

## **Inside Women's Robes: Masculinity and Dress During Èró Festival**

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### **Abstract**

*In literature, the Yorùbá feature prominently in discussions on rituals, festivals, and gender in socio-cultural practices. The Yorùbá, like many other African societies, is patriarchal. However, in practice and literature, reference to femininity and female agency is rife. Èró festival is a community-wide feast where men don full feminine attires and embark on a festive procession around the community. This article considers cross-dressing during traditional festivities as a symbol of feminine power, a gesture to female inclusivity, and a tool of social cohesion in a Yorùbá community. In order to interrogate the centrality of Èró festival – a matricultural complex – to the continued existence of the community, the paper relies on the abundant literature on Yorùbá religion, culture, and particularly, gender relations. It combines an analysis of these with oral interviews with recent participants in the festival and other traditional observances to analyze dress as a gendered item in festive cultural practices among the Yorùbá. The paper thematically presents evidence of gender and dress both in literature and practice and limits itself to Ùṣò in eastern Yorùbáland. It argues that female power, informed by their biologically-*



*derived endowment, is ubiquitous and potent among the Yorùbá. In Òṣò, men enact this feminine power through the symbology of dress.*

**Keywords:** Yorùbá, festival, Èró, matriculture, cross-dressing

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## Résumé

*En littérature, les Yorùbá occupent une place importante dans les discussions sur les rituels, les festivals et le genre dans les pratiques socioculturelles. Les Yorùbá, comme beaucoup d'autres sociétés africaines, sont patriarcales. Cependant, en pratique et en littérature, les références à la féminité et à l'agence féminine sont nombreuses. Le festival Èró est un festin communautaire où les hommes revêtent des vêtements féminins complets et entreprennent une procession festive à travers la communauté. Cet article considère le travestissement lors des festivités traditionnelles comme un symbole de pouvoir féminin, un geste d'inclusion féminine et un outil de cohésion sociale dans une communauté yorùbá. Afin d'explorer la centralité du festival Èró – un complexe matriculturel – dans la survie de la communauté, l'article s'appuie sur l'abondante littérature sur la religion, la culture et, en particulier, les relations de genre chez les Yorùbá. Il combine une analyse de ces éléments avec des entrevues orales avec des participants récents au festival et à d'autres observances traditionnelles pour analyser le vêtement comme un élément genré dans les pratiques culturelles festives chez les Yorùbá. L'article présente thématiquement des preuves concernant le genre et l'habillement, tant dans la littérature que dans la pratique, se limitant à l'Òṣò dans l'est du Yorùbáland. Il soutient que le pouvoir féminin, influencé par leur don biologique, est omniprésent et puissant chez les Yorùbá. En Òṣò, les hommes incarnent ce pouvoir féminin à travers la symbolique de l'habillement.*

**Mots-clés :** Yorùbá, festival, Èró, matriculture, travestissement

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## INTRODUCTION

This article considers the symbolism of matrifocality in Yorùbá patriculture through dress. It examines Èró Festival, a traditional festive observance in Òṣò, a small rural Yorùbá

community.<sup>1</sup> The premise of this paper is that Yorùbá patriarchy is practiced or exists relative to femininity, that is, there could be no notion of patriarchy without women's active participation. Ùṣò is located in Òwò Local Government Area of Ondo State, roughly at an equidistance between Òwò, a frontier Yoruba kingdom to the east and Àkúrẹ́, the capital city, to the west. Ùṣò, ruled by the Ọlóbà, the *oba* (king), has an interesting history. There are two sections or quarters in the community: Òkè Ùṣò, which traces its origin to Òwò and where people speak the Òwò dialect, and Odò Ùṣò, which traces its origin to Ọbà-Ilé near Àkúrẹ́ and where people speak the Àkúrẹ́ dialect.<sup>2</sup> Ùṣò's oral tradition, however, claims its progenitor was an Ọbà-Ilé king, an adventurous warrior monarch who was delayed on an expedition and missed the very important Ìpàgbọ́n festival. By the time he arrived, his son had been coronated in his stead. He eventually settled in nearby Ùṣò and maintained the Ọlóbà title.<sup>3</sup>

Ùṣò's proud affiliation with Ọbà-Ilé is not frivolous. Ọbà-Ilé remains a relatively small town in the area and often finds itself squabbling for paramountcy with Akure in the post-colonial period.<sup>4</sup> However, historically, Ọbà-Ilé occupies a quiet niche in Yorùbá history, one that has been acknowledged by foremost Yorùbá historians as "the oldest settlement not only in the area but in the world," and the site of the "most feared of the ancient spirits inhabiting the depths of the earth."<sup>5</sup>

The Yorùbá people, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, occupy the southwestern part of the country, which constitutes the largest core of Yorùbáland. Their notable presence, however, extends eastwards to Kogi, Edo, and Delta states and westwards outside Nigeria's borders to the République du Bénin, Togo, and Ghana, where sections of each population speak Yoruboid languages.<sup>6</sup> The culture reaches farther

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<sup>1</sup> Ordinarily, in Yorùbá morphology, words do not begin with the letter 'u.' However, certain dialects seem to override this general rule and, especially in the spoken form, supplant the vowel 'i' for 'u' as in place names like Ùṣò (Ìṣò), Ulésà (Ilésà), Ujù (Ijù), and in item names like Uṣu (Iṣu[yam]). Officially, and in textual form, these names are published observing the standard Yorùbá form.

<sup>2</sup> Òkè Ùṣò and Odò Ùṣò may be loosely translated as upland and lowland, or uptown and downtown. Although downtown in the west often refers to the business center of a city, in this case, it is geographically positional. Òkè translates as an elevation and Odò, a lowland. Interviewees argue that the people of Òkè Ùṣò were minorities as the town is more culturally inclined towards Ọbà-Ilé and Àkúrẹ́. For more context, see the news item, "Protest Rocks Uso Community As Residents Demand LCDA Headquarters or Boundary Adjustment," *Path News*, December 4, 2023. Accessed on 30.07.2025 <https://pathnews.com.ng/protest-rocks-uso-community-as-residents-demand-lcda-headquarters-or-boundary-adjustment/>

<sup>3</sup> Oral tradition as provided during an interview with Pa Fadero, an elder and a prospective Èrò celebrant. September 5, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> "Ondo: Oba-Ile community, Deji of Akure bicker over paramountcy, chieftaincy rights," *Nigerian Tribune*, August 27, 2025. Accessed on 30.07.2025 <https://tribuneonline.com/ondo-oba-ile-community-deji-of-akure-bicker-over-paramountcy-chieftaincy-rights/>

<sup>5</sup> S. Adebajji Akintoye, *A History of the Yoruba People* (Amalion Publishing, 2010), 28.

