that life’s success depends on aligning one’s Ori with divine will and moral behavior” (Abimbola 49).

The bronze and terracotta works of art of the Yoruba people, was an indication of the sophisticated craftsmanship and centralized authority (Willet 127). Such developments in terms of artistic and political culture happened alongside the establishment of the Yoruba city-states of Oyo, Ife, Ijebu, and Ekiti, demonstrating some level of autonomy and no doubt, cultural relations. By all accounts, the Oyo Empire emerged and became the most powerful empire between the 17th and 19th centuries, by virtue of its military, which included cavalry and a bureaucratic scheme to establish administration. The empire was fueled by input from trade with external partners, more specifically, European merchants who made their way up the Atlantic coast (Falola 62).

The transatlantic slave trade had a profound impact on Yoruba society. Many Yoruba were captured and sold into slavery, particularly during periods of civil conflict in the 19th century. These displacements led to the spread of Yoruba religion and culture across the Americas, especially in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti (Law 201). The diaspora preserved key aspects of Yoruba spiritual traditions, which evolved into syncretic religions such as Candomblé and Santería. British colonial rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries disrupted traditional political structures, though many Yoruba elites adapted by pursuing Western education and civil service roles. This adaptation laid the

groundwork for Yoruba prominence in Nigeria's nationalist and post-independence politics. As Falola notes, "Yoruba political consciousness was sharpened by both colonial contradictions and internal debates on modernity and identity" (Falola 131).

Today, the Yorubas continue to play a central role in Nigeria's cultural, economic, and political life, maintaining a rich heritage of language, religion, art, and urban organization. The complexity of their history, intertwining myth, monarchy, migration, and modernity, makes them a cornerstone of African civilization.

3.2 The Yoruba People Cultural Beliefs/Beliefs System

The cultural beliefs and belief system of the Yoruba people are deeply rooted in a sophisticated cosmology that integrates spirituality, morality, and social order, playing a vital role in their worldview and daily life. Central to Yoruba belief is the concept of Àṣẹ (Ase), a life force or spiritual energy granted by the Creator that empowers all things, humans, animals, plants, elements, prayers, songs, and objects. Àṣẹ is the power to make things happen and create change, sustaining existence and linking the physical and spiritual realms (Nicole 29). Everything in the Yoruba myths, gods, humans, animals, and even inanimate objects, is believed to possess Àṣẹ, granted ultimately by the supreme deity Olódùmarè (Abimbola 78). The Yoruba universe is divided into two interconnected realms: Aye, the visible world of the living, and Orun, the spiritual realm of the ancestors, deities (Orisas), and spirits (Nicole 29). At the top of the pantheon is Olórun (or Olódùmarè), the supreme Creator and ruler of the universe. Olórun is remote and rarely

worshipped directly, as this deity represents the ultimate source of all life but does not have specific shrines or cults (Nicole 29). Instead, the Yoruba worship a large number of Orisas (Orishas) over 400 deities, each governing natural forces, human endeavors, or moral virtues, acting as intermediaries between humanity and Olórun. Orisas include Obatala, the deity of creation and purity; Ogun, god of iron and war; Shango, god of thunder and justice; Esu, a trickster and messenger god who controls communication and the crossroads, Orunmila, the deity of wisdom and divination Yemoja (mother of all orisha and goddess of the Ogun River), and Ogun (god of iron and war). These deities are venerated through festivals, sacrifices, music, and dance, with the aim of maintaining cosmic harmony and personal balance (Dopamu 103).

The Yorubas also have a belief system of destiny and spiritual consciousness, embodied in the concept of the Orí, the inner head or spiritual self that determines an individual's fate and success. The Orí forms a bridge between the physical self and one's spiritual destiny, with a harmonious Orí crucial for well-being, moral behavior, and fulfillment of life's purpose (Markinde 5). The human person in Yoruba philosophy is a composite of physical, spiritual, and mental elements: ara (body), emi (soul), and orí (spiritual head) (Markinde 5).

Another essential belief is reincarnation, known in Yoruba as Atunwa. Ancestors (called Ìṣèsè) are honored and believed to return to the lineage through newborns. This cyclical view of life and death reinforces family continuity, spiritual accountability, and

moral duty (Idowu 150). Moral behavior is tightly linked to spiritual health, with misfortunes often interpreted as consequences of neglecting divine laws or ancestral obligations.

