

Unexpected Luxury:  
Wild Silk Textile  
Production among  
the Yoruba of Nigeria



## Abstract

**M**ulberry silk produced in China is the type most recognized and used in silk garments. There are at least seven additional silk fiber sources. The Yoruba are a large ethnic group in Nigeria who use native silk that they call *sányán* from the Anaphe moth as one of their most prized fiber resources. Throughout colonial and post-colonial history, both Nigerians and others investigated methods for domesticating wild silk production. Yoruba strip cloth, called *aso-òkè* includes three main categories: *sányán*, *etù* and *alārì*, each appropriate for persons of high social standing and for important occasions, displaying cultural significance. Cotton becomes used as a substitute for expensive silk yarns, being dyed the traditional color of the silk fabrics. To the Yoruba aesthetic, the purpose of something is more important than its actual form. Even as weavers now produce the traditionally *sányán* cloths with substitute fibers, the cloth's glory remains.

**Keywords:** silk, *sányán*, Yoruba, Nigeria, weaving, cultural, cloth

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# Unexpected Luxury: Wild Silk Textile Production among the Yoruba of Nigeria

## Introduction

To the Western mind, silk is a beautiful and luxurious fiber. Mulberry silk produced by the *Bombyx mori* moth in China is the type most recognized and used in silk garments. There are at least seven additional silk fiber sources: (1) Tussur silk produced by the *Antheraea pernyi* moth in China; (2) Anaphe silk produced by the *Anaphe* genus moth in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya and Mozambique; (3) Eri silk produced by the *Attacus ricini* moth in India; (4) Muga silk produced by the *Antheraea assama* moth in Assam; (5) Allanthus silk produced by the *Attacus atlas* moth in India; (6) Byssus silk produced by the *Pinna nobilis* moth in Italy (Akerle 1970); and (7) silk produced by the *Borocera madagascariensis* moth in Madagascar (Spring and Hudson 2002: 8). Possibly these seven other silk-producing moths are ignored because little information is available. A quote from Dr J. Chunwike Ene's 1964 article reveals interest in bridging this knowledge gap:

*A recent UNESCO publication said that silk was not woven in Africa. The exact words used were "The African continent can make no serious claim to the production of silk ... The African may not in the*

*past have possessed the patience and dexterity which the Asiatic through the ages have devoted to sericulture." The fact is that for centuries silk yarns have been spun and woven into cloth in parts of Nigeria. (Ene 1964: 127)*

The Yoruba are a large ethnic group in Nigeria for whom textile production has been a significant part of their artistic and cultural heritage. The Yoruba use native silk that they call *sányán* (Figure 1) from the Anaphe moth as one of their most prized fiber resources. Throughout colonial and post-colonial history, both Nigerians and others investigated methods for domesticating wild silk production. We set the story of repeated wild silk exploration and cultivation experiments in the context of Yoruba history, because the Yoruba continued to adapt their weaving traditions to incorporate new trends, ideas and materials.

## Setting the Scene: The Yoruba

One hundred and forty million people live in Nigeria (Background Note: Nigeria 2008). The Yoruba area in the southwest is one of three major Nigerian population clusters with about 20 percent of the Nigerian population speaking

**Figure 1**

Detail of *sányán* cloth made of native silk from the Anaphe moth. Private collection, 1966. Photographer: Reuben V. Burrell.



the Yoruba language (Falola 1999: 4–5). The Yoruba are a group with some differences among subgroups of customs, institutions and Yoruba dialects, yet united by belief in a common point of origin, their shared use of the Yoruba language and culture (Bascom 1969: 5–6).

**An Introductory History**

By tradition, the earliest known Yoruba settlement is at Ife, or

Ife-Ife, considered their place of origin. Falola (1999: xv) places the foundation of other kingdoms such as Benin and Oyo in the period from 1000 to 1500CE, but from the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries, Ife was the center of a series of Yoruba kingdoms and chieftaincies. Contacts from 1450 to 1850 with Europe and the New World were primarily focused on the slave trade (Falola 1999: xv). Ife, ruled by an *oba* (king), was

the hub of a trading network from the north. From 1698 to 1892, the Yoruba engaged in civil wars as well as an ongoing conflict with the neighboring kingdom of Dahomey (Bascom 1969: 12–13).

