

Colonialism and Transformations in Yoruba Traditional Attires: The Lagos Experience

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Abstract

The place of dress in human society has continued to arouse research-based interests, as a social issue. While some scholars have written on traditional attires and other social aspects of Lagos life, little has been documented on the impact of colonialism on traditional attires. This study focuses on the history of dresses in Lagos, especially the transformations in traditional attires synonymous with the city during the colonial period. The paper adopts historical narrative and multidisciplinary approaches to argue that the coming of the British influenced Lagos to a significant degree with the large number of repatriates from Sierra Leone, Brazil, and Cuba. As such, colonial Lagos witnessed a flirtation of varied dress cultures and transformations which at some point even threatened Yoruba traditional attires, given the introduction of western parse-garments, hats, makeup, shoes and other accessories; up to the point that Lagosians then, mostly youths, were wearing clothes more for the purpose of fashion rather than for covering. In all, the study is a revisit on Yoruba traditional attires in the context of the transformations which almost wipe them off in colonial Lagos.

Keywords: Yoruba traditional attires, Colonialism, Transformation, Lagos, Culture and identity

Introduction

Colonialism has been defined in various ways by different scholars depending on how it occurs to them. Some viewed it from the economic point of view while some from political others also from social/cultural, this study tends to look at colonialism from the social/cultural perspective. It seems generally, if not universally agreed that colonialism is a form of domination - the control of individuals or groups.¹ It has also been seen as a cultural-change process in anthropology, part of what is going to be considered in the study. So in all, colonialism is a term giving to the actions of some certain European countries' head, who at a point in time went out in search of places (other countries) to subjugate and control, in this process there was a kind of cultural interaction and domination.

In discussing the socio-cultural values of a people, scholars often omit (be it intentional or unintentional) some major aspects that bring out the beauty and uniqueness in the traditions of the people. The Nigerian society just like other societies has her own cultural heritage which describes the inhabitant of the society most. One of such is the traditional attires of the people, which is inherited, and through which the people could trace the origin and period of particular events in their history.

The place of dress in the society has been an aspect that has aroused the interests of scholars and researchers as a social issue. Though some scholars have written on traditional attires and other social aspect of the Lagos people, little or no visible acknowledgement have been given to the effect of colonialism on traditional attires of the Lagos people. This study is then situated to focus on this social area that has been neglected in the studied past of the people in Nigeria, with regards to Lagos people. The existing works dwelt so much on topics like dress and identity in Yorubaland, dress and status in Lagos 19th century, among other issues. This study views the various dynamics in traditional attires that have took place during colonial Lagos. The Style of dresses is a topic that have not

¹ Horvath (1972)

been studied. Changes with time makes such study historical and relevant.

This study focuses on the history of dress among the Lagos people, especially the transformations in traditional attire, which has been synonymous with the city of Lagos during the period of study. Though attire when defined is a comprehensive concept which goes beyond just cloth to include other body adornments, therefore for the sake of this study attire would be limited to cloth, that is to say traditional cloth/dress.

The Lagos people in the study is used to refer to the Yoruba inhabitants of Lagos and part of the old western region (areas such as Ojota, Ikeja, Dopemu, Agege, etc), as well as the indigenous people of Lagos who are generally been called the Awori, this to include both men and women, since Lagos is a metropolitan city which accommodated various people within and outside Nigeria. These are the people the study refers to as the Lagos people or Lagosian

Traditional Lagos Attire before Colonialism

Before the advent of the Europeans, Lagosians, men and women who to a very large extent took their origin from the Yoruba race, clothed themselves in the most traditional way. The styles of winding cloth about the body varied including a wrapper worn by women, drawn up under the arms, and a wrapper worn by men, drawn between the legs. As far back as 1300, the city of Oyo-Ile a very major Yoruba settlement in the pre-colonial era, was known logically to be the probable centre of clothing styles and development and probably played as a link with Sudan, an important role in the introduction of flowing gowns and embroidery patterns from the ancient cities of Northern Nigeria and from further afield in North Africa, this which aided greatly what constituted the traditional Yoruba attire even in the pre-colonial period. So therefore, the traditional clothing became a blend of preferences of beads coiffure and wrappers inherited from antiquity, with styles received from other places. The existence of these traditional Lagos attires therefore indicates that there was a way of life on ground even prior to the coming of the colonialist. That is to say the people have their local wears which was either imported from

other places within Nigeria or sown within; there was the availability of local materials which were sown into local styles.

