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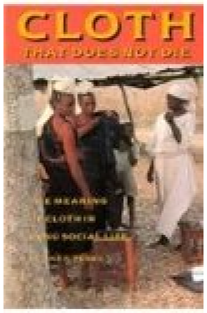
Elisha P. Renne. *Cloth That Does Not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995. xxi + 206 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-97392-0.



Reviewed by Lisa Aronson (Associate Professor, Art History - Skidmore College)
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Threads of Bunu Yoruba History

Given the richness and complexity of Yoruba textiles in terms of their history, aesthetics, technologies, and ritual meanings, it is surprising that so few, if any, book-length studies exist on the subject. It is for this reason, among many others, that Elisha Renne's book *Cloth Does Not Die: The Meaning of Cloth in Bunu Social Life* is a welcome addition to the study of Yoruba cloth. But, more than just a descriptive account of textiles from this little-known region of northeastern Yorubaland, it is a well-documented study of the meaning of Bunu cloth and how that meaning accounts for continuity and change in its production over an eighty year period.

Before colonialism, Bunu women wove and Bunu men farmed and hunted. After colonialism, both men and women were engaging in cash crop agriculture, mainly of yams, that Europeans had introduced in place of more traditional economies, such as cotton cultivation. In the end, inaccessibility to resources and labor contributed to the decline of Bunu weaving. But other factors were at play as well. Renne learned from her careful reading of archival sources dating to the colonial period that Europeans were intent on eliminating traditional handspun, woven attire which they associated with things backwards and uncivilized, and did so by introducing western forms of dress and increasing the importation of factory-made textiles. But her Bunu informants imply that they were hardly passive recipients of these Western-imposed good. Many of them say that they opted for aso oyinbo (white man's attire) and did so for reasons we might not expect. For example, Bunu women claim they began wearing brassieres to keep their chests from becoming flat "like a man's," (p. 183) not, as we sometime assume, for any European-imposed shame concerning exposed breasts. Moreover, they found the imported cloths lighter in weight, more comfortable to wear, and easier to tie and tailor. But, above all, it was for the sake of keeping up with fashion and for olaju (enlightenment or civilization) that they elected to change their attire. This change triggered a gradual decline in a weaving tradition that was once the main source for cloth and clothing in the Bunu area. Bunu women once wove as many as 28 different varieties of cloth for both daily and ritual use and most of them for commercial consumption outside of the Bunu region. Today, only a handful of Bunu still weave and they produce only three types of cloth, all of them of ritual importance: 1) plain white cloth of varying dimensions, 2) hunter's shirts (*awode*), made from predominantly white cloth but with thin blue stripes, and 3) *adofi*, a predominantly blue cloth with occasional white, red, and green stripes required for traditional Bunu marriage ceremonies.

Why these three types have survived in the face of progress (*olaju*) is the central issue Renne addresses in her more than 200-page study. In her explanation, she points to two separate, but not unrelated, factors, 1) the persistence of traditional Bunu religious beliefs in which color symbolism expressed through cloth seems firmly embedded; and 2) an uncompromising need the Bunu have to affirm their own sense of history and identity. Regarding the latter, the Bunu believe weaving to have been a god-given art form that they have been doing for time immemorial. Now, it is for the sake of tradition that they say they must continue this practice. It has also been their tradition to use cloth to bring structure to their lives in a world in which humans, nature spirits (*ebora*), and ancestors are in delicate balance with one another and divided somewhat along gender lines, nature spirits more closely allied with women and ancestors with men.

