

THE SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE *ADIRE* ART TRADITIONS IN YORUBA SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Adire (resist fabric) constitutes a vital part of the material culture of the Yoruba, and it is the observation of the researcher that the artistic culture of humanity is changing daily. What this means is that the particular types of textiles that can communicate identity may change through time in response to economic, demographic, spiritual, technological, and other societal changes. The Adire art tradition of the Yoruba in South-western Nigeria has experienced significant changes over time. Given this, this study is an attempt to look at the significant changes in Adire art traditions in Yorubaland, not only as a tradition but as a process of change and techniques. Although the designs of the Adire have become more complex since the importation of “factory cloth from Manchester”, the overt appearance, to foreigners, is still one of a traditional style. The Adire is often worn; the Osogbo pieces are not. They are decorative in the western style for art’s sake. In design theories, the traditional technique of producing designs for textile printing, using freehand, has given way to professionally calculated methods to achieve aesthetic and balanced designs for the international market as well as for local appreciation. For this reason, various techniques of repeat methods are now being exploited, such as simple repeat, half drop, half slide, diamond, and complex repeats to achieve sophisticated prints.

Keywords: *Adire*, Art, Changes, Tradition, Yorubaland.

Introduction/ Background of the Study

Adire is an integral aspect of Yoruba cultural life in Nigeria. Historically, it has served as a visual record of local experiences and social histories, particularly in the early twentieth century. Produced through resist-dyeing techniques across Yoruba communities, *adire* has continued to evolve in response to cultural, social, and economic influences over time.

The word *Adire* literally means “to tie and dye. In its production, materials such as string, synthetic threads, raffia fibres, and various forms of paste are used to block or resist the dye. *adire* production and trade are historically centred in Abeokuta, where the industry reached its peak in the 1920s. Until around 1910, *adire* making was practised exclusively by women in Abeokuta. However, the introduction of stencil techniques brought men into the production process, as they began cutting zinc stencils and using them to create patterned designs on the cloth.

The motifs are typically transferred by mothers to their daughters within dyeing families from generation to generation. Design inspirations are derived from myth, folklore, cultural motifs, and symbols. The rocky environment of Abeokuta is another source of inspiration. Cultural values of the people are patterned into resist-dyed cloth, for example, showing the evidence of how things are changing. The 19th and 20th centuries brought enormous change to traditional African art, especially in Nigeria (Adepegba, 1995). Since Nigeria’s independence, the artistry and production of *adire* have undergone significant transformation. These changes include developments in technique, increased understanding of colour chemistry, and the recognition of *adire* as a viable vocational and academic field, now taught and researched within universities.

Cultural exchange, Western education, trans-Saharan trade routes, and contemporary globalisation have also influenced *adire* styles. As a result, some *adire* designs have shifted from more material expressions to increasingly stylised and sometimes near-abstract forms. Bakare (2023) postulates that there has not been an in-depth study on the factors responsible for the observable and significant changes in *adire* art traditions in Yorubaland. There has, however, been a significant influx of foreign culture into it, among other challenges that threaten it further. Technological changes influenced by foreign contact, along with the transient nature of locally sourced materials, social mobility, and the rapid shift in indigenous values, have contributed to the decline of the traditional *adire* art tradition has also lost ground to Western textile imports, including both new fabrics and second-hand clothing (popularly known as *okrika* or *bosikona*). These external influences, combined with internal cultural changes within Yorubaland, have resulted in the loss of knowledge surrounding the original processes and meanings of *adire* among many contemporary designers. According to Baba Ede (oral interview, 2019), the tools, materials, techniques, and apprenticeship systems are key factors that have shaped the changes in *adire* production. In light of this, the present study seeks to examine the significant transformations in *adire* art traditions in Yorubaland.

Problem Statement

As previously stated, the *adire* art tradition in Yorubaland has and continues to experience significant changes in its processes, techniques, and cultural meaning over time. These changes have been influenced by social, economic, and technological factors, including increased contact with external cultures, economic instabilities, and shifting local values. The problem this study addresses, therefore, is the need to understand how these have affected both the production and traditional significance of *adire* within contemporary Yoruba society.