The Lagos people, as an inhabitant of coastal tropical fringe, clothe themselves in *agbada* (loose flowing clothes) often reaching the knees and well embroidered costumes of fine fabrics. They consist, in the main, of fabrics such as *alari* (crimson dye cloth), *sanyan* (rough silk), *aso-oke* (hand-woven textile) and *kent*. Tie and die batik materials, the *adire* are equally widespread. All these traditional textiles were made into different styles for both male and female in the traditional Lagos. As confirmed in an interview with an old tailor at Lagos island, he said according to what he heard from older generations who were tailors too, all the youth in traditional Lagos wore the native cloth, which was made from materials such as *aso-oke*, *saflet*, *adire*, and so on, and sown into different styles, and these styles in the traditional Lagos were limited, only the common *buba*, *iro* and *sokoto*.²

During the colonial Lagos period, there were three major types of cloth materials; the first was the *kijipa*, which is defined by its heaviness; any heavy weight and coarsely woven cotton cloth produced on broad looms, and could be sown into different styles was called *kijipa*. This was often used as job dress (such as farming and as household duties wear) for Yoruba men and women. This kind of cloth was often dyed before weaving and in most cases also referred to as *alaro*. Though the attire was not a major produce of the Lagos people, some of it were gotten from the Yoruba hinterland and sown in Lagos. The second was the *aso alapasa*, this was identified through plain or patterned strip-clothes which were characteristically light weight and produced on narrow band looms. It was mostly used by adult male. The third type was the *adire*, which involves any resist dyed indigo patterned cloth, mostly associated with females.³

² Interview conducted with an old tailor, Alhaji Sahdu of Lagos Island, Lagos State on the 3 of August, 2014.

³ Interview conducted with an old tailor, Alhaji Sahdu of Lagos Island, Lagos State on the 3 of August, 2014.

In addition to these local clothes, the people, particularly the ruling class, for some time has gained access to European textile materials; this was when the Europeans were involved in the legitimate trade with Africans before the establishment of colonial rule. The clothes imported included linen and woollen materials which were brought into the West African Coast in the 16th century. In the 17th century, there was textile merchandise which included clothes of gold and silver, scarlet and red clothes, glazed chintzes with large flowers, gold and silver brocade, calicoes and red velvet, all these made up the kind of dress worn at this period aside the hand-woven clothes. From among the clothes imported, velvet appears to be the most expensive and highly ranked, and velvet was one of the fabrics almost certainly destined for the ruling class at this point, and were gifted to some of the Lagos traditional rulers alongside damask cloth. An instance is the case of Oba Dosumu of Lagos, who was seen to gracefully use slippers made of velvet materials in 1875. Damask material, though next highly ranked to velvet was also used by the chiefs.⁴

At this juncture, we will be discussing and describing the different styles of cloth and materials worn by the Lagos people male and female in the pre-colonial era. To start with, we will be looking at the female gender traditional attire in Lagos. Generally for the female youth in Lagos, *iro/iobirin* (wrappers), *buba* (native blouse) and *gele* (head gear), usually a band of 1.5m material style in different forms, shades and sizes together with a *ipele* (shoulder shawl), *sinmi* (underwear), *tobi* (apron with safe) and *iborun* (head shawl) constitute the female wear. For traditional female and royal personage, other body adornments like beads among others were in vogue.⁵

It must be noted that, for the young Yoruba traditional female dress style in Lagos, it is often classified into two, which include the 'unmarried' and 'married'. In traditional Lagos, there were huge differences or changes in the way the females dress. Unlike the case now, in which one might not be able to tell if a lady is married or not,

⁴ Akinwumi (1990)

⁵ Sonuga (1987)

there emerged just slight differences in the way the married and unmarried women dress.

For the Lagos single women, their attire consisted mainly of the *buba*, *irobirin tobi/yeri* and *lagidigba*, while the most common traditional dress for the female was the wrapper. There was the ‘buba’ (a short top) made of a light material, and the *iro* (a large wrapper), tied around the waist or above the breasts. The *buba* used was made from a square or rectangle of cloth with opening or the head in the middle. The wide sleeves falling between elbows and wrists were rectangle sewn into two sides of the *buba*. The material was cut wide, so that shoulder seams fall off the shoulder. This means that the old *buba* was a very loose cool garment and hence admirable appropriate for tropical wear. It was tucked into *iro* (the wrapper), and also in other cases was left out if the weather is hot or if the woman is pregnant or nursing. Women traditionally wear an undergarment known as the *tobi* (short skirt), now replaced by variety of western underwear. The *tobi* was like an apron, tied around the waist with a band and reaching the knees. This *tobi* or *yeri* which went under the two clothes of the young girl was originally worn as sole attire by the young Lagos girls until puberty, and marriage, after marriage, this was said to still be used whilst working on the farm. Young female were given the waist beads (*lagidigba*). The beads were worn underneath the cloth passed over their hips when they were older and began to wear *tobi* or *yeri*, this was a strip of cloth sewn on to a band, which could be a flat strip of cloth or a pleated piece. As for the down wear, the young female wore skirt-cloth (*irobirin*); it was a long wrapper like cloth made from just over 5m of the cloth, wrapped over the brief undergarment. It was wrapped to the side in a draped style, its width sufficient to cover the calves or even the ankles. Married women added a second cloth, tied over the first one. By being tied higher, it covered the breasts and exposed the under cloth beneath it. This second cloth was used to support the woman’s baby on her back. There was also the *iborun* (head shawl), a smaller cloth was folded and laid over the left shoulder.

