We Greet Aṣọ before We Greet Its Wearer

With his gbáriyé-onígha-awé, “the garment with two hundred gussets,” Baba Lébé – seventy years old, from Èrín-Ôsun – treats us to a dramatic display of a specially constructed aṣọ, dress for a Yoruba dance (Figure 64). The design, color, and movement of the gbáriyé-onígha-awé (aṣọ) are arresting, even as they redefine the spatial architecture of the performance arena. From Baba Lébé’s response to the accompanying music, he confirms the inseparability of (aṣọ) dress, performance, and time. Most important, through the aesthetic impact of gbáriyé-onígha-awé, we witness the transformation and redefinition of self through dress, an essential component of one’s iwá. For this reason, the Yorùbá say that “We greet Aṣọ before we greet its wearer” (Aṣọ là ìníkí, kí a tó kí èniyàn).

There is abundant literature on the technologies developed by African peoples in the creation of a wide variety of cloth types, ranging from bark cloth to strip-woven cotton silk, dyed cloth to cut-pile raffia. Some attention has been given to the technology, description of the design, color, and social significance of (aṣọ) dress generally (Figure 65). Here, however, we focus more on the indigenous concepts, meanings, and appreciation of aṣọ. Beyond its narrow definition as dress and body adornment, aṣọ will be considered in its broader sense, which embraces meanings that are deeply embedded culturally, and distinct from Western concepts. We will include shrine decorations and murals, colors, dress, and items of personal adornment associated with specific oríṣà and their devotees, the changeable skin of the chameleon, aṣọ-èbí (uniform worn by relatives and friends on social events), and even the identifiable postures and gestures of ranking members of indigenous Yoruba society. This wider definition of aṣọ is examined within the framework of visual and verbal oríki, especially as they affirm the essential natures and identities of their wearers.
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Beads

We begin with beads which, according to archaeological evidence, were not manufactured by the Yorùbá until probably the end of the first millennium C.E.⁴ The most reliable evidence of Yoruba use of beads comes
from the ancient city of Ilé-Ifè where royalty, chieftains, religious leaders, and the aristocracy had a clearly developed taste for beads and used them as status signifiers. Traditions and concepts associated with Yoruba codes of dress probably predate the eleventh century – the period generally associated with some of the earliest archaeological finds from Ilé-Ifè (see Figure 66).

Beaded dresses, crowns, hats, bracelets, wristlets, and anklets have continued to define their wearer as well as project the cultural importance of beads as a highly valued object of body adornment among the Yorùbá. On state and other important ritual occasions, Yoruba ṣọba (sovereigns) wore beaded dress, beaded crown with veil, and carried beaded horsetail flywhisk and staff. And in Ìjèbú, bead-covered boots were part of the royal regalia. So highly valued is the beaded costume that the Yorùbá have the adage, Ṣeṣẹ́ ni ṣo ćọrọ́ ọ́fọ́, ẹ́ni tó ṣẹ̀rẹ́́ lómo-ọ́ parí oore, meaning “A person who adorns himself or herself with beads has..."
done the ultimate in self-beautifying, the person who gives one a child [in marriage] has done the ultimate in favor.” In the broader context of Yoruba aesthetics in which *iwà* (essential nature) is a prerequisite for *ẹvwà* (adornment, embellishment or pulchritude), beads are immediately relevant to a real-life experience of lasting adornment – àikú parí iwà, “immortality is perfect existence.”7 So, when Yoruba children inherit beads from their parents, it is believed that they are preserving both the identity and the historical continuity of their lineage. During the Igogọ festival in Òwò, it is common to see young women dressed entirely in beads that have been passed on to them from older family members. In Figure 67, the young woman from Òwò decked in beads recalls the àṣà and elegance that we note in the the terra cotta torso with beaded necklaces from Kúbọlajé, Ìlẹ-Ifẹ, dated from the twelfth to fifteenth century C.E. (see Figure 66). In both figures, beads are an item of dress that, on many occasions, need nothing else to enhance their significance and
meaning. In other words, beads are in themselves the bearers of meaning: of ẹwọ, power and longevity.

A fourteenth-century standing male figure in bronze, eighteen and a half inches tall, excavated from Ita Yemọọ, Ilé-Ifé (see Figure 68), also typifies the use of beaded regalia in the ancient Yoruba city. The figure wears a beaded headdress or coronet, several rows of stringed bead necklaces, wristlets, anklets, and what looks like a toe ring on the left foot. Other than the loincloth around his waist, the entire body adornment consists of beads worn directly on the torso, arms, legs, and feet. The left hand holds what could be an ìròkè-Ifá, an Ifá priest’s divination tapper, or an antelope’s horn, possibly filled with ọgún (a potent medicinal substance) probably intended to beam Ọṣẹ, “positive life force” or ẹpẹ, “malevolent life force” at a targeted person or thing. With the right hand, the figure holds what might have been the bottom part of ìrùkèrè, a horse-tail flywhisk, which is used traditionally to acknowledge the greeting of...
68. “Figure of a king,” Ìta Yemọọ, Ìfẹ. Late thirteenth to early fifteenth century. Copper alloy. Height: 19 1/4 ins. (49 cm). Reproduced by permission of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria, 79.R.12.
admirers or an adoring crowd at special public gatherings. Because the elaborate regalia and symbols are also associated with political power and leadership, invariably all scholars of Ifé art have been irresistibly drawn to calling this standing figure, a representation of an Oòni of Ifé, a divine sovereign – the descendant of Odúduwà, the progenitor of the Yoruba people. There is very little or no evidence to support this speculation.

We demonstrate in this and a later chapter that this assumption is the result of either an insufficient understanding of the Yoruba concept of divine kingship or a lack of interest in considering other equally compelling evidence that suggests otherwise.

Arguably the most reliable and visible sign of Yoruba divine rulership is the conical beaded crown with a beaded veil. Such crowns have been documented by scholars who have worked in the Yoruba communities, among them Ìdówá in Ijébú, Ilá-Ọrángún, Ọkukù, Ọtùn, Ọwọ, Ọyọ, and Ìdàn rè. Without exception, the works of these scholars demonstrate the importance of the beaded crown known as adé, and ìbòjú (the beaded veil) for the Yoruba òba. The adé with the ìbòjú need not be confused with orí-kò-gbé-òfù, elaborate beaded coronets without veil, which may be quite colorful and expensively constructed but are not substitutes for the well-known and time-honored conical crown with beaded veil of Yoruba òba. A partial or total concealment of the Yoruba òba’s face with the beaded veil is a critical component of the deliberately constructed impenetrable image and divine authority of the òba. The Yorùbá believe that with the veil, the òba is protected from the èpè or malicious àṣẹ, the lifeforce from without; the sovereign is thereby immune to all forms of malpractice. The pictures of the Ọlòwọ of Ọwọ and the Ôòrè of Ọtùn that were taken in the early 1900s show how important and prevalent it was to conceal the face of an òba in Yorùbáland (see Figures 69 and 70). The closest parallel to the concealment of the face of a Yoruba divine sovereign is the Egúnjín (Yoruba ancestral masquerade), whose face is always totally covered with cloth. Suffice it to say that the reasons are similar – concealed power is more efficacious than revealed power.

