

Cloth is the Center of the World:
Nigerian Textiles, Global Perspectives

Susan J. Torntore, *Editor*

Cover images

Clockwise from top left:

Akwete detail, “*ikaki* (tortoise)” motif (NW-016c); *adire oniko* detail, “kabo (cap)” motif (NW-001b); wax print detail, “Eyes” motif (DW-098); *pelete bite* detail, “*ikaki mgbe* (tortoise bones)” motif (PB-018a). Photographs by Petronella J. Ytsma.

Designed by: Jamie M. Johnson

Printed by: Commercial Legal Printing, Minneapolis, MN

©2001 The Authors. All rights reserved.

Published by The Goldstein Museum of Design
Department of Design, Housing, and Apparel
University of Minnesota

240 McNeal Hall

1985 Buford Avenue

St. Paul, MN 55108

Phone: 612-624-7434

Email: mlarson@che.umn.edu

ISBN 0-939719-12-6

Acknowled

Lindsa

Preface—C

Joann

Introducti

Susan

Essays

“We weave

Lisa A

“Our Great

Elisha

Of Polomir

Anne

“Leave vel

Norma

Appendix—

• Akw

• Pele

• Wax

• Adir

Notes on C

Cloth is the Center of the World: Nigerian Textiles, Global Perspectives

Susan J. Torntore, *Editor*

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements | 5 |
| Lindsay Shen | |
| Preface—Cloth as the Center of My World | 7 |
| Joanne B. Eicher | |
| Introduction—The Center of Many Worlds: Perspectives on Four Nigerian Textiles | 9 |
| Susan J. Torntore | |
| Essays | |
| "We weave it:" Akwete Weavers, their Patrons, and Innovation in a Global Economy | 17 |
| Lisa Aronson | |
| "Our Great Mother. . . tied this cloth:" Pelete Bite Cloth, Women, and Kalabari Identity | 29 |
| Elisha P. Renne | |
| Of Polomints and Alphabets: The Eicher Collection of African Wax Printed Cloths | 42 |
| Anne M. Spencer | |
| "Leave velvet alone:" The <i>Adire</i> Tradition of the Yoruba | 51 |
| Norma H. Wolff | |
| Appendix—Collection Notes and Exhibition Checklists | 67 |
| • <i>Akwete</i> | |
| • <i>Pelete bite</i> | |
| • <i>Wax prints</i> | |
| • <i>Adire</i> | |
| Notes on Contributors | 79 |

Acknowledgements

A central part of The Goldstein's mission is to promote the interdisciplinary study of design. The museum wholeheartedly thanks Joanne B. Eicher for her commitment to helping us pursue this goal through this project. The exhibition draws from the disciplines of anthropology, material culture studies, art history and ethnology; the liveliness of the ensuing debate is due not only to the scholars themselves, but also to Joanne Eicher's talent in drawing together a diverse and complementary range of perspectives on Nigerian textiles.

Guest curator and catalog editor Susan Torntore has worked on this project since its inception in 1997. We thank her for her dedication to interpreting these textiles in an engaging and informative manner that owes much to her extensive curatorial experience. We thank too the four textile scholars who contributed individual expertise—Lisa Aronson, Anne Spencer, Norma Wolff, and Elisha Renne.

We are grateful to Jamie Johnson for designing this publication, and to Petronella J. Ytsma for photography.

This book would not have been possible without generous funding from the following: The University of Minnesota McKnight Arts and Humanities Endowment; The Saint Paul Companies Inc., Foundation; the Minnesota Humanities Commission in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Minnesota State Legislature; Joanne Eicher; Margaret Bubolz; Lynn Campbell; Kathleen Campbell; Suzanne Baizerman; Mary Ellen Roach Higgins; Susan Michelman; the College of Human Ecology; the Department of Design, Housing, and Apparel; and the Friends of the Goldstein Gallery.

