

From Loom to Luxury: Transforming Aso-Oke into High-Value Fashion Accessories

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Abstract: *Aso-oke is one of the most important traditional textiles of the Yoruba people, serving as a symbol of cultural identity, social status, and important life events. Over time, it has grown from a locally valued ceremonial fabric into a widely recognized representation of Yoruba heritage. The textile is traditionally produced using two weaving methods: the vertical broad loom, commonly operated by women, and the horizontal narrow-strip loom, typically used by men. Despite its cultural significance, Aso-oke production faces challenges such as fluctuating raw material costs, inconsistent thread quality, poor colourfastness, and irregular yarn supply, forcing many weavers to rely on whatever materials are available. Expanding the use of Aso-oke into high-value fashion accessories such as bags and footwear creates opportunities beyond traditional weaving, including design, finishing, quality control, marketing, and distribution. This diversification can improve artisans' incomes, strengthen creative expression, and increase the global appeal and commercial value of this iconic Yoruba textile.*

Keywords: Aso-oke, handwoven, colourfastness, indigenous, loom, accessories.

INTRODUCTION

Aso-Oke, the indigenous handwoven textile of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, is one of West Africa's most symbolically dense and aesthetically significant fabrics. Traditionally woven on narrow looms and used primarily for ceremonial garments, Aso-Oke occupies a central place in Yoruba culture, identity construction, and rites of passage. Over several centuries, the textile evolved from a localized prestige garment into a widely recognized emblem of Yoruba heritage. *Aso-Oke* weaving is deeply rooted in Yoruba social organization and craft traditions. The earliest records suggest that weaving centers such as Iseyin, Oyo, Ede, and Ilorin emerged as specialized artisan hubs where weaving knowledge was transmitted through apprenticeships and family lineages (Ishesi, 2025; Rex Clarke Adventures, 2024). The fabric originally served as both ceremonial attire and a marker of social identity, with early forms incorporating locally sourced cotton, homespun yarns, and natural dyes. *Aso-Oke* is not merely a fabric; it is a material expression of Yoruba identity, cosmology, and social hierarchy. Its use in ceremonies such as weddings, chieftaincy installations, festivals, funerals, and rites of passage underscores its role as a carrier of meaning and tradition

According to Ojo (2007) the narrow-strip weaving technique, in which individual strips of cloth approximately 7–15 cm wide are produced and later sewn into larger garments, it is a defining characteristic of *Aso-Oke*. This method enabled artisans to incorporate complex color combinations, patterns, and textures using manually operated horizontal looms. The distinctiveness of these strips allowed for granular control over ornamentation, ensuring that garments could be customized for specific rituals or social statuses. Ojo (2007), opined that before the mid-20th century, *Aso-Oke* weavers relied primarily on cotton and indigenous fibers such as *san* (raffia) for structure and decoration. Traditional dyes, often derived from indigo or plant-based sources, provided deep, earthy hues. However, from the 1960s onward, weavers increasingly adopted imported yarns, synthetic fibers, and metallic threads (notably *alàri*, incorporating shimmering elements), which diversified the aesthetic possibilities and enhanced the appeal of the fabric for ceremonial use (Ishesi, 2025).

Throughout its development, *Aso-Oke* production remained embedded in localized economies dominated by small-scale artisans and family-run workshops. Iseyin, widely acknowledged as the largest historical and contemporary weaving center, exemplifies this structure (Ojo, 2007; Ishesi, 2025). In such communities, looms are typically owned by families, and weaving is practiced by men, women, and apprentices depending on regional customs. These local economies functioned as semi-formal craft clusters long before modern industrial clusters were conceptualized in economic development studies. Weavers relied on regional markets, seasonal demand for ceremonies, and long-distance trade networks connecting Yoruba cities and diaspora communities.

Traditionally, *Aso-Oke* was used to produce ceremonial garments such as *agbada*, *fila*, and *gele*. But beyond clothing, *Aso-Oke* has historically been used in sacred settings, home décor, and as symbolic gifts during marital exchanges. These include; handbags and clutches, footwear, belts and jewelry, cushions and upholstery, bridal accessories, interior decorative pieces. These contemporary adaptations reflect the fashion industry's search for authenticity, heritage-inspired aesthetics, and sustainable production processes.

