

Beyond Gendered Art Practice: Ten Contemporary Women Cloth-Weavers in the Sustainability of Aso-Oke in Oke-Ogun, Nigeria

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Abstract

Several art and craft productions in Africa have been gendered culturally and vocationally. Woodcarving, Metal-Smithing, Bronze-Casting, Pottery, Stone-Carving and Cloth-Weaving are some examples where women are excluded, forbidden or restricted. Such gender roles in the production of arts and crafts have been distributed based on variables such as socio-cultural placement of the sexes, domestic roles, physical strength, industrial proximity, economic advantages and sacredness of the products. This paper focused on a popular cloth originating from the Yoruba ethnic group and presently used globally. Oke-Ogun in northern Yorubaland, in Oyo state, Nigeria, has been reputed as a major producer of woven cloth known as Òfì and also called Aso-Oke (meaning "cloth from Oke"). The importance and functions of the Aso-Oke to the Yoruba culture and as a utilitarian item has transcended centuries of developments, aesthetically, technologically and entrepreneurially; so also, the gendered roles in the production of the cloth. This paper investigated the ventures of contemporary women cloth weavers of Aso-Oke in Oke-Ogun and how their new roles have impacted and contributed to the sustenance and development of the art, restructuring of gender responsibilities, and women economic empowerment. The women were observed, interviewed, and documented across Oke-Ogun in Kisi, Eruwa, Saki, Iseyin, Igboho, Igbope, and Okeho. Ten of the outstanding women weavers purposively selected from Kisi and Igboho were featured with their various cloths visually examined and aesthetically analysed. Also, their enterprises were evaluated to assess the growth and development of

the cloth globally. Conclusively, the paper established that due to the courageous incursions of women weavers, Aso-Oke cloth-weaving has been sustained and expanded in Oke-Ogun, both in its art form and functions, as a dignified entrepreneurship and a base for a new cloth-weaving culture.

Keywords: *Aso-Oke, Contemporary cloth-weaving, Women weavers, Ofi, Oke-Ogun, Sustainability*

Introduction

Weaving is believed to have developed from as early as 6000 B.C., when the early Neolithic people began to settle in permanent dwellings, farming and domesticating animals. Weaving is usually performed on a loom, a device that holds a *warp* thread in place while a *weft* thread is woven through it. Warp is the lengthwise or longitudinal thread in a roll, while weft, sometimes called *woof*, is the term for the thread or yarn which is drawn through the warp yarns and pass over and under the warp on a loom. Ajayi (2009 p.144) stressed that the value attached to clothing made weaving one of the earliest basic arts of civilization among the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. According to Williams, 1998; Lamb and Lamb; 1976; Fádipè, 1970; and Òjó; 1966, four types of looms existed in Yorùbá traditional weaving scene before contact with the western world and colonisation. These were the bush loom, *òfi oko* and twilling loom, *òfi eléjò* for light weaving, the traditional strip loom and the vertical loom used to weave *Kìjípá* (an aged-long Yoruba traditional woven cloth for domestic, religious and funerary use), *Ìyègbé* (shawl, usually placed on the shoulder by the Ògbóni cult) and *Òjá* (narrowband cloth stripes used to tie baby to the mother's back), *Sanyan*, *Etu* and *Alaari*.

The role and function of cloth in any society are both generic and specific. The utility of cloth is relevant in the day-to-day needs of people and, may distinguish individuals and groups specifically in social class, gender, occupation and status within a particular cultural group and geographical area. Cloths are pliable and can be emblematic, which patterns may communicate information on identity, beliefs and values (Aronson, 2002). Cloth is synonymous with textiles in creative processes and functions. Traditional handcrafted textiles have a long-standing tradition and are deeply rooted in the African culture hence cloth is one of the components of its material culture. Among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria, textiles are produced from locally sourced materials like cotton,

silk, bark, goat wool and raffia; all these are commonly used in weaving (Renne, 1995 p.102). Ajayi (2009 p.144) stressed that the value attached to clothing made weaving one of the earliest basic arts of civilization among the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. This paper focuses on Aso-Oke cloth-weaving in Oke-Ogun, in northern Yoruba land. Oke-Ogun in Oyo state reputed as a major producer of Yoruba woven cloth known as *Ofi* or *Aso-Oke* (meaning “cloth from *Oke*”). The towns in this research are Kisi, Eruwa, Saki, Iseyin, Igboho, Igbope, Okeho with significant preference to Igboho and Kisi.



PLATE 1: Yoruba Aso Ofi (Aso Oke)
Photograph Source: Lamb and Holmes, 1980:194



PLATE 2: A Typical Traditional Yoruba Vertical Loom, Photograph Source: Lamb and Holmes, 1980:194

The Yorùbá are considered one of the largest single ethnic groups or nationality in sub-saharan Africa (Akíntoyè, 2010; Mullen, 2004 p.1). Akíntoyè saw them as the most urbanized people in the history of the tropical African forest land, who had largely lived in walled cities and towns since as early as the eleventh century A.D. Fátúnsì (1992 p.1) corroborated the numerical largeness of the Yorùbá people; they occupy most of Western Nigeria which is adjacent to Benin Republic. In Fatunsi’s description, he explains that the Yorùbá territory in Nigeria extends northward to Borgu, eastward to the ancient kingdom of Benin, westward to the Fon and southward to the coast at Whydah, Ajase and Allada (Benin Republic). The geographical position of Yorùbá land lies between the parallels 5.86 and 9.22 north and between 2.65 and 5.72 east (Fádípè, 1970 p.21). The Yorùbá people live on the west coast of Africa, in Nigeria, and they presently originate from the states of Òyó, Òşun, Oñdó, Èkìtì, Lagos, Kwara, Kogí, and Ògùn. They can also be found in western Benin and Togo republics. Yorùbá descendants can also be found in Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, the Caribbean, and the United State of America. Corroborating

