

Preserving Traditional Clothing Identity:

*An Overview of the Past and Present Uses of
Aso-Oke by the Ondo People of Southwest,
Nigeria*

Evelyn Omotunde Adepeko,⁺ Michael Abiodun Oyinloye,⁺⁺ Adesimi Oluwa Adepeko³
& Adebayo Abiodun Adeloye⁴ (Nigeria)

Abstract

Hand-woven fabrics such as *aso-oke* were the major clothing items especially for the commemoration of traditional ceremonies and festivals in Ondo land before the colonial era in Nigeria. Art historian review methods were adopted for this study by reviewing related literature. Data was gathered from both online sources and physical libraries. The population of the study include the inhabitants in Ondo town, Southwest, Nigeria. The study also used interview for data collection and the data collected was analyzed using the narrative method. This study surveyed the types of traditional *aso-oke* used by the Ondo people in the past and present times; and identified *Alaari*, *Sanmiyan*, *Etu*, *Petuje* and *Ogungunelu* as the major ones. Therefore, this study examined their uses in the past and recent times and considered developmental trends in the use of these types of *aso-oke*. This study dwelled more on historical records as methods of data collection. In conclusion, this study revealed that Ondo people are prominent users of *aso-oke* fabrics and also preserver of the cultural identity of the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria through the use of *aso-oke* fabrics.

Keywords: *Aso-oke, Handwoven, Ondo People, Clothing Identity, Textiles, Nigeria*

⁺ Evelyn Omotunde Adepeko, Lecturer, Department of Home economics, Adeyemi College of education, Ondo, Nigeria.
email: adetunde.crown@gmail.com.

⁺⁺ Michael Abiodun Oyinloye, Lecturer, Department of Fine and applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria.
email: abbeymyke@yahoo.com; michael.oyinloye@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng.

³ Adesimi Oluwa Adepeko, Grad Student, Department of Guidance and Counseling, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
email: adeadesimioluwa@gmail.com.

⁴ Adebayo Abiodun Adeloye, Lecturer, Environmental Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria.
email: adebayoadeloye04@gmail.com.

Introduction

Aso-oke, an indigenous hand-woven fabric to the Yoruba people of Nigeria, holds significant cultural and historical value. Over the years, its use has extended beyond Nigeria's borders, making it a symbol of African heritage and identity across the globe. Internationally, Yoruba communities and individuals living abroad continue to wear *aso-oke* during cultural events, weddings, and other celebrations. By incorporating *aso-oke* into their lives, Yoruba diaspora communities preserve their cultural identity and pass down their traditions to future generations. *Aso-oke* is significant to the Yoruba group of south-western Nigeria. The term *Aso-oke* refers to the products from a horizontal loom made by 'Ara Oke.' According to Diyaolu and Omotosho (2020), Lagos merchants in the late 19th century called the Yoruba from hinterland as 'Ara Oke,' therefore refers to the clothe as 'Aso awon ara oke,' meaning the cloth from the upper part of the country.

Before contact with the Europeans, there were abundant uses of hand woven textiles spread across various ethnic groups in Nigeria because there were little or no clothing alternatives for use. Dresses in the Yoruba land was hand woven because there was no alternatives to cloth production. Likewise among the Tiv hand woven fabrics such as the *Anger, Tugudu, Kubeba and bnarda* among others were also sewn into different styles by men and women (Maiwada, 2001). The hand-woven textiles (*aso-oke*) have similar values and purposes among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. People used hand-woven textile as dress items ranging from everyday use (work cloth and cover cloth). Hand-woven textiles were used to commemorate traditional weddings, coronations, chieftaincy activities, passage rites, and burial rites of the aged among others, as well as for other religious and ritual purposes. The examples of these woven fabrics are *sanyan, alaari, etu, shain-shain* and *onjawu* among others are sewn into different styles. The men sew *agbada, buba, dansiki, soro, kembe and sokoto*, while the women sew *buba, iro, ipеле, iborun and gele*.

