

Intersecting Identities: Interrogating Women in Cultural Dress Forms in Contemporary Nigerian Paintings

Sule Ameh James,
Department of Visual Arts,
University of Pretoria,
South Africa.
sulejames94@gmail.com
Twitter: @JamessuleSule

Abstract

This paper interrogates the identities in the representations of women adorned in African cultural dress forms in contemporary Nigerian paintings. While many studies have explored the subject of African dress forms from other viewpoints, not many are known to investigate the topic from the perspective of contemporary Nigerian paintings. It is for this reason I purposively selected five paintings from different artists in which they represented women adorned in African dress forms to communicate the expressions of personal, social, religious, and cultural identities within different contexts. Although the contemporary paintings give clues to the expressions of identities in dress, the ideas and meanings conveyed were also interrogated in each work. In engaging the paintings in close case study interrogations, the paper combines formal analysis and cultural history methodologies. Formal analysis is adopted for the analysis of the formal elements in each painting, whereas cultural history is used to contextualise each painting within the culture and history that is recalled to give the representation its proper identity. Besides, the close case study analysis reveals that the artists drew inspiration from the personal aesthetics of women adorned in African dress forms in different Nigerian cultures. Through the representations, three notable African cultural identities are manifested, which include Yoruba, Gwari, or Gbagyi and Hausa cultures, aside from other identities interrogated in each painting.

Keywords: Identity, Women, African Dress Form, Nigerian Paintings

Introduction

What is contemporary about Nigerian paintings? While the contemporary refers to the now of the paintings, contemporary Nigerian artists distinguish themselves with some unique characteristics.¹ This is because of their individualistic manners, art training, and how they draw inspiration from Africa, her people, and experiences in paintings. Thus, contemporary Nigerian paintings show adaptation of synthesized formal language fused with African sensibilities in highly creative manners based on Western standards (Owerka, 1985). In doing this, the artists who are scattered across Nigeria contribute works not merely with characteristics of their particular societies but in different trends, philosophies, styles, and media to the rich history of contemporary paintings. Such paintings are often responses to the social present and signal attempts by the artists to interpret African experiences through their own eyes as part of those experiences. One of these experiences is the socio-cultural context of women's adornment in African cultural dress forms. Through these, they construct aesthetic languages that communicate ideas on intersecting identities. However, the understanding and interpretations of the identities their works convey depend on the backgrounds of the viewers.

Although decades have passed with new researches illuminating contemporary Nigerian art, the scholarship of art history relies on the fundamental facts of the art schools for understanding the trends of artistic practices in Nigeria. The rich traditions and history dates to the 1950s with the establishment of the first tertiary Art Department of the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology (NCAST), in Ibadan in 1953 and moved to Zaria in 1955. It was later upgraded to a university, known as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1962. This school is popularly known as the Zaria School. In this school, a notable development gave rise to the formation of the Zaria Art Society in 1958; it was the resistance of the pioneering students to colonial hegemony. To this end, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Yusuf Grillo, Simeon Olaosebikan, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Osiloka Osadebe, Okechukwu Odita, Felix Ekeada, Ogbonnaya Nwagbara, and Ikpowosa Omogie adopted what Okeke called Natural Synthesis (Filani, 1998; James, 2021). Natural Synthesis was characterised by the creation of realistic artworks that explored indigenous forms or a mixture of traditions and modernism. It is, for this reason, the contemporary Nigerian artists who trained at different times in Zaria School draw inspiration from aspects of rich Nigerian cultural heritage and her people. To this end, their paintings show distinguishing characteristics that include mostly human figures, elongation of forms, and elegant northern Nigerian architecture. As Filani points out, their works are 'with thematic relevance to the socio-cultural conditions' (1998, p. 40) of different cultures in Nigeria.

As this introductory part presents a historical background of tertiary art education in Nigeria, it is important to state that the products of the Zaria School were instrumental to the formation of art departments in other institutions in Nigeria. This is remarkable in the Yaba School which was the second institution established by the Nigerian government. It started as Technical Institute in 1947 and was renamed Yaba College of Technology (Yabatech), Yaba, Lagos, in 1963. Two artists from the Zaria School who contributed immensely to the development of this School are Yusuf Grillo and Kolade Oshinowo. Their contributions are evident in the good products from the School among who are Biodun Olaku, Tolu Filani, Lara Ige, Edosa Oguigo, and Felix Osieme (Filani, 1998). The artworks of artists trained in this School are known for genre themes with photographic realism, as they are done in narrative and descriptive style. Next in development is the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, where the department of arts

started as Enwonwu College of Art in 1961. Uche Okeke, along with Chuka Amefuna, Chika Aniakor, and El Anatsui among others, trained artists in the search for Igbo identity in forms and radical socio-political and cultural subject matter (Filani, 1998). As a result, they explored *Uli* body painting and decoration as a motif in the composition of images and imagery in both painting and sculpture. However, their style focuses on calligraphic *Uli* art and linearity of drawing and modeling that result in abstraction as a language of pictorial and sculptural expressions, which reflected the philosophy of African art.

This School's style is evident in the works of early products like Obiora Udechukwu, Paul Igboanugo, Chris Echeta, Tayo Adenaike among others (Filani, 1998). The history continues with the establishment of Ife School in response to the need for an art department in a university in Southwestern Nigeria. To this end, in the 1970s, from the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, rose the Department of Fine Arts. The department adopted 'a curriculum that was sensitive to culture dynamics without being atavistic' (Filani, 2018, p. 17). Thus, artists and historians such as Babatunde Lawal, J.R.O. Ojo, Abiodun Rowland, Agbo Folarin, and Igo Ibigbami among others, engaged in a diversity of creative exploration of local materials, decorative motifs, symbols, and images in indigenous and traditional Yoruba context (Filani, 1998). However, the department majored in theoretical content in art and humanities, through which students were trained to view art with academic seriousness. In this regard, in the 1980s, there emerged a noticeable trend of intellectual research into Yoruba art forms, philosophies, and world view, which feature prominently in the forms and contents of their artistic activities. Thus, their artistic practices reflect Nigerian identity in that it is deeply rooted in Yoruba culture.