this Adéjùmò (2002) posited that a large part of the Yorùbá population was relocated outside the African continent as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and this had led to several of their settlements in Europe, Asia, the Caribbean Islands and the Americas especially in Brazil where they have gained strong roots. The population of Yorùbá can be put at about 45 million worldwide; about 35 million of these in Nigeria constituting about 21% of Nigeria's population (Madu, 2013; Nigeria Demographics Profile, 2014; New World Encyclopedia, 2014; Nigeria Handbook: National Bureau of Statistics, 2014, Population Reference Bureau (Washington USA., 2014). There were about 20 Yorùbá kingdoms at one time with a different king ruling over each one, and Ile-Ife was the centre of cultural and religious life (Mullen, 2004; Oláníyan, 1985, p.371; Àiná , 2003 in Àkàndé , 2015, p.2) Buttressing this, Adéjùmò (2002) explained that these city-states had autonomous system of government collectively as a nation, and that the Yorùbá people remained unified through complex diplomatic ties and cultural affinity. Originally, they did not have any single all-embracing name but referred to themselves by names of their sub-groups (Bascom, 1969 p.5). Parrinder (1947 p.125) described the boundary of the Yorùbá as being spreading from Eeyo (Old Òyó) to as far west as Kétu, Ìdàssà, Shabẹ and Kìlibò and beyond into Dahomey and Togoland; to as far north as the banks of the Niger, and their influence reached as far as Benin. The territorial expansion of the Yorùbá kingdom became altered by the incessant warfare the kingdom experienced in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century when Old Òyó was sacked in 1837 (Ojó, 1966 p.18; Johnson 1921 p.13; Oyèlówò, 2015; Omójoà , 2012 p.2).

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The methodology employed for this research comprised of primary and secondary sources of data collection. The study design was qualitative, using an ethnographic approach. Purposive sampling was adopted to select the ten women cloth-weavers from several that were interviewed in Ìsẹ̀yìn, Oyo, Ògbómòşó, Èrúwà, Òkehò, Şakí, Ìgbòho and Kìşí, in Òyó State, Nigeria, where indigenous cloth-weaving has converged. Apart from the in-depth interviews that were conducted through oral structured interview, data was also collected through observation, audio, and photographic documentation. The data were subjected to content and aesthetic analyses. Literature review of vast publications such as books, journals, archival texts and internet sources provided secondary data. The theory of aesthetics was used to analyse the aesthetic variations that exist in the sample products of the woven cloth by the various women. Roger Scuton

(2014) defined aesthetics as the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in terms of which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated (<https://www.britannica.com>). The application of the theory of aesthetics afforded the researchers the opportunity to recognize differences and similarities in the motifs adopted in the cloth production. Also identified, were patterns and variations in the use of colours as well as the magnitude of changes and advancement in production that occur in terms of textural effect and quality that is achieved arising from different yarns or threads used to sustain the market demand and distribution of the Aso-Oke.

Discussion:

Gendered Aso-Oke (Ofi) Weaving Practice in Oke-Ogun

Gender is the identity of the sexes especially male and female. The characteristics, references, analyses, intersections, roles and impacts of the genders in society have been recognized and studied since the 1950s after it was initiated by John Money (1921-2006). The etymological historical meaning for gender differentiates between male and female entities without considering the biological or sociological traits (Mcgill, 2023). However, in recent times, there is a clear distinction between biological sex and gender as a role socially, or in cultural functions. Gender roles vary from identity to social constructions, whether real or perceived. These also include cultural expectations. Schultz and Lavenda (1998, p. 447), confirm that anthropologists have tried to distinguish gender from sex by referring to gender as the cultural construction of beliefs and behaviours considered appropriate for each sex. In line with this, Oladeji (2005, p. 126) explains that the gender pattern in Nigeria (pre-colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary), trains and views the male as the head and superior to the female. These cultural values have predisposed females to limited participation in labour, power-sharing, education, and skill-acquisition, economic and professional practices.

The origin of gendered cloth-weaving practice in Africa can be traceable to the types of looms used. Two types of distinguishable looms exist in West Africa for the sexes: a fixed-frame, treadle-less, heddle-stick (sword), wide vertical loom, used by women, and a double-heddle, narrow-band, horizontal treadle loom used by men (Sieber, 1972 p.155). Schneider and Weiner (1989 pp.23-24) pointed out south-east Asia as one of the societies where women are the main producers and controllers of distribution of textiles. In most parts of Africa, men are seen as the

predominant producers of textiles, woven and dyed textiles and embroidery. This research identified many outstanding women weavers in several towns in Oke-Ogun who practice within their lineages and individually. Ten prominent women weavers in this presentation are: Felicia Afolabi, Modinot Jamiu, Elizabeth Adegbenro, Charlotte Ogunbiyi, Latifat Ismail, Rebecca Adégbénró, Shadiat Yísá, Sarat Abeeb-Ibrahim, Şerifat Ōwóádé and Olúfúnkẹ Ayòdélé Dáda. They operate on both vertical and horizontal loom cloth-weaving industry at Oke-Ogun town of Ìgbòho and Kisi is dominated by women and no single male gender is found practicing the craft there.

1) **Felicia Kẹ̀hìndé Afólábí** hails from Àjíà compound, Ìsàlẹ̀ Ìgbàgbó, Igbópẹ̀. Her inspiration to acquire the necessary skills in narrowband loom cloth-weaving was engineered by Grace Adésopé Felicia was apprenticed to Rebecca Adégbénró at Ìgbòho, around the Temple area. Among the contemporaries of Felicia at the weaving shed of Rebecca Adégbénró were Bósẹ̀ Afolabi, and one Felicia who had relocated to Ìjẹ̀bú -Òde area. Also, were Lydia Oládojà , Alice (Egede), Bósèdé Taíwò and two other women whose names could not be ascertained by Felicia. Felicia was born on December 25, 1974 into the family of Pa Amos Bámidélé Adédòkun and Mary Adédòkun of Àjíà compound, Igbópẹ̀. She attended Baptist Primary School, Igbópẹ̀ in Ore-Lópé local government area of Òyó State between 1981 and 1988 for her primary school education and then Baptist High School, Ìgbòho. She studied up to senior secondary class one, dropped out of school and proceeded to learn a vocation, on her own volition. Initially, her intention was to learn the art of goldsmithing, but for the advice and intervention of Madam Grace Adésopé who persuaded Felicia to venture into learning how to weave on horizontal narrowband loom, she then had a change of thought from goldsmithing to cloth-weaving. She was then apprenticed to Rebecca Adé gbénró in her narrowband loom weaving shed at Temple area, Ìgbòho, for about five years, at the age of thirteen. Felicia reported that her master once told her that she acquired her own skill of weaving on horizontal narrowband loom from Ìlọ̀rin. Felicia's narrowband loom workshop, (Plate 3) is presently located directly opposite First Baptist Church, Igbópẹ̀, Ore-Lópé local government. The sleight hand of Felicia in cloth-weaving is so dexterous, and the craft with her could not be said to be lineage based in nature. She was inspired to learn the craft from Rebecca Adégbénró, and is training apprentices from different families within the town of Igbópẹ̀. Hers is a sole-business enterprise. From the few samples of the narrowband cloth-woven by