Why would the òba, a sacred sovereign whose face is supposed to be concealed, want to have his belly exposed? Only in the colonial and post-colonial eras with a palpable Western influence on and disruption of Yoruba culture could anyone imagine that this has always been the practice in Yorùbáland.
As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the conical form of the divine king’s crown with the veil might have been patterned after *ilé-óri*, the container and house of *àbínrí*, which is also conical in shape. As the representation of the inner spiritual head, *óri-inú, ibpré ì* is a reminder of how the primordial Orí won the first leadership contest among the 401 *órišà* by successfully splitting *óbi-àṣẹ*, the kola nut of authority. Similarly, the contest to fill the throne of a traditional divine ruler could be fierce. The elevation of a person to the rank of *óba-úlọsẹ, èkeji-órišà (óba who is endowed with àṣẹ, and likened to an órišà)*, compares favorably with the rise of Orí to the highest position of authority. Essentially, both *óba*-elect and *Orí* are *òlòrí* (leaders); and once they ascend the throne, they are no longer perceived or treated like ordinary citizens but as *órišà – deities*. Therefore, representing the *óba* barefaced would negate the very premise of their special status as *órišà*. The fact that the faces of the Òòrè of Òtùn and the Òlówò are not shown in Figures 69 and 70 supports our notion that...
it was not until the advent of British colonization and the introduction of photography that Yoruba ọba had their faces captured by the camera. Such photographs are now regularly framed and displayed in the reception rooms of many a Yoruba ọba.

Given the sacredness of traditional Yoruba divine leadership, one should hesitate before proposing that the person depicted in the standing bronze figure from Ilé-Ife is an Ọni. This is a seriously flawed thesis because it ignores the possibility that other critical players and characters in the development of Ife culture and civilization might have been the subject of this figure. Most probably, the temptation to assume that an Ọni is the subject arises from its ọsọ of dressing and the artist’s preferred
medium of its fabrication, bronze – both of which could be linked to power and prestige in Yoruba culture. This is, however, an argument that can be made for at least thirteen very high-ranking Ifẹ chieftains who head ancient Ifẹ communities but are not divine kings like the Qòni.

Let us consider, for example, the impressive chiefly attire of Chief S. L. Omisakin, the Obalufẹ (Qruntó or Qòni-Òde, prime minister equivalent) of Ifẹ. Photo by Phyllis Galembo, 1992. Reproduced by permission of Phyllis Galembo.

Let us consider, for example, the impressive chiefly attire of Chief S. L. Omisakin, the Obalufẹ (or Qruntó, Qòni-Òde,9 equivalent in Ifẹ to the prime minister), especially his headgear whose basic shape recalls the Qòni’s are but without a veil (compare Figure 71 with Figure 98 in Chapter 7). The critical difference between the Qòni of Ifẹ (a divine sovereign) and the Obalufẹ (a most important but secular political leader in Ifẹ) is reflected in the title of the latter wherein he is called Qòni-Òde – a designation that clearly underscores his secular rank and makes him easily identifiable within and accessible to the Ifẹ community. Here, we recall
that a similar distinction exists with regard to Ori-inú (the inner spiritual head) whose representation is always a conical structural object, and Ori-òde (the outer naturalistic head), which is easily recognizable as the human head and is always available to its owner for rites involving one’s Ori-inú. It is in this sense that we should understand why the Qòni of Ifè traditionally wears a crown with veil and does not bare his face like the Òbalúfẹ. Whereas the Qòni of Ifè is Èkeji-òrisà (one who ranks with the òrisà), Òbalúfẹ (Qòni-Òde) is not.

Influential priesthoods whose leaders and practitioners qualify to wear elaborate beaded regalia and use precious metals like brass or bronze include Òbàtálá and Ifà. Both of them are traditionally entitled to don some form of adé (crowns) if broadly defined to include elaborate headgear, caps, and hats that may even be conical or miter-like in shape but without a beaded veil. So when, for example, an Ifà verse says: “Òrùnmilà dàdáé, Qlówò nááá dàdáé” (Òrùnmilà put on a crown, Qlówò also put on a crown),¹⁰ the crown mentioned here is not and should not be confused with that of a Yoruba sovereign with veil. It is elaborate headgear that simply marks one’s seniority and distinguishes a person of higher authority. Moreover, it would be extremely disruptive of, and devastating to, the Yoruba political system if anyone could wear at will the same type of crown with veil associated with Yoruba sacred rulership. For this and more reasons, it would be extremely difficult to prove that those headdresses with diadem shapes, with or without “rosette pattern surmounted by a pointed plume,” are indeed associated with the “king.”¹¹ Such propositions seem to have gained credibility simply because the diadem looks distinctive and it could only belong to the òba. The often-cited examples from ancient Ifè to support this flawed thesis are the so-called head of “Olokun” from the Olókun gravesite, “Figure of a king” from the Wúnmọnìjẹ site, and another full-standing “Figure of a king” (Figure 68). Through repetition or what could be called a standard example of para-literate feedback, the figures with diadems have become “king.” In this connection, it is important to point out that Leo Frobenius, in 1913, was among the earliest scholars to use the “flower and bud motif” on the headdress of the Olókun head to support the suggestion of a “common origin of the Etruscan and Yorùbá cultures.”¹² Frobenius who, most probably, neither spoke Yorùbá nor was sufficiently sensitive to understand their cultural prac-
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The diadem on the coronet worn by this standing figure (Figure 68) belongs solidly within the Ifá divination complex, which uses divination instruments and emblems of office that often carry the imprint of Ifá numerology. Whether presented as eight or sixteen petal-like forms, these numbers are variations of the same theme in Ifá whose prime factors are all twos. Thus, Ifá can be expressed as $4 = 2 \times 2 = 2^2$, $8 = 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 2^3$, $16 = 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 2^4$, and so on. Therefore, the diadem on the headdress could be a visual oríki to high-ranking practitioners of Ifá whose role in and contributions to the founding of Ifè and its civilization are clearly irrefutable. There is good reason to believe that the sixteen petal-like forms arranged in a circle and the one projection from the center (an indispensable centripetal force) allude to the sixteen male Odù and their only female, seventeenth companion (ikẹtàdínlógún ọṣun) Ọṣun who single-handedly saved the world from disaster and rectified the gender imbalance in Yoruba culture as discussed in Chapter 3. Here, it is pertinent to recall the image of the fourteenth- to fifteenth-century pair of bronze figures from Ìta Yemọ̀ (Figure 50 in Chapter 3) – male and female chieftains dressed in equally impressive regalia and wearing almost identical coronets.

