

## Identification and Categorization of Adire Symbols Among the Yoruba

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### **Abstract**

*Adire resist fabrics constitute a vital part of the material culture of Yoruba people of Nigeria. This art form of patterned resist - dyed cloth is dynamic. It is widely practiced and ubiquitous. Adire is part and parcel of today's socio - cultural development; and its symbolization processes are found on the surfaces of dress and decorative materials. However, this art form has suffered systematic scholastic neglect because of the initial scholarly attention to other traditions. In view of this, the aim of this paper is therefore to explore and present Yoruba cultural Symbols in Adire. The specific objectives are; to identify and categorize the various types of symbols used in Adire. The study intends to increase the visibility of local cultural history; as well as showcasing the aesthetic and cultural riches of textile design as a medium of artistic expression. Qualitative research method was adopted. Historical techniques were employed for the analysis of the work for the search of basic data which was collected through primary and secondary sources. This study could provide additional symbols for designers, artists, historians, anthropologists, and others. The study is expected to contribute to the advancement of knowledge on motifs, design, and innovation in the Nigerian and African Textiles and Fashion Industries. Adire textiles could create enormous market for Nigerians and African countries, because of their aesthetic and cultural values.*

**Keywords:** *Adire, Amin, Iconography, Symbols, Motifs, Socio - cultural, Sustainability.*

### **Introduction**

*Adire* is a resist - dyed cloth. The art of *adire* making is commonly practiced among Yoruba people. Although the exact location and the circumstances surrounding the beginning of this ancient art is debatable; however, some scholars are of the opinion that, Abeokuta is the current capital of *adire* in Nigeria (Zakaree, 2017). Others posit that, Ibadan and Osogbo are equally as important as Abeokuta in the art of *adire* making (Doig, 1972). *Adire* constitutes a vital part of the material culture of Yoruba people. It is an embodiment with hidden meanings in symbols (motifs) used for decoration. *Adire* is a means of expressing cultural identity. The iconography of *adire* provides them a voice on matters of public interest (Davies-Okundaye, 2001).

*Adire* motifs (*amin*) are usually developed from symbols and are used to create design patterns. One could say that this is highly developed textile craft that is embedded in Yoruba culture; whose

patterns are expressed on cloth. These symbols are sometimes an abstract representation of objects, ideas, feelings, or behaviour. Jefferson (1974) opines that these symbols are complex in nature; and that their meanings can be a sense of appreciations of an individual. These symbols are often used as body adornment and to reinforce morals. He further says that, the best way to comprehend symbols in *adire* among the Yoruba people is to draw them. These then Symbols become a visual vocabulary which one uses as a starting point to develop and create personal visual statement. Motifs of *adire* are taught by mothers to daughters within dyeing families from generation to generation. However, reports have indicated that, the origin and meaning of symbols (motifs) used in *adire* are systematically being lost due to lack of documentation (Areo & Kalilu, 2002). In support of Areo and Kalilu, more work needs to be done on the meaning and use of *adire* symbols (Davies-Okundaye, 2016). Simmonds (2016) agrees with Davies – Okundaye that more work needs to be done on how *Adire* cloths get their names, along with the motifs and their meanings.

This study, therefore intends to bridge this gap, by exploring the possibility of sustaining Yoruba cultural symbols and motifs in *adire* through documentation in form of a catalogue of visual vocabulary reference point for scholars. This study is justified for two reasons: First, it will enhance the provision of documental materials for references purpose. Secondly, findings from the study could boost *adire* design culture and documentation.

#### **The Significance of this Study is:**

1. Education value: This will identify and contribute new visual vocabulary in the organization of fabrics decoration. The writing component will demonstrate that the researcher has acquired a 'language for research' and 'writing skill' with which to express that language.
2. Cultural value: It will serve as a store house for Yoruba craft and design vocabulary.
3. Tourism value: This could serve as a strong attraction of tourists and open up Nigerians fashion industry for international investment.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This is an idea of the logical structure with which the research is anchored on Semiotics.