Beyond Gendered Art Practice: ...

Felicia shows the width of cloth-woven is not different from those woven on narrowband loom of many other weavers, except in the use and choice of colours of the threads. Felicia expressly stated that it is essential to state that in the recent time, the major differences that exist between the products of works produced during her apprenticeship era is in the width of the cloth-woven, because it is wider now than before. The variety that exists is in term of industrially produced threads that also cumulated into the lightness compared to its previous heaviness of the cloths in time past and more importantly the textural value of the recent products. Felicia Kéhìndé got married at the age of twenty-five (25) in 2002 to one Deacon Samuel Afòlábí , and the wedlock is blessed with children.



PLATE 3 Felicia Afolabi
Photograph: Kóláwọ̀lẹ̀, S. K., 2020



PLATE 4 Mòdinat Jámíù
Photograph: Kóláwọ̀lẹ̀, S. K., 2020



PLATE 5 Elizabeth Adégbénró
Photograph: Kóláwọ̀lẹ̀, S. K., 2020

2) **Mòdinat Jámíù** (Plate 4) was not initially inspired to learn cloth-weaving as a vocation. Her intention was to learn tailoring. It was her younger sister who was enrolled as an apprentice at the workshop of one Màriá Àbèwón, who eventually turned out to be Modinat's mistress. Before Modinat was enrolled at the workshop of her master-weaver, all arrangements were concluded for Silifat (Modinat's younger sister) to start apprenticeship skill acquisition in cloth-weaving at the workshop of Màriá Àbèwón, before Silifat's plan was altered and decided out of her own volition to join their father who was resident in Lagos as at that time. In order not to forfeit all the arrangements and initial deposit paid to Màriá Àbèwón on behalf of Silifat, Modinat was taken to Màriá Àbèwón narrowband loom workshop at Òkè-Àfin area, Ìgbòho. Màriá Àbèwón was trained by one Pa Ayégbajéjé Sàngó at Modékè Ìgbòho. Both Màriá and Ayégbajéjé her master, late Pa Ayégbajéjé hailed from Ìgbòho. However, it was gathered from Mòdinat Jámíù that the craft of horizontal narrowband cloth-weaving was not a lineage-based to the late Pa Ayégbajéjé, but was learnt through apprenticeship from Ìsèyìn. Though the name of the master-weaver of Ayégbajéjé could not be ascertained, but the late Pa Ayégbajéjé was one of the fore-most cloth-weavers who trained many recent weavers the rudiments of cloth-weaving at Ìgbòho. Among the contemporary apprentices of Mòdinat Jámíù were Màriá Àṣàbí, Fọlárin Raliat and one Mèdinat at Modékè area of Ìgbòho. On the other hand, a few of those who acquired their training from Mòdinat Jámíù are Alimat Ógúngbè, Rukiát Àjoké, an Ìbàribá woman, and Latifat at Modékè. Beside the cloth-woven on narrowband loom, Mòdinat Jámíù also weaves on vertical frame loom. She claimed to have acquired the knowledge of vertical loom cloth-weaving from Ilorin. The knowledge/skill of narrowband loom she had initially acquired assisted Mòdinat in the skill acquisition of the vertical loom. Mòdinat claimed she spent less than two months in the workshop of her mistress. Mòdinat Jámíù was born in April 1968. She obtained her primary school education from Òkè-Ìgbòho Baptist School, between 1976 and 1981, and her secondary education from Ìfẹ̀lódùn Grammar School, Ìgbòho between 1981/82 and 1983/84 academic session, and had the schooling terminated after her form three class. Thereafter, she went to enroll in the cloth-weaving workshop of Màriá Àbèwón at 'Dibú Òjèrindé house, Ìgbòho, between 1986 and 1988. Mòdinat got married to Malam Mohammed Jámíù in 1990. The marriage is blessed with children.

3) **Elizabeth Adegbenro** (Plate 5) hails from Aládé Compound, Ìgbòho. Elizabeth lived with her uncle during her childhood period till she finished her Primary Education when she decided to learn a vocation. Though, there were many vocations that opened up to her as options, she preferred to learn the craft of traditional cloth-weaving on horizontal narrowband loom. Elizabeth was apprenticed to one of her uncle's wives whose name was Abílagbó Abigail of Òkè-Lòkò, Ìgbòho. Elizabeth was about fifteen years old when she was apprenticed to madam Abílagbó Abigail. The later, Abigail also learnt the craft of cloth-weaving from one Madam Adébisí Elizabeth who also hailed from Ìgbòho. Among the contemporaries of Elizabeth Adégbénró who were apprenticed at the same period to Abílagbó were Aláwodé Tóóyìn, Abílagbó Mary, and one Risikat, all hailed from Ìgbòho, but had abandoned cloth-weaving at the time when many cloth-weavers took to other trades as the last resort, arising from a total decline in the patronage of horizontal narrowband cloth production. Aláwodé Tóóyìn, after her marriage moved to Ajégúnlẹ̀ area, around Gbáwójò market at Šakí where she was said to be practising the craft of traditional cloth-weaving.

