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***AKWA-OGHA* MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS: INFUSION OF DESIGN CONCEPTS INTO
CONTEMPORARY NON-SYNTHETIC FABRICS**

By

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Abstract

There are many ways Nigerians exhibit their identities and heritages which includes the art and craft traditions particularly, textiles and fashion. Virtually every ethnic group in Nigeria has its own indigenously customized fabrics and dress styles that have been enduring. Several of these customized fabrics have been integrated into modern fashion and occupy a place of esteem and hence are highly appreciated and sought after. In as much as Nigerians want to be identified with indigenous culture in their fashion trends, it has continued to be influenced by foreign culture. Despite the myriad of existing fabric in Nigeria, there has not been adequate representation of cultural elements inherent in Nigerian indigenous art and craft traditions, particularly decorative signs, symbols and motifs for the design of modern fabrics. The study therefore, employs qualitative research methodology as the paper looks at *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols as possible design concepts that can be used on non-synthetic fabrics for easy malleability especially for fashionable products in order to create the needed indigenous identity; unlike its usual heavy hand-woven cloth format.

Introduction

Globally, several ethnicities showcase their ingenuity through their traditional inclinations, chief among these are textiles and fashion. In the same vein, Nigerians are not an exception, as they also showcase their unique identities and heritages through their art and craft traditions, particularly, textiles and fashion. In as much as Nigerians want to be identified with indigenous culture in their fashion trends, it has continued to be influenced by foreign culture. William (1993) affirmed that Nigeria, a country with rich and diverse cultural values is beginning to lose most of its cultural ideals especially through the adoption of foreign culture showcased in the different media. This is because a common but inexplicable attitude of most present-day Nigerians is the lust for whatever is foreign, particularly in fashion and or dress culture. Undoubtedly, the ideological basis of Nigerians is somewhat not yet free from foreign domination, this is as a result of culture of importation of foreign values and goods such as textiles and fashion products. Musa, Yakubu & Danfulani (2009) opined that Nigerian people generally prefer foreign textile goods over the home-made materials. For Alonge (2008) the textile and fashion have its unfair share of Nigerian lust for foreign goods. These statements are considered factual as one realizes the extent to which modern fashion, influenced by foreign culture is bereft of Nigerian ethnic traditions and identity, this has continuously and negatively influenced the choices of indigenous fashion consumers and even designers. In essence, this development has not given the character of modern Nigerian fashion its adequate ethnic/artistic heritage, design elements and identity. In fact, Okeke (1996) informed that fashion is a principal medium which symbolizes identity all over the world; even though its major purpose is to beautify the body and enhance the dignity of a person. In like manner, Cyril-Egware (2012) corroborated by asserting that textiles and their use as dresses are foremost in the expression of people's identity and a significant aspect of a people's culture. In addition, textiles and fashion are symbols of identity, hence should reflect the society of which it is a part of.

Considering the above, there can be no doubt that there has been a neglect of values inherent in our cultural heritage; hence the indigenous motifs have not been a prominent feature in contemporary Nigerian textiles. This paper looks at *Akwa-Ocha* Motifs and Symbols as possible design concepts that can be used for production on non-synthetic fabrics for easy malleability especially for fashionable products in order to create needed indigenous identity; since this type of fabrics have always been a preference to the usual heavy hand-woven cloth. Thereby, encouraging the present trends of imitated tie-dye and batik apparels from a country such as China.

Documentation of Selected *Akwa-Ocha* Motifs, Symbols and Interpretations

Akwa-Ocha hand woven cloth has a predominantly white coloured background with or without colour motifs or symbols found among the Igbo speaking people in Delta State of Nigeria, who commonly referred to themselves as the people of *Anioma*, due to the ever-anticipated state creation “*Anioma*” since the 1990s. Oguah (2013) opined that *Akwa-Ocha* is the traditional cloth worn and used by the *Anioma* tribe of Delta State otherwise known and referred to as Delta Igbo. On the aspect of colour, Ozue (2016) explained that the cloth typically has three or four basic design colours against the white background: red and white, green and white, red, green and white, purple and white, white and silver threads, or white and red with gold metallic thread. However, in present times, colours such as Yellow, Blue, Pink and Wine among others are applied on *Akwa-Ocha*. The weaving of *Akwa-Ocha* is performed exclusively by women and girls when they are not farming, trading or carrying out domestic work. But in current times, formal education has taken center stage so, most young girls are not interested in weaving as societal trends have gone after foreign made products. Furthermore, the level of expertise from the older generations of weavers to younger generation has diminished drastically thus, presently some textile teachers, academic artists and designers have shown interest in the act of weaving of *Akwa-Ocha* but due to academic pressure and pursuit, there is little or no time to spend on the rudiments of this art.

