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Patterned Modernity: Intersections of textiles and contemporary art in Nigeria

This dissertation project analyzes the use of two textiles, the *adire* and *Ankara* (wax print), in the production of Nigerian contemporary art as part of a continuing articulation of modernity. I will trace the production of these textiles through a complex history of trade, technical developments, gendered roles in production, and the evolution of patterns as part of the narrative of modernity in Nigeria that has been largely understudied and its relevance overlooked. The study will thus take as its starting point the early 19th century when West Africa played a pivotal role in global exchange, and contributed to modernization worldwide.¹ By examining these histories, I aim to demonstrate how critical the textile was not only to visual culture and dress of the Yoruba (the focus of most textile-based art historical research) but how critical textiles were to the local economy, local politics, and constructions of identity, and thus to processes of modernization.

A long pastime of weaving, dyeing and printing textiles have amounted to a complex pattern language throughout West Africa. This language is capable of expressing a great deal about individuals, families, or entire cultures through selective use of fabrics, and plays a large role in the construction of personal, cultural, and even national identities. Thus, in addition to the historical analysis of textiles, this project will conduct parallel visual analyses of key patterns with the purpose of answering the questions: *how do certain patterns, changes in patterns, and specific pattern uses articulate moments of modernity in Yoruban culture? What can we know of the processes of modernism in Nigeria through these articulations? What are the implications of the use of these textiles in modern Nigerian art?* Rather than lay out a linear narrative of Nigerian modernism, the answers to these questions will likely reveal a modernity evolved through moments of transition and hybridity between the pre-modern and the modern, and moments of juncture between local and distant cultures.

The history laid out in the first part of the dissertation will inform the chapters that follow, which will examine selections of art produced in the post-Independence era up to today, and provide a new perspective on Nigerian Modern Art. By clarifying the roles of textiles as commodities, which provided a source of income and, to an extent, a source of power to the women who designed, dyed and sold them, the first chapter will provide a launch pad to a later feminist analysis of Nigeria's modern art history, in which I will assert that the textiles can be and ought to be considered as works of art, as opposed to crafts or purely utilitarian or decorative products. The extant literature on these textiles supports this assertion, explaining the intricate pattern language of *adire*, *injiri*, *asoke* etc. and the roles they play in cultural traditions, the expression of identities through dress, and the preference of consumers for new and well executed designs and a reverence for those who were capable of designing them (see Eicher, Barbour, Picton, Byfield). However, in the general discourses of modern art, textiles are dismissed as "traditional" arts², and appear only in modern arts as a source of inspiration for artists who seek to tap into their cultural heritage, despite the fact that

¹ As John Pepper has articulated, too many written histories of African modernisms are truncated, or unevenly focused on the post-colonial period. This causes a persistent view that all non-western modernities are derivative of European Modernity. See: Sylvester Ogbechie "Interrogating African Modernity: Art, Cultural Politics and Global Identities" in *Critical Interventions*.

² Particularly in the context of European and American Arts. The concept of the decorative as a pejorative categorization for abstraction was pronounced in the influential work of Clement Greenberg.

many of these textiles are products of the modern era, and their developments were due to contact with other cultures and the arrival of materials from outside Africa, such as machine-made cotton, metal plates used to make stencils, or chemical additives for dye. This alternative treatment of textiles-as-art forms will not only open up the scope of modern artists to include many more women in a highly male-dominated historical account, but additionally, a better analysis of later artworks which use textiles as media or subject matter can be undertaken.

The appropriation of textiles by contemporary artists functions as mediator in the complex terrain of identity politics at both local and global levels, particularly for those who wish to address the experience of migration. In the last two decades, high-profile contemporary artists such as Yinka Shonibare, Sokari Douglas Camp, and Njideka Akunyili have risen to prominence in the art world through their work featuring African textiles. For these artists, using or referencing textiles was a way of reflecting a part of their split identities. For Shonibare, a self-proclaimed “post-colonial hybrid,” it was a means of critiquing the West’s preconceived notions of African art and “africanness.” While these artists became *de facto* ambassadors of contemporary African art (whether they wanted to be or not) their work actually symbolized multicultural identities and experiences and became a contact zone for the negotiation of seemingly disparate cultural symbols. Using the work of several artists active in Lagos as case-studies, this project will focus on how artists such as Nike Davies Okundaye, Temitayo Ogunbiyi, Kolade Oshinowo, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Victoria Udondian navigate the complexities of identity in modern and post-modern Nigeria through explorations of textile patterns and textile-based traditions like *aso ebi* or the production of commemorative cloths.