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But Them Can't Be God: Chinese Textiles in Nigerian Dress and the Art of Ayo Akinwande

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of Chinese actors in the Nigerian textile industry through the lens of a work by the artist Ayo Akinwande. By examining a sartorial practice called *aso-ebi*, the author argues that the growth of this practice over the course of the 20th century paved the way for an influx of cheap, printed cloth from China. Akinwande's work titled, "Win-Win," uses the metaphor of indigenous dress and patterned fabric to illustrate that Chinese involvement in Nigerian affairs extends beyond textiles to the construction industry.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht den Einfluss chinesischer Akteure in der nigerianischen Textilindustrie anhand einer Arbeit des Künstlers Ayo Akinwande. Mit der Untersuchung einer Modepraxis namens *aso-ebi* argumentiert die Autorin, dass deren Wachstum im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts den Weg für den Zustrom billiger bedruckter Stoffe aus China ebnete. Akinwandes Arbeit mit dem Titel „Win-Win“, verwendet die Metapher der einheimischen Kleidung und gemusterten Stoffe um zu veranschaulichen, dass die chinesische Einflussnahme in Nigerianische Angelegenheiten weiter als Textilien geht und sich bis in die Bauindustrie erstreckt.

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The textile is an aesthetically and conceptually rich material for artistic reinvention. Particularly in the context of Nigeria with its wealth of indigenous textile practices, textiles connect us to the histories of craft, trade, colonization, and resistance.¹ Nigerian artists working through the nation's transition to independence in the 1960s and 1970s turned to textile patterns or practices as referents to indigenous culture that had been devalued under colonialism. Their objective was one of both preservation and aesthetic experimentation.² Today, as artists grapple with contemporary issues of commercialization, environmental degradation, corruption, and other effects of capitalism and globalization, they continue to adopt the textile in their approach because these issues often involve the textile industry directly, and the textile often provides the perfect metaphor for them.

The import textile, particularly the “African print,” or brightly colored cotton fabric generally associated with African dress, is a popular choice for artists not only for its symbolism, but for its abundance and low cost. For some of these artists, such as Obinna Makata and Victoria Udonian who have used discarded textiles and clothing as metaphors for rampant consumerism and materialism, fabric scraps provide both a material and conceptual starting point for their work. For Makata, the scraps were a viable alternative to store-bought, expensive art supplies early in his career, but they soon proved to be valuable beyond their practicality.² As the remnants of the fashion landscape of Lagos, where having new outfits custom tailored for social events is common, fabric scraps not only stand for the materialism of the Lagos social scene, but as products imported from China that dominate the domestic textile markets, they represent the nation's relatively new, yet all-encompassing economic relationship with China.

¹ This article is based on the research presented in “*The Pattern of Modernity: Textiles in Art, Fashion and Cultural Memory in Nigeria since 1960*,” the author's doctoral thesis completed in 2018 at the Freie Universität Berlin. Funding for the research was provided by the Swiss National Science Foundation under the Sinergia project *Other Modernities: Patrimony and Practices of Visual Expression Outside the West*.

² Textile patterns, specifically *adire* (Yoruba, indigo tie-dyed cloth) appear in the paintings of Bruce Onobrakpeya and Nike Okundaye in the decades following independence. Okundaye explains that she incorporates *adire* patterns in her acrylic paintings and ink drawings in order to preserve the patterns for future generations. She also began working in batik and sought to revive indigo dyeing in rural parts of Nigeria. See: Okundaye, Artist talk at the Gallery of African Art (GAFRA), London,

In 2017, an exhibition and research project looked more deeply into the Chinese influence on the Nigerian textile sector as one of several approaches that would shed light on the broader economic relationship between China and Africa. Under the umbrella project, ‘ChinAfrika. under construction,’ exhibited by the Galerie für zeitgenössische Kunst (GfZK) in Leipzig, several Nigerian artists took on the topic of textiles, while artists from other parts of the continent looked at the relationship between China and Africa from other angles. Using the cheap, factory-printed textile as a starting point, one of these artists, Ayo Akinwande, questioned the larger strategy of Chinese involvement in the construction of Nigerian infrastructure in a work that combines indigenous forms of dress with icons of corporate branding (both Chinese and Nigerian) that dominate the national construction industry. His installation titled 赢得 – *Win* (the first word is “win” written in Chinese characters) uses the formal language of Yoruba *agbada* dress to broach an issue of national significance (Fig. 1).