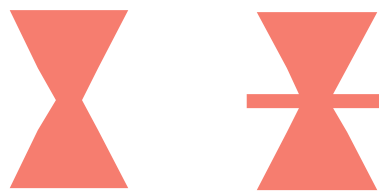
The earliest *Akwa-Ocha* clothes were predominantly white and whatever appeared as a motif, symbols or design patterns then were mostly not easily discernible, but with the introduction of yarn dyeing, motifs, symbols or design patterns became obvious. This development is exemplified by Picton & Mark (1989) who remarked that African textiles emphasize innovation and responds to changing circumstances. The motifs, symbols or design patterns on *Akwa-Ocha* are also unique and simple both in content and style and this gives them their own cultural identity.

The motifs, symbols or designs come in simple forms like, squares, rhombus, triangles and rectangles which are incorporated into the cloth. These are often manipulated adeptly to arrive at some organic and inorganic forms to reflect the people’s cultural values, and worldview. Some design motifs and symbols on *Akwa-Ocha* are symbolic and their meanings are determined by the source of inspiration. Whatever their origin, the motifs and symbols on *Akwa-Ocha* cloth are used not only for their aesthetic value but also as a non-verbal communication. This, therefore, means that the motifs and symbols can be deciphered and their significance appreciated within the context of tradition and cultural values. The people believe that *Akwa-Ocha* inspires certain mystic essence in ceremonies and rituals. Thus, there are numerous purposes and ceremonies for which the people put the *Akwa-Ocha* into use as these factors determine the type of *Akwa-Ocha* to use. These occasions and ceremonies include domestic purposes, marriage and naming ceremonies, burial and funeral ceremonies, festivals and ritualistic ceremonies, title taking and religious worship. The following images are the representation of some selected *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols, as a consequence of the fact that *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols are numerous and cannot be aptly captured in this brief study.

Figures 1& 2



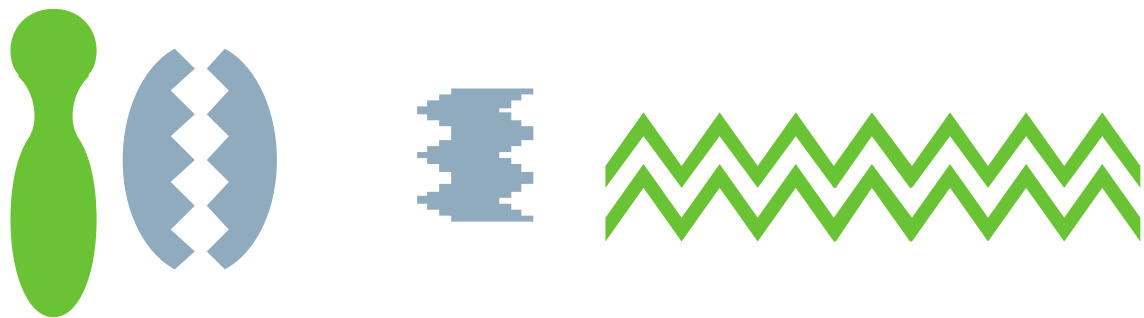
Kpakpando(Star)



Akangweose (Pestle)

Kpakpando(Star) is a motif which has the shape of an eight-pointed star, derived from the glittering myriad stars lighting the heavens. It connotes divine destiny among the *Anioma* people. The *kpakpando* motif is also a symbol of success. Conversely, the motifs derived from *Akangweose* (Pestle) have two variations. The two motifs represent inverted triangles. The first is an X- shaped form; the other is also an X-shaped form but has a horizontal hand running across its middle region. The motif is derived from the small local double-headed pestle used for grinding in the kitchen. It used to be an important kitchen utensil before the introduction of the electric blender and was very much valued in the household among the *Anioma* people. There is a saying among the *Anioma* people - “*odinmaokpohoobunadinaukoni na akangweose di iche ni iche onwe* (the pride of every woman is in her kitchen and different types of pestles she possesses.) This reflects the concept that the kitchen is the domain of women. The *akangweose* motif is a symbol of pride of womanhood and motherhood.