The Yoruba also place significant emphasis on divination, particularly through the Ifá oracle system, a sophisticated method of communication with the divine. Practiced by a trained priest called a Babaláwo, Ifá divination uses sacred texts known as Odu Ifá, which encode centuries of spiritual, philosophical, and ethical wisdom. Through divination, individuals seek guidance on personal, communal, and existential issues (Abimbola 92).

These belief systems are not confined to formal religion but are embedded in everyday practices, proverbs, names, and social structures. For example, naming ceremonies, marriage rites, agricultural practices, and conflict resolution often reflect spiritual principles and ancestral reverence. As Olupona notes, Yoruba belief is “not a closed religious system, but a living, adaptive tradition that engages with both indigenous values and global modernity” (Olupona 27).

3.3 Political Structure of the Yoruba People

Political structures in human societies serve as the organizing frameworks through which authority, governance, and social order are maintained. They define organisational roles, distribute power, and codify the relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions. In Yoruba society, political structure is not merely an institutional

arrangement but a deeply cultural phenomenon embedded in every sphere of life, from family units to towns, kingdoms, and religious institutions. This integrative quality of governance ensures that politics is inseparable from religion, economics, and kinship (Smith 18; Falola 44). The Yorubas just like every other tribe in the society have a well defined political structure, guiding the administrative, economic and social activities of the culture.

The head of the traditional Yoruba political structure is the Oba (king), who serves as a spiritual and political leader, is believed to be divinely chosen and a representative of the ancestors. He governs with the support of a council of chiefs known as the Igbimo, which includes titleholders who represent various quarters, age grades, and guilds within the kingdom (Smith 45). Each chief has defined duties that correspond to administrative, military, judicial, or religious functions. The Yoruba political system is highly decentralized and was historically organized into city-states like Oyo, Ife, Ijebu, Egba, and Ondo. These states maintained their independence but were culturally unified. The Oyo Empire, in particular, developed one of the most advanced political systems in precolonial Africa. It featured a constitutional monarchy where the Alaafin of Oyo ruled alongside the Oyo Mesi, a council of seven principal noblemen who checked his power. The Ogboni society, composed of elder statesmen and priests, further served as a moral and judicial authority (Law 88).

Governance extended into the smallest units of society. Each compound was headed by a Baale (family elder), while neighborhoods and towns had their own local chiefs. These roles mirrored the central political structure, creating a layered but coherent system of governance that reached the grassroots level (Akintoye 101). Women also held political power, notably through institutions such as the Iyalode, the most powerful female titleholder, who represented women's interests in the political and economic realms. As Oyēwùmì argues, Yoruba political systems offered structured spaces for female agency, contrary to assumptions of purely patriarchal governance (Oyēwùmì 64).

The Yoruba political structure is resilient because it is interwoven with cultural values, religious practices, and communal responsibilities. Even in modern times, traditional political institutions like kingships and chieftaincy titles continue to wield influence, especially in conflict resolution, cultural preservation, and local governance.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH CONCEPT

4.0 Analysis of Aso-oke and Adire Fabric

According to sources, market leaders and veteran artisans have revealed that a complex interplay between tradition, symbolism, social status, and changing economic realities has impacted the production and use of Aso-oke and Adire. The themes below capture the core issues that shape the making, meaning, and wearing of their fabric today, with direct quotes illustrating key perspectives from those who weave it, sell it, and wear it.

4.1 Aso-oke Fabrics

There is widespread recognition that Aso-oke is not just a piece of cloth but a symbol of honour and dignity. The analysis of Aso-oke was based on the views derived from an Aso-oke weaver in Iseyin, Folarunmi Adisa, Mama Anike, a market seller in Abeokuta and their market leader.

According to Mr Adeyemi, “Aso-oke is not ordinary cloth; it serves as a symbol of honour to a well-deserved individual. Also, according to Mama Anike, who is an experienced weaver from Abeokuta, “Aso-oke fabric has been in use for a very long time, which is used for different cultural events such as wedding, naming or burial ceremonies. Using Aso-oke shows that the family respects the event.” Folarunmi Adisa reinforced these sentiments by recalling its continuity and prestige; however, he first noted that Aso-

oke started since the days of their forefathers, and it is believed that it started from Iseyin, where their major work is. *“Aso-oke weaving started in the days of our forefathers in Iseyin, although other Yoruba tribes weave too, but our own major work is in Iseyin, and the skill is generational.* He also linked Aso-oke to status ceremonies: *“So, someone who wants to become a chieftain or hold a title, wear big agbada.”* Although these respondents agree on its prestige, they also point out that modern users may not fully understand its deeper meaning. This theme shows that Aso-oke is both a ceremonial garment and a social marker, whose prestige remains even as knowledge about its history is fading.



