

OSOGBO

Model of Growing African Towns

Edited by

C. O. ADEPEGBA

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Institute of African Studies,
University of Ibadan
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Chapter Eleven

DYEING IN OSOGBO TOWNSHIP

Ohioma Ifounu Pogoson

Introduction

Dyeing was practised everywhere in Yorubaland. So rampant was dyeing among Yoruba women that until the 1950s, large areas of the backyards of house compounds were marked out as the open air dyeing grounds whose sizes in Ekiti area, are said to be as large as 500 square yards.¹ According to Ojo, in his discussion of domestic industries in Yorubaland, clothing the family was the responsibility of women as feeding it was the responsibility of men.² Women produce wide cloths in horizontal looms and also change them from the natural colour of cotton by dyeing.

In spite of the fact that the beginning of dyeing is already forgotten,³ the traditional methods of the craft remain indelible with extant practitioners. In the materials used as well as in the methods of production and the application of the dye stuffs, the traditional methods are still basic to dyeing in Yorubaland. As has been pointed out by Ojo, despite the widespread practice of dyeing in Yorubaland, dyeing was more concentrated in some areas partly because of the greater density of the raw material for dye production.⁴ The differential distribution of dyeing skill is also partially responsible. The various practices of the craft in different parts of Yorubaland notwithstanding, the production methods were still similar.

The most popular and common vegetable dye in Yorubaland is the indigo dye or 'elu'. It is obtained from the indigofera trees the leaves of which are treated by subjecting them to a certain regulated process to separate the actual dye stuff known as *indigotin* from the unrequired indigo red called *indigorubin*.⁵ It has been suggested that the high uncultivated occurrence of the *indigofera* plant in many parts of Yorubaland, especially in northern

Yorubaland, may have conditioned the importance of some of the towns as dyeing centres.⁶

The dye is extracted by an elaborate chemical process in which the leaves are pounded, fermented and dried before use. They are usually made into balls (for convenience of carrying and sales). The balls are about the approximate size of a large orange. They may be kept in this condition for several years. They require only to be soaked in a special ash solution which is produced by burning green fire resistant wood in a furnace through which water has been made to drain before. The chemical in which the dye ball is soaked has been referred to in the literature as mordant water.⁷ There is also mordant ash, another essential product for dye which is got from burning a mixture of dried and green wood. The ashes produced are also made into balls ready for use. Each of these materials is readily available for purchase in the local markets. This happens because the preparation process is not precise enough. There must be room for surplus and dye makers and practitioners earned a little extra from the sales of the excess. They at times also gave such excess materials to neighbours who might request for them.

Dyeing, per se, involves dipping the cloths into large dye pots which in Yorubaland are usually installed in the ground. Depending upon the shades of the dyes desired, the cloths may be dipped or soaked in the dye pot for up to several days. It is only after the desired hue of the dye has been got that the cloth is removed and dried out. But basically, there are two types or modes of dyeing in Yorubaland -the block method which implies dyeing the whole cloth in one colour and the pattern dyeing method commonly referred to as *adire*.

This study concentrates in the main on dyeing and *adire* making in the Yoruba town of Osogbo. The historical and artistic development of the craft which is traditionally believed to be the town's major craft will be looked into. Interestingly, the traditional origin of the town even links it with the art of dyeing.⁸ Hence the first part of this study makes use of local traditional associations of the town with dyeing to highlight the importance of the craft in the town. Finally, the study takes a close look at the modern manifestations of the art and its successes.

The histories of many Yoruba towns including Osogbo are deductions from oral histories. Their origins are hinged and shrouded in myths and legends. These myths and legends are numerous and often faintly indicative of some significant extant cultural aspect of the town. Lack of documentary historical records and the reliability and validity problems in the use and abuse of oral traditions make it difficult, and in fact, almost impossible to get the true and accurate origin of many of the towns. This

notwithstanding, possibilities of establishing a plausible historical development cannot be ruled out. Such an endeavour would only require passing these myths and legends through a plausibility sieve for confirmation and refutation. An interdisciplinary approach is also extremely desirable in understanding the oral traditions. These, however, are not the express concerns of this study. They are only needed to trace the history of dyeing in Osogbo, hence only the tradition which first mentions dyeing in the traditional history of Osogbo as well as other accounts and hints of dyeing in Osogbo are taken into consideration.

