SYMBOLS AS DESIGN ELEMENTS AND PROVERBIAL EXPRESSION IN 'ADIRE ELEKO' AMONG THE YORUBA OF SOUTH WESTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
Adire Eleko textile forms have become part and parcel of today's cultural development and its symbolization process are replete with physical attribution in Yoruba civilization endeavours, such as are found on the woven and surface of fabrics. The symbolization process is therefore an enactment of these nuances which has become a way of life. In view of this, the aim of this paper is to examine the meaning of the symbolic motifs used in Adire Eleko textile among the Yoruba people. Some are generally known to almost everyone while some can only be interpreted by a few individual “esoteric”. The use of symbols and motifs an Adire Eleko reviewed the philosophical meanings and artistic initiations in design concept. This paper demonstrates the powerful role of textiles in history, as well show casing the aesthetic and cultural riches of textile design as medium of artistic expression.

Keywords: Symbols, Design, Proverbial expression, Adire Eleko.

Introduction

The use of symbols (motifs) as design element has been in existence long before the introduction of formal education in Nigeria. These symbols represent ideas, physical entities, spiritual and traditional processes of the people. They have helped to communicate and strengthen cultural and religious ideas. They are depicted on surfaces of the fabrics. Certain fundamental geometric designs are used all over the world and it is possible by multiplication, sub-division and interlacement to produce an endless variety of shapes, all of which appear at one point or another in the vast repertory of African design. (Jefferson, 1974)

Symbols are abstract representation of objects; they are complex and their meaning can involve in relation to the sense of appreciation of individual. When a symbol loses its meaning and power for an individual or culture it becomes a dead symbol. Symbols are also used to communicate complete knowledge, abstract truth and ideas about life and its meaning on African textiles. Jefferson (1974) defers in opinion that this is not to say that all African textile patterns have symbolic meanings; some geometrical patterns merely follow the texture of the medium in order to control continuity of design across the area of decoration, while other patterns are made to be enjoyed for their own sake.

In Textile Design, motifs are usually developed from symbols and are used to create design patterns. Some of the African textiles are decorated with motifs which are symbolically oriented and most of the symbols retain their importance and significance over the years. Although some of them however, have been altered or modified through

cultural interaction and graded stylization that have in some instances evolved from naturalistic to near abstraction. Motif is a unit of design and major theme in art work especially in pattern making. It is repeated several times at regular intervals. These can be formed from natural, artificial object, abstract, geometric, regular or irregular shapes. The best way to comprehend the fact is to draw them and then they become a visual vocabulary, which one uses as a starting point to develop and create a personal visual statement. However, figurative symbols or abstract art may approach design with a logical and practical attitude while some uses more fluid initiatives or sub-conscious method in developing their ideas on Africa textile *(Adire)*.

Adire-Eleko is a resist technique that originated from Yoruba in south-western Nigeria that makes use of stencils and free hand for its designing. The normal extensive medium used for it is cassava starch (paste resist). *Adire-Eleko* fabric design of the Yoruba is very rich in symbols. It is an important aspect of their textile tradition. It is mostly practiced by women, and it projects and extols the creativity of the diverse and profuse art forms of the Yoruba. *Adire –Eleko* has large motifs that are repeated, unique and outstanding patterns are created for special ceremonies. This is highly developed textile craft that transcends many cultures and individual production reflects their thought in the patterns they make on the cloth. It is not merely a question of repeated patterns, they have representation such as the desire for wealth or any thought or idea the designer wishes to put forward. The *Adire* motifs and symbols produced by those methods are to be looked into in this paper.

Oral interview conducted reveals that symbols/motifs tradition in *Adire–Eleko* is on the verge of extinction due to influences of religions, westernization, globalization etc. In view of this, the main trust of this paper is to examine the meaning, the symbolic interpretation and function of motifs used in *Adire-Eleko* among the Yoruba people. So as to resuscitate the fast desizing of symbols in African textile arts, especially, considering their relevance in terms of the roles they play in decorative proverbial expression (image promotion) which will help to create visual language through fashion imagery with the aim of communicating and acceptability of *Adire-Eleko* world-wide in the renaissance of modern fashion.

