

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**  
**FACULTY OF BUSINESS, LAW AND ART**  
Winchester School of Art

**EXPLORING INDIGENOUS WEST AFRICAN FABRIC DESIGN IN THE  
CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION**

**By**  
**Richard Acquaye**

**January 2018**

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**Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**  
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## **ABSTRACT**

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### **EXPLORING INDIGENOUS WEST AFRICAN FABRIC DESIGN IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION**

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The project seeks to explore and reflect on the potential of the global commercial application of indigenous West African textiles in the middle to high-end interior textiles and surfaces. Theoretically, the ideas of Sarat Maharaj's *"Know-how and No-How: stopgap notes on "method" in visual art as knowledge production"* (Maharaj, 2009) has been utilised as a method of bringing to light the idiosyncrasies, or veiled aspects of practice in indigenous West African fabric production alongside its diverse and complex cultural connections. The study explores and considers the diverse geographic, economic and ethnographic composition of West Africa, and how these have influenced the various textiles and clothing trajectories of the region.

The research addresses contemporary commercial applications of indigenous West African textiles and further interrogates issues of appropriation, cultural and indigenous ownership and their implications for creativity, mechanisation and the commercialisation of indigenous fabrics. The subtle balance and interplay between assimilation, translation and the role of the African diaspora particularly, and how they imbricate to shape modern-day textile fabrics in West Africa is discussed. It also considers the impact processes of appropriation have, and continue to have, on textile creativity and development, because African textiles have played a key role in constructing social identities and creating an innate bond between the 'owner' and fabric. The research also provides a brief contextual discussion on the evolution of textile production in various West African countries and the role colonialism has played in influencing textile discourse, and further discusses how

textile fabrics have evolved through a complex mix of cultural assimilation, translation, transformation and migration; and simultaneously how the various African diasporas have created a dialogue that has shaped subsequent textile developments utilising a delicate balance of cultural and textile discourses. The work of Yinka Shonibare, Trine Lindegaard, Philippe Bestenhieder, Junya Watanabe, El Anatsui, Grace Ndiritu and other artists and fashion designers who have drawn inspirations from West African textile themes has been used as a means of discussing broader philosophical questions, as well as providing inspiration for the practical element of the thesis.

A visual analysis is conducted on Adire, Adinkra, Bogolanfini, Fon applique, Korhogo and Wax print fabrics to de-construct the hidden meanings of these fabrics and increase an understanding of such complex textile traditions. Visual meaning has also been sought through a social semiotic approach to the visual analysis. Social semiotics assumes that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which contribute to meaning. The visual analytic process reveals and crystallises the intrinsic characteristics of the fabrics that in turn feed into the project's practical exploration.

The practical component of the study proposes and utilises a series of 'collaborations' with technology, new material, colour resources and global trends to generate forms/motifs/visual language that are then translated into commercial designs based on indigenous West African fabric themes. The experimentation has adapted traditional artistic and graphic aesthetics (symbols, design motifs, totems and insignia), creatively manipulating them via digital technology and using a mechanised printing process for completion. The practical component of the study has explored these cultural affiliations further by adopting new materials and processes. It is hoped that the new designs would continue to help re-define indigenous West African textile expressions and their applications globally.

Operating on the premise that, when rules, restrictions and issues of copyright and appropriation are attached to cultural production, innovation in such areas ceases, the study argues that there should be an avenue that would allow the utilisation of cultural designs and elements in collaboration with their owners and to use them in



the appropriate context. The study, in addition, places indigenous West African textile fabrics within a contemporary context through the examination of their uses and interpretation. It examines how the fabrics are utilised outside of their primary market of domestic West African consumption and place them on a more global frontier. It establishes the complexities of commodifying culture and discusses how the notions of authenticity, interpretation and integrity could be explored to benefit the larger society. The study concludes with a consideration of how indigenous West African textile designs could be redefined to resonate with current design trends and by extension testimonial of design history for future generation.

## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, RICHARD ACQUAYE declare that the thesis entitled

### **‘Exploring Indigenous West African Fabric Design in the Context of Contemporary Global Commercial Production’**

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission.

Signed: .....

Date:.....12/03/2018.....

<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>Page</b>
Abstract	i
Declaration of Authorship	iv
Contents	v
List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	x
Acknowledgements	xi

## **Chapter One                      Overview**

1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Contextual Framework of the Study	1
1.2 Objectives of the Study	3
1.3 Research Questions	4
1.4 Definitions and Distinctions in this Study	4
1.5 Structure of Submission	5
1.6 Geographic, Economic and Ethnographic Composition of West Africa	7
1.7 Textile and Clothing in West Africa	13
1.8 Authenticity in Contemporary Design Spaces	18

## **Chapter Two                      Review of Related Literature**

2.0 Fabric Design Evolution and Development	22
2.1 Historical Development of West African Textile Fabrics	23
2.2 Post Colonialism and West African Textile Traditions	32
2.3 Indigenous West African Textile Practices as Knowledge Production	38
2.4 Selected Cases: Contemporary Application of West Africa Textiles	42
2.5 Textile Production and Evolution	57
2.6 Appropriation or Borrowing	64

## **VISUAL ANALYSIS: Analysing Indigenous West African Fabrics**

3.0 Introduction	70
3.1 Adinkra	72
3.2 Adire	75

3.3 Bogolanfini (Mud Cloth)	86
3.4 Fon Appliqué	91
3.5 Korhogo	97
3.6 Wax Prints	103

<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>Practice</b>	
4.0 Introduction		110
4.1 The Design Process		114
4.2 Cultural Conversations		115
4.2.1 Cultural Conversations: Vortex		119
4.2.2 Cultural Conversations: Fence		120
4.2.3 Cultural Conversations: Story Boards		121
4.2.4 Cultural Conversations - Crosses and Adinkra		122
4.3 Design Application – Living Space Wall Panels		124
4.4 Live Project: WSA PGR Room, University of Southampton		125
4.5 Cultural Conversation Show		127

<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	
5.0 Indigenous West African Textiles in Contemporary Design Spaces		136
Notes		142
References		143
Appendix 1. Meaning of Bogolanfini Symbols		158
Appendix 2. Meaning of Korhogo Symbols		159
Appendix 3. Meaning of Fon Applique Symbols		160
Appendix 4. Colour exploration in the study		162
Appendix 5. Reflection and Evaluation		163
Appendix 6. Digital Textile Printing		166

<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
Figure 1. Map of Africa, highlighting West Africa	8
Figure 2. Close-up map of West Africa (indicated with indigenous fabrics)	9
Figure 3. Chief in wraparound Kente	16
Figure 4. Kwame Nkrumah and compatriots wore smock during the declaration of Ghana's independence -1957	33
Figure 5. Close up of sleeveless smock (Fugu)	34
Figure 6. Bogolon dress by Chris Seydou – 1971	36
Figure 7. Beyoncé Knowles in Bogolan	37
Figure 8. <i>Globe Head Ballerina</i> , 2012 - Yinka Shonibare	43
Figure 9. 2013 <i>Spring Summer Collection</i> - Trine Lindegaard	46
Figure 10. <i>Binta Chairs</i> , 2009 - Philippe Bestenhieder	48
Figure 11. 2009 <i>Spring Summer Collection</i> - Junya Watanabe	49
Figure 12. 2016 <i>Spring Summer Menswear Collection</i> – Junya Watanabe	51
Figure 13. <i>Metal Textile Sculpture</i> 2004 - El Anatsui	53
Figure 14. <i>Still Life</i> , 2005 - Grace Ndiritu	53
Figure 15. My Mother's Wardrobe by Serge Attukwei Clottey (2016)	57
Figure 16. Wax print	61
Figure 17. Sawat design – batik	61
Figure 18. Akofena – Sword of authority (Ghanaian Adinkra symbol)	62
Figure 19. Different versions of Akofena prints	62
Figure 20. 2012 Spring Summer Collection - Louis Vuitton	66
Figure 21. Selected Adinkra symbols and their meanings	73
Figure 22. Adinkra fabric (ntiemu and nwomu) stamped and needled	74
Figure 23. Line sketch of Adinkra fabric	75
Figure 24. Adire Eleko	76
Figure 25. Adire Alabere	77
Figure 26. Adire Oniko	77
Figure 27. Adire Eleko – Ogongo Symbol	79
Figure 28. Selected Adire motifs and their meanings	81
Figure 29. Mapo Hall with four spoons	82
Figure 30. Ibadan dun – layout	82
Figure 31. Ibadan dun, mid-20th century	83
Figure 32. Olokun	83
Figure 33. Sun Bebe	84

Figure 34. Ile lyalo (Olob owner of a king)	85
Figure 35. Commemorative fabric for the Hendesons	85
Figure 36. Onikommu	86
Figure 37. Selected Bogolanfini motifs and their meanings	87
Figure 38. Monochromatic Bogolan	90
Figure 39. Polychromatic Bogolan	90
Figure 40. Fon Appliqué workers in 1971, Abomey, Republic of Benin	92
Figure 41. Fon appliqué insignias	95
Figure 42. Hanging Representing King Glele	96
Figure 43. Daguesu (Lightening-Splitting Ram) in Battle	97
Figure 44. Selected Korhogo motifs and their meanings	100
Figure 45. Korhogo Panel that contains the tree, chicken, goat, crocodile guinea fowl and swallow	102
Figure 46. Chicken signifies fertility and grace – Designed for maidens	103
Figure 47. Aagradaa – Lighting Bolts	104
Figure 48. Wax print with Javanese Motifs	105
Figure 49. Wax print with Japanese Design	105
Figure 50. Wax print with Javanese Motif	105
Figure 51. Wax print with African Calabash Flower Motif	105
Figure 52. Wax print with Adinkra Motif	106
Figure 53. Wax print with European Classical Design	106
Figure 54. <i>Wind Sculpture, 2013</i> – Yinka Shonibare	112
Figure 55. Aya – The Fern Symbol in Different Application	113
Figure 56. Simple line design	114
Figure 56. Motif placed up-side-down	114
Figure 58. Umbrellas Mood Images (Culture)	116
Figure 59. Mood Images (Culture)	117
Figure 60. Graphic composition – Cultural Conversations	118
Figure 61. Single Motif Composition – Cultural Conversations	118
Figure 62. Vortex - Part of Cultural Conversations Collection	120
Figure 63. Fence - Part of Cultural Conversations Collection	121
Figure 64. <i>Story Board</i> - Part of Cultural Conversations Collection	122
Figure 65. Cushion – Lines	123
Figure 66. Cushion – Adinkra	124
Figure 67. Wall Panel	125

Figure 68 A. Colour Intro – PGR Room Project	126
Figure 68 B. Colour Intro – PGR Room Project	126
Figure 68 C. Colour Intro – PGR Room Project	127
Figure 69. A cross-section - Cultural Conversation Show	128
Figure 70. Assorted fabrics – Cultural Conversation Show	129
Figure 71. Chairs – Cultural Conversations Show	130
Figure 72. Close-Up, Chair – Cultural Conversations Show	130
Figure 73. Wall Panels - Cultural Conversations Show	133
Figure 74. Cushions - Cultural Conversations Show	132
Figure 75. Story Boards, <i>The Ambush of Agadja</i> - Cultural Conversations Show	132
Figure 76. Colour Palette from Personal Experiments	155
Figure 77. Earlier Design Sample	163
Figure 78. Later Design Sample	164
Figure 79. Design Collaboration	158

**LIST OF TABLES**

**PAGE**

Table 1. Classification of Adire Motifs

80



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## **1- OVERVIEW**

.....“Production”, ... centres on a transformative crossover that throws up a surplus that churns out something more than what was there to begin with. In this sense, it harbours the possibility of spawning something “other” than what already exists - the logic of invention and innovation ..... (Maharaj, 2009:8)

### **1.0 Introduction**

This thesis seeks to increase the exposure and commercial application of indigenous West African textiles. It also investigates contemporary commercial applications for indigenous West African textiles and further explores issues of appropriation, cultural and indigenous ownership and their impact on the creativity, mechanisation and commercialisation of indigenous fabrics. This entails experimentation with, and the production of, a range of practical textile samples and possibilities. Theoretically, the ideas of Sarat Maharaj’s *“Know-how and No-How: stopgap notes on “method” in visual arts as knowledge production”* (Maharaj, 2009) have been utilised as a method for bringing to light the idiosyncratic, or veiled\* aspects of practice in indigenous West African textile production and its diverse and complex cultural connections. This concept of knowledge production in relation to indigenous West African textile production is investigated in detail in the review of related literature. Additionally, there is a practical exploration of the subject that seeks to decode some of the complexities and the challenges associated with contemporary indigenous West African textile production. The practical component explores such cultural affiliations further by adopting new materials and processes. A broader set of unorthodox ‘collaborations’ with technology, new material and colour resources are utilised to generate working designs and forms based on indigenous West African textile traditions. This experimentation adapts a traditional aesthetic language (textile fabrics, panels and clothing), creatively manipulating it with digital graphic techniques and using mechanised printing processes for completion.

### **1.1 Contextual Framework of the Study**

Indigenous textile fabric production in West Africa has remained primarily manual and its design ideas and output have been on a one-off or on a commission basis

(Sieber, 1972; Picton, 1995; LaGama, 2008; Spring, 2012). Apart from cotton and, in some instances, wild silk, indigenous West African textile designs have not been applied to other types of fabrics such as linen, wool and manmade fabrics to any significant commercial extent. Commercially, this has limited the penetration and application of West African textiles in the international market. Many attempts to expand the frontiers (mass production) and application of indigenous West African fabrics have been misconstrued as a subversion of culture and met with opposition because of issues of cultural, indigenous or ethnic ownership. Akinwumi (2008) states that, apart from wax prints that evidently have catered specifically for the aesthetic dictates of the people and have become an inseparable part of taste and preference, indigenous fabrics have not been mass produced. Akinwumi further indicates that, since adopting these factory made prints, West Africa has not ventured further down the route of mass production. Odiboh (2005) states that it is becoming apparent, however, that art and design can no longer afford to be autonomous, and that it must address its social responsibilities in a modern world where there is an abundance of material revolution (the phenomenon of rapid research and development of materials for various product trajectories). This material revolution has led to the production of several products and services across the globe with tribal and indigenous references but essentially with no due regard to the conception of authenticity and its applicability to the source communities. However, it could be argued that these same concepts of authenticity have become part of the broader social process of globalisation.

It is worth noting, that many West African textile traditions are in imminent danger of disappearing in the face of mechanisation, imported goods, changing social structures and modern fashion trends (Anquetil, 1983; Shaw, 2012). This is primarily due to the various traditional techniques of production being labour intensive and time-consuming and requiring a level of commitment that is very difficult to sustain in a region where poverty is rising sharply. Economically, the processes and labour involved do not commensurate with the financial gain derived from such traditional techniques. Many traditional textile fabric producers (weavers, designers and dyers) survive in difficult economic circumstances.

The notion of changing or modifying indigenous West African fabrics to make them more affordable and accessible to a wider market is not a new idea. Changes in the formal qualities of textile fabrics across the region take place all the time. Individual fabric designers and producers react to new visual inputs; adapt them to their inherited aesthetic and technological capabilities. Moreover, in so doing, they change the framework for, and outlook of, their products. Fabrics producers, just like other artisans elsewhere in the world, are constantly seeking to satisfy their customers' demands. In so doing they become the cause of change, as customers have high expectations but lack specificity in their demands. All these elements account for an enormous variety and continuous change in fabric production in West Africa and this situation of constant change and development has been the inspiration for this study. This study, therefore, advocates that a strategic mix of indigenous design ideas and western technology would yield optimum results. This study would also identify and evaluate production techniques and experiment with modern technology and materials to mass-produce textile fabrics which reference West African indigenous designs. The creditability of cultural resources and their symbolic, social and economic value will be enhanced to some extent if they are referenced in profitable endeavours to give them some authority and a presence in the global design space and discourse.

## **1.2 Objectives of the study**

This study:

- Investigates contemporary commercial applications of indigenous West African textiles.
- Interrogates issues of appropriation, cultural and indigenous ownership and their implications for creativity and product application.
- Reflects on the mechanisation and commercialisation of indigenous West African textiles through discussions and product experimentations.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

What is at stake when individuals and commercial entities use resources regarded as indigenous in other parts of the world to develop profit-making but also beneficial and sustainable designs?

What legitimises borrowing from a traditional culture and to what extent are such references still relevant on the global market?

Does the use of symbolic patterns with sacred and cultural significance, outside their traditional context, cause any offence?

To what extent can a balance be struck between borrowing from a traditional culture and restrictive retention by the (indigenous) people?

Do trademark protection and excessive retention block innovation in cultural designs?

### **1.4 Definitions and Distinctions in this Study**

The following terminological and theoretical distinctions are made for the purposes of this research. The terms Culture, Cultural Expressions, Indigenous, Indigenous Ownership and Appropriation have been used at various levels of the discourse. The meaning of Culture as expressed in this study is in agreement with Tylor (1974) that describes culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. No culture is an integrated organic unit; culture encompasses a series of borrowings; they are bits and pieces that people put together in order to make do in their daily lives. Culture is cumulative and progressive because there is always a tendency to borrow. Cultural Expressions, therefore, implies cultural artefacts such as traditional handicrafts, archaeological remains, works of art, folklore and other creative forms.

Indigenous in this context means something originating in, and characteristic of, a particular region or country; native. It also implies something innate, inherent and natural. In recent times, indigenous peoples across the world are protected by international or national legislation as having a set of

specific rights based on their historical ties to a particular territory, and their cultural or historical distinctiveness from other populations. Indigenous Ownership implies collective ownership of cultural expression and by extension the infinite reliance and proprietorship of material and symbolic processes of culture (Dictionary.com 2015; Lewinski, 2004). Appropriation has been discussed from two angles in this study. First, appropriation is the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of a different culture (that has negative connotations). Second, appropriated artworks are visual documentations and metaphors for gradual re-shuffling. Appropriation is further discussed as a strategy of re-invention and a means of transformation that restages 'old' concepts and expressions in a new modern context. The study argues that the concept of appropriation/adaptation is not just an important aspect of contemporary art but also a measure of contemporary self-expression, which illustrates paradigm shifts, and the changing face of modern societies.

Material Revolution in this context is the phenomenon of rapid research and development of materials for the market and by extension giving more possibilities to designers and product outcomes. *In Material Revolution: Sustainable and Multi-Purpose Materials for Design and Architecture*, Sascha Peters (2011) writes, "Material Revolution bridges the gap between research and industry on one hand and designers and architects on the other."

## **1.5 Structure of Submission**

This dissertation is in five chapters. Chapter One encompasses an overview and gives an insight of the study. It gives accounts of the geographic, economic and ethnographic composition of West Africa. It further discusses the contextual framework and outlines the objectives, research questions and structure of the submission. Chapter Two discusses how textile fabrics from different parts of the world have evolved and changed through a complex mix of cultural assimilation, translation, transformation and the migration of various Diasporas. It gives a background to the evolution of textile production in West Africa, and the role colonialism played in influencing developments. It expands on the work of Sarat Maharaj as a justification for foregrounding the idiosyncratic and veiled aspects of

practice in indigenous West African fabric production. It also discusses the work of Yinka Shonibare, Trine Lindegaard, Philippe Bestenhieder, Junya Watanabe, El Anatsui, Grace Ndiritu and other emerging fashion designers and artists who have drawn inspiration from West African textile traditions to create different art forms. The chapter finally wades into the current discourse on appropriation and borrowing with regard to indigenous textile production in West Africa.

