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Textiles, Political Propaganda, and the Economic Implications in Southwestern Nigeria

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The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria are renowned for their vibrant cultural environment. Textile usage in its multifarious forms takes a significant aspect in the people's culture; to protect from the elements, to cloth the dead before burial, to honour ancestors in *Egungun* masquerade manifestations of the world of the dead as well as status symbol for the living¹, to dress a house of funeral as done by the Bunni, a Yoruba tribe near Rivers Niger and Benue confluence,² to record history when used in specially designed commemorative cloth for an occasion, as a leveler of status and to express allegiance when used as "*aso ebi*", and in recent times as a propaganda cloth by political parties. The Yoruba are a properly clothed people. Nudity is an abomination and is synonymous with insanity, hence the saying, "*aso o ba omoye, omoye ti rin ihoho wo oja*", meaning, "it is too late to clad *omoye*, as she has entered the market in the nude. Venturing into the market, which usually has the highest population at any given time of the day in many Yoruba towns, is considered the height of madness.

The Yoruba, not only lay emphasis on dressing, but also on appropriateness of the dress for the occasion for which it is worn. Their aesthetic appreciation is related to the physical appearance, character and clothing of the individual.

Textile and politics have almost become Siamese twins of political propaganda in Nigeria and particularly in Southwestern Nigeria. Though, the use of textiles as propaganda in the politics of Southwestern Nigeria spans over five decades, scholastic work on this genre of textiles have been limited to comments on their use by Post and Jenkins³, and Sklar⁴. Also, work by Akinwumi⁵ investigates the history, provenance and artistic components of the fabric with a view to improving their propaganda effectiveness.

This paper traces the origin of textile as political propaganda and finds its root and antecedent in the indigenous political values and philosophy of the Yoruba. The iconography and the iconology of some of the artistic elements of these textiles are analyzed in the context of the people's worldview. Finally, the economic impact of such textiles on the immediate and remote environment of its usage is evaluated.

¹ Drewal, Henry John: "The Arts of Egungun among Yoruba People." *African Arts* 11(3): 18-19, 97 (April, 1978).

² John Picton, J. Mac: *African Textiles*. London. British Museum Publications. 1979, p. 10.

³ Post, K.W.J, and G.D. Jenkins: *The Price of Liberty: Personality and Politics in Colonial Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press. 1973, pp. 428-30.

⁴ Sklar, R.L.: *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation*. Princeton University press. 1963. Pp 303-34.

⁵ Akinwumi, T.M. *Art and Political Leadership: The Alake Example*. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4.1 (2002).

Textiles and Traditional Politics: The Antecedent in Yoruba Culture

The political system among the Yoruba is mostly monarchical and hereditary in some recognized families among the people with a few exceptions among the Ijebu, Egba and Ibadan sub-ethnic groups where other forms of governance are adopted.

‘Oba’ is the generic title of the king who is considered the divine and paramount ruler with absolute power on issues of governance. He is regarded as next to the gods in power and authority, “*Alase ekeji orisa;*” meaning he has an unquestionable authority, hence, the name “*kabiyesi.*”

The king is also understandably the wealthiest is expected to appear in his best at all functions. The elitist symbol of the Oba’s status is therefore expressed in his regalia.. “Few subjects are as fascinating and as complex as kingship in dressing. In art and ceremony, kings and queens are clearly different from the rest of us. Because these differences are not manifested in physical features, the unique status of these rulers is defined through other external visible means⁶.” At the height of many kings of Old Oyo exhibited their wealth and political power. For instance Alaafin Agboluaje, the paramount ruler of Old Oyo kingdom, celebrated *Odun bebe*, a festival that lasted for three years in 1760s by hosting 1,000 vassal kings and chiefs of Yoruba community and made a lavish daily display of his wealth, which included unique expensive textiles while the festival lasted. Alaafin Atiba,⁷ Alaafin Abiodun,⁸ and Ajiboyede Sunlara⁹ also exhibited their political strength with textile in different forms. Recent usage of textiles in monarchical politics featured in the 1930 Coronation Commemoration of Oba Oladapo Ademola, the Alake of Egba land, and the centenary celebration of the settlement of Egba people in Abeokuta.¹⁰ While the Alake commissioned a very large gown made of velvet, the expensive highly favoured textile material of Yoruba royalty¹¹ for his use, a mass produced printed version of the cloth was made and distributed to some of his subjects, at little or no cost.¹²

