Design of Fashion Accessories Using Akwa-Ocha Motifs and Symbols

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Abstract

Akwa-Ocha, which literally means white cloth, is basically an indigenous hand-woven cloth that is produced by the Aniocha people of Delta state. The cloth which contains surface decorative motifs and symbols is used for various festive occasions among the people. Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols and their functions reveal the people’s history, religion, and social behaviours. Nigerian traditional elements such as the Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols feature in the changing landscape in the design of fashion accessories in Nigeria. How has Akwa-Ocha responded to global consciousness in its application of fashion accessories? How well have the heritage, the motifs, and symbols on Akwa-Ocha functioned as carriers of cultural heritage and identity of the people? This paper therefore focuses attention on the use of Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories. The exploration of Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories for obvious reasons include creating an identity, checking the emphasis already placed on foreign fashion accessories, creating awareness and projecting one of Nigeria’s rich cultural heritages.

Key Words: Akwa-Ocha, motifs, symbols, fashion accessories, and cultural heritage.

Introduction

Nigeria is a country that is constituted of many ethnic groups. Each of these ethnic groups has rich surface decorative art and crafts traditions which have given Nigeria a place in world art. Some of these rich surface decorations appear on local cloths. However, one of the ways Nigerians exhibit their identities and heritage is through their
customized local cloths, but due to foreign influences, they are gradually losing their values. William (1993) affirmed that Nigeria, a country made up of rich and diverse cultural values is beginning to lose most of its cultural ideal especially through the adoption of foreign culture in the different media. Mimiko (2010) corroborated this view as he asserted that our cultural heritages have been watered down by western civilization. In fact, there has been more emphasis on the use of motifs and symbols that are alien to Nigeria in the design of modern creative purposes particularly fashion accessories without reference to Nigerian cultural environment. Along (2008) has rightly observed that an unfair share of Nigeria’s textiles and fashion business goes to foreign goods.

However, the neglect of Nigerian indigenous elements for the design of fashion accessories is particularly true of the surface decorative elements inherent in Akwa-Ocha hand woven cloth which is going into extinction due to so many factors. Its performance prosperities or various qualities in terms of weight and less soothing nature affects the comfort and suitability of the cloth for use as common clothing fabric. Again, the fabric is readily available in wrapper form and several of them are now used as souvenir. In addition, the fabric is woven by aging women as the younger ones unwilling to learn the trade. This development has necessitated the need to make some of the rich values inherent on the fabric such as its motifs and symbols represented as fashion accessories with the use of different forms of materials such as calabash, coconut shells, leather, raffia and beads. This will not only represent more of our cultural heritage elements in fashion accessories, but also create an identity, express national pride as well as preserve a valuable heritage, so that the efforts to develop the Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols by the women weavers will not go into extinction.

**Akwa-Ocha Motifs and Symbols**

The weavers’ perception of all aspects of life and nature and most notably, of ideas that reflect cultural aesthetics and taste of Aniocha culture is translated into visual form. These motifs and symbols are ideas drawn from plants, animals and birds, the cosmos and man-made objects that are of importance to the Aniocha people. More so, inscriptions that convey messages and past historical events involving the Aniocha people also form part of the designs on Akwa-Ocha. Ozue (2016) noted that most of the traditional cotton fabrics are drawn basically from nature and significant experiences that the Delta North people have passed through, thereby presenting it in form on folklore on the woven fabric. The motifs and symbols come in simple shapes and are not naturalistic, but stylized. Onochie (2003) explained that most of the motifs and symbols can be deciphered and their significance appreciated within the context of tradition and cultural values. Some design motifs and symbols in Akwa-Ocha are symbolic and their meanings are determined by their sources of inspiration. Nwosu (2016) observed that the communities, beliefs, idioms myths, proverbs, folklore, tradition and philosophy are put into consideration in the symbolical meaning of designs of Akwa-Ocha. He further noted that other design motifs are mainly for aesthetic values. Some of the motifs and symbols on Akwa-Ocha as presented in the tables below were combined in different design arrangements and finished off as fashion accessories.
1. Kpakpando: Star
2. Akangweose: Pestle
3. Nkpulu-Ego or Ego-Ayolo: Cowrie
4. Ije-Agwo: snake movement
5. Enyi: Elephant
6. Ejekom-be--loya: Going to the lawyer’s house
7. Ukoti: small metal knife
8. Mma-Eku: local knife
9. Ukwu-Efi: Cow leg
10. Ayolo-Eke: Python’s Skin
11. Okwa-Oji: Kola nut bowl
12. Nha or Nsha: Comb
13. Ugba-Afa: divination tray
14. Obo-Aka: Palm of the hand
15. Nkpopu: holes
16. Osikapa na Akpaka: rice and beans