Lindsay Shen
Director, The Goldstein

Preface—Cloth as the Center of My World

These catalog essays by colleagues on four major categories of Nigerian textiles from my African collections bring new perspectives to our knowledge. Although my primary area of teaching and research has been dress, my interest in collecting has been textiles, many of which are used as dress. Actually, my passion for collecting textiles stems from my mother and her enthusiasm for cloth. Both she and her mother were skilled seamstresses (an interest that passed me by), but my mother was also a textile pack rat. I didn't experience or understand her pleasure of owning a cache of cloth upon cloth until I went to Nigeria in 1963. Carl Eicher and I arrived in Lagos with our one-year-old daughter, Cynthia, and drove across the country to the Enugu campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) where Carl was to be associated with the Economic Development Institute (EDI) and we were to live for three years. As we traveled, the many different types of apparel and textiles worn by urban and rural people alike fascinated me. I enjoyed seeing the colorful wax-printed cloths worn by both men and women in Lagos and the indigo wrappers worn by women walking along the roads near Ibadan. After we crossed the Niger River by ferry and entered Onitsha and Igbo country, the colors of the printed textiles began to change from the burgundy, reds, and blues of the Yoruba people to green, yellow, and orange preferences of the Igbo.

After settling our household, I traveled extensively by road and air to many places in southern Nigeria, both east and west of the River Niger. I had more limited travels in northern Nigeria as shown by my destinations on the accompanying map (inside front cover). The variety and beauty of the handmade cloth amazed me, and I found the quixotic and clever motifs of the wax prints delightful. The people in each area who made or wore the indigenous textiles took them for granted, but I discovered that these same textiles were generally unknown to others beyond the immediate area. This observation led me, after my return to the United States in 1966, to search for references about Nigerian textiles and have my cloths classified and catalogued by Janet Harrell for her M.A.,¹ which resulted in my writing *Nigerian Handcrafted Textiles*.²

I didn't set out to make a collection. I just bought cloth whenever I saw something I liked. I had the idea that I would have something made—a dress, a shirt, a pillow top, curtains, a bedspread—from whatever we bought, and I did just that. I especially selected the indigo tie-dyed and starch resist textiles to use for draperies, a wall hanging, and cushion covers throughout our house. I also chose them for comfortable shift-style dresses that were easy to wear on a daily basis in the tropical climate. I commissioned a set of white akwete for a formal "up and down" ensemble to wear to a special dinner held at the Hotel Presidential in Enugu. An indigo tie-and-dye wrapper outfit worn for occasional evening events sometimes created astonishment among Nigerians who thought that such cloth was worn only by Yoruba market women. Miniature wrapper sets were made from wax prints for Cynthia and Carolyn (our daughter born in Enugu in 1964), and we had a family photograph taken in matching wax print outfits. (Even Diana, born in 1966 after our return, wore some little tie-dye dresses). Some thirty-five years later, Carl Eicher and I, as co-owners of a summer home in Michigan, still use *adire* extensively in it for chair covers and draperies.

But the number of cloths soon got out of hand, extending beyond immediate use. I stowed them in boxes and baskets, in closets, and under the beds. Only as our family began to prepare for departure in 1966, did I realize that I had a Nigerian textile collection based on purchases not only from my travels and but also from Akwete vendors and Hausa traders who visited periodically to spread their wares on our verandah. Thus, before we left, I consciously supplemented my cache with examples that seemed to be missing. However, the bulk of the collection reflects my taste and my interest in various processes of textile handwork from the 1960s with some additions from returning twice in the 1970s and making eight Kalabari fieldwork trips from 1980-1991. The collection is narrowly focused but its depth of examples allows an appreciation of variety within textile types.

As it turns out, the featured categories of *adire*, *akwete*, wax prints, and *pelete bite* result from special friendships and associations. The *adire* collection began when Rhoda Omolunsola Johnston Smith, home economist and then principal of the Women's Training Centre in Abeokuta, invited me to tour the Abeokuta market and observe weavers and dyers. She offered to have a matched set of "before and after" *adire* samples made for me, and she introduced me to Betti Okuboyejo who established a business of producing *adire* in a variety of colors beyond indigo. The *akwete* cloth collection resulted from a friendship with Enyinna Chuta, a research fellow in EDI who came from the town of Akwete with female relatives who were weavers and vendors. The wax print collection arose from the graduate work of Ruth Nielsen for her M.A. degree from Michigan State University. She conducted research in Manchester, England, Helmond, Netherlands, and Glaurus, Switzerland, and brought me a duplicate set of fabric samples which expanded the small number of wax prints I had purchased earlier in Nigeria. I collected the *pelete bite* cloths as a result of the first wrapper set given to me by the late Chief I.D. Erekosima and his wife, the late Victoria Adaba Erekosima. Their son, Dr. Tonye V. Erekosima, joined EDI as a research fellow and invited us to visit their family compound on the Kalabari island of Buguma in 1966.