The traditional Lagos’ married women attire was an indication of the attitude of their husbands, that is to say the women do not have

an independent choice of what they appear in, they dress according to the choice of their husbands, this which limited their choice of expression through their attires. Traditionally for a wealthy man who has more than one wife, he will see to it that his wives are well-dressed, this was an exhibition and expression of his wealth, status and achievements, particularly when his wives were not engaged in any commercially productive labour. Despite this, he would not want the women to be more ostentatiously dressed than himself, and possibly this was one of the reasons why women's costume has always been so much simpler than that of men in the traditional Lagos settings.⁶

Basically the married women attire was almost the same with the unmarried with major differences such as first the *ipele*, this was the smaller waist cloth, which was about three yards in length. This cloth was what differentiated the married women in traditional Lagos from the unmarried. The *ipele* was tied around the waist and was knotted in front to support the wrapper and sometimes a small baby when backed. So knotted it could be untied quickly should the infant need to be released. While being tied, it supported the wrapper. There is also the *iborun* which is a third piece added to the female's attire, the *iborun*, a shawl covering the back or head or simply tied around the waist, and sometimes used as a covering on the left shoulder, (this also which later became symbolic of the fact that the woman should work no evil with her left hand). All can be of the same material and colour, but, this will be in its most simple form. For ceremonies, the combinations were elegant and beautiful.⁷ The decorative usage of the *iborun* as well, compares with moments when women took off their shawl (often observed during festivals) and spread the cloth apart in their hands as a kind of banner of dignity, decorating the dance and the occasion with the unfurling of the attire.⁸ In some other cases, the *oja* (sash) could be included to the women's traditional attire; it was

⁶ Negri (March, 1962)

⁷ Falola (2001)

⁸ Interview conducted with Mr. Ajayi Ladi (Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture) on the 20th of August, 2014

worn over the *buba* and *iro* for decoration, or as money-carrying sash, in which the market woman tied together coins and bills as she receives them. This was known as *opoo*

As of the traditional Lagos, there was the traditional fabric used as an outfit by the female, which is the *aso-oke*. This is the local home-spun cotton cloth woven by men and women, as narrow-strip cloth. It is usually woven with vertical stripes in different colours on the background colour. Even at this point, there was a taste for colour and the people had excellent taste in combining colours and successfully mixed several subtle shapes. All kinds of blue are used as well as crimson and white, and these were dye applied to these textiles. Young married girls assume an air of responsibility when they wear formal outfits.⁹

As for the men, generally, they wore *buba* (men's blouse) and *sokoto* (long trouser) with *fila* (cap) made into different styles. The various styles of native wear worn by the Lagos men include *dandogo*, *suliya*, *oyala*, *gbariye* and *dansiki*. The types were determined by size and design, the lightest and smallest was the *suliya*, which reaches just below the knee. It is open on both sides, and the sleeve is ample. The *Suliya* was a Yoruba attire which was mostly fond of and much-patronised cloth worn by the traditional male of Lagos. It was of the family of *agbada* with a slight difference; while the *agbada* is fuller and longer, reaching to the ankle, the *suliya* does not have many of the slits as in the case of the *agbada*. Usually, *suliya* always had an under-vest *buba* and *soro* trousers; all the three were being made of the same material to make the whole dress blend. The *suliya* reaches a little below the knee. *Buba* has been the Lagosians' traditional shirt. This was the casual outfit class and was usually an incomplete dress without the *agbada* (*suliya* which stood as upper wear). The arm-length could be up to the wrist or sometimes much shorter. Every *buba* was slit in the centre for about a foot; buttons were inserted so that the open place does not constitute a cold-inviting dress. The trouser worn to it was usually of the same material and was the *soro* type.

⁹ Ashiwaju & Enem (1976)

The *gbariye* (also known as *girike*) was the biggest. It is a large, heavy, and well embroidered gown. It was strictly a ceremonial dress for the young men. The third is what is referred to as the *agbada*; this which has been in existence during this period is today the most popular gown (traditional) for men. It is equally large, reaching below the ankles, embroidered at the breast and neck, open on both sides, and fully covering the arm.¹⁰

Different kinds of northern style garments were adopted by the Yoruba men of Lagos and other Yoruba men and were given names, while others retained at least a part of their original Hausa name. The name *gbariye*, for instance meant 'with pleats' was a name given by the Yoruba people of Lagos to the attire, and as a result refers to a garment which grows wider at the hemline by means of the insertion of many wedge-shaped pleats or gussets. The *gbariye* was sown into several styles varying with the number of pleats inserted; it has a Bornu origin, but was adopted by the people of Lagos to suit their taste. Examples of the *gbariye* include the *gbariye onigba-awe* (textile with pleat), *alapa-adan* (bat wings) and *alapa-apo* (silk caterpillar cloth) worn by the men; they were also large gowns, with great wing-like sleeves added on to them. Their names were given base on the sleeves each possessed.

Dandogo was another style of cloth worn by the traditional Yoruba Lagos men, which derives its name from the Hausa name *dogo*, meaning 'getting larger'. It is another northern style garment imbibed in Lagos; it was a small gown which has grown larger through the insertion of the pleats. Most of the time in the past, this particular style of cloth was used to display wealth by the wearer, for instance, there was the old custom of displaying wealth by wearing these great gowns in layers one over the other, which meant that the weight of the total cloth was extremely great. Sometimes other times, styles of gowns and trousers were copied from European fabrics, and these might be lined with hand-woven *aso-oke* cloth.

