

EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *ADIRE* IN FASHION: PROMOTING YORUBA CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Adire, a traditional Yoruba textile art form, holds immense cultural significance in Nigeria. Adire fabrics are some of the symbols of cultural heritage among the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. This paper explores how Adire has transcended its utilitarian purpose to become a symbol of Yoruba identity and heritage. Through the lens of photography, and how contemporary designers and artists incorporate Adire patterns and motifs into modern fashion. By promoting Adire, we contribute to the preservation and celebration of Yoruba culture. This study sheds light on the intersection of tradition, creativity, and cultural representation in the world of fashion using the theoretical approach.

Keywords: Adire, Fashion, Yoruba Cultural Heritage and Photography

Introduction

Adire is a combination of two Yoruba words, ‘*Adi*’, meaning to tie, and ‘*re*’, which means to dye. It is the name given to indigo dyed cloth produced by the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria using a variety of resist-dye techniques that reflects their culture, language and art.

Major Yoruba cities traditionally noted and recognised for *Adire* production are: Abeokuta, Osogbo, Ede, Ibadan and Ondo. Of all the centers, Abeokuta and Osogbo are traditionally renowned as the home of indigo, and the ‘home of dyeing’. Therefore, thus goes this saying among the Yoruba people, ‘*Osogbo ile aro*’ meaning Osogbo is the house/home of dye testifying to the fact that Indigo dye/plant is abundantly available in Osogbo.

In the early decades of the 20th century new access to large quantities of imported shirting materials and dyes via the spread of European textile merchants in Osogbo, Abeokuta and other Yoruba towns caused a boom in the production of *adire*, as a major local craft in South West Nigeria because *Adire* producers discovered that the imported white cotton shirting was cheaper, its soft, smooth texture provided a new impetus for *Adire* to meet both local and foreign tastes.

This caused a boom in *Adire* business and more entrepreneurial efforts, making *Adire* a major local craft and also attracting buyers from all West Africa and beyond causing a peak in the demand for indigo/dyed fabrics for exports. (Areo, M.O. 2010)

As the study examines the topic, Exploring the Significance of *Adire* in Fashion: Promoting Yoruba Cultural Heritage Through Photography, sees the lens of the camera is an important and powerful tool not only for the revival of the worn cultural heritage, but also to document the current in order to display it when it becomes history.

Over the last decade, the camera lens has exploited the use of digital photography to eclipse analogue, to record *Adire* strategies and exhibitions in a variety of contexts. This paper examines how photography is disseminating new strategies for contemplating and predicting the history and future of *Adire* as indicated by Sholanke and Oyeyipo 2023.

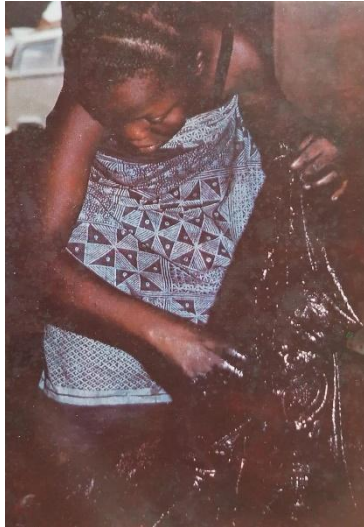


Fig. 1: A young Yoruba girl at a dyeing pit int the 70s
Source: Eicher,1976



Fig. 2: A Yoruba lady dyeing at the cottage level
Source: Authors

The photographs of the two dyeing experiences in figs 1 and 2 were taken about five decades apart. This attests to the fact that, *Adire* dyeing is a living craft among the Yoruba people. The rise of technology has arguably led to a backslide in the consciousness of cultural practices in the world. Photography, while a technological innovation, has been able to record and document these practices to remind current and future generations of the meaning and significance of their cultural heritage. This paper will therefore examine the part photography plays in promoting indigenous textiles.

Significance

Significantly, *Adire* has been widely acknowledged as contributing to the preservation of the identity of the Yoruba people, representing their cultural values, customs, and maintaining their unique characteristics. One element of Yoruba traditional culture, which has been developed and improved over time, is the indigo-dyed cloth known as *Adire* has gained mass popularity and is still celebrated beyond its place of origin. It's fascinating how cultural products such as *Adire* can transcend millennia of time and space, reaching and influencing many people represented by different social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

Adire is significant and a representation of the Yoruba people and their culture and artistic photography. There is also significance in the method of production, each having its unique association with a specific type of dye or technique used. There is a lot of cultural significance in the colors, designs of the *Adire* fabrics as art forms which can be used not only as a means to introduce the cultural roots of the Yoruba people to Nigerians, but it is a valuable marketing element of Nigeria to the rest of the world.