The major tradition of origin of Osogbo that has to do with the craft tells of how Timehin, one of the emigrants from Ilesa, had the task of locating a site for the town. Timehin eventually located a site near the big river (Osun) and decided to mark the place for future easy identification. And this he did by cutting down a large tree beside the river. But as the tree fell upon the river, he heard a loud and furious voice saying

“Ta lo fo ikoko aro mi o
Eyin oso-igbo e tun de o,

meaning:

Who broke my indigo dyeing pots
You wizards of the forest, are you again?

Following this event, Timehin was able to reach an accord with Osun (the goddess of the river) and he settled there with his followers.⁹ The plausibility of this account will be addressed in the concluding part of the study. In the meantime, it is noteworthy to mention that Osogbo was by early this century ranked among the first three reputable dyeing towns in southwestern Nigeria. Others were Ibadan and Abeokuta.¹⁰

Two other sayings which closely link Osogbo with the art of dyeing are believed to have emerged later as the town's popularity (as a dye producing town) grew. The sayings are:

1. Aro nbe ni Osogbo
Enia nbe ni Ibadan

meaning:

Osogbo is known as home of dyeing
But Ibadan is a city of gentlemen.

2. Osogbo ilu aro

meaning:

Osogbo, town of dye,¹¹

They both confirm the town's reputation for dyeing and this reputation may have continued until the colonial and missionary started to have negative influence on the ways of life of the people.

The traditional art and religion which used to boost the culture were removed by these influences. Many of the religious shrines in Osogbo and indeed elsewhere in Yorubaland, were in a state of utter disrepair and neglect.¹² It was the decay of these religious places that provided Susanne Wenger, an Austrian born female artist who had herself only just been converted into a traditional African religionist, a good ground for work. Before the late 1960s, she had rebuilt and restored many of the shrines which with government support, she has up till present continued to maintain. The activities of such European artists (there were others such as Ulli Beier and his wife, Georgiana) as well as those of the local art and theatre producers such as Wole Soyinka and Demas Nwoko of Ibadan were later to crystallise into Osogbo becoming the most popular centre for Yoruba art and culture. Their activities rekindled local enthusiasm. Osogbo also became especially popular for '*adire*' (tie and dye) textile production. Interestingly, an accompanying study on the sociological implications of western education in Osogbo ranks dyeing very highly in the list of professions.¹³ Dyeing is therefore even still regarded as one of the traditional professions of the townsfolk.

The popularity of Osogbo as an *adire* producing town has since the early sixties improved tremendously. It is widely believed that there has been a very positive influence in Osogbo *adire* as a result of the collaboration of the foreign and local artists already mentioned. Also the vagaries of the economic fortunes since then, as well as the black and African consciousness and activism of the period had a generally positive effect on cultural matters and things. The following paragraphs will take a look at *adire* in Osogbo, their variety and the successes of the art form. The history and the contributions of some of the town's influential *adire* artists will also be discussed

One of the extant dyeing yards which I visited in Osogbo was actually nearly as large as Ojo's description. It contained in-situ dyeing pots (Plate 1) several work sheds, a kiln and several crossed bamboo drying posts (Plate 2). The dye pots were partially submerged in the ground to allow for stability when stirring the dye and cloths (Plate 3). The kiln was crude but extremely effective for the preparation of the mordant ash and water.