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19. Step 20. Ukwu Onogbo or Ukwu-pussu: Pussy cat leg
27. Ogwu Azu: Fish Bone 28. Aziza: Broom
31. Akwukwo Akpu: Cassava leaf 32. Ifufu or Ototo: Flower

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Akwa-Ocha Motifs and Symbols in the Design of Fashion Accessories

In this study, the writer has attempted to establish that the emphasis already placed on foreign fashion accessories, and global fashion consciousness has necessitated the expansion of its utility values both in the area of material and technique. Okeke (1996) explained that the additive approach to fashion (use of foot wears, headgear, coiffure,
bangles, anklets, earring, necklaces, and beads) falls within the category. Since nothing has been done so far to adopt the Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories, this study also became imperative. There can be no doubt that the adaptation of Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols will help a great deal in the development and creation of a new trend in fashion.

The re-visitation of Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories anchors in both social semiotics and archetypal theories. Social semiotics theory as propounded by Leeuwen (2005), explained ways in which different aspects of the society combine to create meaning. He also viewed the collector’s culture of the past few centuries now as a very useful resource for artists, designers and other innovators. The present study supports Leeuwen’s argument and it is therefore, a tool with which to understand the re-visitation of surface decorative elements in traditional Akwa-Ocha for the design of fashion accessories. Again, the archetypal theory propounded by Jung (1919) laid emphasis on fundamental patterns and symbols which serve as a prototype from which other similar things are patterned. Traditional Akwa-Ocha woven cloth motifs and symbols can be viewed as a prototype from which other similar patterns can be formulated as exemplified in the fashion accessories presented in this paper.

**Materials, Methods and Design Process**

The process applied in making the fashion accessories is varied and the objects or materials are nominal and easy to come by. Combining materials and methods allowed wide latitude for the writers to use imagination and selection. In fact, adapting common materials and converting them into jewelries in representing the motifs and symbols derived from Akwa-Ocha is somewhat a challenging experience, and the jewelries so made are informal and formal, whimsical or elegant. With concern for the demands of function, weight and balance were highly considered in the use of materials such as coconut shells, calabash, fabrics, beads, raffia, cotton twine and copper wire as aforementioned.

The shapes of the fashion accessories place no limits to the imagination of the producer. Colours were incorporated by the use of brush and dying as luster finish achieved by vanishing. As custom made jewelries in necklace, bracelets, earrings as well as hand bags and shoes designed with indigenous elements adapted to contemporary setting, the progress takes a logical sequence from simple to a more complex design.

**Presentation and Analysis of the Fashion Accessories**

The jewelry contained in (Plate 1) is both a necklace and two earrings designed with Akwa-Ocha motifs which include Onwa (moon) Akangweose (local double-headed pestle) and Ejekomubeloya (going to the lawyer’s house). The necklace incorporates five small spherical pendants with a large one at the middle. They are linked together with a copper wire. The earrings are in two large spherical shapes. The manner of linking the shapes together is to avoid monotony. Again, the construction of the piece is accentuated by its highly polished surface resulting in jewelry that is simple and elegant. This piece was produced with coconut shell and it has all the qualities of jewelry and it is only after close examination that one becomes aware of the material used.
Plate 1: Necklace, Earrings and Ring  
**Artist:** Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
**Medium:** Calabash, Beads, Copper Wire and Acrylic  
**Size:** 32cm  
**Photograph:** Smith Osatohanmwen  
**Date:** 2016

The jewelry shown below in (Plate 2) is a necklace and earrings designed with the skillful combination of three *Obo Aka* (palm of the hand) motifs that form its pendant and earrings. They were produced with calabash and copper wire. Both the pendant and the two earrings incorporate the *Onwa* (moon) motif in spherical shape and in black colour. They are held together with a dark copper wire.