Aso-Ebi and the Nigerian Textile Sector

In order to understand how the “African” or “factory print” came to dominate the textile and fashion industries, including for indigenous forms of dress like the *agbada* (which paved the way for an influx of Chinese fabrics in the 1980s and 1990s), one must first understand the evolution of *aso-ebi*, a sartorial practice among the Yoruba people intended to commemorate a person or event by the wearing of a uniform or special cloth. The story of *aso-ebi* is one of meteoric rise across Nigerian society. The history of *aso-ebi's* expansion not only reveals a unique sartorial phenomenon in West Africa, but it highlights the way that imported,

October 11, 2014. Onobrakpeya, Grillo and the rest of the Zaria Art Society dedicated themselves to what they called a ‘natural synthesis’ of forms and influences of both indigenous and foreign origins. Onobrakpeya emphasizes the importance of “traditional arts” in modern art: “The modern Nigerian artist, also, in the spirit of cultural revival and synthesis has turned to traditional art and good African values for inspiration.” See: Richard A. Singletary, *Bruce Onobrakpeya* (New York, NY: The Ford Foundation, 2002), 150.

² CNN African Voices (interview with Obinna Makata) <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/09/25/spc-african-voices-uncovering-art-obinna-a-cnn>



Figure 1. Ayo Akinwande 赢得 – *Win*, 2017. Top left: *Filà*, or “hat,” resin cast coral beads, plastic helmet, 45x25x18 cm; Top right: *Àwòtélé*, a long sleeved-shirt featuring hand written text on used and machines-sewn cement sacks, 91x132 cm.; Bottom: *Àwòsókè*, a flowing sleeveless robe worn over the *Àwòtélé* composed of cement sacks and aluminum belt. Photos courtesy of the artist.

mass-produced cloth came to eclipse indigenous textiles and domestically printed fabrics over the course of the 20th century.

'Aso-ebi'
 I have seen madness dissolve madness
 And craze beget yet another craze
 And fashion turn the scales of praise
 And clothes give a false look of freshness
 And yards of aso-ebi threaten the sky
 Settling friends and parting them
 Leaving many homes high and dry
 The steersman knocked off the helm.

-T. C. Nwosu 1965³

This eight-line poem from an issue of Nigeria Magazine puts into words the social pressures that might accompany participation in *aso-ebi*. The poem was written five years after Nigeria gained independence, a time when the role of factory-printed cloth in commemorating political and other social occasions reached new heights. These trends helped to drive *aso-ebi's* expansion beyond a family-bound practice of the Yoruba to include friends, colleagues, church congregations, sports teams, political parties, wedding guests, even strangers seeking acceptance into a given social group. It was also no longer an exclusively Yoruba tradition, but was used to visually unite groups across new boundaries and identities. As one scholar argued: "*aso-ebi* negotiates the limits of trans-cultural diffusion by filtering into other ethnic groups both in Nigeria and other West African sub-regions," suggesting that this primarily Yoruba practice has played an important role in the drive towards national unity over ethnic difference in the decades following 1960.⁴ In other words, *aso-ebi* had the capacity to unite citizens of a new nation through an aesthetic of patterned uniformity without sacrificing individuality or erasing ethnicity. *Aso-ebi* evolved by integrating the past with the modern present through the medium of the textile.

