

UlliBeier; a Beacon in the Post- Colonial Renaissance of *Adire*.

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ABSTRACT

Oshogbo in Southwestern Nigeria was renowned for the Yoruba, patterned, indigo – dyed cloth; *Adire*. Traditionally called “iluAro”, home of indigo and indigo dyeing, the dyers in the town were patronized from far and near for their dyeing prowess. This art tradition however suffered a lull in the twilight of Nigerian Colonialism in the 1950s, due to lack of willing young apprentices to learn this generational art which traditionally, was passed from mothers to daughters, as the young girls now preferred Western education in an Eurocentric setting. Another challenge was the flooding of Nigerian markets with cheaper, imported textiles, which were not taxed, while the locally produced ones were. Hand in hand with these twin problems is the mindset of many educated Nigerians, who then saw the *Adire* merely as rural cloth for poor, illiterate, rural dwellers.

This trend however changed in the Post – Independence years of the 1960s, with the concerted efforts of certain individuals, among whom UlliBeier shone as a beacon. Through a paradigm shift in apprentice education and training in this indigenous knowledge, his efforts not only brought a rebirth of the *Adire* art, but also resulted in a dynamic new form of the art, which has become an inseparable part of the socio – cultural, visual landscape of Osogbo, and many other *Adire* art centres in Southwestern Nigeria.

The paper, an art historical research based on field work, consultation of literature materials and interviews of artists, highlights the methods of training employed and bring to the fore how a paradigm shift in pedagogy, technic and technology can enhance the sustainability of many indigenous knowledge in a fast changing world.

Introduction

Osogbo is located in the Yoruba-speaking Southwestern axis of Nigeria. The Yoruba have variously been described as the producers of the largest arts by Fagg(1968) and the most prolific artists of the sub-Saharan Africa by Bascom(1973). Notable among the people’s artistic traditions are woodcarving, pottery, cloth weaving, bead-making, blacksmithing, mat-weaving, leatherwork, gouard decoration, and patterned cloth-dyeing known as *Adire*. Of all the artistic traditions of the Yoruba, the textile art tradition still remains, perhaps, the most decorative, dynamic and extant, with Osogbo being renowned for *Adire* art tradition both in the distant past and in contemporary times.

The etymology of the name *Adire* is a coinage of two words, ‘*Adi*,’to tie; and ‘*Re*,’to dye, that is, tie-dye. But these words from the Yoruba language describe both the process of production and the end product called *Adire*.

The history of the origin of Osogbo is obscure and multifarious due to lack of written records. But since culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society (Taylor,1921), the absence of written records therefore does not negate a well-preserved history, as the people’s culture is rich in both tangible and intangible materials. The latter in form of oral tradition, and kept alive by designated families and

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individuals within the Yoruba society has persevered many generations within the society, with Osogbo not being an exception.

One of such oral traditions links the origin of Osogbo to the indigo dyeing tradition (Pogson, 1995). The account has it that one of the progenitors of the Osogbo people, Olutimehin, an elephant hunter, migrated from Ilesha in order to identify a convenient place for settlement. On locating a site near a river, he embarked on cutting down a tree to mark the space for future identification and settlement. But the fall of the tree resulted in an angry loud wailing thus: "*ta lo foikokoaro mi o, osoigbo, e tun de o*" Meaning, "who broke my indigo-dyeing pot? Wizards of the forest, you are at it again." This myth, by implication, points to the existence of a dyeing tradition in the town that precedes the people's

Also, the location of the first, second, and present palace of the *Oba*, the paramount ruler of Osogbo, near the Osun groove and river buttresses this story. Finally, the radial formation of the town from the Osun groove, with the palace serving as the centre of the present day Osogbo town further attests to the probable authenticity of this myth. Indigo-dyeing therefore is an indigenous knowledge that has been with the people of Osogbo from inception. It is also a traditional knowledge expressed in the myth of the people and embedded in spirituality that tells the story of origin of a people.

Dyeing with many indigenous plants as a vocation is practiced among the Yoruba. Patterned or resist-dyed cloth known as *Adire* among the people is a popular industry in many Yoruba towns. The importance of dyeing in ancient Yoruba area is demonstrated in the ubiquitousness of the practice everywhere, even in the smallest villages (Eluyemi, 1976).

