



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Cultural and Symbolic Significance of Fashion Consciousness of the Yoruba Art/Headdresses

Samuel Káyòdé Oláléyè<sup>1\*</sup>, Julius Sunday Adekoya<sup>2</sup>, Taíwò Fátòsìn Awós , o , lálá<sup>3</sup>

Published online: 27 May 2025

**Abstract:** This paper delves into the hidden cultural and symbolic significance of Yorùbá traditional headdresses, exploring their multifaceted roles within spirituality, social identity, and everyday life. Headdresses such as gele and *filà* are not only symbols of status, but also spiritual tools that connect the wearer to the divine and their ancestral heritage. Specific headdresses are associated with different Òrìṣà and carry unique meanings particularly in the areas for healing, protection, and spiritual alignment. In addition to their spiritual, cultural and symbolic significance, headdresses play a key role in Yorùbá fashion, often signifying wealth, social rank, and personal identity. Beyond aesthetics, Yorùbá headdresses are also embedded in herbalism and traditional medicine, where certain caps are believed to possess healing powers. These headdresses are used in rituals to cure ailments, aids childbirth, and enhance well-being of the wearer. Unfortunately, in this contemporary period, most of these values are no longer in existence due to cultural devaluation courtesy of foreign religion, western education and embrace of foreign culture to the detriment of African/Yorùbá culture. This paper therefore, explores the dynamic nature of Yorùbá headdresses, emphasizing their role in preserving cultural identity and spiritual practices. The study was carried out by conducting interview among ten Babaláwo-Ifá priests, fifteen youths and fifteen elderly men and women and their views content analysed .The study recommends that the youths should be more interested in the promotion of their culture by blending it with the new found culture of the foreigners.

**Keywords:** Culture, Symbolic Significance, Fashion Consciousness, the Yorùbá, Art/Headdresses

## INTRODUCTION

The Yorùbá proverb, *Bí a sá kẹ́, kẹ́, ogún, tí a bù àbàjà ògbo, n, tí a sí wó, gò, mbo, àwàdòrí, tàbí ká fi è, rẹ́, kẹ́, sílẹ́, ló, bọ́, ró, , aájò e wà ni gbogbo re*” loosely translated as Tribal marks of whatever type are ultimately for beautification reveals the deep-rooted aesthetic consciousness embedded in Yorùbá cultural philosophy. Fashion and adornment have long served as vital tools through which the Yorùbá negotiate identity, belonging, and cosmological order. From facial markings and beadwork to hairstyles and elaborate headdresses, Yorùbá people express not only beauty but also lineage, status, and spirituality. In Yorùbá cosmology, adornment particularly of the head is more than vanity; it is a spiritual act. The orí (head) is regarded as the seat of destiny, and as Abiodun

(2014) notes, embellishing the head is a profound expression of reverence for the divine within. Traditional headdresses such as the *gèlè* and *Orí adé* are thus powerful cultural artifacts that merge aesthetics with metaphysics (Lawal, 1996; Drewal et al., 1989).

However, in the context of an increasingly globalized world, the cultural grammar of Yorùbá fashion consciousness is undergoing notable transformations. As globalization facilitates the exchange and hybridization of cultural forms, Yorùbá fashion including traditional headdresses is being reinterpreted and repurposed both within and outside Nigeria. According to Akinrinade and Olaniyan (2020), globalization has introduced a dynamic interplay between indigenous Yorùbá fashion codes and global aesthetics, leading to new forms of identity expression among the youth, especially in urban centers. Recent scholarship affirms that Yorùbá traditional fashion is not disappearing under globalization but evolving as a living, adaptive heritage. For instance, Adesokan (2021) underscores how Yorùbá diaspora communities creatively retain and transform traditional headdress styles for modern occasions, such as weddings and naming ceremonies, where *gèlè* (head gear) tying becomes a medium of transnational identity. Similarly, Oyenuga (2019) analyzes the resurgence of *àṣọ-e, bí()* and *gèlè* styles on social media platforms like Instagram as a negotiation of

<sup>1\*),2,3</sup> Department of Religious Studies, University of Ìbàdàn , Ìbàdàn , Oyo State, Nigeria

\*) *corresponding author*

Samuel Káyòdé Oláléyè PhD

Department of Religious Studies, University of Ìbàdàn , Ìbàdàn, Oyo State, Nigeria  
Email: kayodeleye2005@yahoo.com

cultural pride and cosmopolitanism among young Yorùbá women. These digital platforms have become powerful spaces for the re-articulation of cultural identity through fashion.

The cultural economy of Yorùbá headdresses today exists at the intersection of tradition, innovation, and commodification. According to Akinsola (2022), contemporary Yorùbá fashion designers are not merely replicating heritage but are actively engaging in what she calls “ancestral remixing”—the blending of age-old aesthetics with modern fabrics and styling techniques. This trend is further explored by Adegbite (2023), who notes that the popularization of Yorùbá headgear in Nollywood and Afrobeat music videos has extended its symbolic value into global pop culture, often stripped of its original ritual significance but still resonant with pride and status. Yet, there is a tension between preservation and adaptation. As noted by Oludare and Ogunyemi (2018), the commodification of Yorùbá headdresses in fashion markets sometimes leads to a loss of symbolic depth, especially when stripped of their spiritual or ceremonial contexts. This tension highlights the urgent need for scholarly engagement with how these artifacts are being recontextualized in contemporary society. Therefore, this paper explored the cultural and symbolic significance of Yorùbá headdresses, particularly as they navigate the twin currents of tradition and modernity. It examined how these adornments continue to function as emblems of Yorùbá identity while also adapting to global influences. Through this lens, the research deepened our understanding of how fashion consciousness among the Yorùbá remains a resilient, expressive, and evolving cultural force in the 21st century.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection. The research was conducted in Ibadan, a historically significant city in Yorùbáland that has remained a vibrant cultural hub. Ibadan was chosen not only for its prominence as an ancient city but also because it houses diverse sub-groups of the Yorùbá ethnic identity, making it a representative site for capturing a broad spectrum of views on cultural fashion consciousness, especially as it pertains to headdresses and adornment. A total of forty respondents participated in the study. These included ten Babaláwo (Ifá priests), fifteen elderly men and women (age 60 and above), and fifteen youths (ages 18 to 30). The selection of informants was based on purposive sampling, guided by three main criteria: (1) a demonstrated knowledge or experience with traditional Yorùbá cultural practices (for elders and Babaláwo), (2) self-identification as a practitioner or active observer of traditional Yorùbá fashion aesthetics (for youths), and (3) geographic and social embedded in Ibadan’s cultural life.