By examining the historical foundations, cultural meanings, current production systems, and evolving consumption patterns of *Aso-Oke*, this research establishes the basis for understanding how the textile can transition from a predominantly ceremonial material to a versatile luxury accessory fabric. The study also responds to national economic priorities by exploring how indigenous textile innovation can contribute to Nigeria's non-oil diversification agenda, creative-economy growth, and sustainable artisan livelihoods.

Traditional *Aso-Oke* Production System

Aso-Oke production is characterised by two principal loom traditions, a vertical (upright, single-heddle or broad) loom largely associated with women's weaving and a horizontal (double-heddle or narrow-strip) loom typically used by male artisans, each producing distinct cloth formats and design possibilities (Makinde, Ajiboye & Ajayi, 2009). According to Makinde *et al.*, (2009), the horizontal narrow-loom produces strips roughly 14–15 cm wide that are later sewn edge-to-edge to form larger panels; the vertical broad loom yields wider pieces intended for wrappers or garments. The weaving process is highly manual and rhythmical: warp warping, heddle and treadle control, shuttle insertion, and beating are repeated

thousands of times to form pattern sequences. Craftsmanship is expressed in pattern complexity, stripe sequencing, and the interlacing of coloured weft threads and metallic yarns to create signature motifs. Master weavers demonstrate fine control over tension, shed formation and timing, enabling complex motifs that signal social meaning. The finishing steps of cutting strips and precision sewing to produce a coherent, larger cloth require additional tailoring skills to hide joins and achieve a refined appearance.

According to Modupe, Adeyinka & Aremu (2018); Olutayo, Olayinka, & Fadina (2012), traditional Aso-Oke production is defined by a sophisticated ensemble of hand-operated tools whose functions together enable precise control of the weaving process, pattern articulation, and structural integrity of the cloth. Core implements include heddles (*omu aso*), treadles (*itese*), beaters (*apasa*), shuttles (*oko*), warping drums, winding shafts (*ikawu/gogowu*), reed frames, and shedding sticks (*oju/poporo*), each engineered to regulate warp tension, facilitate shed formation, and ensure rhythmic insertion of weft threads. These tools vary slightly between horizontal narrow-strip looms commonly used in Oyo and Ilorin regions and the vertical broad looms employed in parts of Ekiti and Ondo, with structural differences influencing cloth width, motif complexity, and weaving ergonomics (Makinde *et al.*, 2009). The weaving toolkit also includes auxiliary devices such as bobbin winders, warp pegs, and improvised tension stones, many of which are locally crafted from wood, iron, bamboo, or repurposed metal scraps, a testament to the adaptive ingenuity of Yoruba weaving communities.

Historically, raw materials for *Aso-Oke* were sourced from robust local industries in cotton cultivation, hand-spinning, and natural dyeing. Indigenous cotton fibres and wild silk (*sanyan*, derived from *Anaphe* moth cocoons) formed the primary yarn inputs, while dyes were extracted from indigo (*elu/agiye*), camwood, and other plant-based pigments to produce culturally significant colour palettes (Olutayo *et al.*, 2012; Makinde *et al.*, 2009). However, from the late 20th century into the 21st, domestic spinning and dyeing industries declined sharply due to weakened agricultural extension services, the collapse of textile mills, and increased dependence on imported synthetic fibres (Diogu, Nwigwe, & Diogu, 2014; Muhammed, 2021). As a result, contemporary Aso-Oke weavers have turned to blends of imported mercerized cotton yarns, rayon, polyester filaments, and lurex-style metallic threads (*alaari* choices that influence sheen, drape, tensile strength, ease of weaving, and overall durability

The raw material supply chain is characterized by volatility in cost, colourfastness, thread uniformity, and availability, prompting many artisans to improvise with whatever yarn qualities they can access through local markets in Iseyin, Ilorin, Ibadan, and Lagos. This improvisation affects fabric characteristics such as density, weight, pattern definition, and resistance to fading factors that determine market value and suitability for ceremonial vs. contemporary fashion use. Limited standardization and absence of regulated fibre specifications further complicate quality control, contributing to textural inconsistencies across weaving communities. Consequently, while Aso-Oke remains a symbol of Yoruba aesthetic heritage, its material economy reflects broader structural transformations in Nigeria's textile input industries, shaped by globalization, industrial decline, and shifting consumer preferences.