Furthermore, next in this historical narrative is the Auchi School, made up of art graduates from the Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State established in 1973. A product of Zaria School who contributed to the development of the artistic style of this school is Ademola Adejumo. He pioneered a style characterised with lavishing of vibrant and sweet colours to express the mood of their subjects. Although their rich artistic practices draw inspiration from Nigerian cultures and her people, the school is noted for expressionistic naturalism prominent among exponents such as Ben Osaghae, Edwin Debebs, Sam Ovrati, Tony Okujeni, Alex Nwokolo, Olu Ajayi, and Olu Amoda metal sculptor among others². Aside from the formal art schools, certain art movements also contributed to the development and understanding of contemporary art in Nigeria.

Art Movements in Nigeria

The concept "art movement" refers to some noticeable stylistic and thematic trends with specific emphasis on forms, growing from conscious attempts by groups to establish a new visual culture in the arts. Some of the prominent art movements are *Uli*, *Ona*, and *Nsibidi*.

Uli movement is based in Nsukka. It was pioneered by Uche Okeke, who started adapting *Uli* - Igbo body painting, essentially a cosmetic art, and sometimes with extended reference to traditional wall painting that shares the same linearity of design with body adornment. In the adoption of this motif, the Okeke and group of artists searched for Nigerian identity without necessarily copying directly from the ancient *Uli* tradition as a new stylistic expression. Despite

their search for Nigerian identity in this art movement, it might be argued that it is not a homogeneous Nigerian identity but an Igbo cultural identity. To this end, the stylistic expression is characterised with the use of linear and spiral motifs and symbols in forms and themes with socio-cultural contents. Some of the notable artists are Obiora Udechukwu, El-Anatsui, and Chika Okeke among several others (Filani, 1998). The next is the *Ona* art movement, which was identified with artists of Ife School located in the Western part of Nigeria, where they engage in exploring the indigenous forms and traditions of their immediate environment.

In the late 1980s, five artists who all graduated from Ife school began the *Ona* movement by exploring decorative motifs, ornaments, patterns, and designs peculiar to the rich artistic culture of Southwestern Nigeria. These artists are Kunle Filani, Moyo Okediji, Tola Wewe, Bolaji Campbell, and Tunde Nasiru (Filani, 1998). But over the years, more contemporary artists have been influenced by the art style. Their artistic expressions are rich in visual grammar characterised with the melody of tones, forms, and structure, which also enriches the aesthetic sensibilities of the viewers. To this end, the group focuses on reconciling the dynamic interplay between artistic cognition and skill within the context of culture. Besides the *Ona* movement, Filani (2018) suggests that *nsibidi* was another art movement or style that emerged from Ife art school conduct of research into indigenous, traditional, and contemporary art. However, in a related view Carlson (2018) points out that Victor Ekpuk who graduated from Ife School was influenced by Obiora Udechukwu's linear quality of *nsibidi*. Although Victor Ekpuk adopted a unique style of incorporating *nsibidi* in his artworks, the practice of incorporating *nsibidi* along with *Uli* in composition was first evident among artists of the Nsukka School. *Nsibidi* is a highly non-phonetic writing format with ideographic and pictographic symbols. The graphic symbols consist of both the sacred script used by the Ekpe Leopard Secret Society and the more decorative version that is open and commonly used by the public. In this regard, *nsibidi* symbols consist of a written graphic communication system among the Ekoi, Efik, and Igbo people. This argument demonstrates how the *nsibidi* indigenous symbol has influenced contemporary Nigerian artists in their visual culture.

Ethnic Divides in Nigeria

Nigeria is a nation endowed with human and natural resources but it is intricately divided along the lines of ethnic, religious, and regional divisions. The nation is made up of over 300 ethnic groups spread across six geopolitical regions, with three major ethnic groups namely Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo. These three major ethnic groups are embraced as the dominant languages in the country. For instance, Hausa is the major language in the northwest, northeast, and northcentral, whereas Yoruba is the dominant language in the southwest and Igbo in the southeast, despite other diverse cultural groups within these regions. Although Hausa is the dominant language of communication in the northern sub-region, several ethnic groups within that region do not understand or speak Hausa. Similarly, while Yoruba is the major language of communication in the southwest, the region is made up of people of diverse cultural groups as well. The same goes for the southeast, where Igbo is the predominant language of communication, but with several other cultural groups coexisting there also. But the south-south region is dominated by the Ijaws among other diverse ethnic identities.

Despite the different ethnic groups in Nigeria, there are interactions among individuals across the ethnic divides. This is because ethnicity as a social phenomenon often manifests in interactions among individuals of different ethnic groups within a political system where language and culture are the most prominent attributes. These attributes often create enabling environment for meaningful interactions among individuals through interpersonal relationships, socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political, and religious activities. Rather than experience progressive interactions through appreciations of the rich cultural heritage of the different ethnic groups, the languages and cultures are now the bases along which Nigerians are divided and in conflicts with one another. Such conflicts manifest where Muslims are pitted against Christians, Northerners against the Southerners, in particular Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo against each other, and so on. To this end, instead of Nigerians defending their national identities within their cultural diversities, they define themselves in terms of ethnic affinities. On the other hand, while it might be concluded that ethnic identities are the more prominent means of identification in Nigeria, religion is rather a major source of identity and conflict than ethnicity. This conflict does not emanate from Christianity and traditional religion, but most often from Islam to Christianity.