Oyala was another cloth imbibed during the pre-colonial period by Lagos youth, and was often worn by them. This was of the

¹⁰ Falola (2001)

same look as the *suliya* but was not as big. This was also worn with an under wear, like the *buba*. It was not sown after the *agbada* or *dandogo* gaudy style but with the simplicity of the *suliya*.

The *dansiki* was not a big one, it was a kind belonging to the under vest on which bigger clothes could be worn. It usually has an open side and at times side pockets were attached to the right and left. Lagosians prefer the look of the same material, for either the two or three-piece dresses, which in many cases must be of the same design. At times the cap could be of the same design along with the ensemble. This makes a complete outfit for a Lagos man during this period.

Velvet and damask silk were the first set of European clothing materials imported into Lagos at the end of the 18th century, and later became the most popular fabrics for the rich in Lagos.¹¹ These materials were always sown to reach the ankle, and the style of trousers to it (of the same texture) was designed narrowly by the end of the trouser (the name *kamu* was given to it) which makes the men look smart. There was also an extra cloth attached to the shoulder if the blouse to make for the hands egresses and neck, this was not meant for the poor but, specially made for the rich.

The *sokoto* known as the trouser today comes in different lengths and shapes, all were held at the waist by a cloth cord, they were worn below the vests, which hid the waist and cord. The *sokoto* which varied a great deal and which some of its styles are no longer in fashion today consisted of the following styles *ladugbo*, *aibopo*, *alongo*, *kafo*, *kenbe*, *efa* and the *agadansi*. Each of these was being sown alongside the same material with the top. Each of these trousers either took the form of extremely wide, baggy drawers, tightened-in around the ankles, or narrower ones with close-fitting legs. A large wedge-shaped gusset was inserted between the leg sections of each type. A drawstring is inserted to pull up the fullness to fit the waist. The surplus fabric hung in large folds between the wearers' legs. The drawstring was a narrow cord woven especially for that purpose.¹²

¹¹ Ashiwaju & Enem (1976)

¹² Ashiwaju & Enem (1976)

The trousers were hand-woven attires, and since the cloth could later become rare, a wide circle of cloth was sewn, like six to ten inches of rough white material, through which ropes to tie the trouser to the waist, must run coming out at the middle of the hem of the trouser, in front. All the native trousers were tied to the body by twine or cloth strings sewn to serve such purpose.

The *ladugbo* and *aibopo* were free and loose pants that fit snugly around the knee where they terminate; these are both out of fashion. The *alongo* was styled to be tight in the down part of the trouser, which makes it look more like a sport garment. Warriors used to wear the *kafo*, it is tight-legged pants that reach the ankle. Nobles and wealthy youth prefer the *kembe sokoto*, embroidered at the leg cuffs. The *efa* was like the European trousers, but terminates below the knee. The last type which is the *agadansi*, stretches from the waist to the ankles, was well embroidered at the ankles. Traditionally, it is voluminous between the legs, like the Indian pants. The *agadansi* is still in fashion, but there has occurred changes, as the volume between the legs has now been much more reduced.¹³

All the styles of clothes mentioned were in vogue in the traditional Lagos, and in which the Lagosians (rich, average and poor) made use of it to cover their nakedness and showcase their appearance as well as their status and wealth at this point.

The 19th Century Transformations and the State of Traditional Attire

This period is most significant in the history of the Lagos people, because it was at this period that there came a large number of immigrants from outside and within Nigeria into the Lagos territory. At the emergence of the 19th century in Lagos, there came with it changes in the Lagosians way of life including most importantly the way they dress.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the imported northern attires had become fashionable in the south. Lagos chiefs and other rich important figures that converted to the Islamic faith wore these

¹³ Falola (2001).

gowns, whilst others adopted them because they were fashionable. Sometimes the large gowns were partly covered with a large wrapper of *aso-oke*, or by an enveloping northern burnouse-style cloak (known as *alkyabba*). This large cloak was made from expensive imported silk or velvet, heavily embroidered by hand with arabesque patterns in silver and gilt metallic threads. When Muslim style gowns were not being worn, European styles or the typically African-style cloth was seen. A large piece of cloth made from several strips of *aso-oke* joined together, was used as a wrapper passed about the body in various ways. This was worn formerly over a fine undergarment with sleeves, made from white material. The cloth might be knotted or thrown over the shoulder, crossed and knotted behind the neck, or draped about the hips. This wrapper was used alone over for bare torso, when worn informally in the home or compound.¹⁴

At this point in time as well, it was the fashion also to use the toga-like wrapper as a form of evening dress among the rich. The cloth designated for this particular style was a most costly one, woven only at Ilorin. The Ilorin cloth was composed of dozens of tiny strips of hand-woven cloth, each having excellent patterns worked into them in brilliant colours and black. Silk threads were woven with cotton ones to make the cloth. All the numerous fragments were sewn together like a beautiful patch-work effect. This cloth was worn draped over one shoulder, with a fine quality tunic-like undershirt of silk damask or excellent quality linen.¹⁵

On reaching the marriageable stage, the young men start wearing sleeveless tunic *kukumo* or *gberi* and a style of cloth similar to knickers, while within the household young women appeared in adult skirt 'yeri' and during outings in 'irobirin', to which could be added another wrapper cloth and *idiku*, a small head scarf.

