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Symbolic Designs of Textile Art in African Fabrics

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Abstract

This paper examines the symbolic designs of expressive creativity on African fabrics in textile art. It highlights the variations on the theme, symbolic design, colour, and techniques used for the production of African fabrics. Data for the study rely on primary and secondary sources. The primary data were obtained from in-depth interview, samples of African fabrics drawn from exhibition catalogues as well as unstructured interview schedules with primary artists producing some of the textiles in Africa and users wearing clothes drawn from the African people in Nigeria, Mali, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania. The illustration of the variations in symbols found in African textile, derived from exhibition catalogues, were used to express the cultural contextual meaning of design patterns on African fabrics. Cultural nationalism and identity dominate the printed geometric forms of flora and fauna as well as other patterns of symbolic designs found on the fabrics. The symbolic designs and variations in theme, colour and patterns on African textile represent rare artistic creativity and expression in the current development of textile art in Africa.

KEYWORDS: *African fabrics, symbolism, visual art, Yoruba culture*

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *tkaniny afrykańskie, symbolika, sztuki wizualne, kultura Jorubów*

Introduction

Symbolic designs are the base for every indigenous textile material (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1995). Those symbolic designs are

usually found as prints on the surface of textile materials. These prints are made of different shapes and sizes with attractive and pleasant visual aesthetics. Indigenous textile materials such as *adire*, *kente*, *bangolan*, *bondoukou* materials are some of the observable textile arts that have been found indigenous to the people and environs of Africa. Symbolic designs on indigenous textiles are culture-specific. This partly explains why textiles found among various ethnic groups in human society can be easily identified and associated with a particular culture. Some inhabitants think symbolic designs on their fabric represent a connection to the past while some believe that those designs reflect individual style and preferences (Drewal 1989).

Design is a general term for any pattern or motif, especially in textile designs, prints design, dabbing or direct application (Akinwunmi 2008). It is used as a distinctive fashion in visual and aesthetic appreciation of any society as well as to capture prevailing concepts in practice. In the words of Renne and Agbaje-Williams (2005), in Africa, indigenous textile materials are usually embellished with various forms of designs that are symbolic for aesthetic appreciation. This embellishment may be colour, lines, shape ornaments, embroidery and other related forms that are useful to the making of indigenous textiles (Aremu 2005). Additionally, consideration of gender by the society is an important factor in the design patterns of indigenous fabric. Some design patterns of indigenous textiles are feminine while others are masculine. Adetoro (2010) observes that design patterns of textiles changeover time, depending on the cultural ideas and belief system of the people with respect to fashion.

Symbolic designs in Yoruba textiles take the form of cultural affinity, like all other traditional fabric elsewhere in Nigerian societies which exhibit admirable cultural aesthetics. For instance, the indigo-produced tie-dye known as *adire dudu* or *idi-dudu* along with the indigo-produced resistant fabric also known as *eleko* which exists in visual structures that merge cultural myth concepts (theme) expressed in the Yoruba motif (Asakitipi 2007). A typical illustration in this respect is the motif of the reptiles and house utensils such as spoons and combs. All these exist in Yoruba cultures, which have their different symbolic representations



(Aremu and Ogunsiakan 1997). Similarly, Adesanya (2005) suggests that the variants of fabric found in Yoruba culture are decorated with a variety of abstract designs and symbolic motifs of animals and plants from Yoruba cosmology. Although this depends on the preference of the textile artist producer or commissioned work by the owner, the textiles in Yoruba society have a unique cultural identity that has assisted in projecting the image of the Yoruba textile art.

Visual symbolism in textile art

Visual symbolism in the textile art of Africa is an important component of African identity and culture. Besides, the symbolic patterns found in the textile of the people of Africa plays an important role in the creation of the collective identity of ethnic groups found in Africa. Visual symbols are used to represent a particular person, group, idea or quality. The meaning of every symbol is an expression by the people who created it. It is usually recognised as a common knowledge that is obviously known among the people living in that era. The word, *visual symbol*, is used to represent an entity or idea in a visual form. It is a common phenomenon found in artistic and historical imagery. In the textile art of Africa, symbolic patterns and designs of indigenous textiles have potential value for understanding the African cultural aesthetic and beauty.