Elizabeth opined that the type of threads used in weaving cloths in the recent time constitutes the major difference when comparing the finished products of the recent time with the type of cloth woven in the past. This is so because threads mostly used in the past especially during her apprenticeship days easily broke unlike Crantex, cone thread, cable or twine as the threads presently made available in the weaving industry. Besides, people in the past commissioned to produce for them complete sets of wears such as wrapper *ìró*; head tie *gèlè*; blouse *bùba* and *ìpèlẹ̀*, while nowadays people only request for a set of three of the aforementioned, wrapper *ìró*, *ìpèlẹ̀* and *gèlè*, and most times it is usually *ìpèlẹ̀* and *gèlè*. Also, the number of stripes used to make each differ, in the past, seven stripes of narrowband made-up the *gèlè*, as against only three stripes used nowadays, due to the increase in width of the stripe. *Ìborùn/ìpèlẹ̀* that used to be nine stripes, while in the present time women use only four stripes. A wrapper is now eight stripes as against fourteen stripes. Another major variation is noticed in one of the tools used, the beater, *asa*, the major component was made up of raffia palm, *pèpẹ̀*, while nowadays, and the component is made up of tiny iron rods set within the wooden rectangular frame. In terms of motifs or patterns made on the woven cloth, most times, weavers compose the motifs using their own initiatives; while on the other hand, weavers work to specifications from the customers who could bring a particular type of sample piece they collected elsewhere.

Elizabeth said weavers have ways of connecting with one another, especially when one needs a clarification over a specific type of cloth commission to him or her. The concerned may take the specification to the one she considers more experienced than her to guide on the mode or method of weaving to the new specification. Besides, monthly meetings are scheduled amongst the cloth-weavers on zonal basis. Representatives are also sent to general meetings from different zones on monthly basis too. On every seventeenth day, traditional cloth-weavers usually come to the *Aláṣọ-Òkè* international weavers' market at Ìsẹ̀yìn. Weavers interact and share views and ideas over the cloths they produce. These are contemporary innovations in improving the industry.

Elizabeth Olúwayémisi Adégbénró is of Aládé compound, Obaàgo, Ìgbòho. Her parents were Òkánlāwón Àkàndé and Madam Comfort Àkàndé. Elizabeth was born on March 10, 1973 at Abúlé Wásinmi Àlàáfíà in Ògùn State. She had her primary education from Òkè-Ìgbòho Baptist Primary School between 1978 and 1983. She was seconded to live with her uncle by the time the parents moved down to Ìgbòho from Abúlé Wásinmi Àlàáfíà in Ògùn State. Elizabeth got married to one Mr. Adégbénró Olúwaşégun in 1992.



PLATE 6 Elizabeth Adegbenro;s Cloth
Photograph Source: Kóláwólé, S. K., 2020



PLATE 7 Elizabeth Adegbenro;s Cloth
Photograph Source: Kóláwólé, S. K., 2020

Plate 6 is a sample product of cloth woven by Elizabeth Adegbenro of Òke-Lòkò, Ìgbòho. This purple-coloured cloth woven is made of silk yarn. The same purple silk yarn used to prepare the warp strips was also used as woof. This purple-coloured weave was produced inform of *eléya* holes at an interval of 3 inches. The holes created were made from a comb-like metal instrument of a row of ten bigger teeth forced into the handwoven cloth. The set of teeth of the metal instrument is bigger than the usual one used to produce normal *eléya* holes. The same silk purple

crantex thread is used to make hanging thread design running parallel with the warp that qualifies the cloth to be referred to as *ńjáwùú*. The crantex is a 3-ply thread twisted into one strip. Aside the *eléya* holes and the hanging thread used, there is no other motif created on the cloth. Plate 7 is another product of Elizabeth Adégbénró. The warp strips were made of beige colour with inset of two rows each of silver and gold shine-shine threads with about 15 strips of green warp thread in-between. The beige light brown thread that was used to prepare the warp strips was also used as woof. *Eléya* of small holes was created at 8-inch intervals, in-between of which there is a weft-floated diamond-like motif woven in 4-ply green colour thread.

4) **Charlotte Ògúnbíyí**'s father motivated her to venture into learning the craft of traditional cloth-weaving on horizontal narrowband loom. After some years of her abandonment of practicing the craft that she spent many years to learn arising from the negative reaction she put forth as a result of the discouragement she suffered from her parents to go to a formal school. Charlotte eventually returned to practicing cloth-weaving in 2014. Charlotte (Plate 14) hails from Ìgbòho, from the family of the late Mr. Micheal Ògúntádé and Mrs. Alice Ògúntádé of Bàtá's compound, Modékè, Ìgbòho. She was born a few decades ago, and she is in her early forties. Charlotte did not have an opportunity to attend a formal school (even though she was thirsty of it), but rather, apprenticed to one Mallam Azeez from who she acquired skills in the craft of traditional narrowband loom at age eleven, through a period of about five years. Charlotte's cloth-weaving shed is located at the verandah of her husband's house, Asípa compound around Sánígo, Ìgbòho. Her master, Mallam Azeez was a retired teacher and a veteran traditional cloth-weaver, who came from Òkehò and settled at Ìgbòho some years back possibly as a result of his being transferred in the teaching service. Mallam Azeez had also retired from weaving on narrowband loom too, as a result of old age. Fatimat Àánúire, Mòdinat Tijání and one Mujidat were her colleagues in the days of her apprenticeship training. The only one amongst the three still practicing the craft is Mòdinat Tijání who had relocated to Kádúná after her marriage, while the others had opted out for a better venture considered by them to be more lucrative. However, just as Felicia Kéhìndé from Gbópè posited, about the difference that exists in the mode of working in traditional cloth-weaving nowadays. Charlotte corroborated the assertion of Felicia that the major difference noticeable is in the use of industrially produced

threads which are sturdier than the others produced from local cotton through ginning and carding by women, which break so easily and often.

Charlotte produces traditional outfits of different types for men and women on horizontal narrowband loom. It is expedient to state that cloth-weaving on horizontal narrowband loom is gradually becoming a lineage-based craft with Charlotte Olúwafúnmiláyò Ògúnbíyí because more of her children are found around her learning the craft.



