

Dress the Way You Want to be Addressed (Posted on Facebook on 27, 2023)

When I asked for suggestions on what to wear to the Dan David Prize award ceremony on Facebook a few weeks ago, many people thought I was kidding them. They thought it shouldn't be a difficult decision.

My clothing options are as diverse as Yoruba dress culture. Initially, I thought of wearing agbada made of damask. But I realized it would be unnecessarily extravagant. It's a noisy textile that's undesirable for group pictures. Another option is velvet, which will be discomforting in the relatively hot Israeli weather. Atiku and senator are clearly off the list. I don't want to look like an Abuja money bag or a pimp-zaddy. The Wonyonsi lace scandal of the 1970s and 1980s that defined elite Yoruba culture is one reason I have mixed feelings about lace.

If I wear ankara, I'll most likely look like an Ibadan Micra driver or a meat butcher. Not that looking like one is bad—in my Ibadan state-of-nature, I actually look unapologetically like one. I just don't want the haters of Ibadan to have another reason to unkindly comment that I'm an exception to an old stereotype that has gone with the winds.

The fact that these textiles are imported disqualified them for a scholar of Africa who wants his dress to embody his Africanity. So, I thought more seriously about adire and batik, two locally made textiles. I wanted a textile that speaks effortlessly to Yoruba royal modesty.

Unfortunately, I couldn't think of how, even the best adire and batik, could help me achieve it, flawlessly. I may be wrong. So, I wore four different batiks and adire, specially made for me by talented artist [Ifeoluwa D. Ojo](#), during other events of the four-day award ceremony.

Aso ofi stood out clearly as the best textile for performing the art of being Yoruba at the award ceremony. I commissioned my friend Dr. Taofeeq Adebayo, who is a native of Iseyin, the Yoruba town known for the best aso ofi in 21st-century Nigeria. His task was simple—get me aso ofi, with all the elements of artistry, ingenuity, and rigor—some of the core principles of a historian's craft.

Unfortunately, fashion neoliberalism is killing the ancient art of aso ofi hand-weaving. The very few old master weavers who could make sophisticated ones have been pushed out of the market by younger folks who make far more expensive, bogusly attractive, and aesthetically deficient weaves. Time is also of the essence. Instead of commissioning a new weave, from an old master-weaver, the search party hunted for an already woven that met all my imaginations. If fingers are not equal, all aso ofi are not made the same. Beyond the difference between old and new weavers and weaves, class and identity shape the gradation of aso ofi. I asked for saanyan or alaari, the two highest-ranked aso ofi in indigenous Yoruba clothing history. Saanyan Baba Aso. Alaari Baba Ewu. We found a very good saanyan, but I later declined because it looks exactly like the one Wole Soyinka wore to the 1986 Nobel Prize ceremony. I don't want to impersonate the faultless finesse of the sage.

Finally, I settled for alaari, originally made in the late 1980s, but remained unsold until I paid for it in April. Thick, heavy, and highly textured, the running saanyan strip, about 1 percent of the entire textile, allows me to blend the best in the two Yoruba kings of textiles that have retained their intrinsic values through centuries of history and social change. The dress is history. The wearer is a historian. A historical dress to a history award ceremony. How cool is that? Supercool—I think!

Finding the right textile didn't end the search for the appropriate sartorial representation at the Dan David Prize ceremony. What kind of robe should I make? The clear options are esiki, agbada, and dandogo. I asked myself, if I wear dandogo to Dan David Prize award ceremony, what would I wear when I finally launch my professional Fuji career after I retire from academia or when the Olubadan formally recognizes my chieftaincy title of the "Oka-O-So-Fo of Ibadanland?"

Finally, I settled for esiki, a royally modest style. Instead of making the common pointed trousers, I went for kembe, which my 19th-century elite warrior ancestors wore to the war front. During my last visit to Nigeria in April, I bought a new set of iyun, the king of beads. Wearing a double bead that extends beyond the abdomen on my neck and another on my leg ankle and dressing my cap to the right is not a mere fashion—the symbolism, semiotics, and poetics are clear to people who know why "Ade," "Oye," and "Ola" are common Yoruba names, beyond entries in census registers.

Yours Sincerely in History,  
Ìṣòlá Ojúràbẹ̀màsàá