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Design of Fashion Accessories Using Akwa-Ocha Motifs and Symbols

Onwuakpa, Lovina Ebele

Department of Fine Arts and Design

University of Benin, Benin-City

Edo State, Nigeria

E-mail lovina.onwuakpa@uniben.edu.

Abstract

Akwa-Ocha, which literally means white cloth, is basically an indigenous hand-woven cloth that is produced by the Aniocha people of Delta state. The cloth which contains surface decorative motifs and symbols is used for various festive occasions among the people. *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols and their functions reveal the people's history, religion, and social behaviours. Nigerian traditional elements such as the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols feature in the changing landscape in the design of fashion accessories in Nigeria. How has *Akwa-Ocha* responded to global consciousness in its application of fashion accessories? How well have the heritage, the motifs, and symbols on *Akwa-Ocha* functioned as carriers of cultural heritage and identity of the people? This paper therefore focuses attention on the use of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories. The exploration of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories for obvious reasons include creating an identity, checking the emphasis already placed on foreign fashion accessories, creating awareness and projecting one of Nigeria's rich cultural heritages.

Key Words: *Akwa-Ocha*, motifs, symbols, fashion accessories, and cultural heritage.

Introduction

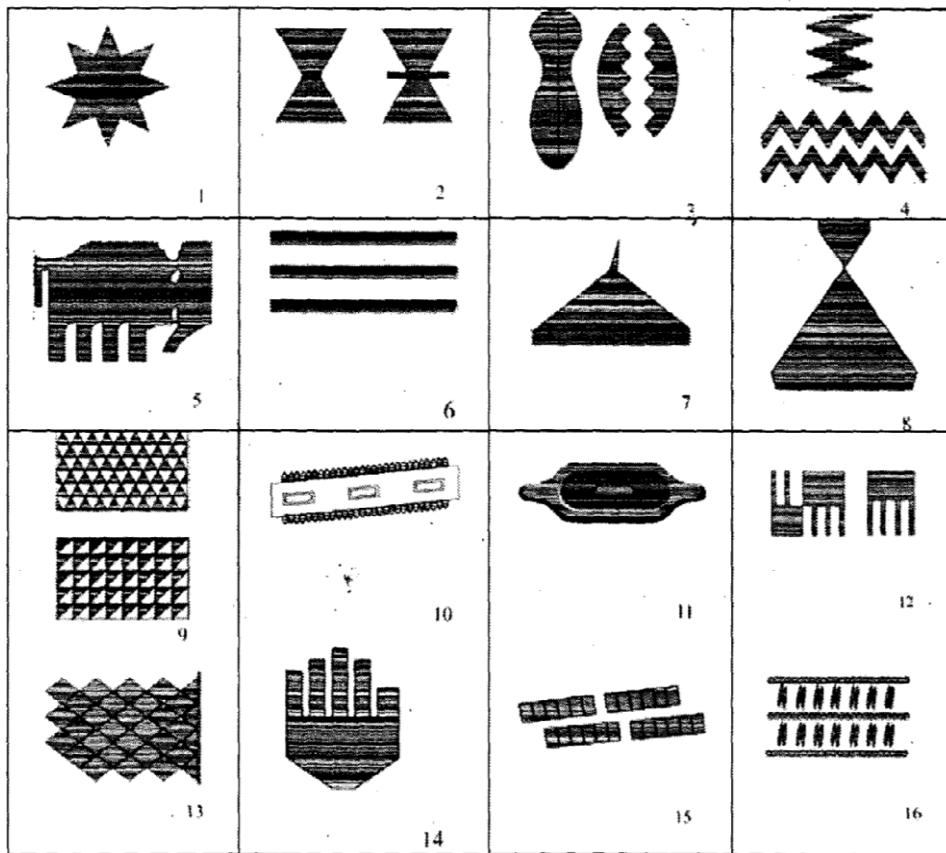
Nigeria is a country that is constituted of many ethnic groups. Each of these ethnic groups has rich surface decorative art and crafts traditions which have given Nigeria a place in world art. Some of these rich surface decorations appear on local cloths. However, one of the ways Nigerians exhibit their identities and heritage is through their

customized local cloths, but due to foreign influences, they are gradually losing their values. William (1993) affirmed that Nigeria, a country made up of rich and diverse cultural values is beginning to lose most of its cultural ideal especially through the adoption of foreign culture in the different media. Mimiko (2010) corroborated this view as he asserted that our cultural heritages have been watered down by western civilization. In fact, there has been more emphasis on the use of motifs and symbols that are alien to Nigeria in the design of modern creative purposes particularly fashion accessories without reference to Nigerian cultural environment. Along (2008) has rightly observed that an unfair share of Nigeria's textiles and fashion business goes to foreign goods.

