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***Adire* in South-western Nigeria: Geography of the Centres**

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Abstract

Adire, the patterned dyed cloth is extant and is practiced in almost all Yoruba towns in Southwestern Nigeria. The art tradition is however preponderant in a few Yoruba towns to the extent that the names of these towns are traditionally inseparable with the Adire art tradition. With Western education, introduction of foreign religions, influence from other cultures, technique and technology, there is a shift in the producers of Adire, the training pattern, and even an evolution in the production centre. While Western education resulted in a shift from the hitherto traditional

apprenticeship method to the study of the art in schools, unemployment gave birth to the introduction of training drives by government and non governmental parastatals. This study, a field research, is an appraisal of the factors that contributed to the vibrancy of the traditionally renowned centres, and how the newly evolved centres have in contemporary times contributed to the sustainability of the Adire art tradition.

Key words: Adire, Geography, Centres

Introduction

The Yoruba are a properly clothed people. Nudity is an abomination in their culture and is synonymous with madness. They also lay emphasis on appropriateness of the dress for the occasion for which it is worn. The significance of cloth in the people's life is expressed in a vibrant textile industry and the multifarious usage of cloth. Their aesthetic appreciation is related to physical appearance, character and clothing of the individual. Consequently textile art tradition perhaps still remains the most decorative of all their artistic traditions. They are renowned for the production of both *Aso-Ofi*, the hand-woven prestige cloth and pattern-dyed cloth, *Adire*. Traditional dyeing with many indigenous plants as a vocation and art tradition especially indigo dyeing is a specialized art which has become a legacy of the Yoruba women, and a hereditary craft passed from mothers to daughters. Its importance in the area is demonstrated by the ubiquitousness of the practice everywhere even in the smallest villages.¹

Dyeing among the Yoruba is of two types; total-dyed cloth called *Amure*, without covering any part for dye resistance or pattern formation and *Adire* which involves creating patterns on the fabric through any of a variety of available techniques before immersing the cloth inside dye. Indigo still remains the oldest natural dyestuff of world textile tradition,² and with Tyrian purple, it is believed to predate the time of Moses³. Indigo is by far the most popular and widely used⁴, the favourite dye in indigenous Africa⁵, and is up to the 1960s when synthetic dyes were introduced the only dye used by the Yoruba dyers.

Boser postulates that West Africa is one of the greatest centres and "one of the most original" in the development of indigo worldwide, with that development occurring in Senegal, Sudan and the South-western Nigeria among the Yoruba⁶ who are still considered the "most passionate lovers of indigo" in West Africa⁷.

The source of the indigo dye are the many species of genus *indigofera* called *elu* among the people which are sometimes cultivated, but which often times grow wild throughout Nigeria. Of these varieties *indigofera tinctora* is the most commonly used because it produces a dark blue colour of great colour fastness. The name 'indigo' derived from Latin word 'indicum,' implying "from India."⁸ This however, does not imply that the plant was introduced into Yorubaland from India or any other place. The Yoruba's method of preparing the indigo leaves and the alkali medium, have been described in detail by Picton and Mack⁹ and Stanfield¹⁰ respectively.

Pattern dyeing in one or more patterns is found in most parts of Africa with the formation of patterns with small and large circles found among the Yoruba and generally throughout West Africa.¹¹ *Adire*, patterned or resist-dyed cloth is a popular industry in many Yoruba towns and the name is coined from two Yoruba words; '*Adi*', meaning 'to tie' and '*re*' which means 'to dye'. The name *Adire* therefore, identifies the particular cloth produced by the people and the process of its production. The name according to Carr¹² and Vol¹³ points to the cloth's origin or that which is tied and dyed, serve as a style designator and as a designation of the group of origin.¹⁴ identifying the culture, language, and an art tradition of the people¹⁵.