However, of all the natural dyes, indigo still remains the oldest natural dyestuff on the records of world textile tradition (Gillow and Sentence, 1999), and with Tyrian purple, it is believed to predate the time of Moses (Proctor and Lew, 1992). Indigo is also by far the most popular, and widely used dye in traditional Africa, and up to the time of the introduction of synthetic dyes in the 1960, natural dyes especially indigo, was the only dye used by the Yoruba dyers (Polakoff, 1982) and *Adire* artists.

However, as widespread as indigo dyeing was all over Yorubaland, a few centres have been identified as the major centres of indigo-dyeing in Yorubaland. These are Ibadan, Abeokuta and Osogbo. But of these three major centres, Osogbo is still traditionally regarded as the "home of dyeing," "*Osogbo, iluaro*." The people of this town are traditionally regarded as the best dyers, and so good are they in their dyeing that it elicited the saying, "*aronbel'Osogbo, omoeniyanninbenile Ibadan*;" meaning Osogbo is the home of quality dyeing, but Ibadan is populated with people (Akpata, 1971).

Scholarly works on Osogbo in relation to the *Adire* art tradition are few. Most scholars are unanimous in the importance of this town as a renowned indigo-dyeing centre. Most of the authors in the book jointly edited by Barbour and Simmonds (1971), emphasize this significance and other aspects of the *Adire* art such as, its production, function, design, typology and chemistry.

Stanfield (1971), Picton and Mack (1979) gave detailed account of the extraction and preparation of the indigo dye. Other scholars such as, Pogson (1995), employ oral tradition to trace the historical and artistic development of *Adire* art tradition in Osogbo, while Adepegba (1995) places the art in the context of the significance of Osogbo in contemporary Nigerian art. This study is, however, aimed at looking at the importance of *Adire* art tradition in Osogbo in the pre-independent years, the factors that boosted its vibrancy and gave the town the name, "home of indigo-dye", Also the challenges that resulted in the lull of the art in the twilight of the colonial era, and the contribution of human agents and personalities with specific focus on the role of UlliBeier in the renaissance and evolution of *Adire* in the town. Also the factors that led to the rebirth and the ripple effect of Beier's effort in the continued sustenance of the art even in contemporary times is analysed.

Adire in Pre-Independent Osogbo

Kalilu's (1991) position of the significance of need and access to materials as factor in the origin, provenance and function of African art forms become relevant here. His argument is that, need and challenges inspire creative ideas, and access to materials is catalyst to the origin of art forms, while patronage determines the

dimensions of practice and provenance of the arts. *Adire* art in Osogbo is no exception to this assertion. The two most important materials of *Adire* production are cloth and dye. Though, dyes are extracted from different plant sources, the indigo dye was the most widespread and popular. The raw material and source of indigo dye are the many varieties of *indigofera*, called *elu*, that are sometimes cultivated, but which often grow wild.

The significance of Osogbo in indigo dyeing is attributable to the geographical location of the town, which favoured the large scale farming of indigo plant, the raw material of indigo dyestuff preparations needed all over the Yorubaland, especially in other notable dyeing centres such as Abeokuta and Ibadan. The climax of *Adire* production between 1920 and 1932, had direct booming effect on other dyeing centres all over Yorubaland, and so viable was *Adire* and indigo dyeing in Osogbo that at the peak of demand for indigo-dyed fabric for export to other African countries, that many *Adire* producers in Abeokuta had to take their cloth to Osogbo for dyeing, while the neighbouring town of Ede supplied Abeokuta dyers with indigo balls, *elu* (Akinwunmi, 2008).

The second material of *Adire* production is the cloth. Textiles for clothing are not new to the Yoruba. Cotton, the commonest raw material for *kijipa*, the handwoven fabric produced by women on the broadloom as the canvas for *Adire*, grows easily and is cultivated in vast quantities among the people. And not only was cotton in large quantity, but it was also of good quality and was "well thought of in Liverpool market, where it commands a paying price equal to that of Louisiana, and superior to that of India (Alvan, 1891).

