

Alaro: Indigo and the Power of Women in Yorubaland

By Stephen Hamilton

“Cotton is what one should plant, not brass; cotton is what one should plant, not beads; as for brass and beads, neither goes with one to the grave; on the day one dies, only cloth accompanies one.” (Owomoyela, 2005)

Cloth belonging to a woman in old Yorubaland follows her through countless journeys. It is the wrapper she receives from her mother when she marries. It is the *oja* (baby tie) she uses to carry her child. If she becomes a chief, she wears a fine glistening cloth, beaten to a high sheen. Cloth is even with her during her final journey. Her voyage into the realm of ancestors, shrouded in the cloth she wore in life, dyed for the last time an endless indigo black. For the Yoruba, indigo was the deepest and most permanent of all dyes. It was in many cases as necessary to the cloth as the cotton from which it was made.

Although the specific origins of indigo dyeing among the Yoruba people has been difficult for scholars to determine, indigo has a long history in West Africa. The region's oldest surviving indigo-dyed textiles have been found in Mali's Tellem caves dating from the 11th century (Bolland, 1991). These textiles incorporate many of the same patterns and techniques common in more contemporary textiles produced in Yorubaland. Fragments of indigo dyed cotton and bast fiber blend textiles dating to the 13th century have been found in royal graves in Benin City (Connah, 1975). In addition to being linguistically related, the Edo people of Benin City and the Yoruba share a long history of cultural exchange. Some of the earliest European descriptions of Yorubaland describe extensive indigo processing practiced by female specialists.

Explorer Hugh Clapperton describes the town Ijana in 1825 as having “upwards of twenty vats per house,” “women were the dyers,” and that “the indigo here is excellent and forms the most capital dye” (Lockhart and Lovejoy, 2005; Ogundiran, 2009). As we see from both archeological and eyewitness reports, indigo has a long history in southern Nigeria. Eyewitness reports in Yorubaland from almost 200 years ago attest to this craft being sophisticated, widespread, and female-dominated. This paper will explore the processes and techniques used by these female dyers as well as the broader societal roles of both these women and the cloth they produce. Most importantly, this essay examines the religious provenance of the dyeing arts as female coded practices tied to the Yoruba concepts of womanhood and feminine power.

Preparing the *Ikoko Aro*: Methods and Materials

The practice of extracting indigo in Yorubaland has historically been the domain of the *alaro* (dyers). These were the female artisans described by Clapperton in the 19th century (Lockhart and Lovejoy, 2005). As an elder and professional dyer, the head of a dyeing compound is known as *Iya Alaro* (mother of dyers), thus gendering the role. These specialist dyers were not only responsible for dyeing finished cloth but also providing the dyed yarns for both male and female weavers. *Alaro* would also be responsible for creating resist-dyed textiles known as *adire*. This was originally an ancillary artform, developed to renew old and previously worn cloth (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). With the influx of industrially made machine-woven fabrics in the early 20th-century, *adire* became a significant part of indigo dyers’ material output (Byfield, 1997; Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). As indigo dyeing is a crucial part of many lucrative and important textile traditions in southern Nigeria, the *alaro* play

important roles in commerce, frequently appearing as central figures in religious literature and traditional histories. What follows is a glimpse into the laborious and often temperamental process of preparing a functioning dye vat using traditional techniques and materials. This description is based on a process I observed and participated in while studying with Yoruba and Ebara dyers and weavers in Ogidi-Ijumu, as well as in-depth documentation of *adire* making by Thorolf Lipp¹. Please note that this is one of the many similar methods used to extract dye in the region.

The dyeing process begins with collecting the young light green leaves of the *elu* bush (*philenoptera cyanescens/ lonchocarpus cyanescens*). Once a sufficient amount of leaves are collected, they are pounded into a blue-green mass and then shaped by hand into balls (Lipp, 1995). These balls are then allowed to dry in the sun (Lipp, 1995). When preparing a dye pot for a deep indigo blue, around 120 balls are broken up and allowed to soak in hot water overnight². The pot used to prepare the dye is called the *ikoko aro (dye pot)*. This is a large earthenware pot that is partially submerged in the ground (Lipp, 1995). After the *elu* balls are allowed to soak, several liters of *aluba* (lye water) is added. The lye water is created by allowing water to seep through ashes (Lipp, 1995). Currently, cocoa pod ashes are used, but prior to the Nigerian cocoa industry's advent, wood ashes from fresh green tree branches were utilized (Gardi, 2009). The dark lye water is tasted to ensure that the *aluba* contains sufficient alkalinity (a strong solution stings the tongue and possesses a strong fishlike taste). Once the taste dissipates, the ashes are changed, and more water is added until enough of the dark lye rich liquor is obtained. The mixture of lye water and indigo is allowed to ferment for about four to seven days, and it is stirred and examined daily (Lipp, 1995). The time required for fermentation to take place depends on the time of year. During the dry season, when the ground is warm, fermentation will

take as little as four days, however during the rainy season, when the ground is cold and wet, fermentation may take over a week (Lipp, 1995)³. During this fermentation period, the indican (an organic compound) in the leaves transitions into indigo yellow, a crucial process as indigo blue is not soluble in water. This is a reduction process which removes oxygen from the dyebath. In its un-oxidized form, this indigo yellow appears as a yellow-green liquid that produces a coppery blue film (flower) at its surface once it is ready. After submerging the fibers in this yellow-green liquid, it is then allowed to oxidize in the open air, which allows the indigo yellow to transition back into the permanent and non-water-soluble indigo blue (Balfour Paul, 1998). The prepared cloth is re-submerged and allowed to oxidize multiple times resulting in a deep blue color (Lipp, 1995).

