

THE YORUBA CULTURE OF *ASO EBI* (GROUP UNIFORM) IN SOCIO-ETHICAL CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

A distinguished feature of Africaness is the spirit of oneness manifesting in “we feeling”, live and let live, serious concern for others and fraternity.¹ This is born out unavoidable interaction with other members of the society. In other words, no man is an island. As opined by Mbiti “I am because we are and since we are I am.”² It follows that individualism of the Western world is alien to Africa. Among the Yoruba, one of the ways of expressing unity is the practice of *Aso ebi*- group uniform, which has from time immemorial been institutionalised.

This issue has been reacted to by scholars mainly from sociological point of view. In this piece, apart from contributing to the sociological explanation of the concept, we shall equally discuss its moral implications. The ethical becomes imperative given the dimension the practice has taken in the contemporary time. Our main source of information is the empirical knowledge of what have been incorporated into the practice as against what obtained in the past, when *Aso ebi* was exclusively social phenomenon. For the purpose of emphasis the Yoruba people are found in the South-Western part of Nigeria, and in some parts of Republic of Benin and Togo. Predominantly, they belong to the Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti and Lagos States.³ They equally form parts of Edo Kwara and Kogi states. The question of their origin is debatable and in the present state of knowledge, not much is categorically known about it. However, two different answers are found in oral traditions. The first holds that their founding fathers were immigrants from a northern source variously identified as Egypt, Meroe, Yemen or Arabia while it is claimed in the second body of traditions that Ile-Ife was the the first habitable place created on earth, from which all earthly creation began.⁴ For this reason, Ile-Ife is referred to as the cradle of the Yoruba race.⁵ The validity of these claims is not our concern in this work.

ASO EBI IN YORUBA SOCIETY

The Yoruba society has always emphasised the imperativeness morality. Thus, immoral practices are frowned at and treated with disdain. Though *Aso ebi* is cultural, it should be noted that morality is an integral aspect of culture. Therefore this paper shall discuss the phenomenon and its interplay with morality.

Aso ebi literally means the cloth of family or kin. However, it is further extended in a free translation to mean cloth worn by members of any group or by people collectively rather than the one that is chosen by an individual for aesthetic and protective reasons. As earlier noted, this practice is

not a new trend among the Yoruba. Anybody who wants others to celebrate an important event with him or her often chooses a cloth for the ceremony. These people would undertake the expenses of buying the dress. Today, ceremonies such as naming, house warming, burial and festivals of various forms will be adjudged not to have been properly celebrated without *Aso ebi* of different kinds worn by different people. It is simply a means of demonstrating people's *esprit de corps* and harmonious rapport.⁶ According to Moloye:

Members of an *egbe- association* come together during celebrations, be it a funeral, a naming, a chieftaincy or a house warming. It is a common feature for members of an 'egbe' to dress uniformly on such occasions. Wearing of similar clothing or dresses [i.e. *aso ebi*] serves to heighten the positive good-feeling of individual association.⁷

The phenomenon is not alien to any part of Yoruba society. Even many non-Yoruba who are resident there have imbibed the culture. Buying group uniform is not essentially gender determined as no sex is left out. However, it has been observed that the inclination on the part of women is on the high side. While some men may not be moved if they appear odd, not many women will feel comfortable to experience this. Therefore, it is not an impossibility that several men who could have been indifferent may be persuaded or diplomatically coerced by their wives. This is why some women can go to any length when the issue arises. We shall shed more light on this later. However, this practice must not be seen as a worthless endeavour because anything that is cultural is not without its attendant significance. This is why it has dawned on us to examine its sociological significance and more importantly its ethical implications, which have not been sufficiently paid attention to by scholars.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ASO EBI