Chapter three comprises of visual analysis that seeks to deconstruct the underlying meanings of indigenous West African fabrics and underpins the practical exploration of this study. It is anticipated that the visual analysis will engender a better understanding of indigenous West African fabrics and help address some of the issues of 'context' that arise when using indigenous West African forms and for that matter other indigenous textiles as a source of reference in any creative endeavour. Adinkra, Adire, Bogolanfini (mud cloth), Fon Appliqué, Korhogo and Wax prints are discussed in this study because they are the most prominent styles within the entire range of traditional indigenous fabric production in the region.

Chapter Four articulates new ways of considering indigenous West African textile design trajectories in the contemporary dynamic global space. Built around different forms of fabric design traditions in West Africa, the design output focuses on artistic themes and techniques that are different from what currently persists throughout the region. Innovations, experimentations and the installation of a selection from the range of design ideas explored during this study are discussed. Different materials that aim to offer a fresh vision for the production of textiles in West Africa were employed in the experimentation processes, inspired by the colours and textures of the indigenous West African textile themes, culture and landscapes, and influenced by the aesthetic and modern dispensation of western technology.

Chapter Five places indigenous West African textile fabrics within a contemporary context through an examination of their uses and interpretations. It discusses the intricacies of commodifying cultural artefacts and how the notions of authenticity, interpretation and integrity could be explored to benefit the whole society. It also discusses how indigenous West African textile designs could be 're-presented' to ensure the preservation of traditional textile techniques for the future.



## **1.6 Geographic, Economic and Ethnographic Composition of West Africa**

West Africa is located in the westernmost part of the African continent. In the United Nations scheme of African regions, it includes 16 countries and one overseas territory (United Nation Statistic Division, 2013). The countries, according to 'colonial divisions', are Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Chad, Nigeria, Togo, Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Benin, Equatorial Guinea and Burkina Faso. The Atlantic Ocean defines the western, as well as the southern, borders of the West African region. The northern border is the Sahara Desert, with the Ranishanu Bend considered the northernmost part of the region. The eastern border is less precise, with some cartographers placing it at the Benue Trough and others, on a line running from Mount Cameroon to Lake Chad (Masson and Pattillo, 2001; Speth 2010; Ham 2009). Bassey and Oshita (2010) contend that these colonial boundaries are intersected by further ethnic and cultural divisions, but are now all superseded by modern geographical boundaries. West Africa occupies an area of more than 6,140,000 km<sup>2</sup> or approximately one-fifth of 'the entire continent'. The vast majority of this land consists of plains lying less than 300 metres above sea level, though isolated high points exist in numerous states along the southern shores of the region (Speth, 2010). According to the World Bank (2015), the countries of West Africa have a population of 245 million. About 65 percent of them live in rural areas. Eight countries in the region (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo) are members of the West Africa Economy and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and share a common currency, a common central bank, a development bank, a regional stock exchange and a common banking regulator. The region's economic growth has averaged only 2.5 percent during the past three years while its population has been growing by 2.2 percent a year.



Figure 1: Map of Africa, highlighting West Africa

Current economic indicators are that West Africa is at the forefront of Africa's transformation with a growth rate of 7.4 percent in 2014, 5.0 percent in 2015 and projected growth of 6.1 percent in 2016 (ADB, 2015). With an average growth of 5.5 percent annually, West Africa is one of the fastest growing regions in the African continent. As many of the countries in the region are undergoing a strong political stabilisation policy, reducing conflict, and even aspiring to reach middle-income status, the region is beginning to reap the fruits of its regional and global integration. The macroeconomic outlook at the regional level is encouraging. According to Weigert (2015), in Nigeria, economic growth accelerated to 6.3%, as compared to 5.4% in 2013, once again driven by non-oil sectors and, in particular, services, manufacturing and agriculture, confirming the dawn of a diversified economy. Côte d'Ivoire recorded robust growth of 8.3% of GDP in 2014, driven by domestic and external demands. Benin, Niger and Togo are on the path to sustained growth, while Ghana's economy contracted slightly. Cape Verde's economic recovery remains slow due to the unfavourable economic

conditions at the global and national levels. Finally, the economic recovery continues in Mali and Guinea-Bissau, two countries which, after a sluggish period resulting from recent unrest in 2014, registered growth rates of 5.8% and 2.6%, respectively.

This economic dynamism has been accentuated by changes in the governance of the countries in the region. The Nigerian presidential election in April 2015 was welcomed across the globe because it was fairer, better organised and more transparent. Likewise, economically, the business environment of the country has improved. Four countries in West Africa: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Togo, are ranked among the world's top 10 countries for business environment improvement between June 2013 and June 2014. The region has also made significant progress regarding human development indicators (education, health and income), which rose much faster than in other sub-regions. Particularly strong performances were recorded in Benin, Mali and Niger, as well as in Sierra Leone and Liberia (ADB, 2015; Moghalu, 2014; Tacoli, 2002; Hopkins, 1973). Notwithstanding difficult challenges, the region projects a palpable dynamism which heralds bright prospects. There is a high sense of optimism with regards to regional stability, research and innovation and inclusive growth. Figure 2 is an indigenous fabric production map of West Africa.



Figure 2: Close-up map of West Africa (indicated with indigenous fabrics)

The region encompasses great diversity regarding culture, language and ethnicity. This is reflected in the lifestyle, food and more importantly for this study, the clothing and textile preferences of the people. Williamson and Blench (2000) explain that West Africans speak a wide range of Niger-Congo languages, belonging mostly, though not exclusively, to non-Bantu branches, though some Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic speaking groups are also found. The Niger – Congo-speaking Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, Akan and Wolof ethnic groups are the largest and most influential. In the central Sahara, Mandinka or Mande groups are most significant. Chadic-speaking groups, including the Hausa, are situated in the most northerly parts of the region nearest to the Sahara; and Nilo-Saharan communities, such as the Songhai, Kanuri and Zarma, are concentrated in the eastern parts of West Africa bordering Central Africa.

Going back many centuries, West Africa is home to many tribes. Some of the tribes make up a substantial part of the population of the countries they inhabit. Typically, even tribes that live in proximity to each other maintain their unmistakable social practices and dialects. The Ashanti, Yoruba, Senufo, Fon and Bamana tribes are especially important to this study owing to the fact that their fabric design traditions are rare, valuable and popular across the world.

The Asante are a major ethnic group belonging to the Akans in central Ghana in West Africa, found approximately 300 kilometres away from the coast. The Asante are a wealthy ethnic group due to the large gold deposits that are mined within their territorial borders. The Asante religion is based on a system characterised by the belief in a mixture of spiritual and supernatural powers. The Asante believe that plants, animals and trees have souls; they also believe in 'spirits', witches and forest monsters, and a variety of religious practices involving ancestors, higher gods or 'abosom' and 'Nyame', the Supreme Being of Asante. The Asante are known for their great diversity in artistic production including woodcarving, metal casting, goldsmithing (Edgerton, 1995; Obeng, 1986) and production of the world's renowned kente and adinkra, (a stamped fabric that is discussed in detail subsequently in this text).

The Yoruba are one of the largest African ethnic groups south of the Sahara Desert. They are, in fact, not a single group, but rather a collection of diverse people bound together by a common language, history and culture. Within Nigeria, the Yoruba dominate the western part of the country. According to Yoruba mythology, they descended from a hero called Odua or Oduduwa. Koslow (1996) states that as many as 20 percent of the Yoruba still practice the traditional religions of their ancestors. The practice of traditional religion varies from community to community. For example, a deity (god) may be male in one village and female in another. Yoruba traditional religion holds that there is one Supreme Being and hundreds of *orisha*, or minor deities. There are three gods common to all Yoruba: Olorun (the Sky God), Eshu (also called Legba) and Ogun (god of war, the hunt and metalworking who is considered one of the most important). The Yoruba have traditionally been among the most skilled and productive 'craftspeople' of Africa, working at such trades as blacksmithing, weaving, leatherworking, glassmaking and ivory and wood carving, with Yoruba women specialising in cotton spinning, basketry and dyeing. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Yoruba bronze casting using the lost-wax method reached a peak of technical excellence never subsequently equalled in Western Africa (Bascom, 1984; Hetfield 1996; Koslow 1996).

The Senufo are a group of people living in northern Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. They are excellent farmers and are made up of a number of different groups who moved south to Mali and Côte d'Ivoire in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Senufo are a very animistic society and the people believe that everything is determined by ancestral spirits. If a ritual is not performed correctly, then it is believed that the spirit will cause drought, infertility or prolonged illness. They follow a strict caste-like system, in which the farmer occupies the top rung of society. Farming is a huge part of the Senufo culture even for those who do not belong to the farmer caste. The domestic unit is the extended family: a patriarch, with his sons and their wives and children. The Senufo are outstanding musicians, using marimbas, tuned iron gongs and a variety of drums, horns and flutes. They are also internationally famous wood carvers, making mainly masks and figures, and are also renowned for the

production of Korhogo fabrics which are discussed further in this study (Holas, 1957; Spindel and Carol, 1989; Glaze, 1981).

The Fon people live in the south of Benin, adjacent to Togo and south-west Nigeria. They are a major West African ethnic and linguistic group and their language, also called Fon, is closely related to the Ewe of Ghana. The traditional economy of the Fon is based on agriculture, relying mainly on corn (maize), cassava and yams for subsistence. A co-operative organisation of adult males' aid in such tasks as land clearing and house building. Each village also has a group of professional hunters who are bound by strict supernatural sanctions. Fon arts are unique and distinct from other artistic traditions elsewhere in West Africa. Their arts, which often incorporate non-religious themes, assembled from multiple different materials and borrowed widely from other tribes in the region, have been, and continue to be, substantially supported by successive kings and their families. Common art forms include wood and ivory carving, metalwork (including silver, iron and brass), appliqué cloth and clay bas-reliefs. The Fon appliqué is one of the most colourful and picturesque representations of traditional culture and ideas in the region.

The Bamana are members of the Mande culture, a large and powerful group of people. They are considered to be among the largest Mande ethnic group and are the dominant Mande group in Mali, with 80 percent of the population speaking the Bambara language (Roberts, 1987). The artistic tradition of the Bamana is rich, characterised by extensive masking customs, which are used as a form of social control and community education. They also produce pottery, sculptures, beautiful Bogolanfini cloth and wrought iron figures fashioned by blacksmiths. Their potters, weavers, sculptors and leather workers are extensively trained in their respective arts as apprentices for up to eight years. The artists supply the community with objects required for daily living and also carry their work to urban centres, where they can be sold for a small profit. While the tourist and art market constitute the main outlets for modern Bamana artworks, most artistic traditions have been part of sacred vocations, created as a display of religious beliefs and used in rituals. Members of Bamana society who still live in rural villages continue to rely on

subsistence farming as the most common means of livelihood (Otter and Dagan, 1997).

Religion plays an essential part in the lives of the people of West Africa, with Islam and Christianity being the predominant religions in the region. However, traditional African religions are the oldest belief systems held by the population of West Africa and include the Akan, Yoruba, Odinani and Serer religions. Although traditional beliefs vary from one place to the other, there are more similarities than differences. They are spiritual but also linked to the historical and cultural heritage of the people (Mbiti, 1992; Duiker & Spielvogel, 2006). Islam is the religion of the region's biggest ethnic groups by population and Islamic rules on livelihood, values, dress and practices have had a profound effect on West Africa. The concept of tribalism is less observed by Islamized groups like the Mande, Wolof, Hausa, Fula and Songhai, than it is by non-Islamized groups. Islam was introduced to the region by traders in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Traditional Muslim areas include Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Guinea and Niger, the upper coast and two-thirds of inland Sierra Leone and inland Liberia, the western, northern and far-eastern regions of Burkina Faso and the northern halves of the coastal nations of Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. (Robinson, 2004; Doi, 2006). Christianity was introduced to the region by European missionaries during the colonial era from the mid-nineteenth century on into the twentieth century and is associated with the British and French eras of colonisation. It has become the predominant religion in the central and southern part of Nigeria and the coastal regions stretching from southern Ghana to the coastal parts of Sierra Leone. Just as Islam has absorbed the elements of traditional African religion, so has Christianity been augmented by aspects of traditional African worship (Akyeampong, 2006; Collins, 1990). These main religions and others have had a profound effect on the material culture of West Africa including its textiles and dress.

### **1.7 Textiles and Clothing in West Africa**

West African textiles and clothing communicate important religious, historical and social information about the cultures to which they belong. They act as markers of status indicating wealth and conferring prestige; they identify members of specific

cultural or social groups and play a significant part in ceremonies of initiation, marriage and death. Throughout history, the elite members of society, who created the necessary socio-political, cultural and economic environments for clothing practices to develop, have determined clothing trends. According to changing historical contexts, individuals and social groups, have used clothing as a form of body modification and to enhance their personal and social image and identity. Dress has also been instrumental in reinforcing images and social boundaries with outsiders; such images are both accentuated on the body itself or the clothes covering the body. According to Belting (2011), an image is more than a product of perception. It is created as the result of personal or collective knowledge and intention. People live with images as the result of personal or collective knowledge and intention. These associations exemplify individuals' bonds with cultural codes and conventions.

Although this research and practice mainly consider fabrics that find their application in interior decoration and architecture the writer has drawn on studies concerning dress and clothing which have been the primary catalyst for fabric production in West Africa. Amongst the rich and varied forms of dress are the typical pieces of West African formal attire, including the knee-to-ankle-length, flowing Boubou robe, Dashiki and Senegalese Kaftan (also known as Agbada and Babariga), which have their origins in the clothing of the nobility of various West African empires in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The traditional half-sleeved, hip-long, woven smocks or tunics known as fugu in Gurunsi, riga in Hausa, and worn over a pair of baggy trousers, are also a popular garment (Nordquist & Aradeon, 1975). Nordquist and Aradeon, further note that in the beach-front districts extending from the southern Côte d'Ivoire to Benin, a substantial rectangular length of material is wrapped under one arm, hung over a shoulder and held in one of the wearer's hands; this dress is reminiscent of ancient Roman robes. The best-known of these robe-like articles of clothing is the Kente (made by the Akan of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire), who wear them as a symbol of national pride. Weaving fabrics and stitching them into garments have been regular customs in West Africa. The practice predates modern record keeping and historical examples can be seen in



museums, archives and the documentation of different breeches, shirts, tunics and coats (Rattray, 1927).

Traditional activities such as festivals and celebrations of war victories and heroism, cultural symbolism and the decrees of kings, chiefs and overlords have all contributed to the shaping of fabric design and manufacture in the region. Gordon (2011) states that, for sacred celebrations, men and women clothe themselves in meaning that is alive and changing, yet anchored in beliefs. For a long time in Ghana, to appear at an important event wearing cloth in the same pattern as the most prominent or eminent chief has been considered an affront. Forward-thinking chiefs largely avoid such social blunders by commissioning new clothes from a local weaver in innovative patterns and colours for the most important occasions. This commission is then undertaken with a commitment from the weaver not to copy it until after the event when requests for replication are considered a compliment (Ross 2009). Such cultural interactions and dynamics continue to drive creativity and innovation in textile production in the region.

The textiles and dress of West Africa have been greatly influenced over time by global textile design and production, especially Europe. With the arrival of European traders in the late fifteenth century, new kinds of textiles, as well as imported garments, were introduced to the West African market. (Kriger, 2006). “For formal attire, there was a fairly clear regional distribution of dress forms. In the largely once-forested region of the lower Niger, from the Benin Kingdom eastward to Cameroon, a substantial textile worn around the waist was usual. With access to European clothing, nightshirts, dressing gowns, and top hats were adopted into the tradition. Westward, from the Yoruba-speaking region and its immediate (non-Benin Kingdom) neighbours to Côte d’Ivoire, a large cloth was worn around the body, under the right shoulder and over the left” (Picton, 2009:1). Figure 3 is an illustration of a chief in wraparound Kente at an official coronation in Ghana.



Figure 3: Chief in wraparound Kente  
Credit: Douglas Anane Frimpong - Photo Editor GCG, Ghana

Indigenous hand woven cloth for everyday wear, incorporating a wider spectrum of colours with commercially produced yarns has persisted. Though it has mainly been replaced by domestic and imported factory-woven cloth. Sumberg and Douah (2010) indicate that even though there were different types of garments in the region, changes in dress accelerated during the Colonial period especially from

1902 to 1960. New styles of fitted tops and slim skirts for women replaced upper and lower wrappers. Details of sleeve size, peplum and skirt length, as well as styles of headwraps varied widely, changed rapidly and indicated the level of a woman's fashion sense. From 1960 men abandoned hand-woven cloth except for very special occasions and began wearing trousers, shorts, shirts, T-shirts and other garments imported from Europe, Asia and North America. Imported Wax prints became a vehicle for expressing socio-political issues and changes via a visual symbolic language often accompanied by an abbreviation of a traditional proverb. Cloth is a vital form of communication in Africa and its traditional language has been expanded to a number of influences creating an ever-changing 'conversation' between textiles and the consumer (that this study hopes to participate in). This study will consider such conversations and hopefully trigger new discussions in the indigenous textile production sector.

At this point it should be stressed that the incorporation of contemporary digital printing techniques for the practical component of this thesis should not be misconstrued in any way as superior to the handmade, traditional textile design traditions of the region; they should be complimentary to those individuals and agencies that are working to protect them. The activities of such individuals and agencies that are working with some communities to produce handmade pieces using traditional techniques is to be commended.

These initiatives must be encouraged as there is still a market for such products. Ethical fashion enterprises such as Fashion4Development (a global campaign that uses fashion-based initiatives to support the United Nations' broader issues in helping Africa) and the UN's International Trade Centre (ITC) Ethical Fashion Initiative, a project which connects the fashion business with African artisans, are bringing issues such as development, poverty reduction and environmental sustainability into wider focus. Since 2011, Fashion4Development, in collaboration with the United Nations, has been working with identifiable groups and individual designers in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and other African countries. Top fashion brands such as the British designers Vivienne Westwood and Stella McCartney, Australia's Sass and Bide and Italy's Ilaria Venturini Fendi are participating in such initiatives and working with indigenous communities to create fashion products

featuring ethnic-influenced patterns, prints and designs inspired by the land and culture of the Kikuyu, Maasai, Samburu and other East African tribes (Phipps-Rufus, 2002). Such efforts are very encouraging as there is enough evidence to demonstrate that these production practices are creating sustainable employment for marginalised women and disadvantaged groups. This is evidenced in the work of Saheed (2013) that outlines the role of women's groups at Adire production centres across Nigeria and the corresponding livelihood it provides for them and their families.

