

The Social and Economic Values of African Commemorative Fabrics in Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Aso-ebi is a terminology of Yoruba origin that refers to same-styled cloth worn by a group or family members during a ceremony in Nigeria. The practice of shared commemorative cloth was restricted initially to family members. However, it is now extended to well-wishers. The shared commemorative cloth is a means of identifying with a family member or friend, etc. during celebrations of diverse kinds like religious and political affiliations, sporting and cultural achievements, courtship and marriage, education, mourning and death of individuals, family or members of an organization. This dimension has transformed the practice into a means of economic gain for organizers / celebrants / marketers/ photographers/magazine vendors as the practice has also acquired new social values. Of note here is the politics of dress, glamour and class distinction that promotes identity politics, which now is one of its social dimensions. This paper, therefore, evaluates some economic/social ramifications inherent in this social identity bargaining as well as co-modification implications of *Aso-ebi* clothes by celebrants with a view of advocating financial sanctity and synergy in such practice. The approach here is evaluative and relies on questionnaires and unstructured interviews.

Keywords:

Aso ebi, Ankara, Aso-oke, Abada, Buba

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Background to the Study

Nigeria is known for its extraordinary diversity of textile traditions. The cultural trend of commemorating events with matching/identical fabrics (nicknamed *Aso-Ebi*) for a group and social solidarity in parties, housewarmings, weddings and funeral has developed from these rich textile traditions. The original purpose of *Aso-ebi* was for social identification or affiliation with celebrating personalities, families among other human clusters and devoid of economic gains. This cultural practice represents traits interwoven to achieve specific objectives among groups.

The first, introduced as *Aso-ebi* printed wax was '*Nana Prempeh*' design, dating from October 1920. ¹ This wax- print was ordered by the United Africa Company to commemorate the funeral figure of Ashanti king, *Nana Prempeh* (Fig. 1). Ewe Chief, Fiaga of Peki, dated 10th March 1931. A *Mummy Cloth* design dating from 28 September 1928 is depicting a woman who was presumably a market trader. ² From records, *Iya Owodunmi aso-ebi* was the first commissioned wax print by a wealthy Yoruba patron to mark the funeral of Madam A. B. Shonowo, a senior family member in the 1930s. This example was followed by, '*Guinness Power*' cloth (Fig. 1); printed in Manchester, England in 1961.



Name: Madam Shonowo Commemorative Fabric
Medium: Printed Fabric
Courtesy: Clarke Duncan, 1930
Fig 1



Name: Guinness Design
Medium: Printed Fabric
Courtesy: Clarke Duncan, 1961
Fig 2

The word also means cloth in Yoruba and ebi denotes family, ³ defines *Aso-ebi* as “uniform, solidarity outfit of the family worn by family members to display solidarity, abundance, class consciousness, diffusion of wealth and to extol social bonding. ⁴ *Aso-ebi* (pronounced “*asho aybee*”), is a social, communicative system that explores fabric and fashion dynamics for events such as weddings, funeral and parties generally, especially, *Owambe* parties. Age- grades and egbe (association) members dress in uniform to assist the celebrant during important celebrations. The tradition originated from the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria, West Africa. William Bascom as cited by ⁵, traced the origin to an earlier period when members of Yoruba age grades wear uniform dressing to mark fraternal bonds.

After this period, commemorative cloth became the strength, beauty and the main repositories of Nigeria's cloth history. In the words of ⁶ "The benefits are especially great in communities that don't have highly visible art identities, but do contain rich cultural resources. It's the difference between the visible art and culture in the neighborhood".

This statement indicates that, Individuals and organizations used Aso-ebi (now a tradition), as a means towards communicating ideas and concepts which have no national or continental boundaries contributing to live ability, cultural experiences, innovation and creativity. The use of commemorative (*Aso-ebi*) cloth as a means of demonstrating group solidarity, social identification and cultural authentication has become an important event marker in most societies. ⁷ He said the Yoruba word: *aso la nki, ki ato ki eniyan*, meaning "it is the cloth we should greet before greeting the wearer" and *eniyan lasoo mi*, means "people are my cloth."