Also, this paper will help in eliciting sense of belonging to those in diaspora who may not have direct contact with these symbols as this will give them cultural pride and total confidence on African design. It is believed that this study would document symbols as design elements in African textile for tourism and educational purposes.

Historical Background

African textiles represent the rich culture and artistic creation in the Africa textile segment through structural relationships of forms, designs, patterns and color expressed feelings and emotions which cannot be voiced in any other ways (Wikipedia, 2014). Symbols and Motifs have different symbolic interpretations. Chu (2003) elaborates that symbols are important means of past, present and future because these are generated within the perspective and aspiration of culture in different periods of history. African textile art serves as a means of symbols communication. Symbols and motifs come in different forms based on geometric shapes such as triangles, rectangles, squares, circles, semi-circles and oval, natural shapes such as anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, aquatic

and floral, man-made shapes such as houses, vehicles, furniture, households utensils, educational materials etc. Longman (2003) defines symbols as a picture or shape that has a particular meaning or represents a particular organization or ideas. A symbol as "an object typifying resemblance association: a type, an emblem and Cambridge Learners Dictionary (2002) similarly defines a symbol as a sign or object that is used to represent an image".

Jefferson (1974) took a cursory peep into ancient history and this showed that symbolism has often been utilized by man. For example: the use of traditional signs in presentation, especially of divine images, powers, degrees or other attributes in man's view to life. He explains further that in ancient Egyptian art, symbolism was highly practiced. For example: rising sun of Osiris symbolizes birth, Sina symbolizes union, Sundral symbolizes sun, pyramid symbolizes heaven, fire and scarab symbolize longevity. Furthermore, he discovered that the Dogon people of ancient Mali use Hombill as a symbol of fertility while *Guwo* as symbols of fertility.

Louise and Balliger (1972) classify a sign as a distinguishing mark or characteristic sign (letters) and forms are used generally to communicate ideas, to learn or do explain an areas contents, and also to mark a token of something intangible. Whereas symbols and patterns can be classified as a relationship, suggestion, interpretation, resemblance or association, it could equally be a form that reveals quantity, special elements or varieties. Much of man written means of communication today can be traced to symbols of the past. These symbols are derived from simple environmental elements or shapes such as man, animal, tree, abode, sun, rain, lightening which are put or arranged in a certain order of communicating an idea or message. A classic example is the Chinese writing with its infinite variety of characters. This according to Louise and Raymon (1972) is based on traditional brush drawings of symbols representing objects of everyday life.

Ibrahim (2009) also attests that, pattern is an arrangement of regular and repeated motifs from nature or the environment in such a way that rhythm is created in color, tone or texture on a given surface. He went further to explain what is a design; an arrangement or composition of some art elements, motifs and symbols into a unified piece or pattern. The word "design" means different things to different people depending on what they are doing and their methods of doing them. Design falls roughly into two categories. First, designing to create a two or three dimensional object or structure that fulfils a specific purpose of using imagery that relates to a use or object, be it a fabric, tile or ceramic etc. Onipede (2007) corroborates that design on the other hand may be taken to describe the planning and organization of the elements that make up the art work. Faulkner *et al* call it a universal syntax through which artists communicate their ideas. Oguntona (1986) explains that design as a human cognitive reaction implies conceptualization innovation, and creativity which in essence is a search after meaning. Therefore design becomes the creator of form. The Yoruba people of south western Nigeria embellish their fabrics so as to define several phenomena. It was believed that motifs have mythological impacts and was often based on the history and culture of the environment. The early motifs which were adopted from body tattoos and geometric shapes used to embellish the village shrines were to attract the god of immorality, longevity and increase. These have different symbolic interpretations. It was believed that some motifs on *Adire-Eleko* had no

symbolic connections attached to them.