In 1861, the British established a consulate at Lagos, which eventually led to the colonization of Nigeria. Although many negative consequences of colonization resulted, so did the exploration and written records of Nigerian

resources, including references to wild silk use among the Yoruba and other groups. Independence, in 1960, set off an ever-changing series of governments and civil wars. Throughout all of these dramatic changes, hand-made cloths of significance have continued to be an important part of Nigerian culture in general and Yoruba culture in particular. As one of the prestige fabrics that indicate status and success, *sányán* holds a place of special cultural significance to the Yoruba (Wolff 1999). Some people refer to *sányán* as *alapo-apo* or *caterpillar cloth* because Anaphe caterpillars produce the silk (Abiodun *et al.* 2004: 31, 122).

### **Cultural Significance of Appearance to the Yoruba**

#### ***Keeping Up Appearances***

In the Yoruba culture, personal appearance and that of associates communicates importance, because Yoruba individuals prize affluence and rank. A common Yoruba salutation, "Ekú ìnàwó," means "greetings on the spending of money." This saying, commonly used at public occasions to greet hosts, indicates the importance of obvious display of economic means (Boyer 1983: 42). In dress, a state of elegance, dignity and composure is sought (Cordwell 1983: 56). "The most important form of aesthetic expression to the Yoruba is clothing and its accessories" (p. 58). The importance of dress has been so elevated that Yorubas laughingly say, "We have always been born clothed" (p. 58) as well as, "It is the cloth we should greet before greeting the wearer" (Abiodun

*et al.* 2004: 45). Thus the Yoruba view cloth and clothing as outward manifestations of station in life and as indication of occupation, training, status, wealth, well-being, hierarchy, attainment and character. The following story from Clarke (1997) illustrates the importance of cloth as an indicator of social status and wealth among the Yoruba:

*The significance of cloth is stressed by an account of the origin of clothing in the texts memorized by the diviners of the Ifá system. It tells how there was dissension and strife in the family that went about naked. Finally, the father consulted Ifá and was told to make sacrifices to Eshu, the messenger of the gods. Eshu then taught the man to harvest cotton and have it woven into clothing. Once his family saw him dressed, they were respectful of his orders and social harmony was restored. (Clarke 1997: 96)*

Fadipe (1970: 260) confirms, "The Yoruba loves fine clothes."

The Yoruba see their society as an intertwined network of both family and non-family relationships, for these social connections govern behavior. The number and rank of individuals that associate with a person serve as important indicators of social rank. People of wealth or high rank, therefore, do not want to be seen on the streets with companions who are poorly dressed or without companions. Instead, they want to be accompanied by those who dress to enhance and reflect their status. Wearing similar or identical cloths to indicate membership in

a group or family is both popular and common in Yorubaland (Clarke 2000). Clubs may commission the cloths, often bestowing a name on the cloth after the club that first ordered them, even purchasing new outfits every year (Bascom 1969: 100). Members wear these identical garments for specific occasions in order that others recognize them when they go through the streets, for obviously such matching garments communicate shared group identity (Abiodun et al. 2004: 47–8). Fadipe (1970: 260) agrees:

*One great motive for joining associations is the desire for self-display. Monotonous uniformity in dress, rather than serving to dampen enthusiasm, serves to heighten the positive self-feeling of individual units of an association. Hence, cloths that distinguish, not one individual from another, but one group of individuals from another, make a great appeal.*

### **Aso-òkè: Cloths of Significance**

Yarn spinning, dyeing and narrow-strip weaving have long been part of Yoruba communities (Moloye 2004: 378). Yoruba call strip cloth, which traditionally included native silk and cotton fibers, *aso-òkè*. These cloths, identified as prestige cloths (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 44) and caliphate cloths (Perani and Wolff 1999: 141–4), fall into the three main categories of *sányán*, *etù* and *àlā̀rì*, each appropriate for persons of high social standing and for important occasions (Wolff and Wahab 2001), displaying cultural significance. They are associated with tradition and a consciousness of identity as Yoruba. “To this day,

to wear garments of *sányán*, *àlā̀rì* and *etù* cloth is the ultimate visual expression of ethnic pride and self worth for many Yorubas” (Perani and Wolff 1999: 141). Akinwumi (1981: 77) translates an old Yoruba saying:

*Kíjìpá—a lazy man’s cloth,  
Òfì (finely woven cloths)—an  
elder’s cloth,  
A poor elder, incapable of  
possessing an Òfì, should buy  
Kíjìpá,  
Because Sányán is the best  
textile fabric,  
Made into a costume, Etù is  
greatly ranked,  
While Àlā̀rì is ranked next to  
it ...*