Aso ebi is obviously a means of identification as all wearers are implicitly demonstrating that they are proud to be identified with the celebrant. Where there are many celebrants and each of them chooses a fabric of his or her choice, it will not be difficult to identify the friends, colleagues or well-wishers of a particular celebrant. This further explains the fact that such an individual matters in the society to the extent that others are concerned about him or her⁸. Conversely, it will be a sheer embarrassment if an individual on account of his or her attitude is not identified with on such occasion. This could be shocking as the personality he or she is made of will be revealed. A Yoruba saying goes thus: *Bo lomo ogun boo lomo ogun wehin re wo* - if a leader looks back, he will know whether or not he has followers. In this context, the celebrant who may not be a leader of any kind but is understood to be leader of the moment by virtue of being the one celebrating an event and who has requested people to buy the fabric that is meant for the occasion. In fact, when it is time to dance, he or she leads while well wishers follow. This implies that any celebrant who despite the fact that he has chosen a group uniform and yet people refuse to buy and identify with him or her, could be a social misfit. Therefore there is a sense of esteem on the part of celebrants who are so honoured. Such people, no doubt are thought to be men and women of integrity or who are loved in their communities, and as they bask in the euphoria of their being honoured by other members of the society, celebrants on the other side of the divide i.e. those not identified with will bury their heads in shame. This point is buttressed in another saying "*Eniyan laso mi, bi mo ba boju wehin timo reni mi, inu mi adun ara mi a ya gaga*- my people are clothes. Of course, people can not be worn, however their presence or willingness to identify with a celebrant by virtue of wearing *Aso*

ebi is a cover for him or her. This suggests that not being identified with is synonymous with nakedness. Also it is usually said, “*karin kapo lo yeni*” meaning moving in group is befitting or the more the merrier. Moloye affirms that, *Aso ebi* serves to distinguish not individuals from one another, but one group from another. *Aso ebi* symbolises togetherness and the sense of solidarity⁹. It is alluded to by the Ifa corpus in *Olodu Ogunda Meji* that the excellence of unity of purpose and of solidarity with people lies in the functional strength conferred on people who observe them.

This is discussed in *Ifa* corpus -the unwritten scripture of Yoruba traditional religion¹⁰ in the story of three friendly hunters on hunting expedition. Each of the three, Akoko, Amere, and Fowomokuu equipped himself with different hunting gadgets, Akoko with an arrow, Amere with a bow-string and Fowomokuu with arrow-head poison; on getting to the forest, they found an elephant to kill, but each of them thought of being able to kill the elephant alone, this however was impossible. They were beset by the anxiety of losing the booty accruing from the big game, then they realised that it was necessary to combine all the three gadgets to attack the elephant. This they did and it was killed¹¹. The lesson that can be learnt from this story is the imperativeness of unity and solidarity; that is why the issue of *Aso ebi* is treated with seriousness. This is buttressed by Dopamu and Alana that:

Co-operation and mutual helpfulness are virtues among the Yoruba. There is limitation to what a single individual can achieve all alone. The co-operation of others is highly important in achieving most goals. It is believed that when two hands join in washing each other, one will have a truly clean hand ... It is also taught that while it is easy to break a broom-stick, it is not easy to break a full bunch of them.¹²

In the same vein, the practice is a way of demonstrating good will towards fellow men, especially the celebrants. Thus, blunt refusal of an individual to buy *Aso ebi* when necessary for no justified reason is synonymous with nursing ill-will towards one's fellow man and the person concerned will be regarded as such. Should he or she grace the occasion, nobody will freely interact with him or her. The plight of those who are financially handicapped is understandable and in some cases, the chosen material could be bought for them by friends, relatives or well wishers, or purchased on credit. People can go to this level because of the serious importance that is attached to group uniform.

Secondly a system of mutual obligation is established by the use of *Aso ebi* in the sense that an individual who buys one when somebody is celebrating an occasion expects to be reciprocated when it is his or her own turn to have cause for celebration. This however goes with sacrifice as individuals will have to buy the cloth no matter how difficult it may be financially because whoever fails to do so is stigmatised and when such a person has anything to celebrate, no one would turn up. At this juncture, it can be adduced that *Aso ebi* depicts African altruism and it is integrative, thereby ensuring stability. The mutual obligation can not be broken by anybody who does not want to be treated with ostracism and there is assurance that while identifying with a member of the community, one is simply investing into the future. This is aptly corroborated by this adage “*Adiye irana kiise ohun ajegbe.*” An *Adiye irana* is a fowl that is slaughtered and eaten by those who participate in the burial of a departed fellow. This proverb holds that whoever partakes in

the eating is already indebted as other people will do the same when he dies. Though this practice no longer subsists, the proverb is still of much relevance. This is to say that a celebrant that feels honoured today will face the reality of honouring another celebrant in future when it is his or her turn to celebrate an event. On altruism as a virtue in Yoruba society Akintola opines that:

The law of nature which stipulates that we should do unto others what we in our own self would want others to do unto us, also implies the complimentary injunction to render selfless help to others. That is altruism or helpfulness in term of service or help we render for no reason other than for giving ourselves to help one another or to elevate humanity at large. Such acts of helpfulness as we are saying must be undertaken, not for any expectation of gain or reward of any kind, but only for the sake of a person or situation needful of help. Nonetheless, altruism is not without its own reward... Altruism or helping others selflessly is a manifestation or practical expression of love for humanity.¹³

Another sociological significance of *Aso ebi* is that it is a leveller of status no matter how temporary this may be. As affirmed by Sofola:

Aso ebi levels the gap between persons of higher status and those of lower one and thereby eliminates, if only temporarily, the built-in antagonism between the have's and have-nots. All wearers of the *Aso ebi* by this common uniform are equal- at least for the occasion on which the *Aso ebi* is worn. The poor man [talaka] feels that he is at least equal to the rich man [oloro] because he wears an identical dress with him. Such a feeling, albeit for a brief moment purges him of his previous feeling of financial inadequacy. He may also feel so honoured by this temporary levelling of his status that he seeks accord with the rich man. The effect of this in terms of social control in the community is important. The individual may become less inclined to commit criminal acts against the society, particularly where property destruction is involved.¹⁴

The validity of the of the foregoing can not be doubted as when a particular *Aso ebi* is worn, the wearers are identified as members of a group. If it is the expensive type, the poor among them at that point in time have joined the league of wealthy people but if it is of low quality and yet it is worn by wealthy people, it is a good way of identifying with the poor. In the contemporary time *Ankara* materials –local fabrics that are common and relatively affordable are favoured to be chosen by many people. For this reason, it has to a large extent ceased to be an impossibility for those who are willing but financially handicapped to buy. This point is sensitive in that those who can not afford to buy often find it difficult to grace the occasion it is meant for and it is sort of social stigma. As earlier remarked, the function of levelling the gap between the rich and the poor is

temporary. Dresses in the real sense of it do not change status. A poor man who appears in an expensive attire and is recognised as such will know that he is not a rich man even if people do not know. On the other hand, the fact that a wealthy man appears ordinary does not in any way change his status to that of a poor man. Two Yoruba proverbs are apposite in respect of this: “*Irinisi ni isoni lojo*” - one is treated the way one appears. In this case, a poor man could be treated as a big man while the rich man who appears shabbily risks not being treated with dignity especially where he is not known. The second one goes thus “*Aso nla ko leeyan nla*” – appearing gorgeously does not imply that one is big and influential. In sum, everybody knows his or her worth. It is either one is underrated or overrated by people. Accurate rating is the prerogative of the personality being rated.

In this section, it has been established that the practice of *Aso ebi* is sociologically significant. That is why it is worth paying attention to in academic discourse. Apart from this, *Aso ebi* is also an issue of concern to the ethicist given the modern day reality. This is the focus of the next segment of this paper.

MORAL ISSUES

The Yoruba society has always emphasised the imperativeness morality. Thus, immoral practices are frowned at and treated with disdain. Though *Aso ebi* is cultural, it should be noted that morality is an integral aspect of culture. There the interplay between the phenomenon and morality shall be examined. This dimension is a matter of expediency because group uniform as a phenomenon involves human activities and every voluntary action is subject to moral evaluation. As earlier indicated our assessment is based empirical knowledge of some practices that are now characteristic of *Aso ebi*, and which seem to have become a norm. In the words of Echekwube :

Ethics...seeks to examine the rationale for human actions. It is a discipline which brings to light the rational and deliberate aspect of human behaviour. Its main focus is on the fact that human beings act freely after they have considered various possibilities open to them.¹⁵