The block dyeing method or dyeing without patterning is believed (as indicated earlier) to be older than dyeing with the inclusion of design patterns. This art form is also believed to be quite old in Africa. Osogbo

traditional popularity is most likely to have been got from this type of dyeing or even merely the dye production. Adire however is fairly more recent and they are of two types - the tie and dye and the batik methods. Both methods are largely similar but allow for varying degrees of patterning. Adire basically means to tie and dye and it is the simplest form of the first category. It involves tying up the clothes to form patterns and prevent the dye from reaching certain desired parts when dyeing. Strings of rafia which are dye resistant are often used for the preparation of the cloths before dipping them in the dye pots. When the cloth has been sufficiently dyed to a desired hue, it is removed from the dye pot, dried out and loosened up to reveal alternate patterns of dyed and untouched areas. Adire has developed so much that several methods and approaches to making it have evolved. To constrain the dyes, Osogbo adire workers have been known to fold up the cloths, stitch or sew them or even use small pebbles when tying them up. Their variety has in fact been well studied.¹⁴

What is more popularly known as 'eleko' in Yorubaland is the starch resist method. It has the same principle as the wax resist method known as batik. The traditional practitioners used starch instead of wax. When the starch dries up, the cloth stiffens so that when dipped into the dye pot, the dye does not reach the starch painted up areas. The designs in this case are done by freehand and the painting is done using feathers. The stencilling method which has also been used by batik producers has made it possible to repeat designs.

Susanne Wenger whose batiks will be discussed in some detail later has even taken this form beyond the previous limits. She painted the folktales of the Yoruba on cloths and waxed and dyed them (Plate 4). She is perhaps the exponent of compositional batiks in Osogbo. This genre has become extremely popular not only in Osogbo but elsewhere in Nigeria. Susanne Wenger has adopted the Yoruba batik technique to her own ends. Yoruba women use adire to decorate wrappers with geometric designs, Susanne Wenger produces large wall hangings depicting the stories of Yoruba gods.¹⁵

The styles and variety of works produced in Osogbo are multifarious and range from popular traditional designs to very contemporary ones.¹⁶ The trend for the adire makers of the early sixties was to produce those designs which sold best and were used for dresses such as 'danshiki' or women's 'iro and buba' or even skirt suits or indeed as the fashion trend of the period dictated. But, it is not for the same style of adire that Osogbo, Ibadan and Abeokuta are known. The cross-fertilization of both artistic and cultural ideas in Osogbo, not present in the other towns, gave birth to

an enthusiastic forum which conditioned the Osogbo artists to produce the unique works for which they are now remarkably popular.

In an age when past modernism is generally accepted as abstracting the more advanced present from the immediate past, it will not be out of place to regard the new form of experimental, although now confirmed successful, adire and batiks of Osogbo as belonging to this class. The period to which reference is being made is that beginning from the late 1960s to the present, and this assumes that the products of pre-1960 are the traditional forms of adire. Western education in the arts during the post independence period witnessed a proliferation. Formal higher education art schools began to emerge and the study of textiles, indeed traditional textiles, was introduced.¹⁷ The effects of this innovation include the introduction into the system, that was once dominated by unqualified semi-skilled but talented artists, of educated and highly skilled professionals.

At this time also, many of the products of the informal occasional schools had begun to record both local and international successes. They were therefore becoming more exposed not only in terms of awareness but also in professional and creative terms. It is the blend of these categories of artists plus the continued presence of the foreigners that created the new textile school which has become uniquely Osogbo.

The economic successes occasioned by the oil boom in Nigeria as from the early 70s were instrumental in shaping local attitudes to local products. Now satisfied with a western products-saturated market, people began to seek local products especially with regard to fashion. Even the recent collapse of this oil-dominated economy has again forced the population to internalise more. The once abundant imported goods have now become distant from the reach of the people. The resultant effect of this for fashion has been a huge growth of the fashion industry. The number of people and the volume of their products especially of adire and batik cloths have increased tremendously. Osogbo has emerged as one of the biggest centres for adire and batik production. The competition created there as a result of this proliferation has indeed aroused much creativity and caused a significant but positive change in the Nigerian fashion scene.

Let us now turn to the notable adire artists in Osogbo. Still actively involved are the Austrian artist, Susanne Wenger and a Nigerian artist, Nike Adams who have popularised batik making beyond Osogbo and Nigeria. There is also Adeyemo Oyekola who was once there in Osogbo as a school teacher but has now transferred to Ibadan. They represent three categories of Osogbo artists.