The existence of cotton in Africa is traceable to at least the last five thousand years, with the manufacture of cotton being in existence even before the advent of European travelers and explorers, who reported the existence of indigenous cotton plants, cotton cloths, and the typology of the cotton in existence, their characteristic colour and texture. They also reported that cotton was grown alongside other food crops with little traded within the country as individuals planted and harvested their own (Eicher, 1976).

Weaving is also thriving business among the Yoruba with two types of looms being used. The horizontal loom on which the narrow prestige cloth, *asoofi* is woven by men. So vibrant is this trade that the weaving industry of Iseyin employed 27% of the total male population in the town in the 1970 (Bray, 1969).

The second loom, which is the vertical broad loom, is operated domestically by women in many homes all over Yorubaland. The raw material, cotton, was cultivated, sourced and hand-spun locally, and its product is *kijipa*, the prototype for *Adire*.

Regular supply of these two materials, cloth and dye for the Osogbo *Adire* artists ensured a sustained *Adire* art tradition in the pre-colonial era. Apprenticeship at this period was generational with mothers in a dyeing centre passing the knowledge of the craft to their young daughters. The *Adire* art tradition was solely a female craft.

The presentation of the finished *Adire* was of a two-strip of woven fabric of twenty-two inches wide and two and half yards length joined together to form a wrapper. And it was in this wrapper form that they were sold for many years. Patronage of the *Adire* then was by women who used them as wrappers and men who used them as cover cloths.

***Adire* in the twilight of colonialism**

Towards the end of colonialism, the *Adire* suffered a lull due to many factors. One of the effects of colonialism is the introduction of Christianity and western form of education. This dealt a devastating blow on the apprenticeship form of training, as many young girls opted for western education with their gaze on the white collar jobs it would offer them, in this Eurocentric setting. Hence, lack of young willing apprentices militated against *Adire* art tradition.

Also, the tedious nature of indigo dye preparation, and the low financial remuneration posed a challenge. In addition to these is the flooding of Nigerian market with cheaper, textile materials that were more colourful than the traditional indigo coloured *Adire*. These *new* materials were also more accessible, and in wider yardages suitable for the stereotype women wrapper form.

Finally, while the locally produced cotton fabrics were heavily taxed by the colonialists, the imported ones were not, thus, making the local textiles more expensive than the imported ones, and thereby discouraging the creativity of the local weavers (Wolff, 2001). *Adire* at this period was now seen as rural cloth for old, poor, rural dwellers, by the educated and urban dwellers.

The product of this indigenous knowledge *Adire* was in a sorry state before the arrival of UlliBeier as the textile was going obsolete because of its domestic usage, unlike the prestige accorded *Aso Ofi* the hand-woven textile of the men narrow loom.

Adire in Post-Independent Osogbo

This period coincided with the arrival of notable individuals whose contributions to the renaissance of the *Adire* art cannot be glossed over. The negative effect of colonialism coupled with the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam, had rubbed off on the Yoruba traditional religion and arts in Osogbo.

Susanne Wenger, a female Austrian artist, who came to Nigeria with UlliBeier, not only converted to the traditional religion, but helped in re-building many of the shrines that were already in a state of disrepair and in addition, learnt the starch-resist method of *Adire* of the people known as *Adireeleko*. Her entrance into the *Adire* art in the 1960s coincided with the introduction of synthetic dye into the *Adirescene* of Southwestern Nigeria. These synthetic dyes, which were originally rebuffed by the *Adire* artists who considered the colour “too loud” (Beier, 1993) were later adopted and adapted in producing the myriads of resist techniques which popularized *Adire*, and widened its clientele.

Adapting the starch-resist *Adire* eleko technique, Susanne Wenger substituted the starch for wax, and used synthetic colourful dyes, instead of the traditional indigo dye to produce folkloric renditions of her understanding of the Yoruba traditional religion, thus taking *Adire* from the functional, domestic wrapper form to an artistic level fit for wall hangings, a pedestal similar to artistic painting.