##### **1. Semiotics:**

The research is investigated on Semiotics/semiology, Gillian (2012) explains that, semiotics sometimes also called semiology and is influential as an approach to interpreting the materials of visual culture; because it draws upon the work of several major theorists where impact on the social sciences since the 1960s has been immense. As an art historian, Mieke Bal and Bryson (1991) say in their defence of semiology that, human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself; and that the people inhabiting a culture busy themselves making sense of those signs as applicable to this study work. Semiology has an elaborate analytical vocabulary for describing how signs make sense. However, it is important to note that *adire* cultural symbols can be analysed using many other methods, and semiology as a method can be used with many other kinds of visual (and other) for documentation of *adire* visual vocabulary as references.

##### **Symbols, Motifs, and Patterns of the Yoruba**

Visual artists have always replicated nature. They have, over the ages, adopted images from their immediate environments. Eicher (1976) in her research stated that, fabric decoration is an art that is peculiar to different culture and people. In order to explain these symbols and their meaning, it is vital to know whether their representations are related to purely personal experience, or whether they have been chosen by a dream for its particular purpose from a store of general conscious knowledge. Some symbols relate to childhood and the transition to adolescence; others to maturity, and others again, to the experience of old age, when a person is preparing for their inevitable death (Carl, 1984). According to Womark (2005) human cultures use symbols to express specific ideologies and social structures and to represent aspects of their specific tradition. Thus, these symbols carry meanings that depend upon one's cultural background; in other words, the meaning of a symbol is

not inherent in the symbol itself but is culturally learned. With old African fabrics, one can easily communicate without saying a word (Sotade, 1993).

Usually in textile design, motifs are developed from symbols in order to create design patterns. Symbols are abstract representation of objects. Some symbols are laden with high philosophical meanings while others are just images or objects for aesthetics, like *Ona* motifs of the Yoruba.

### **Adire cultural Symbols (Motifs)**

*Adire* constitutes a vital part of the material culture of Yoruba; and embodiment with hidden meanings in the motifs used for decoration. *Adire* is the name given to the indigo blue cloths patterned with resist techniques of designs, and it is an inherited craft work done mostly by women. Eicher (1976) argues that, Yoruba people embellish their fabrics to define several phenomena, believed that symbols have mythological impacts, which is often based on the history and culture of the environment. Indeed, it is among the Yoruba people that patterns dyeing is at its most complex, Abeokuta, Ibadan and Osogbo are the main centres. Makinde (2013) says that, however, Barbour was of the opinion that in Ibadan and other Yoruba towns, every motif and symbol had a name, symbolical meanings and that they were recognized and requested again and again. According to Adépégba (2017), Yoruba motifs have always been inspired by local animals, birds, plants and insects of different group for both functional and aesthetic purposes. All the motifs incorporated in *adire* fabrics originated from somewhere. Some designers claim that they got some of their designs in dreams, some are created by the designers themselves. While some are copied from other cultures and some designers are motivated by getting some inspiration from the surrounding, such as: folklore, tales, stories etc.

However, *Adire* cloth beauty depends on the skilful variations in colour combination, motifs, patterns, design, and texture, rather than on a highly evolved technology. Young girls work with their mothers and at early age become skilled in patterns making. Kuba (1991) also accepts that, the Yoruba art of patterns making is outstanding and possesses peculiar art identity that makes it stand out among other similar resist patterns. The capacity to develop these symbols into suitable designs will make it adequately in contemporary textile and fashion design. The ability for these designs to be adjusted for use in different conditions enhances its great and potentials. All patterns and motifs in *adire* cloth have their own names, and traditionally many have a particular meaning or symbolism. Also, people who wear the dyed cloth may give it another name, perhaps in commemoration of a person or events, and a cloth trader may further complicate the terminology

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Qualitative research method was adopted and art historical techniques were employed for the analysis of this study as suggested by Adetoro (1997). The population of the study consisted of thirty-five (35) craftsmen and women, purposively sampled, while forty-five (45) *adire* cultural motifs were identified and extrapolated using the deviant case of sampling for the analysis and discussions. In conclusion, the researcher applied observation, field, library and participation as further says by Egonwa, when the setting of research is used as the major parameter, the researcher may apply field (the field work approach has been successfully used by researchers, such as; Saliu (1994), Dunia (2009) and Babalola (2010), and library as is the case with aspects of the visual arts. The approach has enabled the researcher to use instruments like interview schedule, questionnaire, observation, participation and internet search.