Adire is the name given to the Indigo blue cloths patterned with resists techniques of designs. It is an inherited craft work done mostly by women. Licher (1976) in his research found out that, fabric decoration is an art that is peculiar to different cultures and people. Alabi (2004) attests that, the issue of fabric decoration is as old as mankind and there is no doubt that fabric decoration has serve man in diverse ways. Kuba (1991) corroborates that the most popular method is resists dyeing. The art and trade of fabric decoration is deeply rooted in Yoruba land. Young girls work with their mothers and at early age become skilled in patterns making. Oyelola (2002) defines the catchments of local textile in Nigeria states that the principal production centre of *Adire-Eleko* are Abeokuta, Ibadan, and Oshogbo. It is more or less an indiscriminate trade for both men and women.

Kuba (1991) also accepts that the Yoruba art of fabric decoration, resist dyeing is outstanding and possesses peculiar identify that makes it stand out among other similar resist products from other parts of the world. 'Adire-eleko'pattern was achieved on the fabric through the use of stencil with application of starch made from cassava flour. This starch resists the dye from penetrating through a stencil that has been cut into the cloths with brush or feather.

Meaning, Interpretation and Functions of symbols on '*Adire – Eleko*'

African textile arts are very popular for their use of symbols as motifs, and words which give wisdom through proverbs depicted by materials or sign. Motifs on '*Adire-Eleko'* have meanings and interpretations to their historical and social values. Most of the symbols have both profound meaning. They are complex and their meaning can evolve in relation to the sense of appreciation of the individual. *Adire-Eleko* has different functions with some symbolic meanings attached to them. The serial functions outweigh other functions. Similarly, the meaning of symbols in *Adire-Eleko*, like that of sign is determined by the craftsman and the subjects using it. The subjects and their cultures then are responsible for the meaning given to any particular symbols. This synthetic process of giving meaning to symbols is aptly expressed by the proverb, “the potter, and not the pot”.

To fully know and understand the theme and composition of the symbols in the production of *Adire-Eleko* among the Yoruba, it become necessary and to examine the meaning and symbolic interpretation of motifs in *Adire-Eleko* textile. These motifs have been coded while some have been decoded. Some of the motifs were painted to chronicle the activities of the Yoruba people, many others were chosen to reveal the attribute, power and authority. The social functions outweigh other functions. Similarly, patterns made on it are to enhance the aesthetic appeals of the words more than any other. However, some of the wording designs on them are proverbial sayings portraying certain aspects of the people's philosophy of life.

Folaranmi (2002) spots that, image are symbols used to illustrate proverbs, tales, folklore, myths, stories and express both the culture and wisdom of the people. These include zoomorphic and anthropomorphic image alongside other royal and state paraphernalia. The Yoruba language is exceptionally rich in proverbs, in their social exchanges They believe that it is inappropriate to speak with the whole mouth; they speak with the power and context of proverbs.

"Owe l'esin oro, bi oro ba sonu,
Owe lafin waa" that is…
Proverbs are the horses
"Power" of speech, if
Communication is lost,
We use proverb to retrieve it".

This is a way of introducing proverbs into conversation. It describes or relates the power of the Yoruba proverbs with that of the horses (Linfors *et al*, 1973).
Symbols are sourced in two ways, such as traditional and contemporary sources.

Traditional and Contemporary Sources

Symbols are used to concretize images that have been transformed into ideas. Idea of motifs deals with conceptualization and various sources of interpretation akin to socio-cultural backgrounds.