It can be implied from the foregoing that buying *Aso ebi* is not a matter of compulsion and that is why the practice can be morally evaluated. As significant as the practice is, certain unethical practices have characterised it thereby questioning its relevance. It is a known fact that buying group uniform has become compulsory for many people. This may not be unconnected with the sociological functions earlier discussed. However, it has been discovered that many important things are often sacrificed for it especially family responsibilities. It is a common practice for many to keep money for this purpose while children’s school fees might not have been paid. The future of such children is thereby jeopardised. This calls for a reflection as children are assets and it would amount to gross irresponsibility on the part of parents if the money that ought to be spent on them is diverted and expended on another purpose such as *Aso ebi*. In our opinion, there should be no compulsion in buying group uniform. In fact, a parent who suffers ostracism on account of his or her inability to get a group uniform (because of children’s school fees) will not be forgotten by any right thinking child. With this reality, *Aso ebi* is becoming counter productive. All the sociological functions are fundamental hence, they can not be done away with. But it is important to avoid rigid application of or compliance with societal rules in the interest of the society itself. The point is that if children are not well catered for, the future of the society is already endangered going by this saying ‘youths of today are leaders of tomorrow.’

In religious ethics, taking care of one's family is imperative and nobody is expected to be found wanting in this regard. Therefore, sacrificing the interest of one's family for *Aso ebi* can only be explained in terms of irresponsibility, insensitivity and misplacement of priority. The value attached to children is more than that of cloth, hence the saying "*omo laso, omo tia ko ba ko ni yoo gbe ile tia ko ta*". Children are the clothes we wear, any child that is not trained will destroy the legacy of his or her parents.

Exploitation has equally become a feature of *Aso ebi* in the present time. Therefore, the values that are attached to it have been lost to personal gain accruing to celebrants. It has become the norm to inflate the price of any chosen material by up to fifty percent. It follows that such a material would cost more than the amount it would have been bought for personal use in the open market. Ironically, one would have expected to get it at a cheaper rate since many people are involved and it is often bought in bulk. The reason given for inflation of prices is cost of transportation because there may be a need to go to market, which may be far away. But experience has shown that transport fare can never be commensurate with what celebrants often make. To pacify those who may feel cheated but who have no choice but to buy, some gift items are purchased for every buyer. These again are not worth the money they have paid in excess. In fact, many celebrants prefer people buying the cloth to their gracing the occasion it is meant for because of the money that will be made on each of them. This unethical practice has seriously rubbished the sociological relevance of group uniform. And in order to avoid being cheated some people have devised a means of buying directly from dealers as soon as they know the type that has been chosen. Objectively speaking, one needs to ask if such people would want others to act as such when it is their turn to celebrate. This aspect (unnecessary profiteering) needs to be looked into for *As oebi* to continue to be factor of solidarity in Yoruba society.

Another point of interest is the frequency of choosing group uniform today. Many people belong to different associations in which members do have one thing or the other to celebrate and in most cases, at least once in a month. Since it has become customary every celebrant would want to obey the tradition. This is financially tasking and many people have through it incurred varying degrees of debt. The reason is that the material will be bought on credit rather than not having it and as soon as the celebration is over, it becomes difficult to settle the debt. It has been discovered that such money is either paid years after the ceremony or never paid. Debt incurred in this process is ethically speaking avoidable. No matter the tradition or what is in vogue, a rational individual ought to take wise decision when confronted with moral conflict. In other words, the sense of rationality should propel him or her not to buy anything that he or she is not sure of getting money to pay for on credit. In the words of Omoregbe, the sense of rationality is one of the reasons why a man must live a moral life. He is categorical that:

You must live a moral life because you are a rational being. And to be rational is to be subject to the moral law. This means that to be obliged by the moral law is part of what it means to be a human being, for it is part of man's rationality. Your rationality will tell you that certain kinds of action are bad and must be avoided while other kinds of actions are good and should be done. It imposes on you obligation to refrain from the former and to preform the latter.¹⁶

