

Reimagining *Adire* Motifs: Adapting Yoruba Traditional Designs for Sustainable Fashion

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Abstract

The world at large is going through existential repositioning, from crude to technology, from manual to automation; this is the norm in all facet of human endeavor in which Adire fabric is a part. As Yoruba traditional dyed textiles, it has become imperative to chat a new course into concept of motif generation of the aged-long craft. To this end, this study aimed to achieve this feat through studio exploration and qualitative method. The population consists of ten (10) Adire designers, while ten (10) samples were purposefully selected with 24 samples of motifs for adaptation. The study employs questionnaire and participant observation to obtain data and analyse through simple percentage formula by numerically converting data for statistical rating. The studio exploration involves stages of activity; Adire motifs reconstruction, copying concept and adaptation resulting to eighteen (18) new motifs of polychromatic colour rendition. The finding reveals that, the new set of motifs are not characteristic of usual blue-indigo hue which can best be described as innovative adaptation as a better descriptor of practices that transform fashion trend in the 21st century for sustainability.

Keywords: Reimagining, *Adire* Motifs, Adaptation, Yoruba Traditional Design, Sustainable Fashion

Introduction

The concept of adapting knowledge has been a key tool to innovative creation and novel ideas. The reuse, copying, imitating and remixing existing idea is not uncommon to fashion practice everywhere in the world. With the advent of internet and digital platform recently, it appears these practices have found their way limitlessly in design making. Adapting knowledge from the original one is viewed as academic plagiarism which Gu and Brooks (2008) stated that it conveys a very

strong sense of disapproval. For instance, in motif generation, a designer may combine and remove some parts of original motif to evolve a new motif. In fact, the result may however transverse beyond the original motif consequent upon acceptability. *Adire* motifs are Yoruba traditional visual artistic expressions and symbolic surface designs that are found on *Adire* fabric. The motifs are products of *Aladire* (*Adire* designer) thinking which is greatly influenced by their history, legends, myths, proverbs, folklores, and deep observations of their natural environment and all of which are traditional decorative symbols on *Adire* fabric (Areo and Kalilu, 2013).

Perani, Fred and Smith as observed by Areo and Kalilu, (2013) declare 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”. Adeoti (2011) remark that, Yoruba from time immemorial have a lay down principles and standard codes to generate motifs without recourse to design principles. For instance, in the drawing of human figure, Yoruba often represent the head disproportionately bigger than the rest of the body (Adeoti, 2011). This does not reduce their draughtsmanship in anatomical representation, instead the rendition through this style is a cosmological belief attached to the head as a seat of power over the entire body. The same style is applicable to design generation which are often seen in total abstraction but symbolic of cultural phenomenon and can be explained through deep proverbs and metaphors by those who are vast in the interpretation. For example, a Yoruba proverb “opolopo alangba lo da nu de le, a o mon eyi ti inu n run”. This translates as “many lizards lie flat bellied, no one knows the ones with stomach ache” is visually illustrated in a motif titled *Alangba berekete* (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Alangba bèrèkète (Fat Lizard)
Source: Adeoti, A. (2023)

The image of the lizard is rendered in a rotunda shape which is not realistic rendition of a lizard at least viewing from principle of drawing perspective Adeoti (2011). Again, the nature of Yoruba proverbial linguistics to depict objects, conditions, and circumstances must be observable (Sotunde, 2016) to equate the linguistic emphasis on the visuals by the artist in motif generation so as not to cause collateral damage on the motif.

Adeoti (2013), re-echoed by Areo and Kalilu (2013) state that, pattern and motif application are artistically inherent in the production process of *Adire (Adire Eleko)*. Many of such motifs have names and titles to recognize them while meaning is interpreted within the context of dyer's understanding (Ojelade, Bashir and Oyeniya, 2018). The meaning may however not directly interpret the design visually due to unique and peculiar nature of Yoruba style mentioned earlier.

However, the world has become a global village, and culture evolves in true dynamic nature of evolution (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). Hence, the repositioning of *Adire* motifs in tandem with the 21st century trend is a cause in the right direction. The repositioning was brought to the fore by remixing original motifs to generate an adapted motifs for design purpose of all sorts.

Objectives

- i. To find out what inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs;
- ii. To generate new set of motifs suitable for *Adire* fabrics through adaptation from the original motifs

Research Questions

- i. What inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs?
- ii. In what way can set of motifs suitable for *Adire* fabrics be generated?