Special cloth called *etu* (guinea fowl) or *olowududu* (owner of black threads/yarn) is made by dyeing the cloth or yarn repeatedly until it has achieved a blue-black color (Holmes and Lamb, 1980). A particularly rich dye vat will only last about five days, and this is only if the indican has not been exhausted through multiple dyeings; this is why *alaro* will typically prepare multiple vats so that there will always be a sufficient amount of dye on hand (Lipp, 1995). Preparing a dye vat can be marked with unexpected failure. Erratic temperatures or imprecise pH balances will result in a dye vat that does not ferment properly. Experienced dyers know how to prepare the dye and revitalize spent or even failed dye baths⁴. This knowledge of the slow chemical process required to create successful dye pots is the pride of master dyers. Importantly, the almost alchemic process for preparing indigo often provided these women with great material wealth and tied them to a world of potent and primordial spiritual forces.

Indigo & Yoruba Religion: The *Orisa* And *Iyami* as Owners of The Dye Pot

“ *Ifa* says it is primal and inimitable.

1 I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God’s Creative Will They said it is *Agbe*, the Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starling It was then decreed that *Agbe* be directed to dip its plumage in the *aro* (indigo) dye.

5 *Ifa* says it is primal and inimitable I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God’s Creative Will They said it is *Aluko*, the Carmine Bee-eater *Aluko* was directed to put its own plumage in the camwood paste.

15 *Ifa* says it is primal and inimitable I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God’s Creative Will They said it is *Lekeleke*, the Cow Egret *Lekeleke* was asked to dip its own plumage in the immaculate and powdery white chalk.”

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Eloquently translated by Margaret Olugbmisola, and Razaq Olatunde Rom Kalilu, the preceding is an excerpt from *Odu Ejiogbe* first in order of the 256 *Odu* (signatures) of the *Ifa* divination corpus, the cornerstone of Yoruba religious and philosophical thought (Olugbmisola and Kalilu, 2013). In it, sacred birds are anointed with divine pigments becoming beautiful and inimitable. These acts become a metaphor for the dyeing arts, with birds being symbolic of the *eleye* (owners of birds), *awon iya wa /iyami* (our/my mother/s) or the more terse term, *aje* (witches). In Yoruba spirituality, these are the divine and powerful feminine forces capable of both blessings and terrible destruction. The recognition and appeasement of the *iyami/eleye* are central to many elements of Yoruba spiritual practice (Drewel and Drewel, 2000; Elebuibon, 2008). The preparation of *ebo* (sacrifice or offering) for many deities often include rituals and sacrificial items to placate the *Iyami* and ensure their co-operation or at least non-interference (Elebuibon, 2008)⁵. The near-ubiquitous bird iconography seen in Yoruba sculpture is often interpreted as the avatars of these powerful unseen female forces. Their presence honors,

recognizes, and cools the *awon iya wa*. Both the *Iyami* and the dyeing arts are closely associated with postmenopausal women, and the *alaro* are often described as *eleye/iyami* in Yoruba poetry and folklore. There is even one notorious example in which a powerful *alaro/eleye* attempts to sacrifice pupils of Orunmila⁶ himself for her own festival day (Elebuibon 2008). The dyer birds' presence makes this *ese* (verse) a powerful and symbolically loaded piece of oral literature. This not only delineates the essential and crucial relationships between *Ifa* and the *iyami* but the antiquity and primacy of the dyeing arts in Yoruba imagination (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). *agbe* (the glossy blue eared starling or the blue turaco, depending on the translation) dyes itself with the *aro* (*indigo*), the most powerful and permanent of all dyes.

Indigo and the women responsible for its manufacture play a unique role in Yoruba society. In many parts of Yorubaland, indigo dyeing and other female coded artforms are associated with *Iya Mapo*, the primordial artisan that taught the art of dyeing and many other crafts to humankind (Folarin, 1993; Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2015). *Iya Mapo* is not alone in her association with indigo and the dyeing arts. The worship of the *orisas*, *Osun*, and *Yemoja* are strongly connected to the cities of Osogbo, Ibadan, and Abeokuta, which were three very prosperous centers for indigo dyeing industries during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. These female deities are the owners of the rivers (the *Osun* and *Ogun* rivers, respectively) that run through these towns. They are both associated with divine coolness, healing, fecundity, and the womb. Various myths establish either one of them as essential to creating the world (Abimbola, 2001; Babatunde, 1983; Elebuibon, 2008), and *oriki* (praise names) connect them to indigo dyeing. As we will see from their narratives and their specific worship, there are core similarities between these deities, including their connections with water, coolness, abundance, and motherhood.

Iya Mapo is the matron of almost all female coded art forms, including indigo dyeing, spinning, pottery, hair braiding, women's weaving (on the upright loom), soap making, and palm oil production. (Folarin, 1993). These are all essential commodities in pre-colonial Yorubaland's domestic economies, tying *Iya Mapo* along with *Yemoja* and *Osun* to wealth and prosperity. She is the *orisa* credited with teaching the arts of indigo dyeing (among other industries) to womankind. In certain parts of Yorubaland, she is worshipped and appeased by the *Alaro* to ensure the success of their indigo vats. The following is a description of the appeasement made to *Iya Mapo* by *alaro* in the town of Ede, as observed by Akinremi Odeyemi.

