

Origin of and Visual Semiotics in Yoruba Textile of Adire

Margaret Olugbemisola Areo (Ph.D)* Razaq Olatunde Rom Kalilu (Ph.D)

Department of Fine and Applied Arts Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, P.M.B 4000, Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria.

* E-mail : speakwithgbemisola@yahoo.co.

Abstract

The rich cultural environment with which the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria are endowed has been a catalyst to the wealth of visual artistic expressions emanating from this region, and for which the people have greatly impacted world artistic culture. Of all their many artistic traditions, *Adire*, the patterned, indigo – dyed textile of the people perhaps still remains, the most decorative. The symbols of *Adire* which are created, accepted, and standardized aspect of the people’s culture, are drawn from history, legends, myths, proverbs, folklores and deep observation of the environment of this traditionally deeply religious people. The motifs of *Adire* are taught by mothers to daughters within dyeing families from generations to generations. However, with external influences and internal developments within the Yoruba region, the origin and meaning of these symbols have been lost to many and particularly the few remaining *Adire* artists. This paper, an art historical study, through field work, traces the origin and meaning of these motifs thematically, analyses and group them in order to place them in context and as belonging and originating from among the Yoruba,

Keywords: Origin, Visual, Semiotics, *Adire*, Yoruba, Textile

1. Introduction

The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria are renowned for their vibrant cultural environment. From around the twelfth century to the nineteenth century, they have made significant contributions to the world culture through their great artistic traditions in terracotta, wood carving, stone and metal sculpture, pottery, bead making, blacksmithing, mat weaving, leather work, gourd decoration, cloth weaving, and pattern cloth dyeing known as *Adire*. And beginning from the middle of the twentieth century up to the present, their contributions to world visual artistic culture have largely been in painting, sculpture, printmaking and textile art. Of all the artistic traditions, the textile art of *Adire* still remains, perhaps the most decorative. This is due to the fact that the Yoruba are traditionally a deeply religious people. Their thinking is greatly influenced by their history, legends, myths, proverbs, folklores, and deep observations of their natural environment and from all of which most of the traditional decorative symbols have been drawn.

Carr (2001) and Vol (1987: 2) observe that the name *Adire*, in essence, points to the cloth’s origin or that which is tied and dyed. Perani, Fred and Smith (1998: 6) similarly observe that the name of the cloth relates to a specific ethnic group who are the producers of the cloth, and that it also serves as a style designator and as a designation of the group of origin. In the same vein, Torntore (2001: 11) also observes that the word *Adire* identifies the culture, the language, and an art tradition of the people while Aronson (1999) observes that *Adire* is a facilitator of the spoken or written word.

The etymology of the word *Adire* however reveals much more than the scholastic views hitherto expressed. *Adire*’s meaning is not just only about the Yoruba and their language but also, about the art itself. It is a name coined from two Yoruba words – ‘*Adi*’ meaning to tie and ‘*re*’ which means to dye. In concept, the name *Adire* therefore, is descriptive of both the process of the cloth dyeing and its product. In conception however, the name encompasses a sense of artistic creativity and denote the process of production and the products, respectively as art and artistic objects. This conceptual position is confirmed by the people’s linguistic distinction between *Adire*, the process of production of the art and the creative product there from, and *aro dida*, indigo dyeing, *pa aso laro*, cloth dyeing, and *aso alaro*, dyed cloth. *Adire* is therefore a creative and artistic form and creative patterned dyed cloths.

It is the creativity and the designs in *Adire* that makes it significant both as process and objects of communication in the world of the Yoruba and perhaps beyond. The designs and the decorative elements on the cloth are meaningful part of the people’s day-to-day lives. *Adire* cloth therefore functions as visual language. Its significance can however not be accurately and effectively understood without the foregoing appropriate etymological and semantic definitions as has been done here. An *exposé* of the history and development of *Adire* will reveal the design orientation and the semiotics of *Adire*.

2. History And Development Of Adire

Scholarly opinions hold that the origin of *Adire* is unknown. This has given rise to various theories of accidental discovery. According to Polakoff,(1982: 24) the origin of pattern dyed cloths can probably be traced to the numerous dyeing accidents that occurred centuries ago. She opined that perhaps cloths were twisted in the

dyeing process or that playing children tied their pebble toys in cloth and no one noticed until the cloths were dyed. The accidental discovery theory, according to Lenor Larsen (1976), was repeatedly emphasized by Alfred Buhler in many of his Ciba reviews articles.

Buhler like Polakoff states that all resists derives from the same root probably, from the observation that materials or objects change colour during exposure to smoke, sun or weather except the protected parts that are covered during the exposure. Buhler adds that it is also probable that resist evolved from the dyeing process itself as dyed yarn could produce a white line of resist across the entire skein. He further observed that spots or grease or pitch can so effectively resist dye as to give effect similar to batik. Both Buhler and Polakoff concluded that from this unintentional and indefinite patterning, a conscious use of resist has evolved turning an accidental discovery into many methods of basic resist dyeing techniques (Wolff 2001: 52).

However, the origin of *Adire* tradition, according to Wolff and Stanfield (1971: 9), must be sought in the context of indigo dyeing and the world of the Yoruba women who first created this special cloth over a century ago on *Kijipa*, the handspun handwoven cloth of the women's upright loom.

