

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.

Lastly, this is an intimate family conversation. Out of respect to the family, please do not share or distribute widely. Thank you for respecting these wishes, and thank you for reading / listening.

introduction

My name is Mary and welcome to season three of the *Fields of the Future* podcast. This season, we'll talk about laces in Nigerian culture by looking at and working with laces closely, and talking with a few experts. Now, there are a lot of experiences with lace in Nigerian culture and these are just a few from folks based in Nigeria, among the Nigerian diaspora abroad, and in other places, such as Austria, one of the major lacemaking countries that established a trade relationship with Nigeria.

In this episode, my mom, little sister, and I get together to talk about some of the laces we own. We represent two and a half generations of Nigerian women in the diaspora abroad who wear and use lace, among other Yorùbá textiles of course. I say half because my sister and I are the same generation, but not really. We're sitting together in the living room of our family home with laces spread out all along the chairs. You might hear the rustling of laces getting pulled out of their sleeves and handled on the table, or the stairs creaking as family members go up and down. And all through the episode, I might briefly pause the conversation to, you know, jump in and add a few details and reflections here and there. So, thank you to my family, for briefly allowing us in, and thank you for listening.

Mary: I'm here with my mom and my little sister, Hannah. Did you not like that I said little sister?

Hannah: No, I like that.

Mary: Okay. Hannah, do you want to go first?

Hannah: Yeah, I can go. One of my favorite fabrics is a sparkly pink and mesh fabric. It's pink and black. It has a lot of different gradients of pink, and it also has different types of sequins on it. I actually made a very editorial style out of it – which I loved. It just reminds me of being fabulous; it reminds me of being a gorgeous girl, so I love this fabric so much. It's so cute to me! Pink and black, perfect color combination, I'd say.

voiceover 1 – detailed description of sparkly pink lace

Now I'm gonna take a moment to describe this lace in greater detail. Imagine a storm of baby pink, rose, fuchsia, black, embroidery, velvet, sequins, glitter. As I handle it (*crinkling sound*), I can hear and feel the crinkle of netting and sequins. The lace is somewhat stiff. And as I set it in different ways on the table it holds its shape – peaks, valleys, all of that.

Now, I'm gonna talk about the patterns on the body of the lace. They appear pretty abstract and random, but there actually is organization to it. Starts with the base, which is the baby pink netting or mesh at the bottom; which is covered by long, staggered lines of black velvet; which are in turn covered, partly, by long staggered lines of fuchsia glitter; which are then covered by baby pink embroidery that almost looks like the strokes of a paintbrush. And then those are finally covered by rose pink sequins. This order is consistent throughout.

Now, I'm going to move to the decorative design along the outermost edge – the bottom and top of the lace, the decorative selvedge edge. Compared to the lines and brushstrokes, which I might describe as a little more abstract, this is a distinct floral embroidery. The design at the selvedge edge starts with a scalloped border, which is kind of reminiscent of the curved edges of a sea shell. And just inside that scalloped border is leaves and small curling flowers.

While the embroidery and the sequins are stitched down to the net, the lines of black velvet and fuchsia glitter actually appear to be glued on. And so, as I look across the lace I notice that some of the lines are actually peeling off and sticking straight up from an otherwise flat lace.

Hannah: I would say I definitely prefer sparkle and shine-shine more than plain. It's just something that very much attracts the eye. I feel like that's what new laces do.

Ms Abímbólá: Catchy, exactly.

Hannah: It attracts the eye so when you walk, it's like, "Wow."

Mary: Can you imagine walking in this?

Hannah: Oh, my gosh. It's like, "Oh, my gosh, I want to keep on looking at that dress." And that's really, I feel, what people's objectives are when they're picking these fabrics for weddings and celebrations. They want people to be like, "Yes, I want to see more of that. I want to see all the dresses that could possibly be in this fabric." That's what people want. When I have my wedding, I need to have the brightest, catchiest fabric. That fabric– the styles must be endless in that fabric!

Mary: Do you ever feel though that the shine-shine can sometimes be, not a distraction, but–

Hannah: Never! Never a distraction.

Mary: –but I feel it's a quick way to try and catch attention, then you look closely and it's not really intricately done. (*laughter*)

Hannah: No, this looks intricately done! Compared to that, Mary, that's boring.

(some commotion, laughter and talking over one another)

Ms Abímbólá: That is not boring! That's not boring.

