

ASO EBI: IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL UNIFORM IN NIGERIAN
CAUCUSES, YORUBA CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

by

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submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF VISUAL ARTS

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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NOVEMBER 2014

DECLARATION

I declare that *ASO EBI: IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL UNIFORM IN NIGERIAN CAUCUSES, YORUBA CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY TRENDS* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. O. O.', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

December 2014

ABSTRACT

This study is a critique of *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe* social uniform and social performance phenomena of the Yoruba culture of Nigeria in West Africa. The *Aso Ebi* phenomenon is a social uniform that is inextricable from the *Owambe* spectacle of the Yoruba culture, which, in itself, is a social performance. *Aso Ebi* is a fabric that is selected, made into garments and worn by groups of people who are related to one another in various ways such as family, friends or comrades. The uniforms are worn for social gatherings, especially celebrations, which are popularly called *Owambe*. These celebrations are very elaborate and loud, much like a grand spectacle put on to show wealth, unity and flamboyance. The research is the explanation of how the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* social uniforms manifest themselves and this manifestation is presented through a body of artworks. The artworks seek to expose the unseen actualities involved in participating in these social performances and issues of social survival within these cultural phenomena. The analysis addresses the impacts and influence of conformity in cooperative behaviour by an individual within his/her social identity and relationships. The main question this study addresses is whether the positive factors of unity, social order and expressive visual flamboyance of the social phenomena outweigh the negative impacts particularly on the individuals who participate in these social performances. This is done by acknowledging the experiences of the participating individuals in the conformity and transmission modes of these phenomena in this culture. The visual productions of the concepts in the research are achieved through performance, collages, photography and a sculptural installation. The significance of these emergent visual productions is that they shift the focus from the impression of the group to the conformity by the individual. This highlights the problems faced by the participating individuals in the pursuit and participation of this cultural phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most grateful to God for everything always. I also would like to thank my husband Olaoye Orimolade, my children and my mother for their support unconditionally throughout this programme. My thanks also goes to my whole family on both sides for their support.

My sincere gratitude also goes to Dr Nombeko Mpako, my supervisor. There are no words for all her advice, support, sacrifice and help. She inspires me to be a better person. I also wish to thank Faculty staff of the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Musicology for their support in different ways including the Multimedia section staff and my editor, Barbara Shaw. I thank my colleagues from the department for being there and also my colleagues and friends in Lagos. No one can do this alone and, for all your help, I am truly grateful.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has made this project possible even if it is just by wishing me luck and all those who offered their help along the way when I asked and when I did not. To every single one of you, I am most truly grateful.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all those who stand by me all the time, every time, unconditionally.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Social phenomena are a part of our social lives. They are ways of behaving that significantly identify or are appreciated by a group of people who relate to each another over a period of time and, as such, they have become standard practice for that group (Markey 1926:733-743).

The *Aso Ebi* phenomenon is a social uniform that is inextricable from the *Owambe* spectacle of the Yoruba culture, which, in itself, is a social performance. *Aso Ebi* is a fabric that is selected, made into garments and worn by groups of people who are related to one another in various ways such as family, friends or comrades. The uniforms are worn for social gatherings, especially celebrations, which are popularly called *Owambe*. The *Owambe* is a celebration that typically has many participants who all dress in the same fabric, *Aso Ebi*. These celebrations are very elaborate and loud, much like a grand spectacle put on to show wealth, unity and flamboyance. In this project, I critique the Yoruba *Aso Ebi* phenomenon. My research examines the impact and influence of the *Owambe* spectacle on individuals as a constant, recurring and evolving social ritual which is part of the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon.

The production of clothing has been a fundamental part of human life since the inception of civilisation. Fabric, the basis of clothing, has evolved from simply being a covering for the body to representation of social identity that reflects culture, social status, rank and profession, amongst other indicators of social identification. The source of fabric, method of production and design, and juxtaposition of hues have influenced its functionality (Gillow & Sentence 1997:10–11). Both collectively and as individuals, we choose fabrics for our clothing which reflect our identities, both personal and communal, as a form of communication. We use our fabrics as language and tools for social negotiation with others as shown by the *Aso Ebi* in the *Owambe* spectacle.

1.1 THE OBJECTIVES AND THE RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The main objectives of this study are as follows: firstly, to investigate the *Aso Ebi* ritual and its significance within Yoruba Society, especially during special events like the *Owambe*, with specific reference to the dress, and secondly, to examine the role of the individual within the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon, both as participant (conforming) and propagator (change agent).

The sub-aims of the study which flow from the aim objectives are:

- To evaluate the traditional customs and modern influences within the *Aso Ebi*
- To review the cultural ideology of Yoruba culture relating to the *Aso Ebi* in how it affects issues of structure, status and social politics
- To show its impact and influence on social, economic and political structures of those involved in staging the *Owambe* social performance. These include the celebrant, the social and commercial assistants, the spectators and the participants.
- To determine the visual impact of fabric on the *Aso Ebi* ritual.
- To assess the positive and negative issues related to *Aso Ebi* to determine whether the positive factors of the *Aso Ebi* social uniform outweigh the negative social impacts of this culture as justification for the survival of this phenomenon.

The research unpacks the staging and participation in the *Owambe* spectacle by investigating traditional customs and approaches to social unity and revealing the influence of modern culture on this event. The individual's role in participating and conforming to social practices in the *Owambe* spectacle is also examined. This research establishes the power of the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon within the social performance of the *Owambe* spectacle and their influence over the participants and the Yoruba culture in general. This is informed by the researcher's personal experience of observing and participating in these events.

This study specifically focuses on the fabric used for social uniforms of the *Aso Ebi* phenomena in the *Owambe* spectacle and not the Yoruba dress culture, though it is a part of it. The study examines the visual impact of the fabric used for the uniforms made for social functions in the *Aso Ebi* culture in the face of negative issues such as economic responsibilities, social ostracization, peer pressure, obligatory behaviour, social politics and re-identification, amongst others.

This research is fueled by my own experiences of the *Aso Ebi*, in particular, the challenges I face as an adult. As a female Nigerian of Yoruba decent,¹ I have grown up observing the people around me, including my parents, other family and friends, live their lives around the *Aso Ebi* phenomena of the *Owambe* spectacle. Coupled with becoming an adult and beginning to earn an income, I am immediately obligated to take part and share responsibility for these events. Apart from individual participation, I am also expected to cater for younger ones within the extended family. In addition, as family members age and stop earning an income, the responsibility for the costs of their participation falls onto the young adults who are obligated to ensure the elders' participation in the *Owambe* spectacle even if the young adults do not personally know the celebrant.

The economic impact of the phenomenon on young adults such as myself is overwhelming, but it does not end there. The personal identity and individualism of young people like myself, which is normally shown through our choice of clothing, is concealed. This is because, after acquiring the *Aso Ebi* clothes, there is little left to purchase clothes of our own choice. Since these events usually happen during weekends and holidays,

¹ The *AsoEbi* practice and staging of the *Owambe* spectacle is predominantly the responsibility of females within the society. The males are involved but with fewer obligations.

individualism expressed through clothing is almost non-existent. Furthermore, the *Aso Ebi* fabrics worn for a particular *Owambe* event are identified and associated with the event they were initially used for and are not used for another event. These problems, amongst others associated with the *Aso Ebi*, show that there is a need to research the impact and influence of these fabrics on the participants of these celebrations.

In this study I have used my mother as the perpetual participant because I have observed the effects of *Aso Ebi* on her. She is continually plagued by the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* celebrations as she is mandated to participate in the *Aso Ebi* almost weekly. This has taken its toll on her, myself and my siblings.

This study's practical component produces visual evidence of the effects of conformity and non-conformity. It presents the wearing of the *Aso Ebi* by those who conform to the societal performance and gives the researcher's own views which advocate against the conformity of dressing for *Aso Ebi*. The visual production, which consists of an installation, a performance, digital collage and mixed media painting, focus on the individual in a situation of conformity, ritual obsession, altruistic behaviour and transmission within the world of the *Owambe* spectacle and the *Aso Ebi* stranglehold.

1.2 ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

While acknowledging the near impossibility of re-orienting a whole society to change a culture that is hewn into the social fabric of its people, other measures can be devised that can relieve the pressure of conforming for an individual. These measures can mediate between the individual and his/her social obligations of uniformity within social performance. The dramatically staged installations of Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare reflect the issues that influence his environment. Through his identification with his Nigerian genealogy, Shonibare engages with fabrics that are used by

Nigerian caucuses to re-interpret Western fashion. On another level, he employs the fabric alongside inappropriate or even lascivious staged poses which serve as metaphors for his artistic commentary. In my own work, I find that I relate to both the fabrics and the theatricality inherent in Shonibare's installations as I depict the weight of social performance on the individual.

I also look at a particular piece of work by a Nigerian artist in the diaspora, sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp, entitled *Aso Ebi or Lace, Sweat and Tears* (2005). It was created for the forecourt of the British Museum and consists of five 2.5 meter galvanized steel sculptures depicting five women in green lace with pink head ties. With the first title, *Aso Ebi*, Camp celebrates the beauty of the Yoruba culture whilst the second title alludes to the detrimental financial burden that can result from participation in the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon. Camp uses her material and elements in her composition to address conformity in the *Aso Ebi* in which her work presents both the beauty and ugliness that is involved in participation in the phenomenon.

I also look at Nigerian photographer Jide Alakija whose photographic documentaries are archival based illustrations of the *Aso Ebi* continuum. In my work I relate to the huge impact of photography in the transmission and survival of the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon. I also relate to Alakija's documentation of the iconographic "group photo" of the *Aso Ebi* in these *Owambe* events and how much of the documentation and development of archival images serve as factors of social orientation.

1.3 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE ASO EBI PHENOMENON

Aso Ebi is a compound word loosely translated in English as "family cloth", *Aso* meaning cloth and *Ebi* meaning family. It refers to any fabric used to make uniform clothing for an event. The *Aso Ebi* phenomenon is a very old Yoruba tradition which William Bascom (1951:10) traces to the age

grade systems that signify fraternal bonds. These systems can be tied to the cultural history of the Yoruba where records of woven textiles in Africa are found dating as far back as the 8th century CE (Clark 1998:18). Ancient Yoruba sculptures dating to the 10th to 12th centuries CE also show that textiles were used in those times (Makinde, Ajiboye & Ajayi 2009:55).

Margaret and John Drewal(1984) attribute the development of textiles to the uniform dress comradeship originating in the age-old pairing of Yoruba *Gelede* masquerades which celebrate twins who are revered by the Yoruba. The origins of textiles have been traced to the period in which uniformed dressing was used to mark fraternal and maternal bonds. Men's and women's clubs called *egbe* wore uniform dress called *Aso Egbe* so that their members could be recognised during religious or other ceremonies (Bascom 1951:10). Okechukwu(2011:45-62) describes the culture of textiles that flourished from the end of the World War I, around 1918.



Figure 1.1: Yoruba Gelede Masquerade dance.

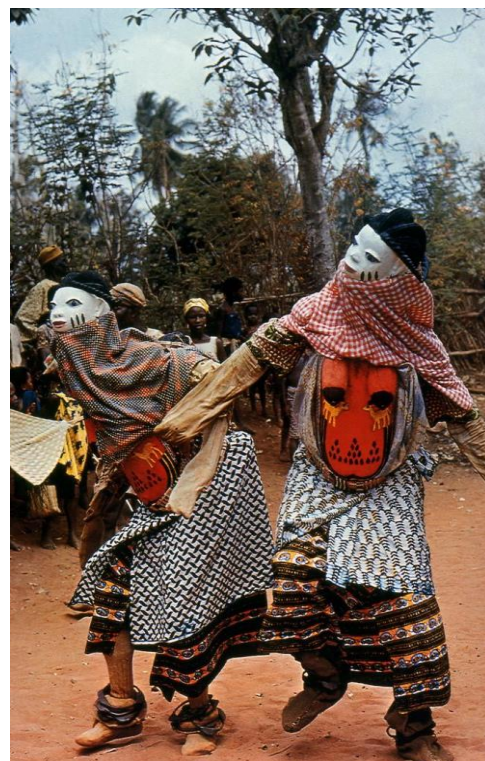


Figure 1.2: Yoruba Gelede masquerade dance.

In Yoruba culture, the concept of the family includes the extended family, neighbours and friends. The adoption of *Aso Ebi* as a social uniform and the participation in the *Aso Ebi* ritual has become a symbol of solidarity and loyalty for these families. *Aso Ebi* therefore becomes a metaphor for an expanded kinship which, Murphy (1986:88) explains, creates and strengthens the networks of loyalties and common identities that join families and their neighbours, sealing bonds which exist through generations. These bonds of kinship are at the core of Yoruba tradition and are reflected in their language where every child is referred to as “my child”, every mother “my mother” and every father is called “my father”.



Figure 1.3: Pius Adesanmi. *Yoruba women in Aso Ebi* (February 16, 2011).

Initially, *Aso Ebi* was used in Yoruba funeral activities as the uniform for children of the deceased and other immediate family members such as siblings, but has evolved into a formal culture for other events such as weddings, naming ceremonies, birthdays, church events, political gatherings and house warming parties among a plethora of other reasons used to stage a celebration.



Figure 1.4: *Participants in Owambe spectacle.*



Figure 1.5: Ceremonial goat dressed in Aso Ebi for celebration.

As the Yorubas are very fashion conscious, these uniforms play a significant role in their social lives. *Aso Ebi* therefore continues to attract attention as a major dress culture in Nigeria during social ceremonies and much attention is paid to the size, colour, quality and quantity of fabric used for uniforms. Historically, the native woven Yoruba fabric called *Aso Oke* was used for *Aso Ebi* but the demand for fabric, due to the growth of the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon in more recent post-colonial years, has led to the use of imported fabrics (Ajani 2012:108-118). There are presently numerous fabrics used by the Yoruba for *Aso Ebi* but the more popular, recognisable varieties are the *Aso Oke*, Damask, *Gele*, *Singele*, Lace, Ankara and African prints.



Figure 1.6: *African fabric prints*(2012).

The types and qualities of the various fabrics are significant in identifying lineage or displaying status and, in contrast, they are also used to enforce equality. This means that Yoruba dress modes, while establishing status and identity (Ajani 2012:108-118), become an attempt to include as many participants as possible who all wear the same uniforms. The hues of the fabrics are a major factor in attaining the desired overall visual effect of the staged *Owambe* spectacle. The fabrics and the clothing made from the chosen fabric therefore present a wealth of aesthetic expression and a visual vocabulary of encoded information. The *Aso Ebi* fabrics have the ability to subvert and/or exploit the allure of the “exotic”, even as they reference Yoruba cultural identity (Ajani 2012:108-118).

1.4 THE OWAMBE SPECTACLE: THE SOCIAL DRAMA

The Yoruba, and other Nigerians, have a very boisterous social life which is permeated with celebrations. Many communities have thriving informal and semi-formal associations (Ajani 2012:108-118) which use every opportunity as a reason to gather for a cause. Every milestone and life cycle event is marked or acknowledged by having a gathering of family members. These gatherings happen for different occasions from birth² to death and even after death as memorial events.



Figure 1.7: Jide Alakija. *Common gatherings for celebrations* (2012).

These gatherings are mostly large, grand celebrations that are characterised by a party atmosphere and are not restricted to any particular class or caste.³ At the more iconic of these gatherings, *Aso Ebi* fabrics are used to impose social uniformity. The absence of *Aso Ebi* fabrics at these celebrations, which is a rarity, is considered improper and,

²It is not customary, though, in Yoruba and Nigerian circles to celebrate pre-births.