4.1. Symbols and Patterns of Aso-oke Fabric

Fig 11: Sample of Sanyan Aso-Oke, Source: OriAde.Co, 2024



Fig 12 Sample of Alari Aso-oke, Source: OriAde.Co, 2024



Fig 13 Sample of Etu Aso-Oke, Source: OriAde.Co, 2024

Figure 1: Sample of Major Aso-Oke Patterns as outlined by Respondents

Respondents explained that the motifs and colours woven into *Aso-oke* fabric communicate important social messages about status, lineage, and occasion. Mr Adeyemi noted that every stripe and metallic thread in the cloth carries meaning, explaining that a simple brown *Sanyan* signifies an elder's dignity, while a bright *Alaari* with gold threads represents the prosperity of a bride's family. Similarly, Mama Anike then emphasized that certain motifs, such as the crown or rooster comb, are reserved for specific families and cannot be woven without permission. She further mentioned that some patterns are meant exclusively for women's garments, while others are for men's, highlighting how *Aso-oke* weaving reflects cultural rules regarding identity and gender roles.

Respondents also mentioned *Etu-Aso-oke*, which is a deep indigo-striped fabric is associated with titled men. They explained that the word *Etu*, meaning "guinea-fowl," refers to the bird's plumage and symbolizes wisdom, masculinity, and spirituality. It was further stated that *Etu-Aso-oke* is used to make *agbada* or wrappers worn at prestigious events such as chieftaincy installations. The respondents added that the combination of *Etu*, *Alaari*, and *Sanyan* fabrics by Yoruba men demonstrates a deliberate use of colours and patterns to express identity and occasion rather than mere decoration.

In essence, the responses indicated that *Aso-oke* designs are not arbitrary but function as a living code of ancestral symbols handed down through generations. The respondents also pointed out that colour symbolism plays a significant role, with deep

blue (*Etu*) representing spirituality, wine (*Alaari*) symbolizing celebration, gold threads denoting royalty, and white standing for purity and peace. Collectively, these insights revealed that *Aso-oke* serves as a silent language through which Yoruba people express identity, morality, and tradition.

4.1.2 Cultural Significance of Aso-oke

Respondents associated the practice of weaving *Aso-oke* with moral training, patience, and discipline. According to Mr Adeyemi, mothers usually begin a girl's training by teaching her to wind yarn before she is ever allowed to touch the loom, emphasizing that patience is the foundation of the craft. Similarly, Mama Anike stressed the importance of discipline, noting that a single mistake in threading could ruin an entire pattern. Another weaver observed that although many learners still acquire the skill at home from their elders, some now imitate designs found on the internet for fashion purposes rather than learning through the traditional apprenticeship system.

These accounts suggested that *Aso-oke* weaving continues to serve as a living heritage passed down through family training and informal guilds, fostering patience, discipline, and respect for cultural traditions. However, the respondents also pointed out that increasing commercialisation and the rise of fast fashion are gradually eroding this deep, generational knowledge, as many people now wear *Aso-oke* merely as a fashionable costume without understanding its cultural language. This theme therefore reflects the

dual nature of *Aso-oke*, as both a vibrant, enduring craft and a cultural tradition facing the pressures of modernity.

4.1.3 Production Process of Aso-Oke Fabric

Folarunmi Mutairu Adisa explained that the process of weaving *Aso-oke* begins with sourcing and preparing the appropriate yarns. He noted that the first step involves purchasing materials, which are usually obtained from Lagos, identifying the two main types used as *ita* (warp thread) and *iro* (weft thread). His explanation indicated that *Aso-oke* weaving still relies on these specific, traditional yarns acquired from trusted suppliers, a practice that helps to preserve the authenticity and quality of the fabric.



