

The podcast is organized into an episode introduction; the main interview with the podcast guest(s); voiceovers, where the host pauses the interview to expand on something in more detail; and episode credits / acknowledgements. This is not a verbatim transcript of the original interview. The podcast episode was edited down to focus on a specific theme or narrative, and also for concision and clarity.

Yorùbá language is central to Yorùbá life & art. Where Yorùbá words or phrases appear, I have tried my best to include accurate written tonal marks – much indebted to Yorùbá encyclopedias, and the work of many language specialists, scholars, and generous aunties. But still, these tonal marks aren't comprehensive -- there are subtle variations from region to region that may not be reflected here. I marked Yorùbá words whose tonal marks I could not complete or confirm with a lighter shade of gray.

introduction

My name is Mary, and welcome to season three of the *Fields of the Future* podcast. This season, we're talking about lace in Nigerian culture by looking at, and working with laces closely, and speaking with different experts on lace. There are a wide variety of experiences with lace in Nigerian culture, and these are just a few from folks based in Nigeria and also in the diaspora abroad. Today we'll be talking with a special guest.

Ms Onuoha: Thank you for having me, Mary. My name is Louisa Onuoha. I work with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria. I work as a museum education officer. I've worked in several museums with the largest collections — the National Museum, Ìbàdàn, National Museum, Lagos, and now the National Museum, Òyó. All of these museums that I have worked in have textiles and lace among the collection. As a museum education officer, one of my key jobs is to do programs and events using the museum's objects as the theme. I was involved as a program officer in the *African Lace* exhibition that happened in 2010 and 2011, a collaborative effort between the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.

mary: Thank you so, so much for joining us, Ms Onuoha. I have to introduce you to all the [listeners] from my personal perspective – we first met many, many years ago, virtually, when I had just started really doing much deeper research into the history of things that I grew up with. Things like lace, things like tie and dye, that I understood from an aesthetic level, but I didn't understand as much of the deep-rooted history of these textiles. I had just started emailing people out of the blue, and I remember a curator – I believe at the British Museum – referred me to you. And you so graciously answered my questions over email. I looked back at the questions and they were so long, but you took the time to respond to them; and we've just had correspondence since then, about lace, the history of lace and how the core of it, the nucleus of it, has been nurtured in Nigeria – even before lace entered into Nigeria – with foundational textiles like *aṣọ òkè* and *àdìrẹ*.

You've just taken a lot of time to educate me, and I'm grateful for that. As you mentioned, also, the exhibition and the catalogue, *African Lace: A History of Trade, Creativity and Fashion in Nigeria* – you had a huge role to play in that. Both supporting the exhibition at the National Museum, Ìbàdàn; the National Museum, Lagos; and the Museum of Ethnology; and also contributing to the catalogue an essay – a very special essay – on the lace traders who sold lace and traveled back and forth between Austria and Nigeria to do their work.

I'm so excited to have you join us today. I have several questions to ask you about the history of lace and also to ask you about *aṣọ ẹbí* culture, which is a huge contributor to the textile culture in Nigeria and among Nigerians in the diaspora. So, thank you! That's just my first thing, is to thank you for being here. It is an honor and privilege, and I'm excited for all of the listeners to partake in this conversation.

Ms Onuoha: What we call lace now in Nigeria are actually industrial embroidered textiles that are produced in the Austrian province of Vorarlberg. We have given it the name lace here, and it has taken over even where it is produced. We call them traditional attire. Like if you're having a wedding or an event in Yorùbáland for instance, they'll ask you, "Oh, what are you wearing? Traditional?" When they say traditional, you wonder, how traditional can traditional be? Then you find them having an *aṣọ ẹbí* of lace fabric as a traditional. At times, they mix it with *aṣọ òkè* or they mix it with damask. Damask also is imported. The Nigerian fashion scene has accepted lace as traditional.

mary: I'm curious because when I ask different people this question, the answer is different – lace being traditional. Do you agree that lace is traditional? What is the divide between– or maybe the contention between lace being accepted as traditional or not?

Ms Onuoha: Well, they say that change is the only constant thing in life. What we had as traditional and what we had as our culture– culture is dynamic. It evolves. I do not agree with those who say that lace is not traditional. My reason for this is simply because, if you go to Lustenau, Vorarlberg where this lace is produced, 90% of the production comes to Nigeria. That production is actually for the Nigerian market. 90%, I can tell you.