“...the items of worship and sacrifice are kolanuts, bitter kola, white pigeon, beans pudding, and beans cake. The worship starts with a procession to the river led by an elderly woman with a white wrapper tied from her chest down to her ankle. She wears an elaborate hairdo and with her body painted with *Osun* (camwood). She is followed by a young virgin girl of about nine, dressed in a similar manner as the old woman, but carrying a white calabash containing the sacrificial items. This elderly woman splatters some indigo dye in the river, chanting:

Ki aro mi ko yooro (let my dye come out well)
Iya iya, ooo (oh mother, oh mother)
Iyaooo! (Mother!)”.

(Odeyemi, 2006; Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2015).

If we analyze this ritual, we see key elements of the worship, symbolism and iconography of *Iya Mapo*. As with *Osun* and *Yemoja*, there is a clear association with water and rivers more specifically. Water and water symbolism is often coded as feminine in Yoruba religion, contrasting the heat and aggression tied to the masculine associated deities of war, blood, and fire. The pure white color associated with the supplicant's dress and the offerings that they give represent divine coolness (*itutu*). In addition to being the embodiment of coolness, water is also a

place of healing, creation, and nurturing. It is not coincidental that white clothing is also associated with the worship of *Yemoja*, *Osun*, and other water deities. The use of “Mother” as an epithet of power, authority, and prestige is a trait shared by all three goddesses as well. It should be noted that *Olomoyoyo* (mother of many children) sculptures typically depicting a woman holding an infant with another on her back and occasionally others at her side, are used in the worship of all of three *orisa* (Folarin, 1993). The use of this iconography shows motherhood symbolism as a manifestation of female power over creation, wealth, and abundance. *Iya Mapo*, the *Orisa* who provided women with the means to attain wealth, independence, and the ability to provide for their families and communities through indigo dyeing, can be seen as another arbiter of this power.

Osun, the owner of the *Osun* river, is the matron of the dye pot in Osogbo. According to legend, the founders of Osogbo, *Laroye*, and *Oguntimehin* were hunting in the forest when they felled trees in her sacred grove. Unbeknownst to them, *Osun* was dyeing cloth in the forest. When the trees they cut down destroyed her workshop, she cried out, “who has broken all of my indigo pots?” After hearing her voice echo through the forest, *Laroye* and *Oguntimehin* replied, “*Oso igbo oso igbo pele oooo!* Loosely translated, this means “O wizards of the forest, be cool!”. When they came upon her, she ordered them to travel out of the forest until they could no longer hear her bell. Where they stopped, they built a shrine and the royal palace establishing the city (Hamilton, 2016)⁷. From this story, we recognize the art of indigo dyeing is not only a crucial part of the establishment of Osogbo but is also spiritually tied to the powers of *Osun*. As with *Iya Mapo*, we establish that indigo manufacture is the provenance of powerful feminine forces, and indigo’s primordial nature as an industry of gods and spirits was tied to Osogbo even before its establishment. *Osun* as the divine dyer further reinforces the *iyami* (mystic woman)/dyer

complex in Yoruba spiritual contexts. In this instance, *Osun* is described as *Oso*, an epithet typically used for male “wizards,” yet as Yoruba does not possess gendered pronouns and only a few gendered terms at all, there is ambiguity attached to the gender specificity of the term.

To further explore this *alaro/orisha/eleye* paradigm of dyers/spirits/owners of sacred birds, we must analyze the connections between the *Iyami/Eleye* and *Osun*, established at the world’s creation. This is detailed eloquently in *Odu Osetura*, of the *Ifa* divinatory corpus. In the verses of *Osetura*, *Osun* was the only woman to descend into the world with 16 other *Irumole* (primordial deities) to bring forth creation. When the other *orisa* ignored her, she summoned the power of the *eleye/iyami* to destroy what had been made without her, as was the right given to her by *Olodumare* (the supreme being) (Elebuibon, 2008). “*Owner of a hair comb decorated with iyun (coral or jasper beads). When she was in a secret place. She spoiled the sacrifice of other divinities*” (Abimbola, 2001). It was not until the other *Irunmole* begged her forgiveness that creation could continue unabated (Abimbola, 2001; Elebuibon, 2008). Thus *Osun*’s connections with the *Iyami* and her identity as the ancient dyer bring the occult, mystical and feminine nature of indigo full circle.

Osun is not alone in this dual identity as a dyer and head of the at times nefarious sorority of the *iyami/eleye*. *Yemoja*, the owner of the Ogun river, is one of the principal female *orisa* of the towns of Ibadan and Abeokuta, both of which were centers for indigo industries. In her areas of worship, *Yemoja* becomes the mother of the celestial and temperamental powers of the *Iyami* (Thompson, 71; Tunkara, 2005). Her praise names include mother of witches (*Iyalaje*) and one who resides in the *Ibu Alaro* (dyeing depths). Her *ileke* (beads) are white and blue, symbolizing the water’s coolness. Like *Osun*, she is a deity strongly associated with fertility and motherhood (the literal translation of her name is (mother whose children are fish). So important is her

connection with the powers of creation that she is considered the mother of most of the other *Orisa* in many of the western Yoruba kingdoms (Babatunde, 1983). It can be said that Yemoja being a guardian of the womb and primordial waters, becomes metaphorically connected to the preparation of the dyes themselves. The mysteries of creation held by women are analogized in her praise name *Ibu alaro* (indigo depths). It is important to note that both *Osun* and *Yemoja* and, by extension, all Yoruba goddesses exist as manifestations of feminine power over all creative forces. The alchemic transformation of the *elu* leaf into the rich *aro* (indigo dye) within the *ikoko aro* (dye pot) mirrors the process of gestation, once again utilizing the mysteries of creation bestowed upon women by *Olodumare*. As these goddesses are guardians of this creative force, their attributes, worship, and praise names exemplify ways in which powerful women manifest this agency, indigo dyeing being one of them.