Participants were identified through community networks, local cultural associations, and personal referrals, ensuring a mixture of perspectives across gender, occupation, and level of religious engagement. The inclusion of Babaláwo was particularly important for grounding the study in indigenous spiritual perspectives, while youths and elders offered insight into generational shifts in fashion consciousness and interpretation. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide, which allowed for flexibility while ensuring consistency across responses. Follow-up questions were tailored to respondents’ experiences and backgrounds. For example, the Babaláwo

were asked about ritual/spiritual usages of headdresses and their symbolic links to cosmology, while youths were interrogated on their motivations for wearing traditional attire in contemporary settings. After transcription, the interviews were subjected to content analysis, with coding based on emerging patterns and key indicators such as frequency of concepts (e.g., identity, spirituality, aesthetics and social status), generational contrasts, and references to cultural continuity or change. This approach allowed for a better understanding of both the symbolic meanings and the evolving functions of traditional Yorùbá fashion elements, especially headdresses.

## RESULTS

The results of the study revealed three key themes: generational disconnect, loss of symbolic knowledge, and efforts toward cultural reclamation. Among the younger participants, there was a noticeable drift from traditional fashion values, particularly regarding the symbolic use of headdresses. While many youths admitted to wearing traditional *filà*-caps or *gèlè*-head gear for aesthetic purposes, especially, during weddings or social gatherings, very few could articulate the cultural or spiritual meanings behind them. One of the respondents confessed that “I just wear it because it looks nice, not because I know what it means.” This lack of symbolic understanding contrasts sharply with the perspectives of elders and Babaláwo, who emphasized that each style of headdress carries specific cultural and even metaphysical weight. They expressed concern that younger generations are absorbing Western fashion ideals at the expense of their heritage, leading to a gradual erosion of traditional consciousness.

Besides this gap, the study also uncovered ongoing efforts by cultural custodians, especially elders and Babaláwo to reverse the trend. These individuals often take it upon themselves to educate younger people informally, using everyday interactions, ceremonies, and visual demonstrations to pass down knowledge. As one elderly man noted, “When I see them wear it wrongly, I don’t shout; I clarify when, why, where and how it should be done. This is a positive way of instilling the lesson in them he concluded.” () Furthermore, there was broad support among interviewees for institutional backing of cultural revival. Many suggested that Obas, kings, and chiefs should lead the way by organizing festivals or community events that allow young people to showcase traditional outfits with appropriate headgear. Majority of the informants were also on the opinion that government to set aside weekly cultural days in schools and public offices to encourage pride in indigenous attires. These suggestions reflect a collective desire to keep Yorùbá fashion consciousness alive, even in a rapidly globalized world.

### The Yorùbá and her Fashion Consciousness

Fashion consciousness in Yorùbá culture, like in many parts of the world, is a prominent feature, influencing how individuals present themselves through various forms of adornment. This consciousness extends beyond clothing, with significant attention paid to skin decoration, particularly among women, who often use oils and creams to enhance their skin’s glow and appearance. In some cases, the desire to conform to beauty standards leads to practices such as skin bleaching, reflecting the belief that lighter skin is more attractive and noticeable. However, fashion in Yorùbá culture is not limited to skin and clothing. Facial

marks, which vary by kingdom and family lineage, are an important part of cultural identity. Marks such as *Àbàjà O, mo, O, ba*, associated with the royal family in *Ò, yó*, and *Àbàjà awon Basorun* are among the traditional practices that symbolize family heritage and social status in the then *Ò, yó*, Empire. (Adeoye, 1979:179-188)

In addition to facial marks, beads play a crucial role in Yorùbá fashion, used not only as accessories but also for spiritual and social significance. Beads are worn on various parts of the body, including the neck, wrists, waist, and head, with specific beads assigned to different religious sects and purposes. For example, red beads are worn by devotees of Sango, while white beads such as *Sé, sé, -e, fun* are worn by followers of *O, bàtálá*. *Otútù O, po, n* is worn by *Ifá* priests, and beads like *Iyùn, Sè, gi*, and *E, nlà* are typically reserved for kings and chiefs, signifying their royal status. Additionally, children also wear beads like *Jojo* and *Ileke Oníró, bà*, which are symbols of protection and heritage. The use of beads extends beyond social and religious functions, with different bead styles denoting wealth, position, and even personal achievements in Yorùbá society. Sometimes, beads are used to prevent unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, while gold adornment became prominent after the encounter with Europeans, it now represents luxury, wealth, and high social standing in contemporary Yorùbá culture. Even on many occasions, it can be useful in medical line as a form of family planning to prevent unwanted pregnancy. (Adetilewa, Personal Interview, 2024).

