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Ife de Negri first went to Nigeria in 1959 and stayed for about ten years, living first in what was then Nigeria's Western Region. She later moved to Lagos where, building on her experience as a lecturer at Central St Martin's School of Design in London, she founded the Fashion department at Yaba College of Technology. De Negri was a prolific painter, often improvising materials to paint with and on, and in the mid 1960s was the first woman to have a solo show at the Commonwealth Institute in London. She also exhibited her work annually in Lagos. De Negri's research on Nigerian costume, still regarded as an important resource on the subject, was published extensively in Nigeria and abroad.

*Yoruba Women's Costume*  
By Ife de Negri

Women's costume is an indication of the attitude of the men at the time such garments are in fashion. Fashion is an indication of the attitude and thinking, socially and economically, of the people.

The Nigerian man's attitude to women has been, and in many parts still is, one of domination. Traditionally for a polygamous man to have his wife or wives well-dressed, was an exhibition of his wealth and achievement, particularly when his wives were not engaged in any commercially productive labour. He would of course not want these women to be more ostentatiously dressed than himself, and possible this is one of the reasons why Yoruba women's costume has always been much simpler than that of the man. Until recently colour and fabric have been more restrained, though now with the growing emancipation of women in Nigeria, and the import into the country of a greater variety of European and Japanese textiles, cheap prices and more elaboration and exaggeration of the basic style is creeping in.

For formal occasions the fabrics are now extremely rich: brocades, velvets and lace are worn, as well as the traditional hand-woven cloth. These hand-loomed cloths *aso-oke* are costly but still retain their charm. Variations of indigo blue are now no longer the only colours seen on Yoruba women. Although they remain dominant, every possible hue is worn and indeed fashion changes are made with the use of colour. When a fabric is new either in weave or in colour, then it is the fashionable one to have. Once it becomes popularised and within the reach of the masses, it is *demi-demi* it loses its importance and is replaced by yet another. So it is with the head-tie, *gele*. This has become overgrown.

There are innumerable ways in which it may be tied. Women's societies, *mesu*, decide on a particular style for their own society and this is known only to its members! To say 'tying the head-tie' is hardly correct, for the cloth is rarely knotted. Rather it is lightly and deftly thrown into position and twisted into the desired shape. To spend too much effort arranging the folds or ends would be disastrous to the light, soufflé effect. This takes considerable skill and practice.

It was but a short time ago that the Yoruba woman had very little independence, except within a very few families. They were brought-up with an attitude of submission and retiring modesty toward their men folk; to be seen on occasion, and admired, but to take no active part in the affairs of her husband; to bear him children and to look decorative. This attitude is shewn (*we*) in the dress of these women. For women of the upper classes and wives of rich men, it is a costume suited to a life of inactivity and conspicuous leisure: modest high-necked blouse, long-sleeved; binding skirts impeding the movement and concealing legs to the ankle; covered hair with outsize turban, precariously poised. The dress of the maternal type of female dominated by the male! An indication of the desire for children and the acceptance of family life seems to be suggested by the emphasis given to the hips and stomach of the women's skirts, an effect created by the bulky folds and draperies which draw attention to this area of the body.

A woman's future depends to an extent upon her powers of sexual attraction. The taste of the Yoruba man has been for rather plump women. Yorubas have never made use of the 'fattening-house,' but the style of dress worn by the women aims at increasing the apparent size and stature of the wearer: enormous sleeves and fullness of bodice, often in a semi-transparent fabric that conceals, reveals and suggests; voluminous folds in the skirt/cloth, constantly needing adjustment to avoid complete loss; the suggestion of ever-present pregnancy, yet pregnancy concealed by draperies; closely outlined hips but covered legs; the decorative turban which allows no hair to show. All these points give sex-appeal to a costume that is womanly but not really feminine. In fact a certain 'ageing' effect is given even to young girls when the complete Yoruba costume is put on. This might be because of the dignified matronly air conveyed by the turban and *buba* especially when the cloth is of rather subdued colour and pattern.

Now that Yoruba women are taking their place in industry and the professions, they often find it more convenient to wear simple European style dress for office hours and keep their more elaborate national costume for parties and formal occasions. Some compromise by leaving-off the head-tie and substituting for the *buba*, a low-necked sleeveless cotton blouse.

Industrialization will surely play a large part in the future of national costume. With the eventual spread of industrialization in Nigeria women will travel distances to work and more will have jobs. Urban life will spread farther in to the bush. More women will learn to sew and cheaper mass-produced clothes will come within reach of those now too poor to buy them. Then it will no doubt be for ceremonial and formal occasions that these women will view with each other for the limelight in the gorgeousness of their national costume.

The *buba* was not always worn, being introduced by the missionary ladies at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, no doubt for reasons of modesty. Today, country-woman may still be seen wearing only the skirt-cloth, pulled up high over the breasts and tied with the usual scarf-like narrow cloth. Sometimes the *gele*, head-tie, is worn by them, but often the head is uncovered when working or sitting around in their compound. It is considered bad-form for a Yoruba woman to walk on the street without her head covered, as it is to wear the *buba* hanging loose from the skirt cloth. In the heat of the day, village women may sometimes be seen with their arms slipped from the sleeves of the *buba* and with it left hanging freely around the neck and over the breasts.

Traders and country-girls usually wear their cloth pulled-up short, for work or informal times. Often their knees are exposed, as well as a glimpse of a brightly coloured cotton petticoat with plenty of machine embroidery on it. The shortness allows for hurrying from place to place, for chopping wood, or sitting astride a great basket of maize or kola.

