

Textiles from a personal and social perspective in the work of Nike Davies-Okundaye

Chief Mrs. Nike Davies-Okundaye (or *Mama Nike* as she is widely and affectionately known) has had an extraordinary life rising above personal circumstances to becoming globally recognised as a multifaceted textile artist, social activist, educator, and feminist. With a career spanning over fifty years, Davies-Okundaye is renowned for reviving and preserving *adire* traditions in Nigeria with her established Nike Art centres, notably the centre in Osogbo dedicated to promoting and sustaining local female Adire makers.

Adire textile is created through a process of indigo resist-dyeing cotton that involves creating a pattern on the fabric and preventing it from absorbing the indigo dye. Three types of techniques are commonly used to achieve this effect: *Onikan*, *Alabere* and *Eleko*, the latter a more widespread method that involves creating designs by drawing with cassava paste onto the cloth's surface. The production of this cloth involves dyeing cotton in large clay pots sunken in the ground, followed by a procedure of dipping and airing to create the bright blue colours of the resulting fabric. Indigo dye is produced from leaves grown locally that have undergone a fermentation process to create different indigo hues. From the mid-1920s onward, adire and other textile industries across Nigeria and other parts of the African continent have seen a devastating decline in production and distribution due to a range of factors including limited governmental investment in infrastructure, political instability, and the importation of second-hand clothes from the West.

In her hometown of Ogidi Ijumu, Kogi State, during her childhood, Davies-Okundaye's late father embroidered ceremonial *agbadas*, the four-piece male attire mostly found among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and other parts of the country. Important rulers and leaders commissioned her father due to his talent and skill, and with her late mother, both would join in embroidering and beadwork to counter the arduous and painstaking task of creating this artform. Conversely, alongside embroidery, the artist was also taught to weave on the loom and work with adire by her grandmother, using the resist dye technique *batik* to produce intricate patterns on predominately indigo-coloured fabrics. Agbadas consist of a loose and free-flowing outer robe (*awosoke*), an undervest (*awotele*), a pair of long trousers (*sokoto*), and a hat (*fila*). It is from this outer robe that the entire outfit derives the name *agbada*, a big, loose-fitting, ankle-length garment with a distinct and embroidered rectangular centrepiece, flanked by wide sleeves rolled over or thrown across arms as wearers go about their activities. The intricacy

and complexity of the agbada's centrepiece embroidery vary depending on how much the wearer is willing to pay.

This display of early works by Davies-Okundaye in the Frieze Masters *Spotlight* section spans twenty years, beginning in the 1960s through the 1980s. This selection highlights the importance of familial craft traditions of beadwork, embroidery, and batik passed down from one generation to the next. Additionally, Davies-Okundaye has been greatly influenced by the formative and lifechanging years she spent in Osogbo, engaging with the town and its artists at the height of its creativity between the 1950s and 1960s, including Twins Seven Seven, Susan Wenger, and Ulli and Georgina Beier. Her Osogbo years contributed to giving visibility to the young artist, and a first United States trip in 1974 to teach weaving at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts led to an engagement with American quilt making traditions. These resulting hybrid adire quilts are shown here publicly in the UK for the first time.

A pair of embroidered artworks *Animal World* (1968) and *Osun* (1972) are indicative of Davies-Okundaye's deft understanding of stitchwork, a skill she learned as a child in these renderings of everyday life and the animals she would have encountered growing up, alongside her deep engagement with Yoruba culture celebrating the god of Osun. The large-scale beadwork, *The palm wine tapper and Ayo game* (1969-1970) is a significant work rendered painstakingly in an expansive surface over 2.5 meters wide, meticulously adorned with multicoloured beading. The central figure, the palm wine tapper, is flanked by both mythical human and perhaps animal figures in a communal scene depicting the popular Yoruba game *ayo*, a game no doubt familiar to the artist and others across Nigeria as a popular leisurely pastime. Early batiks including *Woven in Love* (1977) and *The finger that feeds never lacks* (1979) demonstrate the artist's mastery of free-hand figurative drawing in the textile medium, one that she has mastered over time and continues to explore, expand, and evolve.

In her recent autobiography, titled *A Biography of Nike: Bàtá Mi A Dùn KòKò Ká* by writer and historian Kofo Adeleke, the artist describes the soil as her slate and broomstick her pencil of her early creative engagements. Celebrating the brilliance and determination of Davies-Okundaye, whose life as a theatrical lens has deeply informed her work to date, this narrative display begins with Nigerian familial craft traditions, but through this, the formidable artist *Mama Nike* continues to expand both the meaning and scope of textile as a contemporary

artform. Her beginnings as an artist also reveal a life dedicated to individual artistic expression, curiosity, female empowerment, and transformation.