The iconography of the *Adire* design speaks a visual language and serves as commentaries on matters of public interest. Tribal activities on matters of public interest, historical events, geometric, alphabetic, numerical objects, animals, floral/plants, abstract, linear, naturalistic, pictures of deities, important personalities and other human escorts and royal paraphernalia were incorporated into the fabric probably to enhance balance and rhythm in *Adire-Eleko* design formation . These motifs are popular among the Yoruba culture, sometimes words, applause, prayers, warnings, or positive or negative reactions to events in the societies are incorporated. For example, *Oju teke*, *Ide owo* (cowrie shells), *Ooya* (Wooden comb), *iwa* (Character), *Omoluabi* (Profound good nature), *Ewa* (Beauty), *Asoro d'ayo* (The bringer of joy), *Tibi tire* (of pain and joy) "*Saanu mi Oluwa*" (Have mercy on me, oh Lord), "*Omo Lere Aye*", (Children are the heritage of the world), "*Ire ni temi*", (Success is mine), "*Iwa lewa*", (Beauty is character) and some derived from an obvious theme. such as *Eyepe* (All birds), and others are more stream of consciousness. Still, others got their names from a single motif that must appear among the many patterns. It contains "*Ibadan dun*" (Ibadan is sweet) etc. Also the following motifs are from the cultural elements of the Yoruba: *Oga* (Chameleon), *Oka baba* (Guinea corn), *Ododo* (Flower) *Adan* (Bat) *Waya* (Wire), *Kokoro* (key), *Igi Oye (*Chieftaincy title), *Afara* (Bridge), *Elewe merin* (Four leaves), *Oobe* (Small bat), *Sekere* etc.(Areo, M. O, and Kalilu, R. O. 2013). The harmonious sequence of the above symbolic motifs highlights the ingenious creativity exposed by the Yoruba *Adire* passed down through the ages to us.

Some motifs in *Adire-Eleko* represent objects of 20th century materials culture (Ojo, 1993). Some are replicas of art works produced in traditional Yoruba society. *Adire-Eleko* cloths designing in the present day among the Yoruba people have developed to an enviable standard. Modern day designers have deviated from the design concept of the past. Most of the symbols are a combination of lines to form geometric patterns. Iconography, biomorphic, organic and inorganic elements are used as *Adire-Eleko* now come up in different varieties due to reflection of socio cultural issues to the large new innovation of the 'net' designs by Gambian to Yoruba people. Designs are transferred straight from the 'net' onto the fabric. Some complicated designs are produced with stencils, while uncomplicated ones are being painted by the craftsmen and women. This paper analyzed application of the symbols adopted on the surfaces of *Adire-Eleko* as decoration and forms as found in the illustrations below.

A. Some *Adire Eleko* Symbols (motifs) and their Names Among the Yorubas

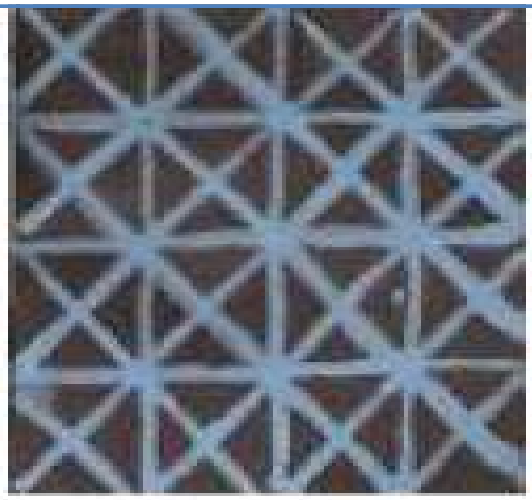


Fig.1: *Waya* (wire) it comes from electrification materials and belongs to skeuomorphic (Man-made object)



Fig.2: *Oga* (Chameleon): It has transformative power, and it belongs to reptilian species.