John Pemberton photographed an Ọ̀bàtálá priest wearing a conically shaped crown in Ìlá-Ọ̀ràngún (see Figure 72). While this headgear is also called adé, there is a marked difference between it and the adé with beaded veil of the Ọ̀ràngún (the divine sovereign of Ìlá-Ọ̀ràngún in Chapter 2, Figure 24), or even the famous adé-ńlàñlá, massive crowns

72. Ọ̀bàtálá priest wearing a white, beaded, conical crown surmounted by a bird with a red parrot tail feather, Ìlá-Ọ̀ràngún. Photo by John Pemberton III, 1984. Reproduced by permission of John Pemberton III.
with beaded veil called arè that only the Òòni may wear on important festivals such as the Olójó festival in Ilé-Ife (see Figure 73). In other words, the “elaborate headgear” worn by the standing bronze figure (Figure 68) may technically qualify to be called adé but does not possess the ìgbà, “authority and power,” of an adé with beaded veil. Most important, we need to acknowledge that distinguished Ifá and Òtàrà priests who have no political constituencies may wear adé without the veil.

Thus, while it is true that beaded adornments are traditionally used by royalty, they are not the sole defining visual symbols of an òba’s divine leadership. The bronze figure may well represent an Ifá priest who also happens to be an onísègúùn (herbalist) because these priests constitute a most prominent group of professionals who are entitled to wear and use high-status beaded necklaces and divination instruments fashioned from ivory – another medium associated with the office of òba. And they do. For example, in Figures 74 and 75, Chief Fágbémí Òjànjùkú, the Òràbà of Lagos, is shown in beaded regalia, holding an ivory ìròkè-Ifá, divination tapper, which looks like what the bronze figure bears in its left hand. The Ifá priesthood may have had humble beginnings, but these priests rose over time to a position of respectability and nobility – the result of their intellectual contributions and healing work in society.

A horsetail flywhisk (írùkèrè) with bead-covered handle is an important status symbol for Ifá priests and òba. When, for instance, two Ifá priests meet, they customarily wave their beaded horsetail flywhisks in salutation – both as a gesture to acknowledge people’s greeting and to celebrate symbolically their elevation to a position of privilege and honor in Yoruba society. In Ifá literature, there is a lengthy reference
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to Òrúnmilà, the patron divinity of Ifá, stating that he fathered eight children in ancient Ìfẹ, all of whom became ìba in several parts of Yorúbàland. Òrúnmilà himself not only wore precious beads but also had a brass crown and a pair of brass slippers, and held a brass staff. Today, prominent Ifá priests may wear beaded crowns, necklaces, arm bands, and wristlets, and carry shoulder bags and horsetail flywhisks. Other beaded items in the Ifá divination repertoire include the ìrójẹ-Ifá (Ifá divination tapper) and agere-Ifá (container with lid to store ıkín, sacred palm nuts for divination). The following oríkì-based verse from Èjì-Ogbè containing the story of Òrúnmilà and his identification with beads is illuminating:

Òrúnmilà
Olálẹkun-lò-ó-jé, [Òrúnmilà]
Ọminikun
Erin-ò-ye-è-yi-padà-kun
Àtútù bi-àkùn
Ọkùnrin-kùn-kùn-ìlóru
Ako-ajá-lolá
Ako-àgùàla l'ọsù
Ọmo-bóókùn
Ọmo-bóyinde
Ọmo-ṣéni-ò-sèdi-jèlènkè
Ká-fì-ilèkè-siidi-ti-ọmọ-ẹlòmiràn
Ọmo-ṣéni-ọmọ-ṣéni- ń-jé

Òrùnmìlà
One-whose-riches-are-beyond-measure is your name.
The-elephant-is-not-an-animal-whose-meat-we-can-carve-by-turning-it-over-from-one-side-to-another
Òrùnmìlà, whose-worth-is-equal-to-that-of-the-most-precious-beads,
The-being-whose-presence-is-awesome-in-the-dark,
Your-wealth-intimidates-like-the-looks-of-a-male-dog
You-are-the-full-moon-that-outrshines-all-other-celestial-bodies
If-your-children-do-not-inherit-your-most-precious-beads,
They-should-at-the-least-inherit-your-brass-ornaments
The-buttocks-of-one’s-child-are-not-so-flat
That-one-would-tie-the-beads-on-another’s-hip
One’s-child-is-one’s-child

Ifá priests’ dress codes appear to be patterned after Òrúnmilá’s. Like a father, Òrúnmilá is believed to have bequeathed his distinguished items of beaded adornments to his Ifá priests, his children – the implication of the last three lines of the preceding Ifá verse. This assumption is immediately relevant to our argument for including Ifá priests among those we ought to consider as possible subjects for the standing bronze figure from Ìtàyemòó, Ilé-Ifẹ. There are, indeed, references in the Ifá divination corpus that specifically link certain types of beads to the ranking of Ifá initiates. Consider the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
&Bí a bá ti koni \\
&Béjìni à á kíni \\
&Bí a bá ti kíni \\
&Béjìni à á jéni \\
&Òrúnmilá, ëlà pèlè ò \\
&Ekùn jéran sùn \\
&Òmọ pònpòtóóró \\
&Òmọ ràn mì lòwó \\
&Kí n gbórùn lè sègí \\
&Awo tóbá tètè dé \\
&Wọn a mọ ọ̀ lèè kà sègí \\
&Eyíti ò bá tètè dé \\
&Wọn a mọ ọ̀ lèè kà iyúń \\
&Sègí ní ng ó kà á \\
&Ng ò kà iyúń \\
&Ejígbáàrà îlèkè ní ng ó kà á \\
&Ng ò kà àkùn \\
&Sègí ní ng ó kà á \\
&Ng ò kà àkùn iku gbòrọ̀ró
\end{align*}
\]

As a person presents oneself
So that person is greeted
The manner of a greeting
Patterns one’s response
Yoruba Art and Language

Órúnmilà, Êlà, I greet you
The Leopard who devours a whole animal for dinner
The offspring of Pónpótóóró
Alone makes it possible
For one to wear sègì, the most valued beads.
Ifá priests who graduate early
Qualify to collect sègì beads
Those who graduate late
End up with iyùn
Sègì beads are what I want.
I have no interest in iyùn
My ambition is to collect a double necklace of the most precious beads.
Àkùn is not good enough for me,
Sègì are the beads I want.
Not àkùn, the dull and lifeless necklace.¹⁷

The most valuable set of beads worn by graduates of Ifá priesthood is sègì, the name given to a variety of beads, especially the blue tubular ones. We also get the impression from this verse that it is the ambition of the very best Ifá priests to don a double necklace (èjgbàrà èlèkè) of the most precious beads (as specified in the preceding oríkì) — a fact that cannot be ignored as we seek to decode and understand the real significance of the double-beaded necklace on the standing bronze figure. The next in rank is iyùn, coral beads, while àkùn, a kind of bead made from the shells of palm kernel nuts, are the least desirable. It is, however, also worth mentioning that even though iyùn may not rank first with Ifá priests, they do rank very highly in other contexts, namely, among the priests and priestesses of Òṣùn and royalty in many parts of eastern Yorùbáland.