### **1.8 Authenticity in Contemporary Design Spaces**

According to Dutton (2003) the term authentic is synonymous with words such as real, genuine and true. He further describes authentic as a term whose meaning remains uncertain until one knows what dimension of its reference is being talked about. Authentic is a "dimension word," and together with its synonyms, they are best understood in the light of their opposites, as well as the words they modify (Austin, 1962). Therefore, the implication of the words authentic or inauthentic is 'context dependent' to a high degree. Janke (2010) also points out that authenticity is often a complex inquiry and refers to the cultural provenance of artwork. In this context, authenticity may involve reference to whether an indigenous person produced the artwork or whether it was produced with proper regard to indigenous customary practices. However, there is a seemingly shifting concept of authenticity and artistic intent in contemporary art. The traditional notion of material authenticity as being the physical and aesthetic evidence of the artist's hand in the 'original' materials is outmoded. There must be a re-thinking of the concept of authenticity with the changing nature of art. Authenticity was, and is, often discussed in the context of attribution, and is traditionally linked with the artwork's material present (Gordon, 2011). Contemporary African arts constitute a complex field of artistic production, research, and interpretation fast becoming a repository of what is termed 'rich intellectual discovery'. There is also an intersection of the shifting models of cultural and epistemological analysis in which Africa's creative energies are becoming a global phenomenon. The material, techniques and outlook of

‘modern’ African art and design does not subscribe to rigid borders, outmoded hierarchies of authenticity, interpretation and integrity.

Issues of authenticity are major concerns in the application of indigenous West African designs. However, with the appropriate communication and dialogue with the ‘owners’ of the design elements, these concerns need not arise. There is a perceived rise in demand for products inspired by indigenous themes. This has led to many unfair practices including the use of inappropriate images by designers, for example, copying sacred symbols and using them in commercial products. Mellor (2001) states that over a decade ago, public representation of copied designs or images as original images had serious implications under most Western legislation. There are additional issues at stake in Indigenous cultures, involving ceremony, custodianship and the sites relating to specific designs. The use of such designs or their appropriation without permission and compensation is not acceptable. Especially when huge profits have been made in the process. It is only rational that the inclusion of indigenous designs in a project is desirable; therefore, the use must be negotiated with the source or the community involved. Usage may be subject to royalties and copyright fees, furthermore, it may be expedient to find out if the subject matter of the work is suitable for its proposed use and reproduction. One must also be aware that it is not acceptable in indigenous communities to widely circulate ‘sacred’ materials. Such ‘sacred’ materials can be avoided if prior background checks are made, as these types of resources are in the minority. In instances when the user or designer is in doubt about a particular subject matter, there should be consideration of the appropriate context for reproduction of such designs and images. It is a proper cultural practice to ask for permission when one is working with cultural designs. In as much as I support the idea that designers should be given the opportunity to interpret and present works in their own ways, I also believe that consideration must be given to interpretation and context when using ‘sacred’ indigenous cultural materials. The artist can also undertake a background study on the indigenous interpretation of the material by way of enhancing the cultural significance of the work.

Commercialisation of Indigenous cultural expression is a highly diversified area in some countries (USA, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa). The influence of

new information technologies, the media, international tourism and the development of market economies has transformed various expressions of traditional folk culture and folklore from interpersonal communication to global technical communication. “These manifestations of creative human endeavour have become a part of the cultural heritage and have undergone certain ‘innovations’ leading to their homogenisation for the development of ‘products’ that appeal to the present-day mass culture catered for by the market economy and the global information society” (Ondrusova, 2004). For West African textile designs to be relevant in contemporary spaces, there must be flexible modes of distribution. This is because distribution is the best way of extending knowledge. Every decision about the further development of indigenous West African cultural expressions should be considered in light of its impact on the global design landscape and the corresponding benefits to the region. There are several untapped elements of traditional culture that can serve as inspiration for individual creative activities whose products can be commercialised. Heffer (2010) relates that textiles have always been at the forefront of material innovation. Even more so today, the textile craft traditions of lace making, weaving, braiding, knitting and embroidery are providing fundamental structures for an unprecedented material revolution. A closer look at the relationship between technology and textiles reveals exciting future global developments. Within various sectors, technology and textiles are providing solutions to help shape new design futures. A hybrid of textile and multi-disciplinary practice is combining technology, past and present, to address complex design problems. For West Africa to have a sustainable textile design and production future, there must be a collaborative, participatory, performative and socially conscious production processes in place. The artist’s view of processes, materials, collaboration and preservation must change to meet contemporary dynamics. Shifting authenticities of process and materiality in contemporary art practice must be embraced as a positive phenomenon. Indigenous artistic practices must be considered to be part of a global creative space and migrate from being overly protective to collaborative. Innovation in smart materials and collaborative practices with scientists and engineers with the designers/arts would create more innovative designs. Historical perspectives and the impact of changing artistic practices on

conservation, curation and art history cannot operate in isolation from current digital innovation.

## **2 – REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.0 Fabric Design, Evolution and Development**

Textile fabrics from different parts of the world have evolved through a complex mix of cultural assimilation, translation, transformation and migration of the various Diasporas. This can partly be explained by the fact that textiles can travel so easily, absorb a variety of cultural influences and in turn impact on those same cultures that they come into contact with; in short, textiles create and are created by culture. This process typically takes place incrementally and over a long period (although not exclusively) so that fabrics eventually become indigenous to their 'host localities'. African Wax Prints, Scottish Paisley fabrics and French Provence fabrics are all examples of fabrics that originated from one region and became iconic symbols of other regions of the world. Furthermore when an item is deemed indigenous, especially by those outside of that particular community, it is often politically, economically and culturally expedient for both the indigenous community and those outside of it to understand such textiles as historically and aesthetically traditional, as explored by Anderson and Ranger (1991) and Hobsbawm (2012) who have ingeniously discussed this concept of imposed or invented traditions. Anderson and Ranger (1991:1) suggest that "Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented".

This study discusses the subtle balance and interplay between assimilation, translation and the role of the African diaspora in particular, and how they imbricate to shape modern-day textile fabrics in West Africa. It also considers the impact processes of appropriation have, and continue to have, on textile creativity and development. This is because textile fabrics have been used in constructing social identities, and this creates an innate bond between the 'owners' and the fabrics.

It is common practice for designers to translate trends from one culture into novel and attractive designs for use by people of other cultures. Fish (2005:1) states that "influential textile design themes in the industrial design sector rely on few and long-established themes like florals, geometrics, conversational (pictorial) and ethnic motifs indicating that, in researching and sourcing for inspiration for textile design, commercially produced textiles produce patterns that re-interpret historical design



styles and use influences from indigenous cultures”. This study argues that when rules, restrictions and issues of copyright and appropriation are attached to cultural expressions, innovation in that area can be curtailed to a large extent. Seemingly, most of the advocacies for copyright and intellectual property rights for indigenous fabric production are restrictive, not progressive. Roberts (2004) argues that they are not rights to make patented things or carry out patented processes; they are rights to exclude others, to stop others from making products or using processes sometimes with or without permission.

## **2.1 Historical Development of West African Textile Fabrics**

The origin of fabric production, dyeing and patterning in West Africa is not accurately known, and as with all searches for points of origin, this ultimately proves more and more elusive as the research for these beginnings intensifies. However, records show that the weaving and dyeing of cotton already existed before the first Portuguese traders landed on the west coast of Africa in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Gascoigne, 2001). Most of the West African tribes that had been part of the ancient Mali, Ghana or the Songhai Empires thrived between 800 AD and 1600 AD around the upper part of West Africa (Ade Ajayi and Crowder, 1989; Connah, 2001). It was speculated that they migrated into the forest and the coastal regions as splinter groups to escape the wars and suppressions by their rulers that were prevalent at the time. It is believed that they acquired the skill of weaving and decorating fabrics while they were still part of those three empires and practised various textile modifications and innovations at their new settlements. The tradition of strip weaving and dyeing or patterning cloth using natural dyes such as indigo, cola nut, *badie* dye, mud and camwood dyes, was an integral part of the region. These fabric production processes and materials are still predominant, although to a lesser extent, in modern-day Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Senegal and Niger. This is so despite the introduction of synthetic dyes and brightly coloured factory-made fabrics.

McLaughlin et al. (1994) indicate that the first Europeans to arrive on the coast were the Portuguese in 1471. They encountered a variety of African kingdoms, some of which controlled substantial deposits of gold. In 1482, the Portuguese built

the Castle at Elmina, the first European settlement on the Gold Coast. This encounter of the Portuguese with the west coast of Africa became a prelude to several other European expeditions and invaders who initially came to trade but later plundered and segregated the region. Because European traders were travelling across the world, they obtained what could be described as an elevated view of textile production and design, material, technology and application from the various localities they traded. They became aware of what local trade and demand were like across the west coast of Africa. Against this backdrop, they adopted several approaches to make a profit such as sourcing fabrics from different parts of the world and selling them in West Africa. Some of these approaches were very beneficial to indigenous textile production; others nearly killed the local textile trade or influenced it to such an extent that some design traditions altered completely. This accounts for the Eurocentricity of much textile research, as it is based on the accounts of the colonising forces; and unfortunately, conventional and accepted histories ignore indigenous records of cultural production such as oral traditions and other forms of 'unofficial knowledge' as espoused by Raphael Samuel (1994).

Picton (1995) asserts that from the outset of the coastal trade, Europeans traders had always included linen and woollen textiles among their goods. Some, particularly the Portuguese, traded local textiles from one part of the west coast to another. They also captured slaves who were weavers and put them to work on the Cape Verde Islands making cloth with North African designs for the coastal trade. On the other hand, Danish merchants in the early eighteenth century were surprised to discover that Ashanti weavers unravelled the silk cloth they had obtained from them in order to re-weave yarn to local design specifications. The Danish merchants instantly saw the financial opportunity of yarn trade, so they started importing rejected yarns from textile mills in Europe and other parts of the world to the west coast. These imported yarns accelerated the weaving traditions in many areas of the west coast as the already dyed yarns saved a considerable amount of time and cost. According to Stanfield (1971), there were some accounts of colonial discouragement and several attempts to subvert local handmade production. The colonial masters did this by restraining the use of local textile

fabrics and then proceeding to import cheap alternatives, thereby transferring the income from Africa to Europe. Although many such colonial interferences can be understood as having a negative impact, there have been some positive implications regarding innovation, material processing and applications. Adire Eleko's origin has been traced to Ibadan, Nigeria, around 1910, and ironically owes its existence to punitive colonial policies. Faced with a shortage of raw cotton for their mills and a resistant African market, European merchants flooded the region with cheap cotton sheeting while colonial governments levied high taxes on locally made cloth. The combination of cheap fabrics on the market and high taxes on locally produced fabrics pushed West African weavers out of work, and by extension "freed" them to turn to farming and hence grow cotton for export to European mills (Clarke, 2002). Examples of the breadth and variety of indigenous textile techniques include the Royal Asante Kente and Adinkra from Ghana, Mud cloth from Mali, Adire from Nigeria and the wax prints that are common to the entire West African region. This study also considers specific examples of the adaptation and assimilation of indigenous textile techniques. Adinkra, Adire, Bogolanfini, Fon Applique, Korhogo, Indigo and debatably Wax print are the most predominant in the region and will be discussed extensively in this study.

Adinkra fabrics are produced from heavy hand-woven plain cotton fabrics and dyes obtained from the roots of the 'kuntunkuni' plant. The fabric is stamped with Adinkra symbols that are characters used by the ancient West Africans to make up words that symbolise the ideas they want to convey without necessarily spelling them out in the conventional sense (Rattray, 1927). Though no one person has been accredited with the origin and the evolution of the Adinkra symbols, nevertheless, these sophisticated ideographs have evolved from simple primary motifs. This can be seen in the existence of several versions of some of the designs and their latest forms. Various versions of a single symbol have been illustrated by Bruce Willies in the book '*The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra*' (1998). Although Adinkra symbols and designs and other derivatives have been seen exclusively as Asante and for that matter Ghanaian, there have been discussions about their real origins that give credence to wider sub-regional origination and modification over time (Arthur, 2001; Mato, 1986; Fianu, 2007).

Adinkra as a design form has been in existence for at least two centuries. Its technique of production in its present form has existed more or less unchanged since the early nineteenth century. Originally Adinkra designs were primarily used for funeral clothing. Today, it is widely used as a dynamic art form to give order and meaning to the social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious practices of the Ghanaian.

Adire is a Yoruba word describing a resist-dyed fabric, traditionally with indigo by blocking some areas of the cloth from absorbing dye by tying, stitching and applying dye resistant substances such as starch paste or wax. The fabric can also be clamped between carved blocks of wood to produce a negative image that, in the case of Adire, would be a white pattern on a blue background. The origin of Adire is not accurately known, however, it has been linked to indigo dyeing in North and West Africa, which dates back to 5000 BC. As a distinctive textile type, Adire first emerged in the city of Abeokuta, a centre for cotton production, weaving, and indigo dyeing in the nineteenth century. The prototype was tie-dyed Kijipa, a handwoven cloth dyed with indigo for use as wrappers and covering cloths (Areo & Kalilu, 2013; Wolff, 2006). The main centres of Adire are Abeokuta and Ibadan; however, there are pockets of dyeing activities throughout most of Yorubaland in Nigeria. There are two broad categories of Adire. In one, the resist agent is raffia or *iko*, where the patterns are made by tying. These cloths are called Adire Oniko. In the other category (which is Adire Eleko), the resist agent is starch – eko - which is either painted or stencilled onto the cloth before dyeing. There is a third category - Adire Alabere which uses stitching as the pattern resist but is often considered a derivative of Adire Oniko. (However, for the purpose of clarity, it will be treated as a separate component in this study.) Adire designs are always balanced and symmetrical in arrangement and there is also a conscious effort to reduce the contrast of dye colour and background designs. A recent development in the production of Adire has modified both materials and techniques where, for example, synthetic dyes and colours other than blue are used to produce multicolour effects. Additionally, lighter, tightly-woven factory made fabrics have been substituted for heavier, coarser and homespun cotton fabrics (Cordwell, 1983; Jegede, 1992; Panorama, 2013).

Malian mud cloth is traditionally referred to as Bogolanfini or Bokolanfini. 'Bogolan' is a Bamana word which means something made by using mud while 'fini' means cloth. The created motifs are usually abstract or semi-abstract representations of everyday objects. Luke-Boone (2001) asserts that the dyes and fabric used in mud cloth can be traced back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. For many years, much confusion existed as to how mud cloth was made. It was considered that the designs were produced by a discharge method, that is, the fabric is first dyed in black and the light patterns are then achieved by bleaching. Picton and Mack (1989) still refer to it as a 'discharged-dyed' textile, although technically, given the description of how it is made, it is not necessarily a discharge process. This is because discharge dyeing is the removal of dye with various chemicals or bleach, often in patterns and designs from an already dyed fabric. However, Bogolanfini is made by dyeing the fabric in a natural dye and repeatedly painting patterns with a specific mud to create the design. The fabric is then allowed to 'cure' for some time to allow the mud to react with the base dye to form a bond. The excess mud is then washed off creating darker tones as opposed to the 'un-mudded' areas hence creating a delicate contrast of light designs on a darker background and vice versa. Traditionally, women who were taught by their mothers during a long-term apprenticeship, carried out the whole painting process. This is in line with most West-African textile production practices, where the different activities in the making of cloth have always been gender defined. For instant, the spinning of cotton is done by women; men do weaving and; decoration is done by both men or women depending on the culture. Presently both men and women are doing the painting of Bogolanfini.

In addition to being highly decorative, the different designs or patterns found on mud cloth have symbolic meanings. The knowledge of the symbolic meanings of these designs is handed down from mother to daughter during their apprenticeship. Imperato & Shamir (1970) explain that these designs are used together to represent a historical event or to commemorate local heroes. The precise, geometric, black and white designs can today be found on everything including furniture, book covers, wrapping paper and more importantly, clothing.

Fon appliqué cloth was created at the royal court and was primarily devoted to the celebration of the Fon monarchs, particularly during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fabric bears distinctive insignia or symbols that celebrate outstanding deeds and names the monarch then adopts. The names are not originally theirs; they are either inherited from the king's ancestry or acquired through war victories or significant achievement. Kent (1971) states that oral traditions handed down by the families of artists at the Abomey court attribute the introduction of this art to the court of Danhomè and to King Agadja (1708-1740). Fon applique pieces attained a sufficiently high degree of artistic skill for them to be often given to other nations with which the kingdom had connections as gifts, and they also served as marks of friendship. Since the conquest of the kingdom by the French in 1894, Fon appliqué cloth has portrayed a wider variety of subjects relating to daily life. They are also a source of inspiration for contemporary creators. While on campaign in Wémè – the modern day Republic of Benin, King Agadja is said to have been impressed by Tedoe voodoo adepts in Gbozoummè whose skirts formed circles of colour like a rainbow during their dances. He decided to bring some of the colourful skirts to his court so he could be dressed in 'rainbow colours'. Before that, all the weaves were plain with very minimal decoration or colour. This was so because the weavers were restricted to decorating the royal clothing with simple designs. However, after King Agadja's interest in the coloured skirts, the weavers were encouraged to try more colourful designs. After the conquest of Whydah in 1727 by King Agadja, there was an upsurge in the art of appliqué cloth due to the massive importation of factory manufactured fabrics from Europe. From that time on, the court artists had access to a broad range of dyed fabrics that formed the typical Fon appliqué backgrounds (Adandé, 2011). Today, in the Abomey workshops and elsewhere, the old forms linked to the royal pictographs are copied, though there is also a constant innovation and adaptation of these same themes. The tourist market has opened up new possibilities - nature and animals that are different from those found in the Fon royal insignia are now subjects for the appliqué cloth.

Korhogo is made by the Senufo people of the Cote d'Ivoire; this type of cloth is designed by using mud to paint the cloth in various abstract and geometric designs. The mud is typically black, brown or rust and it is taken from various parts of

western Africa. The fabric is used for clothes, as well as pillows and home furnishings (Luke-Boone, 2001). Using simple tools, men make fine line drawings of human and animal forms on coarsely spun, narrow-woven cotton strips sewn together to form large hangings. The designers' "paint" may be brown or black fermented mud or modern pigments, and is applied while sitting or kneeling in front of their homes. The designs relate to paintings that decorated ritual houses in years past. The artists take free reign in creating the stylised human, animal, bird and snake forms, some relating to costumed dancers. When entering a Korhogo village, the visitor is met with hundreds of such drawings attached to mud-brick walls and spread on the ground (Hackman, 1998; Luke-Boone, 2001; Polakoff, 1982).

Indigo dyeing has been renowned and widely traded in the West African region for centuries; it is also produced in other regions, sometimes in combination with camwood or kola dye. It is believed that the technique may have originated spontaneously in several areas and that the Soninke and Mandingo may have helped diffuse patterns during their travels through Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. Mauny (1961) indicates that the rich, deep blue colour obtained from plants containing Indican has been used to dye cloth in Africa since the sixteenth century, as evidenced in written records, and probably earlier, according to historical accounts. Indigo was the foundation of numerous textile traditions throughout West Africa, and indigo clothes were considered a symbol of wealth, abundance, and fertility (Diakhate, 2010). Indigo dyeing in most West African communities is traditionally a female task. The person who manipulates the complex resources required for an effective indigo vat commands a highly specialised knowledge.