Mary: Imagine all this embroidery! It's embroidery from corner to corner.

Ms Abímbólá: Do you know some materials—

Mary: And all this cutwork! These are hand— I don't know if they're hand cut, but all these holes!

voiceover 2 – did you catch that?

Did you catch that? Little sis said my lace, which has only a little sparkle but a lot of really intricate embroidery and open work, is boring compared to her lace, which has a lot of sparkle and a lot of glitter but not so much embroidery. I'll also add that mine is about 20 years old and hers from the past year. Keep all this in mind as you listen on.

Ms Abímbólá: It's also important to ensure that all the sequins are well made, because sometimes you'll buy these materials, and the sequins are not properly done. By the time you—

Hannah: They're falling off everywhere.

Ms Abímbólá: —exactly. You get up from where you are sitting, and the whole place is filled with sequins. It just shows that probably the quality is not that good, so we have to make sure there's a balance with that.

Hannah: But I feel that's more so glitter—

Ms Abímbólá: As good as those laces are that have sequins and bling-bling, it's good to also ensure that they are well done, and worth the price.

Hannah: How can you not sew on sequins properly? I think this one was made a little bit not as well, because if you see here, even all the things are now coming off (*laughter*). Look at this.

Mary: Yeah, that's tough.

Mary: Hannah is pointing to, in one of her pink laces, one of the more abstract ones, there are little stripes in the background and they're starting to, I guess, would you say lift off the netting?

Hannah: mm-hmm.

Mary: Yeah, they're starting to lift off the netting.

Hannah: And I've only worn this once.

Ms Abímbólá: My name is Abímbólá, Mary's mom, and I'm pleased to be part of this podcast. One of my favorites would be a particular lace that I used during my 60th birthday—

Hannah: Oh yes, that was a beautiful lace.

Ms Abímbólá: —which I'm very very pleased about. My junior sister that knows more about very nice quality, good quality laces, helped me to get it. It's three different colors, very beautiful—

voiceover 3 - detailed description of 60th birthday lace

Now I'm going to take a moment to describe this lace in greater detail. Imagine turquoise and navy lace, with glimmers of silver. It smells floral like my mum's perfume. I couldn't figure out entirely what kind of lace this was. I thought maybe it was a French lace — embroidery on organza — so I had to go to my mum and my auntie for guidance. And what they told me was that this is a Swiss double organza lace, machine embroidery on a base of double organza. The organza feels lighter and more see-through than voile, but not as light as mesh or netting. The organza is turquoise – or maybe something in the turquoise, sky blue and aqua family. I keep googling pictures of all these colors and it kinda makes it hard to tell what's what, but we'll say turquoise.

Now, all of the embroidery on the organza is in the same turquoise color thread. The pattern is leaves, or— actually I'm going to say teardrops, of all sizes and arrangements, but mostly oriented vertically. I'm just gonna zoom in on one single tear drop. Along the border, on the inside of the teardrop are two rows of tiny, tiny sequins stitched down with thread that seems nearly invisible. Let me tell you, like, I barely caught it. I thought these sequins were glued down until I held it up close to my face and I saw that there was this really tiny, almost invisible thread tacking the sequins down flat. After these two rows of sequins there are evenly spaced running stitches – several lines – that follow the shape of the teardrop. And then there's a glass rhinestone at the very center, towards the round tip of the teardrop.

Now let's zoom out a little bit to talk about what's happening between all of the teardrops. There are bars connecting them all, and where there would've been organza between those bars it's actually been cut out to form a beautiful openwork. As I run my hands over it, my fingers sometimes get caught in the bars and spaces, and I don't see not one single thread out of place. No unraveling embroidery, no fraying of the organza base, which sometimes happens after the organza has been cut to form this openwork. Above the embroidered organza base that's turquoise, are rows of navy blue, velvet flowers that have been appliquéd or stitched down onto the organza. These flowers are pretty big. They're about the size of my palm, and at the center of each there are matte, silver sequins – tiny again – also nearly invisibly stitched down in little curls, that kinda look like the stamen in the center of a real flower.

Hannah: You talked about your junior sister being a connoisseur of laces. Where does she usually go to get her laces?