PLATE 8 Charlotte Ogunbiyi's Cloth



PLATE 9 Charlotte Ogunbiyi's Cloth



PLATE 10 Charlotte Ogunbiyi's Cloth
Photographs: Kóláwólé, S. K., 2018

Cone type of threads featured prominently in the products of Charlotte Ogunbiyi. The three sample cloths in Plates 8, 9 and 10 are quite similar in form and pattern of weaving. These three displayed are referred to as 'carpet'. Beige, *sanyan* and deep blue colour cone threads were used to prepare the warp strips of Plate 8. While the deep blue cone threads are at the two edges, beige colour was sandwiched at the centre. The same deep

blue and beige, *sanyan* threads were also used to weave the woof interchangeably after about forty-six (46) strokes of weaves. This forms regular square motifs of light brown *sanyan*, bluish brown, blue and navy blue colours. In the case of Plate 9, the main colour threads are sky blue and gold. Warp striped threads are divided into four broad portions, and the same sky-blue and gold-coloured threads are also used as woof interchangeably just as in Plate 8. The square motifs created in Plate 9 are a bit smaller than those in Plate 8. The dexterousness of Charlotte also manifests in Plate 10. Deep blue cone type of thread was used to prepare the warp strips and same used as woof. *Eléya* holes at 3-inch intervals were created using white cone thread with criss-cross hanging weft-floated design. At a spacing of about 6 inches were three arrow-like motifs in an alternate arrangement woven in white colour cone thread.



PLATE 11 Latifat Ismail



PLATE 12 Rebecca Adégbénro with Kóláwoḷé, S. K., 2018

5) **Latifat Ismail's** grandmother's dexterity in the art of traditional cloth-weaving on vertical loom was a source of inspiration for her in the weaving industry at her teen age. The inspiration gotten, led to her being apprenticed to another renowned traditional cloth-weaving on both vertical and horizontal loom. The name of her master weaver is Mòdinat Jámíù of Òkè-Ìgbòho. Latifat (Plate 11) affirmed that her master-weaver acquired her skill and training from Ilorin, even though could not ascertain the identity of the master's personality. In the enquiry into the mode of operation of Latifat in cloth-weaving, she opined that the most prevalent

style of traditional cloth-weaving years back was the horizontal loom which constituted two-third of the population of the cloth-weavers; majorly practised by the female gender. For some time before now, the art of traditional cloth-weaving had gone into oblivion at Ìgbòho, as many weavers had quitted weaving industry arising from very low patronage from the people as many had adopted the use of imported damask form of cloth for their outings. Latifat re-counted that about five of them were apprenticed to her master during her training period. Among them were Shakirat, and Męmunat. Besides, Latifat's biological children who had acquired the training in cloth-weaving, Rukayat, Àwáwù and Shakirat were among the apprentices who Latifat had imparted the skill of weaving into. Latifat practices weaving on vertical loom mainly and most times, according to her, designs made on the cloth woven were all her initiative, while few ones were coined out of the existing material design, which would be modified by her.

Latifat could not ascertain precisely when she was born, but she is in her late forties. Her parents were Mr and Mrs Abdul-Raheem and Amudalat Oládojà. However, Latifat could not stay with her parents when she was young, from about the age six, she was seconded to live with her grandmother who through her went to Ansar-Ur-Deen Primary School, Bónní, Ìgbòho between 1982 and 1986. But could not further beyond class four in her education, due to some health challenges. Latifat was apprenticed to Mọdinat Jámíù for a period of four years between 1989 and 1992, after which she set up her own vertical loom cloth-weaving business. She got married at the age of about 27 years in 2002. Cloth-weaving on vertical broadband loom is already becoming a lineage craft in the family of Latifat Ismail as she had introduced the knowledge of the craft to all her children and trained them all the rudiments of weaving on vertical broadband loom. Infact, there is no one among them, either male or female who could not weave at least on the said loom band. Among the three children the marriage was blessed with, Latifat has imparted the skill of cloth-weaving on vertical broadband loom to two children of her own that are a bit grown up.

6) **Rebecca Adęgbęnró** lives at Adęgbęnró's house, Sángo Owódę, Temple area, Ìgbòho, Ore-Lópę local government area of Ōyó State. Madam Rebecca said she had been in the industry of traditional cloth-weaving on the horizontal narrowband loom since 1967, about five decades ago. She submitted she stopped cloth-weaving activities in 2003 when there was a great decline in the patronage of traditional cloth-

weaving products. This was the period when people shifted their interest into the use of damask cloth material as an alternative to traditional narrowband cloth. Years later, she eventually came back to practice the craft when much improvement was notice in the patronage of traditional horizontal cloth-weaving products. At that time, there had been new innovations brought into the mode of producing cloth-weaving on horizontal narrowband loom in terms of the increase in the width of the cloth and the type of threads introduced into the cloth-weaving industry traditionally spun cotton threads gave way to factory produced and cone threads. These innovations however, prompted Rebecca to send two of her apprentices Ruth Adéwálé and Felicia Kéhindé Afolabi to Ilorin on a refresher course to acquire new skills of the modern-day mode of producing cloth-weaving on horizontal narrowband loom. Though this duo had graduated long ago, yet they still hold allegiance to their one-time master Rebecca Adégbénró.

