

# Repurposing in Textiles Domain: a Case Study of Two Female Designers in South-South Nigeria

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## Abstract

Repurposing, recycling, up-cycling, reuse and the like, are currently noticed in academic research in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria. This tendency has been triggered by the global trend of conservation of natural resources and efforts at waste management. In Nigeria however, the terms recycling and repurposing have been used interchangeably, especially by scholars, without proper consideration of the variation in meaning and practice. This paper has the objectives of presenting and analyzing the repurposing efforts of two female textile design graduates in south-south Nigeria. It also seeks to put into proper perspective, the many similar terms used alongside repurposing by researchers in Nigeria. The paper uses the critical analysis research design and approach. It benefits from library and internet research, and the unpublished project reports of the two designers of interest. It has been discovered that repurposing in the textiles field has gone beyond the singular reuse of textile materials. Other non-textile wastes are being repurposed alongside, to create 'new' and useful items. This paper encourages the trend, especially in academic researches and also challenges professional artist-designers to explore more in the reuse of diverse waste to create wealth. This attitude will, by extension provide jobs for the numerous unemployed graduates and other youths in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Repurposing, Textile, Case-study, Female, Designers, South-south, Nigeria

## 1.Introduction

The global call for the conservation of the fast-depleting natural resources has triggered the need for repurposing different forms of waste. This trend is helping in the struggle at waste management which is a very challenging issue in many countries in the world, including Nigeria. It is pertinent to look at the meanings of the words repurposing and recycling since they have often been used without regards to their slightly different procedures. Repurposing in its simplest term, is to change (something) so that it can be used for a different purpose, while recycling is a process to convert waste materials into reusable material to prevent waste of potential useful materials and reduce consumption of fresh raw materials ( Wikipedia,2016 ; Merriam-Webster, 2016). The two terms may seem to have exact meanings but they are distinct in the sense that while repurposing simply dusts up a waste material and puts it to a different use, recycling on the other hand involves converting the waste by melting, shredding, disentangling or simply breaking down the original form before reusing. Repurposing can simply be done at home by dusting or washing, whereas recycling may need trucking off to a centre where the melting or breaking down is technically done (Flexibilityconcepts, 2011). The term reuse seem to sound more friendly but it seems to cut across repurposing and recycling. It means 'to use something again especially in a different way or after reclaiming or reprocessing (Merriam-webster,2016). This paper however needs the distinction between direct reuse and reprocessing to help put things in proper perspectives when the two cases under study come up. Having noticed the effort of the two female textile designers and their uncertainty in the use of recycling in place of repurposing and vice versa, this paper has the specific problem of identifying exactly what they have successfully achieved and presenting them in textual and pictorial forms.

The objectives of this paper are to analyze and present the repurposing efforts of two female textile designers in south-south Nigeria ( Enomfon Edet and Ruth Urom), and to put into proper perspectives, the many similar terms used alongside repurposing in researches in Nigeria. it is the hope of this writer that the contents of this paper will be useful to scholars in the arts and design fields, especially in the understanding of the different possibilities in reuse of waste. It is also expected that the presented efforts of the two textile designers will be and inspiration to artist and designers and others, while adding to the existing repurposed artistic and utilitarian art pieces globally.

## **2. Overview of Repurposing Concept**

The term 'repurposed' is claimed to have really caught on in 1984 (Greenwald, 2007). It became relatively popular after then. The use of the word and process is attributed to the ICT-computer industry. Greenwald (2004) writes 'By 1992 the multi-media industry (led by Microsoft, IBM and Apple) spent an estimated 200 million dollars a year on research and development, hoping to convert PC users and 'REPURPOSE' existing materials to CDROM'. The above fact is the documented evidence of the origin of repurposing but informally it has been done in many cultures long before 1984. In the textile domain, old clothes were reused as rags and pads for carrying water pots and other loads in Africa. In the related recycling concept, cut down palm leaves were processed into thatch and raffia fabrics for many different end uses. It is logical to deduce that soon after the advent of manufacturing, the used product soon found uses other than what they were originally meant.