The prominence of the medicine-filled ram’s horn that the figure holds in his left hand is no doubt significant (see Figure 68). Whether read as an àṣẹ-substance-filled horn or as an ître-kẹ-Ifá, it is still more meaningful within the context of Ifá priesthood than ọba divine leadership. In the obùn-àfọṣẹ cited in Chapter 2, Ifá and Òrúnmilà are solidly linked to àṣẹ and its activation as contained in the lines, “À-a-ṣẹ kòní s’àṣẹ, Àwìṣẹ ni t’Ifá, Àfọṣẹ ni t’Òrúnmilà” (À-a-ṣẹ, the empowered word comes to pass; For, as infallible divination belongs to Ifá, So does prophetic utterance belong to Òrúnmilà). A Yoruba divine ruler need not hold a medicine-filled ram’s horn to proclaim his or her àṣẹ because an ọba is already ọba alàṣẹ, the embodiment of àṣẹ. To borrow Wole Ọṣ́yìnka’s words, “A tiger
does not have to display its tigritude.” Thus, when in court, a Yoruba "oba" never speaks directly to any person because there are chiefs and other designated court officials who speak on behalf of the sovereign. It is, therefore, unnecessary for an "oba" to hold a medicine-filled ram’s horn of medicinal substance for "aṣe. And it is not required that one be an onisèçgün (herbalist) or babaláwo (Ifá priest) to become an "oba."

Another important aspect of the dress worn by this standing figure, shown in Figure 68, which connects it firmly with the Ifá priesthood, is his wraparound skirt with a knot on the left side. This skirt is partially embroidered on its lower end toward the feet. This brings to mind the tradition of wearing the ṣàdúnn, a special ceremonial cloth donned by Òrűnmlà, which is referenced in the Ifá divination literary corpus. The verse reads “Ọjọ ṣàdúnn wá pé. Òrűnmlà sòdùn, ò sòdùn kó” (On the day of the festival, Òrűnmlà wrapped himself with ṣàdúnn cloth). In his explanatory endnote, Abimbola states that ṣàdúnn cloth is “an ancient Yorùbá cloth part of which is made of raffia.” It is noteworthy that Chief Fágbémí Àjànàkú, the Àrábà of Lagos, in his dress, reminds one of this ṣàdúnn tradition with his white wraparound cloth and necklaces of an impressive array of highly valued beads at an Ifá festival in Lagos. No doubt, the ṣàdúnn as used by the Àrábà Àjànàkú serves as a form of visual orìkì to distinguish him as a ranking Ifá priest as well as to honor Òrűnmlà.

Another significant find from Ìta Yemòó, Ilé-Ifè, a pair of bronze figures dated from the twelfth to fifteenth century C.E., is also often misread as “Ọqòní and his queen,” because of their style or aṣù of dressing (see Figure 76 and Chapter 3, Figure 50). Measuring about seven and a half inches in height, with the bronze casting achieving a remarkable thinness of barely one-sixteenth of an inch in some places, both figures in this pair wear beaded necklaces, wristlets, and crown-like hats with no beaded fringes. The wrapper cloth on the female figure is tied high enough on her torso to partially cover her breasts, which is comparable to the way Yoruba women still wear their wrapper overlapping the blouse. Her beaded shoulder sash hangs diagonally across the torso with the tied end resting on the left hip. Similarly, the male wears a diagonal beaded sash as if to convey the idea of gender equality.

Nowhere in Yoruba culture is the equality of the genders as pronounced and taken more seriously than in the Ògbóni council of elders.
who are traditionally charged with judicial functions in the society. The pair of linked brass staffs with male and female figures worn on the neck by Ògbóni elders called ẹdan Ọgbóni not only distinguishes members of the Ògbóni council but also underscores the gender balance foundational to their deliberations and decisions. The slightly taller male figure in the ÌtàYemòó bronze pair has his forefingers locked around the female’s in a gesture that suggests a pact of secrecy – a code of ethics that is considered routine among Ògbóni members. The legs of the male and female figures intertwine, suggesting three rather than four legs. As in the Ògbóni council, this gesture recalls the interdependency and recognition of the male and female powers, their connection to the earth, as well as their indispensability to maintaining law and order in society. This gesture also seems a visual metaphor of the most important binding injunction among this ancient, greatly revered, and powerful group of elders, which is “Ọgbóni mèjì ò di èta,” meaning “Two Ògbóni (members) equals three,” where the third is a symbolic reference to the earth – the witness to all pacts and deliberations. It is,
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indeed, remarkable that the artist’s construction of the two images here shows three rather than four legs touching the earth.

It is highly probable that Ògbóni members in Ile-Ife would have included people from the highly respected Elú-Méje (Seven Elú) and Ile-Ife-Mèfà (Six Ile-Ife) who were, and still are, the traditional administrators of the original quarters of Ilé-Ife. While they wield much political power, they are not divine rulers. Nor are they direct descendants of Odùduwa. These thirteen powerful quarter chiefs could don the most impressive aristocratic costume available to them (including Ṓdùn), which also makes them likely candidates for the subject in the pair of bronze figures from Ìta-Yemòó (see Figure 50 in Chapter 3). Lest we forget, the Ògbóni were not just witnesses to pacts and important decisions in the society but they also foresaw and carried out the execution of hardened criminals and even the removal of an Òba if it became necessary. The judicial responsibilities of the Ògbóni are so far-reaching that it is not likely that both the Qòni and his “queen” (a term which is more meaningful in European than in Yoruba culture) would be core members of the Ògbóni council since this might result in conflicts of interest in the dispensation of justice.24

Even if we were to consider seriously the possibility that the pair of bronze figures represent the Qòni and his “queen,” it is unthinkable that the Qòni would, traditionally, display his intimate emotions for his spouse or spouses by holding hands, hugging, or entwining legs in public. In many Western European cultures, such practices might be considered normal, but in Yoruba culture, they would be taboo. Yoruba divine rulers should not be seen eating, drinking, or even sitting together with their spouse(s) at a dinner table as is the case in many cultures of the West. Many tradition-conscious Yoruba males with Western education and exposure to Western culture still feel uncomfortable holding hands with their spouses, kissing, or engaging in any act that could be interpreted as remotely amorous in public. Thus, the suggestion by some scholars that this pair of bronze figures must be king and queen is not only bizarre but an inappropriate forcing of facts to fit the interpretation generated from outside the Yoruba culture.