No discussion of women's influence in Yorubaland can neglect the marketplace's importance as a nexus of feminine authority. The Yoruba marketplace was historically the social and political domain of women (Drewel and Drewel, 2000). The head of the market in a Yoruba town (*Iyaloja* or some variation of the title) is herself a powerful chief who sits on the king's council (Drewel and Drewel, 2000; Elebuibon, 2008). It is also essential to understand that female *Orisa*, especially *Yemoja*, *Iya Mapo*, and *Osun*, are associated with wealth, not only in terms of children but also in the abundance of resources that cannot be dissociated from the marketplace. It is said of Iya Mapo in her *oriki*, “*you have never allowed your children to go hungry*” and “*calm old mother of the earth...you gave us our profession, you provide for us better than the market*” (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2015). One of *Osun*'s praise songs states that she “*has lots of money*” and “*speaks sweetly to the multitude*”(Thompson, 84).

The market itself is also a place charged with spiritual and political importance. It is repeatedly analogized as a microcosm of the world itself in Yoruba proverbs (Drewel and Drewel, 2000). We see elderly women as owners and sustainers of the market, and by extension, the *iyami orun*, the heavenly mothers, are honored and feared as owners of the world. Such a concept is a core part of Yoruba thought, especially in the ritual societies of *Gelede*⁸, *Iya Nla*, and *Ogboni*. These organizations concern themselves with the affairs of the *awon iya wa* and the earth goddess *Ile*, a goddess who, like the aforementioned *orisa*, also uses water spirit imagery in her tools and iconography (Aronson, 1996; Drewel and Drewel, 2000). The *alaro* and divine feminine entities are connected by their dominion over womanly manifestations of wealth. The dye pot, water, and market become potent symbols, glossing at once spiritual and commercial powers.

Pre-Colonial Provenance: Indigo Cloth Production and Export

The importance and influence of indigo dyeing and the related women's weaving industry are longstanding and have had a powerful historical influence on pre-colonial and colonial Nigerian trade. This in many ways explains the important connection dyers have with divinities and other spiritually potent female entities. As established earlier, the art of indigo dyeing has an extensive provenance in southern Nigeria. In Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo speaking areas, indigo production also overlaps with the manufacture of cotton and raffia textiles. These cloths are created on the upright single heddle loom almost exclusively operated by women. In the Yoruba context, this handspun cotton cloth is known as *kijipa*, and its use as a textile is both sacred and mundane (Asakitikpi, 2007; Holmes, 1980;

Poynor, 1980). The cloth is typically used for domestic purposes, such as for towels, blankets, mosquito netting, chair slings, and work clothes (Holmes, 1980). However, once *kijipa* has undergone the necessary rituals, it becomes medicine cloth, a spiritually charged item, with the power to treat infertility and other ailments (Holmes and Lamb, 1980). Before the expansion of men's narrow strip weaving from northwestern Yorubaland, women's textiles most likely filled all ritual, domestic, and prestige functions throughout Yorubaland and southern Nigeria. The fact that in specific areas of eastern Yorubaland, there is virtually no male narrow strip weaving tradition at all, and the industry is absent in Edo, and Igbo speaking territories lends credence to this theory (Holmes, 1980).

Women's weaving and dyeing skills were used to create various types of blue and blue and white striped textiles used in the area. While the women who produced these textiles also created elaborate openwork and patterned cloths using both locally dyed and imported threads, the most common and near-ubiquitous form of clothing in the region consisted of alternating warp striped cotton textiles (Holmes, 1980). It is important to note that much of cloth used for significant life events such as marriage, age-grade initiations, and cloth ritually associated with chieftaincy and titleholders have also for the most part been woven by women. These textiles often, if not always, include dark, almost black indigo dyed yarns, (Asakitikpi, 2007; Renne, 1995) which require both exceptional skill and at times over one hundred hours of labor to produce. This is especially true for marriage cloth and cloth associated with both male and female titleholders. Since these textiles were made by independent weavers and dyers each heading their own compounds, cotton agriculture, as well as the arts of spinning and indigo production, were near-ubiquitous throughout southern Nigeria. This statement is confirmed by G.J.A Ojo, who argues that every woman in

pre-colonial Yorubaland prepared and spun yarn with the assistance of her daughters. He also states that dyeing was initially the business of all women, with specialists emerging due to the craft's difficulty (Byfield, 1997; Ojo, 1966)⁹. In fact, up until the mid 20th century all women in many villages were still expected to master the art of spinning at an early age and Nike Okundaye indicates that as late as the 1960s, every compound in Osogbo possessed active indigo pots¹⁰. Between the 17th -19th centuries, when Europeans desired to profit from the incredibly lucrative African textile trade, the production and exchange of these West African textiles increased dramatically (Kriger, 2006). This trade corresponded with increased demand for enslaved persons, many of whom were forced to work in industries related to textile manufacture in the Americas and offshore colonies.

