

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE USEFUL:
THE CONTRIBUTION OF YORUBA WOMEN TO INDIGO DYED TEXTILES

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"For millenia, men have described their masculine worlds, their worlds both tangible and spiritual. They have used wood, bronze, stone and ivory. Their concepts of the universe gave shape to martial dances and substance to tales of battles of triumph and surrender In Africa, as in other places of the world, women create their own portraits, distinctive portraits of themselves and their universe. They use cloth, beads, leather and clay to express their views of the real and abstract worlds Their art, like all art, means to delight the eye, console the troubled mind, appease the highest authority, and educate children in the way of the world. The aim also, whether or not articulated, is to infuse and sustain the family in an appreciation for life and the expectation of beauty."

Maya Angelou (1990) *African Canvas*.

The appreciation of African women's artistry has long been hampered by European attitudes. The view is widely held in Europe and North America that aesthetics and utility are poles apart, and that an object created for a definite practical purpose, such as a pot or a piece of cloth, cannot properly be considered as "art". Such objects are relegated to the category of "craft" which is regarded as inferior to "fine art". Since women excel in those arts which are useful and closely related to the human person, their achievements in this field tend to receive scant attention. However, the derivations of the words show that the concepts of "art" and "craft" are by no means mutually exclusive. The basic meaning of the Latin *ars, artis* from which the English "art" is derived, is "skill or knowledge", a reminder that artists must consciously learn how to manage their tools and materials, and acquire practical experience of their potentials and limitations. A 16th century definition of "handicraft" is "a manual art, trade or occupation", whereas a 17th century definition of "art" is "technical or professional skill"; not until 1767 does the expression "fine arts" occur as restricted to painting, sculpture and architecture (see Oxford Universal Dictionary, 1970). Neglecting the older definitions which indicate common ground for art and craft, several modern philosophers (Kart, 1952; Martland, 1974) have tried to create a gulf between them, and adversely influenced the assessment and appreciation of objects created by African women. However, definitions given by Adepegba (1980) and others indicate that the art/craft dichotomy does not exist in Yoruba thought; thus those involved in the creation of pots and cloth may be referred to as ceramic

and textile artists.* This paper will focus on the artistry of those who design *adirẹ*, particularly those who use the cassava paste resist technique (*adirẹ ẹlẹkọ*). When Yoruba women first used this technique, corn-paste (*ẹkọ*) was applied as a resist, hence the name *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ*.

Yoruba women practise various resist techniques for enriching the surface of textiles, such as tying, binding and stitching, but *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* is a comparatively recent resist technique. The actual date of its introduction has not been definitely established. Beier & Wenger (1957) state that it was started in 1910 in Lagos and Abeokuta, but give no source for their information. The responses I received in Abeokuta and Ibadan indicated dates varying from 1880 to 1925. However, it is highly probable that *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* is connected with the introduction of European machine-woven textiles which have the smooth surface necessary for this technique. The power loom was invented in 1785 by Cartwright in England, and by 1850 it had entirely superseded the hand loom. This resulted in increased production and the search for new markets. The boom years of the Lancashire textile trade were from 1880 to 1913, and it must have been during this period that Nigeria began large-scale importation of English cotton fabrics. *Adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* was therefore likely to have started around the same period.

There are two *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* techniques, free-hand painting and stenciling, the former practised by women and the latter by men. According to Stanfield (in Barbour & Simmonds, 1971) a skilled stenciller can complete a 2½ yard cloth, using two or more different stencils, in ten minutes. The hand-painted resist done by women is a far longer and more painstaking process. According to one informant, it took her a whole day of concentrated work to paint eight squares, each containing a different motif of the "Ibadan *dun*" design. A complete wrapper (i.e. two lengths of 2½ yards each) of this particular design contains 56 squares.

The equipment required for *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* is simple, cheap and easy to obtain -- a bowl of starch prepared from cassava flour and alum; hen's feathers, palm midribs and a pointed knife; a flat working surface (usually the floor) and a pole for hanging the cloth on to dry. The feathers and midribs used for applying the resist are extremely flexible and need careful handling to produce the neat clean lines characteristic of the best *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ*. In spite of the delicacy of the "brushes", the starch is applied thickly and care is needed to avoid cracking the drying starch which would allow the dye to seep into the "reserved" areas. **

* The earliest known example of Yoruba decorated pottery was found at Iwo Eleru and has been dated to 1000 BC. The segmented composition of the design on this pottery is also found in *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* where the surface is divided into rectangular units.

** Dyeing in indigo is a profession in itself, previously restricted to women, although many dyers can also execute the tie-resist patterns and paint *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ*.