Fabric of Immortality

While Yoruba culture places high monetary value and durability on beads and precious stones, it is unequivocal in declaring that cloth surpasses...
them all in the traditional discourse of immortality. It is, therefore, worth our while to explore the concept of cloth in Yoruba tradition.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ọwú là bá gbín, a ö gbín’lékè} \\
\text{Ọwú là bá gbín, a ö gbín’deg} \\
\text{Àtì’lékè, àtì’deg} \\
\text{Okan kíi bá ni dé horo ìkú} \\
\text{Ọjó a bá kú, aṣọ níi bá ní lo.}
\end{align*}
\]

Cotton is what one should plant, not beads
Cotton is what one should plant, not brass.
As for beads and brass,
Neither goes with one to the grave.
On the day one dies, only the cloth accompanies one.\textsuperscript{25}

The Yoruba word for cloth and clothing is \textit{aṣọ} or \textit{aşọ}.\textsuperscript{26} Adding the prefix “\textit{a}” to “\textit{ṣọ}” (“to bud,” “to regenerate”) forms the noun \textit{aṣọ} or \textit{ašọ}. \textit{Aṣọ} can therefore be interpreted as that which renews and survives one at death. \textit{Aṣọ} is the agency of regeneration, a rebirth among humans and the \textit{ọríṣá}.

Such is the importance of the concept of \textit{aṣọ} that the Yorùbá say, “It is the \textit{aṣọ} (what one wears) that we should greet before greeting its wearer” (\textit{Aṣọ lá ńkí kí a tó kí eniyàn}). Thus, to be properly dressed is not only important but oftentimes takes precedence over one’s physical attractiveness or deformity. People are admired and highly regarded for their artistic skills to dress themselves and override their physical imperfections. Consider the following \textit{ọrìki} of the Opomulero people of Iwata cited by Karin Barber:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bí ó sì aṣọ} \\
\text{Mo ní à bá sìṣe} \\
\text{Bí ó sì aṣọ} \\
\text{À bá sìwà hù} \\
\text{Bí kókó} \\
\text{Bí oówo} \\
\text{Bí ńkù} \\
\text{Bí àgbáàrin} \\
\text{...}
\end{align*}
\]

If there were no cloth
We would surely be at fault.
If there were no cloth
Our blemishes would be exposed
Like lumps
Like boils
Like swollen hips
Like grape-sized swellings …

What one wears reflects one’s design-consciousness, one’s ájú-ṣṣà, literally, “eye-for-design.” It reveals one’s familiarity with the wide range of types of cloth that one might wear and the insight to wear them appropriately. For an adult to be seen in public without clothes is, for example, a sign of either mental illness or the effect of an irreversible curse, èpè. It is to be stripped naked metaphorically and literally, and to have one’s shortcomings publicly displayed for all to see. It is considered one of the worst forms of humiliation in Yoruba culture – a message that one has been abandoned and unwanted by relatives, friends, and colleagues – stripped of one’s social fabric and metaphorical cloth.

Though not as grave as being without clothes, to be inappropriately dressed is also highly offensive to Yoruba aesthetic sensibility and life-affirming ideals. It is a reflection of a person’s lack of sensitivity to the need of the moment, which belongs broadly under ímọ́jú-móra, an important Yoruba aesthetic canon discussed more fully in Chapter 8. The following Yoruba proverb captures a typical reaction to the lack of ímọ́jú-móra as it relates to dress: “Àifènìpèni, Àifèyàn-pèyàn, lárá okó ò fí ńṣàn ìbànté wólú” (Lack-of-regard-for-anyone, Lack-of-regard-for-people, Makes the bush-dweller enter the town in a loincloth). This saying would be used to chastise a bush-dweller who lacks the necessary sensitivity in his choice of clothing by wearing a loincloth – normally worn to do farm work – to go to the city.

It is expected that an elder should possess a dress made of ìfì (a superior locally woven cloth), at the very least, and ideally, one made into dànídógó, which is an elaborately embroidered and expensive garment that has ample sleeves about a foot longer than the arms of the wearer. But many impecunious elders are not able to afford such an expensive garment. Such elders may have to do with kíjípà, a rougher and cheaper locally woven cloth because “dànídógó is not something to make in a huff” (Dànídógó kì í se aṣò àbínu dá). It could take over a year to make the fabric and almost another year to sew and embroider it by hand. This means that an elderly person could be paying for dànídógó over several years.

At social gatherings and especially weddings, naming ceremonies, and burials, comparing the relative artistry of a person’s cloth is always
a major subject of animated conversation. As a visual oríkì, the weave, texture, color, and design should be perfectly appropriate to the person who wears it as well as to its specific occasion. Cloths greatly admired by the Yorùbá include sànyán, cloth made of native silk created by anaphè caterpillars (see Figure 65); àlàári, baba aṣọ, a rich ruby-red, handwoven cloth called “the father of all cloths”; ėtú, aṣọ àgbà, loom-woven cloth with threads of black and white for elders; àràn, tií parí aṣọ, velvet – the epitome of good taste in cloth; mọsàájì, aṣọ ìfìì, velvet – the royal gold-threaded cloth that has a strong metallic sheen in sunlight; Oláginninní, aṣọ Áràdà, an ancient and extremely expensive cloth with elaborate appliqué from Áràdà (Alàdà); and àdìrè, patterned, indigo resist-dyed greige cloth.

On àdìrè cloth, John Picton writes: “There are two broad categories of àdìrè. In one, the resisting agent is raffia, ikó, and tying and stitching patterns. These cloths are called àdìrè-oníko. In the other category, the resisting agent is starch, éko, which is either painted or stenciled onto the cloth before dyeing. These are called àdìrè éléko.” Then there is aṣọ-òkè, which is strip-woven cloth made on a double-heddle loom with the warp elements tied at intervals to create a pattern of small holes or containing repeated weft-float-weave motifs.

A more contemporary version of aṣọ-òkè is the entirely machine-spun cotton, rayon, and lurex cloth called “UP NEPA” (literally, a comparison with the unreliable “on and off” performance of the Nigerian Electric Power Authority, recently renamed the Nigerian Power Holding Authority). Among the relatively recent additions to the ever-growing repertoires of Yoruba textiles are the imported wax print cotton versions of àdìrè, embroidered eyelet and organdy.