### Categories of Yorùbá Traditional Art/Headdresses and their Symbolic Representations

In Yorùbá culture, headdresses serve multiple purposes, ranging from cultural identity to spiritual symbolism. They are classified into three main categories based on their materials and forms:

1. Headdresses Made with Cotton (*Filà aláfas, o, s, e*)
2. Headdresses Made with Beads (*Filà aláfilè, kè, s, e*)
3. *Adé O, ba*-Crowns of all Kinds and its Significance
4. Symbolic Headdresses Represented on the Head (*filà alámi*)
5. The Concept of *Orí* (Head) and Headdresses in Yorùbá Belief System
6. The Significance of Headdresses in Yorùbá Culture: A Focus on Widowhood and Marital Traditions.
7. Headdresses in Rituals and Ceremonies.
8. The Spiritual Protection and Symbolism of headdresses.
9. The Syncretism of Headdresses in Traditional Herbal Practices.
10. Headdresses in the Contemporary Academic Space.

Each category reflects distinct cultural, social, and spiritual functions, all rooted in the Yorùbá worldview.

#### 1. Headdresses Made with Cotton

Headdresses as an integral part of Yorùbá culture reflect both individual identity and social status and they carry significant cultural symbolism. Among these headdresses, cotton-based ones are the most commonly worn and widely used in daily life. The Yorùbá people craft these head coverings from various high-quality fabrics which include *Ànkàrà, Adìre*, (tie-dye), damask, and *as, o, -òkè* (clothes from hinterland). In a personal interview conducted, (Babaláwo Ifájùwó, n, 2024) supports this assertion through an *Ifá* verse in *Ìrosùn Otùrá* that says;

<i>Gèlè ò dùn</i>	“Head tie is never sweet”
<i>Bí ká mò, ó, n wé</i>	“Until we know how to tie it”
<i>Ká mò, ó, n wé</i>	“Knowing how to tie it”
<i>Kò dà bí kó ye, ni</i>	“Is not sweet until it befits the wearer”
<i>Filà ò dùn</i>	“Head dress is never sweet”
<i>Bí ká mò, ó, n dé</i>	“Until we know how to wear it”
<i>Ká mò, o, n dé</i>	“Knowing how to wear it”
<i>Kò dà bí kó ye, ni</i>	“Is not good until it befits the wearer”
<i>Á dífá fún Ò, rúnmilà</i>	“Cast divination for Orunmila”
<i>Tí Ès, ù O, dàrà yóò yo, kúró nínú ibi</i>	“That Esu Odara will expunge from evil”
<i>E, bo, láwo ní kó s, e</i>	“It was sacrifice that his priest asked him to offer”
<i>Nje, iwo, Ès, ù Ò, dàrà</i>	“You Esu Odara,”
<i>O tó gé, gé, ko wá yo, mí kúró nínú ibi.</i>	“It is high time you remove me from evil.”

The above *Ifá* verse illustrates the deep cultural significance of these headpieces. This verse connects the act of tying *gèlè* (head tie) and *filà* (head wear for men) to ritual and symbolic meaning, asserting that the proper wearing of these items is a key cultural practice. For women, the art of tying *gèlè* is particularly important for spiritual purposes. At major events like weddings, naming ceremonies, and festivals, a large, elaborately tied *gèlè* signifies social status, elegance, and joy, emphasizing the wearer’s place within the community. Men also wear various styles of *filà*, each with its own unique meaning and purpose.

The *Filà Abetí Ajá* with its flaps resembling dog ears, is a cap often worn by younger men or traders, symbolizing adaptability and resilience. The *Gòbì*, a simple folded cap, represents modesty and is typically worn for everyday activities. The *Kémbé*, a looser, baggy cap worn by elders, signifies wisdom and experience, while the *Filà Oníwújú*, with its upright front that is worn during formal occasions to denote dignity and respect. The *Alágàda Méjì*, with two opposite flaps, reflects creativity and individuality, and the *Filà Etù*, made of dark blue *As, o, -òkè*, conveys prestige, often seen on chiefs and elders. The *Filà Sanyán*, crafted from beige *Aso-Oke* fabric, symbolizes wealth and is worn during special occasions. There is another kind of *Fila* made mostly with *Aso Okè* fabric of any kinds and colours called *Gòbì*. This cap can be worn and bend to four different angles or allowed to stand tall on the head of the wearer. It can be worn and the tip bend to the right side, left side, backward, into the front or allowed to stand tall without bending it. Each side the bend of the cap faces has its message/symbolic representation. For instance, if it is worn and it is bends to the left side, it symbolises that the wearer is married. The right side indicates that the person wearing the cap is still searching and single, while to the front symbolises that the wearer is tired of life and the back bending indicates or symbolises he doesn’t care. If allowed to be lifted up, it is a message of pride and confrontational especially to the king that the wearer is passing across. That is, *ki loba ó fi mí, se-what would the king doto me?* *Filà Onípè* with a pointed tip symbolises authority and is typically worn by royalty to denote leadership. The *Tàbúrlè*, a small cap worn close to the head, is a practical choice for everyday settings. The *Òkè Èrùkèrù*, a tall intricately woven cap, is worn by kings and

chiefs during ceremonial events to symbolize power and grandeur. The *Ajṣe Bí Ọ̀yọ̀*, with its dramatic slant, is often worn during social gatherings, reflecting confidence and flair, while the *filà Gbàjúmọ̀*, adorned with intricate patterns or embellishments, serves as a state men piece worn by influential individuals that symbolises status and social influence. Each of these styles is steeped in rich symbolism as explored in scholarly works of Oyewole (2003:41-55), Adepegba (1991), Akintoye (2010), and Lawal (1996: 521), who highlight the cultural depth and significance of these headdresses in Yorùbá life.

