threads of a NATION



CANEX

ALÁRA

1. TEXTILE WORLDS
The Art and Intelligence of Cloth

Cloth has always been a powerful language of creativity, identity and expression.

Across the country, generations of weavers, dyers, embroiderers and makers developed extraordinary traditions of textile production. These textiles were never simply decorative. Their patterns, colours, textures and methods carried knowledge, expressed belonging, marked status and occasion.

From the resist-dyed patterns of Adire and the woven traditions of Aṣọ-Òkè to the geometric sophistication of Akwete, the ceremonial elegance of Akwa Ocha, the woven cloths of the Tiv, and the indigo and embroidery of Northern Nigeria, each textile world developed its own visual language. Much of this innovation was driven by women.

Yet these traditions were never static. What we recognise today as traditional cloth is itself the product of generations of adaptation and reinvention.

Here, the story begins with the makers themselves.

2. Fashion Histories
Before There Were Fashion Houses, There Was Fashion

In the workshops of tailors and dressmakers, in markets and homes, and in the wardrobes of women and men, Nigerians were already creating distinctive expressions of style,elegance and identity. Fashion emerged through a rich relationship between makers and wearers. Skilled artisans interpreted the desires of their clients, while individuals and communities developed their own ways of combining cloth, silhouette, colour and adornment.

As Nigerian society evolved, so too did its fashion. New influences were absorbed,adapted and transformed, producing styles that were at once familiar and new. The decades surrounding independence brought particularly significant changes: designers,boutiques and fashion businesses began to develop distinctive identities. Yet the modern fashion house did not replace the systems of making that preceded it. Designers continued to work within networks of tailors, textile producers, embroiderers and merchants.

This is a history not only of those who designed and made clothes, but of those who wore them, commissioned them, photographed them, sold them and gave them meaning. A history of creativity, enterprise and self-expression that was already flourishing long before it acquired the names and structures of a modern fashion industry.

3. Encounters & Exchanges
The Making of a Nigerian Aesthetic

Nigeria's fashion history has been shaped as much by the movement of materials, people and ideas as by the traditions of making within its borders.

Imported lace, damask, George and wax prints entered existing cultures of dress, where they acquired meanings and uses often quite different from those imagined by their manufacturers. European lace was transformed into an elaborate expression of celebration and prestige. Damask became integral to ceremonial dressing. George wrappers acquired their own place in the dress traditions of southern Nigeria.

Central to these transformations were the textile merchants, many of them women. They were not simply distributors of cloth: they influenced colours, patterns and embellishments, commissioning adaptations that responded directly to Nigerian preferences. The wearers were equally important. Through commissioning, tailoring, tying,layering and adornment, Nigerians transformed fabrics into distinctive forms of dress.

These exchanges were not always equal. Yet what emerges is a remarkable history of cultural agency. Materials travelled, but their meanings were continually remade.

4. The Art of the Occasion
Dressing as Celebration and Expression

In Nigeria, dressing for an occasion is an art in itself.

Weddings, festivals, ceremonies and celebrations have long inspired extraordinary expressions of creativity, elegance and cultural identity. These are moments when clothing becomes more than personal adornment. It communicates belonging, honours tradition, celebrates relationships and expresses individual and collective aspirations.

The art of occasion dressing extends far beyond the garment. Cloth, silhouette, jewellery, headwear, accessories and the ways they are combined form elaborate visual languages,shaped by generations of makers and wearers. These traditions are continually reimagined. The wearer becomes an active participant in the creative process, working with designers, tailors, artisans and stylists to construct a distinctive expression of identity.

Here, the occasion is not simply an event for which clothes are made. It is itself a powerful source of fashion innovation.

5. Fashioning Identity
The Many Expressions of Nigerian Style

As Nigeria's fashion landscape expanded, designers began to develop increasingly distinctive approaches to style, silhouette and self-expression. There was no single definition of Nigerian fashion. Designers explored different possibilities, from refined tailoring and sophisticated occasion wear to bold experimentation with form, colour, construction and embellishment. Some drew inspiration from indigenous textiles and established modes of dressing; others embraced international influences, interpreting them through their own experiences and creative sensibilities.

Designers such as Remi Lagos, Dakova, Maufechi, Sofisticat, Ade Bakare, Deola Sagoe and Odio Mimonet contributed to this expanding landscape, each developing a distinctive approach. Women and men commissioned garments that expressed their individuality,social position and aspirations. Boutiques, fashion presentations and magazines brought new visibility to designers and their work, while skilled tailors, dressmakers, embroiderers and artisans remained essential to the making of fashion.

A fashion culture defined not by a single identity, but by the freedom to imagine, interpret and express many.

6. Komole
A New Architecture of Occasion

Within this rich tradition of occasion, Komole represents a distinctive

moment of reinvention. Developed by Deola Sagoe through her experimentation with Aṣọ-Òkè, Komole transformed a familiar textile into a new language of sculptural form, intricate construction and contemporary elegance, creating silhouettes at once recognisably rooted in Nigerian dress and strikingly contemporary.

Komole was more than an experiment with material. It offered a new interpretation of ceremonial dressing, responding to the aspirations of women seeking both cultural connection and individual expression. Its development reflects the continuing dialogue between inherited textile knowledge, the imagination of the designer and the skills of the artisans who bring these creations to life.