Figures 3& 4



Ego Ayolo (Cowry)

Ije-Agwo (Snake Movement)

The motif derived from cowry is represented in two variations. One is an oval shaped form depressed on both sides at the upper region with a line running in the middle. The other is a disc shape with zigzag edges placed vertically. *Ego Ayolo* served as currency or a means of exchange during the pre-colonial era in Nigeria. The motifs connote wealth. On the other hand, *Ije-Agwo* is a zigzag or wavy movement motif derived from the zigzag trail left behind on the sand by snakes. *Ije-Agwo* motif is also interpreted as the graceful swaying of a dancing woman. The motif is mostly used as border design on *Akwa-Ocha*. The motif is also a symbol of beauty.

Fig 5& 6



Ejekom-be-loya (Visit to the lawyer's house)

Mma-Eku (Local knife)

This is a design of horizontal lines usually found on the border of plain white *Akwa-Ocha* fabric. The motif evolves or is connected with a historical event when the people were taken to court for refusing to pay *Utu-Isi*(poll tax) to the colonial masters. In essence the people were forced to go to court and defend themselves before the magistrate.

They were compelled to seek legal assistance. This motif is a symbol of colonialism. Also, *Mma-Eku* motif is a triangular shaped form, which is derived from the local knife fashioned with metal used for peeling cocoyam, cassava, yam, sweet potatoes and other farm produce. This motif is also a symbol of womanhood. This is because *Mma-Eku* is usually associated with women who use local knives for domestic purposes.

Figures 7 & 8



Ukwa-Efi (Cow leg)

Nha or Nsha (Comb)

Ukwa-efi motif is the shape produced by the forelegs of a cow while in a resting position. This motif is in the form of a checker board or an arrangement of diamond forms. The cow was one of the most domesticated and consumed animals among the *Anioma* people and it connotes wealth. Again, *Nha* motif is derived from the locally carved wooden comb used by women for dressing or beautifying their hair, mostly during *Uta* (social events) and *Emume-Ife* (ceremonies). The motifs derived from comb are represented as biomorphic shape. The motif is a symbol of beauty.

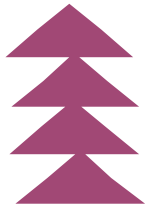
Figures 9 & 10



Ugba-Afa (Divination tray)

Obo-Aka (Palm of the hand)

This motif represented by the systematic placement of several diamond shapes is derived from the wooden tray with shallow depths used by the traditional priests (*dibia*) for divination and worship. It is significant in the cultural lives of the people as a symbol of divination. In the same vein, this motif evolved from the palm of the hand, which the people of *Anioma* consider to be an important part of the body. The motif is represented in form of the palm of the hand in geometric shape. *Obo-aka* refers to the saying that “in the palm of the hand lies every man’s destiny”. This is similar to the Igbo concept of *Ikenga*, which attributes a man’s success to the strength of his hand.

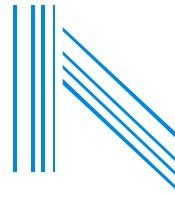
Figures 11 & 12*Ogidiugba (Steps)**Ukwu-Onogbo or Ukwu-pussu (Paws of a cat)*

Ogidiugba, motif derived from steps or stairs is a series of triangles arranged vertically. There is a general saying among the *Anioma* people, “*nwayo, nwayo, ka okeyi ji elu be ojeko*. (Step by step an elder achieves his destiny or gets to his destination). The motif is a symbol of destiny.

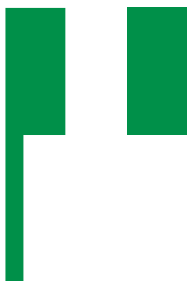
Also, *Ukwu-Onogbo* is a motif consisting of four rectangles representing the paws of a cat. The motif emerged from observations made of the paw-marks of a cat on sand.

Figure 13 & 14

Sugar

*Akala (Line)*

One of the motifs that represent sugar consists of several small rectangular shapes arranged in the form of letter “W” and the other in zigzag shape representing cubes of sugar. Its symbolism lies in the sweetness of sugar. Besides this, *Akala* motifs are usually represented in single or several vertical or diagonal lines. Lines are usually used as border design on *Akwa-Ocha*.