Renne argues that textiles of specified colors are key to maintaining this social order. Not unlike most African cultures, the Bunu recognize three basic colors, white (*funfun*), blue (*dudu*), and red (*pupa*), each corresponding with different segments within the society and different categories of cloth. So important is color symbolism for the Bunu that Renne organizes six of her chapters about Bunu cloth around the theme of color, resulting in one of the more comprehensive anthropological studies of Yoruba color symbolism to date. Her chapter on white cloth, titled "Water, Spirits, and Plain White Cloth," implies that the the Bunu associate the color white with nature spirits, including spirits of the water (*ejinuwon*). As well, the Bunu link it to moist, and often fertile, substances such as milk, rain, mucus, tears, urine, and semen. Renne notes that white cloth is the "panacea for a host of spirit-related problems" (p. 32) and provides the path through which humans and spirits can travel between each other's world as needed. As one Bunu woman explained: "I used the first white cloth bought for me by my husband as a cover when I slept. One night I woke up and could not see the cloth. I lit my lantern to search for it, but could not find it. In the morning, I sent a person to consult Ifa. Ifa said that ejinuwon spirits had taken it away" (p. 26). When the spirits acquire white cloth, such as in the manner just described, it is hoped that they will ensure peace and tranquility to its giver. Thus, white cloth is still woven because it is needed to accommodate the powers of nature spirits, in which the Bunu strongly believe.

By contrast, the blue (black) hue as well as cloths of that color are concerned more with the human realm. Blue represents life fully lived, thus being associated with the most humanly productive act in which women can engage, the bearing of children and marriage rituals leading up to it. In Renne's detailed description of the traditional three-month long marriage ritual (*gbe obitan*), she notes that women wear blue cloth as status symbols, but more importantly, to signal that they are symbolically journeying "to and from the spirit world, believed to be the source of human fertility." Blue is the color of the majority, ten out of thirteen, of the cloths in a Bunu woman's traditional dowry, the other three of them being white. Carried in a round basket shaped like the belly of a pregnant woman, the blue cloths are said to symbolize the children she will eventually bear. One of the cloths in the dowry is the cloth the Bunu call adofi which they single out as the most important marriage cloth. It is the only cloth in the bride's dowry that she herself must own, all other blue cloths usually borrowed for the ceremony. The Bunu also say that the adofi cloth reminds them "of the spirit-wives who taught their ancestors to weave, and of their mothers who wove in the past." Therefore, it is the necessity of ritual combined with tradition that calls for Bunu women to continue to weave this cloth.

Unlike the female-associated white and blue cloths, red cloth (aso ipo meaning funerary cloth) falls within the male sphere. It is associated with chieftaincy and other realms of power and authority in Bunu culture. Not coincidentally, it is also linked to the ancestors over whom male authority is in firm control. At one time, the Bunu wove red cloths richly embellished with wool threads acquired by unraveling imported red blankets. When the red blankets were no longer available through trade, the Bunu compensated mainly by recycling older examples of Bunu red cloths or by adding camwood to white cloths to make them red. Whatever the source, the red cloth serves largely as funerary attire for chiefs and kings. It is also used to construct the Egungun costume performed by men to honor the ancestors and to bring them back to the living when needed.

So powerful is cloth of red color that women must not view or even weave some types of it. Therefore, it is only Bunu men who used to weave it. This example of apparent role-switching is a subject deserving of attention because, curiously, men wove the red cloth on the upright frame loom we always associate with women. Such data suggests, as Renne implies in her chapter on gender and cloth, that Bunu men appropriated some women's weaving, and the creative powers of childbirth with which it is associated, to afford them the power to create and nurture the ancestors. In other words, just as Bunu weaving symbolizes, and thus ensures, the creation and nurturing of children for women, so too does it symbolically serve that function with respect to the ancestors for men.

It is not just among the Bunu that we see men symbolically appropriating female reproductive powers to gain transformative power within their own sphere. Anita Glaze notes in her study of the Senufo that Poro members, who are mostly male, symbolically transform the dead bodies into ancestors by having their most powerful masquerades stoop over the corpse in a gesture that imitates the birthing process.[1] Similarly, Eugenia Herbert observes that a number of chieftaincies in Central Africa link their power base to the iron-smelting process which she shows to symbolically draw on female reproduction.[2] To these pivotal studies on gender in sculptural mediums, we can now add Renne's compelling discourse on the genderizing of cloth in all of its dimensions.