³There are caste systems in Nigeria that are based on different traditional belief systems. The most popular are Igbo and Fulani. They have been severely eroded by new religions such as Christianity and Islam but they still remain as group identifications.

at worst, in the absence of the *Aso Ebi* fabric, a uniform colour code will be imposed.⁴

In Nigerian caucuses, these celebrations are commonly termed in Nigerian slang "*Owambe*" which, loosely translated in English, means "it is there". They are used to describe the point of association, that is, the reason and place of the celebration. The "celebrant", in these situations, dictates the fabric to be used for the event and the participants undertake the responsibility of buying the fabric stipulated (Familusi 2010: 66) and making the garments. The gathering is organised and carried out with the intent of creating an overall effect in order to make a state mentor to inspire but, mostly, it is done to create awareness of the issue that it is centred on. It is typical for the *Owambe* spectacle to be characterised by a grand display of opulence and wealth. Even the middle and lower classes, who desire to make an impact on both participants and spectators, emulate this custom in a brash show and a spray of money (which is probably borrowed).

⁴This is not always acceptable as the fabric is used as memorabilia of the event for which it was chosen. The fabrics are even named within the social circles by the events for which they were chosen. After this, if the event is referred to in conversation, the name of the event for which it was used is mentioned. These *AsoEbi* are cared for so they can last for lengthy periods of time and can be worn for very small meetings or other gatherings that are not extensively celebrated in the *Owambe* style.



Figure 1.8: Newswatch Nigeria. *A display of money in spraying and showing in Owambe spectacle (2012).*

The *Owambe* spectacle is a staged performance event convened for a particular occasion, be it a wedding, a funeral, or any other occasion. The staged spectacle is acted out by the celebrant and the participants to present a particular unified look or feel selected by the celebrant.⁵The spectacle becomes an installation which has a visual effect on both the participants and the audience. In so doing, it achieves the objective of the collective dress code which is to make the spectacle into a social or political statement. The act of gathering together forms the basis of the impact of the uniform fabric material on all involved. The fabric, aside from its innate characteristics, assumes the role of the tool, the prop, the subject and the focal point of the presented and performed installation.

⁵In Yoruba culture the host/s of the event are largely treated as the celebrants regardless of the type of event. A gathering either translates into a celebratory event otherwise it is not held.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, I have focused on theories which seek to explain the participation in *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* staged spectacles. These include social performance, social identity and social uniform, as well as cooperative behaviour and how these factors subvert and complement each other. There is a focus on an analysis of the individual in the context of a social situation; how the individual plays a role and is involved in these social processes and behaviour. This explains how the individual relates to social, economic, political and historical factors that influence social events in his/her society (Diener et al 1980:449-459).

2.1 SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

Performance presents a basis for critical reflection on communicative processes (Bauman & Briggs 1990) whether in cultural performance as a bounded event or in the interactions of daily life. It is viewed as a reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains (Butler 1993). An act of performance is distinctively characterised and marked by a stipulated set of performers and audiences interacting in a marked duration of time (Singer 1972). As such, there is a prescribed location and a set period for the activity of performance. These locations and periods vary extensively but are prerequisites for a performance.

Contemporary performance is assessed beyond its formal feature, which is to accomplish something, to become a relationship between form and communicative function interacting in our social existence (Bauman & Briggs 1990). American sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982) (1959) defined performance broadly as any public activity that influences other people. Goffman expands the concept of performance to include moments of theatricality found in face-to-face interaction where the politics of identity are negotiated through performance of the self. He was of the opinion that individuals see identity as performance and part of the flow of

social interaction and, as individuals, weave their identity constructs (Goffman 1974).

Aso Ebi within the *Owambe* spectacle mirrors Goffman's definition of social performance that asserts that, upon contact with others, an individual would try to exert influence over them. In this, the person guides or controls the perception that others have on him/herself by manipulating issues such as appearance, manner or even the setting in which he/she is placed. In so doing, the individual tries to influence the opinions that others have of him/her (Fine & Manning 2003:34-35). This is evident in the *Aso Ebi* as the celebrant makes decisions to mould the image of the participants by choosing the fabric they wear. The uniform worn by the participants defines the celebrant and associates its likeness with him/her for that particular display of unity. While the participants judge the celebrant by his/her choices, at the same time, they are preparing for the future when the roles are reversed and they become the celebrants.

2.1.1 Dramaturgy

Goffman's(1959)ideas of dramaturgy explore a variety of interactions where people participate in performances in everyday life. He describes the performance of the self as being synonymous with that of an actor portraying a character. Goffman admits being inspired by notions of dramatism as described by Kenneth Burke in 1945 who in turn, derived his inspiration from Shakespeare (Mitchell 1978:1-7). Dramaturgy is explained as a sociological perspective of viewing micro-sociological accounts of social interaction in everyday life, including symbolic interactions. Social performance can be observed in dramaturgical analysis of social interaction in terms of theatrical performance (Macdonis & Gerber 2010:133). This may be explained as observing life events as if they were taking place in the theatre. This applies to *Owambe* which is a staged spectacle with dramaturgical qualities.

Theatrical metaphor is defined as the means by which an individual presents him/herself to others based on cultural values, norms, and expectations with the intent of an expected reaction (Adler & Fontana 1987:217-235). As such, the individual becomes an actor presenting a sense of self in a particular event and is assessed by the audience. The individual hopes that he/she is viewed in the way that he/she intends. An analogy of this could be an exhibition that an artist holds of his/her work. The artist can manipulate the display of his/her work in order to present it the way that he/she would like it to be seen.

In a dramaturgical perspective, the focus is on the context of which the individual is portraying him/herself for an expected reaction (Goffman 1974). The individual's identity is shown through expressive role playing which creates a sense of consensus between the actor and the audience that defines the social situation. The idea of dramaturgy does not present an individual as a stable independent psychological entity, rather, the identity of the individual constantly morphs as it encounters interactions on various levels. An analogy could be a woman in a family situation who plays the roles of mother to her children and wife to her husband assuming various characters depending on the individual/s with whom she is interacting.

In a dramaturgy, the saying "Life is a stage" explains social interaction as the individual takes part in a play or a performance (Macionis & Gerber 2010). Just like putting on a play in a theatre, the settings, clothing, words, and nonverbal actions present an impression of an individual in the minds of others (Macionis & Gerber 2010). In his dramaturgical analysis, Goffman clearly distinguishes between the "front stage" and the "back stage" behaviour. The implication is that the actions of individuals, staged as part of a performance where there is audience, are different to those where there is no audience. As an example, many people dance and sing with total abandon when they are alone in front of a mirror but, with an

audience, they would present themselves differently. Goffman explains that participants in social interactions are engaged in certain practices to avoid being embarrassed or embarrassing others. He finds a relationship between the kinds of acts that individuals put on in their daily lives and theatrical performances (Smith 2002:22).

2.1.2 Social performance within the *Aso Ebi*

In the *Aso Ebi* culture, participation is tied to fitting in with a group of people in a public presentation of the *Owambe* spectacle. The actions of the individual in the staged spectacle are different from those outside of an *Owambe* event. Both parties, the celebrants and the participants, are concerned, on one hand, about the embarrassment of not participating in the celebration or, on the other hand, the embarrassment of nobody participating which would signify the failure of the *Owambe* spectacle.

As the event is likened to a staged performance, it does not present either the celebrant or the participant as he or she is in real life. They are both subsumed in the quest for the success of the event. In this performance, there is a stage area for the “actors”, which are the celebrant/s, the participants and the “enforcers”⁶ to present the event to the “audience” which is made up of onlookers who are not taking part in the celebration. Just like in a theatre, there is also the backstage area that is not visible to the audience where individuals can prepare themselves for the roles they are to play (Smith 2002: 22).

⁶These are individuals appointed by the celebrant to enforce the concept of the celebrant for the event. They may be bouncers to stop people who are not in uniform from participating in the event, souvenir distributors who will not hand out gifts to anyone out of uniform, ushers who stop people out of uniform from getting into pictures with the celebrant, or from dancing at the event so they do not disrupt the desired image of affluence and flamboyance.

Before a presentation, an individual typically prepares a role, or impression, that he/she wants to make on the other. These roles are subject to what is, in theatre, termed “breaking character”. Inopportune intrusions may occur, in which a backstage performance is interrupted by someone who is not meant to see it.

Goffman identifies several elements of social performance that also relate to the *Owambe* spectacle, directly or indirectly: the participant believes in the role in which he/she plays regardless whether the audience understands it or not; the audience must guess whether the performer is sincere or cynical (Goffman 1956); the actor believes that the role he or she is playing will project an impression of him/herself that will be a valuable asset for his/her social standing and progression. In the *Aso Ebi*, this concept depends on the role the individual is assuming for the event which may be the celebrant or supporter. The celebrant would act in the belief that his/her role will affect the participants and the observers, while the participant believes the role he/she is assuming would reflect a certain impression of him/her as a supporter for that event to other participants.

Being in character requires the need for a front or “the mask” that is employed by the actor/performer to play his/her projected self (Goffman 1956). This mask shields the audience from perceiving aspects of the individual’s character that do not conform to the performance just as we put up a façade to protect ourselves or present ourselves in a certain light. The celebrant and the participant in the *Owambe* put up façades for the duration of the event in keeping with the planned script for the performance of the *Owambe* event for the benefit of achieving the desired response from the observers.

For the *Owambe*, it is required that the celebrants and participants stay in character for the duration of the celebration therefore they work together to maintain the image by sending planned signals while, at the same time,

quelling all possible distractions from disrupting the performance. For instance, if, at a certain time, silence is required, all would try to keep quiet for the duration or regardless of how the participant in the *Aso Ebi* may feel about the fabric chosen, he/she will keep it on throughout the event. Any transgression could convey an incorrect message to the observers and this is frowned upon by the person who is staging the event.

There is an amount of deception that is involved much like special effects in films. Some things are concealed from the observer who may not know the true state of things. This is very emblematic of the *Owambe* event. Behind all the spectacle, elegance and grandeur of the staged event, there may be undercurrents of conflict between individuals involved in the participation.

The lengths that people go through to be listed as participants are sometimes astounding. There are situations where an individual might not be in the financial position to participate in the event, however, he/she may receive assistance from others who will offer to purchase his/her *Aso Ebi* outfit to enable him/her to participate. This will happen even though the individual lacks funds to pay for rent and school fees, amongst other things.

The *Aso Ebi* provides dramatic realisation that focuses on the desires of the celebrant for his/her celebration. This could be in the type and colour of the fabric or even in the introduction of props in the performance. For instance, in huge political rallies, Nigeria supporters carry props in addition to the *Aso Ebi* selected for the event. The APC party members are known for carrying traditional brooms which symbolise the act of cleaning while the PDP party members carry umbrellas that signify protection. Props such as jewelry and other elements are also included in staged events that are not political.

Goffman was of the view that a performance often presents an idealised view of the situation the director is intending to present. The observers or the audience are given an “idea” of the goal that the director wishes to achieve and the performers then try to carry out the performance in accordance with the intended idea (Goffman 1956). The participants in the *Owambe* spectacle therefore have an image of what they will look like together in uniform at the event but the celebrant directs the preparation of the location for the event, dealing with various issues like the visual look of the location and the way that participants will experience it.

The “hoax effect” refers to the whole event being summed up as an experience that will have long lasting social effects but vanishes at the end of its assigned duration when all participants go back to the realities of life or move on to the next *Owambe* event that they are scheduled for. Only the memories and images of the event will remain in their experience. All the secrets that are involved in putting up the event are concealed. They are only opened to entrusted participants and therefore remain concealed to keep the image of the event intact.

2.1.3 Goffman’s analysis of social performance

Goffman’s theories are based on a relationship between performance and life. He considers various aspects of the theatre such as the stage, settings, props and backstage activity. In the *Owambe* spectacle, participants assume two roles, that of the actors being viewed and of the audience that is viewing and assessing the event. While, in Goffman’s performances, the actors are able to choose the stage, the props or the costumes to be worn for the performance, in the *Owambe* spectacle, the actor/participant does not have the same freedom to choose. Both Goffman’s actors and the actor/participants in the *Owambe* spectacle have to adjust to the different roles, settings or situations required of actors.

In his book, *Asylums* (1961) made up of essays about the social conditions of mental patients and other inmates, Goffman discusses the concept of “total institution” (Trevino 2003:152) which refers to places where people are treated alike and where their social behaviour is regulated. This is synonymous with the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* participations. Although participation in the *Owambe* event, unlike the asylum or prison, is perceived as voluntary, there is an element of being bound by obligation or social norms associated with peer/family pressure. In these situations, participation is obligatory, clothing is regulated, the performance of the *Owambe* spectacle is prescribed, there is an acceptable way to behave and judgments are made. In order to fit in, it becomes necessary to accept that participation is obligatory. The *Aso Ebi* has become institutionalised in Nigerian society and is also practiced by Yoruba people in *Owambe* social performances in the diaspora. The comparison to Goffman’s *Asylums* establishes the depth of influence the culture has over the individuals from this social grouping.

In the final essay of *Asylums* (1961), Goffman deals with the concept of institutionalisation and how it can mould an individual to play a particular role (Davidson, Rakfeldt & Strauss 2010:150). The impact of being institutionalised is akin to social performance in the required settings of social events. The effect of institutions on human interactions described by Goffman resonates with that of the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* spectacle. They both exercise powers that define how individuals dress and behave at social engagements and affect core decisions that the individual makes for his/her social and economic life. Goffman (1961) says that, even in situations where individuals are institutionalised, they find ways of redefining their roles in the social structure to reclaim a personal identity. This is shown in the ways that social uniforms, such as the *Aso Ebi*, are individualised to indicate personal tastes, social selectivity and affiliations (Holzman & Newman 2007:211).

2.1.4 The Sapeurs of Da Congo

The *Owambe* spectacle is not just a ritual in the life of an individual like a wedding or a rite of passage. Rather, it is a continuously expanding requirement to perform a role in the *Owambe* event throughout his/her life that has a weighty effect on the individual performer. A comparison could be made to the Sapeurs of TheCongo who are derived from la SAPE which is an acronym for *Société des Ambianceurset des Personnes Élégantes*, translated as “the Society of Tastemakers and Elegant People”. It is a culture which is greatly influenced by elegant French clothing for men. The first “icon” or “Grand Sapeur” of this movement was an influential Congolese political and religious figure named André Matsoua who, upon returning to the Congo from Paris, became the first Congolese to adopt the dress sense of a Frenchman instead of traditional Congolese dress.

Unlike the Sapeurs who have imported their dress sense, the *Aso Ebi* is intrinsically indigenous to Yoruba culture. Another difference between them is that the Sapeur have moral codes and directives regarding smartness and hygiene for daily life which is irrelevant to the *Aso Ebi*. A similarity that they share is that their respective dress codes erase social and status differences. The *Aso Ebi* is not linked to any religious background and is also not related to violent activity unlike the Sapeurs who have a religious belief system in addition to their activism which has resulted in several social clashes that have led to violence between them and their government. The Sapeur lifestyle is dominated by male performers while the *Aso Ebi* is a general uniform dress code that is incorporated into the *Owambe* celebration for individuals of all ages and genders.



Figure 2.1: *A Congolese Sapeur in daily dress against his environment* (2011).

There are parallels between these two groups that encourage “keeping up” and putting the “best foot forward” a culture that gives these social performances their high visual impact and influence, often to the detriment of other aspects of an individual’s life.



Figure 2.2: *Young Sapeur gentlemen in pose display*(2011).

Sapeur gentleman, while strutting and posing, regard their performance not just aesthetic but as evidence of a lifestyle which they have chosen. In the case of *Aso Ebi*, clothing also makes a social statement that involves numerous events linking different individuals in the same social structure.



Figure 2.3: A Sapeur gentleman performing poses(2011).