The Yoruba symbolic textile is arguably one of the most well-known varieties of pattern-dyed cloth found in Africa. According to Eicher (2004b) every society in Africa has its own unique identity and symbolic pattern of their textiles art, every society in Africa has its own individual cultural identity and icons that are peculiar to them and serve as trademarks with which any of these indigenous textile materials could easily be identified. This implies that the visual symbolic patterns are commonly found in African fabrics. Examples of such fabrics include the *kente* of Ghana, *kanga* of Tanzania, *pagne baoule* of Ivory Coast, *bagolan* of Mali and the Yoruba *adire*, *aso-ofi* and *aran* textiles in Nigeria are a reflection of visual symbolism of each African society (Barbour and Simmonds 1971).



These fabrics are mainly produced by women who use indigo, henna, onion peels and tree bark exclusively to dye the textile materials. They produce finely-symbolic patterns and designs on fabrics, using some improvised local instruments. These traditional dyers and designers not only catered for the needs of local spinners and weavers who wanted their cotton yarns dyed or designed but were also called upon to refurbish some textile materials that had lost their aesthetic value by re-designing and re-dyeing the clothes and adding attractive symbolic patterns (Akpata 1971).

The Yoruba textile in Nigeria exhibits admirable symbolic aesthetics in design that is aligned with the cultural values of the primary producers of the textiles (Areo 2004). Without doubt, the Yoruba visual symbolic designs are a distinctive textile art of Africa both in form and meaning. It echoes the creative ingenuity-bound traditional technology of the people (Areo 2010). Visual symbolism is an expressive means of communication that enables people to interact with one another. Persons with shared cultural knowledge and background in some instances develop complex thoughts that aid the exchange of ideas and thoughts with others using signs or symbols (Bodley 2009).

African fabric designs

African fabrics, as it is commonly referred to in textile art, is a cotton cloth type whose symbolic designs colour and print objects on the cotton symbolise themes related to African cultures and ideas about their environment and society. Historically, the development of African fabric originated from Western art tradition in Europe. It is also known as Dutch Wax Print, Real English Wax, Veritable Java Print, Guaranteed Dutch Java Print, and Veritable Dutch Hollandais. The practice of textile art in African fabric production represents the long historical process of imitation and impressions. There are several examples of African fabrics, including *Kente* in Ghana, *Kitenge* in Central Africa, *Kangas* in Tanzania, *Ankara* in Nigeria as well as *Pagne Baoule* in Cote D' Ivoire.





Pic. 1. Yoruba men wearing adire attire at a function, 2016

The strip woven *Kente* cloths of the Asante and Ewe are among the most well-known of African textile traditions. Interest in these dramatic fabrics has stimulated the emergence in Accra of specialist textile dealers serving the export market for both new and vintage local textiles. The main feature of Asante *kente* is the framing of geometric motifs woven using a supplementary floating weft between weft-faced bands called *babadua* on a warp-faced and warp-striped background of adjacent strips creating a regular chequer board layout for the completed cloth. Distinct borders at each end of the cloth, created by a more regular alignment of weft-faced areas, are a feature of most but not all Asante. Ewe weavers in the Benin Republic use the same techniques but their output can be distinguished by a preference for cotton over silk/rayon, a different range of colours, the use of figurative as well as geometric motifs and other minor differences. The Ewe tradition also encompasses more varied styles including a greater variety of strip widths, entirely weft-faced cloths, and a number of as yet mainly undocumented local styles. In the 20th century, the Asante



and the Ewe people wove simply-striped and checked fabrics from local white and indigo-dyed cotton.

Furthermore, the *Kitenge* or *Chitenge* is also another variety of African fabrics found in the East and Central Africa. It serves as an inexpensive, informal piece of clothing decorated with a huge variety of colours, patterns and even political slogans. It is commonly worn among the people of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Sudan. The printing on the cloth is made by a traditional batik. This fabric is made of hundred per cent cotton cloth. It is also known as *Ankara* among the Yoruba. The *Kanga* is also another variety of colourful African print fabric similar to *Kitenge* but lighter and worn by women and, occasionally, men in the African Lake regions. The cloth has a deep cultural, historical and economic significance throughout the Indian Ocean and for over one hundred years it has remained one of the most popular of all cultural items across East Africa. Within Kenya and its environs, it is a common thread that links and unites cultures among persons of all ages irrespective of class among the local or foreign groups wearing it. It has a dynamic colour in the world of its own design.