This development creates a different narrative when attempting to understand the ethnic divides in Nigeria. Although Nigeria is divided not merely among the ethnic groups but north and south, the division is also evident in the north where the Hausa/Fulani Muslims are intolerant of other ethnic groups that are Christians. In this regard, the Hausa Muslims who have the political advantage often marginalise Hausa Christians and other ethnic minorities that are of the Christian faith. But the narrative is different in the southern part where Christians and Muslims coexist peacefully despite differences in religious identities. Notwithstanding these differences that often blur the beauties that exist among the diverse ethnic groups, it can be argued that the cultural diversities in Nigeria present a glimpse into rich cultural heritage. These are evident not merely in the daily manifestations of the languages spoken but cultural elements adopted in daily outfits and during special socio-cultural or socio-political events.

Women Cultural Dress Forms in Nigeria

Apart from the influence of the art schools and movements on contemporary artists, many contemporary Nigerian artists have continued to research different themes and concepts within the context of the culture in the making of contemporary art. One of such themes is the dressing of the body among women in Nigerian cultures. In contemporary Nigerian societies, the adorning or covering of the body is 'manifested in many ways individuals clothe themselves with wrappers, tunics, headgears, footgear, and other coverings' (Eicher, 1972, p. 517). Although women dress to cover nakedness, their dressings are also used to beautify their bodies, show group cultural heritage, and are also recognized as markers of life stages in the society (Olajide et al., 2013; Gott and Lougham, 2010). Thus, women's dressings can be analysed as a type of body language that speaks to particular orientations and identities. This suggests as Wiley points out that they 'can, therefore, be interpreted in varying ways by both wearers and viewers' (2013, p. 77). However, such interpretations may be subject to the designs and origins of the diverse fabrics that are adapted in dress forms across ethnic groups in Nigeria. Although women's cultural dress forms may appear to resonate with different ethnic groups in Nigeria, sometimes they reveal cultural overlapping or influences of shared cultures as well. Despite this stance, cultural dress forms in any society may be described as a mirror of the culture of the people.

Therefore, if this subject is discussed normatively from society to society, we must interpret them differently.

It is, for this reason, this paper focuses on interrogating women adorned in cultural dress forms in five paintings produced by selected contemporary Nigeria artists trained in Zaria art school, and to analyse the possible identities that intersect in each painting. This is significant because the representations of women attired in African cultural dress forms are not merely thematic nuance that gives insights to artistic engagements with some modes of personal aesthetics but communicate identities. But the identities conveyed through African cultural dress forms often depend on the specific context of wear, as similar garments can project different messages in different contexts. In this regard, a gap is created because, while African cultural dress forms have provoked considerable studies and discussions, this subject remains an unexplored theme in art historical discourses on representations in contemporary Nigerian paintings. That is the reason this paper focuses on contributing a critical analysis on the possible identities that are conveyed in the representations of women adorned in African cultural dress forms in contemporary Nigerian paintings. But the idea of cultural dress does not refer to a homogenous style because it is virtually non-existent. Therefore, in this paper, I seek to interrogate in each of the purposively selected paintings, the identities that unfold from the interpretations and the ideas conveyed. In doing this, the following questions will guide the analysis: What identities does the interrogation of each painting reveal? What ideas do the interpretations of the paintings convey? How is African identity signified through the depiction of women adorned in cultural dress forms?

In discussing this thematic nuance of dress forms, five artists who trained at different times in Zaria School were purposively selected not merely because their paintings major on human figure but reflect the thematic thrust on women arrayed in cultural dress forms, as their contributions to contemporary Nigerian/African art. The artists are Kolade Oshinowo, Joe Musa, Johnson Oladesu, Olatunbosun Shonibare, and Sor Sen. It might be argued that while the Zaria School training had a fundamental influence on their artistic practices, their present thematic thrusts is a result of further researches and drawing inspiration from women forms in different Nigerian cultures. However, those who laid the foundation of artistic training from the 1960s at the Zaria Art School are 'Professor Charles Argent, Mrs Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu, Messrs. Mike Tailor, and Clary Nelson Cole' (Oshinowo, 2016, p. 19). They contributed to building Kolade Oshinowo's artistic practice, while a later generation of artists trained in the 1980s and 1990s were trained by Gani Odutokun, Professor Lucas Tokan Bentu, Professor Jerry Buhari, Professor Tony Okpe among others. Besides, to interrogate the selected paintings, the paper adopts formal analysis and cultural history methodologies. The formal analysis is used to confront the formal elements of the five paintings and contextualize them within the cultural histories that are recalled, to give the representations their proper identities by locating them in the past and present African lived experiences in which they are immersed.

The Analysis of Women adorned in Cultural Dress forms

In their search for images to represent in contemporary paintings, artists in Nigeria draw inspiration from African lived experiences and people through the synthesis of African aesthetic sensibilities with intellectual approaches based on Western standards. It is against this

background attention is drawn to artists who reference women adorned in cultural dress forms that are distinctly African styles, when attempting to give expressions to identities, even though such identities may be constructed differently from individual to individual, and culture to culture. Through such modes of representations, artists seem to demonstrate that ‘the representation[s] of dress and body ornamentation in visual ... art practices is both symbolic and productive’ (Perez, 2002, p. 30). Although most representations often aim to convey symbolism rather than particular women adorned in different African cultural dress forms to the viewers, this is, however, not to deny that some paintings may represent particular people. It is for this reason the paper interrogates the identities that unfold from the selected paintings in which women were represented wearing cultural dress forms.

Kolade Oshinowo graduated from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1972, and has been engaged with painting thematic nuances that reflect different aspects of contemporary African lived experiences in Nigeria. One major theme that has been featured in his paintings is the representation of women adorned with African dress forms. (See figure 1, a contemporary painting entitled *Harmony* 2016). One may question the relationship of harmony to the theme of the dress form. This thematic thrust is one of the paintings Oshinowo exhibited in 2016, as he points out, in “response to various stimuli within our socio/economic, political, cultural and environmental spaces” (2016, p. 7) in Nigeria. To this end, the painting reflects on the agreement and peaceful coexistences that are evident among people in southwestern Nigeria despite differences.