## 2. Headdresses Made with Beads

In Yorùbá culture, beads hold a significant place in the adornment of kings, chiefs, and heads of worshippers, particularly those dedicated to the Orisa. Various types of beads are used to craft headdresses that signify spiritual and social status. Beads like *Otútù O, po, n, S, e, s, e, -E, fun, Oyinde, Kele, Mó, lo, jò, lyùn, Se, gi, and E, nlà* are integral part of the Yorùbá tradition with each bead type associated with specific Orisa. For instance, *Kele* bead is often used in the headdress of worshippers dedicated to Sango, the Orisa of thunder and fire that represents power and vitality. While *S, e, s, e, -E, fun* is used for Obatala and it signifies purity and wisdom. *Otútù O, po, n* is typically associated with *Ifá* symbolizing divine wisdom and sacred knowledge of the *Ifá* oracle. Beads like *lyùn, Se, gi, and E, nlà* are usually reserved for kings' crowns, often due to their rarity and high cost. These beads are not only symbols of affluence but also reflect the divine connection between the king and the Ọ̀rìṣà they represent. Therefore, the use of these beads is more than aesthetic; it is an expression of divine power and the wearer's role in mediating between the spiritual and the physical realms.

As pointed out above, in Yorùbá society, crowns and headdresses made from beads such as *lyùn, Se, gi, and E, nlà* carry spiritual weight, denoting the sacred authority of kings and chiefs. In some cases, cowries are incorporated into crowns for spiritual reasons because they are considered highly sacred and linked to prosperity and divine favour. As Oyewole (2003) highlighted, these beads and their symbolic meanings are crucial to understanding the complex interplay between spirituality, identity, and leadership in Yorùbá culture. Beads, therefore, transcend their ornamental role, serving as powerful cultural and spiritual symbols. From their roles in religious rituals, where they symbolize divine authority and spiritual alignment to their use in herbalism where they act as tools for healing and problem-solving, these headdresses carry layers of meaning that transcend their physical form. In today's fashion landscape, bead-based headdresses have also found renewed expression in contemporary styles, especially among designers and stylists who draw inspiration from indigenous aesthetics. They are increasingly featured in fashion shows, cultural events, and even weddings, where they serve not just as heritage symbols but as bold and artistic statements that blend tradition with modern taste.

## 3. Adé O ba-Crowns of all Kinds and its Significance

Within Yorùbá cultural paradigms, the adé (crown) transcends mere decorative function; it epitomizes celestial authority and the sanctified bond between a monarch (Kábíyèsí) and their constituency. The absence of the adé results in an incomplete acknowledgment of a Kábíyèsí's-King's sovereignty as the crown embodies both legitimacy and the spiritual affirmation of his reign. The rituals under

gone during the process of installation and the crown qualifies a kabiyesi-king to be *Igbákejì Ọ̀rìṣà* (second in command to the Creator). It is critical to note that not every leader within the community is granted the privilege of donning the adé. For instance, Baalè (village head) cannot put on adé (crown). This exclusivity accentuates its spiritual importance, as it is intricately woven into the metaphysical framework of Ọ̀rìṣà and divine rulership. Academics such as (Babatunde Ojurongbe, 1996) argue that the crown serves as a tangible manifestation of authority and a metaphysical conduit linking the monarch to the divine domain. This distinctive function underscores the Yorùbá conviction that monarchs act as intermediaries between the tangible and intangible realms as earlier said above, *Igbákejì Ọ̀rìṣà* (second in command to the Creator).

For individuals lacking authorization to adorn the adé, there exist significant spiritual and societal ramifications. Traditional Yorùbá convictions posit that the act of taking the sacred crown provokes retribution from both ancestors and the Ọ̀rìṣà. (Tunde Kelani's, 2002) cinematic work *Agogo Èèwọ̀* sadly illustrates this narrative. Set against the backdrop of the fictional locale of Jogbo, the *agogo èèwọ̀* (taboo gong) signifies the reinforcement of ethical and spiritual demarcations. A morally corrupt monarch secures the throne through manipulation; however, the emblematic authority of the gong exposes his ethical deficiencies, reinforcing the notion that sacred emblem, including the crown, necessitate moral integrity. The repercussions for transgressing these hallowed boundaries, whether through deceit or illegitimacy are both immediate and frequently severe.

Kelani's film serves as a critique of governance and ethical conduct, mirroring Yorùbá cosmological perspectives that correlate leadership with divine justice. Scholars such as (Drewal, 1983:) and (Abiodun, 1994:) contend that Yorùbá artistic expressions and rituals, encompassing the utilization of sacred regalia, function as both visual and performative vocabularies for cultural ethics. *Agogo Èèwọ̀* embodies this viewpoint by dramatizing the repercussions of contravening traditional protocols. It illustrates that the adé is not solely a decorative object but a formidable emblem of accountability and reverence for ancestral traditions. Through this lens, the film and traditional Yorùbá thought converge to accentuate the sanctity of the adé as a foundational element of Yorùbá kingship and cultural legacy.