The theory of accidental discoveries is however not supported by Yoruba philosophy and traditional history. Stories encoded in Ejiogbe the first of the 256 chapters of the Ifa divination oral literature credited the origin of patterned dyeing in various hues to Orunmila, the Yoruba deity of wisdom and divination and the Ifa exponent, who was divinely inspired to produce patterned dyed cloths using the material technology of certain birds, Agbe, Aluko, Odidere, Akuko, Lekeleke and Agbufon. In Yoruba cosmology, these six birds were at the period of their creation at the primordial time, divinely inspired and permitted to respectively use indigo, camwood, palm oil, chalk and variegated colour pigments. The verse of Ejiogbe, in a dialogic perspectivization, is self explanatory on this.

Ifa ni o di ogbonda	1
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni eye Agbe ni	
Won ni ki e wi fun Agbe ko fi 'ye ti e s'aro	5
Ifa ni o di o ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni eye Aluko ni	
Won ni ki Aluko fi iye ti e s' osun	10
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni eye Odidere ni	
Won ki eye Odidere o fi iye ti e si epo pupa	15
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni eye Lekeleke ni	
Won ni ki Lekeleke fi iye ti e si efun yeruyeru	20
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni Akuko oyongoloto ni	
Won ni ki Akuko oyongoloto maa d'ade yanranyanran	25
Ifa ni o di ogbonda	
Mo ni o di ogbonfon	
Won ni eye wo ni n da t' Olodumare si rere	
Won ni Agbufon oyongoloto ni	
Won ni ki oun ma dade ori yetuyetu	30
Won ni k'eye k'eye ko ma ke magbo mon	
Opeere nikan lo ke magbo	
Won ni ki won ge ni' di ofiiri jape jape	
Awon lo se 'fa fun Orunmila	
Ifa n fi omi oju se rahun aje suurusu	35
Ebo ni won ni ko se	

O si gbe 'bo n be oru 'bo Nje bi okan yo a gb'ona wa, Atare atesa nwa mi bo wa o suurusu ¹ ...	40
Ifa says it is primal and inimitable	1
I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creative Will They said it is Agbe, <i>lamprotonis chalybaeus</i> , the Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starling It was then decreed that Agbe be directed to dip its plumage in (indigo) dye.	5
Ifa says it is primal and inimitable I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will They said it is Aluko, <i>merops nubicus</i> , the Carmine Bee-eater Aluko was directed to put its own plumage in the camwood paste.	10
Ifa says it is primal and inimitable I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will They said it is Odidere, <i>psittacus erithacus</i> , the African Grey Parrot They said Odidere should put its tail feathers in the (crimson-coloured) palm oil.	15
Ifa says it is primal and inimitable I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will They said it is Lekeleke, <i>ardeola ibis</i> , the Cow Egret Lekeleke was asked to dip its own plumage in the immaculate and powdery white chalk.	20
Ifa says it is primal and inimitable I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will They said it is Akuko <i>Oyongoloto</i> , the big and majestically gaited Cock Akuko Oyongoloto was granted the privilege of donning the glittering red crown.	25
Ifa says it is primal and inimitable I say it becomes imitable It was inquired, which of the birds wishes to distinctively portray God's Creation Will They said it is the big Agbufon, <i>balearica pavonina</i> , the big Black Crowned Crane Agbufon <i>Oyongoloto</i> was permitted to wear fluffy variegated crown. It was thereafter forbidden of any other [bird(s)] to authoritatively boom and appear distinctively, Only Opeere, <i>microscelis amaurotis</i> , the Brown-eared Bulbul, chirped and attempted uniqueness And it was ordered that its tail be clipped very short These were the priests that divine for Orunmila When Ifa (Orunmila) was profusely weeping in desperate need of earnings	35
He was advised to offer sacrifice He offered the prescribed sacrifice And so whenever Okan, <i>combretm erythrophyllum</i> , the River Bushwillow emerges (sprouts) it comes in ornate patterns. Both good (novel) and uniqueness shall seek me profusely	40 ...

It is noteworthy that except the bulbul, which is portrayed as a copycat, common place and inferior, the five other birds and the plant mentioned in the *Ifa* verse are indeed ornately unique and the birds are of very high quality glossy finish. They are almost matchless in the Yoruba ecosystem. The sterling is glossy greenish blue or blue-green like fresh indigo dye, with a bluish purple belly and blue ear patch. Its iris is contrastingly orange or blackish yellow. (Wikipedia: 2010). The Carmine Bee-eater is a slender beautiful and richly coloured bird. It is predominately carmine in colour; with a greenish blue head and throat, black mask, red eyes, black pointed beak and elongated carmine central tail feathers. The African gray parrot in its own case is predominantly grey in colour with a black curved beak and crimson coloured tail feathers. The Cow Egret is interestingly of spotless immaculate and dazzling white colour. The cock comes in varied sizes and plumage colours but invariably with a comb on its head. The plumage of the Crown-crane is the most ornate in the family of cranes. Further to this,

the top of its head is covered with black plush feathers and a fan shaped crest of straw-like feathers at the back of the head.(Encarta: 2009). The River Bushwillow is also intriguing. Its young leaves are pale green which later on maturity becomes dark green above and light green below. In autumn the leaves change to yellow and then red in mid-winter. Its flowers are pale yellow. Its branches grow in an upright manner but at unpredictable and odd angles; and as Phebe (2003) has equally observed, its "... dense spreading crown, interesting fruit and attractive foliage make it a popular ornamental shade tree [shrub]." Significantly however, the Bushwillow, which family comprise of 20 genres and about 500 species, is used in the production of dye.