This realistic painting shows the use of lines in depicting two identical women adorned in *Aso Ebi* (identical dress forms) in the centre of the picture plane. Although the painting is dominated with tones of red and green and different patterns, they are harmoniously arranged in the composition. In this regard, it reflects how Yoruba women could be sensitive to the subtle colour combination of their dress forms if the colours are harmonious (Eicher, 1972). Besides, the rich patterns, colours, and designs on their cultural dress forms signal the adoption of African fabrics that are appropriate for daily outfits and occasions. To contextualise this use of fabric in Oshinowo’s painting during an interview in 2018, he notes that they are “off-cut pieces collected from tailors and individuals. Selected into the desired colour scheme and pasted on canvas before they are painted on”. However, the arrangement of the fabrics in this composition does not suggest offcut pieces but the whole fabric. Aside from that, close analysis reveals that their elaborate *gele* (headgear) delineated with lines creates texture in the different layers of folds, and signals head adornments which dominates the dark curvature at the shallow background. Given that this appears to be the centre of focus in the painting, it might be analysed as alluding to the importance of treating their heads as the seats of their *emi* (souls) and the sites of identity. As sites of identity, their *gele* relates to the aspect of Yoruba aesthetics of head adornment, in which the head is rarely left without considerable adornment (Ajiboye et al., 2018). However, in this context, their *gele* complements the *buba* (blouses) and *iro* (wrappers) to establish their garments and styles as giving insight into the shaping of African cultural identities. Further close analysis of their faces rendered in tones of brown suggests that these women might not just be friends, colleagues, or neighbours but family members. This demonstrates that their use of identical dress forms goes beyond the normal *Aso Ebi* worn by friends; rather it portrays how family members adapt identical dress forms. Such a mode of consuming African cultural dress forms can be

analysed as a process of reproducing social ties. Their sitting posture gives clues not just to closeness but bond that exists among them.



Figure 1: Kolade Oshinowo, *Harmony* 2016, Mixed Media, 119 x 131.

Analytically, besides their African cultural dress forms, the bright linear necklace on the woman seated to the left bears the symbol of a cross which invokes Christian identity, whereas “the crescent” on the bright linear necklace on the second woman symbolises Islamic identity. In this regard, their symbolic ornamentation suggests that dress forms are not sufficient in establishing their religious identities, since the dress could be worn by Muslim women as well. This is significant in highlighting the thematic thrust of harmony between two people of different religions. And, it may further allude to the narratives of religious tolerance that exist in south-western Nigeria, where the Yoruba people live as one family, even when their religious beliefs differ, as against the religious intolerance that dominates the northern part of Nigeria. Thus, this painting traces not merely the long cultural history of fashion in Yoruba culture but of intolerance in northern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria is characterised with religious intolerance because of Muslim extremists who take a position that if others do not follow their religion, they will be damned. As a result, they manifest violence with or without provocation against Christians, rather than ensure peaceful coexistence, unlike in the south-west of Nigeria. On the other hand, history reveals that *aso ebi* was adopted in Yoruba culture from the early 1970s, when it became a mandatory costume among members of a performing arts group, to subordinate

the individuals to the group. Other histories reveal its adoption among family members and children of the deceased during funeral ceremonies. But its usage has since been embraced in a wider context like attending a party, festival, or social occasions in Yoruba culture and among other ethnic groups in Nigeria. To this end, this painting echoes the essence of unity in diversity in southwestern Nigeria. Thus, it can be argued that Oshinowo's painting uses African cultural dress forms and ornaments to symbolically reflect on the African idea of unity that is deeply rooted in Yoruba culture.

This depiction establishes the cultural value for dress forms in south-western Nigeria that are African and European influenced. While this dual influence does not change the African identity of the wearers, the adoption of foreign dress elements in the society creates hybridity which results from the cultural mixture. In establishing the aim, although the painting draws attention to unity in diversity, it also echoes social identity. Such social identity exists not only among family members but friends and colleagues. This also enacts how African cultural dress forms worn in Nigerian societies are often used as a medium of expression of people's social identities such as age, gender, religion, and socio-economic class. On the other hand, the wearing of identical dress forms, in particular, emphasizes the wearers' shared identities. The next painting is by Joe Musa, a contemporary Nigerian artist who also trained at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He practiced art in Lagos for several years before he was appointed the Director-General of the National Gallery of Arts, Abuja-Nigeria. His long stay in south-western Nigeria must have influenced the representation of motifs that are rooted in Yoruba culture as seen in his painting titled *Aso Ebi III* (2007) (Figure 2). The title *Aso Ebi* is a Yoruba concept and hints at the culture that influenced the painting. To contextualize this theme, 'in Yoruba, *aso* means cloth while *ebi* means family, thus, *aso ebi* means family cloth' (Ikpakronyi, 2008, p. 7). To support this view, '*Aso-ebi* connotes the wearing of a chosen or commissioned cloth as a uniform dress to commemorate or celebrate an event or occasion' (Olajide et al., 2009, p. 59). During an interview with Joe Musa, in 2020, he notes that this is one of the paintings in 'women in my life series. The series reflects on the cultural life of Yoruba women who attend occasions in identical dresses not merely to celebrate their friends but to appear attractive to men'. Although Musa's expression appears to reduce women to seductive beings, this is far from his intent. As he adds that, 'men conquer the world to please the women in their lives, so the women, in turn, must look fine to please the men'.