The place of *Adire* fabrics within Nigerian culture, its significance, and its influence on contemporary design and fashion are worth celebrating. The fabric has been utilized by various fashion designers, artists, and photographers who found it to be an invaluable source of inspiration. *Adire*, a traditional craft from Yoruba culture, has radiated throughout the world as

an art form that is proud of its ethnic roots. The beautiful patterns that represent Yoruba culture can be considered a treasure of world culture.

Literature Review Historical Origins

Adire, or traditionally resist-dyed cloths, such as *Adire eleko*, *Adire Oniko*, *Adire Alabere* and others, are important members of the Yoruba traditional textile tradition. Different *Adire* cloths came into existence as a result of the various resist dye techniques that were used to produce them. Areo, (2010) mentioned that the development of *Adire* designs and patterns in the early years of its production was influenced by Moroccan Uros, Brazilian Chita, and early European textile materials. By the 20th century, there was an increase in the use of machine-made textiles that quickly industrialized clothing and materials made by craftsmen. The different *Adire* textiles were primarily worn for special occasions such as engagements, traditional marriages, and funerals. It was important to wear *Adire* cloth during these periods to honour the special or important moments of celebration.

The indigo dye was a product that Yoruba used in dyeing *Adire*. The blue color derived from the indigo plant was believed by Yoruba to have incredible strength. Although Western Nigeria has the oldest known samples of indigo-dyed cloth in Nigeria, it was discovered in a cave near Ijebu Ode, the indigo shrub itself is not native to any region of Nigeria. It is believed to have been introduced to West Africa from Asia. Pre-colonial silk weavings from the area have been traced to Japan, and some brocatelle weavings to France. The earliest written reports of the indigo trade in Nigeria date to the later part of the fifteenth century, but archaeological evidence indicates that cloth with indigo tint has been worn in Nigeria since 300 A.D. (Adejoro,1972)

Before the advent of European textiles in Yorubaland, and indeed in many indigenous cultures across West Africa, the art of indigo-dyeing, *Adire*, and indeed tie-dye and batik, were practiced by women and have been for centuries. The traditional techniques used in producing *Adire*, resist-dyeing cloth and creating elaborate tie-dye patterns and vibrant textile designs have been in existence for centuries Eicher (1976).

Adire patterns also feature often in the collection of West African textiles, with four of the ten earliest textile samples from West Africa in the collection from the Museum of Anthropology in Berlin featuring indigo resistance patterns, one of which shows *adire*-style pattern.

In the 21st century, the new colorful *Adire* continues to meet fashion challenges and serves as an alternative to machine prints. With continually changing patterns, the new *Adire* appeals to fashion-conscious Yoruba people in both urban and rural areas. In Nigeria, one can still buy indigo-dyed *Adire Oniko* and *Adire Eleko* made by older women in Abeokuta and Ibadan, and by artisans at the Nike Center for Arts and Culture in Osogbo, where the artist Nike Davies-Okundaye trains students in traditional *Adire* techniques (Olaloye, 2017)

However, the new multicolored *Adire* utilized simple technology and became a backyard industry, so that the markets were filled with the new *Adire*. The modern form of cheaply produced *Adire*, dubbed *Kampala* because it became popular at the time of the *Kampala* Peace Conference to settle the Biafra War in Nigeria, was manufactured by individuals with no prior knowledge of dyeing—farmers, clerks, petty traders, and the unemployed (Picton, 1995).

Traditional Techniques of *Adire* Production

Starch Resist Pattern: Cloth decorated using starch made from cassava flour to resist the indigo dye was known as *Adire Eleko*. The starch was applied to only one side of the cloth, leaving the other side plain blue. The use of starch allowed for a greater variety of patterns. The starch could be applied through a stencil or painted freehand onto the cloth.

Hand Painting Technique. Hand painting was probably the most time-consuming method of producing *Adire*. In the olden days, women painted using chicken feathers, the midrib of a palm leaf, or a matchstick to create different thicknesses of line. Hand-painted cloths were usually divided into squares or rectangles which were then filled with a variety of patterns.