Be that as it may and consequent upon offering the prescribed sacrifice, by inspiration Orunmila was able to create unique decorative patterned dyed cloths in several hues. The Ifa verse did not however indicate the exact place and time that Orunmila first produced the multicolored patterned cloth. The tradition nonetheless avers that it was a conscious attempt made when life on earth was relatively young and civilizations were just being formed. It is also noteworthy that going by this tradition, the patterned dyed cloths were made with creative and enterprise intentions. Research and scholarship have variously and consistently proven the reliability of Ifa literature as a reliable form of oral tradition in historical reconstruction of the pre-literate eras of Yoruba history (Abimbola 1973: 41-62).

The uncertainty of the point of its origin notwithstanding, there is no concept either *apriori* or *posteriori* to suppose that the origin of the art must or may be accidental. Our position on, and our theory of, a calculated invention stands to reason. This is because the majority of the African peoples that have been associated in one way or the other with tie and dye, particularly the Yoruba, have been known with other artistic traditions with technology and techniques more complex than the cloth dyeing processes.

Sculptural figures in various media from the Yoruba art traditions of antiquity such as ancient Ife, Esie, Owo, and Old Oyo don apparels but without any discernible patterns depicted on their cloths. Furthermore, these sculptures are monochromatic; visual analysis of the sculptures therefore does not in any way suggest that the apparels depicted on them were *Adire*.

Empirical evidence however indicates that the art has a fairly antiquated history in the Yoruba artistic landscape. Clapperton(1830) and the Lander brothers (1965), who visited Yorubaland on their journeys into the interior of Africa in the early part of the nineteenth century observed that indigo dye production and cloth dyeing were very large industries. Observations of Yorubaland by Clarke between 1854 and 1858 also confirmed this position.(1972). For example, Abeokuta as of the nineteenth century was a centre for cotton production, weaving and indigo dyeing. The women specialists dyed cotton yarns meant for weaving. They also redyed (refurbished) faded cloths, tied and sewn resist patterns in stripes and circles on cloths (Akpata 1971: 97)

Be that as it may, the *Adire* cloth is ubiquitous and is still relevant in the contemporary Yoruba society. This is in spite of the changing technology as well as assaults from competition with other textile products and other challenges that *Adire* has faced. The resilience of *Adire* against all these challenges is largely due to the creative spirit of the artist and the dynamism of the art tradition itself. Consequently, the hand stitched indigo dyed prototype which was done on *Kijipa* has evolved over the years into the freehand starch painted type, *Adire Eleko*, which originated at about 1910 (Beier 1957). The *Adire* freehand starch patterned type has also further evolved into the contemporary blocked, stamped and free-form designs, which now come not only in indigo but also in a kaleidoscope of synthetic dye of various tints and hues. So versatile and dynamic is this art tradition that four major types of *Adire* with fourteen distinct variants based on the techniques used in preparing the cloth prior to dyeing were identified by the turn of the twenty - first century (Wolff 2001: 51). Areo (2004) has further identified six broad categories.

Apart from meeting the challenges of modernity the *Adire* tradition has been able to and continues to reflect the tenacity of and the worldview of the Yoruba culture. This is consistent with the principles of their culture, which in Yoruba language is referred to as *asa*, selective choices, and which paradoxically encourages resilience where necessary and dynamism where required (Kalilu1996: 15) hence the saying; "*Igba laso, igba lewu*," that is, the relevance of cloths wane with time, so also is the fashionability of garments.

With the introduction of imported English cotton products, calico and shirting by British trading firms between 1880 and 1925, *Adire* artists started using calico for their products instead of the handwoven materials hitherto used (Oyelola 1992: 62) The British firms also flooded the market with cheaper printed materials. While these imported materials were not taxed, the local hand-woven cloths were taxed by the colonial administrations (Wolff 2001).

The availability of the imported materials ironically encouraged innovation and expanded the textile industry. A totally new form of starch resist patterned *Adire* emerged as these imported cloths provided a softer and smoother surface as the canvas for *Adire* art. Consequently, 1920s witnessed a great boost hitherto not experienced in this Yoruba art tradition and the economy of it. For example studies indicate that, as of the 1920, in Abeokuta centre alone, up to two thousand wrappers were being bought daily by Senegalese merchants (Bayfield 1993: 49). Then, *Adire* was made with two pieces of cloth of five yardages each and which constitute

the size of wrappers used by Yoruba women.

The 1930s marked innovation in *Adire* technology with *Adire* being done on brocade and velvet. The introduction of sewing machines for the hitherto hand-stitched patterns and stencil cutting for the free hand *Eleko* saw the entrance of men into an hitherto female controlled art tradition.

The 1940s saw a decline in *Adire* production. This is due to four main factors of external and internal nature. The first of the external factors is the restriction on exportation of cloth from Europe to West Africa due to the World War II of 1939-1945. The second is the flooding of Nigerian market with factory printed *Adire* imitation from Asia, Europe and Nigeria's textile mills (Keyes-Adenaike 1993: 94). The first of the internal factors is the universal free primary education policy introduced in January 1955 by the Government of the Region Western Nigeria (Fafunwa 1974: 167-170). By this policy children must go to school. This consequently affected apprenticeship. The second of the internal factors is the rapid growth in population, which also dealt another blow to *Adire* industry in the 1950s. This led to the incursion into the old dye courtyards and workshops which were converted or reconstructed for other uses than dyeing. By the 1960s, the *Adire* had come to be seen by the elites and urban dwellers as the cloth for the poor, the non-literate, rural women. The elites and urban dwellers preferred and wore imported fabrics.