Being indebted is not a thing of pride among the Yoruba. In fact, it is shameful and the integrity of a notorious debtor is slightly higher than that of a thief. Many of them have at various points in time been labelled as potential thieves because of their refusal or failure to settle their debt. The question is why must one enter into debt because of group uniform that is in most cases meant for one occasion? Those who are into this practice are no doubt guilty of not facing the reality of life, that is self deception. The claim of many of them is their unwillingness to offend the celebrant, which an ethicist will not subscribe to because if at the end of the day, he or she is not able to pay, the creditor who may probably be the celebrant (and who needs money after the ceremony having spent a lot of money), will be disappointed, the seller, several people in the society and the debtor will end up disappointing himself or herself after suffering humiliation. Debt of any kind is not dignifying, hence the Yoruba proverb “*A kii fi gbese sorun soso*” – fashion is not meant for a debtor. This is because the creditor could disgrace him or her at any time as he or she (creditor) would want to know the source of the money for the fashionable appearance when an outstanding debt has not been settled. However, there are some debtors who are not perturbed about embarrassment from creditor no matter the magnitude, reminiscent of Unoka in “*Things Fall Apart*” authored by Chinua Achebe. This man was indebted to many people and he indicated the amount he was owing each of them on the wall. Thus he would always tell whomever came to him, to intimate himself with the numerous creditors that were on his neck by reading what was on the wall and he would be very confident and proud to tell him that what he was owing him was not as much as what he was owing others.¹⁷

On self deception, the Yoruba are not silent as it is often said that “*Eni tio ba tan ara re ni orisa oke maa tan*” that is, whoever deceives himself will be deceived by the divinities. This means that somebody who is not financially buoyant should not pretend to be, by getting a chosen *Aso ebi* at all cost. Being at the same level with rich people just for a day on account of wearing the same type of dress will not change anything. People of this school of thought are advised to act according to their capacity by this proverb “*Se boo timo elewa Sapon.*” The origin of this proverb has been traced to a woman at Sapon area of Abeokuta, Ogun State, who used to sell cooked beans and she would always advise her customers not to buy more than they could afford to pay because she was not ready to sell on credit. Her worldview is relevant at the present time as to avoid buying things on credit is to avoid being a debtor. This is summarised in another proverb which says “*Eni tio ni kia ma raja awin, se lo ni kia ma je gbese,*” i.e., whoever advises one not to buy things on credit is simply advising him or her not to get into debt.

The practice can also be explained in terms of unhealthy competition especially in polygynous families. This may arise when a particular unit of the family wants to outwit the other or others. In this case, the focus could be on who chooses a better material (more expensive) or who attracts more crowd when there is any celebration. Competition of this nature breeds hatred and intra family acrimony, which may take a dangerous dimension such as use of charm against one another, if caution is not taken. Therefore, the unity that the practice is expected to engender will not come fruition rather, a once united family will cease to be. This is another negative impact of group uniform among the Yoruba.

Conclusion

That *Aso ebi* is a cherished and relevant factor among the Yoruba can not be disputed. It is an essential aspect of their way of life, which has continued to flourish even in the face of modernity. Without mincing words, it is an impossibility at least for now, to exterminate this practice. Ironically, in spite of its sociological relevance, certain unethical practices which may call for its abolition if possible are apparent. This is a case of a society in dilemma as group uniform is a coin, and every coin has two sides. What is the way out? Aristotle provides an answer in his theory of moderation as taught in the doctrine of the 'golden mean' that is, the doctrine that virtue lies between two extremes. It is a mean between excess and defect. For example, generosity is the mid-way between miserliness, an extreme and extravagance another extreme¹⁸. This position is germane because while facing the dilemma of either obeying the tradition at all cost ,or totally disregarding it, the individual concerned should appeal to virtue as exemplified above. The focal point is that in everything we do as humans, the principle of moderation should be our guide and this will help in addressing the problems that *Aso ebi* has caused.

