

***The Pattern of Modernity: Textiles in Art, Fashion, and Cultural Memory
in Nigeria since 1960***

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of History and Cultural Studies of Freie
Universität Berlin

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Berlin, 2020

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Date of defense: 16 July 2018

Grade: Magna Cum Laude

ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the appropriation of printed and tie-dyed textiles in visual art and culture produced in Nigeria since 1960. By examining the social and political functions of the Yoruba indigo dyed fabric called *adire* as they evolved over the 20th century, the analyses of artistic appropriations are informed by the perspectives and histories of the cultural production of women in Nigeria's southwest dyeing centers. Questions related to gendered production of both "traditional crafts" and "modern art" are raised and reformulated for the specific context of textiles. Additionally, the ideology of 'Natural Synthesis' that was a formative force for the post-Independence generation of artists is considered as an influence on the drive to appropriate textiles and their patterns, as well as to conceive of them as "traditional" culture within an artistic paradigm of tradition and modernity. It argues that appropriations of textiles by modernist artists seize and sometimes erase the modernity of female and indigenous cultural production. Since these late modernist movements, artistic appropriations of textiles have continued within the field of visual arts, but underwent significant evolution in terms of media, subject matter, and conceptual underpinnings. Artists no longer undermine the modernity of cultural producers, but use it as a critical tool. These changes represent both a departure from modernist styles that characterized artistic practices in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as a renegotiation with the relationship of textiles to the historical and cultural past of a young nation. As artists and designers of the late 20th and 21st centuries explore the textile in new media and on different terms from their predecessors, new themes emerge such as consumerism, memory and history that situate this generation of cultural producers within global artistic genres and spheres that have dominated since the 1980s.

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GLOSSARY

Adire: (Yoruba) An indigo-dyed cotton cloth produced in southwestern Nigeria predominantly by Yoruba women using a variety of resist-dyeing techniques including tying, stitching or painting patterns with a resist paste.

Agbada: (Yoruba) A men's ensemble composed of four pieces, including a flowing wide sleeved robe. In Nigeria, the *agbada* is typically worn on special occasions and is often composed of *aso-oke* fabric. Variations on the outfit exist throughout West Africa.

Ankara: A common term used within Nigeria to refer to all factory-produced printed fabrics. Often used interchangeably with "African Print."

Aso-ebi: (Yoruba) Meaning 'cloth of the family,' *aso-ebi* denotes the practice of dressing in uniform for events and special occasions for the purposes of identifying and uniting members of a family, group, or community through dress. The chosen fabric may also serve to commemorate the event.

Aso-oke: (Yoruba) a cloth woven predominantly by men on a hand loom by the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. Meaning "top cloth," *aso-oke* is considered a prestige cloth and is typically reserved for special and ceremonial occasions.

Batik: (Javanese) A cloth produced through wax-resist dyeing. Its production exists in several parts of the world, however Javanese batik is perhaps best known, and is the prototype upon which Dutch wax prints and African prints were based.

Buba: (Yoruba) tailored blouse

Dutch Wax-Print / African Print / Hollandaise: Often used interchangeably, these terms refer to the cotton fabrics produced by the Dutch starting in the 19th century as imitations of Javanese batiks and sold in West African textile markets. The cloth has become so embedded in the dress of West African people and expatriate communities that it is often referred to as "African Print" or "African" fabrics. "African Print" may also refer to the production of wax-prints by African manufacturers.

Edo: May refer to the people or language primarily found in Nigeria's Edo State formerly of the Benin Empire.

Fancy Print: An imitation of the more costly Dutch Wax Print and other expensive fabrics produced by rollers. The difference, aside from price and production, is that the fancy print is one-sided while a true wax print is double sided.

Gele: (Yoruba) Head-tie or headscarf for women.

Guinea Cloth: an umbrella term for numerous types of cotton textiles usually manufactured in India (though some were also produced in Europe as imitations of Indian cottons) and brought to the west coast of Africa by Europeans who exchanged them with West Africans for slaves, gold, ivory and pepper.

Igbo: May refer to the people, culture or language of the former Kingdom of Nri and located in Nigeria's south-central and eastern regions.

Iro: (Yoruba) Women's wrapper

Kaftan: A pullover robe worn by both men and women in a number of variations and locations throughout the world. Revived in late 20th century Nigerian fashion through contemporary tailoring and lightweight fabrics.

Raffia: Refers to the natural threads harvested from raffia palms native to tropical regions of West Africa and used in tie-dyeing *adire* cloth.

Yoruba: Refers to the people, language, religion or culture of the southwest regions of Nigeria and parts of Benin. Formerly part of the Kingdoms of Oyo and Ife-Ife, Yoruba people make up one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa.

Uli: (Igbo) Also known as *uri*, refers to a pictorial system of design of the Igbo people. Specifically, Igbo women utilized the linear forms to decorate bodies and their homes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like any project of the same scope and duration of a dissertation, it takes many people to bring it to fruition.

I would like to first thank Wendy, my *Doktormutter*, for believing in this dissertation from the very beginning, when it looked nothing like it does now, for her incisive critiques of my writing, and for being both an advisor and friend.

I am indebted to the many artists who opened their homes and studios to share their work and ideas with me. Their insights into the art world of Lagos and their own practices were a powerful force that shaped this study. They include: Temitayo Ogunbiyi, Obinna Makata, Kelani Abass, George Edozie, Ayo Akinwande, Ndidi Dike, Ibrahim Lawal, Olu Amoda, Andrew Esiebo, Toyin Omolowo and Ngozi Schommers. Through Engineer Yemisi Shyllon and a fellowship at OYASAF I was very fortunate to meet some of Nigeria's great elders of the art world including Bruce Onobrakpeya and Yusuf Grillo, Nike Okundaye, Kolade Oshinowo and Bisi Fabunmi. OYASAF also introduced me to several younger and emerging artists, among them Peju Alatise, whose fabric-based work is testament to the evolving possibilities of the medium. I am so grateful to Titi and Mike Omoighe for accompanying me (a stranger at the time) on two trips to Abeokuta, and to Jean Borgatti for introducing us. Those two trips to the *Adire* Factory in Ijemo provided some of the most important data for the thesis. With their help, I not only witnessed *adire* being made, but was able to speak with the women sustaining the practice in the 21st century against many odds.

I am especially thankful to the staff at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos for hosting me as I did research in and around Lagos, and to the founder and director Bisi Silva for the chance to present my research at CCA, and for entrusting me with the coordination of her incredible Asiko program.

Thanks to the Swiss National Science Foundation, Theodor Schenk Stiftung, Bern University Research Foundation, and the Dr. Josephine de Kármán Stiftung for the financial support, and to the Walter Benjamin Kolleg (IASH) for a space to work.

I am thankful to my colleagues from the 'Other Modernities' project for their feedback and for making our research trips and meetings an entertaining respite from the lonely work of writing, as well as to Miriam for your encouragement, to Marita for the laughs and friendship that pulled me through, to Abhi for keeping my American colloquialisms in check, and to my parents for their support. Thanks to Prof. Peter Probst for suggesting I go to Nigeria in the first place, and to Prof. Tobias Wendl for taking on the role of second advisor when this project migrated to Berlin.

Last, but certainly not least, to Patrick, who encouraged me to do this project from the start and stuck by my side the whole long way through it.

For Patrick, forever-ever.

INTRODUCTION

Intersections and Interstices:

The opening scenes of Lágbájá's music video for the song "Never Far Away" (2005) alternate between a residential courtyard of a Nigerian town set beneath a roofscape of corrugated tin and flashbacks to a domestic scene.¹ In this latter setting, the artist argues with his presumed ex-love who provides the lead vocals to the song about loss, longing and hope. The drumbeats that open the song eventually give way to guitars and a string orchestra. Dressed in black suits, ties, and dresses the musicians enter the courtyard with their instruments only to be ridiculed by onlookers for their formal, Western attire. Laughing and wagging a finger in disapproval, Lágbájá shakes his head and beckons the musicians to come to him as he empties a bag of indigo blue, tie-dyed fabrics onto the ground. Within an instant, the violinists and cellists are wearing matching indigo tunics, wrappers and head-ties. Lágbájá, now satisfied with the uniform change, assumes the role of conductor dressed in one of his signature masked headpieces and matching top.² Once seated, the string orchestra joins an ensemble of Yoruban drummers to play for a captivated audience. Seen only in flashbacks for the most of the song, the female vocalist triumphantly arrives in the courtyard near the end of the video, weaving her way slowly through the crowd to take her place amongst the musicians. Momentarily awed by her presence, Lágbájá moves towards her with arms held wide and embraces her against the backdrop of indigo blue.

The indigo-dyed fabric called *adire*, meaning 'tie and dye' in Yoruba, used by the orchestra in the music video symbolizes the political, social and economic history in which it has been both witness and actor. An icon of Yoruba cultural and sartorial heritage, *adire* is utilized in "Never Far Away" to symbolize the embrace of local culture and the rejection of foreign culture through the act of undressing from their Western style clothing. Worn as a uniform by the musicians, *adire* communicates belonging and acceptance amongst the crowd and within the local culture, signified

¹ The music video can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8n7hA-NDMWA>

² The outfits always include a mask or headpiece that cover his face and reveal only his eyes. Concealing his identity through dress is meant to convey the artist's embodiment of the common man through anonymity. <http://www.lagbaja.com/about/about.php> Accessed July 1, 2016.

as much by the familiar blue patterns of the cloths as by the blend of indigenous and contemporary styles in which they are tailored and worn. Yet, at the same time that the cloth brings a local, visual vernacular, the textile also aestheticizes the synthesis at play in Lágbájá's music--for it too is a synthesis of diverse sources. While "Never Far Away" is a fusion of African drums with European strings, jazz with afrobeat, and English with Yoruba lyrics to the melody of 21st century popular music, *adire's* patterns present an amalgamation of foreign and regional imagery and design, and its material and technique of production may include cotton of European, Nigerian or Asian origin, ancient West and North African dyeing customs, and organic or synthetic indigo and additives from multiple, often distant, sources. Its use in this music video sets the stage for an in-depth study of the contemporary uses of Yoruba heritage that go beyond the boundaries of artistic and academic disciplines. This is, after all, not a dissertation strictly about art, photography, popular culture, textiles or dress but rather about the moments when these cultural ephemera intersect, overlap and interact, and what it means when they do.

These moments begin to unfold in the early 20th century when the *adire* industry reached its economic and creative peak. This was swiftly followed by a steep decline as *adire* became integrated in the political landscape of the 1940s, though it underwent a minor revival in the second half of the 20th century with the help of artists, fashion designers, and individuals with interests in cultural heritage and pro-nationalist sentiments. Within this context, this study analyzes the appropriations of the material or patterns of painted and printed textiles that include *adire* and factory printed cloth by artists and designers working in Nigeria. It examines the ways cultural actors tended to conflate indigenous textiles--in this case those made by women--with "traditionality." Used as a foil to the modernity of mid-century arts and cultural production, the textile provides a nostalgic link to the pre-colonial past in a search for a national identity for artists associated with the late modernist period of the 1960s. Later, the widespread practice of tailoring clothing and the decreasing cost of factory printed textiles inspired a number of artist to work with fabric scraps, either out of necessity or curiosity. These works engage with the economics of dress, the painterly aspects of the textile pattern, and the hyper-materialistic urban society of Lagos, marking a significant departure from the modernist generation. Uniting these two strains of interpretation is a relationship to memory, in particular the

textile's ability to commemorate individuals and events, to evoke the cultural past through pattern and technique (whether that past is real or imagined), and to serve as witness and document to the lives and bodies it touched.

Based on the analysis of the cultural production and phenomena stated above, this dissertation argues that the textile, though a modern form of visual and artistic expression in and of itself, was reconceived by artists and other cultural actors throughout the 20th century as symbolic of a "traditional" culture and past-time to highlight the modernity of their own production and construct a cultural identity during the formation of the independent nation of Nigeria. In turn, such conceptualizations formed in the 1960s, 70s and 80s provided the material against which artistic appropriations of textiles in the late 20th and early 21st century were positioned. Instead of using the textile as a symbol of the past or an icon of nostalgia for pre-colonial culture, contemporary artists and designers focus on the modernity of the textile itself, its embedment in contemporary society, and its continuity within the visual landscape and historical narrative of Yoruban and Nigerian culture.

Reading Art and Writing Art History through Textiles: A methodological approach

*Thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns -- but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver.*³

Textiles, like texts, like paintings, have much to say when closely read. After all, the words text and textile share in their etymological root of the Late Latin *texere* meaning "to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build" while the metaphor above reveals the close associations between the skills of weavers and storytellers.⁴ Certainly these ancient associations influenced the numerous modern writers and thinkers that have adopted the metaphor of weaving and its opposite of unraveling for the construction (or deconstruction) of the written

³ An ancient metaphor reprinted in Bringhurst. Additionally, the written page was called a *textus*, meaning "cloth." See: Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 3rd ed. (Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 2004), 118.

⁴ "Text," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2016, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=text.

word.⁵ Yet, a textile is always more than the sum of its threads. Reading a textile entails an intense scrutiny of its production method be it woven, dyed, or otherwise, but this must be done in conjunction with a historical, cultural and sociological contextualization of that production and its use, as well as a visual analysis of its patterns and aesthetics, or rather acquiring a fluency in its pattern language. Such readings can be applied equally to mass-produced factory prints as they are to rare, handmade, antique pieces. Given the capacity for cloth to communicate quite literally on behalf of the wearer in some West African societies, the metaphors linking textile technologies to writing or telling stories gain traction in non-Western contexts.⁶

Unfortunately, few textile objects or practices have undergone such comprehensive scrutiny. Until the late 20th century, textile objects were typically the domain of ethnographic and anthropological study, and written about from the viewpoint of the researcher rather than the producer. The texts typically provided detailed information about how the textile was made and the function it served in the culture or society that produced it. Several studies of this nature on *adire* are referenced in this text for their valuable information on technique, but they tend to eulogize the practice, lamenting how the state of the industry in the 1970s or 80s pales in comparison to the way it was in the past. Such nostalgic sentiments recall James Clifford on the writing of marginal people by the West. Often a product of the Western imagination within ethnographic study, he writes, "these suddenly "backward" peoples no longer invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it."⁷ In other words, in the eyes of the West, modernity robbed the products (and people) of their authenticity or true essence.

⁵ See for example Derrida's re-reading of Plato's *Pharmacy* via the paradigm of the weaver. He also uses the metaphor of the embroiderer, the seam, the thread, and the fold in the same text: Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Reprint (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁶ This is well documented in a number of sources regarding a number of different textiles. See for example: Lisa Aronson, "The Language of West African Textiles," *African Arts* 25, no. 3 (July 1992): 36–40.; Susan Domowitz, "Wearing Proverbs: Any Names for Printed Factory Cloth," *African Arts* 25, no. 3 (July 1992): 82–87.; Doran H. Ross, "Asante Cloth Names and Motifs," in *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California, 1998), 107–26.

⁷ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture : Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 5.

Clifford's study, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988), turned the lens of ethnography back on the West. In a self-reflective critique of the relations between the West and other societies and cultures, Clifford examined how those relations were composed through the tactics and tools of anthropological, historical and ethnographic disciplines, as well as through the institutional treatment of art and cultural objects. In a number of ways, *The Predicament of Culture* was deeply influential on my own study. With regards to *adire* and African textiles in general, a "product" largely written about by Western scholars in the 1960s - 1980s, Clifford's model guided my reading of early texts on these subjects, particularly where many blatantly committed the blunders of which he is critical, such as the framing of Yoruba cultural production as a vanishing tradition to be salvaged. More importantly, however, Clifford exposed the structures of power underlying the observation, analysis and writing about one culture by another. The hierarchies that were constructed in ethnographic projects revealed a persistent euro-centrism grounded in Western biases, desires, and inventions that were intimately linked to the structures and functions of colonization. As I will argue at numerous points throughout the chapters that follow, Western bias and values concerning the textile are implicated in the study and reception of African art and culture in the west.

Clifford's work also helped clarify the connections between ethnographic studies and the treatment of the textile as an artistic appropriation. At some point during the course of the 20th century, the *adire* industry came to be seen as a quaint, domestic activity of Yoruba women rather than the economic powerhouse of textile industry it once was. One scholar, for example, writes, "Patterning the cloth is a home industry and often a baby is tied to the worker's back while other children play about her."⁸ Others ascribe the intellectual property of the textile's designs to traditions passed from one generation to the next, effectively diminishing the agency of the artist in any formal and creative choices that go into the making of the cloth: Polakoff claims, the artist "employs a feather, continually dipping it into the bowl of paste, as she outlines and carefully fills in the traditional designs which have become part of her childhood

⁸ Esther Warner Dendel, *African Fabric Crafts: Sources of African Design and Technique* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974), 122.

legacy, acquired from her mother or another woman within the family compound.”⁹ Decades later, Gillow writes of hand-painted *adire*, “The patterns used are generally traditional ones handed down with very little change from mother to daughter.”¹⁰ These descriptions and the texts they came from not only ignore the fact that many popular *adire* patterns were inventions of the 20th century, but they refuse to analyze the relationship between *adire* and its place of production in the “domestic sphere.” Rather than a craft best suited for a woman who was already bound to the home by her children and household duties, *adire* production requires weeks, if not months, of careful preparation in a stable environment. This included the delicate fermentation process of natural indigo dye that entailed expert knowledge of its chemical composition, as well as the patterning, dyeing, drying, re-dyeing, and color-fasting of large quantities of cloth. The labor-intensive process of preparing a cloth for sale on the domestic market, or for export, required both extensive knowledge by those directing the process, and the work of family members, children, and indentured laborers to fulfill all the necessary tasks from start to finish. These divisions of labor took place throughout large, open-air complexes that included homes, rather than inside private domestic interiors.

Of course, this is hardly the image of *adire* production one gains from reading about it. Instead, domesticity and matrilineality are deprecatingly reframed to trivialize the practice. The result is an enduring image of an insular, static, feminine craft. Although misleading, this image suited the modern artist whose search for a symbol of a “pure” and “traditional” culture was fulfilled by the indigenous textile, whose own modernity or interculturality was previously undermined by studies such as the ones quoted above. At this point of appropriation or overlap between genres, the “fine” arts become complicit in the subordination of the textile, even where they profess to “celebrate” or “honor” it through inclusion. By extension, the work of women, and the work of the uneducated craftsperson are undermined as well. This continues at the point where the textile, as well as the artwork that adopted its image or material, land in the Western museum space and their value is negotiated all over again by institutional methods of categorization, collection, and exhibition.

⁹ Claire Polakoff, *Into Indigo : African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques* (n. p., 1979), 62.

¹⁰ John Gillow, *Printed and Dyed Textiles from Africa* (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 17.

At this juncture of art and textile, artistic and curatorial practice, Clifford's internal critique extends to the discipline of art history, which has had a problematic relationship with textiles as well as non-Western art for well over a century. Thus, this study straddles the fields of anthropology and art history in that it considers the production of textiles in an expanded perspective that exceeds the canons of both fields. This expansion is achieved both by the artworks that integrate textile media and language, but it is also integrated into the arguments posed in the following chapters that first assert the position that *adire* textile practice was modernized in technique and image in the late 19th century, and second, that the negation of this modernity was integral to both the conceptualization of the non-Western textile in Western cultural anthropology, as well as to the formation of a modern art in Nigeria for which the textile, and other forms of "traditional" culture served as modernity's non-modern "other."

Implicated within the problematic relationship of textiles to both fields of anthropology and art history is the question of gender. In order to understand the conceptualization of Nigerian textiles by Western scholars as domestic craft, to locate it in an extended framework of art and culture that addresses the disciplinary gap in which it exists, one must look back to the trajectory of the textile within the West's art historical narrative. This narrative reveals that the division between high arts and textiles did not always exist. Rather, the production and embellishment of textiles came to be associated with "women's work" and femininity following a gradual split in the Middle Ages in Europe. Practiced by both men and women, embroidery, for example, was considered in medieval England to be a form of high art. Tapestry weaving was also once an esteemed art form practiced throughout central Europe predominantly by men. The question remains then, how did textile-based practices become synonymous with women's cultural production, and thereby relegated to the margins of Western art history? As with Clifford's ethnographic study of the West, a self reflective lens on art history exposes a gradual, systematic structuring of values that subtly empowered one group (in this case men) while it subordinated another (women).

In order to unpack this hierarchy as it relates to textiles, this study draws upon the body of feminist art history that has dealt with the overlap between gender and genre. It looks to the relationship between women and the type of work they produce

to understand how this art has been consumed and written into (or out of) the art historical narrative. This line of thought was developed in the early 1980s largely through the work of Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker. Cultural theory of the 1970s, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and the writing of Michel Foucault that exposed the hegemonies and hierarchies that actively defined a discourse heavily influenced their work. Pollock and Parker's 1981 book *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* was significant in a number of ways. For one, it made a departure from the seminal essay of feminist art history of 1971 by Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Nochlin had concluded in her essay, rather optimistically, that gender discrimination happened in the past and thus the imbalance experienced in the late 20th century in the field of art history when women were almost non-existent in textbooks and major institutional collections and exhibitions was an end result of this prior discriminatory practice. By contrast, Pollock and Parker argued that rather than the "legacy of antiquated prejudice" the erasure of women from art history was a modernist project with much of it taking place in the 20th century. Despite concrete evidence of a shift towards the pejorative in the language used to write about art made by women from the 18th century onwards, they write, "Women were more thoroughly rubbed out of the pages of art's histories at the very moment when through emancipation and post-World War I social changes women were more than ever before active and visible in many public and professional spheres, including art which many women embraced precisely as a realm of new freedoms and self-definition."¹¹ Although the same cannot be said for women's emancipation in Nigeria because women's autonomy and rights were reduced under colonialism, I will show that their erasure from Nigeria's art history was also a 20th century project.

Pollock and Parker exposed a material and practice-based hierarchy in *Old Mistresses* that produced clear-cut divisions between the arts and crafts, or the fine arts and decorative arts that emerged slowly but resolutely alongside social stratifications that ultimately bound women to the domestic sphere. Even in the later decades of the 20th century, when art forms associated with women are "rescued" by artists and curators, these genres could not escape the constraints of the

¹¹ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), xxiv.

"feminine spirit," the essentializing stereotypes of femininity ascribed endlessly to works of certain materials and genres. As Pollock and Parker argue, these stereotypes are perpetuated for a distinct purpose: to provide an opposite against which male artists find meaning and maintain their dominance.¹²

This mechanism of modernity and patriarchy in many respects can be found at work in Nigeria where the advent of colonialism and modernism conspired to create a value system within artistic and cultural production that placed sculpture, a male occupation, above all else. The generation of artists that constitutes what is now viewed as the late modernist period in Nigerian art history was overwhelmingly male. The few women contemporaries that did exist were written out of the art historical narrative in the decades that followed either by omission or a loss or lack of documentation of their lives and work.¹³ The *adire* textile was not only envisaged as an emblem of "traditional," indigenous culture, but also as craft, and thereby separate from the production of art. Thus, although *adire* production continued alongside modernist art, its producers were not considered as artists, and, reconceived as a diminishing tradition, late 20th century *adire* production was viewed as anachronistic or a measure in cultural preservation.

From these paradigms of male-female; modern-traditional; foreign-indigenous; art-craft one can find numerous other parallels within the historiography of Western art history. In addition to Pollock and Parker, I have benefitted greatly from scholars such as Elissa Auther (*String, Felt, Thread: The hierarchy of art and craft in American art*, 2010) who analyzed the resurgence of fiber-based media in American art in the 1960s and 1970s, much of which was in resistance to craft's subordinated position in the art world, even as influential art critics such as Clement Greenberg remained committed to sustaining the hierarchical split between art and craft. Like Pollock and Parker, Auther shows how forces of the 20th century made the split between art and craft, and the subordination of artwork associated with women profound and far-reaching. Along this same theme, but with a specific focus on

¹² Parker and Pollock, 80.

¹³ See for example Agulu on Colette Omogbai in Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 252–56. See also, Peju Layiwola, "From Footnote to Main Text: Re/Framing Women Artists from Nigeria," *N.paradoxa Africa and its Diasporas*, no. 31 (January 2013): 78–87.

textile-based art, the essay collections of volumes 1 and 2 of the *Reinventing Textiles* series edited by Sue Rowley (Vol. 1 "Tradition and Innovation," 1999) and Janis Jefferies (Vol. 2 "Gender and Identity," 2001) provided specific examples of how developing textile theory was applied to textile-based artworks or practices throughout the world. Another text that was published a year prior to the *Reinventing Textiles* series is *Material Matters: The art and culture of contemporary textiles*, edited by Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing (1998). These three essay compilations that address specific artists and their textile-based practices have served as models for how to approach such practices in a field that still struggles to get its bearings. Specifically, the essays provide a wide range of debates that surround the textile, which refreshingly expand the discourse beyond the sometimes inescapable analytical lens of gender and femininity. These essays are particularly useful in the third and final chapter where the relationship of the textile to themes of consumerism, cultural history, and collective memory are explored and questioned.

As none of the above resources address textile-based practices in West Africa, I have gained immensely from the example of Nkiru Nzegwu, whose cutting analysis of appropriations of the Igbo women's art of *uli* by male modernist artists in Nigeria presents one of the only challenges to the previously unquestioned access to women's cultural production assumed by this generation of artists. In the essay "Crossing Boundaries: Gender transmogrification of African art history" (2000) Nzegwu also targets the exhibition of these male artists by a white male curator at the National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C., which, she argues, perpetuates several issues raised by the artworks themselves, and exacerbates a gender imbalance by excluding a number of important female artists from the exhibition. Her scathing critique of the Western exhibition of male Nigerian artists serves to illustrate how feminist theory can be employed to address racial, colonial, and cultural systems of oppression as much as it is used to address patriarchy as an extension of Western instruments of domination and entrenched in the current Nigerian social order. This text has also provided an important precedent in terms of writing about Nigerian modernist art from a feminist perspective. Much of the literature concerning the work produced in 1960s and the 1970s is written by the artists themselves, or are laudatory accounts of the artists' achievements written predominantly by male critics and historians, many of whom were commissioned by

the artists themselves. The few women artists active in that time period have been nearly written out of Nigeria's Modern art history through exclusion from exhibitions, a lack of documentation, as well as cultural attitudes towards women's roles in society.¹⁴ Some of those roles did indeed include producers of visual culture. In fact, this is the point from which Nzegwu commences her critique of the appropriation of *uli*, an art form practiced by Igbo women in Eastern Nigeria, by mostly male Nigerian artists beginning in the 1940s. *Uli* comprises a visual vocabulary of body painting executed in patterns that are heavily symbolic and proverbial in a unique, heavily linear aesthetic. Nzegwu suggests, "*uli* may appropriately be seen as constituting an "active voice," used by women to engage in a variety of socio-cultural commentaries on history and life."¹⁵ Liberally adopting *uli* forms as decorative devices or as a guide to a technical approach to linear drawing, prominent Nigerian artists from Ben Enwonwu to Uche Okeke transformed the *uli* practice from bodies and homes to paper and canvas, effectively shifting the practice away from communities of women to the academy and depriving it of its communicative function.¹⁶ Along this same vein, I will argue that modernist appropriations of *adire* patterns mute its communicability and remove it from the context of female labor that produced it. Further, the rhetoric of the Zaria Art Society, a group of students in the department of art at the University of Nigeria, in Zaria, that called for "preserving" indigenous culture through art echoed many of the anthropological studies of the mid- to late twentieth centuries that suggested *adire* was a dying practice, and called for its rescue.¹⁷ However, such suggestions and rhetoric (though based on some evidence of production decline) greatly overshadow if not ignore entirely the evidence of *adire's* modernity, and its perseverance by adaptation and change.

Nzegwu's questioning of the intentions and outcomes of the act of appropriation of *uli*, and their exhibition in the institutional space of a prominent museum in the United States uncovers various examples of taking liberties. These acts, committed by male

¹⁴ For an overview of this issue see: Layiwola, "From Footnote to Main Text: Re/Framing Women Artists from Nigeria."

¹⁵ Nkiru Nzegwu, "Crossing Boundaries: Gender Transmogrification of African Art History," *Ijele: Art eJournal of the African World* 1, no. 1 (2000): 3.

¹⁶ Nzegwu, 3.

¹⁷ In the introduction to Stanfield and Simmonds' edited text on *adire*, for example, they indicate "Jane Barbour's section stemmed from a desire to save the *adire* patterns for posterity". See Jane Barbour and Doig Simmonds, eds., *Adire Cloth in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: The Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1971), 6.

"modernist" artists against female "traditional" artists, and again by Western curators who assume the imperialist position of creating knowledge about the Igbo, indicate the intersection of gendered and ethnographic othering. Her essay, along with the writings of artists and cultural anthropologists that speak to the drive towards "preservation" inspired my own analysis of the act of appropriation as a means of self-modernizing. Within this line of thought, Hal Foster's essay "The Artist as Ethnographer" (*The Return of the Real: the avant-garde at the end of the century*, 1996) was also useful for its multiple examples drawn from contemporary art practice that test the limits of access and the definitions of alterity, where artists find themselves in the position of ethnographer, and thereby acting problematically as patron to an "other."

Finally, I have borrowed from Theodor Adorno's concept of the *museal* (*Prisms*, 1967), as a way of thinking through the transformation that occurs when a textile is taken from its original context and appropriated as subject matter into an artwork, or as an object of collection and exhibition by an institution.

Methods and Field Research

Based on the major gap in scholarship on textiles, the inadequacy of the materials that do exist, and the seeming lack of artists represented in the West who were working in the African continent, in this case in Nigeria, a great deal of primary source research for this thesis took place in Lagos, the heart of the Nigerian art scene, and in other locations throughout southwestern Nigeria. The aim of two stays in the city of Lagos was to first find out if there were artists working with textiles and fibers, and secondly to begin building up information about their practices through interviews, studio visits, exhibition visits, close examination and documentation of their work, and collecting Nigerian print media that was unavailable abroad. During the first trip to Lagos in June 2012 as a fellow with the Omooba Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Art Foundation (OYASAF) I was introduced to key contacts in the local art scene that helped identify numerous artists that had worked with textiles at some point in their careers. During this trip I was also able to interview Bruce Onobrakpeya, a key figure in the modern arts, and quite possibly the first to integrate textile patterns into painting. A second, and longer stay in Lagos took place over five months in 2014. During this time I was a research assistant at the Centre for

Contemporary Arts, Lagos (CCA). Not only was the staff at a transitional phase between exhibitions of Kelani Abass and El Anatsui, two artists whose work deals with textiles in a variety of ways and are addressed in this thesis, but the connections established through the CCA deepened my knowledge and understanding of a significant trend in Nigerian art that was often entirely absent from the Western exhibitions that purportedly covered this very overlap between African art and textiles.

After this period of interviewing and surveying the scope of the textile-art genre, I narrowed down my focus to artists who had used printed and dyed textiles in their work as opposed to woven ones such as *aso-oke*. This selectivity served several purposes: first and foremost, focusing on *adire* opened up a world of a modern textile production. As I will discuss at length in the 2nd chapter, the development of painted patterning was a fundamental aspect of its modernity. Thus, unlike the borrowing of woven motifs, the appropriation of painted patterning into art was, I argue, the appropriation of one modern image into another. Narrowing the focus to painted and printed textiles also allowed me to see the continuity between the appropriations of the late modernist generation, the schools of batik revival, and the ubiquitous use of African print cloth beginning in the 1990s. It goes without saying, the selection also helped to make more manageable the scope and quantity of artists and artworks included in the study, as well as to engage with the question of gender, which emerged as an undercurrent of several works that appropriated *adire*.

Due to the prominence of *adire* in this study, it became necessary to delve quite deep into the history of *adire* production in order to analyze the modern and contemporary work in which it is incorporated. For the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of *adire*'s history as well as its current state, I travelled to Ibadan and Abeokuta, two towns that were formerly major dyeing centers during *adire*'s heyday. Guided by Nike Okundaye, the woman credited with reviving *adire* production in Nigeria, along with some of her staff, I also travelled to Oshogbo and Ogidi where she has established workshops that train men and women in indigo dyeing and other arts. During these trips, I visited markets, spoke with the women selling *adire*, interviewed the heads of two textile producing compounds in Abeokuta, and accessed the archives of Nigeria Magazine, the Nigerian Field and other published materials at the National Archive in Ibadan in a search for more information about

adire and its 20th century transformation from a primarily tie-dyed fabric to a painted, stenciled and sewn one.

Although the site of production for *adire* was important, many of the objects studied in the course of this research were held in museum collections in Britain, the U.S. and Germany, the same institutions where I was first exposed to artistic appropriation of textiles. This was one of the reasons I spent the second half of 2014 in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) where I had access to the resources of the British Museum, multiple libraries and archives, and where numerous Nigerian artists had established their artistic practices. Thus, this study was built from multiple sites: the Western exhibition and academic spaces where both textiles and artworks are displayed, canonized, analyzed and evaluated, as well as the sites of contact with artists actively working today. On many occasions, when I was not in Lagos these interactions took place in London, Berlin, Dakar or other European and African cities where their work was being shown or where they had taken up an artistic residency. These sites and experiences were external to Lagos, yet were formative for the development of their work. A great deal of the research concerning contemporary artists, particularly those less known, also relied on digital platforms. Where borders and distance made personal meetings difficult, contact with artists was established or maintained over Facebook chat, WhatsApp messages, email, and Skype. I monitored their personal blogs and websites for new posts relevant to their work, found artists' videos on YouTube and Vimeo, and stayed abreast of exhibitions, new works, and other developments by following Facebook feeds, Instagram, and a number of digital publications.

Literature Review

The process of compiling and reviewing the literature for this research which deals specifically with artworks produced in Nigeria that appropriate textile imagery or material posed a similar ad-hoc venture to the academic subject of textiles. The majority of the texts that deal with this topic are catalogues produced for exhibitions that explored textile-based art by African artists. Although some books address textile-based art within a text dedicated to African textiles, such as Chris Spring's *African Textiles Today* (2012), the inclusions of artist appropriations is typically

treated as a peripheral subject. A book written exclusively on this specific practice of textile appropriation by West African artists has not yet been produced, although the sheer number of artists in the region that would fall under such a rubric would easily provide enough material for a book. The exhibitions, which are reviewed in chapter one, were among the first of their kind in the field of African art. More often than not, the texts reflect this nascent stage; they demonstrate the lack of critical resources their authors had to draw upon, and they often fail to produce the rigorous scholarship that the work deserved. The exhibitions also tended to focus on the work of artists working outside the continent who had already established their reputation in the international art world. This meant that artists who had produced work with connections to the textile on the continent prior to these decades were largely excluded. Thereby, the artists of the 90s and 00s generation were assumed to be working in an entirely new artistic genre without precedent.

In order to both address these issues within scholarship on this practice as well as attempt to trace its origins, and provide a more in-depth contextualization, this study looks back to the modern era and borrows from various sources for a comprehensive look at the appropriation of print-textiles in Nigerian art. First, the literature produced specifically about *adire* is reviewed and analyzed, followed by surveys on African textiles, relevant collections of essays related to textiles and dress, and finally, resources on *adire* and Nigerian textiles outside the field of art history. Secondly, the texts concerning Modern African art, especially those which address artists included in this study, are also reviewed.

Western interest in Nigerian textiles reached an initial apex in the 1960s, a time when the newly independent nation was optimistic about the future and was looking to indigenous material culture as a source of national pride. Numerous European scholars undertook field research on Yoruba textiles. Susanne Wenger and Ulli Beier published the first focused study on *adire* in 1957 in an article in *Nigeria Magazine*. The next major text was Jane Barbour and Doig Simmonds' *Adire Cloth in Nigeria* (1971) that consists of five essays by five different authors, each one focusing on a different aspect of the textile from an overview of dyeing methods and indigo's chemistry and history in Western Nigeria to the origins of some well-known *adire* patterns and an explanation of one pattern's transformations. Two of the essays offer

in-depth descriptions of *adire* production processes, as well as photographs of full cloths and pattern details. The essay by George Jackson titled “The Devolution of the Jubilee Design” is the first and one of the only of its kind to consider the origin and subsequent transformation, or “devolution” as the author asserts, of a specific *adire* pattern, the *adire oloba*.

Two later books about *adire* (Warner Dendel 1974; Okuboyejo 1987) offered little in the way of new information. They focused more on aesthetics with illustrations of the patterns in detail. These texts, along with several articles from *The Nigerian Field*, *Nigeria Magazine* and textile journals on the same subject (Aremu 1979; Barbour 1989; Kalilu and Areo 2013; Oyelola 1992, 1993), as well as *adire*-specific exhibitions (*Traditional Adire Cloths* at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria 1969; *Adire: Resist Dyed-Cloths of the Yoruba* at the National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C. in 1997; and *Adire: Indigo cloth of Nigeria* at the Museum for Textiles in Toronto in 1980) comprise a base of information about *adire* that has not changed much since Beier and Wenger’s and Barbour and Simmonds’ texts were first written. They tend to take a formalist approach to patterns and offer technical information about textile production. The same can be said for the survey texts covering a range of indigo-dyed African textiles such as Claire Polakoff’s *Into Indigo* (1979) and Jenny Balfour-Paul’s *Indigo* (1998). More recently, however, some scholars have presented a more thorough and comprehensive account. John Picton’s *Art of African Textiles* (1995), for example, reveals thoughtful consideration of *adire*’s modernity while Pat Oyelola’s *Nigerian Artistry* (2010) offers a more up-to-date account informed by her longtime presence in Nigeria and her continued contact with people in the *adire* industry. Most recently, the daughter of artist Nike Okundaye, Allison Davies, published a book called *Storytelling through Adire* (2014) that includes some alternative interpretations of well-known patterns. This text provides unique insight into the way a pattern may mean one thing to the dyer and those who understand the pattern language of *adire*, and another to the foreigner or outsider who either interpret it for themselves, or are offered an interpretation by locals..

Despite large strides made in textile scholarship since the 1970s, several of the early resources on the subject of *adire* continue to be cited by researchers, curators and

artists. At best, these resources provide accurate information about production techniques and provide insight into the *adire* industry during the time the texts were published. At their worst, these texts favor the authoritative opinion of the author/scholar over the voices of the women who produce the textiles, highlight the “traditionality” of the practice over its modernity, and give the impression that *adire* production has taken place in a domestic vacuum and is in a state of decline and on a path to complete oblivion.

These issues are not unique to *adire*, but are rather endemic to most scholarship on non-Western textiles produced in the 20th century, and are especially evident in survey texts. The texts included in the following paragraphs all include sections on *adire*. The first of these references is a book published in 1979 by John Picton and John Mack entitled *African Textiles: looms, weaving and design* that was published alongside a survey exhibition of the collection holdings at the Museum of Mankind in London. A second edition of the book followed in 1989 and Picton also went on to write *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex* for an exhibition at London’s Barbican Gallery in 1995 in which he critiques his and Mack’s approach to the subject of African textiles in the previous two publications, remarking that the current text moves beyond concerns with ‘traditionality’ and looks to a range of responses on the continent to textiles as a medium of art.¹⁸ Several other publications covering a breadth of the continent’s textiles include Christopher Spring’s *African Textiles* (1989; 1997) Duncan Clarke’s *The Art of African Textiles* (1997), John Gillow’s *African textiles: Color and creativity across a continent* (2003), and *African Textiles: The Karun Thakar Collection* (2015), yet these texts attempt to cover such a vast quantity of material that the information they provide tends to be redundant and dry. The three-volume *Textilien aus Westafrika* (1972) by Brigitte Menzel provided unprecedented detail and illustrations about West African cloth, but the language was difficult without an advanced knowledge of German. While volumes 1-3 covered the technical aspects of the collection holdings at the Berlin

¹⁸ John Picton, Rayda Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* (London: Barbican Art Gallery : Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 11–12.

Museum für Völkerkunde, a fourth and final volume intended to address the cultural and historical significance of the textiles seems to have never been published.¹⁹

Survey texts also tend to favor the same type of textile: the strip-woven cloth. The texts tend to be weak in the same areas as well, such as in East African textiles, a subject that is sparse in its material and documentation, an issue that these texts tend to point out but not remedy. None have since matched the thoughtfulness and novelty of approach as Picton (1995) who shows how the narrative of textiles “subverts and overturns European pretence” and highlights how African agency shaped engagement with foreign cultures.²⁰

Picton’s text was prescient at a time when scholars were only beginning to reveal that there is much more to these narratives than the technologies of looms and the techniques of weaving or dyeing. For the most part, however, the literature on *adire* or indigo-dyeing in Africa written from anthropological and art historical perspectives tended to focus on the interpretations of patterns and production techniques while circumventing the social, political, and economic contexts in which they were produced. Certainly, such an all-inclusive, inter-disciplinary approach was hardly common practice in the 1970s and 1980s but gained traction in the 1990s as the ‘social history of art’ became ingrained in the academic system and gradually encompassed the field of visual culture.

This shift is evident in edited volumes of essays such as *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning* (1992) by Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher, *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time* (1995) edited by Joanne Eicher, and *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (2004) edited by Jean Allman. These collections did for some African textiles what these types of texts do best: brought together diverse topics united by a single thematic thread and written by experts from various fields and geographic specialties, producing more in-depth and rigorous research in much needed areas. The texts also sought to find connections between

¹⁹ Michelle V. Gilbert, “Book Review: Textilien Aus Westafrika,” *Africa* 46, no. 1 (January 1976): 101.

²⁰ Picton, Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles*, 12.

distant cultures and sartorial practices along the lines of gender, social and religious function, economics, and politics.

Outside the discipline of art history and anthropology there are two texts that take entirely different and welcome approaches to *adire*. Judith Byfield is a social historian who has written the most comprehensive account of *adire*'s modern history in *The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Dyers in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1890-1940* (2002), among other articles concerning the same subject (Byfield 1997; 2004). The text examines fifty years of indigo dyeing in which the local textile industry of the southwestern Nigerian town of Abeokuta is subjected to unprecedented boom in the 1920s and bust following the great depression. Byfield utilizes rich primary and archival sources from Abeokuta council and provincial reports, trade records, collections of private papers and interviews that piece together previously unknown perspectives of women in the historical narrative of early 20th century Abeokuta. Unfortunately, her analysis of *adire* ignores its aesthetics. This is precisely where textiles slip between the disciplinary cracks. Disciplines like art history prioritize visual analysis over thorough contextualization or historical analysis while other disciplines shy away from aesthetics either out of discomfort, or worse, because in a hierarchy of information textiles or art are not considered seriously as historical documents, nor is visual analysis considered a rigorous, scientific method of extracting data. Nevertheless, this text provided significant information for my own research, particularly for the second chapter where the modern history of *adire* provides the crux for the argument presented in that chapter that modernist artists highlighted the 'traditionality' of *adire* at the expense of its modernity.

The second text, Colleen E. Kriger's *Cloth in West African History* (2006), takes significant strides to remedy the disciplinary divide. The book traces the ancient histories of cotton, its transformation into textiles and their production and trade in West Africa. *Adire* is included in the study, and Kriger uses it to support the hypothesis (put forth in previous texts) that the Yoruba indigo dyeing practice is in some way connected to the tie-dyed cotton garments preserved in the caves of the Bandiagara escarpment and date to as early as the 11th century, as well as to tie-dyed and resist indigo textiles from Sierra Leone (Bedaux and Bolland, 1980; 1991;

Keyes-Adenaike, 1993; Wahlman and Chuta, 1979).²¹ Thus the text brings together historical data that indicate cross-cultural interactions that shaped *adire*'s early production. Contributing to her argument is an entire chapter dedicated to the visual analysis of an important painted *adire* pattern that offers clues to the cosmopolitan nature of 19th century urban Lagos where the cloth was designed. Through this visual analysis of a singular pattern, Kriger arrives at the same conclusion as Byfield: that *adire* was modernized through a number of technological changes that took place in the late 19th and early 20th century, including the development of hand-painted and stenciled patterning technique. Her research adds that the hand-painted patterns exhibit an acculturation of diverse foreign and regional sources.

Kriger's arguments are significant for my purposes because they speak to both the longevity of indigo dyeing, spanning a millennium, as well as to its multicultural origins and continuity into the modern era. Her visual analysis also informs my own study of another *adire* pattern, the stenciled *oloba* cloth that emerged around the time of the first factory printed portrait cloth in the 1930s. Since this pattern appears repeatedly in the work of modernist Bruce Onobrakpeya, whose work I analyze in the second chapter, the *oloba* is used to both deepen the understanding of *adire*'s modernity as well as to explore the relationship to factory printed portrait cloth, particularly as they begin to appear in the visual arts in the 1990s.

Understanding the relationship between the *adire oloba* and the emergence of commemorative portrait cloth became a key aspect of this study for the insight it provided on the sartorial practice of *aso-ebi* whereby events or people were commemorated by the wearing of a special cloth. Of the extant literature which concerns commemorative and occasional print cloth in Africa there are a number of general surveys that focus on or mention portrait cloth (Nielsen 1979; Spencer 1982; Picton 1995; Picton 2001) in addition to informally published material such as personal blogs²² that offer a digital collection, but these resources offer little in the way of information substantial enough for in-depth historical or visual analysis.

²¹ Both Kriger and Byfield benefitted from the unpublished PhD thesis on *adire* written by Carolyn Keyes Adenaike in 1993.

²² "African Commemorative Cloth: A Series," *The Tomathon Blog*, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://www.tomathon.com/mphp/2013/10/african-commemorative-cloths-a-series/>.

Catherine P. Bishop's article "African Occasional Textiles: Vernacular Landscapes of Development" from 2014 is a welcome break from the usual treatment of these cloths as strictly having political or nationalist agendas. Bishop focuses her analysis on the representations of landscapes within many commemorative cloths that appropriate symbols of modernization to communicate messages of development and progress in a local, visual vernacular. While this article also does not go in depth about the textile's origins, it convincingly expands the notion of the function of the occasional textile beyond commemoration and political propaganda to one that expresses the values and wishes of the wearers, and by extension the values of society.

With regards to Nigeria, there are a few articles that address specific commissioned cloths for commemorative purposes within singular communities and cultural groups (Akinwumi and Renne, 2008; Layiwola, 2009; Oyelola, 2007, 2012; Watson 2003). Among these, Akinwumi and Renne's "Commemorative Textiles and Anglican Church History in Ondo, Nigeria" provided a rare, in-depth study of the participation of a church congregation in the commissioning and use of printed commemorative textiles, while Watson's book *Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan: Chieftancy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City* provided insight into the political power and influence of a portrait cloth. John Picton's *African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex* (1995) was the only one to make the important connection between the invention of the *adire oloba* and the first appearance of factory printed portrait cloth for the West African market. Steiner (1985) provided a vantage point on the preparation of European cloth for sale in West Africa, while Erekosima and Eicher (1981) and Steiner (1994) detailed processes of acculturation applied to imported cloth by African consumers.