But it is not only from the point of view of gender that Renne argues the meaning of Bunu cloth is derived. Renne reflects at great length on the nature and unique properties of the textile medium itself as a determinant of its meaning. In her introduction–which I highly recommend as essential reading for any one interested in the study of cloth and culture–she emphasizes the many inherent qualities in cloth that contribute to its meaning. They include its wearability, its ability to absorb human sweat and other bodily secretions, the socialness of its outside or the privateness of its inside, and, in general, its potential to express ideas about "individuality, social continuity, and the circularity of time and space" (p. 9). All of these properties and more she then eloquently illustrates as she presents her Bunu data throughout the book.

The interesting logic and order with which Renne presents her data is also worth noting. I find it interesting that she uses the Bunu order of things as her own organizing principle, for example, by dividing chapters according to categories of color. Also, her frequent use of sub-headings, inserted at every possible juncture, not only informs us of the precise direction of her thought but makes it clear that, in her analysis, she leaves few corners unturned. For example, her chapter titled "Why Bunu Brides Wear Black" includes such sub-headings as "Producing and Acquiring Black Marriage Cloths," "Who Made and Who Gave Marriage Cloths," "The Meaning of Black Marriage Cloth in Traditional Marriage," "The Meaning of Black Things", and "When Black is Too Dangerous to be Worn." Throughout her tightly organized text, she gives ample voice to her informants as they recount the many Bunu myths, histories, and beliefs she collected during her fieldwork in the course of three different visits between 1987-91.

Exactly where she did her fieldwork is of value as well. Renne focuses her study on a Yoruba culture that falls well beyond the fringes of mainstream Yoruba. Unlike the latter, Bunu royalty does not claim divine origins from Ife, nor do the Bunu worship the hierarchical pantheon of orisha so wedded to it. The Bunu may very well be the remnants of the Yoruba culture existing prior to the creation and spread of divine kingship. Therefore, Renne's study could be quite useful when looking for antecedents for more mainstream Yoruba culture, not unlike studying Gothic cathedrals on the periphery to better understand the roots of those that have long since been elaborated on in the center of Europe.

Renne's study is not without a few minor oversights. She never discusses the European-designed divorce laws which in her introduction she claims so impacted on traditional marriage practices and related weaving. Also somewhat troubling are her illustrations, none of which have figure numbers, and to which she, thus, gives no direct reference within text. This is particularly problematic for her nine color illustrations which, unlike the black and white ones, are confined to just one section of the book. Having no way to reference them within the text itself, one would hope that their captions would help to link them to the text or, at least, to sufficiently explain their content. This is not always the case. To cite one example, she illustrates a Bunu king wearing regalia which appears to be of Hausa or Nupe origins. Yet, in spite of her keen attention to Bunu textile trade, she says nothing about how and from where the king got his gown. The caption reads only that he is "wearing regalia of a northern Bunu king." Furthermore, the ensemble in its entirety incorporates the three colors in question–blue cloth, white embroidery, and red beads and hat. What symbolic messages does this color range imply given the importance of such colors to the Bunu? Again, the label does not help to address this question.

Despite these minor criticisms, Renne's book is an impressive, if not model, study of the history and meaning of one Yoruba cloth tradition. Among other things, she helps to dispel the misconception that African art "history" is irretrievable if not non-existent, by appropriately interweaving her observations about the Bunu cloth in the present with the intricate complexities of the Bunu past, both mythical and historical. Furthermore, her book will be of eminent use for Africanists or anyone in the disciplines of anthropology, art history, history, and folklore who are interested in such topics as the anthropology of cloth, aesthetics, issues of gender, and identity formation in the face of cultural change in the post-colonial world.

Notes:

[1]. Glaze, Anita. Art and Death in a Senufo Village. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

[2]. Herbert, Eugenia. Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies. Bloomington:

Indiana University Press, 1993.

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