Figure 15 & 16

Okoloto motif is a representation of the Nigerian flag, although colours may differ as individual *Akwa-Ocha* weaver portray it. The *Okoloto* motif is a symbol of unity since the flag unifies Nigerians. Again, Aquatic creatures are sacred and revered among the *Anioma* people. This is because it is believed they belong to the water goddess or deities who are feared and respected. Although fish is regarded as an aquatic creature believed to be owned by the water goddess, it is highly consumed by the *Anioma* people who are surrounded by a lot of streams from where they obtain a lot of fishes. The motif that represents fishbone has the shape of a skeletal form of a fish. This motif also represents the skeletal body of a fish without the head or horizontal lines arranged in triangular form. While fish is a symbol of peace and fertility, however, the fish without its flesh is associated with difficult moments in life, such as famine and drought. This motif is seldom used because of its symbolism.

Figure 17



Isi-Oji(Head of Kola-nut)

The motif that represents the head of kola-nut is shown in two forms. One is a diamond shape while the other is also a diamond shape but contain angular shapes at the top and bottom. The motif emphasizes the importance of the kola-nut in *Anioma*. For example, whatever is presented to familiar and unfamiliar guests without kola-nut is considered incomplete and implies that the visitor is not fully welcome. Furthermore kola-nut is also used in ritual performances. The motif symbolizes peace, hospitality and friendship.

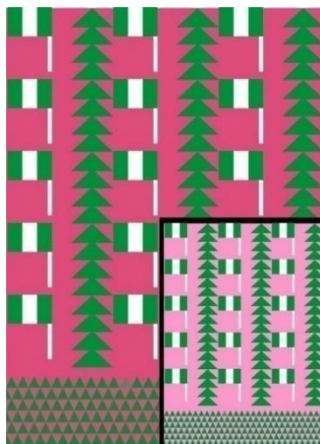
Computer-aided Paper Designs in Colour Derived from *Akwa-Ocha* Motifs and Symbols

Innovation, creativity and aesthetics are natural phenomena in human existence and these concepts are built into the designs made to be applied on contemporary non-synthetic fabrics for fashion using *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols in order to actualize the aim of this paper. Jeffrey (2007) see innovation as a means of giving things new interpretation and new meaning. Likewise, Ntagu (2015) sees innovation as the application of creative imagination in a design context.

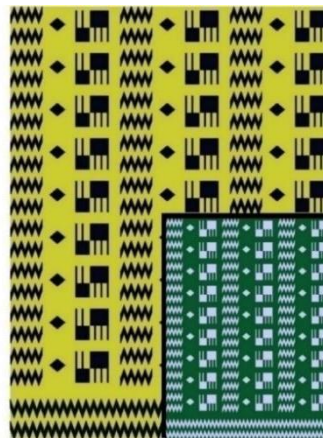
On the concept of creativity, Mcfee (cited in Azeez, 2003) defines creativity as the ability to invent new symbols and ideas to improve on established symbols, to rearrange ideas into new ones and to integrate borrowed ideas into previously organized systems or situations. Azeez (2003) explained that creativity involves originality, innovativeness and dynamism in the area of development and that promotes identity. Okpara (2011) emphasized that creativity connotes those human activities within the environment that

challenges the instinct of originality and imaginative use of skill. In connection with the above statements, the designs below are made with the aid of the computer and printed on paper. The designs are made not only to be suitable for modern textiles and fashion, but also in conformity with pattern arrangements noticeable in indigenous hand woven *Akwa-Ocha* cloth, which are usually vertical and with border designs. However, each design arrangement has a colour-way and is given a title. Some of the designs are titled in English, while others are in Igbo language. The titles in local language are deliberate in order to make known some of the *Anioma* languages. Most of the designs from the composition are a combination of motifs and symbols derived from zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, plants, the cosmos as well as man-made objects.