Bored with the artistic conventions of Europe in her early years and having even ventured out of her native Austria to Paris, then the art capital of the

world, Susanne Wenger¹⁸ came to Osogbo for fresh inspiration. She was first in Ibadan, but then she moved again to Ede and Ilobu before finally settling down in Osogbo. She now looms large in the cultural, religious and artistic history of the town. She arrived in Nigeria some thirty odd years ago as a fully trained and educated western artist and has remained in Osogbo for most of the time. Her activities in Osogbo have been a positive influence to both the inhabitants of the town and indeed the town's reputation which has been uplifted to the Yoruba cultural and artistic resort.

Susanne Wenger located tremendous inspiration in the religion and culture of the Yoruba and therefore proceeded to learn about and master the religious and cultural practices of the people. She apprenticed herself to Ajagemo¹⁹ (Obatala's high priest) who had himself predicted the arrival in Osogbo of a potential student who would be a protector of the tradition and religion of the Yoruba that was already declining on contact with Islamic and Christian innovations as well as colonial influences. The degeneration that had hit traditional religious icons when Susanne Wenger arrived was undeniable. Many of the more important shrines had fallen to dust and its once sacred art works now resided in dark seclusion. That is even when they had not been burnt, carried or sold off.²⁰ Such was the decadence that gave impetus to Susanne Wenger's interest in the revival of the art and religion of the people of this Yoruba town. With local help she set out to rescue the shrines and revive the religion. In the process she found and indeed the religion found her. She has remained in Osogbo with a pertinacious commitment to what she implicitly believes in. Susanne Wenger did not only master the religion of the Yoruba, she apprenticed herself to a local batik maker, the late Iya Alaro, Priestess of Egbe²¹ and also learnt this ancient art form from its true traditional masters. Having perfected the art of batik making, she proceeded to experiment with new ideas to serve not only their secular purposes but also her new found religion. According to Ulli Beier, the most drastic change that ever occurred in Susanne Wenger's career was when she changed over from these violent paintings of her early years in Europe to the controlled and highly disciplined wax batiks.²²

Her preference for wax batiks was advised by its allowance for better precision and the possibility of the use of multiple colours. Then, she used imported dyes. Her batiks made no use of traditional forms, but without exception they now illustrate orisha myths and the religion with which she had become very familiar. More significantly, Susanne Wenger is also credited with having adapted the Yoruba batik technique to her own ends. Yoruba women were originally known to use adire to decorate wrappers with geometric designs but Susanne Wenger produced large wall hangings

(Plate 4) depicting the stories of Yoruba gods.²³ These batiks, often figurative are the early examples which gave impetus to and indeed continued today's contemporary batiks for which Osogbo is now very popular. In her batiks as in her sculptures which now adorn the town's major shrines, Susanne Wenger has created genres which will remain indelible in the cultural history of Osogbo.

Nike,²⁴ as she is popularly known in her own case, is easily the most highly commercial adire and batik artist in Osogbo today. She operates from a modern and highly sophisticated environment which situates at Ofatedo, a few kilometres away from Osogbo. Coming from very humble backgrounds and with little formal education, the economic successes of her art have driven her to a very great height. She now runs a kind of guild system whereby volunteer citizens of the town (or indeed from elsewhere) are taught adire and batik making and their products are put on sale at her now popular gallery which is conspicuously situated along the new Osogbo-Iwo-lbadan road. The gallery has recorded notable success in recent years.

Many of the adire and batiks that come out of Nike's house are still technically executed in the traditional manner. Although working in the main using traditional themes, she however does not restrict her colours to the traditional indigo alone. The result of her introduction into the art of a very vibrant array of colours is a brilliance that gives her works especial appeal (Plate 5).