The name *Kanga* fabric originated from the Swahili word for the guinea fowl, which is black with white spots. The design pattern found in the fabric includes block printing of more intricate designs in red and black. It also has repeating black and white spotted motifs which inspired the name *Kanga*. The production and distribution of this fabric was first produced in Europe and India. In the 20th century, The British, American, Dutch and Japanese imported clothes continued to dominate the market. In the 1970s, textile manufacturing industries were set up in Kenya and, later in 1985, Tanzania became one of the largest producers of the *Kanga* African fabric. At the moment, the fabric is produced in Kenya, Oman, India, and Pakistan. China in recent times is arguably believed to be the largest producer of the fabric. The cloth can be purchased in many markets in East Africa as well as in large and small cities in Asia, Europe and the United States of America.

Kanga fabric is uniquely recognised in the textile art of Africa due to its design patterns. Its basic design patterns structure consists of patterned border (*pindo*) surrounding a central motif (*mji*) and Swahili proverb or phrase (*jina*). The rectangular-shaped printed



cloth measures about 150 cm in length and 100 cm in width. The print patterns of the cloth are categorised into flora, fauna, and other patterns. Two or more usually-vibrant highly-saturated colours and bold patterns are used. In addition, *Bagolan* is another variety of textile fabric found among the Bamami ethnic group in Mali. It is a hand-made Malian cotton traditionally dyed with fermented mud. It is a popular textile fabric found in the Malian culture. In recent years, it has become a Malian symbol of cultural identity. The clothes are a distinctive fabric made by the Banana people of Mali West Africa. The cloth is usually first dyed with yellow, followed by paint mud from local rivers to create the darker areas, and use a caustic solution to discharge the dye from the lighter area. The materials used for the production of the cloths are hand-woven cotton dye, in multiple processes with leaves, branches and river mud.

Bondonkou is also a popular African fabric used in the Eastern province of Cote D'Ivoire. The thread used for the warp stripes background on *Bondoukou* cloth is almost white and indigo-dyed hand-spun local cotton. The cloth strips on most *Bonodoukou* cloth have a narrow white wrap strip at each selvedge where the strips are sewn together – a feature that is shared with many Banle and Gouro blue and white cloths from central Cote D' Ivoire. Adire is an African fabric found among the Yorùbá people of West Africa. It is an indigo-dyed cotton cloth decorated using a resist dyeing technique to create striking patterns in blue and white. The cloth is usually made up of two strips of factory-produced cotton sewn together to form a shape that is roughly square and worn wrapped around the body.

Visual aesthetics in African textile

Visual aesthetics in African textile art are associated with the philosophy of beauty as well as the standards in judging art and other aspects of human life and culture especially in character, wisdom, intelligence, songs, dance, performance and language usage. Artistic rendition features in all aspects of life in Africa, including textiles. The term, *African aesthetics*, is broadly conceptualised in this paper as the African perception and the appreciation of nature, beauty and



value of artistic expressions or representations of African origin. It is embedded in the plurality of African cultures and embodied in people's practices within their local African societal contexts.

The elements of visual aesthetics in African textile portray ideas about reality, spiritual or figurative expression of human or animal images. It is usually embellished with decorative scarification on smooth surface that indicates beautiful and shinning elegance. In most African textiles, clarity of form is detailed in the complexity, composition, balance and symmetry of the symbolic objects found on the cloths. The visual aesthetics of African textile is unique. It reflects their cultural orientation in many forms of their art and design pattern. The propagation of African origin, values and knowledge are well-exhibited in African textile aesthetics in a bid to document the culture and identity of the people on the continent and people of African descent in the Diaspora (Soul 2015).