The initial impetus for a meeting point for artists was mooted by Wole Soyinka, a young graduate who just returned from further studies in the United Kingdom, with UlliBeier, the German academician of University of Ibadan, playing the role of a fundraiser, facilitator, and motivating force. Supported by South African architect, Julian Beinart, the trio gathered like-minded people together, to establish the Mbari Centre, a meeting point for artists and art lovers and organized summer workshops in 1961 and 1962 (Mount; 1973). The ripple effect of this club soon spread to Osogbo through the effort of DuroLadipo, a primary school teacher-turned theatre artiste who persuaded UlliBeier, a resident in his compound, to start a similar centre in Osogbo (Littlefield, 1999).

The Osogbocentre named MbariMbayo, in contrast to the Ibadan Club, catered for the not-so-educated youths in Osogbo. This centre ran consecutively with that of Ibadan in 1962, 1963 and 1964, and organized workshops under the guidance of first, Dennis Williams in 1962 and later Ulli and Georgian Betts, who later became UlliBeier’s wife. With the residence of Georgina Beier, and later Georgina Beier with Ru Van Ruseu (Folarin, 1989) in Osogbo, The workshop functioned till the Beiers departure in 1967. The Beiers’ effort was continued into the 1970s by Susanne Wenger, who was also resident in Osogbo, by which time the vibrancy of the workshop was beginning to wane (Adepegba, 1995).

The participants namely, Jacob Afolabi, TaiwoOlaniyi (Twin Seven-Seven), MurainaOyelami, AdebisiFabunmi, Rufus Ogundele, JimohBuraimoh and later TijaniMayakiri and AdemolaOnibonokuta were provided with materials and given freehand in the production of the art works, without interference from the instructors in order to encourage individual creativity and avoid external or foreign influences. This workshop was a significant and historic departure from the traditional *Adire* art practice. The artists were allowed to express their creativity unhindered and uninfluenced. They therefore drew inspiration for their themes from the myriads of legends, myths, proverbs and folklores that abound in Yoruba culture. The setting of a traditional trade practiced within specific families was replaced by an informal workshop setting. The apprenticeship pattern which was strictly from mothers to daughters changed as the original participation was purely male dominated. This was because the workshop had a performing art tilt to it, and acting was a career deemed unfit for any serious lady wishing to be a future wife and mother, two roles considered the ultimate goal for any well brought up woman. The participants had a skeletal form of

education that aided interaction between the trainers and the trainees. There was a shift in the material of execution of their work from the long tedious indigo dye to colourful, fast result yielding imported synthetic dyes. Though many of the traditional techniques still featured in the bulk of the product of the trainees, they however did not concentrate on reproducing the traditional patterns of *Adire* (plate 1). The outstanding landmark of UlliBeier's training was the introduction of wax-resist technique, batik, to the workshop participants and the adoption of this material to create pictorial renditions of their Yoruba worldview (Plates 3 and 4). Finally, their type of *Adire* gave birth to another clientele and wider usages for *Adire* different from the traditional wrapper form.

Whether these artists were influenced in the subject matter of their batik wall hangings or not has been a source of discourse by scholars (Beier, 1964 and Mount, 1973). What is significant is the fact that the effort of UlliBeier, and the experience gathered by the artists is the bedrock for the artistic phenomenon, which Osogbo has become. Their experience has also become a major landmark in the history of contemporary Nigerian arts, and has been the springboard for the renaissance of the *Adire* art in Osogbo town.

UlliBeier and His Significant Contributions to *Adire* Renaissance

The informal workshop arrangement of MbariMbayo boosted the apprenticeship pattern. As a fall out of the workshop, the generational pattern of apprenticeship for which the *Adire* art tradition was known was jettisoned, and in its place a new form of workshop apprenticeship, different from the traditional one, evolved and was used in the training of the participants.

The initial attitudes of the Osogbo populace to the participants changed gradually. Because of the association of most members of the workshop to the DuroLadipo's Yoruba theatrical group, they were seen as "mad and unserious people, though this association aided the folkloric nature of their works and the titles. This attitude changed gradually as their interaction with and patronage by elites and foreigners was envied by many. And the fact that they were able to travel abroad with the theater group, encouraged many others to want to follow in their path.

