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Reflecting on Collecting: My Romance with African Textiles

Joanne B. Eicher and Diana Eicher

My background as a collector developed by growing up with a mother and grandmother who sewed. We spent hours at fabric stores paging through pattern books and admiring and fingering textiles. After my BA and MA and completing my PhD in the social sciences, I got my feet wet in teaching and research. I became a faculty member in a department called "Textiles, Clothing, and Related Arts," at Michigan State University, and this position seemed to be a perfect fit with my childhood. My courses and research were on the socio-cultural significance of dress and fashion. In the early 1960s, I went with my husband, an economist establishing an economic development institute, to Nigeria on an academic three-year leave of absence. As I settled in and traveled, the wide variety of handcrafted textiles fascinated me and I began collecting them to use for household purposes and clothing (as you can see below). I also found that little written documentation existed about them.



Figure 1. Cynthia and Joanne Eicher wearing African print dresses. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 2. Carolyn Eicher wearing African print wrapper set. Image by J.B. Eicher.

I visited markets, asked questions, watched weavers and dyers, and collected and collected. By the end of my stay, my purchases had grown far beyond any immediate use, into what I realized was a collection. Today I provide an account of the intertwining of my collecting with my academic curiosity and co-present with an artist. My presentation has three parts: 1) describing the collection 2) discussing use in teaching and research at Michigan State and University of Minnesota, and 3) providing the collection for artistic inspiration to my co-author, Diana Eicher, who is a printmaker and paper cutter.

I learned to know Nigeria by traveling with the aid of two small research grants related to my interest in cultural dress. I first collected as I traveled throughout a large portion of the eastern area where we lived, and continued collecting as I traveled further in Nigeria along with brief trips to Senegal and Ghana. The map indicates where I visited and collected cloth.



Figure 3. Map of Nigeria with Places Traveled. Permission: J.B. Eicher.

On return to the US, my next step was to classify my collection, a project that stimulated two Plan B projects (Harrell, 1967; Plumer, 1971), a Master's thesis (Nielsen, 1974), and my book, *Nigerian Handcrafted Textiles* (Eicher, 1976).

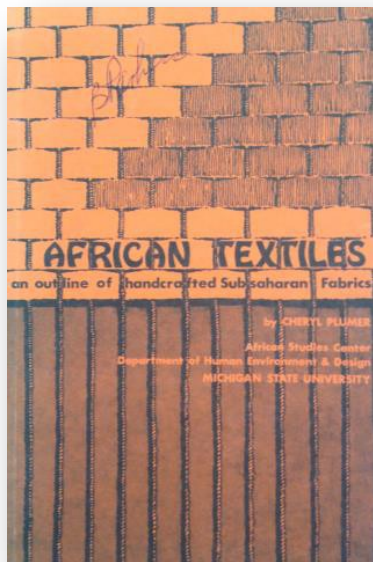


Figure 4. Plumer Cover. Image by J.B. Eicher.

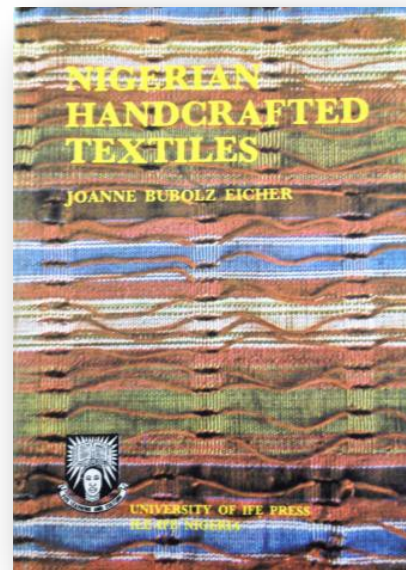


Figure 5. Eicher Cover. Image by J.B. Eicher.

I classified the textiles, photographed them, and began teaching a yearly course on African Dress. I also searched for written materials on African dress. All these activities resulted in the publication of two bibliographies (Eicher, 1969; Pokornowski, et al, 1978).

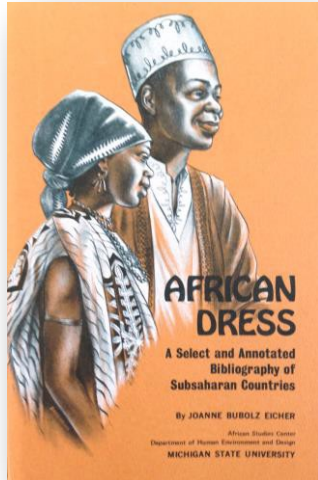


Figure 6. African Dress Bibliography Cover I.
Image by J.B. Eicher.

