

BOOK REVIEW

BATA MI A DÙN KÒKÒKÁ: A BIOGRAPHY OF NIKE

by

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Everything about Nike is extraordinary – her energy, her tenacity, her generosity of spirit, her prolific artist output, her entrepreneurial flair successful, practicalisation of her desire to empower girls and women through the design and production of textiles, the building and furnishing of the largest privately owned art gallery in West Africa and of course, her exuberant *gele* which encircles her head like a far-radiating halo.

Kofo Adeleke has carried out an admirable work of research which traces the development of the Nike phenomenon from her origins in the obscurity of Ogidi Ijumu, Kogi State to worldwide recognition as an artist and philanthropist. Though closely associated with Osogbo through her marriage to Twins 77, an equally flamboyant figure, Nike was not an indigene, as the members of the Osogbo School were not slow to remind her when she achieved fame and fortune which surpassed their own. Possessing a remarkably generous spirit, Nike did not bear grudges; she assisted individuals of the Osogbo School financially when they fell on hard times.

Nike possesses a multitude of artistic skills: she can weave, create *adire* designs and decorative batik, embroider, paint in a variety of media including the tiny seed beads used on Yoruba regalia, sing and dance. And she knows how to market all of these skills! Part of her success stems from her charismatic personality: she is a "people-person", relating effortlessly with everyone who comes her way. She can instinctively put people at their ease and subconsciously suggest they cannot possibly pass up the opportunity of acquiring a share in her warmth and energy through buying one of her creations.

*Adire*, the indigo-dyed resist-patterned Yoruba fabric used to be worn by women as a wraparound skirt (*iro*) for everyday wear. Women had the monopoly of *adire* production until men devised a more rapid method of patterning with the use of stencils. Then came machine printed fabric (*ankara*) which displaced *adire* and obliged its skilled practitioners to look for other means of livelihood. Nike's interest in and subsequent devotion to *adire* were inspired by

2 factors, apart from its intrinsic beauty. Firstly, *Adire* is an indigenous art form which reflects the Yoruba environment. Secondly, but no less importantly, it is an art practised by women who use the proceeds to feed and educate their children. Nike therefore made the revival and promotion of *adire* her mission (or one of them!). She herself is a living advertisement for *adire*, always wearing the fabric in a variety of original styles on public occasions and when in her gallery. *Adire* designs are also printed on her gallery buses and painted on her gallery gates. Nike also developed new uses of *adire* using the fabric for the creation of quilts, an art she observed in America and subsequently learnt herself. Never desirous of hoarding useful knowledge, Nike organized quilting workshops which produced a number of skilled exponents whose creations are popular with the expatriate community in Nigeria, particularly Americans.

Individual expatriates residents in or visiting Nigeria have played key roles in publicizing Nike's work and giving her opportunities to display her skills and her creations in Europe and America: the Wolford's, Juliet Highet, Victoria Scott, Paulette Von Trier, Ulli Beier, the foremost publicist of Yoruba art and culture, with close connections to the Goethe Institut, was of enormous benefit to the career of not only Nike, but many other Nigerian artists, particularly members of the Osogbo School.

Some of Nike's designs, based on traditional *adire* *eleko* have found expression on rugs hand-knotted by Buddhist monks in Nepal. This unlikely occurrence was brokered by Lande Anjous Zygmunt, born in Lagos but living in Sweden, who met a Persian rug specialist at a dinner party in Sweden. An exhibition of rug art was held in 2012 at the Quintessence Gallery in Lagos owned by the late Aino Oni-Okpaku (1939-2019) a Swedish textile artist resident in Lagos who made outstanding contributions to philanthropy and the promotion of the Nigeria arts.

Nike's latest artistic foray, powered by *adire*, is a collaboration with the artist Tola Wewe, a graduate of the University of Ife and a member of the Ona School who seek to integrate the motifs from the Yoruba arts into their work. Wewe creates the overall composition in oils or acrylic, while Nike layers intricate patterns in pen and ink over the colours. This awakens echoes of Nike's early days in Osogbo when she and her co-wives added surface decoration to the paintings of their husband, Twins 77.

Kofo puts Nike into global perspective by comparing her life with Twins 77 with that of other women artists who were married to artists e.g. Frida Kahlo, Françoise Gilot and Barbara Hepworth. However, I think that Nike's life was much more complicated. In addition to developing her own artistic talents and actually helping Twins 77 complete his works, Nike had to perform arduous domestic tasks, entertain his visitors and cope with squabbles among her numerous co-wives with whom she was in competition for their husband's affection. However she never abandoned the traditional role of a Yoruba woman as her husband's help-

mate. Twins remembered that Nike was always there when she was needed (Adeleke p52). It is not in doubt that Nike benefitted from Twins' international contacts but it was her own energy, talent and charisma that carved her a niche in the world of African art. In contrast to the poor, tortured Frida Kahlo unable to bear a child and victim of her own acute physical suffering which she poured into her pictures, Nike was blessed with offspring and abundant energy with which she joyously interpreted the world around her. Frida, a self-taught artist, was married, divorced from and re-married to the accomplished muralist, Diego Rivera, to whom she referred as an anchor and "the universe" (Lehmann p.107). This was a passionate, all-consuming relationship for Frida. Though willing to act in a wifely role, Nike was never emotionally dominated by Twins. She left him for the Welsh engineer, Dai Davies, who gave her a peaceful environment where she could devote herself to her art. Twins wanted to get Nike back, but she was not interested. (Adeleke p.93).

Kofo's thoroughly researched text is enriched by colour illustrations of people and places connected with Nike and, of course pictures of Nike herself and her works. These reproductions are of good quality, essential in any serious work on art. It is particularly important in this book since many of the works illustrated have intricate surface detail. The shadow logo at the beginning of each chapter is the ancient female symbol, also associated later with prosperity. What could be more fitting for a book on Nike, whose shoes do not shuffle along the ground, but make a satisfying "kòkòká" announcing to the world that she has arrived.

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