<sup>6</sup> James S. Olson, *The Peoples of Africa* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), 606-607.

westwards across the Atlantic to the Americas, where Yorùbá cultural practices survive and dominate those of other African groups that were similarly enslaved.<sup>7</sup>

The Yorùbá consist of different subgroups who speak varying dialects of the Yorùbá language, and who are united by myths of origin, belief system, political structure, and cultural practices. This united Yorùbá identity, though a defensive nineteenth-century development responding to colonization, wars, population movement, missionary work, and the rise of new elites, remains strong.<sup>8</sup> A rich community of Yorùbá historians and historians of the Yorùbá, its relatively huge population, and perhaps its archaeological relevance remain at the core of Yorùbá's continued relevance.

A generation of scholars have written extensively on the history of the Yorùbá.<sup>9</sup> As well, archaeological excavations since the 1930s present evidence of human occupation in the Yorùbá region dating back to the Middle Stone Age, but the most popular site is a Late Stone Age rock shelter site, Iwò Eléérú in Ìṣàrún, with deposits dated to 9000 BCE.<sup>10</sup> Iwò Eléérú, literally 'cave of ashes,' was excavated by Thurstan Shaw in 1965. Located fifty kilometers away from Òṣò, the site positions the Yorùbá within discussions about the evolutionary process of the modern man.<sup>11</sup> Iwò Eléérú continues to attract scholars as the only securely dated deposit in West Africa and for its distinctiveness from other fossil deposits.<sup>12</sup> Archaeological evidence, in addition to linguistic evidence, therefore challenges the migratory myths of Yorùbá origins which nevertheless remain dear to Yorùbá folk ethnogenesis.

In scholarly literature, the Yorùbá feature prominently in discussions on rituals, festivals, and, also, gender in socio-cultural practices. The Yorùbá people, like many other African societies, are patriarchal. However, in practice and literature, references to femininity and female agency are abundant. The focus of this study, the Èró festival is a community-wide feast where men don full feminine attire and embark on a festive procession around the community. Not only does this festival continue to hold on, even thrive, in a patriarchal society, it is the community's most prominent traditional observance.

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<sup>7</sup> Toyin Falola and Akíntúndé Akínyemí, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Falola and Akínyemí, *Encyclopedia of the Yoruba*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> See the works of Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos, 1921); and other works by J.A. Atanda, I. A. Akinjogbin, S. O. Biobaku, Ulli Beier, Andrew Apter, Anthony Asiwaju, Robin Law, Jacob Olupona, and Toyin Falola, among others.

<sup>10</sup> Falola and Akínyemí, *Encyclopedia of the Yoruba*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> P. Allsworth-Jones, K. Harvati, and C. Stringer, "The archaeological context of the Iwo Eleru cranium from Nigeria and preliminary results of new morphometric studies." In *West African Archaeology: New Developments, New Perspectives*. ed. P. Allsworth-Jones, BAR, S2164 (Archaeopress, 2010), 29-42.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher M. Stojanowski, "Iwo Eleru's place among Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene populations of North and East Africa," *Journal of Human Evolution*, 75 (2014): 80-89.

This paper considers cross-dressing during this traditional festival as a symbol of feminine power, a gesture to female inclusivity, and a tool of social cohesion in a Yorùbá community. In order to interrogate the centrality of Èró festival, a matricultural complex, to the continued existence of the community, it relies on the abundant literature on Yorùbá religion, culture, and particularly, gender relations. It combines an analysis of these with oral interviews with recent participants in the festival and other traditional observances to analyze dress as a gendered item in festive cultural practices among the Yorùbá. The paper thematically presents evidence of gender and dress both in literature and practice and limits itself to Ùṣò in southeastern Yorùbáland.<sup>13</sup> It argues that female power, informed by their biologically-derived endowment, is ubiquitous and potent among the Yorùbá. In Ùṣò, men enact this feminine power through the symbology of dress.

## APPLYING GEERTZ

The paper borrows from the work of Clifford Geertz, who wrote that cultures create meaning through symbols, by using the symbology of dress to provide a thick description of festive transvestism in the community. The role of clothing in symbolically communicating deeper cultural meanings is reflective of Clifford Geertz's notion that people create meaning through symbols and cultural practices. These meanings are sometimes not superficial, not just in the art, hence Geertz's argument for thick description.<sup>14</sup> Clifford Geertz's work on interpretive anthropology and symbolic meaning or the role of symbols in cultural expressions was groundbreaking in the late twentieth century. The idea is that one can 'read' a culture, instead of merely documenting it.

In his method of thick description, Geertz argues that the analysis of culture is not an experimental science in search of law, or theory, but an interpretive science in search of meaning. This interpretive turn in anthropology is comparable and contemporaneous with the cultural/linguistic turn in history presenting new scholarly vistas and reiterating the transience of understanding. Still, Geertz's formidable anthropological approach is applicable to studying African societies for its advocacy of specificities, rather than generalizations. Even when there are broad themes, Geertz's argument for the need to dive deeply into each cultural expression is particularly useful and rewarding. Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete and, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is.<sup>15</sup> Thick description favors particularity in ethnography rather than theory-based

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Yorùbá subgroups, their dialects, and location within the larger group using maps, See Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola ed., *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 11-15; Atanda cited earlier also establishes the region in southeastern Yorùbáland.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural Symbol" in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90; Clifford Geertz, 'Art as a Cultural System', *Modern Language Notes*, 91, No. 6, Comparative Literature (December 1976):1475.

<sup>15</sup> Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 3-30.

commonality. Beyond this, taking the native view of things and making meaning through the thick description of participant observation and creating webs of meaning is Geertz's proposition for understanding culture.<sup>16</sup> As a young boy witnessing and participating in the Èró Festival in Òṣò, meanings gleaned by the author from the event gave primacy to sheer spectacle and amusement. Some other observer, especially in contemporary times, might find evidence to counter arguments for the alienage of gender fluidity in African societies. Each of these would be incomplete and superficial given Yorùbá complexity; hence, the need for deeper analysis and native insight.