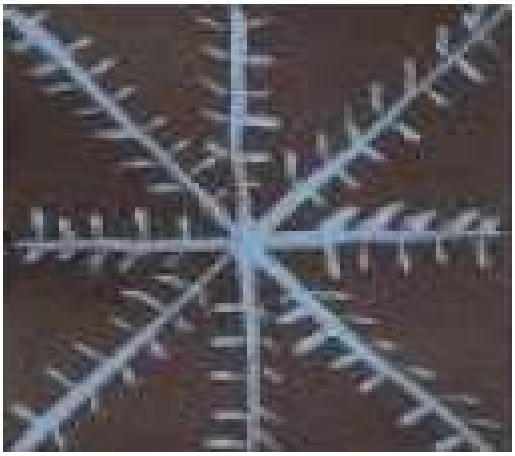


Fig 3: *Oka baba* (Guinea corn) it is in foliages and belongs to the group of floral motifs

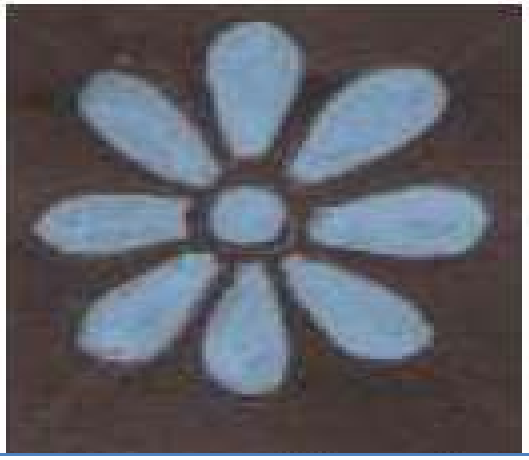


Fig 4: O*dodo* (flower) that beautifies homes and locations and belongs to floral

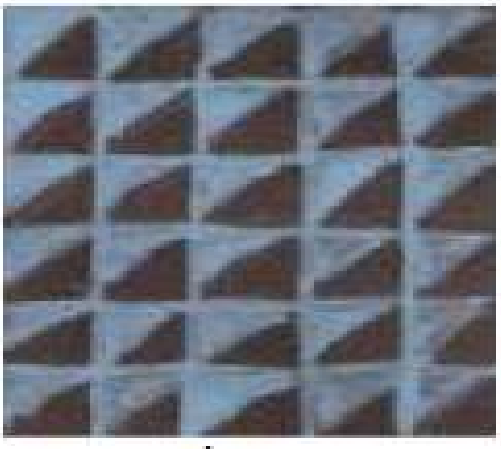
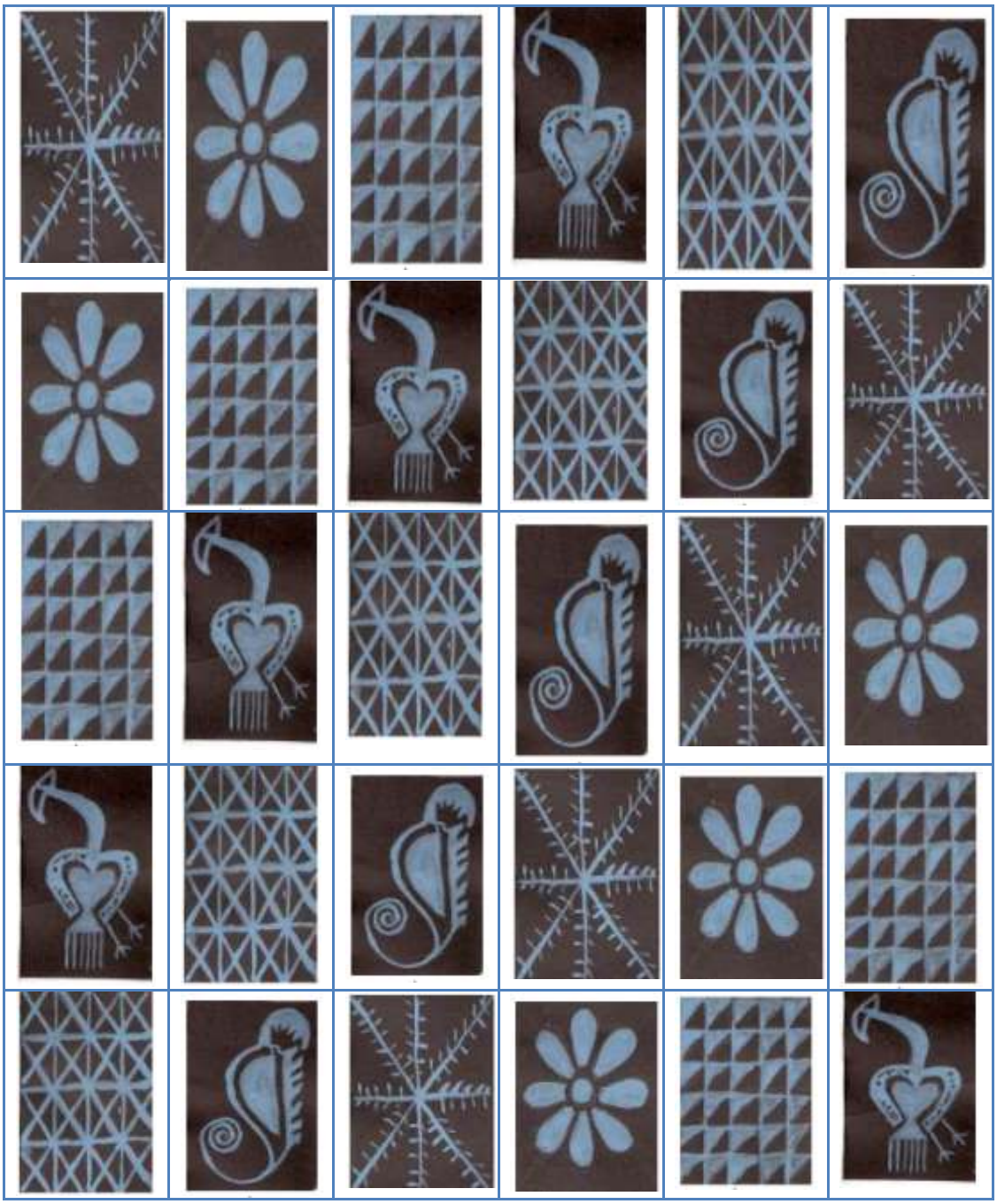