Fig 14: A photo of the Loom Instrument, Source: Bellafricana.com, 2021

Setting the loom requires careful measurement:

According to Mr Adisa, the initial stages of Aso-oke production begin with the setting of cotton. They explained that the process starts with measuring the land to ensure a precise length, typically ninety lengths on one side, before weaving begins. After weaving, the material is placed in water to form the ita (warp thread). They further explained that the iro (weft thread) is produced using the ita, and that once the weaving is completed, starch is applied to the fabric, which is then soaked and left to dry. These shows that the stages of measurement, warping, and starching are not merely technical procedures but crucial processes that determine the fabric's strength, durability, and final finish. This shows that Aso-oke weaving involves careful craftsmanship rooted in precision and traditional knowledge.

From Akata to Akaro

Mr Adisa further identified the intermediate stages involved in *Aso-oke* weaving. He explained that once the yarn has dried, it is taken out to begin the next process, known as *akata*. The *akata* is then woven into *akaro*, which refers to the smaller roll of yarn held in the hand during weaving. He added that the person responsible for rolling the yarn completes this stage by winding it into the *akaro*. This description highlighted that *Aso-oke* weaving follows a structured sequence of interconnected stages, each with its own traditional terminology and function. These steps ensure the yarn is properly prepared for the loom, reflecting the precision and skill that define authentic *Aso-oke* craftsmanship.

Applying *Hune* and Final Weaving

Mr Adisa also described the final stages of *Aso-oke* production, focusing on the finishing processes. He explained that “when we have weaved it into this, it has become... That’s when we

start applying *hune*. When we apply the *hune*, it now forms this final product.” He further noted that the looms used for weaving are not imported but locally constructed by carpenters, built in pieces and assembled on-site, reflecting an embedded tool-making tradition that complements the weaving craft. Although Mr. Adisa outlined each stage of production, he emphasized that the true mastery of *Aso-oke* weaving cannot be completely taught through verbal instruction. According to him, much of the expertise must be learned by “watching and doing,” highlighting the importance of apprenticeship and hands-on experience in passing down this heritage.

At the same time, he acknowledged the growing influence of modern fashion trends on *Aso-oke* production. He explained that contemporary embellishments, such as laser cutting, beading, stones, and embroidery, have become common, especially for ceremonial garments. As he put it, “*This is wrapper for it... We have already embellished it... The husband will use this one as agbada... There is embroidery... after they join this one, they will attach this one and sew it... so and then it becomes ready to wear.*” This account shows that *Aso-oke* weaving today blends tradition with innovation. The process combines ancestral techniques and handmade precision with modern decorative styles, ensuring that the fabric remains both culturally authentic and relevant to contemporary tastes.

4.1.4 Challenges of Weaving Aso-Oke in Modern Times

Scarcity and Cost of Materials

One of the most pressing challenges Mr Adisa notes is the rising cost and irregular supply of yarns: “*We purchase it from Lagos... The two materials we use are called ita and iro.*” Although

he does not complain openly, the reliance on distant suppliers indicates vulnerability to price fluctuations and shortages, which can delay production or raise costs for weavers.

Labour Intensity and Skill Transmission

He repeatedly hints that Aso-oke weaving involves skills that are difficult to explain theoretically: *“If you are to explain the process... You will see...”* This tacit nature makes training new weavers more time-consuming. Younger people may be unwilling to undergo lengthy apprenticeships, threatening the continuity of the craft.

Competition from Machine-Made or Imported Fabrics

While not stated explicitly, his description of elaborate modern embellishments implies adaptation to compete with ready-made or imported fabrics. Weavers now add embroidery, beads and stones to make their cloths attractive, which increases cost and labour.

Infrastructure and Loom Maintenance

He mentions that looms are made by carpenters and assembled on site. This local arrangement also points to a challenge: without proper workshop infrastructure or spare parts, repairs and maintenance can slow production and discourage younger artisans.

The interview reveals a weaving tradition under pressure. The production process remains meticulous and community-based, but its continuation depends on steady access to raw materials, the willingness of a new generation to master tacit skills, and the ability of weavers to innovate against competition. These factors shape not only the economic viability of Aso-oke but also its cultural survival as a living heritage.

4.2 Adire Fabric

There is widespread recognition from the respondents that Adire is not just everyday clothing but also a carrier of family and communal identity. Iya Shakirat, a market woman who honed her skills from lineage, gave her extensive opinion on Adire and its making.

Iya Shakirat explained, *“Adire can be worn for every occasion.”*

She further described Adire making as hereditary and household-based. In her words, *“In my house Adire is hereditary; my mother taught me, and my granddaughter is already learning.”*

She added, *“We don’t learn in school; we learn by watching our parents and grandparents.”*

This family transmission embeds Adire in intergenerational memory, making dyeing both a livelihood and a continuity practice. The household apprenticeship model explains the persistence of core techniques, such as indigo dyeing, folding, and tying, despite market pressures.