The introduction of synthetic indigo and other brightly coloured chemical dyes after the World War II marked a new beginning for the *Adire* tradition. By the 1960s, tie-dyed *Adire* became popular with a wider range of Nigerians and non-Nigerians because of the high quality fabrics and the array of colours used other than the only low quality fabric and the indigo colour hitherto used (Beier 1997: 37). Also, it had become a sign of ethnic and national identity for the elites in Lagos who wore the fabric as a mark of protest against the European values (Eicher 1976)

The 1960s also saw the emergence of 'art batik' as an international art form from Osogbo. This was through the effort of Susanne Wenger who learnt the traditional *Eleko* method and adapted it into an art form using indigo and later synthetic dyes (Beier 1997: 38, 45).

By the 1970s, resist dyeing has entered into the Nigeria educational institutions as part of an academic curriculum. By 1987 unemployed school leavers were trained in some basic skills including *Adire* making. The colourful *Adire* continued to be fashionable into the 1990s, and the present time and are well-patronized by political leaders, religious personalities, fashion designers and beauty queens. *Adire* has thus developed into a fashionable cloth of identity for both rich and poor, the urban and rural dwellers.

Though Eluyemi (1970) has rightly observed that dyeing is done in almost all Yoruba towns, but its centres in most of the towns are not significantly large, much is however done in Osogbo and Ibadan and a few numbers of other towns, but Abeokuta has been for many years and still the most active centre of *Adire* production in the Southwestern Nigeria

3. Techniques, Technology And Contemporary Practices

A profusion of designs have evolved from the original indigo dyed classic *Adire*, but only very few scholastic attention have been given to these designs and the techniques of making them. Even then much of these scholastic attentions have been on the identifications of the designs and the techniques. Stanfield (1971) who in her work on dyeing methods in western Nigeria, among other things, group *Adire* into two types, namely *Adire Oniko*, raffia tied and *Adire Eleko*, starch resist, both stencil and free hand applied ones. Akpata (1971) in her work on the origin of some *Adire* designs attempted some interpretations of the patterns. She therefore provides an iconography of some of the designs in *Adire* and also grouped the various patterns into two, based on their technique of their preparation prior to dyeing. Arrays of new designs have however evolved since the time of her publication.

Wolff (2001) in her own case provides an historical overview of this dynamic art tradition with a cursory peep into the people's worldview. She also observed fourteen distinct variants of four major types of *Adire* based on the techniques of their preparation but did not discuss or classify them.

Akpata (1971) also mentions three methods of *Adire* pattern-dyeing namely, *Adire Eleso*, *Adire Elelo*, and *Adire Eleko*. Her reference to *Adire Eleko* as batik does not however conform to the people's taxonomy. This is because this method is not known as or is called Batik by the Yoruba. The resist materials used both techniques also differ. While corn starch paste is used for *Adire Eleko*, wax is the medium for batik.

Picton and Mack (1979) in their section on Yoruba *Adire* cloth also, based on their techniques of their production, briefly classified the art into two namely *Adire Oniko* and *Adire Eleko*. These are generally salutary contributions. But there are numerous other patterns that have evolved and are now on the *Adire* artistic scene.

Recently, Areo (2010) did a more comprehensive typological identification. She grouped *Adire* into six major types also based on the techniques used in the resist patterning of the cloths. these types are grouped in a chronological order of their development. They are *Adire Oniko*, *Adire Eleko*. Non-resist Techniques, Batik, discharge dyed *Adire* and Factory produced *Adire*. She also identified their various sub-types. In the *Adire Oniko*

group are circles, *Eleso*, *Sabada*, Clamping and Stitching. In the group of *Adire Eleko* are Freehand *Eleko*, Stenciled *Adire Eleko*, *Eleko* Splash and Lace *Eleko* sub-types. The Non-resist type in its own case has Direct Application in various forms, and Discharge Method. The Batik type has four sub-types, Freehand Batik, Splash Batik *Adire Olonte*, and Batik as an art form. The factory-produced *Adire* is only one type. They are actually printed fabrics replicating *Adire* motifs. These classifications are germane to the interpretation and understanding of the motifs and their meanings.

4. Design Orientation And Motifs Typology

Traditionally, the *Adire* art tradition is practiced by women. The pattern, content and sequencing of the designs and motifs are usually handed down from mother to daughter within a family. There is therefore an accepted repertoire of motifs from which each artist learns. The artistry of each artist however depends on her skills and capabilities. Modern items and contemporary techniques have gained incursion into these repertoires in line with the socio-cultural changes and fluxes being experienced by the people. Wolff (2001) once observed that an inventory of motifs in the individual repertoire would run into hundreds. These patterns are in form of stylized representation of plants, animals, everyday objects and abstract pattern. Generally, the designs and motifs of *Adire* tradition are classifiable into five types. These are geometric, figural, skewmorphic patterns, letters, and celestiomorphic.