Methodology

The study is qualitative research approach using ethnographical survey, studio exploratory, and descriptive method. The identity of *Adire* motifs was revealed through ethnographical survey approach as exemplified by Owoeye (2017). There were studio activities during motifs reinvention from *Adire* design which was made possible through studio exploratory.

Population of the Study

The study population consists of ten (10) local dyers from Osogbo (4), Abuja (2), Ede (2) and Ibadan (2).

Samples and Sampling Technique

This study employed purposive sampling technique to select ten (10) local dyers

Instruments for Data Collection

The study employed questionnaire and participatory observation to collect data regarding what inspire the type of motifs used on the fabric. Meanwhile, the use of digital camera and video recording were made possible to record images of *Adire* motifs.

Method of Data Analysis

Qualitative approach was used to interpret objective 1, with descriptive analysis having collected photograph of *Adire* images from both primary and secondary sources. Objectives one (1) was interpretatively analysed using simple percentage formula to find out what inspire the type of motifs used by the craftsmen on the *Adire* fabric being responses through questionnaires. While objective two (2) was purely studio exploratory and participant observation technique rooted in ethnographical background.

Presentation of Results

There are eleven (11) question specimen attached in the questionnaire which shall be analysed with regard to the research questions and objectives of this study.

Objective i: Find out what inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs

Table 4.1: Frequent interactions with the customers

Data frequency and percentage distribution showing the most likely sources of inspiration behind the artists' choice of messages (n=10)

S/N		SA F (%)	A F (%)	D F (%)	SD F (%)	U F (%)
Option Statements						
What inspire Adire designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs						
1.	Frequent interactions with the customers	4 (40%)	2 (20%)	2 (20%)	2 (20%)	0 (0%)
2.	Viewing of landscape, hills, mountain and rivers	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	1 (10%)
3.	History, culture, poetry, folklore and myths	6 (60%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)
4.	Peace of mind, intuitive knowledge and dream	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	0 (0%)
5.	Sculpture and paintings in the shrine	1 (10%)		1 (10%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)
6.	Designs from the existing fabric	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	70 (0%)	2 (20%)
7.	Imagination, creative skills and cognition	5 (50%) 3.67	4 (40%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
8.	Poetry, proverbs and incantation	3 (30%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	2 (20%)	0 (0%)
9.	Spiritual and divine intervention	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	8 (80%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
10.	Copying from design books	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	80 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11.	Commissioning artists to produce motifs	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)

Table 4.1 above shows that, 40% of the 4 respondents strongly agreed to the first option. Two respondents forming 20% agreed, while 20% of the respondents disagreed. Meanwhile, 2

respondents representing 20% strongly disagreed. The implication is that, *Adire* designers obtain inspiration for the type of motif used as decorative designs from frequent interaction with their customers. On the second statement option, presents viewing of landscape, hills, mountain and rivers inspires *Adire* designers to the type of decorative motif, One respondent who strongly agreed and another 1 agreed respectively to the question representing 10%, while 20% of the respondents disagreed supported by 5 respondents representing 50% who strongly disagreed. Meanwhile, 1 respondent was undecided representing 10%. It implies that *Adire* designers are not inspired by viewing landscape, hills, mountain and rivers. The option of history, culture, poetry, folklore and myths inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs presents 6 respondents who strongly agreed to the question representing 60%, while 2 respondents representing 20% agreed. In contrary, 10% of the respondent disagreed and supported by yet another 1 respondent representing 10% who strongly disagreed. This implies that, that history, culture, poetry, folklore and myths inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs.

On the option that, peace of mind, intuitive knowledge and dream inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. In this case, 3 respondents strongly agreed to the question representing 30%, and aligned by another 2 respondents representing 20% who agreed, while 30% of the respondents disagreed and backed by 2 respondents who strongly disagreed representing 20%. This means that, findings are split between the respondents, which inferred that, opinion are divided as to ascertain, peace of mind, intuitive knowledge and dream as inspiration for *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. Option 5 presents 1 respondent who strongly agreed to the question, representing 10%, while 80% of the respondents disagreed. 1

respondent representing 10% strongly disagreed. This means that, majority of the respondents declined to the fact that sculpture and paintings in the shrine inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. On designs from the existing fabrics inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. 1% of the respondents disagreed, and 7 respondents, representing 70% strongly disagreed. 2% of the respondents are undecided. This reveals that, designs from the existing fabrics are in no way source of inspiration for *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. Option 7 shows imagination, creative skills and cognition inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. Five respondents making 50% of population strongly agreed, 4 respondents representing 40% agreed, and 1% of the respondents disagreed. From the table above, it is evident that imagination, creative skills and cognition are inspirations for *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs.