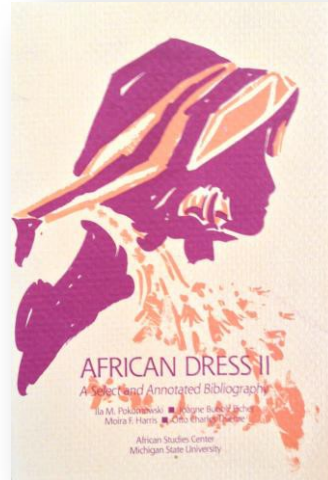


Figure 7. African Dress Bibliography Cover II.
Image by J.B. Eicher.

In classifying the textiles (hand-dyed, hand-painted, or hand-woven), I found seemingly handcrafted ones nevertheless often involved commercial products such as factory produced dye, thread, or cloth. Thus, I found this hand-woven Igbo cloth (shown below) unusual with its handspun and hand-dyed local cotton thread.



Figure 8. Handspun, hand-dyed, and hand-woven Igbo textile detail. Collection of J.B. Eicher.

Another handcrafted textile, the Yoruba indigo resist called *adire* (in examples below), may use commercial cloth, thread or dye. Before dyeing, the cloth is stitched, bound, or hand painted, primarily by women in western Nigeria.



Figure 9. Yoruba woman stitching textile to be dyed 1974. Image by M. Catherine Daly.



Figure 10. Adire textile tie-dye detail. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 11. Adire before and after detail. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 12. Adire hand painted starch resist. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 13. Adire starch resist dyed detail. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 14. Yoruba woman wearing adire starch resist wrapper. Image by J.B. Eicher.

When stenciled (as shown below), men usually did the work.



Figure 15. Left: Adire stencil detail. Right: Adire stenciled cloth detail. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 16. Swans stenciled adire detail. Image by J.B. Eicher.

A narrow band, woven textile from the Yoruba, called aso-oke, is woven by men on a horizontal loom with heddle and treadle, allowing “**infinite**” warping.

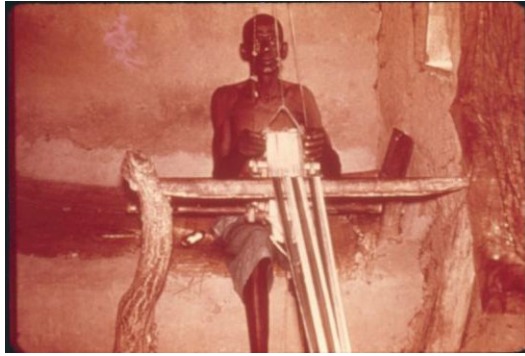


Figure 17. Yoruba narrow band loom. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 18. Narrow band textile detail. Image by J.B. Eicher.

In the eastern area, Igbo women in a small town called Akwete, weave on upright handlooms similar to a Navajo loom. By contrast, this loom has “**finite**” warping.



Figure 19. Woman’s vertical loom, Akwete, Nigeria. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 20. Akwete wrapper set. Image by J.B. Eicher.



Figure 21. Akwete detail. From J.B. Eicher Collection.



Figure 22. *Akwete detail of checkerboard and tortoise motifs. Image by J.B. Eicher.*



Figure 23. *Akwete cloth woven by 8-year old girl. Collection of Carolyn Ngozi Eicher.*

I also collected a few African print examples, like the textiles my daughters and I sometimes wore. Their history relates to the Dutch being in Indonesia and later producing printed textiles in the Netherlands. Although also known as Dutch wax prints, they were commercially manufactured at that time in Manchester, England; Helmond, The Netherlands; and Glarus, Switzerland. They were commonly identified as “African prints,” because some colors and patterns were exported exclusively to West African markets.



Figure 24. *African print cloth seller, Lagos 1971. Image by J.B. Eicher.*



Figure 25. *African print cloth detail. Image by J.B. Eicher.*

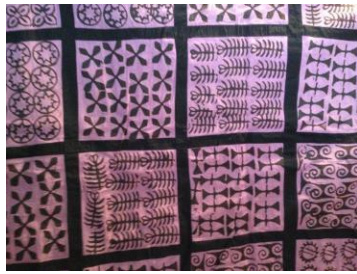


Figure 26. *Igbo girl wearing African print dress. Image by J.B. Eicher.*

On return to the U.S., my collection of African prints expanded in the early 1970s when Ruth Nielsen, a new Michigan State graduate student, formerly a missionary in Nigeria and the Gambia, researched wax prints. She visited factories in England, Holland, and

Switzerland, returning with a matching collection of about 100 one-yard samples for each of us.

