

THE ETHICS OF ASO-EBI CULTURE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Aso-ebi culture originated from the Yorubas. The original idea of aso-ebi was for the easy identification of family members during a landmark event. It was also meant to serve as a means of reinforcing social identity and solidarity among group members. The culture has gained acceptance and spread across other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Despite the growing acceptance of aso-ebi, there are some practices that have ravaged it of recent, thereby questioning its relevance. The study, therefore, examine ethical issues relating to aso-ebi culture in Nigeria. The study administered questionnaires to 100 respondents in Lagos, Nigeria. A descriptive analysis was carried out using SPSS, and it was found that aso-ebi culture had lost its original purpose. Instead of being a culture of solidarity, it has metamorphosed to serve as a medium of social strive, display of affluence, and discrimination against people, who are either unwilling or unable to buy aso-ebi.

Keywords: Ethics, Aso-ebi, Culture, Yorubas, Nigeria

1 Introduction

Aso-ebi is a unique fabric worn in special ceremonies by family members and friends to symbolize unity and support. Culturally, it originated from the 'Yorubas' in the Western part of Nigeria. It was meant primarily to give support to anyone, who had an event such as wedding, birthday, burial or any landmark anniversary that was celebrated. Aso in Yoruba means cloth and ebi means family members when both words are put together, aso-ebi, it translates to family cloth (Ajani, 2012:110). During such celebration members of the family and a few close friends would wear the aso-ebi, which is the same fabric made into either the same or different designs as the celebrant directs. The original idea of aso-ebi was for the easy identification of family members.

However, the culture of adoring aso-ebi has now been extended to include friends, acquaintances, and work colleagues. It has also been adopted by people from other parts of Nigeria. In most ceremonies in recent time, the majority of attendees dress in aso-ebi, which has become a status symbol in celebrations such as weddings, social anniversaries and burials. The culture of aso-ebi has also spread across the Igbos, Hausas and other ethnic groups in Nigeria. It has also gained wider acceptance in another part of West Africa countries such as Ghana, Gambia and Liberia.

Despite the growing acceptance of aso-ebi and its associated cultural practices, there are some practices that have ravaged it of recent, thereby questioning its relevance. For example, aso-ebi is now seen as a means of raising fund, as attendees are expected to purchase the materials at a price higher than the cost price of the material. Celebrants source for the aso-ebi material of their taste, add a margin of 20-50% and distribute them amongst families and friends to buy. Families and friends of celebrant buy these materials to show their support even though they did not plan to attend. Most people buy the materials in order not to offend their friends while some buy to escape victimization, especially if the celebrate was one's superior in office. Some people also buy the aso-ebi materials in order not to be left out or suffer any form of discrimination at the event. The reason is that attendees, who are not wearing aso-ebi, are often treated differently. People have been known to borrow money to pay for aso-ebi; others have used money meant for their families' upkeep while others compel their spouses to buy them. There have also been instances of friction in families as a result of the financial pressure of buying aso-ebi.

Despite this prevailing circumstance, there is a lack of scholarly research on ethical issues relating to aso-ebi and its associated cultural practices in Nigeria. This study, therefore, examines ethical issues relating to aso-ebi culture in Nigeria. It also seeks to understand if people suffer any form of emotional, social, or economic pressure, due to aso-ebi culture. This paper is structured into six sections. The first section is this part that introduced the topic. The second section is the literature review. The third part explains the methodology adopted for the study while the fourth section presents the results, as well as discussions. The fifth section is the conclusions and recommendations while the last section is the limitations of the study.

2 Literature Review

The Nigerian society is known for her multi-cultural diversity (Jekayinfa, 2002; Edewor et al., 2014). Different ethnic groups have different cultural beliefs and behaviours, as well as different attitudes towards celebrations. The Yorubas attach so much importance to aso-ebi and love to identify with celebrants through their mode of dressing at special events and most people from other parts of the country have taken to this lifestyle.

According to Familusi (2010) aso-ebi is a means through which attendees identify with the celebrant and also demonstrate that they are proud of the celebrant thereby giving the celebrant a sense of esteem. Familusi further stated that aso-ebi create a system of mutual obligation in the sense that a person, who purchases an aso-ebi material when someone is marking an event expect the celebrant to reciprocate when he or she is celebrating an occasion. Furthermore, Familusi stated that aso-ebi is socially significant as it serves as a leveler of status in a ceremony even though it temporal. Sofola (1978) stated that aso-ebi culture is socially significant as it bridges the gap between persons of higher status and those of lower ones in an occasion. The reason according to him is that all wearers of aso-ebi are equal at least to the occasion in which aso-ebi is worn. Ajani (2012) stated that aso-ebi culture, among the Yorubas and Nigerians at large, is a means of strengthening social identity and solidarity among group members.