The main center of production for hand-painted cloth was the city of Ibadan. The city itself was celebrated in one of the common patterns known as '*Ibadan dun*', meaning "Ibadan is good" in Yoruba. language. The pattern takes its name from a square in particular that shows the pillars of Mapo Hall at Ibadan. (Eicher 1976)

Contemporary Techniques of Making *Adire*

1. **Twisting Technique:** Twisting technique, (*elelo*), which involves twisting the fabric to be dyed from its two ends along the entire length.
2. **Pleating Technique:** (*Sabada*) is a versatile technique capable of producing many variants and involves accordion pleating of the fabric and tying it at intervals along the length before dyeing.
3. **Clamping Technique:** This technique, which evolved by the end of the last millennium, involves clamping layers of accordion-pleated fabric between a set of wood or metal clamps. The projecting ends of the clamps are then secured tightly with raffia or any suitable thread before dyeing. It was dubbed 'Awilo' after the popular Togolese Musaka musician, Artist of the Year 2020, 'Awilo' Lugomba. (Omoleye, 2023)
4. **Knotting Technique:** This is a simple method involving overhand knots at intervals along the length of the fabric, which is then secured with raffia/rope prior to dyeing.
5. **Torofonkale Technique:** (three-pence- scattered all over the house), is a machine-stitched pattern resulting in straight rolls of white patches.
6. **Ogosofin technique:** a pattern consisting of squares filled with different varieties of vertical, horizontal, and crisscross lines, and at times tiny circles in concentric arrangement stitched within one of the squares. This is also known as '*Ikorita*, the meeting of the roads'.
7. **Oloparun technique:** (bamboo form) is bold straight parallel lines covering the whole length of the fabric.
8. **Onisuga or iyo oyinbo technique:** (sugar cubes) comprises machine-stitched cubes.
9. **Alaale technique:** (floor pleated), is made of tiny straight lines arranged closely together.
10. **Sunsun technique:** (squeezed pattern), comprises tiny stitches producing an overall speckled dyed effect.

***Adire* in Contemporary Fashion**

While the history, patterns, and processes of *Adire* have been widely documented by scholars, there is a noticeable gap in the exploration of their place and role in the fashion industry and external societies from a contemporary viewpoint. It is against this background that this section x-rays some relevant theoretical literature to situate the argument for the rejuvenation of *Adire* making and wearing in Yoruba communities and beyond. This is especially so considering the contemporary fashion industry landscape in which Nigerian designers are making waves the world over. Using *Adire* -inspired fabrics offers a veritable source of limitation for contemporary fashion designers from Yoruba and non-Yoruba societies across the globe.

Also the phenomenal resurgence in popularity of *Adire* has become heightened in fashion, especially African and European fashion scenes and has blossomed the use of *Adire* fabrics onto the runway, featured in fashion exhibitions, magazines, as well as made the fabrics a regular statement in everyday wear for all age-groups. As noted by Omoleye, (2023) major fashion houses such as Duro Olowu, Deola Sagoe, Tiffany Amber, Lanre da Silva and, surprisingly, Italy's Salvatore Ferragamo have introduced *Adire* into their collections at one time or another. *Adire* has taken center stage in fashion shows not only in Nigeria, but also in other nations of the world.



Fig 3: A young Yoruba lady on a runway in a fashion show.

Source: Authors

As seen in Figure 3, *Adire* is now used by young ladies during fashion shows and on the runway. It features in fashion exhibitions and is documented in fashion magazines. *Adire* fabric has become a regular fashion statement for almost all age groups within the Yoruba community and beyond.

Photography as a Medium for Cultural Promotion

Art is an important part of human existence that has continued to evolve as a record of the past and a lens for critical assessment. As such, photography is a form that has varied applications within society. One significance of photography is that it helps in promoting cultural heritage due to its ability to tell stories about people, places, and things. Photography has been used mainly as a means of preserving people, places, and cultures for future reference (Adeoye 2017).

It is on this note that photography practitioners have forged space for themselves as important partners within the promotion of cultural heritage. A striking fashion image does not only captivate the current expression and communication but also makes you view the image. It is the essential element that creates the visual interest in such a manner that it repulses

boredom. A valuable tool in shaping our lives, perceptions, and images, photography is a public art and the most significant visual art and essential means of providing information and the quickest method to inform people about the physical environment, monuments, customs that an individual may never visit to see.

This paper has chosen to use photography as a medium for recording and promoting Yoruba culture with a particular emphasis on *Adire*. This is because the attire of a people exposes many things about them as it is part of people's identity. Photography is the fastest means to promote a particular culture within and outside a country. Photography gives an image a voice, personality, and character. A photo does not only captivate the current expression and communication but also makes you view the image (Adeoye, 2006).