I added more textiles to my collection after our U.S. return when my former husband traveled to other West African countries and brought me selected examples. I also made two of my own trips in the 1970s, purchasing cloth from Ghana and the Ivory Coast, as shown below—the stamped Ghanaian cloth called adinkera and a Korhogo painted cloth from the Ivory Coast.



*Figure 27. Ghanaian Adinkera textile detail.
Collection of J.B. Eicher.*



*Figure 28. Korhogo cloth detail. Collection of
J.B. Eicher.*

The last large cache in my collection relates to an unexpected gift just prior to leaving Nigeria in 1966 that prompted my return in 1980. The textile was imported, hand-woven Indian madras that had a dark, shadowy design in it, which the Kalabari people from the Niger Delta referred to as “our cloth,” but called “pelete bite,” meaning cut-thread cloth. The textile propelled my curiosity enough to conduct research. Kalabari women made the dark, shadowy design by cutting and pulling the light or bright threads, (similar to the idea of Norwegian Hardanger), but pelete bite does not have thread binding around the cut spaces.



*Figure 29. Pelete bite detail.
Image by J.B. Eicher*



*Figure 30. Top: Pelete bite
detail Bottom: matching uncut
cloth. Image by J.B. Eicher*



*Figure 31. Debrah John Bull
cutting cloth. Image by
J.B.Eicher.*

On return to Buguma, the Kalabari island in the Niger Delta, I realized the dream of any collector or researcher, sleuthing a textile fully embedded in a people’s cultural life, but relatively unknown to others. In this case, the Kalabari, living as traders on islands in the

mangrove swamps of the Niger Delta, four degrees above the equator, wore pelete bite for special occasions. This textile had become a familiar part of their lives from at least the early 1800s and they began to take it for granted. My in-depth research and collecting spanned eight trips over eleven years, which arose as I developed close ties with a colleague's host family and Kalabari women artists, providing me an opportunity to purchase examples. My interest in pelete bite often puzzled them, as they tried to imagine what was so unusual in something so common in their lives. My colleague, Dr. Tonye Erekosima, a Kalabari scholar educated in the U.S. and I wrote extensively on pelete bite, first in *African Arts* (Erekosima and Eicher, 1981), followed by an exhibit catalog (Eicher, Erekosima, and Thieme, 1982), and went on to publish further works.

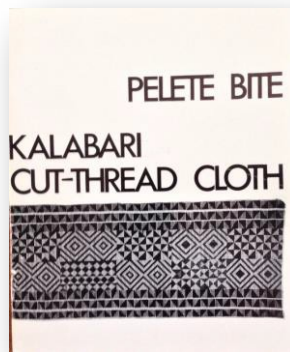


Figure 32. Catalogue cover. Image by J.B. Eicher.

I also discovered that the Kalabari people incorporated other Indian and European textiles into their cultural practices, related to their history as traders with Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese in the late 15th century. Researching pelete bite allowed me to add depth and dimension to my collection.

Next I turn to the relationship of my collection to other activities. I began to selectively loan textiles. My first loan was to the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in 1972—a matched set of two Yoruba indigo adire pieces, followed by an exhibit of several textile types at Michigan State in 1973, which traveled to the Hampton Institute in 1974 and The Tweed Museum at the University of Minnesota, Duluth in 1975. After I moved to the University of Minnesota in Saint Paul, an exhibit began at the Goldstein Gallery that traveled to several other national locations, primarily to college and university galleries. I also made loans to the High Museum, Atlanta and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. The following briefly lists numbers of exhibitions and loans from my collection: 1973-2009, eighteen exhibitions featured both handcrafted fabrics and African prints; 1972-2009, twenty-five sites exhibited selected pieces; and 1982-1984, eight venues participated in a traveling exhibition of Kalabari cut-thread cloth. I also often lectured at the time of an exhibition. A few exhibitions had catalogs, like The Tweed Museum, University of

Minnesota, Duluth and the two galleries at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (shown below). (Smith and Eicher, 1978).



Figure 33. Catalogue cover. Image by J.B. Eicher.

In 2001, Susan Torntore, curator of *Cloth is the Center of the World*, edited the most comprehensive catalog to date (shown below), featuring four primary fabric types: Akwete, Pelete Bite, Wax Print, and Adire with a chapter on each type, preceded by her introduction and my preface about collecting.