A Yoruba woman’s attire is composed of essentially four parts: bìbà, a T-shaped top; írò, a waist wrapper; gèlè, a head tie; and íborùn, a shoulder shawl. While a woman’s attire is never as voluminous or embroidered as a man’s, it is nonetheless equally important that a woman demonstrate abundant use of suitable cloth in order to appear substantial and elegant. The size and quality of a woman’s írò, the cloth wrapped around the lower part of the body, often overlaps the bìbà and hints at her status in society. Ìrò should never be too short or skimpy lest people think that the wearer looks cheap and poor. Ideally, írò should be long and full because “Wrapping-from-waist-to-the-floor is the style of a queen’s wrapper; digging-down-to-the-deepest-bottom is the requirement of the dry moat”...
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Àrókanlè l’aṣọ ayaba, à-wà-kanlè nìtí ṣèrà)32 The bùbá, usually white or plain light-colored, is simple in construction and should show off the more expensive iredì, gélè, iberùn, and the necklace. In contemporary usage, the same shoulder shawl (iberùn) usually carried on the left lower arm easily becomes ipélè, an extra layer of cloth on top of iredì, to make a woman look fuller and more attractive in Yoruba culture. Depending on the circumstance, the same iberùn may double as ọjá, a baby-carrying sash.

The head tie, gélè, must not only fit the wearer but also be formed to make some statement about her mood, status in the family or society, or even contemporary politics (see Figure 77). For example, there are head ties with names like “Gowon” (head of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, 1966–1975); Onilégogoro, “Skyscraper” (reference to modernity); Máwóbé, “It’s so beautiful, don’t dare look at it” (reference to fashion-consciousness); Gbótọko, “Listen to your husband” (advice to wives to respect their husbands); Kilo’ko ọ se?, “What can a husband do?” (a declaration of the equality of the sexes); Kí ilenu ọpọ ẹnu; “Mind your gossiping” (a warning to desist from bad-mouthing others behind their back); Kọ ẹyin si orọgún, “Turn your back on your co-wife” (advice on how to live with jealous co-wives); and many more. Gélè should match the shoulder shawl (iberùn) in color and design, and be appropriate to the occasion. The art of tying gélè tests every woman’s ajú-ọmà, “design-consciousness.” This art is constantly changing: having ajú-ọmà distinguishes the creative woman from the noncreative one. Critics often invoke a proverb like this one: “A head tie is no good if one does not know how to tie it; knowing how to tie it is no use if it does not look good on the wearer,” Gélè ọdùn bí ka mọọ wé, ka mọọ

77. Women wearing gélè from imported fabric that has been stiffened with starch to make it stand up like sculpture, Ìlá-Ọrángún. Photo by John Pemberton III, 1977. Reproduced by permission of John Pemberton III.
wé ó dún bí kó yení. For example, the gèlè worn by the elderly woman in Figure 78 is considered most appropriate for her age and matches her ìrò and iborùn, all of which are asò-òkè woven on the horizontal loom.

While Yoruba men seem to have patterned their large garments after those of the Hausa, their northern Islamic neighbors, it is the way that they have modified and redesigned them to conform to Yoruba aesthetic preferences that is quite intriguing. Adult male attire consists of șòkòtò, a pair of trousers; dànsíkí, a gown with wide arm holes and which goes down to the knees; bũbá, a T-shaped shirt with round neck and wrist-long sleeves, which can be worn simply by itself over șòkòtò, under an ãgbìdá, a large gown, which goes down to the ankles and may be embroidered at the neck and chest, and is open at the sides; and filà, a cap to match. In recent years, it has become fashionable among university-educated men to wear bũbá which may or may not be embroidered around the neck over Western-style dress pants.

There are basically three types of cap (filà) for men to choose from, depending on one’s age, means, and status in life. The first is a cylindrically constructed cap from asò-òkè, or ṣtù. It is soft enough to be pulled in and styled to meet the wearer’s aesthetic taste. While many men wear asò-òkè cap, ṣtù is the choice of elders. Another asà (style) of men’s cap is called filà abetìajá, literally meaning “the cap with dog-like ears” because of the way it looks. Abetìajá is generally made from silk or cotton cloth dyed or left natural. Wearers of filà abetìajá may turn the dog-ear-like flaps up or down depending on the occasion (see Figure 79).

A third kind of cap is filà oníde, literally, a cap made with shiny metallic threads (see Figure 80). Worn by chiefs and men who can afford...
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79. Man wearing agbádá and abetía-já cap, Ìlá-Oràngún. The agbádá is ëtò, an indigo-dyed handwoven cloth and the cap is imported brocade. Photo by John Pemberton III, 1984. Reproduced by permission of John Pemberton III.


it, filà oníde is a round, brimless hat with straight sides and a soft flat top. Eve de Negri writes, “Special families trained in methods of making and embroidering these caps, guarded their secrets well. Velvet was the favorite cloth used, and this was laid over stiffened lining and then
embroidered with metallic threads of silver and gold, in the form of trails of leaves.”

The ambition to rise on the socio-political ladder, to become a leader or king in one’s community, is signaled by what one wears. “The head that wears a cloth cap, etù, strives to wear a velvet cap; the one that wears a velvet cap strives to become a king,” Ori adëtù ñpëte àrarù, ori adââran ñpëte à ti jo. Large voluminous gowns like the agbádá, and others like the gbáriyé, a gown with pleats designed for performing specially choreographed traditional dances, and dànídógó, another gown that has ample sleeves about a foot longer than the arms of the wearer, are sewn from expensive and luxurious materials like sànyán, silk cloth, àlàári, ruby-red handwoven cloth, asp-ôkè, strip-woven cloth, and etù. All of them evoke Yoruba concepts of success, power, and influence. These robes enhance the image of their wearer, affirming an authoritative and substantial presence that hints at the divinity believed to reside in every Yoruba person. The Yoruba gbáriyé is ideal for performing important traditional Yoruba dances. We can appreciate this in the photograph showing Baba Lèbè of Èrin-Ôshùn dancing in his gbáriyé. The choreographic possibilities with gbáriyé are countless. Baba Lèbè creates movements and forms, which enable us to see the construction of gbáriyé (see Figure 81).

Among the various ãsà of gbáriyé are gbáriyé alápá àdàn (gbáriyé with batwing sleeves), gbáriyé dànsìki (gbáriyé made in a smaller dànsìki size), and gbáriyé onígbe-awe (gbáriyé with two hundred gussets).

In addition to the well-known and popularly used Yoruba dress types discussed earlier, there are attires specific to various towns that signify the age, status, and religious affiliation of their wearers. For example, among the Ìjèbú Yorùbá, members of a powerful indigenous elder’s society, Ôṣùgbó, charged with judicial functions, are easily recognized in the community by their dress. Adéronkè Adésanya writes:

The ensemble of members of the Ôṣùgbo includes the itagbe, a patterned or richly decorated and textured shoulder piece cloth, by which members are conspicuously singled out; èdan, gender-sensitive brass figures, isàn, a wrapper usually white cloth or woven strips tied round the waist or draped on the body and tied into a knot on the left shoulder; iyùn, beads, and shaki, shag.

