

***Agbada*: an essay on the power of cloth**

The *agbada* is a distinctive wide shouldered flowing gown worn by Nigerian men in high office or on special occasions. In the past twenty years, it has become a potent symbol of power and status in Nigeria. The *agbada* has a long and complex genealogy spanning cultures and histories, which I will only touch on here. My interest in this paper is rather to examine the relationship between the *agbada*, as a mode of adornment and the forms of power it quite literally embodies. I shall ask whether there are specific qualities of the *agbada* that conform to and are expressive of specific aspects of Nigerian power. In this way, I will provide an example of how clothing can not only *symbolise* and *convey* social forces, but also helps in the construction and elaboration of those forces. In other words, I take the *agbada* to be more than simply a representation of wealth and status; it is rather a material effect in the construction of social hierarchies.

Before developing these themes, let me first describe the *agbada* and provide a cursory historical account of its genesis and development in West African culture. The *agbada* is excessively wide at the shoulders, requiring the wearer to fold the fabric over, creating a layered effect that further accentuates the shoulders. The vertical folds of fabric on either side of the neck form two draping loops, the bottom of each loop being around knee height. The draped effect has been likened to a bat with wings folded over its body. Most *agbadas* also feature an embroidered chest pocket woven out of anaphe silk (known as the *Ajufun*) with a V-neck skewed to one side and a large pocket below, creating an angular contrast to the excessive folding elsewhere. Amongst the Yoruba, traditional male dress for special occasions is most often made from one of three prestigious cloth types: *sanyan* (again made from anaphe silk), *etu* (a small check of light blue on a dark indigo background), or *alaari* (reddish cloth dyed in camwood). The final outfit can comprise up to six separate garments: four robes: *dansiki* (a sleeveless vest), *gbariye* (a flared tunic with short sleeves), *dandogo* (similar to an *agbada* but with more distinct sleeves and a flared body section, traditionally worn by dancers on festive occasions) and finally the *agbada* itself. For the legs, the outfit requires a pair of wide-waisted trousers, known as *sokoto an ehumula* (or *sokoto* for short) and a hat, *ikori* (also known as *fila*). While the *gbariye* and *dandogo* are specifically Yoruba forms of dress worn in the South-West, the embroidery designs on the *Ajufun* originate from the Islamic North, bearing parallels with designs seen throughout the Sahara region, with their roots

in both talismanic concepts and Islamic aesthetics. As well as providing a strong decorative element and strengthening the pocket and neck of the gown, the *Ajufun* is thought to have protective powers. Most *agbada* have variations on two classic designs known as "two knives" and "eight knives" – dagger-like embroidered strips on either a vertical or a horizontal axis. Another favoured motif is the Islamic "magic knot". This pattern is worn both by northerners and by Yoruba who experienced a northern upbringing.¹

At this point, it is important to note that *agbada* itself is a Yoruba term and applies as a term of reference in the South. In the North (amongst the Hausa, Nupe and Fulbe), the *agbada* is known variously as the *riga* and the *babariga* and occupy a different socio-cultural context to the South. For instance, as well as the dress of prominent men, white *riga* are often used as death shrouds in Hausaland (they are also known as *likkafani*). Although the generic term across cultures tends to converge on *agbada*, in fact the form of clothing has a Northern and Islamic provenance. During the late eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth century the balance of power in much of what is now known as Nigeria was disrupted by the impact of an Islamic jihad inspired by the legendary Muslim Fulani leader Usman dan Fodio. A fiery cleric-cum-warrior, Dan Fodio came from what is now known as Senegal. Across the city states of the Hausa North down to the Nupe people on the banks of the Niger, and as far South as the Yoruba city of Ilorin, rulers were swept aside to be replaced by Muslim emirates. The main Yoruba power of Oyo was defeated, the capital city abandoned in the 1830s. Owing their military power to supreme prowess on horseback, the new Fulani rulers brought with them a style of male dress consisting of flowing robes and huge baggy trousers adapted for horseback riding. They also bought an Islamic tradition of "robes of honour" where embroidered gowns and the flowing turbans worn with them became badges of office for both rulers and court officials. Emirs and other rulers purchased the finest robes for themselves and distributed numerous others to their courtiers. An elaborate trade network developed, with both Nupe and Yoruba weavers and embroiderers, along with specialist tailors, cloth beaters, and dyers, serving the main emirates. Centres of excellence in embroidery grew up in Bida, Kano, Katsina, Dikwa, Daura and Ilorin (and continue to this day). Royal courts beyond the ken of Fulani power such as the Yoruba kings adopted