Fig. 4: A young Yoruba lady carrying a Tote bag made of *Adire*: A contemporary use of *Adire*

Source: Authors



Fig. 5: A young Yoruba lady in a modified iro and buba style made of *Adire*

Source: Authors



Fig. 6: A young Yoruba lady in casual outfit made of *Adire*

Source: Authors

Figure 4 shows a lady carrying a Tote bag made of *Adire*. It is another contemporary way of using *Adire*; Batik design. Figure 5 is a picture of a young Yoruba lady dressed in *Adire*. The style of the *Adire* is contemporary, made using the batik technique and sewn in a modern way. The outfit consists of a blouse and a long skirt, designed in a stylish form that complements her slim frame. You can also see her classic headgear. All these features portray her as a proud Yoruba lady in *Adire*. Figure 6 reveals a young lady wearing shorts and a top made of *Adire*. The color combination of yellow, white, and green makes it superb. She looks sweet and happy, confident in herself and in her casual *Adire* outfit.

Role of Photography in Cultural Preservation

In the context of this study, the authors recognize photography as an important medium of preservation and cultural documentation, especially taking into consideration the impact of different external cultures with the Yoruba culture. Yoruba culture, with its deep-rooted values, can be lost over time and this may have an adverse impact on future generations who are not exposed to these cultural values and ways of life. The documentation of *Adire* artisans helps in capturing the knowledge, skills, and techniques used in the production of *adire*. This is helpful in assisting future generations who would like to be trained in the art of *Adire* production.



Fig. 7: A group of young Yoruba girls tying different designs of the old Adire eleko



Fig. 8: A singer in action wearing a flare skirt made of Batik design
Source: Public Domain

In Figure 7 above, we can see the picture of young Yoruba ladies with *Adire* wrappers tied around their chests. This was documented and has remained a fashion statement for over 40 years, and we can still see it today. The spirit continues, as Adire artisans help capture their knowledge, skills, and techniques in the production of Adire. Figure 8 attests to this. In Figure 8, we can see a group of *Adire* producers proudly displaying their products. *Adire* remains a strong phenomenon among the Yorubas. In the context of Yoruba society, photography is a relevant and powerful medium that is capable of capturing values, norms, and ways of life of the people. Photography as a powerful historical tool that has helped in preserving the past, present, and future cultural heritage of a society. Similarly, has noted Adeoye 2006, that photography enables the creation of social memory and helps in bringing responsible attention to people in discussing, recognizing, and honoring the roles and contributions of lifestyle and events that are unique to different cultural groups.

As a genre of photography, documentary photography is an important medium that can be employed to document religion, cultural practices, and secular events. It amplifies the importance of cultural preservation, knowledge dissemination, and inculcation of values. Photography has been recognized to serve as a cultural tool in different societies worldwide. It is considered to be important in preserving the past, present, and future cultural heritage of a society (Adeoye, 2006)

Intersection of Adire, Fashion, and Photography

Nigeria's fashion designers are using *Adire* to make their mark in African and global fashions. In fact, African countries have realized that when their young designers integrate themselves into global fashion, the world will know Africa. To create a sense of pride, the designers integrate colorful traditional fabrics into their designs.



Fig. 9: A Yoruba woman draping a big shawl made of Batik on her shoulder
Source: Public Domain



Fig. 10: A group of artisans producing different Adire designs at the cottage level
Source: Authors

Figure 9 shows a Nigerian contemporary singer. The emphasis is on the full wrapper (as shawl) made of *Adire* that she drapes over her shoulder. This design is made of *Adire Eleko*. It shows that artists and people from all walks of life use *Adire*. Figure 10 shows another Nigerian singer. While her vibe is noticeable, the emphasis is on her skirt-a full flare skirt made of colorful *Adire*. It is a beautiful sight at a musical concert.

Adire designs celebrate events that are important and significant to the Yorubas. In Nigeria, as cited by Omoyele, (2023) Fasuyi and Jemide are visually documenting *Adire* with photography. Fasuyi, owner of Demas Fasuyi Enterprises, specializes in *Adire* and Batik photography without showing the faces of those wearing the designs. Jemide works with their clientele's consent, and the subjects are typically people's heads rather than faces.