Figure 1: Aso-Oke weaver on the loom

Source: <https://kuwaittimes.com> (2026)

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Figure 2: *Aso-Oke Fascinator*

Source: Sissy Remi Aso-Oke & Couture (2026)



Figure 3: *Aso-Oke Headband*

Source: Rehmie.com.ng (2026)



Figure 4: *Aso-Oke Bag*

Source: Yoodalo.com (2026)



Figure 5: *Aso-Oke Bag*

Source: Yoodalo.com (2026)



Figure 6: Aso-Oke Footwear

Source: <https://www.etsy.com/uk/listing/1589028165/> (2026)



Figure 6: Aso-Oke Outfit I

Source: Researcher, (2026)



Figure 7: Aso-Oke Outfit II

Source: Researcher, (2026)



Figure 8: Aso-Oke Outfit III

Source: Researcher, (2026)

The textural richness and structural resilience of *Aso-Oke* make it well suited to a wide variety of fashion accessories, including handbags and clutches, footwear (sandals, mules, and slippers), belts, statement jewelry, headpieces (*gele*), and wristwear such as cuffs and bracelets. Designers and brands are already translating *Aso-Oke*'s narrow-strip construction and bold, woven patterns into structured bags and clutches that utilize the fabric as a focal panel or lining, while footwear designers have used woven panels for upper detailing and insole accents to add cultural provenance and tactile contrast. Accessories provide an attractive pathway for value-addition because of the demand for less continuous yardage than apparel, allow for combination with other luxury inputs like leather trims and metal hardware, and can be produced as limited, high-margin runs that celebrate the fabric's handwoven character. These product categories therefore, represent practical, scalable entry points for repositioning *Aso-Oke* from ceremonial cloth to premium lifestyle objects aimed at both domestic premium buyers and diaspora/international niche.

Contemporary accessory design with *Aso-Oke* relies on a suite of modern design techniques to translate handwoven strips into luxury-grade items. Pattern breakdown, deconstructing the weave's stripe and motif repeat into modular panels and enables designers to plan composition, match motif continuity across seams, and produce visually coherent pieces. Color harmonization practices, often informed by digital color-matching tools, help calibrate the woven palette with leathers, linings, and hardware so the finished product is seen as intentional luxury rather than patchwork. Because *Aso-Oke* is traditionally heavy and variable in stiffness, finishing and stabilization techniques are critical to achieve the structural integrity expected of handbags and shoes. These finishing steps also improve abrasion resistance and colorfastness, attributing to essentials for luxury positioning. Designers therefore blend craft knowledge with product engineering, retaining the hand-made aesthetic while applying modern finishing protocols to meet consumer expectations for durability and fit.

High-value accessory design frequently positions *Aso-Oke* in hybrid material systems that combine woven heritage cloth with established luxury materials. Leather provides structural support (frames, gussets, straps) and premium tactility, while metal hardware (buckles, clasps, zippers) and artisanal beadwork add perceived value, functional longevity, and design accents. Beadwork and metal detailing, often produced by complementary artisans. Further reinforce craft networks and allow for co-branding opportunities that enhance storytelling and justify premium pricing. Thoughtful material integration thus enables the retention of craft identity while meeting the tactile and longevity standards of luxury accessories. Several contemporary designers and brands provide practical models for transforming *Aso-Oke* into high-value accessories. According to Ndukwe (2019), Kenneth Ize has elevated *Aso-Oke* on international runways, incorporating woven panels, fringes, and structured accessories in collections and collaborating with accessory partners to create coordinated clutches and bags that foreground handweave. *Shekudo*, an accessories label producing in Lagos, combines *Aso-Oke* with leather and beadwork to make sandals, clutches and totes while consciously working with local artisans and ethical sourcing. *Minku* (founded by Kunmi Otitoju) is another example of a brand that blends *Aso-Oke* with high-grade leathers in premium bags and wallets, positioning the fabric as an interior or accent material for luxury buyers. These brands demonstrate practical models, close artisan collaboration, hybrid material systems, storytelling in branding, and selective use of off-island production for scale strategies that can be adapted or scaled in Nigerian contexts to balance authenticity, quality, and market expectations.