In recent years, modernity outside of Europe and the United States has received unprecedented and overdue scholarly attention. Just in the years since I began my research, new publications on the topic of African and Nigerian Modernism have greatly expanded the discourse including *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* by Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015) and *A Companion to Modern African Art* edited by Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visona (2013). One of the essays in Salami and Visona's *Companion* is "Modernism and Modernity in African Art" by John Picton in which he addresses (to a greater

extent than any scholar before him) the relationship between Bruce Onobrakpeya's work coming out of the Zaria Art Society and his appropriations of *adire* tie-dye cloth, and *adire*'s modernity. Though this article addresses the exact same topic I address in the second chapter, I present a much different interpretation of Onobrakpeya's appropriation, and also find problematic Picton's description of Onobrakpeya's process as *bricolage* in a later article titled "Fetishizing Modernity: Bricolage Revisited" (2014). Okeke-Agulu's text focuses primarily on the artistic output and ideology of the members of the former Zaria Art Society, that emerged in the late 1950s. Since I suggest that textile appropriations begin with Zaria Art Society member Onobrakpeya's use of *adire* patterns, this text is significant for my purposes. Both Okeke-Agulu and Olu Oguibe in an earlier article titled "Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art" (2002) take the position that such acts of appropriation were nationalist in their aims and, according to Okeke-Agulu, that artistic modernism in Nigeria was aligned with anti-colonial sentiment expressed through the adoption of Western styles of painting to re-imagine indigenous motifs. The problem with this position, I argue, is that like with the acts of artistic appropriation by the Zaria generation, it places too much emphasis on the "creative genius" of the male modern artist while depriving the indigenous artist of authorship and modernity.

Some of the textile patterns discussed in my study are treated with equal attention and importance as the works of art. In doing so I suggest that textile producers in Nigeria were already masters of appropriation and localization of foreign visual culture long before "Natural Synthesis" had been given a name. This has brought me deep into the history of textile production, cotton and indigo trades, and into the history of women's lives in late 19th and early 20th century Nigeria, providing a stark contrast to Nigeria's history of art, in which women are glaringly absent. Indeed, such a study of indigo-dyed textiles is also a study of women's work. As the authors of *Cloth and Human Experience* (1989: 4) Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider have pointed out, the study of cloth is often synonymous with the study of women's lives and experiences, a perspective that is often overlooked. In this study, however, the perspective of women provides a valuable framework in studying the production of textiles and the production of art in Nigeria, where both are highly gendered sites of creation with women dominating the former and men the latter.

On 'Modernity' and 'Modernism'

It is a generally well-established and accepted notion that, as Jean and John Comaroff wrote in *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, "There are, in short, many modernities."²³ The statement is predicated on the multiplying narratives that attempt to counter the Euro-centric meta-narrative of a singular modernity that was systematically exported to other parts of the world via imperial and colonial forces by providing narratives of modernity from "alternative" or "other" people and cultures. This challenge to the notion of a singular modernity is based equally on the variety of ways in which people experienced the processes of modernization with variation in different places, and the assertion that Europe's modernity hinged on its contact with and exploitation of people in those other parts of the world. However, even as the modernities multiply through the efforts of researchers, the weakness of the challenge lies in its refusal to first unpack and dismantle the primacy of European modernism. The number of modernities has proliferated while the meta-narrative has remained relatively unscathed, allowing Europe to avoid owning its colonial past, and lends credence to Olu Oguibe's claim that to "perpetually counter a center is to recognize it."²⁴ What is needed rather is a complete rewriting of European modernity, which, when re-written from a non-hegemonic viewpoint of cross-cultural contact and interaction may in fact reveal more similarities than differences in the experiences of modernity throughout the world.

The core of this rewriting must also acknowledge that "coloniality" as Walter Mignolo argues, is "...the hidden agenda (and darker side) of modernity."²⁵ In other words, modernity as a notion, a theory, a practice or condition has been constructed, implemented and exported by the West. The task of deconstructing and de-centering it is inseparable from colonial history.

In thinking about modernity in the Nigerian cultural context, colonialism maintains a pervasive presence, particularly as the beginning of artistic modernity is generally

²³ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xi.

²⁴ Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.

²⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity," in *Modernologies: Contemporary Artists Researching Modernity and Modernism*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Barcelona, Spain: MACBA Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 39.

accepted to have begun with the work of Aina Onabolu in the first decade of the 20th century when Nigeria was still a British colony. As the history of Nigeria's specific modernity is revealed further by recent research, it appears modernity is reserved for the highly educated, well-traveled, predominantly male members of society. In this uneven distribution there is a continued privileging of the Western experience of modernity in the arts (i.e. painting and sculpture above all else) coupled with a persistent association of the indigenous with the traditional. This dissertation is neither concerned so much with identifying a style or cohesive body of works that comprise a monolithic "Nigerian Art" nor is it concerned with ongoing discussions about the proper application of terms like "Modern," "Postmodern" and "Contemporary" in relation to the arts. For clarity, where it is used in this text "Nigerian art" or "Nigerian artist" indicates that the art is produced or the artist is based in Nigeria. Rather this dissertation takes issue with the co-optation of modernity in the arts along material, gendered and class lines, which, I suggest, creates a facsimile of the patriarchal, hegemonic European model.

Efforts to expand the scope of modernism in Nigerian arts beyond Onabolu have helped relieve some of the codependence on European modernity. The inclusion of the late 19th century photographer J.A. Greene, as suggested by Tam Fiofori, extends the reach of the 'Modern Era' chronologically to a time before Onabolu, while also expanding the notion of what qualifies as art in the Nigerian context by including documentary and portrait photography. This is needed; however, it merely expands the scope by little more than a decade and does little to alleviate the male-centric experience and foreign-media emphasis through its inclusion of photography. John Picton has suggested that Nigerian modernity could be argued to have begun during the Benin Empire (ca. 1180 – 1897) based on the changes in Benin court art following the first contact with the Portuguese early in the 16th century. Court artists began integrating these foreign traders and their wares into figural artwork. Frank Ugiomoh has countered this claim saying that this would not be Nigerian modernism but strictly Edo modernism.²⁶ In my mind, this does not negate Picton's claim, but rather calls into question the validity of ethnic, national, or cultural categorization of

²⁶ Akin Onipede, "From Aina Onabolu to Adagogo Green: Widening the Scope of Modernism in Nigerian Visual Arts," *CCA Lagos Newsletter*, no. 11 (April 2011): 9.; Frank Ugiomoh, "On the Modern and the Contemporary in Nigerian Art," *CCA Lagos Newsletter*, no. 11 (April 2011): 8.

modernisms. Indeed, the very notion of a plurality of modernities solicits such problematic classifications. The value of Picton's argument, however, is in the idea of artistic modernity as a process of appropriation, acculturation, or synthesis of foreign imagery as a result of contact with another culture, rather than a Benin-specific experience or aesthetic. Much as the first European modernists radically altered their painting tradition according to their exposure to art objects and cultural artifacts from Asia, Africa, Pacific islands, and the Americas, Edo bronze casters wove foreign culture into their own visual language. This focus on synthesis reduces the definition of modernity (in the context of art) to the experience of intercultural contact manifested through the processes of appropriation and adaptation. This definition not only shifts the discourse away from euro-centric narratives but also expands the inclusive potential of modernity beyond the royal, male, educated lines along which it has been drawn in the past.

Intercultural contact was an experience in the 15th and 16th centuries that transcended social and gendered strata. These experiences are evidenced by the integration of new, foreign imagery in local cultural production in a variety of forms across West African societies. Taking a position in alignment with Picton's, V.Y. Mudimbe explains, "The three trends in current African art--tradition-inspired, modernist, and popular--are recent: the oldest examples date from the first quarter of the century. One might be tempted, then, to relate their genesis to the impact of the colonial era; yet a number of their themes and motifs--reproductions of crucifixes and Madonnas, biblical references, and so on, all along the western coast of the continent--are part of a history of acculturation that goes back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries."²⁷

Throughout this text, I subscribe to this notion of modernity as emerging from contact between two foreign entities, and artistic modernism as the visual, physical and aesthetic production that results from the appropriation, synthesis and acculturation of one foreign imagery into another. Bearing these definitions in mind, I suggest that if we are to understand Nigerian modernism by synthesis (particularly late modernism as it has been defined by the ideology of 'Natural Synthesis'), then we must consider the textile as a precursor to canvas painting and as a vehicle for the

²⁷ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 174.

processes of synthesis and as objects of modernist art and visual culture. The extent to which textiles were instrumental in bilateral exchanges of material and visual culture in centuries prior to colonialism is profound but not yet fully understood. Nevertheless, this premise—that textiles played an integral role in the way West African (in this study Yoruban, and later Nigerian) people came in contact with, interacted with, and processed foreign culture—forms the bedrock for the argumentation presented in this thesis.

On the Documentation of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nigeria

Nigeria's art history suffers from a dearth of documentation covering artist's lives, their work, and any analysis of how their careers have contributed overall to the narrative of the nation's art history. Even significant artist movements and events, such as FESTAC, have passed into history with few photos or first-hand accounts to mark their existence.²⁸ This is very problematic for the visual arts. Unlike music or literature and other artistic forms of expression that live on in part by virtue of their reproducibility and accessibility (especially in the age of the internet), the visual arts often come in object-form, and are therefore subject to decay, loss, or theft, and their value is intrinsic to their irreproducibility while their very survival and accessibility is limited and controlled by the institutions and individuals who own them.

For women artists, textile artists, or artists working in alternative media, these problems are pronounced by both historiographic and collecting practices that actively exclude them. A recent text that focused exclusively on the collecting practices of Lagos-based private collectors offers a recent example of a text that commits the act of exclusion based on gender and media, providing a contemporary example of Nigeria's historiography that perpetuates a male-centered perspective and narrative. Edited by Jess Castellote, the 2012 book "Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections: New Trees in an Old Forest" begins by clarifying and justifying the scope of the project: He surveyed the collections of dozens of Lagos-

²⁸ Regarding FESTAC, this was a concern of both presenters and audience members at a conference on FESTAC '77 hosted by Tate Modern called "Across the Board" on April 18th 2014 at Terra Kulture in Lagos. The archives of FESTAC are held by CBAAC, which was formed in 1978 for the purposes of documenting and archiving, but it was 24 years before anything on FESTAC was actually published. Still today, there is little information about it, and as of 2014, the FESTAC archives were not viewable due to CBAAC moving locations.

based collectors out of the 70 known to him, limited the selection to works produced after 1985 by Nigeria-based artists, and only in the media of painting and sculpture because this is what dominated every collection. Although the prevalence of sculpture and painting in the Nigerian art scene and collecting practices existed throughout the 20th century, Castellote admits that he noticed an increased interest amongst collectors in multimedia, video and installation art and particularly photography.²⁹ Interestingly, none of these are included in the book. That any art form which is not painting or sculpture is an alternative and less desirable medium is not only projected as the opinion of all the collectors, but it is perpetuated as a localized standard of art's value by the selection criteria of the authors.

Castellote goes on to say that not only is there a preference for sculpture and painting media, but there is a preference for the formal, for "beauty," and for the human subject. Again, with few exceptions, these preferences are reiterated by the selection reproduced in the text. At the same time that the text examines and reproduces a narrow scope of artistic production, Castellote claims "...the fact that the selection in this book includes works by over 80 artists attests to the breadth of the contemporary art scene in Nigeria and makes more difficult the task of highlighting only a few."³⁰ A similar statement in the essay by dele jegede postulates "The collection that this publication supports offers a vital vignette—incomplete as this may be—of the range of works in private collections."³¹ The selection process laid out in the first pages of the text clearly delimit any range represented in the text as extremely narrow, essentially ignoring any diversity of works that may actually exist in these collections.

Despite his initial claims that the text provides a vital, yet incomplete vignette of the collecting scene, jegede laments that the number of women artists in the text's collection is "shockingly low," and reflective of the unfortunate fact that there are not

²⁹ Jess Castellote, ed., *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections: New Trees in an Old Forest* (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2012), 14.

³⁰ Castellote, 78.

³¹ dele jegede, "Art, Currency, and Contemporaneity in Nigeria," in *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections: New Trees in an Old Forest*, ed. Jess Castellote (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2012), 48.

that many professional women practicing.³² The reasons for a gender imbalance in Nigerian contemporary art are undoubtedly beyond the scope of Jegede's essay, yet those reasons are much more than an unfortunate lack of women artists. The author does not address how the practice of collecting may be exclusionary, nor the text's responsibility for its own terms of exclusion. Nike Okundaye, a painter, batik artist, entrepreneur and gallerist based in Nigeria, is glaringly absent from the text, despite being part of some of the collections represented, and being one of Nigeria's most prolific artists. Although Castellote boasts about the inclusion of 80 artists, he also states that hardly any locally based artists have visibility in global discourses, yet Okundaye is a woman artist who has achieved success and visibility out of and in the country to a far greater extent than most of the male artists represented.³³ Further, by omitting all alternative media, Castellote omits nearly all of the locally based artists that currently have global visibility, many of whom are women.

Such contradictions suggest a disconnect between the state of the art world and the agency of collectors in the private art market, which, due to a lack of public funding for the arts, amounts to the largest source of capital for artists in Nigeria. To an extent, the authors seem unaware of their own complicity in a form of inclusion/exclusion at work in their selection criteria. Their portrayal of collectors' habits through the lens of their own compilation ignores any diversity that may actually exist in those collections by treating anything out of the dominant order as anomalies, and serves to sustain the prevailing notion that local collectors are only interested in buying paintings and sculptures.

Another essay in the text by Tobenna Okwuosa confronts some of these issues. Referring to several former students of El Anatsui who have been trained by the artist in the art program at the University of Nigeria Nsukka and have achieved international success yet lack local patronage, Okwuosa ascribes it to sentiments expressed by a number of scholars that local artistic output is apolitical, ahistorical,

³² Jegede, 50.

³³ Her works are held at the Smithsonian Institute and the British Library permanent collections and has been featured in prominent museums and galleries throughout the world.

less adventurous than the art on the international scene, and exhibits stasis.³⁴ His statement presents the opportunity for inward reflection on the causes of such artistic stasis, in which private collection and uncritical art writing undoubtedly play a role, but instead, Castellote ends the book in the same self-congratulatory tone in which it began: “The vital importance of private collectors in the development of art in Nigeria is not in doubt. They are the driving force behind the primary and secondary art market, and they are the ones ultimately sustaining the primary actors: the artists. Throughout their regular acquisitions, they provide most of the fuel on which the engines of contemporary Nigerian art run.”³⁵

By illustrating how women and artists working in alternative media are left out of the art historical narrative, this text also answers one of the preliminary questions that lead to the initial formation of this thesis: when and with whom did the practice of appropriation of textiles begin in Nigerian art? This question was prompted by the observation that outside of Nigeria there are a number of prominent artists whose practices have become synonymous with the textile, namely, Yinka Shonibare, Sokari Douglas Camp, El Anatsui, Nnenna Okore, Moyo Okediji, and Donald Odita, to name a few. Yet, despite the associations these artists have with Nigeria, their work is often interpreted through the lens of the traditional textile, rather than any artistic practices of textile appropriation that pre-existed in West Africa. Castellote's text, as well as other texts that survey the Nigerian art scene may serve necessary documentary purposes but do not engage critically with the works they present or attempt to contextualize them with the international art scene or figures such as those just mentioned (Edozie and Bosah, 2010; Ogbechie 2012).

Textile as Medium and Subject

It would be inaccurate to describe all of the artworks addressed in the proceeding chapters as “textile-art,” “fiber-art” or even “textile or fiber-based.” Although these

³⁴ Okwuosa is referring specifically to many students of El Anatsui at Nsukka University, and is quoting scholars Sidney Kasfir, Eddie Chambers, Chika-Okeke Agulu and Bisi Silva. Tobenna Okwuosa, “The Contemporary Art Market in Lagos,” in *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections: New Trees in an Old Forest*, ed. Jess Castellote (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2012), 89–91.

³⁵ Castellote, *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections: New Trees in an Old Forest*, 78.

schematic categorizations would apply to many artists that emerged from the Oshogbo School (1962 – 1966) and could be loosely used to describe some contemporary artists who work directly with fabric material it is neither the best term to describe the practices at hand nor the thematic underpinnings of the work. There is also the risk that artworks bearing such descriptions would be sidelined by the “textile” label because of its associations with craft, women’s work or fashion. In many of the works discussed, textile material is noticeably absent and most of the works do not directly address issues having anything to do with textiles. Therefore the label may not only be detrimental to the work, it would be mostly inaccurate. The common thread that binds the works is rather an attention to the oral and visual language of patterns, and an awareness of the social importance of textiles and their documentary, commemorative, and expressive agency.

Out of the roughly two-dozen interviews and studio visits conducted for this research with artists who have at some point in their career worked with textile material or patterns, some common themes arose in the responses as to why they chose textiles as media. The responses varied as widely as the nature of the appropriation, but often the initial answer reflected a utilitarian sensibility: many artists began using textiles because they had a lot of fabric around, often in the form of scraps left over from tailored clothing that provided free material for experimentation. This explanation frequently led to discussions about the widespread practice of tailoring in Lagos, which produces a great deal of fabric waste. Cheap fabric imports from China and other parts of Asia have made it more affordable than ever to make a new outfit, but this has also contributed to rampant consumerism and waste. Aside from these commercial and material explanations, artists also spoke about their work in various terms of memory. Whether it was accessing personal memory by using the cloth from the collection or garment of a loved one, or communal or cultural memory, the theme continually resurfaced.

These two currents of commercialism and memory, which actually overlap and feed into and off one another, help to explain *why* many Nigerian artists use textiles in their work, and also help to better analyze the artworks themselves. Memory has multiple definitions and dimensions that span the personal and collective, cultural and national. This study draws on its many iterations through material culture, sartorial practice, political strategy and artistic muse. Thus, I do not seek to define

memory in concrete terms but to utilize it as a point of entry, an analytical tool, and a thematic current that connects artistic practice to the past by means of preservation and reconstruction.

Chapter Summaries

In the first chapter, I review and critique curatorial practice as it relates to textiles, African textiles, and African arts, especially where these phenomena overlap. In an attempt to sketch a history of these practices and their developments, I draw parallels between the Western reception of tapestry, textiles, and fiber-based art (particularly those in the realm of feminist art of the 60s and 70s) to the curation and reception of non-Western art and textiles. I also review problems facing textiles and those who produce, collect, study, or exhibit them and suggest that when those textiles are African in origin or by name, the same problems persist but are compounded by the added complexity and attendant issues of the African label.³⁶ One such layer of complexity is the orality of textiles in some West African cultures. In addition to their visual language, some textiles are named or carry a proverbial meaning; others carry double meanings in the patterns, only understood by the producer, the wearer and the few who are aware of the message she is conveying. Other textiles bear their meanings clearly through inscriptions and can be used for commemorative purposes, inspiring the oft-quoted adage by American fiber artist Sonya Clark and paraphrased by El Anatsui that “cloth is to the African what monuments are to Westerners.”³⁷

This chapter addresses a scholarly gap that lies at the interstices of African art, textiles and textile art and feminist or “women’s” art and in doing so seeks to expose the misconceptions and biases that stigmatized their reception in the mainstream art

³⁶ The discourse over issues of authenticity and identity has been centered on contemporary African art since the early 1990s (much of it came in response to the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*) but are relevant to all forms of cultural production. Olu Oguibe argues that the concept of Africa is one that has been invented in the Western imagination and thus if this fictitious, hegemonic worldview crumbles so too does system of reference by which African people and cultures have been cornered into. “If Africa is not some easily definable species or category that yields to anthropology’s classifications and labels, neither are its cultural manifestations.” See: Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 7.

³⁷ Susan Cooksey, ed., *Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas* (Gainesville, FL: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 2011), 14.

world. It also provides a foreground for the following chapters that address the practices of Nigerian-based artists and designers who have appropriated the textile medium by framing their practices within the complex issues concomitant with both textiles and African identity. The final section discusses the artistic procedures of appropriation and montage as methods that connect textile production with artistic production, suggesting that there are similarities in the ways that both modernist artists and textile producers synthesize imagery from diverse sources in the pictorial plane.

Chapter two is rooted in past practices. It explores the pasts of textile production, and *adire*'s political, economic and social history, as well as the genre of Nigerian art that falls under the umbrella term of Modern Nigerian Art. Chronologically situated in the early and middle of the 20th century, the past is evoked as a historical and cultural concept by artists, one that is intricately linked to cultural memory and nostalgia. I argue that cultural memory, as a conceptual strategy of artistic practice (and by extension cultural production), was not born with the Zaria Art Society but was matured through the careers of its followers and has remained a critical component of artistic practice into the 21st century, particularly in practices that utilized the textile as media and subject matter. The printed textile, by virtue of its ubiquity and commemorative function in Nigerian society, is a commonly appropriated medium by Nigerian artists and designers serving both critical and aesthetic ends. Textiles provide a platform where history, memory, visual and material culture collide and are represented by printed graphics that constitute a pattern: an image that is cheaply reproducible on fabric and easily disseminated in the social-visual sphere via sartorial practice. The textile, I suggest, provides a point of delimitation between the communicative and the cultural memory, a difference marked by cultural memory's "distance from the everyday (transcendence) [that] marks its temporal horizon."³⁸

³⁸ Halbwachs probably assumed, as the authors state, that "once living communication crystallized in the forms of objectivized culture...the group relationship and the contemporary reference are lost", memory becomes history. The authors contradict this, claiming that in the objectivized culture connections to identities still exist. Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring - Summer 1995): 128 "Co

This difference is significant because in order for the artistic appropriation of the textile to function as the artist intends it must shed its communicative memory, which is based in the present, in favor of a (sometimes imagined) past. Situated in the context of Nigerian society, the textile serves a similar function to oral history: in the absence of text it tells stories, commemorates, symbolizes, and passes messages from producer or wearer to viewer. In this context, the textile functions within and through the everyday. By contrast, the appropriation of textiles into art effectively removes it from the everyday, disrupting the flow of dialogue, exchange, and movement, crystallizing into an object of culture that becomes fixed and risks becoming what Adorno has called *museal*.³⁹ This element of the *museal* arises in the practices analyzed in the second chapter where it functions to allow the artist to manipulate the textile's meanings.

The artistic, academic, entrepreneurial and design practices of the artists discussed in this chapter are placed within the framework of the histories, objects and concepts addressed in the first section. The focus on Bruce Onobrakpeya and Nike Okundaye with more brief reference to other practitioners is only a small sampling, but it provides examples of different methods of appropriation of *adire* across a limited timeframe. The modernist style of appropriating *adire* patterns, as practiced by Onobrakpeya and Okundaye, operate in a commemoration and preservation of culture, which, I suggest is often achieved by eschewing *adire*'s modernity in favor of its association to "traditional" culture and the pre-colonial past. The contributions of these artists to the development of a distinctly Nigerian style of art function in the formation and preservation of cultural memory through the idiom of modernity under the guise of tradition. This mode of artistic production is located in the distinctly Nigerian Modern art credo of Natural Synthesis, which encouraged artists to combine indigenous aesthetics and foreign influences to create a new art appropriate for a newly formed nation.⁴⁰ I discuss these works through the lens of Hal Foster's "The Artist as Ethnographer."

³⁹ "Once tradition is no longer animated by a comprehensive, substantial force but has to be conjured up by means of citations because 'It's important to have tradition', then whatever happens to be left of it is dissolved into a means to an end." Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1967), 175.

⁴⁰ Uche Okeke, "Natural Synthesis," in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 208–9. The education that the first generation of artists trained at Zaria

The third and final chapter is situated primarily in the 21st century. It chiefly concerns the phenomena of dressing in uniform (*aso-ebi*), portrait photography, commemorative cloth, design and fashion as political statement, and the current state of indigenous textile production in Yorubaland. These interrelated phenomena, particularly of dress, photography and memory, are inspired first and foremost by an experience I had while in Nigeria. When I was completing my five months research trip in Lagos in 2014, I received a going-away gift from a pair of male graduate students from the University of Lagos that I had befriended over the course of my stay. Their gift to me was a photograph of the two of them. They paid a portrait photographer with a small, makeshift studio on campus to take the photograph and print it out. At first, I found the photo to be very odd. The men struck two, slightly unnatural poses: one stood with a leg lifted up on a concrete slab with his arm resting on that leg, while the other held one hand on a hip and rested the other on his friend's shoulder. They were both dressed in collared shirts and dress pants that belied the hot and humid Lagos weather. Behind them, greenery from the surrounding Lagos campus provided the lush backdrop to their portrait. Such a gift in many western countries may be perceived as narcissistic, and one might assume that the two men are in a romantic relationship. However, as I knew this was not the case, the gifted portrait helped me realize the importance of photography in the processes of remembering and being remembered in the social and cultural context of Nigeria. The gift was significant for the way my two friends planned to have a professional portrait taken, chose nice clothes for the occasion, and struck serious poses that they, and presumably the photographer, believed would capture them at their best. Ultimately, the objective of the gift was not just that I never forget them,

received was an arts training that was based on the Goldsmith's School of Art's curriculum and was put into practice by faculty that were almost exclusively European. The founders of the Zaria Art Society wanted not to abolish this curriculum but to inject it with indigenous histories, practices and aesthetics. Uche Okeke, who wrote the Society's manifesto, would go on to lead the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Nsukka bringing his own application of Natural Synthesis via the line drawing practice of the Igbo called *Uli* into wider practice, and forming the conceptual basis for the Nsukka School. See Sylvester Ogbechie, "Art Schools in Nigeria: Zaria and Nsukka," in *An Anthology of African Art: The Twentieth Century*, ed. N'Goné Fall and Jean Loup Pivin, English language edition (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), 288–89. And Sylvester Ogbechie, "Zaria Art Society and the Uli Movement, Nigeria," in *An Anthology of African Art: The Twentieth Century*, ed. N'Goné Fall and Jean Loup Pivin, English language edition (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), 246–49.

but that I remember them well, which was why a printed, professional photograph was made rather than a digital smartphone shot.

That gift stayed on my mind as I wrote this final chapter. In it, I discuss not only the importance of dress in the social sphere, but the integral role of photography and the portrait photographer in capturing those moments and those outfits that were made especially for the occasion. In the first chapter, the adoption of fabric scraps as artistic media for utilitarian and economical reasons is briefly explored. These artistic strategies will be revisited in the third chapter. Although they appear to offer a straightforward explanation for the prevalence of textile-based works, a closer look reveals the connections to the popularity of *aso-ebi* and the capitalization of the Chinese on the production of mass-produced imitation African prints. The proliferation of cheap fabrics available in bulk has both supplied the demand that *aso-ebi* creates, and fueled its rapid expansion beyond Yoruba social function, phenomena that are explored both materially and conceptually by contemporary artists.

These themes shift the focus of the chapter towards the textile's role in sartorial practice among the Yoruba and in contemporary Nigerian society. Dress, whether it was a hand-woven *aso-oke* wrapper, a tailored *buba* of Austrian lace, or a suit and tie from a London department store, was not only highly visual, but it was also political, and mattered a great deal in the social context of Lagos, and to an extent, Nigeria at large. One of the first fashion designers to implement a pro-nationalist stance through fashion was Nigerian Folashade (Shade) Thomas-Fahm. Among her designs that paid homage to local dress while incorporating modern improvements were garments made of *adire* and other locally sourced textiles. Thus, Thomas-Fahm represents not only an important precursor to the work of Nigerian fashion designer Amake Osakwe of Maki-Oh, also discussed in this chapter, but she was a contemporary of the Zaria artists, a member of the generation that lived through the transition to independence, and an important yet overlooked figure in the formation of a national modern aesthetic.

The findings reveal significant overlap in the symbolism of textiles in the realm of fashion and social function and the symbolism of textiles in artwork of the younger generations that succeeded the modernists. Designers and artists such as Osakwe

and Temitayo Ogunbiyi explore the links to history made possible with the inclusions of *adire* in their work. Several decades into post-independence, the appropriation of *adire* in contemporary works of art such as the multi-media installations by Ogunbiyi and Osakwe's designs demonstrate the ability of indigo dyed and printed cloth to simultaneously evoke the past and reinvent itself in the present. Though the stylistic and conceptual approaches differ greatly from artist to artist, the same concept of memory remains a constant throughout generations of artistic production based on the same *adire* patterns.

Thus, through the lenses of fashion design, 21st century textile production, cultural practices surrounding dress, the political power of dress, and finally the integration of textiles in contemporary Nigerian art, this chapter expands on the notions of appropriation and synthesis explored in chapter two, but also argues that artists and designers working in the 21st century have a different relationship to the material of cultural heritage. Their aim is not one of preservation, but rather of continuation, made possible by their own research-based interventions that made *adire* and other forms of cultural production relevant today.

CHAPTER ONE

The Trouble with Textiles: Challenges in exhibiting, appropriating and theorizing an everyday material

Fracturing the Narrative

For the exhibition of the *Barclay's Young Artists Award of 1992*, British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare exhibited a work titled, *Installation*. Hanging interspersed on the walls of London's Serpentine Gallery were square canvases wrapped in printed fabric and painted in a manner that accentuated the fabrics' patterns. *Installation* evoked icons of Western modernist art in its sparse, seemingly haphazard composition on the wall. The dispersal of small square canvases on a vast white wall conveyed echoes of minimalism slightly at odds with the vibrant colors and bold patterns of the fabric and the thick impasto of paint on the canvases. The fabrics used in *Installation* were Dutch wax-prints that had been produced in Holland and purchased in a London market. Shonibare knew that the textiles would be perceived as African despite their complex history that starts with the Dutch imitating Indonesian batik in the early 19th century.⁴¹ He deliberately offered viewers a facile interpretation that seemed to be linked to his British-Nigerian identity. Sarah Kent, an art critic from *Time Out* magazine, took the bait. She writes,

He creates a dialogue between minimalist abstraction and the brightly coloured designs of African fabrics. The cloth is stretched as though it were canvas and used as the support for swathes of dense pigment – high art meets ethnic design. Numerous modern artists have been inspired by ethnic art, but this is a dialogue of a different kind – between Shonibare and himself, between his Western experience (he was born and brought up here and studied in London art schools) and his distant roots. Without being in any way didactic, the paintings raise questions concerning the relationships between high and applied art and between the first and third worlds.⁴²

⁴¹Shonibare utilizes Vlisco brand Dutch Wax Fabric, bringing to light the company's history, its initial interests in producing Indonesian batiks, and eventual success in the West African market. See: Robb Young, "Africa's Fabric Is Dutch," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/15/fashion/15iht-ffabric15.html>.

⁴² Sarah Kent, "Young at Art," *Time Out*, February 12, 1992.

Kent sets up numerous dichotomies in her interpretation that distinguish between the “high art” of the Western artistic tradition and “ethnic,” “African,” “third world” production, unaware of the fabric’s European, Asian and colonial origins. Since the time Kent’s review was published, critics have questioned Kent’s hasty association of the fabric with the “exotic,” but of interest here is her automatic association of the textile with the applied arts. Kent’s categorization of textiles as applied art sets them in contrast to painting and other ‘high’ or superior art media. This is a reflex born of the aesthetic values of the Western artistic tradition. It seems safe to assume, given Kent’s description of the fabric being “ethnic” and African, that she did not think it was necessary to investigate the cloth medium in question prior to writing the review. Perhaps she thought, as many have before her, that textiles are not that important and their makers are not really artists but designers, anonymous craftsmen and women, or factory workers. Had she looked deeper, she would have discovered that they are factory-made, but based off the handmade batik technique of applying wax-resist by stamping or drawing with a spouted tool. This knowledge may have led to the interpretation of Shonibare’s work as a multifaceted subversion of the supremacy of the Western painting tradition. By utilizing a non-Western form of painting to make several references to the West (first in the reference to Dutch production of Javanese Batik, second in Shonibare’s application of his own painted motifs on the “canvases,” and third in his reference to minimalist painting in their installation) Shonibare unravels the hierarchies in the narrative of art history and undermines Western assumptions about African identity through what he has called a “deliberate denial of the authentic.”⁴³

At the core of this complex subversion is the textile. Yet, although the Dutch wax print has remained central to Shonibare’s work, now twenty-five years after the exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, much of what has been written about him focuses on his challenge to the West’s idea of “Africanness,” which is conceived and produced (like the textile) outside of Africa, rather than the West’s idea of the textile. Certainly, the Dutch-wax print serves as both the vehicle for the artist’s confrontation with the politics of representation and a symbol of the artist’s multi-cultural or hybrid identity, but in order for the textile to operate so effectively in this role it is necessary

⁴³ John Picton, “Undressing Ethnicity,” *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 66.

to also consider the general reception of textile material in the high art realm. Doing so allows for an exploration of how gendered and racial biases of the Western art world go hand in hand.

Within the vast body of literature dedicated to Shonibare's artwork there is scant mention of the significance of cloth as a medium that challenges the dominance of both painting and sculpture utilized by feminist artists to challenge male domination in the arts, even as Shonibare moved towards sewing and tailoring the fabrics rather than painting on them. Nor is the notion of the feminine as it relates to the textile addressed in analyses of his work despite the heavy reliance of many sculptural installations on Victorian-era stereotypes of femininity. This is a significant oversight considering that for many years Shonibare entertained an exclusively Western audience, and the success of his work therefore hinges on the preconceptions his audience holds about the symbolic and physical material he uses. Shonibare seems to be as aware of these preconceptions concerning the textile as he was about the audience's ideas about 'Africanness.' Citing a personal interview with the artist, one scholar credits Shonibare's ability to use the textile in *Installation* to subvert modern painting to his grounding in feminism.⁴⁴ Though the author does not elaborate on this statement, it suggests that Shonibare was aware of the historically feminist appropriation of the textile in art to subvert the dominant order and he may have developed his first textile work based on this knowledge. Elsewhere Shonibare has cited Judy Chicago as an influence on his work, explaining that her practice and that of other feminist artists of her generation were the first to challenge the patriarchal way of producing and presenting art. Chicago's use of textiles, embroidery, ceramics and other forms and symbols related to women and femininity were utilized to negate the heroism, grandiosity, and originality of white male painters, particularly of the Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist styles that prevailed at the time.⁴⁵ Shonibare's *Installation* also serves this purpose.

In his use of cloth to disrupt hegemonic narratives, Shonibare situates his practice among the textile-based arts-- particularly those that sought to disrupt the male-

⁴⁴ Robert Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE* (Munich; Berlin; London; New York: Prestel, 2008), 31.

⁴⁵ "Profile: Yinka Shonibare, MBE" <http://www.contemporary-magazines.com/profile89.htm> Accessed May 1, 2017

dominated art historical canon. Whether this was his intention or not, approaching the textile in Shonibare's work from a feminist perspective proves to be illuminating. For one, Kent's misapprehension of Shonibare's *Installation* can be understood in terms of the textile's subtlety, which is, ironically, also the source of its subversive power. Beginning in the 18th century, the once highly regarded art forms of tapestry and embroidery began to take on new pejorative associations with femininity and domesticity. By the early 20th century, the textile was perceived as devoid of meaning and critical potential and ignored as a legitimate art form. Often relegated as craft, which was distinguished from art early on by Immanuel Kant as being a remunerative, labor-based art whose utility cannot be separated from its aesthetics, textile and fiber works have fallen through the cracks between these two categories.⁴⁶ As one of the founding philosophies in the discipline of art history, Kant's division of utilitarian and non-utilitarian production has had enduring influence.

Exclusion from the mainstream art world has also had its benefits, however. Its perceived triviality has created in the textile a valuable, non-threatening material in the art of subtle critique. Called an art world "Trojan horse" by textile scholar Jessica Hemmings, artists throughout the 20th century embraced the textile's associations with craft, femininity, domesticity, and the applied arts, and used them as tools against gender subordination and patriarchal dominance.⁴⁷ Feminist artists turned to the textile as their medium of choice because it offered the opportunity to reclaim various arts denigrated as "women's work" as legitimate and powerful forms of expression and question the patriarchal system that formed such paradigms of inclusion/exclusion in the first place. Embroidery, for example, has historically provided a way of indoctrinating young girls into the feminine ideal, which led to its becoming "a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity" in the arts.⁴⁸ Artists have also taken up quilting, knitting, sewing, crocheting and weaving in similar

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 164.

⁴⁷ Hemmings writes, "The textile may be understood to act as something of a Trojan horse smuggling across these difficult and complex stories" in reference to the textile-based work of Elaine Reichek. See: Jessica Hemmings, "Postcolonial Textiles - Negotiating Dialogue," in *Cross/Cultures: Postcolonial Studies Across Disciplines*, vol. 170 (ASNEL, Hanover, Germany: Rodopi Amsterdam, 2011), 30.

⁴⁸ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 3rd ed. (London; New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2010), ix.

challenges to gendered and material exclusions, while art historians have sought to identify and credit women from history who have worked in these media and whose work has been appropriated into “high” art without their consent or due credit.⁴⁹

As Shonibare employs cloth to move himself from the periphery to the center of the art world by embracing the “otherness” imposed upon him by the West and exposing its fiction, he does so by predicting what the (mis)perception of the cloth will likely be. Emerging in the early 1990s, this places Shonibare at an important intersection where African and diaspora artists were gaining unprecedented visibility in the art world, with many using found or alternative media such as the textile. Such junctures, where textiles and African art meet in curatorial practice and scholarly publications, are the main focus of this chapter.

Exhibiting the Traditional: A survey and critique of textiles in curatorial practice

*Textile practices have been treated with disregard for so long it is almost inconceivable for some critics and artists to acknowledge them as discursive formations from which meaning can emerge.*⁵⁰

-Mireille Perron

Textiles from West Africa often undergo the same process of categorization as textiles from any other part of the world once they enter a museum space. As objects collected by museums and institutions, textiles are typically housed in individual departments divided along geographic or cultural lines, rather than by a textile-specific department. This is particularly true in the case of encyclopedic collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Very rarely in these institutions do textiles from one department’s collection intermingle with those from another.⁵¹

⁴⁹ One of the early examples of this is Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock’s *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) that gave substantial evidence to the devaluing and appropriating of women’s work, notably of abstract painters in New York utilizing designs from Navajo women’s weaving.

⁵⁰ Mireille Perron, “Common Threads: Local Strategies for ‘Inappropriated’ Artists,” in *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*, ed. Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing (Canada: YYZ Books, 1998), 124.

⁵¹ It was only very recently through the “Interwoven Globe” exhibition that this became possible for the Metropolitan collection, and many textiles which are not easily categorized under the usual precepts were exhibited for the first time through the collaboration of nine departments. See: Roberta Smith, “‘Interwoven Globe,’ a 300-Year Survey of Textiles at the Met,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2013,

Rather, West African textiles are typically collected by the department for Africa, despite the fact that due to global trade, they may have a lot in common with textiles from other parts of the world.

Textiles also present challenges to curators because they occupy a unique position somewhere between art and material culture. Within this limbo, they are consistently treated as subordinate to art despite having both functional and aesthetic aspects that make them objects worthy of collection, display and analysis. The reasons for this subordination are partially rooted in the little value that Western society places in objects that are made by and associated with women or that are anonymously or collectively produced. Amelia Peck, editor of the catalogue for the Metropolitan's 2013 textile exhibition *Interwoven Globe* explains, "Textiles other than tapestries have traditionally been undervalued as works of art, overlooked sometimes because they fall into the domestic sphere, their makers often anonymous and frequently female."⁵²

The origin of this hierarchy that places textiles, decorative arts, and other forms of craft has implications outside of Western collection practices. However, in the context of West Africa, where the gendering of production differs from one textile practice to the next, other principles have governed the collection and undervaluation of textiles. For example, despite the fact that in West Africa many textiles are produced by men and the textile plays more prominent roles in West African societies, collections of African art and material culture have been shaped by a Western preference for sculpture. Where textiles were collected, Western standards of art and aesthetics were influential, as was an arbitrary idea of what comprised an "authentic" African textile. Early collectors of African art and artifacts who made their value judgments based on Western ideals of "high art" or "tradition" as it related to African culture are in part to blame for the fact that today there are so few surviving examples of textiles from the African continent that are over 150 years old. Of course, the susceptibility of fabrics to decay from use and climate is a significant reason why so few textiles from before the 19th century exist in collections, but there

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/13/arts/design/interwoven-globe-a-300-year-survey-of-textiles-at-the-met.html>.

⁵² Amelia Peck, "Trade Textiles at the Metropolitan Museum: A History," in *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800*, ed. Amelia Peck (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 10.

were also certain preconceptions about authenticity that likely dissuaded collectors from purchasing and preserving textiles. Due to their contact with foreign influences through trade, many textiles were not perceived as “purely” African, and were therefore not highly valued or sought after collectible objects.⁵³

Foreign influences included both finished textiles as well as raw materials for their production that came to African markets through various transcontinental and transoceanic routes. Guinea cloths, for instance, were finished cottons manufactured in India, exported to Europe, and then re-exported to Africa's Guinea Coast where they were exchanged for slaves and other commodities in the 17th and 18th centuries. Rather than drive local production out of business, foreign imports like Guinea cloths instead re-shaped and stimulated it.⁵⁴ The West African market was so strong that imports were also re-fashioned at the production site to meet West African consumer preferences. However, early collection practices, institutional categorization and departmentalization, and Western scholarship have together acted to suppress the global trade narrative that shaped African textile production, serving to obscure the modernity and inconstancy of many textile "traditions" in favor of objects that represent a static, and thereby "authentic" product.

A major exhibition of African textiles in the United States at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 1972 illustrated how these Western values were translated into curatorial practice. Although the exhibition attempted to redress misperceptions about African textiles, the monumental show also highlighted the way that a preference for "tradition" persisted even under the handling of art historians at a museum dedicated to the modern arts. Curated by Roy Sieber, *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* made a national tour after its first showing at the MoMA. A dense, 240-page catalogue authored by Sieber accompanied the travelling exhibition and illustrates the types of textiles and body ornamentation that were shown. In the introduction, Sieber makes several statements that identify the shortcomings of Western practice with regard to African textiles, but that also seem to forecast issues

⁵³ Chris Spring, *African Textiles Today* (Washington DC; London: Smithsonian Books; The British Museum Press, 2012), 212.

⁵⁴ Colleen E. Kriger, “‘Guinea Cloth’: Production and Consumption of Cotton Textiles in West Africa before and during the Atlantic Slave Trade,” in *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850*, ed. Giorgio Riello; Prasannan Parthasarathi (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105–6.

in his own curatorial approach: first he notes that the study of these “traditional forms have been neglected by the West” in favor of sculpture, an act that “stems from Western aesthetic values but results in a geographical emphasis on West Africa where most traditional sculpture is to be found.” A couple paragraphs later Sieber asserts that the objects in the exhibition have nearly all been produced in the last century, some are more recent and even new, and “almost all represent technical processes that are still in use and reflect contemporary African taste.” He goes on to say, “the literature of African Arts has tended to deal with their “traditional” aspects, implying that as they have become “modern”—that is, as they have come increasingly under the influence of outside factors—they have lost an irreplaceable *élan*.”⁵⁵ Although he appears to be critiquing this tendency of the extant literature, and countering it by exhibiting recent or new textiles, the rest of his text seems to subscribe to the very same point of view on “modern” textiles, that they are somehow of less value because of their modernity. His discomfort with so-called “modern” textiles is suggested by the inconsistent placement of the term “traditional” in quotation marks and the near exclusion of textiles that are not woven or are not made of plant-based fibers.

Some resist-dyed cloths are included but only to “demonstrate the continued vitality of the decorative arts in modern Africa.”⁵⁶ The dyed fabrics made from imported cloth are brought in to emphasize the traditionality of hand-woven cloth while any sign of modernity in production technique or material in the hand-woven cloth is left out. Post-1945, many hand-woven cloths formerly made with raffia, cotton, or silk threads such as *kente* and *aso-oke* were made with semi-synthetic viscose threads. This was primarily caused by a discontinuation of trade due to the World Wars that disrupted the flow of cotton and silk to West Africa. In the meantime, synthetic alternatives took their place. Yet even once cottons and silks were available again, synthetics remained popular for their affordability, variety, and colorfastness, in some cases greatly expanding the aesthetic possibilities of the weaving practice. During the 1970s, for example, a shiny plastic fiber from Japan called Lurex grew immensely popular for the shiny patina it produced, transforming the aesthetics of

⁵⁵ Roy Sieber, *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 10.

⁵⁶ Sieber, 220.

strip-woven cloth from Ghana to Nigeria.⁵⁷ These transitions may signal to some a loss of the “élan” or “authenticity” of the textile, but such a belief rests on the assumption that the materials used prior to the synthetics were locally sourced, when in fact they were mostly imported as well. In fact, one would have to travel back quite far in time to find a textile that was not heavily influenced by cross-cultural trade and contact. Such an endeavor would not only produce few results but would ignore the agency of African actors in the vast network of textile trade prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

African Textiles and Decorative Arts offers little such historical context or examples of cross-culturality. With few exceptions, even the materials used in making the woven cloths are not mentioned in the body of the text or the descriptions of the illustrations.⁵⁸ Perhaps in an effort to bridge the disciplinary divide between anthropology and art history, Sieber opted to focus first and foremost on the aesthetics of the objects. A review written about Sieber’s exhibition reveals that the selection criteria for the 241 objects included in the exhibition (out of 2400 possibilities) were chosen based on their “aesthetic excellence in contemporary western terms.”⁵⁹ This may in part explain why, following a decade of Minimalism in art in America, some woven pieces such as the muted palette and simple abstract patterns of Yoruba women’s strip-weaving were well represented in Sieber’s exhibition when others, such as the boldly-colored, busy-patterned *adinkra* cloths, were overlooked or omitted entirely. The criteria may also explain why Sieber offered so little information or interpretation to the symbolism of the textiles’ color and design. Selected purely for their aesthetic appeal, historical contextualization and visual analyses of the objects were seemingly unimportant. The lack of historical contextualization and research-based information on the works shown is evident in the catalogue’s scant bibliography. Certainly, at this point in 1972 textile research was only an emerging field, and Sieber had limited and oftentimes flawed resources to draw upon. However, he limited his bibliography further by selecting only English language texts, resulting in an emphasis on Anglophone West Africa in the data.

⁵⁷ Picton, Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles*, 14–15.

⁵⁸ Sieber only briefly mentions cloths that are still made in cotton or raffia today in Dahomey. Sieber, *African Textiles and Decorative Arts*, 159.

⁵⁹ Kate P. Kent, “African Textiles and Decorative Arts (Review),” *African Arts* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1973): 66–67.

Moreover, rather than utilize the data that was available to him to inform his formalist selection, he merely replicates passages from other texts, including some that have proven to be inaccurate and another that was plagiarized.⁶⁰

Despite having the resources of the MoMA and other institutions at his disposal Sieber's exhibition and catalogue did not rectify the Western bias in exhibiting African art by focusing on the textile as opposed to sculpture. Instead, Sieber's curatorial choices perpetuated a number of problems, which include an explicit preference for West African strip-woven textiles, an emphasis on "traditionality" over modernity, and an overarching theme of an "authentic" Africinity rather than cross-culturality, all of which were shaped by Western tastes and have shown to have lasting implications for the reception of both textiles from the African continent and the contemporary artistic practices that have appropriated them.

Preferential treatment for West African strip-woven fabrics above all other textiles from the continent becomes increasingly evident in the decades after the MoMA's seminal exhibition. A simple glance at the illustrations chosen for the covers of numerous texts published in the West (including Sieber's catalogue, though it is not included in the image) on the subject of African textiles reveals favor for strip-woven cloth with a particular fondness for the multi-tonal *kente* cloths of the Ashanti and Ewe people of modern-day Ghana (figure 1.1). As these images circulate in the form of academic and general-knowledge texts and exhibition catalogues, the strip-weave cloth becomes increasingly emblematic of the textile production of the entire continent, thereby constructing associations between this specific form of material culture and a broad notion of an African aesthetic. In a review of the 1978 exhibition at the Denver Art Museum called "West African Textiles" Carolyn Marr remarked "Ashanti *kente* cloth is perhaps the most well known of West African textiles" suggesting further that the brilliant palette and complexity of designs made the Ashanti cloths easily distinguishable from others.⁶¹ Chris Spring also supports this claim when he argues that *kente* "in many ways epitomizes the popular notion of an

⁶⁰ Herbert M. Cole, "Review: African Textiles and Decorative Arts by Roy Sieber," *African Arts* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1973): 77.