According to Eicher (1976) the production and use of traditional hand-woven textiles was evident throughout Yoruba land. Its use spanned across all social strata from the noble to the humble, especially, for use during the celebration of traditional ceremonies and festivals. However, with the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria, the use of these hand-woven textiles declined greatly in many Yoruba communities. This was because of mass importation of other fabrics from other nations of the world for general use as well as for the commemoration of special events. Akinwunmi (1912) upholds this fact by stating that, "drastic socio-economic and political changes took place with the advent of British colonial rule." Despite the decline in the use of handwoven textiles in many Yoruba communities, the Ondo people still continued to acquire and use them (especially the old types) for the commemoration of traditional events and festivals.

Scholars such as Ademuleya (2002), Aladenika (2007) and Adepeko (2008) in their different studies on the Ondo people and continuing appreciation of the hand-woven textiles (especially the old types) observed that it is traditionally appreciated by the people because of their special attachment to the fabrics. They also reveal that the Ondo people still collect and re-use the old types as dress items at important ceremonies even when their kindred all over Yoruba land had since embraced the contemporary types. However, the study observes *alaari, sanyan, etu, petuje* and *egungunelu* as the old types mainly used by the Ondo people.

Etu is a stripe patterned fabric usually made of indigo dyed cotton which is predominantly dark blue with fine light blue at its background. *Petuje*, often called junior *etu*, is almost similar to *etu* and it is made of small checks of light blue on a dark indigo background. *Sanmiyan* is another traditional handwoven fabric used in Ondo. It was traditionally made of yarn derived from silkworms. The fabrics are usually pale grayish brown in color and sometimes divided by white longitudinal warp lines. The regularity and symmetrical arrangement of the warp lines exhibit a high degree of technical skill. Chunwike (1984) affirms the production of silk yarns from wild *anaphe* cocoons are used for the production of *sanmiyan*. He stressed further that Ondo was one of the major silk weaving centres in Yoruba land. The people's continuing appreciation and use of these handwoven textiles justify this review: Preserving the Traditional Clothing Identity: An Overview of the Past and Present uses of Aso-Oke by the Ondo People of the Southwest, Nigeria.



Figure 1. From top left to right, *Alaari* and *Sanmiyan*. Middle left to right, *Etu* and *Petuje*. Bottom left, *Pabi dindu*. Sample sizes are ~ 1 x 2 inches. Source: author's collection 2006; bottom from 2018.

Research Questions

This study is paramount in safeguarding the cultural heritage and promoting cultural continuity. Therefore, it delved into Ondo people's clothing traditions, shedding light on the historical and contemporary applications of *Aso-Oke*, a culturally significant fabric. The study intends to promote the preservation of unique weaving techniques and designs, thereby safeguarding the cultural identity of the Ondo community.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the historical background of *aso-oke* in Ondo town?
2. What are the cultural uses of the different types of *aso-oke* in Ondo town?
3. What are the similarities between *aso-oke* and other traditional hand-woven fabrics?

Methodology

The research adopted a mixed method approach using a combination of review research approach and survey research method. Review research method was adopted for this research using secondary data collection approach. Interview was used as the data gathering method for the survey approach. The population of the study include the inhabitants on Ondo town in Southwest Nigeria. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the samples, only the elderly among the population in Ondo town were sampled. Existing literatures relevant to the topic were carefully reviewed and discussed. The literatures reviewed were carefully selected based on the originality of their contents and relevance to the study. The interview data was presented using narrative method. The research focused on the use and preservation of *aso-oke* fabrics for cultural identity in Ondo town.

Discussion of Findings: Beginning of Weaving in Ondo

Weaving practice, production and use in Ondo especially before independence was nothing different from that of other Yoruba ethnic groups. In the past, women in Ondo planted cotton seeds which were harvested, processed and spun into yarns and subsequently woven into fabrics. A centenarian, Adeduoye, (2006), interviewed for this study revealed that, from time immemorial, Ondo women were weavers and cotton used for weaving was cultivated alongside other food crops. The cultivated cotton used for the production of *poku* – is a plain weave pattern on the vertical loom. She added that *alaari* woven fabrics were also produced centuries ago. She narrated two strange stories relating to its production. The first story goes thus:

“There was a wealthy barren woman who died and was buried in a place specially preserved. Surprisingly cotton plant of special species grew on her grave. It was nurtured because it was a strange phenomenon. When the cotton was ripe, it produced unusual red cotton, which was harvested and made into yarns, which were later woven into cloth with great admirable beauty. This turned to be the *alaari*, which gained popularity and importance among the Ondo people.”