¹ For a detailed account of Nigerian fabric and clothing, see "Nigerian Weaving" by Venice Lamb and Judy Holmes, published by The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria, 1980.

the same style of dress, and in the twentieth century the gowns became the *de rigueur* dress of important men across a large area of Nigeria and into neighbouring countries. The oldest surviving *riga* is a Nupe gown in the 1841 Egga collection in the British Museum.

From a longer arch of history, there is good evidence to support the speculation that the Fulani emirs' dress sensibilities were influenced by the powerful Ottoman Empire to the North in Turkey, still a global force in the world at the time of Dan Fodio's reign. A visit to the palace of the Sultans, the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, reveals glass cases of robes with exactly the same elongated shoulders as with the *agbada*. The elaborate and highly symbolic turbans worn by modern-day Emirs and court officials in the North of Nigeria, creating a fantastic spectacle during the Northern Durbar horse pageants in Kano, Zaria and Katsina, also may trace their origins to the favoured headgear of the Turkish Sultans.

So much for an historical perspective from the past two hundred years. In recent history, the *agbada* has become significantly more widespread in use. Up until two decades ago, at least in the South-West, the *agbada* was worn only by the Big Man of the town or city. Far more common was the short-sleeved *gbariye* tunic. This prompts the question of how and why this rise in popularity took place. The obvious socio-historical parallel with the rise in prominence of the *agbada* is that of the disproportionate wealth obtained from the discovery of oil. The turning point for the rise to visual and symbolic prominence of the *agbada* was the Second Republic of President Shehu Shagari in the 1980s. At the height of the first oil-boom, thanks to high global oil prices, Shagari was often to be seen wearing elaborately flowing *agbada*, adorned with copious embroidery on the *Ajufun*. Interrupted by military regimes that brought with them the military symbols of khaki and dark blue officer-class uniforms, as one dictatorship followed another, the *agbada* returned and returned, becoming ever more widespread amongst the court and hangers-on as it was amongst the rulers themselves. The tradition set by Shagari continues to the present day. The current Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria appears to wear a different *agbada* on each day of the year.

In the socio-cultural landscape of contemporary Nigeria, the *agbada* signifies power, authority and wealth and is most commonly worn by those who either have these

attributes or would like to acquire them. It is no coincidence that Shell has named one of their rigs off the Bight of Benin the “*Agbada 1*”. In a culture where even the smallest boys are given suits to wear, another mode of appearance has had to be devised for the sake of acquiring adequate criteria of distinction. The *agbada* is an interesting form of adornment to consider because of the light it throws on the unique character of African masculinity and power relations. More specifically, from a western theoretical standpoint, the *agbada* embodies the juxtaposition of excessive masculinity and excessive femininity that is commonly expressed by powerful Nigerian men. On some designs, the shoulder is cut so excessively that the *agbada* needs to be folded over two or three times, creating a ripple effect like toffee layers or an exquisite Lebanese gateau. On many *agbada*, these folds need to be pulled up intermittently as they threaten to droop down off the shoulders. This movement is humorously referred to as ‘one thousand, two thousand.’ This phrase refers to the man who is about to ‘spray’ money at the hosts of an owambe party (owambe translates as ‘come and show’), each fold representing the princely sum of a thousand naira. On the other hand, the shoulder folds create a vertical multi-pleated effect like ruched curtains powerfully expressive of a sort of labial femininity. Requiring a minimum of ten metres of cloth and taking over a year to make (for the traditional hand-stitched version), the *agbada* effects a material excess in literal terms; the analogue of the material excess of the female body. This feminine effect is amplified by the colour of the *agbada*; African men are not bound by the colour rules that form part of the western man’s socialisation: baby pinks and blues or bright reds and purples are acceptable colours for the *agbada* wearer. Again, in terms of materials, the *agbada* can be made from pure cotton or guinea cloth at its simplest, all the way to complex lacy designs of interwoven shapes. The late dictator Sani Abacha favoured such intricate cloth-work, in a style often referred to as ‘Saudi’ style, in reference to the penchant for elaborate fabric amongst the ruling elite of Saudi Arabia. When made of lace, the complex of folds played out across of a material complex creates a phenomenal moving sculpture, a meringue of elaborate confectionary, a soft architecture which points the way towards a post-post modern theory of building, taking the fold beyond the fold.