## 4. Headdresses and Symbolic Representations

This category involves headdresses that are not physical objects but are instead symbolically represented on the head using materials like *efun* (white chalk). *Efun* is a white, sacred chalk derived from kaolin. It is painted directly onto the head in symbolic patterns or designs during rituals, festivals, or sacred ceremonies. Most especially, during Obatala festival that is celebrated all over Yoruba land and during initiation into *Ifá* cult. Painted designs are often seen during initiation ceremonies, where individuals are marked with symbols that signify their new spiritual roles or alignment with a particular Orisa. Dancers and performers in traditional festivals may also have their heads adorned with *efun* designs to represent purity, divine connection, or ancestral reverence. The white colour of *efun* symbolizes purity, spiritual clarity, and alignment with divine forces. It serves as a way of visually sanctifying the *Orí* for spiritual engagement. The painted designs often include sacred patterns that represent specific Orisa, the individual's spiritual journey, or the purpose of the ritual. For instance, a person painted with patterns related to Sango may embody

strength, power, and protection. This form of headdress emphasizes the spiritual rather than the physical, reinforcing the belief that the *Orí* is the link between the earthly and the divine as confirmed by (Baba awo Ajibodu, 2024).

*Efun* (white chalk) and *osun* (camwood) are commonly used in various Yorùbá rituals, not just for their aesthetic quality but for their symbolic and spiritual significance. *Efun*, in particular, plays a prominent role in rites such as *Ifá títè* (*Ifá* initiation), where it is used to mark sacred patterns on the initiate's body and the divination tray, signifying purity, spiritual awakening, and alignment with *Òrìṣà* wisdom. It is also central in initiations like *Ìdòsù ṣàngó* (*ṣàngó* initiation) and *Ìràrí Ọṣun*, *Ọyá*, *Èsù* and *Yemo*, ja initiation, where it is applied on the face and body of initiates to invoke the presence of the *Òrìṣà* and signal the transformative journey they are undertaking. These ritual uses highlight *e fun's* deeper role beyond surface adornment as a medium of consecration and spiritual communication.

## 5. The Concept of *Orí*(Head) and Headdresses in Yorùbá Belief System

In Yorùbá spirituality, *Orí*(head) is much more than just a physical part of the body. It holds profound cultural, spiritual, and symbolic importance. The Yorùbá believe that *Orí* is the seat of destiny and the connection between an individual and their divine essence. It is considered the most sacred part of the body representing a person's spiritual identity, symbol of *Olódùmarè* (God in Yoruba belief) and purpose in life. (Fatoki Awobona, 2024), one of the informants explained that with an *Ifá* verse from *Ogbè Ọ̀gúndá* that;

<i>O, rún</i>	<i>ní</i>	"Bow is Odundun (Bryophyllum
<i>Ọ̀, dúndún</i>		pinnatum)"
<i>O, fà ní tè, tè,</i>		"Arrow is Tè, tè, (Amaranthus
		hybridus)"
<i>Tí a bá tá jè, lè, ké,</i>		"It is when we shoot it gently that it
<i>nì n' dún</i>		sounds"
<i>Á dífá fún Orí inú</i>		"Cast divination for Inner head and
<i>abù fún tòde</i>		gives to outer one"
<i>E, bo, lawó ní kí</i>		"They were asked to offer sacrifice
<i>wó, n máa mú s, e</i>		by their diviners"
<i>Njé, orí inú mo</i>		"Inner head I offered sacrifice"
<i>s, e, bo,</i>		
<i>Dákun má ba tí òde</i>		"Please do not destroy my outer
<i>mí jé, .</i>		head"

This *Ifá* verse divides the concept of *Orí* into two major aspects; ***Orí Ọ̀de* (Outer Head)**: This refers to the physical head, which everyone can see. It symbolizes a person's outward appearance and how they are perceived in society; ***Orí Inú* (Inner Head)**: This is the spiritual or metaphysical aspect of the head, representing an individual's inner essence and destiny. It is the part that connects a person to their Creator (*Olódùmarè*) and the spiritual realm.

## 6. The Significance of Headdresses in Yorùbá Culture: A Focus on Widowhood and Marital Traditions.

In the Yorùbá cultural framework, the head (*orí*) is esteemed as the most hallowed component of the human anatomy, representing an individual's fate and spiritual affiliation (Drewal & Drewal, 1983:45). The act of adorning the head with a headdress serves as a means of venerating this spiritual essence. Within the context of widowhood,

this belief is expressed through the ceremonial use of caps to ascertain the widow's remarriage within her deceased husband's family. Following the demise of her spouse, the widow is bestowed with caps from his male kin, predominantly his brothers. Upon being apprised of the ownership of each cap, she selects one, and the selected owner assumes the role of her new husband. This tradition fulfills various cultural, ethical, and spiritual functions.

To begin with, this custom safeguards the widow's dignity and averts societal ostracism. In Yorùbá tradition, widows can be susceptible to allegations of immorality or witchcraft (*Àjé*, ) should they engage in unregulated liaisons or choose to remain single (Fasoranti & Aruna, 2007: 53-73). By entering into a union with a member of her deceased husband's family, the widow preserves her status within both the household and the community, thereby protecting herself from marginalization and ensuring her conduct aligns with societal norms. This ritual exemplifies the collective obligation of the family to provide for her, reinforcing the Yorùbá principle of communal interdependence.

Moreover, this practice sustains familial cohesion and continuity. In Yorùbá society, marriage is perceived as a joining of families rather than merely individuals (Matory, 1994:21-34). When a widow remarries within her late husband's lineage, the familial ties are maintained, and the wellbeing of any progeny from the former marriage is assured. This methodology guarantees the preservation of property and inheritance rights, thereby circumventing disputes and promoting stability within the extended family structure. Additionally, the ritual encompasses spiritual connotations. The employment of caps signifies the sanctity of the head, regarded as the locus of destiny and spiritual alignment (Abiodun, 1994:68-78). The act of selecting a cap represents the widow's acceptance of a new protector and mentor, an individual who will assist her in both her spiritual and earthly endeavours. Yorùbá cosmology underscores the importance of equilibrium and order, wherein inappropriate relationships are perceived to disrupt ancestral blessings and invite misfortune (Peel, 2002:66). This methodical approach to remarriage adheres to the spiritual doctrines of the community, fostering harmony between the physical and metaphysical spheres.

