

Original Research Paper

Yoruba Contemporary Gele: A Stylistic Appraisal

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Abstract: Gele, pronounced gay-lay, is simply head covering, typified and rooted in feminine fashion of the Yoruba, home and abroad. It is the ultimate apparel adorned by the female folks of all age, class and status; giving acclaimed quintessential top notch appeal, deserving of a true Yoruba dress. In other words, clothing accessories conglomerating costume, footwear, makeup and hairstyle is incongruous without gele particularly in the Yoruba milieu. Gele congruity in female dressing is unequivocally material to recent proclivity and self expressions as observed in generation and regenerations of well over thirty stylish gele ideas and innovations. In view of the latter, this paper examines gele stylistic inclination; using Ibadan as its case in point, being the largest city state in modern Yoruba history. The methodology adopted was triangular approaches of participatory field investigation, online survey and artistic visualisation. Gele adherents and stylists of Ibadan metropolis were physically interviewed, figures sourced virtually and appraised artistically. Eight gele styles were shortlisted and stylistically visualised. Findings revealed dynamism in prevailing gele styles, with apparent classic and comely finesse on beholders. Consequently, this paper hopes it finding will help promotes gele styling among teeming youths locally and globally; provoking studies on the subject matter.

Keywords: Gele, Aso-Ofi, Women Head Covering, Yoruba.



1. Introduction

Gele uniqueness is attested both in its feministic monotony and fundamentality in Yoruba, argued the most cultured black race of the globe [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]. Yoruba philologically is triptych in context, crisscrossing language, geography and people [6] [7] [8] [9]. As a language, it is perhaps the most spoken in Nigeria, traversing the borders of her host country and beyond; evident in some West African countries and the Americas [7] [10]. Geographically and spatially covering an area between the River Niger and Atlantic Coast, spanning latitude 6° and 9° north and longitude 2°30' and 6°30' east; estimated at 181,300 square kilometers [4] [9] [11] [12].

The people are the true autochthonous natives of the Southwestern Nigeria, which include Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti and some parts of Kwara and Kogi as her constituent states [13] [14] [15]. They are known for their creative contributions to the world artistic tradition, instanced in Ife bronze heads, Owo terracotta sculpture and Esie stone sculpture [16] [17] [18] [19]. Equally evident is their prowess in pottery, architecture, blacksmithing, brass casting, weaving and textile [20] [21] [22] [23] [24]. They also had their fair share in fashion, which circumnavigates lifestyle and clothing accessories as in footwear, makeup, hairstyle and head covering [1] [25] [26].

Generally and Westerly speaking, human head coverings are of different and diverse types; exemplified instanced in bonnets, caps, crowns, fillet, barrette, hats, helmets and hoods [3]. Others include diadem, tiara, turbans, veils, wigs, head-tie, head-wraps and head-gear [27]. In other words, head-gear, head-wear or head-dress is the appellation given to any element of clothing, usually worn on the head [28], fundamentally to keeps human hair contained and tidy [29]. Its use further includes protection and decoration as observed in defence, medicine, religious faiths, cultural and social; mutually adorn globally by both male and female gender.

2. Literature Review

Interestingly, African men and women are not left out of the action of adorning in headgear. For the women folks, its culture variations are typified in *Dhari*, *Duku* or *Dhuku*, *Akisi* or *Ichafu*, *Dankwali*, *Gele* etcetera [1] [30]. Observably, Ghanaian women wore head wraps for religious rituals on Friday and Sunday or Saturday, depending on their respective persuasions as exemplified in Islamic, Jewish and Christian faiths [28]. Malawian women are quite conservative; they wore head ties strictly during bad weather or bed time (sleep) to protect hair. South African women on the other hand, are colourful in their choice of head gear. While Zimbabwean women wore head wraps as accessories for creating a stylish look. Luckily, head gear in the aforementioned countries is known by the name *Duku*, *Dhuku* or *Dhari* [30].

