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**MORPHOLOGY AND SIGNIFICATION OF GELE EPHEMERAL ART**

**The purpose** of this study is to identify selected contemporary gele morphologies, establishing their signification(s) in line with Yoruba world views. Gele is an ephemeral artistic piece with representation in anything and everything that constitute feminine head covering, hitherto adorned by the Yoruba on casual and non-casual costume. The art, though with apparent scholastic dearth; its contemporaneous growth and intoxicating morphologies in modern fashion, has made this attempt on its signification germane and expedient.

**Methodology.** Combines field investigative approach with bibliographical method. Thirteen (13) gele practitioners were consulted, their social media handles verified and consent sought on post photographs usage. The photographic pieces were subsequently subjected to literary analyses from the Yoruba view points.

**Results.** Morphologically, revealed six categorizations of manual gele; establishing fragility, truth, authority and treasure significations for zoomorphic (butterfly), anthropo-artificial (hand-fan) and flora (leave and rose) subjects respectively.

**The scientific novelty.** Attests gele feminine domiciliation, practice uni-sexuality and technique fundamentality in manual or auto. It further attests hobbyists benevolence and professional capitalism; recognising gele as a major player in Yoruba ephemeral art, worthy of promotion in consonant with sustainable development goals.

**Practical significance.** This study is a clarion call on artists and patrons alike on the need to be alive to gele significations as in its morphologies. Consequently, recommends concrete postulation of gele art to fossilized art by sculptors and ceramicists alike.

**Keywords:** Yoruba civility; Gele; Art ephemeral; Morphology; Signification; Aso-Ofi.

**Introduction.** Gele art is an ever evolving feministic practice with masterful pieces of momentary or temporal enjoyment, classified as ephemeral art. This art is apparently evident in practices of remote, immediate and emerging civilizations of the Yoruba race [1]. The Yoruba are the autochthons of Southwestern Nigeria, with presence in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti States [2–5], with traces in Kogi and Kwara States [6–8]. They are Nigeria's most populous single ethnic group, numbering about forty-nine million people [9]. Her land mass is estimated at 181,300 square kilometer; located between latitude 6° and 9° north and longitudes 2° 30' and 6° 30' east [10, 11].

Territorially, she shares border with Borgurawa and Nupe to the north; Igala on the east; Dahomey to the west; Benin kingdom on the east and Bright of Benin to the south [2, 12]. Yoruba people are by no small measure blessed with verdant topography and good vegetations [2, 4, 13]. The people equally exhibits high

pro prowess in creative vocations, which include metal casting (bronze and brass), goldsmithing (gold), bead making (sand), carving (wood and stone) and pot making (clay) or pottery [14–17].

Wood carvings on posts primal the art, bronze casting was next in line; exemplified with eight naturalistic heads, excavated by Leo Frobenius at Ife in 1910 [18–21]. A development that gave credence to Yoruba reckons in the global committee of civilized cultures, significantly as Africa's most extensive arts producer [19, 22]. Later contact with and cross examination of the Baule art led to a review of the earlier submission on the primacy of Yoruba art [23–25]. Bascom consequently, conferred on the Yoruba penultimate producers of art in Africa [23]. The products of the art traditions of ancient Ife and its neighboring towns, particularly those of Iwo-Eleru, Owo, Imesi-Lasigi, Old Oyo and new Oyo provide evidences of the artistic exploits of the Yoruba [26–30].

The aforementioned are fossilized art though; their remains are repositories of other

Yoruba artistic practices, particularly those with momentary or ephemeral appeal [31–33]. Prominent among such art include mat weaving (*eni wiwun*), gourd carving (*igba finfin*), cloth weaving or textiles (*aso wiwun*), female body adornment with prevalence in body painting (*lali*), makeup, makeover, manicure, pedicure, haircut or hairdo (*idiri*) and head gear also known as *gele* [34, 35].