However, the neglect of Nigerian indigenous elements for the design of fashion accessories is particularly true of the surface decorative elements inherent in *Akwa-Ocha* hand woven cloth which is going into extinction due to so many factors. Its performance prosperities or various qualities in terms of weight and less soothing nature affects the comfort and suitability of the cloth for use as common clothing fabric. Again, the fabric is readily available in wrapper form and several of them are now used as souvenir. In addition, the fabric is woven by aging women as the younger ones unwilling to learn the trade. This development has necessitated the need to make some of the rich values inherent on the fabric such as its motifs and symbols represented as fashion accessories with the use of different forms of materials such as calabash, coconut shells, leather, raffia and beads. This will not only represent more of our cultural heritage elements in fashion accessories, but also create an identity, express national pride as well as preserve a valuable heritage, so that the efforts to develop the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols by the women weavers will not go into extinction.

***Akwa-Ocha* Motifs and Symbols**

The weavers' perception of all aspects of life and nature and most notably, of ideas that reflect cultural aesthetics and taste of Aniocha culture is translated into visual form. These motifs and symbols are ideas drawn from plants, animals and birds, the cosmos and man-made objects that are of importance to the Aniocha people. More so, inscriptions that convey messages and past historical events involving the Aniocha people also form part of the designs on *Akwa-Ocha*. Ozue (2016) noted that most of the traditional cotton fabrics are drawn basically from nature and significant experiences that the Delta North people have passed through, thereby presenting it in form on folklore on the woven fabric. The motifs and symbols come in simple shapes and are not naturalistic, but stylized. Onochie (2003) explained that most of the motifs and symbols can be deciphered and their significance appreciated within the context of tradition and cultural values. Some design motifs and symbols in *Akwa-Ocha* are symbolic and their meanings are determined by their sources of inspiration. Nwosu (2016) observed that the communities, beliefs, idioms myths, proverbs, folklore, tradition and philosophy are put into consideration in the symbolical meaning of designs of *Akwa-Ocha*. He further noted that other design motifs are mainly for aesthetic values. Some of the motifs and symbols on *Akwa-Ocha* as presented in the tables below were combined in different design arrangements and finished off as fashion accessories.