### **PATRIARCHY, FEMALE AGENCY, AND YORÙBÁ CONTINUITY**

Yorùbá cultural expression is complex and diverse, just as the people themselves. This is arguably why, according to Jacob Olúpòṇà, a prominent Yorùbá scholar, the Yorùbá are "the most studied ethnic group in Africa."<sup>17</sup> While the Yorùbá have a patriarchal society, as do many African societies, femininity is integral to religio-cultural observances. Beyond mere presence, femininity features quite prominently in and heavily informs the Yorùbá socio-cultural setup. In cases such as in the Oṇdó community, traditional politics provides a parallel line of female chiefs headed by the *Lòbùn* that administers the town alongside the male chiefs. In Oṇdó and Ilésà, these women were king-makers, who crowned the king.<sup>18</sup> These are enduring practices in these particular Yorùbá communities. The Oṇdó oral tradition, perhaps the only one in Yorùbáland, has a matriarch as progenitor.<sup>19</sup> It is embedded in the folklore and psyche of the people. These examples are manifestations of matriculture within an essentially patriarchal society.

In a counter position, scholars such as Insa Nolte have argued that the existence of such parallel positions, or 'women's wings,' in organizations is evidence of limited representation, and "reinforces complementary gender roles."<sup>20</sup> This paper shows that the notion of these 'parallel positions' only reiterating female subservience requires much more nuance. Also, no debates exist on the complementarity of gender roles among the Yorùbá. It is a stark traditional reality that gender roles are traditionally and intentionally cultivated, taught and practiced. The argument lies in whether having specific gender roles

<sup>16</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play. Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, edited by C. Geertz (New York: Basic Books.) 1973. 412–453.

<sup>17</sup> Jacob K Olupona, "The Study of Yorùbá Religious Tradition in Historical Perspective." *Numen* 40, no. 3 (1993): 240–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3270151>:241

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Ogunshakin, *Ondo: The People, Their Origin, Custom, and Tradition* (Nigeria: Inway Publishers, 1979), 20; Jacob K. Olupona, *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yorùbá Festivals* (Stockholm, 1991), 47.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A History of the Yorùbá: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Lagos: 1921), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Insa Nolte, "'Without Women, Nothing Can Succeed': Yorùbá Women in the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Nigeria," *Africa* 78, no.1 (2008): 85.

invalidates representation or undermines participation. Gender, therefore, is an interesting category that has triggered rich conversations among scholars of Yorùbá.

In her book *The Invention of Women*, Oyewùmi argues that colonialism invented gender as a social category in Yorùbáland.<sup>21</sup> In a counter-argument, Olajubu observes that rather than absent, gender among the Yorùbá is complex and fluid in its configuration.<sup>22</sup> Others have argued for the existence of African feminisms, critiquing liberal feminism that advocate equality of the sexes or that fails to distinguish differences between Euro-American and African cultural contexts.<sup>23</sup> Although heavily critiqued, Oyewùmi's work espouses age, experience and power as more potent social categories rather than understanding 'woman' through 'bio-logic.'<sup>24</sup> While this is true, the powers attributed to women by the Yorùbá are vested in their biomorphology, just as much as age and experience, all of which are crucial to social categorization. This is what Dianne Stewart calls female genital power (FGP), a biological endowment that bestows esoteric, mystical capabilities.<sup>25</sup>

Broadly, Yorùbá cosmology aligns with that of many societies that conceive women as the fairer – and weaker – sex. This *prima facie* weakness, however, provides a much-needed balance in society. The gendered notion of *akọ* (male) and *abo* (female) is produced by but transcends sexual attributes to the abstract and metaphysical. In everyday parlance, *akọ* is associated with violence, turmoil, and lack of productivity while *abo* evokes notions of fruitfulness, peace and purity.<sup>26</sup> Things or phenomena thus become gendered by what they produce or can do, or otherwise. Evidently, productivity, provenance, life, and new beginnings are inherently female. This is however not exclusive to the Yorùbá but finds universal expression as many contemporary nations evoke women's purity in their nationalist or nativist discourses.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùmi, *The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Oyeronke Olajubu, "Seeing through a Woman's Eye: Yorùbá Religious Tradition and Gender Relations," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol 20, no. 1 (2004): 41–60.

<sup>23</sup> Luqman Oṣéyemí Muraina and Abdulkareem J. Ajímátanraẹjẹ, "Gender Relations in Indigenous Yorùbá Culture: Questioning Current Feminist Actions and Advocacies," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 44, no. 9 (2023): 20–42.

<sup>24</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, "Gender in Yorùbá Religious Change," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32, no.2 (2002) 136–166; Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, ix.

<sup>25</sup> Dianne Stewart, "Matri-archive: A New Portal to Knowledge Production in African Studies," *Journal of Africana Religions* 7, no.2 (2019), 311; See also Fola H. Kazeem, "The Vagina as Symbol of Power in the Yoruba Culture," *Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000): 364–370.

<sup>26</sup> Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yorùbá Religious Sphere* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 9, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); David Koester, "Gender Ideology and Nationalism in the Culture and Politics of Iceland," *American Ethnologist* 22 (1995): 572–88; Wendy Bracewell, "Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 19 (1996): 25–33; US westward expansion is also depicted as an immaculate white woman blazing the west-bound trail with her purity and civility.

Ulli Beier countered earlier European convictions about the subordination of African women based on his ethnography in Ede in 1952. Citing the case of Ìyá Şàngó, he argues that it is in religious life that Yorùbá women make their most important contribution. Women form the majority of adherents in Yorùbá religion and are the "sustainers of Yorùbá religious traditions."<sup>28</sup> It is also noteworthy that while the Yorùbá political culture has been male dominated, women usually serve as regents in many Yorùbá communities in the interregnum periods between male kingships.<sup>29</sup>

One could make the argument that the position of Yorùbá women relative to men is premised on the notion that power is both visible and invisible with, respectively, males and females in charge of each domain. From the Western viewpoint, then, women are invisible and westerners understand Yorùbá women's invisibility as limitation, oppression, and irrelevance. Among the Yorùbá, however, there is gender complementarity premised on balance, and gender roles and religious beliefs mutually influence each other.<sup>30</sup> This complementary reality contradicts narratives of stark dichotomy between the domestic and public spheres. The power women possess is symbolized in an important item of paraphernalia held by Yorùbá kings—the staff, which usually includes a depiction of a bird. This bird represents *àjé* (powerful women and/or the women's witch cult) whose possession of *àṣẹ* (authoritative power, spiritual or material, partly shrouded in women's procreative capabilities) the king can summon for the public good.<sup>31</sup> Ayo Adeduntan discusses this exclusively-female reserve when analyzing Tundé Kèlání's movie, *The Narrow Path*.<sup>32</sup> Beyond the metaphysics of *àjé* and *àṣẹ*, women also hold exclusive influence in commerce. *Ajé* is the Yorùbá deity of the marketplace, and of women's economic agency.<sup>33</sup> In that physical and spiritual space, women wield tremendous power and thereby possess the keys to the prosperity of the community. In that realm, men are outsiders.