**Analysis of previous research.** *Gele*, represents anything and everything that constitute Yoruba female head cover or covering [34]. Interestingly, *gele* plays pivotal role in Yoruba clothing or dressing scheme, de-compartmentalized into wear, wrap and crown or gear. Though *gele* is third in rank in dressing scheme, it is by all means the icing on the cake that, gives every Yoruba dress, its true and rightful extravagance and touch of class [34]. An assertion Ologunde [36] acknowledged in his lyrical vibe, noting Yoruba civility in fashion, giving credence to its eminence in the committee of fashion cultures of the globe. Ologunde itemised wrapper, blouse with a top-notch gear as fundamental to sophistication in body fashion of the Yoruba. Noting its tripartite arrangement as shocker and silencer to any opposing stances, recommending monocular or binoculars for haters and antipathies in appreciating the prevailing stylistic or morphologic rendition [36]. Ologunde consequently, mentioned fitting or congruity as ultimate to masterful *gele* rendition.

**Statement of the problem.** *Gele* art of the Yoruba has become a major point of conversational discourse in recent time by all sundry; significantly for its morphologic dynamics and reorientations, heightened by handlers' creative ingenuities. This observation is amplified by the Internet of Things (IoT); a virtual repository space interfacing in real time sent and received data of all kinds [37], *gele* inclusive, generating seamless traffic in the social media. Laudable as this traffic is on the net, critical scholarly appraisal are still infinitesimal. This dearth or inconsequential scholasticism on *gele* is of germane concern to

the study. To this end, it attempts critical examination of *gele* morphology and signification.

**Methodology.** The method adopted in this study is somewhat field investigation and bibliographical approaches, sourcing its data primarily from the Internet through social media handles of the shortlisted *gele* artists. That is, practitioners were consulted for insight and their consent sought for possible usage of clients' (*gele* recipients or adherents) photographs. These pieces were examined visually, using Yoruba *oriki* or literary and performative genres as in spoken words, chants, musical lyrics, *Ifa corpus etcetera* [38]. The aim in this case is to substantiate connotatively and intelligibly on the signification of selected *gele* subjects from the Yoruba worldviews [39, 38].

**The results of the research and their discussion.**

***Gele* artistry and type:** The artistry of *gele* is domicile in creative individuals hitherto known as hobbyists. They are primarily gifted hands and traditionally females who passionately does what they know how to do best without monetary string attached. Hobbyists are volunteers who voluntarily beautifies prospective family members and strangers alike in fitted *gele* for no charges. They usually engage in this pursuits or services outside their regular occupation for leisure or pass time. *Gele* hobbyists operation in Yoruba milieu is ancient, dating back to time immemorial. Their kind gesture is largely taking for granted by recipients who often see the gesture as right; supposedly blinded by Yoruba communal structure, which hinged its ideals on collective ownership of gifts or talents.

The latter, among others is interestingly responsible for eventual commoditization, commercialization and professionalization of *gele* art as a specialized discipline in contemporary time. A development that is likened to a scenario in *Ogbe Wehinwo*, an *Ifa* verse, which like its title "retroflex-reflection" is averse to static stereotypism. But nonetheless,

upheld dynamics or dynamism, which is keyed to followership expansionism. The recent emergence of *gele* patterning or styling professionalism from hobbism can be attributed to the prevailing expansionist nature of its contemporary operators as advocated in *Ogbe Wehinwo* [27, 40].

The two contemporary *gele* drivers, now rub off well on each other both in cash returns and knowledge acumen, smiling to banks and turn out new morphologic subjects [34]. As an organized sector, they now go by the appellation *gele* stylists and artists, operating as an industry where training and retraining is the new normal. *Gele* art training and practice though, traditionally reckoned as feminine domain or better still a prerogative of the female folks. But current prevailing realities now welcome all comers including male folks into its fold as active players of the industry (Fig. 1–2).