⁶¹ Carolyn Marr, "West African Textiles," *African Arts* 11, no. 4 (July 1978): 81.

‘African textile’: the great narrow strip hand-woven cloths of West Africa...” but he neglects to discuss how this popular notion was born in the first place.⁶²

Sieber believed that the Euro-American fascination with the West African strip-woven cloths was directly related to the fact that most of the sculpture that first fascinated Europe and America originated in West Africa. Yet, this explanation does not account for the preference of West African woven cloth above all other textiles that are also of West African origin. While the aesthetics of abstraction that had dominated the 20th century of art in Europe and the United States to some extent explain a partiality for woven cloth over figurative painted cloth, another explanation may be found in earlier stages of Western art history. Tapestry weaving in Europe was once a respected, predominantly male profession in the arts on par with that of the painter, reaching its apex in the late Gothic period in France. Thereafter, the profession gradually shifted from one of creative production to one of imitation whereby weavers were tasked with creating tapestries in the exact likeness of popular paintings by esteemed artists such as Raphael. Tapestry weaving thereby forfeited much of its own creative license in pursuit of increasingly difficult technical skills that allowed for more precision in the replication of paintings. This created a distinction between the painter and the weaver, the artist and the artisan, and ultimately placed the weaver in a subordinate position to the painter as his imitator.⁶³

For over a century, tapestry weaving continued to be subordinated by the “high arts” of painting and sculpture until efforts in England by the Pre-Raphaelites, William Morris, and the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to restore tapestry to its former glory. Morris successfully employed a number of male weavers to work in the medieval style, but it wasn’t until the mid-20th century that tapestry had an opportunity to intervene in the Modern arts. Under a man named Jean Lurçat, backed by French cultural officials and a dealer, tapestry arts were brought together under a biennial held in Lausanne, Switzerland. Lurçat and those working with him wished to revive the great image-based tapestries of the late French Gothic era, but

⁶² Spring, *African Textiles Today*, 21.

⁶³ Ann Newdigate, “Kinda Art, Sorta Tapestry: Tapestry as Shorthand Access to the Definitions, Languages, Institutions, Attitudes, Hierarchies, Ideologies, Constructions, Classifications, Histories, Prejudices, and Other Bad Habits of the West,” in *New Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 174.

by the second biennial in 1965 that vision had been compromised by a surge of interest and entries from tapestry innovators, many of whom were women from Eastern Europe and the United States. This created another divide between those who wished to revive an art form by reproducing it in its late 17th century likeness, and those who wished to revive it by proving it was a modern art medium capable of exploring and pushing aesthetic possibilities in the same manner of painting or sculpture. The latter party eventually won over the biennial and the direction of the weaving practice, but not without Lurçat making misogynist comments about female tapestry artists ruining the profession, indicating a gendering of the split.⁶⁴

This was hardly the first time that weaving was disparaged for its popularity among women artists. Even as tapestry arts struggled throughout the 20th century in Europe and the United States for legitimacy and visibility, weaving was exceptionally well integrated into the curriculum of the Bauhaus in Germany. It outlasted all other divisions of the school for the entirety of its existence from 1919-1933. Despite its endurance, and the validity provided by contracts with textile manufacturing firms won by the program, its mostly female student body was consistently treated with hostility by the faculty.⁶⁵ In the United States, textile-based arts were receiving promising attention from the art establishment. Anni Albers came to teach in the U.S. after leaving the Bauhaus where she was educated and served as program director for some time. Her show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949 marked the first time a weaver was given a solo exhibition in a major institution, and her book *On Weaving* from 1965 was influential for a rising group of artists working in fiber media. However, weavers and other fabric artists working at this late stage in Western Modernism succumbed to pressures of the art world to eschew all traces of the traditional or the decorative in order to be taken seriously, leaving tapestry in the position of once again imitating painting. Even when the artists were male, tapestry struggled for recognition. A number of canonical male artists experimented with the medium of weaving throughout the span of modernist art, including Léger, Picasso, Matisse, Joan Miró, Robert Motherwell, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, Man Ray, and Josef Albers among others. Nevertheless, these and other works of tapestry were

⁶⁴ Ibid., 175.

⁶⁵ Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxiii.

largely written out of art historical accounts of the Modern era, and therefore remained peripheral to the dominant media of painting and sculpture.⁶⁶

Tapestry never achieved its former high status as envisioned by people like Morris, Lurçat or Albers, but it played a prominent role in the burgeoning field of fiber arts in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly within the feminist art movement. However, even as tapestry and other textile arts gained new roles in critical practices, the troubled relationship to tradition remained. Anni Albers' efforts to integrate weaving into modernist practice, for example, went hand in hand with fostering an appreciation for ancient weaving practices and elevating the forms beyond the classification of craft or ethnographic objects.⁶⁷ Thus, as the textile evolved into increasingly sophisticated conceptual and critical tools for artists in the West, the fascination with non-Western woven textiles continued, and the objects were looked to for their traditional techniques and uses rather than their meaning. Exhibitions such as Raoul d'Harcourt's 'Textiles of Ancient Peru and Their Techniques' from 1962, and Sieber's 'African Textiles and Decorative Arts,' provided the narrow range of criteria that excluded those showing signs of modernization in material or form, re-affirming misleading associations between the non-West and the non-modern.

The association between textiles and tradition persisted in the years following Sieber's show at the MoMA. In 1975, the Museum of African Art in Washington D.C. showed *Traditional African Dress and Textiles* followed by a survey exhibition of the collection holdings at the Museum of Mankind in London in late 1979, the catalogue for which was the first edition of *African Textiles* edited by John Mack and John Picton in the same year. The connections between tradition and textile in the context of Africa were repeatedly made in these exhibitions and texts, even though the word "traditional" had been dropped from the title of the London show and many of the included textile "traditions" had long since undergone processes of modernization. Thus even as modernized textiles were increasingly shown and recognized, they were framed in an inferior position to their predecessors, recalling Sue Pritchard's

⁶⁶ For an in depth account of the extent of tapestry's integration in Modern art, see: K.L.H. Wells, "Tapestry and Tableau: Revival, Reproduction, and the Marketing of Modernism" (University of Southern California, 2014).

⁶⁷ Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, 12.

claim that "...for many, the term "textiles" only has resonance if it refers to traditional materials and techniques."⁶⁸

This denial of modernity extended to contemporary African artists working in the mid to late 20th century. In the 1960s, Senegalese artists who revived tapestry weaving utilized the motifs that Europeans looked to as emblematic of African visual culture such as masks and statues, making them the subjects of re-appropriation and critical reevaluation. Under the direction of Papa Ibra Tall, a leading artist of the Ecole de Dakar, a new school for the instruction of weaving was opened in the town of Thiès, Senegal in 1965. With the support of then President Léopold Senghor, Tall founded the Manufacture Sénégalaise des Arts Décoratifs (MSAD) with an interest in developing the visual arts for the Négritude movement that took shape under Senghor's presidency and his generous granting of 25% of the government budget to arts and culture.⁶⁹ The development of a center for weaving provided an alternative to the easel painting that was widely practiced at the time but was reliant on the importation of materials from France and on the French legacy of painting on canvas. Conceptually, the weavings were rooted in the decolonial, Africa-centric ideologies of Négritude and Senghor's idea of *africanité*. Tall's tapestries, as well as those of his colleagues Bacary Dième, Badara Camara and Ibou Diouf, reflected the aesthetic sensibilities of the Négritude artists and the fundamental belief that weaving was inherently an African art form.⁷⁰ Although these tapestries are largely absent from many accounts of the Ecole de Dakar, and were certainly not part of Sieber's nor any of the later exhibitions featuring artists working with textiles (though they were important precursors), the case of Tall and the tapestry school is significant for the way the medium was perceived and utilized as an alternative to the dominant European painting tradition, but also ignored and to an extent rejected by the west for being a mimicry of traditional masterpieces and lacking the ingenuity of true modernist art.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Sue Prichard, "Collecting the Contemporary: 'Love Will Decide What Is Kept and Science Will Decide How It Is Kept,'" in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (London, New York: Berg, 2012), 79.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Harney, "The Ecole de Dakar: Pan-Africanism in Paint and Textile," *African Arts* 35, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 15.

⁷⁰ Harney, 18.

⁷¹ Harney, 16.

Although European Modernism in the arts was developed from a mimicry of non-Western "traditions" and masterpieces through artists' exposure to non-Western art forms, even if this was not yet widely acknowledged at the time, the West held non-Western artists to a different set of criteria in the evaluation of the modern arts. Europe's fascination with "primitivist" arts clouded the reception of both objects and new practices that exhibited modernity in multiple forms. In terms of curatorial practice, however, this becomes problematic as information about the textiles as well as contemporary artistic practices that appropriate them serve to unravel the West's notions of "traditionality" and expose its biases. Although progress towards inclusion concerning African textiles is made, these Western ideas about traditionality continue to permeate the reception of contemporary African art in the West.

Exhibiting the Contemporary, Seeking Authenticity: Textiles and art in curatorial practice

By the end of the 1980s, the use of the word "traditional" shifted towards a redefinition of "authenticity" as it related to the presence of the "traditional" within contemporary African visual culture. With regards to the textile, this meant the artistic appropriation of patterns and processes as a means of signifying a connection to African culture. From a curatorial standpoint, artworks that fell into this category could provide a lens through which to view African textiles in their contemporaneity, or to understand them from a contemporary context. As such artistic appropriation continued and exhibitions that featured them abounded in the 2000s, the curatorial objective shifted to one in which the textile served as a lens on the art and the artist. Predisposed to Western misconceptions about African textiles, however, these exhibitions developed their own issues even as their curators turned to textiles as refuge from the complicated and controversial terrain of identity politics within the field of contemporary African art.

In 1989, when John Picton and John Mack were publishing the second edition of *African Textiles*, the authors were acutely aware of the mistakes made in the first edition, and that a number of shifts had taken place within the discipline that needed to be addressed. Picton recalls removing the word 'traditional' from the title of Mack's essay on Madagascar. He explains, "At best it was redundant: it served no useful purpose and signified nothing that was not already obvious. At worst, it was

misleading, supposing an essentially 'authentic' African practice...Traditionality was, indeed, exposed as a fiction denoting an invented and perhaps largely spurious authenticity."⁷² By the third edition of Picton and Mack's "African Textiles" the authors' approach towards "traditional" textiles shifted again. The book was published in conjunction with an exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery in London titled, "The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex" and it marked the first time the curators included contemporary art as well as factory-made prints and other "non-traditional" textiles, ushering in a new format for exhibiting contemporary African art and textiles.

The exhibition opened with an appliqué produced in Cairo with factory-made fabrics and closed with an installation by Yinka Shonibare. According to Picton, sandwiching the rest of the exhibition between these two unlikely inclusions gave "an indication of the many ways in which textiles in Africa have been made and used and how they have changed and developed through the course of this century" and emphasized the diversity of the selection and the importance of textiles in the visual arts of Africa.⁷³ In this context, Shonibare's work was a highly appropriate inclusion. Rooted in the cross-cultural history of the Dutch wax print, Shonibare's installation was instrumental to Picton and Mack's intention in their third publication to uncover a narrative about artists and patrons involved with the textile as a medium of art in the modern world (rather than a once pristine tradition) that undermined European hegemony.⁷⁴ The work was also useful towards the aim of the Barbican exhibition to broaden the perspective on African textiles by scratching at the surface of textile histories, revealing hybrid origins and a reliance on complex webs of trade that exposed the fiction of a textile's authenticity. However, as Shonibare's work was exhibited with greater frequency in the years that followed, the curatorial objective of showing his textile-based installations and sculptural pieces appears to have changed. As the work of African and Diaspora artists like him garnered more attention in the 1990s, showcased by a number of large-scale exhibitions beginning with the now infamous *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in

⁷² Picton, Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles*, 11. See also: John Picton and John Mack, *African Textiles* (London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Publications, 1989), 8.

⁷³ Picton, Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles*, 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

1989, new relationships between modernity and tradition were being mediated through engagements with personal and cultural identity.⁷⁵ Positioned as the locus of a growing body of work from artists working and exhibiting in New York, London and Paris, African identity was not just the subject of many artists' work, but oftentimes their ticket to the art world establishment, a play in what Olu Oguibe has termed "the culture game," whereby artists embrace their non-Western identity (even those who were born and raised in the West) by making their work look "ethnic" to satisfy the art establishment's expectations.⁷⁶

Shonibare knowingly employed an "ethnic looking" fabric in his work as a symbol of African identity, at once playing into expectations of how his work should look and subverting those same prescriptions. It was one of these expectations that initially motivated Shonibare to use the textile when his tutor in a London college suggested that he make work that was 'authentically African' instead of pursuing his project on the theme of *perestroika*.⁷⁷ Although he elected the Dutch wax print to question and expose the fallacy of an authenticity of "Africanness," posing a critique of the Western art audience, the work nevertheless grew immensely popular and may have even solidified the associations between the fabric and Africa. After a few group shows and a solo in London galleries between 1988 and 1989 while he was enrolled at Byam Shaw School of Art and afterwards at Goldsmiths College, Shonibare showed outside the UK in a group show called "Interrogating Identity" that travelled around to several major U.S. institutions. This exhibition, which "considered the notion of what we would now call the African diaspora through an interrogation of the designation "black" in the United States, England, and Canada," effectively introduced Shonibare's work to the mainstream U.S. art world, but within the paradigm of African identity.⁷⁸ Within the context of these exhibitions concerned with

⁷⁵ This point is made in the introduction by the editors Oguibe and Enwezor, but is elaborated in a number of the essays in the book. See: Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts (InIVA), 1999), 10.

⁷⁶ See: "Double Dutch and the Culture Game" in Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 33-44.

⁷⁷ Rachel Kent, ed., "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE* (Munich; Berlin; London; New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008), 39.

⁷⁸ Kellie Jones and Amiri Baraka, eds., *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 31.

identity is where a shift occurred--the artist's work was no longer serving as a lens on the textile, instead, the textile was providing a lens onto the artist and his identity. In Shonibare's case, the lens revealed that as a society we continue to suffer from a great deal of unease when it comes to comprehending the legitimacy or authenticity of a product, and by extension a person, with multi-cultural or hybrid origins. That unease was evident in the controversial titling of exhibitions of non-Western artists, but also with the discomfort several artists voiced over the use of the term "African" when it was applied to their work or their identity.⁷⁹

Several transitions took place within curatorial practice from encyclopedic exhibitions of 'African Textiles' and blockbuster shows of contemporary African art to the more focused theme of textiles in art. To fully understand from where this trend emerged and why it is unique, it is worth reviewing some of the shows that preceded and informed it. The Barbican show was significant for its inclusion of pieces that presented a challenge to the persistence of "traditionality" in the context of African textiles and put forth visual arts as a part of the evolution of the contemporary textile. However, it was not the first exhibition to show work that demonstrated the overlap between textiles and art. Several earlier exhibitions, which were mounted during the 1960s and 70s alongside the large-scale exhibitions such as Sieber's, focused exclusively on textile-based contemporary arts such as the experimental batik works coming out of Oshogbo, Nigeria in the 1970s, and a New York exhibition of the Senegalese tapestries in 1978. These sometimes tended to be smaller-scale shows in private galleries and universities. They included "Moderne Kunst aus Oshogbo" at the Neue Münchner Galerie, in Munich, Germany in 1965; "Contemporary Art of Oshogbo, Nigeria" at the Contemporary Arts Gallery, New York University in May 1971; "Contemporary Nigerian Graphics and Textiles" at the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston, Massachusetts in 1973; "Aladire and Oshogbo Graphics," at the African Heritage Center Gallery, Washington, DC, November 1973; "Contemporary Nigerian Fabrics and Prints" at the Ife-Ife Black Humanitarian Center,

⁷⁹ For example, Sokari Douglas Camp explains "I see myself as an artist. Being an African artist or being a Western artist has got nothing to do with it....I can't talk about the whole of Africa." Similar sentiments are echoed by Olu Oguibe, Kebedech Tekleab, and Aimé Mpane, among others. See: Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Framing Practices: Artists' Voices and the Power of Self-Representation," in *African Art, Interviews, Narratives: Bodies of Knowledge at Work*, ed. Joanna Grabski and Carol Magee (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 154–57.

Philadelphia USA in Jan 1974; and "Nigerian Batiks" at Tribal Arts Gallery Two, New York in March 1974, among others.

Curiously, as the Barbican-type exhibition proliferated in the decade to follow the 1995 show, batik works from Oshogbo and tapestries from Thiès were absent. Nor were the indigo-textile inspired paintings and prints by Bruce Onobrakpeya and others emerging from the Zaria school included. Apart from Nike (Davies) Okundaye, whose textiles or *adire*-inspired paintings were sometimes included in later shows, the works emerging from Oshogbo that explored the resist technique as an expressive form akin to painting without straying from the fabric medium were excluded, even though they, like the tapestries from Senegal, were important precursors to textile-inspired work of the 1990s and early 2000s.

These exclusions are significant for a number of reasons. By creating separate models for the exhibition of textiles, textiles-as-art, and textiles-in-art, art institutions effectively demarcated these intimately related practices by their differences. The result is that the exhibitions of Shonibare and his contemporaries--which are distinguished from the batik and tapestry exhibitions and the exclusively textile exhibitions by the key factor of appropriation--imply that these artists are inventors of a new artistic genre. The reality is that not only were similar works being created decades earlier by West African artists, but that many textiles are works of art in and of themselves, oftentimes produced through appropriative processes, and made by master weavers and dyers who mark the work with a signature.

The inclusion of textiles by renowned weavers, designers, and dyers in an exhibition helps blur the lines between a textile and a work of art. This was evident in the holistic and open approach to textiles in Doran Ross's 'Wrapped in Pride,' an exhibition of Ghanaian *kente* and African American identity indomitable in breadth and depth of material. Presented in 1998 by the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Textile Series, the exhibition featured the *kente* cloths of master weaver Samuel Cophie, eliminating the division between old or ancient textiles and contemporary art. Cophie, born in 1939, has mastery of complex classical patterns,

but also invents his own and must do his best to protect those patterns as his own intellectual property, as many weavers and designers face threats of plagiarism.⁸⁰

Ross also included several artists who used *kente* in their work, including several hand-woven pieces that brought together elements of *kente*, the American flag, and photography by African American artist Sonya Clark, and paintings by John Biggers, Frank E. Smith and James Phillips whose surface patterning suggested the warp and weft of *kente* strip-weave. The show provided hundreds of examples that illustrated both *kente* as a contemporary art form in its own right, as well as the methods and intentions of *kente*'s appropriation across art, fashion, popular and material culture, specifically as it related to African American culture. Among these objects were examples of *kente*-print, a factory produced cloth with the image of *kente* as its pattern, and many items produced from it. This inclusive approach to curating was, however, short-lived.

As the curatorial trend to place textiles side by side with art became increasingly popular in the 21st century, a formulaic curatorial procedure emerged whereby artists that drew upon the patterns, materials and histories of cloth in their work were exhibited alongside the same textiles that appear to have influenced their practice, particularly when those textiles were of the handmade "traditional" type rather than factory-made. Shonibare was joined by a limited number of other artists whose work appropriated or made reference to textiles, and was labeled as African. The artists in this niche included, El Anatsui, Sokari Douglas Camp, Donald Odita, Viyé Diba, Abdoulaye Konaté, Grace Ndiritu, Atta Kwami, Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, Brother Owoosu-Ankomah, Nike (Davies) Okundaye, Rachid Koraïchi and Achamyelah Debela among others. Their works were shown in 'The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in (September 30, 2008 – March 22, 2009); "The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles / Recent Art" at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University (September 16 – December 6, 2008); "Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas" at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville (February 8 – May 8, 2011); "Hollandaise: a journey into an

⁸⁰ For an in-depth study of intellectual property issues facing *kente* weavers see: Boatema Boateng, *The Copyright Thing Doesn't Work Here : Adinkra and Kente Cloth and Intellectual Property in Ghana*, First Peoples: New Directions in Indigenous Studies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

iconic fabric” at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA) in the Netherlands (November 3, 2012 - January 5, 2013) and at Raw Material Company in Dakar, Senegal (April 10 – June 1, 2013); and the recent “Social Fabric: African Textiles Today,” a 2015-2016 touring exhibition by the British Museum. With little variation, these exhibitions presented contemporary works of art in tandem with the textiles that presented a temporal distinction between “old” textiles and “new” art accompanied by an underlying assumption that something was to be gained by observing these artworks in the vicinity of textiles, a seemingly harmless approach to contemporary African art, which was at the emergence of the 21st century a field fraught with complexity and difficulty.

In some cases, like with Picton's and Ross's previous shows, curators began to recognize the importance of factory-produced fabrics in the history of global trade networks, and the impact of the fabrics on visual and material culture. The introduction for "Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas," for example, indicates that the “intersecting trajectories and the forces that have propelled the ceaseless flow of textiles on the African continent and beyond its boundaries” are the focus of the exhibition.⁸¹ Such efforts to unearth previously obscured histories of trade have revealed West African merchants and producers as powerful actors in the global network of trade. The inclusion of “non-traditional” textiles along with their cross-cultural histories also helps curators to break free of the associations of African textiles with “traditional” or hand-made practices by exposing the connections between West African cloth and Indian woodblock prints, North African looms and West African strip-weaving, or Japanese indigos and European chintz to name just a few examples of evidence of early global exchange of visual culture via cloth. However, these exhibitions and their catalogues have at times also reproduced several problematic tropes of contemporary African art, and struggled to break free from the difficulties of curating African textiles.

Exhibitions of textiles and art-appropriating-textiles often continue to display preferences for West African strip-cloth, which is perhaps best illustrated by the success of Ghanaian-born sculptor El Anatsui. Anatsui had a long and fruitful career as an artist in Nigeria before he became internationally renowned following his solo

⁸¹ Cooksey, *Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas*, 13.

show in 1995 at October Gallery in London that launched his career in the UK and beyond. A few years later, a fortuitous discovery in 1998 of a bag full of discarded bottle caps lead to Anatsui's first "metal tapestry" and a vast series of works in the same material that have earned him the art world's highest accolades. Although Anatsui had been working for decades with found and discarded objects from milk tins to shards of wooden vessels or clay pots it wasn't until he began working with the bottle caps that the international art world took notice. Between 2003 and 2008 a major solo show called *Gawu* featuring his bottle cap tapestries toured the UK and six locations in the US, solidifying Anatsui's place in the uppermost echelons of the art world. The "tapestries" exhibited in *Gawu* were accompanied by a number of other works that were also composed of found and discarded materials such as *Crumbling Wall* (2000), *Wastepaper Bag* (2003), and *Peak Project* (1999). Each of these works, which use the golden lids of condensed milk tins (*Peak Project*), discarded printing plates, or rusted steel sheets once used to grate cassava, address both the lack of recycling in African nations and the enormity of human consumption and waste. What eventually came to be known as metal tapestries and associated with textiles such as *kente* were also providing a commentary on consumption. This commentary is often lost, however, amid the predominant interpretive framework of the textile. *Crumbling Wall*, *Wastepaper bag* and *Peak Project* also serve as examples of Anatsui's artistic process of binding the pieces together with copper wire, which achieves two transformative feats: He turns small, unrecyclable pieces of detritus into monumental scale objects, and he creates a malleable, draping, softness out of metal.

Both of these transformations are critical to the development of a dominant leitmotif of cloth, which emerges as a result of the experimentation with bringing these objects together as a whole. But as interest in his work exploded, his bottle cap-based works became practically synonymous with textiles, specifically Ghanaian *kente*, all but obliterating the clear and significant relationship to his previous work. Unlike Shonibare, who employed the Dutch-made textile deliberately as a means of subversion and a challenge to the notion of authenticity as it is applied to African identity, for Anatsui, the connections to the textile in his work happened somewhat accidentally. Despite the fact the artist had long since left Ghana, and made no initial connection between the woven fabric of his homeland and his works, the

interpretation seemed inescapable as scholars repeatedly made the association between his work, his Ghanaian roots, and Ghana's textile production. "I have discovered only much later . . . that cloth has been a recurring theme or leitmotif, and it is featured in so many dimensions."⁸²

The exhibitions at the Metropolitan, the Grey Gallery, and the Samuel P. Harn Museum all displayed "metal tapestry" works by Anatsui and *kente* cloth. This suggests not just the large role that curatorial practice has played in the interpretation of Anatsui's work as relating to *kente*, but it also highlights a discrepancy within the comparative framework of these exhibitions. Whereas Anatsui's "tapestries" are casually analogized with *kente*, Shonibare's work is not shown alongside factory printed textiles. Although the new information about factory prints may have been illuminating for audiences at Yinka Shonibare's early shows, the factory cloth is not used in the same way that the history and material object of *kente* is used as an analytical tool for viewing an Anatsui. As with the earlier exhibitions of textiles, preferential treatment of handmade "traditional" textiles over factory produced or "modern" ones is evident. Shonibare's use of the physical Vlisco cloth sets his practice apart from those of his contemporaries that may only allude to the textile, but his inclusion in nearly every exhibition having anything to do with textiles raises some questions. One might ask, for example, whether Shonibare's work would have benefitted from a side-by-side exhibition of his installations with an early 19th century Dutch Wax print. Such an inclusion would be contemporaneous with many hand-woven *kente* cloths that fall within the "traditional" category, and serve the same function to guide the viewer to discourses on Euro-African trade and colonialism. The fact that this was not something done by the curators points to an inconsistency in their model whereby some artists' works are deemed to benefit from the comparison to the textile, and others stand on their own. It not only points to a continuing preference for *kente* and other West African hand-woven practices, but it also subtly reinforces a paradigm of old textile--new art by continuing to subordinate factory produced and imported fabrics. Rather than using an antique Dutch wax print to illustrate that factory prints were contemporary with and in some cases even preceded handmade African textiles, many of these exhibitions perpetuated the

⁸² "El Anatsui: *Gawu*" <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/gawu/index.html> (Accessed February 1, 2017).

issues surrounding the reception of African textiles, even extending those misperceptions to African art.

In the closing essay of the catalogue for the “Poetics of Cloth” exhibition, curator Lynn Gumpert acknowledges some of the challenges she and her colleagues faced in organizing the exhibition. The essay opens with an excerpt from David Elliott’s contribution to the catalogue of *Africa Remix* that reads, “Africa has long been a curator’s graveyard. Big, ‘dangerous,’ impossible to pin down, this vast continent has dwarfed any attempt to contain it and many exhibitions of contemporary African art have ended up reinforcing those stereotypes of backwardness, exoticism or dislocation that their curators have struggled to combat.”⁸³ Wary of committing the same mistakes as those exhibitions that preceded hers, Gumpert lays bare her concerns that range from terminology to issues of canonization and authenticity. Several of these issues were brought to her before the installation of the show by one of the featured artists, Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, who voiced his concern over the potential sidelining of the contemporary artists by the parallel display of their work with “traditional” African textiles.⁸⁴

Wemega-Kwawu’s unease in sharing the spotlight with textiles stems from numerous precedents both in exhibitions and literature in which African cloth is often glamorized by institutional language and treatment; described as ‘magnificent,’ ‘poetic,’ ‘essential’ or ‘woven beauty,’ and associated with ‘majesty,’ ‘patterns of life,’ or ‘pride.’ Glamorizing words and phrases are typically reserved for hand-woven, painted or dyed textiles such as *kente*, *adinkra*, *adire*, or *aso-oke*. However, even the quotidian factory-produced fabrics such as *kente-print*, *khanga* and *ankara* long excluded from textile exhibitions and publications, are also occasionally described as ‘dazzling’ or ‘striking’ in their vast array of patterns and bold colors, particularly as they are first found piled high in folded stacks in the open-air markets of Lagos, Accra, Nairobi, and so on. Yet, flattery does not inform or contribute to the work in any meaningful way. Rather, flattery can be counterproductive by diverting attention away from meaningful analysis or historical contextualization. The language utilized in the scholarship of African textiles can read much like an atonement reminiscent of

⁸³ Lynn Gumpert, ed., *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles / Recent Art* (New York, NY: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2008), 85.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro's critique of institutional treatment of Latin American art that presents it in a patronizing and generalized manner "as an enchanting world of timeless splendor and magnificence or as a historical burden to be piously addressed."⁸⁵

Wemega-Kwawu's apprehensions towards an exhibition in which contemporary art is shown side by side with textiles from Africa's past are grounded in real art world examples.⁸⁶ However, whereas he worried about the overshadowing of art in a New York gallery by the grandeur of African textiles, the juxtaposition also presents the risk of pigeonholing the artwork such that it cannot be viewed or read beyond the relationship with the textile and its Africanity. Just a couple weeks after the September 16, 2008 opening of the "Poetics" exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art opened "The Essential Art of African Textiles" that featured five of the same artists as Gumpert's exhibition. "The Essential Art..." exhibition was mounted in the Africa gallery of the Metropolitan Museum. Works by Anatsui, Sokari Douglas Camp, and Atta Kwami were placed amongst the textiles, masks, and ancient artifacts of the entire African continent rather than in the museum's contemporary galleries or in a special exhibit gallery. In this case, the presence of the textile and other artifacts, along with the location of the exhibition undermined the contemporaneity of the artists' practices.

In other cases, it is the modernity or contemporaneity of the textiles at stake, particularly through the division of works into contrasting categories of "old" and "new," or "traditional" and "modern," even in instances where the terms do not accurately apply. The subtitle for Gumpert's show, "African Textiles / Recent Art," for example, implies the latter is more contemporary than the former when in reality several of the textiles exhibited were also late 20th century productions, post-dating some of the "recent art." In the acknowledgements section of the catalogue for "The Essential Art..." joint curators Alisa LaGamma and Christine Giuntini remark, "this

⁸⁵ Gumpert, 93.

⁸⁶ An example is the Art of the Americas wing of the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston, which opened in 2010. The wing ascends chronologically through four floors, with Pre-Columbian objects on the basement floor and works of Abstract Expressionism on the top floor. However, works of contemporary art by Native American artists are located in the basement, presumably because the contemporary works are best understood in the context of the antique Native American pieces. This curatorial choice deprives the contemporary artists of their contemporaneity, and assumes that the works cannot be appreciated on their own.

project is unusual in its juxtaposition of traditional textiles with works by contemporary artists.”⁸⁷ Here, the terms traditional and contemporary are used to contrast textiles and art, thereby depriving textiles of modernity in order to highlight the contemporaneity of the artwork.

Although there was sufficient research available by the time of these exhibitions to dispel spurious notions of a traditional or authentic African textile, more often than not, this body of research was not used as a resource by the curators of these important textile exhibitions. Instead, catalogues frequently referenced scholarship written when textile research was a relatively new, often unsophisticated field, and tended to focus on technique, materials, and formal qualities, which resulted in a portrayal of domestic, “tradition-bound” industries. This restrictive view permeated the Metropolitan’s catalogue, even though the exhibition was rife with textiles displaying silk threads, synthetic dyes, and imported fabrics that are evidence of West Africa’s active involvement in trans-Saharan and oceanic trade, and suggestive of numerous modernizations to textile production. Among these modern cloths, the exhibition included an intricately patterned *adire eleko* cloth titled *Olokun*, an early 20th century product of Yorubaland’s indigo dyeing industry with a distinct pattern indicative of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural cosmopolitan city of Lagos where it was likely made.⁸⁸ However, the information provided in the catalogue for the *Olokun* and a number of other textile pieces (including a men’s robe and wrapper from Nigeria) are sourced from dated texts that were published in the 1970s and 80s. None of the more recently published texts such as Kriger (2006), Picton (1995) or Byfield (1997; 2002) that shed light on the specific modernity of 20th century indigo dyeing in Nigeria were used as resources by the curators. Kriger’s text, in particular, offers an in-depth formal and historical analysis of the *Olokun* cloth that explains why the pattern is representative of a cross-cultural and cosmopolitan port city of Lagos. Although the intention of the Metropolitan’s exhibition was to draw attention to how some “fundamental aesthetic qualities of West Africa’s textile genres have proved

⁸⁷ Alisa LaGamma, Christine Giuntini, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York N.Y.), *The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design without End* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 6.

⁸⁸ Colleen E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History*, The African Archaeology Series (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 155.

resonant for contemporary artists,” these aesthetic qualities have not been analyzed or researched in depth by the curators.⁸⁹

The inattention to a textile’s modernity not only undermines the viewer’s understanding of the textile, but it compromises the viewing of the artwork to which it is being compared. Even where a misunderstanding of the textile is not an issue, the mere presence of the textile may actually serve to inhibit further interpretations of the work by constructing a narrow lens through which the viewer conceives of the artwork. A 2015 solo show in Berlin of Malian artist Abdoulaye Konaté illustrates how the mere presence of a textile places limitations on the interpretation of the contemporary art work. The exhibition at Blain Southern gallery featured a number of Konaté’s monumental fabric works including *Gris-Gris blanc*, an abstracted homage to the hunter’s tunic of the Bamana people. The piece, constructed entirely from unbleached cotton is adorned with elongated sacks that recall the amulets that typically adorn the tunic and serve apotropaic purposes for the hunter.⁹⁰ The monotone off-white color is textured by shadows drawn down from the attachments, flecking the surface with lights and darks. The connection to the tunic is suggested by the "T" shape of the canvas, but the visual and tactile effects evoke the aesthetics of minimalism, abstract expressionism, and *Arte Povera*’s anti-materialism. However, directly beside the piece was a mannequin dressed in the Bamana hunting garment, an addition that made any symbolic connections to Konaté’s work so obvious that any further contemplations of the work itself might have been aborted (figure 1.2).⁹¹

The juxtaposition of El Anatsui’s metal tapestries with *kente* can have the same halting effect, much to the detriment of Anatsui’s work. Although Anatsui’s work is endlessly compared to the *kente* cloth, the similarities of his metal tapestries to the textile only arose much later, according to the artist, who sees the repurposed bottle cap material as integral to the form and meaning of the works, not as a means of visually evoking *kente*.⁹² One could argue that his upbringing in a family of *kente*

⁸⁹ LaGamma, Giuntini, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York N.Y.), *The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design without End*, 9.

⁹⁰ Gumpert, *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles / Recent Art*, 60.

⁹¹ It is unclear whether this was the artist’s wish or a curatorial choice. The exhibition titled, ‘Useful Dreams’ was held at Blain Southern from 7 February – 18 April 2015.

⁹² “Playing with Chance: Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos ‘X-Rays’ El Anatsui at 70,” May 4, 2014, <http://artdaily.com/news/69510/Playing-with-Chance--Centre-for-Contemporary-Art-in-Lagos--X-rays--El-Anatsui-at-70#..>

weavers subconsciously influenced his aesthetics, but by the 1990s at the time when he first turned bottle caps into art he had already been living and working in Nsukka, Nigeria for about twenty years. The same aesthetic similarities that have been made between his work and *kente* could be drawn to the strip-woven *aso-oke* cloths produced in Nigeria, many of which are woven in Lurex threads that create a metallic sheen similar to Anatsui's bottle cap tapestries (figure 1.3). While the aesthetic relationship of the works to textiles is clear, particularly in the way they are capable of being draped and folded, or *act* like cloth, to analyze Anatsui's work exclusively in terms of its aesthetic and symbolic relationship to *kente* provides only a part of the potential interpretive framework. The bottle caps are one key to interpreting the work because they come from liquor bottles imported from Europe. These products represent trade between West Africans and the Europeans that link the works to the wider concepts of slavery and colonialism embedded in the symbolism of the cap and the brand names that many of them still bear.

Despite Anatsui's shift towards a monochromatic palette with the intention of avoiding the red-gold-green and black color scheme pre-existing in the bottle caps that are also common to *kente*, the temptation to textile-ize Anatsui's work persists.⁹³ In 2010, Roberta Smith of the New York Times remarked "...the works evoke lace but also chain mail; quilts but also animal hides; garments but also mosaic, not to mention the rich ceremonial cloths of numerous cultures."⁹⁴ There are indeed direct references to cloth in Anatsui's formal language, structure and even the titles of some of these works such as *Old Man's Cloth* (2003). Much of the literature that accompanies his shows present to the public interesting but limited interpretations of historical narratives concerning trade, slavery and colonialism, but even these are rooted in the past and provide only the token understanding evoked by the side-by-side placement of Anatsui's work with a 19th century *kente* cloth, through which a viewer could draw the same connections.

Reading Anatsui's work through the *kente* cloth allows for an engagement with history via metaphors of weaving, and more importantly, enters the viewer into a discourse on memory tied to the ceremonial functions of *kente*, the practice of

⁹³ "Playing with Chance: Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos 'X-Rays' El Anatsui at 70."

⁹⁴ Roberta Smith, "Swagger and Sideburns: Bad Boys in Galleries," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/arts/design/12boys.html>.

naming and re-naming cloths that alter meaning, and the roles *kente* played in the making of national and pan-African identity. These interpretations are satisfying and fairly easy to make, which lend to their temptation and their persistence. Yet to a degree they are also limited by the Western conceptions of *kente* and African identity and history.

Leaving *kente* behind in considering Anatsui's work opens the work up to new, expanded interpretations of the material and viewing experiences. For one, the textile interpretation ignores the early works of the artist in wood and clay that were formative phases leading up to the development of working with the found materials. Much of this early work is unknown to Western audiences. By looking at this work produced in the 1970s and 80s some continuities become apparent. Prior to working with the bottle caps, Anatsui was already experimenting with assembling physical fragments into freshly constructed wholes. An interest in ideograms early in his career, especially the linguistic traditions of the Akan people that appear in various forms such as *adinkra* fabric, evolved into a broader questioning of the relationship of writing to history and memory. Like fragments of material, words and symbols could also be reassembled anew. The choice of Akan written language was a clear prioritizing of an African language over all others, and suggested an undercutting of the hegemonic power of Latin script in the writing of history to date.⁹⁵ The use of Akan symbols also presented an alternative mode of working visually that broke away from his Western training and adopted the traditions that were legibly Ghanaian, and engaged local memories and histories.

The *Broken Pots* series begun in 1978 would continue the thematic trajectory of memory and history Anatsui entered with the ideograms. As the series title suggests, it was a collection of vessel-shaped objects reassembled from ceramic shards. The reassembling left large holes and cracks between the pieces, suggesting a fragile state susceptible to shattering again. Yet the shards themselves, having survived the long passage of time, have proven resistant. The vessel can be continuously re-made in ever-changing compositions; history, likewise can be shattered, its pieces

⁹⁵ Anatsui also worked with Igbo ideograms in Nigeria. Olu Oguibe notes "Unlike what today remains of the Latin script, rid as it is of both history and symbolism, the Akan ideogram remains a mnemonic sign, a repository of memory and myth—myth as the codification of both history and norm." Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, 99.

continuously re-erected into new narratives. These same notions can be applied to Anatsui's later "metal tapestries," formed of thousands of metal fragments, or equally to a textile whose pattern is merely a methodical intertwining of threads that could be unraveled and rewoven into infinite new compositions.

Materially and aesthetically speaking, Anatsui's "metal tapestry" work belongs among the growing ranks of artists such as Christo and Jeanne Claude, Tara Donovan and Thomas Hirschhorn who explore the monumental capacity of the quotidian object through its transformation via artistic intervention. Removed from the context of textiles or African art, Anatsui's glittering metal-works draw the audience in with their visual allure, inspiring sensations of rapture, and leaving collectors and institutions scrambling for a cut of the artist's cloth.⁹⁶ An encounter with Anatsui's piece at the Venice Biennale in 2007 led Gary Tinterow, curator of Modern art at the Metropolitan, to acquire a second piece from Anatsui in 2008 for the museum's permanent collection. The first, *Between Earth and Heaven*, was featured in the textile exhibition "The Essential Art..." and belonged to the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, where it was displayed. The placement of Anatsui's work in one of the galleries of the Africa department allowed for the piece to be considered "in the context of the rich regional and historical textile traditions it evokes" according to then director Philippe de Montebello.⁹⁷ The second acquisition under Tinterow became part of the permanent collection of modern and contemporary art "thus emphasizing on the international stage his standing as one of Africa's leading artists."⁹⁸ The two acquisitions, each one made of the same material by the same man, but occupying space in different departments and fulfilling different objectives for the museum signals a persistent dilemma for the African artist who vacillates between being "African" or being "contemporary" and is rarely permitted to be both at once.

⁹⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah recalls seeing an Anatsui metal tapestry as "one of the great artistic epiphanies of my life" leaving him "enraptured". See: Alexi Worth, "El Anatsui," *T Magazine*, February 19, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/style/tmagazine/22nigeria.html?_r=0.

⁹⁷ Philippe de Montebello in Director's Foreword, in: Gumpert, *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles / Recent Art*, 6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The interpretation of Anatsui's work as a *kente* cloth re-imagined is neither incorrect nor far-fetched, but it represents an essentialized limit grounded in Western ideas of Africanity. Harking back to Shonibare's subversion of authenticity on Western terms, the inclusion of Anatsui's work in nearly every exhibition that combined African textiles and African art illustrates how the interpretation was framed and popularized as another facile construal: the meaning of the artwork is derived from an ethnic, African "tradition." The Ghanaian painter, Atta Kwami, who was also included in several of these exhibitions, has claimed, "all too often, opinion-makers from the West see their own art in innovative terms, while African art is inauthentic unless it can be seen to be rooted in tradition." He laments the constant comparison of his abstract, brightly colored canvases to *kente* cloth and to European and American painters that have come before him insisting that to view his work exclusively in terms of *kente* would be to stereotype the work.⁹⁹ Kwami's statement reveals a troubling double standard for artists whose work is associated with textiles. Unlike the woven cloths in Roy Sieber's MoMA exhibition, selected for their resonance with contemporary American aesthetics but credited with a degree of originality, contemporary artists who either come from or are associated with Africa must both appeal to the Western aesthetic sensibilities by satisfying Western ideas of what African art looks like, and cite their heritage as the source of their artistic ingenuity.

These issues are encapsulated by the question posed by N'Goné Fall: "While looking at the work of Matthew Barney or Olafur Eliasson people will never refer to their supposed Celtic or Roman origins. But the same people will be tempted to emphasise the 'Africanity' of Pascale Marthine Tayou or El Anatsui. Are African artists condemned to carry their specific antique heritage and expected to perpetuate obsolete traditions?"¹⁰⁰ Fall's question levels with the duplicitous nature of Western practices of inclusion, while Shonibare's subversive display of his 'Africanness' exposes the art world's double standard for black artists working in the West. The double standards of acceptance, the misinterpretations by Western audiences, and

⁹⁹ Sharon Obuobi and Atta Kwami, In Studio with Atta Kwami, January 5, 2017, <http://www.sharonobuobi.com/blog/in-studio-with-atta-kwami.>; Spring, *African Textiles Today*, 56.

¹⁰⁰ N'Goné Fall, "The Repositioning of Contemporary Art from Africa on the Map," *CCA Lagos Newsletter*, April 2012.

the baggage that comes with the label of “African” for artists has brought some to shun it altogether.

The exhibitions referenced above have played a role in creating and perpetuating these conditions for contemporary artists. Given the deficiency of research on African textiles available to or used by the curators, the premise of the exhibitions was flawed by inaccuracies and euro-centricities that included but were not limited to an overemphasis on ‘traditionality’ and the promotion of some types of textiles over others, which were then implicated in the selection and reception of the contemporary artists included in the later exhibitions. With a few exceptions, the combination of textiles and contemporary art in these shows tended towards a simplistic analytical framework that looked to the textile for the source of the artwork’s aesthetic and conceptual substance, tying the artist’s identity to his or her African heritage. Such a curatorial procedure had the effect of making the textile and the meaning of the artwork inextricable, often to the detriment of both pieces. The artworks could not be fully conceived as contemporary productions, nor were their formal or symbolic meanings outside of the textile easily discernible within the textile-bound framework of the exhibition, and the textiles were used as symbols of a “traditional” culture. Ironically, while these exhibitions seemed preoccupied with finding similarities between artworks and textiles, they may have missed the most significant similarity of all: both visual artists and textile designers and producers employ a strategy of appropriation in their practices.

Appropriation as Artistic Procedure

Artistic appropriation, the procedure of taking and reworking existing images, designs, materials or forms for one’s own purposes or into a local visual vernacular, is fundamental to textile production. Through acts of appropriation that translate the visual environment into woven, printed, embroidered and quilted forms, a textile pattern is made. Viewed in this light, the artworks and textiles presented in the exhibitions listed in the last section are first and foremost united by their similarity of process instead of material. Rather than the pejorative associations with copying or stealing that often accompanies discussions of artistic appropriation, the processes whereby textiles have been invented, reworked, and popularized exhibit a commitment to absorbing the visual and material world, translating it into pattern,

and being made marketable in the local or global textile trade. There are several ways in which modernist and contemporary art borrows from the methods of textile design, commonalities that are missing from the both the literature of textile-based art and their exhibitions. In the act of appropriating the patterns or material of textiles, the artist appropriates the textile producer's means of synthesizing diverse visual sources into the pictorial plane, as well as the textile's capacity to speak through symbols, colors, and inscriptions. This serves to level the field by looking at artists and textile producers as equal agents in the making of visual culture, rather than the incompatible and hierarchical positions of artist and craftsman.

Several examples from West Africa illustrate the various means by which foreign imagery or material has been appropriated and acculturated into a local vernacular and function through the textile.¹⁰¹ In Nigeria, for instance, the *injiri* cloth has been imported from India since the mid to late 19th century. Composed of gingham, a lightweight, checked cotton cloth, *injiri* has been adopted into dress and ceremonial functions by the Kalabari people on the Niger Delta, who do not produce textiles of their own. The fabric is altered by cutting and pulling out threads in order to produce geometric designs that serve social identification and symbolic ends, thereby becoming an integral element of Kalabari visual, sartorial and material culture.¹⁰² In a similar practice of alteration, 19th century Asante weavers unraveled textiles purchased from Danish merchants to re-use the magenta silk yarns in their own work.¹⁰³ In the early 20th century, the Yoruba appropriated the portrait busts of King George V and Queen Mary from colonial paraphernalia to produce an indigo-dyed *adire* cloth called *adire oloba* that may have been inspired by British chintz or early factory-made portrait cloths produced in the UK for the West African market. Influence has also shown to flow in both directions: Dutch wax print companies and their competitors in the UK are known to have adapted their patterns to appeal to West African clientele by collecting, observing, and imitating the textiles produced in West Africa. A taste for Indonesian batiks along the Gold Coast may have originated

¹⁰¹ Christopher Burghard Steiner, "Technologies of Resistance: Structural Alteration of Trade Cloth in Four Societies," *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 119, no. 1 (1994): 75–94.

¹⁰² Tonye Victor Erekosima and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, "Kalabari Cut-Thread and Pulled-Thread Cloth," *African Arts* 14, no. 2 (1981): 48–49.

