

Sacred Textiles of the Yorubas of South Western Nigeria

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Abstract: Sacred textiles are textiles products or materials that are used for spiritual purposes. This type of textile product is consecrated and cannot be used for secular activities non-related to divinity or a god. Sacred textiles are used for spiritual functions in different religions and in different areas of the world. Most of the sacred textiles around the world are ancient materials in culturally rich areas of the world. Except for the traditional religion of each region, the major religions of the world originate from the eastern part of the world, countries Asia and some in Europe. This paper intends to explore sacred textiles of the Yoruba tribe in south western Nigeria.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The word sacred means esteemed due to sanctity and generally the state of being holy and perceived by religious individuals as associated with divinity and is used in relation to spiritual activities. It is something considered worthy of spiritual respect or devotion or inspiring awe or reverence among believers of the faith. A material is referred to as sacred once it is used for specific spiritual purposes, no material is sacred on its own. The purpose of which any material is been used makes it either sacred or not. There are many incredible antique fabrics available in spiritual studies. What makes a textile sacred is the intention it is made with the purposes it is used for. The culture and belief system of a region in which the religion originates from, in most cases determines the type of art produced by this religion. The sacred textiles of the religion of the eastern nation are known for bright colours such as red and yellow and are more of wall hangings of the image of the gods and sacred activities used in reverence of such gods. In Islam for example, the major arts produced are abstract or calligraphy with no depiction of any living thing, Christianity appreciates any form of art and allows for different artists to work within the body of the church. Several types of textiles are used in catholic ceremonies and other churches which assist worshippers in their religious devotion. Priests and Bishops wear vestment and the churches and alters are decorated with clothes, background paintings and hangings.

It has been observed by several authors that the origins of cloth production in Africa are lost in time, but archeological findings indicate some of the earliest sites. Tradition of cloth production and design bark cloth, or cloth made from tree bark predates the development of woven textiles in most parts of Africa. Today, it is hardly used for day to day clothing, but some societies use it for ceremonial costumes. In South-Western Nigeria, the Yoruba religious textiles are used in a range of practices and reflect a variety of religious experiences and events, for example, hand beaded textiles which ranges from ragged and faded cloths to brightly coloured, elaborately pieced textiles which are mostly used by masquerades.

The fundamental importance of textiles in Yoruba traditional religious belief is evident in the description of Olodumare, the Yoruba Supreme Being as essentially white object or white material (Akinwumi, 1981). The sacred textiles of these gods are ornamented with cultural objects such as cowrie, horn, gourd, shell, beads and feather. Textiles also play an important role in Christian worship by Yoruba men and women particularly in the dress of church leaders, disciples, and parishioners and in constituting a Yoruba Muslim identity. A shift to the use of tailored textiles was part of the conversion process of both religions. It is agreed that cloth or fabric is equated in Yoruba land of Nigeria with their most precious possession, children the proverb "omo-l'aso eda" which roughly translates "Children are the clothes (covering) of a person" points out that children, like clothes are what is shown to the world and are judged accordingly (Fitzgerald, Henry, & Okediji, 1995). Valuable textiles are what Yoruba use to celebrate the power and presence of their ancestors in exquisite masquerade ensembles known as egungun.

Why sacred textiles?

The pervasive use of textiles as dress, as altar cloths, and a sacred object in religious worship is expressive of the character (*Iwa*) in Yoruba language of a person and objects associated with them. Yet, other more general characteristics of cloth also contribute to their appropriateness as vehicle of religions belief and practice. First, according to Aremu, (1997), is because textiles are flexible they come close into contact with human body, and indeed sometimes referred to as “sacred skin”, they can also be used as wraps, drapes and also to cover the bodies of religious leaders and followers, as well as actors, trees, and shrines suggesting a unity between them. Secondly, the making of textiles may be incorporated into religious worship itself in many parts of the world whether woven, dyed, printed or embellished are valued by communities as cultural, sacred objects and uses in ritual or ceremonial occasions cloth considered as a sacred item has been used since ages as offering to the gods and to adorn them. Yoruba ritual specialists require the weaving of certain cloth within a prescribed period of time.

The absorbent quality of hand woven cotton in Yoruba land makes it an excellent medium for dyeing and printing messages and icons in a wide range of colors. Cotton cloth could be soaked in medicinal concoction’s to strengthen and protect the wearer, who contributes his own sweat into the cloth, reinforcing a connection between the wearer and the cloth.