The painting of *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* was carried out in the home by women and their daughters who learnt by observation and practice. Clumsy work on the part of the learner earned a slap and verbal admonition. The present practitioners of *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* are women of middle age and older, and have not been exposed to western education. Although these women cannot write, many of the shapes on an *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* cloth contain elements similar to letters of the alphabet, and the painters possess a manual dexterity greater than that required for writing.

Women reflect their perception of the world around them through the depiction of a variety of separate objects arranged in an orderly series of squares or rectangles. The segmented composition of an *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* cloth recalls the segments into which the woman has to divide her attention throughout her life. Husband, children, relatives, in-laws, friends, home, trade or profession -- each has to receive a share of her mental and emotional energy without upsetting her equilibrium. From many disparate interests the woman is expected to create a harmonious whole. Similarly, on an *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* cloth, the various elements of the design are organised to form a pleasing totality.

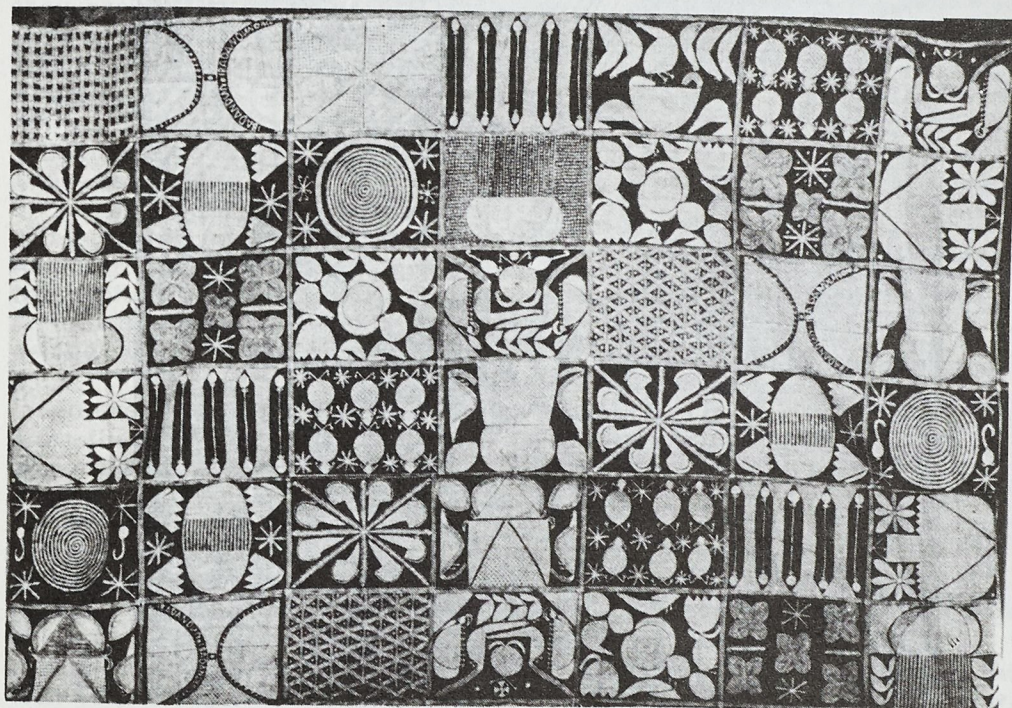


Fig.1. Hand-painted *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* cloth; *Ibadan dun* design.

Note the following designs mentioned in the text:

1st row: middle square: pillars of Mapo Hall and spoons. 2nd from right: frogs.
2nd row: 3rd from left: snake and stars. 1st on right: umbrella & cassava leaves.

There is no attempt to depict the objects in a natural 3-dimensional way. The artist adopts the "ideoplastic" approach, or "nature remodelled by thought" (Boas, 1927). She is not creating visually accurate illustrations but decorating the cloth with designs abstracted from the world around her. The world of the farm is there, represented by bananas, bitter kola nuts, cassava leaves and cocoa-pods, with birds of various shapes and sizes, chosen for their decorative qualities when presented in profile. Animals such as the lizard, frog, scorpion and snake are shown as seen from above. Small manufactured goods of widespread distribution are depicted too -- clocks, spoons, keys and matches. Symbols of indigenous and foreign authority can be seen -- crowns, fly-whisks, umbrellas, and the pillars of Mapo Hall at Ibadan, that neo-classical edifice from the colonial period, dominating the city from the crest of Mapo Hill. References to the three main religions of Yorubaland can be seen in the cross, the Muslim writing-board and star and crescent, and the Ifa divination tray, referred to disparagingly by the *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* artists as the "tray of lies".