In the twenty-first century, wearers still reserve *aso-òkè* prestige cloths for special occasions and sometimes, these cloths may be woven of *sányán* substitutes dyed to resemble wild silk colors. Nigerians wear factory-produced textiles for everyday, except for men’s caps made from recycled, old *aso-òkè* garments and baby-ties woven by women (Clarke 2000). Color distinguishes *sányán*, *etù* and *àlā̀rì* cloth and hold meaning for the Yoruba. “The beige and scarlet colors of *sányán* and *alā̀rì*, along with the deep indigo blue of *etù* cloth, ... are believed to possess moral as well as aesthetic qualities. Garments in these colors are regularly worn by kings, chiefs, priests of indigenous cults and individuals who value the traditions of the past” (Perani and Wolff 1999: 141).

*Sányán*, the white- and beige-colored cloth historically made from wild silk fibers falls into the Yoruba range of “white” and associates the wearer with high morals

(Wolff 1999: 75). Purity becomes associated with the silk fiber as indicated by taboos related to the degumming and dyeing processes. For example, sexual intercourse must not be associated with the process in any way: a woman who is boiling silk nests should not sleep with a man that night. In addition, adult males should not come near a dye pot because they may have had intercourse (Ene 1964: 128). Red and white stripes characterize a cotton or silk strip cloth. The red color symbolizes danger, but also connotes strength and bravery. Regarded as an auspicious color, red also possesses protective properties (Wolff 1999: 76–7). *Etù* (Figure 2) is a blue and white striped or minutely checked cotton cloth (Perani and Wolff 1999: 121) known to be costly because of requiring many immersions in the dye pot to become dark indigo (Akinwumi 1981: 74; Clarke 1997), a color that indicates wealth, maturity, elder status, along with political and social stature (Wolff 1999: 75). Quotes from a Yoruba verse and proverb indicate this importance. The verse from an Ifá divination text describes *etù* “as the father of all cloths,” and the proverb asserts that a man whose head has worn an *etù* cap should never again carry a load (Clarke 1997), both also highlighting the respect Yoruba have for elders.

### **Garments of Significance**

The garments tailored from *aso-òkè* indicate the prestige and pride in Yoruba culture of their wearers who must carefully consider the appropriateness of both fabrics and garments to display status.



**Figure 2**

Professor Rowland Abiodun at Amherst commencement wearing an *etù* embroidered gown called *gbáríyè*, May 27, 2007. Photographer: Charlie Quigg, Amherst College Public Affairs.

For example, one Yoruba saying implies aspects of status and taste as follows: “Clothes are the glory of the body, but for cloths [*sic*], many people will look like the monkey, others like the baboon” (Falola 2001: 114–15).

Prestige is enhanced for Yoruba men by wearing voluminous layered robes (Boyer 1983: 42) with the traditional male dress possibly consisting of a full set of no less than six garments: four robes, *dánsíkí*, *gbáríyè*, *dándógó* and *agbádá*; a pair of wide-waisted trousers, *sòkoto*; and a hat, *fila*. Men often wear the *gbáríyè* and *dándógó*

alone with the hat, *fila* (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 55). For everyday wear, men may wear the *sòkoto* and *bùbá* covered by a *sapara*, *agbádá*, or *gbáríyè* (De Negri 1962b: 4). We give special attention here to those that have historically involved wild silk fibers. The *agbádá*, a wide and heavy robe, often has hand-embroidered patterns at the breast and neck, using natural silk. For less expensive versions, the thread used is imported rayon silk and embroiderers usually do the work on a machine (Oyelola 1981: 40). The *gbáríyè* (Figure 2) is a wide-skirted, fluted smock with embroidery traditionally of Anaphe silk (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 55), often decorated with embroidery motifs that are different from the embroidery on the *agbádá*. Embroiderers arrange the *Northern Knot* motif symmetrically around the neck and down the front of the *gbáríyè*. Embroidery outlines the two oval-shaped pockets in the front. The *dándógó*, a wide-skirted pleated smock or vest with embroidery traditionally of Anaphe silk, is larger and heavier than the *gbáríyè* with large sleeves (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 55).

