



## The Documentation of Embroidery Types in South Western Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper is a documentation of embroidery types in South Western Nigeria. Relevant literatures to the study were reviewed and instruments used to collect data were Questionnaire and oral interview. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed to the sample population which included hand and machine embroidered designs. The views on hand embroidery was found to be subjective where motifs and designs were chosen based on fashion trends and not on the merit of the hand embroidery craft. The designs and motifs have distinct names and were generally inspired from utilitarian objects based on human, animals, reptiles and plants from life. The invention of machine tailored embroidery has made it possible to produce a wide range of designs; however, it has affected the art of hand crafted embroidery because it is laborious, painstaking and time consuming. This has also led to a decline in its patronage as consumers tend to favour machine embroidered design.

### Introduction

The term Embroidery was first applied to decoratively stitched borders on medieval church vestments, and its practice dated back to 200-500AD. The embellishment of the edges of church vestments became prominent in Egypt in 500 A.D and in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, historical and archaeological evidences suggest that, the embellishment of textile materials flourished in China in 618 and 906 AD. According to Wheeler (1921), the art of embroidery spread from China via India and Egypt to Greece, Rome and the Eastern Mediterranean through the Middle East. The art later spread to other parts of the world. Heathcote (1979) attributed the emergence of the craft in Nigeria to the trading activities with the Arabs during the reign of Queen Amina, the legendary warrior and Queen of Zauzau (Zaria). The people of the city converted to Islam between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Berman (2000) opined that embroidery was used as a medium to propagate Christian religion in Europe in its early days. A large proportion of the congregation was illiterate, and the best medium to teach bible contents was to illustrate some events in embroideries and other art media for easy comprehension. The Islamic religion also made use of the art extensively in decorating many items such as the walls of their houses, mosques, caps, bed spreads among others. Gostelow (1979) noted that, the art of embroidery has been sustained because of its contributions and freedom to create either linear patterns or flowing pictorial composition.

### Historical Development of Embroidery Designs in Nigeria

The art of embroidery is been dominantly practiced in Nigeria by the Hausa in the North and the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria. Ogunduyile (1985) averred that, dignity and power have been attached to various embroidery works worn by the Emirs and the Obas. The practice of embroidery provides many Nigerians with means of livelihood in various aspects that has to do with preparation of yarn dyeing, drawing of designs; embroidery and merchandising of the products, all of which have been sustaining the crafts.

The type of embroidery designs used in the northern part of Nigeria differs from the ones used in South Western Nigeria. A peculiar hand embroidered design may not be acceptable in South-Western Nigeria if it has some elements of Northern culture. A typical Yoruba man may not wear cloth embroidered with Hausa motifs because of social discrimination. Hand embroidery used to be on males clothing's especially on trouser (*sokoto*) blouse (*buba*) and a big gown (*agbada*). As a result of gender inequality, women were not given the same level of status to men in terms of dressing thereby, there were no embroidery on females clothing. Despite the cultural and social difficulties, which are associated with lack of work of embroidery, people in South-Western Nigeria, continue to embrace the tradition of embroidery and wearing traditional attires in an attempt to maintain their traditional identity.

Lots of opinions on embroidery have been established by both native and foreign scholars reflecting its definitions, origin and practice. Adediran (1997) noted that, embroidery in Yoruba land is a decorative art which is employed to improve structural aesthetic qualities and the general finishing of clothes. Makinde (1992) affirmed that, embroidery was initially meant for preserving the neck of garments in Yoruba land; unlike the Northern part of Nigeria where the practice of embroidery was influenced by the predominant Islamic religion which forbids representational arts such as was found in sculpture. This has given rise to excellent embroidery works and

decorations that are linear and symmetrically oriented, which has been applied to the Hausa caps, skull caps, leather goods and calabashes

Although the art of embroidery is not indigenous to the country, however embroidery has formed an integral part of Nigerian clothing culture. Among the Nupe and Hausa, research has proven that embroidery has been a long tradition, and it is used on many types of garments, from Hausa farmers' cloths to riding robes and ceremonial apparels. The embroidery done on men's clothes is traditionally made with dark stitches with asymmetrical and non-representational designs. Gorgeous voluminous robes, intricately embroidered are a symbol of prestige and rank for men in Nupe and Hausa communities.