In Nigeria, head gear is popular among her three major tribes of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The Igbo named their traditional hair tie *Akisi* or *Ichafu* [30], while in Hausa it is known as *Dankwali*; the Yoruba on the other hand calls it *Gele* [1] [25]. *Gele* is loosely use in Yoruba to connote all kinds of head covering of the women folks. Diverse as its forms and types, paramount is the indigenous rectangular flat piece (scarf), usually manipulated creatively to gives eloquent, dynamic, befitting and sophisticated beauty on beholder [31]. *Gele* has become a predominant part of the women quintessential look, particularly in contemporary times. Lately, it is the most popular fashion accessory for different ages of feminine gender with impressed variety of formalistic twists and perpendicular balances. The simplest form of *gele* is not only similar to, but very much like an ordinary bandanas [31]. Its sophisticated designs on the other hand, require more effort and time often produced from the special fabric known as *Aso-Ofi* also called *Aso-Oke* [5].

Fabrics used in making *gele* are no doubt plethora and evolving time and time from generation to generations. Nonetheless, some materials has weathered the times and tides and they include *Aso-Ofi*, Damask, French lace, Net, Swiss, Jubilee, Brocade, African print (Ankara) and *Adire*. The enlisted materials ranked foremost in *gele* adornment, majorly as a result of their tight glossy structural cum textural qualities and surface patterning and colourations, which are available and accessible [32] [33] [34] [35] [36] [37]. Also worth noting on the aforementioned fabrics is their characteristic stiffness, firmness and flexibility to hold together [38].

Fundamentally, *gele* is classified into three formalities of casual, costume and custom-made. For clarity, casual *gele* is mainly plain or patterned, somewhat a regular scarf, tied for daily or domestic activity. Costume *gele* on the other hand is adorned on specialised outfits like carnival, stage play and dance practice to mention few. Custom-made *gele* is however, worn by all sundry in this milieu, courtesy of it exigency at ceremonies; making it the most popular and most celebrate among its peers. This *gele* is significantly designed for ceremonial balls, often thrown in this part of the world on

weekly or week long bases. Child christening, house warming, graduation, engagement and wedding ceremonies are examples of such aforementioned balls [39].

Ethically, *gele* is required to cover the entire woman's head and ears, leaving only face and lower part of earlobes exposed. Traditionally, the way a Yoruba woman wore her *gele* is often an indication of her social status, significantly in terms of age and marriage. For married women, the end of their *gele* leans to the right side of their head, which symbolises the fact that, such a woman is married. While for adult single ladies, their *gele* is tied to lean on the left side of their head, meaning they are at their prime, mature, searching and ready to mingle for marriage. Infants or yet to be adults, particularly teens leans their *gele* to the front, which implies their future is ahead of them. Old and elderly women tie theirs to the back, which suggests their sun has set, retiring from active social activities.

In today's society, traditional etiquette on tying *gele* has been thrown under the bus as age or marital status is no longer articulated in the scheme of things. The implication of the latter however, is that, no define regulation or limitation is in place on contemporary *gele* making. The making of *gele* is now marked by a sense of dynamism and creativity, apparent in material eloquence manoeuvrings through vertical stretching, horizontal elongation, perpendicular balance, spiral twists to folds. Tying or wrapping of *gele* in this generation is simply a statement of fashion, elegance, confidence, power, glamorous, proclivity, self expression and style. According to Ogan [40], style or styling means to do something that becomes accepted or fashionable, that a lot of other people copy; noting further that, when something is stylish, it simply implies vogue, calling attention of all sundry.

Gele styles are enormous, numbering well over thirty ideas and still counting, due to its ever changing forms, provoked however by innovation and creativity. This scenario has in recent times brought to for proclivity and self expression; majorly in costumed made *gele*, with evidential generation and regenerations of stylistic ideas. Avant-Garde, Flowery Umbrella, Infinite Pleats, Perfect Rose, Fan, Pleats Overload, Side Rose, Side-Twisted Fan, Wide Flower, Centre Knot Peacock, Centre Bow, Multiple Pleats, Multiple Pleats Bling, Two Step Pleats and Left Ruffle Stone Bead are some of its prevailing instances [29].