The workshop was able to demolish the gender barrier traditionally placed in the learning of *Adire*, which was hitherto a generational female art within a dyeing family. It, thus, aided the incursion of men into the *Adire* art.

However, while breaking the gender barrier, the theatrical undertone of the workshop restricted female participation because women's involvement in theatre was frowned at, as such women were viewed as wayward and undesirable for marriage, the ultimate goal of all women in the Yoruba traditional setting. The multiplier effect of these workshops had tremendous impact on many females. Among such females is Nike Davies Okundaye, who learnt the traditional *Adire* making from her grandmother. She was later married to one of the participants of the workshop, Taiwo Olaniyi (Twin Seven-Seven) from whom she learnt the art of batik. Nike now operates a sort of guild system, and have trained many, the number expanding into hundreds. Her efforts in reviving traditional indigo dyeing and *Adire* patterns in her centres are ensuring that the art does not die out. She also owns galleries in Osogbo, Abuja, Lekki in Lagos, Ogidi-Ijumu (her hometown), and even abroad. She has since exhibited her works in both solo and group exhibitions within and outside the country. Other women who have either learnt from their husband or participants at the MbariMbayo workshop are, Alake Buraimoh and Abimbola Akerele.

Apart from these women, each of the participants at the MbariMbayo workshop set up their own studios after UlliBeier's departure. Because of the wide, and good publicity and patronage enjoyed by the workshop participants through UlliBeier before his departure, and the reasonable living the artists were making, many of their close acquaintances quickly became willing apprentices to them (Adepegba, 1995). Thus, emerged another generation, follower or descendants of the workshop. The ripple effect of the workshop keeps expanding and this is obvious in the new *Adire* centre Osogbo has become even in the contemporary times. The overall effect of the foregoing is the provision of employment to many youths in the town and a turnaround in the *Adire* art, which was going moribund before Ulli's arrival.

It is noteworthy that there was improvement in technical and technological trend of *Adire* arts, as new techniques of patterning evolved and new materials in terms of dyes and textile materials and dyeing vessels were utilized by this new set of *Adire* artists.

The ripple effect of Ulli's effort in Osogbo was also felt in the neighbouring town of Ile-Ife, where a similar workshop, Ori-Olokun, was organized by Michael Crowder and Solomon Irene Wangboje. These two from Ori-Olokun workshop were the foundation lecturers in what is now known as "Ife Art School" in the Department of Fine Arts, in the then University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. This Art School whose motto is: "for learning and culture," has been able to introduce some of these traditional elements into its textile unit. This has benefitted many graduates of this university are found in many art schools within and outside Nigeria. The wider range of colour brought about by the introduction of colourful synthetic dyes, led to a more vibrant and wider range of colour from which the educated urban dweller could make his choice. This was encouraging when compared to the monotonous indigo colour of the pre-independent years.

Many of the traditional dyeing centres in Osogbo never recovered from the blow of the colonial twilight years. Osogbo, which boasted of many major traditional dyeing centres such as, Balogun Kujenyo, Layiokun, and OkeBaale, now has only one centre, the Alaka or Aka Compound (Areo, 20010) still functioning, with a very old woman of about ninety supported by two of her daughters-in-law and a granddaughter, struggling to keep the centre running in the face of competition from modern challenges. Their patronage is still limited to the few foreigners that visit the town during traditional festivals and other art lovers who insist on the traditional patterned indigo dyed *Adire*.

In spite of the scarcity of such traditional centres, from the ashes of their decay has arisen many contemporary batik centres. These batik centres dot the Osogbo landscape and have become a visual signature of Osogbo town. With these centres, Osogbo has been able to reclaim its name as "iluaru" even in the contemporary times and the town is very significant in the development and dynamism of the contemporary artistic landscape of Nigeria. All this would not have been possible without the effort of UlliBeier, who shone like a beacon in the renaissance of the *Adire* art. His effort has made the batik textile of Osogbo unique. This uniqueness in their style has remained unequalled by any other dyeing centre in contemporary Southwestern Nigeria.