Designs of the Nupe embroiders are well known and priced by Nupe and Hausa people. Three types of stitches are primarily used. They are the chain stitch, the buttonhole stitch and couching. The stitching is done with either imported or indigenous silk thread on either imported or hand-woven cloth. Often, indigenous silk thread in its own creamy color called *Tsamia* in Hausa, is used for the most well-known and prized by Nupe and Hausa people. Three types of stitches are primarily used. Prestigious and elegant *Rigona* (robes) on hand-woven narrow band cloth which is most times, creamy in color (Renne, 2004).

There are still other types of embroidery designs in the country. These embroidered cloths are used as bedspread, tablecloth or wall hangings. Some artists say that, the colorful and cheerful cloths are the examples of "folk art", but the Hausa call it "Hausa bridal sheets". What is note-worthy in these cloths is that the embroidery designs and traditional house decorations have similar motifs. Embroidery was not also indigenous to the Igbo, but surface designs for body paintings were easily converted to embroidery designs for table linens in the Igbo town of Arochukwu (Fosu, 1982). Yoruba men have also used some embroidery on clothing, round the neck of their traditional *agbada*.

The study reported here was conducted in 2013 and its objectives were in two folds which are to identify;

1. the different types of embroidery practices in selected cities in South- Western States of Nigeria;
2. the current production techniques of hand and machine embroideries in selected cities in South- Western Nigeria.

### Embroidery in South Western Nigeria

The research population for this study is South western Nigeria which is noted for the design and use embroidered garments. The following cities in south western Nigeria are specifically renowned for the production and usage of embroidered garments:

- (i) Oyo in Oyo state
  - (ii) Akure in Akure state
  - (iii) Abeokuta in Ogun state
1. The traditional and contemporary machine embroidery Designers in Oyo, Abeokuta and Akure cities of Oyo, Ogun and Ondo states respectively.
  2. The consumers of the embroidery designs in these selected cities.

Table 1: Sampling Frame for the study

Location	Hand embroiderers	Machine embroiderers
Oyo	20	80
Abeokuta	10	60
Akure	30	50
Total	60	190

Source: Record books of the Association of Embroiderers in the selected cities; 2014

### Types of embroidery in South Western Nigeria

There are basically two types of embroidery practiced in Southwestern Nigeria, they are:

1. Hand embroidery
2. Machine embroidery

### Hand Embroidery in South Western Nigeria

Hand embroidery involves stitching embroidery designs by hand into the fabric using hand needles. This process is time consuming and painstaking, but gives unique and interesting result. Embroidery on gowns may have been developed as a method of strengthening seams and other areas of weakness. However, elaborate stitched work has become a sign of prestige and wealth. Most robes follow variants of two classic designs: These are known as eight knives and two knives. These designs refer to the points that project below the neckline. Heathcote (1979) observed that, designs were inspired by Quranic motifs as well as folk designs. Embroidery designs spread over a wide area in West Africa, and it is clear that motifs and patterns were developed in the interaction between Yoruba, Nupe and Hausa embroiderers. One such design is the *Yar Ilori* (daughter of Ilorin) design, a reference to Ilorin, the Yoruba town where the design originated.



**Fig 1a, Hand Embroidery from Ilorin**  
**Source: Researcher's pilot study (2013)**



**Fig 1b, Hand Embroidered Cap**  
**Source: wood (2010)**

Most designs have different symbolic interpretations irrespective of similarities of decorations. It was noted, however, that some motifs on embroidered garments have no symbolic connotations attached to them, thus, such motifs were merely for aesthetic purposes. Most of the designs used by the Yoruba are similar to those of the Hausa and have very similar meanings in their names. For instance, *Aska biu* (two knives) in Hausa is called *Abe meji* (two knives) in Yoruba. Ogunduyile (2001) observed that, simple designs on the necks and pockets of Yoruba *agbada* were in resemblance with that of the *kwodo da linzami* found on Hausa *babanriga* (robe), but such designs were adapted to suit various embroiderers and consumers in Yoruba land. The *Aska tara* (nine knives) design on Hausa garments, are also referred to as *abe mesan* (nine knives) on Yoruba *Agbada*, while such design motifs as *tunbi giwa* (elephants stomach), *gidan zuma* (house of honey), *kai gidan biyar* (head of five houses), *tambari* (drum), and *kwado* (frog) have common meaning to Hausa embroiderers but have different meaning to the Yoruba embroiderers (Ogunduyile, op-cit).