Evidential as *gele* stylistic innovation and impact is to female (women) fashion both at home and abroad [31], it is rather unfortunate to note that, it has not attracted scholarly scholarship commensurate to its trajectory. Many of what constitutes *gele* repository are basically social accounts of newspaper, blog, twitter, instagram posts [32] [33] [34] [35] [36] [37] [38]. In view of the latter, this paper appraises *gele* styles in contemporary Yoruba land; using Ibadan as its case in point, being the largest city state in modern history [9] [41] [42]. Ibadan, fondly called the city on the hill, is the capital of Oyo State, Nigeria; located on coordinate 7°. 24' 7.0632' North latitude and 3°. 55'. 3268' East longitude; playing host to 1. 4m people [43]. The city is many things to different people, to many; Ibadan is the power house of the state, to some an industrial and commercial hub of the state, while to others, the intellectual melting pot of Oyo state and at the same time her fashion haven [5] [41] [42] [44].

3. Methodology

Triangular methodological approach, encapsulating participatory investigation, bibliographical cum online survey and artistic visualisation was adopted. *Gele* adherents and stylists of Ibadan metropolis were physically interviewed one on one base on the diversity and dynamics of their *gele*. Figures (pictures) were sourced from stylists Instagram handles and adherents consent sorted, these pictures were subsequently appraised visually, using accessible bibliographies.

4. Finding and Discussion

Plethora as *gele* styles are; only eight were short listed for appraisal in this study. This exercise is an artistic overview of costumed made *gele*, known for its diverse variations; a corpus from which the likes of side-twisted fan, centre knot peacock, centre bow, two step pleats, infinite pleats, ruffle, multiple pleats and avant-garde were stylistic appraised to give a sense of wholeness.

Based on Figure 1, this *gele* is costume made for Sarah's pre-engagement ceremony photo-shot, styled "side twisted fan". The piece was shot on a dark background; giving a sense of sharp contrast of black as against pink. The *gele* complements her light nude make-up and costume which comprises the blouse, necklace, bracelet and a pair of earrings. The *gele* is made from 36" x 72" synthetic *Aso-Ofi*, of pink colouration. It is a march for the blouse, which is an extract of same *Aso-Ofi*, embedded with pink satin at the arm, which was and complemented with white and red star or petal ribbons

scattered around her bust. The *gele* is a three step conical pleats, side twist, twisted to the right to give a visual appeal of a fan handle as the style suggested. Visually [45], the manoeuvring of the *gele* is an admixture of left and right cross current perpendicular balance with horizontal elongation and spiral twists. The leaning of the *gele* to the right, symbolically implies a fresh beginning. The bride is however, pose to face us directly eyeballs to eyeballs. This phenomenon suggests the fact that the D-Day is already here or better still suggesting her eagerness for the day to come and pass.



Cedit: Adamsgele Instagram handles

Figure 1. Side Twisted Fan *Gele*, Synthetic *Aso-Ofi*, 36" x 72", 2022.



Credit: Glambyolufunke Instagram handles

Figure 2. Centre Knot Peacock *Gele* *Aso-Ofi*, 36" x 72", 2022.

Based on Figure 2, this piece is a pre-birthday party photo-shot of Mary Ann, adorned in “centre knot peacock *gele*” style. The *gele* adornment is very much in line with tradition as its tying covers the entire head and ears, leaving only face and lower part of earlobes exposed. Its rendition is basically perpendicular pleats of three steps stretching vertically to form an anchored knot at the centre, ending as tails suggesting the shape of peacock. The material adopted was a plain brilliant yellow *Aso-Ofi*, complemented with stripe blue, yellow and red *Aso-Ofi* blouse. Visually speaking, centralized *gele* suggest youthfulness and possible transition to the next phase of life, which may be from teen to adolescent, adolescent to adulthood or single to spinster. The celebrant was posed, tilting her face to the right, which connotes the fact that, she was counting her blessings. She wore a very light makeup,

complemented with a matching red lipstick, which only a discerning observer can detect, it absence of jewellery.