The production of what was popularly known as "Benin cloths" was, for the most part, the provenance of female artisans. Though these textiles were called Benin cloths because the Benin kingdom controlled and managed a large part of the trade, they were in fact not at all produced in the Benin Kingdom (Holmes, 1980; Kriger, 2006). The cloths themselves were probably produced by Edo, Yoruba, and Igbo speaking nations under the suzerainty of the Oba of Benin and the kingdom of Ijebu Ode in central Yorubaland (Kriger, 2006). Although there is a dizzying variety of elaborate regional styles, each group produces warped striped and deep blue dyed /overdyed cloths that share fundamental similarities (Holmes, 1980). Each textile typically has a web of 18"-30" inches measuring between 70" and 96" inches in length. Generally speaking, a single panel may be used as a head tie, baby carrier, or sash. Two paneled cloth (comprised of two pieces sewn together at the selvage) is generally used for women's wrappers and shawls, while three and

four-paneled varieties are made into toga-like garments worn by men and occasionally female titleholders (Asakitiki, 1997; Holmes 1980).

The ubiquity of this style of garment across West and Central Africa no doubt led to its popularity. It is also important to note that blue and white, warp striped textiles are incredibly popular all over West Africa and may have been since at least the 11th century (Bolland, 1991; Kriger, 2006). The popularity of these textiles is one of the many reasons that Portuguese, Dutch, and English merchants were able to supply markets for them up and down the West African coast. As early as the 16th century, Portuguese and later Dutch merchants were able to make profits exchanging these textiles for gold in the Akan, Ga, and Ewe speaking regions of Ghana and for enslaved persons as far south as Angola in Central Africa (Kriger, 2006). Certain varieties of these textiles even outpriced many of the imports manufactured on European and Indian looms. Though records of export are somewhat spotty, reports show that between 1644 and 1646, 16,000 cloths were purchased by the Dutch alone, with claims that the “British had imported even more” (Kriger, 2006).

What is certain is that such a large amount of cloth required a massive workforce to produce. Unlike men's weaving traditions, women typically do not use a guild or apprenticeship system. The cloth was woven by women who operated workshops out of their homes with their unmarried daughters, granddaughters or other female relatives, or *Iwofa* (indentured laborers exchanging labor for personal debt or debt of a parent) (Byfield, 1997). These women may also work as dyers or purchase their yarns from spinners or dyer/spinners in the market. We can assume from Ojo's statements that prior to the mass importation of cotton shirting there must have been considerable overlap between dyers

and spinners. No part of the industry was mechanized (Kriger, 2006). All yarn was handspun and hand-dyed, with each cloth woven on the very simple yet efficient single heddle, upright loom. Considering the well-documented influence and at times dominance Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo women had over local economies, and the sheer amount of labor required to fuel increased demand; we can assume it was a social and financial imperative for women in the area to take part in this industry. Local cotton agriculture must have also been intense, as well as the production and use of indigo dyes. David van Nyendael, an 18th Dutch trader well known for his descriptions of the Benin Kingdom, remarked on the cotton textile industry and the amount of cotton cultivated in the area.

“That a large quantity of cotton bushes must grow here, you may reasonably conjecture when I tell you that not only all of the inhabitants are clothed with it, but they annually export thousands of woven cloths to other places.” (Roth, 1903)¹¹

Both skilled and unskilled labor around textile industries was not only widespread but ubiquitous throughout southern Nigeria. It must be noted that although no part of this industry was mechanized, labor relating to weaving and dyeing was well organized . Although knowledge of spinning, weaving, and dyeing was near-ubiquitous, women also specialized in different parts of the industry. Spinners, dyers, and weavers were each dependent on each other's work. Spinners produced yarns that could be purchased at the market by dyers who would bleach and or dye yarns to sell to weavers (Byfield, 1997; Johnson, 1921) . These weavers, in turn, sold their products to traders and local customers

in the marketplace. The markets in which they operated would have been well organized and headed by powerful female chiefs who settled disputes and maintained order. As indicated earlier, the marketplace represents a spiritual metaphor for the world. The heavy focus on textile industries in the 16th to 19th century thus placed these women at its center. During and even after the colonization of Nigeria, indigo textiles and the women who created them would continue to have an incredible social and cultural impact across West Africa.

Ritual and Titled Cloth

As mentioned previously, handwoven, handspun, indigo dyed textiles were used near ubiquitously in West Africa for centuries. Women across southern Nigeria exploited their proficiency in producing these textiles to sustain a lucrative industry. However, it must be noted that the importance of these textiles and their value as trade commodities was tied to their complex social, spiritual, and at times political significance. This was true not only for the societies that produced them but also for the societies that imported them (Aronson, 1996; Holmes, 1980). Up until the mid-twentieth century, variations of indigo and indigo striped textiles were still serving important ritual and social functions among Yoruba nations. This is especially true in the eastern parts of Yorubaland, mainly in Kwara, Kogi, Eastern Ondo, and Ekiti states. Here the men's narrow strip weaving traditions are either absent or not as significant (Holmes, 1980). The most important functions of these textiles include cloth for marriage dowries, baby ties, cloth that represented transition into certain age-grade societies, cloth that was used in religious rituals or worn specifically by priests

and priestesses, and cloth associated with title taking (chieftaincy) (Asakitikpi, 2007; Holmes, 1980; Poynor, 1980). Here we will explore some of these textiles, their use, and the symbolism they employ.