Also of attendant development is the welcoming of auto *gele* also known as pre-styled *gele* into the fold. Auto-*gele* has injected a level of change to how women wear gear, eliminating likely individual struggle with tying or wrapping and a result of its ready to wear inclination. Interestingly auto-*gele* is designed and developed for all occasions (Fig. 3) and as contemporary addition to manual *gele* type (Fig. 4).

Tied or wrapped gear known as manual *gele* often course pain though, as a result of the tightness and toughness of the materials employed. It is still the most loved by all sundry, primarily for its fine artistry that gives a sense of fulfilment on the part of two (the artist's hand and the client's head); while the medium of engagement is usually plain cloth of different surface qualities. The process of engagement is often marked by a sense of eloquence, elegant creases, vertical stretching, horizontal elongation, perpendicular balance and spiral twists, exemplified in crown-like creation of form or structure for the head (Fig. 5–7).

The above Fig. 5 to 7 are clear reflections of the procedural stages of tying manual *gele*. Fig. 6 attests to the use of accessories; pin or needle to be precise. Other accessories include brooch, tread, gum stay and gum have come to stay in the sustenance of contemporary *gele* morphology.

However, tied casual and non-casual *gele* often reveals the touch of elegance, confidence, glamour and power in female traditional and non-traditional outfit. Casual handmade *gele* are fundamentally worn on daily bases for domesticity [33]. While, the non-casual handcrafted once are worn majorly for special occasions, typified with wedding, naming ceremony, house warming and burial ceremony to mention few. This development has attracted millions of aficionados around the globe, courtesy of the Internet of Things (IoT). Apparently, this attraction is evident in Africa, Europe, North America, South America and Australia. Interestingly, many non-Yoruba and to a very large extent Africans wear *gele* as a sign of reverence, particularly in African events, some adopt it as part of their everyday wear while others adorn it as a result of their soft spot for the Yoruba culture [35].

**Manual gele:** Prior to this time, there was nothing called auto *gele*, its nascent momentum even in this milieu is however, no match for manual *gele*, which hitherto trail the blaze in Yoruba land and elsewhere in the globe till date as fine art. Alakija [41] in the 1970s recorded, how phenomenal the arrival of a particular manual *gele* morphology known as *Onile-gogoro* (Owner of skyscraper) was; coming as a future shock or better still a new wave [42], taking the general populace at surprise and incredulously trailing the blaze for over a decade from 1970s through to late 1980s. Ologunde [36], on the other hand, enlisted the likes of *Koju soko* (face your hobby), *Umbrella (agborun-gbojo)*, *Labalaba* (butterfly), I.T, Ceiling Fan (*abebe aja*) in his "Onigele Skentele" album.



Fig. 1. Finishing touch by Mr. Tee gele, 2022



Fig. 2. Finishing touch by Juliana juliagele, 2022



Fig. 3. Auto gele by rallys\_closet, 2022



Fig. 4. Manual gele by dstrandz, 2022



Fig. 5. Gele pleating foundation by gele\_by\_mimi, 2022



Fig. 6. Gele pinning with needle by gele\_by\_mimi, 2022



Fig. 7. Completing gele pleating process by gele\_by\_mimi, 2022

Others includes *Lukumo* (look-worm), National Theatre (*nosonna tiata*), Man Diesel (*mon disu*) Satellite (*satilaiti*), Overloud (*erutopaju*), Boys follow me (*odo'mokunrin tele mi*) as the prevailing morphologic subjects of the early 1990s, which permeate through to this time though with new additions. Today, there exist well over forty *gele* morphologic styles or patterns in the public domain [43]. Some of the prevailing styles include Avant-garde, Hand fan,

Flowery, Infinite pleats, Perfect rose, Fan, Pleats overload, Side rose, Side twisted fan, Wide flower, Centre knot, Peacock, Centre bow, Multiple pleats bling, Two step pleats, left ruffle stone bead [34]. They apparently fall under anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, anthropo-zoomorphic, anthropo-artificial or flora *gele*.