### **Adire Symbols**

Major finding in the course of the study were extracted from the objectives of the study. The identified *adire* cultural symbols are shown in plate 1 (*Olokun*), and Plate 2 (*Ibadan dun*). Which is free hand painting and with a great variety of designs in the squares and were extracted in (plate 3 to 6) and redrawn for documentation.



Plate 1: Olokun (Sea goddess), @ Jane Barbour, 2012 © Beyond Indigo, Nike Davies-Okundaye 2001

In this study, as shown in Plate 1, *Olokun* is the *Orisa* (deity) of the Sea, and it means, life is sweet. *Olokun* cloth is divided differently from any other, which consists of two rows of five large squares with long rectangles at each end at the bottom, with twelve smaller squares



Plate 2: (Ibadandun) Ibadan is sweet, @ Jane Barbour, 2012 © Beyond Indigo, Nike Davies-Okundaye 2001

While Ibadan dun means, Ibadan is sweet and is one of the highest qualities adire eleko and it is named after Ibadan. The square which gives the cloth its name contains the pillars of Mapo Hall, alternating with spoons appears either two or three. It consists of the following motifs: many birds (ducks, ostriches, turkeys, guinea fowl hens and crested crane. Also, crocodiles, Chameleons, Scorpions, Snakes, Lizards, Hedgehogs etc.

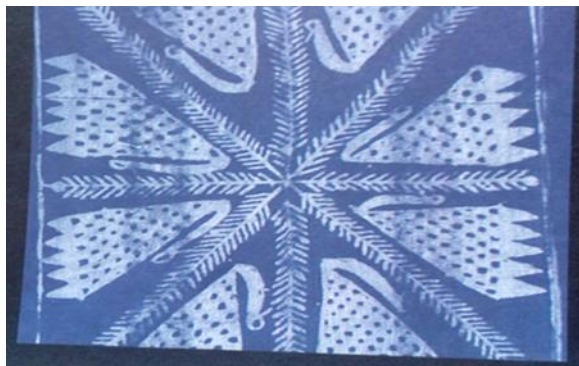


Plate 3: (Eye'n joka) Birds eating corn  
Significance: Valuable items must not be kept in  
© Beyond Indigo, Nike Davies-Okundaye 2001.



Plate 4: (Omo lere aiye) children are the Pride of the world  
Significance: Children are the gain of this world presence. of thieves.

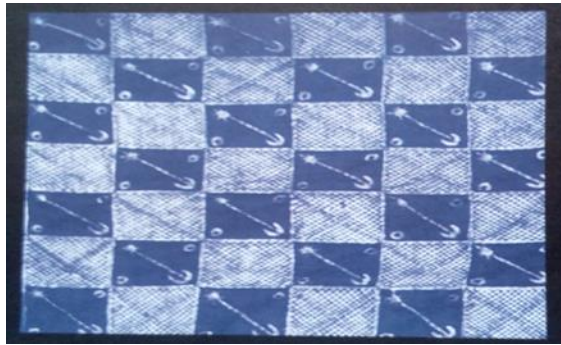


Plate 5: Isana (Matches)  
Significance: He whose roof is on fire does not go to sleep.

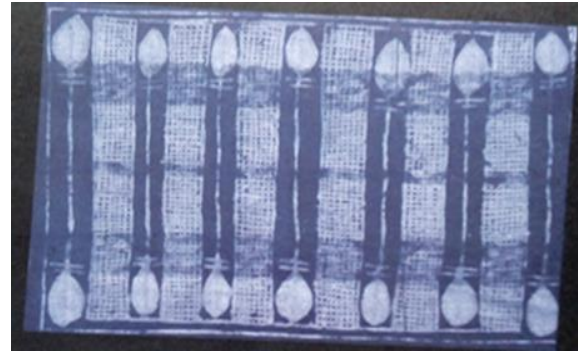


Plate 6: (Opo ile mapo) Pillar of Mapo Hall  
Significance: The Pillar of a home shoulder many responsibilities.