Aso-ebi culture, which emanated from the Yorubas, has gained acceptance in other ethnic groups in Nigeria and is seen more as a Nigerian culture than as a Yoruba cultural phenomenon (Nwafor, 2011). According to Ajani (2012:111), aso-ebi is increasingly gaining acceptance in the Nigerian society consequence for three main reasons: first, Nigerians have a positive attitude towards associational culture and social life. More so, many rely on these associations as substitutes for state institutions and protection. The second reason is the perceived need to build a social identity and social relations. The third reason is due to the thriving urban life that facilitates the growing trend of the culture beyond the Yoruba land.

Despite the general acceptance, the current trend and pattern of aso-ebi culture has continued to undermine the values of the long age practice of solidarity and social integration. For example, the role of aso-ebi as a social leveler is gradual been defeated. There could be five aso-ebi in a single party while some wear cheap Ankara fabrics other are gorgeously dressed in another set of expensive fabrics thereby creating a sense of discrimination between the rich and the poor. According to Familusi (2010) one of the major distinguishing characteristics of Africa is the spirit of oneness, a serious concern for others and fraternity. However, aso-ebi of recent causes some form of segregation between those who are wearing them in an event and those who cannot afford them.

It is also pertinent to assert that exploitation has also become a feature of aso-ebi culture in recent time. Therefore, the values attached to it have been lost to personal gains accruing to celebrants. It has become the norm for celebrants to inflate the price of any chosen aso-ebi material by up to fifty percent. It implies that such a material would cost more than the original amount it is sold on the open market. In the Yoruba tradition, people believe in providing assistance either financial or otherwise to members of their social group whenever there is a call for celebration (Dopamu, 2010). The Yorubas like most African ethnic groups is communal and believes in the principle of collective responsibility. Consequently, celebrants take advantage of this tradition to impose aso-ebi on families, relations, and friends at exorbitant prices.

Aso-ebi culture also tends to breed unhealthy rivalry particularly in polygamous families (Familusi, 2010). This rivalry, according to Familusi, usually arises when a particular family intends to outfit the other. Familusi further stated that competition of this nature engenders hatred and intra-family acrimony, which could take dangerous dimension in the form of using charm against each other.

The foregoing unethical practices signal the fact that the original purpose of aso-ebi culture, particularly its sociological relevance, has been seriously ravaged. This is why the study seeks to examine the ethical issues surrounding aso-ebi culture and its social, moral, financial, and psychological effects on Nigerians.

3 Methodology

3.1 Population

The study was conducted in Lagos state, the South-Western part of Nigeria. Lagos state was chosen for this study because aso-ebi culture originated from the Yorubas, which dominates the South-Western part of the country. Lagos state was also chosen because it has the highest population that is over 5% of the national estimate, and it is where aso-ebi culture is predominant. Furthermore, Lagos state population growth rate is 8%, which has resulted in capturing about 37% of Nigeria's urban population (Odebiyi, 2010).

3.2 Sample

The study administered structured questionnaires that consist of questions on aso-ebi culture to 100 respondents that were traced to different areas and events in Lagos. The data collected from the 100 respondents were subjected to descriptive and inferential statistical analyses using SPSS 20.

4 Results and Discussions

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Male	40	40
Female	60	60
Total	100	100

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 1 depicts the gender ratio of the respondents. The result shows that the 100 respondents were made up of 40% of males and 60% of females.

Table 2: Marital Status of Respondents

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Single	39	39
Married	57	57
Divorced	0	0
Separated	4	4
Total	100	100

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 2 indicates that 39% of the respondents were single, while 57% were married. The outcome further connotes that none of the respondents is divorced. However, the result indicates that 4% of the respondents were separated. This result ultimately implies that the majority of the respondents were married.

Table 3: Age Limit of Respondents

<i>Age Limit</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
20-30 Years	37	37
30-40 Years	39	39
40-50 Years	15	15
Over 50 years	9	9
Total	100	100

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 3 shows that 37% of the respondents fall within the age limit of 20 and 30 years; 39% fall within the range of 30 and 40 years; 15% are between 40 and 50 years; and 9% are above 50 years of age. This outcome implies that the majority of the respondents were between the age of 30 and 40 years. A cursory look at the table reveals that virtually all the age categories were included except the minors, who fall below 18 years.