Of all of the many variations of striped *kijipa*, it is the *olowududu* that stands out in both prestige and labor. Literally translated as owner or lord of black yarn, *olowududu* in its broadest sense is any variation of cloth where the majority of the warp is composed of blue-black yarns (Holmes, 1980). These yarns are exceptionally fine and have been dyed dozens of times in indigo by expert dyers. After the cloth is woven, it is then beaten with a large wooden mallet until it achieves a glistening sheen (Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980). Cloth falling under this category has many uses, however, the labor involved in its manufacture makes it an important prestige item. In Ekiti, *olowududu* cloths composed of three panels (*iketa*) called *gandaro* are among the most valuable textiles worn by male chiefs (Holmes, 1980). The cloth measuring around 6' x 7' feet is made up mostly of blue-black yarns with white stripes appearing a foot apart from each other along with the web (Holmes, 1980). The depth of its color signifies the cloth's value and importance. Another example of a similar two-paneled (*ikeji*) cloth associated with women's chieftaincy is the *igbalode* and *alagaletu* (Holmes, 1980). *igbalode* directly derives its name from the head of a woman's title society, while *Alagetu* loosely translates as "the rich wear the best cloth" (Holmes, 1980). *Etu* (guineafowl) may reference a delicate white check pattern on a indigo black ground (Holmes, 1980). However, *etu* may also be used interchangeably with *olowududu* as a term for indigo black cloth/yarns (Asikitikpi, 2006)¹². In both cases, this cloth's prestige and value as symbols of rank and wealth are its blackness. It is indigo that determines their color, and quality.

Among some Yoruba groups, the act of weaving certain textiles also comes with specific ritual restrictions (Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980). In this context, weaving becomes a sacred act, one tied to both harnessing or controlling the potency of feminine energies. The most prominent examples come from the weaving traditions of the Owo Yoruba detailed at length by both Robin Poynor and Aretha Oluwakemi Asakitikpi. When women are weaving ritual textiles, they must honor specific *eewo* (taboos) (Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980). Women must not weave while menstruating, and they must remain abstinent during the process of weaving. Women must only eat fresh foods while weaving; food cooked the day before is forbidden (Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980). The cloth is praised in song by women visiting and leaving fresh offerings of kola, sugarcane, antelope meat, smoked fish, alligator pepper, and roasted plantain (Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980). One of the most fascinating of these taboos is that men (including male children) are not allowed in the area where women are weaving (Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980).

Although there has been significant literature on gender taboos in Yoruba culture, few focus on men's restricted access in areas of female provenance. One prime example is the *giriyo* cloth, used during the *Ero* festival, which is woven for men entering the *Ighare* age grade. Though these textiles are woven for men, they can only be worn during the festival itself (Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980). Afterward, no man or male child is allowed to wear or be held in the textile as it is believed that he will perish due to its spiritual potency. After *Ero*, the cloth is returned to the woman who wove it, and she will use it as a wrapper (Asakitikpi, 2006). Like other titled cloths, such as *gandaro* and *igbalode*, *giriyo* makes significant use of dark blue-black yarns beaten to a high sheen. Of particular interest is that even though a man uses this textile, *giriyo* spends most of its existence as a woman's object

(Asakitikpi, 2006; Poynor, 1980) . Women spin its yarn, and female specialists dye and weave the threads into precious cloth. Its power as a ritual object can only be safely yielded by women and powerful men. This is yet another instance of women artisans making use of potent, unseen, and otherworldly forces.

Of similar manufacture are the many textiles associated with marriage rituals throughout the region. One of the most notable examples are the *aso alara* textiles woven by Igbomina Yoruba women in Kwara and Osun state. Although there are numerous variations of these textiles among the rarest and most prestigious are deeply dyed blue-black cloths with subtle white weft inlay patterns. These cloths may also incorporate lace-like openwork known as *eleya* or *alajere*. Associated with wealthy families, such textiles are typically woven by a woman's mother or another female relative (Clarke, 2020). Various other simpler blue and white striped cloths are woven all over Yorubaland as marriage cloth. The *okun* cloth of Ilorin and the *adofi* cloth made by the Bunu of Kabba are notable examples (Aronson, 1997; Holmes, 1980; Renne, 1995). It is important to remember that many significant cloths worn in life are overdyed this same deep blue-black and are used as burial shrouds (Asakitikpi, 2006; Holmes, 1980).

It is crucial to understand that the darkest shades of indigo are understood by the Yoruba and many other African cultures as a shade of black. Elisha P. Renne's exploration of cloth production by the Bunu Yoruba in Kogi state covers the complex symbolism of indigo blackness representing death, wealth, prestige. The indigo cloth carried during Bunu marriage rituals becomes symbols of women traveling between the world of spirits and the living world. Indigo again becomes symbolic of extradimensional feminine powers