The origin of '*Adire*' or pattern dyeing according to Polakoff¹⁶ and Lenor Larsen¹⁷ can probably be traced to the numerous dyeing accidents that occurred centuries ago, this theory was repeatedly emphasized by Alfred Buhler in many of his Ciba review articles. Truly many of the methods of resist dyeing are so basic that they might evolve anywhere as a result of turning an accidental discovery into a technique. Hypothetically, the origin of *Adire* may be linked to the Yoruba considering the archaeological discovery in some Tellem burial caves of Mali.¹⁸ Among the archeological findings is a cap bearing the extant and popular *Osubamba* motif common in the *Adire* art of the Yoruba. This coupled with the fact that the Yoruba of Old Oyo kingdom exported their art across and beyond West Africa through trade, military activities and political dominance.¹⁹

Be that as it may and as rich as scholarship on *Adire* is, there is dearth of scholarly study of the geographical spread of its centres of practice. This is perhaps due to a general opinion that the cloth is "ordinary cloth for ordinary people," and therefore not worthy of the type of scholarly study that could be accorded *Aso Ofi*, the prestigious hand-woven cloth of the Yoruba. There are however some challenges militating against the *Adire*. First is the fact

that the cloth is bought as utility by different individuals who might end up using it at a location farther from the point of purchase. Second is the fact that the seller is usually not the producer of the cloth, and this poses the problem of identifying the sources and the artists of such cloths. Finally the buyer of an Adire piece is merely interested in the cloth for its aesthetic appeal and most times is not interested in where it was made or who the maker is. The foregoing problematic and challenges therefore make a study of the centres and the spread of Adire imperative.

Early explorers such as Mungo Park²⁰, Clapperton,²¹ Millson Alvan²² observed the existence of the cultivation of cotton in vast quantities among the Yoruba, the quality of which Alvan said was "well thought of in the Liveipool market" and existence of a vibrant weaving and dyeing traditions with a viable textile market dating back to at least the sixteenth century. Much as detailed as the observations of these explorers are, they all failed to mention other centres of Adire and dyeing practice apart from the ones they visited.

Johnson²³ in his historical study discusses extensively about various aspects of the people's life, and mentioned 'Elu', the popular indigo dye of the Yoruba, but did not discuss the centres of this important textile tradition. Other authors such as Boser-Sarivaxevanis²⁴, Adenaike²⁵ Perani²⁶, Aig-Imoukhuede²⁷ Barbour and Simmonds,²⁸ Stanfield,²⁹ Oke³⁰, Barbour³¹, Jackson³², and Akpata³³, Taylor³⁴ Larsen³⁵, Barkley³⁶, Oyelola³⁷, Bayfield³⁸, Beier³⁹, and Areo⁴⁰ have written series of articles on different aspects of West African textiles in general and *Adire* in particular. They have nonetheless done so severally without discussing the centres of its practice, and in the cases where the centres were mentioned, they are only cursory remarks about such centres, or that the study did not covering the developments covered by the period of this research.

The centres of Adire art tradition

Kalilu⁴¹ argues that need and challenges inspire creative ideas, and that access to materials is catalysts to the origin of art forms, while patronage determines the dimensions of practice and provenance of the arts. Kalilu's theory of the significance of need and access to materials as factors in the origin, provenance, and function of African forms becomes relevant here. This theory is applicable to the ubiquitousness of indigo dyeing among the Yoruba which may be partly because of the level of availability of indigo

plant in each area, and partly because of the different levels of distribution of the dyeing skill.

Cloth is also a motivating factor in the creation of new pattern. Cotton, the commonest and the raw materials of *Adire* canvas pattern grows easily and is cultivated in vast quantities among the people. Used in Edo kingdom of Benin as early as thirteenth century AD⁴², its existence in Africa has been traced back to at least five thousand years, with the manufacture of cotton cloth being in existence even before the advent of European travellers and explorers, whose reports included description of indigenous cotton cloths and cotton plants of the best quality and, which was grown alongside other food crops with little traded within the country as individuals planted and harvested their own.⁴³ Most scholars are also unanimous on the fact that the prototype for *Adire* was the dyed *kijipa*, woven by Yoruba women on the vertical upright loom, with its raw materials made from locally cultivated, handspun and hand-woven cotton.⁴⁴ In addition to the availability of cotton locally, the introduction of wider and softer cotton materials by British firms also aided *Adire* production.⁴⁵ In essence, four factors; access to material, need, the challenges from cheaper imported printed materials and prevalent unemployment in contemporary Nigeria, have been contributory to the dynamism of *Adire* and its spread to other centres across Yorubaland.