### **2.1 Repurposing in Textile**

Repurposing and reuse of textile seem to be almost as old as the earliest manufacture of textiles. Myzerowaste (2014) has suggested that if you are handy with a needle and thread turn your old clothing into something new and lovable, or follow Grandma's footsteps and turn old clothes into cleaning rags. In some civilized countries there are textile banks, established to collect, save and re-channel old textile wares. At the banks old clothes with marks or holes are stored according to qualities of fabrics then decent items can be unpicked and re-spun into yarn or re-woven into fabrics while the worst and badly worn out can be used as stuffing for soft furniture.

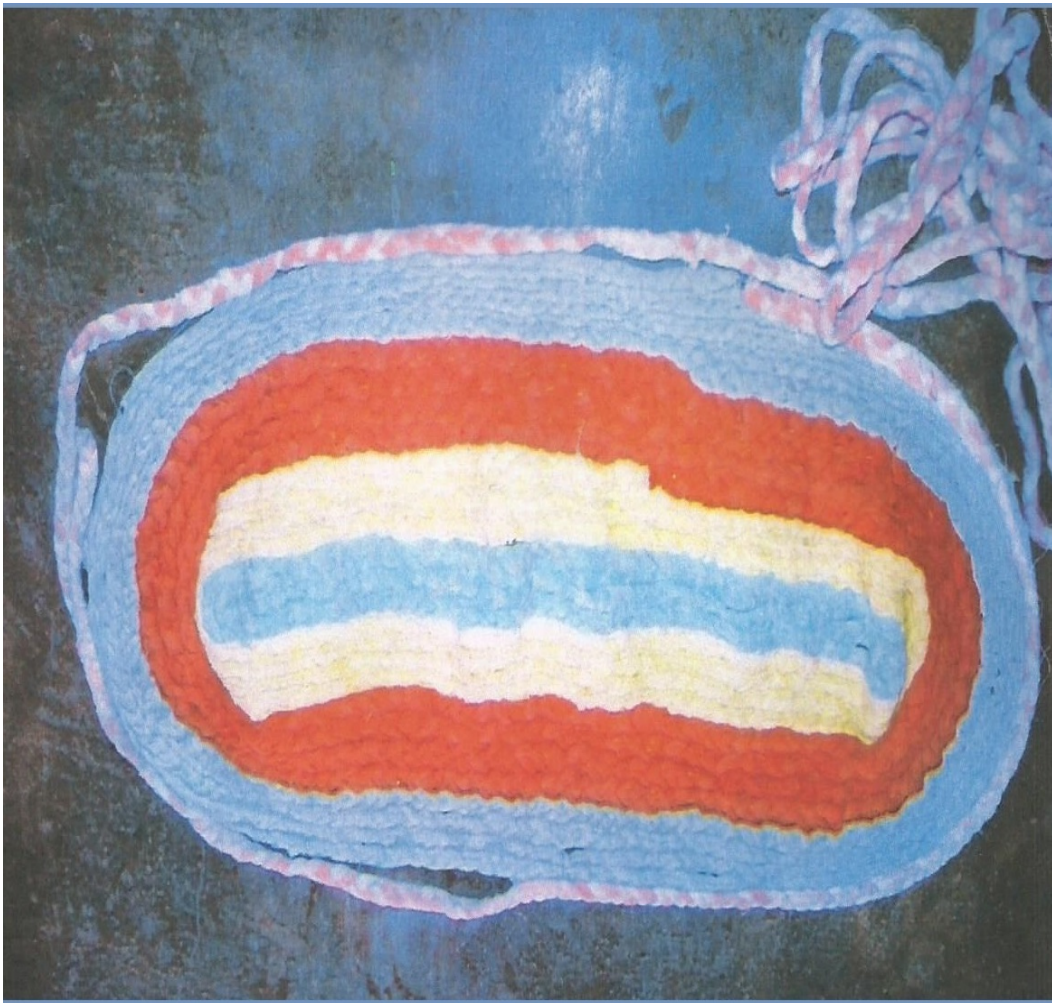
It is possible to 'fall in love again' with your old clothes by dyeing your old white shirt into a favourite colour, adding some sequins or feathers and maybe, attaching pieces of ornamental fabrics. One can attach a smiley patch on the knee of an old trouser and this can rekindle one's passion if the wardrobe got boring. What if you use pieces of your once favourite pair of jeans, to create funky slip-on shoes or sandals. The possibilities of repurposing of textiles are as many as the textile items themselves.