Figure 18 & 19



Title: Our Pride
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper



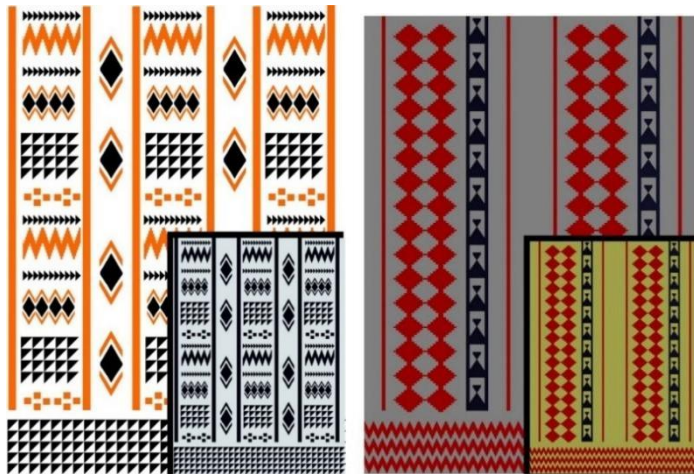
Title: Unity
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

The work titled *Our Pride* (figure 18) was inspired by *Akwa-Ocha* hand woven cloth motifs arranged in exotic styles. The *Akwa-Ocha* motifs employed in the design include *Okoloto*(flag) and *Ogidiugba*(step). The design can be achieved on a non synthetic fabric through screen-printing or any other printing technique. The placement of the motifs do not follow any canonized rule but a harmony of *Okoloto*(the Nigerian flags) and *Ogidiugba*(steps) motifs combined together in a way that is somewhat appealing as a design to express national pride and identity in modern fashion trend. The paper work which measures 21 x 29 has brilliant colour of deep pink and a lilac colour as its background. The motifs which appear in green and white colours create a contrast with the background colour as they demonstrate two basic designs. The first shows a continuous play of Nigerian flags. While, the other is a stylistic arrangement of series of triangular forms. One can say that the motifs employed for the design of this piece may not carry the same symbolic meanings as those on local hand woven *Akwa-Ocha* cloth, but a way of preserving a valuable heritage and publicising it in modern fashion. The *Okoloto*(flag) motifs in their green and white colours metaphorically alludes to the country of Nigeria and the desire at moving Nigeria forward as indicated by the forward facing triangular forms that represents *Ogidiugba*(step) motif.

This piece entitled *Unity* (Figure 19) contains three distinctive motifs inspired by decorative elements on *Akwa-Ocha* hand woven cloth. The motifs include *Nha* (comb) *Ije-agwo* (snake movement) and sugar which are finely combined together to form a pattern or design that connotes unification. The motifs do not appear interlocked but they stress the verbal and visual oneness of a design for fabric production. There is no focal point in the arrangement of the motifs; however, each series follows a defined movement so that they appear in hints, subtle glimpse rather than obvious references. Each series of motif is somewhat manipulated as a picture plane to form a convenient organic visual compartment. Again the motifs which appear in deep

green colour over a lemon yellow background and white over a forest green background not only unifies the entire work format but allows for structural depth in the sense that the background colours seem to create windows through which the motifs are seen. This windows effect also creates an impression of spatial depth despite the flatness of the background colour.

Figure 20 & 21



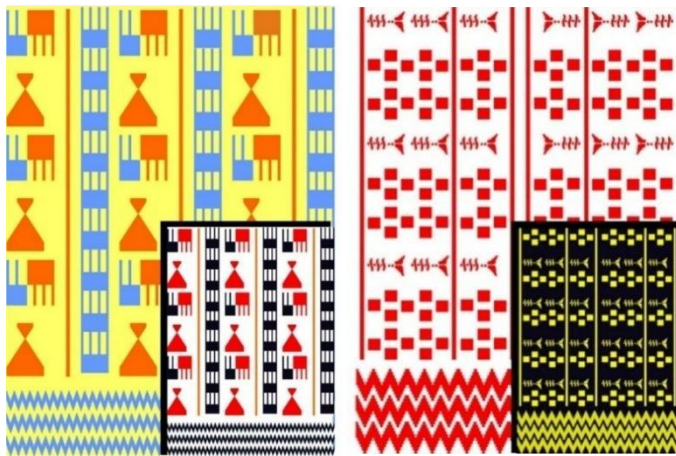
Title: Dynamism
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

Title: Togetherness in Culture
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

This piece titled Dynamism (Figure 20) is designed to reflect several motifs arranged in stylistic order. The motifs in their geometric triangular and rectangular forms include *lje-agwo* (snake movement), *Ogidiugba* (step) represented with series of triangles, *Ukwu-efi* (cow leg), *Ukwu-onogbo* or *Ukwu-pussu* (paws of a cat) represented with rectangular forms, *Isi-Oji* (kola nut head) represented with diamond forms and *Ego-ayolo* (cowry). The stylistic arrangement of these motifs in different compartment is quite significant which in effect makes them appear dynamic. In fact, the arrangement of motifs or patterns employed for the design of this piece is in a harmonious sequence as manifested in their fluid symmetry. The work format does not have a dominant focus but is entirely covered with numerous intricate designs. The motifs in the main design are rendered in navy blue and orange colours against a white background which makes them appear more visible when viewed at a distance. While the alternate design colours in the colour way, is navy blue against a powder blue background.