Detailed morphologic categorization of *gele* is however, presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Manual *gele* morphologic categorizations by subject

S/n	Morphology	Subject
1.	Anthropomorphic	<i>Kojusoko</i> , Boys follow me
2.	Zoomorphic	<i>Labalaba</i> , Peacock
3.	Anthropozoomorphic	<i>Lukumo</i>
4.	Anthropo-artificial	Hand fan, Man diesel
5.	Flora	Perfect rose, Flowery, Side rose, Wide Rose, leave, Onion, Lily
6.	Artificial	<i>Onilegogoro</i> , National theatre, Satellite, Overloud, Ceiling fan, Umbrella, I.T, Avant-garde, Fan, Pleat overload, Side twisted fan, Infinite pleats, Centre Knot, Centre bow, Multiple pleats bling, Two step pleats, Left ruffle stone bead, <i>etcetera</i>

**Manual *gele* morphology:** From the above table 1, it is crystal clear that prevailing *gele* morphologic classification is categorized into six of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, anthropo-zoomorphic, anthropo-artificial, flora and artificial subjects. Interestingly, Yoruba women are very particular of how their *gele* is tied; some want it conservatively low (Fig. 1), while others like it tied flamboyantly high (Fig. 2, 4 and 7). Little wonder why Apata [44] in one of her track title "*Gele*" gave a lyrical credence to *gele* profundity as testament to females or better still women social status, peculiarly for those that put in extra hospitality in their spouses' daily care. Apata further, emphasized high or higher (profound *gele*) superlatively to denote supremacy and excellence that surpasses any other in terms of uniqueness and elegance [44]. The latter perception is supposedly responsible for the attendant morphologic complexities, apparent in manual *gele*, particularly those worn for special outings like wedding, naming ceremony, house warming, burial ceremony

*etcetera*. Butterfly, hand-fan, leave and rose are some of the old and new prevailing *gele* subjects that grace such occasion in contemporary time, adorned mainly for self aggrandizement. These subjects however, falls under the trio of zoomorphic, anthropo-artificial and flora morphologies.

**Manual *gele* signification:** Social and cultural signification is key in tying *gele*. For instance, front leaning of infant or adolescent girls' *gele* connotes futurism, suggesting their future is ahead of them. Older or elder state women tie theirs to the back, implying their sun has set. While, adults or middle-aged women tie their *gele* to the side, meaning their future is now and ready to take it by force; exemplified in marriage, family and other rites. In addition, *gele* with leaning to the right, suggest married status on its beholder. While those leaning to the left indicate, its host is single. The latter principle has been jettisoned, supposedly by contemporary Naija culture, which pays zero premiums on marital status. This neo-Naija culture is indeed phenomenal with main stake



on *gele* aesthetics at the expense of signification.

Hence, cultural significations of selected *gele* morphologies become expedient. They are butterfly (zoomorphic), hand fan (anthropo-artificial) and leave and rose (flora), significantly examined from the Yoruba worldviews.

**Zoomorphic:** Butterfly *gele* happens to be the only identified subject under zoomorphic morphology [45, 46]. *Labalaba* is butterfly in Yoruba philology [47], signifying fashion, fragility and somewhat pride. Its fragility is attested in the fragile nature of butterfly and the impending and violating danger that needs to be avoided in other for its pride (wings) to be kept intact and sustainable. Little wonder why the Yoruba clarifies the place of butterfly in the scheme of cloth or clothing as fabric merchants. The shortlisted butterfly (*labalaba*) samples are three with evidential variance in fabric, accessory and coloration as instanced in Fig. 8 to 10 below;

The duo of Fig. 8 and 10 plays host to a green butterfly *gele*, where the former (Fig. 8) was accessorized with pin, giving descending or resting impression; the latter (Fig. 10) was knotted, supposedly ascending to the heavens. Their green coloration suggest growth. Fig. 9 on the other hand showcased a red butterfly *gele* in flight motion heading to the west, accessorized with gold brooch, its red

coloration suggest power. The three *labalaba* gear in Fig. 8 to 10 are products of Aso Ofi.