As earlier noted, some parents often misplace their priority in order to satisfy the desire to buy if possible, every chosen fabric. It would be appropriate to suggest that *Aso ebi* should be sacrificed for the future of children and not the other way round. The Qur'an calls on the father to provide for the child's food, education, clothing and shelter¹⁹. This however does not suggest that the mother does not have responsibilities to discharge in the upkeep of the family. When necessary, she is expected to complement the head of the family rather than to be preoccupied with the desire to have every group uniform. On the other hand, the Bible (1 Tim.5:8) is emphatic that "if any one does not provide for his relatives, especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

In this paper, the relevance of *Aso ebi* as a factor of solidarity and cohesion in the Yoruba society has been indubitably established. This is exhibited in the passion that is demonstrated towards it any time there is an event to celebrate; that the poor can be helped to get a chosen fabric so that they will not be ostracised. It is always a thing of joy when celebrants are identified with. This practice is however fraught with difficulties arising from prevailing unethical practices like incurring debt, abandoning family responsibilities and apparent cheating of well wishers by celebrants due to abnormal profiteering in modern time. Our recommendations do not suggest the abolition of cultural practices, but such must be observed in line with prevailing reality in order to avoid possible loss of relevance.

Endnotes

¹J.K. Ayantayo, (2002) "Conservation of Cultural Heritage in Yoruba Cities Through Renewal of Communal Ethics" in Amole, D., Ajayi, A. And Okewole, A. (eds) *The City in Nigeria: Perspectives, Issues, Challenges and Strategies*, Proceedings of a National Conference organised by the Faculty of Environmental Design and Management , Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, p128. See also A. Akintola, [1999] *Yoruba Ethics and Metaphysics*, Ogbomoso: Valour Publishing Ventures Limited, 202.

- ² J.S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heineman Educational Books Ltd, 1980, 109.
- ³ J.O. Awolalu, J.O. and P.A. Dopamu, P.A (*West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonjo Press & Books Industries Nigeria Limited, 1979, 3.
- ⁴ E.B. Idowu. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Lagos: Longman Nigerian P.L.C. 1996, 4.
- ⁵ S.A. Akintoye. "Yoruba History: From Early Times to The 20th Century" in Lawal N.S., Sadiku, M.N.O and Dopamu, A. [eds] *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture*, Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc, 2004, 1.
- ⁶ J.A, Sofola. *African Culture and the African Personality: What Makes an African Person African*, Ibadan: African Resources Publishers Co., 1978, 126.
- ⁷ O. Moloye. "Traditional High Fashion in Transition" in Lawal S.N., Sadiku, M.N.O. and Dopamu, A. [eds] *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture*, Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc., 2004, 385-386.
- ⁸ J.A. Sofola. *African Culture and the African Personality*, op cit., 1978, 126.
- ⁹ O. Moloye. "Traditional High Fashion in Transition" op. cit., 2004, 386.
- ¹⁰ S.A. Adewale. "Ethics in Ifa" in S.O. Abogunrin (ed.) *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1986, 71.
- ¹¹ A. Akintola. *Yoruba Ethics and Metaphysics*, Ogbomosho: Valour Publishing Ventures Limited, 1999, 202.
- ¹² P.A. Dopamu, and E.O. Alana. "Ethical Systems" in Lawal, N.S., Sadiku, M.N.O. and Dopamu, A. [eds] *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture*, Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press Inc., 2004, 167.
- ¹³ A. Akintola. *Yoruba Ethics and Metaphysics*, op. cit., 1999, 110-112.
- ¹⁴ J.A. Sofola. *African Culture and the African Personality*, op. cit., 1978, 128
- ¹⁵ A.O Echekwube. *Contemporary Ethics: History, Theories and Issues*, Lagos :Spero Books Ltd., 1999, 14.
- ¹⁶ J.I. Omoregbe. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*, Lagos: JERP Ltd., 1998, 25-26.
- ¹⁷ C. Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*, Essex: British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data, 1986, 6.

¹⁸ J.I. Omoregbe. *Ethics : A Systematic and Historical Study*, 1998, 164. This view is also expressed by A. Dzurgba. *Principle of Ethics*, Ibadan: Agape Publications, 2000, 87.

¹⁹ I.L. Akintola. "Islamic Moral Values" in Abubakre R.D.[ed] *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria*,Ilorin: NASR, 1993, 72; (Qur'an 2:333).

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