© Beyond Indigo, Nike Davies-Okundaye 2001.

Plate 1 & 6: Adire cultural symbols explored (Simmonds, 2016)

### Findings:

The study achieved its aim and objectives with varying degrees of success, from the data obtained, analysis made and through the interviews conducted during fieldwork. It was in an effort to achieve these objectives that the following corresponding findings were made. The objective of this study is to **identify and categorize various type of Yoruba cultural symbols used for adire in Nigeria**. In this study, all the *adire* symbols covered in this study have been identified. However, concerning the identification of motifs, it was informed that a single example may be known by a variety of names, but since these design elements are often highly abstracted and simplified, they may be identified differently by different people. For instance, same designs may carry a symbolic or metaphorical connotation; another may describe the quality of the motif's appearance and another may be a reference to its position on the body. General opinion from the field, a name may show that a motif is associated with or worn by either a group of status. It may even describe the event; the decorations are meant to celebrate or advertise. In as much as names of designs are useful when trying to learn something about Yoruba culture from Yoruba women's art, one should bear in mind that the traditional artists are at liberty to name a design. *Adire* motifs are numerous but the researcher identified forty-five (45) *adire* symbols (motifs) and patterns; names in Yoruba. According to Nike Okundaye (oral interview, 2019), *Adire* symbols (motifs) and patterns employed on *adire* cloths include: Floral, Fauna, Object and Abstract Motifs.

**Table 1:**

Floral Motifs	Fauna Motifs	Object Motifs	Abstract Motifs
<i>Ewe</i> (Leaf)	<i>Egugun Eja</i> (fish bone)	<i>Opon iro</i> (Tray of lies)	<i>Imu</i> (Nose)
<i>Igi oye</i> (Chieftaincy tree)	<i>Oobe</i> (small bat)	<i>Iyari</i> (Comb)	<i>Arewa</i> (Star of the North)
<i>Igi lye</i> (Tree of life)	<i>Omo eye</i> (chick)	<i>Jigi</i> (Mirror)	<i>Ifeinukoenu</i> (The kiss)
<i>Ewe ege</i> (Cassava leaf)	<i>Ogongo</i> (Ostrich)	<i>Sekere</i> (Maracas)	<i>Olokoto</i> (Cycle of life)
<i>Okababa</i> (Guinea corn)	<i>Eja</i> (Fish)	<i>Agborun</i> (umbrella)	<i>Ori orun</i> (Sun head)
<i>Wewe Osun</i> (Sliced orange)	<i>Alangba</i> (Lizard)	<i>Agogo</i> (Metal Gong)	
	<i>Oga</i> (Chameleon)	<i>Amuga</i> (Scissor)	
	<i>Agunfon</i> (Crested crane)	<i>Opo ile Mapo</i> (Mapo Pillar)	
	<i>Eye</i> (Birds)	<i>Oju opo</i> (Road track)	
	<i>Ejo</i> (Snake)	<i>Ade</i> (Crown)	



	<i>Igbin</i> (Snail)	<i>Isana</i> (Matches)	
	<i>Pepeye</i> (Duck)	<i>Ipon</i> (Ladle)	
	<i>Erin</i> (Elephant)	<i>Ilu igi</i> (Drum stick)	
	<i>Yoro</i> (flea)	<i>Waya</i> (wire net)	
	<i>Opolo</i> (Frog)	<i>Jakan</i> (Hemming)	
	<i>Alaingba brekete</i> (Fat Lizard)	Oni koko (The one with Cocoa)	
		<i>Aage</i> (Kettle)	
		<i>Agbo'le</i> (Circle of houses or compound)	
		<i>Rita</i> (Fork)	
		<i>Pataki</i> (Mat)	