Aim of the Study

Social changes threaten the retention of cultural values as each generation dances to the tune in vogue, which suggests that there is a kind of sociological control that rules over values in *Adire* Art Traditions. Given this, the aim is to document the development and evolution of this traditional textile art form. Examine the significant changes in *adire* art traditions in southwestern Nigeria, with particular focus on evolving influences, processes, and techniques. It also aims to investigate and establish the creative patterns and manipulations of traditional subjects within the *Adire* Art Tradition.

Objective of the Study

To identify the various types of *adire* fabrics and to examine the factors responsible for the significant changes in *adire* art traditions in Yorubaland.

Research Question

What types of *adire* can be identified today, and what factors are responsible for the significant changes in *adire* art traditions in southwestern Nigeria?

The research focuses on identifying the significant changes in *Adire* Art Traditions in Yoruba, southwestern Nigeria.

Justification of the Study

Although Yoruba *adire* textiles have received considerable scholarly attention, there remains a lack of comprehensive research specifically addressing the significant changes that have occurred in *adire* art traditions over time, as is currently the purview of this study. Existing literature often provides only general or surface-level discussions of these transformations, without offering identifiable changes as well as a detailed analysis of the cultural, social, and technical factors shaping them. This study is therefore justified, as it seeks to fill this gap by examining the evolution of *adire* processes and techniques in depth. The findings will contribute to the preservation of indigenous knowledge, strengthen cultural pride, and reinforce confidence in African textile design as a valuable artistic and cultural heritage.

Literature Reviews

Factors Responsible for Significant Changes in *Adire* Art Traditions in Yoruba, Nigeria.

Adire cloth making is a traditional textile art form that originated from the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria, particularly in the city of Abeokuta. One notable form, *adire eleko*, involves applying starch to create resisted patterns before dyeing, and represents a key aspect of Yoruba artistic heritage. Over time, *adire* has undergone significant changes in response to broader shifts within contemporary African art. Historically, transformation in textile design and usage occurred gradually through contact with neighbouring or foreign groups, whether through trade, religion, education, or other cultural exchanges. In the present day, however, change has been more rapid, shaped by Western cultural influence, global media, and evolving aesthetic values.

These external influences, along with processes of appropriation and reinvention, have contributed to new interpretations of *adire* fabric. Today, the religious and social traditions of Africa are in a state of flux, and in many places, they are gradually disappearing. As a result, it has become increasingly challenging to find artists who work expertly in the styles of their ancestors. Only in a very few regions do artists still practice traditional forms with little loss of quality. The breakdown of African traditions began with the arrival of European colonial powers, who ruled the continent for

generations. Even before colonisation, through *adire* trade and other exchanges, foreign customs had already begun to enter African societies.

Under the influence of these new ideas, every sphere of African life, economic, political, social, and religious, started to change. The decline of traditional religion has been one of the most significant of these changes, as it has had the most profound effect on traditional art (Mount, 1989). Smith and Eicher (1982), in their systematic study of African textiles, emphasised the importance of early accounts written by European travelers and explorers, particularly those from the 16th to 18th centuries, as valuable records of traditional clothing and body adornment practices. These accounts provide foundational material for comparison with later developments in African textile traditions.

According to Adepegba, the 19th and 20th centuries brought significant changes to traditional African cultures, including those of the Yoruba, as a result of external influences (Atanda, 1980). Trade, cultural interaction, and various forms of contact introduced new ideas that greatly affected Nigerian textiles. As Ojo (2000) notes, Yoruba clothing culture has undergone modifications and innovations due to increased exposure to foreign styles. Foreign motifs were sometimes added to existing designs, or new patterns were created altogether. Techniques and methods of production also shifted from indigenous practices to newer approaches. These changes extend beyond handcrafted textiles to other African art and design forms as well.