Furthermore, the cap itself encompasses multiple layers of significance. Within Yorùbá tradition, the *Filà* (headdresses) embody authority, responsibility, and identity (Akintoye, 2010:102-104). By presenting their caps, the late husband's brothers symbolically convey their readiness to undertake the responsibility of caring for the widow. The process of selecting a *filà* (headdress) illustrates the dynamics between individual autonomy and collective obligation, which are central to Yorùbá cultural practices. The chosen *filà* (headdress) signify not only the new marital connection but also the transfer of social and familial duties to the designated individual. This practice further underscores the Yorùbá's pragmatic approach to navigating intricate life transitions. Widowhood represents a phase of emotional and social turbulence, and the structured nature of this ritual offers clarity and guidance. By engaging the extended family, the community ensures that the widow does not experience isolation or vulnerability but remains integrated within a framework that prioritizes her welfare while preserving the integrity of the familial unit (Adeyanju & Ogungbamila, 2013: 341–349).

## 7. Headdresses in Rituals and Ceremonies

In Yorùbá religious and royal traditions, headdresses hold profound symbolic and spiritual significance,

especially in contexts that highlight authority and divine alignment. The *adé* (crown) often crafted with beads or cowries, stands out as a typical symbol of a king's sacred role. It embodies the duality of his position as both a political leader and a spiritual intermediary. The *adé* (crown) is believed to house mystical powers that link the king to the ancestors, deities (*Òrìṣà*) and the cosmos. To protect the sanctity of this power, the crown is often adorned with a veil, which shields onlookers from its sacred energy and emphasizes its divine nature. This veil signifies that the power emanating from the crown is not meant to be seen or experienced casually, as it represents the king's spiritual potency. This profound significance of the *adé* explains why many candidates compete fiercely for kingship in Yorùbá land. Beyond political authority, becoming a king signifies access to a revered spiritual position, where the *adé* serves as a conduit to the divine. The crown not only legitimizes the king's rule but also binds him to the community's spiritual well-being, making the role of kingship highly coveted. Traditional ceremonies in Yorùbá land are inseparable from ritual practices, where the presence of the king, adorned with his *adé*, is indispensable. Festivals such as *Ìṣeṣe* Day, *Òṣun* *Òṣogbo* in *Osogbo*, *Agemo* in *Ijebu* and *Remo*, *Òkè* *Ìbàdàn* in *Ibadan*, *Èdí* in *Ile-Ife*, *Ògún* festivals in *Ekiti* and *Ondo*, *Ègúngún* festivals, and the *World Ifá Festival* in *Ile-Ife* all require the active participation of the king. At these events, the king, with his crown firmly positioned, leads prayers for the community, invoking blessings, protection, and prosperity. The crown, in this context, represents not only his authority but also his role as a spiritual custodian of his people (Dada O.O. 2024).

In addition to the king, other significant figures such as *Báálẹ̀s*, chiefs, and priests wear their designated headdresses during these rituals as assigned by the *Ọ̀ba*. Each headdress signifies the wearer's rank, responsibility, and connection to the divine. For instance, a priest's headdress often symbolizes their alignment with a specific deity, while a chief's cap/headdresses represent their allegiance to the king and their role in governance. These headdresses unify the hierarchy and underscore the communal and spiritual order within Yorùbá society. While headdresses in rituals are deeply symbolic, there are also occasions where they are embraced primarily for aesthetic and cultural purposes. Events such as the *Ọ̀júdẹ̀ Ọ̀ba* festival, naming ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, and funerals showcase the artistic and fashionable aspect of headdresses. In these contexts, *gẹ̀lẹ̀* (head wrappers) and *filà* (caps/headdresses) are styled in elaborate designs to reflect the celebratory mood. Although their primary function in such settings may not be spiritual, they still convey identity, pride, and cultural heritage. The significance of headdresses in Yorùbá ceremonies lies in their ability to merge the sacred with the social, the divine with the aesthetic. Whether used in royal rituals to invoke divine authority or in cultural celebrations to express identity and beauty, headdresses are a cornerstone of Yorùbá traditions. They serve as powerful symbols of continuity, connecting the present to the ancestral past and ensuring that cultural values remain vibrant and respected.

## 8. The Spiritual Protection and Symbolism of headdresses

Headdresses are also thought to protect the *Orí* from negative spiritual influences. By covering the head, individuals shield their essence from harm and enhance their connection to the divine. The materials, patterns, and colors of the headdress often carry spiritual meanings,

further emphasizing the wearer's identity and purpose. Akanji (2023) supported this assertion with an *Ifá* verse from *Ò wó, nrin* *Ògúndá* that goes thus;

<i>Agbégbé èsín momibo,</i>	“We have heard from them last year”
<i>Agbègbè èsín momibo,</i>	“We also heard from them last year”
<i>Ò kànkàn lá o m̀igbo,</i> <i>wo, n kári</i>	“We shall be hearing from then one after the other”
<i>Á dífá fún Abíkúsò, gbò</i>	“Cast divination for Abikusogbo”
<i>Tí ns, e o, mo, bíbí inú</i> <i>Agbo, nmirègún</i>	“The child of Agbonmiregun”
<i>Wó, n ní kó, rúbo, làiníkú</i> <i>ara re,</i>	“Who was asked to offer sacrifice to prevent death”
<i>Njé, oriri ni ikú ó pa o</i>	“Now, it is Oriri that death will kill”
<i>Ikú ò ní pa o, mo, ò, pè,</i>	“Death will not kill the child of Ope (palm tree)”
<i>Oriri ni ikú ó pa</i>	“It is Oriri that death will kill”