The popular theory of visual aesthetics in Western tradition is the racialisation of art. It explains the concept of art as a racial ideology that dynamically glosses over the artistic and aesthetic philosophies of other cultures and supplant in them with Western principles, objectives and beliefs. The racialised theory of visual aesthetics substitutes ignorance for knowledge, provincialism for universalism and falsity for truth. Its obfuscation of art as a human activity is achieved by transforming art into a synonym of white cultures demands epistemological shifts from the social ontology created by racism. In this study, visual aesthetics is operationalised as an appreciation of beauty, intelligence, character, wisdom, elegance, sophistry and mastery of human creative endeavour that speaks to ontology and philosophy of life among the peoples of Africa.

This implies that the aesthetic value in any form of arts genre and the philosophy that underpins it either in textile, sculpture, ceramics, music, dance or painting is based on belief system. Visual aesthetics among the Yoruba of sub-Saharan Africa suggests the "sense of perception" that can be understood within the cultural system of African people. African visual aesthetics combined moral, spiritual, linguistic, musical and performance realms. It entails moral excellence linked to physical perfection and ideal social order. Among the Yoruba, for instance, *ashe* is a compelling concept in Yoruba aesthetics. It explores the life force, possessed



and conveyed by all art forms from visual, to narrative and performance. In addition, *ashe* provides a tangible contact with the *orisa* deities of the Yoruba pantheon. *Ashe* is intrinsically related to the essential nature of creativity called *Iwa*, “perceptible to those who have worked with the ancestors” and thus acquired critical and discerning eyes. Closely related to *Iwa* are *Oju inu* (inner eye) or *Oju ona* (artist insight), the external harmony of all artworks. In the realm of Yoruba culture, the beauty of objects, texts, satire, language, music, and dance lie not only in what catches the eye but also in the *ashe* derived from the work’s completeness. From these elements, one can discern *Iwa* or essential nature in the artworks, and finally its *ewa* or beauty (Abiodun 2014).

Similarly, another vital concept of Yoruba aesthetic is *Ara*, the evocative power of visual, verbal, musical, and performance arts associated with the ability to amaze. *Ara* bespeaks creativity through departure from norms. Yoruba artists are explorers and their works reflect new understandings. In the remarks of Olabiyi (1993) about aesthetics, art is always “unfinished and generative.” Yoruba visual and verbal arts are also linked through *Ori*, individuality and *Yato*, difference and originality. He pointed out that art is an invitation to infinite difference and departure and not a summation for sameness and imitation. The traditional creativity binary posed for so many cultures is thereby dissolved and innovation is implied in the idea of the customary belief system of the Yoruba people.

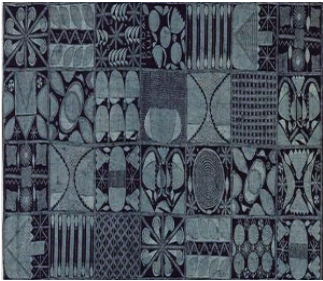
Methodology

Symbolic designs of textile Art of Africa were selected to exemplify the various structural patterns of the design base of Africa fabrics spread across different groups of African people across Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, Kenya and Tanzania. A purposive sampling technique was used to select textile fabrics of African countries found in exhibition catalogues of the available textile art fabrics found in Africa. A descriptive survey and study-based approaches were adopted. The study-based approach was initiated to explain the symbolic pattern and cultural meaning embedded in the textile art of the African people. The experimentation of the various symbolic designs represents an idea of the African people





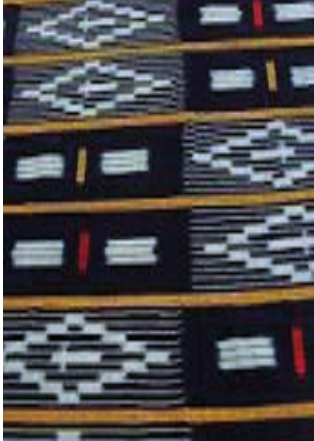
with respect to artists of various designs in the African continent. This paper examines the textile traditions of Ghana, Mali, Tanzania, Cote d'Ivoire and Nigeria. In each case, the design symbols are exemplified to show the variations of symbolic designs found on fabrics in Africa.