The painting which is executed with a palette knife is polychromatic and creates rough textures of linear patterns on the entire picture plane. The context depicts two ladies adorned in identical clothes standing together in a close-up posture, as they appear dramatic in this painterly composition. Although the composition shows contrast, it draws attention to their identical dress forms and the different colours of their *gele* (Jubilee headgear). The tonal effect on the headgear of the woman on the left combines yellow, red, and tones of blue whereas the woman on the right is adorned with a headgear dominated with blue and patches of green. This difference is perhaps not merely to create the tonal effect but variety, because the lady on the left side chose to use the blue fabric meant for her *gele* as a drapery veil, held over her back to complement the outfit. A small blue handbag that hangs on the right hand of the lady to the immediate right hints at a fashionable object that complements her shoes, even though it was not depicted. Their dress forms hint at composing the flamboyant culture of fashion, with colour combinations that are not merely harmonious but symbolic of *aso-ebi*. To further demonstrate this claim, their multi-coloured *buba* (blouses) depicted with tones and shades of blue and green, over wrappers

represented in tones and shades of red and yellow create aesthetic blends on rectangular clothe tied at the waist and worn in parts of West Africa. Such wrappers remain a globalized signifier of Africanness not in production but adaptation. In this context, Musa's painting signifies an African identity on the lived experience of women dresses culture in Yoruba ethnic identity.



Figure 2: Joe Musa, *Aso Ebi III*, oil on canvas, size is unknown, 2007
(Photograph by Joe Musa)

In the contemporary era, this dress form is intended to locate the wearers within a latent aesthetic theory, which states that ‘the main reason for dressing for social events is to be attractive enough to be looked upon’ (Diyaolu, 2010, p. 36). This perhaps accounts for making *aso ebi* an aesthetic cultural element to be referenced in the painting of Musa. Although Musa is from the northern part of Nigeria, the influence on him in this representation is from Yoruba culture. This stems from his relationship with people in Yoruba culture and as the immediate environment where he lived – in the southwest of Nigeria. Historically, women and men alike had used the Yoruba traditional handwoven clothe *Aso Oke* as *Aso Ebi* (Olajide et al., 2009), but it is not as colourful as modern colourful, fashionable, and expensive fabrics selected, sewn and worn to individuals’ taste for specific occasions. Some of these unique and attractive fabrics are often referred to as Nigerian clothing even though they are imported. They include lace, jacquard, adire, and Ankara which are used to prepare dresses in Nigeria.³ Indeed, Shade Thomas-Fahm rejected such European clothes in her fashion boutique in Lagos (see *Faces of She*, Lagos: Literamed, 2004; see also *African-Print Fashion Now!* and *African Lace*). To this end, while the Jubilee *gele* was

originally from Great Britain, lace continues to come from Switzerland. However, the incorporation of such foreign elements in African dress forms in contemporary Nigerian society reveals the effect of multiple cultural attachments on identity. This shows the influence of African and European on southern Nigeria dress forms, yet not blurring their African identity.

Notwithstanding this observation, in the contemporary era, *Aso Oke* is still worn during socio-cultural ceremonies such as naming ceremonies, engagements, weddings, housewarming, and funerals (Akinbileje, 2014). Therefore, the different modern colourful fabrics appropriated in framing *aso ebi* aside from *Aso oke*, show that cultural dressing rarely disappears in the process of acculturation but can be transformed in ways that were unimagined some decades gone by and still keep the cultural norm. This identical dress forms constructs and projects group identity and membership. This echoes gender socialization and changing styles or fashion vogue.

While the painting echoes social and collective identity, it also constructs their Yoruba cultural identity through thematic nuance. The idea in this painting as Musa (2020) observes, is to “make a statement on how *aso ebi* adopted among women who are sometimes childhood friends – poor or rich add colour to an event”. This demonstrates that when *aso ebi* is worn to attend social events it functions as non-verbal veritable tools for communication of unity and oneness, that obscures class differences. Given the fact that *aso ebi* has a wider usage among friends and close associates in Yoruba culture and other cultural groups in Nigeria, it is worthy of note, therefore, as Ikpakronyi notes that ‘the focus of *aso ebi* has been to emphasize the unity of the group’ (2008, p. 7). It may as well be analysed as a symbol of cultural ideals of beauty. The construction of identity through women's dress forms continues with the painting of Johnson Oladesu (b. 1964). Oladesu studied painting at the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (BFA), Master of Fine Arts degree (MFA), and Ph.D. in Fine Arts respectively. He is currently a lecturer at the Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria. His painting selected for analysis is entitled *Modern Gwari Woman* (2002) (Figure 3). The term Gwari or Gbagyi in the title draws attention to a cultural group in north-central Nigeria, whose major occupation is hunting, pottery, farming, and fishing.⁴ Oladesu's search for symbolic representation of human figure led him to this thematic thrust, which shows influence from an indigenous contemporary culture. This influence in Oladesu's (2020) view is “borne out of concern for them. Because while women should be treated tenderly with love, Gwari women are burdened with lots of heavy tasks like farming and transporting loads on their shoulder-back, a task not common among the men”.

The expressionistic painting reveals the use of lines in outlining a woman ferrying a calabash load on her shoulder. Although the content of the calabash is not represented, Oladesu (2020) points out that it is “painted in tones of purple to make the burden of the weird practice less for the woman”. While the practice may attract sympathy from Oladesu, his stance in using shades of purple in an attempt to lessen the burden on the woman does not lessen any burden in reality, as it is a creative expression. However, the linear movement of this dramatic image draws viewers' attention to the focal point in the composition, which symbolises a unique cultural heritage of a Gwari woman. Rather than a romance of head loading like the Fulani milkmaid and women in other Nigerian cultures, the symbolic image reveals the woman's mode of ferrying a heavy calabash or basin loaded with farm produce or other goods on her shoulder. Besides, the contrast in this composition is highlighted in the distribution of tones of blue, white, purple, brown, and green. Although the woman appears bowed beneath the weight of her load, the

traditional practice is justified because it is averred to ‘weigh lighter on the shoulder than on the head’.⁵ This establishes not just a unique cultural practice but an impenetrable culture, despite an encounter with colonialism, western education, and modern ways of life.⁶