It was found that many new motifs that form patterns that symbolize a lot of things have been incorporated in the *adire* modernize African style. They have a particular tendency for innovation. The identified *adire* symbols (motifs) above, includes representing plant life, animals, and bird's activities, actions or movements, everyday objects and cosmic or celestial bodies. These form the criteria for categorizing the *adire* motifs and symbols. The categorized below, is in various components by nature and the techniques used, such as: type of designs and techniques used, as shown in table (a). i - v, and (b). i - iii. All ***adire* symbols identified in this research have been categorized** as outlined. Consequently, upon the below categorizations, it was found that, *adire* symbols, are not only many but also varied. The *adire* symbols do not only differ in form, but also in function and meaning. Some are reserved for the royalties, festivals and craftsmen and women household. It was found that there are many replications from one dyeing centre to another amongst the Yoruba and even from foreign countries. It is evident that modernity has penetrated the Yoruba *adire* cultural symbols in many respects, especially in the use of second-hand clothes (*bosikona*) and well-tailored made clothes. However, the design motifs have stood the test of time as they have not changed much over the years.

**a. Categorization by Type of Designs:**



- i. Flora Pattern
- ii. Fauna Pattern
- iii. Everyday objects Pattern
- iv. Abstract pattern

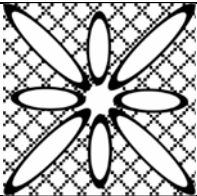
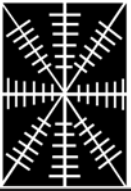


**b. Categorization by Techniques**

- i. Stencilled Cassava *Adire* Technique
- ii. Freehand Cassava *Adire* Technique
- iii. Machine Stitched *Adire* Technique





**a. Categorization by Types of Design:**





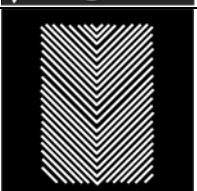

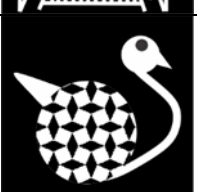

**Table 2: Flora Patterns**

Yoruba Names	English Names	Motifs
<i>Igi oye</i>	Chieftaincy tree	
<i>Igi iye</i>	Tree of life	

<i>Ewe ege</i>	Cassava leaf		
<i>Oka baba</i>	Guinea corn		
<i>Were osan</i>	Sliced orange		
<i>Ewe</i>	Leaf		

**Table ii: Fauna (Animal) Patterns**

Yoruba Names	English Names	Motifs
<i>Ogongo</i>	Ostrich	
<i>Adam -Oobe</i>	Small Bat	
Eja	Fish	
<i>Alangba</i>	Lizard	

Oga	Chameleon		
Erin	Elephant		
Alangba berekete	Fat lizard		
Eye	Bird		
Egunguneja	Fish Bone		
Omo eye	Chick		
Pepeye	Duck		
Agunfon	Crested crane		










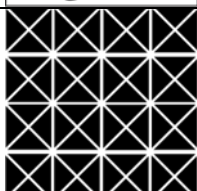


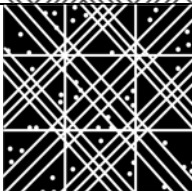


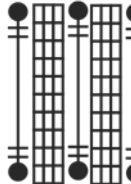

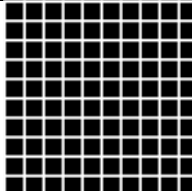
<i>Yoro</i>	Flea		
<i>Ejo</i>	Snake		
<i>Opolo</i>	Frog		
<i>Igbin</i>	Snail		

Table iii: Everyday Object Patterns

Yoruba Names	English Names	Motifs	
<i>Amuga</i>	Scissors		
<i>Iyari</i>	Comb		
<i>Ilu igi</i>	Drum stick		
Waya	Wire net		