¹⁰³ John Picton, "Seeing and Wearing: Textiles in West Africa," in *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York, NY: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2008), 24.

with the return of African soldiers who had spent extended periods of time in Indonesia between 1837 and 1872, prompting the production of European wax printed textiles made specifically for West African markets.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, evidence found in early trade records points to an adaptation of West African indigo blues to the production of ‘Guinea’ cloths in India that were destined for West Africa.¹⁰⁵ In a more recent example, the African print manufacturer, Sotiba, designs patterns that appeal to its clientele in the United States by appropriating motifs such as masks, drums, and cowrie shells that symbolize Africa to Americans. The fabrics are printed in Sotiba’s factory in Senegal, where they are then exported to the United States and branded as “authentic” African prints. To the Senegalese these prints are viewed as “touristic” and are therefore undesirable. Sotiba produces an entirely different range of patterns for its clientele in Senegal that closely resembles the designs and palettes of the Dutch wax fabrics, which they also brand as “authentic” African prints.¹⁰⁶

Intertwined with the processes of synthesis and acculturation, appropriation is critical to the development of visual culture and it provides insight into the history of cross-cultural interaction via trade and exploration that preceded the arrival of Europeans on the African continent. As it has been demonstrated in the last section, until very recently the histories behind textiles were largely excluded from textile exhibitions, or their history was limited to information about its production technique that promoted an “authentic” view of the textile over the cross-cultural aspects of its production. In part, this accounts for the fact that the exhibitions and their accompanying texts did not identify the common ground between procedures. Although some of the texts dealt in overly simplistic terms with the appropriation of textiles as a reference to the artists’ ‘roots,’ rarely is the act of appropriation addressed as a legitimate artistic strategy for either the artist or the textile producer. In an instance where appropriation was addressed in the accompanying catalogue for “*Hollandaise*” the

¹⁰⁴ Françoise Vergès, “The Invention of an African Fabric,” in *Hollandaise: A Journey into an Iconic Fabric*, ed. Koyo Kouoh (Dakar, Senegal: Raw Material Company, 2013), 41.

¹⁰⁵ Kriger, “‘Guinea Cloth’: Production and Consumption of Cotton Textiles in West Africa before and during the Atlantic Slave Trade.” 106.

¹⁰⁶ Leslie W. Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion, Dress, Body, Culture* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2002), 135–36. See also: Adam Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism: Dress, Textiles and Culture from the 17th to the 21st Century* (London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013), 187.

author notes that the practice existed in textile production long before it was an artistic strategy, but does not elaborate.¹⁰⁷ Like most exhibition texts, the focus was instead placed intently upon the subject or material of the appropriative act, rather than on the act itself. This seems to be a missed opportunity for a meaningful way to discuss the type of artwork that deploys not only textile material, but textile processes of weaving, printed patterning, quilting, stitching, and dyeing, and perhaps most importantly the textile's memories and meanings.

For many artists, the use of textiles cannot be reduced to the vague notion of African identity that the material may signify. Often, as was the case with Anatsui, this interpretation comes later. Instead, artists may begin with fabric scraps for utilitarian and economic reasons. In Nigeria, the availability of cheap fabrics imported from China and the nation's reliance on tailor-made clothing produces an enormous amount of fabric waste that for some artists has become a viable new medium in the last 10-15 years. Particularly in the context of Lagos, where custom tailoring and the use of uniforms for family and community events is so common, a new cloth may be purchased for each special event. The pattern then comes to be identified with the memory of that specific event and the people involved. Whether it is factory produced or a handmade piece, it carries its own biography of production and consumption.

For Lagos-based artist Obinna Makata, the fabric scraps he collected from a local tailor provided the material for his ink on paper drawings at a time in his early career when he did not have the finances to buy expensive art supplies (figure 1.4). Yet, the boldly colored fabric also appealed to his aesthetic sensibility as a painter, and soon it became apparent that the material was highly symbolic. As the work developed into a series and was picked up by the owner of an art foundation in Lagos, Makata began to recognize the analogy between his material of choice and the rampant consumerism of the Lagos lifestyle. The pressure to conform to an image of success and luxury through the constant purchasing of new clothes, phones, electronics, cars, and houses was mediated through Nollywood, music videos, and the fashion industry, and it permeated every aspect of life from religion to family celebrations. All

¹⁰⁷ Vergès, "The Invention of an African Fabric," 41.

of this was embedded in the fabric material.¹⁰⁸ Every scrap came from the making of an individual's outfit, leaving a piece of evidence of that person's aesthetic taste, their economic means (reflected in the price and quality of the fabric), or their participation in a party or community dressed in a uniform (*aso-ebi*, *owambe*). In this sense, the fabric remembers, and that memory is part of what is brought into the artwork through its use.

The deployment of a textile's memory appears a crucial element to its appropriation into an artist's practice. Two artists active in Nigeria, George Edozie and Kolade Oshinowo, utilized specific fabrics in their works that once belonged to loved ones, thereby inscribing the work with their memory. Oshinowo, who began using the fabric scraps provided by his daughter who worked as a fashion designer, first saw the scraps as a practical opportunity to turn waste into art. He began by using the scraps as a base for his canvases through which he could build up the surfaces and give them texture. Eventually this led to the integration of the fabrics into the paintings where the preexisting pattern was allowed to dictate the palette and the composition. One of the few paintings he produced with a composition already in mind is a work titled 'Engagement' (figure 1.5). The African print used in this painting was taken from the ceremony of his late sister's funeral, but the painting depicted the engagement of his nephew to his fiancée.¹⁰⁹ The pattern featured a geometric design that gave the illusion of volume. This in turn gave immense depth when he used it to paint a group of people gathered together at the family event. The pattern allowed the group to appear to swell and vibrate, mimicking the movement of a real crowd, while borrowing the associated memories of his departed sister held within the pattern to give the work personal resonance.

For Edozie, using fabric was a natural transition from the medium of paper collage he was working in prior to 2006. Like Makata, his works feature primarily the African print variety, but following the passing of his mother he integrated fabrics that belonged to her, including a mud cloth indigenous to Eastern Nigeria. As more and more artists began using fabric scraps as a paint medium, Edozie transitioned again to working in sculpture by wrapping and tying the fabric to wire and metal structures.

¹⁰⁸ Obinna Makata, interview with Erin Rice, April 14th, 2014, Lagos, Nigeria

¹⁰⁹ Kolade Oshinowo, interview with Erin Rice, June 7th, 2012, Lagos, Nigeria

The works also became increasingly critical in their content, addressing issues such as the corruption in the oil industry and national politics, but the textile remained the primary material with which he worked.¹¹⁰

This shift to a critical mode of using textiles is significant. Edozie's large-scale wire and fabric structure titled "VIP" or "Vagabond in Power" was destined for installation in the lobby of a hotel in Lagos. A metaphor for the intimate relationship between powerful "big men" in the Nigerian government handing out scraps to the "near starved little people" below them and "big men" in the oil industry (both of whom siphon off the nation's resources and pocket the profits), "VIP" originally featured a fuel pump in place of the figure's genitalia. This was too literal and too controversial for the hotel, however, and the pump was removed.¹¹¹ The scraps of fabric that are knotted to the wire skeleton, however, might be interpreted to provide this same link between the corruption of men in power and the fuel industry, albeit in a subtler way than the fuel pump. The domestic mass-production of printed cloth in Nigeria was once a vibrant industry, but fell victim in part to the insufficiencies of the nation's infrastructure, which included a lack of oil refineries to match the vast quantities of oil extraction from Nigerian land. This resulted in the importation of expensive, low-grade, black market fuel, making it nearly impossible to meet the energy needs of large factories. As the government failed to remedy the infrastructure, nor make significant efforts to save the industry, hundreds of thousands of Nigerians eventually lost their jobs.¹¹²

Both Makata's allusion to the consumerism demanded by Lagos society and Edozie's "VIP" composed of fabric scraps use the textile as an allegory for criticisms they can not always voice in public. The procedure of appropriation of course, as well as the method of montage, is historically grounded in allegory and social critique. The use of fabric scraps, as opposed to whole cloths, allows for the fragmentation of the patterns. Whereas some of the personal associations with specific cloth are retained, some pieces might be small enough that the original pattern is no longer discernable. In bringing together the scraps from many cloths in

¹¹⁰ George Edozie, interview with Erin Rice, April 16, 2014, Lagos, Nigeria

¹¹¹ George Edozie, interview with Erin Rice, April 16, 2014, Lagos, Nigeria

¹¹² Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen, "Globalization and De-Industrialization: South-South Neo-Liberalism and the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry," *The Global South* 2, no. 2, Africa in a Global Age (Fall 2008): 165.

2D montage and 3D installations, new wholes are composed and meaning is renegotiated. By disintegrating the individual patterns, larger issues related to industrial textiles in general become accessible. As Benjamin Buchloh has argued in relation to early montage artists George Grosz, Johnny Heartfield, and other German Dada artists' and poets' ability to strip words or visual symbols down to their shells, "The procedure of montage is therefore one in which all allegorical principles are executed simultaneously: appropriation and depletion of meaning, fragmentation and dialectical juxtaposition of fragments, and the systematic separation of signifier and signified. In the sense of Walter Benjamin's definition of the allegorical, one could say that the allegorical mind arbitrarily selects from the vast and disordered material that a person's knowledge has to offer."¹¹³ Buchloh's interpretation gives the artist a great deal of agency in the making of meaning through the processes of appropriation and montage.

The historical connections of Dutch Wax print to colonialism provided the substance for Shonibare's engagement with the contemporary Western notion of African identity. He recognized the subversive capacity of the textile and appropriated them along with other materials and references into carefully constructed tableaux. Working in a manner that uses textiles from their environment by combining their imagery and symbolism with other elements unites artists such as Makata, Edozie, Oshinowo, and Shonibare, even when the end results differ dramatically from one artist to the next. Based on their appropriative artistic processes, these artists have precedents not only in the production of textiles or in early 20th century montage, but also in the art that emerged from the era of Nigerian Modern art.

¹¹³ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," in *Art After Conceptual Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 29.

CHAPTER TWO

***Adire Eleko* in Modern Art: Appropriation and synthesis as artistic strategies from Zaria and beyond**

The Artist as Ethnographer

In his book *The Return of the Real* (1996) Hal Foster suggests that the post-modern artist is tending towards a practice grounded materially, theoretically, and visually in real bodies, real sites, real problems, and real histories. In the essay titled "The Artist as Ethnographer" Foster engages with Walter Benjamin's essay "The Artist as Producer," which functioned to call artists to side politically and engage materially with the disenfranchised, or 'the other,' but made strong warnings against patronizing the very parts of society they aimed to support. Foster seeks to update Benjamin's essay by responding to the ethnographic turn in the arts in the decades leading up to the 1990s, turning the paradigm of the artist from producer to ethnographer and issuing several similar warnings through examples of art in which the artist committed the same pitfalls Benjamin described but against the ethnic "other" rather than the proletariat.

Under the curatorial framework reviewed in the previous chapter that brought together visual art and African textiles, artists were coaxed into the role of ethnographer. He or she was responsible for recovering, understanding, and representing cultural heritage on behalf of the original producers. More often than not, the identities of the producers of the textiles were not made known, nor were they presented as artists. Instead, the visual artists largely determined the meaning of the textiles, which were removed from their original context of production and use.

Foster's paradigm of the artist as ethnographer is useful in analyzing the work of Nigerian artists produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Appropriation played a key role in artistic practice following independence in 1960. In particular, artists looked to indigenous sources for aesthetic and symbolic material for use in their own work. Working as impromptu ethnographers, Foster's critique helps reveal how Nigerian "tradition" became a foil to Nigerian modernity in the process of appropriating indigenous culture into art. Increasingly, within the realm of the arts, as modernity is developed and defined in terms of a higher education, travel to foreign lands, and

access to resources, its difference or otherness from that of “tradition” comes into sharp relief. The 'proletarian' or 'ethnic other' becomes the backdrop to the modern self. The Nigerian artist is still othered in respect to the global art world, but he or she nevertheless occupies a place in that world, which is one that can rarely be accessed by those the artist claims to represent.

The modern artist working as ethnographer becomes particularly problematic when the predominantly male artists appropriate the cultural production of women. Class and gender as opposed to ethnicity mark their 'otherness.' As its primary aim, this chapter takes an in-depth look at the appropriation of the indigo dyed textile, *adire*, produced by Yoruba women, into the modernist work of Bruce Onobrakpeya. His work will be thoroughly contextualized in the emergence of the Zaria Art Society, and compared with Uche Okeke's appropriation of the female dominated *uli* painting, a form of body and wall painting practiced by Igbo women, which has overshadowed all other forms of appropriation by artists that emerged from the Art Society.

Onobrakpeya's approach to synthesis will be analyzed through several examples of his work and excerpts of his writing. The comparison to Okeke will highlight several similar procedures elected by both artists and identify how the critique of *uli*'s appropriation failed to address the gendering of modernism by focusing on the issue of ownership. Similarly, analyses of Onobrakpeya's practice locate the agency of the work in the artist's process, rather than in the original material he uses.

A summary of the technological and aesthetic developments of Yoruba indigo dyeing in the 20th century illustrate how *adire* became a product of the modern era, and to an extent a visual representation of the modern state of the nation. These developments run parallel to the imposition of European modernism both as a cultural and political hegemonic force that in part shaped Nigerian modernism through colonial policies, and as a site of artistic resistance for Nigerian artists. Conceiving of *adire*'s modernity is critical to understanding the discussion of Onobrakpeya's work and the overarching argument put forth in this chapter that the modernity of women's production, in this case *adire*, was undermined by its appropriation into Nigerian modern art as a representation of “traditional” culture.

This chapter also connects the work emerging from the Zaria school to currents in broader artistic contexts, including the appropriation and advancements of *adire* in

the work of the Oshogbo School. A section on the processes of preservation serves to situate Nigerian modernism internationally, as well as to explore possible explanations for the trend towards appropriation. Specifically, the inclination of artists in Nigeria to turn to cultural heritage or “tradition” as a source of inspiration for modernist art is examined as a product of internal and external forces that encouraged artists to look to the past, bringing to light the complicity of Western figures in the making of a modern art and art history that excludes and undermines women’s artistic output. These forces—which operated locally and throughout the continent as artistic workshops and schools—serve to contextualize Nigerian modernism within the hegemonic colonial order, revealing similar processes of othering and gender bias and lending credence to Salah Hassan’s observation that “... ‘modernity’ itself is a European construct that was initially articulated while ‘traditional’ Africa was being colonised.”¹¹⁴

Appropriation as a Subversive Artistic Strategy

Olu Oguibe has argued that within the space of the visual arts the nature of the nationalist struggle for the African artist was “written through a strategy of appropriation of the forms of imperial culture.”¹¹⁵ By this he refers specifically to early modernist artists in Nigeria such as Aina Onabolu who worked in the European tradition of painting on canvas. Onabolu, referred to as the “Father of Nigerian Modern Art,” campaigned passionately in the early 20th century for the integration of an arts curriculum into Nigerian public schools, as well as for his right to paint in the European tradition. Olu Oguibe, and more recently Chika Okeke-Agulu, have both championed his mastery of portrait painting as a radical anti-colonial strategy.¹¹⁶ This position presents a reversal of predominant views on Onabolu’s embrace of a European representational painting style. Oguibe posits that this was an act in defiance of colonial policy that deemed colonial subjects unsuited for education in the fine arts. In place of fine arts, authorities promoted indigenous craft as an

¹¹⁴ Salah Hassan, “The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics,” in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, ed. Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe (London: Institute of International Visual Arts (InIVA), 1999), 220.

¹¹⁵ Olu Oguibe, “Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” *Third Text* 16, no. 3 (2002): 243.

¹¹⁶ See Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, 129.; Oguibe, “Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” 248.

acceptable form of creative practice. Colonial policies aided Christian missions in the destruction of indigenous arts that produced the objects and images missionaries regarded as idolatrous.¹¹⁷ These conditions created the possibility for two forms of resistance: “One was to persist with the indigenous forms which colonialism condemned and sought to obliterate. The other was to hack, to use a most appropriate colloquialism, into the exclusive space of the antipode, in other words to possess the contested territory by mastering the forms and techniques of Western artistic expression in order to cross out the ideological principles resident in its exclusivity.”¹¹⁸

Both forms of resistance identified by Oguibe are methods of appropriation: one was the appropriation of the European tradition, exemplified by Onabolu; the other is the appropriation of indigenous forms to elevate them through modernist artistic faculties. Both Oguibe and Okeke-Agulu use the late modernists of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the members of the Zaria Art Society, as examples of this latter form of appropriation. There are two problems with their position, however: neither scholar differentiates between the different subjects of appropriation, and this lack of differentiation becomes important as the artists moved increasingly towards an appropriative procedure that drew sometimes indiscriminately from indigenous sources; secondly, neither Oguibe nor Okeke-Agulu addresses the inherent pejorative of appropriation that is the sometimes ethically questionable taking of forms, meanings and ideas from one source and relocating them and reusing them for one’s own purpose, often without permission, or without the proper recognition of the original source. As the following sections delve into the specific appropriations of Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya, the issues with the claim that the Zaria artists were radically anti-colonial artists comes into plain view. As the artists work was produced, promoted, and ultimately written into history, the identities of the people who created the indigenous culture they appropriated were anonymized, their work called traditional, trivialized, and their histories schematized.

Natural Synthesis as Nationalism

¹¹⁷ Oguibe, “Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” 244–45.

¹¹⁸ Oguibe, 245.

The members of the Zaria Art Society, active several decades after Onabolu, developed an approach to nationalism through art that combined the two strategies of resistance outlined by Oguibe. Working predominantly in canvas painting, sculpture and other media in which they were formally trained by primarily European faculty at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria, the society was formed by a group of male undergraduates in the art department who found the curriculum to be lacking in content that was relevant to their cultures and interests in forming a new national identity in the years leading up to independence. To counter this euro-centricity the students took it upon themselves in 1958 to begin researching and integrating regional cultural sources into their work from that point forward. The Art Society gathered together to exchange knowledge about indigenous culture and to provide a platform through which to expand their study of the fine arts and publish their writings. At the core of the Art Society's ideology was a concern for the nation's indigenous culture that was at risk of being lost to the influence of colonialism. Many of them continued working in painting and sculpture, but began looking to Nigeria's rich cultural heritage for subject matter, effectively combining Western and Nigerian influences according to their own preferences, styles and skills. This process they called 'Natural Synthesis' and it defined much of the work that emerged from the group of eight artists.

The intentions behind the acts of artistic appropriation by the Zaria artists are articulated in a manifesto that outlined a strategy of combining influences in visual art. Authored by the group's founder, the artist and poet Uche Okeke, it advocated the method of "natural synthesis" whereby the best of Western and Nigerian artistic traditions, forms, techniques and ideas were selected, merged and transformed in a new artistic practice to usher in the postcolonial era. Okeke called upon artists working at the time of independence to bring fresh forms of creative expression that both pay homage to the rich cultural past, and make strides towards the new nation's future. In a sense, Okeke called on his colleagues to become custodians of Nigerian culture as both instruments of its preservation and its creation. Capturing the sense of urgency and responsibility that fell to his generation Okeke wrote, "Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to

satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past.”¹¹⁹ In words and actions the Art Society situated itself close to the new nation’s political pulse and became implicated in its progress. As a result, much of the work produced by the group’s members reflected the political struggle of the postcolonial nation state and served as a site for the enactment of cultural decolonization.¹²⁰ Putting strategies of “natural synthesis” into politically oriented artistic practice, the artists turned their attention to forms of indigenous culture, integrating them into works of art in the techniques in which they had been formally trained.

In synthesizing ‘old and new, local and foreign’ as Okeke urged, the theme of national unity over ethnic diversity emerged alongside a concern for the preservation of the ‘old’ and the ‘local’. Appropriations of indigenous terracotta sculpture, textiles, body painting and bronze figures into new media became a means of mitigating loss or change via a spirited, nationalist aesthetic in the interest of political and cultural progress, aligning the Art Society with broader nationalist objectives of solidarity. Uche Okeke appealed to his fellow artists to develop Modern African art independent of foreign influence yet to draw as much from other cultures as they deemed fit and wed it to native culture.¹²¹ The appeal asserted a freedom of the modern artist to appropriate from whatever source he wished, while synthesis would avert aping European art or simply copying old local traditions.¹²²

Consistent with Oguibe’s analysis, appropriation and subversion worked in close collaboration within the various applications of ‘natural synthesis’ to artistic practice. Yet, not all processes of appropriation are equal and there were distinct differences between the applications from one Art Society member to another. For example, the three-dimensional work of Demas Nwoko, who reworked the ancient Nok terracotta sculptures into his own sculptural language is distinct in its appropriation of ancient indigenous forms. Named for the location where terracotta figurines and heads were discovered in Nok, Nigeria, the Nok civilization was believed to have flourished

¹¹⁹ Uche Okeke, “Natural Synthesis,” (1960) reprinted in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995) 208.

¹²⁰ Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism : Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, 14.

¹²¹ Okeke-Agulu, 89.

¹²² Okeke writes “I disagree with those who live in Africa and ape European artists...It is equally futile copying our old art heritages, for they stand for our old order.” Okeke, “Natural Synthesis.”

sometime between 1000 BCE – 500 CE. Little is known about the sculptural pieces that they produced, leaving them open to interpretation and speculation. By contrast, although indigo dyeing has been practiced in West Africa for at least a millennium, the patterns Bruce Onobrakpeya appropriates are largely 20th century creations. These patterns are relatively well documented, and tend to have multiple meanings that are known by those who produce and wear them. Many of the meanings derive from Yoruba folklore, religion and the natural world and are passed down from one *adire* producer to another, or are invented or elaborated by master dyers, who sometimes sign their names to the cloth. Unlike the Nok terracottas, there is little ambivalence when it comes to the way the Yoruba interpret patterned indigo cloths, and scholarship has come a great distance in providing a comprehensive history of this ancient dyeing practice that has continued into the 21st century.

Unlike the sculptural practices central to indigenous religion that were banned by missionaries and colonial authorities, textile practice was encouraged as a trade and a craft. Paternalistic as it may have been, textile as craft was sometimes taught in schools and was the subject of government-sponsored workshops in places throughout Yorubaland. Nevertheless, in spite of colonial support, over the course of the 20th century textiles produced in Yorubaland became a form of anti-colonial resistance in dress. It was also a thriving industry where women were in control from production to the point of sale. Therefore, to appropriate indigenous textiles in art is entirely different from, for example, continuing to practice sculpting in wood, or appropriating the visual culture of an ancient civilization. Textile design and production was neither static nor "traditional" but rather an ever-evolving practice contemporaneous with modernist art.

The artists emerging post-Independence were expressing their political dissent against colonial influence, but they did so without recognizing the contributions of cultural producers to the development of a modern visual culture or to colonial resistance. In the case of *adire*, this is especially problematic because its producers were predominantly female, and women were already subjected to decreased autonomy and power under the colonial order.¹²³ Rather than embrace textile

¹²³ "The inherently sexist attitudes of British colonial officers, conditioned by bourgeois British attitudes toward women, led to an even greater worsening of the women's situation." Cheryl

production of the Yoruba or elsewhere into the growing idea of the modern in Nigeria, they were omitted from it except on the terms of their appropriation into art. In the context of Nigeria, this problematic gender relation is compounded by the fact that women were largely absent from the overwhelmingly male Zaria Art Society and Nigerian Modern art movement.

***Uli* and the Question of Ownership**

In applying a 'natural synthesis' to his own artistic practice in the early 1960s, Uche Okeke adapted the linear forms of *uli*--the painting of women's bodies, homes and other surfaces practiced by Igbo women--to compositions on paper. Much of Okeke's work produced in the years after his graduation from Zaria tested the graphic and spatial properties of pre-existing *uli* forms. The principles laid out in his writings were thus not made immediately manifest in his artwork but emerged from the experimental period that followed the end of the Art Society. Prior to graduation, Okeke had been working in representational oil painting that reflected his interest in European Modernism. Although these early works indicate an interest in line, Okeke shifted towards abstraction in 1961 with a work called *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)*. This work was important because it signaled Okeke's realization of the aesthetic possibilities offered by Igbo visual culture and the development of his own style.¹²⁴ Many of the drawings and paintings completed in the years following the completion of *Ana Mmuo* utilized a limited variety of repeating linear forms such as the spiral, frequently found in *uli*, to compose representational figures.

From then on, Okeke's artistic production moved increasingly towards the linear and graphic properties inspired by *uli*'s visual lexicon that became his signature style. Okeke's style influenced a younger generation of artists who dedicated themselves to the study and experimentation of *uli* that emerged from Okeke's teachings and leadership at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, forming what is now known as the Nsukka school.

Johnson, "Grass Roots Organizing: Women in Anticolonial Activity in Southwestern Nigeria," *African Studies Review* 25, no. 2/3 (September 1982): 149.

¹²⁴ Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, 101.

Uli had been an exclusively female art form until Ben Enwonwu, a pioneering Nigerian modernist painter and sculptor, first reproduced *uli* motifs in his paintings in the 1940s, followed by Okeke in the 1960s.¹²⁵ Both male artists transformed the motifs by modernist formal procedures, freely modifying the graphic and linear forms to suit their individual stylistic preferences. The nature of the *uli*-based work by Okeke and his followers that largely erased the symbolic underpinnings of *uli*'s female production, raised concerns about the appropriation of the motifs. Anchoring the critiques aimed at Okeke's graphical use of *uli* is the question of rightful ownership over cultural forms and practices. Okeke and the predominantly male Nsukka group were accused of stealing *uli* from its female practitioners and imbuing the art with a male aura.¹²⁶

Nkiru Nzegwu problematizes the gendered nature of the ownership further by explaining that *uli* served as a decorative visual language encoded in proverbial symbolism that women used to engage in a variety of socio-cultural commentaries. In relocating the forms from a rural, domestic and gendered space to the elitist space of modern art the appropriation of *uli* constituted several important shifts. "These shifts from public (traditional) spaces to private (modern) spaces, and from rural to urban locations embody a move from sororal and maternal feelings to individualistic feelings of fulfillment."¹²⁷ Removed from the context of Igbo women by whom and to whom the *uli* ideograms speak, the motifs are stripped of their communicative capacities and bestowed new meaning according to the individual artist. Thus by transforming *uli* motifs by aesthetic and conceptual means their authorship is transferred to the artist.

The extent of this transformation has been so substantial that some scholars have argued that the synthesized *uli* found in Okeke's work and that of his protégées would not be recognized as *uli* by classical practitioners. This claim, which has been used to support the right of the modern artist to use *uli* forms at will, is corroborated by several incidents, but ultimately does not absolve the act of appropriation. In the

¹²⁵ Nzegwu, "Crossing Boundaries: Gender Transmogrification of African Art History," 3.

¹²⁶ Sarah Adams, "One Person Does Not Have the Hand of Another: Uli Artists, the Nsukka Group, and the Contested Terrain in Between," in *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*, by Simon Ottenberg (Washington DC: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in association with University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2002), 54–55.

¹²⁷ Nzegwu, "Crossing Boundaries: Gender Transmogrification of African Art History," 3.

1930s, Kenneth Murray, a British officer working in the education department of Nigeria's colonial government, attempted to document *uli*'s visual vocabulary by commissioning Igbo women in Umuahia to reproduce the motifs on large pieces of paper. From these drawings he copied several of the motifs onto smaller squares of paper. Yet, in removing the motifs from the larger papers where they had been placed and properly modified according to the spatial dimensions of the paper and in relation to the other motifs, Murray ruined the proper composition of the forms according to the *uli* artists he had consulted.¹²⁸ The responses of the *uli* artists suggest that the forms could not be recorded and saved through transcription. Nor could the motifs be isolated and still retain their significance since the aesthetic and conceptual meaning behind *uli* was contingent upon the entire composition as it was found on a body or on a wall, which was the true mark of the artist. *Uli*'s symbolic meaning was not encapsulated in a singular motif but rather dependent upon the aesthetic and compositional choices of the artist in collaboration with the client.¹²⁹

In 1959, Okeke received a similar response from his mother when he questioned her choice to leave a section of paper blank as she demonstrated her knowledge of *uli* painting to him. She explained that the space was already too crowded, indicating that the underlying principles of design within *uli* were not just about the forms but about the negative space surrounding them, and that these principles were fundamentally different from what Okeke had learned through his artistic training that was based on European principles of space and form.¹³⁰

Decades after Murray's attempted documentation of *uli* and Okeke's early tutorials with his mother, an American scholar of *uli* history, Sarah Adams, recounted a comparable experience. Adams was conducting research in Nigeria with the help of two classical *uli* artists who served as informants and her *uli* instructors at the time when she acquired a dress made by the Nsukka artist Ada Udechukwu. Udechukwu had embellished the dress with *uli*-inspired forms painted directly on the plain black fabric. When Adams wore the dress to show it to the *uli* artists, Ekedinma Ojiakor and Martina Okafor, they were not only unimpressed with the garment but they

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Anne Willis, "Uli Painting and Identity: Twentieth-Century Developments in Art in the Igbo-Speaking Region of Nigeria" (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997), 103.

¹²⁹ Willis, 95.

¹³⁰ Willis, 240.

seemed to make no connection between the linear designs and their own work. In defense of the Nsukka group's appropriation of *uli*, Adams used this anecdote to argue that amongst classical *uli* painters there were no claims of ownership of the forms. Rather, she discovered *uli* artists copied patterns freely from one another. It was not the motifs alone that defined the practice of *uli* but a combination of motifs and their spatial arrangements according to the particular body or space it occupied. It came down to each artist having her own unique style that could not be imitated or owned by anyone else.¹³¹

Murray, Okeke and Adams supported the right of artists, male or female, to appropriate freely from *uli*'s visual vocabulary. Their experiences implied that *uli* defies ownership in a number of ways: by its inherent impermanence through the use of natural dyes on bodies that fade away after several days, and the need for regular maintenance and protection from the climate for outdoor murals; the subtleties of aesthetics that shift from one artist's hand to another such that even in the imitation of a design each rendition is nevertheless unique; and lastly, the fact that each of these individuals was able to consult a classical *uli* artist shows that even as *uli* took on new dimensions on canvases, paper, clothing, and sculpture following multiple appropriations by modernist artists, classical *uli* continued to be practiced.

In other words, Murray, Okeke and Adams attempt to overturn the underlying assumption that the appropriation of *uli* was detrimental to the classical *uli* practitioners to whom the motifs belonged. The defense was hinged on the argument that *uli*, by its own nature, was not owned by anyone. Yet, this defense reconciles only one aspect of the artistic procedure that appropriated, transformed, synthesized and reframed *uli*. Rather than resolve the dispute over whether appropriations of *uli* are justified, the explanation that the motifs defy ownership indicates a misdirection of the gendered critique of appropriation. The inherent issue with appropriation is not, in this case, about ownership but in the nature of appropriation under the paradigm of 'natural synthesis' that called for both the transformation of indigenous sources but also for the artist to be in service of its preservation, two demands that

¹³¹ Adams, "One Person Does Not Have the Hand of Another: Uli Artists, the Nsukka Group, and the Contested Terrain in Between," 56.

contradict one another. In blending old and new, local and foreign, 'natural synthesis' also entailed the framing of culture into categories of 'modern' and 'traditional,' 'foreign' and 'indigenous,' 'art' and 'craft,' even where the terms did not accurately apply, providing an artificial construct into which practices such as *uli* were placed as 'traditional indigenous craft' and against which the 'modern' was created.

***Uli*, Tradition, and the Making of Modern Art.**

The 'modern' has long been built upon a tenuous definition of 'tradition' that relies on tradition's associations with the past and its evocations of conservatism and immutability. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, at the very core of the *avant-garde* movement in the West was a belief in the originality of modern art that lay within the individual's possession of an "imaginary naiveté" freed from contamination of tradition.¹³² Upholding this belief in originality was the assumption that the production of the past was incapable of the spontaneity, radicalism, and imagination to which the *avant-garde* aspired. As modern art reached its apex in the West in the form of Abstract Expressionism, its ideals were defined by influential critics such as Clement Greenberg as being completely void of the functionality and decoration he believed was embodied by 'traditional' arts.

'Natural synthesis' operated through the construction of a similar traditional-modern paradigm, which, rather than remove all traces of the past, set modernity in stark relief against it. The classic scenario went "an artist studies an art form indigenous to his ethnicity and reformulates a modernist aesthetic and formal style on the basis of that art."¹³³ For Okeke, artistic reformulation pushed the boundaries of *uli*'s manifestation and meaning at the same time that it created a distinction: *uli* was merely the source (frequently referred to as "tradition" or "heritage") with which the artists worked and drew inspiration while what the artist produced was *art*. The "modern" in the work of Okeke and his peers was found in juxtaposition with the "not modern." Difference was identified and amplified as tradition through associations with the past and continuity, whereas modernity embodied the future and change.

¹³² Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 157.

¹³³ Chika Okeke-Agulu and John Picton, "Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Modernism in Nigeria: The Art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, 1960-1968: [With Commentary]," *African Arts* 39, no. 1 (2006): 26.

Although *uli* co-existed simultaneously with the emergence of 'modern' art, its difference was projected and to an extent constructed to emphasize the modernity of 'modern' art. What was erased or obscured, therefore, was the contemporaneity of the classical *uli* practice and any resemblance it bore to the emerging idea of modernity.

Over-emphasizing the 'traditionality' of *uli* was only one of the ways women's cultural production was omitted from the formation and historiography of modern art in Nigeria. Anonymity played a large role, much as it did in the ways non-Western art was appropriated and framed by artists, art historians, collectors and curators in the West. Okeke and his contemporaries frequently framed the cultural forms they appropriated as produced anonymously by ascribing it to an ethnic group. In the example of Zaria, the artists in the society were encouraged to do research on indigenous culture that would serve to both educate the Art Society members, enrich the conceptual aspect of their artworks, and "preserve" the indigenous practices for posterity.¹³⁴ However, the version of *uli* and Igbo culture that Okeke promoted both in his artwork and through his research was based solely on the Nri-Awka in the Anambra basin where his family comes from.¹³⁵ Okeke promoted the cultural production of the Nri-Awka towns as pan-Igbo, fostering a homogenous perspective of the Igbo ethnic group over its heterogeneous and complex reality. Even within that region, differences in *uli* aesthetics from artist to artist, village to village were erased in Okeke's schematic view.¹³⁶ Okeke's influence has been so far-reaching it has been suggested that the Nri-Awka style is now representative of all Igbo *uli* painting.¹³⁷ Personally, Okeke credits only his mother with teaching him everything she knew about *uli*, and makes reference to *Asele*, an *uli* designer from Igbo mythology that brought the practice to earth.¹³⁸ More broadly, *uli* was redefined

¹³⁴ "The strong conceptual link between their art forms and the cultural traditions reflects part of the Igbo artists' concern toward the preservation of their indigenous cultural heritage" see: Chukwuemeka Vincent Okpara, "The Igbo Art and Cultural Heritage: Changing Time, Changing Form," *Sociology Study* 2, no. 12 (December 2012): 903.

¹³⁵ Willis, "Uli Painting and Identity: Twentieth-Century Developments in Art in the Igbo-Speaking Region of Nigeria," 244–45.

¹³⁶ Elizabeth Péri, "Varieties and Qualities in Uli Painting," in *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Ottenberg (Washington DC; Seattle: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art; University of Washington Press, 2002), 37–51.

¹³⁷ Willis, "Uli Painting and Identity: Twentieth-Century Developments in Art in the Igbo-Speaking Region of Nigeria," 244–45.

¹³⁸ Uche Okeke named his cultural institute *Asele*, after this mythical designer. Willis, 247.

through Okeke's narrow vision, rather than by comprehensive research, resulting in a simplified version of the Igbo cultural heritage that may have been erased, rather than preserved, a great range of variation in *uli* practice.

The simplification of Igbo visual culture under Okeke's ethnographic research is reminiscent of the problematic origin of African art history as an offshoot of anthropology and ethnography written in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe. African objects were considered neither as art nor worthy of in-depth research that would have revealed much about their production. Born out of the discipline of anthropology, African art history began with an attempt to focus exclusively on the forms of African sculpture. Carl Einstein's influential *Negerplastik* attempted in 1915 to convince his European readership that African sculpture was art, even if it did not conform to popular notions of beauty. He did so by compiling a collection of photographs of sculptures, unprecedented in both quantity of images, and the consistency of stylistic treatment. The objects were photographed individually, isolated from cultural context, against a neutral background, well-lit, in soft-focus, and from multiple perspectives. The results gave the reader the ability to compare one to another on the basis of form alone. Einstein's tactic was to aestheticize non-Western objects in a way that was visually appealing and familiar to his Western audience, but reduced each piece to a pure sculptural form devoid of any information about its maker, size, origin or use.¹³⁹

Einstein's publication capitalized on a rising interest amongst Europeans in African culture. A few years prior to *Negerplastik*, Leo Frobenius published his archeological findings in West Africa from 1910-1912. His discovery of a naturalistic copper alloy head undermined European understandings of African aesthetics, and also disproved the belief that Africans were without a rich history. However, Frobenius' groundbreaking discoveries were tainted by his claims that the works were not African, but rather from the lost civilization of Atlantis, indicating his inability to conceive of an ancient African art of such high quality, even when the concrete evidence lay before him.

¹³⁹ Z.S. Strother, "Looking for Africa in Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik*," *African Arts* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 8–9.

Frobenius's false attribution and Einstein's lack of attribution were common practice in the early 20th century. In European institutions and literature African cultural objects were frequently attributed to groups or workshops, or assumed anonymous, even when the name of the artist was available or known. Such was the case with the British exhibition of the carved palace doors by Olowe of Ise, who remained unnamed for decades after its initial showing in England in 1924.¹⁴⁰ These practices were not without their critics however, and for some artists, the institutional treatment of non-Western objects presented an opportunity for critical intervention. A mask, for example, from the Ivory Coast that had been attributed to the Guro people was later credited to a single man known as the Master of Buafilé.¹⁴¹ An image of the mask is used in German Dada artist Hannah Höch's collage titled "Monument I" (1924-1928). Höch used images culled from an ethnographic journal to challenge the European reception of African objects, particularly in a series of photomontages titled *From an Ethnographic Museum* (1924 – 1930s). The series appropriated photographs of African sculptures and masks as metonyms for people under colonial oppression. Höch claimed, "I wanted to show up the unscrupulous simplistic use of the negro sculpture from Africa that was flooding Europe at the time."¹⁴² Images of African objects were frequently combined with images of women from mass media. Hoch drew parallels between modes of exoticization and anonymization of women's bodies and colonial subjects.

Anonymity was promoted in scholarship, curatorial practice, and for many European artists who were not taking a critical stance in the way that Höch was, it made the forms easy to repurpose in experimental art making. Dada artists, as well as their cubist predecessors and contemporaries, appropriated heavily from African visual culture, utilizing aspects of African sculpture and masks in styles that actively resisted accepted modes of artistic representation in European bourgeois culture, but that neglected to recognize the original source.

From the colonial perspective, refusing to recognize individuals as artists was a hegemonic strategy within the cultural sector that perpetuated constructions of

¹⁴⁰ Roslyn Adele Walker, "Olowe of Ise," *African Arts* 31, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 38.

¹⁴¹ "Dada Africa: Dialogue with the Other (Exhibition Brochure)" (Museum Rietberg; Berlinische Galerie, 2016).

¹⁴² "Dada Africa: Dialogue with the Other (Exhibition Brochure)."

difference, guaranteeing dependence of the colony on the colonial authority.¹⁴³ Applying this notion in the context of Nigerian modernism, difference is constructed by class and gender rather than race or ethnicity. As Nigeria's modernist artists repeatedly turned to indigenous visual culture they rarely, if ever, recognized the individuals who produced those pre-existing forms of culture. Instead, the work was attributed to ethnic groups even when the individual names of master practitioners were known. Since these artists were often working at the same time as the modernist artists the removal of their names from the forms they produced served to undermine their contemporaneity. This helped frame indigenous culture as "traditional" even when many of its forms defied the problematic definition of "tradition" by virtue of its continued practice and, more importantly, its adoption of modernity on its own terms.

One method of framing indigenous culture as "traditional" was to place modernist art in the service of its preservation. The Zaria artists positioned themselves as the saviors of indigenous culture by orienting their practice towards cultural research and the appropriation of African forms into painting, drawing, printmaking and sculpture. Appropriation was key to this strategy because it ensured that indigenous forms would not simply be copied, but rather changed and revived through modernist artistic procedure. The Zaria manifesto implied that the preservation of certain traditions could be achieved through inclusion and synthesis in modernist art, even as the necessary component of change in processes of appropriation and synthesis belied the possibility of real preservation. Indeed, the Zaria artists manipulated, simplified and decontextualized appropriated forms to such an extent that much of the forms' original visual and symbolic meaning was significantly altered or erased.

A year after the initial gathering of the Zaria Art Society, Okeke wrote, "We must not live always in the past – exhibiting Nok, Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Benin and so on, glorifying the past to the detriment of the future. We should love the past, if we may, and get our inspirations from it."¹⁴⁴ Okeke stipulates the distinct role of the artist to take from the past but to change it sufficiently that it may serve the present and future. But the past and tradition do not necessarily go hand in hand. In delineating between

¹⁴³ Oguibe, "Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art," 244.

¹⁴⁴ Uche Okeke, "Growth of an Idea (Zaria, 1959)," reprinted in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 210–11.

“traditional” forms and “modern” ones, difference, in the form of “traditionality” was enacted and emphasized in visual as well as conceptual ways, while difference along ethnic lines was being eliminated.

Despite Okeke’s commitment to his own Igbo identity and his interest in preserving indigenous Igbo culture, his view was aligned with his nationalist political leanings that sought to avoid inter-ethnic conflict. Part of the nationalist political cause was the belief in the necessity of transcending ethnic difference in order to unite diverse people as a nation. Such beliefs were promulgated by artists in visual materials that would reach the general public in the forms of postage stamps and posters and other paraphernalia that pleaded with citizens to “Think Nigeria: Bury ethnic and religious difference” as a poster by artist Gani Odutokun put it.¹⁴⁵ Under the guise of ethnic indifference and national identity, artists were granted de facto access to all forms of culture that fell under the rubric of “Nigerian.” His otherness in relation to colonial hegemony placed him and his colleagues in political alignment with his fellow countrymen. This made it possible for artists like Okeke and Onobrakpeya to borrow freely from Igbo, Yoruba, Urhobo, or Hausa cultural elements and synthesize them in an artwork, while they were actively defining what it meant to be modern through access to higher education and travel. Anonymity and homogenization via appropriation worked in concert with the nationalist objective, reserving the modernist aesthetic and experience as a privileged and male one.

There is ample evidence of classical *uli* practitioners working before, during and following the Zaria and Nsukka movements, even though the practice was decimated under colonialism and later the civil war. Yet, the names and the work of these women who were solely responsible for shepherding *uli* well into the late 20th century went largely unmentioned and undocumented, particularly where their lives and work might present a contradiction to the prevailing notions of their tradition-bound practice. Certain analyses of *uli* have suggested, for example, that Igbo artists living in certain regions of Eastern Nigeria in the late 19th and early 20th centuries developed a great variety of forms in their specific *uli* lexicon because of their close proximity to the palm oil trade, bringing more foreign influence to the local culture.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, ed., *Artists of Nigeria* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2012) 261.

¹⁴⁶ Péri, “Varieties and Qualities in Uli Painting,” 42.

Women in these regions were more exposed to elaborate trade routes and markets more so than women elsewhere, which may have added a complexity and modernity to their work that is excluded from later historical accounts. This information unearths a view of women actively engaged in early global trade and responding to it in artistic ways. However, the rhetoric of Okeke, his followers and numerous historians of their work avoided such historical details and continually focused on the decline of the art of *uli*, even as the definition of the modern artist came to include the type of artistic complexity that comes from exposure with foreign culture.

The exclusion of contemporary classical *uli* artists changed with younger generations of artists affiliated with the Nsukka group when they took an interest in documenting, interviewing and sharing the work of living *uli* practitioners. But the art form continued to decline to the point of near total disappearance by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. A painter and scholar of art history from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi has followed and promoted through his scholarly work the classical *uli* artist Eziabo Okaro. She has since passed on. He states, “Most of the *Uli* classicists have given up or [are] dead. The art lives in museums, history books and in the work of a few Nigerian artists. Even that is dying” He also states there has been recent effort to revive *uli* through craft.¹⁴⁷ The great *uli* experiment by artists affiliated with Nsukka may not have preserved the classical *uli* art form as intended, but rather spread awareness, and expanded knowledge and documentation of it.

While anonymization and traditionalizing of women’s cultural production helped define the realm of arts that included ‘traditional arts’, indigenous arts and craft arts, the modern arts were set in contrast to these terms. As the Zaria artists pursued their artistic endeavors into the first decade of independence and onward, their work seemed to subscribe to pre-existing notions of the ‘modern artist’ even as they consciously strove to avoid to them. This plays out in the aggrandizement of the male modern artist (who is identified by creating a certain type of art, and by being highly educated and well travelled) by critics and scholars as well as in the type of work that is produced and categorized as modern or not modern. This latter, non-

¹⁴⁷ Chuu Krydz Ikwuemesi, personal correspondence with Erin Rice via Facebook Messenger, received August 6, 2016.

modern type of work is framed as low art and feminine so as to justify its exclusion and projected difference. Inclusion comes when the modern artist is inspired by 'women's work' or 'indigenous arts' not to produce it himself but to elevate it through his artistic faculties, thereby assuming part of its authorship.

Within all of these acts—the framing of women's cultural production as part of the past, the erasure of cultural specificity and individual identity, and the definition of modern art through the male experience—the presence and agency of women in modern history are, in large part, denied. Once again, the European model of modernism's development presents parallels to the systemic exclusion of women from Nigeria's art history. The absence of women in Western art history is explained in part by several factors: there were fewer women artists because women were not granted the same opportunities and privileges as men to pursue an education or a profession in the arts; women who overcame the odds to become artists were marginalized by or excluded from written histories; and lastly, beginning in the Renaissance and continuing well into the 20th century the art forms that women dominated such as embroidery were denigrated as craft, mechanical arts, low arts, or decorative while the male dominated art forms of painting and sculpture were considered "high art." Together, these factors point to a pervasive sexism that was not limited to individual artistic practice or societal constraints but that was institutionalized through art criticism and theory, the formation of the canon, and curatorial practice. Beyond Europe, they were integral to the formation of a value system that was applied to arts in Nigeria internally via colonialism and externally via the scholarly reception and analysis of African arts.

Adire Eleko: The modernization of indigo dyeing

Although Uche Okeke advocated for a trans-ethnic approach to art making in his writing, his artistic practice demonstrated a devotion to Igbo culture in both form and content. Bruce Onobrakpeya, by contrast, utilized an approach that combined multiple ethnic sources in singular works. A prolific printmaker and one of the artists of the Art Society, Onobrakpeya answered Okeke's call to bring together indigenous and foreign forms by synthesizing a vast array of artistic, literary and folkloric sources from Urhobo oral tradition to royal Benin sculpture in a variety of modern media. Among these diverse appropriated sources are geometric and figurative

patterns that draw directly upon the indigo dyeing practice of Yoruba women called *adire*.

Onobrakpeya, maintained an enduring commitment to appropriation and synthesis over the span of several decades. A bronzed lino relief from 1971, titled *Uli*, demonstrates both his commitment to synthesis over a decade after Okeke wrote his manifesto and the appropriation of women's artistic production in two forms: *uli* and the patterns of indigo dyed textiles (figure 2.1). The image consists of an elongated and highly stylized figure at the center of the composition flanked on either side by a row of squares containing geometric patterns. An oval form floats above the figure's head and appears to be encircled by numerous arms. The rendering of the central *uli* form is at once reminiscent of the elongated linear designs that characterized Okeke's drawings and is indicative of Onobrakpeya's signature stylization that would be developed through his experimentation with printmaking techniques.