Rebecca acquired her narrowband cloth-weaving skill from one late Asiru Adétòná, a native of Ìséyìn, who resided around Obaàgo, Ìgbòho in 1967. Rebecca was about nineteen years of age this time, when she was apprenticed to Asiru. After a while, Asiru Adétòná (Rebecca's master) returned to Ìséyìn. The departure of Asiru led Rebecca to another master weaver popularly called Bàbá Afusat, a native of Òtu in the present Ìtèsíwájú local government area of Òyó State. It was a health challenge that brought Bàbá Afusat to a religious leader at Temple area at Ìgbòho, Rebecca went further to report that when Bàbá Afusat eventually recuperated from his illness, he decided to finally settle down and started practising his traditional cloth-weaving vocation. Bàtùlì from Bónní area, Ìgbòho, Wosilat Àmòkè from Òkè-Ìgbòho and Felicia Akínyodé were the contemporaries of Rebecca in her master's weaving workshop at that time, in 1967 Rebecca Adégbénró was born circa 1948 at Ìgbòho, into the family of Nathaniel and Alice Ògúnrindé both of Erinjákùn lineage. She had her Primary Education at Òkè-Ìgbòho Baptist School, Ìgbòho. Although she could not complete this level of education, as she dropped out of school after her class five. Thereafter, she opted for traditional cloth-weaving as a vocation in 1967 at the age of nineteen. She spent three years with Asiru Adétòná to acquire necessary skills in cloth-weaving on horizontal narrowband loom, and another three years with Bàbá Afúsát (1970-1972) after her graduation in 1972; Rebecca got married to Joseph Adégbénró in 1974, who thereafter took her to Buake, in Ivory Coast in search of a greener pasture. While in Ivory Coast, Rebecca reported she never practiced her vocation but rather engaged in selling wares until they

both came back to Nigeria in 2004. On the arrival of the family to Nigeria, she went back to practising her traditional *Aṣọ-Òkè* cloth-weaving vocation. Rebecca reported that the only mode of connection with other cloth-weavers is the meeting of the cloth-weavers' Association of Ìgbòho and Igbópè that comes up every eight-day interval. She recounted that about seventeen independent traditional cloth-weavers now form the membership of the association in the region. The uniqueness of manual skilfulness of Rebecca Adégbénró is revealed in her *sányán* cloth woven in beige colour. This *sányán* had its warp strips prepared in beige colour yarn with white colour yarn broad strip band at the centre. The same beige colour yarn used to prepare the horizontal warp strips was also used to weave the weft. The white yarn strips appear as warp-floated, while a comb-like metal tool was forced into the hand-woven cloth to create *eléya* holes, and crocodile motifs were combined to make weft-floated design on the surface of the *sányán* cloth. Creamy lurex was used to weave the weft-floated comb-like and crocodile motifs. At a spacing of about 4 inches are *eléya* holes across the horizontal narrow band at 2-inch intervals with straight hanging threads from one hole to another along the warp strips. The very high level of proficiency at which Madam Rebecca Adégbénró produces her horizontal *aṣọ-òkè* cloth is made manifest in her enablement to weave to the dictates of her customers by way of customizing the cloth woven. In a particular cloth a name of a deceased person (Josefu Odékúnlé) for whose burial ceremony the *sanyan* cloth was produced as family costume, *aṣọ-ẹbí*, was boldly woven on the surface of the narrowband cloth in creamy lurex. The name inscription in weft-floated pattern woven with the aid of a supplementary heddle. The Yoruba traditional comb-like motif used on this narrowband cloth is called *Òdòyà* displayed in mirror pattern. In Yoruba context, the use of comb *Òdòyà*, symbolizes separation, hence the use of this motif *Òdòyà*, on the family costume, *aṣọ-ẹbí*, for the burial ceremony of Josefu Odékúnlé was possibly aimed at indicating a final separation between the living and the dead. Madam Adégbénró stated that such customized cloth could be commissioned for chieftaincy, wedding, burial or any important ceremony as the case may be, while the wool thread with which the weft-floated design was made was wool. The weft-floated design was woven in yellow yarn of about six-ply twisted together to make a pattern of warp and weft weaves in an alternate appearance within a rectangular shape of the yellow weft-floated yarn. In an alternate repeat pattern, the yellow wool thread was subdued by the green woollen yarn that made the warp strips and a supplementary heddle was used to create the weft-floated design.



PLATE 14 Charlotte Ogunbiyi



PLATE 15 Abdul-Rasheed Adijat



PLATE 19 Sarat Abeebe-Ibrahim
Photo Credit: Kóláwólé, S. K., 2018

7) **Shadiat Yísá-** The art of vertical loom cloth-weaving is an aged long tradition in the family of Shadiat Yísá (Plate 23) who claimed to have inherited the craft from her grand-mother named Aishat Òisa. Though her mother, Adijat Òsávisé also acquired appropriate skills in cloth-weaving on vertical broadband loom from the grand-mother Aishat Òisa, yet Shadiat Yísá learnt directly from her late grand-mother. Shadiat hails from Kúrokò in Adávi Local Government Area of Kogí State. She had been into the craft right from her tender age and grew up in it from age six when she started living with her late grandmother who passed in 1996 at the age 85. Shadiat Yísá, though highly prolific and versatile in vertical broadband loom cloth-weaving, moved to Kísí town in Ìrèpò Local

Government Area of Òyó State, alongside her husband in 1992. On their arrival at Kìsì, she set-up her cloth-weaving enterprise. According to her, it appeared there was no trace of vertical loom cloth-weaving practice at Kìsì or its production had drastically diminished and almost gone into oblivion, while the horizontal loom type was not even practiced by anyone at the time when she, an Ìbirà woman arrived at Kìsì in 1992. This is because very few other weavers practising the craft referred to Shadiat Yísá as their mistress and grand-mistress within the community of Kìsì. They include Sarat Ibrahim, Sukurat Tajudeen, Alirat Sulaiman and Serifat Òwóadé to mention just a few who directly or indirectly acquired their skills from Shadiat.

Shadiat Yísá was born at Kúrokò in Okene, Kogi State, Nigeria, to the family of Mr. and Mrs. Òsávisè, of Èbirà tribe. She was born on July 21, 1968. She was privileged to have her primary education at Kúrokò, Adávi Local Government Area of Kogí State between 1982 and 1986. Before her enrolment for primary education, Shadiat had been under the tutelage of her grandmother, Òisa, through who she acquired the skills of weaving on vertical broadband loom. At the age of about 18 years, she joined her biological mother at Ìbàdàn, and stayed with her till she got married to Mallam Àlù Yísá in 1992. It was shortly after the union they decided to move to Kìsì, where she eventually decided to display her dexterous skills in vertical loom cloth-weaving. As at the time of compiling this field investigation, eleven apprentices were under training in her workshop learning some basic skills on vertical broadband loom on full time basis.