Although the exact origins of *aso-ebi* are unknown, the issue of financial strain it placed on practitioners - *leaving many homes high and dry* - and its increasing economic burden was becoming more noticeable by the first decades of the 20th century.⁵ At this time, newspapers in Nigeria were receiving letters to the editor from readers who complained about the increasing costs and pressures to keep up with the demands of *aso-ebi*, particularly in the event of a wedding when it was customary for the groom to pay to attire the bride's entire family, a convention known as *Owo Aso Iyawo*. Some readers wrote in support of the custom but warned that it could get out of hand, while others called it "degrading," "worthless" and "deplorable."⁶ The financial concerns that have become a hallmark of public discourse surrounding *aso-ebi* prove to be over a century old. This early and ongoing discourse is significant because it sheds light on *aso-ebi's* ties to the economy and the shifts towards an import-reliant textile industry that continues to dominate the landscapes of fashion and *aso-ebi* practice in 21st century Nigeria. These shifts had significant consequences for indigenous textiles.

By the 1940s, the popularity of indigenous fabrics, such as the Yoruba woven *aso-oke* cloth, and indigenous styles of dress for special occasions was on the rise, particularly among urban residents. Even though imported, factory-produced cloth from Europe was widely available at the time, *aso-ebi* occasions were considered special and therefore indigenous fabrics and styles were still a popular choice for celebrants. Particularly for politically active citizens, indigenous textiles represented high quality domestic production and a symbolic rejection of European imports.⁷ However, the growth of *aso-ebi* - in both frequency and volume - necessarily sparked a transition from locally produced fabrics to factory prints, albeit even as styles of indigenous dress became increasingly popular. One solution was to use

³ Published in Nigeria Magazine September 1965, No. 86, page 221. Literary supplement edited by Onuora Nzekwu. Published by Government of Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria

⁴ Okechukwu Nwafor, "The Fabric of Friendship: Aso Ebi and the Moral Economy of Amity in Nigeria," *African Studies* 72, no. 1 (April 2013): 4.

⁵ While one source places its invention at the dawn of colonialism (Olukoju 1992, 2006), another dates it (without evidence) to 1920 (Akinwumi 1990).

⁶ Aiye K'Oto, "Aso Ebi," *The Nigerian Chronicle*, April 10, 1914, sec. Letters to the Editor, 4.

⁷ Betty Wass "Yoruba Dress in Five Generations of a Lagos Family," 338.

factory printed cloth that resembled indigenous textiles.⁸ Another was to tailor an indigenous style, such as the *Agbada*, with imported factory cloth. These trends grew in popularity, especially among educated urban Lagosians in the mid-20th century as a form of resistance to colonialism and the Western styles of dress often imposed on colonial subjects.⁹

The post-Independence era led to a loosening of *aso-ebi* rules and an increase in expendable wealth for many middle-class Lagos families, allowing practitioners to combine their tailored uniforms with unique jewelry or other accessories. The increasing agency of individuals in shaping interpretations of “indigenous” culture meant both the meanings and modes of dress were under almost constant reinvention. As this unfolded, the taste and necessity for cheaper, widely available factory prints grew, and the market that supplied these fabrics grew along with it. In today’s social milieu, *Ankara*, or African print, remains the primary choice for *aso-ebi* practitioners because it offers an enormous selection of patterns in a wide range of quality and prices.

Akinwande’s “Win-Win”

Ayo Akinwande was born in Lagos, Nigeria, where he continues to live and work. He studied architecture and experimented with photography before embarking on a career as a visual artist. These former endeavors, however, inform and shape his current work which is oftentimes documentary by nature and concerned with the rapidly changing urban environment and built space of Lagos.