Although foreign elements of the dress first entered Nigeria through the trade routes, trade developed with North Africa across the Sahara, and by the mid 15th century, Kano was becoming a great commercial centre drawing merchants from North Africa, the Western

¹⁴ Ashiwaju & Enem (1976)

¹⁵ Ashiwaju & Enem (1976).

Sudan and Bornu, who founded their way into Hausa land. These included fine clothes from North Africa, European cotton and silks, and other luxury items. As for the south in which Lagos is included, there were the secondary trade routes that led to the south and new ideas in dress travelled with goods.

From about the latter half of the 19th century, the growth of Islam and Christianity took place in Lagos with the introduction of these two religion, the early missionaries began to make attempts to differentiate their converts from non-convert, which came through the clothes put on. For instance the Christian converts started adopting western dress styles. Also visible among the Christians are the intra-religious dresses. For instance the choir in the church has their uniform which is different from the rest of the congregation's outfit. As for other denominations or churches, the 'white garment' phenomenon in the Celestial Church, and the Cherubim and Seraphim church, it has been indicated that differences in robes and sashes correspond to differences in the spiritual rank of the wearer Early Muslim converts and missionaries dressed in Arabic manners. The 'agbada' was associated with them coming from the north and mostly worn generally by both Christians and non-Christians.¹⁶

In an attempt to civilize the so-called pagans by introducing a 'superior religion' and literacy, the Muslim and Christian missionaries were at the par. Under the Christian and Islamic influence both the European style suit and the Hausa-style gown acquired a symbolic value denoting high status. There was the Muslim gown like the European jacket; it supported an extra-ordinary variety of over garments, tunics, mantles and jacket worn over the other, and the turban worn over a skull cap. The Muslim religion encouraged and insisted on the simplicity of dress for their converts. As far as comfort is a concern, tight-fitting stuffy clothes were worn by Christians, and the heavy hand-woven gowns were worn in profusion by the Muslims. Muslim converts later began to wear tailored garments associated with '*alla*' rather than untailed clothes. These cut and tailored garments contrasts with uncut clothes woven on looms with a revolving warp,

¹⁶ See Akinwumi (1990).

implying to them, circular continuity. This circularity which was suggestive as reincarnation, was associated with indigenous religious beliefs about rebirth.¹⁷ The Hausa-Muslim who came to Lagos wore gowns and trousers associated with foreign clothes that came with Islam into Hausa land in the late 14th or the mid 15th century, even when he sees himself as an agent of civilization. Before the 14th century, the common clothes were the wrapped garments worn mostly in southern Nigeria.

With the emergence of the Islamic religion and the conversion of Bornu rulers in the 11th century, there was the spread of Muslim culture/dress into other parts of the country (Nigeria) and which Lagos was included and affected. With this also came European medieval costumes and accoutrements into the dress of the Calvary. In typical Muslim fashion, garments became important items as gifts between rulers and as rewards to deserving individuals.

The variety and richness of the Muslim dress which was new to the people commended it as a prestige object, and its voluminous nature coincided with the traditional notion of the size of the dress as an indication of status (that is to say the voluminous the attire is determines the wealth status of the wearer) All items of Islamic dress, both male and female were adopted and adapted according to local fabrics and aesthetic values and thus spread to other parts of Nigeria from the north (Bornu) through the local trade.¹⁸ To support this fact on the spread of adopted Islamic dress is the fact that, parts of those who moved down and settled on Lagos Island were the Kanuri, who came from Bornu and the Hausa-Fulani of mixed blood. And so it must be noted that as these people came down to Lagos, they brought along with them their culture and way of life and in which became partly adopted by the Lagosians.¹⁹

There was a great controversy in the late 19th and early 20th century Lagos that Rev. Charles Phillips felt obliged to write a play

¹⁷ Renne (1995)

¹⁸ Saburi (1976)

¹⁹ Interview conducted with Mr. Ajayi Ladi (Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture) on the 20th of August, 2014.

about the Lagos traditional attire at this point in time, the play which he titled *aso ile wa* (our native dress). As early as 1873 when he was pastor of Breadfruit church, the reverend was said to have noted with dismay the prevailing adultery in the Lagos society, which he said was due to the expense of Christian marriage and the worldliness of young ladies. The play centres on the argument for and against the retention of the European attire. The characters of the play that are against spoke of the ridiculous contradictions in attires by those who wore odd attires like high collars, ties, and tight-fitting shoes. While those who are for pointed out that the traditional attire (comprising the *agbada* and *sokoto*) were at that point in time as 'foreign' to the Yoruba as the English jacket and trousers, and that even the younger generations of Muslim families were already imitating the cut of English shirt and trousers. They claim that a flowing garment had no place in the world of trains, bicycles, and steamboats, and that the Europeans who otherwise looked down on the imitative nature of the elite were nevertheless in the habit of assuming that those in traditional attires were of a lower status; and that whether their critics liked it or not European clothes were here to stay and would in time become indigenous if not already so.²⁰