Plate 16 Rebecca Adégbénró's Cloth



PLATE 17 Shadiat Yisa cloth



PLATE 18 Shadiat Yisa cloth



PLATE 19 Shadiat Yisa cloth

Shadiat Yisa cloth series of variations exist in the type of motifs or designs employed in her cloth sample products. This resulted into names being given to the cloth produced. Such names are *Olómolànpè*, we call on the child's mother; *Eléékún Aro*, Lame man's knee; and *Borogidi*, plain; among others. These names were given arising from the type of shed sticks used to pick the design woven on the cloth panel. The versatility of Madam Shadiat on the modern vertical weaving frame was made manifest in Plate 18. This broadband cloth panel was prepared in golden silk rayon thread. The yarn used to prepare the warp strips on the vertical loom was also adopted as the woof in weaving the cloth panel. *Eléya* holes were created on this panel of cloth at alternate spacing of 3-inch intervals. Through the *eléya* holes, hanging threads were carried in diagonal at an angle across the strips of warp to create zig-zag patterns on the cloth panel. This pattern was weft-floated on the panel of cloth. The 10 strips hanging threads were manually picked by hands and inserted into the warp strips before the sword stick was used as beater to pack the weft compactly. The zig-zag movement of the hanging adopted for the design suggested the name *Eléékún-Aro*, Lame man's knee given to it. In Plate 17 is a two broad bands of red (*àlààri*) and gold silk rayon threads in alternate arrangement. Small *eléya* holes at 2-inch intervals were introduced to create an impression of lace material of the cloth. The mode of weaving appears to be warp-floated as the gold band warp strips completely submerged the red *àlààri* used as weft yarn. There were hanging threads carried over the warp bands of *àlààri* and gold silk rayon threads along the gold silk rayon warp strips. While red *àlààri* thread hanged over the band of *àlààri*, so also gold thread was hanging over and through the *eléya* holes in gold band. The extraordinary creativeness of

Shadiat Yisa was manifested in the intricate design in Plate 19. This blue vertical broad band cloth has weft-floated all over repeat motif on it. The cloth was purposed to be used as woman wrapper, *iró*. The lower portion of the wrapper was heavily designed in form of checkered motif with alternate plain squared shapes in-between the weft-floated weaving, tapped with triangular shaped forms of white yarn that create an impression of a frontal elevation view of an architectural design of an 8-story complex. Also are full-drop alternate repeat pattern of square-shapes motif that balanced what could have been an empty blue background on the left-hand side. The intricacy of the design was so perfectly arranged. The shed sticks used to produce this type of design was called *Ọlómọlánípè* from which the cloth woven by the shed sticks derived the name given to it. In a situation where the cloth woven on the broadband loom does not carry any form of motif or pattern of design on it, and it appears completely plain, such cloth woven is usually being referred to a *Borogidi*.

8) **Sarat Abee-Ibrahim** was born in 1999 to the family of Imam Ibrahim Sólíù Dánbàbá of Ilé Nlá compound, Kìsì. She obtained her primary education from Ansaw-Ur-Deen Primary School, Kìsì. Sarat Ibrahim is an independent; non-lineage based broadband loom cloth-weaver who was apprenticed to her master shortly after her primary education at the age of fifteen years. She was apprenticed to Madam Shadiat Yísá, an Ébirà woman who hailed from Kúrokò, Okene, in Kogí State. Sarat trained for a period of four years, and she happened to be the first apprentice in Shadiat's workshop. Sarat affirmed that her master, Shadiat acquired her broadband loom cloth-weaving skills through her grandmother from Kúrokò, Okene in Kogí State. Her contemporaries in the workshop of Madam Sadiat Yísá were Alirat, Serifat and Zainab. Sarat posited that none of the mentioned personalities is still practicing cloth-weaving today. Sarat has also trained a number of other broadband loom cloth-weavers.



PLATE 20 Sarat Abeebe-Ibrahim's cloth



PLATE 21a, Şerifat Ōwóádé



21b Şerifat Ōwóádé

Photograph: Kóláwólé, S. K., 2018

Plate 20 is the sample cloth product of Sarat Abeebe-Ibrahim. The prowessness of Sarat was exhibited in the way and manner she wove the vertical broadband cloth under reference. This panel of cloth was produced to be used as a male flowing gown, *agbádá*. The highly intricately designed portion was aimed at forming the frontal part of the flowing gown. The weaving design constitutes all-over full-drop alternate repeat pattern of square motifs. This arrangement has formed somewhat like checkered pattern. The black and white cone thread used created a highly contrasting and distinct appearance. While the black square motif in the design was woven as warp-floated, the white yarn design appears as weft-floated having the warp strips yarn dividing it into series of dots. The black dominated portion that could have created an imbalance design on the left was covered with all-over repeat pattern of square motifs.

9) **Serifat Ọwọ́adé** was born in August 1991 at Alágbèdẹ compound, Kísí, Ọyó State. She attended Làlà Community Primary School, Kísí, between 1999 and 2005. She had her Junior Secondary Education between 2006 and 2008. After the completion of her Junior School Education, she was apprenticed to her master for a period of about two years in the workshop of Mrs. Alirat Sherif. Serifat decided to learn how to acquire appropriate skills of cloth-weaving on the vertical broadband loom out of her passion to preserve the cultural identity of the Yorùbá nation. She was aged seventeen when she decided to learn the art of cloth-weaving from Alirat Sherif. Serifat affirmed that her master Alirat trained in the workshop of the Ebirà-woman chief weaver, Shadiat Yísá. Serifat's contemporary in the workshop of Alirat was Àyòní, who she said had left for Ábíá State after her marriage. The weaving workshop of Serifat was erected in the frontage of a building with four female and a male apprentice that were acquiring the skills needed in weaving on vertical broadband loom. Serifat Ọwọ́adé was the weaver of the sample cloth products of the vertical broadband in Plates 21a and 21b. Crantex bluish green thread dominated the weave with white crantex yarn used to create spiral shape of a moving snake-like motif, six of which were arranged together to form triangular shape. The six spiral motifs appear weft-floated at the centre of the cloth band. At both edges of this cloth panel are attachments of white beads corresponding to the weft-floated design at the centre in terms of the choice of colour. The beads that were tacked together in twos and threes were used to occupy the empty spaces that could have created a kind of an imbalance as the major motifs of the design were centred at the middle of the cloth panel. The same set of white beads were tacked together in multiple of four on the cloth panel in Plate 21a. This cloth panel was woven in bright blue colour crantex thread. It was woven in plain, known as *Borogidi* in Yoruba, as there was no motif or design originally woven on it in the process of production. Two of this cloth panel could be sewn together to make a woman wrapper, *iró* or a man flowing gown *agbádá*.