Consequently, the fact that an African artisan produces an object does not necessarily mean that it reflects traditional African artistic values. Thus, this adherence to an arbitrary system of valorisation creates significant challenges for contemporary African arts, which are often shaped by Western-style education (Vansina, 1994). For example, Osogbo pieces are typically painted on calico or produced in batik, and they often feature a centrally framed narrative image. In contrast, the *adire* is a dyed textile with no single central motif; instead, images are repeated throughout the composition, and repetition itself becomes a defining structural principle.

Although *adire* designs have become more elaborate since the introduction of factory-produced cloth from Manchester, to foreign observers, the cloth may still appear to follow a traditional aesthetic. Furthermore, *adire* is commonly worn as clothing, while Osogbo pieces are generally not worn. Instead, they are produced as decorative objects aligned with Western notions of ‘art for art’s sake.’ In design theory, the traditional freehand method of creating textile patterns has increasingly given way to more calculated and professionally structured approaches intended to achieve balanced and aesthetically refined designs for both international markets and local appreciation.

As a result, various repeat techniques are now employed, including simple repeat, half-drop, half-slide, diamond, and other complex repeats, in order to produce more sophisticated prints. However, even after such developments, the human desire to enhance the visual appeal of everyday objects continues to inspire modification and creative experimentation. The *Adire* art tradition has likewise been a subject of sustained investigation and reinterpretation. This suggests that external influences have played a role in shaping the evolution of *adire* art tradition in the Yoruba Southwestern Yoruba land.

Materials and Methods

A comprehensive approach is considered essential because the issue under study is multifaceted. This research, therefore, adopts a mixed-methods design. A quantitative method was used to assess the significant changes in *adire* art traditions, which included the use of statistical data to identify the factors responsible for these changes. In addition, qualitative research methods were employed

to explore the cultural and social implications of these changes in southwestern Yorubaland. This involved in-depth interviews, discussions, and ethnographic observation. A historical survey was also conducted to establish the background and development of *adire* production.

Furthermore, a survey method was used to collect data from respondents, as recommended by Adetoro (1997). Identifying the various types of *adire* fabrics and examining the factors driving their transformation was necessary in order to evaluate the changing value of *adire* art traditions. The study relied on field, library research, and online sources. The section below outlines the significant changes in *adire* from traditional wrappers to modern dress forms.



Plate 1: *Adire* Free yard Short gown: (Eja, Isana, Orokun aro, Agbo ile.)
Source: Bakare, O.O, (2023)



Plate 2: *Adire* free after-dress net gown (iyari, ododo, orokun aro, sekere. Opo ile mapo).
Source: Bakare, O.O, (2023)



Plate 3: *Adire* short skirt with bow (opo ile mapo, aiyedegbe, orokun aro iko orita)..
Source: Bakare, O.O, (2023)

Plate 1 is a Freeeyard Short Gown with multicoloured arrays of *adire* designs, most especially, turquoise blue net at the front side. The *adire* designs are youthful and casual; the greatest strength of the researcher lies in the ability to make use of visual elements and blend different patterns with them.

Plate 2 is known as Freee After-Dress Gown, which was being taped with adapted adire Designs (Batik), and each motif depicts Yoruba mood or emotions in the use of colour, aesthetics, philosophy, and proverbial expression. The small touches of adapted batik make it more unique, elegant, beautiful, and ready to wear to an occasion. Patterns and designs derived from Yoruba ideology and proverbial expression are just a way to express the researcher's thoughts in this study. Significant factors influenced the researcher by inspirations, cultural and native experiences, and this sample is the elegant image (motif) of the Yoruba people.

Plate 3 is a short skirt with a bow, and this is suitable for young ages and very ready to wear for ladies. The design is an important inspiration and metaphor in the Yoruba social and aesthetic system, and the researcher brings out all creativity to have rhythm in this study.

Discussion and Findings

Oral Interviews

Information collected from Adesina Adeseye, Mosun Hassan, Tosin Adeleye (Elegushi), and Idowu Israel (oral interview, 2019) indicates that innovations introduced in the 1930's allowed men to

participate in *adire* production, which had initially been a craft practiced primarily by women. Adeogun (personal communication, 2019) further explained that new tools and techniques made it possible for designers to incorporate a broader range of motifs drawn from their environment. During the second half of the twentieth century, a broader colour palette became available with the introduction of imported synthetic dyes.