The deeper metaphysical question the *agbada* throws up is whether the associations that signify masculine or feminine forms in the west have any linkage with the Nigerian cultural context. Is the shoulder accentuation expressive of masculinity and the shoulder

fold femininity within the terms of a Nigerian socio-cultural ontology itself? Or do these forms have no fixed association? In other words, do rigid linear forms signify masculinity and fluid curvatures femininity in an African cultural context? If they do, then the *agbada* is expressive of the juxtapositions between an excessive masculinity and an excessive femininity, as we suggested at the outset. If however there is no linkage between form and gender, perhaps an entirely different conceptual architecture is required to begin to comprehend and map the *agbada*.

In other words, the intense combination of masculine and feminine forms the *agbada* embodies may only be interpreted as such from the standpoint of a western episteme of gender, form and sexual identity. In the same way that Foucault's work on the History of Sexuality points towards a series of discontinuities across western history in the mechanisms of sexual identity and expression, the suggestion is that we should look upon the *agbada* as opening up another regime of gender signification that cannot be translated into the conceptual boxes of contemporary western theory. The alternative, western theoretical perspective would be to view the *agbada* as a mode of pure appropriation. As with drag queens and high western theory of the late twentieth century, the *agbada* would therefore function as an appropriation of the feminine by the masculine territorial drive. Curves, folds, pleats, labial forms, all are appropriated by the masculine drive as a form of domination; nothing will be left to the woman to call her own. It is unthinkable that a woman would ever wear an *agbada*.

Whichever the case, as with contemporary female forms of high adornment such as the *Gele* headwrap most often worn by Yoruba women on their way to owambe parties (an aesthetic form of folding which rivals Japanese origami in terms of sophistication and variation), the *agbada* is an elaboration of bodily being. It acts as a protuberance upon the world, turning men into fluffy multi-coloured swans. The bulging stomach of the well-lived Nigerian male is nicely accommodated by the folded complexity of the *agbada* frontage, complementing the vertical sculptural effect with a puffed up robin-redbreast horizontal effect. *Agbada* and *Gele* turn the Nigerian male and female into birds of prey, replete with orchidaceous plumages spanning the extent of the body. The west has not seen such complexities of adornment since the Tudors.

The *agbada* as an elaboration of the powerful therefore imbues its own form of comportment. As soon as one puts on an *agbada*, one finds one's status has been raised at least a notch. From a phenomenological perspective of preconscious directives, the cut of the cloth bears an implicit suggestion that the shoulders should now be pushed out and back, the chest pumped out, the head held high. One cannot run or risk quick movements when wearing the *agbada*. All bodily gestures must be done at half-speed to achieve best effect and to avoid the imprint of dirt on the pure expanses of cloth. The *agbada* nurtures slowness if not sloth; movement in time to the speed at which the midriff of the wealthy man expands beyond itself. Of course, the slow speed of the *agbada* wearer is an expression of pure power in itself. The Big Man in the *agbada* has no cause to rush; everything that needs to be done with any haste or urgency will be done by someone else, the understudy or the underling.

From the outside looking in, the *agbada* is therefore a powerful symbol of class oppression, derisively captured in this poem by James Amuta:

Agbada and Our Virgins

Do we still have any virgins left
Who was not born still, blind and bone-deaf?
Whose virtue can exercise thrift
When Naira is flaunted by the *agbada*-clad thief?

Can that virgin resist the thief in *agbada*
Who rides in long trains of tints and sirens,
Whose tongue is spiced with the breath mints of Naira,
And ready to blaze treasures like fire fountains?

When our virgins were raped by Khaki
We shed our blood to put *Agbada* in his place
Now our virgins are defiled with our own money
By *Agbada* who hid his khaki under a solemn face.