Not a departure from tradition, but an extraordinary expression of its capacity for reinvention.

7. Textile Reinvention
The Possibilities of Cloth

Building on the inheritance of cloth innovation, Nigerian designers began to explore new ways of working with familiar textiles, transforming not only how cloth was worn, but how it was conceived, produced and understood. Aṣọ-Òkè was reimagined through new approaches to weaving, colour, construction and tailoring. Printed cottons became canvases for intricate embellishment, reconstruction and playful experimentation with pattern and volume. Adire was explored through unexpected materials, techniques and silhouettes.

Innovation could begin at the loom, in the dyeing process, through the manipulation of a fabric's surface, or in the relationship between cloth and the body. Central to it were the relationships between designers and the weavers, dyers, embroiderers and artisans whose expertise made new forms of experimentation possible.

Reinvention was never simply about making tradition modern. Here, tradition is not a fixed inheritance, but a living source of possibility, continually reimagined by those who make,transform and wear it.

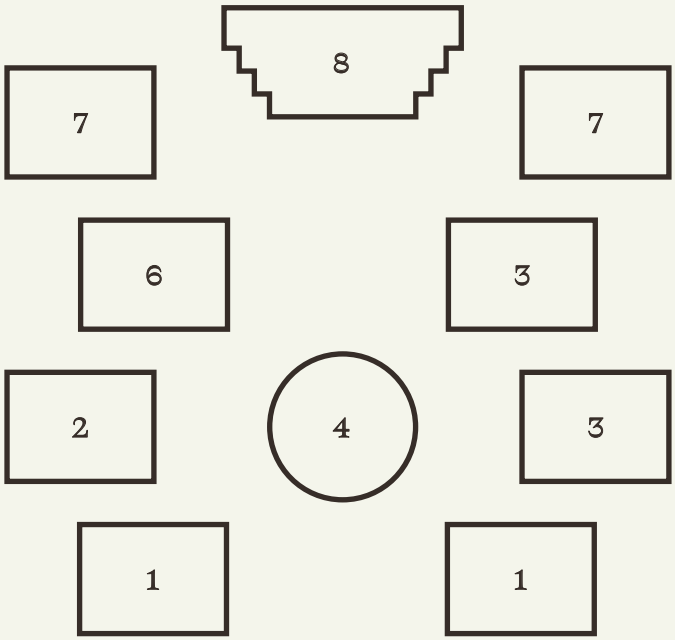
8. Future Loom
New Directions, New Possibilities

The future of Nigerian fashion is being imagined in many different ways. For some, the future lies in renewed engagement with traditional crafts, working alongside weavers, dyers and artisans to reconsider established materials and techniques. For others, it emerges through experimentation with unconventional materials, new technologies, unexpected silhouettes and alternative approaches to construction. Designers are questioning familiar conventions, exploring the relationships between clothing, identity and the body, and challenging assumptions about gender,beauty, sustainability and cultural expression.

Innovation is not always a departure from the past. It can emerge through the recovery of overlooked knowledge, the renewal of endangered skills, or the discovery of unexpected possibilities within familiar materials. Equally, it can arise from the desire to create something entirely new.

This is not a prediction of what Nigerian fashion will become, but an exploration of the possibilities already taking shape. Here, the many threads of the exhibition converge,revealing a future that remains open, inventive and continually in the making.

EXHIBITION MAP



1. TEXTILE WORLDS
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2. FASHION HISTORIES
Before There Were Fashion Houses, There Was Fashion

3. ENCOUNTERS & EXCHANGES
The Making of a Nigerian Aesthetic

4. THE ART OF THE OCCASION
Dressing as Celebration and Expression

5. FASHIONING IDENTITY
The Many Expressions of Nigerian Style

6. KOMOLE
A New Architecture of Occasion

7. TEXTILE REINVENTION
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8. FUTURE LOOM
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ABOUT ALÁRA

ALÁRA is a destination for contemporary African design, fashion, art and culture, rooted in Lagos, Nigeria. Bringing together established and emerging designers, independent makers and distinctive objects from across the continent and its diaspora.

Founded by Reni Folawiyo in 2015, ALÁRA is a Lagos-based concept store and cultural destination exploring the intersections of fashion, art, design and culture.

THREADS OF A NATION

Commissioned by CANEX.

Curated by Reni Folawiyo and ALÁRA.

This is the beginning of a much larger story. If you hold a piece of it —
a cloth, a photograph, a memory, a name we have missed — write to us:
threadsofaNation2026@alaralagos.com

CREDITS

Scan here:

A NOTE ON ATTRIBUTION AND PROVENANCE

Many of the textiles and garments presented in Threads of a Nation emerge from traditions of making, wearing, collecting and exchange in which individual makers, dates and histories of ownership were not always documented.

Where possible, objects have been identified through available research, oral histories, collectors' knowledge and established textile traditions. Where information remains incomplete, attributions are presented with appropriate qualification.

These gaps in documentation are themselves revealing. They remind us that much of Nigeria's fashion history has been preserved not in formal archives, but through the knowledge, practices and memories of makers, merchants, families and communities.

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