The aphorisms above indicate that the Yoruba attach great importance to their clothing in occasions of celebrations. In other words, fashion is inseparable as such; they are always flamboyantly dressed in quality fabric and have an unparalleled love for exotic fabrics like the Kalabari of Rivers State. As recent as the *Aso-ebi* clothing traditions are, it is taken more seriously than anything else, including food ⁸. Also, Bascom as cited by ⁵ wrote that Yoruba men and women's clubs have their distinctive clothing by which members can be recognized. In fact, Aso ebi concept has become an incontrovertible evidence of the culture of consumerism; A guest's VIP ticket or identity card and indicative of the wearer's group membership, hence this paper examines the social values of *Aso-ebi* cloth and the implications on social and economic impact among social groups, artisanal industries, and a celebrant's economic life. The approach here is evaluative and relies on unstructured interviews and interactions. It is important to engage this study considering the social and economic dimensions of what has become a social solidarity that is dependent on fashion and fabric where an attendee to such occasion is required to purchase such fabrics. As observed, such purchases often are costlier than the market price.

The supposition here is that in recent practices involving *Aso-ebi*, celebrants rely on purchases made from them to augment the cost of the celebration while extolling social bonding. The dimension of cloth or fabric trading involved here constitutes commercial dimensions with this practice. In a nutshell, the *aso-ebi* has become a source of social wealth creation for celebrants and artisanal economies. The commercial aspect here added to the original intention deserves investigation to situate its social implications and how some attendees conceptualize this growing phenomenon.

To situate its social implications and how some attendees conceptualize this growing phenomenon; hence this paper examines the social values of *Aso-ebi* cloth and the implications on social and economic impact among social groups, celebrant, and artisanal industries. To enable an exhaustive study of this paper, interviews with celebrities, questionnaires to survey a random group of working class people using a

Likert scale of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, for analysis and the way various inter-ethnic cultures that have used *Aso-ebi* will constitute part of the text.

***Aso-Ebi* Cultural Practice**

UNESCO, (2008) in the “Definition of Culture” states that an ethnic group represents “a group of people possessing a common ancestry and cultural tradition with a strong feeling of belonging and cohesiveness”. Thus the Yoruba's are the originator of *Aso ebi* cultural practice and the focal point was strictly for socialization. Contemporary, it has become a national phenomenon embracing close relatives, corporate bodies, cultural agencies and private individuals, religious and political associations, thus threatening the foundational premise upon which *aso ebi* concept was formed.

Aso-ebi cloth provides access to digitized fabrics that are printed with images and text documenting events, individual and organizations. They include: Historical, political, religious, economic, educational and sociological significance to African society. ⁹ Also objects of the importance of clothes have been researched by Ojo and Akinrujomu (2006), Akinbeleji (2012), McDonald (2011), Little Kenneth (1974). For the purpose of this paper, the commemorative cloth will be called *Aso-ebi*.

Important politicians used the medium for harnessing support for election campaigns or more general expressions of national solidarity. Also, Governments also commissioned commemorative cloths to promote issues relating to health, literacy, security, sporting events and the Festival of Black Arts and Culture in Lagos (Festac, 1977). Sometimes sporting or cultural achievements are celebrated, including the musical phenomenon. Society recognizes the role of clothing as a communicator of information during social interaction, as the signal of wealth and profession, as an aid in the establishment of self-identity and self-esteem. *Aso-ebi* cloth remains a powerful tool for socialization, identification and a reflection of cultural values.



Name: Owanbe Celebrations

Aso-ebi became an important contributor to Nigeria dress culture after 1930 especially with a plethora of local festivals, traditions, ceremonies and celebration of achievements. It has become a symbol, the connotation of Nigeria identity; a guest's VIP ticket or identity

card and indicative of the wearer's group membership or position within a group. In order to understand *Aso-ebi* phenomenon adequately, it is necessary to devise a definition of the term *Aso ebi* fabrics, fashion, and artisanal industries.

***Aso-ebi* Fabric/Fashion**

Fashion is a complex concept.¹⁰ Style is defined as “a characteristic or distinctive mode or method of expression in the field of some art and fashion as the prevailing style at any given time.” In Nigeria, commemorative events have become an avenue to demonstrate one's wealth, style and fashion vogue. The rich outfitted the various ranks in appropriate fashion styles and vogue (haute couture to traditional clothing) in occasions as they spend huge amounts on *Aso-ebi* clothing and fashion accessories. *Aso-ebi* textiles range from traditionally woven materials, Adire (traditional tie-dyed cloth) to elaborate and exotic natural and synthetic fabrics that are going through innovations and creativity. The fabrics include: Ankara prints, Da Viva, Java, Silk, Indian Madras (George), guinea brocade, The Real Dutch Wax prints, *Aso-oke* woven fabrics and different lace materials from different parts of the world and they create an effortless illusion of the customized proportioned figure, class, and exclusivity.