Men primarily embroider men’s caps and large gowns (Bascom 1969: 101). The greater the amount of embroidery, the greater the prestige attributed to the wearer: “The embroidery designs which were used hundreds of years ago still appear on men’s robes today” (Oyelola 1981: 40). Although older designs used by Yoruba and Hausa male embroiderers are based on traditional Muslim designs, some embroiderers also design unique motifs that relate to contemporary life and concepts.

Women as well as men signify wealth and importance by volume of clothing and quality of fabrics worn. Women layer wrappers and shawls and wear large head ties of the prestige cloths. "For prestige contexts, both men and women adhere to the aesthetic of accumulative layering and 'bigness' to amplify a wearer's physical and symbolic presence" (Perani and Wolff 1999: 121). For the Yoruba bride, the most desirable ensemble is a complete outfit of *sányán* cloth (de Negri 1962a: 10).

### Tracing the Use and Development of *Sányán* Knowledge

#### *The Pre-colonial Period*

Little documentation about production of textiles from wild silk fibers appears to exist prior to British colonization. Ene (1964) attributes this lack of written information to secrecy.

*Until recently, Nigerian silk cloth was a royal prerogative and could only be worn by princes and a few dignitaries in their courts. Silk weaving was practiced only within the precincts of palace and the art was kept rigidly secret. A secret matter in old Africa was not even discussed and many such things must have escaped the attention of the 18th and 19th century explorers, missionaries and other anthropological writers. (Ene 1964: 132)*

Throughout history, as the people now considered part of the Yoruba ethnic group moved from place to place in Nigeria, raw materials, textile production techniques and

textile products (including the production of wild Anaphe silk) circulated amongst Nigerian groups through textile trade. Although difficult to trace early Yoruba textile history, they influenced other groups with their production techniques and products. Perani and Wolff (1999: 139–41) argue that in the late eighteenth century, the Yoruba taught their well-known silk weaving skills to the Nupe people. In addition, the abandonment of the Yoruba city of Oyo in the 1830s led to the dispersals of Yoruba narrow-strip weavers throughout western Nigeria with the establishment of large communities of weavers in the towns of Iseyin and Ilorin in the nineteenth century.

Egga, too (near the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers), was an important textile production and trade center until the late nineteenth century (Perani and Wolff 1999: 139) for the Yoruba and others from the Upper Niger, Kano and Ilorin. The textile production included silk weaving that relied on imported raw material. In Egga, approximately 200 weavers produced strip-woven cloth. A British expedition to Nigeria in 1841 brought back to the British museum samples of textile products from Egga, among them were twelve cloths of Yoruba origin, two of which were known to be specifically from Ilorin, an important point because Ilorin produced the highest quality cloths that eventually came to compete actively with the Nupe product. Among the artifacts were nests of West African wild silk, one with cocoons still in the nest. The extensive trading of textile products among Nigerian ethnic groups is clear from the reports of the 1841 expedition (Johnson 1973: 353–63).

Some Yoruba weavers from Egga resettled in Bida in 1857 (Perani and Wolff 1999: 139) and in 1860, the Oje market (a well-known cloth market still held every sixteen days) was established in Ibadan (Oyelola 1981: 22).

### *Colonial Exploration of Nigerian Textile Resources*

During the colonial period, the British sought to understand the resources available to them in their colonies, including textile resources. British Inspector of Agriculture, Mr G. C. Dudgeon, documented the use of wild silk worms as a textile yarn source in Nigeria, Uganda, Natal and Mozambique from 1906 to 1910. Silk specimens were collected and sent to the British Imperial Institute for testing (African Wild Silk 1916: 168) with the intent of determining whether colonists could realize a profitable textile industry. Scientists microscopically inspected the fibers, documented information about its properties and experimented with various methods for degumming and spinning the silk into yarn and making silk threads into test fabrics. While the overall conclusion was that colonists would meet with many obstacles in making wild silk production a profitable industry (African Wild Silk 1916: 80), the recorded information yielded insight into the properties of wild silk and its production techniques.