This piece entitled Togetherness in Culture (Figure 21) contains myriads of motifs in their various geometric proportions placed vertically and horizontally. The constitution of motifs derived from patterns on *Akwa-Ocha* include *Mma-eku* (local knife for peeling of farm produce such as cassava and cocoyam), *lje-agwo* (snake movement) represented in zig-zag forms, sugar represented in diamond shape with zig-zag edges and *Akala* (lines). At the edge of the design is a repetition of *lje-agwo* (snake movement) motif in zig-zag forms which is meant to run through the whole length of a fabric. The deep pink and prussian blue colours against an olive green background used for the design is to create harmony. The colours on the colour way are deep pink and prussian blue colours against banana yellow background.

Figures 22 & 23



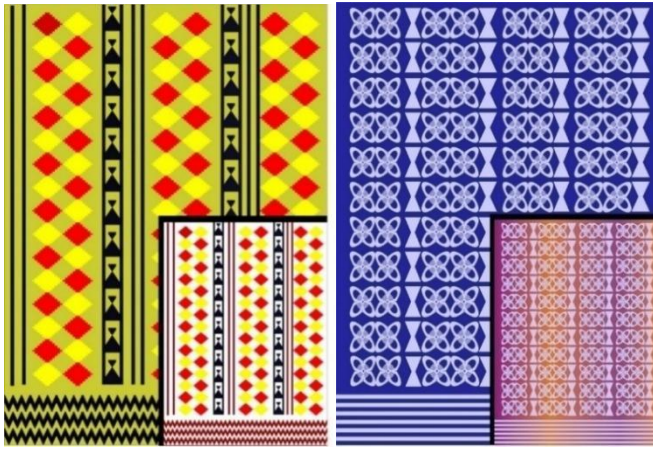
Title: Pride of a woman
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

Title: Zoomorphic Patterns
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

The simplicity of this piece titled *Pride of Women* (Plate 22) is in the combination of the geometric patterns or motifs which define the design. It is another work in which *Akwa-Ocha* cloth motifs which constitute the design are taken beyond their present use and subjected to contemporary interpretation and as exposition of cultural sophistication. The work however, also shares certain things in common with other works; the principle of multiplicity adapting the motifs. The motifs adapted in the design include *Nha* (comb) *Mma-eku* (local knife for peeling farm produce such as cassava and yam, *Akala* (line) and *lje agwo* (snake movement) *Akwa-Ocha* motifs such as *Nha* and *Mma-eku* motifs are usually associated with women in *Anioma* communities because they use comb to beautify their hair, while *Nma-Eku* is a major feature among a woman's domestic utensils. The motifs are creatively distributed against the background in order to achieve a compositional contrast. The complementaries of blue and orange are used against a light yellow background, while on the colour way, the same colour motifs are set against an open background typical of *Akwa-Ocha* hand woven cloth.

This piece entitled *Zoomorphic Patterns* (Figure 23) contains three different motifs. As the title indicates, the motifs are mostly derived from zoomorphic or animal life. The motifs used for the design include *lje-agwo* (snake movement) represented in zig-zag forms, *Ogwu-azu* (fish bone) represented in skeletal form of a fish, *Ukwu-onogbo* or *Ukwu-pussu* (pussy cat paws) represented in geometric square configurations and *Akala* (line) represented in lines. The fish bone and pussy cat paws motifs are bound by *Akala* (line) motif in vertical form and generally, the entire design is bordered horizontally by *lje agwo* (snake movement). The motifs for the main design have brilliant orange colour against a white background and the colour way, are in yellow colour against a prussian blue background.