In Òwọ, men over sixty years of age drape themselves with a toga-like cloth during ìgbéro, an age grade ceremony for elders who are ready
to join the rank of respected elders who are no longer expected to do demanding manual labor in the community. Ìgbéru cloth is large and much wider than a woman’s wrapper. Woven by women on a vertical loom, ìgbéru cloth is predominantly indigo blue broken up by parallel lighter shades of indigo and accentuated by relatively thin white stripes.

Also in Òwò, chiefs and men in whose families there had been distinguished war generals with outstanding military records wear a ceremonial gown called orùfànràn (illustrated in Chapter 2, Figure 30). Orùfànràn consists of three pieces: jacket, skirt, and hat. The jacket has wide three-quarter sleeves and is made of an inexpensive cotton material on which have been sewn scale-shaped pieces of red wool flannel. The hat (not pictured) is a tall miter-like headdress with two long ivory pieces on the sides, each carved to resemble a feather. The surface of the garment recalls the scaly skin of a pangolin. The orùfànràn alludes to the power and invincibility of its wearer through its form as already discussed in Chapter 2.

In Praise of Gods and Cloth

Being anthropomorphic, Yoruba Òrìṣà are metaphorically clothed by their verbal and visual Òrìkì. The cloth, here defined broadly, refers to the shrine, the architectural decoration of the space of an Òrìṣà, and the costumes worn by priests and devotees to honor and evoke the essential nature (ìwà) of an Òrìṣà. For example, the costumes of Sàngó priests are predominantly camwood-red and white; those of Òbàtálá priests are white; those for Èshù are red and black. The characteristic emblems or items alluding to the power and presence of an Òrìṣà, which include beads, handheld ceremonial objects, and body and facial decorations of devotees, augment the overall embellishment, ëwà, of an Òrìṣà.

Mural paintings such as those in the Òṣòpònná shrine and on the exterior of the shrine of Òrìṣà-Pópó in the town of Ògbómọsọ, photographed by Ulli Beier in the 1950s, illustrate another dimension of the meaning and use of the Yoruba term, ãṣò (see Chapter 2, Figure 16). Moyo Okediji reports that female artist-devotees executing murals for an Òrìṣà-Íkìrè shrine in Ilé-Ifé describe their work as “making new clothes for the Òrìṣà.” This characterization of Òrìṣà-Íkìrè mural paintings applies to Òrìṣà-Pópó shrine paintings (see Figure 82). In any case, Òrìṣà-Íkìrè and Òrìṣà-Pópó are both local names for Òrìṣà-Funfun – the umbrella term used for all the Òrìṣà that are Òrìṣà-Ànlá/Òbàtálá-derived. Among them are Òrìṣà-Ọgíyàn in Òjìgbò, Ọbalùọn in Ifọ́n, and simply Òrìṣà in Òwò. Thus, to fully appreciate Òrìṣà-Pópó in Ògbómọsọ, one has to start with Òrìṣà-Ànlá/Òbàtálá, the deity whose character comes closest to that of Olódùmarè, the Prime Mover in Yoruba religious belief.

Òrìṣà-Ànlá is widely believed to be the first artist, the creator of the physical part of humans, the earth, and the arrangement of its trappings. As the patron deity of all artists, Òrìṣà-Ànlá/Òbàtálá created the Yoruba primary colors – black, white, and red. He carries out his creative activity in total seclusion, which is the reason he is called Ògbókúnkùn-ṣọnà, “One who creates in total darkness.” Òbàtálá is also recognized as an elder Òrìṣà who asserts his presence by wearing an immaculately white and glistening robe at all times. On the murals of Òrìṣà-Pópó shrine, white anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, stellar, and other barely identifiable abstract forms emerge from the deep recesses of impenetrable black background that constitutes Òrìṣà-Ànlá’s/Òbàtálá workshop/studio.
Visually, we are reminded of the process whereby the àdùrè cloth designer depends solely on the dark indigo dye into which her cloth must first be dipped before we can see the images and designs on the àdùrè cloth (see Figures 83 and 84). Their similarities suggest that the designs on the Òrìṣà-Pópó shrine mural could have provided the original inspiration for the earliest àdùrè textile – a comparatively later development than shrine mural paintings in Yorùbáland. Even the design motifs and their configurations on both the Òrìṣà-Pópó mural and àdùrè cloth are remarkably similar. One only needs to compare Georgina Beier’s experimental àdùrè cloth design, which was inspired quite clearly by the Òrìṣà-Pópó mural, to agree with this conclusion. Indeed, the arguments in support of calling the Òrìṣà-Pópó shrine mural àṣọ, or the cloth, are stronger when we study and compare their design structure and layout.

Like àdịrẹ cloth, the Òrìṣà-Pópó mural is partitioned into segments, whose main motifs are not intended to be read as a narrative. As one approaches the shrine, the three parallel, rope-like abstract designs that grace the entrance create a wave-like ripple as if to clear the way.
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to welcome Òrîṣà-Pópó priests and devotees to the ultimate theater of artistic creativity. The outermost band with its intricately worked zigzag pattern is skillfully integrated into the surrounding designs and motifs. On either side of the entrance to the shrine, the mural is divided into about eight segments each. No one segment is like the others in image or design, but together they explode with diverse forms. The mural is a powerful, affective visual oríkì to their patron-deity. Òrîṣà-Pópó, like Òrîṣàálá/Ọbàtálá, accommodates all kinds of ìwà, embellishments, by validating differing essential natures (ìwà).

The three larger segments closer to the entrance are arranged longitudinally, separated by thick white lines and covered at the top by a pair of thick white parallel lines that enclose five white oval shapes joined by very short, barely visible white lines (see Figure 82). This column of three segments is separated from the next column of five segments, all abstract in design, and by a black column containing ten sets of four parallel white strokes marked vertically, spaced more or less equidistantly. Starting with the topmost of the three large segments, we encounter four dominant images with round heads, elongated ear-like forms, and thin, neck-like white lines that connect to a relatively rectangular, black-patterned white mass, perhaps a torso. Floating in the black background between the heads are tiny two-headed forms, insect-like creatures and humanoids. The second and middle segment is dominated by four relatively large double-headed forms in white with black patterns. They may well refer to pestles or to the symbol of an Òrîṣà, probably Ọ̀ṣàgọ̀. In the black background and in the space between the narrow middle part of the double-headed forms, are white matchstick figures, animals that look like quadrupeds, and one slightly bigger, more recognizably human figure with prominent shoulders, arms, torso, and upturned feet.