The [Nigerian] lace merchants go to Vorarlberg to make orders. They go as far as joining in the design. Their orders involve asking the production outfits, "Put a little bit of hole in this place, put a little bit of sequins here," and all of that. It's traditional to the people, to Nigeria, because we now go there, we make orders, we don't just sit back any longer. Because it used to be, sit back and then they will bring your stuff. But no, we go there now, get involved in the design process. And that tells a lot.

Our designs come from what we see in Nigeria, what we see in our communities. There was a time in the 60s— there were laces that had guitars, musical instruments. There were laces that had apples, laces that had these kinds of designs on them – things that are indigenous to us here in Africa, in Nigeria. Then when we go to Vorarlberg, we say– (*trails off*). So that way, I don't think it's not– I think it is– (*pause*) in any case, the people have accepted it as their traditional wear.

mary: The first thing I want to show is– this is my understanding of what laces looked like in Austria when they were first being made. You'll notice that the lace is mostly white; it's a small piece; it's not yards and yards and yards. It's very tiny designs. There are florals, but no color, no sequins.

voiceover 1 – describing laces for the Austrian vs Nigerian markets

Now, I'm going to take a moment to describe what I'm seeing in greater detail. I'm looking at laces machine-made in Austria in the early- to mid-1900s, some for the Austrian market, some for the Nigerian market. And these are in a book (*sound of pages flipping*) *African Lace*, not in person. I'm looking at one picture of a lace, made for the Austrian market in the early 1900s. It's long and oval on a black background. The long oval lace appears to be white, and many of the laces historically worn and used in Europe were similar: white, cream, beige, tan. I know that colors

were in style at various points in this region. There's black Chantilly lace in France, and there's some interesting folklore around yellow laces too, but I've mostly seen them in neutrals.

Now, I compare this to images of some of the voile laces worn and used in Nigeria in the mid-1900s. Hmm. Now, while white does show up often as a voile base that the embroidery is done on— or sewn on— or embroidered on— I don't know the right way to put it (*laughs*). The embroideries and the voiles also take many different colors. I see white embroidery on purple voile (*pages flipping*). There's pink, blue, and white embroidery on black voile. And that doesn't even include the laces of today, where you have colored sequins, gemstones, lurex threads, and so on to add different other dimensions of color. One thing that is common between the laces made for the Austrian market and those made for the Nigerian market is the selvedge edge. For that long white oval lace, there is a decorative border all around the edges of the oval. It's slightly scalloped, too, just like the borders of many of the voile laces described in this series, worn and used by Nigerians.

Last but not least, we gotta talk about the patterns. The long white oval lace made for the Austrian market is a mix of large and small florals. The small florals look almost like dandelions. In fact, the florals are very defined and distinct. There are curling stems spread throughout in between the flowers. A botanist might be able to identify exactly what these flowers are – that's how clear it is! When I flip to some of the mid-1900s laces worn and used in Nigeria a few pages after that, the flowers are still there, but they start to get more abstract. For one lace, it could be a flower, it could be a cloud, depending on which way you look at it. In another lace, there are diamonds; in another there are hearts; in another there are fans, squares; in another there are concentric circles. I even see a logo for the All-Africa games in Lagos. Even one teal lace, with alternating embroideries of high heels. That is how much the patterns varied.

mary: It's striking to me as I go through the process of looking at all of these materials, how different the laces are in our culture compared to how laces started out in Austria and Switzerland and those European countries that were producing lace at the time. It's so clear that Nigerian culture has left its own visual stamp on lace making in Europe. Can you talk more about Nigeria's influence on the aesthetics of lace?

Ms Onuoha: Okay. What you've shown me now, Mary – the white one – that was how lace actually started out here too. Women were using them in the Southern part of the country. Women used them to make blouses, and then they used the hand-woven traditional cloth to make the wraparound skirt, or wrapper. Even in the 20s, that had happened. I know that up till now, I remember that my mom had a series of white lace blouses that she used to tie the different george materials. That's what they call it in the East, the Hollandaise. In the West, the Yorùbá women used the white fabrics. That's what we call the ólekú style. Then they used the aṣọ òkè or aṣọ òfi, hand-woven cloth, to make a skirt or to just tie around, like in the form of a wrapper. That's how the first type of lace that we had in Nigeria, that's how they found their way in.

