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## Design of Fashion Accessories Using Akwa-Ocha Motifs and Symbols

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### Abstract



*Akwa-Ocha* which connotes white cloth is basically an indigenous hand-woven cloth that is produced by the Aniocha people of Delta state. The cloth which contains surface decorative motifs and symbols is used for various festive occasions among the people. *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols and their functions reveal the people's history or past events, religion and social behaviours. Nigerian traditional elements such as the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols feature in the changing landscape in the design of fashion accessories in Nigeria. Thus, contemporary trend in global fashion conciseness has influenced *Akwa-Ocha* in its application of fashion accessories. *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols function as carriers of cultural heritage and identity of the Aniocha people. This paper therefore focuses on the use of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories using available local

materials. The exploration of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories for obvious reasons include creating an identity, checking the emphasis already placed on foreign fashion accessories, creating awareness and projecting one of Nigeria's rich cultural heritages.

**Keywords:** Jewelry, embellishment, symbol, fashion, accessories

## Introduction

Nigeria is a country that is constituted of many ethnic groups. Each of these ethnic groups has rich surface decorative art and crafts traditions which have given Nigeria a place in world art. Some of these rich surface decorations appear on local cloths. However, one of the ways Nigerians exhibit their identities and heritage is through their customized local cloths, but due to foreign influences, they are gradually losing their values. William (1993) affirms that Nigeria, a country made up of rich and diverse cultural values is beginning to lose most of its cultural ideal especially through the adoption of foreign culture in the different media. In like manner, Mimiko (2010) corroborates as he asserts that our cultural heritages have been watered down by western civilization. In fact, there has been more emphasis on the use of motifs and symbols that are alien to Nigeria in the design of modern creative purposes particularly fashion accessories without reference to Nigerian cultural environment. Alonge (2008) has rightly observed that an unfair share of Nigeria's textiles and fashion business goes to foreign goods.









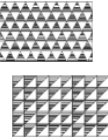

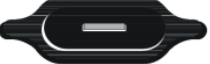

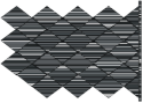



However, the neglect of Nigerian indigenous elements for the design of fashion accessories is particularly true of the surface decorative elements inherent in *Akwa-Ocha* hand woven cloth which is going into extinction because expertise and skills is not taught to the younger generation. Its performance prosperities or various qualities in terms of weight and less soothing nature affects the comfort and suitability of the cloth for use as common clothing fabric. Again, the fabric is readily available in wrapper form and several of them are now used as souvenir. In addition the fabric is woven by aging women as the younger ones are unwilling to learn the trade. This development has necessitated the need to make some of the rich values inherent on the fabric such as its motifs and symbols represented as fashion accessories with the use of different forms of materials such as calabash, coconut shells, leather, raffia and beads. This will not only represent more of Nigerian cultural heritage elements in fashion accessories, but also create an identity, express national pride as well as preserve a valuable heritage, so that the efforts to develop the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols by the women weavers will not go into extinction.

## ***Akwa-Ocha* Motifs and Symbols**

The weavers' perception of all aspects of life and nature and most notably, of ideas that reflect cultural aesthetics and taste of Aniocha culture is translated into visual form. These motifs and symbols are ideas drawn from plants, animals and birds, the cosmos and man-made objects that are of importance to the Aniocha people. More so, inscriptions that convey messages and past historical events involving the Aniocha people also form part of the designs on *Akwa-Ocha*. Ozue (2016) informs that most of the traditional cotton fabrics are drawn basically from nature and significant experiences that the Delta North people have passed through, thereby presenting it in a form of folklore on the woven fabric. The motifs and symbols come in simple shapes and are not naturalistic, but stylized. Onochie (2003) explains that most of the motifs and symbols can be deciphered and their significance appreciated within the context of tradition and cultural values. Some design motifs and symbols in *Akwa-Ocha* are symbolic and their meanings are determined by their sources of inspiration. Nwosu (2016) says that the communities, beliefs, idioms myths, proverbs, folklore, tradition and philosophy are put into consideration in the symbolical meaning of designs of *Akwa-Ocha*. He further notes that other design motifs are mainly for aesthetic values. Some of the motifs and symbols on *Akwa-Ocha* as presented in the Tables1 and 2 below were combined in different deign arrangements and finished off as fashion accessories.

Table 1

Some of the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols

 1	 2	 3	 4
 5	 6	 7	 8
 9	 10	 11	 12
 13	 14	 15	 16








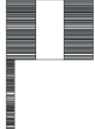








Key:

1. Kpakpando: Star
2. Akangweose: Pestle
3. Nkpulu-Ego or Ego-Ayolo: Cowry
4. Ije-Agwo: Snake movement
5. Enyi: Elephant
6. Ejekom-be-loya: Going to the lawyer's house
7. Ukoti: small metal knife
8. Mma-Eku: Local knife
9. Ukwu-Efi: Cow leg
10. Ayolo-Eke: Python's skin.
11. Okwa-Oji: Kola nut bowl.
12. Nha or Nsha: Comb
13. Ugba-Afa: Divination tray
14. Obo-Aka: Palm of the hand
15. Nkpopu: Holes
16. Osikapa na Akpaka: Rice and beans

(Source: Onwuakpa, 2015).