Various hand-dyed textiles employing wax-resist batik methods were also introduced, producing patterned cloth in a wide array of dye tones and hues. However, this development did not immediately reach its full potential. These innovations attracted Nigerian fashion designers, who adopted *adire* motifs into printed fabrics and garment construction, thereby transforming *adire* into an entrepreneurial craft. Among such designers are Ade Bakare, Kesse Jabari, Jimmy King, Rowland Olujimi Gureje, Quintessence, African Pride, and the tradition is now taught in formal institutions.

Despite the general decline of the textile industry in areas of industrial textile production, *adire* has distinguished itself through its resilience and continued potential to contribute to the revival of the sector. However, it appears that *adire* has not yet fully realised its potential both locally and internationally, even with contemporary corporate and modernised African fashion styles, as illustrated in plates 1-3 above.

Research Question: What are the significant changes in the *Adire* fabrics in Southwestern Nigeria?

Table 1. Analysis of respondents’ views on the significant changes and their influences on the *Adire* Fabrics in Southwestern Nigeria

S/N	STATEMENT	Extent of agreement					Ef	Efx	Mn	Rnk	Rmk
		SA	A	U	SD	D					
i.	Factors responsible for the significant changes in the <i>Adire</i> in Nigeria are the youths, Education, Technology, Religion, and civilisation.	27	60	1	1	1	90	381	4.23	4 th	Agreed
ii.	The materials like <i>tjap</i> , <i>tjanting</i> , zinc stencil, foam, design net, and feather can be used to design <i>Adire</i> .	35	55	0	0	0	90	395	4.39	1 st	Agreed
iii.	<i>Adire</i> art tradition has lost ground to Western textiles, like the new clothing, and used one (<i>okirika</i> or <i>bosikona</i>).	28	57	3	1	1	90	380	4.22	5 th	Agreed
iv.	The <i>Adire</i> arts tradition still substantially relies on old techniques.	15	37	3	17	18	90	284	3.16	8 th	Agreed
v.	The older generation still upholds the <i>Adire</i> arts tradition.	16	40	5	15	14	90	299	3.32	7 th	Agreed
vi.	Are there new socio-cultural motifs and pattern designs in <i>Adire</i> art traditions?	30	57	1	0	2	90	283	4.26	3 rd	Agreed
vii.	<i>Adire</i> art traditions altered through cultural interaction and graded stylisation, such as trans-Saharan trade, Western Education, and Globalisation.	37	48	1	2	3	90	387	4.29	2 nd	Agreed
viii.	Were there rites associated with the <i>Adire</i> art tradition before and after it was created?	21	47	5	7	10	90	332	3.69	6 th	Agreed
	Aggregate Mean								3.95		Agreed

Source: Researcher Field Survey, 2020

In Table 1, the findings from respondents' views on the significant changes in *adire* art tradition indicate that respondents agreed that changes occurring in *adire* production are in the materials now used for design, such as *tjap*, *tjanting*, zinc, stencil, foam, net, and feathers (mean = 4.39).

Respondents also agreed that *adire* culture has been influenced by interactions with other civilisations through trade, education, and globalisation (mean = 4.29). Furthermore, respondents agreed that these interactions have led to the emergence of new motifs and designs in the making of *adire* cloth (mean = 4.26). Respondents also acknowledged that these changes have been significantly shaped by youth culture, religion, civilisation, and technological advancement (mean = 4.23). On a negative note, respondents agreed that globalisation, through trade liberalisation and the influx of foreign textiles, has had a significant impact on changes in *adire* production (mean = 4.22). However, despite this negative influence, respondents still agreed that the *adire* continues to be produced using traditional rites, techniques, and artistic practices, particularly among older generations, with mean scores of 3.69, 3.32, and 3.16, respectively. Based on these findings, it can be deduced from Table 1 that several sociocultural and external factors have significantly contributed to changes in *adire* cloth traditions.