Ankara Prints (African Wax Prints): The word *Ankara* is derived from *Adinkara*, the name by which cotton prints from Ghana are known.¹¹ *Ankara*, as the Nigeria local prints are known, is fast assuming both national and international identification. *Ankara* is an appellation given to “The Real Dutch Wax” imitations and it has become the *Aso-ebi* vogue in most occasions in Nigeria and beyond. It is mass produced, provides access to digitized fabrics that are embellished with portraits and graphic images and they are relatively cheaper than hand woven fabrics. The recognition and acceptance of Ankara have generated great demand for the fabrics giving rise to many textile companies in the 80s.



Name: Nigerian Printed Fabrics

They include: Aswani Textiles, Afprint, Five Star, Nigeria Textiles Mills Plc, Kaduna Textiles Limited (KTL), Arewa Textiles, Unitex Textile, Asaba Textile Mills and United Nigeria Textile Limited (UNTL). However, UNTL and Da viva Prints remained a household name in Nigeria till date because of quality, aesthetics and durability. (Thisday of Feb. 3, 2008). Contemporary, wonderfully versatile Ankara prints has taken over the

fashion industry as African designs and manufacturing potential have become prominent in the global fashion scene. Both the national and international designers are creating styles to set the catwalks running for a long time.

Each *Aso-ebi* cloth comes with a price tag between # 1,500 to #25,000 for Ankara prints such as: *London wax* (A. Brunnschweiler company of Hyde, Manchester, England), *Fancy wax*, *Star wax*, *Java print*, *Asian wax* (Chinese), *the imitation Javanese batik wax prints in West Africa* and *The Real Dutch wax prints* (Vlisco Company of Helmond, Netherlands). The Real Dutch Wax is known locally as (*Abada*) the word *Abada* mean “durable cloth” in Delta / Edo State region and as (*Hollandaise*) in the Eastern region of Nigeria. Due to their aesthetic interest, quality and polychromatic hues, the prints are sold within the range of #18,000 to #25,000 each.

Aso-oke: Aso oke is a short form of Aso Ilu Oke also known as Aso-ofi meaning clothes from the upcountry. Weaving on both the upright single-heddle loom and the narrow strip double-heddle is, without the doubt, one of the most successful artistic traditions in Nigeria. Clarke maintains that the tradition of *aso-oke* weaving inherited from the upheavals of the 19th century is centred on three prestige cloths: *etu*, *sanyan* and *alaari* as they are generally called in Yoruba land. These fall under the category of Aso-ofi (ofi means loom). These clothes are still associated with a deep sense of respect for tradition and a consciousness of identity as Yoruba's. Contemporary, there is lace *aso-oke*, net *aso-oke*, silk *aso-oke* and other exotic types. These woven clothes remain at the center of *Aso-oke* tradition; *Sanyan* and *alaari* are the most respectable, costly and prestigious form of clothes for special occasions. They are reserved for special occasions where dignified dressing is required to express strong communal and solidarity effect. The price tag is #2, 000 - #25, 000 each.

Lace Fabrics: These delicate vintage inspired laces are the exclusive fabrics for societal pacesetters. Lace fabrics were created to make clothing more attractive and to enhance aesthetic. Laces such as: *French Laces*, *Swiss Voile*, *Austrian laces*, *Italian laces* and Nigerian laces. It ranges from #2, 000 to #500, 000 for five yards of lace material and head tie. Industrially produced lace; embroideries, initially produced from the Austrian province of Vorarlberg and Switzerland, became in vogue in post-independence Southern Nigeria till date. Lace trend is a Nigerian expression of a tradition of another culture that has been adopted and acculturated. Contemporary, there is a break away from classical laces to polychromatic background laces and different types are available: knotted lace, knitted lace, crocheted lace and needle lace.

Aso-ebi Fashion

Yoruba Traditional Weaving.¹² Yoruba women generally use *Aso-ebi* in a number of ways which can be casual or ceremonial. The traditional vogue of Yoruba women's outfit consists of four segments: the *buba* (blouse), the *iro* (wrap skirt), the *gele* (head tie/wrap), and the *ipele* or *iborun* (shoulder sash).