Designs such as *Ibon*, *Pako* and *Osupa* in Yoruba embroidered *agbada* have same meanings among the Yoruba in South Western Nigeria. From the foregoing, it is clear that embroiderers and consumers provide names for embroidered designs in both cultures. Although it was claimed by embroiderers in Oyo that the Yoruba have been involved in the art of embroidery earlier, but it was also observed that the high level of Western education among the Yoruba has brought about significant reduction in the number of hand embroiderers in the region.

### **Machine embroidery in South Western Nigeria**

The invention of machines for sewing and stitching with various designs and patterns seems to be gradually replacing the hand embroidery methods. Pilot study by the researcher also showed that two groups of embroiderers exist in South- Western Nigeria, one group specializes in hand embroidery, while the other deals with machine made type. The practice of hand embroidery is taking a new dimension as the machine embroiderers now recreate handmade designs into machine embroidery designs. It is observed that the machine embroiderers are now being reduced to mere copy process, while the techniques used are based on restricted stitches which allow for a minimum expression of creative ideas. The tools of the embroiderers which are needles, threads and thimbles are probably imported, however, there are also locally made ones.

Machine embroidery was introduced to South-Western Nigeria when some individuals were converted to Islam in the 1960s, (Oyelola 1981). During the spread of Islam in the Northern part of Nigeria, people had to choose either to become Muslim or risk being made slaves. The badge of Muslim convert was then the embroidery garments worn by the Islamic faithful in the Northern part of Nigeria. The use of embroidered garments thereafter diffused Southwards with the spread of Islam to the Nupe and Yoruba land of South- Western Nigeria. This embroidery practice might have been introduced first to the Northern part of Nigeria through trans-sahara trade. Heathcote (1976), Oyelola (1981) and Picton et al (1989) considered embroidery in the Northern part of Yoruba land as an art associated with the Islamic people of West Africa. This opinion was shared by Thompson (1976) and Adediran (1997) who observed that embroidery was introduced to Yoruba land as a result of the trade connection between the Hausa and the Yoruba traders. It is the view of scholars that embroidery may have been spread to other parts of the country from Northern part of Nigeria, which visibly formed part of their dressing. The Hausa were said to have accepted the religion (Islam) and subsequently adopted the dressing modes associated with it. In recent years, embroiderers have started some experiments with traditional motifs using machine embroidery to make

design on the *iro*, (wrapper), *buba* (blouse) and *gele* (headgear). That means, headgear and many other women's garments are being embroidered. Makinde (1997) stated that the origin of embroidery in Yoruba land is obscure, but its practices and spread are commonly linked with trans-sahara trade.

Embroidery is also used throughout South Western Nigeria as a means of embellishing ceremonial costumes and everyday clothing. With the coming of machine embroidery into fashion, the effects have been commended as a modern development in the world of technology. A mass range of designs are now available due to this development. Akinwumi (1998) noted that Nigeria's experience has shown that machine embroidery was done for mass consumption as well as for the exclusive use of many political leaders and some affluent fashion conscious men and women. Fashion embroiderers who create the designs seem to lack the knowledge and skills to develop new concepts. A concept not much worked upon is personalized or customized to a special client.



*Fig 2, An embroidery design on a coil embroidery machine*

Source: Researcher's pilot study (2013).



*Fig 3, An embroiderer working on 20U embroidery machine*

Source: Researcher's pilot study (2013).

### Categories of Embroiderers (Types of Embroidery Practices)

The study reveals that there are two types of embroiderers based on the method used. The machine embroiderers constituted the majority (78.72%) while those using hands termed hand embroiderers formed the minority (21.28%) of the respondents in table 7. The result indicates that the machine embroiderers are more in number than the hand embroiderers.