Now, should we watch the virgins of our people
Defiled by *Agbada* (who extorted our trust)

Not for the good of the people - but for evil-
A selfish ritual to retain khaki-power at all cost?²

Although somewhat clunky from a purely poetic point of view, the poem has a strong resonance for anyone who has visited a Nigerian university campus in recent times. Amuta's poem is essentially a critique of post-colonial power relations in Nigeria, with the *agbada's* replacement of the khaki symbolic of one regime of oppression (the beneficiaries of a contractual system of patronage) taking the place of another (military dictatorship and the colonial power it aped). The *agbada* is the sign of illegitimate appropriation, the *extortion of trust*, the theft of the 'national cake' turned into a textural metaphor. The character of *Agbada* referred to in the text has another name in popular discourse: the *aristo*. The aristo is a name given to wealthy Nigerian men who pick up students for transactional sex. The reference to 'long trains of tints and sirens' in the poem is of course an allusion to the aristo-as-politician. Various university campuses across the country have become notorious for scantily-clad young women parading on campus at night as flashy cars cruise by, just as the local scandal-sheets have tales of drug-fuelled orgies at Governor's lodges across the country. At a minimum, the aristo will cruise the campus in a Mercedes V-boot, at best if not a Hummer, then a Toyota Prado SUV. Rather than payment in advance as with standard street sex-worker practice, the aristo will pay the student 'transport' money or more simply buy credit for her phone, after the act. The aristo and the *agbada* are interchangeable signifiers, functioning as both metonyms and synonyms of each other. In both cases, class-oppression is at work, as ten or metres of fabric folded into one piece of clothing is the preserve of the wealthy, just as buying phone credit is a luxury for a population where around 70% live on a dollar a day or less.

It is from the point of view of power that we can begin finally to address my core question of how the *agbada* came to symbolise and construct power and status in contemporary Nigerian society. Rather an issue for historical research, this question really concerns what the *agbada* embodies as a form of clothing in the context of Nigerian power relations. Aside from a regal ritardando in movement, the folds of the *agbada* imply that which is hidden. Beneath the *agbada's* multiple folds lies concealed pleasures, violences, appropriations, stories that will never be told. Functioning as a social mask,

² See www.nigerians.biz

the *agbada* both conceals *and* expresses status. At a prosaic level, one can never predict the things a man may pull out of his *agbada*: a wad of crisp 500 naira notes, the keys to his Benz, the phone number of last night's trip to the campus. A common piece of advice amongst Nigerian women is to wait to see the potential *agbada* suitor wear western clothes to find proof of the man. If his suit is elegantly tailored, the *agbada* speaks the truth; if the suit is of limp, ill-fitting nylon, the *agbada* lied. In a cash economy where over 95% of all transactions involve bank notes, attracting scores of armed robbers across the country, the *agbada* is also a convenient way of discretely carrying bricks of local currency. At an ontological level, the folds of the *agbada* construct power itself as a form of concealment. The *agbada* masks corruption and brutality, refiguring violent appropriation as a pure form of the feminine. The western suit would never be able to tame such wildly excessive corruption as effectively or with such serenity. It is therefore no accident that the rise in prominence of the *agbada* mirrors precisely the rise in prominence of extreme corruption and moral decay amongst the 'leadership' in Nigeria. The *agbada*'s folds transform greed and the crude mechanisms of patronage into a series of graceful, dignified movements. Oil-flares, secret European bank accounts and by proxy property deals in the UK and US are invisibly condensed into the graceful movement of the hand, nestling daintily into its pocket. The avaricious, desiring-machine body clambers out of the tinted glass Mercedes, folds of corpulent fat hidden from view by the gliding extremities of the *agbada*.

As both a resplendent form of male adornment and a locus for a specific construction of power, the *agbada* is a powerful signifier of wealth, privilege and class oppression in Nigeria. So long as power in Nigeria remains based around patronage, rent-seeking and appropriation, channelling the rent-seeking spoils of the country to offer up to the tiny few, leaving the vast majority of the population in penury staring in from outside, the *agbada* will continue to be worn as a mask for the powerful, secrets of pleasure and violence softly occluded from view within its many folds.