Table 4: Financial Status of Respondents

<i>Financial Status</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Poor	6	6
Below Average	11	11
Average	57	57
Above Average	16	16
Very comfortable	10	10
Total	100	100

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 4 reveals that 6% of the respondents are poor, 11% are below average; 57% are average, 16% are above average while 10% are very comfortable. This outcome implies that the majority of Nigerians are average income earners.

Table 5: Budgeted Expenditure on Aso-ebi

<i>Proposed Expenditure on Aso-ebi</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
N5,000-N10,000	78	78%
N10,000-20,000	7	7%
N20,000-50,000	13	13%
N50,000-100,000	2	2%
Above N100,000	0	0
Total	100	100

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 5 depicts the outcome of the proportion of income the respondents are willing to spend on the purchase of aso-ebi. The result shows that 78% of the respondents is willing to spend between 5,000 and 10,000 NGN (25.16 and 50.32 USD); 7% is willing to spend between 10,000 and 20,000 NGN (50.32 and 100.65 USD); 13% is willing to spend between 20,000 and 50,000 NGN (100.65 and 251.62 USD); and 2% is willing to spend between 50,000 and 100,000 NGN (251.62 and 503.23 USD). This outcome simply implies that the majority of Nigerians are willing to spend between 5,000 and 10,000 NGN (25.16 and 50.32 USD) on aso-ebi.

Table 6: Actual Expenditure on Aso-ebi

<i>Amount Spent</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
N5,000-N10,000	57	57%
N10,000-20,000	18	18%
N20,000-50,000	11	11%
N50,000-100,000	8	8%
Above N100,000	8	6%
Total	100	100

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 6 reveals the outcome of the proportion of income the respondents spent on aso-ebi. The result indicates that 57% of the respondents spent between 5,000 and 10,000 NGN (25.16 and 50.32 USD) on aso-ebi as against 78% of the respondents, who proposed to spend between the range of 5,000 and 10,000 NGN (Please refer to Table 5). This result implies that the remaining percentage (i.e. 21%) of the respondents has most probably exceeded their budgets. The result also indicates that 18% of the respondents spent between 10,000 and 20,000 NGN (50.32 and 100.65 USD) on aso-ebi as against the 7% of respondents, who proposed spending between 10,000 and 20,000 NGN (See Table 5). Furthermore, the outcome shows that 8% of the respondents spent between 50,000 and 100,000 NGN (251.62 and 503.23 USD) on aso-ebi as against the 2% of respondents, which proposed spending between 50,000 and 100,000 NGN. Finally, the result depicts that 6% of the respondents

spent over 100,000 NGN (503.23 USD) on aso-ebi meanwhile; none was willing to spend such amount on aso-ebi (see Table 5). The implication of these results signals the fact that an average Nigerian spends a significant proportion of his or her income on aso-ebi, which is far above his or her budget. This is because people are often compelled to buy the aso-ebi materials. The result further lend credence to the assertion of Dopamu (2010), who stated that the Yoruba tradition believe in providing assistance either financial or otherwise to members of their social group whenever there is call for celebration.

Table 7: Moral Responses

<i>Moral Responses</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>ID</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
1. Would you buy an aso-ebi, for every occasion that demands you to wear one?	29%	39%	7%	12%	13%
2. The traditional reasons why aso-ebi is in use for events have been violated.	13%	22%	15%	25%	25%
3. Buying aso-ebi gives me emotional satisfaction.	29%	37%	13%	13%	8%
4. The activities associate with the selling and buying of aso-ebi have been abused.	12%	17%	10%	28%	33%
5. Do you buy it to please the celebrant?	19%	24%	6%	34%	17%
6. To have a befitting ceremony we must sell aso-ebi to friends /family.	31%	26%	9%	18%	16%
7. If you don't buy aso-ebi, does this mean you do not love the celebrant?	53%	35%	6%	4%	2%
8. I would not attend a ceremony where those invited are wearing aso-ebi and I'm not.	43%	34%	6%	8%	9%
9. I buy aso-ebi to avoid being discriminated at event.	31%	26%	9%	20%	14%
10. Do you derive joy/satisfaction in wearing aso-ebi?	19%	21%	22%	24%	14%
11. Do you accept the view that aso-ebi should be stopped because it is exploitative?	19%	23%	20%	20%	18%