The geometric motifs are dots, lines of various forms such as straight lines, hatching, cross hatching, etc; triangles, squares, circles, semi-circles, spiral lines and rectangles. The figural motifs are of two sub-types; zoomorphic and floral. The zoomorphic motifs are of eight sub-group: avian, reptilian and mammalian species, arthropods, annelids, mollusca, pisces, and amphibians. The avian species represented are about twelve. They are *Opeere* (Brown-eared bulbul), *Agbufon* (Crowned Crane), *Adaba* (Red eyed dove), *pepeye* (duck), *Asadi* (Black kite, *milvus migrans*), *Etu* (Guinea fowl), *Adie* (fowl), *Okin* (Indian peafowl, *pavo cristatus*), *Odidere* (African grey parrot), *Tolotolo* (Turkey), *Igun* (Hooded vulture, *necrocyrtes monachus*), and *Ogongo* (Ostrich). The reptilian species in their own cases are about seven types: *Alangba* (Lizard), *Akika* (Pangolin), *Ejo* (snake), *Alabahun* (Tortoise) *Oni* (Nile crocodile, *crocodylus niloticus*), *Eja* (Fish), *Omoole* (Wall gecko), and *Oga* (Chamelion). Three mammalian species; *Adon*, (bat), *Okere* (squirrel), and *Eerin* (Elephant) are identifiable. The arthropods are about two. They are *Okun* (Millipede), and *Akeeke* (Scorpion). Only one annelid, *Ekolo* (Earthworm) is identifiable. Similarly, *Igbin*, (African Giant Snail, *archachatina marginata*) is the only one represented in the mollusca sub-group. The pisces is the Tilapia in its own case. Only one amphibian motif, *Opolo* (Toad) is used.

The floral motifs are *Ewe Ege*, and *Ewe Oye/Akoko*, respectively foliage of cassava and *markhamia tomentosa*. Other flora motifs are *Fulawa* (Petals), *Ogede were* (Banana), *Ogede Agbagba* (Plantain) *Koko* (cocoa pod), *Koro Owu* (Cotton seed), *Odan* (Fig tree), and *Oka baba* (Guinea corn plant).

The skewomorphic, that is representation of man-made objects, are more varied. They range from utensils to other objects. In this range are mirror, knife, *Irukere* (horse tail), *aago owo* (wrist watch), *walaa* (slate), *isana* (matches), *garawa* (bucket), *ese masiini* (sewing machine's pedal), *opo Mapo* (Mapo hall pillars), *koko taba* (tobacco pipe) *orita* (road junction), *amuga* (scissors), *agbo ile* (house compound), *igbako* (ladle), *suga* (sugar cubes), *opon Ifa* (Ifa divination tray), *ilu gangan* (Gangan talking drum), *sekere* (gourd rattle), *akete* (straw hat), *taya* (tyre), *ile eyin* (egg tray), *yeti* (ear ring), *atori* (whips), *agboorun* (umbrella), *ileke bebe* (waist beads), and *boolu* (ball).

The letters are the alphabets of particularly the Yoruba language. The motifs based on celestial bodies or planets for which Kalilu had invented the word celestiomorphic, such as, *Osupa* (moon), and *irawo* (stars). Some of these motifs are pictorial and discernible, while some of them have little pictorial semblance to what is represented.

5. Semiological Appraisal

Understanding the semiotics in *Adire* must strongly take into cognizance the Yoruba worldview. This is because for the Yoruba, there is no happenstance, and life is one continuous whole without any break. They believe in the cosmic realms of the world (*aye*) and the great beyond (*orun*) across which the human soul transmigrates respectively in body and spirit in processes of birth, death and reincarnation. This belief is reflected in the Yoruba names such as Babatunde (father has returned), Iyabode (mother has returned), and in some practices like the *Egungun*, a masquerading, traditions, that religiously and artistically represent deceased ancestors who are believed to return in the masquerades costumes (Drewal and Mason 1998: 77). Signification in *Adire* therefore cuts across different realms. This is discussed along the lines of the aforementioned design orientation and motif typology identified earlier.

5.1 The Realm of Geometry

The dot is a prominent sign on motif of *Adire* patterning. To the Yoruba, the dot is more than a means of filling a

space. It is symbolic in the sense of the belief that each human soul have come to *aye* (earth) from *orun* (heaven) and is connected spiritually to both worlds. It is also believed that each star in the sky represents a human soul on earth. For this reason, when a star falls off the sky, a human soul is believed to have passed on. Drewal and Mason (1977) has rightly observed that the dot is a kind of sanctifying and sacred pointillism that conveys transformation and transcendence of worldly entities united with other worldly forces. They further observed that the dots, are points of light and blessing and are also profusely used in different contexts; on Egungun masquerade costumes embodying ancestral spirits and on Epa headdresses, as well as on walls of shrines, and on the heads of Yoruba deities initiates as signs of power uniting their destinies with specific divine forces in the cosmos. Dots therefore apart from breaking solidity of the indigo colour of the fabric, create brilliance. They are spiritual points of brightness, and symbols of the rebirth and transformation of a human soul.

Lines in their own cases in Yoruba worldview and according to Thompson (1973: 19-61) impose human order into the disorder of nature. Lines, *ila*, to make clear, or imprint implies imprinting of culture or civilization (Abraham 1958: 399). Usage of lines for decoration is not peculiar to *Adire*. Lines as an art form is also found in the Yoruba body decoration of body markings called *ila*. This cutting of linear scar into the body identifies and clarifies the ethnic subgroup, lineages or religious group of the individual. Also in decorative body tattoos favoured by women, *kolo*, similarities are found with the *Adire* patterns employing needle as technique for the pattern creation; *Adire alabere* (Drewal 1988: 83-96). In dividing the cloth into segments and using lines in the design elements, in the making of *Adire* we are therefore drawn into the social cultural practices of the people.