Fig 5: *Walaa* (Slater)- This is Islamic slate belong to skeuomorphic (Representation of man-made object.



Fig 6: *Adan* (Bat)- is associated with mystical p ower, i.e to the Yoruba. Belong to zoomorphic symbols or motifs

B. Repeat Pattern of Adire-Eleko Symbols (Motifs) and their Names in Yorubaland



C. **Some Adire Eleko Symbols (motifs) and their Names among the Yorubas**

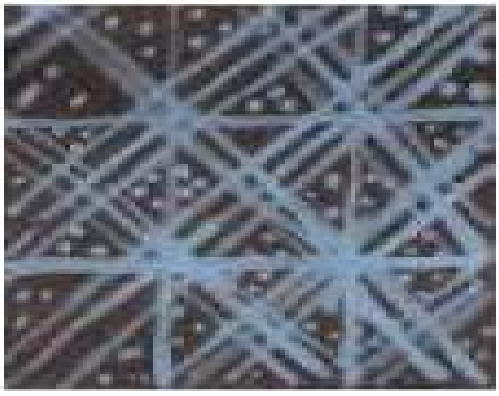


Fig 1: *Sekere* (Gourd rattle) - Is a musical instrument in Yoruba land and belong to skeuomorphic (Man-made object)



Fig 2: *Oobe* (Bat)- this is identifiable and symbolize the mystical power of women known affectionately as "*awon iya wa*' [*aje*]-witches



Fig.3 *Kokoro* [Key]Object for opening locked doors and it belong to skeuomorphic [man made]

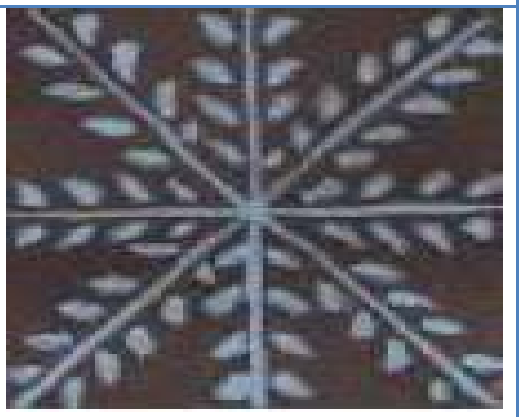


Fig.4.*Igi-oye* [chieftaincy tree) used for chieftaincy installation among the Yoruba people and belong to floral motifs