**Anthropo-artificial:** Hand fan *gele* is the most evident subject in the anthropo-artificial categorization. This subject is a hyphenated compound word, a combination of animate (hand) and inanimate (fan). The duo of hand and fan in this case symbolically signifies the truth; which regardless of time or season is told, it forever remain the truth. The truth is by no small measure synonymous to gold (*wura*) in Yoruba worldview, which never tarnish. Apparently, the duo of Right twist hand fan and Left twist hand fan are its prevailing samples currently trending (Fig. 11-12).

Fig. 11, which is left twist hand fan *gele* suggest knowledge in search of the truth, while Fig. 12 plays host to right twist hand fan *gele*, signifying wisdom of the truth and its readiness to deliver.

**Flora:** Plant, bacterial and fungal life are classified under flora morphology. Short listed for signification is the duo of leave and rose or flower. Leave is known to signify agility, piece, leadership and beauty to mention few, while rose symbolizes wealth, extravagance and fragrance. For instance, *Newbouldia laevis* leave (*Ewe Akoko*) symbolized leadership; while *Spodias mombin* leave (*Ewe Iyeye*) implies prosperity and survival.



**Fig. 8.** Descending butterfly gele by alaga\_royal, 2022



**Fig. 9.** Right flight butterfly gele by claraito'sblog, 2022



**Fig. 10.** Ascending butterfly gele by kadoshphotography\_c, 2022



**Fig. 11.** Left twist hand fan gele by stylishgwin\_africa, 2022



**Fig. 12.** Right twist hand fan gele by owambeuk, 2022



**Fig. 13.** Leave gele by thrivegueddings, 2022



**Fig. 14.** Leave gele by etsy, 2022



**Fig. 15.** Leave gele by gele\_by\_mimi, 2022



**Fig. 16.** Central rose gele by owambeuk, 2022



**Fig. 17.** Right side rose gele by darkskinwomen, 2022



**Fig. 18.** Left side rose gele by gele\_by\_mimi, 2022

Fig. 13 to 15 had reflection of leave *gele* morphology rendered by the trio of thriveloguweddings, etsy and gele\_by\_mimi. The intent and concerns of these artists were simply to make beautiful damsels out of their clients and not signification of the adorning gear. The three *gele* master pieces in Fig. 13 to 15 will supposedly pass for *Spodias mombin* (*Ewe Iyeye*), it symbolically portends peace, fertility and prosperity. This inference is deduced from victory song, rendered by Paimo [48], which brings to mind another variation of the song by Fabiyi [49]. The two aforementioned submissions, affirmed the protective providence and symbolism of

*Spodias mombin* as sanctioned by Almighty God.

**Flower or Rose (Ododo):** Flower or rose *gele* morphology represents beauty, fragrant and procreation. Adegeye [50] supported the latter claims in the song recognizing rose as fragrant and in furtherance liken it to children, treasures worthy of cherishing. Little wonder why modern ladies adorning in rose *gele* as exemplified in Fig. 16 to 18.

The signification of *gele* morphology in the figures above, attest treasure, fragrance, growth and prosperity. For clarity the significations of critiqued *gele* morphology are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Manual *gele* categorizations by morphology and subject

S/n	Morphology	Subject	Signification
1.	Zoomorphic	Butterfly	Fragility, beauty, pride
2.	Anthropo-artificial	Hand-fan	Truth, equity, tenacity
3.	Flora	Leave	Authority, peace, grace
		Flower/rose	Fragrant, growth, treasure

The above table 2 gives three concise meaning or signification to each identified morphologic subjects; these submissions are whoever opens to other findings

**Conclusion.** *Gele* art is by all means ephemeral art, judging from its temporality or temporal nature. This artistic nature, encapsulates body tattooing, markings, scarification, painting, makeup, makeover, manicure, pedicure, hairdo and haircut to mention few. They play very important role in modern day body art. The role played by *gele* is more unique and revealing than its other compatriots in body art. Though, *gele* growth is not without humble beginning, its soaring to notability in contemporary times has come to stay. A development that is thrust on paradigm shift or in local parlance "Wake up", which apparently is antidote to fate. This wakeup call, attests advancement; embracing all sundry participation (male, female, young and old) in *gele* art, as against tradition that, seeds

operational prerogative solely to the female folks.