Certain notable and large Yoruba cities traditionally noted for *Adire* are Osogbo, Ibadan, Ede, Ondo and Abeokuta. There are several other centres, but they were either not as large or active or of international reckoning as the centres in the aforementioned five cities. Of all the centres, Osogbo is traditionally renowned as the home of indigo, and the “home of dyeing”; “*Osogbo ilu aro*” and the people are so good as dyers as to elicit the Yoruba saying “*Aro nbe l’Osogbo, omo eniyan ni mbe nile Ibadan*,”⁴⁶ It is Indigo that dominates Osogbo, while large human population dominates Ibadan. At the peak of the demand for indigo-dyed fabric for export, many *Adire* producers in Abeokuta had to take their cloth to Osogbo for dyeing, while its neighbouring town of Ede supplied Abeokuta dyers with indigo balls, *elu*⁴⁷.

Historically, *Adire* making was introduced into Abeokuta, a town founded in 1830 by, Egba settlers of Ibadan who returned to Abeokuta, after fleeing from the result of the nineteenth century civil wars. One of such early settlers was Balogun Coker Sowemimo. The remains of old dye pots at Sowemimo compound at Ita Baale, Olugbode, Ibadan attest to this.⁴⁸ Though the original

Egba dyers quickly imbibed this patterned dyeing tradition, they were however not very good at the beginning of the twentieth century,⁴⁹ but learnt quickly and by 1926, about 25% of the town's population was involved in *Adire* production, and by 1933, about 80% of the cloth trade in the town, was *Adire*.⁵⁰ With importation of different types of material, development of different techniques and technology of *Adire* production, Abeokuta currently takes the lead in *Adire* production, with wide varieties of *Adire* in Itoku market, and large number of the dyers, designers, and traders of *Adire* concentrated at Alake, Oke-Ona, Egba and Idomapa.

Traditionally, three centres were renowned for flourishing *Adire* production in Abeokuta. These were Kenta, Ijemo, and Igbein quarters. While the Igbein centre is no longer vibrant, production at Ijemo quarters is on the average but the Kenta quarters still produce high volume of *Adire*.⁵¹ This may be due to its proximity to the popular Itoku market which is popular for retailers *Adire* and sellers of materials of *Adire* production. Also, vibrant contemporary *Adire* centres using synthetic dyes can be found in the proximity of this market (plate 1). There is also a division of labour.



Plate 1: A flourishing dyeing centre in Abeokuta, photograph by Dr. Debo Areo, 2007



Plate 2: Adire designer in Abeokuta, photograph by Gbemi Areo, 2007

In this town; the designers create pattern on the cloth (plate 2). The dyers dye the cloth (plate 3). There are beaters who beat the cloth into a high sheen with a wooden mallet on a log of wood, and there are the retailers who sell the finished cloth to the populace.



Plate 3: Dyers in Abeokuta, photograph by Dr. Debo Areo, 2007.

The last fifty years have witnessed tremendous growth in *Adire* production in this town and this has turned the town into the real important centre of *Adire*.

This is due, among other factors to the versatility, creativity and dynamism of the designers' and dyers in designs innovation. So rich was their production at a time that Adire was nicknamed "pa'ran ti" meaning "leave velvet alone." An indication that considering the profusion of *Adire* designs in Itoku market in Abeokuta and Oje market in Ibadan, the people had no need of the imported velvet fabric of the period.

Adire is also practiced in Ede town. Their praise song linking them to *Iya Mapo*, the Yoruba goddess of creativity, who is revered as the protector and guardian of all female crafts and believed to be the first dyer points to Oyo, probably the Old Oyo kingdom as the source of their art.

Iya Mapo Atiba (2ce)
Iya Mapo atiba, iba re o, ki aro oja
Oloyo, Iya Mapo, ohun to 'se, gbesin
*Iya Mapo oo fi ebi pa omo re ri.*⁵²
Iya Mapo of Atiba (2ce)
Iya Mapo, I reverence you, may the dye produce well.
The owner of Oyo. Iya Mapo, this is an activity that earned
you the gift of a big horse.
Iya Mapo, you have never allowed your children to go
hungry.

Traditionally, the family compounds noted for indigo dyeing in this town are seventeen. Nine of them claimed to be the original practitioners. These are: Elerin, Kusi, Talafia, Akoda, Imam, Adogbe, Olateyin, Jagun Alaro and Akuaro. Other family compounds that learnt the art from these original practitioners families are: Babanla, Odomu, Alague, Jagun, Apena, Regba, Dawodu and Olukola.⁵³ Ede town which at the apogee of its *Adire* production, supplied indigo balls, *elu*, to Abeokuta dyers presently has only one traditional centre, Akoda dyeing centre still in operation with eight dyers aged between 50 and 80 years. No apprentice was even found at this centre (plate 4).