Iya Shakirat also noted that, *“Families bring their own designs so that people will know their heritage or message.”* She emphasised, *“Indigo is our oldest dye and people still ask for it because of its meaning.”*

Although she agrees on its versatility and symbolism, she also points out that many modern users wear Adire only for fashion without understanding its deeper

message. This theme shows that Adire is both an everyday fabric and a deliberate vehicle for communal messaging and status signalling, whose meanings persist even as some knowledge fades.



4.2.1 Symbols and patterns of Adire fabric

Fig 15: A sample of Alaale Adire, Source: Twin Campala Apparel Store, 2025



Fig 16: A sample of Crack Adire, Source: Nairaland.com, 2023



Fig 17: Sample of Alahon Adire, Source: African Adire Textiles, 2022

The interview with Market Seller (Iya Shakirat) revealed that Adire cloth is distinguished by a rich repertoire of motifs created through resist-dyeing and named after visible, everyday forms rather than explicit mythic stories. She observed that “*many Adire designs were named after visible forms rather than explicit mythic stories.*”

She listed multiple Adire types and motifs: “*We do Alaale (broom), Alahon (tongue), Guinea fowl, Candle-wax batik and the ‘Crack’ marbling.*” These names reflect familiar objects and natural elements within Yoruba life. She further explained that the techniques also vary by motif: “*The broom and tongue motifs are tie-and-dye, but the crack is made by folding the cloth on the floor many times before dyeing.*”

These patterns are not merely decorative; they also carry cultural significance and act as a visual vocabulary of Yoruba aesthetics. For instance, “Alaale” (broom) signifies unity and cleansing, “Alahon” (tongue) can allude to communication and expression, while “Guinea fowl” evokes beauty and intricacy. The “Candle-wax batik” technique produces flowing, waxy streaks, while the “Crack” motif, produced by repeated folding, creates marbled streaks reminiscent of natural imperfections, symbolising endurance and creativity.

Importantly, Iya Shakirat also emphasised that, although some names and meanings of designs can be discussed, “*some steps cannot be fully explained without seeing them.*” This suggests that the symbolic language of Adire motifs is acquired through apprenticeship and practical immersion, rather than through written theory.

From her account, Adire's patterns are formed through specific manipulations of cloth that encode culturally resonant forms and values. The names anchor the motifs in visible, everyday objects, making them accessible and locally meaningful. The inability to explain some steps theoretically highlights the tacit, experiential knowledge embedded in Adire production, a living heritage passed down through observation, repetition, and practice.

4.2.2 Cultural Significance of Adire

Iya Shakirat presents Adire as simultaneously everyday clothing and a medium for communicating identity.

She said, *"We make Adire for weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies, even graduation. One cloth can serve all."*

These statements highlight Adire as a "social language": colours and motifs chosen for rituals and celebrations act as a code of belonging. Even when some motifs are now used for aesthetics, the practice of commissioning family designs shows that Adire remains a deliberate vehicle for identity and communal messaging. Also, the fact that clients can make any designs of their choice makes Adire production responsive to social needs and event logic. It also means the social meaning of a cloth can be established by a family's choice rather than by fixed community rules.



Fig 18: Photo of Adire Dyeing Workspace, Source: Researcher, 2025

4.2.3 Production Process of Adire Fabric

The interview with the market seller, Iya Shakirat, provided valuable insights into the production process of *Adire*. She explained that *Adire* making is deeply rooted in tradition, skill, and hands-on practice. According to her, traditional *Adire* production primarily involves the use of indigo dye and 100% cotton fabric, reflecting the continued reliance on natural materials as a key feature of the craft. Iya Shakirat described the sequence of steps typically followed by artisans, noting that they first prepare starch, then dampen the fabric, fold, tie, or stitch it, immerse it in dye, and finally wash it in hot water. She gave a specific example of the “crack” design, explaining that for this pattern, the

fabric is spread on the floor, folded multiple times, and then dyed. Her explanation highlighted the highly tactile and sequential nature of the *Adire* process, where each manipulation directly influences the resulting pattern.