Socio-Economic Impacts

The commercialization of *Aso-Oke* as a high-value fashion textile carries significant socio-economic implications, with potential to generate employment, stimulate rural economic growth, promote inclusive participation, and preserve cultural heritage. At the production level, repositioning *Aso-Oke* into fashion accessories and premium products expands labor demand beyond traditional weaving, encompassing design, finishing, quality control, marketing, and distribution, thereby providing artisans with higher, more stable incomes and greater agency in the creative process. Such engagement enhances skill acquisition, empowers artisan communities, and produces multiplier effects in local economies through increased household spending and service demand. Commercialization also creates avenues for rural entrepreneurship, particularly in weaving towns, where cooperative clusters, accessory workshops, and finishing units can retain more value locally, reduce dependence on agriculture, and establish rural-urban economic linkages that mitigate migration pressures. Beyond economic benefits, the market-oriented adaptation of *Aso-Oke* fosters cultural preservation by valorizing traditional motifs, weaving techniques, and symbolic heritage in a manner that remains relevant to contemporary lifestyles. When managed responsibly, commercialization encourages communities to sustain traditional craftsmanship, participate in design innovation, and transmit cultural knowledge). However, realizing these socio-economic outcomes requires addressing infrastructural constraints, providing training and capacity-building for artisans, ensuring market access and fair pricing, and implementing supportive institutional and policy frameworks that balance economic development with cultural integrity.

Challenges Limiting Transformation into Luxury Products

Aso-Oke possesses clear attributes valued in luxury markets. Yet converting those attributes into reproducible, high-value fashion accessories like bags, footwear, belts, jewelry, and interior pieces faces systematic constraints. A major constraint limiting the transformation of *Aso-Oke* into high-value luxury products is the weakness of Nigeria's textile supply chains, which results in inconsistent quality and restricted production capacity. *Aso-Oke* weavers operate at the terminal end of a deteriorating cotton-to-cloth ecosystem, where domestic cotton production, ginning, spinning, and fabric finishing have steadily declined over the last two decades. According to reports from Kolawole (2024), only a limited number of textile mills remain functional, while the broader value chain has contracted significantly due to infrastructural decay, policy instability, and competition from imported fabrics. This collapse has reduced the availability of high-quality, locally produced yarns and threads that could support weaving, forcing craftsmen to depend on imported rayon, polyester, and metallic yarns to achieve the desired aesthetic properties of contemporary *Aso-Oke* fabrics. Such dependence exposes artisans to fluctuating import costs, foreign-exchange volatility, and shipping delays (Sesan, 2018). Reports from Kolawole (2025) further explained that Nigeria's broader manufacturing landscape continues to rely heavily on raw-material imports, reflecting persistent input scarcity and supply uncertainty in local production networks. These conditions collectively undermine the consistency and reliability of *Aso-Oke* outputs, leading to variations in tensile strength, weight, texture, and qualities critical for luxury accessory manufacturing, where uniformity and durability are essential performance indicators. Also, designers and fashion brands face difficulties in meeting contract fulfillment, scaling production, or positioning *Aso-Oke* as a dependable luxury material. Addressing these supply-chain weaknesses requires interventions such as cooperative procurement systems for artisans, investment in local spinning and ginning pilot clusters, and

partnerships between textile innovation hubs and weaving communities to experiment with locally sourced fibers and improved finishing methods.

Another constraint hindering the advancement of *Aso-Oke* into high-value luxury products is the limited access artisans and small-scale fashion entrepreneurs have to affordable credit and productive investment. Transforming *Aso-Oke* from a predominantly ceremonial textile into a competitive luxury material requires capital-intensive improvements such as upgrading traditional looms, acquiring modern finishing and quality-control equipment, meeting textile certification standards, and financing small-batch prototype development. However, weavers and small fashion firms often face significant financial barriers due to Nigeria's stringent lending conditions, high interest rates, and underperforming public-sector intervention funds intended to support manufacturing and creative industries (Kolawole, 2024). Several analyses of Nigeria's SME and artisan sectors reveal that although microfinance institutions provide loans, these financial products are commonly misaligned with the production cycles of textile artisans and are often too small, too short-term, or too expensive to support capital investment or forward production needs (National Economy, 2024). As a result, weavers are unable to invest in improved weaving technologies or finishing facilities required to achieve luxury-grade consistency. Overcoming these barriers requires targeted financial instruments that respond to the realities of artisan-based production, including blended-finance models, public-private credit guarantee schemes, and expanded programs that offer in-kind capital such as shared finishing and certification facilities.