Among the Yoruba, the success or otherwise of an Oba’s (king) reign is measured by the peace and material acquisition of his subjects. A popular traditional song captures this,

<i>“Laye Olugbon mo da’borun meta</i>	<i>During the reign of Olugbon, I made three shawls</i>
<i>E o ma ko yi lorin</i>	<i>Join me in this chorus</i>
<i>Laye Aresa, mo da’borun mefa</i>	<i>In the time of Aresa, I made six shawls</i>
<i>E o ma ko yi lorin.</i>	<i>Join me in this chorus</i>
<i>Laye Areo, mo ra’ aran mo ra</i>	<i>In the reign of Areo, I bought velvet and</i>
<i>Sanyan baba aso,</i>	<i>Sanyan the king of all clothes</i>
<i>Af’ole lo le pe’le yi o’dun</i>	<i>Only a lazy man would say this kingdom is not pleasant</i>
<i>E je ko ni toun gb’oko lo.”</i>	<i>Such a man had better return to the farm.</i>

⁶ Blier, Suzanne Preston: The Royal Arts of Africa. The Majesty of Form. New York. Harry M. Abrams. 1998, p. 61.

⁷ Johnson Samuel: The History of the Yoruba. Lagos: CMS Bookshop. 1921, 179

⁸ Babalola. Awon Oriki Orile. Glasgow. Collins. 1967P. 44

⁹ Johnson, S. The History of the Yoruba: Lagos. CMS Bookshop 1921:163.

¹⁰ Akinwumi, T.M. Art and Political Leadership: The Alake Example. Journal of Cultural Studies, 4.1 2002. P. 198.

¹¹ Barbot J. Description of the Coast of North and South Guinea. 1932.

¹² Ajisafe, A.K.. Abeokuta Centenary and its Celebration. Lagos. Ife-Olu Printing Works. 1931.

The saying; “*Oba to je ti’lu toro, oruko re ko ni parun,*” meaning a king whose reign was peaceful and pleasant, his name will forever live on, further buttresses this belief.

Also, textiles were used as items for payment of tributes, by weaker communities to their stronger overlords. Textile was thus, a means of maintaining political hierarchy.

There are textile materials such as the *Are* in Ile Ife and *segede* robe in Ila-Orangun, which can only be worn by the Oba and which are passed down from the first obas through generations of Obas in these towns. For any person aside the Obas to wear these textiles implies instant death.

Textiles in Military Politics

In a bid to transform himself to a civilian President, the then military Head of State General Sanni Abacha, awarded a contract to a Chinese company for the supply of propaganda event fabric. Abacha however died before the date of celebration. The company could neither redesign the textile for alternative consumption nor recoup the balance from the succeeding leadership. Many advertising companies had produced promotional textile items for the Nigerian hosting of the 1995 FIFA Under-20 Football Tournament, but recorded massive loss when the hosting was withdrawn due to political reason of human rights abuses levied against Nigeria.

Textiles in Democratic Politics

Electoral principle was introduced into Nigeria’s political landscape in 1923 with representatives chosen by residents in Lagos and Calabar. It was not until 1957 that other parts of Nigeria experienced electoral principle with representatives into different legislative bodies chosen constitutionally by adopted political parties. The earliest record of textile usage as electioneering campaign tool in Nigeria is traceable to an Ibadan politician—*Adegoke Adelabu* of National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroun, who in order to win votes in 1954 and 1956 commissioned propaganda cloths which he sold to his supporters, thereby winning the election convincingly. The success recorded by *Adelabu* has over the years resulted in the usage of textile as an indispensable instrument in Nigeria's electioneering campaign particularly in Southwestern Nigeria.