The conclusion from the above is that women hold exclusive coercive *and* influential powers in certain areas of Yorùbáland – religious and economic spheres – and these metaphysical endowments are biologically derived. As material human *things*, they are female by what they can naturally give or produce, and they are prequalified for wielding

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This notion also fueled and justified most of the lynchings in post-bellum America. George A. Crofutt, *American Progress*, ca. 1873. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/97507547/>.

<sup>28</sup> Ulli Beier, "The Position of Yorùbá Women," *Présence Africaine* no. 1, I-II (1955) 40. <https://doi.org/10.3917/presa.9551.0039>

<sup>29</sup> Oyèrónké Oládémọ. *Women in Yorùbá Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 4

<sup>30</sup> Oládémọ, *Women in Yorùbá Religions*, 5, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Olajubu, *Women in the Yorùbá Religious Sphere*, 23, 43, 54.

<sup>32</sup> Ayo Adeduntan, "Road Called Vagina: African Womanist Detours of Tundé Kèlání's *The Narrow Path*," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 32, no. 4 (2020): 410 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27105596>.

<sup>33</sup> S. J. Mathews, "Ajé & Àjé: Gender and Female Power in Yorùbáland," (PhD diss., UCLA, 2014), 1, ProQuest (Mathews\_ucla\_0031N\_12973). Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5rr3cmj. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/60b6p51f>



such powers by their morphology. This distinctiveness in biology plays out in the uniqueness and value of their apparel. During kingship interregnums, as mentioned earlier, it is interesting that female regents will wear the traditional masculine *agbádá* or *dàńsíki* (traditional flowing or shorter tops) with *şóşó* (pants) and *filà* (cap) as well as other paraphernalia of the royal office. In that situation, the king's apparel symbolizes kingship authority and the women who don it possess royal authority.

This goes in line with Olajubu's claim that cross-dressing in ritual spaces is an example of fluid gender categories.<sup>34</sup> Fluidity in gender and the possibility of transition, though not physiologically, is perhaps what Oyewùmi argues for. This transition occurs through the possession of certain knowledge, power, and influence. Dress is therefore a symbol of this tradition especially during rituals and festivals.

## FESTIVE TRANSVESTISM

Generally, dress evokes discussion surrounding sexuality and especially the female body. This is why African old women have traditionally employed nudity as a powerful protest tool to show disapproval and sanction wrongdoing before, during, and after colonialism. This practice persists till today. The purposive nakedness of a mother is a show of power repudiating a projected subordination and passivity by social authority figures, and is intended to shame society into compliance. Women have weaponized this understanding for the good of their patriarchal societies and naked protests were particularly potent during the colonial era for advocating better conditions and fighting injustice. The Aba Women's riot of 1929 and the 1947 Abéòkúta Women's Union protest are notable cases.<sup>35</sup>

Another act of defiance among the Igbo is called 'sitting on a man,' whereby women as sparingly clad in loin cloths as men openly query men's manhood by singing lewd songs and using language ordinarily not expected of women, as well as being violent, in order to shame erring men into conformity.<sup>36</sup> While the feminine body is generally revered, that of

<sup>34</sup> Olajubu, *Women in the Yorùbá Religious Sphere*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Chima J. Korie, and Elizabeth Onogwu. "Women and Rural Protest in Colonial Eastern Nigeria: The 1929 Women's Revolt (*Ogu Umunwanyi*) Reexamined." *Journal of Women's History* 36, no. 3 (2024): 94-117; Judith A. Byfield. *The Great Upheaval: Women and Nation in Postwar Nigeria* (Ohio University Press, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> See Judith Van Allen. "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 6 no.2 (1972): 165–81; Daniel Olisa Iweze. *Histories of Tax Evasion, Avoidance and Resistance* (Routledge, 2022), 127; Abiodun Afolabi and Oladiti Abiodun Akeem. "Change and resistance: a reflection on the Aba Women Uprising in Colonial Nigeria." *Hemispheres* 37 (2022): 53; Korie and Onogwu. "Women and Rural Protest in Colonial Eastern Nigeria," 104; and "Undressing for redress: the significance of Nigerian women's naked protests" *The Conversation* September 3, 2020. Accessed on 26.07.2025 <https://theconversation.com/undressing-for-redress-the-significance-of-nigerian-womens-naked-protests-144823>

mothers has a higher place for having given life, borne the sacrifice and throes of birthing, and thereby paid their dues in sustaining society.<sup>37</sup> To be semi-clad is to become essentially a man. Therefore, women wear nakedness to arrogate masculinity. However, when it is not sanctioned, it is a taboo, and therefore, a powerful gesture.

In the same vein, dress is a channel through which men attempt to access femininity and this is the case with the Èró festival. When it is an enactment, a communally sanctioned spectacle, then, it becomes what Gilmore understands as “controlled violence,” or “symbolic aggression.”<sup>38</sup> The festive spectacle of cross-dressing and its accompanying ‘violence’ is not only controlled but momentary, consciously providing for a fleeting disruption of societal order. Globally, festivities permit remarkable fluidity of behavior, socially sanctioned abandon, or role-reversal.<sup>39</sup> The festive performativity of another gender by cross dressing does not signify the permission of transgressive practices in Yorùbá culture; rather it simultaneously pays homage to femininity, entrenches patriarchy, and normalizes traditional gender roles.