The lowest segment shows three elongated, frontally posed white figures with round heads, long necks, raised arms, and slim legs, wearing straight knee-length tunics with black-patterned marks. In the dark background, between the heads and slightly higher, tiny animal and human forms float, visually balancing the negative and positive spaces in the segment. The largest segment commands the top of the entrance. There, the composition is freer, less structured, than those of the segments that flank the entrance to the shrine. The wavy cloth-like, horizontally oriented, rectangular form that consists of ten white vertical rectangles floats like a banner atop the shrine. Below it, starting from
the left, images in white depict the sun symbol, a row of white circular forms held between two white lines, a four-legged bird, a chick, a tortoise and, again, the sun symbol. All of these segments, in their distinctive and self-contained visual configurations, are Ôrîṣà-Pópó’s visual oríkì. Like a verbal oríkì, the images and motifs in the mural carry condensed, elaborate, and highly charged visual salutes that manifest the presence of Ôrîṣà-Pópó. The observations of Henry and Margaret Drewal on the significance of autonomous segments in Yoruba art are illuminating.

Like the preparation of medicine (òógún), during which each ingredient is invoked and activated separately, thus contributing its own unique àṣẹ, seriate composition is a formal means of organizing diverse powers, whether verbally or visually, not only to acknowledge their autonomy but, more importantly, to bring them into actual existence, to marshal them, and to set them into action.¹⁴⁰

Just as it would not be acceptable for the Ôrîṣà-Pópó shrine to be without its mural, its metaphorical cloth, the Yorùbá equally value their own metaphorical cloth – ẹbí, their immediate and extended family members, age grades, professional colleagues or associates. This notion is rooted in the Yoruba proverb, Ènìyànn lăṣọ̀ọ̀ mi, “People are my cloth.” A similar saying, Ômọ ṙaṣọ̀ọ̀ mi, “Children are my cloth,” conveys essentially the same meaning. Indeed, most noticeable at one’s burial ceremonies, child naming, marriages, housewarming, and other important occasions are one’s ẹbí, wearing àṣẹ-ẹbí, attire of the same fabric and color to show their relationship to the celebrant (Figure 85). Seen together, these celebrants are not only considered beautiful but also as the living human cloth through which the departed relative or colleague now lives.

Because the material cloth survives its owner and not the reverse, Yorùbá also believe that when the dead return to earth, they will be covered completely with cloth like the egúngún, ancestral masquerades. This explains the Yoruba concept of the deathlessness of cloth, aṣẹ, and also as an attribute shared only by Olódùmaré, the Prime Mover and Creator-in-chief.⁴¹ The socio-religious and aesthetic significance of cloth in Yoruba thought far outweighs its destructibility as a material object. So, when ancestors masked as egúngún make their annual visits to the land of the living, they are covered with old and new, plain and colored, local and imported, strips and panels of cloth, often with traditional medicinal attachments, òógún, which could take the form of amulets, gourds, animal skulls, old and new coins, and cowries to enhance their àṣẹ.
The design and color of the egúngún costume must project the identity and character of the ancestor that it purports to represent (see Figure 86). In addition, the costume must accommodate the taste of today through a careful and deliberate layering of contemporary fabric over the traditional. As in Yoruba aesthetics, tradition and innovation are not antithetical; indeed, innovation cannot take place without a background of tradition. In the context of egúngún, especially, layering of new on old fabric is considered necessary because the ancestral masquerade needs to connect with, and be responsive to, the needs of those living on earth. The real purpose of ancestors’ visits to the earth is to bless relatives and the community. They have to appear to be substantially better endowed than the recipients of their blessings in order to be credible. This view is supported by the Yoruba òwé, “If a person offers
to lend you a dress, you should consider what he or she has on” (Ẹni tó máa yání léwù, tí ọrúnun rè tà ọ́wò). Thus, it has to be abundantly demonstrated that the egúngún itself possesses enough to be able to give generously to those on earth.

Thus, it is not unusual to find a dazzling display of expensive and contemporary fabrics from overseas on top of highly regarded traditional Yoruba cloth in egúngún costumes. There is another dimension to the cloth spectacle – the invocation of ọ̀ṣẹ, power, lifeforce associated with the chameleon, alágẹ̀mpo, which, with its ọ̀ṣẹ, can acquire all the dress, designs, and colors of anything around it.

The line from the Ìfá literary corpus, Yéyéye ọ́sọ́ ọ̀gbó, “Cloth only wears to shreds” is visualized by the free moving panels of egúngún costumes that usually consist of strips of cloth and/or màiwò, fresh yellowish tender green palm fronds also called asọ-ðkú, “cloth of the dead.” Together shredded cloth and palm fronds become the visual metaphor for the transformation of the whole cloth to its immortal form – the human to the ancestor through egúngún performance. Egúngún’s visit from ṣrun, the abode of ancestors (also called “home”), to ayé, “this world” (also called “the marketplace”), is the celebration of the season of renewal of relationships between ancestors and humans on earth. Egúngún receives gifts and replenishes his “wardrobe” with the help of relatives and the community. Though the cloths on the egúngún might have been made locally, or in Germany, Indonesia, or America, the ancestral presence is believed to be everywhere and in every fabric. In the end, the cloth becomes the agent that enables the Yorùbá to build a bridge between this world and that of the ancestors (Figure 87).

The different members of one’s blood relation or social unit, ṣebí, are “shreds” of a metaphorical cloth symbolized by asọ-ṣebí, which people wear at burials and important social gatherings. The underlying aesthetic of “shreds” is one of infinite multiplicity, the effect of which becomes visualized when the egúngún dances and spins. Visually, the strips and panels seem to blend together, as the colors fade into one another. In the end, nearly all details disappear and the costume becomes part of everything and is immortal, like Olódúnmarè himself (see Figure 87).

In sum, this chapter demonstrates that oríkì is multivalent and cannot by nature be verbal only. We have thus argued that oríkì is also visual. Specifically, we have discussed under the rubric of visual oríkì, asọ, which literally signifies cloth, but essentially refers to everything one wears, even
We Greet Aṣọ before We Greet Its Wearer

the appearance of all things. Hence, mural decorations on Òríṣà shrines qualify as aṣẹ, while certain social and artistic human activities are designated aṣẹ insofar as they metaphorically perform that function. Yoruba Òríṣà, ancestors, sovereigns, priests, priestesses, men and women of all ages and social groups are identified and beautified by their aṣẹ. Indeed, their existence and recognition is contingent upon the possession of aṣẹ in this idiomatic sense in Yoruba thought.

Notes on Text

My research for and work on the exhibition Cloth Only Wears to Shreds, Yoruba Textiles and Photographs from the Beier Collection at the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, was a major impetus for this subject. This chapter is largely an expansion of my chapter titled “Fabric of Immortality: In Praise of Gods and Cloth” in the exhibition catalog, Cloth Only Wears to Shreds, Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2004: 39–58.