Figure 3: Johnson Oladesu, *Modern Gwari Woman*, 2002, 86x75cm, collection of the artist. (Photograph by Johnson Oladesu)

The expression on her face suggests a focused gaze as she walks cautiously to avoid falling, perhaps because of the load she is carrying. Not to complicate ‘scholarly efforts to negotiate cultural meaning and artistic’ (Ogbechie, 2016, p. 93) representation, she may be considered modern because of the wrapper she tied around her chest; this resonates with the thematic idea of the painting. Thus her wrapper is a vehicle through which she expresses her individuality and engagement with modernity (Wiley, 2013). Although this reflects a daily dress form of a woman in Gwari culture, it gives clue to progression from the earlier practice of appearing half nude with only a wrapper tied around her waist, when returning from the farm. Yet her nudity does not resonate with the idea of the Gwari woman’s use of her body in protest or seduction but a socio-cultural way of life. Thus, in referencing her mode of cultural dressing, the artist constructs a unique modern African cultural identity of the Gwari woman. Besides, her blue drapery headgear complements the colour of her wrapper and seems to create a visual narrative that a Gwari woman does not attach any much meaning to the colour of her dressing (Onike, 2009). This is, however, not to deny the possibility of her using colourful and fashionable dress forms.

Gwari or Gbagyi are found in three states in northern Nigeria: Niger and Kaduna States and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. Historically, in Gwari society, “women carry loads on their shoulders (Bwapa), because they believe that the head should be accorded a royal status as

the King of the entire body, saddled with the task of thinking for the body, as a result, it should not be burdened with a manual or pedestrian task, such as ferrying goods from place to place”.⁷ As a daily socio-cultural lifestyle, the Gwari woman would generally walk a long distance to farm and market with a piece of wrapper tied around her waist, thereby appearing nude. But any time she is at home, she ties her wrapper (Onike, 2009). This historical narrative and the ferrying of load influenced Oladesu’s choice of subject – *modern Gwari woman*, which is a departure from the relatively nude outfit of the traditional woman. The depiction constructs not merely the cultural identity of the woman but her personal or individual identity. In doing this, it conveys the nature of her membership within a given culture, one that is normal. The idea this painting conveys in Oladesu’s (2020) view is that of “advocating for a discontinuation of the cultural practice of Gwari woman’s mode of ferrying load because it is a form of punishment”. Although he seeks to see an end to the practice, given that it is a cultural heritage, it might take a modern generation of Gwari women discontinuing it, rather than an influence from outside the culture.

The next painting that constructs identity through the figurative representation of a woman is the work of Olatunbosun Shonibare (b.1976), a Nigerian born to Yoruba parents from Osun State. He is a graduate of a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Even though he lives in northern Nigeria, he drew inspiration to construct a woman’s identity through dress form from his Yoruba culture, see figure 4 entitled *Mopelola* (2014). Although this title as Shonibare (2016) points out, simply means ‘my wealth has come’, it could be read as the name of the woman depicted in the portrait as well. Thus the individuating of the painting with her name enunciates the source of inspiration – Yoruba cultural identity. This polychromatic painting is rich in linear representations on the background and in outlining the portrait of a woman dressed in a brilliantly colourful yellow blouse with an elaborate *gele* (headgear). This hints at a mode of African portraiture that relies on the clothing of the subject to evoke her status. Although her elaborate *gele* shows high linearity in designs and texture in the folds, it draws attention to a mode of head adornment in Yoruba culture. Thus, her dress form hints at a cultural norm for a design that involves the aesthetic response of a woman ‘who dresses her body aesthetically according to the norms of [the] beauty of her society’ (Eicher, 1972, p. 517). This is evident in the different linear patterns on her dress form which suggests, on the one hand, the adoption of high-quality fabric and on the other hand the incorporation of special embroidered themes on African garment forms. This appears to emphasize that the Yoruba woman from Southwest Nigeria is particularly noted for her exquisite fashion taste. Thus her elaborate adornment with exotic clothing, colourful beaded necklace in tones of yellow and red, and a large white and grey earring constructs her social identity as a woman of status and seeks to resonate with the thematic idea that this is a wealthy woman. This demonstrates the adaptation of dress form to construct the portrait of an individual by communicating her personal or individual identity within a cultural context.

Furthermore, despite Shonibare’s use of lines and patterns, his use of tones of orange and yellow on the woman, and dominant blue in the background creates a contrast in the composition. During an interview with Shonibare in 2016, he notes that “the background highlights a visual narrative on the circumstances that surrounded her before she experienced a change in status as echoed by her fashionable dress”. To this end, on the right side are silhouette imageries that show her struggling with pregnancy, backing her baby, hawking goods, and exposure to all weathers among others. This narrates some of the economic struggles of this woman in supporting her family, before rising to the position of fame. To contextualize her dress form

within the cultural history of Yoruba women's practice of adopting expensive fashionable fabrics for making high-class clothing, the paper traces some of the practices. For example, history reveals that some of these expensive traditional clothes are either produced or adapted. And the wearer of the cloth is usually a wealthy and highly placed person (Asakitikpi, 2007). In the 1990s, a Nigerian woman, Shade Thomas-Fahm was notable for her thirty-five years of wealth of experience in the Nigerian fashion industry, where she produced creative straight lines and curvilinear patterns of embroidery on Yoruba women's traditional *iro* (wrapper) and *buba* (blouse). In doing this, she personalized the compositions on the dress forms of her patrons who were drawn from the cream of society, including many former African heads of states (Akinwumi, 1998). This demonstrates that in 'Yoruba land there are cloth forms, which reflect social status because only leaders and the rich can afford them' (Asakitikpi, 2007, p. 104). Such dress forms are often used in social cycles for prestige and may be analysed as flamboyant dress, which 'communicates something about people's festive mood, joy, success, a great achievement and joyous celebration' (Olajide et al., 2013, p. 39).