To further examine this deduction, the third null hypothesis, which stated that there is no significant relationship between sociocultural and global changes and the production of *adire* cloth among the Yoruba in Nigeria, was tested. The hypothesis was examined by cross-tabulating respondents' expressed opinions on significant changes in materials and techniques with their views on alterations caused by cultural interaction and stylistic adaptation, such as trans-Saharan trade, Western education, and globalisation. The statistical procedure adopted for this test was the Chi-square, and the result is presented below:

		<i>Adire</i> clothes are altered through cultural interaction and graded stylisation, such as trans-Saharan trade, Western Education, and globalisation.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	
The materials like tjap, tjanting, zinc stencil, foam, design net, and feather can be used to design <i>Adire</i> clothes.	Agree	0	0	0	48	7	55
	Strongly agree	2	2	1	0	30	35
Total		2	2	1	48	37	90

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	66.118 ^a	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	84.391	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.820	1	.016
N of Valid Cases	90		

a. 6 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .39.

From the cross-tabulation of the items, the value of χ^2 with 1 degree of freedom at the 0.05 level is 4.00. The calculated value of χ^2 after Yates's correction is greater than the table value; the result does not support the null hypothesis. Furthermore, since χ^2 (df = 4, N = 5.820) = 66.118^a, and the p-calculated value is less than the p-alpha value at the 0.05 level of significance (0.000 ≤ 0.05), the result is statistically significant. A further look at the calculated chi-square value of 66.118^a with df = 4 at 0.05 shows that the tabulated chi-square value of 9.448 is less than 66.118^a. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which stated that there is no significant relationship between significant changes and the production of *adire* symbols among the Yoruba in Nigeria, is hereby rejected. Thus, based on the calculated tabulated chi-square results, it can be deduced that the *adire* symbols have been significantly influenced by changes in their production processes.

Summary

Summarily, this research examined the significant changes in the *Adire* art traditions of Yorubaland in order to understand their historical, cultural, and artistic evolution. The study explored how *Adire*

fabric making has developed over time, its impact on contemporary textile practices, and its continued relevance in the socio-cultural context of the Yoruba people in southwestern Nigeria.

Recommendation and Contribution of Knowledge

The *Adire* art tradition in Yoruba, Southwestern Nigeria, has undergone notable transformations that reflect both historical continuity and contemporary influences. The following recommendations and contributions to knowledge are highlighted:

- i. Contemporary *Adire* artists have contributed to the evolution of the tradition through creative reinterpretations of traditional patterns and techniques. Their innovations play a key role in shaping the modern expressions of *Adire* Art.
- ii. There is a need to investigate further, document, and preserve the development of creative pattern traditions among coastal Yoruba textile communities.
- iii. The *Adire* art tradition is closely linked to Yoruba cultural heritage, as its motifs and subjects reflect values, beliefs, and symbols significant to Yoruba identity and social life. This connection underscores the artistic and cultural importance of *Adire* as a form of expression and representation of Yoruba heritage.

Conclusion

This study examined the significant changes in the *adire* art tradition in Yorubaland, highlighting the historical, cultural, and technological factors that have shaped its development over time. Findings from both oral interviews and survey data indicate that while *adire* remains a distinctive cultural textile of the Yoruba people, the processes involved in its production have undergone considerable transformation. Innovations such as the introduction of synthetic dyes, stencil, and batik techniques, new motif adaptations, and broader market influences have contributed to shifts in both aesthetic style and production practices.

The study further established that globalisation, trade interactions, Western education, and technological advancement have played key roles in reshaping *adire* fabrics, motifs, and their cultural significance. Despite these changes, many traditional elements of *adire* making, particularly among older practitioners, continue to be preserved, demonstrating resilience and continuity within the tradition. The research has also shown that contemporary designers have adapted *adire* to new fashion contexts, contributing to its relevance in modern textile and design industries. Overall, the *adire* art tradition stands as both a historical legacy and a living cultural practice. Its evolution reflects the dynamism of Yoruba society: the capacity to preserve heritage while also embracing adaptation and innovation. The continued documentation, teaching, and creative engagement with *adire* are therefore essential to safeguarding its cultural meaning and sustaining its role within contemporary Yoruba identity and artistic expression.

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