However, two contemporary centres using synthetic multicolour dyes and with skeletal services were found in the town. Each of these centres had an apprentice. Also, the patterns on the indigo dyed cloth found at the traditional centre were mainly machine stitched and a few with the popular circular motif of the Yoruba (plate 5).

Ibadan, as an *Adire* centre, was aided by the migration of people from many Yoruba towns into the town as a result of the internecine wars of the eighteenth century. These immigrants, specialists in different crafts, included dyers and other textile artists⁵⁴ who settled in different parts of the town. The blacksmiths settled in Beere,



Plate 4: Traditional dyer in Akoda compound Ede photograph by Dr. Debo Areo, 2007



Plate 5: Patterned cloth from Akoda dyeing centre in Ede. Photograph Dr. Debo Areo, 2007.

Eleta, Oja Oba, Agbede and Adodo quarters the ceramists in Odi Odeyale, the weavers in Oke Oluokun, Kudeti and Odinjo, dyeing compounds all over the city with concentration at Idi Aro. Cloth production ranked among the most vibrant craft industry in Ibadan during this period.⁵⁵ However, only a dyeing centre each was found in Idi Ayunre and Oje. No apprentices were also found at these centres.

Osogbo as earlier observed, is traditionally the home of indigo. Taiwo⁵⁶ mentions Balogun Kukenyo, Layiokun, and Oke Baale as major centres of indigo production, however of all the traditional dyeing centres for which Osogbo was renowned, only the Aka compound centre is still functional producing patterned indigo dyed cloth. Also contemporary adaptation of the *Adire Eleko*, the traditional paste resist *Adire*, into the batik version, which uses wax as a medium of resist, started in Osogbo in the Mbari Mbayo workshop organized by Suzanne Wenger, Ulli Beier and Georgina Beier in the 1960s⁵⁷. The town in contemporary times takes the lead in the production of quality batik yardages for domestic and aesthetic usages, with many centres such as the Nike Art Gallery owned by Nike Okundaye located in the town. At the centre, trainees engage in batik making, tie-dye, indigo dyeing and other art traditions (plate 6)



Plate 6: Trainees from Nike Art Gallery in Osogbo. Photograph by Gbemi Areo, 2007

Other contemporary Adire making centres in the town are; the Artist Cooperative run by David Osawe and the Heritage Gallery of Jimoh Buraimoh.

Eluyemi⁵⁸ in 1978 identified seven indigo dyeing centres in Ile-Ife. These are Olufi, Ogbongi, Orunto-Jaojo, Iredumi, Akui, Lukosi and Ogbon-Oya compounds. The centre at Orunto compound was patronized in the early to the middle 1980s by the undergraduates students of Fine Arts Department of University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University).⁵⁹ However no centre was found in Ile-Ife during this research, and the Orunto centre which was patronized by Areo up to 1987 is now occupied by a residential quarter. Few contemporary *Adire* makers in synthetic colours and modern techniques are however found in this town, amongst whom are products of the Osogbo Mbari Mbayo workshop of the 1960s and the Ori Olokun Art workshop established in 1969. Others are Richard Famoriyo a graduate of Nikky African Fashion and Textile Designing School Lagos, and products of Areo Margaret's Textile/Fashion Designing School Margareta Designs, Ife, of the late 80s into mid 90s.

Most of the traditional centres of *Adire* production were located in the Ogun, Oyo, and Osun states with the largest concentration in Abeokuta in Ogun state and Ibadan in Oyo state. Centres in Osogbo, Ikirun, Ede in Osun state, and Iseyin, Ogbomoso, and Oyo in Oyo state and Ayetoro in Ogun state are less concentrated.⁶⁰

Perani⁶¹ records that weavers and other artists moved from Oyo Ile at its collapse in 1836 to other Yoruba towns such as Ilorin, Ede and Iseyin. This was confirmed by Kalilu's work on Old Oyo and its extant crafts.⁶² Perani adds that handwoven prestige cloths such as *Alaari*, *Sanyan* and *Etu* which was woven with indigo dyed yarns (plate 10) were some of the products of Ilorin town in the nineteenth century. Indigo dyeing by implication must have been one of the arts brought from old Oyo, as indigo dye is imperative to the production *Etu*.