Ene (1964) reports that a German firm, Afrikanische Seidengellschaft, experimented with domesticated silk plantations between 1908 and 1914. Despite



trouble from parasites, it is reported that “hundreds of tons of silk” were exported annually to Germany, but the First World War ended the experimentation. However, the company reformed along with British and Belgian interests in the late 1920s under the name “African Silk Corporation.” British industrialist, Mr R. H. Dorman-Smith, came close to signing a contract with the Nigerian government (through the Colonial Office) to build factories for degumming Anaphe silk in Nigeria in 1930, but the uncertain nature of the experimental operation and lack of funding stopped him from venturing into the silk industry in Nigeria (Ene 1964: 132–4). After Dorman-Smith’s withdrawal, the Nigerian government offered silk productions licensure to the African Silk Corporation. This company also abandoned the project because of lack of capital. From his study of archived Nigerian research records, Ene cites two additional reasons for the failure of attempted silk domestication: (1) a lack of information about the Anaphe silkworm and (2) the invention of nylon, which could serve as a substitute for silk (Ene 1964: 135).

According to Ene (1964), “... secrecy was officially clamped on the silk by the British War Office and the Nigerian Government during the second world war, when it was discovered that Anaphe silk was an excellent substitute for oriental silk, the supplies of which were cut off early in the war by the Japanese” (Ene 1964: 132). This would have been approximately 1939 to 1945. Starting in 1941, thousands of tons of wild silk cocoons were collected from Nigeria

and exported to Britain to produced much-needed war supplies, but despite Nigerian hopes, this wild silk export market did not continue after the war. Instead, interest turned to trying to raise *Bombyx mori* silkworms on mulberry trees in Africa (Ene 1964: 136).

Data collected by C. B. Dodwell on the textile industry in Iseyin from 1952 to 1953 appeared in 1955 in *Nigeria Magazine*, a publication of the Nigeria Ministry of Culture and Social Welfare, Federal Department of Culture. While the report provides little information about *sányán*, it includes a detailed accounting of the textile system including yarn spinning, dyeing and weaving and textile trading and insight into the importance of textiles among the Yoruba. Dodwell considered Iseyin an important textile trade center because of its location at intersection of two important trade routes and the ready supply of labor and raw materials to create textile products (Dodwell 1955: 119). In addition to selling their cloth at Iseyin, cloth traders would travel to Ibadan and Lagos markets to sell their cloth. From Ibadan, cloth might travel to major Yoruba cities and beyond. From Lagos, the British Empire exported cloth (Dodwell 1955: 124).

### **Post-colonial Nigeria**

Nigeria gained its independence from Britain in 1960. After that time, interest in Nigerian wild silk continued by scholars both inside and outside of Nigeria. Dr J. Chunwike Ene’s previously mentioned article seems intended to educate the reader about the existence and history of the wild

silk industry in Nigeria. According to Ene, "The vast majority of educated people living in Nigeria at present, including those who have lived in the country all their lives, have never heard of the existence of indigenous silk yarn" (1964: 132). Not only attributing this lack of knowledge to early secrecy, he also attributes the lack of information to possible mistaken identity due to wild silk's resemblance to cotton and increasing use of imported artificial silk for embroidery. Ene also notes that as early as 1963, embroiderers used imported artificial silk for almost all the embroidery work taking place in Zaria market.

In 1970, a technical memorandum entitled *A Review of the Technique of Silkworm Rearing and Silk Production* was produced by the Federal Republic of Nigeria as an investigation of the potential of reviving, modernizing and making profitable the wild silk industry (Akerere 1970: 2). This report came largely from five previous *Bulletins of the British Imperial Institute* from 1915 to 1923. The *Review* concludes with a summary of potential problems of domesticating the wild silk industry and reports that an experiment in developing a mulberry silk plantation was started in 1964.

Scholars living and traveling in Nigeria also produced works that provide introductory information about wild silk and *sányán*. Eicher's *Nigerian Handcrafted Textiles* (1976) includes a section, "Silk Fibres and Fabrics," with references from Ene. Shea (1982) criticized *Nigerian Weaving* by Lamb and Holmes 1980, based on their personal observations and communications in Nigeria as well as various

supporting references, for errors in spelling, history, linguistics and geography, but their chapter on the Yoruba provides information about wild silk production during their time in Nigeria in the late 1970s. According to Lamb and Holmes, as of 1980, *sányán* production declined significantly, because garments made entirely from *sányán* were said to have become very rare and extremely expensive (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 40). In 1981 *Nigerian Crafts* by Pat Oyelola aimed to stimulate children's knowledge and learning activities, but also provided information about Nigerian crafts with a section on textiles, including *sányán*. M. O. Ashiru of the Forestry Institute of Nigeria wrote, "Silkworms as Money Spinners" (1989), summarizing research from 1911 to 1988 with the intent of exploring the potential of either mulberry or non-mulberry silk cultivation as a source of income.