Also For instance, in Echeruo's work, he mentioned an observer in 1887 who commented in an editorial section of a newspaper publication, and who wrote sarcastically of the 'broad cloth' thrown over the left shoulders and passed under the right arms, but which a change appeared imminent following the claim of some Lagos Christians, that the 'unanimous opinion of intelligent Africans is that health in West Africa is impaired, and lives shortened by the adoption of European tastes, customs and habits, materials and forms of dress which they are not used to'.²¹

The clothes worn by an inhabitant of Lagos in the 19th century would have been composed of a long wrapper, a large piece of cloth draped toga-like over the shoulder, and a hat. As a result of the Islamic influence, short pants/trouser and a kind of vest became part

²⁰ Euba (1987)

²¹ Echeruo (1977)

of the wardrobe for the male youth. While the female youth wore one or two indigo-dyed wrappers with headties, the second wrapper could cover the chest. The number of wrappers worn also distinguished the married and unmarried females; this shows just a little change in the usual traditional attires

However, when western textiles and individual items of dress were first introduced, people adapted them to the local styles, or wear them with the local dress. The greatest single threat to traditional dress has been the introduction of western attires which included clothes, hats, makeup, shoes and other accessories, and came with the introduction of Christianity in the mid 19th century.²² The European missionaries who came to Lagos were always dressed in dark suits and high collars, while their wives were dressed in long-sleeved, tight-waist dresses, shoes and stockings; clothes that could have not been unsuited to the tropics, but which nevertheless was said to be forced to be worn by the converts.

In the mid-19th century, Sierraleonian descendants of liberated slaves also began to migrate to Lagos; they were called 'Akus' or 'Saros'. The 'Saros' brought with them their 'Saro fashions', which included jackets, waistcoats and trousers, and broad-brimmed straw hats for the men, while the women wore long European-style gowns, combined with headties. The typical dress of a Saro woman around 1880 consisted of a loose dress of English Manchester print, called a covet suit, a petti-coat, a waist string of beads, a hand-woven wrapper worn over the dress or as a scarf, and a head tie of Indian Madras cloth.²³ The 'Saros' were eager to abandon their traditional attires which were used as work clothes for that of the dominant race and class (the trending European attires), including the frock coats, gloves, and so on.²⁴

Aside the *Saros* were the Agudas who were immigrants from Brazil and Cuba to Lagos, they were also returned descendants of slaves, and brought their Gay Latin American Festival costumes. For

²² Saburi (1976)

²³ Euba (1987)

²⁴ Euba (1987)

instance, during the Christmas or Easter periods, the ‘*Mei Boi*’ and ‘*Carreta*’ masquerades paraded the Brazilian quarters of the city of Lagos; they were often referred to as ‘*popo aguda*’. The masquerades appeared in costumes that are in form of animals, birds or fish in colourful dresses dancing to gay music provided by the ‘*samba*’. During this period, masks were worn by the young boys, and men gorgeously dressed in fancy velvet clothes and head gears of various shapes to match. Originally the festival was introduced into Brazil where it became very popular and from Brazil, the returnees brought it to Lagos, in which the Lagosians described the masquerade as ‘*orisa aguda*’, and then comparing it with the traditional festival of *Eko* known as *orisa eko*. Aside from the festival attires introduced, the Brazil women became the first dress makers of Lagos, and in which their art greatly influenced dress in Lagos and created the novel idea of changing fashions.²⁵

Literate Christian converts among the freed slaves who migrated to Lagos also chose to wear costly European dresses, enhancing their new position as political elites in Lagos and Sierra-Leonean societies. In the 1870s and 1880s a British-influenced social life developed in Lagos, the black elite mostly ‘Saros’ educated in England, fancied British way and style of life and thus switched to it by weaving the latest European fashions. While European dress was customary for festive occasions, at home or in everyday life, they wore distinctive attire which combined Europeans and African elements. The Afro-Brazilian culture manifested itself in the love of fine clothes and expensive jewellery which made the Bahia women famous. This led to change in cultural attitude of the Lagos people toward dress; they now prefer to spend their last penny on appearances and attires. According to Freyre:

the Bahia Negroes is easily recognised by her turban, as well as by the exaggerated height of her silk; the rest of her clothes consist of an embroidered Muslim blouse over which she puts a bayette which has

²⁵ Saburi (1976)

stripes which are typically of Bahia manufacture. The richness of the blouse and the quantity of gold jewellery are the principal articles of her coquetry.²⁶

The Yoruba Lagos women's wrappers and head tie also became modified with the bayette which was the stripped hand-woven cloths imported from West African Coast by the Nagos that was worn by the Bahia woman as a shawl on her full-length dress.

The creoles were another set of people who lived in and dominated Lagos in the 19th century, their love for fine clothes in the ladies were manifested in the wearing of crinolines and high heeled boots and the incorporation of the *aso-ebi* (family outfit), this was the Yoruba Creole's equivalence of the traditional custom of dressing alike in an event, for group solidarity, and to differentiate between the statuses of women. Whereas as mentioned earlier, the tradition of the Yoruba married woman to be distinguished from her unmarried sister by the number of wrappers she wore still remained. In addition, at the turn of the century in Sierra Leone, a wife of a pious man appeared in the church in an attire made of light coloured shantung or silk, but if she had travelled abroad, her dress was light grey and her bonnet white.²⁷ This culture which was brought into Lagos was imbibed by the Lagosians.