Based on Figure 3, this *gele* styled “centred bow” was adorned by Olivia at friend’s wedding ceremony, where she was a member of the bridal train and doubles as the chief bridesmaid. The *gele* though a typical example of its kind, but appears infirm visually, suggesting an oversize or untidy *gele*. Formalistically, it was a five step pleats *gele* with a massive bow attached or hooked at the centre of the head. The material used was a synthetic *Aso-Ofi*, mainly for its thickness, durability and flexibility, giving room for maximum manipulations. This *gele* is monochromatic in colouration [46], evidently a champagne gold with some strip glitters of silver; adorned on same coloured blouse with lace embellished transparent bust. It adornment definitely, nonconformist to tradition, rather a modernist approach leaving out her hair, which was complemented with heavy make-up and a pair of gold wirework earrings.



Credit: vc_gele Instagram handles

Figure 3. Centred Bow *Gele*, Aso-Ofi, 36" x 72", 2022.



Credit: geleloge Instagram handle

Figure 4. Two-Step Pleated *Gele* Style, Aso-Ofi, 36" x 72", 2021.

Based on Figure 4, two step pleats is the name accredited to this *gele* style, adorned by Iyabo, which was took as pre-child christening ceremony photo-shot. She was posed against a lighter background pertained with flowery ornamentations of blue rose white petals and pink shrub like leaves. Formalistically speaking, the *gele* was rendered to give a visual impression of a centrally balanced two steps or phases. The first phase was apparently a compact perpendicular pleats balance,

while the second was a decompressed vertical pleats or folds with twisted spiral flaps, firmly laid both at the edges and the base. She was adorned in silver like necklace, engagement ring, bracelet, pair of earrings and purse, complemented by her light nude make-up, blouse and *gele*. The material for both the *gele* and blouse was *Aso-Ofi*, of sky blue colouration.



Credit: oseibeautyplus Instagram handle

Figure 5. Infinite Pleats *Gele* Style *Aso-Ofi*, 45" x 216", 2022.

Based on Figure 4, this imagery of Mayowa was shot as her pre-engagement ceremony photograph [47], adorned in “infinite pleats *gele*” style. The *gele* is known as infinite pleats because it was pleated numerously such that, its pleats numerical numbering is unimaginable. Made from 45 x 216 inches *Aso-Ofi* material, which is of tomato red colouration. Visually speaking, the *gele* is complemented with an *ipele* which is of the same colouration, a pair of gold ear-ring, gold neck lace ornamented with metallic white and cream pearls at the centre and slightly heavy nude make-up. She wore a stripe blouse of white, red, light brown and dark brown. The *gele* though, worn in contemporary manner leaving some part of the hair on the fore head to show, it consequently take care of tradition by covering substantial parts of the ears.



Credit: suziestouches Instagram handle

Figure 6. Knot Ruffled *Gele* Style, Linen Satin Fabric, 36" x 72" 2022.

Based on Figure 6, this gele style is known as “knot ruffled *gele*” worn by Omawunmito grace the occasion of her grand ma’s burial ceremony. Pictorially, the *gele* was firstly pleated to give the three

steps vertically perpendicular balance that was centrally knotted at the centre, which was extended, ruffled at the top to cover entire head. Evidently, the style was made from a 36 x 72 inches metallic green linen satin material; artistically rendered to complement her half shoulder sleeved blouse, which was produced with dark blue, greyish green and light pink leaves and flower patterned Ankara and white lace materials. The *gele* was firmly created to take the supposed shape of the hair she was wearing.

Based on Figure 7, this *gele* was made from *Aso-Ofi* material, styled “multiple pleats”; adorned by Temi as her pre-traditional wedding ceremony photo shot. The *gele* fabric was further patterned at the edges and the centre with leaf and flower outlines, coloured in blue and orange. The patterning of the *gele* was done with screen printing technique by hand, using contrasting opaque hue of royal blue and carrot orange against white *Aso-Ofi* back ground to complements her white and blue blouse. Equally, observable was her pair of carrot orange and metallic white bead earrings and her very light nude make-up. The style as the name suggest, multiple pleats, gives a visual impression of continuous cum spontaneous circular folds progression from the base, consequently relaxing at the edge, playing host to pattered ornamentations. Temi’s posed though, a show of confidence, it is to a large extent reminiscent reflection of her past and present, which suggest her scepticism of the future.