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 7 depicts the moral responses on the issue relating to aso-ebi culture. The outcome shows that 68% of the respondents are not willing to buy aso-ebi in occasions that demand the wearing of aso-ebi; 50% of the respondents subscribed that the traditional purpose of aso-ebi has been violated. In addition, the result also reveals that 66% of the respondents do not agree that aso-ebi yield emotional satisfaction; 61% of the respondents subscribed that the activities involved in the sales and the purpose of aso-ebi have been abused. Furthermore, the result also indicates that 51% subscribed that they buy aso-ebi with the purpose of pleasing celebrant. These findings tend to lend credence to the assertion by Familusi (2010) that aso-ebi is a means through which attendees identify with the celebrant and also demonstrate that that they are proud of the celebrant thereby giving the celebrant a sense of esteem. The outcome also shows that 57% of the respondents do not subscribe to the sales of aso-ebi before a ceremony could be befitting. In the same vein, 88% of the respondents do not support the assertion that the non-purchase of aso-ebi is an indication that one does not love the celebrant. This outcome is, however, contrary to the norms and tradition of the Yorubas, who believe the wearing of aso-ebi in an event, symbolizes social identity and solidarity with the celebrant (Ajani, 2012). The result further reveals that 34% of the respondents subscribed that aso-ebi is purchased simply to avoid discriminations in events. Finally, the outcome of the study indicates that 42% of the respondents were of the opinion that aso-ebi should not be stopped simply because it is used as a mean of exploiting attendees while 38% of the respondent were of the view that it should be stopped. 20% of the respondents were indifference as regards the view if the aso-ebi should be stopped. The implication of this result is that aso-ebi is increasingly seen as a mean of exploitation rather than its original purpose of serving as a mean of social identity and solidarity.

Table 8: Financial Responses

<i>financial Responses</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>ID</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
1. Buying aso-ebi has economic value for the buyers.	28%	26%	13%	20%	13%
3. I will buy aso-ebi again at any cost.	46%	38%	5%	5%	6%
4. I will borrow money to buy aso-ebi when I need it?	63%	25%	2%	5%	5%
5. Not wearing aso-ebi doesn't mean I cannot afford it.	15%	11%	2%	28%	44%
6. Do you have a special budget for aso-ebi?	46%	32%	11%	6%	5%
7. Would you use the money for family's upkeep to buy aso-ebi?	68%	21%	2%	4%	5%

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 8 shows the financial responses on the issue relating to aso-ebi. The result shows that 54% of the respondents were of the view that aso-ebi do not have economic value; 84% of the respondents do not subscribe to the purchase aso-ebi at any cost while 11% of the respondents subscribed that they can buy aso-ebi at any cost. The outcome further indicates that 88% of the respondents were of the view that they cannot borrow money to buy aso-ebi while 10% were of the view that they can go as far as borrowing to buy aso-ebi. This lend credence to the earlier assertion of this study that, some Nigerians can do anything, including giving up the children's school fees to buy aso-ebi. The outcome of the study also depicts that 78% of the respondents stated that they do not have a budgetary allocation for aso-ebi, while just 11% of the respondents claimed they did. It implies that the purchase of aso-ebi constitute a financial strain since most Nigerians do not have a budgetary allocation for it. Finally, the result indicates that 9% of the respondents stated that money meant for the family upkeep could be diverted to the purchase of aso-ebi.

Table 9: Social Responses

<i>Social Responses</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>ID</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
1. Aso-ebi is vital to wedding ceremonies	20%	25%	11%	27%	17%
2. Aso-ebi is important to funeral ceremonies	17%	28%	12%	24%	19%
3. Aso-ebi is relevant to birthday parties.	31%	36%	16%	5%	12%
4. It is necessary for union meeting/traditional gatherings.	18%	25%	15%	25%	17%
5. Aso-ebi makes event elegant/fulfilling.	10%	17%	15%	42%	16%
6. Aso-ebi gives me a sense of belonging at events.	13%	32%	12%	30%	13%
7. The use of aso-ebi at occasions shows unity.	18%	27%	10%	30%	15%
8. It gives me a unique integrity.	19%	35%	17%	15%	14%

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

Table 9 reveals that 45% of the respondents were of the view that aso-ebi is not vital for wedding ceremony, while 44% of the respondents subscribed that aso-ebi is vital for ceremony; 45% of the respondents do not subscribe to the important of aso-ebi for a funeral ceremony, while 43% of the respondents subscribed to the use of aso-ebi in funeral ceremonies. Furthermore, the result depicts that 43% of the respondents were of the opinion that the use of aso-ebi in union meeting and traditional gathering is unnecessary, while 42% affirmed the important of aso-ebi in union meetings and traditional gatherings. The outcome further shows that 45% of the respondents were of the view that that aso-ebi do not give a sense of belongings, while 43% subscribed to the view that it does give a sense of belonging. Finally, the outcome shows that 45% of the respondents do not subscribe to the view that aso-ebi shows unity in events while 45% subscribed that it does show unity in events. It could be inferred from the preceding results that the purpose of aso-ebi is fast losing its original purpose as a mean of social identity and solidarity among the Yorubas and in other ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Table 10: Psychological Responses