As early as 1966, Robert LeVine had identified ritual cross-dressing practices among the Yorùbá and Ibo of Nigeria.<sup>40</sup> In his work with members of the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, a female-themed male masquerade cult, LeVine observes a conspicuousness of transvestism among the Yorùbá, so much so as to suggest “a more pervasive element in their culture than in others.”<sup>41</sup> Yet he states emphatically this happened on ceremonial occasions. LeVine vividly describes the staggering influence of women on the male cult:

During my interview with the Gelede elders, two or three old crones several times poked their heads in the window to correct and scold the men. I had never before witnessed such an attitude of officiousness and arrogance on the part of women during my interviews with elders of other cults or with healers. It seemed to be part of the general picture of the cult as dominated by the “mothers,” that is, the witches.<sup>42</sup>

He goes further to quote Ulli Beier,

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<sup>37</sup> Oluwasola Ibitayo Daniels, “Nudity and Power in North-Eastern Yorùbá: A Study of Pre-Colonial and Modern Traditional Practices,” *Kenneth Dike Journal of African Studies*, 1, no.1 (2020):4.

<sup>38</sup> David D. Gilmore. *Carnival and Culture: Sex, Symbol, and Status in Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Addo, Ping-Ann. “Anthropology, Festival, and Spectacle.” *Reviews in Anthropology* 38, no. 3 (2009): 219–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00938150903110625>.

<sup>40</sup> Robert A. LeVine, “Sex Roles and Economic Change in Africa,” *Ethnology* 5, no. 2 (1966):186-93.

<sup>41</sup> LeVine, “Sex Roles and Economic Change in Africa,” 193.

<sup>42</sup> LeVine, “Sex Roles and Economic Change in Africa,” 192-3.

Gelede is the secret of women. We the men are merely their slaves. We dance to appease our mothers.<sup>43</sup>

Geoffrion argues that festive transvestism creates a "liminal time-space for the exploration of gender practices and sexualities."<sup>44</sup> In other words, the short period when this happens is a short period where sexes invert and experience the other's reality through the social performance of dress. The event provides a liminality that removes inhibition and permits the abnormal or outrageous. In performance events such as beauty contests, cross-dressing allows men to "test the local boundaries of gender identity."<sup>45</sup> A *New York Times* article describes the Abissa festival among the Akan people of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire as an "occasion for letting loose" in a society governed by countless traditional protocols.<sup>46</sup> During this festival, "men could dress as women and women as men."<sup>47</sup> It is a "moment of collective catharsis," which removes restrictions: townspeople can reproach their leaders and each other in a symbolic "accusation-repentance ritual" performativity.<sup>48</sup> In this framework, festive transvestism in Èró Festival is an example of the complexity of gender among the Yorùbá, bringing to light the debate about the traditional existence of gender dichotomy on one side and fluidity on the other.

## DRESS AND FEMININITY IN ÈRÓ FESTIVAL

By all indications, the word Èró may be translated into English as the conjugated verb, 'to wrap,' presented in the two syllables È and ró, and derived from ìró (wrapper). To ró is simply to wrap. Wrappers for the lower body is a quintessential female cladding and dress style in many African societies. To clad, or be clad, in wrappers was therefore to make effeminate as in the expressions 'tied to mother's apron strings,' 'tied to his wife's wrapper,' and 'woman wrapper.'<sup>49</sup> In some African cultures, men also wear some form of wrappers publicly. However, generally, wrappers are associated with women in and beyond

<sup>43</sup> Ulli Beier, "Gelede Masks," *Odu* 6 (1958): 5-23.

<sup>44</sup> Karine Geoffrion, "Ghanaian Youth and Festive Transvestism." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15 (2013): S48-61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23524928>.

<sup>45</sup> Hansen, Karen Tranberg. "The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 384. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25064858>.

<sup>46</sup> "Grand-Bassam Journal; In One Unbridled Week, a Town's Moment of Truth," *New York Times* November 3, 1995. Accessed on 10.05.2025 <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/11/03/world/grand-bassam-journal-in-one-unbridled-week-a-town-s-moment-of-truth.html>

<sup>47</sup> "Abissa 2024: les N'Zima de nouveau en fête." 7info YouTube page. Accessed on 26.05.2025. <https://youtu.be/y9SbpfyBbA?si=smk6-2oxMwCFbhpJ>

<sup>48</sup> "The festivals of Ivory Coast: dances and music," *TransAfrica*, Accessed on 26.05.2025. <https://transafrica.biz/en/the-festivals-of-ivory-coast/>

<sup>49</sup> Specifically, 'woman wrapper' is a contemporary Nigerian lingo to denote a man whose actions and ideas are geared towards gaining the approval and/or affection of females. "Woman Wrapper" Urban Dictionary. November 14, 2017. Accessed on 28.05.2025 <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=woman+wrapper> Urban Dictionary is a crowd-sourced dictionary of informal cultural expressions.

Africa. For instance, private Victorian era robes for women, now called dressing gowns or robes, were also called wrappers.<sup>50</sup> Among the Yorùbá, ìró is both a private and public garment.

To understand the rationale behind Èró, it is useful to touch on the age grade system as an integral aspect of the social structure of the community. The age grade system is a social organization based on age stratification of social practice or participation. Membership and activities within a grade is exclusive to people of that age set and transitioning to a higher age set is celebrated by a rite of passage.<sup>51</sup> In Ùṣò, the polity is three-tiered consisting of the *làrẹ* (Ọlọbà-in-council), the *Ọmọlúṣò* (Elders who had observed Èró), and the *Ugbàmọ* (younger adults next in line for *Ọmọlúṣò*). This socio-political structure further establishes the historic ties between Ùṣò and Ọwò as the same *làrẹ* and *Ugbàmọ* also exist in Ọwò.<sup>52</sup> Aside from the Ọlọbà-in-Council, which consists of the king and his cabinet of chiefs, the other two tiers, *Ugbàmọ* and *Ọmọlúṣò*, are age-grade derived and for the purpose of this paper, most relevant.

Among the Yorùbá generally, the age grade system is an important traditional social mechanism and constitutes the executive arm of the society. Traditionally, age groups in Ùṣò were saddled with many responsibilities including executing communal works, burying the dead and accompanying rituals, and defending the community from external aggression. The *Ugbàmọ* is the oldest grade consisting of men between the ages of forty and fifty, and only a step below the *Ọmọlúṣò*, which is the highest level of non-royal civil membership. Tradition saddles the *Ugbàmọ* with the defense of the town. Though under the direction and oversight of the *Ọmọlúṣò*, the *Ugbàmọ* also wield considerable power such as preventing the deceased from being buried and even holding ceremonies to ransom. The community therefore holds the transition from the *Ugbàmọ* to the *Ọmọlúṣò* in high esteem. This is what the Èró festival marks and signifies. The festival remains till date the most colorful and important observance in the community.

