

Basic Detail Report



Man's Agbada (robe)

Date

Early 20th century

Primary Maker

Artist not recorded

Medium

Handspun cotton, wild silk (sanyan)

Description

Man's prestige robe made from aso oke strips. Each strip is woven in hand-spun undyed (beige) wild silk (sanyan) with thin white cotton warp stripes. The front and back

are extensively hand-embroidered in white silk. Sanyan is the most revered prestige cloth, reserved for special occasions, made from wild African silk, spun from Anaphe silkworm nests. While there are several genus, the Anaphe family is restricted to the African continent. In Yoruba territories, Anaphe silkworms create communal double-layered cocoons, a single football-sized "nest" for the entire colony. The outer layer of the cocoons is a darker beige color, giving the characteristic hue to the resulting thread. Communal cocoons cannot be unraveled into a single filament like cultivated varieties, so when finally degummed, washed, and spun, the threads tend to be coarser and less lustrous. But the nests can be easily plucked from trees and sold, and producing the silk does not require killing the silkworms. Once harvested, the nests will be boiled in wood ash overnight, rinsed, carded, and spun into a raw silk yarn. Rarely is the thread dyed, since the natural beige color is highly valued. The color and fiber are considered pure, having been cleansed through the degumming process during which taboos related to sexuality are honored. During the first half of the 20th century, there were a series of European-driven attempts to cultivate wild Anaphe silk and to create a profitable silk industry, but these failed. By the 1980s, local demand also fell as the expensive production could not compete with commercial substitutions. In Yoruba aesthetic, the appearance and purpose of garments are more highly valued than fiber content, so beige-dyed cotton (called "kugu") is a reasonable alternative that still carries cultural significance. Today, true silk sanyan cloth is very rare, only produced by commission for very high prices.

Dimensions

53 1/8 × 99 3/16 × 3/16 in. (135 × 252 × 0.4 cm)