Table 1. Types of African Fabrics

S/N	Name of Fabrics	Country	Symbolic Design	Function/ Meaning
1	Adire Eleko	Nigeria (Yoruba culture)	 <p data-bbox="484 1026 808 1124">Source: https://art.famsf.org/limota-oladimeji/wrapper-adire-eleko-2018816</p>	Adire-Eleko, Ibadan-Dun. This is a starch-printed Ibadan-Dun design produced with different motifs.

S/N	Name of Fabrics	Country	Symbolic Design	Function/ Meaning
2	Kente	Ghana (Ewe culture)	 <p data-bbox="444 766 856 869">Source: https://etudescoreennes-abidjan.blogspot.com/2018/02/etude-sur-la-culture-du-pagne-en-cote.html</p>	Kente refers to an Ewe symbolic fabric made of hand crafts with hand woven method. These involve strips of cotton and silk.
3	Bondoukou	Cote D' Ivoire	 <p data-bbox="458 1379 838 1483">Source: http://adireafricantextiles.blogspot.com/2013_08_01_archive.html</p>	Bondoukou fabrics have a similar function to that of Kente because of their cultural marriage. Bondoukou fabrics have weft faced bands on we a warp faced background like that of Kente. Figurative motifs build its uniqueness that reveal the fabric's cultural contrast to other culture.

S/N	Name of Fabrics	Country	Symbolic Design	Function/ Meaning
4	Bangolan	Mali	 <p data-bbox="440 760 856 826">Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Traditional_mud_cloth.jpg</p>	<p data-bbox="879 420 1114 698">The Malian traditional mud cloth otherwise referred tribal fabric have accentuated design shapes of geometrics that juxtapose patterns in black and white.</p>
5	Kangas	Tanzania	 <p data-bbox="491 1390 801 1456">Source: https://tdsblog.com/kanga-leso/</p>	<p data-bbox="879 960 1114 1452">Kanga are colourful fabrics similar to 'Leso', a traditional fabric in Kenya culture. The fabric is known as 'cloth of unity', mostly worn by women. The dynamic and colourful indigenous designed fabrics have been known in Africa cultural arena for more than a century.</p>

S/N	Name of Fabrics	Country	Symbolic Design	Function/ Meaning
6	Kitenge	Kenya	 <p data-bbox="447 820 852 888">Source: https://snctfabrics.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/kitenge-cloth.jpg</p>	<p data-bbox="879 420 1112 702">Kitenge symbolic fabrics are pieces of traditional colourful cloths in Kenya. They are similar to 'Kanga' but they are thicker with broad edges on the long side.</p>
7	Pagne Baoule	Cote D' Ivoire	 <p data-bbox="447 1501 852 1605">Source: https://etudescoreennes-abidjan.blogspot.com/2018/02/etude-sur-la-culture-du-pagne-en-cote.html</p>	<p data-bbox="879 1046 1112 1430">The name 'Pagne Baoule' was rooted from Baoule culture. The symbolic fabric indigenously belong to the Akan ethnic cultural society who migrated from their ancestral home in Ghana and settled in Cote D' Ivoire.</p>

S/N	Name of Fabrics	Country	Symbolic Design	Function/ Meaning
8	Atoghu	Cameroon	 <p data-bbox="440 915 852 1015">Source: https://afrilege.com/products/satin-silk-toghu-bamenda-african-print-fabric</p>	<p data-bbox="879 420 1112 657">Atoghu has the African symbolic patterns of the traditional Bamileke fabrics that hailed from the Grassfields region of Cameroon.</p>
9	Jalabe Sabode	Gambia	 <p data-bbox="450 1426 847 1526">Source: http://www.mariespastiche.com/2015/02/nigerian-adire-cloth-3-ways-to-make-it.html?m=1</p>	<p data-bbox="879 1084 1112 1252">Gambian traditional fabrics are prevalent form of cultural expression from different ethnic groups.</p>

Conclusion

It has been established from this study that there exists an ethnography of expressive creativity in the textile art on African fabrics. It highlights the variations on the theme, symbolic design, colour, and techniques used for the production of African fabrics. Cultural nationalism and identity dominate the printed geometric forms of flora and fauna as well as other patterns of symbolic designs found on the fabric. The symbolic designs and variations in theme, colour and patterns on African textile represent rare artistic creativity and expression in the current development of textile art in Africa.

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