Wax prints are some of the most iconic textile fabrics found in West Africa; they are factory produced colourful cotton fabrics with wax printing or imitations of wax prints. They can be understood as industrialised versions of hand-drawn, hand blocked and hand dyed batik. The prints have a very complex origin although most today have been shaped considerably by West African culture, symbolism, proverbs and maxims. Sylvanus (2007) and other notable scholars in the area of West African arts have corroborated that African prints are not necessarily African, but Euro-Japanese that have evolved and incorporated African themes. They were developed from Indian batiks that were sold in Indonesia and Japan, developed by

the Javanese before the nineteenth century. Because batik was of Hindu origin, its sacred importance was associated with women's birth, initiation, marriage and death (Lubell, 1976). The Javanese had developed a high level of batik artistry before they were colonised by a succession of countries and overlords (TPW, 2013). Even though the Javanese produced many symbolic and representational patterns and perfected the skill of batik making, while under the rule of India, the Chinese, Islamic clerics and the Dutch; they were significantly influenced by the influx of new ideas from the cultures of these different overlords. Consequently, Chinese mythology, Islamic geometric symbols and Buddhist themes were incorporated into their batiks. A greater development of geometric designs was made manifest than ever before during the era when Java became an Islamic state. This is because Islam forbade the representation of human forms (Irwin and Bratt (1970) as cited in Akinwumi, 2008). By the seventeenth century, Java had come under the political control of the Dutch and Javanese batik was introduced to the Netherlands and other parts of Europe. The Dutch began producing the Javanese batiks with machines. Batik was not readily accepted in Europe because of its 'exotic' design content. The Dutch then led interested European firms in developing overseas markets for the machine-made batiks, which became known as wax prints. Customarily, during the Dutch trade expansion, factories were established in foreign ports and possessions in India, Java, Sumatra and Ceylon, among others (Robinson, 1969; Nielsen, 1979). Nielsen (1979) further establishes that during the late nineteenth century, the Dutch directed their textile mills in Haarlem, Leyden and overseas to produce wax prints for the West African markets. Before then, small quantities of wax prints had been introduced to West Africa by the Europeans; first through Christian missionaries who needed the prints for their converts; second, through the European producers who made wax prints for the African market and; then finally, through West African soldiers who brought back Javanese batiks to their wives after their service, between 1810 and 1862 in Indonesia. West Africans embraced these Dutch wax prints, assimilating and using them in their societies as part of their culture and self-expression.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a rapid upsurge in the export of the cloth to Africa and later in the twentieth century, African prints were



produced and supplied by local factories in West Africa. The marketing of the prints at the retail level was significantly enhanced by the way and manner they attracted indigenous names meaningful to the local consumer and which greatly aided their commercial appeal. The names came in the form of proverbs, attractive phrases and words, slogans, maxims and witticisms that were given to each successful design by African traders. Most often the names had no connection with the designs in question. The practice was established as one of the strategies for marketing African prints at various local markets. Nielsen (1979) observes that the early years of the twentieth century witnessed the export of predominantly blueprints to Nigeria while orange and black went to the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Later, the eastern part of Nigeria favoured deep red and yellow while Cote d'Ivoire cherished brown, yellows, red, dark red and green. The Zairians, on the other hand, were more enthused by brown, cream, pink, purple and light green. Anaman (2011) posits that until 1960 most prints sold in West Africa were produced in Europe, but the situation changed in the post-colonial era. Currently, Ghana is home to several exceptional and high-quality wax printers and manufacturers including Tex Styles Ghana Limited (GTP), a subsidiary of Vlisco - the Netherlands and Akosombo Textile Limited (ATL), which is a subsidiary of Manchester-based A Brunnschweiler and Co. (ABC) Textiles.

It is evident that even though these textiles are now manufactured domestically, the businesses that manufacture them are mostly not owned by Africans. Regardless of how wax prints precisely entered West Africa, it could be argued that they were originally envisioned as cheap mass-produced batiks for the Indonesian marketplace but found a more passionate market in West Africa. However, over time they have become synonymous with high-quality African fashion and spread to other markets. The prints are extensively used in Cote d' Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, Benin, Mali, Togo, Congo and are now regularly used outside Africa in the UK, USA and Asia. As indicated earlier, wax print designs are a consolidation of various artistic cultures, specifically Indonesian, Indian, Chinese, Arab, Dutch and European classical designs. It appears that European producers were mainly concerned with the fabric colour preferences of various African countries. Invariably, the development of specialty African prints seems to have been very

gradual for the Dutch producers. They produced very few designs featuring African content, with the exception of the famous Ghanaian state sword (Akofena) produced as one of their earliest designs. However, design contents of the prints changed considerably from the middle of the 20th century when most of the production was relocated to Ghana and other West African countries. The prints now reflect more West African themes.

## **2.2 Post-Colonialism and West African Textile Traditions**

Many nationalist movements arose across West Africa following World War II. Kwame Nkrumah led Ghana to become the first sub-Saharan colony to achieve its independence in 1957. This was followed next by Guinea in 1958 under the leadership of President Ahmed Sekou Touré. This transformation continued, and by 1974, West Africa's nations were entirely autonomous. Many authors writing during this time, and even during earlier colonial times, saw themselves as both artists and political activists, and their work reflected their concerns regarding the political and social conditions in their countries. As nation after nation gained independence from their colonial rulers, a sense of euphoria swept through Africa as each country celebrated its independence from years of political and cultural domination (Neil, 1990; Huggan, 2001; Gregory, 2009).

Postcolonialism in West Africa left in its wake a cocktail of preferences, ideologies and an increased awareness and support for the production and wearing of local textiles. This transformation can be explained by the fact that after decades of colonial rule, accompanied by a powerful Western influence in every aspect of culture, including dress, fashion has become a medium for the visible expression of pride and African identity. Textile and fashion designers as with other professionals came of age in the struggle for African independence from colonial rule. Pride in national identity has become a prominent element of political and cultural life in many communities. Indigenous styles of dress became a statement of national or regional pride in the post-colonial era.

Today in many African countries, political leaders and other influential members of society are championing local styles of dress. Given the association of Western-style dress during colonialism, it is hardly surprising that many African anticolonial

movements of the 1940s and 1950s made elements of traditional clothing symbolic of their campaign toward independence. At the point of independence, many new republics designed a national dress, intended to unite the diverse peoples within their borders. For example, in the former Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko's *authenticité* campaign urged Zairians to return to "authentic" African clothing styles. Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah encouraged educated nationalists to wear the *fugu*, a waist-length tunic worn by the common man while Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta wore a beaded *ogut tigo* hat and a beaded leather belt (Owoeye, 2011).



Figure 4: Kwame Nkrumah and compatriots wearing smocks during the declaration of Ghana's independence in 1957  
Source: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/xf5CPacHt4Q/hqdefault.jpg>



Figure 5: Close up of sleeveless smock (Fugu)

Source: [www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/a-cultural-point-of-order-a-fugu-is-not-a-batakari.html](http://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/a-cultural-point-of-order-a-fugu-is-not-a-batakari.html)

Contemporary African governments and political leaders continue to wield considerable influence on popular styles of clothing. Kangas and kitenges have become wearable advertising, with designs promoting national health campaigns such as family planning, or president's birthdays and national holidays. Owøye (2011) further contends that, after Thomas Sankara had come to power in Burkina Faso in 1983, he declared locally woven cotton to be the national fabric and required government workers to wear it. In Southern Africa, men's "Kaunda Suits" are named after Kenneth Kaunda, the former president of Zambia became popular and has maintained a positive presence to this day. In South Africa, Gatsha Buthelezi, head of the Zulu-dominated Inkatha Freedom Party, encouraged supporters to wear the animal skins and head-dresses of Zulu warriors at public events. Nelson Mandela's taste in brightly-coloured shirts made them fashionable when he served as the country's president from 1994 to 1999. In 2004, President Kufour of Ghana instituted the National Friday Wear Policy that requires every

worker to wear locally made prints to work and for all official purposes. The policy was aimed at projecting a unique Ghanaian identity through the extensive use of local fabrics and designs as business wear (GNA, 2004). These trends and interventions have influenced many African textile fabrics and fashion designers whose sensibilities have been informed by the political mood of this period; reflecting a desire to bring West African fabrics and their styles to both local and more importantly, global textile markets.

The African American diaspora also joined in this Renaissance and used West African fabrics to reinforce their identity. Kuba embroidery fabric from the Democratic Republic of Congo; Bogolanfini, Bamana mud cloth from Mali and Kente from Ghana are fabrics that evoke racial pride, identity and solidarity in the African American diaspora. Although there are several other fabrics and clothing, the three fabrics mentioned above are increasingly recognised as African by people of all colours and they have come to symbolise African identity in the Diaspora, of course, Kente being the single most recognised fabric. Hernandez (1999:46) writes, “Kente cloth first captured the attention of African Americans in 1958 when Ghana’s first president, President Kwame Nkrumah, visited Washington D.C. wearing Kente. Photographs of the Ghanaian president adorned several newspapers and magazine covers, helping to establish the African cloth as a symbol of African pride and identity. Sometime in the mid-1980s, Black Americans decided to adopt this Kente cloth in their ceremonies. It began to appear at academic graduations and other ritual occasions among African Americans.”

Apart from Kente, other indigenous West African fabrics have received wide patronage among African Americans. According to Toerien (2003), the popularity of mud cloth designs increased dramatically when in 1979, Chris Seydou, a Malian fashion designer based in Paris, included Bogolanfini dresses and wraps in his winter collection (Figure 6).



Figure 6: *Bogolon* dress by Chris Seydou – 1979

Source: <http://www.africaonmysleeve.com/blog/2014/10/20/cradle-of-creativity>

More recently, Beyoncé notched it a step further in figure 7, obviously exploiting the appeal of Bogolanfini and its essential Africanness. The garment is made from an assortment of monochromatic and polychromatic Bogolonfini fabrics and complemented with different accessories.





Figure 7. Beyoncé Knowles in Bogolan

Source: <http://www.pagnifik.com/les-etoffes-africaines-4/>

This cocktail of Bogolan dress (figure 7) was made by Tina Knowles, the mother of Beyoncé under the label 'House of Dereon'. The Amulets on the dress were designed by Louis Vuitton. The brooches in the crown, rings in yellow gold ornamented tribal set diamonds, Spessartite garnets, tsavorites and multicoloured sapphires were all supplied by Louis Vuitton. The Jewellery Necklace was originally done by the tribesmen of Baoule (Cote d' Ivoire) but was provided by Argiles Gallery of Paris. The Formica Bracelets were designed by Stephen Dweck and Rhinestone Bracelets by Alexis Bittar. The imposing *Gele* (African headdress) was sculpted with fabric made by Bou Couture, Abidjan - (Cote d' Ivoire). Finally the leather sandals by Nicholas Kirkwood for RODARTE an American luxury label founded by Kate and Laura Mulleavy. Beyond the unusual mix of accessories that

adds to the elegance of the dress, the composition casts several shadows and which could be discussed in terms of appropriation, adaptation, translation, multiculturalism, globalisation, dissemination, assimilation and many others. All the above dimensions tilt the scales of authenticity in its essence on the composition of the dress. However, this study advocates for such collaborations to generate more interest and expand product dimensions.

Over time, West African textiles such as Adinkra, Indigo cloth and Adire gained new significance as expressions of pan-African and diasporic African pride and nationalist identity in the USA. These fabrics hitherto had long been associated with ritual and ceremonial contexts in several parts of the region. Beyond the traditional “African” uses, they have found their way onto the runways of high fashion, luxury home-wear stores and as the content and material of some fine art projects. Indigenous West African fabrics have adorned the bodies and homes of people from many different cultures. Adire, Mud cloth, Adinkra and other West African fabrics could be said to be in a constant state of cultural dispersion and dissemination.

### **2.3 Indigenous West African Textile Practices as Knowledge Production**

Textile designs have been the most communicative form of visual expression in West Africa and have been fundamental to the valorisation of individuals within society and the maintenance of social hierarchies for centuries. Textile fabrics are as diverse as the number of ethnic groups in the region. Undoubtedly, some of them are outstanding in form, colour and appeal and are much-admired universally. Beyond the sheer look and beauty of West African textile fabrics, they also have symbolic, social and cultural significance. This is entrenched and implicitly understood by various societal groups and informs indigenous consumers when choosing between various kinds of fabrics. Bouttiaux (2008) indicates that West African fabrics epitomise one of the many creative manifestations of cultural identity that have shaped communities occupying its diverse regions. Cultural, religious and ritual meanings are conveyed in colour preferences, materials, embellishments and design, as well as reflecting priorities associated with behaviour, age, ranking and ritual practices. Textiles and dress also function as an important barometer of change and are intrinsically allied to trade. Inter-cultural contact, political and



ideological change and shifting religious observance are aspects central to an understanding of the economic and cultural dimensions of textile fabrics. To emphasize the historical context within which textiles have developed and evolved in the region, Sieber (1972:10) indicates, “the richness of invention and variety in the arts of personal adornment may reflect the breadth and range of the aesthetic life of traditional Africa with greater accuracy than the limited formulations that currently serve in the West as a basis for most studies of African art”. Despite homogenising trends, even the most casual tourist visiting Abidjan, Accra, Dakar, Lagos or Lomé is struck by the breath-taking variety of prints and colours used for the everyday clothes of its residents. As Gordon (2011) explicates, the value of a given fabric is dependent on a range of variables: the rarity and quality of the threads and other materials; colouring agents applied to the fibres; the time spent on its production (usually related to the complexity of construction or embellishment); and sometimes the motifs it contains.

Historical context, symbolism, techniques and material manipulation and several other societal interventions and preferences have nourished indigenous textile production and have become an embodied knowledge; to a larger extent in practice and a lesser extent in theory, of course, due to the literacy level in the region. Embodied knowledge here implies habits, routines, information and tasks that a person understands and processes without necessarily a conscious thought. Maharaj (2009:2) asserts “We glean that the drive to render, regulate and represent perceptual experience on the back of methodological formulae is constantly amended by the artist’s handling, by embodied knowledge”. He further suggests, “I am left pondering the idea that method is not so much ready-made and received as “knocked together for the nonce” - something that has to be invented each time with each research endeavour”. This view runs at variance with indigenous West African textile production practices that follow a certain set of rigid procedures that are not in consonance with the modern notion of creativity, innovation and freedom of expression. However, to realise the full potential of indigenous art practices, there is a need to assess the current trends in research, development, technology and markets for those products. Also, there is a need to examine various forms of indigenous visual design traditions to learn about their role and significance in

indigenous societies and thus discover areas that could be modified and developed into marketable brands. The correlation between indigenous West African textile designs' relationship to localities and traditions, issues of interpretation and how they reflect interaction with other parts of the world are imperative for a deeper understanding of how traditional indigenous textile design can become relevant and survive in a contemporary global context.

Indigenous approaches to understanding the production, meaning and symbolism associated with various images and objects created through time can, of course, be given alternative considerations. Maharaj (2009:3) espouses "it is about unpacking the notion of visual art as knowledge production, taking apart its components and scouring its operations. These considerations beg the question as to what makes the texture of visual art thinking quite its own, its difference. It is distinct from the circuits of know-how that run on clearly spelt out methodological steel tracks. It is the rather unpredictable surge and ebb of potentialities and propensities - the flux of 'know-how'". Subjecting the various layers of operation in traditional textile production to some form of standardisation would give fluidity to the notion of 'know-how' about proclivity and sustainability. Demonstration of profound knowledge and understanding of the major forms of indigenous art are key to their social functions. The need to develop an appreciation and understanding of the cultural heritage values of indigenous art in a global sense demonstrates an understanding of the historical development and social context of the major West African indigenous artistic traditions which underpin this study. There is also need to compare, contrast and critically analyse key interpretive frameworks and techniques through which textile traditions and adaptations are perceived.

Maharaj (2009:7) further questions rhetorically, "Why knowledge 'production'? The question crops up again as we see 'method fever' intensifying the drive towards institutionalisation of art research and practice: with this goes a heightened academicization not in the sense of enhanced analytical rigour but of regulation and routine. Why speak of "production" when it smacks of factories, surpassed industrial modes, heavy metal sites and plants, the assembly line's mechanical regime – standardising components at odds with the vagaries of art practice?". Why not speak of knowledge production when the indigenous processes are time-

consuming and are at variance with modernity? Why not speak of knowledge production when the indigenous fabric production sub-sector cannot match demands and competition from other fabrics imported from elsewhere? Of course, for any form of culture based product to thrive and be relevant in this era, industrial modes, heavy metal sites and other facets of production as indicated above would be a necessary and common feature. Harnessing the knowledge of the people of West Africa, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new design applications offers a vision of sustainability. This exploration focuses on textile design process mechanisation through scalable platforms that will provide solutions to meet modern textile design needs. To digitally render and disseminate traditional textiles as this study advocate is only a newer form of mechanisation as rigid as the older industrial methods Maharaj suggests limits knowledge production. While digital production might in Maharaj's view be a limitation to some extent, when we actually consider the almost unbounded capabilities of CAD that can generate newer and more diverse ways of creating knowledge production. This is so because computer application allows some fluidity and a swifter response to changing situations that older production methods do not, and therefore is more conducive to knowledge production alongside textile production.

Downes (2010) layers knowledge production into filtering, validation, synthesis, presentation and customisation. These layers came about as a result of analogies he drew between knowledge production on the one hand and mining, construction and growth on the other. He stresses that the mining approach emphasises accuracy and purity. Getting the right knowledge set, getting accurate data and validating data are of critical importance. The images, symbolism, colour and all other cultural dimensions of West African indigenous design forms lend themselves to the various layers of knowledge production - filtering, validation, synthesis, presentation and customisation. Filtering in this context implies separating original West African designs from various forms of adulteration based on some set criteria. Validation, on the other hand, is ensuring that the current narrative of textile design practices are reliable and supported by established facts. Synthesis encompasses describing patterns, trends or flows of large amounts of information either documented (written, artworks, symbols and many others) or handed down from

generation to generation via oral traditions. Presentation in this context is the making of concepts understandable through visualisation or logical demonstration or exhibition. Finally, customisation can be understood as the modification of various indigenous art forms and information into current and relevant products that would resonate with people and do so profitably. Customisation again would meet demands of the ever-increasing bespoke textile design and luxury market supported by the current digital textile printing regime. The potential of the indigenous West African textile industry would be expanded and sustainable. Considering the current textile production trends across the world, innovation is very vital and one can draw on the rich West African textile resources with the appropriate technology for cutting-edge designs.

## **2.4 Selected Cases: Contemporary Application of West African Textiles**

In order to understand the complex processes of knowledge production as expressed via textiles and clothing, this research examines a number of case studies of contemporary designers/artists. Such contemporary designers and artists have used West African textile fabrics in their work by exploring the uniqueness of their colour, texture, symbolism, concepts or a combination of these characteristics. Yinka Shonibare, Trine Lindegaard, Philippe Bestenhieder, Junya Watanabe, El Anatsui, Grace Ndiritu and other emerging contemporary designers are discussed at this juncture because their works have found wider acceptance around the world. They have drawn inspiration from West African textile themes to create different art forms and are contributing in a variety of meaningful ways to debates on authenticity.

Yinka Shonibare explores cultural identity, colonialism and post-colonialism within the modern-day context of globalisation. A trademark of his art is his use of brightly coloured African wax and fancy prints. Famously, he utilises these to explore African identity and its relationship to colonialism by dressing Victorian mannequins in costumes made from African fabrics in works such as “*Dysfunctional Family*, *Discus Thrower (After Myron)*, *Globe Head Ballerina (Figure 8)*, *Revolution Ballerina*, and *Mrs Pinckney and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina*”

(Hemmings, 2014). He also mounts such fabrics on stretchers, adding impasto abstractions to some and leaving others unaltered. Drawing on Western art history and literature, he interrogates what makes up the collective contemporary African identity today.