(Aronson 1997; Renne, 1995)¹³. As Renne explains, black cloth is symbolic of lives well lived, and “human productivity and fertility”, concepts that are reinforced by their near-universal use in marriage rituals across Yorubaland (Aronson, 1997; Renne, 1995). This explains the importance of these textiles in the adoption of titles and the transition into elderhood. As black threads represent the long and repetitive dyeing process, they become a metaphor for accumulating experience, fertility, wealth, and prestige, leading to the acquisition of titles. With the final transition into the spirit world, one is shrouded in cloth dyed indigo black, cloth that has experienced the living world and all of its pains and pleasures (Aronson, 1997; Renne, 1995)¹⁴. This exquisite blackness can only be achieved through the labor and expertise of the *alaro*, the expert cloth dyers. The spiritual potency of divine and shining blackness is seen in cultures throughout West Africa (Boone, 1986). The spiritual weight of black as a color is deeply rooted in other elements of Yoruba philosophy. The color black represents an intermediary energy between the cool/coldness of white and red heat (Drewel and Mason, 1998). Black is deep, enigmatic, and endless. The glistening blackness of beaten indigo cloth is regarded as beauty embodied, and is mirrored in admiration for blemishless dark skin and the oiled palm nut shells used in Ifa divination. At times, the indigo pot is used as a metaphor for the endless knowledge imparted by the divination system of Ifa (Drewel, 90). Blackness represents esoteric and unseen forces. It glosses the metaphysical and hidden powers possessed by the *Iyami/Eleye*. This is the same power that women possess and manifest both consciously and subconsciously. The art of dyeing thus becomes a manifestation of this sacred knowledge, and the products of these artisans then become symbolic of feminine mysteries. A dark indigo dyed Bunu women's marriage cloth embodies the womanly command over the mysteries of

procreation and fertility. This connection is reverberated elsewhere in Yorubaland, with the connections between the dyeing arts of the goddesses *Iya Mapo*, *Osun*, and *Yemoja*, who also govern fertility, wealth, and childbirth. Indigo once again becomes symbolic of each of these facets of life as well as a feminine agency over them.

***Adire*: Expansion and Evolution of Indigo Textiles in the 20th Century**

As I have demonstrated, indigo dyed textiles have served as a cornerstone of Nigerian women's cottage industries for centuries. Although *alaro* would also dye large amounts of cotton yarns in the past, for both male and female weavers, the most famed products of the Yoruba dyeing industry were and in many ways continue to be the beautiful resist-dyed *adire* textiles (Byfield, 1997; Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). As in other places in West Africa, the earliest *adire* cloth consisted of tie (*adire oniko*) and stitch (*adire alabere*) resist patterns executed on handwoven, handspun cotton cloth (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). Although examples of *adire* on "*kijipa*" are exceedingly rare, oral traditions state that this ancient form of *adire* was probably among the many textiles produced by female artisans early in Yoruba history (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013).

During the onset of the colonial era in the late 19th century, the British sought to control the means of production for agricultural and manufactured goods (Byfield, 1997). Cotton was produced primarily for export, and the British began to import copious amounts of inexpensive cotton shirting and machine-spun yarn for sale to the local populace (Byfield, 1997). The once-bustling trade in handspun, handwoven indigo fabrics transitioned to new products that re-interpreted ancient traditions while incorporating new materials (Byfield, 1997). As a testament to Yoruba women's commercial and creative

ingenuity, *alaro* began using the now plentiful imported shirting to increase the production of both old and new forms of *adire* (Byfield, 1997) (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). The smooth surface of industrially made cloth allowed *Aladire* (*adire* makers) to create *Adire Eleko*, a new and elaborate form of *adire* using cassava starch as the resist medium. Delicate and intricate patterns are painted with *lafun* (cassava starch) using chicken feathers, knives, and pieces of broom straw, creating beautiful textiles coded with layered and powerful proverbial messages (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). Unlike fine handwoven indigo cloth, which was often either treated as heirlooms or precious items that their owners could use as burial shrouds, *adire* was meant for everyday use (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). Demand for this fabric was high and as was the case centuries earlier, African merchants were trading these textiles all along the West African coast, exploiting eager markets from Senegal to Angola (Byfield, 1997). *Alaro* were able to purchase cloth on credit, with payments due after six month periods. The great demand for the cloth in foreign and domestic markets allowed for incredible profit margins for women involved in the industry. This quickly became the primary industries in Yoruba towns, such as Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Osogbo (Byfield, 1997). It is important to reiterate that although new products created changes in women's textile industries, indigo's spiritual and social importance remained at the art form's core (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). The finest cloth was produced by master dyers who made the finest and most permanent dyes. During the heyday of the *adire* trade, the craft was still associated with postmenopausal women (Byfield, 1997), who are themselves closely tied to the *iyami /eleye*, the powerful mothers capable of both offering blessings and creating calamity (Elebuibon, 2008). The new symbolism developed with the introduction of *adire eleko* echoed Yoruba religious ideology,

proverbs, and other forms of verbal artistry tied to Yoruba philosophy (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). *Adire*'s most prominent centers of production are again closely associated with the orders of powerful female deities who are themselves dyers associated with fertility, wealth, and divine coolness.