As for the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Lagosians do not care much for clothing as a covering; there has been a change in orientation with the emergence of the freed slaves most especially from Sierra Leon. The youth became very fond of cloth for display, and on great occasions, exhibited it in great quantities, and in all colours and shades of colour. And that on ordinary occasions it was observed that many people content themselves with less clothing than decency requires. The young of both sexes were very often allowed to go without clothing and thus even when it might be expected that their sense of propriety would lead them to seek the use of it.²⁸

²⁶ Euba (1987)

²⁷ Euba (1987)

²⁸ Plankensteiner & Adediran (2010)

In this respect, Lagosians were not worse people than the people of the interior. At those times when the 19th century Lagosians thought it fit to dress properly, his clothing conformed to the Ijesha rather than the Oyo type namely; a 'loin' cloth reaching to the ground, a large wrapper ending on the shoulders, and one or other of a large variety of hats.²⁹

At this point, for a wedding occasion, there were changes in the costume of the bride and groom. For the bride, there were eight bridesmaids dressed in ruby nun's veiling, prettily trimmed with white lace and ruby satin; hats made of ruby velvet and cream feathers were introduced. The bride put on an English attire of corded white silk made with a very long square court train- the front being draped in beaded white net, with lace and sprays of orange blossoms down the sides; a wreath of orange blossoms tulle veil and diamond ornaments complete her bridal costume. And part of what could be given as a wedding present was native clothes, that is to say not all Lagos women wore the latest English fashions that were being advertised in the newspapers. For the groom, there was the page suit of satin, satin waist coat, broad pointed old lace, collar (prince charley) and a notable cap, silk stockings and patent shoes with a silver bucket.

Even with the vast influence of European clothes and fashion, it was also possible at this time that the women wore the traditional attire when the occasion demanded, and certainly in the privacy of their homes. As part of the traditional attire, the *buba* was a blouse added to the women's outfit towards the end of the 19th century. Though first of all limited to women only and girls forbidden from using it, but later on, girls started wearing it. For the men, their *torso* garments include *toga*, *esiki* and also *buba*, while the *agbada* became restricted to the elderly men.³⁰

Colonialism and Lagos Attire in the 20th Century

The colonial period which started from 1906 up till 1960 for Nigeria, could be said to have been as far back as the 19th century for Lagos.

²⁹ Euba (1987)

³⁰ Akinwumi (1990)

This is because the British occupation of the area of Lagos has taken place since c. 1860s, and this influenced the society to a significant degree, bringing along with it a large number of repatriates from Sierraleonian, Brazil and Cuba who were to have a great influence on the structure and nature of the society, as discussed earlier.³¹

The colonial era in Lagos state witnessed a flirtation of many cultures with its culture, Lagos which became the centre of administration and the seat of the British government becomes the centre for the transfer and melting point of different cultures and social lives. To start with, there have been more migrants into Lagos from the interior and with each bringing its own culture.

At the beginning of the colonial rule, the British government in Lagos (Nigeria generally) capped their official uniforms with white helmets, like the District Officers wearing helmets, as part of their uniform, sanitary inspectors putting on 'khaki' trousers and coat over the sleeve and tie along with a brown helmet. With Lagos as the seat of government, there was the creation of public and private jobs in which indigenous people were absorbed, with some people becoming clerks, railway guards, nurses, teachers, some enlisted in the queen's Nigerian regiment, police, pilot and steward, and thereby creating/producing uniforms for each of these offices. Thus, each of these offices possesses distinctive uniforms used to recognise them. For instance, the police at that time had black woollen knickers with a kind of Indian tunic shirt worn over which a police belt held the knickers and tunic together. This stood as the basis for what is in vogue today, as most section of government offices has their uniform.

Apart from the government workers who wear uniforms, there were also some other associations like the Boy Scouts, Boy's Brigade, school children, soldiers in the arm, members of St. John's Ambulances and the similar bodies which use dresses made from textile in the local factories in Lagos.³² Aside from this, during the period between 1900 and 1939, European attire predominated at

³¹ Cole (1975)

³² Interview conducted with Mr. Ajayi Ladi (Lagos State Council for Arts and Culture) on the 20th of August, 2014.

festive occasions such as weddings, naming ceremonies, baptisms, house-warming, funerals or memorial services. With the dominant foreign rule, there came a drastic shift in the way the people think and therefore came changes in dress. Even the traditional rulers were not left out; for instance there was the case of king Dosumu of Lagos recorded, that he was noted to have been seen in an attire of a clean loose white robe: red silk velvet slippers and looking sophisticated in the European attire he was wearing.