The backdrop of the Sapeurs' performance is their daily life which clearly depicts the contrast between the garb and the performance and the reality of often impoverished surroundings. The *Owambe*, on the other hand, conceals reality with the façade of the staged spectacle.

The social performance of the Sapeur revolves around the individual and the way that he lives his life. It takes place continuously throughout the year and most Sapeur gentlemen go the lengths of acquiring up to thirty or more full sets of apparel so that they can wear each set once a month to tide them through the year. For the *Owambe* performance, on the other hand, *Aso Ebi* is chosen for one singular event among many others taking place. Participants do not remain in character because, once the *Owambe* event ends, the performance is over and the participants return to their daily lives to await the next call for an *Owambe* performance. Just like the Sapeurs, though, *Owambe* performances continue throughout the life of the individual and the custom is often passed on through generations and by association with other individuals.

2.1.5 Contemporary Trends

Another adopted social performance akin to the concept of *Aso Ebi* is that of bridal trains. In bridal trains, the bridesmaids are a visual spectacle in

asocial performance which, in this case, is the wedding. Unlike the *Aso Ebi* where all take part in the performance, the bridesmaid is typically a young woman, often a close friend or sister of the bride. These social performances are restricted to weddings while *Aso Ebi* is done for a plethora of social events. At a wedding, the bridesmaids' activities are minimal and their role is more of an aesthetic one though they do assist the celebrant on the day of the wedding (Martin 2005:383). Bridesmaids share the concept of the social uniform with those taking part in an *Owambe* ceremony but the calls to perform the part of a bridesmaid take place only during a short phase of youth, unlike the *Aso Ebi* which includes all ages. Just like the participant in the *Aso Ebi*, the bridesmaid is responsible for her uniform and, in both cases, the choice of the uniform and the presentation of the event are directed by the celebrant.

It is not the tradition for bridesmaids to entertain the bride or to have to wear dresses that they cannot afford (Martin 1999:136-137) but the concept of dressing for a social performance has evolved into a norm in both cases, the traditional bridesmaid and in Nigerian caucuses.



Figure 2.4: *Bridesmaids with the bride at a wedding (blog photo).*



Figure 2.5: *Nigerian Bridesmaids and Bride at a wedding. (blog photo)*

Emotions are the core agents of social organisation in humans. They are bio-psychological phenomena that motivate social interactions and relationships. Emotion is related to basic physiology, particularly with stress and anti-stress systems. These generate “temperament” that affects social connectedness (Kotrschal 2013:3-21). In considering drivers for social performances, emotions are connected with the self-preservation of the individual that propels this cooperative social behaviour which results in the high costs of participating in social performances. The individual recurrently succumbs to the emotional influences of the social pressures involved in the phenomenon.

2.2 DE-INDIVIDUATION, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND THE SOCIAL UNIFORM

Dress plays a functional role in manipulating attitudes and behaviours of individuals so that it becomes possible to predict future roles or consequences. People use dress as a mechanism to develop and mould behaviour with others by understanding how, why and what we wear. We can use dress to make deductions about others and how we dress allows others to draw inferences about us as individuals or groups.

The uniform is viewed as a device to define the boundaries of complex organisations, to ensure that members will conform to the goals, and to eliminate conflicts in the status sets of their members. The uniform serves several functions; it acts as a totem that reveals and conceals statuses, certifies legitimacy and suppresses individuality (Nathan & Nicholas 1972:719-730). The social uniform is an identity marker for groups of individuals who communicate visually and exhibit their unity in their apparel. They clearly set themselves apart from others, for example, biker gangs who dress in black leather attracting attention on the highways (see figure 2.6 below).



Figure 2.6: *Biker Gangs bring war to Britain*(7 Jan 2013).

The *Aso Ebi* social uniform, as a tool in the *Owambe* social performance, serves to articulate future prospects, reactions, orientations and the intentions behind the celebrant's choices. It is not possible to carry out the performance without the participants who volunteer to promulgate the cause of the celebrant with their individual participation. In assessing the cost for an individual within the group, it is pertinent to view the position of

the individual within the social performance as the participant becomes de-individualised.

The concept of de-individuation refers to a diminishing of one's sense of individuality when the individual is placed or finds him/herself in a situation where he/she becomes part of a group. At its core is the psychological state of decreased self-evaluation and decreased evaluation apprehension causing anti-normative and dis-inhibited behaviour (Diener et al 1976:178-183). The theory seeks to present plausible reasons for different kinds of collective anti-normative behaviour in various degrees of negativity (Staub 1996:117-132) but it is also associated with non-violent and positive behavioural tendencies.

The *Aso Ebi* social uniform finds a synonym in the de-individuation theory which is understood to be an absence or loss of individuality and personal responsibility when a person becomes a part of a certain group. This can take place in both positive and negative extremes (Morris 1996: 651-781), such as in gangs and cults like the Klu Klux Klan, which erode individuality. There is no negative behaviour associated with the *Aso Ebi* but neither is it a simple matter of social unity. Its span of influence continues to widen to cover several aspects of social and political life. The core of the *Aso Ebi* is to visually depict a mass of people in support of one person or cause. It does not lay emphasis on the individual participant in any way.



Figure 2.7: Spartacus Educational. *Ku Klux Klan initiation ceremony*(1954).

Within the *Aso Ebi* there is an absence of hierarchy in that participants are all equal. There are no demarcations between the participants in their roles as supporters of the celebrant or cause. As such, issues of financial or social standing do not arise because

Aso Ebi levels the gap between persons of higher status and those of lower ones and thereby eliminates, if only temporarily, the built-in antagonism between the have's and have-nots (Sofola 1978:128).

This particular characteristic of the *Aso Ebi* positively influences the interaction between participants during and after the social performance by affecting the ways they relate to each other. It levels the playing field of the social structure and is directly supported by the Yoruba proverb that states "*Asonla koleeyannla*" which is loosely translated as "the rich, gorgeous dress does not reference a rich and influential person". It prevents individuals being underrated or overrated by others (Familusi 2010:1-11). The individual who participates in the *Aso Ebi* is therefore less likely to be singled out of the group of performers because, in striving for the unity and rewards of social conformity of the *Aso Ebi*, it is very unlikely that the individual would be inclined to behave negatively as such an act would single him/her out (Sofola1978:128).

In the grouping of *Aso Ebi* for the *Owambe* spectacle, the visual element at its core is that of a crowd. The French psychologist, Gustave Le Bon, was the first person to write about the theory of crowd psychology in his publication *The Crowd: A study of the Popular Mind* (1895). Le Bon explains that individual personalities become dominated by the collective mindset of the crowd which he characterised as unanimous, emotional, and intellectually weak (Postmes & Spears 1998:238-259). The behaviour of the individual within the crowd is heavily influenced by the loss of responsibility of the individual and an impression of universality of behaviour tends to increase with the size of the crowd (Toch 1988:954). That means that people in smaller groups tend to be more cautious in their behaviour than the same set of individuals would be if they found

themselves part of a larger crowd. An analogy to this concept is that of football supporters. The three elements that this analogy shares with the *Owambe* spectacle are: the social uniform, the specific event and the location. A group of individuals headed to a football tournament would dress to affiliate themselves with the team they support. They also tend to exhibit more emotional restraint before arriving at the location of the football event than after their arrival when they become part of an even larger crowd. At this point, their individual identities are completely subsumed into the crowd at the football event.



Figure 2.8 Hartlepool United football team fans travelling to London dressed as smurfs (2012).



Figure 2.9: Football fans at Camp Randall Stadium Wisconsin (2008).

In the *Aso Ebi*, the effect of the crowd reflects the success of the *Owambe* spectacle. This causes anxiety for the celebrant because he/she does not know the number of volunteers who will participate in the celebration until the event takes place. This is supported by a Yoruba proverb that says “*Bo lomoogun boo lomoogun wehin re wo*” which translates as “if you think you have a great multitude of followers, look behind you”. This means that the confidence of a celebrant or director is judged by the number of voluntary participants in his/her event. The implication is that, if a leader looks back, he will know whether or not he has followers (Familusi 2010:1-11). The number of followers is particularly important in politics where the *Aso Ebi* social uniform is used.

Le Bon proposed that crowds manifested the three stages of submergence, contagion and suggestion. This allows crowds to become a powerful force for destruction. In the first stage of submergence, the individuals in the crowd lose their senses of individual self and personal responsibility which is induced by their anonymity within the crowd (Reicher 2001:374-377).

The contagion stage refers to the propensity for individuals in a crowd to blindly and unquestioningly follow the predominant ideas and emotions of the crowd. Le Bon's view was that the contagion effect spreads rapidly among the "submerged" individuals in the crowd (Greenberg 2010:1-2). This effect is exemplified in “Portraits of Reconciliation”, the work of photographer Pieter Hugo and writer Susan Dominus. They are currently working on a visual project which entails making portraits of victims and perpetrators from the Rwandan genocide. The images are of Hutu and Tutsi people who are undergoing a reconciliation and rehabilitation program to stabilise the psyche of the people from the horror of the genocide in Rwanda. The subjects in the portraits are a pairing of victim and perpetrator and the images are accompanied by testimonies of shock, shame and disbelief of the individual perpetrators of their behaviour at the

time of the genocide. In these testimonies, the individuals state that the evil that transpired was completely out of character for them.



Figure 2.10 Jean Pierre Karenzi Perpetrator (left) Viviane Nyiramana Survivor (right) participants of *Portraits of Reconciliation* (2014).

The testimony from figure 2.10 above is:

Karenzi: "My conscience was not quiet, and when I would see her I was very ashamed. After being trained about unity and reconciliation, I went to her house and asked for forgiveness. Then I shook her hand. So far, we are on good terms." (Karenzi 2014)

Nyiramana: "He killed my father and three brothers. He did these killings with other people, but he came alone to me and asked for pardon. He and a group of other offenders who had been in prison helped me build a house with a covered roof. I was afraid of him—now I have granted him pardon, things have become normal, and, in my mind, I feel clear." (Nyiramana 2014)

The suggestion stage refers to prevailing emotions of a crowd that show negative behaviour. Le Bon believed that this behaviour is drawn from a shared archaic unconsciousness that is emphatically uncivilized in nature. This behaviour, however, is constrained by the moral and cognitive abilities of the least capable members (Forsyth 2012:305-328).

Le Bon was of the view that a loss of personal responsibility of the individual within a crowd encourages the inclination to behave in a primitive and hedonistic way as a collective group (Hans 1988:954). The participants' individual behavioural traits are therefore totally un-presented or manifested. The suggestion stage is not evident in the *Aso Ebi* participant who is compelled to become part of the group for reasons of social progress and the ideological concept of lending the individual self to the cause of *Owambe* for the survival of the group, the celebrant, the individual him/herself and the observers of the *Owambe* spectacle.

The term "de-individuation" was coined by Pepitone and Newcomb in 1952. They studied the work of Le Bon and came to the conclusion that, when an individual becomes part of a group, he/she is not treated as an individual. This is because the individual's interest in the group is what causes him/her to support the cause of the group rather than pursuing his/her individual interests (Postmes & Spears 1998:238-259). This is a characteristic evident in the *Aso Ebi* where individuality and control over internal or moral constraints is not lost, rather, they are sublimated for the cause of the group in a form of self-sacrifice (Postmes & Spears 1998:238-259). There is a tendency to assume that conforming to the *Aso Ebi* rules for social performance in the *Owambe* happens through social coercion, however, the individual participant must still consent. This makes the participatory behaviour a conscious acceptance to conform.

According to Nadler, Goldberg and Jaffe (1982:1127-1136), crowd behaviour is directed by the norms in a specific context which, in this case, is the *Owambe* event. The celebrant, who is being honoured and supported by the participants, organises all the aspects of the event. This, Familusi (2010:1-11) explains that it makes him or her the leader by virtue of his/her request for volunteers for the *Aso Ebi*.

Unlike the group theory of “de-individuation” discussed above, the individual involved in the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon is not relieved of individual responsibility but is assessed on his/her capacity to exhibit loyalty through the sacrifice of individual responsibility. This makes him/her eligible to be part of that social group. Through cooperative behaviour, individuals jointly gravitate towards group cohesiveness for the duration of the *Owambe* event. This behaviour refers to the convergence theory, which purports that crowd behaviour is not a product of the crowd rather that the crowd is a product of the meeting of like-minded individuals (Reicher 2001:374-377).

In the *Aso Ebi*, the convergence theory can be applied to the individual participants who are seen as willing loyalists who come together as a crowd which reinforces their behaviour (Reicher 2001:374-377). In this instance, crowd behaviour is not irrational rather it is the individuals in the crowd who are jointly expressing themselves. The reaction of the crowd is the rational product of existing beliefs and values. This can be exemplified by the “Occupy Nigeria” event that was held in Nigeria in January 2012. This event brought together huge crowds from different strata of society to contest the Nigerian government’s decision to remove the oil subsidy. The general populace called the government to book on issues of waste, the looting of the National treasury and corruption at the expense of the citizens of Nigeria. Crowds gathered in several states, crippling the government until resolutions were made.



Figure 2.11: *Maryland, Lagos Nigeria during the Occupy Nigeria protest(2012).*

This convergence theory is criticised because it excludes the social determination of self and action. It is also argued that all the actions of the crowd are born solely out of the intents of the individual involved (Reicher 2001:374-377). Even if the individuals involved in a crowd are like-minded at the outset, key individuals may suggest appropriate actions while other individuals follow. This applies to the *Owambe* event because it is the celebrant who makes the decisions while the participants fall in line behind him/her.

The convergence theory is also criticised because the emergent norms which developed within the group or crowd do not take into account the presence of existent socio-cultural norms (Reicher 2001:374-377). The *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe* relies heavily on existing socio-cultural norms and this is supported by the Yoruba saying “*A ma se ti won se n se*” which translates to “we will do things as they are done”. Therefore, the core of the *Aso Ebi* is its norms which follow social traditions. In the context of the *Aso Ebi*, social and individual identities are irrevocably linked, and social behaviour can vary along a continuum of interpersonal and intergroup behaviour. This assumes that individuals naturally strive for a positive

self-concept within their particular social identities (Tajfel & Turner 1979:33-47). Social identification defines people in terms of the group that they relate to. The *Aso Ebi* practice serves as a means of reinforcing social identity and solidarity among group members.

In viewing personal identity within the context of social identity with a view to placing the individual within the social situation, Tajfel & Turner (1979: 188) describe personal identity as “a haphazardly floating independent variable which strikes at random as the spirit moves it”. This means that the individual’s social identity is constantly changing as it moves through different social situations. The individual, in the case of the *Aso Ebi*, assumes a new identity in each group of *Owambe* that he/she participates in. With a continually changing *Aso Ebi* uniform, he/she also carries his/her own personal characteristics which may be suppressed while taking part in the group events.

Both the social and the individual identity are parts of the self that have both individual and group goals. Through *Aso Ebi*, self-definition is shared with others who also claim membership of a social group, hence the Yoruba saying “*Eniyan lasomi, bimobabojuwehin ti moreni mi, inu mi adunara mi a ya gaga*” which means “people are my clothes, when I am surrounded by my people I am alive” (Familusi 2010:1-11). The metaphor of describing people as clothing refers to socialising which is the need and willingness to identify with the social environment while also associating with personal identity. Sociological theorist, Emile Durkheim (1857–1917) in *The Rules of Sociological Method* ([1895]1950) and *Moral education* (1961) asserts that social forces are patterns of behaviour that are capable of exercising coercive power over individuals (Durkheim 1950:110). These forces are external to the individual and manifest as group norms in the Yoruba caucus.