This story was also corroborated by Akeem (2006); Femi (2006); Akinseye (2006); and Olayo (2006) during a focus group session in 2006. The kernel of the second story is that,

“more than three centuries ago the Ondo people planted cotton which was *alaari* fabrics. When it was planted on the farm, a slave was permanently placed in charge of the farm to tend and nurture it and ensure adequate care until the time of harvest. As the plant blossomed and matured, red instead of white fluffy buds appeared and it later broke open in readiness for picking. As soon as the breaking of the buds began, simultaneously, the skin of the slave also began to crack just like the way the harmattan cold-dry effect makes the human lips crack. The slave remained in the farm as long as he lived cultivating and harvesting *alaari* red cotton year in year out. The owner (who lived in town) only came when the harvest was ready for collection. This was her submission in the year 2006 during a joint oral interview with one of the authors.”

The Use of *alaari* in Ondo

All the respondents agreed that *alaari* woven fabric is paramount or the premier of all *aso oke* types used in Ondo kingdom. It is generally accepted as 'first Dress Asset' to own, most probably for the reason that it allows for more, flexible use in most important landmark occasions of social life. The use of *alaari* woven fabrics cut across all age groups but it is mostly used by the elderly. According to the interview data collected from Ogidan (2006), the reason for this is not far-fetched. It is the most expensive of all the old hand-woven textiles used in Ondo, so it is not within the reach of the young people. The use of *alaari* woven fabrics highlights the clothing culture of Ondo people across their social strata, that is, from the lower class to the wealthy ones. It counts so much in rating a family's wealth in the olden days according to some opinions. Among the Ondo people, *alaari* fabrics are assets, which appreciate no matter the age. This view probably arose from the known fact that families regard it as a heritage to be passed down from one generation to the other.



Figure 2. A man in *alaari*. Source: Author's collection 2018.

Alaari woven fabrics are of different types. They include; *gunlodo, jama, lusen, lalubasa, egoro, lita, egungunelu pupa, paba pupa, okegbeeye, elekuru, lopokan, dametu, fopelo, eleta, leya, lomolangidi, alaari petuje, alaari lubo meji, alaari pupa, opopo otun, liyonkon, looto pupa, eleta pupa, eleje aja, alaba dametu, orukope, labe, alaari layinyan, alari libuluu, alaari ligirini* and *alaari labere*. According to the interview data from Akinsulie (2006) as the names differ, so does the price, as well as the premium placed on each fabric.



Figure 3. A woman in *alaari*. Source: Author's collection 2015.

The Use of Alaari in the Yesteryears

It was noted during a focus group with Ogunye (2006), Fabiyi (2006), Fatimehin (2006) and Ogidan (2006) that the pride in *alaari* is predominantly evident in the various functions in which it appears. Though the use of *alaari* is common to all Ondo people, we can say that in the olden days because of class, it was meant for the royal, the noble, the high chiefs, the rich and the highly placed people. The use of *alaari* in burying the aged was a practice in the past. It was used for wrapping the corpse of the nobles and also used to decorate the walls of the room where the corpse was laid. During funeral ceremonies the children of the deceased were dressed in *alaari* while the invited guest would be dressed in other woven fabric such as *sanyan*.

It was also discovered from the interviews with Akinsulie & Fabiyi (2006), that it is also the culture of the Ondo people to mourn their dead, just like other Yoruba towns and villages. However, the ways and manners the Ondo people go about it is quite different from that of other towns in Yoruba land. There is what can be termed as “grave deposit.” Different members of the family and close associates of the dead would bring various traditional woven fabrics (mostly *sanyan*) for the corpse; these are also used as parting gifts for the dead. It is worthy to note, that even in contemporary times, *sanyan* is used during funeral ceremonies especially by the children and close relations of the deceased. Other mourners could wear *etu* or *petuje*.



Figure 4. Left, children of deceased in *alaari* during burial ceremony. Right, family members in *etu* and *petuje* during burial ceremony. Source: Author's collection 2015.

Alaari was also used extensively during the coronation of kings and installation of chiefs. The chief to be installed wears a big native trouser with wide mouth called *kembe* with very loose waist gathered together with a rope and ties a big *alaari* wrapper called *Iketa* (*Iketa* is bigger than a regular women's wrapper) around his waist, or wraps it around himself and ties it over his left shoulder like the old Roman prince or emperor. The wife of the chief been installed is also clad in three pieces of *alaari*, *iro*, *ipele*, and *gele*. This is called *olodemeta* (three-piece apparel).