Ms Abímbólá: She gets it from various places, and I do have other sisters as well that deal in laces. Sometimes they get it from Austria—

Hannah: Oh, Austria—

Ms Abímbólá: —my senior sister gets some laces from Austria before, but she has stopped selling laces now, a lot of quality laces. But now that we have a lot of companies producing laces now, things have changed compared to the way it was before. There are laces from Korea, from China, from Nigeria, other places apart from the standard Austrian laces people are used to (*affirmative sounds Mary & Hannah*).

There are different outlets for the laces that we get now, and we use it for different occasions, for birthdays, for weddings – for celebratory events, generally – naming ceremonies, joyful events.

Mary: Before you go on, I just want to say something about this lace, because this lace is–

Ms Abimbólá: –they call it HOH, very expensive.

Hannah: I can imagine-- *(pause, whispers)*. Wow. My mom just revealed the price!

(laughter, some commotion)

Mary: She just told us how much it was. It's not for y'all to know, but wow.

Hannah: Wowza.

Mary: And the company that she mentioned, HOH, is a company in Austria that has been producing and selling lace.

Ms Abimbólá: And mostly, expensive laces like this, it's not that people cannot buy it, but most people, when they're doing celebrations – more so when you have an aṣọ ẹbí – the celebrant will want to wear something that is sort of unique so that even visitors will not overdress you, because apart from the people that will wear their aṣọ ẹbí, there'll be some other people who will just dress nicely, or in events where there's no aṣọ ẹbí, people will just come and celebrate and dress very well. So in a way, to avoid having guests that will–

Mary: Try to outdo you! *(laughter)*

Hannah: But I will say though, it is–

Ms Abimbólá: –you want to make sure you dress well, but sometimes people don't even mind. Guests can even overdress, but some people do not mind. They just accept the way it comes.

Hannah: Yeah, because it is up to the celebrant. If you don't want people to outdress you, you better come with a style that is worth it because, Nigerians, they don't care about that. *(laughter)* They will overdress you. It's just, that is what it is. You just have to step up your game.

Mary: Not everybody, okay?!

Hannah: Step up your game!

Mary: There are some people who are like, "Okay, I'm not going to outdo the celebrant. Let me just tone it down."

Ms Abimbólá: Tone it down, yes. There are people who are considerate of that too.

Mary: Exactly.

Hannah: Well, that's not me. Next! *(laughter)*

Mary: That's not my sister, but me and my Mom, we not like that!

Mary: Of all of the laces that everyone has shown, Mummy, it seems like a lot of yours have flower motifs, and Hannah, yours kinda have more abstract motifs, which I think is–

Hannah: Yes, that's the word I was looking for.

Mary: –maybe the latest style.

Hannah: Yeah, I think the latest style is more abstract, more busy, a lot going on. There's obviously a distinct pattern in each. I definitely agree.

Hannah: And how much do these laces range from? What's the cheapest lace you can get, and what's the most expensive lace that you can get?

Ms Abimbólá: Laces range depending on the design, the quality, the origin of the lace, where it comes from... You can find some good quality laces ranging from \$500, five yards, \$600, \$700, \$1,000 or more. It just depends on one's taste and what you want. It's not really necessary to be buying those expensive laces. But once in a while, when you are the celebrant, you want to wear something very nice. But you can find affordable laces – \$100, \$200 – depending on the design and what you want to use it for. For younger people, there's no need just spending so much money. But for the older people, as good as this is (*sound of fabric rustling*) –

Mary: My mom's holding up one of the laces that has netting on the background and a lot of sequins.

Ms Abimbólá: We also look at it that maybe this would be appropriate for a younger generation. For the older generation, you want something that is more–

Mary: Substantial.

Ms Abimbólá: Exactly.

Mary: More fabric.

Ms Abimbólá: So in that regard, laces will be \$150 to \$200. That will be the range, \$120, \$150, \$200, \$250. That will also encompass the head tie because it goes together. The way we do those pricing will be the head tie along with the material.

Mary: I guess that just leaves my laces.

Hannah: Yes.

Mary: The next one is– this is a voile lace?

Ms Abimbólá: Yes. They are very soft and last longer, even if you launder it. The base of it will be good cotton, or softer cotton, compared to the netting.

Hannah: Yeah, this is more cotton. Interesting. Is that more expensive?