Shonibare identifies elements in African prints and historical paintings and incorporates these in his work. The vibrancy of African wax prints and the potency of their colours have influenced and pushed the frontiers of his work further utilising the colours, contrasting shapes, sizes and textures of the motifs and details of the cloth most effectively (Gumpert, 2008; Iniva, 2013).



Figure 8: *Globe Head Ballerina*, 2012 - Yinka Shonibare  
Source: <http://www.yinkashonibaremba.com/biography/>

Just as Shonibare uses his artworks as a form of resistance or critique, the Sapeurs of Congo and other dandy cults across Africa, express class as a form of resistance by assimilating Western forms of clothing. The Sapeurs merge local aesthetics within the Western fashion canon, thus creating distinct fashion identities. Such post-colonial and post-modern fashion sense resonates among different age groups and disperses the shadows of perceived poverty that all too often characterise the outsiders' views of their communities. Warm (2013) describes them as people who have taken on "English Gentleman chic" sartorially transcending the superiority of their oppressors. The movement embodies the elegance in style and manners of colonial 'dandies' as a means of resistance. La Sape can be traced back to the early years of colonialism in Africa and in particular to Brazzaville and Kinshasa. The French mission was to enlighten the "uncouth" and "naked" African people, so they brought second-hand clothing from Europe as a bargaining tool to gain the loyalty of the chiefs. Brazzaville soon became the "most favoured residential area for whites and the seat of colonial government." By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their "houseboys" were the first to embrace European modernity because they were given clothing instead of money as compensation for their work. The Congolese elite included not only the houseboys but also those who held lower positions as clerks in colonial offices and other places. "Captivated by the snobbery and refined elegance of the Coast Men's attire, Congolese houseboys spurned their masters' second-hand clothes and became unremitting consumers and fervent connoisseurs, spending their meagre wages extravagantly to purchase the latest fashions from Paris" (Gondola, 2010). Jenkins (2005) describes the traditional cosmopolitan as someone who escapes the orbit of their parochial culture through high culture and absorption of the values attached to that culture, and this includes luxuries such as opera, ballet, paintings and other art forms. The variety and colours of their dresses are striking yet set against the backgrounds of the landscape and the life stories of the wearers themselves; they have become pre-eminent global examples of resistance through dress.

Kente is a colourful handmade strip-woven cloth originally made by the Asante and Ewes of Ghana in West Africa. Its renown has spread internationally so that it is now one of the most admired of all fabrics in many parts of the world. Traditionally

Kente has red and golden-yellow colours dominating with white used to separate the various design units or blocks. All other colours are usually in the minority. However, Trine Lindegaard a Danish designer combines unusual colours to make Kente in collaboration with West African weavers ([trinelindegaard.com](http://trinelindegaard.com), 2013). Though the colours are unconventional, the outcomes of these combinations have been very successful. There are interesting colour combinations such as golden-yellow, yellow ochre and sea-blue; wine, golden-yellow and sea blue; navy blue, cream and wine. Furthermore, apart from its usage to separate the design units, white is also used to 'pick out' certain designs in some of her works.

The use of white as a major component in some of the design units against a rather 'pale' and emaciated 'western' model may seem to undermine the grandeur and elegance of the typical Kente wrap-around on a sturdy and plump African. However, the seeming corruption of indigenous Kente designs due to the modifications by Trine has repackaged and presented it to a wider global audience. The spring-summer 2013 menswear collection resonates with western design consumers judging by the critical acclaim her collections received that came after the release of the designs. (Figure 9 is from her spring-summer 2013 menswear collection)





Figure 9. 2013 *Spring Summer Collection* - Trine Lindegaard

Source: [www.fashionbeans.com/2012/trine-lindegaard-ss-2013-mens-lookbook/](http://www.fashionbeans.com/2012/trine-lindegaard-ss-2013-mens-lookbook/)

"The collection is rooted in these African fabrics. I wanted to take them away from their traditional use, the wraparound dresses and headpieces, and their links to social status. I wanted to make them more accessible but still, keep the traditional influences. I have used a lot of technical fabrics and dyeing throughout to keep it fresh" (Lindegaard, 2013). The Kente collection is the debut collaboration that introduced her unique approach to African textiles to the global consumer.

Lindegaard has expanded the frontiers of Kente in three main areas; that is colour combination, design and usage. She has tried to keep the traditional pattern outlook of Kente but manipulated motif placement, colour combination and used them in entirely different ways. Lindegaard combines Kente fabrics (which are weft-faced woven fabrics) with knitted fabrics and other plain weaves, sateen weaves and hi-tech materials to make wearable and modern clothes including very colourful T-shirts, caps, shorts, long and short sleeved shirts, trousers and tracksuits. Lindegaard uses colour and innovation to translate Kente from its traditional



symbolic usage into classless everyday wear. She taps into the various characteristics of the West African fabric and translates and expresses them in different media. Benjamin (1968: 254) discusses, “translation as an approach and the question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning”. The first aspect is if there is an ideal translator and the second is if the work lends itself to translation and, therefore, given the significance of the approach to the translation. He emphasises that by its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, the connection is all the closer due to its importance to the original. Translation ensures the continued life of an object, in this case, Lindegaard’s ‘translation’ of Kente means it would continue to adapt and flourish and reach more customers. As Walter Benjamin (1968:254) extrapolates “Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability”. This reinforces the amorphous nature of translation and emphasises how design elements can be altered and augmented to extend their appeal and application.

Philippe Bestenheider drew on West African wood carvings when designing his famous Binta armchairs (Dezeen, 2009). The chairs, at first glance, display typical African design characteristics including the plethora of colours, motifs and the elaborate patchwork of African wax prints that he used for the upholstery. The motifs in the fabrics used were excessively bold and blended well with the broad and flat surface of the chairs. The contrast of colour and motifs was effectively used to differentiate the various parts of the chairs. In some instances, the back, seat, apron, support or legs of the chair are rendered in the same fabrics. In other instances, every part of the chair is differentiated from each other by different wax prints. To ensure that the colours he used harmonised, Bestenheider worked in the various colour ranges that is, either cool colours (blues and greens) or warm colours (reds, yellows and oranges). The brash colours and contrasting patterns emphasise the armchair’s shape, enveloping and moulding its silhouette.



Figure 10. *Binta Chairs*, 2009 - Philippe Bestenhieder

Source: [www.dezeen.com/2009/04/23/binta-armchair-by-philippe-bestenheider-for-moroso/](http://www.dezeen.com/2009/04/23/binta-armchair-by-philippe-bestenheider-for-moroso/)

The chair's form (figure 10) is based on African wood carvings, and the upholstery is made from a cocktail of wax print fabrics. However, the chair frame is made from polyurethane rubber foam. This unusual collaboration of medium and concept reinforces the contemporary notion of material revolution, which is a phenomenon of rapid research and development of materials and by extension gives more possibilities to product outcomes.

Junya Watanabe went against his 'norm' with his spring/summer 2009 collection by featuring brash and mid-toned African wax prints on silk and denim and a series of imposing headgear (as captured in figure 11 below). The models balanced enormous head-dresses of dried flowers tied with what could be described as gingham or broderie anglais fabrics as they took to the runway in the African prints of vivid red, green, blue and white (Vogue, 2009).



Figure 11. *2009 Spring Summer Collection - Junya Watanabe*

Source: <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/fashion-week/g637/rtw-junya-watanabe-0908/>

From the most elaborate crowns to everyday headwear, items to dress and adorn the head are an essential element of clothing throughout West Africa. It is not clear whether the headgear tradition of West Africa influenced this collection, however, Watanabe struck a delicate balance between West African prints and his signature looks. He draped fabrics into tops, tunics and dresses, steadily mixing them with faded denim, bright gingham checks, glittering eyelets and surprise splashes of leopard spots and neon. Watanabe's use of the print designs on silk struck a sour chord with Vlisco, however, for not obtaining their permission to use them. The

Dutch company quietly ordered him to stop, and eventually settled with the designer out of court. However, Vlisco has not held Watanabe's infractions against him and ironically the company boasts about the Watanabe collaboration in press releases. Watanabe, when asked for a comment, did not confirm or deny the 'appropriation', but said: "all was settled amicably" (Helbach, as cited by Felsenthal, 2012). Perhaps the lesson that can be learned from such a case is that people associate wax prints with Africa rather than Europe or Asia and by implication do not bother to seek the necessary clearance when they use them in their designs, suggesting regulation need only be adhered to when dealing with European companies. This could be due to the seeming lack of clearly defined copyright regime in the region. As to whether Watanabe used wax print designs on silk for his collection without the necessary clearance or permission because he thought designs from Africa do not have the needed copyright protection, is debatable. However, could Vlisco and other printers of wax prints, claim ownership of them? They can claim some ownership or copyright, perhaps, for printing but as for the design content of wax prints, this would be very difficult to prove.

Moving forward to Spring Summer 2016, Watanabe has collaborated with Vlisco for his collection. Describing the spectacle, Blanks (2015) indicates that "everything was infected in some way with pattern and colour here as naive as children's book illustration, there as geometric as an array of Cubist forms. Nothing was sacred, not a Breton stripe, not a double-breasted suit in a navy shadow plaid, not a Bermuda short, nor Watanabe's signature inside-out pieces. The patchwork gave each outfit a strong character; the tribal add-ons compounded it. He metaphorically situates the collection in the period's context. With Panama hats, bow ties, and sockless brogues, the models might have been Dutch businessmen adrift on the equator; their work long finished, their compass bearings lost, their world slowly merging with the environment in which they found themselves".





Figure 12. *2016 Spring Summer Menswear Collection – Junya Watanabe*  
 Source: [www.nowfashion.com/junya-watanabe-man-menswear-spring-summer-2016-paris-14865](http://www.nowfashion.com/junya-watanabe-man-menswear-spring-summer-2016-paris-14865)

Watanabe used wrap-arounds typical to the kikor wraps of Kenya and other grasslands of Africa as shown in figure 12. The accessories encompass wide shiny bands, assorted chains, ornaments of certain African tribes and tessellated patent leather. In the same fashion, he used a cocktail of fabrics such as woven animal rug shawls, soft fabrics with patterns of plant and animal life, patchwork of colourful fragments, colourful Boubou fabrics and a few stripe ribcage-like harnesses and capes of huge eyelets. Describing the collection, Templeton (2015) says the concentric head gear that bounced geometrically with every step had a hypnotising effect. In this iteration, it felt as if the designer continued his voyage through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and moved on from last summer's Art Deco into Vorticism, blended with African flavours and the necessary lightness of summer. The combinations of several clothing styles, accessories and fabrics make Watanabe's collection endless regarding design possibilities; and these kinds of multimedia and different indigenous design collaborations is what this study advocates.

El Anatsui is one of the most exciting contemporary visual artists of our time. Emerging from the vibrant post-independence art movements of the 1960s and '70s West Africa, he has gone on to receive widespread international acclaim for his sculptural experiments with media, form and tradition (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009). El Anatsui, unlike the other artists and designers discussed above, does not use fabrics neither does he produce fabrics, but he simulates and creates the sensation of fabric with waste materials such as crown caps from bottles, discarded tins of evaporated milk, rusty metal graters and old printing plates. He does this with considerable dexterity and artistry and so although his work may resemble typical colourful West African fabrics; they are in fact complex sculptures. Indeed, Anatsui's work is consistently informed by his recognition of the capacities of material culture to embody the history of a community. According to Galvani (2008), throughout his career, El Anatsui has worked with a great variety of media, including wood, clay, glass, photography, metal and recovered materials. Constantly evolving, he continues to amaze audiences worldwide with his creations that often have no precedent in art but that have nonetheless developed a following. El Anatsui's *Wall Sculptures* (Figure 13) are iridescent, radiant cascades



of pixelated metals that seem at a glance very sophisticated but are made from recycled twist-off metal liquor caps of all kinds.



Figure 13. *Metal Textile Sculpture 2004* - El Anatsui

Source: <http://www.atelierfiftyfive.com/contemporary-african-art>

El Anatsui's works are not only visually stunning, but they also serve as sophisticated visual metaphors of the history and present-day realities of Africa. He uses resources typically discarded to create sculptures that defy categorisation. His use of these materials reflects his interest in recycling, transformation, and an

intrinsic desire to connect with his continent while transcending the limitations of place. His works question the history of colonialism and draw connections between consumption, waste and the environment. Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu (2009) further indicates that while drawing on the aesthetic traditions of his native Ghana and adopted Nigeria, as well as contemporary Western forms of expression, Anatsui's works engage the cultural, social and economic histories of West Africa generally. Through their associations, his humble metal fragments offer a commentary on globalisation, consumerism, waste and the transience of people's lives in West Africa and beyond. Their re-creation as powerful and transcendental works of art - many of which recall traditional practices and art forms – suggests as well, the power of human agency to alter such harmful practices. Benjamin (1968) believes that the traditional concepts in any discussion of translation are faithfulness and authorisation – the freedom of faithful reproduction and, in its service, loyalty to the word. A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block the light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its medium, to illuminate the original all the more fully. Benjamin echoes the real essence of translation that is to extend the life of a piece of work without distortions. By extension, it would be construed that a word or work of art can cast two or more shadows, so in translation, the most suitable shadow must be identified and reflected. Even though this notion of translation could work for certain art forms and literary works, insatiable creative endeavours most often push certain original works beyond what is acceptable. This, in many cases, obscures the true meaning and essence of the source of a work and that sometimes gives rise to cultural concerns of purity, authenticity and true ownership.

The work of El Anatsui, for example, deftly exploits handicraft to fascinating conceptual ends, as compared to say, Esther Mahlangu's<sup>2</sup> geometric abstract wall paintings taken from indigenous Ndebele village (Gauteng, Northern Provinces - South Africa) architectural wall decoration, has been transported to both gallery spaces, airplanes, vodka bottles and BMW cars. The fact is that the separate works of these two artists - one positioned as a craft maker, the other repeating and extending the patterns of a decorative tradition - re-emphasise mediated views of decorative design and contemporary African arts (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009).



Grace Ndiritu exploits textiles as a meaningful vehicle for creative expression following the various journeys of self-discovery she has made to several parts of the world (LaGamma, 2008). Although she sometimes uses other fabrics of different origins, West African fabrics have been predominant in her performances. Gumpert (2008) reiterates that using vibrantly patterned factory-manufactured fabrics purchased in Mali as her props, Ndiritu underscores the dual role of textiles in people's private and public lives: cloth is intimately connected to the construction of people's identity and simultaneously projects the identity into the world around them. By wrapping her body within textiles as shown in Figure 12, Ndiritu extends Matisse's methodology in his odalisque paintings of transforming both the figure and patterns into a single pictorial plane. By loading patterns upon patterns in 'Still Life', Ndiritu also creates and controls tensions within the fabrics that provoke a transcendental experience (Raza 2014). The repeat of egg-shaped 'openings' and the fabric draping to conform to the movement of the artist's body, for example, suggests a possible link to the inherently female qualities of the prints which in turn, connotes female sexuality and gender which is an essential component of the West African culture. To reinforce this claim, the fabric used in the project is known as '*Ansan Wolor*' a Ga term that translates as 'egg of the guinea fowl'. *Ansan wolor* is a summation of femininity; that is, fertility, fruitfulness and abundance.



Figure 14. *Still Life*, 2005 - Grace Ndiritu

Source: <http://cottonglobalthreads.com/exhibit/grace-ndiritu/>

Further references could be made to works of Serge Attukwei Clottey (figure 15), Abdoulaye Konate - *The Tapestry Artist* (Mali), Sokari Douglas Camp - *The Art of the Ritual* (Nigeria), Owusu Ankamah (Ghana) and several others who are making a strong impression on a global scale. Attukwei Clottey draws on textiles and materials in Ghana and other parts of West Africa and weaves into his sculptures subtle traces of loss, remembering and of rebirth (Ayim 2016). He believes each weft, line or mark are potent carriers of memory and communication. In terms of form, Clottey draws on the interplay of wax prints both internationally and locally. He incorporates the universal and recurring theme of the barcode alongside the aesthetic structure of Ga *Kpanlago* rhythms. Clottey also reflects on the enduring discourse of wax print's local demand against their international production from Indonesia to Holland to China (Ayim, 2016).



Figure 15. *My Mother's Wardrobe*, 2016 - Serge Attukwei Clottey  
Source: Gallery 1957, Accra – Ghana

Borrowing, referencing, translating and reinterpreting design themes are not new. Artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck and couturiers such as Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, Madeleine Vionnet, Paul Poiret and Sonia Delaunay referenced African art and textiles for their creations and produced modernist interpretations of African arts (Hannel, 2006). If one considers the various perspectives from which the artists mentioned above have referenced African arts in their work and practice, it could be inferred that creativity can be heightened when there is creative freedom and concerns such as authenticity and ownership would give way to self-expression.

## 2.5 Textile Production and Evolution

From the ancient times to the present day, methods of textile production have continually evolved, and the choices of textiles available have influenced how people carried their possessions, clothed themselves, and decorated their

surroundings (Jenkins, 2003). The following section considers how fabrics from different parts of the world have been transformed and assimilated by their 'host localities'. In some instances, an entire design tradition from one part of the world has been transformed and localised in other parts and those designs have become a tradition in their 'adopted localities'. For example, indigenes (Indian) fabrics popular in mid-17th century France because of their 'exotic' nature and bright colours were very expensive and sought after by French nobility. They were imported through the port of Marseille, the largest city of the Provence region, and which became the centre for the marketing of these Indian fabrics. However, pressure from cloth manufacturers in Provence and silk manufacturers in Lyons and other parts of France succeeded in 1686 in getting Louvois (French Secretary of State for War between 1641 - 1691 during the reign of Louis XIV) to prohibit both the importation of printed cotton from India and the printing on white cotton cloth throughout the realm (VMP, 2016). Eventually, Jean de Valdrôme, a navigator, who brought the technology to France, learnt the skill of printing by the Indians and Persians. The prints were carved onto wood and then hand stamped on fabrics with natural dyes such as indigo and madder. The new process resulted in the birth of what became known as Provence fabrics around the middle of the 18th century. Over time, the original Indian ornamentation and designs were replaced by Provençal themes such as lavender, olives, sunflowers, cicadas, mimosas, lemons and also wheat (Schoeser & Dejardin, 1991; Moireau, et al. 2009). Provence fabrics, as they are currently termed were adapted, assimilated and translated to traditionally French taste and have remained a vital part of their material culture to date. The role of technology in the continued development of Provence fabrics cannot be overemphasised and is relevant to the central objective of this study, which is, transforming West African textile design resources with the aid of modern technology into various possible end products.

Paisley design or Paisley pattern is an English textile term for a design using the boteh, a droplet-shaped vegetable motif of Persian origin. Dallas (1995) notes that the designs became very popular in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries, following imports of post-Mughal era versions of the designs from British India, especially in the form of Kashmir shawls, which were then imitated locally. The



shawls' introduction to European consumers was attributed to soldiers returning from the colonies of India who brought them home as gifts for their wives, swiftly followed by their importation by the then East India Company. According to Patrick Moriarty (2014), many different cultures have used the paisley symbol and consider it to represent many objects including a cashew fruit, a mango, a sprouting date palm, or an Indian symbol of fertility. This relates to the argument made earlier concerning the different representation and implication of West African symbols in different geographical locations. The name 'Paisley' is not an international name for the pattern; it is called *palme* in France, *bota* in the Netherlands, *bootar* in India and *peizuli* in Japan. Due to the huge scale of shawl production in Paisley, Scotland, the pattern was given the name 'Paisley'. However, the paisley pattern evolved mainly in the Kingdom of Kashmir and during Mughal Emperor Akbar's reign (1556–1605), when shawl-weaving production increased dramatically. The weavers absorbed other influences coming across the borders from nearby China, India and the Middle East region that gave the fabric wider acceptance and appeal.