Again, *gele* art has paradigmatically advanced from its hitherto benevolent hobbyist tradition to a more capitalist approach, welcoming professionalism and corporation; incorporating corporate ideals and values into its operation in terms of training and practice. A development that brings to mind, maize organizational structure, which interestingly is in tandem with organizational structure of contemporary *gele* industry. Its players now go by the appellation artists or stylists with expertise in auto and manual *gele*. Though, auto *gele* has in recent time generated supposed momentum as a result of its ready to wear solution; it will for a long time play second fiddle to hand or manually crafted *gele*, mainly for its lack of fine art credibility. Little wonder why, the current operators of *gele* now exhibits prolificacy in creative hindsight, as true heir to their forebears insightful fountain of creativity; as passed on from generation to generations, which has



generated well around sixty (60) manual *gele* morphologic subjects and still counting.

Laudable as the creative prowess of the *gele* operators are, knowledge into symbolic signification of their creations, which to a large extent has lasting effect and impression on the beholder and its audience is no doubt germane. In this case, *gele* is not on trial but the duo of it beholder and audience. As such, *gele* artists and adherents alike, particularly those of Yoruba extraction and in extension aficionados around the globe, should as a matter of fact, be abreast

with the signification of their adorning gears from the standpoint of culture. The study consequently hoped, its findings will go a long way in raising consciousness, worthy of provoking further scholarly research on morphologic signification of *gele* art ephemeral. It conclusively, recommends concretization of *gele* art to fossilized art in wood, metal, glass and clay by sculptors and ceramicists alike, for economic growth, industry and innovation.

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## МОРФОЛОГІЯ ТА ЗНАЧЕННЯ ТРАДИЦІЙНОГО ГОЛОВНОГО УБОРУ «ГЕЛЕ» В КОНТЕКСТІ КОНЦЕПЦІЇ ЕФЕМЕРНОГО МИСТЕЦТВА

**Мета** дослідження полягає в тому, щоб ідентифікувати вибрані сучасні морфології геле, встановлюючи їх значення відповідно до світогляду народності «йоруба».

**Методологія** дослідження поєднує первинний дослідницький підхід із бібліографічним методом. Автором проведено консультації з тринадцятьма майстрами, практикуючими геле, перевірено роботу соціальних мереж і отримано згоду на використання фотографій.

**Результати.** На основі аналізу розроблено класифікацію традиційного головного убору «геле» залежно від різних ознак: форми, тканини, призначення, джерела натхнення тощо. Виявлено, що геле – це ефемерний художній твір із представленням різних концепцій, що становить жіночі головні убори, які досі прикрашають йоруба в повсякденних і святкових костюмах. Морфологічно



виявлено шість категорій геле; визначено довговічність, відповідність та важливість зооморфних (метелик), антропо-штучних (віяло) та флори (листя та троянди) предметів відповідно.

**Наукова новизна.** Проведене дослідження засвідчує жіночу доміциляцію, практичну одностатевість і принциповість техніки в ручному або автоматичному режимі розробки традиційного головного убору «геле». Встановлено лідируючу роль «геле» в ефемерному мистецтві народності «йоруба», гідним просування відповідно до цілей сталого розвитку.

**Практичне значення.** Дослідження є корисним як для митців, так і до меценатів щодо необхідності використання геле в сучасному дизайні.

**Ключові слова:** йоруба, геле, ефемерне мистецтво, морфологія, значення, головний убір, мода, дизайн.

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