Many families in Ilorin, must have engaged in indigo dyeing at a time going by surnames such as Elelu and Alaro that are attestation to this, but this is no longer the case,⁶³ as the only indigo dyer identified in Ilorin; Iya Alaro or Iya Bacita in Olorin compound of Balogun Ajikobi area, had her medium sized dye pot, placed in a corner inside her apartment. Her dyeing is skeletal and patronage is limited to pre-dyeing of yarns before weaving, and to herbalist

who use the exhausted indigo solution in preparing herbal antidote for poisoned patients.



Plate 7: Indigo dyed yarns from Akoda dyeing centre in Ede. Photograph by Dr. Areo Debo, 2006

However eleven contemporary synthetic dyeing centres were identified in Ilorin. Five were students of Kayode Rotimi, a graduate of David Osawe owned Artist Cooperative Centre Osogbo. One centre is run by Anne Salubi, a Fine Art graduate of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Another is that of Gbemi Areo, a Fine Art graduate of University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University. Others learnt the art from Ibadan, Lagos and Abeokuta. All these centres specialize in batik, tie-dye, appliqué and printing, with none engaging in indigo dyeing.

There is a group of *Adire* producers in the Bode Thomas area of Surulere in Lagos who are mostly a blend of Togolese, Nigerians and some of other Francophone countries. These dyers engage in different techniques of tie-dye and batik and it is common sight to see women carrying the finished fabrics in large bowls to those who will iron them in readiness for market.

Centres found in Ondo, Ekiti and Kogi states engage in contemporary method of *Adire* making using multicolour synthetic dyes with patterns similar to those found in other centres all over Yorubaland.

A new trend in the *Adire* art tradition is the evolution of skill acquisition centres in many of the Nigerian Museums located all over the country. Schools, Alliance Francaise and many other government and non-governmental organizations periodically organise *Adire* making workshops to reduce youth restiveness and unemployment in the society (plates 8, 9, and 10). Though these workshops have aided the growth of contemporary *Adire* industry, one of them has so far engaged in indigo dyeing.



Plate 8: Cross-section of trainees at Adire workshop organized by National Museum Ilorin (Photograph by Dr. Debo Areo, 2001).



Plate 9: Cross-section of graduands of the Museum organised Adire workshop, Ilorin, 2001 (Photograph by Dr. Debo Areo)



Plate 10: Cross-section of Secondary Schools Students at an Adire workshop organized by Alliance Francaise, Ilorin, 2001. Photograph by Dr. Debo Areo

Conclusion

Though many indigenous plants are used for dyeing by the *Adire* artists, the indigo dye remains the most extensively used and the most popular among the Yoruba. Compared to dyeing in other colours, it is a specialist female activity from a traditional female vocation to an all-comers vocation. Cloth dyeing among the people is also of two classes; total-dyed cloth called *Amure*, in which the whole fabric is dyed without pattern creation, and patterned, dyed cloth, *Adire*.

Some patterns are peculiar to each of the traditional centres found throughout Yorubaland. While the majority of stencilled cloths are made in Abeokuta, *Adire* artists in Ibadan specialize in *Adire Eleko*, particularly the freehand-painted type which is believed to have probably originated at Idi-Aro area of the town between 1910 and 1915.⁶² In Ede however a lot of machine stitching is found to be prevalent with few tying. The machine techniques and stencil *Eleko* were introduced in the 1930s in Abeokuta, with a small proportion of both techniques found in Ibadan, to save production time and increase output. No indigo dyeing centre was identified in Ogbomoso, a town whose *Adire* traders exported the cloth to Gold Coast, the present day Ghana in 1910 in response to significant demand for *Adire* in the country⁶³

Oshogbo town still remains the greatest hub for batik in different forms as a result of the workshops organized by expatriates in the 1960s, and from there it has spread to a more or lesser extent to other centres.

With the introduction of Fine Arts into the curriculum of many secondary and tertiary institutions, the *Adire* art tradition is now found in many art schools. Also, the introduction of imported synthetic dyes has greatly widened the array of colours from the single indigo colour of old. New techniques and technology have also broadened the design scope and kept the art tradition dynamic among the Yoruba and have sustained many of the traditional centres of *Adire* practice. These changes have also aided the development of contemporary centres.

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