10) **Olúfúnkẹ Ayòdélé Dàda** hails from Ìlọfà, Òkè Èrò Local Government Area, in Kwara State. She was the founder of Ayo-Olofi Cloth Weaving Centre. She was born on 12 May, 1975 to the family of Mr. Àjàyí and Mrs. Ìdòwú Dàda, both hailed from Ìlọfà, Kwara State, Nigeria. Olúfúnkẹ lost both of her parents in 1984 at the age of nine years. The death of her parents prompted her to move to stay with her grandmother who also gave up the ghost just two years after in 1986 shortly after the demise of her parents. She later moved to live with her eldest brother Fólórúnṣó who

was already staying at Òmù-Àrán in Kwara State. In 1992, the family moved to Lagos in search of a greener pasture.

She started her elementary education at St. John C.A.C. School, Ìlofà, Kwara State in 1980 and left after class four to complete the education at Òmù-Àrán between 1988 and 1991 at Seventh day Adventist Primary School. She proceeded to Òmù-Àrán High School, Òmù-Àrán but dropped out of school at the completion of Senior Secondary One, in 1996. Olúfúnkẹ́ was inspired into the craft of traditional cloth-weaving on horizontal narrow band loom by her elder sister Títílayọ̀, who was already in the weaving industry at Òmù-Àrán. Each time she was asked to hawk-about groundnut, she would have some time to imitate her sister in practising cloth-weaving in her sister's weaving shed. Olúfúnkẹ́, out of the passion she had for weaving eventually ended up learning the skill from her brother's wife. Both Títílayọ̀ (her elder sister) and her brother's wife were at one time or the other apprenticed to one Felicia, an indigene of Òtun-Èkìtì; she practiced the craft for about seven years after which she got married to one Pastor Wàsù Gbádébọ̀ in 2001. It was after this union of theirs she sat for external General Certificate of Examination (SSCE) and gained admission to the then Òyọ̀ state College of Education, Òyọ̀ in 2004 and completed the course of study in Hausá/Yorùbá in 2007. Olúfúnkẹ́ was inspired back into the craft of hand-woven textiles business by her Pastor, Bishop Rótímí Adétúnjí of Chapel of Solution, Adéwálé Street, Ajégúnlẹ̀ in Òyọ̀ town who provided all materials needed to start the business of horizontal narrowband cloth-weaving in 2010; and she has been in the business since then up till today. Ayọ̀-Olólúfi Weaving Centre is a sole-business enterprise that is not really lineage based. The Weaving centre is located at Ajégúnlẹ̀ market area along Bọ̀rọ̀bọ̀rọ̀ - Agúnpopo road, Qfà-méta in Atiba Local Government Area.



PLATE 22 Olúfúnkẹ́ Ayòdélé Dàda



PLATE 23 Shadiat Yísá



PLATE 24 Female Apprentices undergoing training in Igboho

Conclusion

The enterprise and efforts of the spotlighted women weavers have impacted the cloth-weaving practice in Oke-Ogun in Oyo state, Nigeria, and beyond. They have followed in the models of predecessor women such as Azume Azume (d. 1950), Felicia Adepelu (b. 1932), and Ladi Kwali (d. 1984) who were highly talented and accomplished potters that achieved exceptional success in form, style and function of pottery. Also in textiles, hand-woven cloths and pattern-dyed indigo cloth (Adire) are areas where many undocumented women excelled in skills, particularly in their various communities. For example, Madam Samuroh (d. 1970) was a well-known Adire textile designer whose cloth can be found in museums in England and America.

The strives of these women cloth weavers in Oke-Ogun have resulted in the following observable conclusions:

- (i) Cloth-weaving as a skill, practice, enterprise and fashion is sustainable in Oke-Ogun. Large quantities of Oke-Ogun woven Aso-Oke are recognized as part of Nigeria's export market.
- (ii) Loom stereotypes have now been broken in the traditional cloth-weaving industry in Oke-Ogun. Women can now weave on any type of loom.
- (iii) Apprenticeship as a form of training has become acceptable as important and necessary. This has opened several opportunities to young people especially females to acquire skills for entrepreneurship and continuity of the industry.

- (iv) The weavers have shown that minimal formal education is required to learn cloth-weaving which has enabled inclusiveness from all social levels of their society.
- (v) Cloth-weaving can be a full-time vocation as seen from the magnitude of works done. These women weavers have up-scaled the vocation to a full-time business from it being practiced as a mere pastime hobby for housewives or a part-time work for unemployed people.
- (vi) Marital status of a woman is not a barrier to the practice of cloth-weaving
- (vii) From the innovative additions in motifs, colours and style, and high quality of yarns used, the cloths have been made trendy to sustain patronage. Aso-Oke has transcended beyond its traditional uses as mere cloth and has found a respectable place in the manufacturing industry where it is used for various items such as fashion accessories and furniture (Plate 25).
- (viii) The weavers have shown that all religions permit the practice of cloth-weaving. Many of the women are committed to their various religions such as Islam, Christianity, and traditional religion

The persistence of the women weavers venturing to sustain the cloth-weaving practice can be supported by funding from government and other organizations for expansion.



PLATE 25 Aso-Oke used for contemporary household and fashion accessories such as furniture, foot wears, and handbags

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