On poetry proverbs and incantations inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. It signifies 30% of the respondents who strongly agreed, another 3 respondents, representing 30% agreed to this assertion. Meanwhile, 2 respondents making 20% of the population disagreed and 20% of the respondents strongly disagreed. This proved that poetry, proverbs and incantations inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs.

Option 9 indicates whether spiritual and divine intervention are sources of inspiration. One respondent representing 10% strongly agreed to this assertion, and another one respondent, representing 10% agreed, while eight respondents making 80% disagreed meaning that, spiritual and divine intervention do not inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. On whether copying from design books inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. This assertion was disagreed by 8 respondents, making 80% and 2

respondents representing 20% strongly disagreed. This means that, *Adire* designers are not inspired by copying from design books for the type of motif used as decorative designs. Lastly, this option shows if commissioning artists to produce motifs inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. Five respondents, representing 50% disagreed, and 4 respondents, representing 40% strongly disagreed. This means that, commissioning artists to produce motifs does not inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs.

Objective 2: To generate new set of motifs suitable for *Adire* fabrics through adaptation from the original motifs

Materials: Pencil, sketch pad, eraser (soft rubber), cutting knife, brush/es, gouache paints, cardboard, measuring scale, French curves, computer, drawing board, water-tape, water, scanned machine, CorelDraw application, digital printing machine, art-cards.

Studio Exploration and Procedure

Stage 1: The original motifs were directly redrawn using pencils inside sketchpad. This was possible through picture (jpeg) copies of *Adire motifs* and were enlarged enough by photocopying machine to enhance visibility. The drawings were manipulated by removing some elements from one motif and remix with the other to create a new form. This process continues until desired results were achieved.

Stage 2: Manual application of colour paint was done on the motifs. The finished drawings were mounted and pasted on a sizeable drawing board using water-adhesive tape. Gouache colour paint was thickly prepared and applied layer by layer to bring out various colour formations.

Stage 3: After the painting, the motifs were digitally scanned for onward manipulation through CorelDraw application in order to achieve precision and accuracy, while computer application was used to bring out coloured versions. It must be mentioned that, some of the motifs were titled after much intellectual and rigorous debate with the *Adire* designers. A total of new set of eighteen (18) motifs were generated which are displayed below:

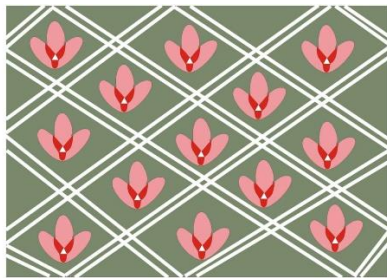


Fig. 2. *Ire oko* (Harvest)

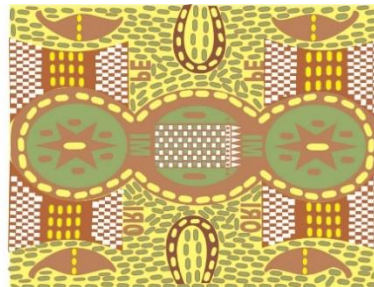


Fig. 3. *Idinleke* (Fortune)



Fig. 4. *Ile-ola* (Wealthy house)



Fig. 5. *Eru jeje* (Fearful)



Fig. 6. *Ile-owo* (House of money)



Fig. 7. *Ore ki yo re* (Friendship)

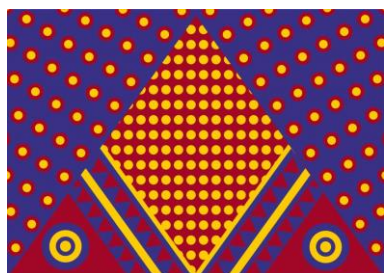


Fig. 8. *Agbede meji*
(Between heaven and earth)



Fig. 9. *Se jeje* (Be careful)



Fig. 10. *Aye dun* (Sweet life)

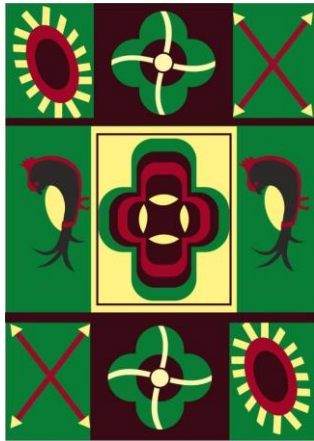


Fig. 11. *Ori la ba bo*
(Head should be appeased)