According to the interview data collected from Akeem & Femi (2006) during betrothal, the bride and the groom wears *alaari* while the parents of the couple wear another shade of *alaari*. Also during naming ceremony, the mother of the baby wears *alaari* to distinguish her from the crowd.



Figure 5. A chief in Ondo. Source: Author's collection 2015.

There are two notable traditional festivals in Ondo, *Ogun* festival and *Odun-oba* (Fadipe and Obiana, 2021:45). The first one is Ogun Festival which is dedicated to Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and war. Ogun is highly revered in Yoruba mythology and is considered the patron deity of blacksmiths, warriors, and hunters. The festival is usually held annually and involves various rituals, ceremonies, and performances. The second one is Odun Oba Festival, is a celebration dedicated to the reigning monarch, the Osemawe of Ondo. The festival serves as a tribute to the king and is marked by various ceremonies and festivities (Ademu-leya, 2014:141). During these festivals, the king, the chiefs and the nobles are elaborately dressed in *alaari* which serves as the royal official outfit for the day. These festivals mark the peak of traditional festivals in Ondo. When these eminent personalities are in their full *alaari* regalia, songs such as the following are rendered to eulogise them.

Ugba uli o ma mu soge
Awo uli o m mu seyan
Abata butu aso bami lo
Ma mu soge nuli o
Ma ma ya gbe o
Ma ma ya gbe
Alaari lori aso ma mu seye

Family treasurers, I will pride in it
 Family heritage, I will be proud of
 The richest attire of my father
 I will wear with dignity
 I will wear with dignity
 I will wear with dignity
alaari the chieftain of dresses (fabrics)
 I will wear with dignity

Ma mu pon mo o
Ma mu pon mo
Alaari lori aso
Ma mu pon mo

I will use it to carry my child on my back
 I will use it to carry my child on my back
alaari, the chieftain of dress
 I will use it to carry my child on my back



Figure 6. Ondo Chiefs during Odun-Oba. Source: Author's collection 2006.

The Use of Alaari in Contemporary Times

Just like the times of old, there are little or no changes in the use of *alaari* fabrics, between now and then except that *alaari* is no longer in full use for burials. The use of *sanyan* has replaced this in contemporary times (Adepeko, 2009).

However, there are some modifications in its usage in contemporary times. For example, during betrothal, the bride ties *alaari* shawl (*iborun*) round her waist over whatever attire she has on, while the groom uses a piece of *alaari* as a muffler.



Figure 7. Groom and bride during betrothal. Source: Author's collection 2006.

According to the interview data from Ogunye (2006) *Obitun* dancers also use *alaari* fabrics. They entertained the crowd during important traditional ceremonies or festival end-of-the-year school activities, both in the primary and secondary Schools, government functions and *Ekimogun* day celebration.

Traditional Premium Attached to Ondo Hand woven Fabrics

It was revealed by Ogidan & Ogunye (2006) that, in Ondo tradition, a number of factors determine the traditional premium placed on a particular hand woven fabric. These include: (a) the age of the fabric, (b) the design, (c) type of weaving yarns and (d) the dye stuff. Each will be discussed separately as follows.

Age of the Fabric

In Ondo tradition, the age of a traditional hand woven fabric is treasured and it determines the premium placed on such fabric. Age is particularly considered in rating the prominent old hand woven textiles, that is *alaari*, *sanmiyan*, *egungundu*, *etu* and *petuje*; *alaari* is prime among them. This belief is reflected in an Ondo axiom: “*aso e gbo, da ma ma wekun*” meaning “the ruggedness of a cloth does not hide its quality.” Among the Ondo people, a very old hand woven fabric is called *keleku* (see figure 8 below for examples).



Figure 8. Two examples of very old *alaari* fabric (*keleku*) – Groom and Bride during betrothal. Source: Author's collection 2016.