Positioning *Aso-Oke* as a premium textile for high-value fashion accessories is its limited international exposure and underdeveloped branding infrastructure is also a challenge. Luxury markets reward strong brand narratives, strategic storytelling, and consistent visibility across curated retail channels, including designer boutiques, concept stores, trade shows, and high-end online platforms. Many *Aso-Oke* producers and Nigerian fashion entrepreneurs, however, lack the branding expertise, export readiness, and global partnerships needed to compete effectively. While some Nigerian designers have gained attention in international fashion media, including *Vogue* and *Vogue Business*, this recognition often focuses on apparel rather than systematically promoting artisanal accessories made from *Aso-Oke* (Ndukwe, 2019). Comparative studies of other African textiles, such as Ghanaian *kente* and Nigerian *adire*, show that successful global market entry depends on compelling brand narratives, culturally informed storytelling, and strategic placement in international retail channels (Ndukwe, 2019). Without such infrastructure, *Aso-Oke* is often perceived abroad as ethnic or ceremonial rather than as a modern luxury product, constraining its ability to command higher price points and reach affluent global consumers. Overcoming this challenge requires targeted brand development programs, collaboration with international design accelerators, participation in curated trade fairs, and the establishment of certification or provenance labels to enhance authenticity and global luxury appeal.

The development of *Aso-Oke* into high-value luxury accessories is constrained by persistent gaps in standardization, finishing quality, and product consistency. Luxury accessory production requires precise attention to details such as edge finishing, lining, interfacing, hardware integration, color calibration, and durability, standards that often exceed the capabilities of small-scale artisan operations. Traditional *Aso-Oke* weaving, which involves joining handwoven strips, naturally introduces variations in texture,

thickness, and color. Access to formal finishing facilities, standardized production processes, and textile testing laboratories is limited for most Nigerian weaving communities and small fashion enterprises. While some production hubs offer certification and finishing services aligned with standards. Consequently, products often fail to meet luxury durability expectations, reducing competitiveness in high-end markets and limiting access to export channels.

Another barrier to positioning *Aso-Oke* in global luxury markets is the persistent risk of cultural appropriation and the limited effectiveness of existing intellectual property (IP) frameworks in protecting traditional cultural expressions. *Aso-Oke* motifs, weaving patterns, and symbolic heritage remain vulnerable to unauthorized copying, mass production, and commercialization by actors who provide neither attribution nor economic benefit to the originating communities. According to Oyedokun (2025), conventional IP tools such as copyright, patents, and trademarks are poorly suited to safeguard communal knowledge or culturally embedded designs, leaving traditional textiles exposed to exploitation. Without stronger protective mechanisms, artisans gain little from commercial exploitation of their designs, cultural meanings risk commodification, and the global value of authentic *Aso-Oke* diminishes.

CONCLUSION

The transition of *Aso-Oke* from indigenous loom-based craftsmanship to contemporary luxury applications demonstrates how cultural heritage, artisanal skill, and modern design innovation can intersect to generate both socio-economic value and global cultural visibility. Existing programs on indigenous textiles, luxury value creation, accessory design, and sustainability reveal *that Aso-Oke* is uniquely positioned to benefit from renewed interest in ethical, culturally rooted, and handcrafted fashion. By advancing material innovation, promoting gender-inclusive and youth-centered participation, strengthening artisan livelihoods, and integrating *Aso-Oke* into premium product categories, the value chain can be transformed while preserving its cultural integrity. Loom to luxury represents both a developmental pathway and a cultural strategy, one that safeguards traditional knowledge while unlocking new creative and economic opportunities for artisans, designers, and communities across Yorubaland and beyond.

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