In “Win-Win,” Akinwande uses dress as a metaphor for the politics, economics, and public opinion of urban development and trade in Nigeria, where Chinese involvement is deeply entrenched. Akinwande’s version of the *agbada*, which is a four-piece men’s attire composed of pants, a long-

sleeved undershirt (*Àwòtélè*), a flowing sleeveless robe (*Àwòsókè*), and a hat (*Filà*), the undershirt and robe are composed of cement bags bearing the name “Dangote,” the cement brand manufactured by the megalithic Dangote Group conglomerate owned by Nigeria’s richest man, Aliko Dangote. Cement bags are combined with elements that directly reference the CCECC or the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, such as a blue aluminum belt bearing the acronym and a blue construction hat like the ones worn on their work sites. The materials are symbolic of the construction sites where they may have been previously used and discarded, and more significantly, where Chinese presence is pervasive. As a popular choice for *aso-ebi* uniform, particularly for special events, the *agbada* represents something of a national outfit. By using the Dangote sack in place of an actual textile, Akinwande may allude to the monopoly Dangote holds on the industry, including all Chinese run and sponsored projects, but also to the ubiquitous factory printed textile. Thus while the Dangote sacks may suggest that some Nigerians benefit financially from Chinese presence in the country, the Chinese elements of the *agbada* (which may include the sacks if that is where they are made) allude to the Chinese domination of the Nigerian textile market, and the role China may have played in the downfall of the domestic industry.

Tucked into the pockets of the *agbada*’s robe are 5 Nigerian Naira (NGN) banknotes, an almost worthless denomination of the nation’s currency that has been subject to steep depreciation since the mid-1990s. The notes are an allusion to the cheap price tag on Nigeria’s land and resources, or perhaps to a bribe paid for the rights to those resources, which the Chinese now have a hold over. Yet the banknotes are only the most obvious reference to the economic relationship between the two nations. Other references lie in the shape of the blue belt, which resembles that of a heavyweight champion’s belt, suggesting that in the wrestling or

⁸ This is documented in Akinwumi, Tunde M., and Elisha P. Renne. “Commemorative Textiles and Anglican Church History in Ondo, Nigeria.” *Textile* 6, no. 2 (2008): 126–45.

⁹ Betty Wass “Yoruba Dress in Five Generations of a Lagos Family,” 338

boxing match between Chinese, Indian, Lebanese, European and American contenders for control over Africa's resources, China seems to be emerging as the winner.¹⁰

Textiles undoubtedly represent one industry where Chinese presence in Nigeria is far-reaching. The sacks are ubiquitous and instantly recognizable throughout the country as a Nigerian brand of cement used in Chinese construction projects. In a sense, the piece becomes emblematic of what it is to be Nigerian in 2017, that is, to live in Chinese fabrics, Chinese houses, Chinese built cities and drive on Chinese roads while only the lucky few Nigerians are enriched. Thus Akinwande's garment invites multiple interpretations. On one hand, the *agbada's* form presents a quiet resistance to the pervasiveness of foreign culture, much in the same way dress functioned as anti-colonial expression in the decades preceding independence. Following the transition from military rule to civilian rule in Nigeria, for example, the phrase "from khaki to *agbada*" was adopted to draw an analogy between clothing and two types of authority. Whereas khaki represented the military uniform, the *agbada* represented civilian dress following the presidential elections in 1999 in which a new civilian leader was democratically elected.¹¹ On the other hand, the Dangote label, the blue belt, money, and hat erode that resistance by suffusing Yoruba dress and custom with cheapness and corporate branding. It serves as a reminder that culture, along with natural resources such as land and oil, can also be bought and sold to the highest bidder.

In an additional nod to the role of the textile in Nigerian society, the undershirt of the *agbada* contains the transcriptions of several interviews Akinwande held with market traders working in Lagos' Balogun market who do business directly with the Chinese. Handwritten by the interviewees in Pidgin English or their native Yoruba or Igbo languages, the inscriptions describe the experiences of the traders and their opinions of the Chinese. The testimony provides insight into the

direct impact of Chinese involvement on individual traders, and like a factory print carefully chosen for its subtle message, it also communicates publicly on behalf of the wearer or owner. The messages that emerge, however, together represent ambivalence towards Chinese involvement in Nigerian economic affairs. Some traders have been negatively affected by business with the Chinese, complaining of language barriers, counterfeiters who photograph their wares and send the images back to China to be copied, and aggressive tactics by Chinese middlemen. Others, particularly those who were for decades denied visas to Western countries and access to European manufactured goods, are happy to do business with a nation that greets them with open arms and presents far fewer restrictions. While one inscription claims, "...one day China go rule the world through industry" another declares "BUT THEM CANT BE GOD." Their messages vacillate between praise and criticism, entrenching the work in ambivalence.