Designs

According to Nwanchukwu & Ibeabuchi (2012) hand woven cloths have a lot of significant designs used to decorate them. The design adds more value to the pieces of woven cloths and causes them to be appreciated by the people that own them and others. These designs are made up of motifs portrayed in different colors. Ondo hand woven fabrics are mainly stripe patterned. The only exception is *alaari*. Some *alaari* fabrics have figure motifs and some inlay design on them although, majority of *alaari* fabrics are striped patterned. The stripe patterned *alaari* fabrics are classified into two:

1. The one with the combination of *sanmiyan*, *petuje* or *etu* and;
2. The one with stripes only.

Alaari handwoven fabrics are sometimes combined with other hand woven fabrics such as *sanmiyan*, *etu* because in terms of ruggedness, *alaari* fabrics are weaker than the remaining *aso oke* types. The combination is done to support *alaari* weaker yarns in garment: *Alaari* fabric gets weaker as a result of keeping the fabrics in either tightly closed wardrobe or cupboard or the locally made wooden or metal boxes called *apeti* and *iyatinbo* respectively without regular airing or inspection of the fabric. *Apeti* is used by men while *Iyatinbo* is used by women for cloth storage. Therefore, insects such as moths destroy *alaari* yarns in garments while the other combinations are unaffected.



Figure 9. Left, *Alaari* combined with *Sanmiyan*. Right, *Alaari Lomolangidi* design. Source: Author's collection 2006.

The figure is called *omolangidi* (a Yoruba carved wooden toy). This figured motif featured prominently on *alaari* fabrics according to the weavers in the 1920s and 30s. The cube motif in the fabric was incorporated much later. This shows that the fabrics are the old time fabrics of delight in their different times of production and use. They show complex structural weaving of the Ondo people. The sample above is combined with another *alaari* type,

the reason for this might be that the *lomolangidi* design might not be enough for a woman's shawl, hence, the additional ones. *Ikat* design (known as *layinyan* in Ondo) is another old unique and aesthetically pleasing design. This design was achieved on hand woven fabrics by bunches of unique warp yarns intermittently tied and dyed before they were woven. *Ikat* design is a complex design of the ancient times which is very rare on contemporary woven fabric because most contemporary weavers lack the technique of dyeing the yarns and weaving such complex designs. Figure 10 below is an example of an *Ikat* design on an old Ondo traditional hand woven fabric.



Figure 10. *Ikat* design. Source: Author's collection 2006.

The Yarn of the Fabric

The worth of any woven fabric is also evaluated by the type of yarn used for the weaving. Those made with hand spun yarns are older in age and more cherished because hand spun yarns are not obtainable for use in contemporary times. Therefore, the existing ones need to be treasured and preserved, thus attracting higher premium. Woven fabrics made with hand spun yarns are characterized by thickness and they coarseness. Adepeko (2009) indicates the use of hand spun yarns for weaving has perhaps made possible its re-use and social renovations done to the fabrics because of thicker or heavier woven fabric which in turn responsible for its lifespan.

The Dye

The quality of dye for dyeing yarns used for weaving is also a major factor in rating a particular woven fabric in Ondo. Those fabrics that are color-fast are more expensive than those that are not. The very old *aso-oke* types whose yarns were dyed with the local vegetable dyes are most treasured (Adepeko, 2009).

Shift in the Use of Alaari

Fashion is not static, it is dynamic. The use of *alaari* hand woven fibre is gradually taking a new dimension. In recent times even the academia has embraced its use though in way that will suit their academic purpose. For example, the Management of Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, as a way of identifying with the indigenous heritage sews academic gowns for the principal officers of the College with *alaari* hand woven fabrics. Academic Icons visiting the College are also presented with such gifts as way of identifying indigenous crafts. The gowns are use during land mark ceremonies such as graduation and inauguration of the institution.



Figure 11. A former Provost of Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo. Source: Author’s collection 2018.



Figure 12. Left, (and right, 3rd from the left) Professor Toyin Falola, the guest lecturer during the 2018 College convocation is seen gracefully dressed in academic made with *alaari* fabrics.

Comparison Between Aso-oke and Other Handwoven Clothes

Aso-Oke is a traditional hand-woven fabric that originates from the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It is a popular textile in Nigerian culture and is known for its intricate designs and rich symbolism. According to Fadipe and Obiana (2021), when discussing the similarities between *aso-oke* and other traditional hand-woven fabrics, it is essential to consider various aspects, including weaving techniques, cultural significance, and symbolism. Among the Igbo people is the *Akwete*, mainly used by women as wrappers. Afigbo and Okeke (1982), Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi (2012), Nonso (2021) all agreed that Igbo people are widely known for *Akwete* cloth weaving which is majorly done by women.