The beginning of Èró festival is fuzzy but septuagenarian and octogenarian members of the community confirm it was a practice that predated them. The festival is held every nine years in December: it is an initiation process into the commune of elders. Beyond the linguistics, “the definition of Èró is freedom.”<sup>53</sup> This implies an end to labor: a transition from the age grade in charge of communal assignments and responsibilities to a segment of the community that only serve in an advisory role to the *làrẹ*. This transition absolves the qualified from all communal responsibilities. Beyond this absolution, the *Ọmọlúṣò*

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<sup>50</sup> “Elegance at home: Victorian wrappers” Nov 2, 2021. *Recollections* Accessed 02.06.2025 <https://recollections.biz/blog/elegance-at-home-victorian-wrappers/>

<sup>51</sup> Falola and Akinyemi, *Encyclopedia of the Yoruba*, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Sydney Ogunleye, the Alajadudu of Iloro, Owo, “Igogo Festival: A love story with a lasting legacy,” TVC News Nigeria YouTube. Accessed on 02.06.2025 [https://youtu.be/GIELrzBak\\_I](https://youtu.be/GIELrzBak_I)

<sup>53</sup> Telephone interview with Pa Aiku Oke, High Chief Osodi of Ùṣò on January 7, 2025.

enjoy certain other privileges. Having been initiated into the commune of elders, Èró graduands may no longer stand while sharing palm wine at the *Ọlóbà*'s palace and may keep their caps in the presence of the king. They can also make meaningful contributions to discussions at the *làrẹ*. These are important privileges within the community. In preparation for the festival, Èró candidates who themselves were once *Ugbàmọ* would present the subordinate age group as the next *Ugbàmọ*. In the year of celebration or initiation, the candidates must cultivate a piece of farmland, and the proceeds thereof are fed to the people during the celebration. This signifies the last responsibility to the community before stepping into the community of elders.

As a patriarchal Yorùbá community, however, the most striking feature of the ceremony is the feminine symbology present throughout its events. Foremost, the notion of communal responsibilities and the freedom from them connotes not just age and growth but also possesses heavily gendered connotations: communal responsibilities are typically masculine. One could therefore interpret the initiates' transvestism to mean that they are graduating from masculinity and becoming feminine. To drive home this point vividly, during the procession through the community, Èró candidates wear the *Ùgberò*, a full-fledged female ensemble consisting of the *iró* (wrapper), *bùbá* (blouse) and *gèlè* (head tie). To any visitor or external observer, this bizarre spectacle would only be tempered by the knowledge that it was an event, publicly sanctioned, and thus temporary. It is also crucial to know that the *Ùgberò* can only be procured and presented to the candidates by their *àrẹmọbinrin* (first daughter).

The special role of the *àrẹmọbinrin* in Èró is as prominent as that of the *Arugbá* in Ọṣun Ọṣogbo. During the Ọṣun Ọṣogbo festival, an observance dedicated to Ọṣun, Yorùbá goddess of fertility and procreation, the central female character, *Arugbá*, supposedly a virgin young woman, is a communal celebrity for her sacrifice of abstinence throughout the years she holds that position, and consequently, her potential endowment to cleanse and purify. Her virginity and dedication embody her with purgatorial virtues. In contemporary literary cultural works, the *Arugbá* is the superhero a corrupt male-dominated community needs for renewal or redemption.<sup>54</sup> For the Èró Festival, the *àrẹmọbinrin* of each candidate is saddled with the responsibility of purchasing the material for his *iró*, *bùbá*, and *gèlè* or having them woven at the loom. In addition to the *Ùgberò* is the *Ṣowóṣi* (*sheghosen* in Ọwò); both *Ùgberò* and *Ṣowóṣi* are indigenous fabrics in Ọwò.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Rotimi Fasan. "'Arugba': Superwoman, Power and Agency." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2016): 283. See note on page 290 for an overview of Osun in Yorùbá imaginary. *Arugba* translates as calabash-carrier.

<sup>55</sup> "Indigenous fabric -Owo as a study case," *The Hope Newspaper* 18 April 2023. Accessed on 01.06.2025 <https://www.thehopenewspaper.com/indigenous-fabric-owo-as-a-study-case/>; See also T. M. Akinwunmi, "Taboos and the Control of Social Roles and Quality of Owo Ritual Textiles." *Lagos Notes and Records* 11 (2005).

The indigo dyed material features narrow weft stripes across bold warp stripes (see Appendix 1).<sup>56</sup>

Interestingly, becoming feminine is not derogatory in this case, but gestures at the inevitability of the cycle of life and the waning of vigor. This feminization of men through dress is “simply a tradition we have grown up to know. They wear female clothes to look like their wives.”<sup>57</sup> The cloth and the role of the daughter in its purchase is symbolic. By the purchase of *Ùgberò*, the daughter underscores her importance to her father and to this specific tradition, signaling the daughter’s, and by corollary, women’s hold and influence on fathers and men. Effectively, the *àrẹ̀mọ̀bìnrin* robes her father in femininity and participates in absolving him of masculine responsibility. This emasculation is celebrated as a coming of age rather than ridiculed as effeminacy; men don women’s attire as a symbol of retirement from valour and laboured commitment, and an entrance into rest. Casting off the toga of valiance to ‘become women’ is thus symbolized by their feminine apparels. Rest, though, is not tantamount to irresponsibility, as the *Ọ̀mọ̀lúșò* continue to serve the community by drawing from their wisdom and experience, rather than brawn. In the same manner, women are of imperative significance to the community in other ways than physical labor.

During the procession, each candidate carries a broom (a domestic tool), and sweeps the ground in front of him towards the new *Ugbàmpo*, thus signaling a transfer of responsibilities and a hand-over of masculine power. One should take note of the irony of employing sweeping, a supposedly feminine domestic activity, to signal transfer of manly duties. While they ‘become women,’ tradition forbids the candidates from having any form of sexual intimacy with any woman, their wives inclusive, for the seven days of festivities. To be a woman and be with another woman would be anomalous. This not only establishes gender roles in society but upholds heteronormativity.