Ms Abimbólá: Not too expensive, but at least it's more expensive than the netty materials, because of the quality.

voiceover 4 - detailed description of voile lace

Now, I'm going to take a moment to describe this lace in greater detail. I want you to imagine a turquoise and white fabric. This lace is what we refer to as voile. Some French speakers might pronounce it as "vwal," but we know it as voile. It's machine embroidery on a base of lightweight cotton, plain weave. The voile is the white part of the fabric, but not only that, it's a soft, dull white. Kinda looks like it could have been a vivid white at one point, but at this point, it's kind of aged gracefully over time to the color that I see in front of me today.

Now, I'm gonna try to describe the embroidery patterns that have been created with the shiny turquoise thread. We'll start from the outermost edges of this long panel of lace, and then work our way in. Now, at the outermost edges, there is a scalloped border kinda similar to the edges of a seashell here. Now, if we go further inward on the fabric, we see what I would call the primary pattern. It's six alternating columns of circles and then hexagons, that kind of look like wheels with a hub and spokes. Think of a bicycle wheel, for example. The soft white voile that would be in between the lines that kinda radiate from the center of the wheel is cut out so it leaves a beautiful open work pattern. When I look through the cutouts of the wheels, I can see my fingers clearly. Throughout, there are gemstones of various colors glued every once in a while onto the voile between each of the columns of circle and hexagon wheels. I see lavender, sky blue, light green, red, even yellow. And then, there's one more distinct pattern separating each six column repeat of circles and hexagons. So it goes: hexagon, circle, hexagon, circle, hexagon, circle. And then before the next round is a double helix. And I know that might seem kind of strange, but I studied molecular biology in undergrad. So, it looks like a double helix to me.

Now, next to this fabric is another version exactly like it, but with one major difference. At the center of every one of those circle or hexagon wheels is a clear gemstone. If you remember, the wheels pretty much take up the majority of the lace. So if you could imagine – the gemstones are pretty much everywhere. As I run my hands across it, what I mostly feel is the defined hardness of the tiny gemstones. As I hold it up, the gemstones twinkle and catch the sunlight.

Mary: For some reason, I don't like the netted styles as much as the voile styles.

Hannah: Really?!

Hannah: But I do feel the voile styles are definitely more historic. The netted styles definitely seem more new and modern. So I understand if you really care deeply about the history and preservation, you would like the voile more than the netted styles.

Mary: I also just feel like– even just hear it, the sound. Imagine walking and all you hearing is crinkle, crinkle, crinkle.

(laughter, among sounds of fabric rustling in the background)

Hannah: That's true.

Mary: This one is one of my favorites because my mom gave it to me. Basically what had happened was – and this is something that we also talk about in another episode – just one of the realities of lace in Nigerian culture is sometimes there's this aspect of excess and having a lot of laces. And you know, if you

buy one lace for every event, you're accumulating so much (*laughter, affirmation from Ms Abímbólá*). Is it wasteful? Is there a way to reuse it? And so I think what a lot of – Mummy, correct me if I'm wrong – older Nigerian woman (*pause, then trails off*)... The complication that can happen is there's so much fabric, and not always somewhere to wear it to.

Ms Abímbólá: Yes, yes.

Hannah: Yes.

Mary: And so this was a situation where, I think my mom had this for a long time and had really used it quite a bit–

Ms Abímbólá: Exactly.

Mary: –worn it to church, worn it to everywhere (*laughter, affirmation from Ms Abímbólá*). It was time to go. And I saw it and I was like, "I think I can do something with this."

Ms Abímbólá: I had it. Your dad had it as well, the family–

Mary: The entire family had it, or just the parents?

Ms Abímbólá: Myself and your dad had it.

Mary: I got this out of the bag of things that, you know, was gonna be donated and decided to try and make something from it. What I ended up doing was– And I got the rhinestones from my sister, actually.

Ms Abímbólá: Okay, okay, wow.

Hannah: I remember those from my graduation cap.

Mary: I essentially put rhinestones all over this, at the very center of all the circles and hexagons, and just made it so that, like Hannah said, as you walk, it catches your eye. The rhinestones kinda refreshed it a little bit.

Ms Abímbólá: Exactly. That is very true.

Mary: So, we can keep something that is good quality and has lasted–

Ms Abímbólá: You just regenerated it. Beautiful.

Hannah: Yes, passed it down from generation to generation, so now you can give your kids that fabric.

Mary: Indeed.

Ms Abímbólá: That is so nice too.

Hannah: And they're going to remake it.

Mary: Any other last thoughts as it relates to any of the laces we talked about today?

Hannah: My question is, why don't people buy lace from Nigeria?