<i>Psychological Responses</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>ID</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>SA</i>
1. Events would not be colourful without people wearing aso-ebi.	21%	39%	6%	17%	17%
2. Celebrants ensure that souvenirs are given to only those who wear aso-ebi.	26%	27%	7%	29%	11%
3. Buying aso-ebi from friends/family is a way to show affection.	16%	34%	5%	33%	12%
4. I am happy to support a friend/family by buying aso-ebi.	9%	26%	6%	44%	15%
5. There is no restriction to the number of times I buy aso-ebi annually.	26%	30%	13%	22%	9%
6. Does it add any value to your well-being?	38%	36%	11%	10%	5%
7. Is it proper for celebrants to inflate the price of aso-ebi?	41%	31%	13%	11%	4%
8. Do you buy out of pressure?	43%	24%	11%	18%	4%
9. Will you use aso-ebi to raise money when you have the course to celebrate?	38%	30%	10%	16%	6%

Source: Authors' Field Work, 2015

***NOTE:** SD- Strongly Disagree, D- Disagree, ID- Indifference, A- Agree, SA- Strongly Agree.

Table 10 shows that the majority of the respondents (i.e. 60%) were of the perception that events could be colourful without aso-ebi; this again depicts the less preference for aso-ebi. The result also indicates that 45% of the respondents subscribed to the view that buying aso-ebi from friend/family is a way of showing affection; 59% of the respondents were of the perception that buying aso-ebi is a means of supporting the celebrants. This outcome tends to lend credence to the assertion by Familusi (2010). Furthermore, the result shows that 67% of the respondents do not give to pressure in buying aso-ebi; however, 22% stated that they yield to pressure in buying aso-ebi. This result implies that some Nigerians buy aso-ebi out of pressure. Also, the result depicts that 68% of the respondents do not subscribe to the course of using aso-ebi to raise money for events.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The cultures of aso-ebi seem to have lost its original purpose. Instead of being a culture of solidarity, the culture has metamorphosed to serve as a medium of social strive, display of affluence, and discrimination against people, who are either unwilling or unable to buy aso-ebi. The thoughts shared by the respondents seem to have strong implications of moral negligence, social and psychological pressure. It is unethical to discriminate against any person in ceremonies for the singular reason of not wearing aso-ebi. Discrimination often causes psychological harm to people discriminated against, and no one wants to experience it. Hence, people are willing to go out of their way to buy the aso-ebi even when they do not need them. The effect of this is that many people have many clothes that they do not need in their wardrobes yet there are many social needs in the country that could have been solved with the money spent on clothes that are not needed. This research work can be a good tool for people to examine their approach to aso-ebi and celebrations. Being aware of some of the problems identified above, celebrants can decide to choose colours for their events and request that friends wear any clothes they already have instead of using aso-ebi. Some people are already doing that. Other prescriptions could be to limit the adornment of aso-ebi to only the immediate family members, to use very simple and affordable materials or to use only the head tie as the aso-ebi. No doubt aso-ebi can add some colour to events as some respondents have identified, it is important that celebrants pay attention to the concerns many people are raising about the growing culture.

Nigerians should go back to the traditional purpose of aso-ebi that is majorly for identification of the family members of celebrants in social events. The sales of aso-ebi should solely be seen as a way of 'identification' and not a medium of raising funds for the purpose of the events. The sharing of gifts at events on the basis of aso-ebi should be abolished because such is capable of leaving an adverse impression on guests, who are unable to buy. Making a great effort to honour celebrants' invitation is enough support given that people are very busy. Such show of support and love should not be taken for granted but should be reciprocated by celebrants by not adding financial and psychological burden on friends and well-wishers. The money spent buying endless sets of

aso-ebi should be spent on other noble causes and the poor, especially as the World Bank estimates that there are about 64% of Nigerians living below the poverty line.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study drew its sample from Lagos state, South-Western part of Nigeria, which constitutes more of the Yorubas. It does not infer that the outcome of this study is not applicable to other ethnic groups, such as the Igbos and Hausas, where aso-ebi culture is also practiced. It is, however, suggested that further study be carried out on this topic by extending the sample to cover other ethnic groups in other geo-political zones in Nigeria.

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