Credit: royalty_ _signature Instagram handle

Figure 7. Multiple Pleats *Gele* Style, *Aso-Ofi*, 36" x 72", 2022.



Credit: geleayaoba Instagram handle

Figure 8. Avant Garde *Gele* Style, Damask, 36" x 72", 2022.

Based on Figure 8, behold Toyin adorned in “avant garde” styled *gele*, which she wore during her golden jubilee ceremony. In a clime like hers, where fiftieth birth anniversary is not only taking very serious but celebrated with all sense of responsibility and in grand slam. Her choice of avant garde was informed by its tall conical shape, coupled with the fact that, the name brings to mind modernity. The style show cased five steps pleats perpendicularly balanced to make way for the vertical twists, which flips out at the edge. The material used in tying the *gele* was Damask and true to its characteristics is shiny, crumpling and light texture. It is a monochromatic hue of different tints and shades of flowery patterns, which matches perfectly with her heavy makeup. Visually, this *gele* style attests to vertical stretching, horizontal elongation and perpendicular balance, rendered to complement adjoining accessories, importantly the blouse, neck chain, bracelet, wrist watch and two rings (engagement and wedding). The thrusting of her left hand around the left ear of her tilted face is symbolic. It implies what in local parlance is called “*Kelegbe mo egbe*”, means groupings should know there group, which further suggest for onlooker not to be beclouded by her youthful look.

5. Conclusion

This study cannot be said, to be complete, without the mention of Bisade Ologunde’s, (Lagbaja) lyrical rendition, titled “*Onigele skentele*” waxed as thus [47]:

<i>Kosi fashion kan tojo tiwa lo</i>	There is no fashion, that surpasses ours
<i>Iro ati buba yen, pelu gele skentolo</i>	Wrapper and blouse, with headgear in motion
<i>Gele odun, bi ka mowe</i>	Headgear is not as appealing, as knowing how to tie
<i>Ka mowe, ko da bi koyeni x2</i>	Knowledge of tying, is not same, as it fitting x2
<i>Eyi ye o!!!</i>	This fits you oh!!!
<i>Baba talo sope ko ye x2</i>	Father of whom dare says it does not fit you x2
<i>Awon da?</i>	Where are they?
<i>Ki keke pa mo, ko pa baba won lenu</i>	Let silence shock, struck their father’s mouth
<i>Gege dige pa mo baba won lenu</i>	Suppression, repression stuck their father’s mouth
<i>Oro hunrun hunrun,</i>	mutters of rumbling rumblings
<i>Sebi, inu elede lo n gbe</i>	You known, is resident inside a pig
<i>To ba sepe oju lo n dun won,</i>	If their eye sight is dysfunction,
<i>Kagba jige funwon...</i>	Let’s get them recommended glasses...

Apart from primacy, mastery, fitting and congruousness of *gele* in Yoruba fashion; the take from the above lines, is the need to get supposed short sighted individuals, particularly haters magnifying glasses, preferably binoculars for clear vision of the evidential head gear style or styles as the case may be.

Clearly, the appraised *gele* styles are simply fashion statements of elegance, confidence, glamour, proclivity and self expressions. It is informative to state that; *gele* is by far stylish today, than it has ever had in its history, courtesy of ever dynamic stylists. Today, *gele* has taking a new turn of professionalism particularly among young people and many more young people are taking advantage of it. As instanced in this study, the appraised styles were done by stylists and their Instagram handles were credited. The art though laborious, their responsibility however, is two folds; one is to make their clients (*gele* adherent) pretty and unique, the other is to direct their energy to improving the art from where they left off (cradle). Interestingly, there exist well over thirty existential styles and still counting, thanks to *gele* indefatigable stylists and the stylish adherents.

Insofar, throwing of balls at ceremonies (big or small) remain legal in this milieu; *gele* stylistic ideas will continues to thrive with new creations by specialists (artist or stylist), which in turns implies cashing in on their part and ultimately smiling to the banks. This development is hoped to influence our teeming youth positively by gainfully taking advantage of this window as addition skill worth acquiring. Consequently, this paper further hopes, its findings will provoke other scholastic studies on *gele* in the nearest distant future.

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