British production of woven shawls began in 1790 in Norwich, England but to a greater extent in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the small town of Paisley, Scotland. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the paisley shawl was the 'must-have' accessory of its day, a status symbol worn for important occasions and recorded in numerous portrait paintings. Their local production roughly equalled the quantities of imported Kashmir shawls at that period. Until photography developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, paintings recorded fashion trends and these paintings are now a valuable resource for mapping the different stages in the development of paisley patterns and variations in shawl shapes and sizes (Andrews, 2008). The designs that were originally copied from the costly silk and wool Kashmir shawls were adapted first for use on hand looms, and after 1820, on Jacquard looms by the weavers of the town of Paisley in Renfrewshire, Scotland. Unique additions to their hand and Jacquard looms permitted them to work in five colours when most weavers were producing paisley using only two colours. By 1860, Paisley could produce shawls with fifteen colours, which was still only a quarter of the colours in the multicolour paisleys then still being imported from Kashmir. These cheaper printed shawls eventually caused

the demise of the true Kashmir shawl and ironically were eventually exported back to India and Kashmir impacting on the production there.

The former retained their popularity despite their much higher prices. The main reason being that cashmere is hair from a goat, and these fine hairs are soft and provide excellent insulation. Cashmere was therefore preferred to sheep's wool, which was regarded as much less luxurious. Also, the superior Kashmiri looms produced a fully reversible fabric with many more colours. Although enticed by the exotic Indian shawls, many western clients preferred an embellishment more compatible with their decorative concepts and began to revise or create designs to be woven in Kashmir. The weavers blended their traditional patterns with foreign elements in what must have seemed at first as strange anomalies. However, the Paisley shawls gained a greater market share through innovation and have remained relevant as an example of textile translation to this day.

The two previously mentioned examples of non-African assimilation serve to introduce a similar process evident in wax prints where motifs originating elsewhere found greater acceptance and reinterpretation in West Africa. As indicated earlier in this study, wax prints were inspired by Javanese Batiks. The first wax prints exported from Holland in 1893 and then later England to Africa mimicked Javanese Indonesian designs and folk themes. Butterflies, scorpions, fish and trailing leaves are early examples of this design influence. The sacred Garuda bird is a very common folk symbol in Indonesia and features in most of the old prints but how this motif was translated once it arrived in West Africa is instructive, and following its arrival prints based on the head and tail feathers of the Garuda appeared in various forms as a wax print. Interestingly, along the west coast of Africa designs inspired by the Garuda have had several different names and translation; in Ghana – bunch of bananas; in Burkina Faso – the mask; in Cote d' Ivoire – shell and; in Togo – snail out of the shell (Relph and Irwin 2010). Figure 17 is an Indonesia Sawat batik inspired by the Garuda bird and figure 16 is a wax print version.



Figure 16. Wax print



Figure 17. Sawat design - batik

Similar to the Provencal example (cited above), where, original Indian ornamentation and designs were replaced by local Provence motifs and colours, the Dutch and English also incorporated West African motifs into some of their wax print designs. However, the case of wax prints' stages of translation is even more complicated than that of Provence fabrics, as it is not just the importer adapting the original print, but in this case the producer having originally appropriated a foreign motif, then appropriating another culture's imagery to sell it to them more effectively. They also took measures to guard against losing out against local producers who might take advantage of their situated knowledge of local motifs to also cash in on the burgeoning market.

The related concepts of kinship and authority have inspired many wax designs. Relph and Irwin (2010) remarked that around 1904 the English and Dutch both launched a design, still popular today, called the sword of kingship (also called the staff of power). It is based on the Akofena (figure 18), a royal sword of the Asantehene, ruler of the Asante Kingdom of the Ashanti Region of Ghana.



Figure 18. *Akofena* – Sword of authority (Ghanaian Adinkra symbol)



Figure 19. Different versions of Akofena prints

Due to the multivalence of powerful visual motifs, the same Akofena symbol is understood, interpreted and named differently according to the consumers in Nigeria; Cote d' Ivoire and Mali as 'The Corkscrew' while in Togo it is called 'The Axe'. Correspondingly, a fabric designed with a motif of the Royal Stool (Golden Stool), a very powerful Asante symbol, is known in Togo as 'The Stool of Unmarried Women'. This is not just a corruption of the essence of the symbol but a serious demeaning of its significance as an embodiment of the souls of the Asante. The West African perception and interpretation of designs vary from region to region; the names and associations stem from popular culture, semiotic interpretation or



even events (political, social, cultural and many others) of the various localities across the region at the time the fabrics got to the market. There is an anecdote concerning a new ABC wax print in the later part of the 1950s that hit the Nigerian market on the same day that government workers received a raise in salary. ABC's original name for the fabric became instantly irrelevant and to this day in Nigeria, it is still called 'the bonus' (Circa 1960 cited by Relph and Irwin 2010). Egyptian motifs – mummies, pyramids and the ankh symbol – also crept into some early wax print designs, but they were discontinued by the beginning of the 20th century because designs inspired by West Africa motifs were more popular. Over time as wax prints became more and more popular in West Africa, the European producers adapted to the local taste and included more African symbolism in their designs (Relph and Irwin 2010; Clarke 1977; Storey 1974).

While the swirling arabesque pattern was certainly not invented in Paisley, Scotland, it is almost universally known by the name of the town that gave rise to its popularity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Provence and several other fabrics have a similar chequered and interesting evolution and modernisation becoming globally commercialised and therefore profitable for their adaptors. The same could be said for wax prints, which have travelled through time and across oceans and continents: from Indonesia to Holland and back to Indonesia, then, after their rejection making the long journey to West Africa where they found wider acceptance. From there they travelled on to central and southern Africa. After modification and 'domestication' in West Africa, wax print has been translated into an ethnic fabric and is now highly influential on the design cultures of Europe, USA and Asia. Most indigenous textile production traditions in West Africa currently portray some foreign influences and amalgamation of motifs from different sources, composition and also material innovation. This multiplicity of influences concerning the appearance, outlook and dimension of designs makes the discourse on the borrowing, referencing and appropriation of West African textiles a very complex one.

## 2.6 Appropriation or Borrowing

This section reflects on the cultural appropriation and other current issues regarding ownership as against borrowing/copying/referencing because the interplay of those terms is an important aspect of this study. Considering the complexities of appropriation in the latest design discourse, this is an attempt to open a wider public, interdisciplinary conversation about the importance of cultural products in all aspects of modern creative endeavours. Cultural appropriation is defined as “taking – from a culture which is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artefacts, history and ways of knowledge” (Scafidi, 2005:9). The idea of “cultural appropriation” has recently entered mainstream debates about how African cultural creations are used, borrowed and imitated by others. In fashion, art, music and beyond, some critics now argue that certain African cultural symbols and products should be off-limits to non-Africans. “Accusations of cultural appropriation raise important and complex questions about the nature of culture. The reality of human experience is that borrowing and cultural mixtures are widespread. This is evident in language, religion, agriculture, folklore, food and other cultural elements” (Arewa, 2016: 1). In aesthetic practice, appropriation may result from an authentic desire to question the historical validity of a current, unconventional or contemporary code by aligning it with a different set of codes, such as previous styles, heterogeneous iconic sources, or to different modes of production and reception (Buchloh, 2009). This study conjectures that referencing from historical models may be motivated by a desire to establish continuity in tradition with some modification to engender a universal application. However, far from an uncontested process, the movement of cultural products to a much wider public domain provokes both majority-minority struggles and fraternal conflicts. However, if the proper safeguards underpin the process of borrowing and application, some of these conflicts and misgivings could be avoided.

A recent report by Xanthe Brooke on *Why ‘Borrowing’ Should Never Tip Into Exploitation*, wades into the discourse on appropriation;

*“... creatives are by their very nature magpies, perpetually searching for inspiration. From Puccini’s Madame Butterfly to Yves Saint Laurent’s African collection first*

*seen in 1967, it is often hard to tell where inspiration stops and cultural appropriation begins. The waters are especially muddy in the West where designers, writers, filmmakers and artists have always been shameless about their fascination with discovering different cultures, stealing and appropriating from all over the world”.*

She further cites instances of cultural appropriation in history including the Romans robbing the Greeks or the Elizabethans delighting in the first Native Americans, up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the likes of American heiress Nancy Cunard and her well-documented passion for African jewellery (Brooke, 2016). Indigenous people and some critics have expressed strong views on the subject because what is termed ‘borrowing’ or ‘referencing’ by designers is considered as stealing by the ‘owners’ and some of the views expressed are not complementary. “Stereotyping Indigenous cultures as static ‘voices from the past’ lies at the heart of many cultural property issues, particularly the misuse of Indigenous images, designs or sounds by non-Indigenous peoples. This form of cultural appropriation is akin to theft and denies the complex reality of Indigenous societies where rights to land, and to stories, music and designs that connect people to place cannot be separated from Indigenous peoples’ identity” (Smith and Ward, 2000:10). This borrowing or referencing poses some problems for those who want to ensure that their designs do not fall foul of the guardians of respective cultures. From this angle, any Western designer is arguably part of a dominant group exploiting a different culture from her or his own with little understanding of the meaning and importance of a whole range of artefacts.

Le Souk (2017) further argues that regulating the use of cultural symbols is somewhat of a slippery slope, in that rules could easily be misinterpreted as to the political correctness of dealing with the complexities of cultural appropriation. Any utilisation of cultural symbols should be accompanied by an understanding of the value and traditions of the symbols that are appropriated to ensure that their use is appropriate and benefits those they belong to. It is not enough for designers to believe that they are ‘honouring’ another culture through the use of such symbols. In a time when information is just a few clicks away, there is no longer any excuse not to fully understand the embedded codes of the items that are being used as

inspiration. Many cultural symbols have prescribed uses, often ceremonial and sacred, and their misappropriation for other uses can be interpreted as a dishonour to the culture. With an increased media spotlight on cultural appropriation, ignorance is no longer bliss. “It is essential that inspiration is just that and not some badly thought out pastiche. Sensitive, informed and intelligent references to different cultures can only be positive” (Le Souk, 2017). Some critics have even gone further to caution designers, industry players and trend forecasters of the need to be vigilant and guard against lax thinking; with the nature of global trend gathering, there is an ever-present danger that trends can tip the wrong way. In contemporary global design practice there is no shortage of examples of how to transcend design colonialism and truly honour the artisans and cultures that fire the inspiration, but sadly there is also no shortage of examples of outright cultural appropriation and cheap imitations of time-honoured traditions. The former garners respect, while the latter only public shame and ridicule. There have been too many examples in the past of cultural appropriation in the commercial space, peppered with occasional outcries, but followed by with ‘business as usual’, and yet more cultural appropriation in the name of inspiration. Le Souk (2017) infers that a significant component of Louis Vuitton’s Spring Summer 2012 collection revolved around the iconic Maasai shuka, a traditional bright red checkered wrap, worn by men of the tribe in a myriad of variations (as shown in figure 20).



Figure 20. 2012 Spring Summer Collection - Louis Vuitton  
Source: <http://www.zumi.co.ke/louis-vuitton-and-the-maasai-shuka->

The Shuka in Louis Vuitton's collection was worn as scarves, wraps, shirts, sarongs, and even as draped dresses, and as a puffa jacket in the women's collection. Junya Watanabe's Spring 2016 menswear collection was entirely African themed, with models sporting dreadlocks, Maasai beaded collars and Dutch waxed cotton prints.

However, this lack of protection for cultural products does not automatically suggest that more laws are the answer. As both a legal historian and professor, Scafidi (2005:xi) shares the concern of many of her colleagues that, in some areas, intellectual property protection has over the years expanded to the degree that it threatens to impoverish the public domain and creative enterprise. In fields such as intellectual property law, greater recognition of the power structures underlying borrowing in different contexts is important. Even though indigenous people in West Africa devised a proprietary myth around their works and practices to make up for the absence of copyright and patent laws, lessons from commercial copyright law could be learnt and applied to indigenous cultural designs. This can be an important starting point for sharing and referencing in future for the mutual benefit of the respective indigenous group and the users. Atleast, designers will be informed about the sources and also the implications of using such indigenous design resources.

Some exploratory work is being done to codify and clarify exactly what cultural appropriation means by the Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage (IPinCH) Project, a seven-year international research initiative base at Simon Fraser University, in British Columbia, Canada. The project sets out to explore 'the rights, values, and responsibilities of material culture, cultural knowledge and the practice of heritage research.' Likewise, part of UNESCO's mission is to 'Encourage international co-operation in the conservation of the world's cultural and natural heritage.' In the future, there may well be legislation put in place to protect and regulate the use of traditional knowledge as intellectual property.

There are two extreme dimensions considering the various discourses on cultural appropriation; one that it often reinforces negative stereotypes and fails to give credit where credit is due and the other that considers cultural appropriation as a

means to boost the respective culture from which it is being taken. Between these two views, there must be a middle ground that would allow for some form of compromise for referencing from various cultural resources for the benefit of all parties. As Young and Brunk (2012:4) put it “not all appropriation from other cultures is morally questionable; sometimes items are freely transferred from one culture to another”. They argued further that “an American tourist who purchases a sculpture from a properly authorised dealer in Australian Aboriginal art has, in a sense, engaged in cultural appropriation, but does nothing objectionable”. What remains essential to remember is that borrowing is right if ‘the Borrower’ is going to create something new, and express something actively progressive and positive; and if the borrowing is the inspiration rather than the result. The crux of the issue is the perceived ‘stealing’ of another culture’s ideas. However, designers would rightly argue that inspiration should not be governed by political correctness or ownership. Verwoert (2007) relates that appropriation is a materialist model of art production involving the gradual re-shuffling of a basic set of cultural terms through their strategical re-use and eventual transformation. Incorporation of traditional stylistic features into modern art is a process of continual cultural exchange, with creative appropriation documenting, in a visual form, that cultural exchange, and providing a platform for re-thinking and re-defining what is primitive or traditional (Shiner, 1994). Karlholm (2009) explains that contemporary art is a cultural product, an expression of highly differentiated cultural processes showing a level of complexity as a result of developments in information technology, multiculturalism and globalisation leading to art that reflects and faces up to the challenges and developments of the ‘Now’.

Considering all the latest discussions, it could be inferred that, understanding the context of borrowing is important for preventing exploitative cultural appropriation. An understanding of both borrowing and appropriation should be incorporated into legal, business and other institutional frameworks (Arewa, 2016). Contrary to the general views and notion that modification of indigenous art forms and design expression peel the past away, this study argues that modification of these forms give some new life to them. This new life or renaissance cannot be achieved if the indigenous art forms and design expression are so protected that they remain

dormant, but instead indigenous designs could be re-packaged as inspirational resources with the aid of the appropriate technology.

### **3 - VISUAL ANALYSIS: Analysing Indigenous West African Fabrics**

A good deal of circumspection is always needed in transferring techniques and terminologies developed for the solution of a particular problem to other fields of research ..... (Gombrich, 1979:103)

#### **3.0 Introduction**

This visual analysis seeks to analyse the underlining meanings of indigenous West African fabrics, which in turn underpins the practical exploration of this study. It is hoped that the visual analysis would assist in a better understanding of indigenous West African fabrics and help address some of the issues of 'context' that arise when using these and, for that matter, other indigenous textiles as a source of reference in any creative endeavour. *In Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and Leeuwen (1996) state that "just as knowledge of another language can open new perspectives on one's own language, so knowledge of other semiotic modes can open a new perspective on language". Even though the subject matter of Kress and Leeuwen is language, links can be made to this study, that is, engaging with and having a better understanding of indigenous West African textiles can offer new perspectives on them. Newman in a 1974 study on the qualities of Pan-African art indicates that hundreds of distinct cultures and languages, and different types of people create over one thousand different styles that defy classification. Each art and craft form has its history and its own aesthetic content. However, there are some common denominators such as materials, application and socio-cultural implication. Newman (1974:2) further asserts that "African art attracts because of its powerful emotional content and its beautiful abstract form. Abstract treatment of form describes most often, with bare essentials of lines, shape, texture and pattern, intense energy and sublime spirituality". The designs are rich and bold regarding colour and they are ideal for design regeneration and modification. Furthermore, how the various symbols, patterns, colours and motifs are applied to the cloth is reliant on a skilful artist who can 'blend' tradition with aesthetics. How the artist expresses him/herself can reflect much about what is important within the culture (Byfield, 2002; Beier, 1997). The messages that the West African fabrics send through their symbolism can only be understood if there is a shared common knowledge about what all the symbols,



colours and patterns mean and that is what this visual analysis seeks to communicate. This is because developing a common knowledge draws on some forms of visual analysis to enable ways of reading the patterns, potential inherent codes, messages, symbolism and what they might signify. Art Historian Ernst Gombrich (1979:140) suggested that “what must interest us in the context of perception of form, however, is not so much the exact boundaries of these media as the degree to which the appearance of overlap imposes a reading on forms and lines. Once more it is the ‘continuity assumption’ which comes to the fore in this universal effect”.

This visual analysis of indigenous West African textiles draws on Gombrich’s book *‘The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art’* which outlines the emergence and perfection of representation of art and or design across cultures and time. Gombrich demystifies reading of very complex classical and oriental designs by breaking them down into smaller units in simple line sketches and rendering. The meaning of the textile fabrics has been explained in accordance with their social semiotic (Goodwin, 2000). This is because social semiotics assumes that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which contribute to meaning. It focuses on analysing and describing the full repertoire of meaning-making in these fabrics used by people in different contexts and on developing means that show how these are organised to make those same meanings. The contexts include actional, visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional, depending on the domain of representation (Kress, 2010). The design forms have been discussed in line with Charlotte Jirousek’s (1995) *‘Art Design and Visual Thinking’* analysis model and for this purpose they are captured in the following observational dimensions and criteria: medium (what the object is made of); technique (how the object was made); size (is it large or small?); composition (the arrangement of elements in the work); space (the relationship of object to the space around it); colour (elements of colour hue, value, intensity or saturation, local colour); line (uses of line description, expression, decoration) and space (methods for creating space in a 2-dimensional object, overlap, vertical perspective, linear perspective).

Adinkra, Adire, Bogolanfini (mud cloth), Fon Appliqué, Korhogo and Wax prints are discussed in this study because they are the most prominent styles within the entire range of traditional indigenous fabric production in the region. Even though wax prints, in essence, are not indigenously West African, due to the significant role they have played in the region's textile culture they have been included in this analysis.

