

Theology and Implications of Ceremonial Uniform Clothes (Aso-Ebi or Anko) In African Culture and in the Church

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Abstract	Original Research Article
<p>The African practice of ceremonial uniform clothing, commonly called Aso-Ebi or Anko, has become a significant cultural phenomenon. While it fosters unity and enhances the aesthetic appeal of celebrations, it also presents challenges such as affordability, indebtedness, and social exclusion. This paper employs a historical and analytical methodology, drawing on scholarly and online resources, to examine the theological and social implications of Aso-Ebi in African culture and the Christian church. Findings reveal that the practice, though culturally celebrated, has extended into the church, where it often pressures financially vulnerable members. Consequently, some individuals incur unnecessary debt in an attempt to purchase ceremonial clothes, while others face discrimination or stigmatization for their inability to participate. This study argues that although the church and society should affirm cultural identity, they must resist practices that lack eternal value, perpetuate inequality, and encourage unnecessary spending. As an alternative, affordable forms of uniformity—such as plain white clothing or garments of other colors and styles—are recommended, given their accessibility and reusability within both the church and society.</p> <p>Keywords: Aso-Ebi, Anko, African culture, ceremonial clothes, church, theology, affordability.</p> <p>Citation: Atanda, P., & Oyeyemi, P. (2025). Theology and implications of ceremonial uniform clothes (Aso-Ebi or Anko) in African culture and in the church. <i>GAS Journal of Religious Studies (GASJRS)</i>, 2(2). [12-14]</p>	

INTRODUCTION

In African societies, ceremonial uniform clothing, popularly known as Aso -Ebi or Anko, plays a central role in celebrations. These garments are chosen for special occasions such as weddings, burials, housewarmings, and naming ceremonies. Their purpose is to symbolize unity, beautify the event, and enhance its prestige. However, the question of affordability raises serious concerns, particularly in contexts where financial inequality is prominent.

This paper, in discussing the issue of ceremonial clothes and their relevance, explores the following: the concept of ceremonial clothes (Aso-Ebi), the historical emergence of Aso-Ebi, its glamorous but tempting nature, its purpose and significance, the discriminatory and stigmatizing effects, alternatives to ceremonial clothes, theological implications, and a conclusion.

The Concept of Ceremonial Uniform Clothes

Ceremonial uniform clothes (Aso-Ebi or Anko) are garments worn collectively by celebrants and their supporters

during festivities. They are designed to make an occasion distinctive, memorable, and glamorous. Friends, family members, and well-wishers purchase these outfits as a sign of solidarity with the celebrant. Although variations of this practice exist in other parts of Africa and beyond, Aso-Ebi is particularly rooted in Nigerian culture. It is usually used for occasions and ceremonies.

Historical Emergence of Ceremonial Clothes

The practice of Aso-Ebi can be traced back to traditional Yoruba society in Lagos, where dressing alike during ceremonies served as a communal marker of identity. Over time, this tradition spread across Nigeria and other African countries, becoming a cultural norm.

Ceremonial clothes (sometimes called Anko originated from the Nigerian tradition of wearing matching outfits to symbolize unity and celebration. They were dedicated to fostering a sense of communal belonging (Irala) (ThisDayLive). Over time, the practice evolved into a tradition widely accepted across the nation. The clothes symbolize unity because they are usually worn by many people in society during particular celebrations,



such as child naming, housewarmings, weddings, or even funerals.

Celebrations involving ceremonial clothes are communal in nature: the community gathers to feast and celebrate with the celebrant. In modern times, ANICO has also emerged as a contemporary fashion brand symbolizing heritage, resilience, and creativity (Inala).

The Background of Ceremonial Clothes

According to Eko Pearl Towers, in Lagos the ancient tradition of dressing alike is called ceremonial clothes or Anko, and it is still visible during ceremonies across the city. The background of ceremonial clothes is both ancient and traditional. It is ancient because it dates back to early human communities where ceremonies were common. It is traditional because it has been repeatedly practiced over generations, thereby becoming accepted as part of society.

In Nigeria and other African countries, ceremonial clothing has become a social norm. Beyond tradition, ceremonial clothes have also been positioned to challenge stereotypes by showcasing the richness and sophistication of African fashion. As Inala emphasizes, “We invest heavily in using Nigerian artisans and sustainable practices, proving that African fashion can be sophisticated and innovative.”

The Glamorous but Tempting Nature of Ceremonial Clothes

The visual appeal of Aso-Ebi is undeniable. Its vibrant colors and coordinated designs enhance the attractiveness of any event. Yet, this glamour often exerts pressure on individuals who cannot afford the garments. Many go into debt, borrow money, or neglect essential responsibilities such as school fees and daily sustenance in order to conform.