Aso Oke Woven Fabric



Women Wearing Traditional Attire

However, the present trends are a fusion of different styles from all over the world. Fashion designers, seamstresses and tailors use the fabric to create customized skirt and blouse which is a favourite among women and the styles are timeless and classic. Also, The Niger Delta women; tie two wrappers with customized lacy blouses for *Aso-ebi*. Contemporary Ankara prints, *Aso oke* and assorted local and foreign lace are blended with fabrics like organza, satin, taffeta, raw silk and dry lace and are further embellished with stones, beads and sequins to enhance aesthetics.

The South-West and Northern Nigeria,¹³ men wear a complete dress consisting of *Buba* (top) and *Sokoto* (trouser), handcrafted traditional attires like *Agbada* or *babariga* (large embroidered flowing gown) and *fila* (cap) while *Chieftaincy*, now known as Niger Delta or Senator, *Woko*, *Doni*, *Isi-agu* and *Etibo* (eight bob) are the traditional wears of the South-South and South-East geopolitical zone, Nigeria. Today, *Aso ebi* tradition is a money spinning venture for the bride's family or the celebrant saddled with the responsibility of entertaining, giving gifts to invited guests and artisanal industries



Agbada Fashion



Contemporary Fashion



Customized Skirt and Blouse

Artisanal Industries

5 maintain that by 2008, a new form of artisanal industries that lunched *Aso ebi* concept into a more cosmopolitan, and modernizing. Artisanal handicraft is a production process characterized by minimal automation, the production of items completely by hand that are functional or decorative in nature and requires one or more art practitioners. The emergence of state economies known as 'event organize' created employment opportunities for textile merchants, event decorators, catering, fashion designers, fashion accessories sellers, photographers, supermodels, event managers, magazine vendors, furniture, car rentals, events/hotels, architecture, escort/ushering services, sound management, DJs, MCs, security, and other service providers.

These state economies facilitate quick services; affordable price, and business effectiveness of an event organizer because event planning is a network oriented venture. 13 sees event organizer as one who undertakes innovations with finance and business acumen in an effort to transform innovation into economic goods and services. Thus, employment creation, wealth generation, increased competition, increasing productivity and poverty alleviation are some of the positive impacts of *Aso ebi* practice in artisanal industries.

UNESCO and 14 emphasize that 'the term 'cultural industries' is almost interchangeable with the concept of 'creative industries' cultural industries therefore involves those industries whose inspiration are derived from heritage, traditional knowledge, and the artistic elements of creativity while creative industry places emphasize on individual creativity, culture, economy or heritage-related nature.

Mrs. Titilayo and Mrs. Kate Ogunbadero, both fashion designers assert that, *Aso ebi* concept has promoted sales, increased patronage and place Nigerian traditional attires in the global market. Mrs. Aluko a caterer buttressed that the catering business is very lucrative and highly profitable while Mrs. Braid, a textile retailer confirmed that *Aso ebi* practice encourages high patronage, opening new markets, contributing to economic advancement and social empowerment of many Nigerians.