There are a number of factors that helped this relationship between Austria and Nigeria. During the Nigerian independence in 1960, just immediately after the independence, the Austrian embassy opened in Nigeria around 1962 and 1963. And they didn't just open, they opened with a trade delegation. And I understand that the first head of this trade delegation was a man from Vorarlberg. And remember, Vorarlberg is the lace-producing area in Austria. The man by the name Heinz Hundertpfund – I apologize if I didn't pronounce that correctly – upon his reaching the shores of Nigeria, he opened the eyes of his

countrymen to the trend in white laces. In fact, I want to believe that, the Austrian embassy that opened here with a trade delegation came largely because of the trade that had been ongoing. He just went back home and told them, "Ah, this is what the situation is. The people love lace. Right now they are using the white lace for blouses in Nigeria. So if there's a way we can break into this market fully, I think we should." I'm just saying, but I want to believe he must have gone back home to say something in that line. The people from Austria started sending their agents.

Then another reason was that, to further solidify this, Lufthansa and Swiss Air started operations of direct flights to Lagos at this same period. They made the whole process a lot easier. You don't have to go through one country to get to Lustenau, to get to Vorarlberg, or to come to Lagos. It became easy. The agents could fly in direct to Lagos, merchants could go straight to Austria. Because before this time, the laces were produced by the same Swiss and Austrian production outfits, but they couldn't market directly. They had to go through these agents who were in Britain, who were the British agent companies in Holland and in Germany. They couldn't do direct trade with Nigerians. By the time the Austrian trade delegation came and by the time Lufthansa and Swiss Air started operations in the 60s, those middlemen were cut off and the people from Nigeria – the merchants – could reach the production outfits directly.

mary: I want to go back to something you said about the design – starting to incorporate things that are indigenous to Nigerian culture, Nigerian heritage, even things that you could physically see in Nigeria at the time. When did that start happening? When did people start saying, instead of that white lace that I showed you, "I want to do something different."

Ms Onuoha: Okay, that started happening around the 60s and 70s, especially around the 70s during the oil boom. It was the oil boom that brought the wearing of lace about, the glamour. It came with everything. Nigeria had a lot of money. The middle class was very, very affluent. They were living well. There was a middle class. It's not like what we have – the rich and the poor – now. No, there wasn't. There was a very, very wealthy middle class, and so everybody wanted to shine in some sort of way. In fact, musicians sang about lace. Ebenezer Obey, King Sunny Adé, they all have records. In fact, I think Ebenezer Obey has about seven, if not more, records released at that period about lace.

mary: Wow.

Ms Onuoha: Then of course there were also some other people who were against this fabric that had lots of holes. You spent so much on it, and it didn't have any meaning. It could just get torn, or something would just happen to it. Even up until now, if you're not very careful with your lace fabric and you move anyhow, and then it gets stuck to some table around or somebody's earring or somebody's bangle at a party, of course, it gives way. People like Wólé Şóyínká thought it was– and that was when he wrote his– they call it Òpèra Wónyòsi, but it's not [pronounced] "opera wónyòsi." It is "òpè ra wónyòsi." "òpè ra wónyòsi." It's a kind of lace– he said it's only a fool that will buy wónyòsi.

mary: Wow.

Ms Onuoha: There was a popular armed robber at that time who was executed at the Bar Beach. He was very problematic. Ah– I have forgotten his name, but I'll try and remember now. That man also would go to parties in expensive exquisite lace fabric with his group. And rather than people frown at him, they would rather want to eulogize him, and he would spray money.

During the oil boom, that was when the lace fabric gained prominence among Nigerians. That was when the likes of Chief Mrs. Obebe and Chief Mrs. Owolana, Debo Adekoya, those were the famous merchants

of lace. Like Mrs. Owolana, I had an interview with her in 2010 and she told me that the first lace she sold came from London. When she brought the fabric back home she made times two or times three of gain. That prompted her. She started asking. Then when she went to London again, somebody told her, "Why stop at London? Why don't you just go to where they make lace? Go to the factories. Go to the production places where they make this." And she asked, "Where?" And they said, "Austria." And so, that was how she began her journey. She became a very, very big trader in lace.

mary: Hearing you talk about all of the different locations, from Nigeria to London, London to Vorarlberg, it makes me really reflect on the globalness of this kind of textile industry. I'm thinking about my experience being Nigerian, being based in America, and how this textile practice is still so strong in my family, even though we're miles and miles away from home. And of course the heart of it is always Nigeria. Even when me and my cousins are looking for styles, we're looking at – what are the people wearing in Nigeria? What are the tailors sewing in Nigeria? Are the tailors doing corsetry? Then everyone else is doing corsetry. I'm curious, how has it stood the test of time and location, even as Nigerians are dispersed across the globe?