Adire is used not only in Nigeria but also outside the country. Some of the prints may be made in Nigeria or by Nigerians in other environments, yet they are not always recognized as part of the creative vision behind the showcased looks. Even photographers and bloggers whose works are featured on fashion platforms do not necessarily reference *Adire* by name. "*Adire* in Fashion" aimed to address these issues through photographic documentation and education. (Omoyele2023)

As an expression of identity, the symbol and importance of dress among the Yoruba is significant in determining individual roles and status within and outside of their ethnic enclave. *Adire*, which means 'Adi and re which means tie and dye, can therefore be seen as a means of communication. One can then say that the concept of dress amongst the Yoruba embodies symbols of identity. Dress and appearance can also be seen as resources for the manipulation of identity (Hughes2022).

Photographic Expressions of *Adire*



Fig 11: A young boy wearing a bow tie and a waist coat made of Batik design.

Source: Authors



Fig. 12: A young Yoruba proudly displaying her beautiful dress made of *Adire*.

Source: Authors



Fig. 13: A Yoruba man in shirt made of Batik design with a matching cap

Source: Authors

The young boy in Figure 11 poses proudly in *Adire*. In the picture, the bow tie is made of *Adire*, and the waistcoat is also made of *Adire*. It is another contemporary and fashionable way of using *Adire*. The young girl in Figure 12 proudly spreads out her beautiful *Adire*, showcasing its lovely pattern and design. She is wearing sneakers and a stylish hairstyle to match her elegance. And proud of her heritage. The young man and a young boy in Figure 13 are both confident in their attire. Their bow ties and waistcoats are made of *Adire*. With their pose, they command confidence and are proud in their *Adire* outfits.



Fig. 14: Beautiful throw pillow made in *Adire*
Source: Adire Lagos Ecobank 2024



Fig. 15: Nigerian Flag wrapped in *Adire*
Source: Adire Lagos Ecobank 2024



Fig. 16: Nigerian youths wearing contemporary styles made of Batik
Source: Adire Lagos Ecobank 2024

Figure 14 is a display from “Adire Lagos, Ecobank 2024” when Ecobank held an exhibition on *Adire*. The throw pillows and batik designs all reflect especially the rich Yoruba culture of *Adire*. Figure 15 reveals the map of Nigeria wrapped in *Adire* dyed with the colour green, while the map itself is in white, depicting the green-white-green. It was displayed as an exhibit when Nigeria celebrated one of her Democracy Days. What a national identity. Figure 16 shows the picture of a male and a female. The male is energetic and proud of his *Adire*, which is a unique type where wax is used to inscribe on the fabric. The female is wearing a replica of the old *Adire Eleko*.



Fig. 17: Love for *Adire* fabrics is beyond local boundaries.
Source: Adire Lagos Ecobank 2024



Fig. 18: A Yoruba woman in *iro* and *buba* made with *Adire*
Source: Authors



Fig.19: A man and his boy wearing bow ties and waist coats made of Batik
Source: Authors

The man in Figure 17 is from a different cultural background. He is wearing an *Adire* top looking confident and happy during the Ecobank Nigeria exhibition in 2024. This is a testament that *Adire* is being appreciated beyond local boundaries. The woman in Figure 18 could be simply referred to as a lover of *Adire*. At a close look, even the throw pillows near her feet are made of *Adire*. The *Adire* design is bold and sharp, with a solid white and black color combination. It is a tie-and-dye type of *Adire*, sewn in the conventional but contemporary Yoruba style of *Iro* and *Buba*. The scholar in Figure 19 is wearing a cap and a top made of *Adire*, a timeless shirt design for men. All these people show interest and

confidence in their cultural heritage, and the pictures are documented through photography so that the younger and future generations can have a glimpse of it.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted that granting *Adire* its pride of place and ensuring that it flourishes not only enriches fashion education knowledge and professional practice but also ensures that cultural heritage is promoted and revitalized. Furthermore, encouraging cross-pollination of ideas among photographers and *Adire* artisans will present contemporary possibilities by breaking constraints to generate more diverse and attractive *Adire* designs (Hughes2022).

Adire stands on its own two feet and has been able to compete commercially, albeit in a small way, and has been able to carve an enviable niche for itself within the international market. According to a fashion expert, "People buy fashion because they want somebody to talk about them. They want status and glamour... not just a piece of garment." Thus, we emphasize that simply promoting popular fashion is not the objective, but a strategic branding and entrepreneurial focus on the construction of nationality for Nigerians. (Akinrujomu,2022)

Recommendation

This paper recommends that, forthwith at all levels of *Adire* production and use, regularly documentation of *Adire* products and activities through photography should be a priority, in order to develop a wide database that will help upcoming *Adire* producers and fashion designers trace the evolution of *Adire* production and use to appreciate its cultural value and indigenous knowledge of this Yoruba craft.

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