Intersecting lines are also significant as they represent the crossroad which in Yoruba worldview symbolically implies a state of confusion; hence the saying "*Ikorita meta tii da'mu alejo*" that is the T- junction confounds a visitor to a strange location. It is also taken to be the meeting point between the physical and the spiritual realms. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that sacrificial objects as propitiation to the gods or objects till date are largely placed at crossroads in Yoruba spiritual practices. Drawing these lines is an act of connection between different realms in human and spiritual experience.

5.2 The Realm of Figures

Figural representations are largely employed in the traditional starch resist cloth, *Adire eleko*, employs a variety of stylized representation of certain animals. These figures of animals, flora, man-made objects, letters, and celestial bodies have specific symbolism in the life of the Yoruba. For example, in the avian category of the zoomorphic forms, the Indian peafowl, the ostrich and the crested crane are associated with royalty and leadership; the egret with purity and the parrot with knowledge and wealth. Some of the other birds are associated with the powers of the witches and magico – medicinal values. Of particular significance is the bat (*adan*) which is amongst the animals often used in sacrifices in Yoruba traditional religion. As the saying goes, "*Tia a'bar'adan, a ma fi oobe s'ebo*", if you cannot find the bat (*adan*), you can use the *Oobe* (a smaller specie of bat) for sacrifice.

Bats (*adan*) are found in abundance in Southwestern Nigeria. The smaller specie called *Oobe* are found in abundance in the Northern part of the country but sometimes migrates down south. The saying implies an admonition to make do with what one has instead of allowing opportunity to pass one by. The bat is believed to be mysterious because of its dual nature of being a mammal and bird, *Ko s'eku, ko s'eye*, and thus qualifies to be used for sacrifice. It is also nocturnal, and night is considered sacred, as time when witches are believed to meet, and the time for placing strong sacrifices to appease deities and the witches. The lizard, *alangba*, is a favourite motif and portrays the Yoruba belief that it is difficult to discern a man's heart, his thoughts feelings and scheming by merely looking at him, hence the saying; *gbogbo alangba lo da'kun de'le sugbon ao m'eyi ti 'nu nrun'*, that is, all lizards lie on their belly, but the one with stomach ache is not discernable.

Contrariwise, the wall gecko - '*omo onile*' "child of the owner of the house" or "heir of the household" as the Yoruba name implies stays and lives in the house whereas the lizard stays on the outer walls or cracks in the wall of the house. Since the Yoruba belief in reincarnation and that there are some mischievous children - '*Abiku*' who are born repeatedly, only to die each time and return to heaven, this motif is used for women who experience having such children, and on the body of such children. It symbolizes that the child will live to old age and not die prematurely (Campbell 1995: 27). It is also the totem for some families. The crocodile (*Oni*), is an amphibious animal with the ability to live on land where man lives and in the water where *Olokun*, the water deity lives. This dual attributes makes crocodile unique and of high spiritual value.

The mysterious ability of the chameleon in its own case to adapt to its surroundings by adopting the colour of that environment makes it unique in Yoruba thinking. Its transformative ability is, and is taken to be a reflection of an ability to escape, or neutralizes the machinations of one's enemies (Parrinder 1967:13). This implies invincibility, flexibility or abundance. For instance a man who is blessed with a rich wardrobe or change of raiment is referred to as "*o npa 'ro aso bi oga*" meaning he is so rich he changes his cloth as often as the chameleon.

The snake is also a common feature in other Yoruba visual art forms and is found portrayed as totem, in much

folklore. Because of the Yoruba's belief in reincarnation, a man is believed to be capable of coming severally (through birth) into the earth, and of going back to heaven (through death). Their concept of life is therefore cyclic, without beginning or end, a continuous, and immortal existence. This is represented in the snake coiled posture. Parrinder(1976) states further that the coils of the snake are not stationery, but moves cyclically around the earth, getting all the heavenly bodies in motion. The snake is used as a totem for almost all the volatile tempered *orisa* (gods) to express their swift retributive powers (Folaranmi 2000:56). It symbolizes regeneration, long life, potency, truth, fierceness, wrath, wealth and guidance. It can also symbolize a stress-free life as '*oka*', the phyton is believed to stay on a spot, while its prey come to it."Oju kan ti oka ba wa ni onje re wa nba". It does not have to run after its prey or stress itself in getting its food.

The Snail (*Igbin*), is seen to be slow but inspite of this, God still provides its needs. The saying "*Igbin t'enu mo'gi o gun*", meaning that the snail persists until it is able to climb a tree, is a reflection of the animal's persistence in getting what it wants. It symbolize therefore perseverance and persistence. The habitat of the snail is cool, and damp. It is therefore used in sacrifices when calm is required hence the saying, "*Ero pese in ti'gbin*", i.e. calmness is attributive of the snail. It is also taken to symbolize inseparableness and unity from the people's saying "*Bi'gbin fa, ikarahun a tele*", i.e. when the snail crawls, its shell follows suit. This could also be seen in the context of the Yoruba belief in the duality of man comprising of the body and the soul. The "*Ori*" the inner man, the human's core, guides his activities and destiny. It is therefore a reflection of the prayer or wish "*ibi t'ori ngbe nii re, k'ese sin ni lo*" that one's inner man (*ori*) should abide with man in all his undertakings.

