

# The *Tokunbo* Phenomenon and the Second-Hand Economy in Nigeria

Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale

PETER LANG

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This book investigates the social construction and reconstruction of *Tokunbo* meanings and how these impact on the second-hand economy in Nigeria. Qualitative data were collected at Abeokuta, Ibadan and Lagos in Nigeria and at Cotonou in Benin Republic. The research confirmed that *Tokunbo* arose from the contact of the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria with Europeans in the fifteenth century and developed further under colonization by Great Britain. *Tokunbo* as a given name was reserved for children conceived or born in Western countries. The name conveyed an elitist status on bearers and their families, presenting them as harbingers of Western civilization. Following an economic downturn and the consequent dependence on second-hand imports from the 1990s onward, the values attached to *Tokunbo* were socially modified and transferred to second-hand imports. From this point on, consumers described these imports in glowing terms, emphasizing their quality compared to “substandard” imports from Asia. The *Tokunbo* second-hand economy enables access to goods that consumers consider essential for the transmission of modernity through the consumption of Western material culture.

Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Ibadan. His thesis was on *Political Clientelism and Rural Development in Selected Communities in Ibadan, Nigeria*. He has an interest in scholarly African issues related to the sociological fields of Development, Cultural, Political, Rural and Urban Studies. He has won the University of Ibadan Postgraduate School Award for scholarly publication in 2007, the *Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique* (IFRA; French Institute for Research in Africa) Research Fellowship in 2009 and the American Council of Learned Societies–African Humanities Programme Post-Doctoral Fellowship (ACLS-AHP PostDoc) in 2010. At present, he is a lecturer in Sociology at Nigeria’s Premier University, the University of Ibadan, Ibadan.



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# **Africa in Development**

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Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale

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This book is dedicated to all the people who bear the name ‘Tokunbo’ and who have experienced derision following the transfer of *tokunbo* values from humans to goods. It is also dedicated to all who, for socio-economic reasons, are constrained to consume *tokunbo* goods and who thus rationally symbolize the imported second-hand as the alternative ‘standard’. Thanks are also due to all respondents who participated in this study: without their willing support, the research that appears here would have been unachievable.





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## Foreword

I feel greatly honoured to have been asked to write the Foreword to this book by Dr Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale. Indeed, it is also with a sense of pride that I am doing this task of presenting a general overview of fundamental importance to the underdevelopment process in Nigeria, representing the whole picture for most of Africa. Many efforts have been made to 'develop' the so-called 'developing' economies with little to show for it. With little or no deep thought as to the reasons for the impracticability of these policies, people from the 'developing' nations are being made to say to themselves: 'Something must be wrong with us'. It is disturbing that, after decades of independence, still nothing seems to be working. All predictions have continued to fail in spite of the immense skilled human and natural resources. 'What a waste!' people claim. Unfortunately, all these agitations and concerns have not led to solutions as very many efforts refuse to acknowledge the 'why' of the situation before proffering a 'cure' for the ailments. As medical doctors will acknowledge, without proper diagnosis, there can never be right prescriptions.

This book is a central contribution to the understanding of why policies and efforts fail. Using historico-sociological insights, combined with in-depth and concise empirical data, Dr Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale has shown how the *tokunbo* phenomenon, a concept once conveying symbolic meanings of superiority for 'imported' children (babies born overseas), has changed its meaning to 'superiority' of imported second-hand goods. The author beautifully presents the development of the underdevelopment process wherein 'waste' from the 'more developed' nations becomes the consumers' preference in the developing nations, even against new imported products from a comparative nation like China whose products they denigrate with such euphemisms as '*Chinco*'. Interestingly, the *tokunbo* idea also typifies almost all aspects of former colonized territories. For instance, nations and kingdoms that once had their own kings began, with the advent of colonialism, to go to *Ilu oba* ('the Monarch's country') outside their territories, where the sovereign reigned supreme. By implication their erstwhile kings ceased

to exist. As such, even as the economic institution became subordinated to the conquering hegemony, the political terrain was not left undefiled.

Unfortunately, what is now appreciated are only products in the historical situation of the developed world, where pressures on waste disposal facilities, landfills and the challenges of e-waste have necessitated the recycling and export of used goods. Without a commensurate historical experience in the former colonies, the histories of the colonizing nations continue to dictate the pace or, indeed, what is termed development, in the 'neo-colonies'. On the contrary, however, these only apply to what is considered relevant in the 'ruling nations'. For instance, in many of the former 'home' countries, to date, the monarchical institution continues to be relevant, whereas indigenous political institutions in former colonies have been subjected to relative non-existence or, at best, have become largely irrelevant to governance. Consequently, hegemonic nations, due largely to their superiority in arms and ammunitions, continue to use their ideas to determine what happens in other parts of the world.

Clearly therefore, one is able to discern how internal challenges in one part of the world have been subordinated and have become gains for the developed nations due to their advantaged position in the world economy. More fundamental, however, is the incapacity of the developing nations to re-construct their socio-economic and political situations within the global economy, as their attitudes – perhaps more appropriately, 'cultures' – have been globalized in inferiority. Thus, as the dependency theorists once suggested, the perpetuation of historico-sociological relationships engendered during the colonial period is further producing a neo-colonial structure still tied (albeit in inferiority) to the world economy controlled by the developed nations. This control, some have argued, is enhanced by the behaviour of the indigenous peoples of these developing nations.

Nonetheless, this perspective neglects the all-important role of education in the creation of privileged elites in these nations, and ignores too their inferior position vis-à-vis 'partners' in the relationship. Of course, it was those 'educated abroad' who felt privileged to give birth to '*Tokunbo* children'. In the same vein, their education abroad was perceived to be superior to that of people who studied at home, a view that continues in the present-day perceived 'superiority' of the Diaspora. Ironically, the relevance

of the environment in knowledge-generation is driven to the background. Indeed, formal education has been dissociated from the informal economy within which it subsists, and thus has a sort of lack of relevance to survival in society. This is contrary to what existed in pre-colonial Nigeria, and indeed, Africa, where the exploitation of the environment informed the social-political relations developed around it.

In fact, the criticism of dependency theory neglects – unfortunately – the textile industries that were well developed in various parts of pre-colonial Nigeria and the social relations built around them. Just as the textile industries were well developed to satisfy the needs of the people, other industries relevant to their existence were created for survival. The textile industry, for instance, did not exist without the required technology to process raw cotton to manufacture clothes.

Put simply, the underdevelopment process engendered through the incorporation of Africa into the world capitalist system, albeit in a peripheral role, created a historical situation that needs to be appreciated in our understanding of ‘how we got to where we are’. Where we are, and our ability to go forward, are fundamentally dependent on our capacity and capability to restructure our former relationship in a fundamental way. Unfortunately, ‘where we are’ has become almost unimportant because of who we have become! We have not become ourselves but what we have been made to be by others, and they loom larger than us in all aspects of our existence.

As it is for second-hand goods, signifying ‘inferiority’, so it is with what is seen as knowledge, politics, religion and all aspects of the economic institution. They are of ‘second-hand’ status in so far as they have virtually no relevance to the environment within which they subsist, except they are perceived within the world-view of those from outside the borders. A nation that cannot determine its needs, based on an ability to control the internal and external environments, exists only as a ‘second-hand’ economy – an inferior nation constructed from the perspective of others, which continues to exist only as long as the others determine its existence.

— AKINPELU OLANREWAJU OLUTAYO, PhD  
University of Ibadan, Nigeria  
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