Table 2

*Akwa-Ocha motifs and symbols II*

 17	 18	 19	 20
 21	 22	 23	 24
 25	 26	 27	 28
 29	 30	 31	 32

17. Nkpulu-Obi: Physical heart 18. Ubor: Thumb piano 19. Step  
 20. Ukwu Onogbo or Ukwu-pussu: Pussy cat leg 21. Sugar 22. Akala: Line  
 23. Mkpa: Scissors 24. Okoloto: Flag 25. Carpet. 26. Agiliga  
 27. Ogwu Azu: Fish Bone 28. Aziza: Broom 29. Isi oji: Head of Kola-nut  
 30. Okala-isi-oji: Half segment of Kola-nut 31. Akwukwo Akpu: Cassava leaf  
 32. Ifufu or Ototo: Flower

*(Source: Onwuakpa, 2015).*

## ***Akwa-Ocha* Motifs and Symbols in the Design of Fashion Accessories**

In this study, the writer has attempted to establish that the emphasis already placed on foreign fashion accessories, and global fashion consciousness has necessitated the expansion of its utility values both in the area of material and technique. Okeke (1996) explaining the additive approach to fashion says that the use of foot wears, headgear, coiffure, bangles, anklets, earring, necklaces and beads falls within the category. Since nothing has been done so far to adopt the *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories, this study also became imperative. There can be no doubt that the adaptation of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols will help a great deal in the development and creation of a new trend in fashion.

The re-visitation of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols for the design of fashion accessories anchors in both social semiotics and archetypal theories. Social semiotics theory as propounded by Leeuwen (2005), explains ways in which different aspects of the society combine to create meaning. He also sees the collector's culture of the past few centuries now as a very useful resource for artists, designers and other innovators. The present study supports Leeuwen's argument and it is therefore, a tool with which to understand the re-visitation of surface decorative elements in traditional *Akwa-Ocha* for the design of fashion accessories. Again, the archetypal theory propounded by Jung in 1981 lays emphasis on fundamental patterns and symbols which serve as a prototype from which other similar things are patterned. Traditional *Akwa-Ocha* woven cloth motifs and symbols can be viewed as a prototype from which other similar patterns can be formulated as exemplified in the fashion accessories presented in this paper.

### **Materials, Methods and Design Process**

The process applied in making the fashion accessories is varied and the objects or materials are nominal and easy to come by. Combining materials and methods allowed wide latitude for the writer to use imagination and selection. In fact, adapting common materials and converting them into jewelries in representing the motifs and symbols derived from *Akwa-Ocha* is somewhat a challenging experience, and the jewelries so made are informal and formal, whimsical or elegant. With concern for the demands of function, weight and balance were highly considered in the use of materials such as coconut shells, calabash, fabrics, beads, raffia, cotton twine and copper wire as aforementioned

The shapes of the fashion accessories place no limits to the imagination of the producer. Colours were incorporated by the use of brush and dyeing as luster finish achieved by vanishing. As custom made jewelries in necklace, bracelets, earrings as well as hand

bags and shoes designed with indigenous elements adapted to contemporary setting, the progress takes a logical sequence from simple to a more complex design.

### **Presentation and Analysis of the Fashion Accessories**

The jewelry contained in Figure 1 is both a necklace and two earrings designed with *Akwa-Ocha* motifs which include *Onwa* (moon) *Akangweose* (local double-headed pestle) and *Ejekomube loya* (going to the lawyer's house). The necklace incorporates five small spherical pendants with a large one at the middle. They are linked together with a copper wire. The earrings are in two large spherical shapes. The manner of linking the shapes together is to avoid monotony. Again the construction of the piece is accentuated by its highly polished surface resulting in jewelry that is simple and elegant. This piece was produced with coconut shell and it has all the qualities of jewelry and it is only after close examination that one becomes aware of the material used.



Figure 1: Necklace, Earrings and Ring made from Calabash, Beads and Copper Wire

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016

Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun

The jewelry shown below in Plate 2 is a necklace and earrings designed with the skillfully combination of three *Obo Aka* (palm of the hand) motifs that form its pendant and earrings. They were produced with calabash and copper wire. Both the pendant and the two earrings incorporate the *Onwa* (moon) motif in spherical shape and in black colour. They are held together with a dark copper wire.



Figure 2: Necklace, Earrings, made from Calabash, Copper Wire and Beads

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016

Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen



Figure 3: Necklace, Earrings, made from Calabash, Copper Wire and Beads

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016

Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen

The jewelry depicted in Figure 3 above was produced mainly with a dark coloured stained calabash. The *Akangweose* (local double headed pestle) motif represents the shape of the main pendant while the *Okalalsi-oji* (half segment of the kola nut head) motif represents the adjoining pendants just as the two earrings were repeated several times as part of the pendants and as the earring. The main pendants contain an orange colour part and *Akala* (line) motif in three linear engravings. This was also repeated on the two earrings. The pendants of this jewelry were linked together with a beaded linear form.