### **3.1 Adinkra**

Adinkra is the name given to the colourful, hand-stamped fabric originally used for mourning by the Akans of Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire. Adinkra, manifested as patterns on textile fabrics, have been in existence for at least two centuries. The technique of production in its present form has remained essentially the same since the early nineteenth century (LaGamma, 2009; Rattray, 1927). It is a highly expressive and diverse fabric with regard to the meaning and significance of the symbols used as imagery throughout its production. The number of symbols is constantly increasing and ever-evolving. Ghanaian artists are constantly creating new Adinkra symbols to reflect a more modern way of living. Unlike many of the textile designs of the region that are composed utilising simple geometric forms, natural objects, images and several other combinations, Adinkra fabrics are made from purely abstract symbols that are representational. Adinkra symbols essentialise feelings of strength, simplification and the generalisation of ideals and further, stand for originality and self-expression.

To make an Adinkra cloth, a flat piece of ground is prepared by clearing and sweeping after which the fabric to be stamped is pegged out with pointed tipped wooden pins. Apart from Ntonsu (an Adinkra village in Ghana) where fabrics are still stamped on the ground, padded tables are used instead. Stamps are cut out from calabash or gourds and propped at the back with tiny sticks to enable easy handling in-between the thumb and the forefinger. Each stamp typically contains one symbol and measures approximately three inches square. The relief surface of the stamps are coated with dye and stamped on cotton cloth. In recent times, imported fabric is used for the background and then the stamping or designing is done according to the message the wearer or owner of the cloth intends to convey to observers. The quality of any Adinkra cloth also shows the status of the one

wearing it. Willis (1998) states that the original Adinkra cloth was not meant to be washed since the dyes used were not fast and faded easily as a result of the natural ink used without any chemical additive fixatives. Today, other types of cloths are made with Adinkra motifs, but they are stamped in fast dyes using the batik method. Adinkra cloths are typically commissioned by an individual for personal use or by the female entrepreneurs and retailers who distribute the cloths at the markets. Together, designers and their clients determine the appropriate symbol or combination of symbols for each occasion. An established designer, familiar with a family's history, will draw on genealogical information to create a cloth. Furthermore, clients can select from traditional samples available at the artist's workshop or come with an older design they wish to be replicated. Figure 21 presents a selected range of Adinkra symbols with their classic meanings and symbolism.

















 Funtumfunafu-Denkymfunafu (The siamese crocodile) Symbol of Destiny	 Kae Me (Remember me) Symbol of Faithfulness	 Me Ware Wo (I shall marry you) Symbol of Commitment	 Odenkyem (Crocodile) Symbol of Adaptation
 Gye Nyame (Except God) Symbol of Omnipotence and immortality of God	 Dwanini Mmen (Ram's Horns) Symbol of Concealment	 Fofoo/Folo (Seeds of Bidens Pilosa) Symbol of Jealousy	 Ntesie - Mate Masie (I have heard and kept it) Symbol of Wisdom and Knowledge
 Gyewu Aikui (The back of Gyewu's head) Symbol of Leadership	 Epa (Handcuffs) Symbol of Law and Justice	 Mmra Krado (Seal of the law) Symbol of Justice	 Nyamedua (An altar to God) Symbol of Worship and Devotion
 Hweshwemudua (Measuring rod) Symbol of Quality and Standard	 Ese Ne Tekrema (The Teeth and The Tongue) Symbol of Interdependency	 Nkyinkyini - Ohemmaa nkyinkyini (Changing oneself) Symbol of Adjustment	 Nisaa (A type of Blanket) Symbol Value and Quality

Figure 21. Selected Adinkra symbols and their meanings

Source: From field study

In the Akan culture, artists have over many years, created a wealth of creative Adinkra symbols. Over one thousand designs or their derivatives have been estimated to exist (Willies, 1998). The symbols are categorised according to six sources of derivation, namely: creatures (animals, birds and insects), celestial bodies, the human body, man-made objects, non-figurative shapes and plant life. Adinkra symbols are based on the conventions of the Akan, so they all have Akan names. There are four types of Adinkra cloths classified according to the background on which the patterns are stamped. They are 'mpakyinwa' (plain

background), 'nhwimu' (background with linear markings), the Kente strip type and the 'nwomu' (background with hand embroidery). Apart from classification by background designs, Adinkra can be classified according to background colouration. When the background colour is reddish brown, it is called 'kuntunkuni'. When it is brilliant red, it is known as 'Kobene' and 'Birisi' when it is indigo. All the colours have symbolism; black, for instance, among the Asante evokes an aesthetic response of sadness and hopelessness. Red is normally associated with blood and death. That is why, during funerals, Kobene, in particular, is worn by the closest relatives to show how grieved they are while others at the funeral appear in different cloths. Kobene is also worn in Ghana when there is a national calamity as a form of mourning. Apart from the three colours mentioned above, there is now a multi-coloured variant, which is referred to as 'fancy' Adinkra. The traditional colours have been expanded to include blue, yellow and turquoise. These colours are more likely to be worn for special occasions than for funerals (Iddrisu, 2001). All the colours mentioned are used for the background of Adinkra fabrics; the motifs or symbols and grids are always black as indicated in figure 22 and illustrated in figure 23.



Figure 22. Adinkra fabric (Ntiemu and Nwomu) stamped and hemmed in  
Source: <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/adinkra1.htm>

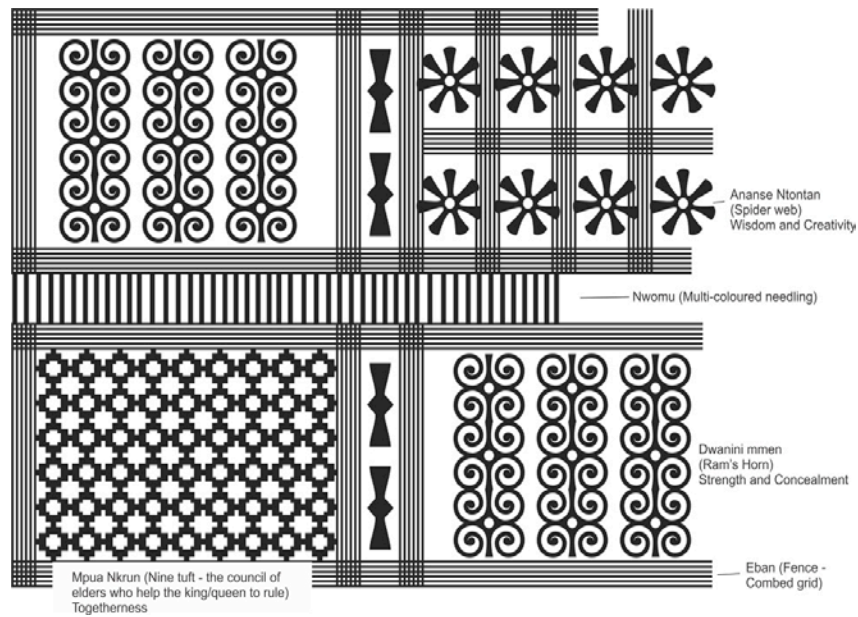


Figure 23. Line sketch of Adinkra fabric layout

Originally, Adinkra fabric was not meant to be used for commonplace daily activities or as ordinary wear. Primarily it was used for making funeral clothing and was limited in its use for items deemed sacred or special and used only for special occasions. However, over time, the symbols increased as designers modified and added new ones, and so, for example, Adinkra is now used for making special gift items given during rites and ceremonies such as child naming, puberty, graduation, marriage and soul-washing. They are mainly used as symbols of respect for the departed souls during burial rites and ancestral remembrance ceremonies. Their significance as symbols of prestige, gaiety and glamour are evident during such community celebrations as festivals and the commemoration of historical events, when people proudly wear the best of their Adinkra garments to reflect the spirit of the occasion. As indicated above, social changes and modern living have brought about significant changes in the contemporary use and production of Adinkra symbols.

### 3.2 Adire

The rule of Yoruba art forms is not to copy nature or to interpret the expression of the inner thoughts and values of life, but to find expression from the memory of nature's composition and shapes already stored in the consciousness of the inner mind. The results are abstractions of meaningful motifs and patterns, texture and colour to form an art of high aesthetic value, expressed in symbolic language. The



repetitive systems and patterns found in nature have great importance in Yoruba designs and this quality reflects a common cultural bond that ties Africans together (Jegade, 1992). Adire is a Yoruba word describing a resist-dyed fabric, traditionally using indigo. This process involves blocking some areas of the cloth from absorbing dye by tying, stitching or by covering areas with a dye-resistant liquid such as starch paste or wax, or clamping the cloth between carved blocks of wood to produce a negative image which, in the case of Adire, would be a white pattern on a blue background. There are two broad categories of Adire. In the first category, the resisting agent is raffia, (iko), and patterns are created by tying the raffia throughout the cloth strategically and with great knowledge so as to produce a patterned cloth. These cloths are called Adire Oniko. In the other category, which is Adire Eleko, the resisting agent is starch, (eko), which is either painted or stencilled onto the cloth before dyeing. There is a third category Adire Alabere which uses stitching as a form of resist but, in some contexts, this is considered to be a derivative of Adire Oniko, however, for clarity, it is treated as a separately in this study. Figures 24 – 26 are the three main types of the Adire fabric:



Figure 24. *Adire Eleko*

Source: <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/afgallery.htm> (2014)



Figure 25. *Adire Alabere*

Source: <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/afgallery.htm> (2014)

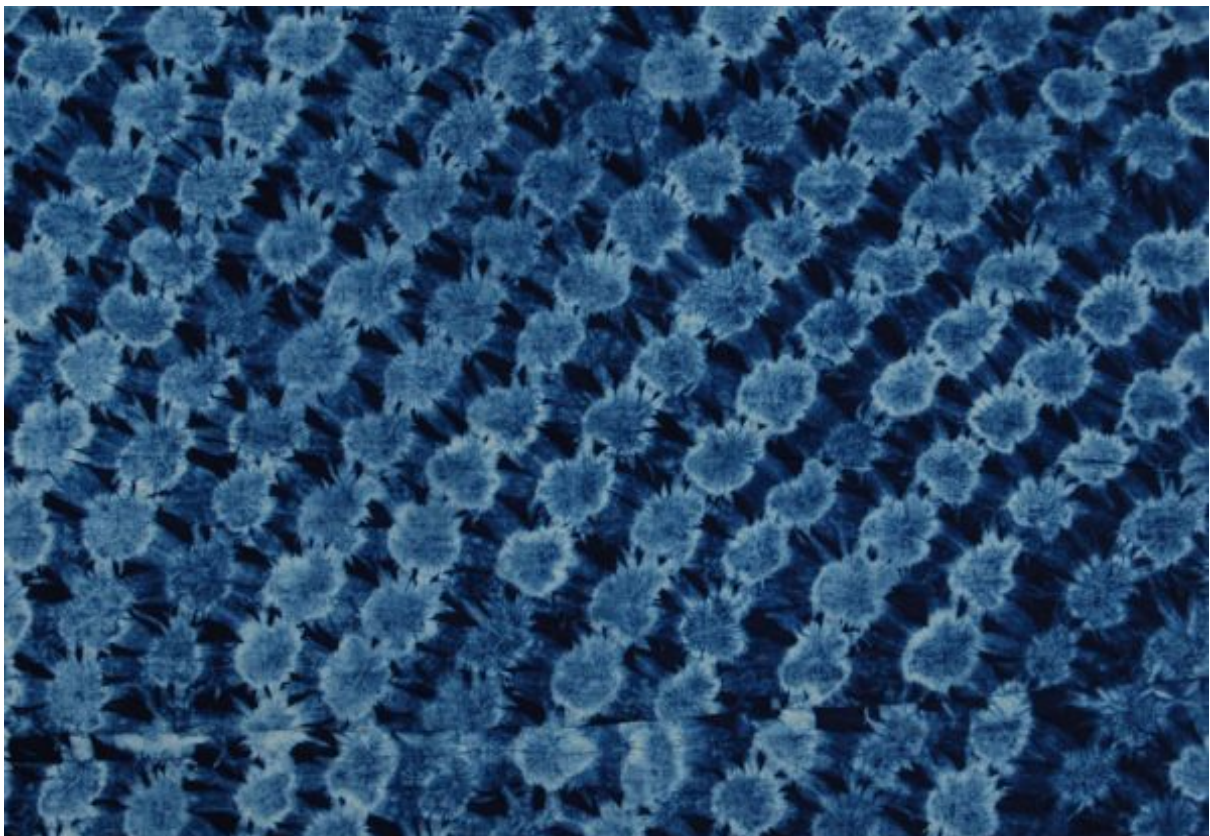


Figure 26. *Adire Oniko*

Source: <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/afgallery.htm> (2014)

According to a legend, the origin of Adire is attributed to Orunmila, the Yoruba deity of wisdom and divination and the Ifa advocate, who was believed to be divinely inspired to produce patterned dyed cloths prompted by the patterns found on certain birds namely *Agbe*, *Aluko*, *Odidere*, *Akuko*, *Lekeleke* and *Agbufon*. In Yoruba mythology, these birds were divinely inspired and permitted to use indigo, camwood, palm oil, chalk and variegated colour pigments respectively at the period of their creation. This implies that they used these materials to create their plumage and this, in turn, translates to the textile printers themselves who emulate the birds' brilliance (Areo & Kalilu, 2013). However, there is another dimension to the origin of Adire dyeing that can probably be traced to the numerous dyeing accidents that occurred centuries ago. It is inferred that perhaps the fabrics were twisted in the dyeing process or that playing children tied their pebble toys in fabrics and no one noticed until the fabrics were dyed. It has further been observed that spots of grease or pitch can effectively resist dye producing an effect similar to batik and that, from this unintentional and indefinite patterning, a conscious use of resist materials has evolved, turning an accidental discovery into many methods of basic resist dyeing techniques (Wolff, 2001; Polakoff, 1982; Stanfield 1971).

Adire designs are always balanced and symmetrical in arrangement and there is also a conscious effort to reduce the contrast between dye colour and background design. A complete cloth is made from two panels of fabric (which can be made of several strips) about eight feet long, joined along the selvedge to produce a single cloth that appears seamless. Typically the dyer lays one panel of fabric on top of the other and treats them as one in the resist process; this produces two identical pieces. Seeds or stones are used to produce dots or rings of uniform size. In 'stitched Adire', the dyer folds the cloth to divide each panel into equal squares, which are then filled with motifs that are carefully arranged in a balanced, symmetrical manner. The patterns on cloth intended for tunics are also symmetrical. After the resist has been removed, the Yoruba typically dye over the whole fabric with a light wash of indigo to soften the white design. Synthetic dyes and colours other than blue are used to produce multi-coloured effects. Lighter, tightly-woven commercially made fabrics have substituted heavier, coarser and homespun cotton fabrics. The use of sewing machines to produce Adire Alabere –



more detailed patterns – is on the ascendancy. Depending on the length and tightness of the stitch and the thread used, the result can end in a line that looks remarkably like the backbone of a fish. One pattern can cover the entire cloth, or a variety can be used. Each completed cloth has a different combination of these designs, together with others, and individual variations on them. The traditional Adire pattern layout is comprised of squares of 8" x 8", or 8" x 7" or by measuring approximately two by one and a half handspans (Carr, 2001). The squares are positioned in straight lines along and across the whole length of the cloth with each square separated from the next by lines or a grid drawn with starch resist. The configuration or the layout created together with the symbols that are used are what lend the layers of meaning to the cloth. Figure 27 illustrates the Ogongo (The Ostrich) motif in a grid.

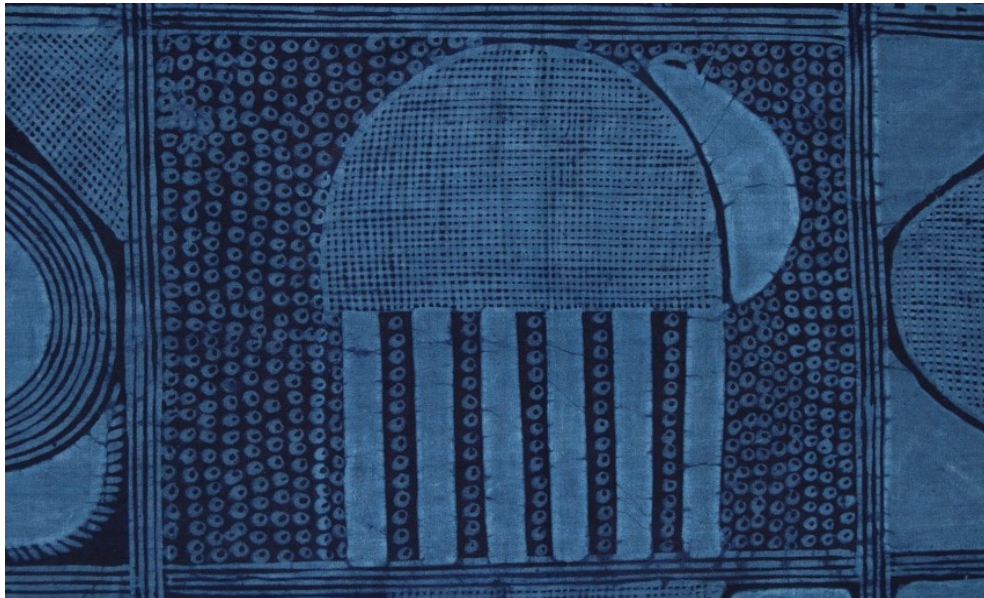


Figure 27. *Adire Eleko - Ogongo Symbol*

Source: <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/adiregallery.htm>

Just like the Adinkra and many other West African fabric designs, the Adire fabrics are made from basic pattern units that are repeated several times to complete the required size of fabric. The pattern, content and sequencing of the designs and motifs have evolved. There is, therefore, an accepted catalogue of motifs from which each artist can draw. The skill of each artist, however, depends on the expertise and competence developed over many years. Contemporary production techniques such as the use of synthetic dyes and factory-made fabrics have had

various effects on Adire fabric in line with the sociocultural changes and fluxes being experienced by the people. In a recent study, Areo & Kalilu (2013) classify Adire patterns into five broad groups. These are: geometric, figural, skeuomorphic (manmade) patterns, letters and celestiomorphic (stars/constellation) patterns. The geometric motifs are dots, lines of various forms such as straight lines, hatching and cross-hatching, triangles, squares, circles, semi-circles, spiral lines and rectangles. The figural motifs are of two sub-types: animal and plant.

The most enduring motifs are Opeere (brown-eared bulbul), Agbufon (crowned crane), Adaba (red-eyed dove), Pepeye (duck), Asadi (black kite, *Milvus migrans*), Etu (guinea fowl), Adie (fowl), Okin (Indian peafowl, *pavo cristatus*), Odidere (African grey parrot), Tolotolo (turkey), Igun (hooded vulture, *necrocytes monachus*) and Ogongo (ostrich). These pattern units are sometimes representational, symbolic or both and they have various meanings and implications in usage. There are over 400 motifs that have been recorded. Table 1 is the classification of Adire motifs into natural and man-made sources. They have been presented in this way for clarity, however, there are several other variations and types.