Purpose and Significance of Ceremonial Clothes

Despite its challenges, Aso-Ebi serves important cultural functions. It fosters unity, solidarity, and shared identity. The practice provides a visible expression of community, affirming the African value of collective celebration over individualism.

Aso-Ebi matters for several reasons

- 1. Solidarity** – Wearing the same cloth signifies support for the celebrant.
- 2. Identity** – It creates order in large gatherings, making it easier to identify groups.
- 3. Aesthetic pride** – Bold colors and patterns reflect cultural creativity and beauty.

In the church, Aso-Ebi is sometimes linked to biblical themes of unity and fellowship (Acts 2:44–47). However, critics warn that its emphasis on costly fabrics conflicts with Christian values of humility and inclusiveness (Ademiluka 301). Thus,

Aso-Ebi stands at the intersection of culture, faith, and economics.

Discriminatory Nature and Stigmatizing Effects

While Aso-Ebi symbolizes togetherness, it simultaneously excludes those who cannot afford to participate. In church contexts, this exclusion contradicts Christian principles of equality and inclusiveness. Acts 4:34 records that in the early church, there was no needy person among them, because believers shared possessions to meet everyone’s needs. The use of ceremonial clothes in church can thus be discriminatory toward the poor. If introduced, the church should provide for members unable to purchase them. Otherwise, it risks excluding the very people it should embrace.

In the early church, believers shared all they had, even selling lands and properties to provide for the needy (Acts 4:34–37). If the wealthy today insist on ceremonial clothes, they should also sponsor the less privileged so that unity is preserved. As Henry notes, “Those that had been maintained upon public charity were probably excluded when they turned Christians, and therefore it was fit that the church should take care of them.”

An alternative is plain white clothing, which many people already own. This avoids financial pressure and ensures inclusivity. Clarke also observes that the Jews once called the poor to feast on sacrifices, but as Christianity spread, the poor often lost such benefits—making inclusivity even more critical in the church.

Alternatives to Ceremonial Clothes

If ceremonial uniforms are to remain part of African celebrations, affordable alternatives should be promoted. Plain white clothing is an ideal option: it is widely owned, affordable, and reusable, making it more inclusive than expensive fabrics.

Theological Implications

From a theological perspective, practices that burden the vulnerable contradict the gospel’s message of liberation and inclusivity. The story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) illustrates the danger of indulging in material excess while neglecting the poor.

Ceremonial Clothes in African Life

Across Africa, ceremonial clothes mark important life events such as weddings, funerals, initiations, and festivals. The fabrics, colors, and designs often carry symbolic meanings. For instance:

Ghana: Kente cloth once reserved for royalty is now worn at graduations and weddings to affirm identity (Ross 54). Cameroon (Bamileke): Tunics are embroidered with ancestral and spiritual symbols (Metropolitan Museum of Art). Kenya & Tanzania (Maasai): Bright red Shúkà cloth is worn at rituals to symbolize courage and identity (Hodgson 112). These examples demonstrate that ceremonial clothes in Africa are not

just decorative but also cultural expressions of community and belief.

Ceremonial Clothes in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Ceremonial Clothes or Aso-Ebi is the most visible form of ceremonial clothing. Families, friends, or groups choose fabrics such as lace, Ankara, or aso-oke, which everyone wears to the event.

Historians trace Aso-Ebi to early 20th-century Yoruba society, where extended families wore matching clothes to affirm kinship (Eicher and Ross 148). Today, it has spread beyond families into churches, workplaces, and social groups.

Economically, Aso-Ebi supports Nigeria's fashion industry, sustaining designers, tailors, and fabric merchants (Okeke 77). Socially, however, it can be exclusionary. As Ojo notes, the financial pressure often leads to social tension and marginalization of the poor (19).

Challenges and the Future of Ceremonial Clothes

Aso-Ebi remains culturally significant but faces challenges: high costs, social exclusion, and pressure to conform. In religious settings, debates continue on whether it promotes unity or materialism.

Nonetheless, ceremonial clothes are adapting to modern fabrics and global fashion. In Ghana, even Western academic gowns are now blended with local textiles to affirm African identity (Essel & Kemevor 4). This adaptability ensures that ceremonial clothing will remain an enduring aspect of African life.

CONCLUSION

Aso-Ebi is a deeply embedded cultural practice in African societies, symbolizing unity and identity. However, its challenges—including financial pressure, indebtedness, exclusion, and stigmatization—raise serious theological and ethical concerns. For the church, uncritical adoption risks undermining inclusivity and care for the vulnerable.

Affordable alternatives such as plain white clothing can preserve the spirit of unity without imposing financial burdens.

Ultimately, culture should be affirmed, but practices that contradict gospel values of love, equality, and compassion must be reconsidered.

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