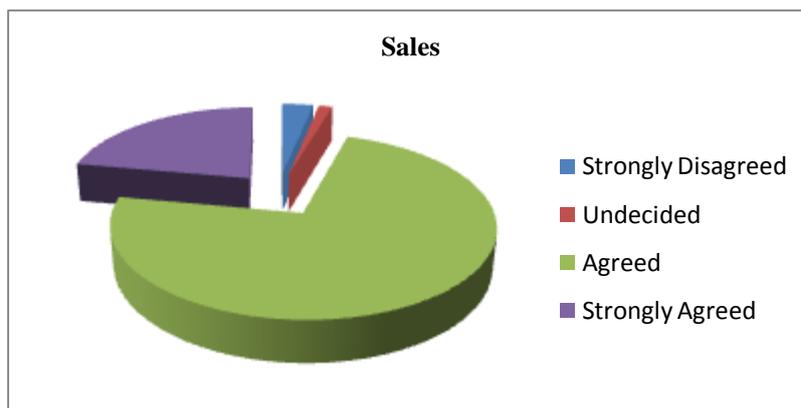
Table 2: Types of embroidery practices by respondents

Types of embroidery	Abeokuta		Oyo		Akure		Total	Cum. %
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
Hand	7	10.77	15	15.79	28	37.33	50	21.28
Machine	58	89.23	80	84.21	47	62.67	185	78.72
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Field Work, 2014

### The symbolic meanings of embroidery motifs

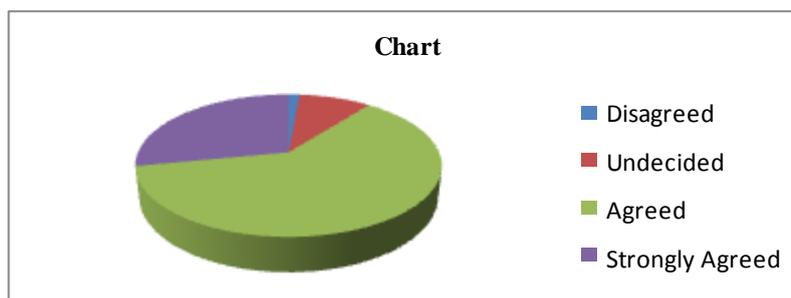
Motif is often the primary consideration in selection of embroidery design 3.2% of respondents strongly disagreed with this statement, 1.4% remained neutral undecided, while the majority (73.3%) agreed with it, the remaining 22.1% of the respondents strongly agreed that motif is often the primary consideration in the selection of embroidery design. The mean response indicated that on the average, the consumers considered motif as the primary consideration in selection of embroidery design.



Source: Field work, 2014 fig 4

#### Handmade embroidery is more expensive than the machine embroidery

1.4% of the respondents disagreed with this statement, 9.1% were undecided, while the majority (61.4%) agreed with it, the remaining 28.1% strongly agreed with it. The mean response of 4.16 indicates that the respondents on the average agreed with the statement that handmade embroidery is more expensive than machine embroidery.



Source: Field work, 2014 fig 5

Regarding the types of embroidery practices in the study areas, the machine embroiderers carry the largest share (78.72%) while those that were into hand-made embroidery were just 21.28% of the sampled embroiderers. This result largely confirmed the findings of other researchers that majority of embroiderers are into machine embroidery. In his opinion, Fosu (1986) attempted to suggest reasons for low recognition given to hand embroidery in Nigeria; the author observed that hand embroidery is laborious as it takes three specialist in hand embroidery to complete a full embroidery decoration on a royal garment between two and three weeks. This slow production process according to him might be due to the laborious and tedious method being used. In addition, there had been wide spread assumption that the handmade embroidered garment lacks luster and aesthetic qualities inherent in machine embroidery.

According to Ogunduyile (1985), the rich traditional motifs with symbolic meanings which dominated hand embroiderers have been adapted by the machine embroiderers and geometric shapes which could be attributed to technology have been incorporated to create new styles.

In a pilot study conducted by 2013, it was however observed that the manipulation of hand embroidery is unique and creative activities with it cannot be compared with machine made embroidery. The craft of hand embroidery is mostly practiced by the older generation today (Ogunduyile 1985).