The masquerade deity is popular among the south western Yorubas, almost every community of the Yoruba clan have their distinct masquerade deity. The masquerade is believed to be from heaven popularly called ‘*ara orun*’. The Yoruba believes that the spirit comes into the clothing to perform some functions and return after such functions have been completed. The type of textile fabric or clothing used by this deity is very unique and cannot be seen on any normal person. The clothing of the masquerade is composed of a mask and different articles of cloth adorned with various cultural objects. The choice of this clothing is because of the belief that the masquerade deity is of the celestial realm, the patches of cloth used are of different colours making the masquerade clothing full of colours. Sacrifices are offered for/to the costume or clothing and the headdress before they are worn. It was mentioned that the amulet holds medicinal preparations which have the performativity power called “*ase*”. It provides protection against enemies at a time when the transformed person is vulnerable. The main protective amulets according to the author, however are on the inside of the costume, not outside. The *egungun costumes* serve as a link to the ancestral spirit. Some of these costumes are very colorful and attractive, while some are very fearful and repellant. Rituals are performed and incantations are also chanted to pacify the ancestral spirits believed to reside in the costume.



Figure 1: Masquerade outfits



Figure 2: masquerade outfits

Ademuleya, (2002)observed that Yoruba clothing and textiles fulfill a variety of social and symbolic purposes. The author further notes that these clothes function for specific spiritual uses or for prestige. Apart from the functional uses of textiles among the Yoruba, there are other prestige values attached to textiles and clothing as their artistic and aesthetic importance, religious and sacred implications and authority and power of royal usage.

However, it must be stressed that this classification is only for analytical convenience, because Yoruba generally do not see these two worlds as distinct and separate, but rather as merging or overlapping into each other. The ancestral spirits are those family members who have departed from earth, but continue their existence in a higher realm. They are actually venerated, honored and approached for help, but never worshipped. In line with this belief, the dead are given befitting and honorable burials, especially those who die at an old age. The Yoruba also believe in reincarnation, that is, a departed family member who was loved and respected will be born again into the same family they left behind on earth. The ancestral spirits may also come back to earth at certain times of the year, through *egungun* masquerades.



Figure 3 : masquerade outfits

Sacred textiles of the Yoruba palaces

Ileke is a bead used for the *yeye osun* which is sacred and could be used as other beads being worn by chiefs, but it must not be worn when one is going to have his or her bath, also it is a taboo to put it on and have sexual intercourse. The *oba* crowns are equally sacred and most at times, it must not be worn for more than two hours. History dictates that only the reigning *Ooni* must not look inside the crown because any attempt to do so would result in him joining his ancestors. *Ifa* oral tradition reveals that the crown is very heavy (about 70kg) and it is believed that the *Ooni* of Ife is spiritually empowered to wear it during the Olojo festival which occurs once a year, the crown is too heavy for him to bear on any other day. Maybe that is why he could only use it for just two hours. The *aare*'s crown is specially made of 151 items part of which is cutlass and hoe. The crown is said to have 5 sensory organs like every human being.



Figure 4: an Oba's crown

Among the Yoruba, religion has less influence on daily life than does the culture. Marriage and friendship are common between those of different faiths. Each religion however, has its daily ritual observance; Muslims heed the call to pray five times daily. Those practicing the traditional religion are aware of the '*orishas*' involvement in daily life. Art reflecting the gods, goddesses and ancestors can be seen in households and throughout the towns. These manifestations of higher powers are often prayed to or worshipped in return for blessing



Figure 5: Oba's regalia and crown



Figure 6: Women during an Osun festival

II. CONCLUSION

The major type of design that can be seen in South western Nigeria community are abstract designs, any attempt on depiction of living things will be deliberately altered to make such living thing abstract, they believe that evil spirits have power of possessing any artwork depicting a living creature and is what influences the kind of design an artist does. Though, because of the influence from western culture, artists now depict living creatures, but in designing cultural things, this law is still very much considered. The dynamics of change, adaptation and continuity largely account for the resilience of the traditions it was this ability to accept challenges and incorporate changes into existing cultural belief system and practices which led them to accept factory made modern textiles as appropriate for sacred and traditional uses. Textiles are nevertheless regarded as important expression of cultural values. Ademuleye (2002) observed that Yoruba textiles and clothing fulfill a variety of social and symbolic purposes. The author noted that when they function for specific ritual or religious use or for prestige, these clothing provides considerable information on the wearers personality and social status. Akinwumi, (1990) in his discussion of *aso-ebi* revealed how clothing could give information about the nature of events attended by the wearer. For example, marriage ceremony, burial or religious ceremonies. Apart from the functional use of textiles among the Yoruba, there are other prestige values attached to textiles and clothing as their artistic and aesthetic importance, religious and sacred implications and authority and power of royal usage.

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