According to the artist's description of the image, the main motif is a woman who carries a vial on top of her head containing the natural plant dyes used in *uli* painting surrounded by "traditional geometric patterns."¹⁴⁸ The description makes clear what the image does not: that the figure is a woman practicing the art of *uli*. The remark about "traditional geometric patterns" is more misleading, however. These geometric forms appear with high frequency in Onobrakpeya's work from the late 60s and for several decades to follow, and while they too were produced by women (a credit he gives elsewhere) they are not exactly "traditional."¹⁴⁹ As John Picton has pointed out, "*adire* is the 'classic' example of a 'traditional' textile that is nothing of the kind: rather, it is a form that effectively takes apart the very notion of traditionality."¹⁵⁰ But as was the case with the appropriation and synthesis of *uli*, traditionality was a necessary component for modern art. Where the *Uli* lino relief exemplifies Onobrakpeya's layering and synthesis of indigenous visual forms his writing highlights the importance of tradition in the artistic process:

...The modern Nigerian artist, also, in the spirit of cultural revival and synthesis has turned to traditional art and good African values for

¹⁴⁸ Richard A. Singletary, *Bruce Onobrakpeya* (New York, NY: The Ford Foundation, 2002), 150.

¹⁴⁹ See "The Blue Motifs" in: G.G. Darah and Safy Quel, eds., *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent* (Lagos, Nigeria: Ovuomaroro Gallery, 1992), 137.

¹⁵⁰ Picton, Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles*, 16.

inspiration. I use "good African values" because this is where synthesis comes in. Synthesis here means accepting what is good and beautiful in our culture and enriching it with worthwhile ideas from abroad to create new sets of values or forms. Culture is not static, it is always growing. No people have rejected their past completely, otherwise there will be no future for them. So I will emphasise that African traditional arts or art forms derived from them should be seen as beautiful.¹⁵¹

In this statement, Onobrakpeya clarifies his approach to the synthesis of old and new, local and foreign. He emphasizes the aesthetic value of "traditional" arts and culture, as well as its inclination towards change, but implies it is necessary for the artist to intervene to bring culture to new heights through the process of synthesis. Despite acknowledging the dynamic and changing nature of culture, his statement also places indigenous culture squarely, problematically, in the past, and makes a clear distinction between the "modern Nigerian artist" and "traditional arts." The "modern Nigerian artist" is an individual charged with the task of cultural revival through a process of synthesis whereby he must select that which is "good and beautiful" from the past and enrich it with ideas he has acquired from abroad, presumably through education and travel. The "traditional arts," whose producers are unknown or unnamed, serve as a source of inspiration for the artist and as a foil to his modernity.

The "traditional geometric patterning" utilized in Onobrakpeya's *Uli* print and many other works that followed are derived from a specific type of *adire* called *adire eleko*. In contrast to tie-dyed and hand-stitched cloth, known as *adire oniko* and *alabere*, *adire eleko* is a modern fabric. This is especially significant to the reading of Onobrakpeya's works that use *eleko* patterning because it is this modernity that is undermined by its inclusion in modernist art. Thus, an understanding of how *adire eleko* is modern and why that is significant is necessary to analyze its appropriation.

Adire Eleko's modernity is first and foremost dependent on several technological factors that both altered its production and allowed for the modernization of its appearance, which assured its integration into 20th century Nigerian society. Unlike other forms of indigo dyeing and patterning, *eleko*, meaning "with paste," is created by painting or stenciling the pattern onto the fabric with a resist-agent usually made

¹⁵¹ dele jegede, *Onobrakpeya: Masks of the Flaming Arrows* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2014), 266.

of cassava flour allowing the image to remain white or light blue through several dips in indigo dye baths. The technique likely developed in the first decade of the 20th century, marking a significant departure from the *oniko* and *alabere* types of patterning practiced up to this point that centered around techniques of tying and stitching fabric with threads of the raffia plant, and were typically produced on locally woven cotton cloth.¹⁵² The *oniko* and *alabere* techniques produce a limited range of patterns composed of stripes, “moons,” or ringlets. The precise origin of this type of textile in Yorubaland is unknown, but archaeological finds prove they have been produced in West Africa since at least the 11th century CE. In particular, an indigo-dyed coif found in the Tellum Caves in the Bandiagara Escarpment (current day Mali), dated roughly to the 11th century, features a resist pattern of un-dyed spots where the fabric had been gathered, revealing similar patterning to 19th and 20th century samples from Yorubaland.¹⁵³

While the associations of *adire* with ‘tradition’ are undoubtedly rooted in the longevity and continuity that is revealed by the finds at the Bandiagara Escarpment and other evidence, much of what is called *adire* today are products of the innovations and inventions of the early to mid 20th century. The first and arguably most pivotal moment for the modernization of the *adire* industry arrived with the widespread availability and affordability of machine-produced imported cotton from Europe. Incorporation of these factory-made products may have single-handedly lead to the

¹⁵² The development of *adire eleko* is disputed, but 1910 is suggested by a number of reliable sources, citing the availability and affordability of machine woven cotton, which arrived in 1880. The *eleko* technique is also thought to have been developed at this time in response to a demand for printed cloth, all of which were imported up until this development. See Pat Oyelola, “The Beautiful and the Useful: The Contribution of Yoruba Women to Indigo Dyed Textiles”, *The Nigerian Field*, 57, (1992): 61. John Picton cites Carolyn Keyes Adenaike’s unpublished PhD thesis in Picton, Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles*, 16, 30. Razaq Olatunde Rom Kalilu and Margaret Olugbemisola Areo, “Origin of and Visual Semiotics in Yoruba Textile of Adire,” *Arts and Design Studies* 12 (2013): 22–34s. also cites Ulli Beier’s 1957 article in Nigeria Magazine. Colleen Kriger believes Beier and Wenger’s claim is consistent with the trade records from Lagos around 1910, see Colleen E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History*, The African Archaeology Series (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), 164.

¹⁵³ . See Rita Bolland, *Tellem Textiles: Archaeological Finds from Burial Caves in Mali’s Bandiagara Cliff*, trans. Patricia Wardle (Amsterdam; Leiden; Bamako: Tropenmuseum; Royal Tropical Institute; Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde; Institut des Sciences Humaines; Musée des Sciences Humaines; Musée National, 1991), 108, 164.

early 20th century expansion and great economic growth of the *adire* industry.¹⁵⁴ The smooth, tight-weave of cotton sheeting made a new type of patterning with paintbrushes and stencils possible. For the first time, *adire* designs incorporated portraiture, text, and figurative as well as abstract decorative motifs.

The adoption of machine woven cotton and the new patterning techniques were joined by other technologies such as caustic sodas and synthetic dyes in the 1920s. All of these innovations served to quicken and simplify the laborious process of making *adire*. The transition to printing patterns on *adire* via painting or stenciling was also a shortcut to achieving patterns similar to the tied-and-dyed cloths that Yoruba women had a strong reputation for producing. A quicker means of production was required to compete with and to supplement the foreign cotton prints flooding local markets from India and Europe. Thus it was crucial that stenciling, painting and other methods of applying resist-paste to cotton fulfilled this need at the same time that it reduced costs.

The foreign prints arriving in Yoruban markets as well as the foreign technologies that were reinventing textile production at home were contingent upon trans-Saharan and Atlantic trade routes that connected Yorubaland to the wider world. Beyond the trade objects that they transported in and out of the region, these networks brought the women who produced and sold *adire* into contact with the visual culture of distant people. Any aesthetic similarities in local production and imported fabric indicated not only adaptations to production in *adire* centers such as Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan, but a series of transactions in the exchange of visual culture through the printed textile. Records from the 19th century suggest that cloths like *adire* influenced the production of printed cottons abroad, which indicate a strategy employed by foreign manufacturers to produce fabrics that would sell successfully in West African markets.¹⁵⁵ Although the *adire* industry would eventually come to be largely eclipsed by the factory-produced print, the impact of *adire*'s pattern language on the production of these factory imports from Europe and Asia was significant because it changes the perception of West Africa in early trade from a minor to a major player.

¹⁵⁴ Judith Byfield, "Innovation and Conflict: Cloth Dyers and the Interwar Depression in Abeokuta, Nigeria," *The Journal of African History* 38, no. 1 (1997): 80.

¹⁵⁵ Vlisco kept swatches and notes on West African indigo in its ledgers. See John Picton, Rayda Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery., *The Art of African Textiles : Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* (London: Barbican Art Gallery ; Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 24.

As printed *adire* continued to be produced well into the 20th century alongside other modernized versions of patterns, such as those machine-stitched and dyed, the stylistic and functional characteristics of *adire* and print cloth frequently overlapped.

As foreign factory prints in Europe were adapted to look more like West African indigo cloth, various elements of the hand-painted *eleko* patterns alluded to the impact of cross-cultural contact on textile production within Yorubaland. The *adire eleko* motifs utilized in Onobrakpeya's *Uli* print and shown in the form of six squares that flank the *uli* figure on either side, for example, are derived from a pattern called *Olokun*, an *eleko* cloth typically composed of ten squares, which are doubled by combining two rectangular cloths, and surrounded by smaller squares (figure 2.2).

Painted entirely in free-hand, the *Olokun* is composed of twenty main squares, ten on each of two halves of fabric sewn together such that the main squares are in the center, while smaller rectangles containing reptiles, birds, fish and scorpions form the periphery.¹⁵⁶ The large squares contain motifs that have been identified (with some variation) as mats, umbrellas, matches, tops, scissors, four-legged stools, sticks, leaves, chicken wire, and flowers, some of which may represent the goddess of the sea in religious iconography of the Benin Kingdom for which the pattern is named. The women who painted cloths such as the *Olokun eleko* cloth were inspired by diverse sources that were brought to them via trade, migration, and colonization, and reflect the multiethnic, cosmopolitan nature of the city of Lagos in the late 19th century where the cloth was produced.¹⁵⁷

The goddess *Olokun* is also revered as a religious figure in some parts of Yorubaland, particularly in a city like Lagos that is close to the sea and had ties to the Benin court.¹⁵⁸ The deity's devotees believed she would bestow wealth and many children upon them, bringing many women to her worship, and perhaps providing an explanation for the continuity of the two religious cosmologies and the appearance of the four-legged stool symbol that appeared in Benin bronzes long before the invention of *adire eleko*. The *Olokun* pattern not only draws upon the visual and theological repertoire of the ancient Benin Kingdom, but visual parallels in

¹⁵⁶ Picton and Mack, *African Textiles*, 157.

¹⁵⁷ For full analysis of this pattern see: Kriger, *Cloth in West African History*, 154–59.

¹⁵⁸ Kriger, 154–55.

this and other *adire eleko* patterns can be found in Akan *adinkra* cloths, Indian woodblock prints and European factory prints, asserting that the demographic of 19th century Lagos which was made up of people from across West Africa, Europe, Brazil and Cuba created in the *Olokun* a “product of this multiethnic and multicultural city”.¹⁵⁹ Thus, the *Olokun*, like some works by the Zaria Art Society, is also composed of appropriated and synthesized elements. In this sense, the *Olokun adire* cloth is arguably both chronologically and conceptually as “modern” as any other 20th century work of art.

Adire eleko's modernity was not limited to its technological development or innovative aesthetics. Since men were employed to cut the stencils used in patterning some cloths, *eleko* also broke with gender conventions of labor, bringing men directly into *adire*'s production line for the first time. Gender conventions were ruptured again in the 1960s as men began wearing *adire* in the form of tailored tunics.¹⁶⁰ By this time, *adire*'s sartorial role for women had also undergone drastic changes. For the vast majority of its history, *adire* was considered a cloth for poor, rural women.¹⁶¹ This was in part because prior to the introduction of factory woven cotton, *adire* was often made from an old, worn out or stained cloth that was renewed by indigo dyeing.¹⁶² For those who wore it, it was an everyday cloth worn wrapped around the body above the breasts. The very rare presence of *adire* in photographs from the early 20th century also suggests that *adire* was not a fabric worn on special occasions when photographs were more likely to be taken.¹⁶³

Over the course of the 20th century, the associations of the cloth with rural dress slowly began to disappear as *adire* was reinvented through its methods and materials of production, giving rise to new patterns, new colors, and new styles of dress made possible by tailoring. As the push for independence from Britain

¹⁵⁹ Kriger, 155.

¹⁶⁰ Jane Barbour, “Adire Cloth in Nigeria - 1989,” *The Nigerian Field* 55 (1990): 66.

¹⁶¹ Kalilu and Areo, “Origin of and Visual Semiotics in Yoruba Textile of Adire,” 26.

¹⁶² John Picton, Rayda Becker, and Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* (London: Barbican Art Gallery; Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 15.

¹⁶³ This is an observation I make based on having searched numerous photographic collections for evidence of *adire* in use, including National Archives in London, Smithsonian, Nigerian Nostalgia online collection, and the small number of photographs used in texts, many of which date to later in the 20th century.

intensified and was realized in 1960, *adire* became a sartorial choice for Lagos elites who sought to express their rejection of European values through dress.¹⁶⁴ Foreigners aligned with the anti-colonial movement also took to wearing local fabrics. As one scholar put it, “cloths like *adire* allowed consumers to be simultaneously ‘modern’ and ‘traditional.’ Untailored wrappers and dyed indigo cloths placed women at the beginning of the twentieth century in the same cultural universe with women at the mid nineteenth century, but they had modernized that universe through the use of imported cloths, tailored blouses, and resist patterning.”¹⁶⁵

Adire also had an enormous impact on the economy of Yoruba dyeing towns. By 1912, cloth was Nigeria’s largest import with a value that would more than double in the first decade and a volume that reached an annual 100 million square yards. An estimated 25% of these imports were consumed in Abeokuta where local dyeing compounds were turning out record exports and profits.¹⁶⁶ *Adire* from Yorubaland had developed a reputation as a high-quality indigo cloth in West African markets and was in demand throughout the coast from the Congo to Senegal.¹⁶⁷ A strong reputation and ties to international trade continued to bring unprecedented economic wealth and sovereignty to women dyers up until the mid-1920s. However, integration with the global economy also meant that the Nigerian textile market was very susceptible to the decline of international markets following the stock market crash of 1929 and the economic depression that ensued.

The quality of *adire* cloths also began to decline. The connection to international trade brought technological changes to the local production of indigo cloths that set *eleko* apart from its predecessors. But beyond the technical alterations to production, the adoption of modern chemical additives also provided practical economic solutions in hard times. Many women turned to adding caustic sodas and synthetic indigo to their dye formula to survive the economic crisis and a shortage of natural indigo.¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the widespread adoption of additives had unintended and

¹⁶⁴ Kalilu and Areo, “Origin of and Visual Semiotics in Yoruba Textile of Adire,” 26.

¹⁶⁵ Judith A. Byfield, *The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Dyers in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1890-1940*, Social History of Africa Series (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 70.

¹⁶⁶ Judith A. Byfield, 53-56.

¹⁶⁷ Byfield, “Innovation and Conflict: Cloth Dyers and the Interwar Depression in Abeokuta, Nigeria,” 77.

¹⁶⁸ Byfield, 91.

undesired outcomes. By decreasing the duration and difficulty of the dyeing process the introduction of these new chemicals encouraged women with little or no skill in indigo dyeing to try their hand in the business. The new competition angered veteran dyers who were already struggling to remain profitable and pay their debts to the European firms that lent credit to their businesses. The influx of unskilled dyers also had a detrimental effect on the product quality. Overuse of caustic soda proved to damage the integrity of the cotton cloth and the synthetic indigo created a blue finish that did not hold up to the depth, intensity and fastness of color as cloths dyed organically with natural indigo.¹⁶⁹

The combination of new chemicals and a low-skill workforce severely undermined the quality of cloth and began to destroy the reputation of Yoruban indigo in foreign markets, forcing *adire* producers to turn to colonial authorities and local leaders for help in protecting the industry. The local leader, the *Alake*, responded with attempts to limit the use of caustic soda and synthetic dye and implement regulations pertaining to *adire* production. When these new regulations were not observed, however, he banned the soda and dye entirely to the dismay of many dyers.¹⁷⁰

The new colonial order had also brought its own challenges to dyeing establishments. For one, colonial authorities under pressure from the League of Nations outlawed a system of pawned labor that made up a large percentage of the *adire* workforce. These laborers were often responsible for preparing the ingredients for the fermentation of natural indigo. Without their workforce in place or with access to modern chemicals dyers found themselves unable to produce at the volume and pace that was necessary to remain profitable. Furthermore, in order to protect itself from the economic stress brought on by the depression the government expanded tax collection, putting an additional financial strain on women.¹⁷¹ Left with no choice, many women continued using caustic soda and synthetic dye against the orders of the *Alake*. In February of 1936 police began arresting people and confiscating cloths from the women who did not comply with the *Alake's* orders.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Byfield, 92.

¹⁷⁰ Byfield, 95.

¹⁷¹ Byfield, 88–89.

¹⁷² Byfield, 96.

The interference with the indigo dyeing industry by the *Alake* and colonial authorities prompted outrage and political action on the part of women in the area of Abeokuta. Whereas economic difficulty and increased competition had previously provoked animosity and division amongst dyers, they were united by their defiance of the *Alake*'s authority. The prolonged conflict ushered in an era of political action whereby the market women of Abeokuta allied themselves to regain their autonomy. This placed *adire* and the women who dyed and sold the cloth in political alignment with other market women and women's rights activists who were fighting against the taxation and import sanctions imposed by local authorities. Consequently, *adire* became integrated into the political landscape and affiliated with the anti-colonial movement that extended beyond the markets of Abeokuta and connected these women to movements that were aimed at rejecting European hegemony by political action or choice of dress.¹⁷³

The dissenting voices of women from multiple backgrounds and social classes in Abeokuta were united under a single woman, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, who sought to empower working class and illiterate women by teaching them to read and providing the necessary resources for them to fight government taxation and interference in their businesses at the market. Brought together under the name Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), the market women formed a powerful group that was emboldened by their leader who refused to pay her taxes. By the 1940s, Kuti's political vision had become clearer and more radicalized. She decided to abandon Western clothing in favor of Yoruba style wrappers that had the dual effect of erasing the socio-economic differences between her and the women she represented, as well as make an anti-colonial statement of cultural pride through dress.¹⁷⁴ With all members of the AWU dressed alike, they made a visual statement of solidarity, particularly as they took to the streets of Abeokuta to demand that the *Alake* step down from his position.

These events from *adire*'s history are critical to understanding how *adire* became not only a technologically modern product, but an emblem of modernity. They reveal

¹⁷³ Byfield, *The Bluest Hands: A Social and Economic History of Women Dyers in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1890-1940*, 69–74.

¹⁷⁴ Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 66.

how those who produced it and wore it were implicated in the social, economic and political milieu of the early to mid 20th century. Their actions as cultural producers, businesswomen, activists and citizens convey the extent of their influence. As these events unfolded during the tumultuous decades of the 1920s and 1930s, *adire* producers continued to create new patterns that reflected and responded to changing times. Many of these changes took place alongside the emergence and development of Nigeria's modern art movement. Yet, as Modern Nigerian art developed over the course of the 20th century and *adire* was appropriated into its idiom, these events that testify to both *adire*'s modernity and to the agency of the women who produced it were left out.

***Adire* in Modern Art**

Okeke and his followers perceived of *uli* as traditional and indigenous culture, and it was on this basis that they adapted its forms into modern art. This served to both fulfill the desires laid out in Okeke's manifesto for the Art Society to conceive of a new art for a new nation that neither copied the past nor abandoned it altogether, and set itself apart from the overwhelming influence of the European painting tradition. Yet it was precisely in this process of defining modern art that the traditional arts were conflated with the past and that which the modern artist strived to transcend.

Onobrakpeya's artistic practice is distinct both stylistically and conceptually from Uche Okeke's, but under the premise of 'natural synthesis' multiple similarities can be found in the way appropriations of *adire* serve to traditionalize and anonymize the art form to the extent that much of its modernity is undermined. Onobrakpeya utilized *adire* along with dozens of other forms derived from multiple ethnic backgrounds and diverse literary, mythological, religious and artistic sources. Nevertheless, the two artists' appropriations of women's cultural production warrant comparison because together they shed a great deal of light on both how *adire*, *uli*, and potentially other forms of visual culture, were reconceptualized as 'traditional' and help explain the absence of women in Nigerian modern art.

Just as Okeke's work and research did little to document the identities and lives of the women who produced *uli* in its original form, Onobrakpeya does the same with *adire*. Even where labor served as a leitmotif in his works, the female laborer or dyer

is absent. An etching from 1985 titled *Obioko II*, for example, portrays a boatman in his vessel calling to the shores for customers to ferry across the river (figure 2.3). This is one of many of Onobrakpeya's prints that pay homage to the common man or laborer. With his head held high and an oar poised across his body, the boatman's figure takes up the vast majority of the composition, leaving most of his boat, the churning waters, and his customers ashore out of view. Instead, the man's torso and his garments hold the viewer's attention. Extending from the man's waist and flowing over the edge of his narrow boat is the familiar pattern of an *adire eleko* cloth. The fabric reveals itself from underneath the man's tunic, and is given relatively prominent attention in the image. With the integration of the cloth into the man's clothing the artist shifts from using the grid-pattern motif as decorative or space-filling purposes as it did in *Uli* to using it as a conceptual device that elevates the status of the subject. This shift suggests a new strategy that is contingent upon the artist's recognition of *adire*'s associations with the working class, and perhaps the cloth's relatively newer commemorative function.

Yet the relationship between labor and *adire* ends there. The image is not paying homage to the labor of indigo dyeing. This is not because *adire* production was easy work, on the contrary it was a laborious process that could take weeks or months to complete a single cloth, but because in all of his prints and paintings that feature workers—from boatmen to farmers, tailors to weavers, as well as dyers---the laborer is always male. The *uli* print seems a rare exception to the rule, but the woman holding the vial of *uli* dyes is so stylized she is hardly recognizable as a woman or an *uli* artist. When *Obioko II* is compared to Onobrakpeya's depictions of women from "The Blue Motifs," a series in which the artist captures his "fascination with the indigo blue designs on the clothes worn by the women," another difference becomes apparent.¹⁷⁵ The female subjects in "The Blue Motifs" are never actively engaged in work or activity the same ways as his male subjects. Rather than *adire* being used as a conceptual and graphic device as it is in *Obioko II*, *adire* is the subject of the series, not an exploration of *adire*'s production but a mere observation of what Yoruba women looked like during the artist's travels to the region.

¹⁷⁵ Singletary, *Bruce Onobrakpeya*, 137.

Despite his interest in depicting laborers, in Onobrakpeya's work the women who labor over the dye vats in the production of *adire* are noticeably absent. Instead, women appear as passive consumers of *adire* rather than its politically and economically influential producers. The difference is particularly pronounced when "The Blue Motifs" series is compared to the "Zaria Indigo Series." Within the latter series, Onobrakpeya depicts men at work in the dye pits in Birni, the old walled city of Zaria in Nigeria's northern Islamic region.¹⁷⁶ In these works, the male dyers are seated on the ground with legs bent straddling the edge of the dye vat engaged in the dipping of cloth into the dye. Their faces, bodies and garments are painted a deep indigo hue in stark contrast to the orange earthen tones of their surroundings, further solidifying the association between the northern region, the men, and the blue cloth they produce (figure 2.4).

The images are reminiscent of documentary photographs from the dye pits in the 1960s around the time Onobrakpeya produced the series, suggesting that he visited the dye pits in Birni and made sketches while on site. Based on the similarities to the photographs, the paintings and prints seem to represent an accurate contemporary portrayal of the ancient dye pits in the north where men are fully in charge of the indigo dyeing process. However, the images only tell a small part of the regional dyeing history. It was only in the early 20th century that dyeing in Hausa territory became a strictly male domain. Previously, the center of the Hausa Kingdom at the palace in Kano was sustained by a system of royal concubinage that relied on hundreds of enslaved women and eunuchs for the production of indigo-dyed cloth.¹⁷⁷ Some of these women were Yoruba who brought their knowledge of indigo dyeing to the north as both free and forced laborers.¹⁷⁸ A *jihad* in 1804 brought about significant structural changes to the Kingdom that resulted in the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate. Textile production expanded significantly under this large and powerful Islamic polity. The vast reach of the Caliphate and the importance of textiles in Islamic culture brought forth collaborations from multiple ethnic groups living

¹⁷⁶ See Darah and Quel, *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent*, 43.

¹⁷⁷ For a full account of women's role in indigo cloth production in Kano see: Heidi Nast, *Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigerian Palace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

¹⁷⁸ Philip J. Shea, "Big Is Sometimes Best: The Sokoto Caliphate and Economic Advantages of Size in the Textile Industry," *African Economic History* 34 (2006): 12.; Kriger, *Cloth in West African History*, 148.

together under its dominion.¹⁷⁹ The Caliphate reigned for a century before it succumbed to the British pacification campaign in 1903. It was at this time that the dyeing industry became a strictly male domain, though Yoruba immigrants continued to bring their knowledge from the dyeing centers in the south.

Like with *uli*'s image and history as it was portrayed through the work and research of Okeke, the world of indigo dyeing through the lens of Onobrakpeya's work is schematized. The value of these Zaria artists' own interpretations of women's cultural production, therefore, lies not in the research or attempts at preservation but rather in their abilities to reinvent these forms for a new era of nationalism. However, with regard to *adire*, this was not the first time that patterns were used for political purposes. Onobrakpeya's most effective use of appropriation as an artistic strategy was not in the use of *adire* patterns as a motif in his drawings and paintings, as was discussed in this section in the work *Obioko II*, but when he realizes the similarities between textile patterning processes and printmaking, and begins to approach the pattern as a storytelling device instead of a decorative element.

Politics into Patterns

Adire became directly implicated in politics by way of activism and anti-colonial forms of dress, however, some patterns also indicate the effort by designers to keep in step with changes in power. Specifically, *adire* designers picked up on the emerging trend of commemorative portrait cloth with the creation of a new pattern in 1935 featuring the King and Queen of England (figure 2.5). The *adire oloba*, meaning 'cloth with a king', was created especially for the silver jubilee celebration of King George V and Queen Mary, marking an increased involvement of *adire* in the political-visual landscape. The pattern would prove to be immensely popular even as its invention came at the time of the industry's economic difficulty. The King George V cloth would inspire a number of iterations of the *oloba* design that were adapted for new rulers and new purposes over several decades, but consistently demonstrated an effort on the part of its producers to respond to the influx of foreign material, the changing political climate, and the shifting desires of their clientele. Like the *Olokun*, if not to a

¹⁷⁹ Shea, "Big Is Sometimes Best: The Sokoto Caliphate and Economic Advantages of Size in the Textile Industry," 14.

greater degree, the *oloba* was integrated into the modern world in technical, symbolic and utilitarian ways.

Composed of a central medallion shape that contains the portrait busts of the two royals and surrounded by various plant, animal, human figures and royal emblems, the *oloba* came to symbolize power through a unique synthesis of visual icons and motifs. Even as its subjects changed, using an iconic design that allowed pattern makers to swap out figures and names interchangeably, the cloth's symbolic meaning remained the same. Rather than a straightforward representation of colonial or British power, however, the *oloba* contains numerous nuanced symbols of power in the Yoruban vernacular. This is key to the pattern's adaptability, both in fulfilling its commemorative function and in its appropriation into art by Onobrakpeya.

Throughout the colony, the silver jubilee celebrations featured fireworks, bonfires, speeches, live music and dances, and children's street parades. The events stretched over several weeks in May of 1935. Leading up to and during the jubilee, images of the king and queen were disseminated throughout the visual landscape on banners that decorated the streets, on mugs that were handed out as gifts to schoolchildren, on commemorative stamps issued for the occasion and in local English and Yoruba language newspapers (figure 2.6). These visual sources likely provided reference material for the artists who drafted the central motif of the *oloba* design, which appropriates the portrait busts, the medallion shape used in some banners, and icons of British royalty.

The synthesis of icons of British visual culture combined with emblems of Yoruban royalty and wealth suggest the intentions of the stencil-maker to reflect the political atmosphere. Yet these political symbols account for only one part of the imagery that makes up the pattern. Many *oloba* cloths also feature a human-headed winged creature that has been identified as *al-Buraq*, the steed that carried Mohammed from Mecca to Jerusalem.¹⁸⁰ They may also show other human figures including riders on horseback, hunters, female nudes, biblical and crowned figures, as well as a wide array of animals including birds, elephants and horses in addition to flowers and

¹⁸⁰ N. Stanfield and G. Jackson, *Adire Cloth in Nigeria: The Preparation and Dyeing of Indigo Patterned Cloths among the Yoruba*, ed. J.; Barbour and D.; Simmonds (Ibadan: Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1971), 85, 87.

other vegetation. These, as well as the common occurrence of the cowrie shell and a more rare appearance of the pineapple, are indicators of the vibrant cross-cultural commerce that connected Nigerian markets to India, Southeast Asia, Europe and North Africa. The circulation of imagery printed on textiles facilitated an exchange of visual culture that influenced production in Nigeria, similar to the assimilation of foreign imagery on the *Olokun* pattern.

The *oloba* pattern shows a clear stylistic and iconographical digression from the stock of *adire eleko* patterning that preceded it. It also contains several motifs that are not named among those that have been identified as common to *adire eleko* cloths.¹⁸¹ Certainly the nature of stenciling, which produces an image by filling in negative space leaving each individual part freestanding, partially explains the appearance of the *oloba* cloth that distinguishes it from intricate hand-painted *eleko* patterns such as the *Olokun*, even in the less common cases of some *oloba* cloths that were made through a combination of stenciling and free-hand patterning (figure 2.5). Scholars believed that there might have been a jubilee cloth commissioned from the United Africa Company (UAC) that would have been produced in the U.K. for the West African market and potentially inspired the *oloba*'s invention, though none was ever found.¹⁸² Thus, a better means of interpreting the *oloba* and its unique blend of iconography may be found in Yoruba visual culture. Specifically, the *oloba* retains some of the aesthetic values that are prefigured in Yoruba sculpture and portrait photography.

Photography's inception in West Africa dates to 1839. Portrait photography had begun replacing the roles of figurative sculpture among the Yoruba by the 1930s and likely much earlier.¹⁸³ As analyses of early West African portrait photography have shown, certain conventions were utilized in the posture and composure of the sitter that set them apart from conventions of European portraiture. These differences can be observed in the work of Nigerian photographer J.A. Green who took portraits of

¹⁸¹ For list and description of motifs see: Margaret Olugbemisola Areo and Razaq Olatunde Rom Kalilu, "Origin of and Visual Semiotics in Yoruba Textile of Adire" *Arts and Design Studies* Vol. 12, 2013 Pg. 27.

¹⁸² George Jackson, "The Devolution of the Jubilee Design," in *Adire Cloth in Nigeria*, ed. Jane Barbour and Doig Simmonds (Ibadan: Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1971), 83.

¹⁸³ Stephen F. Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," *African Arts* 12, no. 1 (November 1978): 52.

both Africans and Europeans out of his studio in Bonny in the eastern Niger Delta region as early as 1894.¹⁸⁴ A contrast can be seen between Green's photographs of Europeans, which are characterized by their informality, and those of Nigerians in which "the Africans assume more formal, dignified, and symmetrical poses."¹⁸⁵ Since portrait photography at this early stage was only available to the few who could afford it, Green's portraits are often of Bonny's elites and chiefs, which may explain the desire for formality. Men, in particular, assume a frontally oriented position to the camera and tend to sit with their knees and elbows splayed, garments spread to their full width, and hands placed on the knees. This observation is consistent with previous claims by Stephen Sprague and Nigel Barley that these conventions of squared postures emphasized the sitters' "dignified stateliness" while the inclusion of the hands ensured the sitters' "completeness."¹⁸⁶

By the time of the invention of the *oloba* pattern, these conventions for portraiture were well established in photography. It is conceivable then that in the designing of the *oloba*'s central portrait medallion that the image of the king and queen was adapted according to the visual codes of Yoruba portraiture. For one, in both of the *oloba* versions featured here (figures 2.5 and 2.7) and in many others, the two royals are depicted in a squarely forward position, as opposed to the $\frac{3}{4}$ profile used in many of the state issued portraits of the British royals, including those circulated in the Yoruba language newspapers. Two, the designer has chosen to include more of the body than is typically seen in European portrait busts, allowing for an elaboration of the garments that cover the body. This is significant considering the importance of displays of fabric and garments by Yoruba chiefs and kings as material expressions of civic power.¹⁸⁷ Lastly, in both versions the artist has portrayed King George's hands. In the *oloba* from the Diko compound the elbows are splayed in an exaggerated fashion similar to the manner of many of the men in photographs.

¹⁸⁴ Martha G. Anderson and Lisa L. Aronson, "Jonathan A. Green: An African Photographer Hiding in Plain Sight," *African Arts* 44, no. 3 (2011): 39.

¹⁸⁵ Anderson and Aronson, 41.

¹⁸⁶ Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," 54.; Anderson and Aronson cite Nigel Barley, 1988 *Foreheads of the Dead: An Anthropological Look at Kalabari Screens*. Washington DC: National Museum of African art, Smithsonian Institution, 43-44.

¹⁸⁷ Ruth Watson, "*Civil Disorder Is the Disease of Ibadan*": *Chieftancy & Civic Culture in a Yoruba City*, West African Studies (Athens, Ohio; Oxford, UK: Ohio University Press; James Currey, 2003), 150–51.

The Diko *oloba* cloth also illustrates the effort on the part of the designer or stencil cutter to achieve a likeness to the king and queen. In the rendering of King George's face one can observe the close attention paid to the part in his hair and to the shape of his moustache (Figure 2.7). Similar attention to detail has been paid to the Queen's crown, her earrings and necklace. A certain level of likeness has been achieved as a result, testifying to the skill of the stencil maker, and suggesting that the other aesthetic choices made that produced the semi-abstracted, stylized look may indicate a desire on the part of the designer to achieve "mimesis at the midpoint", that is, like many Yoruba portraitists working in sculpture before him, to locate the image "somewhere between complete abstraction and individual likeness."¹⁸⁸ Likeness may have also been desirable for the makers of *oloba* because factory portrait cloths were becoming increasingly popular, and their designers typically copied portraits directly from portrait photographs that sought not only to replicate the subject's likeness, but the formalities of the portrait.

The designers of the *oloba* also opted to include a number of symbols to connote power in the local vernacular. Chief among these symbols are the birds that appear around the heads of the royals. In the Diko *oloba* one appears to be emerging from King George's head while another rests on the queen's shoulder. In the British Museum version two birds in flight are suspended between the two royals. The inclusion and placement of the birds may be making reference to a specific Yoruba idiom of royalty in two ways: first, the bird emerging from the King's head recalls the Yoruba beaded crown, a piece of regalia worn exclusively by Yoruba kings with divine right to rule and distinguished by its conical shape and the appearance of birds on the sides and the top.¹⁸⁹ Second, according to Yoruban mythology, the first king was aided by a large bird that helped him choose the location of his future kingdom. Only descendants of the first king are able to reign over the Yoruba people. Other sources suggest that upon creating the first female the Yoruban gods gifted her with a bird, allowing her to counterbalance the power and advantages of men. Birds also appear on medicinal and divination staffs throughout Yorubaland, though

¹⁸⁸ This is a paraphrasing of R.F. Thompson's interpretation of Yoruba sculpting from 1971. See: Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," 54.

¹⁸⁹ For more in depth description and images see: Robert Farris Thompson, "The Sign of the Divine King: An Essay on Yoruba Bead-Embroidered Crowns with Veil and Bird Decorations," *African Arts* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 8.

the meaning of the birds and the accounts of Yoruba origination in general differ widely from region to region.¹⁹⁰

The interpretation of the birds as symbols of Yoruba royalty is supported by the appearance in some versions of the pattern of the word “OYO” above the portraits. The word refers to the Oyo Empire of the Yoruba that was one of the largest and most powerful states in West Africa at the time of its zenith in the 18th century, and remained a competing regal entity throughout the colonial era. The letter “O” appears to be composed of a cowrie shell that was formerly used as currency and also appears as a motif on its own in other *oloba* cloths. Other symbols found on the *oloba* such as equestrian figures, lions, elephants and men holding guns have been interpreted as relating to leadership associations in Yoruba society.¹⁹¹

It is impossible to know for sure whether these inclusions signify a specific political sentiment on the part of the *oloba*’s producers or consumers, but based on the evolution of the *oloba* pattern following its invention in 1935, it is clear that its producers were in step with transfers of national and regional power from one ruler to the next over several decades. Moreover, the specific Yoruba idioms utilized in the King George *oloba* patterns are retained in future iterations of the pattern where the likeness of the person depicted is not, indicating a prioritization of Yoruba aesthetics over European ones.

This transition is already discernable in the second generation *oloba* pattern for the coronation of King George V’s successor, Edward the VIII. King George V died less than a year after celebrating his Silver Jubilee. His eldest son Edward took the throne in January of 1936 but he reigned only briefly until his abdication the following December. During these months, an *adire oloba* cloth was made in anticipation of his coronation ceremony, which ultimately never took place (figure 2.8). This rare cloth shows that a King George V pattern was quickly adapted by simply substituting in the new king’s name, spelled ‘King Ediwodu VIII,’ in place of George and Mary’s

¹⁹⁰ Robert Farris Thompson, “The Sign of the Divine King: An Essay on Yoruba Bead-Embroidered Crowns with Veil and Bird Decorations,” *African Arts* 3, no. 3 (1970): 16–17.

¹⁹¹ Pat Oyelola, “Picture and Pattern in Contemporary Batik and Adire,” in *Ezumeezu: Essays on Nigerian Art and Architecture / A Festschrift in Honour of Demas Nwoko*, ed. Chika Okeke-Agulu and Obiora Udechukwu (Glassboro, NJ: Goldline & Jacobs Publishing, 2012), 66.

names. The figures in this cloth are clearly derived from those featuring Edward's predecessors, evinced by the presence of pronounced facial hair on the king, despite Edward VIII's clean-shaven appearance, and the presence of a queen that Edward VIII did not have during his brief reign. Edward VIII's abdication meant that his pattern was quickly discontinued and explains why it is much rarer to find. It also suggests that the Edward VIII pattern gives a close approximation to what the *oloba* pattern looked like in the mid 1930s, since it is unlikely this pattern would have been reproduced once it was clear the coronation would never take place.

Despite the brevity of Edward VIII's rule, the *oloba* pattern enjoyed continued popularity well beyond the reign of the kings it portrayed, suggested by the fact that it could still be found readily in markets during the 1960s and 70s (the time when many foreigners purchased them and many ended up in museum collections). They can be occasionally found in markets today, and according to one source in Abeokuta, the *oloba*, as well as other classic patterns can be made to order, but they may take several months to produce. What has ultimately enabled the *oloba* to outlive the monarchs it commemorated is its adaptability for new occasions, while maintaining continuity in appearance over time, a hallmark of *adire eleko* production whereby patterning is taught by one generation to the next.¹⁹² Just as the original pattern was adapted slightly to commemorate George V's predecessor, further alterations were made to portray Nigerian chiefs and heads of state following independence, including a cloth for Yakubu Gowon whose military regime ruled from 1966 – 1975, and the Alake of Abeokuta in 1970.¹⁹³ These later manifestations borrow iconography directly from the original pattern, including the crown motif, the seated figure, and the name of the person depicted, which would otherwise not be recognizable since a generic king figure is used in all of these cloths, a departure from the clear dedication to likeness exhibited by the original George V pattern. This new generic figure, combined with the composition of repeated medallions shapes

¹⁹² Hand-painting patterns is typically a skill handed down from mother to daughter, a custom which has kept many of the original patterns in production for several generations. Stanfield and Jackson, *Adire Cloth in Nigeria: The Preparation and Dyeing of Indigo Patterned Cloths among the Yoruba*, 53.

¹⁹³ For images of these cloths, see: John Gillow, *Printed and Dyed Textiles from Africa*, Fabric Folios (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), 76.; C. Polakoff, *African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 67.; Pat Oyelola, *Nigerian Artistry* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Mosuro Publishers, 2010), 31.

that within it hold the most important elements of the pattern, serve, along with its associations to the coronation and jubilees it formerly commemorated, to codify the concept of a cloth which connotes and celebrates figures of authority. Put simply, it did not matter who was depicted in the cloth, the *oloba* evoked strong associations of kingship and power to those who understood its pattern language. From this point forward, the British crown, specifically the St. Edward crown is strategically appropriated and retained from the original *oloba* designs into the newer ones for rulers of an independent Nigeria.

The extent to which a piece of cloth can impact politics is difficult to measure, but a case study on civic culture and politics in early 20th century Ibadan (a Yoruba city also known for its *adire* dyeing) reveals precisely the power a portrait cloth can have and the political unrest it may instigate. In 1939, just four years after the release of the *adire oloba* cloth, and three years after a colonial governor in Ibadan declared that the local *Olubadan* title would be henceforth given official recognition, a cloth surfaced in the markets of Ibadan that put a name and face in visual and material form to that title. Concerned that the widespread sale of the cloth might incite political disorder, the Ibadan Native Authority released a decree that effectively banned the sale and use of the cloth. The royal blue damask featured a full standing portrait of the *Olubadan* named Okunola Abasi (spelled elsewhere “Abass”) holding a leopard on a leash and enclosed in the medallion shape typical of portrait cloths. Abasi is dressed in striped robes and a turban, a depiction drawn by the designers of the cloth directly, and quite accurately, from a photograph of him that circulated in Nigerian newspapers during the time of his reign as *Olubadan* (1930 – 1946). It was the inscription and decoration enclosed within the border around Abasi as it appeared on the cloth, however, that caused the greatest concern to the colonial authorities. As in the *adire oloba*, the image of the St. Edward crown sits at the top of the medallion. The sides of the medallion and at the bottom read “*OLUBADAN D’OBA ABUSE BUSE*” or “*The Olubadan has become King, Everything is Finished.*”¹⁹⁴ These two additions, which distinguished the cloth design from the

¹⁹⁴ Ruth Watson, *'Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan': Chieftancy & Civic Culture in a Yoruba City*, *West African Studies* (Athens, Ohio; Oxford, UK: Ohio University Press; James Currey, 2003) 145-150.

photograph, were enough to provoke the colonial authorities to ban the cloth outright from sale or use from Ibadan to Lagos.

The Ibadan Patriotic Association (IPA) had ordered the cloth from a European manufacturer. The IPA was motivated by an upcoming Conference of Yoruba Chiefs, organized by the colonial administration, whereby, for the first time in history, all Yoruba chiefs would gather under one roof under the guise of having a voice in colonial governing. In the days leading up to the conference, a Yoruba leader, the *Alaafin* brought the cloth to the attention of a colonial authority. The two men agreed that the cloth must not be allowed at the conference and instituted a ban on its sale and use effective immediately. Citing a risk of riots and violence, the order prohibited anyone from exposing the cloth in public and offenders could be fined or imprisoned or both. The portrait cloth, which was nearly identical to the portrait of the man it featured that had circulated without conflict in local newspapers, contained the crown emblem and an inscription that the authorities found to be particularly controversial. By Yoruba custom, the *Olubadan* title was not in a position to be king. Within the Oyo Empire hegemony, the chieftaincy of Ibadan, which included the *Olubadan*, was subordinate to the *Alaafin*. By stating that the *Olubadan* title holder was now king, the cloth disrupted not only the indigenous power structures, but undermined the ultimate colonial authority: the British crown.

What authorities feared was not the cloth itself of course, but they feared that it would be worn in large numbers by Ibadan residents to the Yoruba conference. Such an act of turning the damask portrait cloth into a garment and wearing it in public would amount to a blanket statement of allegiance to the *Olubadan*, not simply as the local ruler, but as king.¹⁹⁵ Since the cloth featured an easily recognizable figure of *Olubadan* Abasi, with the addition of the crown the cloth made a clear statement of who was king, regardless of whether or not one could read the inscription. At the same time, the inscription and the transfer of the image onto cloth changed an ordinary photograph into a subversive element of material culture. The fact that the cloth was printed on damask and imported from Europe was not without its own significance. Damask, as opposed to the basic cotton weave used, for example, in the production of *adire*, is a densely woven cotton fabric with a satin-like finish. Along

¹⁹⁵ Watson, 152–53.

with velvets, silks, and sateen, damask was imported from Europe by the wealthy and worn exclusively by elites and chiefs as assertions of their political status and power. For the general public of Ibadan to adorn themselves in damask, particularly a damask dyed a royal blue, presented yet another potential upheaval of the established hierarchy and power structure. Thus, the potential agency or danger even of the cloth lay in the design, the material, and the capacity of the textile to be disseminated in large numbers and worn as a political statement. This agency was effectively undermined by the ban of its sale and use, highlighting the important role of the body and the individual in the actualization of a textile's symbolism and power.

The case highlights the communicative nature of the textile: it speaks without the wearer having to open his or her mouth, it is a non-violent form of protest, and it is difficult for authorities to prosecute the wearing of clothing when the meaning of the cloth is not so obviously stated by its design. This was not the first time cloth was used to assert power and authority among the Yoruba. Rather, this action derived its very agency from a long established practice of communicating through fabric, and it illustrates how a textile can celebrate and commemorate one minute, and in the next minute be used to subvert or criticize.

Appropriating the Design and Symbolism of the *Adire Oloba*

Along with the *Olokun*, the *oloba* is the most frequently utilized *adire* pattern found in Onobrakpeya's works. As with the *Olokun*, Onobrakpeya adopts the easily recognizable composition of the stenciled pattern to new configurations in prints and paintings. According to Onobrakpeya, he returned again and again to the *oloba* composition in his artwork because it was useful to him as a storytelling device.¹⁹⁶ Conceptually, this allowed for a sort of template that was both easily recognizable to his audience and retained some of the associations the *oloba* held to power. The template could then be filled and modified for the new composition. The ease with which designers could alter the *oloba* design to accommodate new rulers, or new desires of *adire*'s clients was transferrable to Onobrakpeya's works.

Apart from the conceptual devices made available to the artist by *adire*'s pattern language and its deep integration into the nation's social and political fabric, *adire*

¹⁹⁶ Bruce Onobrakpeya in conversation with the Erin Rice, April 18th 2014, Lagos, Nigeria

offered Onobrakpeya technical and stylistic possibilities that contributed significantly to the evolution of his personal style as an artist. As Onobrakpeya has said himself, he learned a great deal about the use of space by looking at *adire* designs and applying what he learned to his printmaking.¹⁹⁷ This is evident in his use of geometric motifs to fill unused space, his all-over compositions, and the structure of several works that take the *oloba* pattern as their compositional starting point. The characteristic stylization and flatness typical of *adire* appealed to his technical strengths. His draftsmanship, particularly drawing in the round and perspectival space, was limited such that after the 1960s he abandons these modes of working altogether.¹⁹⁸ Instead, he came into his own when he emphasized flatness and the stylized aesthetics embodied by the *adire* textile. Printmaking, his preferred mode of working, is also similar in procedure to the printing of a textile, just as painting on a canvas is not so far removed from the preparation of a painted *eleko* cloth.

