



Artwork Information Sheet 10



NIKE'S CYCLE OF LIFE

Cycle of Life, 1980, Fabric, 354 x 275.5cm
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INTRODUCTION

The Adire fabric is popular among the Yoruba people as it also originates from them in the Nigerian context. Adire making involves a variety of resist dyeing techniques to create a single piece, implying a lot of hard work. Nike Davies Okundaye is renowned for popularizing this textile across the world. Irrespective of the difficulties she encountered at a young age, she has become one of the most influential female artists from Nigeria. Her work "cycle of life" tells a great deal about the different symbolisms in the Adire Fabric.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NIKE

'Mama Nike' as she is fondly called was born in 1951. She learned the art of Adire from her mother who passed away when Nike was six and later on from her grandmother who passed away a year later. Following these unfortunate incidents, Nike had to move in with her Great grandmother who was also a local artisan from whom Nike would come to learn various crafts like woodwork, ironwork, and beadwork. Eventually, her great-grandmother died and Nike had to move back with her Father. Her father, a local artisan was unable to bear the cost of her school fees and so she had to stop schooling. As a result of a disagreement with her father at the age of 13, Nike ran away with a traveling performing troupe to a town called "Kaba" where she harnessed dance skills.

Through the sale of her artworks, Nike was able to sustain herself. She started working with a popular artist in Oshogbo town and eventually they got married. She became quite popular among art collectors through the sale of her artworks. Nike was recruited by a United States agency in Nigeria in 1972 to join a group of ten African artists, who would teach indigenous African art in the US. While in the US, she met other artists and exchanged ideas as well as expanded her knowledge of art. On her return to Nigeria, Nike continued to make more sales, having learned better ways to apply her art.

In her home, Nike had a mini-workshop where she trained other women in the community on arts and

crafts. Nike's home was also a mini gallery and had become a tourist site, where expatriates came to visit and buy artworks. A lot of young women and girls were empowered in the process. Over time, Nike felt the need to expand her galleries and workshops, this gave birth to the Nike Art Galleries in Oshogbo, Ogidi, Abuja and Lagos.

ADIRE

"Adire" is a coinage of two words, "Adi," to tie; and "Re", to dye, that is, tie-dye. These words from the Yoruba language describe both the process of production and the end product called Adire" (Areo 2013). The art of making Adire is passed on over generations from parents to their children and it goes on and on. It is done mostly by women but over time, more men have gotten involved.

Large earthenware pots are usually used for the dyeing process. The dye is either gotten from the indigo leaf called "Elu" a plant which is grown locally "in the Saki area of Oyo state" or from artificial dyes that are imported. To create the dye mixture, the dye is added to "water that had been softened with caustic soda". The cloth is then dipped into the dye and pulled out for it to oxidize and acquire the rich blue colour.

This process would then be repeated. The more times a cloth was dipped, the darker it would become. Sometimes after it had been dyed the cloth would be beaten with a mallet so it took on a sheen" (V&A, n.d.).

A pattern of dyeing in which certain parts of the cloth are treated to resist dye is used in the process of making Adire and this is called Resist dyeing. Before a cloth was dyed, it would be treated in some ways to create patterns where the dye should not touch. Starch, wax, raffia, cassava root paste and chicken feathers are some of the items used to treat the cloth. The techniques involved in making Adire can be grouped into three; "Oniko" or tied, "Alabere" (stitch with raffia) and "Eleko" painted. "Oniko" involves tying the fabric with raffia palm in various ways; the fabric could be folded or rolled up before it is tied. For "Alabere" the cloth is stitched with raffia, creating intricate designs in the process.

“Eleko” entails hand-painting with cassava root paste. This process involves crushing cassava roots, leaving a paste-like substance which is painted onto the surface of the cloth with chicken feathers as a brush to create designs through which the dye would not be absorbed.

THE CYCLE OF LIFE



Fig 1. Cycle of Life (Detail), 1980, Fabric, 354 x 275.5cm
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Mama Nike spent three years producing “The Cycle of Life”. This work was a part of her training at the Oshogbo School of Art under the tutelage of

Georgina Ulli Beier. Georgina Beier, a European lady who was a teacher at the Oshogbo art Workshops was also the wife of the German researcher and author Ulli Beier. She was the costume and set designer for Duro Ladipo’s theatre and conducted the Oshogbo art Workshops from 1963 to 1966.

Using different patterns from different parts of the nation, Nike tells the story of the pattern of life through this work. The work is a hand-stitched wall hanging. Its dominant colour, indigo is the colour of love and therefore has been put together in different shades. Each pattern is a symbol and therefore signifies something. Some motifs signify law-making and rulers while the crab motif signifies the stage in life when children crawl before they eventually walk. The Flower motif represents life, the circular motifs signify money and the motif which has the form of a key signifies the tool which is used to access the money. The work is comprised of sections of different fabrics joined together called “patchwork” a term borrowed from the West. It is the art of combining pieces of different fabrics.

The work has an interesting design which is called “Orimikpe”, a Yoruba term which means “my head is correct”. This bit has a story behind it; according to the story, in making Adire men use stencils in creating their designs and so they get the work done faster than women who create their designs by painting them individually using chicken feathers. As a result of this, they tease the women saying “you have a small brain” (because the women create designs through a more tedious process) and the women, in turn, respond “all these things come from my head”, “orimikpe” which means “my head is correct”.

Other motifs and their significance include; the star motif which represents the indomitable nature of a fighter. The tribal mark motif is used to show the identification of a person’s roots. The sugarcane motif signifies the intransigence of sweet things in life. The hand fan motif signifies royalty as well as the consuming nature of fire. The scissors signifies continuity in life as it is used to cut the physical connection between mother and child after birth.

The indigo colour in which the whole fabric was dyed was gotten from the "Elu" seed and the ashes from the skin of the cocoa pod. It was burnt, diluted in water then filtered. The water gotten from this was used to outline the indigo leaf after which it was left to stay outside for seven days before it could be used as a dye. The deep purple of the work was gotten by dipping the fabric over 20 times into the indigo dye while the lighter part was gotten by dipping 10 times. Together, the Work celebrates the cycle of life and the different ingredients that spice up life.

CONCLUSION

The Adire making process is both tasking and daunting. Nike Davies Okundaye through her numerous art workshops and centres has helped propagate the awareness of this local art form. The motifs from the adire fabric with their symbolic meanings also show the depth of thought that goes into any adire making process. The motifs are not accidental but well thought out and the result is pleasant to view. Today, more people across the globe have come to know about the "Adire" fabric and the different symbols inherent in it.

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