Celebrant and well-wishers in an Event Center



Decorated Event Center

Aso-Ebi as Tool for Socialization

Table 1: Psychological Responses

S/N	Physiological Response	SA	A	N	D	SD
		21%	21%	21%	21%	21%
1	Does the wearing of <i>aso-ebi</i> fabric increase the financial base of the celebrants?	5	5	3	2	5
2	Does the wearing of <i>aso-ebi</i> fabric among family and friends promote unity, affection and solidarity?	5	9	3	2	1
3	The wearing of <i>aso-ebi</i> can it enhances socialization of all classes of people?	2	11	1	5	1
4	Apart from the celebrants, does textiles retailers benefit from <i>aso-ebi</i> culture?	13	5	1	0	1
5	Will <i>aso-ebi</i> fashion facilitate entrepreneurship practice in Nigeria?	8	9	1	1	1
6	Can <i>aso-ebi</i> culture promote 'self-reliance' or technology for knowledge?	8	6	3	2	1
7	Does the sewing of <i>aso-ebi</i> cloth add financial values to Nigerian fashion industries?	10	9	0	1	0
8	Accessories sellers do they benefit from <i>aso-ebi</i> culture?	9	7	0	4	0
9	Entertainment industries do they benefit from <i>aso-ebi</i> tradition?	4	7	3	5	1
10	Is <i>aso-ebi</i> culture a leveller of all classes of people?	3	6	3	5	1
11	Will <i>aso-ebi</i> culture encourage the increase in production of indigenous textile industries?	13	6	0	1	1
12	Does <i>aso-ebi</i> fashion encourage creativity among celebrants and guests?	5	10	3	1	0
13	Is <i>aso-ebi</i> fashion an aspect of creativity that is required for economic growth?	4	9	1	5	0
14	Can the weaving of innovative woven fabrics promotes Nigerian dress cultural and fosters its appreciation?	5	13	0	1	1
15	Will it provide employment opportunities for fashion/textile practitioners?	7	11	1	0	1
16	Can <i>aso-ebi</i> fashion consciousness lead to creative exploration of a new design direction?	8	8	1	2	0
17	Will <i>aso-ebi</i> practice foster efficient weaving tradition in Nigeria in particular and the art world in general?	3	7	5	3	2
18	<i>Aso-ebi</i> culture can it promote textile cottage industries in Nigeria?	5	11	2	0	2
19	Will occasions not be colourful and glamorous without the wearing of <i>aso-ebi</i> uniforms?	7	5	2	5	1
20	The wearing of <i>aso-ebi</i> will increase the production of <i>Adire</i> and <i>Batik fabric</i> ?	7	6	2	4	1

Source: Author's Field Work, 2015

*NOTE: SD- Strongly Disagree, D- Disagree, ID- Indifference, A- Agree, SA- Strongly Agree

Analyses of the questionnaire

The analysis is based on a Likert scale of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Add all the numbers = 15. Divide by the Likert number 5. $15/5=3$ this gives a cut off mean of 3. Any mean of 3 and above is agreed while a cut off mean below 3 disagrees. Use the total respondents on each scale to multiply the scale number and divide by the total respondents of the questionnaire e.g. $60/20=3$

QUST	5	4	3	2	1	Total	Mean	% (5, 4 & 3)
1	25	20	9	4	5	63/20	3.15	34.02
2	25	36	9	4	1	75/20	3.75	52.5
3	10	44	3	10	1	68/20	3.4	38.76
4	65	20	3	0	1	89/20	4.45	78.32
5	40	36	3	2	1	82/20	4.1	64.78
6	40	24	9	4	1	78/20	3.9	56.94
7	50	36	0	2	0	88/20	4.4	75.68
8	45	27	0	8	0	80/20	4.0	57.6
9	20	27	9	10	1	67/20	3.35	37.52
10	15	24	9	10	1	59/20	2.95	28.32
11	65	24	0	2	1	92/20	4.6	81.88
12	25	40	9	2	0	76/20	3.8	56.24
13	20	36	3	10	0	69/20	3.45	40.71
14	25	52	0	2	1	80/20	4.0	61.6
15	35	44	3	0	1	83/20	4.15	68.06
16	40	32	3	4	0	79/20	3.95	59.25
17	15	27	15	6	2	65/20	3.25	37.05
18	25	44	6	0	2	70/20	3.85	57.75
19	35	20	6	10	1	72/20	3.6	43.92
20	35	24	6	8	1	74/20	3.7	48.1