Field study among Yoruba master weavers by Wolff and Wahab from 1993 to 1994 led to the discovery of the taxonomy of the men's *aso-òkè* strip weaving. While the basic strip-cloth form of *aso-òkè* weaving has changed little over the centuries, weavers have adapted to new fibers and yarns. Contemporary Yoruba weavers divide *aso-òkè* into two categories. *Aso owu ríran* (literally "cloth of thread from spinning") refers to the older types of strip cloth made with handspun thread. *Aso owu eebo* (literally "cloth of the thread from Europeans") refers to the newer types of strip cloths made with machine-spun thread. The Yoruba master weavers identified *aso sányán*, *aso etù*

and *aso àlààrì* as belonging in the *aso owu ríran* category. In their research, Wolff and Wahab found that in weaving centers such as Iseyin produced *aso owu ríran* cloths in familiar colors but used machine-spun cotton thread and sold the cloths in the market as *sányán*, *etù* and *alàrì*. Consumers did not seem concerned about the fiber content, because, to them, color was most important. A cotton cloth called *kugu*, dyed with vegetable dyes to appear the same color as *sányán*, has the same cultural significance as *sányán* (Wolff and Wahab 2001).

Silk yarns are time consuming to produce and expensive and cotton becomes used as a substitute, being dyed the traditional color of the silk fabrics (Perani and Wolff 1999: 178–9). To the Yoruba aesthetic, the purpose of something is more important than its actual form (Cordwell 1983: 56). Traditional items may be adapted to accommodate trends and innovations while retaining their time-honored value. New fibers have been accepted and incorporated into older weaving methods alongside older fibers (Falola 2001: 107). Shea (1992) reports seeing cloth that incorporated as many as three or four different kinds of fibers, providing an explanation why other fibers are now acceptable for garments traditionally made of *sányán*. Weavers incorporate even modern textile fibers, such as Japanese Lurex, a metalized plastic fiber, into *aso-òkè* cloths (Clarke 1997; Perani and Wolff 1999: 176) and tailors may use European silk fabric dyed in a similar beige hue to create gowns (Cordwell 1983: 59).

Interest in cultivating wild silk worms in Nigeria continues. Shittu-Gbeko and Osundehunsi (1999) published a research article with the intent of providing information needed to cultivate both mulberry-based and *Anaphe* silkworms. The research project included collection and examination of *Anaphe* silkworms and moths and offers detailed scientific information about the growth, lifespan and necessary environment of the *Anaphe* silkworm. They concluded that while growers should pursue mulberry sericulture first, researchers should further investigate the possibilities of *Anaphe* sericulture (Shittu-Gbeko and Osundehunsi 1999: 68–72).

Demand is limited, but still true *sányán* production continues for clothing worn at special occasions when it is important to show Yoruba heritage. In the twenty-first century, weavers produce true *sányán* cloths only by commission and these cloths are very expensive. Despite the fact that production of wild silk cloth has dramatically declined, it still holds a place of honor in the hearts of the Yoruba people.

### **Nigerian Wild Silk Production Process and Uses**

Moving from the available accounts about the sources, means of production and uses of Nigerian wild silk among the Yoruba and other groups, we focus next on specific information about the *Anaphe* silkworm that inhabits various parts of Nigeria.

### ***Anaphe* Moths and Silkworms**

For many years, Nigerians have produced silk fibers from the worms

of wild insects from the genus *Anaphe* that belongs to the family *Eopterotidae*. Those commonly used for silk production in Nigeria are *Anaphe infracta*, *Anaphe venata* and *Anaphe moloneyi* (African Wild Silk 1916: 167; Akerle 1970: 14). Other types of *Anaphe* silkworms are *A. ambrizia*, *A. carteri*, *A. reticulata* and *A. vuilleti*. There is little information about the biology and life history of these silkworm moths (Ashiru 1989: 3). In general, *Anaphe* moths live in the wild and lay eggs on the underside of the leaves of various trees, depending on where they live, in large clusters containing 200–300 eggs. The eggs hatch into worms, which feed on the leaves. Akerle calls the worms “gregarious” (1970: 14), because they move about the tree together and spin their cocoons together. Ene (1964) delightfully describes their way of life.