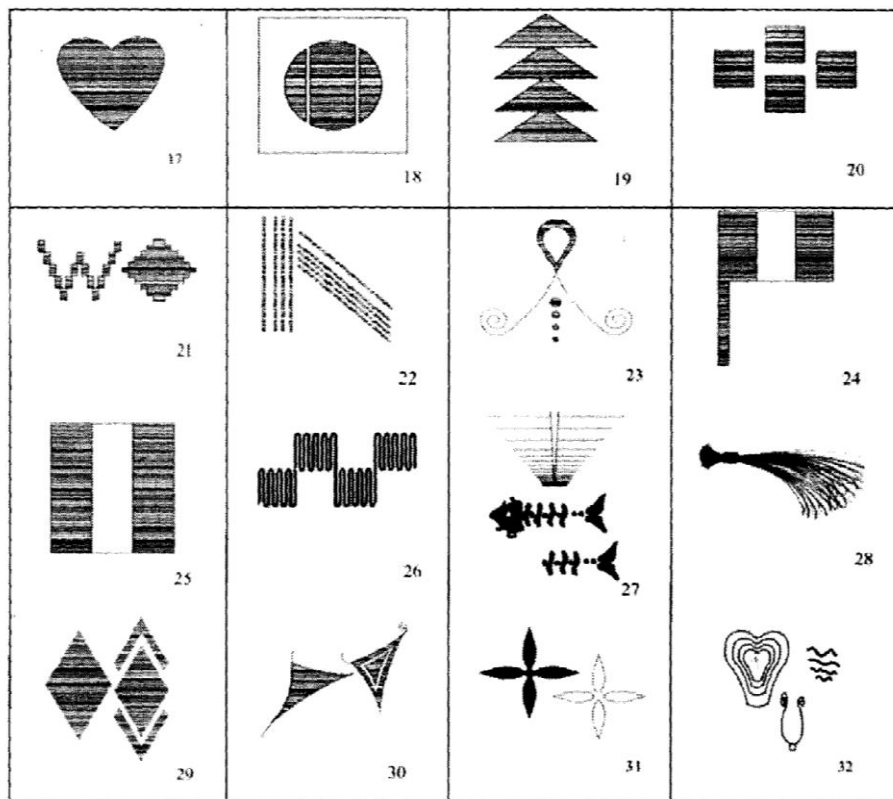


- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Kpakpando: Star | 2. Akangweose: Pestle |
| 3. Nkpulu-Ego or Ego-Ayolo: Cowrie | 4. Ije-Agwo: snake movement |
| 5. Enyi: Elephant | 6. Ejekom-be--loya: Going to the lawyer's house |
| 7. Ukoti: small metal knife | 8. Mma-Eku: local knife |
| 9. Ukwu-Efi: Cow leg | 10. Ayolo-Eke: Python's Skin |
| 11. Okwa-Oji: Kola nut bowl | 12. Nha or Nsha: Comb |
| 13. Ugba-Afa: divination tray | 14. Obo-Aka: Palm of the hand |
| 15. Nkpopu: holes | 16. Osikapa na Akpaka: rice and beans |

Title: Akwa-Ocha Motifs and Symbols

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa

Year: 2015



17. Nkpulu-Obi: Physical heart 18. Ubor: Thumb piano
 19. Step 20. Ukwu Onogbo or Ukwu-pussu: Pussy cat leg
 21. Sugar 22. Akala: Line
 23. Mkpa: Scissors 24. Okoloto: Flag
 25. Carpet. 26. Agiliga
 27. Ogwu Azu: Fish Bone 28. Aziza: Broom
 29. IsiOji: Head of Kola-Nut 30. Okala-lsi-Oji: Half segment of Kola-Nut
 31. Akwukwo Akpu: Cassava leaf 32. Ifufu or Ototo: Flower

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Akwa-Ocha Motifs and Symbols in the Design of Fashion Accessories

In this study, the writer has attempted to establish that the emphasis already placed on foreign fashion accessories, and global fashion consciousness has necessitated the expansion of its utility values both in the area of material and technique. Okeke (1996) explained that the additive approach to fashion (use of foot wears, headgear, coiffure,

bangles, anklets, earring, necklaces, and beads) falls within the category. Since nothing has been done so far to adopt the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories, this study also became imperative. There can be no doubt that the adaptation of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols will help a great deal in the development and creation of a new trend in fashion.

The re-visitation of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories anchors in both social semiotics and archetypal theories. Social semiotics theory as propounded by Leeuwen (2005), explained ways in which different aspects of the society combine to create meaning. He also viewed the collector's culture of the past few centuries now as a very useful resource for artists, designers and other innovators. The present study supports Leeuwen's argument and it is therefore, a tool with which to understand the re-visitation of surface decorative elements in traditional *Akwa-Ocha* for the design of fashion accessories. Again, the archetypal theory propounded by Jung (1919) laid emphasis on fundamental patterns and symbols which serve as a prototype from which other similar things are patterned. Traditional *Akwa-Ocha* woven cloth motifs and symbols can be viewed as a prototype from which other similar patterns can be formulated as exemplified in the fashion accessories presented in this paper.