<i>Isana</i>	Matches	
<i>Agbo ile</i>	Compound	
<i>Sekere</i>	Maracas	
<i>Opon iro</i>	Tree of lies	
<i>Ipon</i>	Ladle	
<i>Opo ile mapo</i>	Mapo Pillar	
<i>Ojuopo</i>	Road Track	
<i>Pataki</i>	Mat	


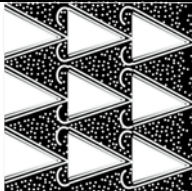






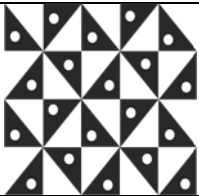

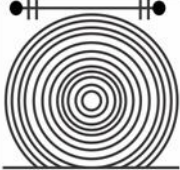

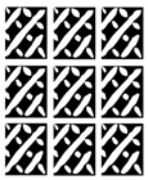


<i>Aage</i>	Kettle	
<i>Ade</i>	Crown	
	Local Architecture	
<i>Agborun</i>	Umbrella	
<i>Jakan</i>	Embroidery	
<i>Orita</i>	Fork	
<i>Agogo</i>	Metal gong	

Table iv: Abstract Patterns



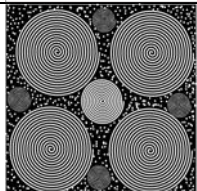


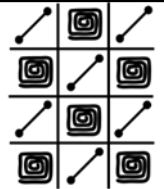
Yoruba Names	English Names	Motifs
<i>Arewa</i>	Northern star	

<i>Ayed' egbe</i>	the world is on its side		
<i>Imu</i>	Nose		
<i>Olokoto</i>	Circle of life		
<i>Ori orun</i>	Sun Heads		
<i>Olorokun Aro</i>	Lame man's knees		
<i>Ifenuko enu</i>	The kiss		
<i>Onikoko</i>	Seed of cocoa		


- i. Stencilled Cassava Resist Technique      ii. Free hand cassava *Adire* Technique  
iii. Machine stitched *Adire* Technique






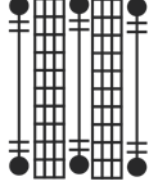


**b. Categorization by Technique:**

**Table i: Stencilled Cassava Resist Technique:**

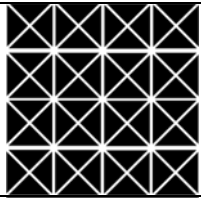

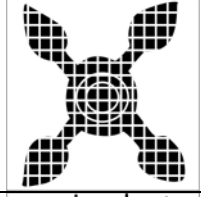
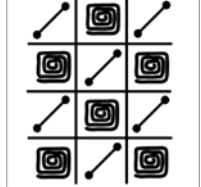
Yoruba Names:	English Names:	Motifs
<i>Oniyarin</i>	One with the comb	
<i>Opon iro</i>	Tray of lies	
<i>Olokoto</i>	Tops (Toys)	
<i>Erin</i>	Elephant	
<i>Orita</i>	Fork	
<i>Onisana</i>	Matches	

**Table ii: Free hand Cassava Technique:**



Yoruba Names	English Names	Motifs
<i>Iboju</i>	Mask	

<i>Ifenukenu</i>	Kiss		
<i>Onikoko</i>	The one with cocoa		
<i>Agunsofin</i>	Crested crane		
<i>Alangba</i>	Lizard		
<i>Omoeye</i>	Chick		
<i>Opo ile mapo</i>	Pillars of Mapo Hall		
<i>Alangba berekete</i>	Fat Lizard		
<i>Ogongo</i>	Ostrich		

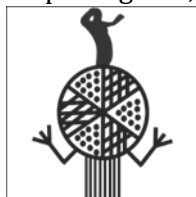


<i>Waya</i>	Wire net	
<i>Oga</i>	Chameleon	
<i>Opon iro</i>	Divinity tray	
<i>Isana</i>	Matches	

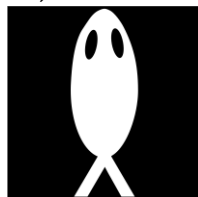
**Table iii: Machine Stitched *Adire* Techniques:**