In the recent time, there are changes in dressing styles across the ethnic groups in Nigeria which does not exempt the Ondo people. The change was informed by the incentive to consider the modification of Ondo traditional hand woven fabrics to suit contemporary fashion trends. The attempt of change in fashion by the Tiv is witnessed in their heavily woven fabrics which are now used during winter season and also for traditional occasions. Maiwada (2001) noted that, the Tiv fabrics have been used as new designed clothing in form of 'Rainbow,' while *Anger* another form of hand woven cloth among the Tiv tribe.

1. **Weaving Techniques:** *Aso-oke* shares weaving techniques with many other traditional hand-woven fabrics from different parts of the world. These techniques include the use of supplementary weft. *Aso-oke* often features supplementary weft threads, where additional threads are woven into the fabric to create intricate patterns. This technique is common in other traditional textiles, such as *Kente* cloth from Ghana and brocades from various regions (Ademuleya, 2014:134). *Aso-Oke* is woven on narrow-strip looms. Similar looms are used for weaving fabrics like the Inca textiles from South America and the *Ikat* textiles from Southeast Asia. These looms are known for their ability to create finely detailed patterns.
2. **Cultural Significance:** *Aso-Oke*, like other traditional hand-woven fabrics, holds significant cultural importance. They are often used in ceremonies, festivals, and rituals. These textiles are considered symbols of identity, heritage, and social status. Other fabrics with similar cultural significance include *Kente* Cloth which is highly regarded among the Akan people of Ghana. It is used to symbolize cultural identity, and the patterns and colors have specific meanings (Diyaulu, 2016).
3. **Symbolism:** *Aso-Oke*, like many other hand-woven fabrics, often incorporates symbolism into its designs. These symbols can represent cultural values, history, and spirituality (Chunwike, 1984:30). For example, *Kente* cloth and other Ghanaian textiles often feature *Adinkra* symbols, each with its own meaning. These symbols convey proverbs, concepts, and beliefs. The Persian carpets are renowned for their intricate designs and symbolism. Different patterns and motifs in these carpets signify aspects of nature, life, and spirituality. Native American tribes have a rich tradition of weaving textiles with symbolism. These textiles often reflect tribal history, spirituality, and connection to the land (Seran and Rupasinghe, 2013:29).

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the interplay between cultural heritage, historical significance, and contemporary relevance. Through an in-depth exploration of the past and present uses of *Aso-Oke*, this study has provided valuable insights into the rich clothing tradition that define the Ondo people's cultural identity. The findings highlighted the importance of preserving traditional clothing practices as they serve not only as symbols of cultural heritage but also as vehicles for identity, expression, and community cohesion. *Aso-Oke*, with its vibrant colors, simple patterns and deep cultural meanings, stands as a testament to the creativity and artistry of the Ondo people.

This study also emphasized the need for proactive measures to safeguard and promote traditional textile crafts like *Aso-Oke*. As globalization and modernization continue to shape

the world, it is crucial to recognize the significance of these heritage practices in maintaining cultural diversity and fostering a sense of belonging among communities. In the face of evolving fashion trends and changing societal norms, the Ondo people, along with other communities around the world, must actively engage in the preservation and transmission of their traditional clothing heritage to future generations. This can be achieved through education, awareness campaigns, and supporting local artisans and craftsmen, ensuring that these invaluable traditions continue to thrive in the modern era.

This study also serves as a valuable contribution to the broader discourse on cultural preservation and heritage conservation. By acknowledging the importance of traditions like Aso-Oke, society can move forward in a more inclusive and culturally rich manner, celebrating the past while embracing the future.

Recommendations

In order to preserve the value of Aso-Oke in Ondo, the following are recommended:

1. oruba people should use Aso-Oke more frequently not only for special occasions like weddings and burial ceremonies but also as daily wears sown to different styles.
2. The younger generation should be encouraged to use the old Aso-Oke types especially during the celebration of traditional ceremonies as well as festivals to keep the clothing identity alive.
3. Weavers should be counsel to weave light-weight Aso-Oke fabrics so that it can be sewn into variety of styles.

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