These mixed reactions towards the Chinese also extend to the general public. According to Akinwande, the broadly negative perspective on Chinese products and their reputation for poor quality originates in the West. Yet, in Nigeria, access to cheap Chinese products, known locally as "Chinco," that are much more affordable than everything else on the market is seen an asset to many Nigerians experiencing financial difficulty. The lack of quality is only an issue in certain products. Some garments, for example, do not necessarily need to be of such high quality that they will last for many years. For special occasions where the garment will be worn only once a cheap Chinese suit may suffice, or an *aso-ebi* outfit made of cheap fabric. The string of imitation coral beads that accompany Akinwande's *agbada* provides an example of the sufficiency of a cheap substitute. Specifically, the bead necklace shows how Chinese imitations can seamlessly replace more expensive originals that play an important role in culturally specific practices. The beads are viewed as a

¹⁰ Ayo Akinwande, 赢得 – Win, Artist's text.

¹¹ Elisha P. Renne, "From Khaki to Agbada: Dress and Political Transition in Nigeria," in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 125.

symbol of royalty, originating in Benin. They are often worn by brides and grooms on their wedding day and for other special occasions in Benin and Nigeria. A necklace like the one seen in 赢得 – *Win* might cost upwards of 25,000 NGN (approximately 80 USD), especially if the beads are made of semiprecious stones or natural coral. Akinwande's string of plastic coral beads that were likely manufactured in China cost a mere 1000 NGN (approximately 3 USD). For many, the cheaper necklaces are indistinguishable from the pricier versions and do not sacrifice the association with royalty, wealth and status the beads are meant to convey.¹² This helps to explain the popularity of counterfeit designer textiles supplied by the Chinese that are bought even by wealthy consumers. Counterfeits create the illusion of affluence and luxury (as opposed to quality) through a system of signs embedded in its patterns at a fraction of the original price.

The Collapse of the Domestic Textile Industry

The tendency towards factory prints illustrated by the 20th century development and expansion of *asobi* has created increasing demand for low-cost fabrics in high quantities, contributing significantly to the closure of nearly all of the nation's textile factories. Long before the arrival of Chinese trade in the 1980s, Nigerian markets were inundated with European factory prints and other foreign fabrics. Yet, as a major actor in a global textile trade the markets absorbed the foreign products with little impact on indigenous production. Later, with the help of the Nigerian government, who sought to offset the reliance on imports of printed cotton fabrics from foreign manufacturers, numerous textile factories opened around the time of independence to supply the national market for printed fabrics with products made in Nigeria.

Starting with the first factory opening in Kaduna in 1956, the industry grew rapidly into the 1980s to the point where it employed over 1 million people, generated over 1 billion NGN in yearly revenue, and with over 200 companies throughout the country was the second largest textile manufacturer in Africa, second only to Egypt.¹³

The federal military government was actively involved in protecting the Nigerian textile industry through policies such as the Indigenisation Decree of 1972 whereby foreigners were forced to divest from textile businesses in order to give Nigerians more share of the national economy and promote homegrown industry. However, the policy also brought adverse effects for many Nigerians whose businesses relied partially on foreign imports and investments, including those who were already actively promoting sales of indigenous textiles.¹⁴ By the 1990s and 2000s the companies that once thrived and employed tens of thousands of Nigeria's workforce were struggling to remain profitable. Their struggles were due to a number of factors that included the collapse of Nigeria's oil refineries prompting a reliance on low-grade imported fuel, inadequate infrastructure and escalating operating costs. The industry also had to compete with a new threat: the influx of cheap Chinese fabrics that came to Nigerian markets following China's opening up to trade with other nations, and the facilitation of that trade under the guise of South-South cooperation and the Structural Adjustment Programs instigated by the International Monetary Fund. The Nigerian textile market had been brimming with foreign imported cloth from Europe, India, or other parts of Africa for centuries, but the prices of Chinese imports were set so low that the competition was nearly eliminated, and any attempt at regulating the trade was undermined by smuggling, counterfeiting, and government corruption.¹⁵ By 2007 the *Guardian* reported that 80% of Nigeria's textile market was dominated by Asian imports. A combination of

¹² Interview with Ayo Akinwande, May 31, 2017.