It is difficult for these women to keep clean and smart in small villages where water is scarce, where no one owns an iron, and the struggle for existence, even, is great. Such difficulties are no deterrent, and it will always be a bright, fresh look procession of women stepping quickly down the lane on local market day!

The privilege of covering the head with a cloth when outdoors was extended to all married women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before this time only brides were allowed a covering for the head. Dr. O. Johnson writing in the early twenties tells us that *gele*, or head-tie, was a band about 6-10 inches wide and about five feet long wound twice around the head and tucked in on one side. Nowadays it may be as long as one wishes, and as wide. Usually it is about two yards or so in length and about one yard in width. No long the simple tucking-in on the side! Styles are innumerable.

At one time the hands, feet and nails were coloured. Hands and feet were immersed in pots of camwood dye up to the wrists and ankles. This gave them a red hue like that of women in Egypt and North Africa who use henna. Chewing kola made the teeth brownish. (To keep them white a chewing stick made of a special wood is used every morning like a tooth brush.) A concoction said to be made from the skin of chameleon bouled with certain leaves was in use to dye the finger-nails. *Baye*, a fruit of *Randia Cordata*, coloured the lower eyelid and a *stibium* of *Tiro*, applied with a stick along the edge of the lid. Lips were often dyed and tribal marks were cut into the face.

The curious custom of *Aso-Ebi* that of a group of women donning the same cloth designated by the hostess for a special party is less popular nowadays than it was. This might be because the idea has begun to pall or because if the cloth should be an expensive one, to attend the function wearing it (especially if there are several females in the family) would involve a costly outlay for the husband or father. Another reason for its decline in popularity apart from its being condemned by some for its unnecessary extravagance, is that some hostesses have used it as a money-making idea! They have bought the cloth in bulk for a price and sold it to the would-be guests at a great deal more. Since in order to attend the party the guests must wear the chosen cloth they had no option but to pay the price asked for by the host.

Another custom which has already died out in urban districts is that of the traditional mode of dress for a bride. Mass weddings take place in some country villages before the rains come and farming starts in earnest. For this the bride has her hair dressed in a very old traditional style. The hair is left in the 'cocks' comb' style for about six months during which time it is covered with the veil, *iborun*. This veil is used during this time to cover the face, so that no one visiting the house shall look upon the face of the new bride! It is customary for these brides to remain in the house for three months.

Most women wear necklaces of coral (valuable family heirlooms), imitation coral, *segi* and *okun*, all in great profusion as money allows. Many bracelets are worn and these may be of beads or metals. In the days before foreign imports of silver etc., the traditional bracelet worn by both men and women was of three twisted circles: iron, brass and lead. The man wore his high up on the upper arm, the woman at the wrist. Modern earrings, lockets, and rings are often based on styles used by European women in Victorian times.

The most sought after cloth to be worn for the complete outfit of the bride hand-woven cloth *Sanyan*, beige, with fine white threads woven into it, made from the cocoons of insects. If she were rich enough the bride would choose *Etu*, to change into. This is a natural fibre cloth of black speckled with white, or she may prefer *Alari*, crimson with stripes of green, black, white. Or she may prefer *Alari*, crimson with stripes of green, black, white. The most expensive of all the *Tapala*, a very precious all-crimson cloth the edges of which have a trimming of perforations.

Even in the smallest village Yoruba women will hire complete costume jewelry as well for the sum of about 12/6d per day, to be worn for some important occasion. ....a birth, a death, a wedding. They may own but one cloth. On the birth of a new

child the father will strive to buy another as a mark of appreciation for the gift of the new baby. This will most surely be an indigo-dyed cotton cloth.

Costume for the Yoruba woman is today extremely elaborate. First there is her underwear composed of *Tobi* or *Yeri*, once the sole garment, made up from a straight strip of cloth, sometimes pleated, reaching to the knees or thereabouts, sewn to a band which is tied around the waist: the petticoat of coloured cotton with tucks and other embroidery; and the *Lagidigba*, waist beads (not so commonly worn now except by children). The outer garment is called the *Irobirin*, a large wrapper of about 6 yards wrapped on the body to cover the breasts and reach to the calf or below. For brides and richer women two may be used and then the ankles are covered, and the cloth may even touch the ground. A smaller cloth of about three yards called the *Iborun* is used by married women. This is usually folded and laid carefully over the left shoulder.

The short blouse of tunic style with long or short sleeves is called the *buba*. It is cut from straight pieces of fabric folded into square or rectangle shapes, without a shoulder seam and having a simple boat-shaped neck, or rounded neck-line cut fairly high.

These days all the clothes and the *buba* may be made from any fabric but at one time Yoruba women's cloths were all made from home spun cloth woven in standard breadths of 10 to 5" wide. Clothes which were about 1 yard wide were imported first from *Oro* or *Ila*, in Ighomina Province. They were known as *Akoko* cloths being chiefly the production of *Akoko* women. These women were among the first to make the wide clothes but later the idea spread and it became customary for women to make 'broad-cloths' or women's cloths, and men the narrower ones. Formerly only men were engaged in weaving among the Yoruba, in the same way tailoring was done only by them.

Originally, the small garment *Tobi*, or *Yeri*, was the sole garment worn by women, given at puberty and worn with the waist-beads *Lagidigba*. Before puberty only the beads would have been worn. In some very remote country districts women may occasionally be seen working in the farms wearing only *Tobi*. Some references are made by early travelers to the use of bark cloth. Unfortunately nothing can remain of early garments in a climate like that of Nigeria and there are but chance notes made by early traders about the clothes of these people before the present elaborate styles developed.