However, she also cautioned that not all aspects of *Adire* making can be easily articulated. In her words, “Some steps cannot be fully explained without seeing them,” suggesting that the craft involves a form of embodied knowledge that can only be learned through observation and practice. This underscores the experiential and tacit nature of skill transmission in *Adire* production, where apprenticeship and hands-on learning remain central.

Her account revealed that the *Adire* production process embodies both cultural continuity and technical expertise. The ritualised steps, such as preparing starch, manipulating the cloth, and applying dye, connect contemporary practice to Yoruba textile heritage. The “crack” design, in particular, demonstrates how pattern formation arises from specific, intentional fabric manipulations. Overall, Iya Shakirat’s explanation illustrated that *Adire* making is not only about the physical act of dyeing cloth but also about preserving a living cultural tradition that depends on apprenticeship, observation, and generational transmission.

4.2.4 Challenges of Weaving Adire in Modern Times

Material Problems with Fabrics

Iya Shakirat pointed out that not all fabrics currently available in the market are made from genuine cotton, a situation that often results in significant losses for traditional *Adire* makers. She explained that “some cloths reject the dye. You will not know until you have done everything, and the colour will not stay. That is our loss.” Her statement revealed the challenges artisans face when working with modern, imported fabrics that contain synthetic blends incompatible with natural indigo dyes.

This observation highlights how the influx of global textile imports and the prevalence of blended materials have disrupted the authenticity of the *Adire* production process. Such fabrics not only fail to absorb dye properly but also lead to wasted labour, materials, and time, ultimately reducing the income and sustainability of local dyers who rely on traditional cotton and indigo.

Imitation and Fast-Fashion Copying

Iya Shakirat expressed concern about visitors who attend brief workshops or take photographs of her *Adire* designs only to reproduce them poorly on a large scale. She lamented that “they come, snap our work, go and do it anyhow. Their colour will wash off and people will say *Adire* is bad.” Her statement illustrated how untrained imitation and mass production not only damage the reputation of authentic *Adire* but also undermine the market for genuine, hand-dyed fabrics made by skilled artisans.

She further emphasized the limitations of superficial learning, stating that “there are some things you cannot explain without seeing them. You must watch and practise.” This highlighted the embodied nature of *Adire* knowledge, skills that cannot be replicated through short training sessions or online tutorials but must be absorbed through direct observation and long-term apprenticeship within family or community settings. The erosion of this form of learning threatens the survival of authentic craftsmanship.

Iya Shakirat also linked these present challenges to a longer history of imitation dating back to colonial times. According to her, “all these mass printings started from colonial times. Now they print *Adire* patterns and flood the market.” This observation connected the current struggles of Yoruba dyers to a colonial legacy of copying and industrial reproduction, which continues to devalue handmade textiles and reduce demand for authentic work.

Despite these difficulties, she acknowledged that global visibility has also brought pride and new customers to local producers. This theme therefore reflects the complex balance *Adire* artisans must navigate between preserving authenticity and adapting to the realities of a mass-market economy shaped by globalization and historical imitation.

Shift from Heritage to Pure Fashion

She noted that motifs and colours once held family or communal meanings but are now often selected for aesthetics alone: “*Before, colours and patterns were for family meaning. Now people just choose what they like for fashion.*” This reflects cultural

dilution, that is to say, symbolic codes that once marked lineage and events are giving way to purely decorative consumption.

4.3 Summary of Analysis

This chapter examined interviews with Aso-oke weavers and sellers from Iseyin and Abeokuta, and an Adire market woman from Abeokuta. The respondents regarded both textiles as living heritage that were significant and symbolic and taught skill. Aso-oke education as ceremonial fabric with colours and motifs capturing identity – Sanyan for elder dignity, Alaari for prosperity, and Etu deep blue stripes for masculinity and spirituality. Weaving is still a collaboration; purchasing and brainstorming yarns, measuring, starching, and finishing on locally built looms. Adire was described as household-based resist dyeing using cotton and indigo with motifs like Alaale (broom), Alahon (tongue) and "Crack" marbling as reflections of everyday forms. Both forms of craft passed knowledge through apprenticeship rather than training. Challenges were identified in synthetic fabrics, imitation, mass production, increased input costs and decline of interest from youth. This suggests surfacing traditions that are dynamic in structure but pressured to survive on access to materials, transmission of education, and finding a balance between authenticity and contemporary practices.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of the Study

This study explored the topic “Symbols and Meaning in Aso-Oke and Adire Designing Patterns” among the Yoruba people of Nigeria especially Abeokuta. It examined how these fabrics serve not only as clothing but as vital expressions of culture, belief, identity, and history. The work traced the traditional roots of these textiles, their creative processes, symbolic designs, and the contemporary challenges they face in a rapidly changing world.