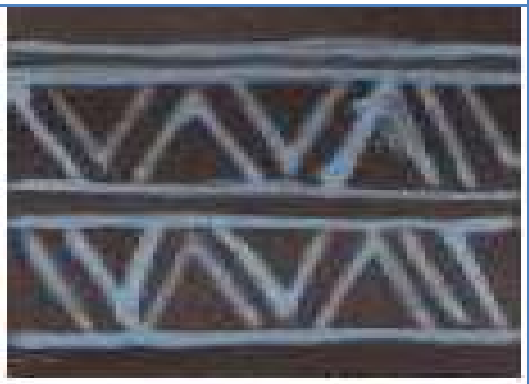
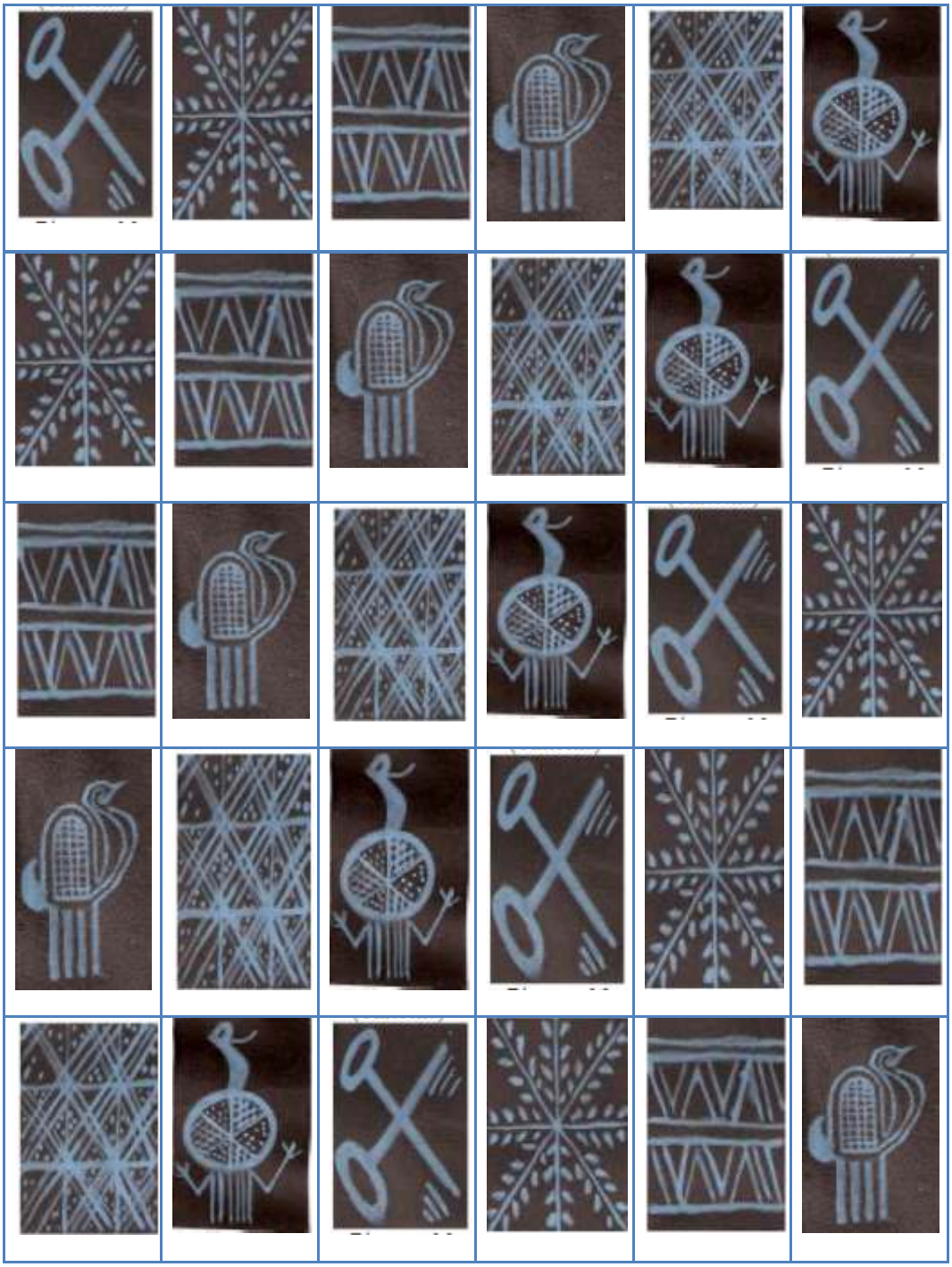