Ms Onuoha: My answer to that will be, one, that the fabric itself, it has this glamour. It radiates some kind of– it's exquisite. And the way it comes out when a lot of people wear it in the *aṣo ẹbí* tradition, or a group of people, or husband and wife, there's just that beauty about lace.

mary: Over the course of this conversation, another thing you've brought up that I think is very interesting is, it's not just about lace. When you mentioned damask, you mentioned george, we've talked about, of course *aṣo òkè*, even ankara or things like kampala, tie and dye, *àdirẹ*. I think one thing I'm realizing is, it's not just the textile. It's not just lace, but it's also the culture of dressing that Nigerians have, and ascribe importance to. There's one proverb in *African Lace* that professor Péjú Láyíwọlá expanded on in her contribution to the catalogue. I remember going over it with my mom, so I have to– I don't want to say it improperly, but it basically translated to–

voiceover 2 – the proverb

mary: I'm here with my mom, and we're going to go over the proverb real quick. Mum?

mum: A kíl ẹ̀sọ gbélé. A kíl ẹ̀sọ gbélé.

mary: A kíl ẹ̀sọ gbélé. A kíl ẹ̀sọ gbélé.

mum: Good.

mary: Is that right, Mummy?

mum: Yes, very right. Yes, yes. A kíl ẹ̀sọ gbélé. Very right.

mary: And what does it mean, Mummy?

mum: It just means you won't dress up, take time to look beautiful, and then just stay at home.

mary: Mmm – we don't do that. *(laughter)*

mum: Exactly, yes. Your aim is to beautify yourself, get dressed with a beautiful outfit, look gorgeous, make-up, and then go and enjoy yourself.

mary: Thanks, Mum.

mary: –that was just powerful to me because if it wasn't lace, it would be something. It isn't always lace, like you said. Every tribe within Nigeria has their own specific textiles that they take wherever they go. It's just embedded in the cultural tradition to really value dressing, to value textiles, to value presentation— as a way of honoring oneself, but also honoring the community. I think that's one of the reasons why it has stood the test of time.

One of the things that comes up in the discussion about lace is – and also, I think this is relevant from an economic point of view – what does it mean for Nigeria to have really propped up Austria's economy coming out of World War II when this industry was on the verge of collapse and this money is going outside of Nigeria to Austria? That is one of the critiques of lace and buying lace and wearing lace, is that all of this money is going to another country when we have such – as you said – rich and thriving textile industries locally. Have there been lace factories that have been established in Nigeria? Is there efforts to redirect the economy of the lace industry into different aspects of textiles made locally in Nigeria?

Ms Onuoha: Yes. This is a very, very, very good question. A very important one too. The way people felt about it made General Olúṣégún Ọ́básanjó in 1976 to ban the importation of lace into Nigeria. In fact, when this ban was made, there were two Austrians who used to smuggle lace because they now found another route. They went through Republic of Benin to bring in the lace, because people still wanted lace. It became a big issue for them in Austria because their market, the production, is primarily for Nigeria. It's not for use over there. 99% of what is produced in Vorarlberg is for the Nigerian market.

And so when this ban was placed, it had a very, very big effect on the economy of Austria. So much so that the producers, they made a case with their government and told them that, "We're going hungry, people don't have jobs anymore." Almost everybody in Vorarlberg at some point in time lived off the production of lace. So it became a big issue. Ọ́básanjó's argument was – why must we spend so much money bringing in lace, bringing in all this fabric when we have a good thriving textile industry in Nigeria? Why can't we wear what we have? In any case, what is Austria doing for us?

mary: Exactly.

Ms Onuoha: Austria was made at this time to start buying oil, not that they really bought that much. They had to up their buying capacity because that was one of the conditions the president gave at the time. By the time that was happening, the problem was [still continuing] on, and the lace merchants here were screaming— because here too lace has helped the economy somehow.

mary: Absolutely.