While concentrating on the production of wearing apparel, she has venture out into making brightly coloured batik duvets or quilts which are on display in her gallery and have become quite popular with foreign clientele. In addition to this, she has engaged in huge batik wall hangings with figurative works depicting Osogbo myths and legends. Perhaps she may have been influenced by Susanne Wenger. There is in fact little doubt that these great wall hangings done in batik draw great inspiration from the earlier ones that had been produced by Susanne Wenger. Nike's wall hangings are however more vibrant, more figurative and detailed than the best of Susanne Wenger's. In Nike's batik wall hangings, we see the close proximity between the artist and her town's history and culture. Nike's figurative works can best be viewed in her private quarters at her residence in Ofatedo, near Osogbo.

Nike has, as a result of her successes, had the opportunity of working abroad and by this has taken the art which she learnt and still teaches in Osogbo beyond national boundaries. She has been guest at international art workshops to teach participants. In this manner, as well as in the success the art has brought not only to her but also to all those who have

passed through her, she has contributed tremendously in elevating the name and reputation of the town.

Oyekola²⁵ had his early education in Ghana. There, he had learnt from his folks that Osogbo, in Nigeria (only a few kilometres away from his town, Ogbomoso) was very highly renowned for adire and batik making. He then naturally developed an unquenchable thirst to work in adire. Therefore, as soon as he arrived in Nigeria and completed his early education, he headed for the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where he majored in Graphics. No sooner had he settled down in Osogbo than he discovered a relationship between graphics and textiles, or more precisely adire and batik making which was later to become his major form of expression. While teaching at Osogbo he apprenticed himself to two traditional adire and batik makers - Gbenga Ogunsola and Ramoni.

From these two artists, he learnt and became proficient enough to produce his own experimental designs recalling his educational background. And, so successful has he become with his unique combination of colour fabrics and traditional indigo that he now earns commissions from rich individuals and corporate bodies as well as exporters of adire products. He insists that what makes his works truly African is his use of indigo. Traditional indigo to him must of necessity be part of his adire or batik to make them truly African. But in addition, the experiences of his formal education have made him a master in the choice and use of colour fabrics. He is able to use both materials to produce an interesting blend whenever he chooses.

He started by combining geometric and abstract shapes taken from traditional African designs. But he has very recently made a huge success of figurative and African landscape motifs which of course best serve as wall hangings or framed up paintings for offices (Plate 6). Oyekola's works, because of the economic gains which have generally become true of this endeavour, are of two types - those meant for export and those meant for local use. Experience has, according to him, shown that the brighter and more African in nature his production is the more attractive the product is to foreign clientele. Whereas it is only the sophisticated or exposed African who cares for such works. His works although not very popular among traditional batik and adire users, have found especial appeal among the younger generation. The fact that he presently teaches in the Polytechnic in Ibadan and the fact that his production has a wide appeal are indications of his enormous contribution to his students, the public and the historical development of Osogbo adire and batiks.

Dyeing in Osogbo is incontrovertibly of a fairly old age. But adire or resist patterning and dyeing is recent. It could not be because of a phenomenon

that started only about thirty years ago that the town is associated with dyeing. Could it therefore be because of the quantity of the block dyeing in the town in the past? If that was the case, for whom were large quantities of cloths dyed? And since there is no evidence that the town was an important weaving centre in the past, where could the large quantities of cloth dyed have come from? Except the production of dyed cloths began only recently after the European contact, it could not be for quantities of output that the town was known for the profession. There is however the possibility that the quality of the town's dyes was of a better quality than those of other Yoruba towns. In that case, important people from far and near could have been patronising the town's dyes. The present reputation of the town for adire might have therefore rested in a solid traditional base. This is more likely as most of the artists who have projected the town well in adire and batik making learnt the craft from indigenous dyers.

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Plate 1: One of the extant dyeing compounds in Osogbo showing in-situ dyeing pots.



Plate 2: Dyeing compound in Osogbo showing cloths hung to dry on bamboo poles



Plate 3: An Osogbo dyer stirring cloths in the dyer pot.



Plate 4: This wall hanging is displayed in the office of the Director of the Institute of African Studies (Produced in the early 60's).



Plate 5: A collection of Nike Davis batiks taken from a photo album at her home in Ofatedo.



Plate 6: One of Oyekola's batiks depicting a local drummer.