Fig 5.*Afara* [Bridge] Is a taste of among the Yoruba,made for easy crossing of vehicles and pedestrian It belong to skeuomorphic [man made].



Fig 6. *Ogongo* [Ostrich] is associated with leadership to the Yorubas. It is the King of birds (Baba eye). Belongs to zoomorphic motifs

D. Repeat pattern of *adire-eleko* symbols (motifs) and their names in Yoruba land



i. Sekere (Gourd rattle) | ii. Ogongo (Ostrich) | iii. Kokoro (Key) | iv. Igi oye (Chieftaincy tree) | v. Afara (Bridge) | vi. Oobe (Small bat)

The aforementioned symbols were combined together for aesthetic and functional purposes as repeat patterns to form design for a typical *Adire Eleko* fabrics among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. All illustration were drawn by Areo M. O. And arrangement of repeat pattern were done by Bakare Olumide

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper discusses the meaning, symbolic interpretation functions and relevance of symbols (motifs) as design elements and proverbial expression in *Adire-Eleko* for cultural identity and prosperity. This is represented in Yoruba land where people considered its importance in making use of symbols to interact with other world. This is also a means to assume an insight to social, religious, political and economics of many African societies. Symbols come to us through the ages in the areas of communication, documentation, information, identification, socialization, entertainment, etc. They are so knit and interwoven that they become difficult to define. Some symbols are exotic, whose meaning are generally known to almost everyone, while, some can only be interpreted by a few individuals. These symbols are noted in *Adire –Eleko* fabric of Yoruba land. It should be noted that these symbols break language barrier, and have to work with other elements of design to effectively carry out its functions.

Adeyemi (2008) explains thus, Yoruba of the South-western Nigeria would say:

> Atewo la ba'la aa
> Meni to koo,
> Meaning; we just woke up
> Or met the scarifications
> Or lines on palms; we do not know who wrote them".

Chinese have excelled in many fields of the decorative arts using their symbols to depict their culture. The Yoruba symbols document not only the activities of African civilization, but also celebrates individuals by means of likeness. The simplicity and directness of older African signs, symbols, motifs and patterns have given a lot of inspiration to modern contemporary Nigerian artists.

In conclusion, the article revealed that symbols are not just found and inspired by the artist but to make metaphoric association between one thing and another. Another point is the continuity of the same design motifs on every product. The existing ones are interesting but lack variation. Since art forms do change, new concepts of expressing society's beliefs and aspirations should be created. The design can be improved by making the motifs purely abstract or by re-orientating the existing design.

The study identified *Adire-Eleko* as an element of traditional culture worthy of preservation. It serves as a symbol of national pride and identity elsewhere in the world. It is believed that this study will be a resource of documentation of motifs and symbolic value among the Yoruba, the designers and students of Industrial Design and Fine and Applied Arts of institutions who are in need of more literacy on symbols, most especially in their curriculum and products.

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