The current production techniques of hand and machine embroideries in selected cities in South- Western Nigeria

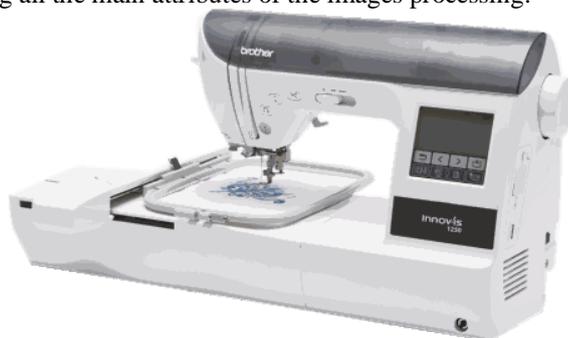
#### Computer Aided Embroidery Design in Nigeria

Although traditional hand embroidery has existed for thousands of years, machine embroidery is aged at about 200 years. Andreadis, lampridou and Sherar (2015) mentioned that, Josue Heilmann created the first hand embroidery machine in the year 1828. Four hand embroiderers were able to operate the machine simultaneously; this signaled the start of revolution in embroidery. Today embroidery machines can be single-head or multi-head, which can fit up to 56 heads. Each head can fit one thread color, which means that the number of heads determine the amount of colors that could be included into embroidery without interrupting the machine's function. Along with the embroidery machines, design software's were developed to specifically serve various embroidery requirements. This breakthrough boosted the embroidery production and a new revolution began in the embroidery industry which led to the use of computer aided design CAD.

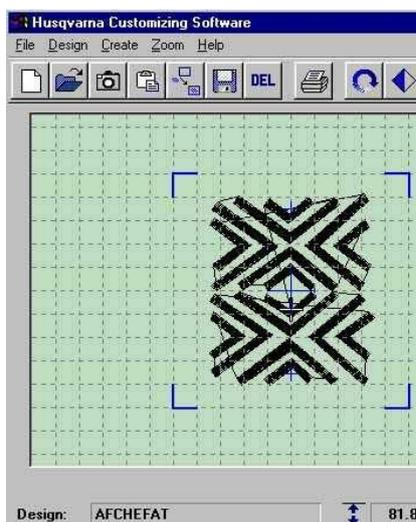
Computer Aided Design can be defined as the use of computer technology for design of objects, real or virtual to achieve precise drawing. Anderadis et al (2015) observed that, the resulting drawings contain symbolic information such as the materials, the processes, the dimensions and the tolerance, according to application specific conventions. Computer Aided Design is also utilized by the embroidery industry in order to improve the embroidery designs.

The embroidery design software that has been developed fulfills home, commercial and the industrial embroidery needs. Bidwell (2009) opined that, there exist various commercial and free software products to choose from, this enables the designing and editing of embroidery patterns and images. The purpose of the design embroidery software is to translate the drawing made in the computer into stitches, and executed by the embroidery machine.

The software products usually have advanced user interfaces with sophisticated functions. The users can create a drawing, set up the number of stitches, define the type of stitches, that is, satin, run fill stitches; it will select colors and edit the design. There are also more complicated functions, which include the import images to the software and their digitalization, offering all the main attributes of the images processing.



**Fig 6, CAD enabled Automated embroidery machine**  
Source: [Http://www.bing.com/images/search](http://www.bing.com/images/search) (2013)



**Fig 7, CAD embroidery software interface**  
Source: [Http://www.bing.com/images/search](http://www.bing.com/images/search) (2013)

Furthermore, some of the embroidery design software solutions offer letting functions. These functions aim to convert automatically a true type font into stitches. In this way, a font character can be embroidered. Wing (2010) believed that the emergence of computerized embroidery in fashion industry was created for factory workers or embroiderers using hand in fashion industry. Until there was invention of embroidery sewing machine, the factory workers were using needle and thread manually.

Computerized embroidery means the automation of embroidery machine operation, which is mostly controlled by the accurate computer instruction to create high quality and standardized embroidery design. Embroidery machine manufacturing industry which has solved the labor intensive problem as most of the processes is done by computer. Moreover, as the entire process is planned precisely, production fault and related cost is reduced. As a result of these advantages, computerized embroidery is commonly used in the fashion industry.

Nowadays, familiarization of fashion designers towards computerized embroidery is well used by some international fashion brands to add value to designs. It is believed that the local designers are not familiar with the techniques, Nigeria fashion designers especially the older generation seldom use computerized embroidery activity in their designs. They mostly use CAD while meeting the requirements of employers or customers.

