

BOOK REVIEW

Okechukwu Nwafor. *Aso Ebi: Dress, Fashion, Visual Culture and Urban Cosmopolitanism in West Africa*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. 252 pp. 42 Color photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$24.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780472054800.

As academics increasingly recognize the relevancy and potency of African fashion, not only as an art form, but as a barometer of cultural, social, political, and economic shifts, new and important scholarship is being published in a variety of subdisciplines. One of these recent contributions, specific to the field of art history, is Okechukwu Nwafor's *Aso Ebi: Dress, Fashion, Visual Culture and Urban Cosmopolitanism in West Africa*. Through six chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion, Nwafor explores the complexities surrounding aso ebi, or "family cloth" (5). As a form of "special occasion" attire primarily for women, aso ebi involves wearing preselected, coordinating materials to important social events, such as weddings, birthday parties, and political rallies, to signify belonging and connectivity to the event's honorees and celebrants. While the prevalence of aso ebi in Nigeria has long been recognized, Nwafor's book offers a much-needed unpacking of this sartorial phenomenon, exploring how "a fusion of clothing, fashion, and photography have provoked and heightened a unique kind of urban visibility in Lagos" (5).

Each chapter examines a specific, multi-faceted aspect of aso ebi, from the adoption of *ankara*, or wax print, as the primary material for aso ebi (Chapter 2), to understanding aso ebi as a form of reciprocal transaction, influenced by the effects of late capitalism (Chapter 4). Although the organization of the book and its chapters is at times convoluted, hindering the reader's understanding of Nwafor's arguments and overarching narrative, the author is able to highlight and explore several compelling aspects of aso ebi as a form of Nigerian visual culture. Chapter One focuses on the historical emergence of aso ebi; it begins with a fascinating synopsis of the origins of Lagos, emphasizing the city's cosmopolitan identity, as formed through an influx of diverse peoples. Nwafor traces the origins of aso ebi to the late nineteenth century, suggesting that the wives of prominent chiefs were perhaps the first women to don aso ebi uniforms. He further links *ẹgbẹ* or age-grade associations, as a potential progenitor of the more popular

expression of aso ebi. These organizations were then imitated by colonial missionaries, providing another possible means for the promotion of aso ebi dressing. While the origins of aso ebi may be indeterminate, Nwafor irrefutably documents the historical significance of aso ebi as linked to the culture and image production of Lagosians.

Chapter Six explores how the adoption of digital technologies has impacted the consumption of and engagement with aso ebi. Nwafor employs Kingsley Chuk's digitally altered photographs as a case study, arguing that his images become a space where "time is blotted out and replaced by a surface that is only timeless" (178). In making this assessment, Nwafor overlooks how the physical aso ebi garments are inextricably linked to time. Regardless of how a photographed setting may be reformed or reimagined, the materials and silhouettes of specific aso ebi garments will betray any purported timelessness, as they are ultimately forms of fashion, in a constant state of revision and invention. This attests to an important point: when theorizing about forms of dress, textiles, and bodily adornment, particularly in Africa, one should not overlook their connectivity to the concept of fashion.

In acknowledging this newfound penchant for digital revision, Nwafor makes an important observation: that individuals who choose not to wear aso ebi can literally be erased from photographs. This furthers Nwafor's narrative of the exclusionary aspects of aso ebi, providing a fascinating counterpoint to the perceived and assumed comraderie of aso ebi. As Nwafor states: "Inclusion [in aso ebi] is no longer driven by true friendship or family network but by a socially imposed competitiveness that borders on sheer number" (91).

Nwafor's challenging of established preconceptions of aso ebi is perhaps his book's most important contribution; this is further evident in the book's overarching theme of aso ebi as it relates to economies, both on a global scale and on a more micro level, in terms of individual wealth and monetary exchange. Embedded in Nwafor's discussion of the selection, purchasing, and enacting of aso ebi at events, particularly weddings, is the acknowledgment that aso ebi functions as a means for individuals to actually profit from the sale of aso ebi materials. These profits may be used to offset additional wedding expenses, such as the purchasing of gifts for attendees. This nuances the established, scholarly understanding of aso ebi as a form of expressing intimacy and connectivity; instead, it asserts that aso ebi is equally informed by profitability and one's capacity to cajole social networks to amass attendees, symbolizing a person's collective wealth and social prestige. As invoked by the following Yoruba quote, aso ebi is ultimately an indicator of having "companions to wrap...like a cloth" (83).

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doi:10.1017/asr.2023.64