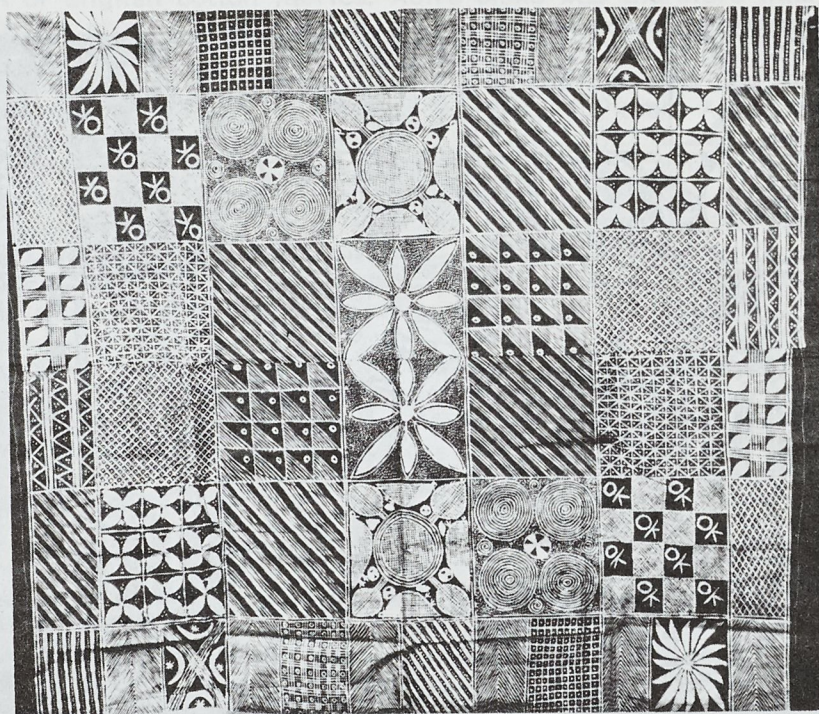


Fig.2. Hand-painted *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* cloth; Olokun design.

Note the following designs:

- 1st row: 2nd from left: cutlasses. 3rd from right: stars and crescents.
 2nd row: middle square: tray of lies [Ifa divination tray] & birds.

Abstract designs based on the straight line and the curve are also found, particularly in the *sun bebe* design. Some of these abstract designs have generally accepted interpretations: e.g. a spiral represents the snake; a circle with lines radiating from it is the crossroads; zig-zag lines are the knees of a lame man. Others are purely decorative and are not identified by name. Others again are labelled with a sentence which is an imaginative interpretation, e.g. a large square divided into smaller squares containing small circles and crossed by transverse lines was called by one informant *olowo gbele ranṣe* (a rich man stays at home and sends people on errands). Phrases indicating desires or anxieties are also found on some cloths, e.g. *omo dunnì* (it is good to have children), *ṣanu mi Oluwa* (have mercy on me, O God). These phrases are sometimes difficult to decipher due to the mistakes made by the non-literate *aladirẹ* as she copies the shapes of the unfamiliar letters written for her by the person who commissioned the cloth.

Thompson (1971) and Lawal (1974) questioned members of Yoruba society on their attitudes and reactions to specific art objects, and the canons of visual beauty they arrived at for sculpture can also be applied to designs on *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* cloths: *jijora*: relative mimesis; *ifarahon*: clarity of mass; *didon*: luminosity and delicacy; *fifin*: clarity of line; *gigun*: straightness; *didogba*: good composition and symmetry. There is no doubt that the skilful artist of *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* also possesses the necessary attributes of good character identified by Abiodun (1987): *ifarabale*: calmness; *iluti*: teachability; *imoju-mona*: sensitivity; *tito*: genuineness; *oju inu*: insight; *oju ona*: design-consciousness.

Interesting developments have arisen from the *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* technique. In the early 1960s, it was used for decorative panels created purely for contemplation. Pioneers in this field were Susanne Wenge Senabu Oloyede and Kikẹlọmọ Ọladepo, all of Osogbo. Later, wax was substituted for cassava paste as a resist, which opened the way for a wider range of colours exemplified in the works of Nike Davies. Men (e.g. Sangodare) began to realise the potentialities of the resist technique and started to practise what had previously been a woman's art form.



Fig.3. Early decorative batik by Senabu (Zaenab) Oloyede, created in the early 1960s. The chevron designs at top & bottom also appear in Fig.2.

Nowadays, fabrics intended for clothing are painted with molten wax with a foam brush, or stamped with wax applied to patterns fixed to a wooden plate. The rich variety of resist-dyed fabrics available in Nigeria today have their origins in the imagination, skill and creativity of the Yoruba designers of *adire*.

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