Figure s24 & 25



Title: Sweet Millennium
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

Title: Lines and Symbols
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

This work titled *Sweet Millennium* (Figure 24) is another design which stands out in terms of composition made up of four motifs. The motifs are namely *lje-agwo* (snake movement) sugar, represented with diamond shapes, *Mma-eku* (local knife for peeling farm produce such as cassava and yam) and *Akala* (line). The motifs which are arranged in vertical forms have a composite formal balance. The design is colourful and the motifs are in combination of both organic and geometric forms arranged in several compartments. Each compartment is enclosed or framed by two vertically running lines, as applicable in some other works, *lje-agwo* (snake movement) motif runs at the bottom as the border design. The patterns that make up the designs on this work and others have not only become trade marks of tradition and culture, they also portray the relevance of the past in the present as a means of expressing cultural identity. The yellow colour used for the background of the entire design, projects the brilliant orange and Prussian blue colours of the motifs. The consistent use of yellow colour on this and other works cannot but be symbolic. The yellow colour symbolises the rays of the sun and life in *Anioma* concept of colour. On the other hand, the colour way has brilliant orange and Prussian blue against a white background. This work which presents not much of rendezvous of patterns is entitled *Lines and Symbols* (Figure 25). The piece is designed in such a manner that each series of the three motifs employed for the design is placed in different portions of the work format amalgamating into a dynamic flow of patterns that do not lose their quality. These three motifs so depicted in stylization and in various placements indicate the extent they have been re-arranged to form a design by the writer. The series of *Okwuchi-akpa* (cover of bag) motif seem to be more prominent in this design than the *Akangweose* (pestle). Also, running across the whole length of the work format as border design is the *Eke na Egwulugwu* (rainbow) motif represented with lines which signifies greatness and beauty among the *Anioma*. The main design contains motifs in white colour against a blue background and the alternate way contains motifs in white against deep yellow and Easter purple colours.

Figure 25 & 26



Title: Interplay of Patterns
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper



Title: Cross Rhythm
Size: 21 x 29cm
Medium: Print on paper

This piece titled Interplay of Patterns (Figure 25) reveals another interesting combination of motifs. The aesthetics of patterns on *Akwa-Ocha* from where the motifs were adapted is again strikingly visible in the character of the motifs employed in the design. The motifs are arranged in vertical rows demarcated by *Akala* (line) motif. The motifs appear so elaborate and distinctive, covering the whole length and width of the paper and four distinct motifs are visible. They include the *Nkpulu-ego* or *Ego-ayolo* (cowrie) in the colour of white and orange placed one after the other. The second motif is *Ukwu-efi* (cow-leg) represented in right angles triangle in clusters of three rows. The other motif is *Akangweose* (double-headed pestle used for grinding in the kitchen) also in white and orange colours represented as double headed triangle. The deep blue background colour hosting the display of these motifs as a design complements the area in shocking pink colour. The alternate colour way contained lilac background with deep blue and white colour motifs.

This design composition entitled Rhythm (Figure 26) is structured with few motifs which are spread spatially, but held together by their repetitions. The design precisely consists of three motifs derived from different sources which under normal circumstance cannot be put together. They include one of the re-occurring motifs *Ije-Agwo* (snake movement) usually represented in zig-zag movement, sugar represented in the form of chevron and *Ejekom-be-loya* (visit to the lawyer's house) represented in series of lines usually three.

The motifs are stylishly arranged as the *Ije-Agwo* motif crossing at different angles alongside the other motif to form a simple composition in a rhythmic manner. The movement of the *Ije-agwo* motifs is quite dramatic that they take the viewer's eyes all over the picture plane. The *Ejekom-be-loya* (visit to the lawyer's house) motif in lines running horizontally defined the border. The design composition in this piece demonstrates a harmonious interplay of motifs created in colour variations as well as a strong contrast. The colours employed in this design are brilliant yellow and blue for the motifs against a brownish colour background and the alternate colour way has lilac, sky blue and brilliant yellow against a pussian blue background.

Conclusion

Nigeria with her rich cultural heritage is somewhat not yet free from foreign domination with reference to textiles and fashion despite the fact that people want to exhibit their identities with their dress style. Thus, the new innovation of modern textiles and fashion influenced by *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols as surface pattern of ornamentation not only serve as significant model for a better appreciation of the beauty and glamour of homemade fabrics, but promote unity and most importantly create an identity. The study posits that, this phenomenon will also

sustain homemade textiles and fashion by providing an avenue for job creation as well as make a positive impact in checkmating the emphasis already placed in foreign designs.

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