Forms of Propaganda Textiles

Propaganda textiles come in different forms. Factory printed yardages of textile materials known as *ankara*, which is sold in six yards, T-shirts, Fez caps, hand bags, purse, banners, umbrella, flags, school bags and mufflers, and canvas back packs etc.

In the 2011 electioneering campaign, an aircraft was flown over Kwara State in Nigeria with large textile banner bearing the portrait of a governorship candidate attached to its tail. The strategic aerial view of the plane made this medium very visible to more potential electorate.

Design and Colour Symbolism of Propaganda Textiles

The design features of propaganda textiles can be grouped into Party logo, colours, candidates portrait, affiliation to a tribal group, that is, textile worn to reflect party's and allegiance to ethnic group being visited by the campaign train (Figures 1, 2 & 4.)



Figure 1. Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) party faithfuls with the party logo embroidered on their robes. Culled from The Punch. Wednesday, February 23, 2011.



Figure 2. Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) stalwarts in party colours printed on fabrics and hand-woven into Aso-Oke for caps and headgear. Culled from The Nigerian Punch Newspapers. Wednesday, February 16, 2011

Also the age and dress culture of the electorate is also taken into account. For instance youths are known to prefer T-Shirts, fez caps and round neck polo shirts.



*Figure 3. Printed textiles with portrait of party candidates.
Photographs by AREO, M.O. (2011)*

The various forms of campaign textiles serve as a bearer of manifesto of the party and a constant reminder of why the party or candidate should be voted for.

Propaganda textile commissioned by party candidates usually comes in form of medallion bearing the candidates portrait printed on different forms of textile (Figure 3.)

Symbols are not used without due consideration for their meaning in the people's culture. In terms of designs, the cock used on the prototype cloth commissioned by Adelabu in 1954, represents the cock's supremacy among other domestic birds, because of its size and ability to crow and give accurate time. The key symbol used in 1956 by the NCNC symbolized the party's access to the Western Nigeria House of Assembly. Another party, Action Group (AG) used the palm tree as their party symbol with the caption "Igi Owo" meaning "money tree" a pointer to the economic viability of the palm tree among the cash crops in the Southwestern Nigeria.



Figure 4. Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) faithfuls in Benin traditional wear while on campaign to Benin City. Culled: The Nation, Wednesday, March, 9, 2011

The 1979 political dispensation featured five political parties namely: the Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP)'s whose symbol was a key, implying access to prosperity, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN)'s symbol was a house hedged on both sides by a plant each, symbolizing shelter, and abundant food for the electorate, the Nigerian Peoples' Party (NPP) on its part had two adults, male and female, a girl and a boy, portraying the welfarism stance of the party to each family unit, the Unity Party of Nigerian (UPN) focused on education, and its choice of the flame in the middle of a map of Nigeria indicates the ability of education as the light that can eradicate poverty, lack and want, finally the Great Nigerian Peoples' Party (GNPP), a break-away faction of NPP had as its symbol a cock and the palm tree, representing timely prosperity for its voters.



Figure 5. Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) party faithfuls in Ibo attire and holding brooms, the symbol of the party, while on visit to Eastern Nigeria. Culled from The Punch. Tuesday, March 15, 2011.

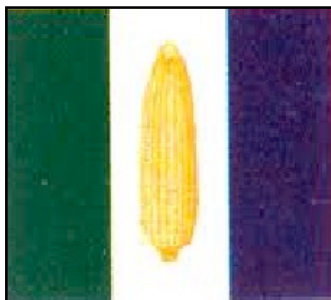
The 2011 General election featured 65 political parties. The six (6) notable parties were; Peoples Democratic Party (PDP with the umbrella as its symbol signifying shelter and care for the electorate, Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN)'s symbol of broom represents Unity of the nation, All Nigerian People Party (ANPP)'symbol of corn, signifies provision of food in abundance for all, Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) has the pen as its symbol, which represents education, Labour Party (LP) had wheel and family, which means technological advancement and welfare of the people, and the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) chose a cock on pedestal. (Figures 4 & 5). Often, the textile carries the colours of the party that are chosen for what they represent in the mind of party stalwarts. More emphasis is placed today on the picture of the candidate than colours employed by the parties.