Materials, Methods and Design Process

The process applied in making the fashion accessories is varied and the objects or materials are nominal and easy to come by. Combining materials and methods allowed wide latitude for the writers to use imagination and selection. In fact, adapting common materials and converting them into jewelries in representing the motifs and symbols derived from *Akwa-Ocha* is somewhat a challenging experience, and the jewelries so made are informal and formal, whimsical or elegant. With concern for the demands of function, weight and balance were highly considered in the use of materials such as coconut shells, calabash, fabrics, beads, raffia, cotton twine and copper wire as aforementioned

The shapes of the fashion accessories place no limits to the imagination of the producer. Colours were incorporated by the use of brush and dying as luster finish achieved by vanishing. As custom made jewelries in necklace, bracelets, earrings as well as hand bags and shoes designed with indigenous elements adapted to contemporary setting, the progress takes a logical sequence from simple to a more complex design.

Presentation and Analysis of the Fashion Accessories

The jewelry contained in (Plate 1) is both a necklace and two earrings designed with *Akwa-Ocha* motifs which include *Onwa* (moon) *Akangweose* (local double-headed pestle) and *Ejekomubeloya* (going to the lawyer's house). The necklace incorporates five small spherical pendants with a large one at the middle. They are linked together with a copper wire. The earrings are in two large spherical shapes. The manner of linking the shapes together is to avoid monotony. Again, the construction of the piece is accentuated by its highly polished surface resulting in jewelry that is simple and elegant. This piece was produced with coconut shell and it has all the qualities of jewelry and it is only after close examination that one becomes aware of the material used.



Plate 1: Necklace, Earrings and Ring
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
Medium: Calabash, Beads, Copper Wire and Acrylic
Size: 32cm
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen
Date: 2016

The jewelry shown below in (Plate 2) is a necklace and earrings designed with the skillful combination of three *Obo Aka* (palm of the hand) motifs that form its pendant and earrings. They were produced with calabash and copper wire. Both the pendant and the two earrings incorporate the *Onwa* (moon) motif in spherical shape and in black colour. They are held together with a dark copper wire.



Plate 2: Necklace and earring
Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
Medium: Calabash, Beads, Copper Wire and Acrylic
Size: 31cm
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen
Date: 2016

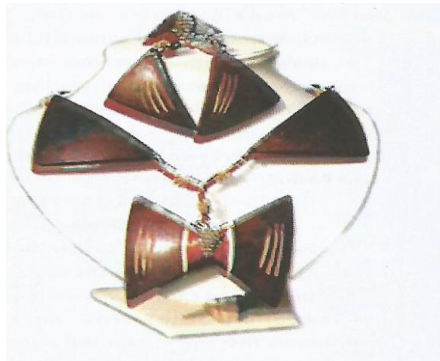


Plate 3: Necklace and earring
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Calabash, Beads, Copper Medium: Calabash, Beads, Copper
 Wire and Acrylic Size: 31cm
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Date: 2016

(Plate 3) above was produced mainly with a dark coloured stained calabash. The *Akangweose* (local double headed pestle) motif represents the shape of the main pendant while the *Okala Isi-oji* (half segment of the kola nut head) motif represents the adjoining pendants just as the two earrings were repeated several times as part of the pendants and as the earring. The main pendants contain an orange colour part and *Akala* (line) motif in three linear engravings. This was also repeated on the two earrings. The pendants of this jewelry were linked together with a beaded linear form.

The necklace contained in (Plate 4) was made of wood and designed in the shape of a reptile. The design of this piece appears somewhat sleek and complex as it incorporates motifs which include *Ejekombeloya* (going to the lawyer's house) represented in three blue linear forms and *Isi-oji* (head of kola nut) which was represented in white beaded chevron shapes. The piece which was barely vanished was deliberate because if it had received a high vanish, much of its beauty would have been lost.



Plate 4: Necklace and Earrings
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Wood, Broach, Acrylic and Copper Wire
 Size: 33cm
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Date: 2016

The structural pieces (Plate 5) are designed units of versatility, which can be worn as bracelets, used as curtain holders or displayed as ornaments. These bracelets fashioned with coconut shells have bands made of fabrics that contain overlay motifs painted in various colours. The bracelets were finished with light vanishing to give it a faint lustre effect.