The representation of the fish may also be a pointer to the belief in *ori* the inner man, hence the saying, "*Ori I'eja fi n la'bu*". "It is with the head the fish swims through the depths". The fish is therefore a symbol of breakthrough or success. It also represents the prayer that one's "*ori*" or destiny should make way for one in the quagmire of life.

The flora motifs are guinea corn, cassava leaves, akoko leaves and floral representation. Guinea corn, "*oka baba*" is grown by the Yoruba. The leaves are given to goats, sheep and cows as fodder, the stem is used in preparing a red dye and also in medicinal concoctions. the young pliable stems are coiled into circles for bicycle wheels by small children. Guinea corn seeds are used in the preparation of paste cooked as pap which is a staple of the people. Also an alcoholic wine, "*Burukutu*" is brewed from the seeds. Guinea corn is never represented in isolation, but surrounded with birds eating the seeds on the stem. Although this is a problem for farmers but it symbolizes divine provision or supply, with little or no stress.

The Akoko leaf, *markhanua tomentosa* is a prominent representation in *Adire*. The *markhanua tomentosa* is considered noble, and its leaves are invariably used in coronation rituals all over Yorubaland. The Cassava leaf (*Ewe Ege*) and the plant is a common place plant in southwestern Nigeria. The paste made from cassava flour, is used as the resist paste for *Adire eleko*. Flowers, *ododo*, in its own case symbolizes children, referred to as "Ododo Eye", the height of a man's glory, success and fulfillment among the Yoruba, hence the saying; "omo ni ododo eye."

The skewmorphic motifs on *Adire* are allusions to the Yoruba socio - environmental experiences. The motifs include radiator fan, skyscraper, automobile, tyre, matches, umbrella, crown, key, maracas (*sekere*), mirror, handcuffs, Islamic writing slate (*walaha*), scissors, medallion and alphabets.

The usage of the Roman alphabets came with the introduction of Western education into Yorubaland. The illiterate *Adire* makers usually buy stencils cut into alphabets designs to use. Since the cutters were also not literate, they only cut out what has been written for them, leaving no gaps between words. The alphabets thus form an overall design, often times meaningless to the literate. However, in a few instances where the words are discernable, they are proverbs, prayers or declarative statements such as; "*Ori mi pe*", meaning, I have a sound mind; "Omo lere aye", that is, children are the heritage of the world; "Ati d'ade kiniun", "the crowning of the Lion is with God's approval; "Saanu mi Edumare", meaning "have mercy on me Lord" and many other such phrases that from the Yoruba language.

The Celestial bodies particularly the stars, are believed to represent humans inhabiting the earth, hence their use in representations on *Adire*. When a star falls from the Yoruba night sky, a person is believed to have passed on somewhere. A man's star is believed to be aglow at the height of his fortune. Hence the saying "irawo re ntan", his star is aglow. A downturn in fortune is referred to as "irawo re w'omi", that is, the individual's star has plunged into water (rivers). The moon also features in the Yoruba thinking, since time is measured by the lunar months. Saying such as "Osu ola le" The season of abundance and wealth has dawned, reflects this. It is believed that since no man is capable of obliterating the glowing of these celestial bodies, then the glory of a man cannot be covered or dimmed by any other mortal

5.3 The Realm of Onomastics

Aside from naming the motifs and giving meanings to the motifs and their names, the art of *Adire* interestingly has overarching naming system by which already named motifs are grouped and the group seen, recognized, and named as one entity. The naming system in this case is therefore not based on one single motif. The name of the

whole cloth consequently is determined by the collection of motifs peculiar to it or used on it. Six of such overarching or group names are identified here. These are; Ibadan dun, Olokun, Sunbebe, Eyepe, Ile-Iyalode and Onikomou. The traditional *Adire* pattern layout comprises of squares of 8 inches by 8 inches, or 8 inches by 11 inches, or by measuring approximately two by one and a half hands span (Carr 2001). And the squares are positioned in straight lines along and across the whole length of the cloth with each square separated from the next by lines or grid drawn with starch resist. The configuration is what lends meaning to it. The names are given to the whole cloth as measured.

Ibadan dun, "Ibadan is sweet or pleasant". This pattern is the most complex and most detailed of all traditional *Adire eleko* - the starch resist *Adire*. This cloth is normally divided into four rows of seven squares. None of the motifs in these twenty-eight squares appears more than once. However, the square that gives it its name is the square containing the pillars of Mapo Hall alternating with spoons, three or four times. The Mapo Hall, built by Welshman Tafy Jones to accommodate the British Colonial Administrators was novel in the Southwestern Nigeria for its architecture, size, and central location in Ibadan. The number of spoons determine the quality of the cloth. The highest quality has five spoons, good ones four, and the least have three spoons (Carr 2001). Many of the other motifs that have been mentioned earlier are used to fill the squares. Ibadan Dun therefore, can be called the climax or height of *Adire* virtuoso. It also expresses the mastery of an *Adire* maker.

"Olokun", The sea goddess, consists of two rows of five large squares with long rectangles at each end at the bottom twelve smaller squares. The large squares in Olokun design cloth consist of abstract patterns, encasing smaller rectangles which contain creatures such as birds, lizards, crocodiles and so on, tops, mats, wire. The central square of Olokun has the four-legged stool, and frequently has the O.K. motif on it (Akpata 1971).