Fig. 12. *Ola* (Wealth)



Fig. 13. *Ife okan*
(Heartily love)



Fig. 14. *Abiyamo*
(Motherhood)



Fig. 15. *Ominira* (Freedom)

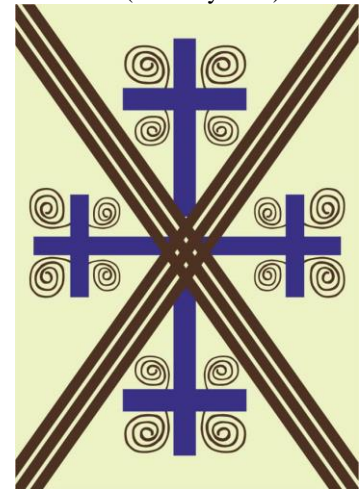


Fig. 16. *Ona iye* (Breakthrough)

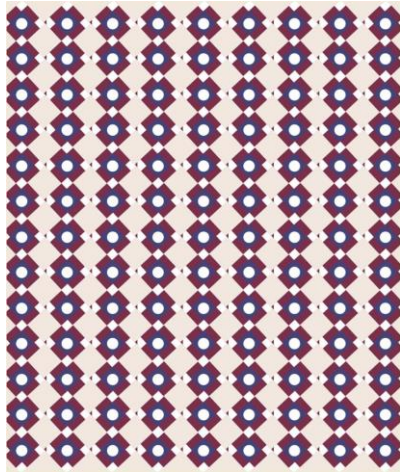


Fig. 17. *Agbajo owo*
(Cooperation)



Fig. 18. *Omo laso*
(Child is cloth)

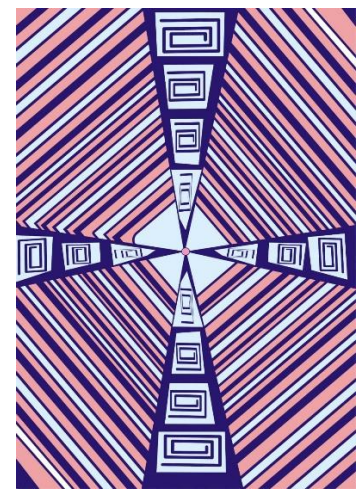


Fig. 19. *Inu jin*
(Stomach is deep)

Discussions

Based on the objective one of this study, which states to find out what inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. In table 4.1 option one, majority holds that, frequent interactions with the customers do inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. It was observed that, Interactions with the customers sometime influence and impose choice of patterns, causing clash of interest between the intention of the designer and customers' dictates.

In the option 2, viewing landscape, hills, mountain and rivers as an inspiration to *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs did not scale through. It was noted that, though the option do inspires some other artists especially painters but contrary is the case in this context, and the view of Georges Braque by Wadley (1970) is in concordance to this submission. He argued that when artist paints landscape for instance, there is no doubt that the serenity of such landscape may have inspired the artist. Option 3 presents history, culture, poetry, folklore and myths inspires

Adire designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. Considering majority of respondents who positively responded, hence, the specimen is accepted. A mere glance at some of *Adire* designs for instance, the visual culture embraces some of the contents in the questionnaire. For example, the motif titled ‘*Agbole*’ (Compound), *Fitila* (Traditional lamp) and *Adé* (Crown) are all objects of culture, hence they inspires the *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. This view was upheld by Nike Okundaye, a Yoruba textile designer who says she is being inspired by the Yoruba mythology in her textile works (Agbo, 2020).

Option 4 presents inspiration, peace of mind, intuitive knowledge and dream as inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. There was a division in opinion between the strongly agreed, agreed and strongly disagreed as well as disagreed respondents. The finding revealed that, since there is split decision hence the question is null, In contrary, opinion of Sally Uwechue-Mbanefo, a former Director General of Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) (This Day News Paper, 2018) is in tandem with the option “peace of mind” when he was asked in an interview what inspires her to paint? She said:

“What inspires me is peace of mind, she says, adding, if I have peace of mind, you can see the different aspects of art. Love also inspires me. Peace of mind. I do landscapes with still life drawing. You can see from my works that it is not just landscapes but my works are also about my life when I was in Europe”