Plate 5: Bracelets

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa

Medium: Coconut Shell, Fabrics, Beads and Acrylic

Size: 36cm

Photograph: Smith osatohanmwun

Date 2016

The jewelry pieces contained in Plates 6, 7 and 8 are different types of necklaces that have basic similarities although they are each based on an individual approach to design. They were designed with calabash and copper wire. The repetition of each shape was done for duality of purpose, while the finishing of the calabash has reflections for greater brilliance resulting from qualitative of polishing. The repeat method adopted in the design was to create some form of balance. This approach becomes the definite character of each piece and it dictates the essential character of the forms of the jewelry pieces. The first jewelry contains three small shapes of calabash that form the pendants which incorporates patterns in colours of yellow, green and purple at the middle area in order to accentuate and minimize the plain areas and create contrast. The second jewelry has the shape of its central pendants and the two earrings derived from the *Nkpulu-obi* (physical heart) motif, while the adjoining pendants are represented with *Onwa* (moon) motif in rounded forms. The third has skillfully combined *Kpakpando* (star), three pendants as well as *Onwa* (moon) that were motif skillfully combined together. The pendants of the first necklace in calabash shapes are linked with a chain while the pendants of the other two are linked with copper wire.



Plate 6: Necklace and Earrings
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Calabash, Copper Wire
 Size: 33cm
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Date: 2016



Plate 7: Necklace and Earrings
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Calabash and Copper Wire
 size: 32cm
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Date: 2016



Plate 8: Necklace and Earrings
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Calabash and Copper Wire
 Size: 30cm
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Date: 2016

There are other end use products or fashion accessories such as portable hand bags, purses and shoes designed in various shapes and patterned with various *Akwa-Ocha* motifs that were adapted to contemporary use. They are contained in (Plates 9, 10, 11, and 12).

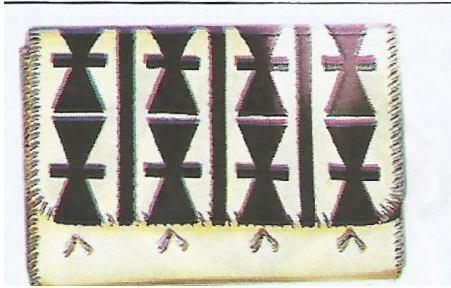


Plate 9: Ladies' Pouch
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Leather, Polyester Thread and Copper
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Size: 23x28cm
 Date: 2016

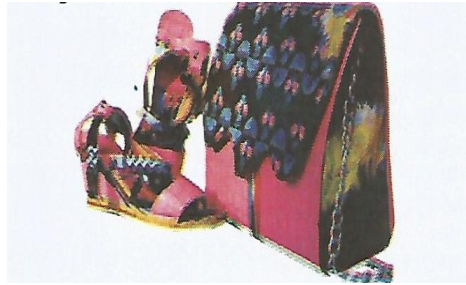


Plate 10: Ladies sandal and Bag
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Leather, Fabric, Broaches
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Size: 23x28cm
 Date: 2016



Plate 11: Appliquéd Leather Bag
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Leather, stones and Polyester Thread
 Size: 23x18cm
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Date: 2016

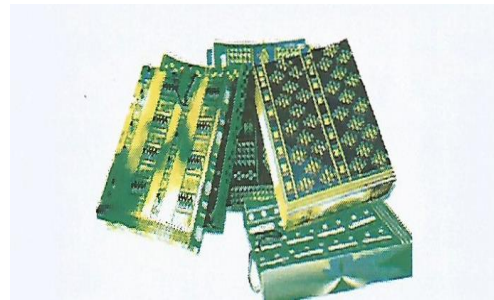


Plate 12: Shoppers Bags
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa
 Medium: Digital Print on Paper
 Size: 61x39cm
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun
 Date: 2016

Conclusion

The various fashion accessories presented in this paper have shown that the re-visitation of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols used for their design is quite appealing and will have a far-reaching impact on the emphasis already placed in foreign fashion accessories. This phenomenon will also result into a conceptual outlook, create an identity and serve as an eloquent testimony to the continuing dynamism of the elements constituting this local cloth. More so, as the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols are declining, the need to diversify and advance their utility values of which has provided the platform for experimentation. Besides, the re visitation of *Akwa-Ocha* for the design of fashion accessories and critical analysis of the finished products brought about an

aesthetic vocabulary that communicate both the philosophical and sociological message of the Aniocha communities.

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