Ms Abimbólá: We do have some companies, to be honest. We have ankara making textile companies in Nigeria and I believe they started doing some, at least, low profile laces... Things are getting better with being able to get the raw material. Fortunately, I believe Nigeria is even one of the cotton producing countries. Is cotton not one of the things that they use for laces?

Mary: Yeah.

Ms Abimbólá: So it's just the expertise.

Mary: The whole reasoning behind it is really, quite honestly, ridiculous, because Nigeria and a lot of west African countries produce their own cotton and cotton of the finest quality, but when the British colonized Nigeria, it was in their economic interests for Nigerians to buy British cotton. This is just the story of colonization and imperialism – but basically, a lot of the yarn producing mills, a lot of the infrastructure required to make these textiles, now exist outside of the country. But again, I'm not an expert, but that's how I understood it from the few discussions I've had.

Ms Abimbólá: Okay.

Hannah: Interesting.

Ms Abimbólá: Apart from laces, we do have the local fabrics that we produce, like the àdìrẹ.

Mary: Àdìrẹ, aṣọ òkè, kàmpàlà.

Ms Abimbólá: Aṣọ òkè that goes with the laces because, apart from wearing the laces, you still have to-

Hannah: Buy gèlè.

Ms Abimbólá: Exactly, the accessories to enhance it. Nigerians are very good in weaving.

Mary: mhmm, yep.

voiceover 5 - an aside on colonization & episode conclusion

I know y'all are tired of hearing me talk, but I think this aspect of colonization, imperialism, and globalization is an important one. I can't overstate how much the region we now know as Nigeria was and has always been resource-rich, arts-rich, and highly skilled. I mean, just look at the Benin bronzes, the Nok terracottas, and the ancient city of Ilé-Ife. And while locally woven and dyed textiles were once dominant, the region was also no stranger to foreign textile trade. Benin ọbas were wearing imported velvets in the 1800s. And the region was not only growing, spinning, and weaving both indigenous and non-indigenous cotton species to supply the people's clothing needs and textile needs locally, but they were also exporting that cotton to British mills.

But the thing about imperialism is, it's never enough. When European colonial regimes established themselves in west Africa in the mid-1800s, they were out for their own commercial interests. Their tools were to economically pillage and culturally plunder, not just to trade but to make them dependent on [European] economies. So, recognizing how much the people in this region of west Africa used fabric, even back then in the late 1800s, it was only a matter of time

before the British flooded the market with cheaper, mass-manufactured cotton from British mills. And that was the beginning of the end of Nigeria's cotton production and refining.

But you know what? We're not about to give colonization and imperialism all that credit. Because even though lace is a part of this global power dynamic, Nigerians were and have always been agents of our own destiny. And so in this series, we look at lace as an example of how Nigerians took something foreign and remade it in their own image. And along the way, propped up a country's entire lace industry. Now this hasn't been without its challenges and complexities, which we'll get into, don't worry. But my sister's question, "Why isn't lace made in Nigeria?," is just one example of how the things that we're sitting around our table gisting about, the things that are everyday life to us, go deep, wayyy deep. Into things that are big and complex and sometimes even nation-shaping. Yeah, textiles can do all that.

If you join us for the rest of the series, we'll go deeper into a lot of the topics that we touched on today. And we'll also stay tactile, too, and get into what these laces look and feel like, how they're made, and perspectives on lace's authenticity as Yorùbá textile. Is it ours, or not? Big questions. But for now back to my mom and sister's closing thoughts.

Ms Abímbólá: I would just say, from experience and probably the different laces that we've come across, it seems like, as technology is changing from time to time, we are seeing different patterns from what we were used to, from what our parents were even used to, then. All the new, colorful netty laces that we have now, were not available then. Very nice things are coming up now, which the younger generation— and we, even adults, we love the different, colorful creativity that we are seeing in the textile industry. Everybody seems to be embracing it and enjoying the different things coming up.

Hannah: So, lace is always evolving.

Ms Abímbólá: Yes, exactly.

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For more on coloniality in west African textiles, see the article "Post-Colonial Fabrics in Contemporary African Art" by Yayra Sumah in *The Sunu Journal* and the first few chapters of *Àdirẹ Èlẹkọ Fabric Art: A Vanishing Nigerian Indigo Impression* by Tunde M. Akinwunmi. This isn't comprehensive at all, just a few resources that have helped me in my journey of understanding.