## **3. Interrogating the Designs of the two Female Designers**

The main purpose of the present study is to present and critically analyze the cases of repurposing from the project reports of two of the writer's supervisees. Ruth Rajuno Urom is a Bachelor of Arts' graduate of the Department of Visual Arts and Technology, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria, who finished in the 2013/2014 school session, and Enomfon Edet who graduated from the Department of Fine and Industrial Arts, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, in the 2014/2015 session. Their repurposing research in the textile domain yielded designs which are worth being studied and exposed to the global research community, with due acknowledgement.

### **3.1 Appraisal of works of Ruth Urom**

Ruth Urom titled her project 'Recycling Used Textile Materials for the Creation of Various Art Works'. Basically this designer had the interest of producing under school- studio conditions, a table cover, a duvet, a padded stool, a cushion, a foot-mat, and an art piece titled African Activities. Out of the six works as delimited by the designer, only one is actually a recycled work, 'Footmat' is a simple design where strips torn from different colours of t-shirts are twisted into thick yarns which are braided into a circular shape. The twisted strips of fabric are made into a continuous yarn which is held together with a fabric glue and stitched with thread and needle where required.



**Plate 1.** Ruth Urom, 'Footmat' , Old T-shirts, 70cm x 35cm, 2013. Courtesy: Ruth Urom,2014.

The other five pieces are actually from repurposed textile materials. The student-researcher as at then didn't realize the distinction between the two terms. One of the most interesting pieces is 'Table cover'. Here the designer cut pieces of dyed and printed cloths into circular shapes of about 3cm to 6 cm diameter after which she pleated and sewed them into rosy flowery circles. The interesting aspect of the work is the linking of the bits into a lace fabric. According to the designer Urom (2014) 'the major determining factor is how these rounds are fused together and the colour combination also helps'. The dexterity of the designer in the placement of the round fabric flowers and balancing of the colours in appropriate proximity makes for the aesthetic appeal of the finished 'lace' fabric. A sample is shown on plate 2.



**Plate 2.** Ruth Urom, 'Table Cover', Old Fabrics, 120cm x 90cm, 2013. Courtesy: Ruth Urom, 2014.

Another interesting repurposed design is the 'Cushion'. This is a large throw pillow, the cover of which is made by sewing together different shapes of assorted used fabrics ranging from cotton, linen, nylon and other fibre types. The stuffing is a combination of very old and faded fabrics and foam . See plate 3.



**Plate 3.** Ruth Urom, 'Cushion', Old Fabrics, 30cm x 50cm, 2013. Courtesy: Urom, 2013

The 'stool' is similar to the cushion but another expressive piece is the 'duvey'. This piece is made up of different pieces of 'ankara' (Nigerian wax prints) cut into oblong shapes of about the same sizes. The pieces were sewn together in a full-drop repeat pattern. In between two pieces of the repurposed fabric, half-inch foam is sandwiched while the sides are trimmed with a red ribbon. This multi-colour cum multi-fabric duvey has a fabric which if were to be printed as one piece would have been near impossible if one should consider the number of rollers or screens to be made for each hue. The duvey is shown on plate 4.