When analyzing the semiotics of Yoruba *adire*, we can see common symbolism apparent in other Yoruba art forms as well. Of particular interest is the use of symbols that appear in women's weaving traditions. Snakes, lizards, birds, and frogs are common, as are combs, mirrors, umbrellas, and other utilitarian objects (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). Like in the famed *Aso Olona* cloths woven by the Ijebu Yoruba and the *Aso Alara* wedding cloths woven by the Igbomina, the symbols echo proverbs, folklore, and iconography tied to Yoruba philosophy and religion (Aronson, 1996; Clarke, 2020; Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013; Lipp, 1995). Popular patterns include representations of *Olokun*, the gender-fluid *orisa* of the sea (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). This cloth includes symbols of mirrors, river leaves, snakes, and birds (Olugbemisola and Kalilu, 2013). Many of these are symbols associated with water and all associated with beauty and femininity (Aronson, 1996). Another popular pattern is *ori mi pe* (my head is correct or my head is cool), a testament to the importance of the head as the seat of one's destiny and a divine entity in its own right (Thompson, 84). To possess a good (cool) head is to be aligned with one's destiny. Although *adire* was not primarily a ritual or prestige textile, these textiles' semiotics centered women's narratives and social life. Just as *adire* became a vital market commodity controlled by women, it also became a window into a visual language in which only Yoruba women have full fluency.

By the end of the 1940s, the global economic depression began to negatively affect *adire* industries (Byfield, 1997). Often, British intervention manipulated indigenous rulers and colonial tax laws, which greatly affected indigo dyers (Byfield, 1997). The British colonial government also deliberately disempowered women. The Yoruba worldview that afforded women like the *alaro* commercial, political, and spiritual power was ideologically opposed to the British patriarchy. Women market vendors regularly ran into conflict with the colonial government and their puppets in traditional governments. The Abeokuta women's revolt and the Aba women's war are two prominent examples of this (Onor, 2017). The power women held as priestesses in important religious institutions and ritual societies was significantly reduced with the Yoruba people's conversion to Christianity and Islam (Onor, 2017). New wage-based economic systems made women more dependent on their husbands, creating new gender imbalances and reinforcing pre-existing ones (Byfield, 1997; Onor, 2017). The decline of indigo dyeing industries in the mid 20th century did not wholly stifle the work of *aladire*. There was a resurgence of traditional *adire* making in the 1960s and 1970s spurred by the new sacred art movement in Osogbo and the emergence of younger multimedia artists reinterpreting traditional art forms (Lipp, 1995). The use of synthetic dyes to make wax-resist Batik cloths using traditional *adire eleko* patterns can be seen as an extension and evolution of a visual language deeply indebted to earlier Yoruba textile traditions and the women who invented them.

The art of indigo dyeing comprises ancient, sacred knowledge. The process of producing a successful dye pot has been passed down through countless generations. The skill and patience required for this work are among the feminine mysteries held by the *alaro* since time immemorial. As illustrated in the verse from *Ejiogbe* cited earlier in this

paper, indigo dyeing is tied to powerful spiritual forces. These energies are an intimate part of women's worlds. The birds, who are themselves metaphorical manifestations of the primordial, divine mothers, were the first dyers. *Orisa Iya Mapo*, who taught dyeing to womankind, along with *Yemoja* and *Osun*, whose powers associate them with both the dye pot and the womb, are divine manifestations of womanly dominion over life itself. These goddesses' command fertility as well as spiritual and physical wealth. Indigo, and the women working with indigo, became major contributors to pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial economies of West Africa. The textiles made by these women were important not only as valuable and highly coveted trade items but also as crucial markers of status and title. The wealth associated with indigo and its strong association with female enterprise only reaffirm the indigo dyer as a manifestation of feminine agency. It is indigo cloth that has been a central part of the marketplace for centuries, which is both a commercial and spiritual center of the Yoruba world. These are all the provinces of powerful women. The *orisa* are dyers, the *eleye/iyami* are dyers, and indigo cloth is itself charged with their feminine power, beauty, and prestige.

Endnotes

1. Recorded at the Nike Center For Art and Culture 20 years before my stay there.
2. This method was taught to me by Ms. Agnes Umeche; I was told it helps start the fermentation process.
3. I experienced this personally while learning indigo dyeing in Ogidi-Ijumu; when preparing the indigo vat during the dry season in January, the process took only four days. However, during the rainy season in June, the vat took seven days to ferment.
4. While preparing indigo during the rainy season, the vat almost failed. Chief Nike advised me to add forty more *elu* balls soaked in boiling water to the vat. After doing so, it became usable in two days.
5. Elebuibon also states that the *iyami* will often work through the *orisa* to do their bidding (Elebuibon, 2008)
6. Orunmila is the *orisa* who taught the *Ifa* oracle to humankind.
7. Interview with Ifatumbi Ifaleke on the founding of Osogbo [Personal interview]. (2016, March).
8. Yemoja is considered the mother of both the Gelede and Efe masquerades (Tunkara, 2005)
9. Chief Nike confirms this. She and all her age mates were expected to learn spinning at an early age. As of 2016, I met many elderly women who know how to spin in Ogidi Ijumu, but very few regularly spun cotton for sale at the market.
10. In reference to conversations with Chief Nike Okundaye in Osogbo in 2016.
11. Quote attributed to Nyendael.
12. Chief Nike Okundaye referred to all indigo black cloth as *etu* in conversations and interviews about Yoruba textiles. Ms. Agnes Umeche, an indigo dyer and weaver from Okene, referred to dark indigo cloth as *etu*, however it should be noted that she is herself *Ebira* and not a native Yoruba speaker.
13. Citations are from Aronson's review.
14. Sylvia Ardyn Boone's exploration of feminine beauty among the Mende exemplifies ideas surrounding shining blackness, women's beauty and power. It should be noted that the Mende women are also master indigo dyers and the Sande women's society, and its symbols heavily reference water and water spirits.

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