This *Ifá* verse narrates a story of *Abíkúsò, gbò* the son of *Àgbo, nmirègún*, who have been seeing the sign of death, through bad dreams and sickness, he went to consult *Ifá* and he was told to make sacrifice, and importantly, the sacrifice will be done in his cap/headdress instead of calabash, immediately after the sacrifice, he was told to put in the cap one *è, ko*, -solid pap and sleep with the cap on his head. In the middle of the night while *Abíkúsò, gbò* was sleeping, *Ikú*-death came to kill *Abíkúsò, gbò* with *kùmò*, -club; *Ikú* did not hesitate to hit *Abíkúsò, gbò*'s head with the *kùmò*, -club. The *è, ko*, -solid pap in the cap spilled out of the cap, and *Ikú*-death laughed and left, thinking it was the brain that spilled out of the skull. That was how *Abíkúsò, gbò* escaped death with the help of sacrifice made with his cap.

In Yorùbá culture, the head is not just a body part but a representation of one's entire being. Respecting the *Orí* through headdresses therefore, reflects a deep understanding of personal and communal identity. Whether during daily life, festivals, or spiritual ceremonies, the way the head is adorned. This belief system highlights the Yorùbá people's holistic view of life, where physical, spiritual, and social aspects are interconnected. It also explains why Yorùbá culture places such great importance on preserving and celebrating traditions related to the *Orí* and headdress, ensuring that these symbols continue to honour the sacredness of human existence as explained by *Toluwani* (2024), an informant.

## 9. The Syncretism of Headdresses in Traditional Herbal Practices

In Yorùbá herbalism, headdresses, particularly caps, hold a unique and profound role as instruments of medicinal and spiritual power. This practice underscores the Yorùbá worldview, which sees no strict division between the physical and metaphysical realms. Objects like caps are believed to carry not only functional but also symbolic and spiritual significance, serving as vessels through which Yorùbá traditional medical practitioners channel energy, invokes divine intervention, and executes healing. A central belief in Yorùbá herbalism is that the spoken word, when combined with intent and spiritual force, carries transformative power. This is especially evident in the use of caps as medicine. The herbalists, deeply knowledgeable

in the art of incantations (*ògèdè*, *o fo`* or *e se, -Ifá*), recites carefully crafted words into the cap, imbuing it with specific spiritual energy. For instance, to cure headache, an herbalist may chant incantations into a cap and then instruct the patient to wear it or place it lightly on his head. Babaláwo Ifájuwon (2024) supports this with an incantation (Ifá verse) from Èjìogbè;

<i>...T' awo ni á lé o</i>	"...That of the initiate shall lead"
<i>Tawo ni á lékè</i>	"That of the initiate shall be on top"
<i>Ojú oró nì n' lékè omi</i>	"Ojuoro ( <i>Pistia stratiotes</i> ) is always on top of the pond"
<i>Tawo ni á lé o</i>	"That of the initiate shall lead"
<i>Tawo ni á lékè</i>	"That of the initiate shall be on top"
<i>Òs, ìbàtà nì n' lékè odò</i>	"Osibata ( <i>Nymphaea lotus</i> ) is always on top of the lake"
<i>Tawo ni á lé o</i>	"That of the initiate shall lead"
<i>Tawo ni á lékè</i>	"That of the initiate shall be on top"
<i>Filà nì n' lékè orí</i>	"It is cap that always lead the head"
<i>Tawo ni á lé o</i>	"That of the initiate shall lead"
<i>Tawo ni á lékè</i>	"That of the initiate shall be on top"
<i>Bí obìnrin ró igba as o,</i>	"If a woman ties two hundred clothes,"
<i>Gèlè nì n' lékè rẹ̀,</i>	"It is head tie that always lead"
<i>Tawo ni á lé o</i>	"That of the initiate shall lead"
<i>Tawo ni á lékè</i>	"That of the initiate shall be on top"
<i>Èjìogbè nì n' lékè Ifá</i>	"It is Ejiogbe that always lead Ifá"
<i>Tawo ni á lé o</i>	"That of the initiate shall lead"
<i>Tawo ni á lékè.</i>	"That of the initiate shall be on top"

The spoken words are believed to harmonize the physical and spiritual energies, bringing relief to the afflicted area. This practice reflects the Yorùbá understanding of health as a balance between the body, mind, and spirit. Caps are also used to ease childbirth, a process laden with both physical and spiritual challenges. A Yorùbá herbalist may prepare a cap infused with medicinal herbs or spiritual energy through incantations, which the expectant mother wears or holds during labour. This practice is believed to reduce pain, ensure safe delivery and protect the mother and child from malevolent forces. The cap thus, becomes more than an accessory; it acts as a conduit for divine blessings.

In the economic sphere, caps can also function as a market booster. Through incantations and rituals, a cap is imbued with energies meant to attract customers and ensure successful transactions. A trader might wear such a cap or keep it close to their wares, believing it will enhance their charisma, draw favourable attention and create an aura of prosperity. This practice illustrates the Yorùbá belief in the interconnectedness of material success and spiritual alignment as enlightened by Aringbangba (2024) in a telephone chat. Beyond personal and economic uses, caps are also employed in the treatment of psychosomatic and organismic diseases. These conditions, often perceived as stemming from disruptions in spiritual equilibrium that requires holistic healing methods. The herbalist, through incantations into a cap, seeks to realign the patient's spiritual and physical states, addressing the root causes of their ailments. The cap is then worn by the patient,

symbolizing a restoration of harmony and a shield against further disruptions.