The necklace contained in Figure 4 was made of wood and designed in the shape of a reptile. The design of this art work appears somewhat sleek and complex as it incorporates motifs which include *Ejekombeloya* (going to the lawyer's house) represented in three blue linear forms and *Isi-oji* (head of kola nut) which was represented in white beaded chevron shapes. The piece which was barely vanished was deliberate because if it had



received a high varnish, much of its beauty would have been lost.



Figure 4: Necklace and Earrings, made from Calabash, Beads, Wood, Acrylic and Copper Wire

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016

Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen

The structural pieces (Figure 5) are designed units of versatility, which can be worn as bracelets, used as curtain holders or displayed as ornaments. These bracelets fashioned with coconut shells have bands made of fabrics that contain overlay motifs painted in various colours. The bracelets were finished with light vanishing to give it a faint lustre effect.



Figure 5: Necklace and Earrings, made from Coconut Shell, Fabrics, Beads and Acrylic

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016

Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen

The jewelry pieces contained in Figures 6, 7 and 8 are different types of necklaces that have basic similarities although they are each based on an individual approach to design. They were designed with calabash and copper wire. The repetition of each shape was done for duality of purpose, while the finishing of the calabash has reflections for greater brilliance resulting from qualitative of polishing. The repeat method adopted in the design was to create some form of balance. This approach becomes the definite character of each piece and it dictates the essential character of the forms of the jewelry pieces. The first jewelry (Figure 6) contains three small shapes of calabash that form the pendants which incorporates patterns in colours of yellow, green and purple at the middle area in order to accentuate and minimize the plain areas and create contrast. The second jewelry (Figure 7) has the shape of its central pendants and the two earrings derived from the *Nkpulu-obi* (physical heart) motif, while the adjoining pendants are represented with *Onwa* (moon) motif in rounded forms. The third has skillfully combined *Kpakpando* (star), three pendants as well as *Onwa* (moon) that were motif skillfully combined together. The pendants of the first necklace in calabash shapes are linked with a chain while the pendants of the other two are linked with copper wire.



Figure 6: Necklace, Earrings, made from Calabash and Copper Wire

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun



Figure 7: Necklace, Earrings, made from Calabash and Copper Wire

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun



Figure 8: Necklace, Earrings, made from Calabash and Copper Wire  
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016  
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen

There are other end use products or fashion accessories such as portable hand bags, purses and shoes designed in various shapes and patterned with various *Akwa-Ocha* motifs that were adapted to contemporary use. They are contained in Figures 9, 10, 11 and 12.

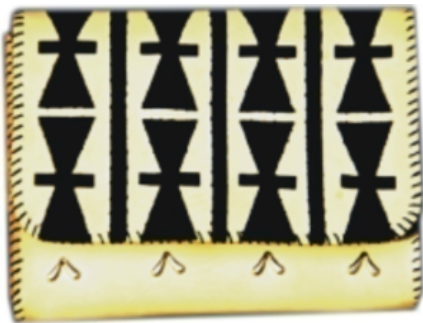


Figure 9: Ladies' Pouch made from Leather, Copper, Polyester Thread  
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016  
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen



Figure 10: Ladies Sandal and Bag made from Leather, Fabric, Broaches  
 Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016  
 Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwen



Figure 11: Appliquéd Leather Bag made from Leather, stones and Polyester Thread

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun



Figure 12: Shoppers Bags made from Digital Print on Paper

Artist: Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa. 2016  
Photograph: Smith Osatohanmwun

## Conclusion

The various fashion accessories presented in this paper have shown that the re-visitation of *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols used for their design is quite appealing and will have a far reaching impact on the emphasis already placed in foreign fashion accessories. This phenomenon will also result into a conceptual outlook, create an identity and serve as an eloquent testimony to the continuing dynamism of the elements constituting this local cloth. More so, as the recognition for *Akwa-Ocha* motifs and symbols are declining, the need to diversify and advance their utility values of which has provided the platform for experimentation in the use of available local materials. Besides, the revisitation of *Akwa-Ocha* for the design of fashion accessories and critical analysis of the finished products brought about an aesthetic vocabulary that communicates both the philosophical and sociological message of the Aniocha communities.

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### **About the Author**

Dr. (Mrs) Lovina Ebele Onwuakpa is a textile/fashion designer and Art Historian. She obtained B.A, M.F.A and M.A from University of Benin and Ibadan in Nigeria respectively. She also obtained a PhD from University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. She has participated in several art exhibitions and has published in reputable local and international Journals. Lovina is a member of Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FAAN), Nigerian Field Society and Association of Textile Technologists. She lectures at the University of Benin, Nigeria and her research area is textile/fashion.

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