Yoruba Names	English Names	Motifs
<i>Igi oye</i>	Chieftaincy tree	
<i>Amuga</i>	Scissors	

Also, this research tried to fulfil its objective by documented *adire* cultural symbols in the form of repertoire as references for designers, historians, artists and scholars. Pursuant to the achievement of this objective, it was found that, the *adire* symbols obtainable together, are a repertoire of a rich and flamboyant cultural heritage, which could serve a springboard for the development of unique and lovely ideas in contemporary African fashion. Through the opinion gathered in the field, this will help designers, artists, as well as other professionals to look through another lens in designing.



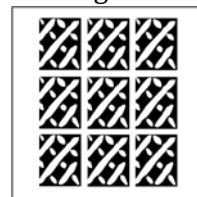
*Oobe* (small bat)  
(Plate 7)



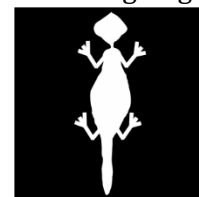
*Eja* (fish)  
(Plate 8)



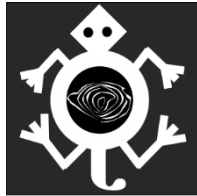
*Eye* (bird)  
(Plate 9)



*Orokunaro* (lame man's knees)  
(Plate 10)



*Alangba* (lizard)  
(Plate 11)



*Alangba berekete (fat lizard)*  
(Plate 12)



*Oga (chameleon)*  
(Plate 13)



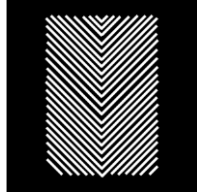
*Amuga (scissor)*  
(Plate 14)



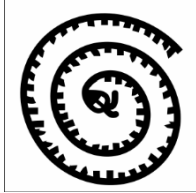
*Omoeve (chick)*  
(Plate 15)



*Agufon (crested crane)*  
(Plate 16)



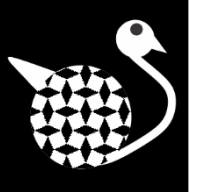
*Egun eja (fish bone)*  
(Plate 17)



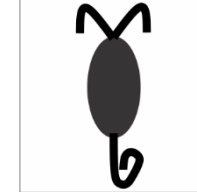
*Ejo (snake)*  
(Plate 18)



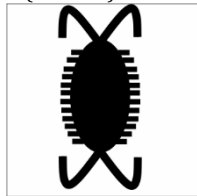
*Opolo (frog)*  
(Plate 19)



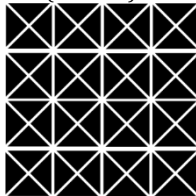
*Pepeye (duck)*  
(Plate 20)



*Igbin (snail)*  
(Plate 21)



*Yoro (flea)*  
(Plate 22)



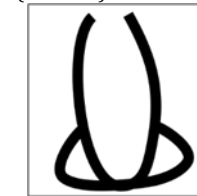
*Waya (wire net)*  
(Plate 23)



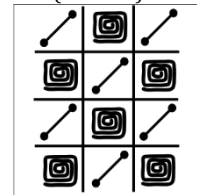
*Wewe osan (Sliced orange)*  
(Plate 24)



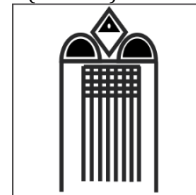
*Local Architecture*  
(Plate 25)



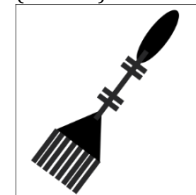
*Imu (Nose)*  
(Plate 26)



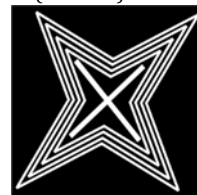
*Isana (matches)*  
(Plate 27)



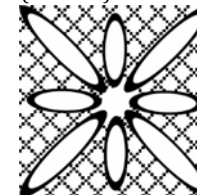
*Oya (comb)*  
(Plate 28)