## CONCLUSION

Yorùbá traditional headdresses are not merely ornamental but serve as deeply encoded cultural texts each style, fabric, and form carrying embedded narratives of identity, hierarchy, gender, and spirituality. These adornments function concurrently as visual language and cultural memory, preserving ancestral wisdom while communicating social belonging and spiritual roles. Their continued relevance, even in an age of digital media and global fashion trends, speaks to their adaptive strength and symbolic depth. From the sacred beaded crowns of kings to the elegantly tied *gèlè* of women, these headpieces are vessels of meaning that speak to both individual identity and collective heritage. More than offering a descriptive account, this paper contributes to the theoretical discourse in cultural studies by framing Yorùbá headdresses as an evolving grammar of fashion consciousness where aesthetics, spirituality, and social power intersect. It challenges the binary that separates tradition from modernity by showing how traditional fashion items like headdresses are not static relics but dynamic tools of cultural negotiation. In doing so, it expands our understanding of fashion not only as personal expression or visual culture, but as a space of cultural resilience, identity formation, and theoretical insight into how communities navigate continuity and change. This work, therefore, offers a culturally grounded contribution to the theorization of indigenous fashion consciousness within global cultural studies.

## REFERENCES

- Abiodun, R. (1994). *Understanding Yorùbá art and aesthetics: The concept of Àṣẹ*. *African Arts*, 27(3), 68–78.
- Abiodun, R. (2014). *Yorùbá art and language: Seeking the African in African art*. Cambridge University Press.
- Adegbite, O. (2023). Cultural visibility in Afrobeat: Yorùbá aesthetics in the age of global music. *Journal of African Popular Culture*, 8(1), 77–93.
- Adeoye, C. L. (1979). *Àṣà àti Ìṣe Yorùbá*. Oxford University Press.
- Adepegba, C. O. (1991). *Yorùbá traditional art and its philosophy*. University Press.
- Adesokan, O. (2021). Diasporic style: Yorùbá adornment and the politics of cultural continuity. *African Studies Review*, 64(4), 534–552.
- Adeyanju, C. T., & Ogungbamila, B. (2013). Influences of widowhood cultural practices, values, and beliefs on the psychosocial well-being of bereaved women in South-Western Nigeria. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 24(4), 341–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659613491050>
- Akinrinade, I., & Olaniyan, T. (2020). Tradition in flux: Fashion, youth identity and the globalization of Yorùbá aesthetics. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 38(1), 23–39.
- Akinsola, B. (2022). Ancestral remixing: Contemporary Yorùbá designers and the politics of style. *Fashion*

- Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 26(2), 157–176.
- Drewal, H. J., & Drewal, M. T. (1983). *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀: Art and female power among the Yorùbá*. Indiana University Press.
- Drewal, H. J., Pemberton, J., & Abiodun, R. (1989). *Yorùbá: Nine centuries of African art and thought*. Harry N. Abrams.
- Fasoranti, O. O., & Aruna, J. O. (2007). A cross-cultural comparison of practices relating to widowhood and widow-inheritance among the Igbo and Yorùbá in Nigeria. *Journal of World Anthropology: Occasional Papers*, 3(2), 53–73.
- Kelani, T. (Director). (2002). *Agogo Èèwò* [Film]. Mainframe Productions.
- Lawal, B. (1996). Àwòrán: Representing the self and its metaphysical other in Yorùbá art. *The Art Bulletin*, 78(3), 511–544.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.1996.10792078>
- Lawal, B. (1996). The Gelede spectacle: Art, gender, and social harmony in an African culture. *African Arts*, 29(3), 511–544.
- Matory, J. L. (1994). *Sex and the empire that is no more: Gender and the politics of metaphor in Oyo Yorùbá religion*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Ogundipe, M. (1985). African women, culture and another development. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 1(1), 12–21.
- Oludare, J., & Ogunyemi, A. (2018). Globalization and cultural identity: The Nigerian youth and the dynamics of traditional attire. *Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, 3(3), 45–60.
- Oyenuga, O. (2019). Digital gẹ̀lẹ̀: Yorùbá female identity and Instagram aesthetics. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 35.
- Oyewole, S. O. (2003). Cultural significance of Yorùbá headdresses. *Nigerian Journal of Indigenous Knowledge and Development Studies*, 5(2), 41–55.
- Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Peel, J. D. Y. (2002). *Religious encounter and the making of the Yorùbá*. Indiana University Press.
- Ajibare, A. (2024, September 12). *Personal interview*. (Unpublished)
- Ayomide, T. (2024, October 15). *Personal interview*. (Unpublished)
- Babaláwo Ifájuwon. (2024, October 10). *Personal interview*. (Unpublished)
- Babaláwo Ifájuwon. (2024, November 21). *Telephone interview*. (Unpublished)
- Babatunde, O. (2024, October 10). *Personal interview*. (Unpublished)
- Dada, O. O. (2024, October 15). *Telephone interview*. The Head of Ọbatala Worshipers Worldwide and the Obalesun of Ile-Ife. (Unpublished)
- Ogundepo, T. (2024). *Personal interview*. Yorùbá hunter and traditionalist. (Unpublished)
- Unnamed Informant. (2024). *Telephone conversation with Arín gbágbà*. (Unpublished)