Chapter One deals on the background to the study, showing that Aso-Oke and Adire fabrics go beyond aesthetics as they are carriers of cultural meaning, belief, and communication among the Yoruba and artifact of expressions. The chapter also identified the problem of loss of original meanings due to modernization and globalization. It outlined the aims and objectives which is mainly to explore and document the symbols and meanings in these fabrics and the research approach was described, the qualitative research methods involving interviews with weavers and market women. It also explained the scope, limitations, and significance of the study, emphasizing its importance in cultural preservation and academic contribution.

Chapter Two provided a detailed literature review on fabrics in Nigeria, focusing on their cultural, economic, and cultural roles. It started with the concept of fabric as a

vital human invention used for protection, communication, and identity. It also analyzed the significance of Nigerian fabrics, showing how they express hierarchy, empowerment, religion, and unity. The chapter then examined Yoruba fabrics and their types such as Aso-Oke, Adire, Ofi, and Kampala — highlighting how each holds distinct meanings and techniques. Finally, it elaborated on the major types of Aso-Oke (Sanyan, Alaari, Etu, etc.) and Adire (Oniko, Alabere, Eleko, Onibudo), explaining their cultural relevance, production methods, difference and importance in Yoruba society.

Chapter Three explored the historical origin of the Yoruba people and cultural context behind Yoruba textile practices. It examined their worldview, belief system, and political structure. The chapter explained that Yoruba fabrics reflect their spiritual beliefs showing how their Fabrics are deeply connected to social structures and ceremonies. It also described how Yoruba governance and social organization (with kings, chiefs, and family elders) create a setting where fabrics like Aso-Oke and Adire act as visual symbols of authority, gender, and status.

Chapter Four presented the findings from interviews with weavers and market women in Iseyin and Abeokuta, revealing how Aso-Oke and Adire remain central to Yoruba identity. The analysis showed that Aso-Oke represents dignity, honour, and celebration, with colours and motifs carrying specific meanings for example, Sanyan for elders, Alaari for joy and prosperity, and Etu for wisdom and masculinity. The chapter detailed the production process, from yarn preparation to weaving, and emphasized

patience, discipline, and apprenticeship as core values of the craft. Similarly, Adire was shown as a family-based practice involving generations of passing down. It also showed the challenge involved in the craft especially Adire. The research in all showing that indeed this fabrics still holding meaning and cultural appreciation even in todays society not withstanding the challenges.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the research done on this topic “Symbols and meaning in Aso-oke and Adire designing patterns”

- **Cultural Documentation:** Government agencies, museums, and academic institutions should record the symbols, meanings, and oral traditions behind Aso-Oke and Adire before they disappear. This can include visual documentation, interviews, and exhibitions as this will also attract people to the craft.
- **Inclusion in School Curriculum:** Textile arts, especially Yoruba fabric traditions, should be introduced in art and design or costume design at secondary and tertiary levels. This will encourage youth participation and ensure skill continuity starting from Secondary levels
- **Support for Local Artisans:** Policies and grants should be created to support weavers and dyers with raw materials, affordable cotton, and access to natural dyes. This will strengthen local production and discourage reliance on synthetic imports as this is truly a farm of creativity that is not fully taped in yet.

- **Modernization with Cultural Integrity:** Designers should integrate traditional motifs into modern fashion without losing symbolic meaning. This balance will attract new markets while preserving heritage.
- **Research Continuity:** Scholars should continue to study the evolving meanings and usage of these fabrics, comparing traditional and contemporary interpretations to understand how culture adapts over time from m different perspective as the topic is open for more explore.

5.3 Conclusion

This study has shown that Aso-Oke and Adire are not merely decorative fabrics, but living expressions of the Yoruba history, spirituality, and identity. Each motif, colour, and pattern carries layers of meaning from proverbs and values to social status and lineage. However, globalization, imitation, and loss of traditional education threaten their continuity.

The Preservation of these fabric tradition requires more than admiration; it demands intentional education, documentation, and innovation. By blending ancient wisdom and craft with modern creativity, Yoruba fabrics can continue to thrive as symbols of resilience, beauty, and cultural pride not just for Nigeria, but for the world at large.

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