The turn of the 20th century became a period when various old associations had largely lapsed out with new ones being formed during the colonial rule such as those based on mosques and churches. Voluntary social clubs known as *egbo* formed started commissioning fabrics for marking anniversaries and other occasions of their association. At this point in time, the new elites were also interested in taking part in family occasions for which commemorative uniforms (*aso-ebi*) were used. This is a practice where members of the same family will dress alike using some cloth pattern on occasions. This practice of *aso-ebi* was a Lagos concept that emerged in the 1920s with a few bereaved family members who were using uniform hand-woven fabrics for easy recognition in a church congregation. *Aso-ebi* was interpreted by the Lagosians to be uniform mourning outfits which many people strove to have and wear as a mark of respect for the dead and not the way it was being used in the latter years.³³

In the 1920s also, a Lagos doctor, Sapara, ordered his tailor to make for him an *agbada* in light cotton cloth, shorter and narrower than the usual voluminous gown, and with only a little embroidery around the neck, finishing with a triangle in the front. This at this point became a new gown style adopted by the youth of Lagos and became very popular and named after him 'sapara style'.³⁴

The period as late as 1933, it was observed that Lagos people do not care much for clothing as a covering, but they were very fond of it for display, and on great occasions, they exhibited it in great quantities, and all colours and shades of colour. On ordinary occasions

³³ Akinwumi (1990)

³⁴ Oyelola (2010)

many of the people content themselves with less clothing than decency requires. The young of both sexes were very often allowed to go out without clothing and this even when it might be expected that their sense of propriety would lead them to seek the use of it.³⁵

In the late 1930s there was the formation of political parties in Lagos, the use of the local style of clothes by the educated classes became common and native and European clothes began to be worn equally on special occasions.³⁶ So this means that there was the reawakening in the wearing of traditional attires, which was formerly abandoned at the start of the 19th century, for the European attire and style of dress. Though with certain historical events that took place in the first half of the 20th century which affected the Nigerian colonialist, such as the first and second World War (1916-18, 1939-45), and the economic depression of the 1930s, there was no room for most indigenes to reflect or take any giant strides in improving the indigenous textiles or fashion up till the period towards independence.

In the 1950s, what culminate a rich woman's wardrobe was a strapless blue and silver ball dress, worn with a crinoline underskirt to emphasise the fullness of the dress with gloves and shoes to match. Clothes worn during the day was a day frock of simple but elegant design within the house, and for outdoor worn with a matching jacket. For special occasions, the western-style clothes were abandoned for a traditional dress. An instance was what was said to constitute the wardrobe of the wife of the then Nigeria Federal Commissioner, who gave evidence of her dress sense as stated in the West African Magazine. Where she had Nigeria 'welcome to the queen's velvet ensemble which was made in London and other clothing such as a king-fisher blue cocktail dress and a little dark suit she wore when presented to the queen mother. This was a typical complete dress worn by the rich women in Lagos society at this point.

Also for the young men, they became appearance-conscious, they had in their wardrobe western wears consisting of one or two-button jacket, with a black slit, narrow lapels and the slim look

³⁵ Euba (1987)

³⁶ Plankensteiner & Adediran (2010)

trousers, trouser legs taped at times to under eighteen inches. There was also the choice of colour for every wear. Window pane cheele lattice wears, stripes were pattern seen in worsteds, waistcoats became very fashionable, might have lapels or long points. For evening, one dress suit bead pleated edges to the black satin faces, and the cuffs. Also there were the ready-to-wear clothes imported from Italy. These as captured by the West African Review were the dress in vogue for young men as at the period of 1957.³⁷

Other clothes in vogue include, vest, panties, nylon petticoat, nylon tricot waist ships and full-lengths, rayon crepe (offering protection when worn under cotton dress), three-quarter shot, and dressing gown/house coat of woollen material. Among the top clothes were warm over-coat and tweed suit which is warming, tough, etc. (West African review 1955). As for the traditional wears, with an impact over a far wider region, there were the spread fashions in cloth and modification of the older pattern of trade. The Yoruba gowns and smocks, *dandogo* and *gbariye*, still retained the pair of openings through which the wearers could hold their horses' reins. This now serves only as the opening of pockets that can be seen in garments intended for very young boys.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that there was attire transformation in Lagos during the colonial era. First was the shift to English attires, which left out the use of beads in addition to imbibing the use of uniforms for colonial government work. The second was the drastic transformation in traditional wears in itself as styles began to emerge. People became more open as some had the opportunity to travel out of the country and came back with ideas that became incorporated into dress designs. This should not be overlooked in the social/cultural history of the Nigerian people, as it stood as the basis for what is happening today in the fashion industry.

Although some might argue that cloth is a contemporary discourse of history, as it was only affected in the area of

³⁷ Anon (May-August, 1957)

emancipation of colonialism which ushered Nigeria into globalisation and modern era, it must be noted that in Lagos, the changes have been in occurrence right from the pre-colonial era, as the Lagos people import most of the clothes they wear from the hinterland like Ilorin, Ijebu/Abeokuta, Iseyin, Ibadan, and so many other places in the country. It could then be said that there was a very drastic change in the 19th century with the emergence of different immigrant groups from outside the country, bringing along with them their cultures and in which dress styles were major. Then the Lagos people who have been imbibing other people's culture began to adopt the dress styles of the migrants. The immigrant consisted of freed slaves from Sierra Leone/Freetown, Brazil, Cuba, and also missionaries from the western world. That point in time was a significant one in the history of Lagos; and from then onward, the changes have been constant all through the colonial era. More changes have been emerging even up to now, and it seems the changes kept on and will keep on emerging as we progress in the history of Lagos.

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