Ms Onuoha: Now we have photojournalists all over. We have makeup artists. It has helped local industry, so to speak. Coming back to your question, one thing that now happened was that Olúṣégún Ọ́básanjó now told them, "Okay. Come here and build industries, lace factories." They tried to do that, but another clause was this: you cannot entirely own any company here if you're not Nigerian.

mary: Mmmm, mhmm.

Ms Onuoha: So collaborative efforts began to rise. There's a particular man, Prince Shafi Mobolaji Shittu, the Baba Adinni of Aiyeye, he was one of the biggest importers of lace at the time. He was doing this with his brother. So together with their colleague in Austria, their Austrian partner, they formed the company ANEF in 1972, Austro-Nigerian Embroidery Factory. They began the production of a particular kind of lace that eventually had the name Aiyeye lace. I met Aiyeye lace. I know Aiyeye lace. Aiyeye lace was named after the town, Aiyeye. That's where they built the factory. Aiyeye is in Ijẹ̀bú. Ikenne. That's where Alhaji Shittu and his brother, that's where they're from. We were opportuned to visit him. I don't know if he still lives, but at that time we went to Aiyeye, we saw him. He told us how the industry was then, how they built the factory, with their partner from Austria.

Another one was the Shokas lace. That's the Shokas factory. That was owned by Shote & Kasim Industries. It was located in Ijẹ̀bú as well. They were called Novelty Embroideries. Novelty Embroideries. The very popular agent, Blaser, was their partner. They put money together and built that factory. There was another one called Supreme Lace, and this Supreme Lace was owned by— yes, Supreme Lace should still exist if I'm not mistaken. It's around the industrial area in Ikeja. It's managed by Rudi Bösch, whose family is into the embroidery business back home in Austria. He came here — early 80s, I think — and has remained here since then. He runs that Supreme Lace in Ikeja with a Nigerian partner as well.

At least, we can talk about these three lace production companies in Nigeria that ran as partnerships with their Austrian colleagues. Unfortunately, most of them are closed down, if not all of them. I know Supreme Lace still works, but minimally— minimal production. They're closed due to infrastructural problems and all. Then Rudi Bösch told us— and Alhaji Shafi— that there are cheap smuggled goods that come in from Asia, that are competing very seriously with the Austrian markets and with the markets here. Then the production cost is so huge, lack of raw materials, high energy costs, government unwillingness to support the textile industries, among so many other things.

mary: I so much respect the work that... *(trails off)* For one, when I think about the aládirẹ for example, who keep their craft under lock and key, and I know that there are challenges even in the dying industry to find next generation to pass that down to-

Ms Onuoha: Of course.

mary: When I spend time in Abẹ̀òkúta with kampil dyers, with aládirẹ — even if they allow me in, right, because I'm an outsider, I'm not a knowledgeable person in the field, so there's of course skepticism and rightfully so — but I respect how much they have attempted to really safeguard the practice.

Ms Onuoha: The craft.

mary: I just hope it continues to remain. I think even of Chief Mrs. Níké Òkúndayè and the work she's doing to preserve in Òşogbo and in other dying centers in Nigeria so that the textile industries can remain. That means a lot. I'm appreciative. And your work as an educator as well.

Ms Onuoha: Thank you, thank you.

credits / acknowledgements

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Now, I gotta give a very special thanks to my family for, just everything. To this episode's guest, the scholar and educator, Ms Louisa Onuoha. To Helen Polson, Emma Cormack, Michele Majer, and the BGC exhibitions team for their work on the micro-exhibition associated with this podcast. And most importantly, to the countless teachers, knowledge holders, culture bearers, and creators who keep these things alive. This series is dedicated to Grandma.

All through this episode, Ms Onuoha and I speak on a specific book, *African Lace: A History of Trade, Creativity and Fashion in Nigeria*. This book brought together several experts on lace – from the photojournalists who snap the textiles worn in Naija celebrations, to scholars who spent time in the archives of Austrian lace mills, and more. It was also one of the places where I started learning more about the history of lace. Alongside conversations with all the aunties, uncles, makers, and teachers in my life about their textiles. And also, working with textiles of my own. If you're interested in learning more, consider starting here with this book, *African Lace*. But keep in mind, there are many, many elements of this topic, and Yorùbá dress culture more broadly, that exist in archives outside of books, or just aren't for everyone to know, or access. Even me, too, I have to know my limits. So, tread respectfully. And ask your elders about the textiles that run in your family or region – whether that's Naija lace, or something else. You might be surprised what you learn.