Respondents' opinions were sought regarding the current production techniques of embroidery. 'Hand embroidery is better than machine embroidery' with relative importance of (RII 0.546) indicates that embroiderers in the study areas slightly agreed that hand embroidery is better than machine embroidery. However, the researcher is of the opinion that hand embroidery is better than machine made embroidery because it retains our traditional inheritance of the motifs and culture of the people

Meanwhile, the current preferences of both consumers and producers were in favour of traditional embroidery with a (RII 0.711). This result suggests both producers and consumers have preference tilt more towards traditional embroidery.

**Table 3:** Embroiderers' perceptions on the current production techniques

S/N	Perception statements	Mean	RII	Rank
1	Hand embroidery is better than machine embroidery	2.25	0.546	2
2	The current preferences of both consumers and producers favour traditional embroidery	2.93	0.711	1

**Source:** Field Work, 2014

### Assessment of the effects of modern technology on the production of embroidery clothing

Results indicate that traditional handmade embroiderers steadily improve upon their designs so as to retain customer patronage (RII 0.818), this proves that there is a working relationship between the embroiderers, customers as well as fashion designers (RII 0.768). This is a good development as a better working relationship among stakeholders will improve the quality and process of making embroidery. However, inadequate access to funds appears to be the major constraint of embroidery practice in southwestern Nigeria (RII 0.764). Meanwhile, consumers believed that the use of computer aided design (CAD) on the machine embroidery affects the demand and supply of handmade embroidery with a relative importance of (RII 0.740) and this is closely aligned with the perceptions of consumers that 'the reproduction techniques of traditional embroidery are more tedious than the machine embroidery' (RII 0.736).

The results show that consumers show no difference in their perception of whether traditional embroidery enjoys more patronage than machine embroidery (RII 0.542) and whether the patronage level of embroidery materials is low (RII 0.532).

The examination of current production techniques based on the embroiderers' perceptions revealed that machine embroidery is better than hand embroidery. As noted earlier on, this finding can be justified in view of the fact that the process of hand embroidery is time consuming and painstaking though it gives unique and interesting results. The mean responses of the sampled respondents indicated that they were indifferent in their perceptions regarding the current preferences of both consumers and producers to either hand-made embroidery or machine-made embroidery. This result could be explained going by the fact that certain set of consumers of embroidery might prefer machine embroidery because it is predominant and cheaper. According to Makinde (1997), machine made embroidery has become predominant, convenient and cheaper. On the other hand, other sets of consumers may have preference for handmade embroidery on the basis of its uniqueness. In addition, originality and creativity is better expressed with hand embroidery.

### Results

The assessment examination of the effects of modern technology on the production of embroidery clothing revealed that in terms of durability, the embroiderers' were of the opinion that both hand and machine embroidery are durable since they disagree in their response to the statement that, handmade embroidery is more durable than machine embroidery. On quality of embroidered clothing, it would be observed that, the embroiderers were of the opinion that, quality is steadily improved to retain customers' patronage of the traditional handmade embroidery. It could therefore, be said that quality remained the motivation for the consumers of hand embroidery. Examination of the relevance in variety of contemporary embroidery to fashion trends and patronage revealed that the embroiderers had positive perception towards this issue. The relevance of contemporary embroidery could be attributed to technology that has been incorporated into embroidery to create new styles that are in line with contemporary fashion trends. As expected, the sampled embroiderers in the study areas, were of the opinion that the production techniques of traditional embroidery are more tedious than machine embroidery. For example, it can take up to three people to complete embroidery works over a long period of time on a single garment. This finding can be justified on the ground that each of the two embroidery types has its own characteristics attributes.

### Conclusion

From the investigation carried out from the study on hand and machine embroidery in selected cities of South Western Nigeria, most of the artist who produced the design of embroidery are more of females than men especially using the machine to make embroidery design. Most of them are married and are not educated. Findings also show

that the art was introduced through the trade between the Northern Nupe and the missionaries in Abeokuta for the propagation of the gospel. The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria used diverse motifs and designs or traditional arts objects like carving, leather and cloth as means of expressions. Some of the motifs and designs used were *Ibon*, *Pako*, *Osupa*, *Abe meji*, *Abe mesan* which is believed to have inspired their creative intuition. It was also discovered that both hand-made and machine embroidery fabrics serve many functions to people wherever they are practiced, this includes the social cultural, political, aesthetics and economic functions.

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