Plate 2: Necklace and earring  
**Artist:** Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
**Medium:** Calabash, Beads, Copper Wire and Acrylic  
**Size:** 31cm  
**Photograph:** Smith Osatohanmwen  
**Date:** 2016
Plate 3: Necklace and earring  
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
Medium: Calabash, Beads, Copper  
Wire and Acrylic Size: 31cm  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen  
Date: 2016

(Plate 3) above was produced mainly with a dark coloured stained calabash. The Akangweose (local double headed pestle) motif represents the shape of the main pendant while the Okala Isi-oji (half segment of the kola nut head) motif represents the adjoining pendants just as the two earrings were repeated several times as part of the pendants and as the earring. The main pendants contain an orange colour part and Akala (line) motif in three linear engravings. This was also repeated on the two earrings. The pendants of this jewelry were linked together with a beaded linear form.

The necklace contained in (Plate 4) was made of wood and designed in the shape of a reptile. The design of this piece appears somewhat sleek and complex as it incorporates motifs which include Ejekombeloya (going to the lawyer’s house) represented in three blue linear forms and Isi-oji (head of kola nut) which was represented in white beaded chevron shapes. The piece which was barely vanished was deliberate because if it had received a high vanish, much of its beauty would have been lost.

Plate 4: Necklace and Earrings  
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
Medium: Wood, Broach, Acrylic and Copper Wire  
Size: 33cm  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen  
Date: 2016
The structural pieces (Plate 5) are designed units of versatility, which can be worn as bracelets, used as curtain holders or displayed as ornaments. These bracelets fashioned with coconut shells have bands made of fabrics that contain overlay motifs painted in various colours. The bracelets were finished with light vanishing to give it a faint lustre effect.

Plate 5: Bracelets
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
Medium: Coconut Shell, Fabrics, Beads and Acrylic
Size: 36cm
Photograph: Smith osatohanmwen
Date 2016

The jewelry pieces contained in Plates 6, 7 and 8 are different types of necklaces that have basic similarities although they are each based on an individual approach to design. They were designed with calabash and copper wire. The repetition of each shape was done for duality of purpose, while the finishing of the calabash has reflections for greater brilliance resulting from qualitative of polishing. The repeat method adopted in the design was to create some form of balance. This approach becomes the definite character of each piece and it dictates the essential character of the forms of the jewelry pieces. The first jewelry contains three small shapes of calabash that form the pendants which incorporates patterns in colours of yellow, green and purple at the middle area in order to accentuate and minimize the plain areas and create contrast. The second jewelry has the shape of its central pendants and the two earrings derived from the Nkpulu-obi (physical heart) motif, while the adjoining pendants are represented with Onwa (moon) motif in rounded forms. The third has skillfully combined Kpakpando (star), three pendants as well as Onwa (moon) that were motif skillfully combined together. The pendants of the first necklace in calabash shapes are linked with a chain while the pendants of the other two are linked with copper wire.
There are other end use products or fashion accessories such as portable hand bags, purses and shoes designed in various shapes and patterned with various Akwa-Ocha motifs that were adapted to contemporary use. They are contained in (Plates 9, 10, 11, and 12).
Plate 9: Ladies’ Pouch  
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
Medium: Leather, Polyester Thread and Copper  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen  
Size: 23x28cm  
Date: 2016  

Plate 10: Ladies sandal and Bag  
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
Medium: Leather, Fabric, Broaches  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen  
Size: 23x28cm  
Date: 2016  

Plate 11: Appliquéd Leather Bag  
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
Medium: Leather, stones and Polyester Thread  
Size: 33x15cm  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen  
Date: 2016  

Plate 12: Shoppers Bags  
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa  
Medium: Digital Print on Paper  
Size: 61x39cm  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen  
Date: 2016  

### Conclusion

The various fashion accessories presented in this paper have shown that the re-visititation of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols used for their design is quite appealing and will have a far-reaching impact on the emphasis already placed in foreign fashion accessories. This phenomenon will also result into a conceptual outlook, create an identity and serve as an eloquent testimony to the continuing dynamism of the elements constituting this local cloth. More so, as the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols are declining, the need to diversify and advance their utility values of which has provided the platform for experimentation. Besides, the re visititation of *Akwa-Ocha* for the design of fashion accessories and critical analysis of the finished products brought about an
aesthetic vocabulary that communicate both the philosophical and sociological message of the Aniocha communities.

References