*Ipon (ladle)*  
(Plate 29)



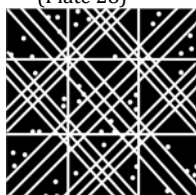
*Arewa (Star of the North)*  
(Plate 30)



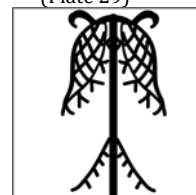
*Ewe ege (cassava-leaf)*  
(Plate 31)



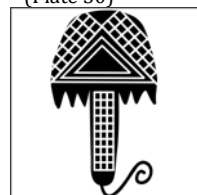
*Agbo'ile (compound)*  
(Plate 32)



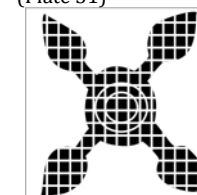
*Sekere (Maracas)*  
(Plate 33)



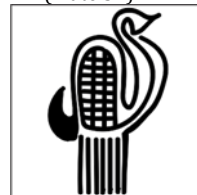
*Igi iye (Tree of life)*  
(Plate 34)



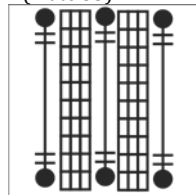
*Agboorun (Umbrella)*  
(Plate 35)



*Opon iro (Tray of lies)*  
(Plate 36)



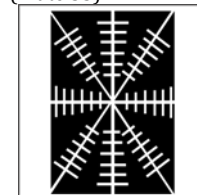
*Ogongo (Ostrich)*  
(Plate 37)



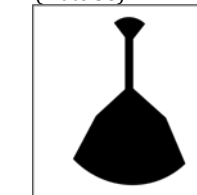
*Opo ile mapo (Mapo Pillars)*  
(Plate 38)



*Igi Oye (Chieftaincy tree)*  
(Plate 39)



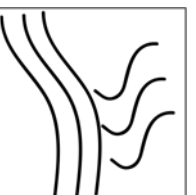
*Oka baba (Guinea corn)*  
(Plate 40)



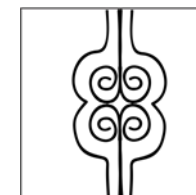
*Agogo (Metal Gong)*  
(Plate 41)



*Oju-opo (Road track)*



*Jakan (Hemming)*



*Ifenukonu naa (The kiss)*



*Oni koko (The one with cocoa)*



*Iboju (Mask)*

(Plate 42)



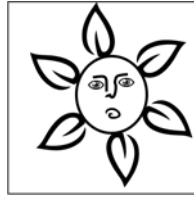
Aage (Kettle)  
(Plate 47)

(Plate 43)



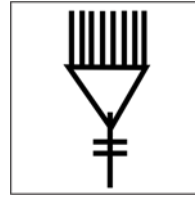
Ilu igi (Drum stick)  
(Plate 48)

(Plate 44)



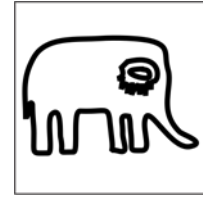
Ori orun (Sun Head)  
(Plate 49)

(Plate 45)



Orita (Fork)  
(Plate 50)

(Plate 46)



Erin (Elephant)  
(Plate 51)

Plate 7 - 51: *Adire* cultural symbols Catalogue (Bakare, 2019)

### Recommendation:

This study has identified, and categorized the various *adire* cultural symbols of Yoruba people in Nigeria. The researcher appreciated the categorized art tradition in the form of shape, and meaning expounding their social – cultural essence. It had further shown that each category of the *adire* symbols varied in form, shape, meaning *et cetera*.

### Conclusion:

This study presents are just few of several works analysed finally for the study due to space constraints, only a few were analysed in this paper. The research work is expected to document the extent to which *adire* symbols could serve as repertoire for designers, artists, scholars etc. This research is a historical study of Yoruba cultural symbols used in *adire* in Nigeria in the socio – cultural and economy setting in Nigeria but the scope of this study was *adire* symbols which was found to have significant records for research on the subject matter.

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