*They live together in groups whose members number from several dozen to hundreds of caterpillars. They live on special trees ... and move about the branches in procession, the head of each caterpillar nearly touching the tail of the one in front. At night, they pile up on top of one another and sleep in a heap. (Ene 1964: 127)*

*Anaphe infracta* and *Anaphe venata* produce silk in western Nigeria (Eicher 1976: 24), an area inhabited mainly by the Yoruba. These silkworms are found in Ibadan district and feed on the *Albizia fastigiata* and a species of *Sterculia* (Akerle 1970: 6). In northern Nigeria, mainly populated by the Hausa, the *Anaphe moloneyi* produces silk called *tsamiya*.

Hausa may know *A. moloneyi* silk by specialized names, based on the tree leaves that the silkworm eats. For example, *Tsamian tsamia* (spellings vary) silk, from the Bauchi Province (African Wild Silk 1916: 170; Akerele 1970: 17), refers specifically to silk from caterpillars that feed on the Tamarind tree and is considered to be of the best quality (Ashiru 1989). Caterpillars also produce *A. moloneyi* silk in other parts of northern Nigeria and locals may know this silk by other names. In the Agege district silkworms feed on the leaves of *Cordia milleni*. *Lomi* or *Boko silk* comes from various parts of northern Nigeria. *Koko silk* comes from the Sòkoto province. These silks have slightly different characteristics from the *A. infracta* and *A. venata* silk (Akerele 1970: 17).

### **Anaphe Cocoons**

When they are ready to spin cocoons, the worms gather in the crevices of the tree (Akerele 1970: 7). Yoruba call Anaphe silkworm nests *ekuku* or *apo ekuku*. Once safely inside their cocoons, the silkworms transform into silk moths. The cocoons vary in appearance depending on the type of silkworm. In western Nigeria, the *A. infracta* silkworms build a large communal cocoon-mass or nest of soft silk glued together by a gummy secretion (Ene 1964: 127–8). The nest has two layers: an outer fibrous mass and an inner hard shell. The nest, brown in color, varies in size and shape, but may weight up to eight pounds. When completed, the larvae enter the nest and each encloses itself in a small cocoon

(Akerele 1970: 7). In northern Nigeria, *A. moloneyi* cocoons are found in clusters, whitish and not protected by an outer case (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 30), which looks like a flat mass covered on each side with a papery layer of closely interlaced silk (African Wild Silk 1916: 167). Some of the cocoons produced by *A. moloneyi* differ in their appearance. Those that produce *Lomi* silk are small and reddish brown. The cocoons for *Tissnain tsamia* silk are grayish yellow with occasional reddish brown and vary from 1 to 1½ inches in length and ½ inch in diameter. *Koko* silk cocoons are small and vary in color from dull-reddish brown to light brown (Akerele 1970: 17).

### **Harvesting and Selling**

Harvesters collect cocoons from the wild and sell them to yarn spinners (Ashiru 1989: 5). A farmer or hunter may pick up the Anaphe cocoons in their regular course of activities and then sell them at the nearest market (Ene 1964: 127). For example, Bororo Fulani herdsman collect cocoons while traveling with their cattle southwards through the savannah and bring them to market in the villages through which they pass. Others may collect the cocoons more purposefully (personal communication, Norma H. Wolff, September 2005). Harvesters then trade the cocoons to major yarn centers such as Kano, Zaria and Bida. Yoruba women (who are often the wives of male weavers) visit local as well as distant markets all over the Mid-West Region to buy silk fiber in the form of nests (Ene 1964: 129).

### **Fiber Characteristics**

Some of the characteristics of the Anaphe wild silk fiber are similar to *Bombyx mori* silk, while others are quite different. Some characteristics vary depending upon the type of Anaphe silkworm that spun the silk. Certainly, we do not know all properties of this wild silk fiber, but information is available on color, shape, diameter, luster, strength and environmental properties. Color varies from a pale creamy color to brown. Sericulturists produce a white form of *A. infracta* silk, known as *Gambari Sányán*, by enclosing the worms in calabashes where they spin their cocoon (African Wild Silk 1916: 168), because silkworms' enclosure in a container prevents them from producing the outer brown nest cover (Eicher 1976: 24). *Lomi* and *Tissnain tsamia* silk have very uneven color varying from reddish brown to white. Anaphe silk has slight longitudinal striations. The inner cocoon filaments are circular in cross section. The outer nest filaments are coarse and harsh. The inner cocoon filaments average 18 microns in diameter (0.0007 inches approx.). The silk fibers vary in diameter from 0.0004 to 0.0007 inches. The diameters of *Lomi* and *Tissnain tsamia* silk vary from 0.0003 to 0.0008 inches. Anaphe silk is less lustrous than *Bombyx* silk, but has normal strength in comparison to *Bombyx mori* silk, in contrast to *Lomi* silk with poor strength and *Tissnain tsamia* silk having fair strength with some rather weak and brittle portions. *Koko* silk is of good strength. Anaphe silk has good affinity for dyes (Akerele 1970: 15–18). Lamb and Holmes report