The *Aso Ebi* phenomenon reveals the societal norms and their influence on individuals in the society as a form of normative consensus. Durkheim (1950:71) uses the analogy of the existence of crime in society. He explains that the actions and reactions of a society against crime, is the definition of its boundaries in reaction to what is considered a crime within that society. This may be used to define the morality within that culture. The *Owambe* spectacle plays the same role achieving its functionality through the actions and reactions to the event within the Yoruba society. Since voluntary action is subject to moral evaluation, participation in the social performance and social uniform of *Owambe* and *Aso Ebi* in the Yoruba society may be viewed as moral obligations within the parameters of the social requirements of Yoruba society. The social structure of the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon affects the morality of those directly tied to the practice, making it part of the nature of that society (Durkheim 1961:87). As such, the *Aso Ebi* social uniform as cultural phenomenon becomes an effective part of the social structure of Yoruba society.

When clothing is worn that has symbolic meaning for both the individual and his/her audience, it impacts on both socio cultural and communicative functions. The impact of dress directly affects the behaviour of observers significantly. The power of social uniforms employed within a society for staged social performance spectacles like cultural carnivals, such as the world famous Brazilian Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, cannot be underestimated. These social performances offer a possibility of creating a space for negotiating and resisting culture through inversion, bringing about genuine improvement in social conditions (Crichlow2013:81).



Figure 2.12: Marcelo Sayao/European Press Photo Agency. *Samba School Imperatriz, Rio Carnival (2013)*



Figure 2.13: Vanderlei Almeida/AFP/Getty images. *Rio Carnival Brazil(2013).*

2.3 SUSTAINED COOPERATIVE BEHAVIOUR AND TRANSMISSION

Considering the longevity of the *Aso Ebi* phenomena through evolution and expansion, the question can be asked if the aforementioned characteristics of unity, loyalty, support and the like contradict the fact that it is individual pressure associated with participation in the *Owambe* social performance that preserves the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon. It does not seem that many individuals with the same experience in participation have much of an impact on the spread of the phenomena. This implies that there is more to its existence than just the physical or visual impression of the *Owambe* spectacle as a major factor in the sustenance of the social uniform for social performance. As such, the consideration of social orientation and socio cultural inheritance of ideology may be viewed as major contributing factors to the seeming “voluntary” recruitment of participants for this social performance on different levels. How this orientation of perpetual obligation in cooperative behaviour is transmitted and wielded as influence might then be viewed as a stronger impact on the individual in the sustenance of the *Aso Ebi* phenomena.

Cooperative behaviour describes the way individuals act together in groups for the common or mutual benefit of individuals within that group. It is also interpreted as behaviour which takes place on a specific occasion that increases the reproductive success of an actor’s social partners (Ross-Gillespie, Gardener, West & Griffin 2007:331-332). An analogy of this could be putting up a gate that will be used by several people.

The idea of an actor advancing the progress of another may imply that it impedes the progress of the actor but, in reality, it presents long term benefit for the actor. As kin share part of the individual’s genetic make-up, enhancing each other’s progress and can contribute to the passing on of traits of the individual to future offspring (Hamilton 1964:1-16).

The idea of cooperation is complex and participators may provide both direct and indirect contributions. The extent of cooperation may not be readily identified as cooperative behavioural activity as it may be viewed as an interaction between two individuals for the mutual benefit of both but it may also form part of a broader scale of communal goals that bring people together (Clutton-Brock 2002:69-72). The success of cooperation relies on the depletion of the individual. The more the individual is submerged and the attention directed to the beneficiary, the greater the success of the beneficiary at the expense of the individual. While it does seem at odds with the traditional concept that individuals compete to survive and maximise their progress (Clutton-Brock 2009:51-57), in some cases of cooperative behaviour, there is self-sacrifice for the good of the group which offers no reward for the individual actor for his or her contribution.

In cooperation between kin, the kin see the promotion of the celebrant as their own individual promotion (Clutton-Brock: 2009: 69-72). There are ways to create this kind of cooperation between members of the same family. There is the "pay-to-stay" theory whereby an individual promotes others with the assurance that the favour would be returned because the individual is an accepted part of that community. There is also the "territory inheritance" theory which infers that individuals perform cooperative activity in order to get access to the territory for their own individual benefit upon departure of the beneficiary. This could be inheritance after death or a sharing of beneficial wealth concerned with that location (Balshine-Earn, Neat, Reid & Taborsky 1998:432-438). When cooperative behaviour is sustained, the position of the beneficiary is maintained through rewarding the individual, directly or indirectly, for past acts of cooperation. On the other hand, individuals can be penalised for a lack of contribution (Gardner et al 2009:1-8).

Boyd and Richerson (1982) describe group selection as a potential force in the transmission of human cooperative behaviour and the integration of both cultural and genetic modes of conduct. They oppose the ideologies of social sciences and socio biology regarding individual behaviour together with the transmission of behavioural qualities in the creation and sustenance of social groupings and orientation.

If the inclination for human cooperation is fundamentally egoistic and is based on assertions from evolutionary theory (Lewontin 1970:1-18), this would mean that human cooperation is solely motivated by self-interest or the prospect of self-benefit. The concept that cooperation is galvanised by a selective process is based on genetic models of evolution which indicate that people should cooperate with groups of related individuals (Boyd & Richerson 1982: 325). On the other hand, Boyd and Richerson (1982: 326) argue that social science sees the natural selection process as an accurate reflection of reality and that through several models of transfer or transmission of behavioural constructs, there is a common factor of group selection. This view explains the spread, growth and survival of the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon in the staging and participation of *Owambe* spectacle. Boyd and Richerson (1982:326) also say that, in comparison with other species, humans tend to cooperate on a large scale. Their view of human involvement in cooperation stems from the idea that humans are not solely self-interested.

In the case of *Aso Ebi*, it is inferred that individual humans are not self-sufficient in that social reliance weighs heavily on self-progress and development through self-evaluation. The celebrant relies on the involvement of the participants to actualise his/her social intentions which, in turn, contribute to his/her self-progress and social standing. The participants join in the obligatory process in the expectation that, at some point, they will take the role of the celebrant and this will, in turn, affect their self-development and social standing. The role of the *Owambe*

participants, according to Boyd and Richerson (1982:326), shows that people make choices to cooperate by comparing changes in their personal welfare with those of others. Individuals observe their social environment and deduce which groups to associate with for personal development. The idea of cooperative behaviour is generally associated with the production of things that economists term “public goods”. This may be explained as a commodity or service which is produced by an individual for the benefit of others within a group and cannot be feasibly withheld from any members of the group (Olson, 1971). This favours the notion that any “rational selfish individual” requires some form of coercion to participate in the cooperative production of public goods for themselves. If the group is large, it is possible that individual benefits will be severely diminished.

In the situation of *Aso Ebi* the position of the “rational selfish individual” is not relevant. The product of cooperation in *Aso Ebi* is more of a social value in terms of what “public goods” are produced. “Rational selfish individuals” (except in rare cases) would not voluntarily invest in the provision of public goods in large groups (Boyd & Richerson 1982:328). This, however, does not erase the obligatory factor because it is separate from the systemised coercion to conform. The presence of this goes against the notion that if the increment of cost exceeds the incremental benefit, a “rational selfish individual” does not invest (Boyd & Richerson 1982:328).

In the process of *Aso Ebi*, the individual voluntarily participates in *Owambe* through acquiring the *Aso Ebi* for several reasons such as genetic transmission with kin loyalty. The latter is extremely broad as the Yoruba operate an extended family system which includes informal adoption of genetically unrelated persons who are included in a group through closeness, shared experiences, adjudged loyalty and other reasons. In the *Aso Ebi*, family members are expected to express loyalty by participating in the event, regardless of the cost, otherwise it is assumed

that something is amiss. A situation might arise that causes time and cost to be juggled but the need to show allegiance does not dissipate.

This inclination to obligatorily participate is also acquired through transmission of cooperative behaviour. The impact on the individual is exemplified in that the individual can have up to 18“family” *Owambe* functions within a year, not including other social, religious and possibly professional groups that have events during the year. The individual may have as many as one event per week or even more. What is more, in the case of “family”, *Owambe* gatherings, depending on the type of event, may last for days and require more than one specific *Aso Ebi* which the individual is obligated to acquire.

Models of transmission of cooperative behaviour may vary and, in the case of *Aso Ebi* and its expansion and longevity, different models of transmission are galvanizers to *Aso Ebi* phenomena of cooperative behaviour. This characteristic of *Aso Ebi* supports Boyd and Richerson who state that “social interaction produces “forces” that affect the frequency of different culturally transmitted variants” (1982:327).

Associated models of transmission for the *Aso Ebi* are: genetic transmission, as referred to previously, with its major characteristics of kin selection in social groups; cultural inheritance transmission; and conformist transmission. Cultural inheritance is transmitted in situations where individuals acquire the characteristics of their behaviour from other individuals by modelling or imitating them. In this case, in order to determine the behavioural characteristics of the individual, it is necessary to understand the behavioural characteristics of those individuals from whom the individual acquired his/her behaviour. The group of individuals that influence the behavioural qualities of the single individual could be predecessors or even come from the individual's contemporaries which open up new influences to be acquired or inherited. In the contemporary

setting for the *Aso Ebi*, a broad range of new possibilities have been introduced through peer influence amongst other kinds of social influences.

The development of global popular culture through the internet with social networks like Facebook and other social media provide new ways for celebrants to announce their strategic intentions and become instruments of social and cultural influence. Before the event, celebrants post calls for participation and, after the event, evidence of participation, such as photographs, is posted by both the celebrant and the participants thereby wielding a wider net of area of influence.

Photography is the most popular way to spread information. Cameras are available on communication devices such as phones and tablets. These tools enable the celebrant/director to share visual documentation of their event with those who attended as well as those who did not, including the general public. See Appendix A for a copy of an email message recruiting participants and displaying participatory costs to the invitee. It originally included images of the visual concept of the *Aso Ebi* chosen by the celebrant.

There is also indirect cultural influences on these *Owambe* events from suppliers of goods and services such as photographers who go to these events, take photographs and disseminate them, fashion magazines who publish these events for the general public and vendors who facilitate the full scale production of an *Owambe* event with services ranging from the distribution of souvenirs to the supply of tailors who make the fabrics into fashionable clothes. They all have a dialogue with the celebrant and the participants that facilitate the continuity of this phenomenon (Okechukwu 2012:1–16).

The textile industry has an indirect influence on the individual because he/she must buy the fabrics to make the clothes for the *Aso Ebi*. The importation and manufacturing of fabrics fuels the social uniform phenomenon and this sustains the *Owambe* spectacle.

Human cooperative behaviour is tied to culture which affects the way we behave (Richerson & Boyd 2005:6). This information is acquired through social learning and is characterised by conformist transmission. This means that individuals are likely to imitate the behaviour that they learn from others from their cultures (Boyd & Richerson 1982: 329). *Aso Ebi* has spread to the diaspora through the migration of people from Yoruba land who took their culture, ideologies and ways of behaving with them. The new settlers then integrate with those already there and instill both sets of cultures into the existing population.

An individual may join various social groups with different characteristics like family, religion, profession for the purpose of social relevance. The interest of the “rational selfish individual” as (Boyd and Richerson describe him or her) within the purpose of these social groups does come to light in that activities that galvanise their progress are fuelled by associations that both reward and punish. Even with this individual irrelevance in the *Aso Ebi*, the individual does seem to gain by conforming in the anticipation of the reward that comes from assuming the role of celebrant in the long run. On the other hand, even when the individual has not assumed the role of celebrant, he or she still enjoys exclusion from the punitive effects of abstaining from participation.

In the conformist transmission, dissolving a social group does not entail the physical death of any individual. Instead, it is as simple as breaking up the group as a social interactive structure which disperses its members (Boyd & Richerson 1982: 346). This might not impact on the *Aso Ebi* phenomena as it employs different means of transmission simultaneously

and individuals do not particularly impact the state of the social group. This would mean that even if there is a falling out, that should be a reason to disassociate with the social group which should lead to the eventual demise of their group activities, that lapse may be compensated for by another reason to hold the group together.

In the desire to conform, the visual effect of the *Owambe* spectacle reflects the “*ariya*” (jollification), “*miliki*”, “*faaji*” (dancing, eating and drinking), the flaunting of wealth and the numbers of spectators who attend. These factors produce the visual effect that the celebrant intends. Despite the social intent of “public good”, the spectacle belies a sinister reality that these events can financially incapacitate many participants, especially the women who have an obsessive need to conform by “keeping up with the Joneses” by being part of the “in” crowd. This results in situations that impact, sometimes tragically, on both their professional and personal lives.

The effects of reward and punishment for conforming are apparent right from the start of the display of the social spectacle of the *Owambe*. If participants in the *Aso Ebi* are wearing the social uniform, they are made to feel welcome at the event and given privileges not given to “outsiders”, that is, those who have not conformed. The obligations of the *Aso Ebi* culture are so imposing that it is not unusual for a family member to come under scrutiny should s/he refrain from buying an *Aso Ebi* for a family ceremony, regardless of his/her financial situation. This omission is regarded as a refusal to display allegiance to the group at such occasions and therefore causes tension within the group. The punishment for not conforming is an investment in the production of some other public good, for example, civil order (Boyd & Richerson 1982:328) the exclusion and social ostracisation that comes with abstaining develops a form of power in the social structure that orders behaviour within that community. Conformist behaviour may also be found in the survival needs of a “rational selfish individual” who might view alliances much like military or

political tactics to gain the set goals of the individual in the long run. As such, the individual is blind to both cultural and genealogical traits involved with grouping. All that might be necessary in the rationality of the individual is a possible chance of victory hence survival (Boyd & Richerson 1982:348). An analogy would be if a person continues to answer calls to participate with certain people who do not have any particular personal relationship to him or her for reasons of simple influence in gaining some goal within that social group. It may be church, office or a political career. For all the times the person participates in the *Owambe* events of these other people, they are compelled to answer to the individual's call to participate when the time comes. This may apply to *Aso Ebi* when it is used for other reasons together with the *Owambe*. The individual may conform for reasons of survival that do not have cultural or genealogical ties. For instance, during the recent presidential elections in the USA, Nigerians in the diaspora collectively put on an *Aso Ebi* in support of incumbent President Barak Obama which made a visual impact that was also a political statement. An individual may therefore decide to hold an *Owambe* event for military or political reasons in search of victory.

Judith Byfield (2004) highlights how the Nigerian elite refused to wear Victorian dress introduced by the colonialists as a form of commitment to their political and cultural values. This was a form of protest by the Yoruba people. Byfield (2004) describes the tactics of the now legendary activist, the late Mrs Ransome Kuti, the voice for the Abeokuta Women's Union. Mrs Kuti used the dress code of *Aso Ebi* as a political tool in protest marches by women to the regional colonial office against the imposition of tax levies.

The *Aso Ebi* has also become a very popular tool in political rallies that almost take on the form of *Owambe* events. Cooperative behaviour in political rallies is utilised as the social uniform for political survival right from the top to the grass roots. The performance is used as a means to

identify the beneficiaries of the rally. This is supported by Fowler and Christakis (2010:5334) who explain that subjects who choose to associate with people who display similar behaviour to themselves, create the desired public good.



Figure 2.14: *Aso Ebi* for 2012 USA elections in support of Obama (2012).



Figure 2.15: Politicians in *Aso Ebi* for Ekiti State PDP Party rally for 2015 democratic elections in Nigeria (2014).

The observable cooperative behaviour in *Aso Ebi*, as with group behaviour in other cultures, is eventually assimilated and accepted as the norm. It is then transferred from generation to generation (Boyd & Richerson 1982: 328-329). The cooperative behaviour in the *Aso Ebi* phenomena conforms to a dual inheritance theory⁷ which creates and transmits the social style. The dual inheritance theory suggests that we do not simply imitate our predecessors (Henrich & Boyd 1998:215-242), instead our “rational selfish individual” seeks what is beneficial to ourselves and adapts to behaviours that will profit us. The benefit from the “public good” produced by the cooperative behaviour of the *Aso Ebi* might therefore outweigh the sacrifices involved and would further promote a conformist orientation for social survival.