The *oloba* also supplied an effective structure for the synthesis of multiple forms and sources. This may account for its recurrence during the time when Onobrakpeya was producing works with Christian themes. The lino engraving titled “Nativity II” from 1978 demonstrates how the *oloba* was utilized for Onobrakpeya’s non-political purposes yet still served to orient the image by placing the powerful (Mary with baby Jesus) at the center and the less-powerful three kings, herders, animals and angels on the periphery (figure 2.9). The stylizations of these peripheral figures are very similar to the original King George *oloba* decoration. He has even retained the band of text that runs the length of the cloth at the bottom except that in the print it is no longer words but markings that allude to words, a nod, he explains, to the often-illiterate stencil cutters and designers responsible for making *oloba* patterns.¹⁹⁹

What is remarkable about “Nativity II” is the manner in which Mary is portrayed in an *adire*-like cloak with plaited hair. She is neither derived from the Europeans on the original *oloba*, nor a European Christian depiction of Mary. Nor is she similar to the other women depicted in Onobrakpeya’s works. Instead, he allows her garment and her hair to become emblematic of her royalty, blending Christian and African forms in

¹⁹⁷ Darah and Quel, *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent*, 137.

¹⁹⁸ Jegede, *Onobrakpeya: Masks of the Flaming Arrows*, 109.

¹⁹⁹ In conversation with Bruce Onobrakpeya in his studio, June 2012, Lagos, Nigeria.

such a way that Christianity no longer appeared to be a religion brought from the West.

Adire appears as clothing in other adaptations of the *oloba* as well. An untitled painting from 1969 which features three women together, seemingly engaged in conversation with one another, utilizes the *oloba* pattern in a couple of ways. First, the woman on the far right is dressed in an *adire oloba* wrapper, the central medallion with newly stylized figures adorns her waist. The woman to her left wears a pattern featuring a single figure flanked by geometric designs. The women are wearing the cloth wrapped at their waists, over a blouse with short sleeves. They are turned towards another woman who wears an indigo dress with tailored sleeves. Both of these forms of dress indicate modernizations in the way the cloth was worn, and the combination of a wrapper and blouse has been used as a form of resistance to modes of European dress, by blending European and African styles.

Onobrakpeya produced a number of copies of this painting over the period of several years. A serigraph print on paper produced one year later shows a nearly identical configuration of women with the title "Have You Heard?" The new title alludes to the rumored end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, and the three female figures appear to be discussing it.²⁰⁰ Onobrakpeya utilizes the *oloba* as a point of reference to the subject of national rule. By taking advantage of these associations with politics, he is able to orient the meaning of the print without directly referencing political power in the composition (figure 2.10).

On the Significance of a Signature

Among the three versions of the work "Have You Heard?" a pencil drawing, a serigraph, and an oil painting, there is one significant difference.²⁰¹ In the oil painting of "Have You Heard" Onobrakpeya has added his name to the bottom edge of the *oloba* cloth worn by the woman on the far right. He has strategically placed the name where the *oloba* cloth usually features a band of text with a proverb or the name of the compound where the cloth was produced. He also mimics the look of the uppercase lettering used in the stenciled pattern. In the case of the Diko cloth, both

²⁰⁰ See Darah and Quel, *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent*, 211; 221.

²⁰¹ It is not clear how many versions of this composition Onobrakpeya produced. Three found in the resources the artist commissioned himself are the ones referenced here.

the name “Diko” and the proverb *ise kosehin oluwa* or “everything is known to God” are included in the inscription. Thus, the inscription served as a signature and a way of adding a message to the cloth that would be understood by those who could read the Yoruba language. Onobrakpeya’s choice to put his name on the cloth was highly unusual. Many of his works are unsigned within the printed area. Moreover, this is not an actual signature but his name is part of the painting and placed in a way that it becomes part of the cloth, and by extension, an inscription on the woman’s body.

The “ONOBRAKPEYA” inscription allows the artist to take authorship of the painting and by extension, the *adire* pattern. Whether or not this was his intention, it is significant because of the relevance of the signature both in the claiming of one’s creative and intellectual property. The addition of a signature by craft practitioners has been employed to combat anonymity, theft of designs, and to gain art world acceptance and legitimacy.²⁰² This strategy has been very effective in Australia for Aboriginal artists who created batiks that were ascribed to communities rather than individuals. In the case of *adire*, however, the situation is slightly different because quite often *adire* artists sign their works. This is especially true for master designers.²⁰³ It becomes a mark of their originality in a field where many *adire* artists simply copy popular designs, and it allows them to demand more at the point of sale. By integrating his name into the design, Onobrakpeya may also be referencing the fact that stenciled *adire* designs were cut by men. It may also be interpreted as a way in which the artist integrates himself into the historical trajectory of indigo dyeing. Regardless of the interpretation of the addition of the artist’s name, it draws attention to the transformative power of artistic appropriation.

"Have You Heard" reveals the accuracy of the term appropriation to describe the process of using textile material and pattern language in art because other terms do not recognize that act of taking ownership, regardless of whether the act is perceived as a form of cultural theft or not. For example, John Picton has suggested that the process by which Bruce Onobrakpeya works is better described as bricolage following Lévi Strauss’s concept of the *bricoleur* as “someone who works with his

²⁰² Sue Rowley, “Craft, Creativity and Critical Practice,” in *Reinventing Textiles: Tradition & Innovation*, ed. Sue Rowley, vol. 1 (Winchester, England: Telos, 1999), 3.

²⁰³ See for example the ‘Lifting up the Beads (*Sun Bébé*)’ cloth in the Smithsonian collection signed by its maker Madame Samuroh: Joan Kelly, ed., *Adire: Resist-Dyed Cloths of the Yoruba* (Washington DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1997), 18.

hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman...” Strauss explains further, “the ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, but unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools...the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’...By his craftsmanship he constructs a material object which is also an object of knowledge.”²⁰⁴

Picton’s suggestion is useful in understanding much of the production of the Zaria group in which diverse sources across ethnic, religious and linguistic boundaries are unified in the visual plane. However, the term lends too much credit to the artist in giving significance to the material he appropriates. This is not an issue when Onobrakpeya illustrates themes from Urhobo folklore into his own rendition because this material belongs to the Urhobo people and a single person cannot claim its ownership. It was, after all, one of the aims of the Zaria Art Society to mine indigenous culture and rescue it from oblivion. Nor is the term bricolage inaccurate when Onobrakpeya uses found objects such as old circuit boards. The boards no longer serve their original purpose, and can therefore be re-purposed by the artist. But Onobrakpeya’s appropriation of a repertoire of *adire* cloths was contingent on the patterns’ capacity for synthesizing a broad range of visual sources in a singular design that communicated in a local vernacular. Thus, Onobrakpeya’s use of *adire* patterning is very different from his use of folklore or the found object in its attempt to “rescue” culture that was not necessarily in need of rescue and to modernize a form of cultural production that was already modern.

More importantly, the patterns adopted by Onobrakpeya were already highly symbolic and part of a visual form of communication facilitated by the cloth and by its wearing on the body. *Adire*, like many factory printed and Dutch wax cloths, has a designer, a number of influences (both local and foreign) on its appearance, and it has a history that carries meaning within it. The pattern's symbolism, though constantly evolving, already exists, and it is part of what is appropriated when its patterns are used in art. Therefore, the term appropriation is applicable to the processes of Onobrakpeya and other artists working with the textile’s forms and

²⁰⁴ Picton quoting Lévi Strauss in John Picton, “Fetishising Modernity: Bricolage Revisited,” in *Art History and Fetishism Abroad: Global Shiftings in Media and Methods*, ed. Gabriele Genge and Angela Stercken (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014), 215.

material. It recognizes that what was borrowed came from someone or somewhere else. By contrast, the position of Picton, as well as the interpretations of Zaria's artistic output by Oguibe and Okeke-Agulu, all place emphasis on the artist in the creation of meaning, and thereby locate the agency associated with modernity and political resistance within the modernist artistic process, inadvertently removing it from cultural producers such as textile artists, from whom artists like Onobrakpeya have derived a great deal of material.

Adire Appropriation beyond Zaria

The artistic procedures of appropriation and synthesis were not limited to the Zaria Art Society. The Mbari Mbayo club emerged in the 1960s in the Yoruba town of Oshogbo and several of its early members went on to be influential Nigerian artists. The club was formed through the collective efforts and desires of Duro Ladipo, a young Nigerian playwright, and Ulli Beier, a European who would come to play a large role in the development of Nigerian visual and literary arts. Within the transdisciplinary productions of the Mbari Mbayo Club, textiles and dress were integral to the formation of aesthetics unique to what would eventually be called the Oshogbo Group, combining theater with music, literature, and visual arts.

On the event of the club's inauguration in 1962, Duro Ladipo starred as the king in a production of his own play, *Oba Moro*. Hanging behind him and fellow actor Tijjani Mayakiri was a large *Olokun* cloth that served as the backdrop to the play (figure 2.11). Easily identifiable by the "OK" motif frequently found in *Olokun* patterns, the textile accentuated the "Yorubanness" of a Yoruba-language play, about a Yoruba king within the once indomitable Yoruban Oyo Kingdom, effectively and literally 'setting the stage' for the integral role batik would come to play in the Oshogbo school. The artist Susanne Wenger, who was married to Beier at the time, also participated in the opening with an exhibition of linocuts and batiks, establishing another initial link between Mbari Mbayo, Oshogbo, and the art of textiles.²⁰⁵

In the context of Oshogbo where indigenous religion was practiced locally in the sacred Osun Groves the *Olokun* has particular relevance because of its connection

²⁰⁵ Peter Probst, *Osogbo and the Art of Heritage: Monuments, Deities, and Money* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011), 40.

to the Yoruban pantheon. Oshogbo would become home to a major center for batik under the care and tutelage of Wenger, who would take it upon herself to revive the Osun grove and the Yoruba religion against the ravages of colonialism and Christianity. *Olokun's* patchwork of motifs stands as reminder of its own modernity, carefully composed by women artists who were actively acculturating and synthesizing foreign visual culture in their own pattern language. Yet, the selection of the *Olokun* pattern subtly positions the production of *Oba Moro* within a modernist framework at the same time that it places women's work in the literal and figurative background to a male lead.

The use of *adire* as a backdrop to a play also signals a new function for the textile as a decorative wall hanging. Though this is likely not the first time *adire* was used in this way, it is symbolic of what it would become under the Oshogbo school. Arguably, the simple transition of *adire* from the body to the wall is as great a leap towards a "modernist" aesthetic as achieved by Onobrakpeya and other artists that came out of Zaria. Oshogbo also offered opportunities to men who were interested in practicing *adire eleko* and experimenting with the art form as a means of expression. Though they were not without opposition, male artists such as Ademola Onibon-Okuta persevered by taking up an apprenticeship with a senior *adire* specialist. Others like Sangodare Gbadegesin studied batik under Wenger.²⁰⁶

Among the visual artists that participated in Mbari Mbayo's gatherings and workshops were several artists who practiced batik and pushed its technical and visual boundaries. A prominent artist in the group named Twins Seven Seven had brought his new wife, Nike Okundaye, to live with him in Oshogbo. Seven Seven taught her how to draw, but being in Oshogbo offered Okundaye the opportunity to return to the art of *adire* she had learned from her great grandmother. This led to her discovery of the wax-resist (batik) method and allowed her to establish her own career apart from her husband's influence. Okundaye expanded her skills as a dyer and began breaking down the barriers between Yoruban textiles and modernist art forms, adapting *adire* patterns to paper and canvas.

²⁰⁶ Oyelola, "Picture and Pattern in Contemporary Batik and Adire," 69.

As her artistic style has evolved in the decades since Oshogbo, Okundaye has translated the batik and *adire* forms into pen and ink drawings and acrylic paintings on canvas. The *Olokun* and other *eleko* patterns feature prominently in many of these later works. Often composed of two image layers that include *adire eleko* patterns laid out in the familiar grid structure the scenes that emerge range from rural landscapes, market scenes, and images of women going about daily activities. The interplay between foreground and background is minimal. On rare occasion the patterning is allowed to bleed through the foreground scene to appear as the patterning on a woman's wrapper. In general, the patterning is treated with great precision and detail and is given priority over the secondary image, which is sometimes painted so faintly and in loose, expressionistic strokes that it is nearly subsumed by the patterning as it is for example in *The Levees of My Inspiration* (1990). Compositionally, the two subjects remain distinct layers, but conceptually it is made clear through the sustained repetition of patterns and themes over many years that *adire* is integral to the lives of Yoruba women, a notion at the core of Okundaye's artistic practice.

Each of these paintings contributes to a body of work that has become a visual repository of *adire eleko* patterns. The squares of patterns are hand-painted on to canvas as they would be hand-painted in cassava paste onto cotton prior to being dipped in an indigo dye bath. Among dozens of geometric motifs in the paintings, several figural and architectural motifs emerge that identify with specific *adire* cloths, which make the paintings that Okundaye paints in an indigo-like hue visually very similar to an *adire* cloth.

According to Okundaye, this process of directly copying *adire* patterning is a strategy of preservation. She explains that the patterns were used as a form of non-verbal communication between women, and to reproduce them in paintings is a way for people to remember the patterns.²⁰⁷ Women painted the patterns onto the fabric to express what they were feeling, experiencing or wishing for in the moment.²⁰⁸ At times, patterns could contain double meanings that were only understood by the

²⁰⁷ Nike Okundaye, Artist talk at Gallery of African Art (GAFRA), London, October 11, 2014.

²⁰⁸ Christian Purefoy, "Nigeria's 'Mama Nike' Empowers Women through Art," *African Voices* (CNN, April 12, 2011), <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/04/12/nigeria.nike.davies.okundaye/>.

women who produced and wore the cloth. For decades, this has meant that some of the interpretations that have been repeatedly published by foreign scholars have only been partial. There was always an explanation for each motif readily supplied for an inquiring visitor, but the second meaning known only to those who “spoke” the pattern language of *adire* remained hidden. Okundaye and her daughter Allyson Davies revealed the central motif of the *Olokun* cloth, believed to be depicting a four-legged stool, alternatively to be representing a tray with four spoons, understood by local women as an allusion to female genitalia with the message “only a woman knows who the father of her child is.”²⁰⁹ This local meaning adds further credence to the connection of the pattern to a goddess associated with fertility.

While such alternative interpretations of the patterns could go a long way in shedding light on the origins and evolutions of *adire eleko*, these revelations are limited to Okundaye’s public talks, teaching, and her daughter’s publication (Davies, *Storytelling Through Àdire*, 2014). Her modernist work, on the other hand, falls into a similar preservationist, traditionalizing purview of the ‘synthesis’ experiment.

Okundaye borrows from a limited variety of *adire*’s geometric patterning. She uses the same abstract, geometric motifs again and again, leaving out most of the figural icons found on the fabric. Similar to Uche Okeke’s promotion of a limited range of *uli* that represented only a small fraction of Igbo visual culture, Okundaye’s modernist artworks present a simplified lexicon of *adire* motifs. The meaning of the patterns, assuming this is part of what is meant to be preserved, may actually be lost in its inclusion in a painting.

The accompanying imagery in *Levees* as in many paintings of the same time period and genre by Okundaye relates to only vague and conventional expressions of womanhood in rural Nigeria. It does not appear to have anything to do with *adire*, its production or its meaning, creating a similar disconnect between subject and object demonstrated by Onobrakpeya’s *Obioko II*. Rather, the combination with a rural

²⁰⁹ Jane Barbour identifies the motif as most probably a stool but says other informants gave other interpretations. Jane Barbour, “The Origin of Some Adire Designs,” in *Adire Cloth in Nigeria: The Preparation and Dyeing of Indigo Patterned Cloths among the Yoruba*, ed. Jane Barbour and Doig Simmonds (Ibadan, Nigeria: University of Ibadan, 1971), 49–80.; Nike Okundaye in conversation with Allyson Davies, Artist Talk at Gallery of African Art (Gaafra), London October 11, 2014. See also: Allyson Davies, *Storytelling Through Àdire* (Allyson Davies, 2014).

scene denies the *Olokun* of its origins in the port city of Lagos, and makes no references to the Yoruba pantheon to which the *Olokun* also relates. The paintings remove the patterns from the vital context where they are produced, consumed and retain meaning thereby falling short of their preservationist aims. If Okundaye paints the patterns because historically people have used them to speak with one another, and by recording them in a painting they can be remembered, then the question remains how are the paintings better preservers of *adire*'s pattern language than *adire* itself?²¹⁰ One could even argue that the textile is still far more accessible to people than her painting, which was on sale in Okundaye's Lagos-based gallery for 10,500 USD in 2016.²¹¹ A new *adire eleko* cloth, by contrast, costs between 20-30 USD.

Unlike *uli*, which is a fragile, ephemeral art on the body, and one that is not easily preserved when it is found on the wall of someone's home, a textile can be saved for a long time. *Adire* textiles are still in rather large supply: not only are they preserved in museum collections around the world, but they can be found in private collections in Nigeria and abroad, as well as purchased in Nigerian markets or *adire* "factories." Old patterns such as the elaborate *adire oniko* can be commissioned from those capable of making them. In Oshogbo and her hometown of Ogidi, most of this existing industry can be directly credited to Okundaye herself, meaning that her long-term efforts in training women in *adire* and batik production have paid off in terms of maintaining the production of indigo dyeing in Yorubaland. However, although *adire* dyeing persists thanks to Okundaye's efforts, it appears limited to the spaces of her art centers and it is reliant on financial subsidization from Okundaye or sales to tourists drawn to her workshops by Okundaye's reputation as an artist.²¹² This hardly qualifies as a continuation of the vibrant industry that *adire* once was. It is far more reminiscent of the experimental fusion of *adire*, batik and art that took place in Oshogbo in the 1970s.

²¹⁰ Artist talk, Nike Okundaye at Gallery of African Art, London, October 11, 2014.

²¹¹ <http://www.nikeart.com/shop.php> Accessed 19.08.2016

²¹² This observation is based on my visits to Oshogbo and Ogidi where, in both cases, there was a lot of pressure to purchase items from the gift shop to support the workshops, and in the case of Ogidi, the only time anyone was producing textiles seemed to be when we (the visitors) were on the grounds, otherwise the lights were off.

Arguably, Nike Okundaye is *adire*'s greatest champion when she appears in public wearing indigo blue from head to toe in her oversized *gele* and flowing *adire kaftans*. Her amiable, welcoming, and outgoing personality draws the attention of visitors to Nigeria, the international media (from CNN to The Guardian), and Nigerian celebrities and elites. Once inside her gallery in Lagos and in her presence it is impossible to not take notice of the cloth, its patterns and the artworks that adopt them. Visitors are often offered the opportunity to dress in *adire* and wear beaded necklaces and headdresses typically reserved for special occasions or royalty. Following the trajectory of Okundaye's life and career proves that *adire* has survived by way of change and adaptation, rather than preservationist efforts.

The notion that the indigo dyeing practice was in a state of slowly dying out and being lost was not merely a sentiment expressed by artists but was echoed in much of the scholarship written on *adire* since the 1970s. One of the earliest publications on *adire*, edited by Jane Barbour and Doig Simmonds in 1971, states in the introduction that an entire section of the book "stemmed from a desire to save the *adire* patterns for posterity." Writing about two female batik artists emerging from the Oshogbo art scene in the early 1970s, Jean Kennedy ascribes the work of Senabu Oloyede and Kikelomo Oladepo to the influences of their artist fathers, who both worked in sculpture. She downplays the obvious connections between the work of Oloyede and Oladepo and *adire* by citing spurious differences between two forms of batik art. "...Both [Oloyede and Oladepo] make use of a traditional medium, *adire eleko*, their work is free and unprescribed. They may derive some inspiration from traditional themes and carry over certain influences, however, the final results are not traditional."²¹³

Presumptive conclusions about *adire*'s impending death based on decline in the industry on the part of both scholars and artists have contributed to the erasure of its modernity. *Adire* was not always conceived of as "traditional" or "indigenous." It was only much later that the cloth would come to be called "a traditional Yoruba women's wrapper."²¹⁴ Rather, the labeling of *adire* served a specific purpose: The appropriations of *adire eleko* cloths like the *Olokun* into modernist art allowed the

²¹³ Jean Kennedy, "New Heirs to Talent in Oshogbo: Senabu Oloyede, Kikelomo Oladepo," *African Arts* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1971): 24.

²¹⁴ Kriger, *Cloth in West African History*, 155.

artists to evoke notions of tradition and the past. Even as these associations were inaccurately applied and the forecast of *adire*'s future was pessimistic, the production and modernization of *adire* continued into the 21st century, but the urge to conflate *adire* with nostalgia for Nigeria's past was felt by scholars and artists alike.

Preservation and Indigenization from Schools to Workshops

In order to understand both the tendency to frame *adire* as “traditional’ culture and preserve it through appropriation into modernist art, it is important to trace the impetus towards using indigenous “traditional” art as a source of inspiration for the modern African artist. Although the Zaria Art Society members were explicit about their concern with the overbearing influence of the West on their arts education, they were neither the first nor the last to voice this sentiment. Around the same time as the formation of the society, Nigeria’s ministers of education were seeking to integrate a curriculum that drew equally from tradition and modernity in the arts after a long-standing debate over the nature of Nigeria’s arts curriculum as articulated by two men: Chief Aina Onabolu and Kenneth Murray.

Onabolu studied art in London and Paris then returned to Lagos in 1923 with intentions of introducing Western artistic notions of perspective, proportions and media such as painting on canvas to the secondary school system. He also convinced the administration to recruit teachers from the UK who could assist with instituting the new arts curriculum. One of those teachers was Kenneth Murray, who would disagree with Onabolu’s sweeping embrace of a foreign system of arts education, and would instead push for the reintegration of traditional arts and crafts. Ultimately, despite the development of these two schools of thought, the secondary school curriculum was unified under the Cambridge University School Leaving Certificate Examination, the British rubric upon which all Nigerian curricula were based. This system remained largely unchanged from the late 1930s to the time of independence, prompting Ulli Beier to declare in 1960 that, “art teaching suffered the same failing that the whole of Nigerian education suffered. It is too foreign oriented.”²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Chidum Onuchukwu, “Art Education in Nigeria,” *Art Education* 47, no. 1 (January 1994): 57.

Concerns for the state of African art also came from abroad. In a controversial essay titled, "Return to Origins," Frank McEwan, who at the time of publication in 1968 was the director of the National Gallery of Art in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), forcefully argued that a century of interference by foreign explorers, missionaries and colonizers had dispossessed Africa of its "creative essence." According to McEwan, while those in the rural areas of East Africa squandered their creative talents making trinkets for the tourist industry, African students ensnared within the Western educational system were far worse off, for their indoctrination had resulted in a near continent-wide destruction of authenticity in African art.

McEwan proposed the art workshop as a viable alternative to the art school. Opposed to the rigidity of the university curriculum that 'destroys art from the moment of its birth,' McEwan conceived of a workshop that was loosely structured, allowing the artist to come and go as he or she pleased and work when creativity struck.²¹⁶ More importantly, given the proper support and protection McEwan envisioned an environment where the artist could rediscover and revive African expressive culture, not to ape tradition, but to tap a deep well of inspiration that could revive the creative spirit and counter the influence of the West.

McEwan was not alone in this vision. In Nigeria, a young missionary named Kevin Carroll with the Society of African Missions from Ireland recruited dozens of sculptors, bead workers, textile artists and carvers to form the Oye-Ekiti Workshop in 1947. The intent of the Oye-Ekiti workshop was threefold: to develop a Yorubanized Christian art genre for use in the churches of Southwest Nigeria, to preserve and promote the local arts by encouraging artisans to synthesize Yoruba forms and styles with Christian iconography, and to stage a modernist resistance to the imposition of European religious imagery.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Frank McEwan, "Return to Origins: New Directions for African Arts," *African Arts* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1968): 88.

²¹⁷ The church played a large role in the early stages of decolonization. Carroll also encouraged his participants in the workshop to continue working with their traditional patrons and fulfilling their commissions so that they would not lose their original source of inspiration and financial income. He encouraged participation in the workshop regardless of the person's religion. See: Nicholas J. Bridger, "Oye-Ekiti Workshop: Creating African Christian Art in Nigeria," *Material Religion* 5, no. 1 (March 2009): 108.

Among several of Kevin Carroll's participants, many of whom had illustrious art careers including the sculptor Lamidi Fakeye, was the young Bruce Onobrakpeya who joined in 1967, five years after his graduation from the university at Zaria. Carroll commissioned Onobrakpeya to paint the Stations of the Cross for St. Paul's Church in Lagos, marking the first of many collaborations between the two men. Onobrakpeya attributes much of his own success as an artist to Carroll's patronage during these formative years of his career.²¹⁸ It may have also inspired him to integrate Yoruba textile design into his work.

Adire features heavily in Onobrakpeya's depictions of the scenes of Christ's crucifixion and death, particularly where Veronica is shown offering a shawl to wipe Christ's face. Set against a background of a leaf motif commonly found on *adire eleko*, Christ, burdened by the weight of his cross which is also adorned in *adire*-like patterning, reaches out to take the cloth from Veronica who is dressed in an *adire gele* and wrapper. Still relatively unfamiliar with the sartorial culture of the Yoruba, the commission for St. Paul's offered Onobrakpeya the opportunity to experiment in blending imagery, icons and styles within a Christian framework, creating within this time dozens of works in the Christian theme including the aforementioned "Nativity II." Specifically, Carroll's commissions came with the objective of manifesting a "Yorubanized" Christian imagery, an aim that could be realized through the application of synthesis.

Although the mid-1960s were the years he spent travelling to Yoruba towns and observing the culture and way of life, he was also exposed to the type of work that was created within the Oye-Ekiti workshop under Carroll's tutelage. In all likelihood, Onobrakpeya would have seen works such as the Nativity crèche carved by the young artist named Bandele. The carver experimented with a merging of Yoruba forms with the Christian story. Alongside Carroll and a few other local artists, Bandele produced a crèche that was sent to Rome as an example of Christian art in the Yoruban context and vernacular.²¹⁹ The result combined woodwork, beads, textiles, embroidery and weaving in the creation of six figures: Joseph, Mary, baby Jesus, and the three kings. Although Joseph and Mary appear fair-skinned and

²¹⁸ Nicholas J. Bridger, *Africanizing Christian Art: Kevin Carroll and Yoruba Christian Art in Nigeria* (Cork, Ireland: Society of African Missions, Irish Province, 2012), 91–93.

²¹⁹ Bridger, "Oye-Ekiti Workshop: Creating African Christian Art in Nigeria," 109.

clothed in plain tunics, the three kings are dark-skinned and adorned in the accoutrements of West African royalty. While certain items identify the kings directly with Yoruba kingship and Ifa divination, such as the beaded crown and the divination bowl, they also wear robes made of *kente* cloth. While their garments are Asante rather than Yoruban, they nevertheless symbolize royalty in the West African context, and serve to fulfill the objective of the workshop by displaying a coexistence of European with Yoruban artistic styles, and Christianity with indigenous religion.²²⁰ What appears crucial to the appropriation of Yoruba textiles in the context of Christian art is that the textiles present a means of inclusion of indigenous forms of religion and authority in a manner that is non-threatening to the European Christian audience.

The visions of Carroll and McEwan were hardly identical but they had all the trappings of European patronage familiar across Africa in the late colonial period, the type of involvement criticized by V.Y. Mudimbe in *The Idea of Africa* that aimed at rescuing indigenous art from foreign influence but that ultimately reproduced a great deal of the problematic dynamics of teacher and student, patron and artist that the workshop intended to supplant.²²¹ Even Onobrakpeya, who is quick to extol Carroll, has criticized McEwan's assertion that African culture has been broken down by calling it a "typical neo-colonial" lamentation about Africa.²²² Kenneth Murray's initiatives have been criticized as well. Both Oguibe (2002) and Okeke-Agulu (2015) contend that Aina Onabolu's encouragement of students to experiment with new forms and techniques was more aligned with the Nigerian modernist experience than Murray was, a position that contradicts prevailing views of the development of early artistic Modernism that typically viewed Murray's position as pro-Nigerian. Murray zealously promoted a preservation of culture, introducing a discourse of authenticity that served to both undermine Onabolu's work and create a prescriptive model of production that was replicated elsewhere in Africa.²²³

²²⁰ Bridger, 109.

²²¹ Mudimbe compared both McEwan and Carroll's efforts to Pierre Romain-Desfossés' project in Lubumbashi, D.R.C. (formerly Elisabethville) to "awaken in his students this ancient, aesthetic memory" that had been abolished by the interference of white men. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, 160–61.

²²² Safy Quel, ed., *Bruce Onobrakpeya: Symbols of Ancestral Groves* (Lagos, Nigeria: Ovuomaroro Gallery, 1985), 25.

²²³ Oguibe, "Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art," 249.

Notions of authenticity rooted in African culture echoed across the political spectrum as well. Freshly independent nations looked to the past in the making of a new, modern, national identity. Charismatic leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Leopold Senghor encouraged all Africans to embrace their culture and history with pride, a mission Nkrumah translated into dress by wearing *kente* cloths almost exclusively. Pan-African events, such as FESTAC hosted by Nigeria in 1977 put the continent's cultural heritage on display on an international stage. For Onobrakpeya, who took part in FESTAC '77, the event was a huge source of pride for him and his fellow Nigerian artists, and it encouraged a continuation of the spirit of synthesis to "take the best from our culture and the best from outside and move on from there."²²⁴ For others, the experience of FESTAC, and more specifically its repercussions in the decades after it, has had a hampering effect on innovation in Nigerian aesthetics. Professor Denis Ekpo, for example, argues that for many Nigerians "the concept of culture is trapped in the FESTAC spirit" and as a result art has served as the handmaiden to the preservation of culture.²²⁵

To a large extent, the influences of foreign workshops and their figureheads shaped an entire generation of artists by emphasizing the importance of African identity. Curator Simon Njami identifies this generation as the first of three stages of metamorphosis for the African artist. Artists in the first stage exhibited an extreme celebration of African roots that corresponds with the period immediately following independence. Specifically, artists took pride in exhibiting their "Africanness" in the form of visual arts.²²⁶ The resulting work, exemplified by the Nsukka and Zaria artists, has been described as an "ethnoaesthetics" and is attributed to the politics of the postcolonial state.²²⁷

²²⁴ Bruce Onobrakpeya on the benefits of FESTAC '77 speaking during a roundtable discussion at "Across the Board, Interdisciplinary Practices: FESTAC '77" Hosted by Tate Modern at Terra Kulture, Lagos, Nigeria Friday 18th April 2014

²²⁵ Denis Ekpo in a roundtable discussion at "Across the Board, Interdisciplinary Practices: FESTAC '77" Hosted by Tate Modern at Terra Kulture, Lagos, Nigeria Friday 18th April 2014

²²⁶ Simon Njami, "Chaos and Metamorphosis," in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (Düsseldorf, Germany: Museum Kunst Palast; Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 20.

²²⁷ Moyo Okediji, "Ona and Uli: Ethnoaesthetics and Postcoloniality in African Art," in *The Nsukka Artists and Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Ottenberg (Washington DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 205.

There appears to be a contradiction between the critical reception of the “return to origins,” to borrow McEwan’s phrase, when it is advocated by a European or when it is practiced by an African artist. Oguibe posits that the Zaria Art Society’s means of appropriation did not constitute the same problematic turn to the indigenous and traditional as markers of authenticity as Murray, and Okeke-Agulu defends the originality of the Zaria group in their individual approaches to synthesis and tradition. Only Ulli Beier recognized it: “there are more and more young Africans who join the expatriates in crying: We must preserve our traditional arts. This clamoring for the ‘preservation’ of African art shows how much the younger generation is out of touch. It assumes that traditional cultures are in fact dead, that one is dealing merely with art objects, as if they were archaeological discoveries, and not with living people who are still, all over the country, using these objects in sacred ritual.”²²⁸

Beier goes on to discuss the dilemma posed in the preservation of objects. When an official of the Nigerian Antiquities Service sees a “traditional” object in use in a village and he purchases it and places it in a museum, he succeeds in preserving the object. However, in doing so he becomes complicit in the destruction of the culture in which the object served a function, and the object becomes useless and *museal*. If he sees the “traditional” object and leaves it where he found it, it will continue to be used by the culture, but risks succumbing to some form of destruction. In other words, to attempt to preserve something that is still alive may actually produce the inverse effect. His cautionary tale applies to the modern artist, who in mining his or her indigenous culture for objects or forms becomes the archaeologist or ethnographer of that culture which implicitly places the “modern” artist in a position of power relative to the “traditional” artist.

The gender implications of this hierarchy cannot be ignored when the vast majority of the “modern” artists were male. While scholars have addressed the gender discrepancy in Nigeria they have done so by attempting to justify female absence or attempting more inclusive attempts of historiography. Okeke-Agulu, for his part, inserted the work of Colette Omogbai into his text *Postcolonial Modernism* and explains that her expressionist work and her rejection of received aesthetic traditions

²²⁸ Ulli Beier, *Art in Nigeria 1960* (London; New York; Ibadan: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 6.

were opposed by older artists, which is the reason her acceptance into the Lagos art scene was hard won.²²⁹ Even while Omogbai's stance towards the Western influence in Nigeria's art education and her aesthetic and theoretical questioning of established artistic criteria aligned her in many ways with her Zaria contemporaries, she was challenged on the basis that she had not shown mastery of representational draftsmanship and her work did not "look feminine." By contrast, Onobrakpeya also struggled with representational draftsmanship and drawing in the round, favoring a flattened plane and expressionistic style, for this he has been hailed a 'creative genius.' Oguibe has argued the issue lies in the fact that women's artwork did not differ enough from their male counterparts. In particular, their representations of women looked exactly like those produced by male artists, which is to say that they were essentialized images of women in the limited roles of dancers, market women, and mothers.²³⁰ This is indeed true, but rather than account for the lack of women in the arts it shifts the blame onto women for their own absence, and fails to engage critically with the representation of women in male artistic production.

The historical work of retrieval is only worthwhile if it serves to unpack and disrupt the meta-narrative or canon that created the center-periphery paradigm to begin with. This need not be an assault on the male practitioners but rather a critical analysis of how a European patriarchal system was adopted and "synthesized" along with its aesthetic conventions. In the specific case of Nigerian art, none of the scholarly accounts address the problematic conflation of tradition and indigenous culture with women within those paradigms of synthesis, even as these practices have effectively edged women out of the framework of modernity while claiming to be inclusive of them.

This chapter has looked to the past in an attempt to identify the junctures and shifts that created what many comfortably refer to as the genre of Modern art in Nigeria. Defined loosely by the politics of post-colonialism, nationalism and the variety of artistic styles that were spurred by notions of synthesis, Modernism in the context of

²²⁹ Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism : Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, 256.

²³⁰ See: Olu Oguibe, "Beyond Visual Pleasures: A Brief Reflection on the Work of Contemporary African Women Artists," in *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists*, ed. Salah M. Hassan (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997), 63–72.

Nigerian art proved to have a difficult relationship with tradition and indigenous culture, much as it has had in the West. Equally so, artistic Modernism in both parts of the world had a conflicted relationship with gender, undermining women's artistic and cultural production through its terms and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Writing women out of the nation's Modern art history was the work of colonial authorities, artists, curators and historians, Nigerians and foreigners alike.

Taking the *adire* cloth as both its lens and subject this chapter questioned the tenets of Modern art, particularly as those tenets hinged on its difference from tradition. *Adire*, in the methods of its production and its expressive function in Nigerian dress, proved to complicate that difference through its own modernization and contemporaneity. The next chapter looks at the ways that *adire* evolved past Zaria, Oshogbo, and past its own modern era. In a demonstration of *adire*'s continued evolution, the developments that shaped *adire*'s image and function in the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st will be explored as *adire*'s patterns and history inspire new generations of artists and designers. In ways that depart drastically from the generation that came of age in the 60s and 70s, *adire* will continue to be adopted into art, fashion, and digitally printed textiles, especially through the ever-expanding social-sartorial practice called *aso-ebi*.

CHAPTER THREE

Transcending “Tradition”: Making and invoking memory through dress, design, and art in contemporary Nigeria

This chapter introduces and analyses several social phenomena related to dress that have surfaced in contemporary art practice. It argues that the younger generations of artists, designers, and other cultural actors born after the shift to independence are freed from the conceptual constraints related to nationalism, colonialism and tradition that weighed heavily upon the shoulders of the older artists discussed in the previous chapter. Influenced by globalization, both its benefits and its threats, these artists that came of age in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s, explore themes of international relevance in an indigenous and local vernacular. Their work critically invokes and pays homage to the past without being hampered by tradition. The chapter begins with the practice of *aso-ebi*, or “cloth of kin” which is the wearing of uniforms made of the same cloth by families or other groups, and proceeds to explore interrelated events, practices, and trends including the popularity of commemorative and portrait cloth, the rise and decline of the Nigerian factory textile, the flood of legal and illegal Chinese products onto the textile market, the recurrence of textiles in portrait photography, and finally, the overlapping of contemporary fashion design with contemporary art and textile production. Underlying the correlation of these phenomena are acts of remembering and being remembered.

***Aso-ebi* and the Economy of Dress and Memory**

'Aso-ebi'

*I have seen madness dissolve madness
And craze beget yet another craze
And fashion turn the scales of praise
And clothes give a false look of freshness
And yards of aso-ebi threaten the sky
Settling friends and parting them
Leaving many homes high and dry
The steersman knocked off the helm.*

-T. C. Nwosu 1965²³¹

This eight-line poem from an issue of Nigeria Magazine articulates the social pressures that might accompany participation in the sartorial practice of *aso-ebi*. The poem was written five years after Nigeria gained her independence, a time when the role of portrait and commemorative cloth in political and other social occasions reached new heights. These trends helped to drive *aso-ebi*'s expansion beyond a family-bound practice of the Yoruba to include friends, colleagues, church congregations, sports teams, political parties, wedding guests, even strangers seeking acceptance into a given social group. It was also no longer an exclusively Yoruba tradition, but was used to visually unite groups across new boundaries and identities. As one scholar argued, "*aso-ebi* negotiates the limits of trans-cultural diffusion by filtering into other ethnic groups both in Nigeria and other West African sub-regions," suggesting that this primarily Yoruba practice has played an important role in the drive towards national unity over ethnic difference in the decades following 1960.²³² In other words, *aso-ebi* had the capacity to unite citizens of a new nation through an aesthetic of patterned uniformity without sacrificing individuality or erasing ethnicity. In much the same manner that the Zaria artists sought to transcend ethnic and religious difference through a synthesized aesthetic in visual art, *aso-ebi* evolved by integrating the past with the modern present through the medium of the textile.

Although the exact origins of *aso-ebi* are unknown, the issue of financial strain it placed on practitioners *leaving many homes high and dry* and its apparent increasing rate of occurrence was well underway by the first decades of the 20th century.²³³ At this time, newspapers in Nigeria were receiving letters to the editor from readers who complained about the increasing costs and pressures to keep up with the demands of *aso-ebi*, particularly in the event of a wedding when it was customary for the groom to pay to attire the bride's entire family, known as *Owo Aso Iyawo*. Some readers wrote in support of the custom but warned that it could get out of hand, while

²³¹ Published in Nigeria Magazine September 1965, No. 86, page 221. Literary supplement edited by Onuora Nzekwu. Published by Government of Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria

²³² Okechukwu Nwafor, "The Fabric of Friendship: Aso Ebi and the Moral Economy of Amity in Nigeria," *African Studies* 72, no. 1 (April 2013): 4.

²³³ While one source places its invention at the dawn of colonialism (Olukoju 1992, 2006), another dates it (falsely and without evidence) to 1920 (Akinwumi 1990).

others called it “degrading,” “worthless” and “deplorable.”²³⁴ The financial concerns that have become a hallmark of public discourse surrounding *aso-ebi* prove to be over a century old. This early and ongoing discourse is significant because it sheds light on *aso-ebi*’s ties to the economy and the shifts towards an import-reliant textile industry that continues to dominate the landscapes of fashion and *aso-ebi* practice in 21st century Nigeria. These shifts had significant consequences for indigenous textiles.

By the 1940s, the popularity of indigenous fabrics, such as the Yoruba woven *aso-oke* cloth, and indigenous styles of dress for special occasions were on the rise, particularly among urban residents.²³⁵ Even though factory-produced imported cloth from Europe was widely available at the time, *aso-ebi* occasions were considered special and therefore indigenous fabrics and styles were still a popular choice for celebrants. Particularly for politically active citizens, indigenous textiles represented high quality domestic production and a symbolic rejection of European imports.²³⁶ However, the expansion of *aso-ebi* in both frequency and volume necessarily sparked a transition from locally produced fabrics to factory prints, albeit even as styles of indigenous dress became increasingly popular. This shift, and the mechanisms that brought it about, are evidenced by the case of the Anglican Church in Ondo. In this Yoruba town, Christianity was recognized and practiced in the mid-19th century and the church routinely commissioned commemorative cloths for its congregation on the anniversaries of the church’s 1875 founding and other significant events.

On the occasion of the church’s jubilee celebration in 1925, the reverend proposed that the congregation adopt a locally woven commemorative cloth to have as its own *aso-ebi* uniform that would serve as both a sign of belonging to the church as well as a way of recognizing the significance of the 50-year anniversary. The reverend chose a local cloth called *luboлегunekan*, which was considered the finest example

²³⁴ Aiye K’Oto, “Aso Ebi,” *The Nigerian Chronicle*, April 10, 1914, sec. Letters to the Editor, 4.

²³⁵ Based on Wass’ findings in her study of a Lagos family from 1900-1979. She notes that Western dress was widespread in the first decades of the 20th century for the purposes of special occasions in urban areas. Likely, Western dress was less popular in rural areas. See: Betty M. Wass, “Yoruba Dress in Five Generations of a Lagos Family,” in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 331–48.

²³⁶ Wass, 338.

of local weaving.²³⁷ Over the fifty years since its founding, the church's small congregation had grown considerably. The *aso-ebi* order to outfit each of the church's members in *lubolegunekan* amounted to several thousand meters of hand-woven cloth. This proved to be an impossible task for the women weavers who would have had to fill the order before the anniversary celebration. Once it was apparent that the order was too large for the weavers to fulfill, the reverend decided to seek out a stripe-patterned, factory-made cloth that resembled the *lubolegunekan* instead. When a search of the markets in Lagos and Ibadan turned up nothing of the kind, the reverend brought a sample of the locally woven cloth to a bishop in Lagos who commissioned a printed replica of the *lubolegunekan* to be made in England.

The printed cloth was not only swiftly produced in time for the congregation members to tailor it into new outfits, but at 3 shillings for five meters it was more affordable than the locally produced textile.²³⁸ The low cost made the cloth accessible to all members of the congregation, and it also allowed for pieces of the fabric to be given as gifts to non-members with the aim of recruiting new followers to the church.²³⁹ Wearing the cloth was a symbol of one's conversion to Christianity and belonging to the church community, but it was also symbolic of the Yoruba culture of Ondo. The striped cloth appealed to the local aesthetic of Ondo residents, reflecting foresight by the church leaders who used the visual language of an indigenous textile pattern to promote and integrate a relatively new and foreign religion.

Three more commemorative cloths for the Anglican Church of Ondo would follow in 1975, 1982 and 2002. No commemorative cloth was printed in 1950 because the church lacked the funds to order cloth from the UK, and no Nigerian factories existed at the time.²⁴⁰ Taken together with the 1925 *lubolegunekan* replica print, the latter three cloths roughly outline the trajectory of large-scale orders for commemorative *aso-ebi*, otherwise known as *aso-odun*. All three of the cloths were factory produced and featured graphics, portraits, or both, suggesting a definitive shift away from a specific local aesthetic towards a contemporary one. Following the trends for mid-20th century graphic prints across Africa, the iconography of these cloths sought to

²³⁷ Tunde M. Akinwumi and Elisha P. Renne, "Commemorative Textiles and Anglican Church History in Ondo, Nigeria," *Textile* 6, no. 2 (2008): 131.

²³⁸ Akinwumi and Renne, 132.

²³⁹ Akinwumi and Renne, 140.

²⁴⁰ Akinwumi and Renne, 141.

reinforce ideas of progress and modernity. Through illustrations of esteemed church members, emblems of education and material wealth, and the church's buildings, which reflected its growing acceptance amongst the local population through affluence, such textiles contributed to processes of development by illustrating various ideas about modernity and distributing them to the masses. By voicing collective aspirations for the future and inscriptions of the past through the vernacular of the printed textile, the Anglican Church of Ondo's commemorative cloths were consistent with emergent trends in national and Pan-African printed occasional cloth.²⁴¹

For the church's centennial celebration in 1975, the congregation size exceeded 20,000 members. By this time the Nigerian textile industry was producing its own factory printed cloth, allowing the church to avoid the expensive outsourcing that prevented them from commissioning a cloth in 1950. Printed in Lagos by the Nigeria Textile Mills, the centennial cloth featured a repeating pattern of four round vignettes displaying one of the church's original leaders, Bishop Charles Phillips, a Nigerian Christian family, a collection of Christian symbols, and an image of the Anglican Church Cathedral of Ondo. By 1982, the church's proposed design shifted away from the depictions of individual church leaders towards generalized Christian motifs such as bibles inscribed with uplifting psalms. The 2002 version combined images of the church and other symbols of Christianity while reintroducing portraits of church leaders. These design choices, which were often heavily influenced by the wealthy and educated congregation members, reflect not only the values of that group, but also a desire for the cloth to function as a historical document.²⁴²

The significance of the Anglican Church of Ondo's use of commemorative cloth and participation in *aso-ebi* is two-fold. First, the attempt and failure in 1925 to use a locally woven textile for *aso-ebi* provides insight into how *aso-ebi* presented opportunity to spurn local handmade production, and paradoxically, fabric orders of the magnitude required to clothe entire church congregations are in part responsible for the increase in demand for cheap, factory produced and imported fabrics, and a

²⁴¹ Catherine P. Bishop, "African Occasional Textiles: Vernacular Landscapes of Development," *African Arts* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 72–74.

²⁴² Akinwumi and Renne, "Commemorative Textiles and Anglican Church History in Ondo, Nigeria," 140–41.

turn away from indigenous production. Second, the stark differences in the design of the commissioned patterns from one anniversary celebration to the next roughly trace the evolution of consumer tastes in *aso-ebi* commemorative fabrics, which began with a preference for designs that resembled indigenous textiles and shifted towards photo-realistic representations of well-known persons and places, which coincides with the post-Independence popularity for portrait cloths used for nationalist and political purposes. Later cloths continued with the photo-realistic designs but featured symbols that represented modernity and progress in favor of specific identities, and finally re-integrated the portrait alongside symbolic graphics and text.

These findings coincide with the use of printed commemorative cloths for the royal family of Benin. Since 1978, remembrance of the king, or *Oba*, has been conducted through the commissioning of a portrait cloth from a Nigerian textile firm. Although these printed fabrics did not replace an indigenous fabric in the commemoration of individuals, the combination of realistic depictions of the deceased with emblems from Benin's rich cultural past in the form of the Queen mother head, situate the deceased in a long line of Edo cultural achievement and royalty.²⁴³ Thus, there are parallels between the use of commemorative print cloth by the Yoruba and the Edo, the religious and the royal realms. Above all, both groups incorporated familiar iconography (in the *lubolegunekan* and the Queen mother pendant) with the modern advantages of the printed cloth in the making of a new custom. The effect of these choices is that of continuity between indigenous culture prior to colonization and culture in the post-colony, expressed through the factory printed cloth.