My family, friends, and many colleagues know the rest of the story. The intense experience of living in Nigeria for three years thrust me into pursuing a new dimension of teaching and research upon my return. Over the years, my own knowledge about the dress and textiles of Africa, particularly of Nigeria, has expanded from the pleasure of collecting to an intellectual endeavor. Sharing my collection with the public and expanding the knowledge about these particular textiles through the expertise of the essayists, Lisa Aronson, Elisha Renne, Anne Spencer, and Norma Wolff, brings me much pleasure. I thank them for their insightful contributions. I also thank Susan Torntore whose hard work and perseverance as curator and catalog editor have brought both the exhibit and this catalog to fruition, and her predecessor as curator, Bobbie Sumberg, who shouldered the preliminary preparations. I appreciate the inspired work of Diana Eicher as designer and M. Catherine Daly as curriculum specialist. Lindsay Shen and Becky Yust supported the germ of the concept to its completion as an exhibit. Suzanne Baizerman, former director of The Goldstein, originated the idea for this exhibit. Close friends, family, and colleagues helped fund the catalog, making the exhibit live beyond its short life: Margaret Bubolz, Kathleen Campbell, Mary Ellen Roach Higgins, Suzanne Baizerman, and Susan Michelman. Theresa Winge carried through on coordinating the companion symposium of "Wrapped and Draped: Alternative Fashions" for the opening weekend. Eugene Allen, Director of the Office of International Programs, and Robert Jones, Vice President of Multicultural Diversity and Campus Life, provided useful funding for websites for the symposium and for the fall semester course on "Dress and Culture: Africa."

Learning about Africa and Africans through textiles and dress has enriched my life. By posing questions and providing answers, undergraduate and graduate students in classes and through research projects at the University of Minnesota and Michigan State University contributed immensely to my intellectual growth. I want to credit Carl K. Eicher, my former husband, whose zeal for studying and participating in economic development took us to Enugu and launched my immersion in African studies. Keith McFarland, Dean Emeritus, College of Home Economics at the University of Minnesota, whose administrative zeal brought me to St. Paul, offered moral and networking support for me to pursue my own zeal about African research. Tonye Erekosima, as research partner, adds immeasurably to the storehouse of knowledge on Kalabari culture. All three daughters, Cynthia, Carolyn, and Diana, continue their enthusiasm about our family links to the rich cultures of Africa. Thanks to all.

Joanne B. Eicher

June, 2001

Harrell, Janet E. 1967. *Classification and documentation of the Eicher collection of selected Nigerian textile fabrics*. Master's thesis, Michigan State University.

Eicher, Joanne B. 1976. *Nigerian handcrafted textiles*. Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press.

Nielsen, Ruth. 1974. *The history and development of wax-printed textiles intended for West Africa and Zaire*. Master's thesis, Michigan State University.

The project

This exhibition the collection of Joanne B. Eicher, a privately held collection of textile tiles in a visual and cultural, and historical potential of cloth and identity.

The Dogon project, our interpretive goal. Cloth has played an important geographic area. The relationship between ethnic groups and the social value of the material in economic relationships. In interpretation, we see a section of Nigerian cloth trade and the present an image of adapt and thrive in

The exhibition Eicher collection has *akwete* (cloth hand commercially woven and produced in Nigeria the Kalabari in the lived changing tape interpret important the roles of cloth it a depth seldom well as of cloth, t

The exhibition African textile scholarship explore the beauty of all of whom I fostered by their and publications,