⁷Dual inheritance theory refers to how human behavior is a product of two different and interacting evolutionary processes combining both genetic evolution and cultural transmission and evolution (McElreath & Henrich 2008:555-570)

CHAPTER THREE: VISUAL CONCEPTUAL INTERESTS

In this chapter, I elaborate on artists whose work or concepts are relevant to my own work. I briefly describe their individual works particularly those with specific features that relate to my own work or research with regards to the concepts that they address or their techniques and media. In this I highlight relationships, inspirations and similarities and differences between their work and my own in the various mediums of installation, performance and photography amongst others.

3.1 INSTALLED THEATRICALITY

The work of Nigerian born visual artist in the diaspora, Yinka Shonibare (1962-), has a visual rather than a contextual connection to my work. Shonibare is recognised for his exploration of colonialism and post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalisation. His work includes painting, sculpture, photography, film and performance. Shonibare's work examines race, class and the construction of cultural identity through a commentary on interrelationship between Africa and Europe and their respective economic and political histories. He cites Western art history and literature in his visual production to question the validity of contemporary cultural identities. Shonibare's reference to this in his use of fabrics relates to the outside influences on the imported fabrics used for the *Aso Ebi* that have impacted the traditional fabrics if not the *Aso Ebi* ritual itself. The clothes are mostly worn in the flamboyant *Iro* and *Buba* (this is a loose top with a wrapper) or *boubou* (this is a long loose gown often embellished with embroidery, it is worn by both male and female) and the long skirt with the head wrap that is distinctively Yoruba. This Yoruba costume is a particular visual element in my work as opposed to Shonibare's use of the "African" fabrics in making decidedly historically European costumes as visual elements in his work.

There are other parallels between his work and my own practical component. Shonibare tends to particularly focus on the employment of Ankara print fabrics for his work as they are primarily identified with African dressing (specifically in West Africa). These fabrics are very bright and have vibrant colours and intricate patterns or motifs. They have distinctive cultural markings that project the layering of meaning in the material, design and poses of his mannequins staged for metaphor and effect. In my work, I also use fabrics that are specifically related to *Aso Ebi* from West Africa but my use of fabric is not limited to the use of Ankara fabrics as they are not the only kinds of fabrics associated with the *Aso Ebi* culture. Also in my work, I include fabrics used for head dresses which are the bane of the *Aso Ebi* culture. The women's head dresses are the most flamboyant aspect of the traditional costume as they present a strong visual impact. In calls for participation, the head dress is always present. While other parts of the costume may be optional, the head dress is a constant and continuous aspect of the uniform that affects individual participants. Shonibare does not include heads in his works, so the traditional head dresses are not included (see figure 3.1 below).



Figure 3.1: Yinka Shonibare. *The Three Graces* (2005).

Shonibare particularly dresses his mannequins in Victorian styled period clothing made from identifiably African Dutch wax fabrics which he uses to manipulate his audience into a sense of artifice and authenticity within the context of Colonialism and post Colonialism.

This characteristic is not related to my work as my research does not focus on these issues, neither does my work directly engage with concepts of post-colonial influences or their impact on social identity as Shonibare's work does. I do, however, share his focus on fabric as a primary source of metaphor in social discourse. My research engages with the Yoruba cultural phenomenon *Aso Ebi* as a centre of cultural power. It authenticates the status of indigenous culture in the face of globalisation in highlighting how the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* phenomena continually evolve while acknowledging the effects of modernisation.

I also focus on an examination of fabrics related to my indigenous Yoruba culture which includes the Dutch wax used by Shonibare. I share with him an appreciation of beauty provided by the visual images found in textiles while addressing the underlying issues. This embodies the visual impact of the *Aso Ebi* in the *Owambe* spectacle and it also attracts hidden undercurrents that are hewn into the splendor and display of these fabrics used for the social uniform in the *Owambe* spectacle

Shonibare's work employs aesthetics to attract his audience. He laces this with humor and whimsicality that could be construed as a literal/verbal joke but instead deals with issues of identity, politics, culture, race and reconstructed history that lie just beneath the first impression of the art works. This also resonates in the titles of his mannequin installations as can be seen in figures 3.2 and 3.3 below.



Figure 3.2: Yinka Shonibare. *How to blow up two heads at once (Ladies)* (2006).



Figure 3.3: Yinka Shonibare, *Reverend on Ice* (2005).

One might view Shonibare's mannequin installations as the drama of static theatre. They are set up in mid action, dramatising their staged movements. This quality is related to my own installation which refers to the staged dramatization of the rituals involved in putting together the *Owambe* event. The theatricality of Shonibare's productions have pointers to European history while, in my work, I refer to history in progress that is specifically indigenous to my Yoruba genealogy.

In his productions, Shonibare uses signifiers to reference the issues that he is promulgating in the given piece. He tells a story drawn from an already existing fiction to portray a reality, as he explains:

So the idea of the theatrical for me is actually about art as the construction of a fiction, art as the biggest liar. What I want to suggest is that there is no such thing as a natural signifier, that the signifier is always constructed--in other words, that what you represent things with is a form of mythology (Shonibare 2005).

This can be seen in his work *The Last Supper* (2013) (figure 3.4 below) in which he parodies the iconic painting of "The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci (1495-1498). He even retains the title while presenting the contradictions which, rather than referring to the solemnity of Jesus and his disciples before the death of Christ, refer to bankers of colonialist England before the crash of the financial industry when banks went bankrupt and thousands of people lost their savings and investments in the first decade of the 2000s. In his interview with Anthony Downey Shonibare said "I have always viewed art as a form of opera, or as being operatic, ... And opera is excessive; it is beyond the real, and therefore hyper-real", (Shonibare 2004). Anthony Downey interpreted his relation with sign as an unstable element that ties into the notion of the identitarian ambiguity that Shonibare presents in the masquerade of his work (Downey 2005)

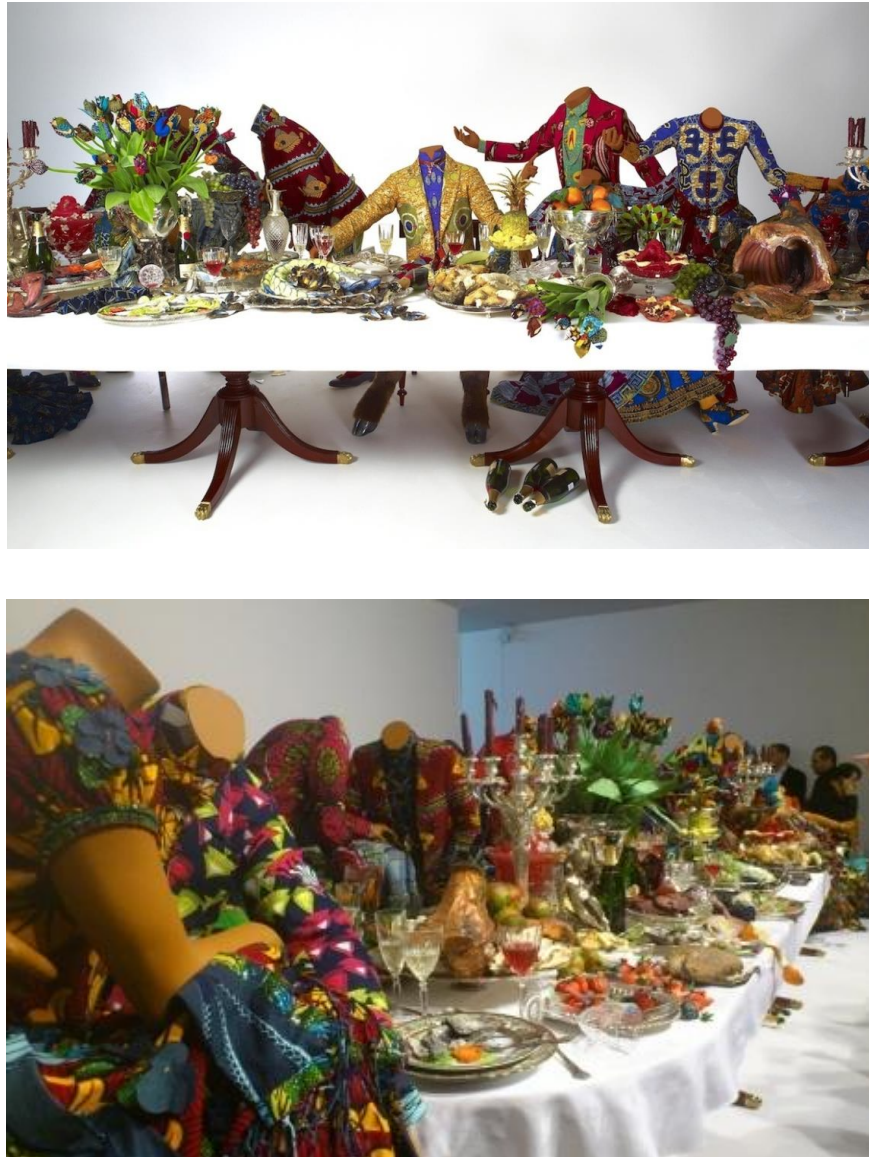


Figure 3.4: Yinka Shonibare. Two views of *The Last Supper* (2013).

In my presentation, the narrative is told from the reality of the staged events of *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe* and, in turn, presents signifiers of the existing social reality of the individual involved in the fiction of the *Aso Ebi* ritual in staging the *Owambe*. In this manner, the perception of the audience is manipulated through the staging of the theatricality of the drama. This portrays how the director/celebrant in these *Owambe* events uses the constructed visual grandeur of the *Aso Ebi* to attract the audience to his/her personal agenda.

In theatre, staging is the process of selecting, designing, adapting to, or modifying the performance space for a play or film. The interest of the staged sculptural installation as used by Shonibare, and of interest to my work, is the function of the staged three dimensional piece and how it reflects the fiction of the live theatrical ritual of the performers in *Aso Ebi* in the *Owambe* event. The staging allows the viewer to be included in the piece like that of the theatre in the round where the arrangement of the seats around the staged activity in the middle allows the audience to engage intensely with the action of the play. In this, the viewer sees beyond the performers to the reaction of other audience members viewing the drama.



Figure 3.5: Theatre in the round (Craig Mason Theatre Canada) (2012).

The theatre in the round reflects how the viewers of the *Owambe* spectacle are not only the audience because they are not separated from the staged spectacle. They can walk through the performances because they have access to the stage and they take full advantage of that. In the *Owambe*, the audience can say “*Mo gbo mo ya*”, translated as “I heard and I came”. The audience is not invited to perform but come as the designated audience of the spectacle who are expected to spread the news about the event through local gossip. The stage in the *Owambe*, like most theatre in-the-round, is at the same level as the audience so that the “play” seems to be playing out in real life in the middle of other activities that may be going on in the street or in the next house.

Both Shonibare's work and my own work use the theatricality of single figures to present the drama of the installation. In this for every different figure installation there is a the possibility of changing the story and perception of the audience as staging is not defined as a particular mode of behaviour or expression, neither does it depend on degrees of demonstrativeness (Burns 1972:2) rather it is determined by a particular view point which is a mode of perception (Burns 1972:13). It is this that is prepared, staged and presented to achieve the desired view of the audience. As such, the employment of the single figure in my work (mannequin in the case of Shonibare) can change how it is used much like an actor may act different parts or characters.

In his single figure installations, Shonibare stages the pose as if it were frozen in the middle of an action. He uses props and colour that is achieved with the use of the fabric. He stages actual sets for these mannequin installations, for example, as seen in his piece *The Swing* (2001) (figure 3.6 below) which includes the shrubbery in which the actual swing would be placed and with the shoe of the mannequin suspended in mid-air as though it had flown off in the action of moving on the swing.



Figure 3.6: Yinka Shonibare *The Swing (After Fragonard)* (2001).

Shonibare's engagement with props for the dramatisation of his work is seen in his *Homeless Man* (2012) (figure 3.7 below). The boxes, arranged as though balanced on the back of the mannequin, seem as though they may topple over at any moment, enhancing the immediacy of the artwork.



Figure 3.7: Yinka Shonibare. *Homeless Man* (2012).

This use of props accentuates the signifier for the viewer. An analogy of this may be viewed in his piece *Girl on A Globe* (2011) in which the figure is balanced on the spherical globe. To accentuate this prop, Shonibare chose a globe that presents a heat map with its colours of yellow, orange and red instead of the more traditional blue/green globe. This expresses the ecological and environmental imprint of industrialisation and how we face the balancing act of handling the role and place of man on earth.



Figure 3.8: Yinka Shonibare. *Girl on Globe 2* (2011).

3.2 CONFRONTING FACADES

Nigerian born sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp (1958-) who lives in London with her family engages with repurposing materials when constructing her figural sculptures. Camp gives her modern African figural sculpture an industrial feel by using steel as the material of choice in her sculptures. She, in effect, is trying to decentralise its cultural influences with the steel while, at the same time, holding on to its cultural qualities. In her work, she juxtaposes cultural associations and Western influences. Andrea Barnwell described her impression as obscuring identity in her work with masqueradery. This is by leaning to the idea of how masquerades present

themselves as something other than what they appear to be (1998:67) Camp's steel figures are a balance between two different social orders, the first reflecting beliefs, religion and traditions and the second reflecting the technological advances of her adopted society.

In my research, I focus on Douglas Camp's work entitled *Aso Ebi* or *Lace, Sweat and Tears* (2005). This sculptural installation relates to my own work with the *Aso Ebi* in the *Owambe* celebration. In this piece, Camp addresses the phenomenon of the *Aso Ebi* as I do in my work, but we approach the presentation of the phenomena and issues surrounding it in different ways.

Camp's sculptural installation *Aso Ebi* or *Lace, Sweat and Tears* was commissioned for the centre piece of the Africa Garden of the British Museum court. It was unveiled in the garden designed by television's *Ground Force* team on April 30, 2005. The sculptural piece is among works of other African Artists in the garden including El Anatsui, Emmanuel Jegede and Adam Madebe.



Figure 3.9: Sokari Douglas Camp. *Aso-Ebi/ Lace, Sweat and Tears* (2005).

Douglas Camp's sculpture spans 2.5 metres, was made from her signature material of galvanised steel and is a water feature in the garden. The installation depicts five female figures dressed to represent the Yoruba concept of *Aso Ebi* in *Iro* and *Buba* with the *Ipele* and *Gele* (the loose top, wrapped fabric about the waist also including the traditional shawl and baby wrap which is topped off with the flamboyant head dress). It symbolises the beauty and resilience of the culture. The steel clothes are cut and assembled to mimic choice imported lace fabrics that are popular for the *Aso Ebi*. The metal lace fabrics and head tie materials are painted in bright colours of pink and green like those purchased from the textile traders that build commercial businesses for the *Aso Ebi* culture.



Figure 3.10: Sokari Douglas Camp. *Aso-Ebi/Lace, Sweat and Tears* (2005).

Camp's use of steel, a material synonymous with strength in the production of the sculptural installation for the depiction of the *Aso Ebi* infers the unrelenting sturdiness of this cultural phenomenon. Camp's manipulation of the material relates to the participating individuals in this cultural event and how they fashion their lives around the steel grip of the phenomena on their social lives. The piece emphasizes the obligations of people who participate in *Aso Ebi* as an imposition of this culture on their

everyday lives. In the sculpture, the heads of the figures are perforated at the temples and the heads and the water feature runs through it so that water spurts out from the heads of the sculptural figures. These sprinklers symbolise the sweat of the participants and what they go through to participate and keep up with the continuous flow of calls to participate and the economic impact this has on their daily lives.