Majority of respondents declined to the fact that sculpture and paintings in the shrine inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs in option 5. So also, designs from the existing fabric inspires *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs in option 6 was met with stiff opposition. Option 7 has it that imagination, creative skills and cognition inspire

Adire designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. It is not surprising realising these responses because, power of artistic rendition actually lies in imagination, creative skills and cognition as Pablo Picasso in Wadley (1970) admits. Option 8 reveals that, poetry, proverbs and incantations inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. In favour of this assertion, above the average respondents positively supported. It was found out that, some of the motifs in *Adire* fabrics actually reflect poetry and proverbs. It was noted by Adeoti (2011) that, the “partitioned patterns are usually found combined in sequence laid down by tradition, and explained with a deep custom of proverbs and myths in Yoruba literature”. For instance, a motif titled *Sèkèrè* (Maracas) is impregnated with proverbial codification. Hence, Yoruba saying “*Sèkèrè o se fopa lu, jagun jagun ko se fo’ba we*” (one cannot beat maracas with stick, and a warrior is in no comparison to a king). Apart from the obvious function of maracas as musical instrument, it is also used as an object in proverbial contents with camouflaging meaning. That is why Sotunde (2016) remarked that, “...proverbs as a distinct linguistic heritage of the Yoruba whose social and spiritual life is reflected in proverbs”.

In option 9, spiritual and divine intervention as source of inspiration do not inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs with popular responses. This is in parallel reflection of the Yoruba philosophical life which, anchors human existence in spiritualism. The Yoruba believe in truism of divine intervention (Abimbola 1975), yet *Adire* designers are not inspired by this phenomenon. It was discovered from option 10 that, copying from design books does not inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. This is demonstrated by the majority of respondents who disagreed and strongly disagreed. The experiment conducted by

Okada and Ishibashi (2016) to investigate cognitive processes underlying creative inspiration using copying as a test in drawing is in contrast to this submission. It was established in that experiment that, copying could actually impact creative inspiration as the researchers submit. Irrespective of area of specialization in visual arts, drawing is fundamental, and this is certainly the basic element required by the *Adire* designers to excel in production. It is the view of this study that, though the *Adire* designers do not copy design, perhaps a trial can as well inspire and upgrade their creative skills in this direction, so far it has been established that copying is a game changer from the above experiment. Another finding was made in option 11 that, commissioning artists to produce motifs does not inspire *Adire* designers to the type of motif used as decorative designs. This was demonstrated by overwhelming 90% of respondents who contributed to this result.

In the objective two, new set of motifs were generated as adapted from the original *Adire* motifs. It is an established fact that, *Adire* pattern is monochromatic indigo-blue colour using indigofera plant (*Elu*). In this study, there was a shift to polychromatic approach in producing the new motifs. There were a lot of trial and errors in the development of new motifs generation among the *Adire* designers, and working with them revealed ever dynamic ethnographic products to justify the objective. Invention of new motifs takes cue from the existing *Adire* motifs where two or three motifs were combined together to create a new form. Some major elements were cropped from one motif, and combined with minor in another motif to form a new pattern. In some cases, conspicuous element from the original motif may be noticeable in the newly developed one, and this may form similarity, while some other ones are totally distinct from the original motif. For instance, a motif titled *Ile-ola* (Wealthy house) (fig. 4) and *Ile-owo* (House of money) (fig. 5) were

developed from *Adire* motif *Onitira* (Islamic document) (fig) with a striking resemblance supported by other design elements.

Conclusion

Adire motifs are cultural symbolic pattern of the Yoruba of the Southwest Nigeria which are used for surface decoration of their *Adire* traditional dyed textile. The motifs have meanings which are wrapped in proverbialism and metaphors. These motifs have evolved a new forms and contents in this study in tandem with 21st century fashion trend and sustainability. Equally, the study escalated various discussions around what actually inspires the type of motifs used by the designers, this with the view to educate intending textile designers of relevance of *Adire* motifs to their choice of career. Also, the study has oversimplified *Adire* motifs for fashion designers and textile design lovers who will have enormous choice of designs temFig. to create fashion of their desire.

Recommendations

1. The study informs fashion designers on the need to culturally sustain the indigenous designs for various designs of all sorts.
2. The government should as a matter of urgency create a preservation archives of indigenous designs Fig.s for future reference.
3. Future researches should be encouraged to include other ethnicities in Nigeria design landscape to develop and re-invent new forms of their traditional motifs for various uses i.e. *nsibidi*, *uli*, *arewa*, just to mention but a few.

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