Anaphe silk also has a greater resistance to rotting than Bombyx silk (1980: 40).

### *Yarn Spinning*

Yoruba women extract the silk fibers by degumming the silk nest and spin the fibers into yarn (Ene 1964: 129). After the moths have emerged from the communal

cocoon, the entire nest is soaked in water to soften it and women then separate the nest into cocoons and carefully remove extraneous matter, for the gum that holds Anaphe cocoons together is quite resistant to chemicals used in traditional degumming processes. The method of degumming used by the Yoruba involves boiling the nests in a mixture of

**Figure 3**  
Woman spinning yarn. Iseyin, Nigeria,  
1973. Photographer: Mattiebelle  
Gittinger.



water and wood ash, known as *lábúlábú* in Yoruba (African Wild Silk 1916: 168), which requires a considerably long boiling time, usually overnight (Ene 1964: 128). After experimenting with imported Anaphe cocoons, members of the British Imperial Institute recommended that fiber harvesters boil cocoons in a 3 percent solution of sodium carbonate, followed

by a 3 percent soap solution and then rinsed until the water runs clear, a process requiring 6 hours (African Wild Silk 1916: 170). Once degummed, spinners then card out and spin the fibers into yarn (Akerle 1970: 12–13). Spinners keep their hands damp while spinning the yarn. *A. venata* and *A. infracta* silk produces a rough, coarse yarn because their broken

fibers become tangled. Spinners can spin *A. moloneyi* silk directly from the cocoon. Anaphe silk yarn is not usually dyed, but retains its natural brownish shades, although sometimes it may be dyed indigo blue or magenta red (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 39–40). Spinners produced the yarn (Figure 3) mainly in Ijebu-Igbo area and in Ife and traded the spun yarn at several



**Figure 4**  
Detail of narrow-band weaving  
on a loom. Iseyin, Nigeria, 1973.  
Photographes: Mattiebelle Gittinger.

markets of Iseyin, Ife, Ibadan and Ijebu-Ode to weavers in other cities (Eicher 1976: 25).

### **Textile Production**

Yoruba weavers weave yarn from *A. venata* and *A. infracta* into cloth, with *A. infracta* being the preferred source of silk for Yoruba weaving (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 39). The Hausa, however, commonly use yarn from *A. moloneyi* for robe embroidery. Yoruba male weavers mainly weave *sányán* and usually work in guilds or family groups (Ene 1964: 129). The head of the group takes orders, provides needed raw materials, directs the weaving work, sells the cloth and distributes the profits to the members of the group (Dodwell 1955: 135).

Men use the traditional narrow-strip men's loom to weave Anaphe wild silk fiber in strips (Figure 4) about 4 inches wide and up to 40 feet long (Ashiru 1989: 5). Because of its expense, weavers may use *sányán* only in the warp, with cotton yarns of a similar color used for the weft (Lamb and Holmes 1980: 40). Weavers may create one or two white stripes of *A. moloneyi* silk within the strip (Ene 1964: 129). Weavers sell the long strips in bundles and tailors then cut and sew the strips side-by-side in dimensions suitable for clothing.

The resulting fabric, a rather coarse cloth, differs from that created with *Bombyx* silk. Tailors fashion the completed fabric into garments. *Sányán*, highly valued among the Yoruba in Nigeria, becomes primarily reserved for the production of the previously discussed garments for ceremonial occasions.

### **Conclusion**

Anaphe wild silk, a resource unique to Nigeria, has long been an important part of Yoruba culture and identity, resulting also in a long-standing interest in Anaphe sericulture. Related research projects, however, have not resulted in expanding its use much beyond Nigeria. Even as weavers now produce the traditionally *sányán* cloths with substitute fibers, the cloth's glory remains. Yoruba textile craftspeople hold their traditional values while adapting to changing trends.

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