Figure 3.11: Sokari Douglas Camp. Detail *Aso-Ebi/Lace, Sweat and Tears* (2005).

My installation involves the use of fabrics, specifically, fabrics that have been used for *Aso Ebi* purposes in the *Owambe*, made into clothes. There is a duality and contradiction in this use of material which I find in the fragility, softness and lightness of fabric and how it can become an arsenal of powerful social performance phenomena. These fabrics have a documentary and archival quality conferred on them by the events and social performances that have utilised them. They are evidence of both the victim and the victorious specifically in reference to the experience of the obligations and hazards of participating in the *Aso Ebi* for social performance. It is evidence of the individual being both the conquered

and the conqueror of the experience of conformity to a certain social standard. Instead of using steel to depict strength as Camp does, the fabrics used in my work are actual material evidence of the events for which they have been used. The difference in the process between my work and Camp's is in the material used. She uses steel to project the metaphor she has employed while, in my work, there is a seaming together of actual pieces of history and records of participation.

At the unveiling of the sculptural piece, Camp also performed an enactment of the Aso ebi in a celebratory gathering of people. This enactment highlights the issue of conformity in that the sculptural piece assumed the character of the celebrant as the focus of the gathering while Camp and other invited volunteers played the role of participants. They were garbed in Yoruba attire of *Iro* and *Buba* with the head dress *gele* while others were in the skirt version popularly identified as "up and down". They had group photos taken documenting the event and presenting these images in other means of communication such as social media spreading the news and propaganda of the sculptural piece. The participants also mimicked the sculptural installation by posing in front of the pillars of the garden court for photographs.



Figure 3.12: Group photo Aso Ebi Participants at opening of Aso-Ebi/Lace, Sweat and Tears (2005).



Figure 3.13: Sokari Douglas Camp. *Aso-Ebi/Lace, Sweat and Tears* (2005).

Camp's performance speaks to my own work of performing the role of the celebrant with an inclusion of signifying my invited participants in their voluntary role of uplifting my image. My work also focuses on how the participation and conformity of the volunteers impact the celebrant and how a volunteer participant eventually becomes the celebrant. As such, the individual participant receives a reward due for being the willing participant. The costume of Yoruba attire and head dress used in Camp's performance, also appears in my performance as the individual who has become the celebrant.



Figure 3.14: Sokari Douglas Camp. *Aso-Ebi/Lace, Sweat and Tears* (2005).

3.3 DOCUMENTARY IN TRANSMISSION OF ORIENTATION.

The documentary works of Nigerian art photographer Jide Alakija of the *Owambe* and *Aso Ebi* phenomena relate to my work because they expand and delineate the role of the commercial photographer and the documentary quality of photography in the context of the *Owambe* celebration. Nwafor (2010:12) describes fashion and photography in Nigeria as powerful forces in the construction of self. He regards photographers as central players and photography and digital media as primary disseminators of *Owambe* in Nigerian caucuses. This is because the contemporary *Owambe* event is incomplete without the photographers. There is a photographer who is employed to take photographs and the commercial freelance photographers that attend these events, documenting them for their commercial value both for the participants of the event who may want these documentary images for their own dissemination or for sale to other print industries that make profits from disseminating the images of the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* events.

Nwafor (2010:12) says that photography and fashion are mutually interdependent in these social circles. Photography helps to promulgate the concept of conformity that is present in the *Aso Ebi* in the *Owambe* and photographers document the visual impact of the event on the observer. In this way, photography orients the observer in the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe*.

The documentary characteristic of photography that disseminates the images of the *Aso Ebi* through both print and digital media lends gravitas to the phenomena. Nwafor (2010:12) describes this by saying that:

photographers and "fashion" magazines frame visual experiences and encounters through the styling and dissemination of images of people in Aso Ebi and various forms of "traditional dresses".

The extended family structure of the Yoruba means that individuals will view many of these events, either in the flesh or through photographic documentation and social media. They adopt and modify ideas from these to use in their own events, expanding the social phenomena of *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe*.

In his photography exhibition titled *Owambe: Aso Ebi and the politics of dress* (2011) at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, Nigeria, Alakija presented images of the *Aso Ebi* and the *Owambe* in progress from an archive of images that he took as a professional photographer in these events within and outside of Nigeria. He highlighted the intrigue of the politics behind the beautiful images of these spectacular events. His images are a presentation of his own experiences in documenting these socio-cultural phenomena and show the resilience of these phenomena. He documents the character of the *Owambe* in its flamboyance and intricacies, showcasing the presentation of the event.



Figure 3.15: Jide Alakija. *Flurry of an Owambe Spectacle with supporters flanking the Celebrant.*

Guardian Newspaper Art Journalist Tajudeen Sowole (2011) described Alakija's exhibition stating:

As resilient as aso-ebi culture appears as one of the beautiful aspects of the Nigerian character, the economic cost of belonging to this identity may, however, erode its inherent cultural value... And this, it has been argued, has been part of the changes in aso-ebi over the years. From what used to be dominated by ankara, aso-oke, wools and other low-cost fabrics, taste for aso-ebi, in recent times, has gone higher, such that social gatherings, particularly, wedding, according to research findings, are being exploited by celebrants to make extra money through selling fabrics at exorbitant prices.

Sowole notes that Alakija confirms that the increasing cost has not diminished *Aso Ebi* abroad; rather that it is getting more sophisticated.



Figure 3.16: Jide Alakija. *Array of colour at an Owambe event.*

In my work I also include clips of *Owambe* events in progress to show both the documentation and the concepts of the activity that are involved in the staging of these events. These clips also show the participants *en masse* as they would be to an audience at these events. I use these clips as elements in the overall production of my work that is overlapped with a performance.

Alakija also documents the *Owambe* act of “money spraying”. This is an iconic characteristic of an *Owambe* event. It is the spraying of money on the celebrant and on the participants themselves. The greeting “*E ku inawo*” is the customary phrase used for the celebrant of the *Owambe* spectacle. It loosely translates as “your act of spending”. It is an acknowledgement of the effort displayed by the celebrant in staging his or her grand event. It is closely related to the act of spraying money on the celebrant by participants during the *Owambe* party.

At an appointed in time during the party, the celebrant dances in front of the band or the drummers. The participants then flock around the

celebrant to dance with him or her to commiserate and to spray money on the celebrant as the musicians eulogise both them and the celebrant. Newly minted money is preferred for this activity. This money is acquired from banks and money vendors. Money vendors are individuals whose business is to commercially exchange old money notes for crisp new ones. They act like a *bureau du change* but for local currency and they take a small fee for the service.

The spraying of money is a material show of support and financial backing of the celebrant by the participants. This act cushions, to an extent, the expenses of the celebrant in hosting the guests at the *Owambe*. Even though the Yoruba are very spiritual, they also are attracted to the display of wealth and opulence. This is reflected in the names that are given amongst the Yoruba. These names often include the word “Ola” meaning wealth, in names such as “Folawe” which translates as “Having a bath in wealth” (as opposed to water), “Olamikun” which means “my wealth is full” and “Olakunle” which means “the house is full of wealth”. The names portray the concept of a profusion of wealth that may be likened to the availability of common resources such as air, earth, water. The performative action of spraying money is not restricted to the wealthy, rather, it cuts across class and status. It highlights the strength of loyalty and selflessness towards the celebrant and vice versa in a show of “my wealth is yours” as an act of love and endearment.



Figure 3.17: Jide Alakija. *Spraying money on the celebrant during dance.*

Alakija captures the performances of the celebrant in the *Owambe* where the celebrant consciously assumes the centre of focus by dancing amongst the participants. This performance is somewhat ritualistic as it comes up in practically every *Owambe* event. It is not particularly attached to the money spraying though that may also happen during this performance by the characters of the *Owambe* spectacle.

Alakija, through his photographs, documents the joy of the celebration and not just the success of the celebrant but also the success of the participants who display their support for the celebrant. This can be seen in both images of the celebrant and participants taken by Alakija below.



Figure 3.18 Jide Alakija. *Celebrant and friends of the Bride*

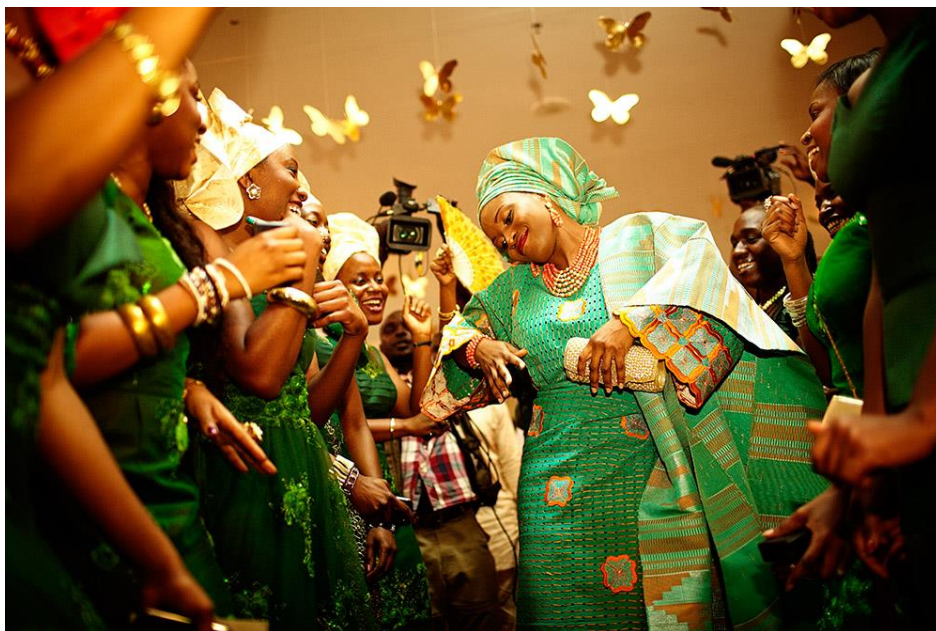


Figure 3.19 Jide Alakija. *The Celebrant dancing within her Aso Ebi supporters.*

My own performance in my work, I appropriate this activity in the *Owambe* event of the celebrant taking up the floor for a dance surrounded by volunteer participants/supporters which is the performative show of unity in these events. In Alakija's documentation, he highlights the role of the men in the *Owambe* who mostly go unnoticed in the flurry of activity as the *Aso Ebi* and the staging of the *Owambe* is dominated by the women. The

women are the organisers, orchestrators and politicians behind the scenes for the benefit of the whole “Ebi” family in general. The males also participate in the *Aso Ebi* though they are not as evident as the females. It is more popular amongst younger males though it cuts across all ages and sexes. This may be seen in wedding pictures of the friends of the groom as seen in Alakija’s work below.



Figure 3.20: Jide Alakija. *Traditional Groomsmen 1*(2012).



Figure 3.21: Jide Alakija. *Traditional Groomsmen 2*(2012).

In his work, Alakija highlights the digital trends such as social media, telephone communication and emails that are used in the *Owambe*. These activities are so regularised they are not really noticed as major activities in the midst of staging the event. This can be seen in his image taken of participants in an *Owambe* event who are all using their Blackberry phones. The image captures the intensity of the dissemination of information concerning these *Owambe* spectacles.



Figure 3.22: Jide Alakija. *Bridesmaids on their Blackberries.*

Alakija also documents the very popular concept of the group photograph at the *Owambe* events. This group photograph generally includes the celebrant and the participants in their social uniforms or just the participants who, in most cases, know each other. It is these pictures that are distributed and used for promulgation by both the participants and the celebrant of the event. It is a visual show of support to indicate who is influential and popular. The group photograph is therefore evidence of the social power attributed to the celebrant. The greater the number of

participants in the group photograph, the better. This type of group photograph is a signifier of rampant and idealised conformism.



Figure 3.23 Jide Alakija. *Wedding feferity red and gold Aso Ebi* (2014).

In my own work I also use the group photograph and its power as evidence that presents the *Aso Ebi* as a continuously recurring social phenomenon in the Yoruba culture. I use the photograph as an object of memory and promulgation that remains the same as times change thereby creating an archive of information that shows the progress of the *Aso Ebi* over time.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY: “ENIYAN LASO MI” (PEOPLE ARE MY CLOTHING)

This study acknowledges the near impossibility of re-orienting a whole society to change a culture that is hewn into the social fabric of its people. However, in the midst of all the experiences of the individual in his/her social structure, there are measures that can mediate between the individual in his/her own specific situation and his/her social obligations that uphold this culture. There are avenues to keep this cultural phenomenon alive without its survival being at the detriment of the individual.

4.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In my methodology I have used a phenomenological, qualitative method. This has been done by triangulating participant observation, reviewing literature & interviewing strategy for gathering the data. The information gathered was then used as a framework for exploration in creating the practical production.

The key Informants interviewed were a major component of the research. The idea for key informants stems from survey methodology, which is used extensively in areas of social, political and anthropological research. The information gathered were recounts and opinions on the issues and experiences involved in the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe*. As such a Key Informant in this research could be defined as someone that has experiential knowledge about the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe*.

The requirements that made informants eligible for the research were simple and as follows:

- They should be 18 years old and above.
- They should have experienced being a celebrant or participant in the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe*.

- They should be knowledgeable about the strain of trends in their individual experiences in these phenomena.
- Sampling criteria for the key informants was also not limited to single gender though there were more female respondents.
- Informants were not restricted by sector, education, backgrounds or social status

My field work included informal interviews with individuals in Yoruba society and in the diaspora about the process of planning and participating in an *Owambe* spectacle. The focus of these interviews was about the choices they make with regards to the ceremony and the participation in the *Aso Ebi* culture. I also viewed personal blogs of individuals to sample their experiences and impressions of the impact of the social uniforms on their personal lives. I also drew on personal experience as an individual genealogically linked to the Yoruba culture and as an individual living in a Nigerian caucus with a focus on my mother who has been a participant for most of her life.

The initial course of action for me was to gather as much informal and direct information as possible from random individuals of my acquaintance. The informal interviews guaranteed the participants full anonymity in the research to allow them the freedom to candidly express their experiences in participating in the social rituals. The participation was restricted to informal interviews and there were no identifiable documentation or records collected for this research. An informed consent form was prepared for the research as seen in Appendix B. This form explained the intent and desired outcomes for the informal interviews.

4.1.1 Goals of the Research Information Sheet

The goals of the research were:

- To highlight how the *Aso Ebi* affects issues of identity in these caucuses and how they are bound to the concept of social grouping. Also, how the cultural ideology affects concepts such as structure, status and social politics within the Yoruba/Nigerian culture.
- To show how the *Aso Ebi* is perpetuated through the participants who promote the *Owambe* celebrant, the social and commercial assistants and the spectators through social, economic and political structures.
- To establish the power of fabrics as a tool in the influence of Yoruba social culture and to suggest solutions to the negative impacts of the *Aso Ebi* phenomena in the *Owambe* spectacle that continue to grow in popularity in a global society.

4.1.2 Scope and Outcomes

The research randomly sampled individuals from Yoruba and Nigerian caucuses. By extension, it also reached caucuses in the diaspora that exhibit traits of the *Aso Ebi* phenomena. Although the *Aso Ebi* is a part of a broad Yoruba dress culture, this research mainly focused on aspects of the social uniforms used in the *Owambe* spectacle. I examined how the visual impact of the fabric used for social uniforms functions in the *Aso Ebi* culture. I also investigated the negative issues related to the tradition of *Aso Ebi* such as economic responsibilities, social ostracisation, peer pressure, obligatory behaviour, social politics and re-identification, amongst others.