Economic Implication of Campaign Textiles

Political textiles have had socio-economic impact on the culture of the South-western Nigeria. It has developed in the culture a genre of textile that has now become ubiquitous and inseparable from democratic electioneering campaign of the region and party functions, which traditionally was not part of the indigenous culture.



(6a) Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN)



(6b) All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP)



(6c) All Progressive Grand Alliance



(6d) Congress For Progressive Change (CPC)



(6e) Labour Party (LP)



(6f) Peoples Democratic Party(PDP)

Figures 6a – 6f. Some Party Symbols

This form of textile has become a viable job provider for graphic artists and youths who produce the design many who through apprenticeship have become trained and are now small scale entrepreneurs. These sets of people are kept busy in the electioneering years.

Textile mills also swing to active business in order to produce large quantities of printed materials that have to be given to the electorate at short notice. (Figures 6a - 6f.)

Tailors also experience high patronage during this period and huge revenues in form of Value Added Tax (VAT), Sales and Import Tax, are realized by all tiers of government.

Negative Implications

Though the production of propaganda textiles in Southwestern Nigeria have had documented economic gains, there are also records of economic losses due to over rating of candidates, miscalculations and over-ambition.

Some were unaware of risks associated with ordering propaganda fabrics, while poor quality of propaganda fabrics and high cost of production with the resultant high selling price, sometimes culminated in the loss recorded due to outright rejection by sponsors.

Olubadan's (King of Ibadan) attempt to copy the success story of *Egba* centenary anniversary propaganda fabrics led to a colossal loss. Also *Adelabu Adegoke's* effort to replicate his 1954 propaganda cloth success story failed dismally and the loss probably led to his death. History is replete with similar losses in the region.

Conclusion

Political legitimacy and succession find ready expression in textile among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria both at monarchical, military and democratic levels. Political hierarchy depends largely on use of textiles. In Nigeria, the contemporary use of textiles as political electioneering tool originated from Southwestern Nigeria. This is traceable to the belief that the ruler should be capable and wealthy enough to take care of the ruled. This finds ready expression in the giving of gifts to subjects by the rulers, and also in the saying, “*eniti yoo fun ni l’aso, t’orun re la koko wo.*” This means that he who promises you a garment should be assessed by his raiment. Therefore, in order to assert their capability, prospective political leaders have resorted to giving propaganda cloth to electorates. Also, the collective usage of these cloths engendered connectedness, unity, group affiliation, belief in common ideological values and claims. The visual impact of the textiles when worn collectively, ingrains in the memory of the observer, and thus serves as a reminder of who to vote for. Through propaganda textile, a genre of textiles has therefore come to stay in the people’s culture.

Economically, this type of textiles has lent significant impact to the economic life of those involved in different stages of its production and usage. Factors observed to be responsible for the success of this genre of textile includes; low level of literacy, which necessitates the need for visual imagery, and poverty among the electorate which has aided the cloth’s acceptance. The symbols used on these textiles and their meanings are also rooted in the people’s culture. Not much emphasis has been placed on colour symbolism in the design of the textiles. The use of textiles is likely to continue with increased vigour since the culture encourages it and the politicians who adopt its usage have most times recorded success in the past.

However, due to the utilitarian nature of this genre of textile, they are made with low quality materials. Each political party will do well to produce a good quality, and durable propaganda cloth to serve as the party uniform in order to reduce the monetary wastage



Figure 7. A full page newspaper advert assuring delivery of commissioned textile within 24 hours and at campaign venues. Culled: *The Punch*, Thursday, March 17, 2011.

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