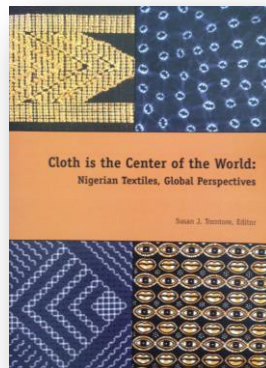


Figure 34. Catalogue cover. Image by J.B. Eicher.

Apart from exhibits, I occasionally spoke informally to groups, most recently in June 2014 as a scheduled TSA “Close-up” at my home, showing selected examples. Most recently, I have been gifting selected pieces to museums.

Now I turn the presentation over to Diana Eicher, an artist, specifically printmaker and paper cutter, who is exploring my collection. Diana is adjunct faculty at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design where she coordinates the Printmaking and Papermaking Studios. She has a BA in painting from UC Santa Cruz, an MFA in printmaking from U Hawaii, Manoa, has studied at the Academy of Art in Venice and at Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque, and had a one-person show in Shanghai.

Papercuts from my Mother's Nigerian Textile Collection by Diana Eicher

One of my earliest memories as a child of about age five is of my mother showing me a reproduction of *Le Violon d'Ingres* (Ingres's Violin) by Man Ray. This image is a photograph of Man Ray's model, Kiki, wearing a turban with her back shown and no arms. Man Ray painted the "F" holes of a string instrument on her back in the photograph and then re-photographed the image, so that the "F" holes appear on Kiki's back, making her look like an instrument.

This piece confused me since I could not understand, as a child, if it was a real or made up image. This photo was important to me, because it symbolized how an artist could create something beautiful that began with a simple idea. Over the years, I learned how complex Man Ray's idea was: to simplify and create a compelling visual image.

Because my parents lived in Nigeria for three years in the 1960's, travelled, worked, and conducted research as well in other parts of Africa, they purchased artwork and brought it home. Our house had African sculpture and paintings from artists like Uche Okeke, Bruce Onabrakpeya and the sculptor, Lamidi Fakeye, on the walls and on the shelves along with indigenous pieces, such as masks. There was also other artwork, including a print by Matisse. I spent many hours as a young child going to sleep and staring at artwork. I always considered the work "normal," but later found out when I got to college that it was quite unusual. I could not figure out—in one black and white drawing in particular—how the body parts fit together, and what part was what, so I learned instead to look at it in an abstract way. I also found out from my mother years later that my birth announcement was an original print done by the Nigerian artist, Uche Okeke, that she asked him to create. I consider it auspicious, since I turned out to be an artist and printmaker myself.

Over the past twenty-five years, I have worked as a printmaker, exploring various media: screenprinting, woodcut, intaglio, lithography, as well as painting and drawing. I was attracted to printmaking because of the processes and techniques necessary to reach the end result, as well as the collegial community of the printmaking studio. For subject matter, I have been fascinated with interpersonal relationships, as well as representing people or objects through portraits. I discovered papercutting after taking a class and fell in love with the medium. I now find that I use paper cutting as a way to generate ideas for my prints, and I also make prints from my finished paper cuts, since I have documented a

way to do this with screenprinting, published in an article about this technique (Eicher, Winter 2013).

Since I had grown up with African art and textiles, I did not think about the possibility of using these icons as subject matter for my work. However, my Mother suggested that I use her textiles for an exhibition that I was working on. We went through her collection and picked out some of her favorites, and I picked out some of mine. Here are four examples of papercuts from a series where I used the technique called “Adire,” which is a Yoruba method for using starch as a resist with indigo-dyed textiles as reference material for my papercuts. I will use the papercuts to create my screens and then screenprint the papercuts on fabric—making yardage and wall hangings. I have begun making clothing from fabric that I have printed and have already created a vest using screenprinted yardage from my papercuts.



Figure 36. Bird and Plants. Image by D. Eicher.



Figure 37. Combs. Image by D. Eicher.



Figure 38. Flower. Image by D. Eicher.



Figure 39. Pinwheel. Image by D. Eicher.

The end result is that through my work, I am documenting the world, our complex relationships with others and ourselves, as well as the world around us. Although I am beginning this new series based on my mother’s Nigerian textile collection, I find it fascinating subject matter, since the imagery is so familiar to me, but at the same time, makes me look at it from a new perspective. My goal is to simplify and create a set of compelling visual images of my own and I present the first four that I have completed inspired by her adire cloths.

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