¹³ Sola Akinrinade and Olukeya Ogen, "Globalization and De-Industrialization: South-South Neo-Liberalism and the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry," *The Global South* 2, no. 2, Africa in a Global Age (Fall 2008): 163.

¹⁴ See for example how Folashade Thomas-Fahm's Lagos based fashion business was forcibly taken over by the military on the grounds that it did not comply with the decree: Thomas-Fahm, *Faces of She*, 171–73.

¹⁵ Akinrinade and Ogen, "Globalization and De-Industrialization: South-South Neo-Liberalism and the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry," 167–68.

these factors caused roughly 170 of Nigeria's textile manufacturers to close by 2008.¹⁶

Conclusion

Despite the optimistic title, 赢得 – *Win* is far from a declaration that the growing influence of China in Nigeria and throughout Africa is going to be beneficial for both parties. Akinwande suggests that only time will tell who will be the true beneficiary of this relatively new partnership. A 2014 poll, however, indicates that 80% of Nigerians hold a favorable opinion of China, compared to just 10% with unfavorable opinions. This is the highest approval rating of China in the world, and it is consistent with some of the sentiments expressed by those traders quoted in Akinwande's work.¹⁷ The direct impact of Chinese trade on domestic textile production and commerce does not appear to be a concern of the artist. Rather, he cites the idea of a mantle, a heavy garment that rests on the shoulders, as the reasoning behind using the *agbada* as the main motif in a work that he explains is about the larger picture of China's immense presence throughout Africa, as if the entire continent were cloaked in a Chinese garment. Akinwande's piece pares this metaphor down to a Nigeria-specific uniform without engaging deeply with its symbolism. However, the mechanisms of the textile and dress are implicitly and explicitly at work in this piece. The cement bag "textile" fashioned into the *agbada* robe and undershirt combine two easily recognizable and non-threatening forms from which Akinwande embarks on an exploration of other, sometimes sensitive themes. With the inscriptions for example, their messages are not intended to be read and understood by all of those who view the work. Written in languages indigenous to Nigeria, and not shared amongst all Nigerians, the inscriptions operate like some textile patterns that speak only to those who are privy to their meanings and messages.

Akinwande's form of dress utilizes the subtlety inherent to the material of a textile and the subject of dress. He uses the familiarity of the *agbada* form and the Dangote label to relate to multiple visual landscapes of Lagos. Inserting accessibility into the work, the textile and its many iterations in forms of dress construct a work that is non-threatening in its familiarity yet present a platform for critical engagement. Rather than invoking the *agbada* for the sake of cultural preservation, Akinwande's synthesis of forms illustrates the constantly shifting and evolving nature of so-called "traditions" of dress. His "textiles" continue to communicate much in the way that classic patterns spoke on behalf of their wearers, but in place of the classic pattern is corporate branding and everyday conversation.

His conclusions about Chinese influence are ambiguous or non-existent. Nevertheless, the work symbolizes the very latest changes in an industry that has been subject to tumultuous upheavals over the last century. These upheavals have not been properly documented, studied or analyzed, making artistic practice that has utilized textiles key witnesses to textile history, just as they were in the mid-20th century at the birth of the independent nation. The works of Akinwande, his predecessors and his contemporaries who engage the textile as a tool, medium or subject provide critical insight into the ever-shifting and ever-important role cloth plays in Nigerian society.

¹⁶ Akinrinade and Ogen, 164–65.

¹⁷ 2014 BBC World Service Poll