Information was gathered from informal interviews with individuals who remained anonymous and from the literature review as part of the research for my practical visual art production. The visual discourse engages with the concept of conformity and non-conformity advocating against the obligatory impositions of wearing the *Aso Ebi* to conform to the societal performance of the *Owambe* spectacle. The need for social interaction and unity is recognised but a requirement for a middle ground

between the need to participate in social performance and individuality that would reduce the impact of requirements for participation is suggested.

In line with my agreement with the people interviewed, they have remained anonymous and their personal information is not included in my presentations for this research. In this study, I recognise the need for social interaction and unity without discrediting the phenomenon of *Aso Ebi*. This was brought home when one individual told me about her experience in having to buy fabrics and make garments for all her female siblings and her mother for a family event with her in-laws that impacted her financially and affected her relationship with her sister.

Another told me that she has at least two scheduled events to participate in every week of the year in which she must either buy a new *Aso Ebi* or wear one from an event she ought to have attended with her peers. She collects the clothes and cannot give them away in case they are called for another function. This means that she has clothes that she has not worn in long periods because she has not had opportunity due to a new outing every other week.

One individual told me of a week where four different people came to invite her to participate in *Aso Ebi* events for the coming month. They all dropped different head gear in the exact same shade of yellow. She already had two in the same shade but she had to buy them because although they were all the same colour, they had different patterns.

There are a plethora of similar experiences that were gathered where the individuals expressed their disapproval of the responsibilities that come with the call to participate in the social phenomena. They felt that other means of handling these phenomena should be developed as opposed to an eradication of these customs.

4.2 PRACTICAL WORK PRODUCTION

In my practical work, I address these problems by engaging the individual within a group as an alternative solution to the conformity of the individual within the group. I view the individual as a unit in a multiplicity of characters that form the group. The individual here is assessed both as part of a whole and as an entity in him/herself.

My visual work also addresses the impact of social conformity on the individual. In my installation, I present the individual within the overwhelming obligatory requirements for participation in the social performance of *Owambe*. I alter the way the individual is perceived in association with the fabrics that dominate him/her through participation in the *Owambe* spectacle. I try to capture, through visual interpretation, both the acceptability of participation in the *Aso Ebi* phenomena as well as the burden of it. It is this record that is viewed as a possible influence in the experience of the viewer to sow the seed of a new social orientation to an enduring culture.

The works are focused on highlighting the journey and situation of the individual participant. In the course of my research, the frequency of the requirement to participate for the individual became apparent while the intensity of the obligations made me liken the situation of the individual to the warning signs that are used to communicate with people in critical situations. In my work, colour is used as a signifier. The analogy of this would be the way colour is used to warn that a change in colour to a warmer shade is an alert or alarm as, for example, from green to amber to orange to red. It is this heightened signifier of red that is used as the identification of the individual in the recurring participatory ritual of the social performance.

In some of the works, the hypothetical participant is marked with the colour red. This references the repetitive nature of the obligation to participate by

the individual, showing the heightened levels of participation the individual has to endure. This was inspired by the focus on one individual, my mother, as an analogy of the hypothetical individual. This is drawn from a lifetime of observing her roles as a participant in these social phenomena.

4.2.1 Fabric Installation

The first work is an installation which I have entitled “Cacophony” and is made from headdresses from my mother’s closet as materials for the work were gathered from a single “red individual”. All the pieces are part of the archive of her participatory roles in various events. I have used the head-dresses as metaphor to present an overwhelming state of otherness of the “red individual”. For every time an individual answers a call to participate, the person absolves him/herself of his/her identity and assumes the aspirations of the celebrant. For the duration of the *Owambe* event, the individual becomes part of a whole rather than a whole in him/herself. The individual’s participation in the *Aso Ebi* changes him/her into a person that the celebrant has designed for the celebrant’s end game. Every head dress worn in any *Owambe* event makes the “red individual” an “other” and numerous events mean numerous “others”.

The landscape format of the installation is a metaphor for the ability of the social phenomena to transcend geographic locations. The installation is a site specific arrangement that can mutate with the environment in which it is displayed much like the *Aso Ebi Owambe* phenomena that transcends location as it moves with caucuses that can migrate as they choose. The head-dresses pose a dilemma in that they are linked by their history as part of an individual’s closet of clothes acquired through participation and, at the same time, present a wide range of different statements by celebrants through their choice of clothing at these *Owambe* events. The kaleidoscopic presentation of the various head-dresses signifies the cacophony of identities that the “red individual” has to endure in continuous succession of ritualised calls to participate.



Figure 4.1: Odun Orimolade. *Cacophony* (2014).



Figure 4.2: Odun Orimolade. *Cacophony* (2014).



Figure 4.3: Odun Orimolade. Detail *Cacophony* (2014).



Figure 4.4: Odun Orimolade. Detail *Cacophony* (2014).

Each head dress was individually wrapped and pinned in place then pinned together to create a large expanse of fabric sculpture. The piece retained the indents of the head space that is created through the wrapping of the stiff fabrics around the head. The empty spaces for the head in head-dresses are a metaphor for the absence of the original

identity of the “red individual”. The Yoruba place huge emphasis on the head as a sacred and spiritual connection of an individual with the parallel spiritual realm. The head is the embodiment of the mind of the individual who, in this case, is absent in the space of participation.

The fabric-scape spreads much like the appreciation of a natural landscape incorporating the changes and undulations that are present in the varied juxtapositions of the headdresses. The components of the landscape come from the plethora of hues that are put together in various ways and the undulating patterns from the celebrants over the period of the collection of the archive of *Aso Ebi* headdresses.

4.2.2 Video installation and live Performance

The second work is a performance piece entitled “*Eniyan Laso Mi: People Are My Clothing*”. “*Eniyan laso mi*” translates as “People are my clothing”. I present the “red individual participant” who has turned around and come to the point where it is his/her turn to become the celebrant and send out calls to participate. In the performance, the call to dance is a metaphor for the façade of altruism that is presented in the sacrifice entailed in participating. The turn of the individual to become the celebrant in these events shows that individuals take turns in conforming to the requirements to participate. The concept of altruism in these phenomena is therefore an illusion that hides the true goal of social survival.

The costume for the performance is a representation of the celebrant and the participants in the *Owambe* dance event. The costume is made of traditional Yoruba dress with a “*Buba*” top, “*Gele*” head gear, the “*Ipele*” or traditional shawl and “*Iro*” wrapper. The costume is a metaphor for conformity that rules these phenomena. The lower wrapper is over-laid with a number of “*Gele*” *Aso Ebi* to represent the crowd of participants that surround the celebrant at the dance. I chose the “*Gele*” as a representation of people as the “*Gele*” are worn on the head. The

performance is imposed over the background montage of an *Owambe* spectacle, it is also rendered over the animation of “Cacophony” and, lastly, presented as a live performance art piece within a public space.



Figure 4.5: Odun Orimolade. *Preparing costume of Aso Ebi Head dresses for Eniyan Laso Mi performance in blue screen studio (September 2014).*



Figure 4.6: Odun Orimolade. *Trying on costume skirt of Aso Ebi Head dresses for Eniyan Laso Mi performance in blue screen studio (September 2014).*



Figure 4.7: Odun Orimolade. *Full costume for Eniyan Laso Mi performance* (September 2014).

The performance began with dressing in the traditional party attire for the celebrant. The process of wearing the clothes is cumbersome with all the layering, wrapping and tying of the head gear. It is a reference to the illusory altruism that the celebrant has experienced in previous characters as a “red individual”. I mask myself in red cloth covering all of my head and hands. The act of masking myself removes my individuality from the enactment, erasing my personal identity. This iterates the fact that the role

of celebrant is rotational and is open to all individual participants as the situation arises. The character of the celebrant is not permanent for the individual who will rather have the more recurring role of the individual participant.

I stood away from the spread of the head dresses as I got dressed, going through the process of organising while the participants (referenced by the headdresses) awaited my direction as celebrant. Once I was dressed, I stepped into the middle of the head ties taking control of the arrangement of the head dresses as would a celebrant in coming into his/her own *Owambe* event. In one swooping movement, I gathered the head dresses up to my body in the creation of the skirt, attaching them to myself. In so doing, the skirt of head dresses is animated by my dance movement mimicking how the celebrant, who is the director of the staging of the *Owambe*, directs the pace and tone of his/her own event. As I swirl and twirl, the skirt follows my every movement I make. The dance in itself is a metaphor for the reward of conformity and self-sacrifice. The public performance also references the moment of attention in the spotlight that the “red individual” receives in the role of the celebrant. The movements of the dance are done to get the attention of passersby through the masquerade of the costume. The flighty movements of the head ties “geles” of the skirt speak of the support, loyalty and sacrifice of the participants’ obligations to achieve the visual intent of the celebrant in his/her *Owambe* event.

The immediate performance experience resulted in the creation of a poetic “rant”. The comedic satire ran through a list of reasons to celebrate that started out legitimate and proceeds to the unreasonable while referencing genealogical transmission of conformity which is here below.

Ariyo!
Awaiye –ariyo!
A se asyori -ariyo!
A se igbeyawo –ariyo!

Party!
We are born –Party!
We graduate –Party!
We get married –Party!

Mo bi omo –Ariyo!	I have a baby –Party!
Mo se aseiyori –Ariyo!	I am successful –Party!
Mo se ojo ibi –ariyo!	It is my birthday –Party!
Mo fe gbogo –ariyo!	I want to win Political election–Party!
Mo ti gbogo –ariyo!	I have won –Party!
Mo je oba –ariyo!	It’s my coronation –Party!
Mo bo lowo iku –ariyo!	I have escaped death –Party!
Iku mu mi –ariyo!	Death has caught me –Party!
Mo bi omo –ariyo!	My child is born–Party! (repetition- emphasis)
Omo mi se ojo ibi –ariyo!	It’s my child’s birthday –Party!
Omo mi se aseiyori –ariyo!	My child has graduated –Party!
Omo mi se igbeyawo –ariyo!	My child’s wedding –Party!
Omo mi shu –ariyo!	My child passed stool –Party!
Omo mi to –ariyo!	My child peed –Party!
A rin erin –ariyo!	We laugh –Party!
A sun ekun –ariyo!	We cry –Party!
A wu iko –ariyo!	We cough –Party!
A sin –ariyo!	We sneeze –Party!
Awalaiye –ariyo!	We live –Party!
Aku –ariyo ooo!	We die –Party!

4.2.3 Photography

The third work is entitled “Imbibed pose”. For the piece, I have appropriated the concept of the group photo as a metaphor. The metaphor reflects the transitory nature of the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* phenomena within caucuses through cultural and genealogical transmission. The group photo is a staple image found within *Owambe* caucuses as part of the evidence of participation. It also functions as a major tool in the promulgation of the agenda of the celebrant and the expansion of the phenomena through the photographic image.

I also use the group photo which is an object of memory and archive as a metaphor for the revelatory role of the archive in documenting the ambiguity of both change and repetition that is exposed in the lives of individuals who take on participatory roles in conforming to these social phenomena. For this, repetition is used as metaphor for generations of individuals potentially caught within the transmission process of

conformity. The repetition is also a metaphor for the ritualistic characteristics of the calls to participate. They are expected like clockwork with every milestone event that occurs with potential celebrants.

There were several group photos taken for the work. These images were then modified using Photoshop. The images of the participants were multiplied to present a unit. This shows that everyone or any one individual participant is a potential representative for all other participants. They go through the same calls to participate and are subject to the same requirements to participate even if their individual personal experiences are different.

The core components of the images are arranged in a transitional manner to present the transmission process. In all the images the central character is the celebrant. The first image has a mother who is also a grandmother as the celebrant. The mother sits in the centre as the celebrant who is always dressed differently from the participants. She is flanked by participants dressed in *Aso Ebi*.

The central celebrant in all the images holds the future represented by the baby who will receive orientation from the people that surround the child as he/she grows up. In the second of the six images, the central figure is joined by a younger “daughter” who, with the “mother” figure, becomes a joint celebrant. It is the mother who is showing the “daughter” the reins. In the following image, the mother/grandmother is removed from the image and the daughter remains alone as the celebrant, carrying on the tradition into the future. The next image includes the daughter with the niece as joint celebrants and then the niece character becomes the sole celebrant. Throughout the series of photographs, the celebrant is surrounded by the participants called to the *Aso Ebi*. In the last image, the niece remains to carry the tradition into the future but the participants are replaced by very

young participants only. They represent the future of the phenomena and the sustainability of it through orientation transmission.

I have over-laid these images with sound from contemporary iconographic music of the Yoruba *Owambe* celebration. The metaphor of sound is used here to reflect memory ignited by the image of the group photo for the individual. The ambience of the *Owambe* event is always characterised by music. There are two great music icons, namely, King Sunny Ade and Chief Ebenezer Obey, who are very prolific Yoruba high life musicians. Affluent celebrants often hire them as live bands to play music at their *Owambe* events.



Figure 4.8: Odun Orimolade. *Imbibed pose: Grandmother as celebrant* (2014).



Figure 4.9: Odun Orimolade. *Imbibed Pose: Grandmother and daughter as celebrant* (2014).



Figure 4.10: Odun Orimolade. *Imbibed Pose: Daughter as celebrant* (2014).



Figure 4.11: Odun Orimolade. *Imbibed pose: Daughter and Granddaughter as celebrant* (2014).



Figure 4.12: Odun Orimolade. *Imbided Pose: Granddaughter as celebrant* (2014).



Figure 4.13: Odun Orimolade. *Imbided Pose: Granddaughter as celebrant with other grandchildren as individual participants* (2014).

4.2.4 Collage

The fourth work is entitled *The Call*. In this work I have used invitation cards, group photos and stenciled motifs as metaphors for ritual in repetition, conformity and visual illusion respectively. I generated a collage of the group photo images and an archive of printed text in sheets to be attached to one another to create a wall or floor piece. For this I collected a plethora of invitation cards to different events that are used as a tangible call to participate in an event. These invitations were printed for weddings,

funerals, church events and engagements, among other occasions. During the collection process and the informal interviews, I gathered that the invitation may be accompanied with the hues for the day in print or with a sample of the cloth to be used for the event. In some cases, the participatory uniform fabric would be delivered along with the invitation compelling the recipient of the call to accept the fabric and incur whatever financial obligation is attached to it.



Figure 4.14: Odun Orimolade. *Detail, Collection of Invitations (Calls) acquired during field work on Aso Ebi and Owambe experiences.* (2014)



Figure 4.15: Odun Orimolade. (Detail, Collection of Invitations (Calls) acquired during field work on Aso Ebi and Owambe experiences. (2014)

Within social groups, there are informal talks before picking dates for *Owambe* events so that they do not clash with other members of that social group who intend to have events of their own and that the colours and fabrics are not duplicated.

I also collected an array of group photographs of *Aso Ebi* participants in the *Owambe* event. This collection references the repetitive nature of the obligation to participate. This was inspired by the focus on one individual, my mother, as the hypothetical individual. In these images, the hypothetical individual's face is marked with the colour red while all the other participants' faces are coloured in uniform black hue.



Figure 4:16: Odun Orimolade. Selection of Aso Ebi group photos from Owambe events with individual participants erased in black and the “red individual” highlighted in representation of all individual participants. (2014)

In all the group photographs that were used for the collage, the identified “red individual” participant is a recurring factor that indicates the extent of the consistent conformity to the obligation to participate and response to the call (invitation) to participate.

In the collage, the calls to participate (invitations) are arranged in random order with the group photograph images. The calls to participate, as arranged in the collage, come in random order showing the repetition of the calls and the evidence of response which is the group photograph which is to be viewed from a two dimensional perspective that highlights both elements at the same time to create an accumulation of activity in the call to participate and the response by the hypothetical individual participant.