The printed cloth is the vehicle through which the photographic pattern is disseminated to the people, and through which the people express their allegiance to the Edo hegemonic order. Yet, it is the photograph itself that operates to secure that hegemony by "constructing and construing the past and its presence in the incumbent reigning *Oba*."²⁴⁴ In particular, an image by Nigerian photographer J. A. Greene of *Oba Ovonramwen* following his capture and exile by colonial forces, has

²⁴³ Peju Layiwola, "Royal Textiles of Benin," *The Nigerian Field* 74 (October 2009): 15.

²⁴⁴ Charles D. Gore, "Commemoration, Memory and Ownership: Some Social Contexts of Contemporary Photography in Benin City, Nigeria," *Visual Anthropology: Published in Cooperation with the Commission on Visual Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (2001): 328.

played a key role as a representation of the monarchy. Ovonramwen's exile was part of the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 that aimed to bring the Kingdom of Benin under the control of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate. It was through this Expedition that the British seized a number of court art objects seen on other Oba's commemorative cloths. Many of the objects remain, controversially, in British possession. Therefore, their images, and the images of deceased or deposed monarchs reconstitute the Benin royal court in the collective Edo memory, not simply for the sake of remembrance but as acts of recognition of the continuing legitimacy of the pre-colonial kingdom, even within the current nation-state of Nigeria.²⁴⁵

The Rise of Factory Print

With the Edo case as well as the Church of Ondo, the ability to print portraits, photographs and other photo-realistic representations on cloth had clear and important uses. But it was also the ability to distribute the cloth to the masses that ensured its appearance in the public sphere, allowing it to function collectively as gestures of remembrance or allegiance.

Further case studies also shed light on the burgeoning of factory print. A study by Okechukwu Nwafor that sought to identify 20th century *aso-ebi* trends over the course of four decades from 1960 to 2000 found an increase in the use of factory print by the public in celebrating special events. This study, which used the work of Nigerian photographer J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere as visual documentation of Lagos women in *aso-ebi* uniform, concluded that in addition to responding to international fashion trends, *aso-ebi* preferences for specific cloth shifted significantly from a preference for Yoruba *aso-oke*, *adire*, and Austrian and Swiss lace to a widespread adoption of factory prints, or *ankara* in Nigerian parlance, in the practice of *aso-*

²⁴⁵ Gore, 327.

ebi.^{246,247} Beyond changing preferences for materials, this study also observed significant change in individual interpretations of dress codes and a loosening of *aso ebi*'s unofficial guidelines. While Ojeikere's images of women in *aso-ebi* uniform reveal an adherence to uniformity in the use of identical fabrics and identical combinations of skirt, blouse, and *gele*, by contrast, an image taken by the author of the study documented an example of *aso-ebi* trends in 2003 that indicated that the codes of sartorial conduct when it comes to taking part in *aso-ebi* have loosened significantly. The four women in the author's image each wear an outfit composed of identical *ankara*, but the similarity ends there. They exercise choice and individualism in the styles the fabric has been tailored into, the addition of different colored trim, the color of fabric used for their *gele*, and a diversity of accessories.²⁴⁸ Thus, as *aso-ebi* became more embedded in the social landscape of urban Lagos, the expression of individualism through accessories and styles of tailoring was permitted by adhering to the code of uniformity embodied by the factory printed textiles. In a sense, the factory print allowed *aso-ebi* participants to stretch the limits of uniqueness within conformity. In doing so, Lagos' citizens reinvented the notion of a national or culture-specific fashion.

A third study relevant to dress in Lagos looked at photographs from five generations of an elite Lagos family. It reveals ways that notions of the 'indigenous' were immersed with personal and familial dress over the course of the 20th century. Conducted by Betty Wass, the study examines a period from 1900 to 1974. It divides this time into three parts (1900-1939, 1940-1959, 1960-1974) and observes the shifting trends from period to period across age, marital status, education, and gender. Among a number of clearly visible shifts in the dress habits of the family's

²⁴⁶ The origin of the term *ankara* is disputed. Oyedele and Babatunde explain (without providing evidence or referring to their source) that a young Nigerian "girl named Ankara was given to the cheaper version of the Dutch Wax made by the Turks which was at the reach of the poor and was considered indigenous due to its vibrant colour and motif." John Picton suggests that the term comes from the Yoruba word for Accra, the Ghanaian city from where many foreign fabrics may have been imported to Nigerian markets. Pat Oyelola also cites the Yoruba name for Accra, 'ankra' as the source of the name, See: Pat Oyelola, "The Acculturation of Factory Print," *The Nigerian Field* 72 (2007): 3.; Carol Tulloch, ed., *Black Style* (London: V&A Publications, n.d.), 21.; Ayokanmi Motunrayo Tolulope Oyedele and Obisesan Babatunde, "The Resurgence of Ankara Materials in Nigeria," *Journal of Education and Practice* 4, no. 17 (2013): 167.

²⁴⁷ Nwafor, "The Fabric of Friendship: Aso Ebi and the Moral Economy of Amity in Nigeria," 4.

²⁴⁸ Nwafor, 4–6.

many members, Wass identifies several that are relevant to the discussion of *aso-ebi* in 20th century Lagos. Over the course of the early, middle and late periods, Wass found that in general, indigenous styles of dress increased significantly. The author found correlations between indigenous dress choice and gender as well as education. Women tended to wear indigenous styles more often than men (approximately 40% women vs. 11% men) even from the early period when use of indigenous styles was at the lowest rate throughout the study. Women's use increased steadily but incrementally over the three periods, whereas men's use of indigenous dress tripled after 1940. This increase in indigenous styles of dress in the middle period is attributed to an increase in nationalistic sentiment, which was expressed by educated, urban Lagosians through a rejection of Western style dress.²⁴⁹

Finally, Wass notes that in the early period there was little mixing of indigenous and Western styles.²⁵⁰ This changes however in the middle period when it became common, for instance, to wear shoes and a handbag (which were previously considered Western) with an indigenous style garment.²⁵¹ This mixing signaled the disintegration of two previously distinct categories, as well as an increasingly wealthy population that could now afford multiple outfits and accessories such as jewelry and handbags. It also signaled the increasing agency of individuals in shaping interpretations of the "indigenous" in fashion. A woman could dress in *iro* and *buba* made of fine imported cloth that reflected a cosmopolitan sense of style. Both the meanings and modes of dress were under constant reinvention. For example, whereas Western styles of business suits and tailored dresses once symbolized a highly educated person, it lost these associations in the 1940s and 1950s. By then, strict codes of fashion were being broken down into elements that were remixed into new, hybrid forms of dress.

Within this study, indigenous dress did not necessarily mean the wearing of indigenous fabrics, nor a strict adherence to "traditional" garments and styling. Although textiles such as *adire* and *aso-oke* are identifiable in some of the photographs from the early and middle period in Wass's study, it is not always

²⁴⁹ Wass, "Yoruba Dress in Five Generations of a Lagos Family," 338.

²⁵⁰ Wass, 334.

²⁵¹ Wass, 340.

apparent whether the fabrics were produced domestically or imported. Wass does mention, however, that during the politically active decades leading up to and immediately following independence, indigenous fabrics were enjoying a revived appreciation amongst elites. Yet, although these handcrafted items were promoted as being of equal quality to European imports and aligned with pro-nationalist interests, consumers still preferred the variety and affordability of European factory imports when it came to their own wardrobes.²⁵²

Although these studies differ significantly in their focus groups and objectives, all roughly sketch a similar trajectory suggesting that over the course of the 20th century *aso-ebi* and commemorative practices proliferated, engaging larger groups of people and with greater frequency. As this unfolded, the taste and necessity for cheaper, widely available factory prints grew, and the market that supplied these *ankara* fabrics grew along with it.

In today's social milieu, *ankara* remains the primary choice for *aso-ebi* practitioners because it offers an enormous selection of patterns in a wide range of quality and prices. This is significant because within *owambe* party culture and other social events that call for *aso-ebi*, the purchase of a cloth is part of a cycle of gift giving whereby, although the textile serves as the vehicle through which the gift is bestowed, it is merely the first step in a series of exchanges or refusals that mediate one's standing in the social sphere. According to one source, the aim of the initial selection is to find a cloth that looks expensive with a low price point. The fabric is then sold to the celebrant's friends and family members with a mark-up of about 50% of the original cost. The benefit of this exchange for the celebrant is that he or she recovers some or all of the cost of the party. A higher mark-up however, particularly on an already expensive cloth, can amount to a subtle means of extortion.²⁵³

The benefit for the party attendees who partake in purchasing and wearing the cloth are more nuanced, they range from a token gift bag containing small trinkets to larger displays of appreciation such as being served the best food during the

²⁵² Wass, 338.

²⁵³ Tobias Wendl, "Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 39 (2001): 81.

meal.²⁵⁴ By contrast, opting out of the selected *aso-ebi* attire can have adverse effects on the partygoers, which include being denied the best food, or being left out of group photographs. These numerous exchanges of gift and counter-gift are not finished after the celebration ends, but rather they inspire those who attended to throw their own celebrations, partially motivated by a desire to recover the cost of attending the previous party, creating a cyclical system of exchange. Participation in this system requires investments of both time and money, creating a financial obstacle towards social acceptance and an elevated social status. The line from Nwosu's poem, *and fashion turn the scales of praise*, encapsulates the direct relationship between dress, as it is often dictated by *aso-ebi*, and social acceptance or rejection.

Modernity and Synthesis in Nigerian Fashion since 1960

The studies by Nwafor, Wass, and that of the Anglican Church of Ondo revealed similar findings about the shifting meaning behind dress according to cultural and national values, as well as the development of modern dress through a mixing of indigenous, Western, and newly invented styles. Specifically, Nwafor's study highlighted the adaptation of the mini-skirt, a wildly popular fashion trend of the 1960s born in London, into *aso-ebi* attire by fashioning them out of indigenous-style fabrics. Wass' study called attention to the role that anti-colonial politics played in shaping the fashions of educated, urban elites, while the congregation members of the Anglican Church of Ondo demonstrated a collective desire for progress through their choice of cloth designs. As these trends developed at a time of nationalist fervor, fashion designers, textile manufacturers and tailors found themselves at the frontier of political movement as they helped shape the tastes and styles of modern dress. A photograph of a woman and her child dressed in outfits tailored from factory print cloth celebrating the Nigeria's independence in 1960 illustrates how a cloth commemorating Nigerian Independence from Britain functioned as an expression of patriotism and solidarity with fellow citizens. The woman's wrapper is patterned with a lion, the Nigerian flag and a crown motif similar to that seen on *oloba* patterns, as well as the words "Nigeria" and "Freedom." Her child wears a different design

²⁵⁴ Oba Adeoye, "The ASO-EBI Factor and the Yorubas," Blog, *Oba' Adeoye 1st*, (Accessed July 12, 2016).

featuring “1960 Independence” (Figure 3.1). The woman’s sandals and jewelry combine with the political message of her *iro* and *gele* to create a form of dress that draws upon both notions of “traditional” and “modern” set within the specific context of the newly founded nation of Nigeria.

A founding figure of Nigeria’s modern fashion and a contemporary of the Zaria Art Society artists, Folashade Thomas-Fahm further transformed these two notions of dress through her own fashion line and ideology. Thomas-Fahm believed that personal aesthetics were integral to the successful formation of a new nation and the modern self. Proper dress was an expression of pride in oneself, and by extension, of pride for one’s country. Thus, nationalism could be expressed through something as simple as a well-tailored outfit.²⁵⁵ For her, dressing well was more than just a choice of what to wear. It meant selecting the best fabrics in suitable weights and colors, and tailoring the fabric such that the garment complemented the female form, and completing the look with proper footwear and accessories. Good personal hygiene, good-posture, carrying oneself with poise and using good manners all contributed to this vision of one’s best self, a self that collectively would be the face of the new nation. “The way to the nation’s heart” she writes “could be the way you dress, what you wear and the way you wear it.”²⁵⁶ Thomas-Fahm made dressing well not just a goal for the elite and wealthy, but for everyone. To her it was a political imperative.

In 1967, the Zaria artist Yusuf Grillo was teaching at the Fine Arts Department in Yabatech when he met Folashade Thomas-Fahm for the first time. A few years out of a fashion design course at St. Martin’s College of Art in London and beginning to make a name for herself as the first fashion designer in Lagos, Thomas-Fahm invited Grillo to come and see her show at the University of Lagos. Several years prior to coming into contact with the Zaria alumna, Thomas-Fahm was already experimenting with the ways locally produced fabrics such as *adire* and *aso-oke* could be reinvented through a fusion of modern, Western, and indigenous styles. Working independently in a manner remarkably similar to the Natural Synthesis artists, Thomas-Fahm developed new fashions that drew upon existing modes of

²⁵⁵ Shade Thomas-Fahm, *Faces of She* (Lagos, Nigeria: Tegali Communications, 2004), 180–81.

²⁵⁶ Thomas-Fahm, 180.

dress including *gele*, *iro* and *buba*, in ways that reflected a deep knowledge and respect for the social and historical significance of dress in urban Nigerian culture, and the business acumen to recognize the enormous opportunity for a brand based on local aesthetics and values. These new designs, such as the *adire kaftan* intended for women to wear in the home while entertaining guests or an *adire eleko* midi-dress inspired by Western cuts, were tailor-made to suit individual women but maintained a larger, nationalist vision for Nigerian fashion (figure 3.2).

Indeed, dress was essential to independence movements and processes of decolonization in Nigeria and throughout Africa, as well as to the formation of pan-African identity and ideology that extended beyond the continent to African American culture and diaspora communities throughout the world. Thomas-Fahm may have been the pioneer of turning what was coming to be known as ‘national dress’ in Nigeria into a career in design, but she was not alone in her vision of the role of dress as a strategy in the process of decolonization. Across the continent, personal dress was on the frontline in a visualization of political autonomy. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of a newly independent Ghana, made a symbolic gesture of wearing the *kente* cloth produced by the *Asante* people. Specifically, he employed a pattern of *kente* previously reserved for royalty among the *Asante* kingdom, even though he was neither royalty, nor *Asante*. The idea was that the textile would retain its significations of power, authority, and royalty even when removed from its original context. For Nkrumah, this political manipulation of the cloth proved a powerful visual statement as he espoused his Pan-African vision and ideology.

Prior to becoming president, Nkrumah had already practiced with forms of dress as a political strategy by wearing the north Ghanaian tunic called *batakali* whenever he addressed the Convention People’s Party. This attire was usually accompanied by a passionate speech to his fellow party members, however, at more somber occasions, such as when he addressed the National Assembly, Nkrumah wore a Western style business suit.²⁵⁷ Nkrumah’s fall from power also demonstrated the ways that a turn of events or public opinion could be equally powerful forces in determining the meaning of a textile or garment. A *kente* cloth once known by the

²⁵⁷ Barbara S. Monfils, “A Multifaceted Image: Kwame Nkrumah’s Extrinsic Rhetorical Strategies,” *Journal of Black Studies* 7, no. 3 (March 1977): 314–15.

title “Fathia befits Nkrumah” after the engagement of Nkrumah to Fathia Helen Ratzk was later renamed “One man does not rule a nation,” a proverbial title alluding to Nkrumah’s later years when he was ousted in a military coup. His political enemies were the ones who renamed the cloth as part of a smear campaign against him, but it stuck in the minds of the public long after he was out of office.²⁵⁸

Textiles, Photography and the Desire to Remember and be Remembered

Perhaps equally as important as controlling one’s appearance is controlling the documentation of that appearance. At a certain point in Nkrumah’s political career, he made sure that he was wearing *kente* in nearly every official portrait photograph, ensuring that image of him would spread even in his physical absence. In doing so, Nkrumah elected a popular tactic for his own self-representation: manipulating image through the use of textiles in photography.

Well before Nkrumah’s portraits in *kente*, textiles and portrait photography had established a long, interconnected history in West Africa. While the portrait and occasional textile demonstrate a straightforward merging of photography with textile material and pattern, a person’s values were displayed through the medium of the cloth in less obvious ways. Before the invention of graphics on cloth, the textile served the purpose of garment, backdrop, and prop to the portraitist and his or her subjects. Composing a portrait also meant selecting, draping, or displaying textiles to the desired effect. The overlap between these two practices speaks to the importance of remembering, and the equal weight that photography and textiles hold in that process. The desire to be seen and remembered at one’s best works in cooperation with portrait photography. Even in the instance where the sitter does not have the resources for a new outfit or expensive accessories, the photographer can provide some as props, such that the image will convey affluence through fine fabrics and designer pieces, even where it does not exist.

Reminiscent of the frontal position of King George on the *adire oloba* commemorative cloth, which allowed him to appear stately and dignified and to show off his garments in full, conventions of early Nigerian portrait photography indicate a

²⁵⁸ See chapter four of *Kente Cloth: History and Culture* (UK: XLibris Publishing, 2017). (no page numbers)

desire on the part of the sitter to be captured, and thereby remembered, at their best. Since these frontal positions did not coincide with the conventions of European portraiture, it likely reflects choices made by the pattern designer or portraitist to comply with local conventions. The tendency to emphasize wealth through lavish displays of textiles or other material objects can also be observed in portrait studios across West Africa. In Ghana, the role of textiles in portraiture were so intertwined that it was common for the occupations of portrait photographer and tailor to be held by the same person, removing the middleman from the transaction where a customer wanted to be photographed in a new outfit.²⁵⁹ The practices of pioneering African portraitists like J.A. Greene and Chief S.O. Alonge of Nigeria, Malick Sidibe and Seydou Keita of Mali have been explored at length elsewhere (Geary 1988; Enwezor, Oguibe and Zaya 1996; Wendl and Behrend 1998; Haney 2004; Enwezor 2006; Leers 2013; Peffer and Cameron 2013; Anderson and Aronson 2011; Staples, Kaplan and Freyer, 2017), but it is worth noting that portrait photographers today, though often removed from the studio to makeshift stands at events, work with a similar objective to their predecessors to capture their sitters in the glory of their full attire. These contemporary photographers utilize portraiture in asserting their place in the continuity of West African photographic legacies. In Nigeria, such practices include George Osodi and Adolphus Opara both of who presented portraitist series in recent years such as Osodi's 'Nigerian Monarchs' and Opara's exploration of the custodians of Yoruba Orisha spirituality.

Portraitist collections contain invaluable visual archives of fashion trends, material fads, and speak to the values of the sitters and the societies they were a part of over a period of time spanning several decades. Thus, photographs, along with the textiles or fashions they capture, serve documentary and historiographical purposes as well. Some artists and photographers have seized upon the photograph's documentary capacity in order to engage with their personal or cultural pasts. The works of Kelani Abass, a painter and multi-media artist, blend photography, painting, performance and installation to mine his family's rich history as a material and conceptual archive. Many of these works, such as "Àsìkò 2 (Family Album Series),

²⁵⁹ Kerstin Pinther, "Textiles and Photography in West Africa," trans. Julia Ng, *Critical Interventions* 1, no. 1 (2007): 113.; Wendl, "Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana," 84.

utilize textiles in two forms (figure 3.3). Abass integrates family photographs into his paintings in which the family members are dressed in the same cloth featuring a carton of eggs pattern. The textile serves to identify and unify members of the family during the events, as well as in the photos that survive it. In “Àsìkò 2,” the archival photos are enlarged and reproduced on a deep blue background, which is a deviation from the ochre-hued compositions that make up the majority of the series. At first, Abass did not associate the use of the color blue with indigo, but later ventured to say that indigo dyeing had been part of his experience as a child growing up in Abeokuta where his stepmother, who had been involved in making *adire*, would make textile designs with him and the other children.²⁶⁰

The title “Àsìkò” is the Yoruba word for time. It was also the title of the solo show at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, which was called “Àsìkò: Evoking personal narratives and collective histories.” The word encapsulates both the photograph’s ability to capture or suspend time as well as the inevitable passage of time represented by the artist’s generational connection to the people in the images. In his own words, “[Photographic reproduction] captures an illusion; the intermingling of two inseparable elements, time and space, and the overlap of the past and the future.”²⁶¹

Many of the photos reproduced in Abass’ work are taken from family *owambe* celebrations that took place around the time of independence. As these *aso-ebi* events became more ubiquitous, it opened doors for aspiring amateur photographers who were hired to capture the occasion. According to Abass, these parties and their documentation were critical tools in the preservation of culture at a time when Western influence was still pervasive.²⁶² However, the photographs also document the formation of culture. Rather than a neat divide between past and present, indigenous and foreign culture, or a simple overlap of the two, these photographs and the works that they are integrated into show how *owambe* and fashion trends were utilized in the reinvention of culture for the independence era. Thus, as the subtitle for the exhibition suggests, the works are not just about Abass’ familial

²⁶⁰ Kelani Abass, interview with Erin Rice, March 28, 2014, at CCA Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria.

²⁶¹ Kelani Abass, “Àsìkò: Evoking Personal Narratives and Collective History (Exhibition Catalogue)” (Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, 2013), 14.

²⁶² Abass, 26.

history, but rather the images are representative of a national or Nigerian culture at large and its ongoing process of evolution.

This collective aspect of *owambe* and *aso-ebi* fashion is especially evident in the work of photographer Jide Alakija. Based in London, Alakija documents the extension of *aso-ebi* practices in weddings amongst the expatriate Nigerian community in the UK. He also documents weddings in Lagos. The images capture the variety of *aso-ebi* manifestations and the creativity with which wedding guests conform to the dress code while expressing their own individuality. However, removed from the context of Lagos or Nigeria, *aso-ebi* serves to culturally identify an entire expatriate community with Nigeria.

The artist stresses that the practice of *aso-ebi* at an event increases the importance of photography. Each guest, who has undoubtedly put in a considerable amount of money and effort into their outfit, may want to have their individual full-length portrait taken as a keepsake. The photograph and the outfit each play an instrumental role in the making of a memory of the day. Whereas the photo serves to document the subject's attendance at the event, and his or her dedication to the host's *aso-ebi* wishes, the textile, its pattern and color indicate the association the subject has to the host or hosts, since different cloths may be chosen for familial ties to the bride or groom, or other distinctions.²⁶³

As the traditional portrait has been displaced by the ubiquity of cameras, selfies, and the sheer frequency of events requiring a professional photographer, the overlap between fashion, photography, social gatherings and cultural expression has become increasingly pronounced. Alakija notes that in the UK, weddings and events have average attendances of 300 guests, a manageable number for a single photographer. By contrast, it is not out of the ordinary in Nigeria for 2000 guests to attend a single event.²⁶⁴ These numbers not only indicate the growing need for multiple photographers at Nigerian events, but they provide insight into the sheer volume of fabric required for an event where thousands of attendees are dressed in *aso-ebi* uniform. The frequency and volume of *aso-ebi*'s occurrence have

²⁶³ "Jide Alakija in conversation with Clara Giacalone and Jude Anogwih" in exhibition catalogue for *Owambe, Aso-Ebi and the Politics of Dress: Jide Alakija* (Lagos, Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos) 2011.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

undoubtedly played a role in the circumstances of the Nigerian textile market over the course of the 20th century. The extent of that role has yet to be thoroughly explored, however, photographic records indicate the popularity of foreign fabrics in the Nigerian sartorial landscape. From Dutch wax prints to Austrian and Swiss lace and factory prints from multiple sources, Nigeria has long been a major consumer of textile imports. Over the course of the last thirty years, the rising industrial power of China and other Asian manufacturers have brought about seismic shifts in global textile trade. For Nigerians, cheap cloth imported or smuggled from China has brought both devastation to the domestic textile manufacturing sector, and affordable fabric to the Nigerian consumer.

But Them Can't Be God: Chinese textiles in Nigerian dress and contemporary art

The tendency towards factory prints illustrated by *aso-ebi's* 20th century development and expansion reveals how the increasing demand for low-cost fabrics in high quantities has contributed to the closure of nearly all the nation's textile factories. Initially, Nigerians sought to offset the reliance on imports of printed cotton fabrics from European manufacturers. Numerous textile factories opened around the time of independence to supply the national market for printed fabrics with products made in Nigeria. Starting with the first factory opening in Kaduna in 1956, the industry grew rapidly into the 1980s to the point where it employed over 1 million people, generated over 1 billion NGN in yearly revenue, and with over 200 companies throughout the country was the second largest textile manufacturer in Africa, second only to Egypt.²⁶⁵ The federal military government became actively involved in protecting the Nigerian textile industry through policies such as the Indigenisation Decree of 1972 whereby foreigners were forced to divest from textile businesses in order to give Nigerians more share of the national economy and promote homegrown industry. However the policy also brought adverse effects for many Nigerians whose businesses relied partially on foreign imports and investments, including those who were already actively promoting sales of indigenous textiles.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Akinrinade and Ogen, "Globalization and De-Industrialization: South-South Neo-Liberalism and the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry," 163.

²⁶⁶ See for example how Folashade Thomas-Fahm's Lagos based fashion business was forcibly taken over by the military on the grounds that it did not comply with the decree: Thomas-Fahm, *Faces of She*, 171–73.

By the 1990s and 2000s the companies that once thrived and employed hundreds of thousands of Nigeria's workforce were struggling to remain profitable. Their struggles were due to a number of factors that included the collapse of Nigeria's oil refineries prompting a reliance on low-grade imported fuel, inadequate infrastructure and escalating operating costs, and the influx of cheap Chinese fabrics that came to Nigerian markets through smuggling or through legal trade made possible under the guise of South-South cooperation and the Structural Adjustment Programs instigated by the International Monetary Fund. The prices of Chinese imports were set so low that the competition was nearly eliminated, and any attempt at regulating the trade was undermined by rampant smuggling, counterfeiting, and government corruption.²⁶⁷ By 2007 the *Guardian* reported that 80% of Nigeria's textile market was dominated by Asian imports. A combination of these factors brought roughly 170 of Nigeria's textile manufacturers to close by 2008.²⁶⁸

In recent years, the contemporary states of fashion and a bleak outlook for the domestic textile economy have factored into textile-based and textile-inspired contemporary Nigerian art. Some of these artists, such as Obinna Makata and Victoria Udondian have used the textile and scraps of clothing as metaphors for rampant consumerism, using fabric scraps to provide both a material and conceptual starting point for their work. A 2017 project has collectively taken this metaphor one step further by using the Chinese influence on the Nigerian textile sector as a vehicle through which to explore the broader economic relationship between China and Nigeria. Under the umbrella project, 'ChinAfrika. under construction,' exhibited by the Galerie für zeitgenössische Kunst (GfZK) in Leipzig several Nigerian artists have taken this topic to task, while artists from other parts of the continent look at the relationship from other angles.

Using the cheap factory printed textile as the lens, one of these artists, Ayo Akinwande, questions the larger strategy of Chinese involvement in the construction of Nigerian infrastructure. His installation titled 赢得 – *Win* (the first word is "win"

²⁶⁷ Akinrinade and Ogen, "Globalization and De-Industrialization: South-South Neo-Liberalism and the Collapse of the Nigerian Textile Industry," 167–68.

²⁶⁸ Akinrinade and Ogen, 164–65.

written in Chinese characters) uses the formal language of the Yoruba *agbada* to address an issue of national significance (figure 3.4).

The *agbada* is a four-piece men's outfit composed of pants, a long-sleeved undershirt (Àwòtélé), a flowing sleeveless robe (Àwòsókè), and a hat (Filà). In Akinwande's version, the undershirt and robe are composed of cement bags bearing the Dangote label, the cement brand manufactured by the megalithic Dangote Group conglomerate owned by Nigeria's richest man, Aliko Dangote. Cement bags are combined with elements that directly reference the CCECC or the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, such as a blue aluminum belt bearing the acronym and a blue construction hat like the ones worn on their work sites. The materials are symbolic of the construction sites where they may have been previously used and discarded, and more significantly, where Chinese presence is pervasive throughout Nigeria.

Tucked into the pockets of the *agbada's* robe are 5NGN (Nigerian Naira) banknotes, an almost worthless denomination of the nation's currency that has been subject to steep depreciation since the mid-1990s. The notes are an allusion to the cheap price tag on Nigeria's land and resources, or perhaps to a bribe paid for the rights to those resources, which the Chinese now have a hold over. Yet the banknotes are only the most obvious reference to the economic relationship between the two nations. Other references lie in the shape of the blue belt, which resembles that of a heavyweight champion's belt, suggesting that in the wrestling or boxing match between Chinese, Indians, Lebanese, Europeans and Americans for control over Africa's resources, China seems to be emerging as the winner.²⁶⁹

As a popular choice for *aso-ebi* uniform, particularly for special events, the *agbada* represents something of a national outfit. By using the Dangote sack in place of an actual textile, Akinwande may allude to the monopoly Dangote holds on the industry, including all Chinese run and sponsored projects. The Dangote sacks serve as a suggestion that some Nigerians benefit financially from Chinese presence in the country. Alternatively, the Chinese elements of the *agbada* (which may include the sacks if that is where they are made) recall the Chinese domination of the Nigerian

²⁶⁹ Ayo Akinwande, 赢得 – Win, Artist's text.

textile market. Textiles undoubtedly represent one industry where Chinese presence in Nigeria is far-reaching. The sacks are ubiquitous and instantly recognizable throughout the country as a Nigerian brand of cement used in Chinese construction projects. In a sense, the piece becomes emblematic of what it is to be Nigerian in 2017, that is, to live in Chinese fabrics, Chinese houses, Chinese built cities and drive on Chinese roads while only the lucky few Nigerians are enriched.

On one hand, the *agbada* form presents a quiet resistance to the pervasiveness of foreign culture, much in the same way indigenous dress functioned as anti-colonial expression prior to independence. Following the transition from military rule to civilian rule in Nigeria, for example, the phrase “from khaki to *agbada*” was adopted to draw an analogy between clothing and two types of authority. Whereas khaki represented the military uniform, the *agbada* represented civilian dress following the presidential elections in 1999 in which a new civilian leader was democratically elected.²⁷⁰ On the other hand, the Dangote label, the blue belt, money, and hat erode that resistance by suffusing Yoruba dress and custom with cheapness and corporate branding. It serves as a reminder that culture, along with natural resources such as land and oil, can also be bought and sold to the highest bidder.

In a final nod to the textile, the undershirt of the *agbada* contains the transcriptions of several interviews Akinwande held with market traders working in Lagos’ Balogun market who do business directly with the Chinese. Handwritten by the interviewees in Pidgin English or their native Yoruba or Igbo languages, the inscriptions describe the experiences of the traders and their opinions of the Chinese. The testimony provides insight into the direct impact of Chinese involvement on individual traders, and like a factory print carefully chosen for its subtle message, it also communicates publicly on behalf of the wearer or owner. The messages that emerge, however, together represent ambivalence towards Chinese involvement in Nigerian economic affairs. Some traders have been negatively affected by business with the Chinese, complaining of language barriers, counterfeiters who photograph their wares and send the images back to China to be copied, and aggressive tactics by Chinese middlemen. Others, particularly those who were for decades denied visas to Western

²⁷⁰ Elisha P. Renne, “From Khaki to Agbada: Dress and Political Transition in Nigeria,” in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 125.

countries and access to European manufactured goods, are happy to do business with a nation that greets them with open arms and presents far fewer restrictions. While one inscription claims, "...one day China go rule the world through industry" another declares "BUT THEM CANT BE GOD." Their messages vacillate between praise and criticism, entrenching the work in ambivalence (figure 3.4).

These mixed reactions towards the Chinese also extend to the general public. According to Akinwande, the broadly negative perspective on Chinese products and their reputation for poor quality originates in the West. In Nigeria, access to cheap Chinese products, known locally as "Chinco," that are much more affordable than everything else on the market is seen an asset to many Nigerians experiencing financial difficulty. The lack of quality is only an issue in certain products. Some garments, for example, do not necessarily need to be of such high quality that they will last for many years. For special occasions where the garment will be worn only once a cheap Chinese suit may suffice. The string of imitation coral beads that accompany Akinwande's *agbada* provides an example of the sufficiency of a cheap substitute. Specifically, the bead necklace shows how Chinese imitations can seamlessly replace more expensive originals that play an important role in culturally specific practices. The beads are viewed as a symbol of royalty, originating in Benin. They are often worn by brides and grooms on their wedding day and for other special occasions in Benin and Nigeria. A necklace like the one seen in 赢得 – Win might cost upwards of 25,000 NGN (approximately 80 USD), especially if the beads are made of semiprecious stones or natural coral. Akinwande's string of plastic coral beads that were likely manufactured in China cost a mere 1000 NGN (approximately 3 USD). For many, the cheaper necklaces are indistinguishable from the pricier versions and do not sacrifice the association with royalty, wealth and status the beads are meant to convey.²⁷¹ This helps to explain the popularity of counterfeit designer textiles supplied by the Chinese that are bought even by wealthy consumers. Counterfeits are used to create the illusion of affluence and luxury (as opposed to quality) through a system of signs embedded in its patterns.

²⁷¹ Ayo Akinwande, interview with Erin Rice via Skype May 31, 2017.

Despite the optimistic title, 赢得 – *Win* is far from a declaration that the growing influence of China in Nigeria and throughout Africa is going to be beneficial for both parties. Akinwande suggests that only time will tell who will be the true beneficiary of this relatively new partnership. If Nigeria's own textile industry is any indication, the fate of other industries where Chinese influence has yet to be fully implemented does not look positive. The direct impact of Chinese trade on domestic textile production and commerce does not appear to be a concern of the artist. He cites the idea of a mantle, a heavy garment that rests on the shoulders, as the reasoning behind using the *agbada* as the main motif in a work that he explains is about the larger picture of China's immense presence throughout Africa, as if the entire continent were cloaked in a Chinese garment. Akinwande's piece pares this metaphor down to a Nigeria-specific uniform without engaging deeply with its symbolism. However, the mechanisms of the textile and dress are implicitly and explicitly at work in 赢得 – *Win*. The cement bag "textile" fashioned into the *agbada* robe and undershirt combine two easily recognizable and non-threatening forms from which Akinwande embarks on an exploration of other, sometimes sensitive themes. With the inscriptions for example, their messages are not intended to be read and understood by all of those who view the work. Written in languages indigenous to Nigeria, and not shared amongst all Nigerians, the inscriptions operate like some textile patterns that speak only to those who are privy to its meanings and messages.

Akinwande's form of dress utilizes the subtlety inherent to the material of a textile and the subject of dress. He uses the familiarity of the *agbada* form and the Dangote label to relate to multiple visual landscapes of Lagos. Inserting accessibility into the work, the textile constructs a form that is non-threatening in its familiarity yet presents a platform for critical engagement.

A Rebirth of the Indigenous Textile

Akinwande's work alludes to the circumstances of the industrial textile, specifically the Nigerian manufacturer. Of course, there are other players in the industry aside from Asian manufacturers. These include domestic (i.e. non-industrial) textile producers and Europeans who have been an integral part of the West African textile

trade since pre-colonial times. The conditions that have allowed Chinese products to dominate the textile industry have also forced these actors to reevaluate their strategy and role in the Nigerian market. One such European manufacturer, Vlisco, the Dutch Wax Print producer in Holland, took several steps to rebrand their products as luxury fabrics in an effort to combat cheap fabrics with high quality ones that appeal to wealthy and discerning clientele. Faced with sluggish sales and rampant counterfeiting of their products, Vlisco has carefully controlled where and by whom their fabrics are sold, assuring clients that the retailers can be trusted to sell the authentic cloth. Still, China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, which dropped restrictions on their textile exports, has presented a number of challenges to Vlisco's profitability. The legalization of Chinese trade in West Africa has come with the consequence of imitation cloths that use some of Vlisco's classic and best-selling patterns. These counterfeits, although easily distinguishable from the real Vlisco products at first, have become increasingly sophisticated. The quality is so high and the price so low in comparison to real Vlisco cloths that even devoted Vlisco clientele are buying them.²⁷²

Since 2004, a number of additional solutions have addressed these problems and reshaped the Vlisco name and the product. Perhaps most significant of these changes, Vlisco moved towards a high fashion profile by teaming with designers to showcase new collections of patterns that they paired with clothing designs and exclusive retailers in select African cities. Vlisco boutiques now boast *Prêt à Porter* lines, removing the tailor from the equation and providing the convenience of a finished product. Packages from the *Prêt-à-Créer* line come as boxed sets of Vlisco fabrics and crystal accessories that when combined with some of the patterns readily available on their website can help customers create the perfect Vlisco outfit on their own or with the help of a tailor.

The company strategy also includes seasonal releases of new patterns through a broad marketing campaign, allowing them to come out a step ahead of the counterfeiters and work with the fast-paced cycle of fashion seasons. These tactics appeal to the fashion-savvy consumer and their desires for new, unique patterns (as opposed to the classic ones that have been produced since the 19th and early 20th

²⁷² Jos Arts, *Vlisco* (Netherlands: W Books, 2012), 14–18.

centuries) and a product that conveys an image of wealth, success and good taste. The Luxury Edition fabrics from a 2012 line of Vlisco designs called “Silent Empire,” for example, featured Swarovski crystals, embroidery, and silver or gold thread, illustrating how one seasonal line integrated the company’s new strategy to produce fabrics distinctive in both design and material. The company has also integrated the custom of giving cloth as gifts by encouraging brides-to-be to “spoil” their friends, family and guests on the wedding occasion. The same page of the 2015 brochure advertises a regal blue evening gown, which may signal the intentions of the company to capture more of the *aso-ebi* market as a future direction for Vlisco (figure 3.5).

By marketing the company as the producer of new, unique, and “authentic” fabric, the Vlisco brand aligns itself with a market trend for high-quality, unique fabrics--a trend that has also permeated indigenous production and *aso-ebi* commissions. While the indigenous indigo dyeing industry in the 21st century is of a significantly smaller scale than in its 20th century heyday, it did not disappear altogether as many had predicted in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite periods of decline, there is also ample evidence of its survival and indications that it will be sustained for the future.

A search in 2014 for *adire* production and sales in the city of Ibadan and the Oje market that once bustled with *adire* vendors turned up little except the explanation that *adire* vendors had left the market to sell their wares in another part of the city, and a young man trying to make a niche for himself in the fashion business by resist-patterning and dyeing second-hand shirts in indigo. However, Abeokuta proved far more fruitful in the search for production that was running autonomously and resembled the 20th century industry. The following two case studies present examples of 21st century dyers who are running indigo dyeing businesses in Abeokuta that are sustained by local sales. Although Abeokuta was once a major center for *adire* dyeing with a large portion of production intended for export, current local dyers report that their clientele are Nigerians who want products made in Nigeria in a Nigerian aesthetic. The dyers use a combination of modern and traditional techniques, and a blend of Nigerian and foreign raw materials. Dyes, for example, are often imported from Germany, but the cloth they dye on is reportedly woven in Nigeria’s north, which is a significant departure from the 20th century accounts of *adire* production that utilized European cotton almost exclusively. It is in

the design of the patterns where these two textile producers diverge. Where one is committed to unique, bespoke patterns, the other remains a source for “traditional” patterns to satisfy those clientele that seek products that represent Yoruba or Nigerian heritage.

Textile designer Akeem Shofolahan of the Masallam Kampala Adire Factory of Abeokuta developed his local practice beyond the classic patterns of *adire*, preferring to work in a wax-resist type of *adire* dyeing called “English.” In 2014, Shofolahan was training up to 10 apprentices at a time in his factory. His team was working on a substantial *aso-ebi* order of upwards of 300,000 units for the Redeemed Church’s congregation. The commission was so prized that Shofolahan feared the design he had made especially for the congregation would be stolen, copied, and he would be undersold. To prevent this, he worked out of sight of the public and sold his products directly to his customers rather than at the market. Unlike nearby *adire* compounds where women worked outside, patterning, dyeing and finishing fabrics in plain sight of anyone who walked or drove by, Shofolahan’s apprentices labored furtively over thousands of yards of cotton inside small, private studio spaces. They worked at a quick pace with wax, hand-carved stamps, and multiple applications of different dye colors to produce a unique product that would represent belonging to the church for anyone who wore it. The final product was a blue cloth, similar to a natural shade of indigo blue, with alternating squares of decorative and cowrie shell motifs. Shofolahan went to great lengths to ensure the design would not be reproduced by anyone else, securing the commission for his business and assuring his clients that their *aso-ebi* uniforms would be one of a kind (figure 3.6, 3.7). It is clear from the design however, that he adhered to an aesthetic that would appeal to clientele in a town with an *adire* history. The palette, design, and grid layout are all reminiscent of classic *adire* patterns while remaining the invention of Shofolahan and his team.²⁷³

In an *adire* dyeing compound not far from Shofolahan’s studio, consistency, rather than secrecy and ingenuity of design, seem to be the key to sustainability. Run by Iyaaloro Olayemi Showunmi, her daughters, nieces and their children, her family

²⁷³ Shofolahan Akeem, interview with Erin Rice, Masallam Kampala/Adire Factory, Abeokuta, Nigeria, March 3rd, 2014.

brought the *adire* dyeing business to Ijemo, the *adire* dyeing quarter of Abeokuta, over 120 years prior. They sustained their business through the tumultuous decades in the early 20th century when *adire* peaked and then went into steep decline. Today, the family works in a similar manner to the *adire* production of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The open-air compound stretches across several homes, bisected by a narrow but busy road. Behind the homes the resist starch is applied with combs or stencils, or the fabric is machine sewn. All of these methods produce patterns that can quickly and easily fill the surface of an entire cloth. They are then dipped into dye vats, and hung to dry in the sun on the roadside before several more dips in the dye bath to reach the desired indigo hue. Finally, the starch resist is scraped off or the stitches are pulled out to reveal a completed cloth that is folded, packaged and sent to the nearby Itoku market (See figures 3.8, 3.9, 3.10).

The compound at Ijemo was producing common patterns that were neither time consuming nor difficult to apply, but like Shofolahan's new design, conveyed a sense of continuity with the past. The combination of Nigerian cotton with well-recognized Yoruba indigo patterns was something that had sustained the compound's business for over 120 years, and sticking to these local products was believed to be the key to remaining profitable. More difficult patterns were still made there as well, but they had to be requested ahead of time and could take months to complete. Showunmi, the family matriarch, was working on a raffia *alabere* cloth that had taken 3 months of labor to prepare it for the dye bath (figure 3.11). The white cotton fabric used by the family was also of great importance. They dyed only on matte and brocade white cotton from Kaduna in Nigeria's north, reputed to be of the best quality because it absorbed the dye well which helped produce colorfast fabrics.²⁷⁴

Shofolahan's Factory and the *adire* compound at Ijemo represent a straddling of industrial and handmade textile manufacturing, and as such, have defied expectations of indigenous industry and the odds of success against Chinese and other imports. Ijemo's Iyaalaro Olayemi Showunmi was confident in the sustainability of her compound because of the longevity of the *adire* industry in Abeokuta, and a continuing interest by Nigerians in the *adire* textile. Shofolahan shared in her positive

²⁷⁴ Iyaalaro Olayemi Showunmi and several family members, interview with Erin Rice, translation from Yoruba by Mike and Titi Omoighe, Ijemo, Abeokuta, March 3, 2014.

outlook, believing that the interest in unique, local, and handmade textiles would not fade anytime soon.

If recent national trends in high fashion are any indication, both Shofolahan and Showunmi are pioneers in their steadfast commitment to local products and designs. The textiles they produce indicate a possible future for Nigerian manufacturing that combine mass-produced raw materials with the distinction of local, hand-made production. The fabrics also bring to mind the era of indigenous production sought by purists at the same time that they are based on current and bespoke designs.

Aso-ebi's expansion, a takeover of the textile markets by low-priced Asian imports and smuggled goods, as well as the continued resiliency of the handmade indigenous textile all have ramifications for the appropriation of textiles in Nigeria's contemporary art and contemporary fashion. As the last chapter discussed, the field of indigenous textile design and production was intertwined with the burgeoning field of modernist art, particularly within the experimental Zaria and Oshogbo groups. Collaborations also came in more direct forms, such as the commissioning of modernist artist Erhabor Emokpae to design an impression of Benin's Oba Erediauwa I for his coronation commemorative cloth printed by the UAC.²⁷⁵ As younger generations of artists have inherited the legacies of Oshogbo, Zaria, and other pioneers, the fashion and art realm appear to have become far more intertwined and at times indistinguishable as both designers and artists realize the critical and conceptual potential of the textile and blur the lines between the disciplines of art, design and fashion.

Common Threads: Interdisciplinary overlap between contemporary art and fashion

In much the same manner that textiles like *adire* were reconceived in the 20th century as "traditional" in order to highlight the modernity of works by artists working in the 60s and 70s, fashion designers have also turned to fabrics, beads, jewelry, and other items associated with "traditional" African culture in order to imbue designs with a specific or generalized African identity. Particularly as fashion designers from African nations have brought their designs to global audiences, referents to specific cultures

²⁷⁵ Layiwola, "Royal Textiles of Benin," 14.

or localities, or nods towards a more ambiguous idea of “Africa” have become prevalent in high fashion. Bogolan, or mudcloth, for example, has been used to these ends in the designs of Chris Seydou, a Malian fashion designer who brought this emblem of traditional Malian culture to international fashion arenas through his synthesis with contemporary couture.²⁷⁶ By contrast, as a way of identifying culturally with Africa, African Americans have used Akan *kente* cloth, or rather a mass-produced simulacrum of it, broadly and indiscriminately. So-called “*kente* print,” which has been used to make everything from umbrellas to dashikis and handbags, simply “conveys Africa” in a non-specific sense, and therefore has served as a symbol of black pride for African Americans.²⁷⁷ Similar to *kente*, African prints, Dutch waxes, batiks, and the like have appeared in high and mainstream fashion over the last decade, signaling Africa without subscribing to a specific ethnic, national or cultural identity. Especially for designers who were not African, such as Japanese designer Junya Watanabe, printed textiles provided the fodder for his desire to re-imagine Africa in the Japanese context. For designers of West African origins the prints resonate personally and culturally while retaining a broad applicability. Nigerian-born Duro Olowu, for example, uses *ankara* because it reminds him of his childhood. It was the fabric his aunties from rural areas would wear and carry their babies in. Though it was associated with village life, and with poor, illiterate people at that time, *ankara* has undergone nothing short of a renaissance. In Oluwu’s words, “it is the denim of West Africa.”²⁷⁸ Like modernist designers, Olowu integrates the notion of synthesis into his designs, noting that African women tend to combine ‘traditional clothes’ with a Gucci scarf. He uses these seemingly offbeat combinations as a platform for experimentation.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶See: Victoria L. Rovine, “Fashionable Traditions: The Globalization of an African Textile,” in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 189–211.

²⁷⁷ Joseph K. Adjaye, “The Discourse of Kente Cloth: From Haute Couture to Mass Culture,” in *Language, Rhythm, & Sound: Black Popular Cultures into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 33–35.

²⁷⁸ Funmi Odulate, “Into Africa,” *Vogue*, 2009, available at: <https://www.bellanaija.com/2009/02/vogue-celebrates-nigerian-ankara/> (accessed 4/9/2012).

²⁷⁹ Judith H. Dobrzynski, “Africa and Its Spheres of Influence,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2010, Sunday edition, sec. Art.