Many, who benefitted from Ulli's training directly or through the multiplier effect, continue to contribute to the economic growth and stability of Osogbo town. UlliBeier is therefore a beacon in the renaissance of the *Adire* art at a very crucial time. His contribution to the evolution of *Adire* and contemporary art should serve as inspiration to others on how paradigm shift in many aspects of any indigenous knowledge can aid its sustenance and even rebirth.

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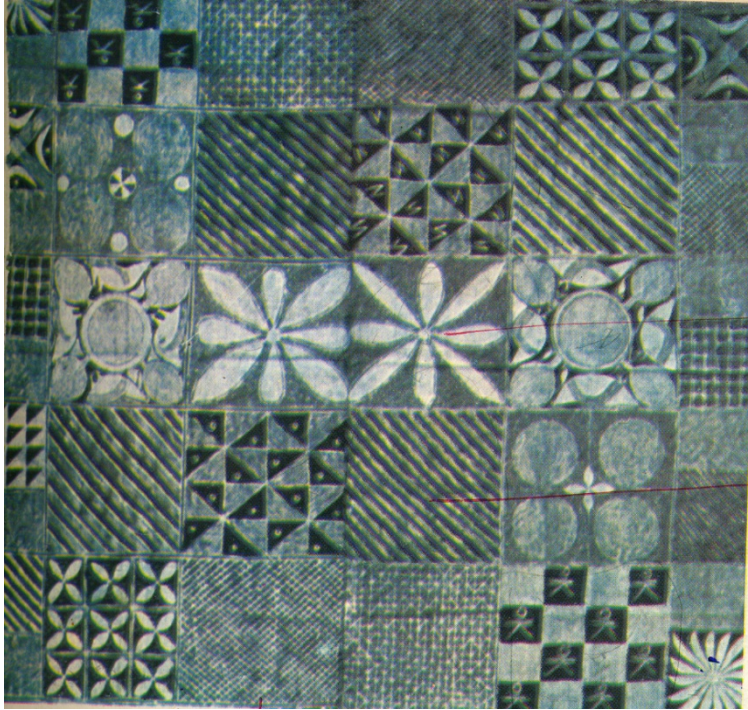


Plate 1
Indigo-dyed *Adire* Eleko(cassava starch resist) with traditional patterns.
From the Alaka dyeing centre in Osogbo. Photograph by GbemiAreo. 2007



Plate 2
Batik (wax resist)with traditional motifs and dyed in synthetic brown dye.
From Nike Gallery in Osogbo. Photograph by GbemiAreo. 2005.

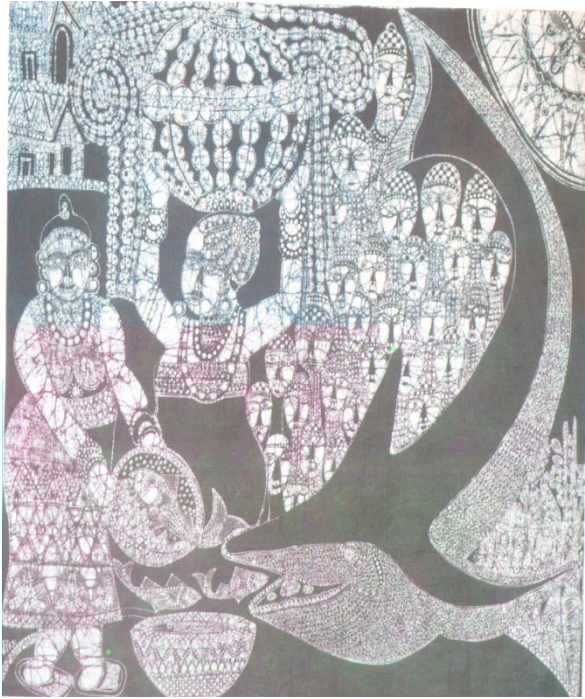


Plate 3
Osun Worshippers. Batik wall hanging from Nike Gallery. (1979).
Catalogue, Celebrating an Icon at Fifty Five. 2006 p. 8)



Plate 4
Village scene. By Nike Okundaye (1968). Batik Wall hanging in synthetic colours.
Catalogue; Celebrating an Icon at Fifty Five 2006. p.12