**Plate 4.** Ruth Urom, 'Duvet', Old Fabrics, 163cm x 155cm, 2013. Courtesy: Urom, 2014.

The most deviant design in Urom's portfolio is 'African Activities'. Here the designer-researcher departed from the utilitarian tendencies on which the field of textiles dwells, veering into art for art's sake. The wall panel features representation of female figures pounding in sizable mortars, with long pestles. The difference in the sizes of mortars suggests the pounded stuff. In Nigeria the giant types are used to pound boiled oil palm fruits, while the medium one is for pounding boiled yams into fofoo. The container-carrying women figures suggest water-fetching from a river or stream while the others are back from fetching firewood. In this process, pieces of old ankara were cut in the shapes of women, mortars and pestles and glued down on a primed canvas stuck to a rigid stretcher. Pieces of a contrasting fabric colour is used to demarcate the different activities and give a boarder to the design. Principles of balance, proportion, and rhythm are noticed on this piece. See plate 5.



**Plate 5.** Ruth Urom, 'African Activities', Old Fabrics, 100cm x 15cm, 2013. Courtesy: Urom, 2014.

### 3.2 Appraisal of the works of Enomfon Edet

Enomfon Linus Edet titled her project 'Using Marbled Tie-Dyed Fabric on Recycled Tyres for Furniture Design'. This designer-researcher delimited her work to two seats and a centre-table, made with vehicle tyres and researcher-made marbled tie-dye. According to the designer in her statement of problem, 'other materials have been used for interior decoration to the neglect of used tyres which are all around the environment' (Edet, 2015). The writer of this paper is persuaded to believe that the designer is referring to Nigerian environment, because the use of vehicle tyres for interior and exterior decoration is not strange to the global community. Her objectives however are to decorate used tyres with researcher-made marbled tie-dye for interior decoration; to visually represent a typical marbled tie-dye design for interior decoration; to showcase tyres being used with researcher-made marbled tie-dye for interior decoration; and to provide reference material for further studies in textile studio production. Though the designer uses recycling for her work, this writer recognizes it as repurposing because the tyres were merely washed and varnished and not melted or broken down.

The high point in Enomfon's project is the use of her studio-made tie-dyed fabrics as the upholstery fabric. Padding is observed to be made with foam which is quite regular in upholstery-making, globally. The top of the centre-table is made of thick glass, cut into a circular form. The use of elements and principles of design in her project is commendable. The choice of colours on the tie-dye contrast well with the glossy black hue of the tyres and there is a good sense of balance and proportion in the entire arrangement of parts. The comfort of sitting on the tyre-sofa could have been enhanced if the designer-researcher had heeded this writer's advice to attach springs as links between the two tyres, at the back of the seats. This would have added more flexibility in usage than the plywood used.

It is interesting to notice the round tie-dye-covered plywood which serves as the shock absorber for the glass on the centre-table. That concept helped in harmonizing the set. The plain-coloured throw pillows have helped in breaking the monotony of the busy 'splash-dyed' fabric surface decoration. The grey base of the centre-table and the silver legs of the set contrast well with other parts thus providing further balance to the entire design. See the upholstery set in plate 6.



**Plate 6.** Enomfon Edet, 'Marbled Tie-Dye on Recycled Tyres', Used Tyres, Tie-Dye fabrics, Glass, Metal and Wood, 75cm x 75cm x 90cm H, 2015. Courtesy, Edet, 2015.

#### 4. Conclusion

The idea of reuse of waste is a vital necessity in the world today because it has helped to conserve natural resources which are thinning out by the day. The repurposing of waste helps to get rid of pollution of the environment in many ways. Taking less waste to the incinerators reduces the amount of toxic fumes which can be injurious to humans and the ozone layer. A zero tolerance of waste will generally create a cleaner and healthier environment, and nature itself will have a chance of reorganizing itself. Epa (2016) has indicated that recycling conserves natural resources such as timber, water, and minerals. It prevents pollution by reducing the need to collect new raw materials. It serves energy. It helps sustain the environment for future generations, and it helps create new well-paying jobs. The activity of the two female designer-researchers is in a good direction and this writer recommends more researches in reuse of waste whether in recycling or repurposing as they all have the prospect of providing a cleaner, healthier, and richer environment for all living organisms, and hopefully, 'satisfaction' to the ultimate creator.

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