Ironically, although this position of elder rids them of manly responsibilities to the community, it does not strip them of access to privileged secrets of the town nor the religio-cultural classified information that are afforded only to masculine ears and eyes.<sup>58</sup> The system of curfew central to *orò* for instance precludes female participation. The Yorùbá presumes that two things are involved when a woman becomes privy to *orò* secrets: either death or masculinization.<sup>59</sup> In other words, access to certain levels of knowledge is associated with masculinity and one begins to see the sense that, while there

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<sup>56</sup> A picture can be found in this virtual gallery: “Owo Wrapper Cloth” Adire African Textiles. Accessed on 02.06.2025 <https://www.adireafricantextiles.com/product/owo-wrapper-cloth/>

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Pa Oke.

<sup>58</sup> Brian C. Smithson, “Sounding the voice of tolerance: the *orò* secret society at the Yorùbá borderlands.” *Material Religion* 17, no. 4 (2021): 517-538.; Michael Marcuzzi, “The bullroarer cult in Cuba.” *Latin American Music Review* 31, no. 2 (2010): 151-81; Abiodun J. Macaulay and Shola Balogun. “A Selection of Yoruba Oro Sacred Texts from Nigeria.” *Delos: A Journal of Translation and World Literature* 37, no. 1 (2022): 45+.



are traditional gender roles among the Yorùbá, there are other social categories that make transition across the divide possible, if not common. The *Ùgberò*'s relevance transcends the one-week ceremony, however. It is usually stowed away until the passing of the individual, when it becomes part of the funeral rites for the deceased.<sup>60</sup> That is, ordinarily, the Èró graduand is buried in the *Ùgberò* provided by his *àrẹ̀mọ̀bìnrin*. This is ostensibly to show that the hold the female daughter has on him continues in death. Considering the prevalence of the afterlife in Yorùbá thought, one could interestingly read this as perpetuating their transition into femininity for all eternity.

Different versions of Èró exist in the neighboring towns of Ipele, Ute, Idanre, Àkúrẹ̀, and Òwò. An elder in Òwò confirms that the festival "is a practice borrowed from Òwò."<sup>61</sup> The fact that a section of the town originated from Òwò buttresses this claim. During the most-celebrated Igogo festival in Òwò, the king, Ọlọ̀wò, dons full female attire and other chiefs may also do the same in solidarity. Other neighboring communities similarly name their festivals Èró and key mentions such as *Ugbà̀mọ̀* and *Ùgberò* have very similar-sounding variants. Apparently, transvestism is a feature of only the Òwò version of Èró Festival. By all linguistic indications, Èró does not necessarily connote being dressed in female attires but simply being robed. In Ute, for instance, Èró Festival, the most colorful traditional festival, happens in five-year intervals, and it is an ungendered affair. However, where Èró is celebrated, the same themes of graduation from age groups upon attaining seventy years of age, along with unity and love, resonate.<sup>62</sup>

In Àkúrẹ̀, a similar festival is Ògún Obìnrin, literally 'women's Ògún festival.' Ògún, the Yorùbá god of war and metallurgy, is a male deity and the Ògún festival is predominantly a masculine affair. Observance of the Ògún Obìnrin began during the reign of Ọ̀ba Afúnbíowó as an appeasement or antidote to the toxicity of the actual Ògún festival, which often featured actual and performed violence.<sup>63</sup> That a female version of the festival exists

<sup>59</sup> *Orò* is a Yorùbá corporate ancestor cult which demands and enforces the sequestration of non-initiates, particularly women. While non-initiate men who violate its secrecy may be penalized, female transgression attracts weightier consequences. Its interface or presentation is its distinct sonic presence, unlike other deities that have physical shrine. See Brian Smithson and Michael Marcuzzi cited immediately above.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Pa Oke, High Chief Osodi.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Pa Fadero.

<sup>62</sup> Ero Festival: Ute community celebrates new septuagenarians. Ondo State Radio-vision Corporation (OSRC) YouTube page April 10, 2022. Accessed 10.06.2025. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qv164\\_Ambnc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qv164_Ambnc). Age grade from 21 to 70 are responsible for communal work.

<sup>63</sup> Metallurgy also associates state formation, war, and bloodshed with Ogun. See Akinwumi Ogundiran, "Yorùbá Indigenous Religion" *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 23 Oct. 2024; Accessed on 09.06.2025. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.1556> Ayodeji Ogunnaike explores the continued relevance of Ogun to increased violence in contemporary America by framing our current world as the "Age of Ogun." See "Oyinbo Ọ̀mọ̀ Aṣogun Dere: An Analysis of Racial Injustice, Gun Violence, and Sexual Assault in America through a Traditional Yorùbá Religious Perspective," *The Journal of Interreligious Studies*, 23 (May 2018): 103-126.

in Àkúré speaks to the social permissiveness of festive spectacle. During this observance, women clad in full male ensemble of *agbádá* (flowing top), *ṣòkòtò* (trousers) and *filà* (cap), with sticks in hand, go about every night singing and greeting, but also chiding and ridiculing men who are either offenders or who are not man enough: either that they are impotent or shirk their responsibility as husbands and fathers. These women, riding on the temporary immunity afforded them by the festival, assemble at the frontage of offenders, irrespective of their class and position in society, and rain abuse on them. Even the monarch is not exempt from this show of spite. During the week-long festivities, women also sit in public spaces and direct denigrating songs with unbridled and explicit sexual content at male passersby. Male traffic in the town is largely reduced during this period as men who are impotent, unsure of their sexual prowess or masculinity, or who having offended, prefer to stay at home. Such lack of restraint by women is unacceptable outside of the festive period. The entire ensemble of sticks and male garb are also an anomaly on an ordinary day. Wearing male dress is a ritual performance that has neutralizing capabilities because the ritual is performed by women.<sup>64</sup> This underscores the theme of feminine invisible power which is very prominent among the Yorùbá.