Throughout the 90s and early 2000s, designers and artists alike seemed to awaken to the aesthetic possibilities of African print and their conceptual capacities as well. The realities of life in Lagos, for instance, were integrated into the 2009 line of clothing designed by Ituen Basi. At the time of a ban on the importation of foreign fabrics in Nigeria, Basi utilized *ankara* scraps in designs that mismatched colors and patterns in single pieces. The resulting patchwork effect inspired artist Peju Alatise's early fabric-based work.²⁸⁰ According to Basi's website, the 2009 line "started a new era of *Ankara* interpretation in Nigeria and Africa."²⁸¹ Since then, she has gone on to expand upon *ankara*'s material possibilities and to integrate the line drawings of artist Victor Ehikhamenor into custom-made fabrics for her 2014 line titled *Ekemini*. That same year, Ehikhamenor produced a work titled "I Hope You Remember" of enameled canvas that evokes the headscarf. The piece pays homage to the headscarves worn by his mother, and thus serves as a link to her memory and role in passing down cultural histories.²⁸² Similarly, Kolade Oshinowo who was inspired to start using textile scraps as a paint medium because his daughter was working as a fashion designer, stepped over the threshold of high fashion through a collaboration with Nigerian designer Tiffany Amber. In a collection titled "Rhapsody of Fashion & Art" Amber used Oshinowo's painting "Marketmood" to create a textile and a line of full-length gowns out of it.²⁸³ The paintings were displayed side by side with the new line of clothing at the release event.

If these collaborations between artists and designers are any indication of an increased blurring of the boundaries between artistic and design practices, then the menswear label Ikiré Jones may represent the completion of this process of seamlessly integrating two forms. Born in Nigeria and based in the US, chief designer and creative director Walé Oyéjidé, Esq. provides the artistic hook for the label's "international dandy" concept. With no formal education in fashion design, he

²⁸⁰ Peju Alatise, "Material Witness (Exhibition Catalogue)," ed. Dapo Akintunde (Nike Art Gallery, March 2012), 18.

²⁸¹ Ituen Basi "About Us" <http://www.ituenbasi.co.uk/index.php/about-us> (Accessed June 1, 2017)

²⁸² Liz Bolshaw, "Victor Ehikhamenor: Shaped by Memory and Tribal Tradition," *Financial Times*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/a3544b56-ce34-11e4-86fc-00144feab7de?mhq5j=e2>.

²⁸³ Dayo Adepoju, "BN Red Carpet Fab: Tiffany Amber Rhapsody of Art & Fashion Event," *BellaNaija* (blog), February 12, 2009, <https://www.bellanaija.com/2009/12/bn-red-carpet-fab-tiffany-amber-rhapsody-of-art-fashion-event/>.

relies on his creative vision and tailor Samuel Hubler to execute it to the standards of the label that seek to combine high quality Italian construction with African aesthetics.²⁸⁴ Although once part of the young generation of designers that experimented with the possibilities offered by African prints, Oyéjidé's more recent designs in silk have taken the notion of an "African aesthetic" in a new direction. Several of these new pieces have been included in a number of recent exhibitions that have explored precisely this phenomenon of the overlap between design and art, such as the "Making Africa: A Continent of Contemporary Design" that began in 2015 at the Vitra Design Museum in Germany and will tour until 2019. Included in this exhibition are a few samples from Ikiré Jones' line of scarves and pocket squares, which are smaller versions of his silk tapestries that immerse motifs from diverse sources spanning Italian Renaissance painting to masterpieces of 16th century Benin court art with people of color that have passed unsung through history. Through color and composition the silks resemble Italian renaissance paintings at first glance, but closer inspection reveals that they are interventions on the Old World Masters and the art historical canon they appear to mimic.²⁸⁵ Yet they are also objects of beauty and luxury on their own, and are intended to be worn with an Ikiré Jones bespoke suit.

Amaka Osakwe, founder of the fashion label Maki-Oh, has also skirted the line between art and fashion, though she is much better known for her clothing designs. Specifically, the Maki-Oh brand brought handmade *adire oniko* and *eleko* fabrics to *haute couture* runways and to ready-to-wear lines through Osakwe's transformative contemporary aesthetic. Celebrities such as Michelle Obama, Lupita Nyong'o and Solange Knowles have been seen wearing the *adire* lines, thus bringing the textile into an international spotlight like never before.²⁸⁶ The adoption of the *adire* textile is undoubtedly a strategy of connecting to Osakwe's heritage not unlike the strategies employed by other designers to place African fashion designs within specific

²⁸⁴ Poundo, "Prêt-À-Poundo: Ikiré Jones for The Western African and International Dandy," *OkayAfrica* (blog), May 10, 2013, <http://www.okayafrica.com/photos/ikire-jones-fashion-trends-menswear-west-african-prints/>.

²⁸⁵ See: <https://ikirejones.com/archive/>

²⁸⁶ See <http://issues.ayibamagazine.com/solange-knowles-in-maki-oh-at-bet-upfront-2015-event-in-new-york/> (accessed Oct. 17, 2015); <http://www.bellanaija.com/2014/03/11/presenting-the-maki-oh-fall-2014-ready-to-wear-collection-lookbook/> (accessed Oct. 17, 2015);

localities on the continent using certain materials. However, when those materials are mass-produced, it suggests the designers' commitment to cultural production is merely lip service. Osakwe cites her cultural heritage as her biggest source of inspiration and actively contributes to its continued production by using locally made, locally sourced organic cotton and silk dyed in natural indigo.²⁸⁷

Supporting the producers living off making *adire* today not only contributes to the sustainability of the practice, but assures Osakwe's products are entirely produced in Nigeria and benefitting Nigerian workers. This commitment to local labor and production coincides with Osakwe's knowledge of women's work and struggles in Nigeria's history. Her designs reflect this knowledge of female production, as well as the use of textiles to speak for women. Unlike with the appropriation of *adire* patterns into modernist paintings, Osakwe re-imagines the textile within the sartorial tradition of women's wrappers in which it was borne. Her Fall 2014 ready-to-wear line feature several ensembles honoring the wrappers and *buba* of colonial-era clothing that combined indigenous and Victorian styles but ultimately came to represent an anti-colonial sentiment in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. A wrap skirt from the Autumn/Winter 2014 line embodies this history of communication. The blue and white fabric is patterned with text in Yoruba language, a translation from three lines of poem-like verse about a fictional female character looking at herself in the mirror and speaking to her lover (figure 3.12). The design, both in the pattern as well as the combination of a wrap skirt with a blouse, recall *adire iro* and *buba* with commemorative text instead of graphics (figure 3.13).

Where Osakwe's designs evoke history and memory through subtle means, her art presents a more direct interaction with women's history through the medium of cloth and dress. "Nigeria at 50" is a multimedia installation that in addition to showing Osakwe's artistic side also makes known her knowledge of women's history and achievements in Nigeria's modern era. Composed of several cuts of fabric, differing in size, shape, color and texture, as well as a pair of sandals, "Nigeria at 50" pays homage to important female figures from the first five decades of Nigeria's independence, such as Nike Okundaye, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Buchi

²⁸⁷ Amelia Diamond, "Know Your Labels: Maki Oh," *Man Repeller* (blog), November 22, 2013, <http://www.manrepeller.com/2013/11/know-your-labels-maki-oh.html>.

Emecheta, an influential writer, among others (figure 3.14). Her inclusion of Ransome-Kuti may reference the early-20th century conditions of *adire*'s production as highly dependent on imported cloth and dyes, a dependence that ultimately implicated it in the political struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. It was at this time, when Ransome-Kuti utilized dress as a tool of resistance and an expression of defiance, opening the *adire* garment to new possibilities.

This installation together with her clothing designs reinforce the associations between women, labor and textiles. Yet rather than using *adire* and its history as cultural reference points, or a token acknowledgement of an ancient past or "tradition," Osakwe's engagement with the textile is in fact part of a continuing narrative whereby the fabric continues to be produced, and its uses continue to evolve. As the person controlling that production and evolution, Osakwe asserts her place amongst the women that have shaped culture and history. Pushing the material to what might be viewed as new extremes, Osakwe plays with notions of women, labor and textiles in her Spring/Summer 2012 promotional video that uses streetwalkers as models for her line of apparel. One of those women wears a pair of shorts made of *adire*. The shorts are cut very high, and the use of what is typically viewed as a "traditional" textile as sexually alluring attire is provocative. At the same time, it continues to be rooted in the experience of women and work and it evokes the various levels of dress and undress that Nigerian women have elected in the past as provocations. For example, women in the Niger Delta took naked to the streets to demand the oil company compensate for the havoc it wreaked on the Delta's people and natural environment. With nothing but their nudity, a serious cultural taboo, the seemingly powerless women of communities where Shell and Chevron operate all but brought the flow of oil to a halt.²⁸⁸ Osakwe's designs reorient the textile in relation to the body in garments that conceal or reveal, and are informed by the history of how, why, and by whom they were worn.

Beyond "Tradition": Temitayo Ogunbiyi's reinvention of *adire*

Similar to Osakwe, the practice of artist Temitayo Ogunbiyi presents new directions for the *adire* textile in the 21st century that pay homage to the industry's past while

²⁸⁸ Candace Schermerhorn, *The Naked Option*, Documentary, 2011.

defining its contemporaneity. For Lagos-based Ogunbiyi, the image of *adire* serves as an apt departure point for her multi-media textile works, which fuse the history of indigo dyeing in Yorubaland and technological innovation in a blending of form and content. Yet, as much as her work draws on textile practices of the past, it also demonstrates how acts of storytelling, commemorating, and memorializing have changed across the globe in the age of social media. Using the well-established association of *adire* and its more colorful “modern” variety *kampala* with the capacities for communication and their connections to Nigeria’s cultural history, Ogunbiyi weaves a contemporary tale of global interconnectedness while speaking in the visual vernacular of textiles. In the setting of Lagos, a city that speaks fluently in the pattern language of textiles while being simultaneously entrenched in the newest communication technologies and media, Ogunbiyi uses the textile as the vehicle through which she inserts herself and her appropriations of a popular *adire* pattern in the trajectory of several centuries of indigo dyeing history, and in the continual reinvention of the fabric’s role in contemporary Nigerian society.

Presented in London in 2012 during the Summer Olympics, Ogunbiyi’s Nigeria House installation, *Eagles Will Fly*, featured two fabrics digitally designed and factory printed with *adire*-inspired patterns that blended with images of famous soccer players from Nigeria’s past (figure 3.15, 3.16). Soccer was a sensitive subject to many at the time since the Nigerian national team, the Super Eagles, did not qualify for the 2012 Olympics. By putting the faces on a fabric—many of whom are depicted smiling or at a moment of jubilation—it is not the recent failures of the team that are remembered, but the team at its best during moments of past victories. Like a panegyric, the fabric brings together the triumphant moments of individual players in order to construct an image of the Super Eagles fit for the long life of a commemorative textile. Like the *adire oloba* and the many factory-printed commemorative portrait cloths that have come before it, the subjects are immortalized through a combination of photograph and fabric in the form of a pattern.

The soccer theme recalls a print cloth produced by the textile firm Sotiba following the 1998 FIFA World Cup tournament in which a popular Senegalese singer, Youssou N’Dour, sang the official anthem. Sotiba’s design integrated N’Dour’s image within a repeating soccer ball motif that made obvious allusion to the event, but also placed the musician in the position of the tournament’s star, instead of any of the

game's players from the French and Brazilian national teams.²⁸⁹ Undoubtedly, the choice was motivated by the Senegalese company's desire to sell to Senegalese clientele, however it also speaks to the ability for a commemorative fabric to shape cultural memory of a specific event through its imagery and design. In particular, Sotiba's design indicates how an international event is recast through the prism of regional or cultural specificity. The significance of the 1998 World Cup for the Senegalese was not who played or which team won, but rather, who sang the anthem. Ogunbiyi's cloth immortalizes the Super Eagles' moments of glory, rather than their recent defeat.

Memory, in both its personal and collective form, is a theme that permeates Ogunbiyi's work. Specifically, Ogunbiyi examines the modes and objects of human memory, even as they have shifted in the recent decades to digital formats on social media platforms. Born and raised in the United States to a Jamaican mother and a Nigerian father, Ogunbiyi was aware from a very early age how the experience of migration can lend meaning to physical objects and hold the memory of former homelands or former lives. One of her earliest textile-based pieces was assembled from cloth from Ogunbiyi's mother's wedding dress, and pieces of her father's and brother's clothing in a patchwork homage to her family. The individual pieces of cloth that comprised the piece would have significance for only those closest to the artist, but as a whole tell a common story of love, marriage, migration, and family. These processes of collecting and assembling are found in other works that serve a more collective memory, rather than a personal one. She often takes objects from sites of significance, such as a photo frame from post-Katrina New Orleans, and combines them with other objects and her own drawings in a layering of meaning. In her textile pieces, this process is repeated but the objects are digital rather than physical. Bits of conversation from text messages, Facebook exchanges, tweets, or images from her Blackberry display are collected and assembled into a composition that takes on a kaleidoscopic effect once they are printed on plain cotton weave. In these pieces both collective and personal memories are evoked, as the conversations concern current events but are told through the digital communication from her network of friends and family. In a final layering of meaning, the textiles are shipped over land or

²⁸⁹ Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion*, 151.

oceans, mimicking the patterns of human migration, and infusing the work with its own stories and memories.

Part of the layered work that composed *Eagles Will Fly* was an *adire* cloth patterned with a comb technique. This fabric, which was in addition to the commemorative portrait style print featuring Super Eagles team members as well as pencil drawings and other layered materials, situates *Eagles Will Fly* within a wider project called *Arodudu Reconstructed and Revisited* (2012). The layering of this piece of fabric solidifies the associations with *adire* dyeing that are only alluded to in the Super Eagles digital print. *Arodudu*, which simply means to dye a dark color, refers to the older repertoire of patterns at large. Ogunbiyi explains, "Since moving home to Lagos in 2011, I have been interested in how, if at all, traditional techniques of textile design might be combined with my digital textile printing to produce a hybrid diachronic product. Separate from one another, both of these fabrics function as an archive, denoting a particular moment or period in time."²⁹⁰ This distinction between the relevance of the fabrics when they are viewed separately and when they are viewed together reveals the significance of each element of Ogunbiyi's installations, as well as her conception of her art and digital prints as a continuation of *adire*'s historical narrative, rather than a mere reference to it.

This assertion of digital *adire* into the evolution and development of *adire* as a whole is especially prevalent in Ogunbiyi's 2014 installation for the OFF program of the 2014 Dak'Art Biennial (Figure 3.17, 3.18). Titled, "Elevator Chatter (Abeokuta to Dakar)," Ogunbiyi installed a structure that evoked the elevator both spatially and conceptually on the sidewalk outside the Maison D'Aissa Dione. The white, unassuming, freestanding wooden structure could be accessed from the street and entered through slim double doors. The interior was scarcely large enough to hold two people at a time. Once inside, a kaleidoscope-like reworking of the *adire oniko* pattern that was also part of the Nigeria House 2012 installation surrounded the visitor. The floor, walls and ceiling were papered with the printed pattern. Small pencil drawings of food the artist ate while in Senegal preparing the installation hung from the walls, making a tiny intimate gallery of the "elevator" space and offering a glimpse of the artist's encounter with the city of Dakar. Some of the drawings were

²⁹⁰ Temitayo Ogunbiyi, captions for *Arodudu Reconstructed and Revisited*, 2012

held within the now empty food packaging, including a bar of French, organic chocolate infused with aphrodisiac spices, a pack of Senegalese cashews, and a bag of raisins on which the description of the contents is inscribed on the packaging in seven languages. Some of the drawings indicate the date the food was consumed, and some of the packaging still retains the price sticker in CFA. A paper torn from the same sketchpad as the drawings hangs next to the door and indicates the title of each drawing by number. The titles also offer dates and other clues relating to the food sources and the artist's experience. The first drawing of a muffin asks "Where are my sisters?/Ou est mes..." and is titled "May 2: Arik Muffins for All". The inscription is likely a reference to the abduction of over 250 girls from a school in Chibok, northern Nigeria by the Boko Haram terrorist group during the night of April 14-15, 2014. Arik Air is the airliner that services routes connecting Lagos to Dakar. Another drawing of caramelized peanuts, its French-language packaging peeking out from behind the sketch paper, is titled "May 7: Sticky Clusters, Groups, Trees, and Thoughts of Sambisa," a reference to the Sambisa forest where Boko Haram was alleged to have held the victims of the kidnapping at its fortified camp. A drawing of a corn-cob called "May 5: Guess the Kernels, Guess the Girls" dotted with numbers ranging from 180 to 329 and each followed by a question mark relates the counting of kernels on a cob to counting missing schoolgirls. The inability of the Nigerian government, the media or any other authority to report a reliable or accurate number of missing people is here reduced to the absurdity of a guessing game. Kernels on a cob are hard to count because they all look the same and the round cob makes it difficult to keep track of where counting starts and ends. The comparison is a simple metaphor yet a biting critique of the Nigerian government's handling of the crisis in Chibok. In the weeks and months following the kidnapping, there was no information released about the girls' names, no photos to help identify them, no concerted effort whatsoever to rescue them, prompting the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls which spread internationally and seemed equally directed at the forces responsible for their rescue as the ones responsible for their initial abduction.

Rooted in the recent experiences of the artist, these drawings referred to a wide range of occurrences told from personal and public perspectives. From the mundane act of snacking, to the international media coverage of Nigeria's mass kidnapping, the events are woven together by the itinerary of the artist, her location, travels,

meals, purchases and her experiences of the collective as they filter through her personal networks, social media feeds, and American or Nigerian news media outlets. Underlying these more explicit references are the historical currents that connect Dakar and Lagos and other parts of West Africa in a number of ways. For one, although the wallpaper pattern is derived from a photograph of an *adire oniko* cloth that the artist found in her father's hometown of Abeokuta, its installation in the city of Dakar serves as a reminder of the ancient origins of indigo dyeing that likely migrated to or from the Dogon region of current day Mali to or from the coast to the south. These vast land areas between the Sahelian and Coastal regions of West Africa were also connected by trade routes and by semi-nomadic people such as the Fulani, long before they were divided into colonies or nation states. References to Arik Air, the artist's journey from Lagos to Dakar, and the dated recordings of her drawings with the leftover packaging from things she ate serve as a sort of contemporary travelogue. Combined with the artist's connection to the *adire* dyeing town of Abeokuta, the installation marks a sort of repetition of migratory history of objects and people over West African land. Finally, an art historical reference to the Malian photographer Seydou Keita is embedded in the use of textile pattern as the wallpaper to the interior. Keita's portrait photography is best known for his use of boldly patterned textiles as the backdrop to his subjects. With the *adire oniko* as the backdrop, the connection is subtly reinforced, but also localized to the cultural bearings of the artist.²⁹¹

Within this imagined migration, the artist inserts her production and her actions into the contemporary state of *adire*, while acknowledging the integral role of cross-cultural and migratory movements in *adire*'s past in which female designers and market sellers were the agents. Much in the way her hybrid textile in "Eagles Will Fly..." brought together classic compositions with modern techniques and pattern imagery to expose an ongoing development of the *adire* textile, an earlier work from 2012 took this migratory step in the making of an artwork a bit further. "Towards Remembering 160-something" is an installation anchored by a textile pattern designed by Ogunbiyi composed of messages of condolences sent via Blackberry

²⁹¹ Temitayo Ogunbiyi, interview with Erin Rice, April 10, 2014 Lagos, Nigeria

Messenger, website commentaries, and emails concerning the Dana Air crash in Lagos on June 3rd, 2012, in which an estimated 160 people died (figure 3.19).

Taking parts of digital conversations from the general public and part from her private correspondences, Ogunbiyi constructed a history of the event through the voices of people throughout the globe who were present in Lagos when the crash took place, or were affected by it abroad. The fabric's pattern utilizes the lapel ribbon as a prominent motif, reiterating the commemorative purpose and function of the textile. This function extends to the installation as a whole through a number of other references to memory and mourning. In another section, the fabric is cut into small squares and interspersed with plain white handkerchiefs that signify both the use of a cloth to wipe away tears as well as the motions of Igbo dance performed at funerals (figure 3.20).²⁹² The work allows the textile to function as a "traditional" textile in that it communicates, tells a story, and commemorates an event in a way that operated both personally and universally. In this sense, the work serves as a precursor to the *Elevator Chatter (Abeokuta to Dakar)* installation in the subtle integration of the personal with the universal, the private with the public.

Towards Remembering also serves as a mirror on the artist's movement and migration. Ogunbiyi designed the textile on her computer from her studio in Lagos. It was then sent as a digital file to a printer in the United States. Once printed on fabric, it was shipped from the U.S. back to Nigeria where it was brought to Oshogbo to undergo *kampala*, a modernized version of tie-dye that uses synthetic, imported dyes in a wide range of colors beyond indigo blue. The migratory pattern of the textile from Nigeria to the U.S. and back to Nigeria mimics that of the artist and her father, and once again serves to insert her work, particularly through the use of digital printing and *kampala* dyeing, into the ongoing development of the *adire* textile.

Taken together—*aso-ebi*, commemorative and occasional prints, and the textile as prop, garment, and backdrop for portrait photography—provide numerous interconnected examples of how the textile is integrated in the process of remembering. In the specific context of *adire*, the long history of an exclusively female production for female consumption that changed only in the first quarter of

²⁹² Temitayo Ogunbiyi, *Towards Remembering 160-something*, captions. Courtesy of the artist.

the 20th century implicates the textile with multiple histories. The association of *adire* with the feminine which was undermined by modernist appropriations of *adire* patterns that ignored the agency of its producers is revived by contemporary practices that utilize the fabric's patterns, palette, history, and capacity for both communicating and commemorating. Women working in fashion design today in particular have demonstrated an interest in exploring the ways the feminine is deployed within strategies of reclamation. Whereas Thomas-Fahm aligned dress with political imperative, Osakwe embraced the *adire* textile's relation to female labor, histories and bodies, and reformats them into semi-autobiographical narratives. Contemporary cultural producers have experimented with material properties, the physical and aesthetic limitations, as well as the symbolic and conceptual potential the textile holds within the rich contexts of dress and art in Nigerian society.

CONCLUSION

The Past, Present and Future for Textiles in Contemporary Art in Nigeria

The results of this research show that artistic practices in Nigeria that appropriate textile material or patterns have precedents in art movements and individual artworks that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The connections between appropriative practices of the 1990s to the 21st century and those of the Modern era have been omitted from historical accounts and exhibitions, which has problematically interpreted textile-based art to referencing the artists' African "roots" and crediting them with the invention of an artistic genre that they inherited from earlier generations. While the artistic output of Nigerian modernists has been understood as having nationalist intentions, this thesis finds that these works often relied upon the use of women's textile production that was inaccurately labeled as "traditional." Notions of "tradition" served as a foil to the formation of a modern art and modern identity, yet ample evidence of the co-existence and evolution of textile disprove its "traditionality" or association with the past. In recent decades, the use of textiles in art and cultural production has changed substantially as contemporary artists and fashion designers, freed from the constraints of nationalism or colonialism, turn to the textile as a critical, sometimes subversive tool to engage subjects of national and global relevance.

In light of these findings on *adire*, dress, and its appropriation into art of the modern and contemporary eras, the significance of the uniform change in Lágbájá's music video for his song 'Never Far Away' becomes evident. The orchestra's simple change of clothes embodies the popular and growing practice of *aso-ebi*, as well as the complex history of indigo dyeing in Yoruba culture that was implicated in the political and economic landscapes of the 19th and 20th centuries. The choice of *adire* over the Western style suit and dress alludes to the evolution of dress that witnessed the indigenous textile go from a peasant's cloth to a powerful rejection of colonialism and Victorian culture. Worn collectively, the fabric represents national, ethnic and cultural identity as much as it serves to unite members of an orchestra, a family or community. As the modern history of *adire* illustrated, 20th century indigo dyeing was hardly the "traditional" indigenous production it once was. Instead, like Lágbájá's synthesis in music, *adire* was transformed through contact with foreign technologies

and foreign visual culture that was acculturated through its pattern language, and revolutionized through adaptations to contemporary life by artists, designers, playwrights, tailors, and *adire* producers.

This project began with the question: *is there a precedent in Nigeria for textile-based art?* The question was inspired by the noteworthy presence of textiles in artworks circulating in European and American art institutions in the 1990s and 2000s under the terms “African,” “Global” and “African Diaspora” art. Many of these artists were not living on the African continent, yet were producing work that was categorized under the “African” label. Some of these artists had ties to Nigeria, and using the textile medium or visual language was a popular way to relate the work to their “Africanness,” which motivated the project’s initial inquiry. Several years and a great deal of research later, the answer to that question is a definitive “yes.” However, as the three main chapters that comprise this dissertation demonstrate it is hardly a simple yes, but rather a complex interconnected web of answers that implicates Western art history, textile production, and curatorial practice.

By looking at the confluence of art and textiles from several different angles but with a strict focus on Nigerian art and printed textiles, this dissertation fills a scholarly gap and addresses some issues within current scholarship regarding gender and textile media. The areas where textiles and arts overlapped in the context of Nigeria provided the cornerstone for the argument that Western biases towards textiles and the cultural production of women shaped the reception of this specific genre of contemporary art. This was in part achieved through an examination and critique of the curatorial, academic and global artistic phenomena that have shaped the discourses of textiles, textile-based arts, and West African arts.

While situating Nigeria's modern art into a broader global and interdisciplinary scope, this study took focused and careful looks at the specific context and time-frame of pre-Independence Nigeria’s *adire* textile industry and the Modern art movement that developed between roughly 1920 – 1970. An in-depth look at the processes and forces underlying the modernization of *adire* production challenged its perception as “traditional” culture that persists today. The intention of *adire*’s inclusion in works by the Zaria Art Society artist Bruce Onobrakpeya, and later, Mbari Mbayo club members and Oshogbo group artists was to both root the work in a local, Yoruba

vernacular, while highlighting the modernity of the artwork against which *adire*'s traditionality was set in contrast.

While artistic appropriation is interpreted through *adire*'s specific involvement in political affairs, technological developments, women's rights and other forms of protest, the research into other textile-related phenomena that shaped and influenced the decisions of both visual artists and fashion designers to work with indigenous or factory produced fabrics highlights the ways this artistic genre has changed substantially since the days of Shonibare, Anatsui and their contemporaries. The trajectories of 20th century sartorial customs such as *aso-ebi*, and interrelated practices such as commemorative and portrait cloth, photography, *owambe*, and new competitors on the international textile market have replaced the older generation's concerns for nationalism and ethnicity in the work of younger artists using textiles as both conceptual and material tools. Subversion and critique shift from the tools of the colonial subject to the Nigerian artist at large in his or her individual quest against consumerism, capitalism, patriarchy, and other forces.

Above all, *adire*, in its physical, symbolic and historic manifestations is proven to persist in the 21st century as it did through the tumult of the 19th and 20th centuries. Carrying on in its own evolution, *adire* remains an opportune material for re-invention and re-imagination at the hands of creative people. Beyond the creative practices of artists and designers, the textile underpins all aspects of everyday life. Its ubiquity, persistence, deep symbolism and rich history suggest that the practices analyzed here represent perhaps only the beginning and only a portion of the extraordinary aesthetic and conceptual potential of the textile.

IMAGES

Chapter 1



Figure 1.1 A selection of texts illustrating a preference for strip-woven cloth, especially *Ewe kente*, for the cover image. Photo by the author.



Figure 1.2 Installation view of Abdoulaye Konaté *Gris-Gris Blancs* at Blain Southern in Berlin February 2015. Photo courtesy of Francis Mobio



Figure 1.3 *Aso-oke* handwoven cloth in cotton and Lurex, collection of Elisha Renne. Reproduced from Barbara Plankensteiner, *Eine Geschichte des Handels, der Kreativität und der Mode in Nigeria*, (Ghent; Snoeck, 2010), 78.



Figure 1.4 Obinna Makata, "Pregnant in the Belly" 2012, Ink and fabric on paper, 26.5 x 35.5 cm. Reproduced from: "Obinna Makata: Metahistories" (African Artists' Foundation (AAF), Lagos, 2012) Exhibition catalogue.



Figure 1.5 Kolade Oshinowo "Engagement," 2011, mixed media painting, 80x154 cm. Photo by the author.

Chapter 2

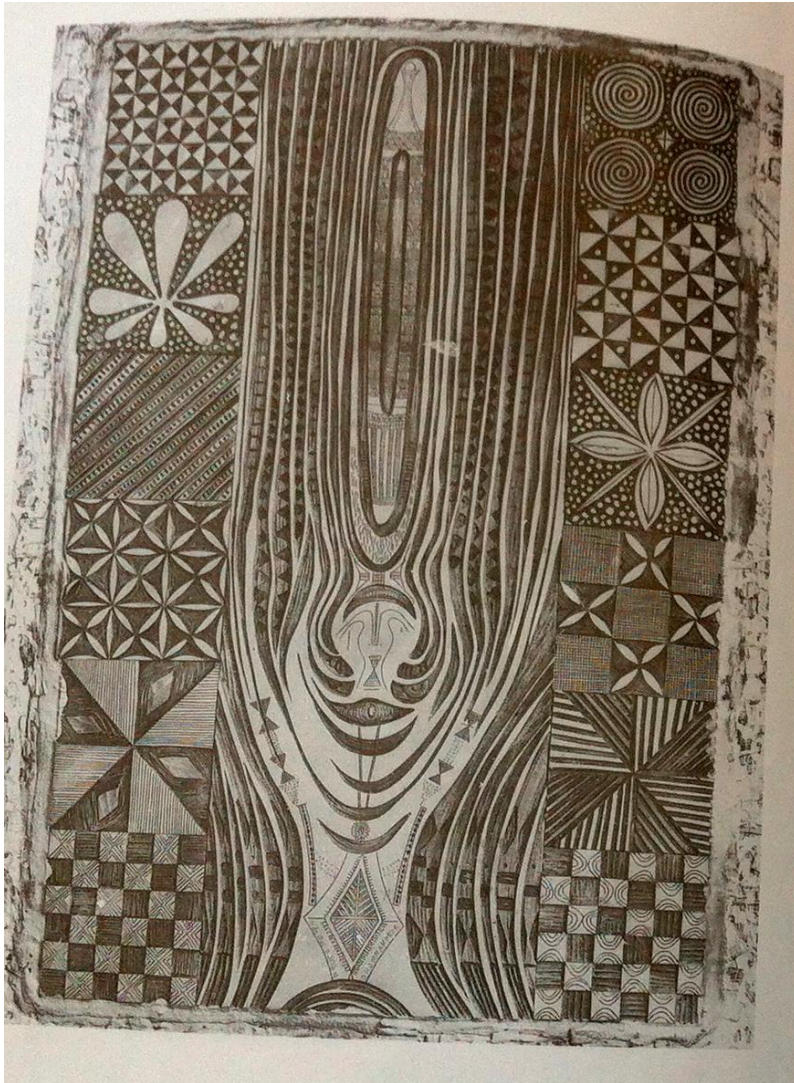


Figure 2.1 Bruce Onobrakpeya, "Uli," 1970, bronzed lino relief, 102cm x 76.2cm. Reproduced from Darah and Quel, *Bruce Onobrakpeya: The Spirit in Ascent* (Lagos: Ovuomaroro Gallery, 1992) 148.



Figure 2.2 *Adire* cloth in *Olokun* pattern, Yoruba woman's wrapper, indigo dye on cotton, acquired in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1971, date of production unknown, 196cm x 176 cm, ©Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 2.3 Bruce Onobrakpeya, "Obioko II (The Boatman)," 1983, Plastograph 32.7 x 23.5 cm. Reproduced from Jegede, *Onobrakpeya, Masks of the Flaming Arrows* (2014) pg. 101.



Figure 2.4 Bruce Onobrakpeya, "Zaria Indigo," 1965, oil painting on board 102 x 76 cm, collection of Prof. J.P. and Egun Clark. Reproduced from: jegede, *Masks of the Flaming Arrows*, (2014) pg. 124.



Figure 2.5 Hand-painted and stenciled *Adire Oloba* celebrating the Silver Jubilee of King George V. Indigo dye on cotton. Date unknown. ©Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 2.6 Yoruba language newspaper announcing Jubilee Celebration of King George V and Queen Mary from May 11, 1935. Photograph by the author with permission from National Archives, Ibadan



Figure 2.7 *Adire oloba*, Diko compound, Abeokuta. Collection of the Smithsonian Institute. From: [https://africa.si.edu/collections/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:11913](https://africa.si.edu/collections/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:11913)



Figure 2.8 King Edward VIII *Adire Oloba* (detail) Reproduced from Goode and King *AH! This Nigeria!!: A collection of Expatriate Memories* (2008) 31. Original photo by Helen Travers



Figure 2.9 Bruce Onobrakpeya, "Nativity II," lino engraving, 1978. Image courtesy of Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation.



Figure 2.10 Bruce Onobrakpeya, "Have you Heard?," ca. 1970, serigraph on paper, 55.9 x 76.2 cm. From: <http://www.gafraart.com/artists/25-bruce-onobrakpeya/works/25/> (accessed 1.7.17)



Figure 2.11 Tijani Mayakiri and Duro Ladipo on stage during Ladipo's *Oba Moro* at the Mbari Mbayo Club, Oshogbo in 1962. Reproduced from Ulli Beier, *Thirty Years of Oshogbo Art*, (1991) pg. 41, Photo by Nina Fischer.

Chapter 3



3.1 "A mother and her son, October 1st, 1960" <http://nigerianostalgia.tumblr.com/post/42228675219/a-mother-and-her-son-oct-1st-1960-more-vintage> (accessed 1.7.2017)

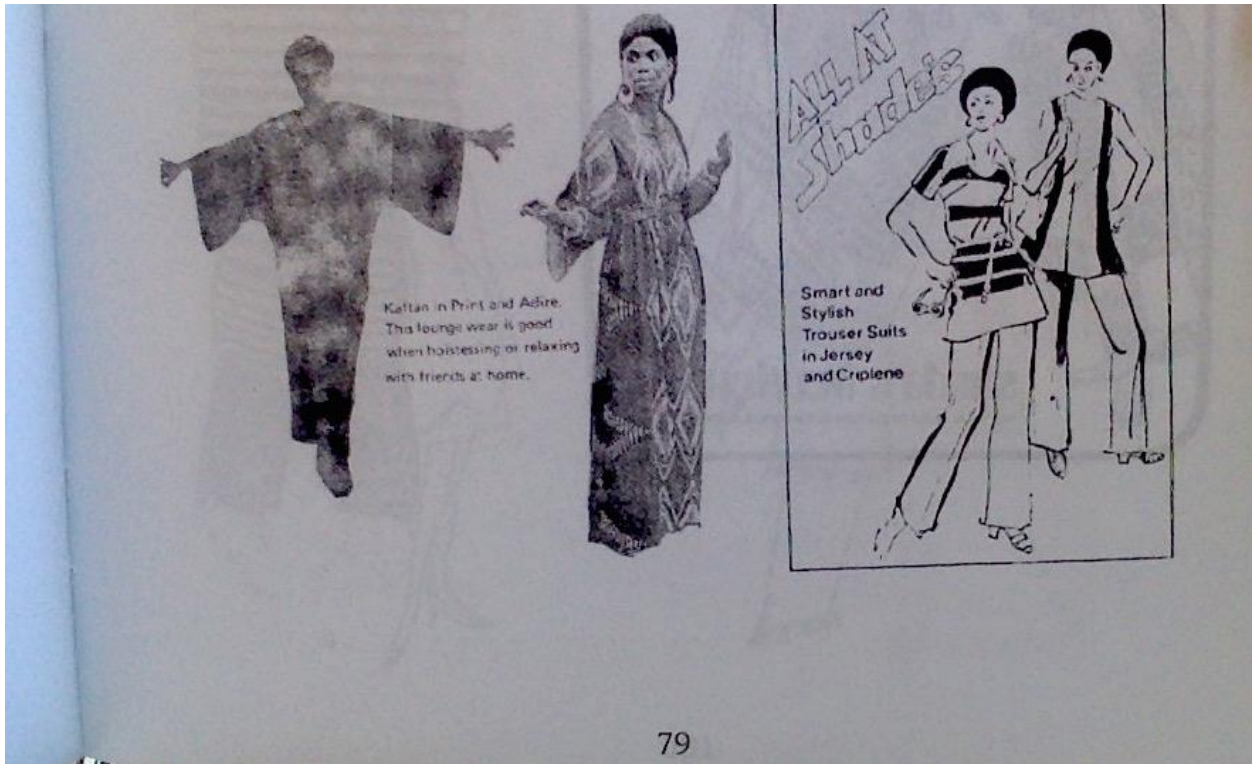


Figure 3.2 *Adire Kaftan* by Folashade Thomas Fahm. From Thomas-Fahm, *Faces of She* (2004) 79.



Figure 3.3 Kelani Abass “Asiko 2 (Family album series),” 2013, diptych, corrugated cardboard, laminated print and acrylics on canvas, 91x122x6 cm, each. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.4 Ayo Akinwande “贏得 – Win,” 2017, (From top left) “Filà,” Resin cast coral beads, plastic helmet, 45x25x18 cm; “Àwòtélé,” Texts on used and machines-sewn cement sacks, 91x132 cm.; “Àwòsókè,” used and machine-sewn cement sacks, aluminum, N5 naira notes, 118 x 147 cm. Photos courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.5 Viscò brochure “See: A Vision of Beauty” from last season of 2015. Photo by author.



Figure 3.6 An apprentice applies wax resist with a stamp at the studio of Akeem Shofolahan, Masallam Kampala Adire Factory, Abeokuta, Nigeria, March 2014. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.7 Detail of cloth with cowrie shell motif. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.8 *Adire* cloths drying on outdoor racks and on the roadside at an *adire* factory in Ijemo, Abeokuta, March 2014. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.9 Removing the thread from a sewn-patterned *adire* at the Ijemo factory, Abeokuta March 2014. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.10 Scraping the resist substance off a newly dyed stenciled *adire*. Ijemo, Abeokuta, March 2014. Photo by the author



Figure 3.11 Iyaalaro Olayemi Showunmi with an un-dyed *adire alabere* she was working on. Ijemo, Abeokuta, March 2014. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.12 From the Maki-Oh Autumn/Winter 2014 collection, source: <http://makioh.com/#> (accessed 1.7.17)



Figure 3.13 Woman in commemorative *adire-style iro, buba, gele*, Lagos 2014. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.14. Maki-Oh "Nigeria at 50," 2010, mixed-media installation. Source: www.makioh.com (accessed 1.7.17)



Figure 3.15 Temitayo Ogunbiyi “Eagles Will Fly as We Glide in the Sky and Hope to Walk on Water” 2012, Drawings on paper, canvas, adire, and digital textile print on window mesh, fluorescent light bulb, Murray Melvin Foyer, Nigeria House mixed media installation. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.16 Temitayo Ogunbiyi, "Eagles Will Fly as We Glide in the Sky and Hope to Walk on Water" 2012, (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.17 Temitayo Ogunbiyi, "Elevator Chatter (Abeokuta to Dakar)" 2014, Interior view of multimedia installation, Maison D'Aissa Dione, Dakar. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.18 Temitayo Ogunbiyi, "Elevator Chatter (Abeokuta to Dakar)" 2014, Exterior view of multimedia installation, Maison D'Aissa Dione, Dakar. Photo by the author.

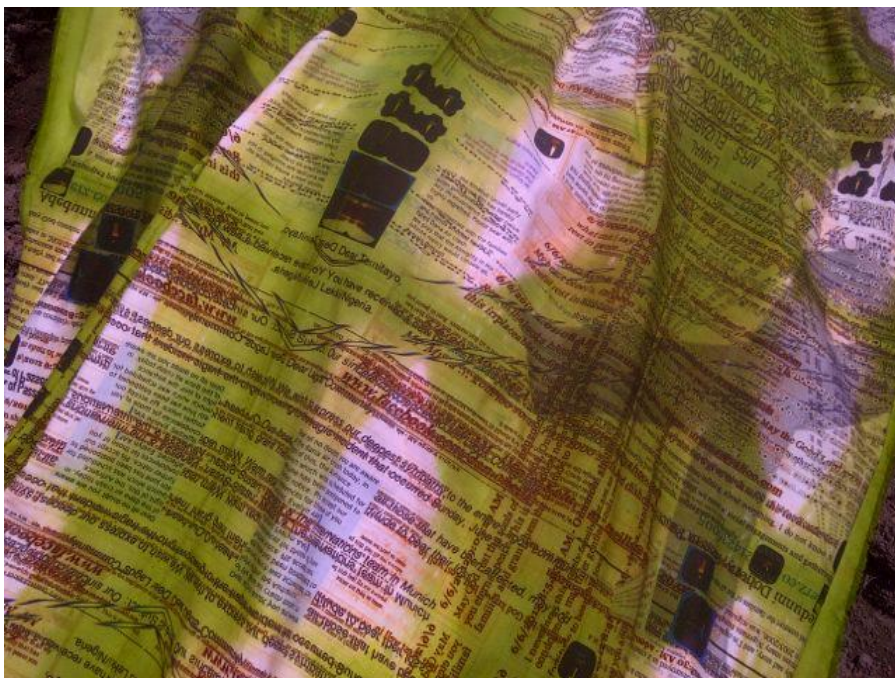


Figure 3.19 Temitayo Ogunbiyi, “Towards Remembering 160-Something” 2012, printed cotton textile before *kampala* tie-dyeing (top) and a detail after (bottom) as part of a multimedia installation at Nigeria House, Theatre Royal, London. Photos courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3.20 Temitayo Ogunbiyi, detail of multimedia installation “Towards Remembering 160-Something” 2012, Nigeria House, Theatre Royal, London. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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APPENDIX

Table of Nigerian and Nigeria-based artists that have worked with textiles as subject or medium

Artist Name	Type of Work
Abass, Kelani	Paintings with photo transfer of family in aso-ebi, also uses indigo like blue hue in many works
Adeyemi, Yinka	Batik on rice paper, tapestry, part of Oshogbo group
Akinwande, Ayorinde	Uses alternative materials to recreate indigenous styles of clothing
Alakije, Jide	Photography of weddings incl. documentation of aso-ebi
Alatise, Peju	Layering of ankara fabrics in 2 and 3-D
Anatsui, El	"Metal tapestry"
Dike, Ndidi	Aso-oke inspired designs in mixed-media
Dilomprizulike (Junkman)	Uses fabrics scraps in assemblage and 3D found object works
Edozie, George	Sculpture and painting with ankara and indigenous fabrics
Ehikhamenor, Victor	Enameled canvas <i>gele</i> , and collaboration with fashion designers
Essien, Nsikak	Painting, often featuring women wearing wrappers, gele, with adire-like or other patterning
Fabunmi, Adebisi	Oshogbo Group, yarn on muslin, printing on muslin
Gbadegesin, Sangodare	Wax batik under Wenger, representations of Yoruba deities
Grillo, Yusuf	Uses adire blue palette
Jawando, Seni	Acc to pat oyelola he was a batik artist
Lawal, Ibrahim Adebayo	Appliqué, embroidery
Makata, Obinna	Drawing utilizing fabric scraps
Odunlade, Tunde	protégée of Oshogbo artists
Ogunbiyi, Temitayo	Adire inspired, material and conceptual, digital print textiles
Ogundipe, Moyo	Painter whose subjects range from women in aso-ebi, gele, to folkloric imagery, with pattern-like surface

Okediji, Moyo	Use of adire inspired patterning in painting
Okore, Nnenna	Mixed media sculptor, incl. fabric, and cloth-like constructions, studied under Anatsui.
Okundaye, Nike	Batik, painting and pen and ink with <i>adire</i> motifs, embroidery
Oladepo, Kikelomo	See Oyelola "Picture and Pattern" Jean Kennedy African arts 1971
Oloyede, Senabu (Zeinab)	Acc. To Pat Oyelola she was the first to create decorative batiks in Oshogbo. See Jean Kennedy 1971 African Arts
Omolowo, Toyin	Aso-oke designs in mixed media
Onobrakpeya, Bruce	Uses adire patterns in paintings and prints
Opara, Adolphus	Photography series of Yoruba Orisha portraits, focus on their attire
Oshinowo, Kolade	Painting utilizes fabric scraps (factory print types) as media, and
Osodi, George	Photography featuring portraits of Nigerian monarchs in full regal attire
Owolabi, Tunde	Photos, painting, sound, installation using aso-oke
Udondian, Victoria	Uses scrap fabrics in 3D work
Wenger, Susanne	Batik

Publications List

(2020) "But Them Can't Be God: Chinese Textiles in Nigerian Dress and the Art of Ayo Akinwande" *Artl@s Bulletin*: Vol. 9 No. 1 Article 5.

(2015) "Patterned Identity: Textiles and Traces of Modernity in Contemporary Nigerian Art" *Identitäten / Identities: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven* (Heidelberg, DE: Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg) 169-189.

(2014) "Patterned Modernity: The Role of Women in the Production of Textiles and Contemporary Art in Nigeria." *FKW Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und Visuelle Kultur*, No. 57, 86-99.

Summary of Results / Kurzfassung der Ergebnisse

The findings show that artistic practices in Nigeria that appropriate textile material or patterns have precedents in art movements and individual artworks that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The connections between appropriative practices of the 1990s to the 21st century and those of the Modern era have been omitted from historical accounts and exhibitions. While the artistic output of Nigerian modernists has been interpreted as having nationalist intentions, this thesis finds that these works often relied upon the use of women's textile production that was sometimes inaccurately labeled as "traditional." Notions of "tradition" served as a foil to the formation of a modern art and modern identity, yet ample evidence of the co-existence and evolution of textile disprove its "traditionality" or association with the past. In recent decades, the use of textiles in art and cultural production has changed substantially as contemporary artists and fashion designers turn to the textile as a critical, sometimes subversive tool to engage subjects of national and global relevance.

Meine Forschungsergebnisse betreffend Nigeria zeigen, dass sich heutige künstlerische Praktiken, die sich textile Materialien und Muster zu eigen machen, ihren Ursprung bereits in Kunstbewegungen und individuellen Arbeiten der 1960ern und 1970ern haben. Die Verbindungen zwischen Appropriations-Praktiken der Zeitgenössischen und der Modernen Kunst sind im historischen und Ausstellungsaspekt häufig zu nicht beachtet worden. Die Werke von zeitgenössischen nigerianischen Künstlern werden häufig als nationalistisch interpretiert. In meiner Dissertation habe ich jedoch zeigen können, dass sich diese Arbeiten wiederkehrend auf Textil Produktionen von Frauen, die fälschlicherweise als "traditionell" bezeichnet werden, beziehen. Die Verwendung des Begriffes "Tradition" wurde als Gegenpunkt zur modernen Kunst und Identität verstanden. Jedoch zeigen sich klare Beweise, dass sich diese "traditionelle" Textilien fortlaufend entwickelt haben und mit der zeitgenössischen Kunst koexistieren. In den vergangenen Jahrzehnten haben Künstler und Modedesigner den Gebrauch von Textilien in der im Kunst- und Kulturbetrieb grundlegend verändert. Textilien sind nunmehr kritische, oftmals subversive Werkzeuge um nationale und globale Inhalte zu vermitteln.

Curriculum Vitae

Erin M. Rice received a B.A. from Providence College in 2006 and a Masters degree in art history from Tufts University in 2010. Her dissertation, written first at the University of Bern in Switzerland and completed at the Free University, Berlin, was supported under the Sinergia project “Other Modernities” funded by the Swiss National Science Fund (SNSF). She has worked at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Tufts University Art Gallery, and the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos. She has taught art history courses at several universities in the United States, as well as for the Goethe Institute and Leuphana University in Germany.