Figure 4.17: Odun Orimolade. *Collaged invitations and group photo images for “The Call”(2014).*

The images and invitations were arranged in sections of half imperial sized cardboard papers that could be put together on site. The idea of the site specificity relates to the permeability of the transmission and adaptation of the *Owambe* and *Aso Ebi* phenomena. The impermanent quality of the presentation allows it to move, as it does in reality, away from its point of origin and reappear in the diaspora or even into other cultures in Nigeria.

I stenciled patterns of textile designs found on lace fabrics that are used for the *Aso Ebi*. These designs cut across different types of lace fabrics of which the texture and material may be different but they all have predominantly floral and geometric patterns. The aesthetic quality of these fabrics is part of what constitutes the overall visual image and attraction of the *Owambe* spectacle. The visual attraction of the fabrics worn in *Aso Ebi* for the *Owambe* event is the initial step to satisfy the intent of the celebrant and identify his/her celebration as unique.

I overlay the collage of group photos and calls for participation (invitations) with the stencils and spray on the designs in various colours on different panels. The overlay of the fabric designs are a metaphor for the visual image of the flamboyance and elegance of the *Owambe* spectacle and how the calls and the costs of the participation are overshadowed by the beauty of the event. I try to keep the colour of the designs light and translucent to show the collage beneath, right through the textile design. In this way, the direct impact of the visual spectacle is shown.



Figure 4.18: Odun Orimolade. *Stenciling over collage pieces.* (2014)

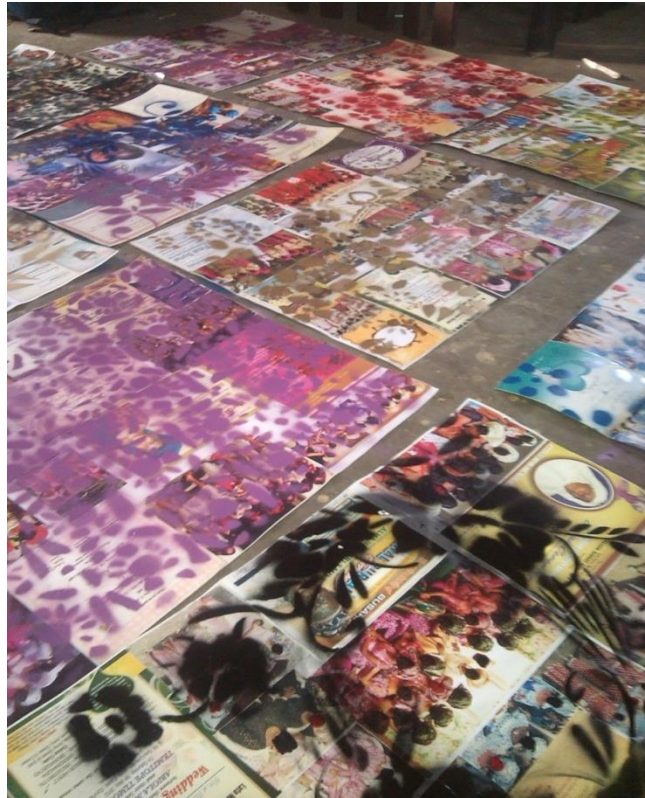


Figure4.19: Odun Orimolade. *Cross Section of Stencilled collages*. (2014)

4.2.5 Digital Collage

The fifth work is entitled *The Veteran*, and in this piece, I have employed the contents of an *Aso Ebi* participant's closet as a metaphor for ritual, obsession and social power. The continually growing mass of clothes acquired through the *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe* participation is seen as the obsession with "keeping up with the Joneses". The individual is compelled by the need for social acceptance to acquire the goods that are the reward for participation that stretch him/herself beyond what is comfortable and even beyond what is rational. This is exemplified by individuals who spend funds meant for daily needs such as food, shelter and education on the requirements to participate in an *Owambe* call.

I also use portrait photos of a single individual from several *Owambe* events that were attended by the same individual (the actual images used here are those of my mother) as metaphor for ritual, repetition, obsession, conformity and as a unit in a reference for multiples. I also erase the

head/face in the images as a metaphor which references the absence of individual identity that occurs when conforming to the ideals of the celebrant. The head and face are replaced with the metaphorical “red individual” who shows constant selflessness in the bid to acquire the rewards of social commodities. I superimpose the single photos over the images of the closet repetitively as a metaphor for the obsessive, ritualistic behaviour of the individual participant involved in these phenomena.

The piece is specifically inspired by my mother and it evolved as my research progressed with the in-depth involvement of my mother as a participant and her closet as a subject of visual interest. This closet is, in fact, a room because the number of outfits acquired during her years of participation has outgrown her closet. The closet was started when, as a young woman, she took on the obligations to participate in these *Owambe*, *Aso Ebi* events. As such, she is a model example of an individual who has been indoctrinated into participation through cultural and genealogical transmission.

Her own clothes, including work clothes and day wear, are separate from the clothes acquired from participation in these events. These clothes are an archive of evidence of participation in events over the years. Over time, she has gathered many single photos of herself at these events. These images to her are evidence of her sacrifices and selflessness for her friends and family. They are the evidence of her social significance and claims to her authority to give out calls for participation when the time comes for her to have her own *Owambe* event. The constituents of my mother’s *Aso Ebi* closet are an array of clothes in different fabrics and used as either clothing or head gear. There are many different kinds of fabrics such as Dutch wax, traditional dye fabrics, Jaquard, French Lace, Cupion, Organza, Swiss voile, Muslin and dry lace, amongst others

There are also different types and styles of head dresses that cut across time and type of fabrics, according to fashion trends in print and weave. In these, the more valuable ones are the traditional Yoruba woven cloth called the Aso Oke. The stiff imported head dresses are made from the following materials: *Gele gidi* (real headtie) called Herms, Singele and Damask. Traditional weave fabrics in the collection consist of: *Onyowu*, Silk and *Aso Oke*.

In the interview, my mother identifies the fabrics in the closet according to the events she participated in, naming each according to the event it was used for. It is the norm in this culture to name the fabric used for the *Aso Ebi* of the *Owambe* event by the name of the celebrant who may not necessarily be the formal celebrant. For instance, at weddings, the celebrant is regarded as the parents of the person being married even though this person is the formal celebrant. The fabric used for the event would then be given the parents' name such as "the fabric from Mrs Sijuade's son's wedding". As she goes through the fabrics of her participatory role in different events that present the desires of the different celebrants who send out these calls, she eventually becomes the celebrant who wants to portray her own event.



Figure 4.20: Olaoye Orimolade. Detail of *Mom's Cupboard*. (2014)



Figure 4.21: Olaoye Orimolade. Cross section of Lace fabrics from the "red individual's" closet. (2014)



Figure 4.22: Olaoeye Orimolade. *Cross section of Lace fabrics from the “red individual’s” closet. (2014)*



Figure 4.23: Olaoeye Orimolade. *Cross section of Lace fabrics from the “red individual’s” closet. (2014)*



Figure 4.24: Olaoye Orimolade. *Cross section of head dresses from the “red individual’s” closet. (2014)*



Figure 4.25: Olaoye Orimolade. *Cross section of print clothes from the “red individual’s” closet. (2014)*

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

While numerous factors such as age, gender, education, political struggle, and contemporary contexts determine the meaning of the *Aso Ebi* social uniform and the fabrics employed, individuals fall into recurring patterns of masquerading in staged drama spectacles of social engagement. The definition of “masquerade” is a disguise or staged presentation that does not project reality (Merriam-Webster dictionary 2010). Whether the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* can be compared to a masquerade, seems to be rather ambiguous because, while there is a measure of pretense involved when staging the *Owambe* spectacle, the staging of *Owambe* makes the inner desires of the celebrant into the centre of attention which is also projected onto all individual participants through *Aso Ebi*.

These patterns suggest that the *Aso Ebi* phenomenon comprises cultural texts that reflect the larger system of social expression and structure within the caucuses that use it. *Aso Ebi* in the *Owambe* spectacle can then be considered as visual ideology for the organisers and initiators as they provide interpretations of people revolving around particular notions of social organisation through social performance. This social performance and manipulated perception resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1929, 1941) ideas of the carnivalist misalliances in which he implies that the format or order of the carnival blends together elements that, in other circumstances, would not be together. First is the image of the *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe* which erases differences, then, there is the more detailed issue of individual participants who may not necessarily know each other but unite because of their loyalty to and relationship with the celebrant.

5.1 RELATED CONCEPTS TO CRITIQUE

The concepts of Imperialism, otherness, ritualistic obsession and altruism, as they are manifested through *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe*, are the findings of this study through observation and the relating of experiences by

individuals during interviews. There are conceptual and visual synonyms that might be referred to in a description of the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* phenomena and, in viewing them in relation to the actuality of these Yoruba phenomena, their characteristics support the argument of my study which critiques the reach and behavioural influence of the *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe*.

5.1.1 Imperialism

The nature of the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* is characteristically imperial as it subdues individuals within these caucuses by the domination of a pressurised conformist social relationship. It is based on the subordination of the participating individuals by the social phenomena and the extraction and exploitation of obligatory resources derived from the participants which are both economic and in kind. The role of vendors and the textile industry that support these phenomena while depleting the pockets of the participants is explained. There is recognition of social relationship needs such as social power, status and influence that are acquired for social survival by conformity. As such, the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* phenomena create the “othering” of individuals within caucuses (*The Dictionary of Human Geography* 2000, sv‘imperialism’).

5.1.2 Otherness

In the context of the *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe*, the individual assumes the state of otherness. The individual is consigned to embodying this otherness by submitting him/herself to the direction of the celebrant in the bid to achieve the intent of the celebrant. There may be apprehension in achieving the intent of the celebrant through social domination or power even though this is created by the voluntary participation and performance of other individuals (Said 1978: xviii).

The assumption of otherness by an individual in the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* phenomena are a result of a socially constructed order of relations. However, since this development of social phenomena is a product of a

consensus of individuals within a social group to support this ideology within their caucus, it is therefore also plausible that the same caucus of social individuals have the capacity to modify or change the prerequisite factors involved in carrying forward this cultural ideology.

5.1.3 Ritualistic Obsession

A ritual is a sequence of activities involving gestures (performance) words (invites-calls) and objects (*Aso Ebi*), performed in a sequestered place (*Owambe* event) and according to a set sequence (the event as chosen by a celebrant) (Merriam-Webster 2010, sv 'Masquerade') which takes place according to the tradition and culture of that society.

The above reference to *Aso Ebi* in *Owambe* can be perceived as a ritual, in this case, as social control used to maintain a certain social level while limiting discord and disputes by the influence of the social ritual. The performance of the individual in the *Owambe* event gives the phenomena their value. The individual conforms to the suggested order, thereby reducing dissent and presenting a uniform or coherent system of accepted social activity. The individual thus submits to the "correct performance custom" denying any personal ideals.

5.1.4 Altruism

It might be argued that the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe* are guided by altruistic motives. However, on closer observation, the phenomena belies the cores of altruism of which are based on the ideals of selflessness and the welfare of others at the expense of the individual. While altruism might exist in the state of self-sacrifice without an expectation of gain or benefits from selfless acts for the participants, altruism, in relation to the *Aso Ebi* and *Owambe*, presents itself as a type of façade in the experience of the individual participant. Altruism in this relation seems to become a form of untruth.

The argument for selflessness through self-sacrifice does not particularly apply in the case of these phenomena as the individual participant is compelled to volunteer and sacrifice their most basic needs for social acceptance. The involvement of the rational selfish individual in the phenomena is to secure the long term benefits of participation and to avoid the social punishments of non-conformity. Therefore there is something to be gained from the self-sacrifice to this cause which is an avoidance of repercussions in the face of stringent economic constraints and obligatory inconveniences.

In exploring plausible solutions to the impact of this conformity through my practical production, I tried to give the audience insight into Goffman's idea of the backstage of this staged spectacle that is a continuous ritual in the life of the individual participant looking for individuality in the midst of this conformist culture. I also shed light on the weight of obligation on the individual because of conformity.

In every work of genius [of someone else] we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility than most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another (Emerson 1841:152).

Emerson's statement above speaks directly to the question of addressing *Aso Ebi* in the *Owambe* as a social performance. Many people (as individuals) focus on the negative aspects of the social uniform but few are willing to venture into avenues that will alleviate the individual of the dire effects of carrying on the tradition. The tradition itself shows no signs of dissipating and holds a history almost as long as the culture itself.

This is not to say that all aspects of the *Aso Ebi and Owambe* culture are bad. The challenge here is retaining the positive aspects of unity, visual

brilliance, elegance and originality while finding a means of reducing the unpalatable aspects. Proffering solutions does not necessarily mean the death of a deeply entrenched tradition that has whole occupations and livelihoods attached to it but, in order to find a balance, these areas must be shielded from crumbling while accepting change as inevitable.

The gradual acceptance of some changes to the set system could be through subtle reorientation of elements such as attitudes, values, ideologies, role models, amongst others. This means influencing the non-material aspects to affect the material aspects of the tradition by dealing with the debilitating aspects that make participation a grueling experience. The recognition of the role and importance of the individual within the group would engender a more positive outlook on the participation in the social performance.

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APPENDIX A: MESSAGE RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Aso Ebi for Tayo and Bayo's Traditional Engagement

- May 1
- To
- tayoandbayo@gmail.com
 - fabricsbykiba@gmail.com

Dear Friends,

We hope you have been great. Thank you for your support, prayers and well-wishes for me and Bayo as we prepare for our marriage ceremonies. We truly appreciate you!

As our traditional engagement on 20 September 2014, we are making arrangements for *Aso Ebi*, with the intention of confirming our order by mid-May. *Aso Ebi* details:

- Metallic top, solid wrapper, and aso-oke head tie: N16,000

- Men's Cap (One strip of Aso-Oke): N1500 Fabrics by kibA is providing the described *Aso Ebi*. To reserve yours, please remit payment as indicated below and kindly be sure to include your name: (payments in Nigeria) N16,000 for women N1500 for men

Abisola. O. Kamson. GT Bank Act # 0011948381 (payments from the USA)

\$100 for women \$10 for men

If you are not in either of the countries mentioned above and are interested in *AsoEbi*, then please reply indicating such.

* For those of you who are first-time *Aso Ebi* wearers, *Aso Ebi* is a Yoruba phrase that means 'clothes of the family' in English. Many friends of the couple will wear the fabrics described above in styles of their choice. Pictures are attached to better convey this concept. *Aso Oke* fabric is a hand loomed cloth woven by the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. *Aso Oke* means 'top cloth' in the English language. It is used to make men's formal attire (agbada), women's wrappers (iro) men's caps (fila) and women's head tie called (gele).

Thank you in advance for your support. Please let Bisola of Fabrics by Kiba (Cced) know if you have any questions or special requests!

Warm wishes,
Tayo

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY, VISUAL ARTS AND MUSICOLOGY

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

RESEARCH TOPIC: ASO EBI: THE CULTURAL PHENOMENA OF THE YORUBA SOCIAL UNIFORM AND INDIVIDUALITY

ORIMOLADE ADEFOLAKE ODUNAYO Student Number 4538-324-3

This exercise is to conduct informal interviews with individuals in Yoruba society and in the diaspora about the process of planning and participating in an *Owambe* spectacle. The focus of these interviews will be on the choices they make with regards to the ceremony and the participation in the AsoEbi culture.

All individuals that give personal experiences will remain anonymous in the presentation of research information though consent is requested to use the stories of their personal experience for academic research.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

PHONE:.....

EMAIL:.....

CONTACT:.....

I understand the procedures for this aspect of research and see that it is of no harm to myself or others. I hereby give my consent to the anonymous use of information received from me.

Sign date:.....