Ironically, communities tend to draw the line between the symbolism of transvestism and homonormativity. Working with Ghanaian youths, Geoffrion argues that African societies try to detach cross-dressing from homosexuality, but instead employ it to reinforce heteronormativity, against a permanent exhibition of transvestism in fear that cross-dressing indicates homosexual tendencies; these festivals reinforce rather than redress hegemonic masculinity.<sup>65</sup> Cross dressing in this context is not an everyday practice but a spectacle in ritual context.<sup>66</sup> This is in tandem with Ronit Irshai's analysis of Jewish scholarship, and the observation that the intention behind cross dressing is what is important, and not cross-dressing *per se*.<sup>67</sup> In this case, festivities ratify cross-dressing as a symbol to communicate intricate cultural messages. For the Yorùbá, and specifically those in Òṣò, dress communicates the integral value of women to their culture and creates an opportunity for visibility, solidarity, and cohesion.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Mrs. Veronica Adedun, a 70-year-old Àkúré indigene, granddaughter of a previous High Chief Sasere of Àkúré, and granddaughter of Ọba Afúnbiowó on April 19, 2025. Ọba Afúnbiowó is considered the most prominent *Déjì* of Àkúré. *Déjì* is the title of the Akure monarch.

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrion S49, S56, S57.

<sup>66</sup> Addo. "Anthropology, Festival, and Spectacle," 217–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00938150903110625>.

<sup>67</sup> Ronit Irshai, "Cross-Dressing In Jewish Law and the Construction of Gender Identity." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, no. 38 (2021): 46+. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed May 29, 2025). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A671460678/LitRC?u=tall85761&sid=summon&xid=c914f842>.]



This paper has presented the Èró Festival as a matricultural complex integral to the sustenance of the Ùṣò community, where male candidates in the festival employ transvestism and female dress as a communal symbol of success, progress, continuity, and solidarity. While the Yorùbá people are generally patriarchal and patrilineal, there exists, in many instances, a strong articulation of matriculture. Exclusively wielding invisible power and influence, women are prominent rather than obscure, complementing rather than subdued. The sexuality of female dress and its appeal is tied to this bio-metaphysical power and when men wear female clothes, they symbolize an appropriation of these powers. Rather than effeminizing and carrying its associated stigma, cross dressing men in Ùṣò highlight the importance of women to the community, the hold of women on men, and the inevitability of the cycle of life. This practice, however, upholds heteronormativity and occurs strictly within a communally-sanctioned, temporary, festive space.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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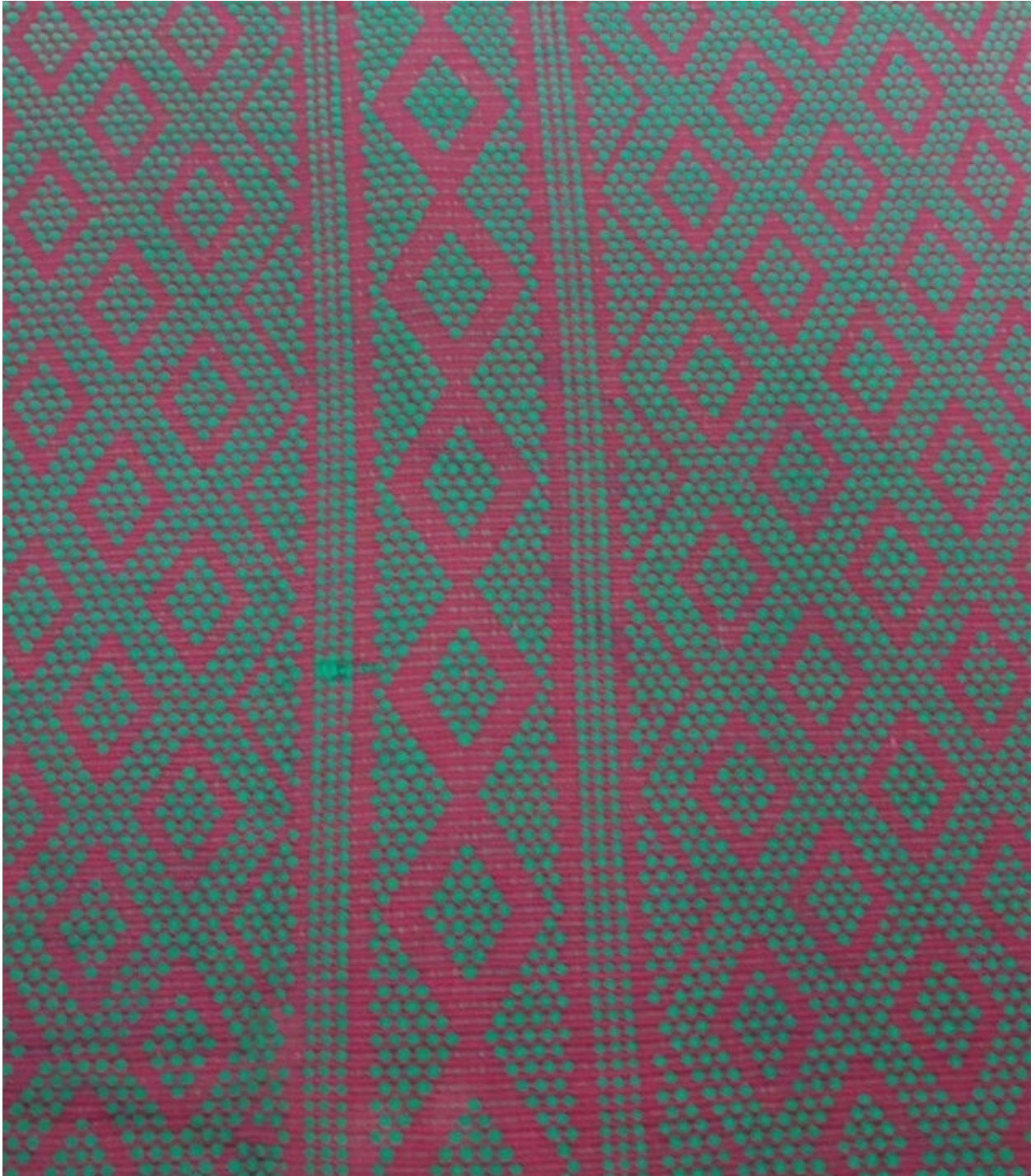
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## APPENDIX 1



Şowóşì (*sheghosen* in Ọ̀wò) “Senghosen, a woven clothing of the Yoruba People of Owo kingdom, Ondo,” *Lipstick Alley*, February 10, 2023; Accessed on August 22, 2025  
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