Figure 4: Olatunbosun Shonibare, *Mopelola*, oil on wax, 34x24 inches, Artist Collection, 2014. (Photograph by Olatubosun Shonibare)

This demonstrates how in modern Nigerian societies, wealthy women wear expensive clothes to portray their rising social status. Hence they make unlimited choices from high-quality imported or locally made fabrics with unique designs and colours. Although the interpretation establishes her as a woman of social status and wealth, it is also evocative of individual identity. In this way, the dress elements construct individual identity through attributes of wealth and status. In other words, it makes a commentary on her personality through dress as visible markers of social status. Additionally, in Nigeria, such specific design elements on her dress forms like patterns and colours ‘might be named after a personality, or might refer to an idea or historical event’ (Savage, 2005, p. 174). Africanness is thus framed on the live experience of a Yoruba woman dressed in flamboyant cultural styled attire that elicits her achievement in society. The last painting that constructs identity analysed in this paper is by Sor Sen (b. 1985), a contemporary Nigerian artist born to Tiv parents from Benue State. Sen studied painting at Bachelor of Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees in the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. During his studies in Zaria, he drew inspiration from scenes in the northern Nigerian landscape, one of which is *Peers of the Realm* (2013) (Figure 5). During an interview in 2016, Sen notes that the title highlights “the bond that exists between young women who are peers”. However, Sen’s introduction does not create any African cultural identity as it merely draws attention to peers bonded together.



Figure 5: Sor Sen, *Peers of the Realm*, 2013, oil on canvas.
(Photograph by Sor Sen)

This polychromatic painting shows the aesthetics of the intricate convergence of lines and colours in representing people in a pastoral landscape. This style as Sen (2016) notes, entails “employing lines as a fundamental element of art for expression with strong stylistic influences from post-impressionism”. To this end, this composition employs linear qualities in the execution of forms, as evident in the immediate foreground which depicts three women walking away from the viewer towards a northern Nigerian city gate. Although the arrangement of the women shows a close bond, their covering with colourful drapery *hijab* dress forms that flow down gracefully draws attention to the focal point in the composition. The *hijab* is ‘a tailored garment that covers the head and body but not the face’ (Renne, 2013, p. 92). Their colourful and fashionable *hijabs* and wrappers in tones of blue, green, purple, red, and brown demonstrate that Hausa Muslim women in northern Nigeria are not always adorned with dark-coloured clothing that covers the whole body with headgear that is worn as a veil. However, their linear dress forms signal the bringing together of parts in a relationship. Sen’s application of the tones of colours on these women, the landscape, and the background create contrast in the composition and illusion of perspective towards the city gate. While the unique colours and linear patterns of their dress forms hint at the expression of individual preferences, they make the images bold and dramatic as a sense of structure and movement is created.

Besides their dress forms, the two women with babies firmly wrapped behind them with colourful clothes around their bodies construct their identities as mothers. This does not mean that the woman in the middle without a baby is not a mother; it may be her baby is grown and was not considered part of the outing. On the other hand, the analysis further reveals their identities as married women who have a bond of friendship evident in their close ties as they walk together. To support this stance, during an interview with the artist in 2016, he notes that ‘In the painting, what I was interested in was to capture the lifestyle of women as seen in Nigeria’s northern region’.

The cultural history reveals that until the 1970s, the *hijabs* were not part of the Hausa Muslim women's dress forms in northern Nigeria. But during the early twentieth century, women used *lulluba* a form of wrapper to cover the head and shoulder or the complete body when in public spaces (Renne, 2013). The *hijab* covering for Hausa Muslim women was necessitated by their quest to access public spaces and urban settlements in northern Nigeria. Thus the *hijab* is viewed as a revolution for the women, because in Mahdi’s view ‘up to 1975 hardly any Muslim woman in northern Nigeria wore the hijab, while today one could not miss the growing number of women who wear it’ (2009, p. 2). Another major factor that holds the demand for Hausa Muslim women to be adorned with *hijab* is the Sharia law. The Sharia law which was introduced in 2009 in some northern states in Nigeria mandates Hausa women to wear a *hijab* before going to public spaces. Depending on the viewer’s perspective, Hausa Muslim women who wear these dress forms may be seen as ‘devout and modest followers of Islam, as subordinate women forced to hide their bodies and sexuality’ (Renne, 2013, p. 92). In this regard, aside from serving to construct a religious identity, the adoption of the dress forms among Hausa Muslim women hints at the construction of African cultural identity as well. The reason the *hijab* is seen as a symbol of cultural identity is because of its acceptance and daily usage in public spaces among Hausa Muslim women. But it originated from the Middle East, which hints not merely at the influence of Arabian culture on northern Nigeria but emphasises hybridity that is associated with the effects of multiple cultural attachments on identity. This then indicates that the various styles of “fashion hijab” worn by northern Nigerian women suggest their adaptation of earlier hijabs

obtained from Saudi Arabia, thereby evoking a dress form that is African and Arab-influenced and constructs the Islamic identity of the women. The rationale that underpins this adaptation, as Mahdi points out, is Hausa's "male demand on women, a compromise women were prepared to make, to enable them to access the urban spaces previously dominated by men" (2009, p. 5). Also, some Hausa Muslim women hold the view that 'wearing the hijab enables them to negotiate public space without fear of sexual harassment' (Renne, 2013, p. 92). Thus, the *hijab* is not just 'Muslim attire' but a dress form that is perceived to provide a sense of security for the wearer.