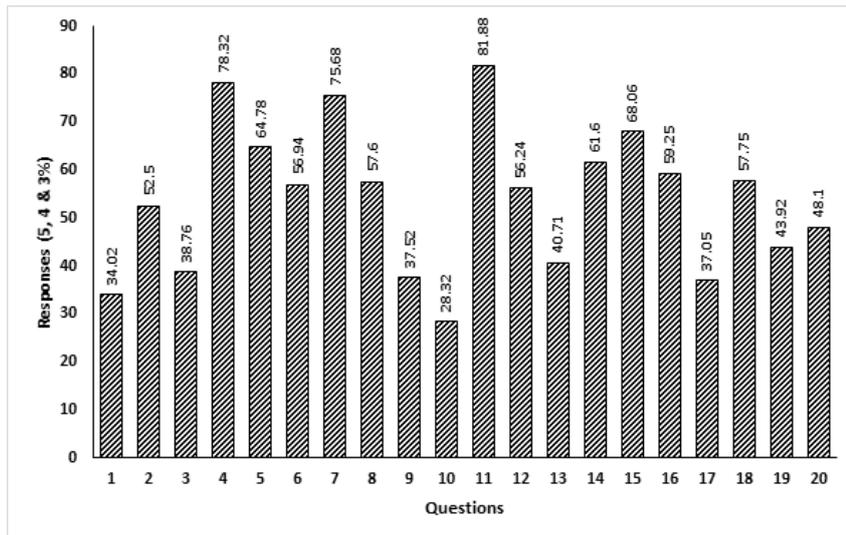


Chart showing responses of 5, 4 & 3 to questions 1 through 20

The data analyses of the questionnaire revealed that 34.02% of the respondents to question 1 agreed that wearing of *aso-ebi* fabric increases the financial base of the celebrants, 56.24% of respondents to question 12 agreed that it encourages creativity among celebrants and guests and 52.50% of question 2 accepted that the wearing of *aso-ebi* fabric among family and friends promote unity, affection and solidarity. The results also revealed that *aso-ebi* fashion is an aspect of creativity that is required for economic growth (40.71% question 13).

Question 11 has the highest positive response (81.88%) indicating that the textile industry benefits more from *aso-ebi* culture, inferring that *aso-ebi* culture encourages the increase in production of indigenous textile industries. This is closely followed by questions 4 and 7, which indicates that apart from the celebrants, textiles retailers benefit from *aso-ebi* culture (78.32% question 4) and the sewing of *aso-ebi* cloth add financial values to Nigerian fashion industries (75.68% question 7). 64.78% of respondents to question 5 agreed that *aso-ebi* fashion, facilitate entrepreneurship practice in Nigeria. 56.94% responded affirmatively to question 6 that *aso-ebi* culture can promote 'self-reliance' or technology for knowledge. 59.25% of question 16 accepted that *aso-ebi* fashion consciousness can lead to creative exploration of a new design direction and 57.75% of question 18 affirmed that *Aso-ebi* culture can promote textile cottage industries in Nigeria. The results further revealed that the wearing of *Aso-ebi* will increase the production of *Adire* and *Batik fabric* (48.10% question 20)

61.60% of respondents to question 14 agreed that the weaving of innovative woven fabrics can promote the Nigerian dress culture and fosters its appreciation while 68.06% of respondents to question 15 agreed that it will provide employment opportunities for fashion/ textile practitioners.

The mean of question 10 is below 3 indicating a negative response, hence; from the Likert scale, respondents rejected the idea that *Aso-ebi* culture is a leveller of all classes of people. 28.32% of respondents to question 10 support this fact.

Conclusion

The Yoruba people of South-West Nigerian have developed distinctive fashion vogue to communicate and to enhance cultural practice. It was a cultural practice for sociological and economic relevance restricted to family members only; however, it has become a national phenomenon has become a national phenomenon, embracing sartorial practices, state economies, and stimulating commerce in all sectors.

The use of commemorative (*Aso-ebi*) cloth for social events denotes unity in solidarity, social identification and cultural authentication for the celebrant and the family members. Dressing in commemorating cloth assists in the re-establishment of the essential structure of the strengthening of deep-rooted affection among age grade system, friends and relatives. It gives a sense of purpose and self-identification which translates to fulfill; the actual aim of attending the event.

Economically, *Aso-ebi* culture has become a source of social wealth creation for celebrants and state economies by supporting growing employment opportunities, stimulating commerce for textile industry, textile distributors, fashion designers, and cultural tourist expenditure. Apart from income generation benefits, longer lasting, more sustainable socioeconomic benefits are derived from extolling bond in communities by increasing integrative functions and social connections. According to ¹⁴ “it's that social impart that leads to the arts, having a socioeconomic impact”

Nevertheless, *Aso-ebi* culture has the ability to contribute immensely to the dynamics of the socioeconomic milieu, it's a mean of demonstrating group solidarity, social identification and it has become an important dress vogue in many social ceremonies in Nigeria. *Aso-ebi* fashion is, therefore, a crowning achievement of textile traditions that reflects an individual's: culture, personality, preference, innovation and creativity that create socioeconomic value for the celebrant and the society. The approach here is evaluative and is to ensure the socioeconomic values and promotion of African commemorative in its highest and widest conception, to bring to light the diverse contributions of commemorative clothes to the celebrant/society and universal current in contemporary fashion/textiles vogue. *Aso ebi* fashion is, therefore, a crowning achievement of textile traditions that add value to the celebrant and the society.

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