"Sun Bebe", as the name implies "lift up the bead", is an allusion to the sensuous raising of the beads by ladies. The design is a collection of abstract designs, with a background of tiny circles. *Bebe* is the small flat waist beads favoured by Yoruba women.

Ile Iyalode, "Iyalode's compound", is an allusion to the place where it is made or the originator of the design. It is one of the designs created using cut metal stencils.

Onikomou in its own case simply means "The - One - with - Comb". This name portrays the name of the cloth and the process of making it. Starch paste is spread on the cloth. Spiral lines are made on the cloth by scratching through the starch with a comb. The starch is left to dry and the cloth then dyed.

6. Conclusion

Symbol all over the world is a physical or visual reflection of something abstract, with a deeper meaning, the study of the motifs of *Adire* enables one to understand the deep undercurrent of this visual art tradition. It goes beyond mere representation, but thus becomes a facilitator of the people's language. The motifs thus becomes a voiceless semantic of a visual language, to be appreciated and enjoyed by all but only to be decoded by those with knowledge about the people. Through *Adire* motifs, an abstract (visual) sign is charged with meaning and symbolic value.

The *Adire* motifs and patterns will go a long way in telling a lot about the Yoruba people since time tests a symbol's capacity to anchor itself in the history of a people or to transcend it and inscribe itself in their collective memory. Time turns signs into symbols. Symbol is therefore universal as it transcends the particular because it relates to a definite period and pattern of history. And *Adire* as an art tradition and as a product satisfies these because no matter how abstract the patterns appear to the uninitiated, the motifs and symbols of *Adire* are clear to the makers, and those with cognate knowledge about the art. Through the *Adire* motifs, a glimpse into the worldview of the Yoruba is therefore experienced. Their belief, ways of life, religious and socio-cultural belief are made known and experienced.

Note:

1. Personal communication, September 21, 2010 with Babalawo Ifabukunmi Adewale, who is a Botanist and Ifa priest.. He is also the Chief Executive Adewura Medical Centre, Agbelekale, Abule Egba, and Secretary Lagos State Board of Traditional Medicine.

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About the authors

Dr. Margaret Olugbemisola Areo¹ is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, Oyo State Nigeria.

Prof. Razaq Olatunde Rom Kalilu² is a professor of Art and Art History in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, Oyo State Nigeria.

**** All illustrations are drawn by Areo Margaret Olugbemisola except where indicated otherwise.**

Some Adire motifs and their meanings



Figure 1
Adan (Bat) motif.



Figure 2
Oobe (smaller specie of bat)



Figure 3
Oga (Chamele)



Figure 4
Alangba (Lizard)



Figure 5
Igbin (snail).



Figure 6
Yoro (Flea)



Figure 7
Eye (Bird).



Figure 8
Eye (Bird).



Figure 9
Eye (Bird).



Figure 10
Omo Eye (chick)



Figure 11
Pepeye (Duck)



Figure 12
Opolo (Frog).



Figure 13
Eja (Fish).



Figure 14
Alangba Berekete (Fat Lizard)



Figure 15
Eegun Eja (Fish bone)



Figure 16
Ejo (Snake).



Figure 17
Agufon Crested Crane)



Figure 18
Ogongo. (Ostrich)



Figure 19
Agufon. (Crested Crane)



Figure 20
Ejo (Snake).



Figure 21
Ooya(Comb).



Figure 22
Ipon (Ladle)



Figure 23
Agboorun.
(Umbrella)



Figure 24
Opo Ile Mapo
(Mapo pillars)



Figure 25
Agbo'le
(Compound)



Figure 26
Sekeseke(Cuffs)



Figure 27
Sekere(Gourd Rattle).



Figure 28
Kokoro(Key).



Figure 29
Opon Iro(Tray of Lies)

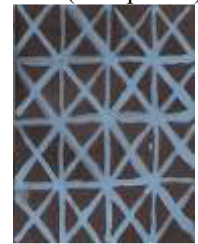


Figure 30
Waya(Wire)



Figure 31
Arewa
(Star of the North
Tree)



Figure 32
Ayed'egbe
(The world is on its Side)



Figure 33
Afara(Bridge)



Figure 34
Amuga(Scissors)



Figure 35
Igi Oye
(Chieftaincy
Tree)



Figure 36
Oka baba
(Guinea Corn).



Figure 37
Elewe Merin
Four-leafed plant



Figure 38
Ewe Ege.
Casava leaf



Figure 39
Ododo(Flower)



Figure 40
Igba(Calabash).



Figure 41
Igi Iye(Tree of Life).
Oga(Chameleon)



Figure 42
Igba(Calabash)



Figure 43
Igi Odan(Market Tree)



Figure 44
Orunkun Aro
(Lame man's knee)



Figure 45
Orunkun Aro
(Lame man's knee)



Figure 46
Digi(Mirror)



Figure 47
Abebe(Fan).



Figure 48
Eni Pakiti(Mat)



Figure 49
Gangan(Talking Drum)

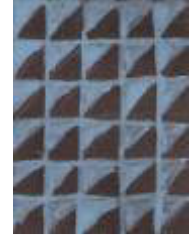


Figure 50
Waala
(Quoranic Slate)



Figure 51
AagoOwo(WristWatch)



Figure 52
Ibadan dun. (Eicher (1976)



Figure 54
Olokun design (Eicher, 1976).



Figure 55
Sun bebe (lift beads).
(Smithsonian Institution Washington D.C. 1971)

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