The interpretation on the one hand evokes women who as friends are returning home from a visit. And it also demonstrates as Sen (2016) points out, that "in this painting, what I was interested in was to capture the lifestyle of women as seen in Nigeria's northern region". To this end, the painting echoes a lifestyle of bond that exists among peers. Such bonds can be analysed as evidence of good interpersonal relations, which evokes the construction of social identity. Although this dress form may be analysed as concealing a lot of secrets, in Renne's words, it also has the 'potential for seductive beauty and pious purity [that] attracts such intense, if varied moral responses in northern Nigeria' (2013, p. 93). Their *hijab* can be analysed as 'a Muslim garment, a cosmopolitan outfit and a way to mark social solidarity or assert uniqueness' (Wiley, 2013, p. 87). While it may be analysed as being unique, this Hausa Muslim cultural dress forms frames Africanness that is rooted in northern Nigeria.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this paper, the contemporary Nigerian paintings analysed are representations of women adorned in African cultural dress forms, but the specific paths each artist took in giving form to Natural Synthesis were divergent. This is because they accommodate social and environmental factors and reflect personal aesthetics and identities. While the identities were however constructed differently in the paintings, two paintings were given titles in the language that influenced their representations. This is evident in *Aso Ebi* by Joe Musa and *Mopeola* by Olatunbosun Shonibare, which are Yoruba indigenous concepts. Whereas these titles evoke African cultural identity, such use of indigenous philosophical concepts also emphasizes the role of Yoruba indigenous language in the interpretation of contemporary Nigerian art. This also demonstrates the interdependence of the verbal and visual arts in Africa/Nigeria. While the analysis highlights the construction of intersecting identities through the representations of women adorned in cultural dress forms, their paintings reflect engagements with some cultures in Nigeria. In so doing, their 'ideas and motifs are drawn from a variety of cultural sources' (Owerka, 1985, p. 78). Thus, their paintings open up on the one hand glimpses into some of the aesthetics of women's mode of adornment in African cultural dress forms, and on the other hand, they resonate with contemporary indigenous cultural identities. But such identities cannot be divorced from the effects of an encounter with other cultures. To this end, African and European-influenced southern Nigeria dress, whereas African and Arab-influenced northern dress. Despite the fact these distinctions hint at hybrid identity in dress forms, both forms enunciate African identity. However, the wide diversity of patterns on their dress forms 'suggests that they can index the wearer's uniqueness and ability to put together distinctive looks' (Wiley, 2013, p. 85).

Furthermore, the different paintings relay ideas on the construction of multiple identities through dress forms worn by women and demonstrate that the meanings of dresses are often ambiguous. This, therefore, destabilizes any notion of women depicted with dress forms in contemporary

Nigerian art serving to construct only an identity. A similar construction is evident for instance, in the representation of a woman attired in dress forms which feature in Ben Enwonwu's sculpture titled *Anyanwu* (bronze, 1954-1955), which reflects feminine beauty in both Benin and Igbo cultures. But the context references a 'woman dressed in the royal regalia of the Bini people: a "chicken-beak" headdress, heavy coral necklaces and bracelets' (Ogbechie, 2008, p. 128). To establish the identity, the head of the figure hint at a royal portrait of an Edo Queen Mother. So, as much as African cultural dress forms contribute to identity formation, their consumption helps to create and display the wearer's social network and traces a long history of competitive displays of wealth. To this end, the consumption of cultural dress forms among the women depicted in these contemporary paintings enacts a process of constructing unique personas (Wiley, 2013). While some drew attention to the materials or fabrics used in producing the cultural dress forms, the ways the wearers are represented, and the clothing worn, others focus on representing cloth of the same colour, and styles of the wearers in conveying personal religious, cultural, and social identities.

The analysis establishes that African identities were constructed in the contemporary Nigerian paintings by making 'reference to Africa through the incorporation of figurative iconography associated with the continent' (Rovine, 2009, p. 56a). In this regard, the African identities are deeply rooted in Nigerian socio-cultural contexts. While their paintings reference imagery of women adorned in cultural dress forms as abundance reference to Nigerian scenes, they reflect how such garments are adopted in constructing individual, social, cultural, and shared or collective identities. These are all manifestations of contemporary paintings infused with African and Nigerian sensibilities (James, 2019). Finally, the constructions of identities through dress forms in contemporary paintings were done in the manner the artists drew from images of Africa and Nigerians in particular, as well as from diverse textiles and garment styles and the stories they tell through such representations.

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Notes

¹ This stance was expressed in an online article titled unseen art scene which reflects on contemporary Nigerian art since the 1950s.

² The names of artists that contributed to the development of Auch school, in an article titled 7 Art schools that shaped contemporary Nigerian art. Available: <https://artwa.africa/7-art-schools-that-shaped-contemporary-nigerian-art/>

³ This describes some of the clothing found in Nigeria. As expressed by Innocent Osuji in an article titled Nigerian culture and traditions with reference to fabric materials used in making the different traditional dress styles. Available: <https://osujinnocent.wordpress.com/nigeria-independent/the-nigerian-culture-and-traditions>

⁴ This expression is by Khadijat Abdulkareem in an article entitled the uniqueness of the Gwari tribe. It seeks to contextualise the occupation of the people and other uniqueness features in their culture.

⁵ This is a discussion on the cultural practice of the Gwari people identified with carrying load on their shoulder. In an article titled Gbagyi (Gwari) people: the indigenous people of Abuja and an African ethnic group known for carrying loads on their shoulder. Available: <https://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com.ng>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Reasons for the traditional practice by Gwari women in carrying load on their shoulders and not their heads in an article titled Gbagyi (Gwari) people: the indigenous people of Abuja and an African ethnic group known for carrying loads on their shoulder.

Short Bio

Sule Ameh James earned his Ph.D. in Visual Studies at the Department of Visual Arts, University of Pretoria, South Africa, in 2019. His doctoral thesis is entitled, Tracing the Idea of African Vernacular-Rooted Art: A Critical Analysis of Selected Contemporary South African and Nigerian Artists (2007-

2016). Based on this and new research, he is preparing a series of publications, centred on contemporary African art history and visual culture.