Table 1: Classification of Adire Motifs

Source	Class	Examples
Natural	Animal	<i>Alangba</i> (Lizard), <i>Akika</i> (Pangolin), <i>Ejo</i> (snake), <i>Alabahun</i> (Tortoise) <i>Oni</i> (Nile crocodile, <i>crocodylus niloticus</i> ), <i>Eja</i> (Fish), <i>Omoole</i> (Wall gecko), <i>Oga</i> (Chamelion), <i>Adon</i> , (bat), <i>Okere</i> (squirrel), <i>Eerin</i> (Elephant), <i>Okun</i> (Millipede), <i>Akeeke</i> (Scorpion), <i>Ekolo</i> (Earthworm), <i>Igbir</i> , (African Giant Snail, <i>archachatina marginata</i> ), <i>Opolo</i> (Toad)
	Plant	<i>Ewe Ege</i> , <i>Ewe Oye/Akoko</i> (cassava and <i>markhamia tomentosa</i> ), <i>Fulawa</i> (Petals), <i>Ogede were</i> (Banana), <i>Ogede Agbagba</i> (Plantain) <i>Koko</i> (cocoa pod), <i>Koro Owu</i> (Cotton seed), <i>Odan</i> (Fig tree), and <i>Oka baba</i> (Guinea corn plant)
Man-made objects		<i>Irukere</i> (horse tail), <i>aago owo</i> (wrist watch), <i>walaa</i> (slate), <i>isana</i> (matches), <i>garawa</i> (bucket), <i>ese masiini</i> (sewing machine's pedal), <i>opo Mapo</i> (Mapo hall pillars), <i>koko taba</i> (tobacco pipe) <i>orita</i> (road junction), <i>amuga</i> (scissors), <i>agbo ile</i> (house compound), <i>igbako</i> (ladle), <i>suga</i> (sugar cubes), <i>opon Ifa</i> (Ifa divination tray), <i>ilu gangan</i> (Gangan talking drum), <i>sekere</i> (gourd rattle).

Source: Areo & Kalilu (2013)

















	Adan (Bat)		Eye (Bird)		Agufon (Crested Crane)		Eye (Bird)
	Sekeseke (Cuffs)		Opolo (Frog)		Opolle Mapo (Mapo pillars)		Alangba Berekete (Fat lizard)
	Oga (Chamele)		Ejo (Snake)		Orunkun Aro Oga (Chameleon)		Ooya (Comb)
	Oobe (Smaller Bat)		Amuga (Scissors)		Kokoro (Key)		Alangba (Lizard)

Figure 28. Selected Adire motifs and their meanings  
Source: Areo & Kalilu (2013)

Aside from naming the motifs and giving meanings to the motifs and their names, the art of Adire, interestingly, has an overarching naming system by which already named motifs are grouped and the group is seen, recognised and named as one entity. According to Areo & Kalilu (2013), the naming system, in this case, is therefore not based on one single motif. Consequently, the name of the whole cloth is determined by the collection of motifs peculiar to it or used on it. Six such predominant or group names are identified as Ibadan dun, Olokun, Sun Bebe, Eyepe, Ile-Iyalode and Onikomun.

**Ibadan dun** – literally means Ibadan is sweet or pleasant: this pattern is the most complex and most detailed of all traditional Adire Eleko – the starch-resist Adire. This cloth is normally divided into four rows of seven squares. Originally, none of the motifs in these twenty-eight squares appears more than once, but in recent times that rule is not strictly adhered to. However, the motif that gives the cloth its name is the pillars of Mapo Hall alternating with spoons three or four times (see figure 29). The motif appears a number of times in the cloth – sometimes even side by side.

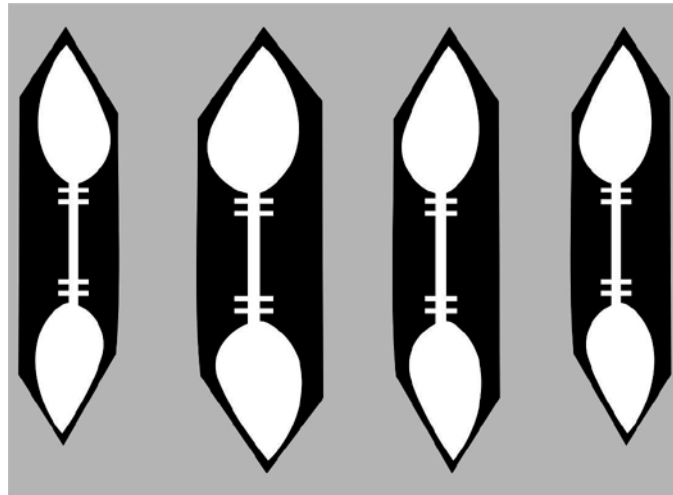


Figure 29: Mapo Hall with four spoons  
Source: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

Carr (2001) indicates that the number of spoons determines the quality of the cloth and that is an example of the common embedded socio-cultural knowledge concerning Adire. The highest quality has five spoons; good quality cloth has four and the poorest quality has three spoons. Many of the other motifs that have been mentioned earlier are used to fill the squares (See figure 30).



Figure 30. Ibadan dun – layout  
Source: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution (2014)



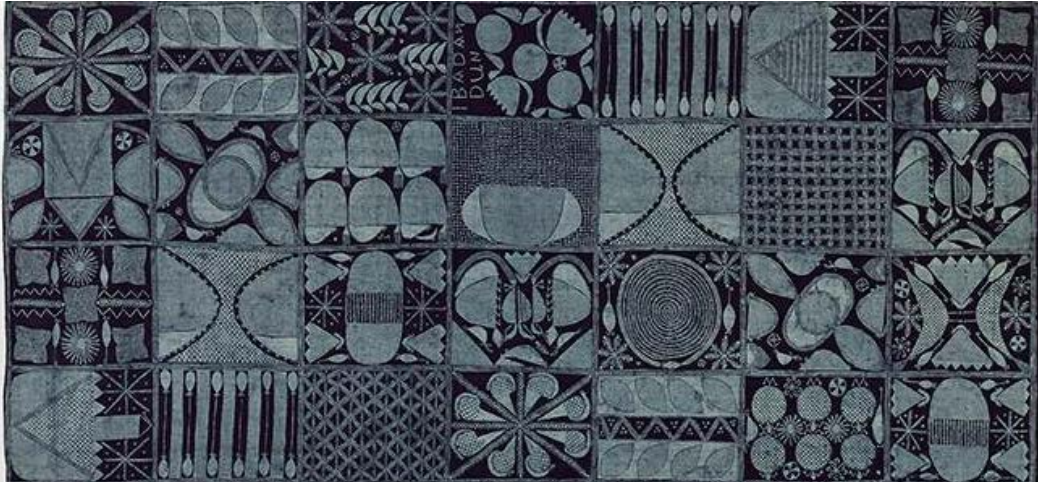


Figure 31. *Ibadan dun*, Mid-20th century  
Source: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution (2014)

**Olokun:** this also expresses the mastery of an *Adire* maker. "*Olokun*", the sea goddess, consists of two rows of five large squares with long rectangles at each end and twelve smaller squares at the bottom. The large squares in *Olokun* design cloth consist of abstract patterns, encasing smaller rectangles, which contain creatures such as birds, lizards, crocodiles and also house mats and ware. The central square of *Olokun* has the four-legged stool and frequently has the O.K. motif on it.



Figure 32: *Olokun*  
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2014)

**Sun Bebe:** literally implies, "lift up the bead" and is an allusion to the sensuous raising of the beads by women. The design is a collection of abstract designs, with

a background of tiny circles. Sun Bebe design represents the sound of the beads shaking and rubbing together as a woman dances and has an erotic connotation. *Bebe* simply means the small flat waist beads favoured by Yoruba women and the dynamic design and the concept of visually representing sounds in this way are of considerable interest. "Waist beads have traditionally been worn by African women since the 15<sup>th</sup> century to serve many celebratory purposes. In Africa, beads are rarely simple ornaments; they are worn visibly as a sign of status or hidden as an invisible yet perceptible signal to a husband or lover" (Yahwo, 2016). They are special and symbolise a healthy life dimension that set women apart from men and can also be worn for seduction. Many women used waist beads as an instrument of body shaping. Waist beads are more than mere shapes, colours and sizes; each string of beads holds traditions, values, and customs.

Comparatively, the design units of the Sun Bebe fabrics appear well segmented with a good variety of designs very neatly drawn. There is an unusual variation where the blocks of patterns are separated by a wide undercoated dark blue line, a framing effect that adds much to the graphic impact of the pieces.



Figure 33: Sun Bebe

Source: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution (2014)

***Ile Iyalode*** – "Iyalode's compound": this is an allusion to the place where it is made or the originator of such designs. These types of fabrics are commemorative and normally feature images of kings, overlords, royals, heroes and master craftsmen with inscriptions that celebrate those personalities. They are usually created using



cut metal stencils and cassava starch as a resist material. Figure 34 is a fabric for Ile Iyalo – Olob which literary translates as ‘owner of kings’.



Figure 34. Ile Iyalo (Olob owner of a King)  
Source: <http://www.tireneventures.com/beauty.html> (2014)



Figure 35. Commemorative fabric for the Hendesons

Because such fabrics are commemorative, the text is usually the name of the person, appellations, the occasion, the place and year. Figure 35 is an example of a fabric that was commissioned to honour Richard and Helen Hendeson, anthropologists from Manchester in the United Kingdom who conducted a series of studies in Onitsha, Ibadan – Nigeria in the 1960s.

**Onikomú** literally means "The-One-with-Comb". This name reflects the name of the cloth and the process of making it. Starch paste is spread on the cloth. Spiral lines are made on the cloth by scratching through the starch with a comb. The starch is left to dry and the cloth then dyed (See figure 36).

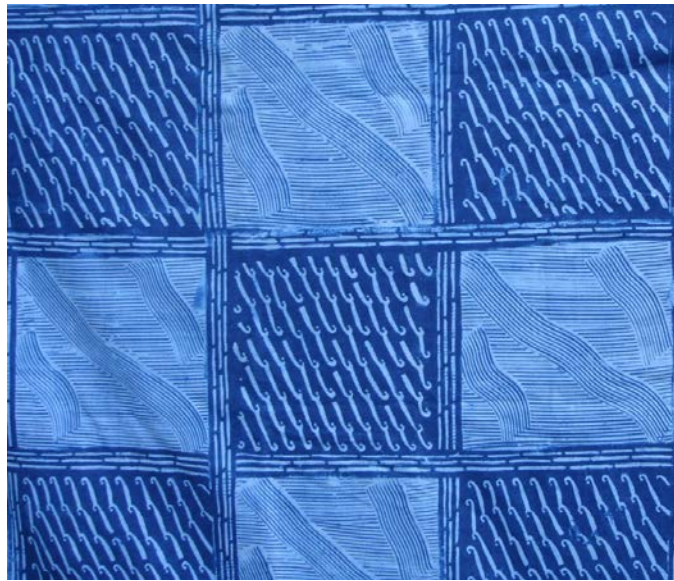


Figure 36. Onikommu

Source: <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/afgallery.htm> (2014)

In contrast to some of the fabrics being considered in this study that are produced rudimentary and relatively controlled patterning, Onikommu allows for some flexibility of outcome as far as the boundary of the spread of starch is demarcated on the fabric. All the Adire fabrics discussed here are going through constant modifications and alterations with the introduction of new materials and other experimentations.

### 3.3 Bogolanfini (Mud Cloth)

All Bogolanfini or Bokolanfini fabric designs are made from basic pattern units that are repeated several times to complete the required size of fabric. 'Bogolan' is a Bamana word, which means something made by using mud, while 'fini' means cloth. The Bamana can be located around the east and north of Bamako in Mali and who traditionally made the cloth. Luke-Boone (2001) describes Bogolanfini as 'probably the most influential ethnic fabric referenced of the 1990s. This was largely due to a series of fashion shows by Chris Seydou (a Malian fashion designer) in Paris, New York and other European cities in the 1980s and early 1990s. Seydou was well known for his adaptation of Bogolan fabrics into garments such as bell-bottom pants, motorcycle jackets and tight miniskirts (Diakité 1994; Rovine, 2001). Traditionally, Bogolanfini production was a purely manual process; starting with the



weaving of the fabric, which is done mainly by men. The weaving was produced using narrow looms that produce strips of barely six inches in width. Women, piece together these strips into various sizes, ready for dyeing. Until quite recently, vegetable dyes were the main dyes used for dyeing Bogolan. Luke-Boone (2001) asserts that the dyes and fabric used in mud cloth can be traced back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. The fabric is first soaked in a dye bath made from milled or ground leaves boiled or soaked over time. The fabric, which turns yellow after immersion in the 'leaf dye', is then dried in the sunshine for some time. The designs are then painted onto the dyed fabric with a piece of metal or wood. The paint in the form of mud slurry is carefully and repeatedly applied to outline the intricate motifs on the cloth. The mud is collected from riverbeds and fermented for up to a year in special receptacles – mud jars. After that the mud is painted on the fabric; through a complex chemical reaction between the mud and the 'leaf dye', the brown colour of the mud remains when it is washed off. The areas that are not painted with mud that is, 'the yellow base' is then discharged by applying soap or bleach, which makes it white all over again.

Bogolanfini fabrics which were originally used for making hunters' shirts or tunics are now used for women's wrappers or wraparounds, skirts and men's sleeveless loose tops and many other contemporary applications. A woman would wear Bogolan during important transitional periods in her life: after excision (female circumcision); before the consummation of her marriage; immediately following childbirth and finally as a burial shroud (Rovine, 1997). In recent times, Bogolanfini has found many more applications in response to the growing tourist trade. Artists also paint Bogolanfini using vegetable dyes and mud but often feature designs unrelated to those of traditional fabrics; in turn, their newer motifs are also often found on clothing (See Appendix 1). Such designs have found a wide range of application in commercial products, such as coffee mugs, curtains, towels, sheets, book covers and wrapping paper (See figure 37 for some selected Bogolanfini symbols).













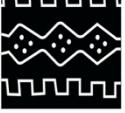






	Beds of Bamboo and Millet		Grasshopper neck		Farmers Sickle (another version)		House of Calabash flowers
	Wealth and Luxury		Spindle		Fini N'Goloni Sirakele (one twisted road)		Iguana's Elbow
	Farmers Sickle		Wealth and Luxury (another version)		Kolowi (Cowrie Shell)		Yiri Boulou (tree leaves)
	Brave and Fearless		Small drum		Mali		Calabash Flowers
	Stream called the Wuowanyanko		Mauritanian women's cushion		Calabash Flowers		

Figure 37. Selected Bogolanfini motifs and their meanings  
Source: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

There are several such motifs or pattern units, but the most predominant ones are *Beds of Bamboo and Millet*, *Farmers Sickle*, *Iguana's Elbow*, *Wealth and Luxury*, *Spindle*, *Brave and Fearless* and *Calabash Flowers*. These pattern units are sometimes representational, symbolic or both and they have meaning and implication in usage, which will be discussed below. Although there have been several variations and modifications, some of these basic units are still very visible in Bogolanfini fabrics either individually or in combinations of two or more.

***Beds of Bamboo and Millet:*** Originally, it was said that this pattern was used by women who wished to show their superiority to their rivals in a typical West African polygamous marriage setting. Presently, the pattern has become extremely popular, and so it is not always assumed that a woman wearing it is making any specific marital rivalry references. 'Beds of Bamboo and Millet' is more representational than symbolic; semiotically the 'Beds of Bamboo and Millet' connotes rather than denotes and so its implication derives its strength from its primary meaning.

***Iguana's Elbow:*** the African iguanas are relatively small herbivorous lizards compared to the same species in the Americas, averaging around six and a half feet (two metres) long and weighing about eleven pounds (five kilogrammes). They have a series of irregular scales on their cheeks and legs; most often these scales are in a variety of colours and are visible from a close distance. They are very endearing and that makes them easy pets for most people. A prevalent reason is that iguanas are very common in many parts of Africa and represent good fortune. An iguana can lead a hunter to water and is also symbolic of African people in warfare with foreign powers. Apart from the symbolism of the iguana, its natural appearance and beauty are enough design inspiration.

***Wealth and Luxury:*** this basic design unit is more representational than symbolic. It is believed to have originated from the Mauritania area and was executed as a design on the cushions of rich women. Such women are so wealthy they do not have to work but just rest their heads on pillows such as those designed with this pattern unit.

***Calabash Flowers:*** this refers to the elegant and unique flowers of the calabash or gourd plant. Unlike most plant flowers, calabash flowers come alive in the night, hence pollination is completed by night insects for the propagation of its calabash fruits. The matured fruit varies in shape and size and has a variety of uses. The dried calabashes or gourds are hollowed out and are very common utensils in households across West Africa. They are used to clean rice, carry water and as food containers. Smaller sizes are used as bowls to drink palm wine or other traditional beverages. Calabash has also found application in musical instruments such as the harp–lute, lute, traditional fiddle and percussion instruments. The calabash flowers are very significant because without them there would be no calabash or contribution from them to the social life of West Africa. *Calabash flowers* is a popular pattern that shows the prosperity derived from the calabash flowers. There are further list of Bogolanfini pattern units in Appendix 1.

Figures 38 and 39 are two examples of Bogolonfini fabrics (monochrome and polychrome).

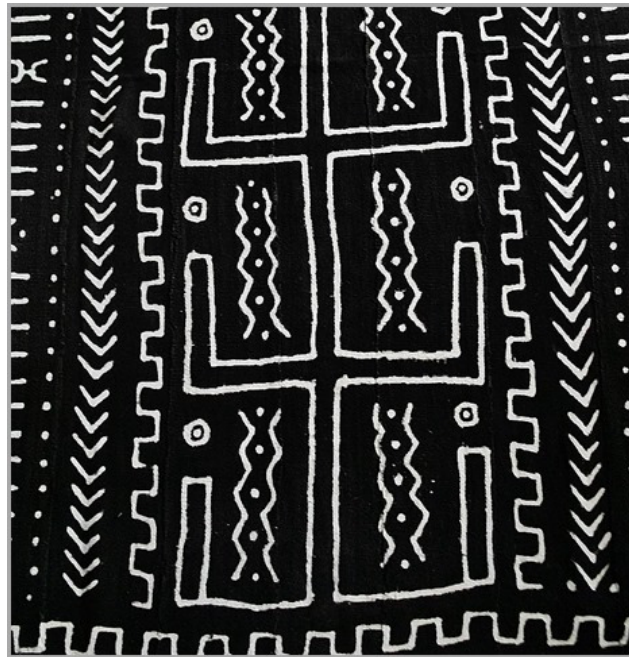


Figure 38: Monochromatic Bogolan

Source: <https://tishfarrell.com/2013/10/11/silhouettes-and-symbols/>

The central motif of figure 38 is the joined up 'EEE' is known as crocodile fingers. The 'greater than sign >>>' on the borders is called sickle or *wokoso* and said to relate to a specific event, that of a farmer who had a sickle he especially liked and thought should have its own pattern. The circles with dots inside represent love of family and community. The large circle is the home, and the dot inside the family.



Figure 39: Polychromatic Bogolan

Source: <http://www.tishfarrell.com.co.uk/itm/african-mud-cloth-bogolan-mudcloth->

Bogolanfini has become a popular Malian export, notably to the United States. There, it is marketed as "mud cloth", either as a symbol of African American culture or as a generically "ethnic" decorative cloth (Rovine 2005). In Mali, the cloth is worn by people of all ethnicities, including prominently in Malian cinema and by Malian musicians, either as an expression of national or ethnic identity or as a fashion statement. Particularly popular among young people, Bògòlanfini is made into a wide range of clothes, Western miniskirts and jackets as well as traditional flowing robes. Traditional Bògòlanfini designs are also used for a broad variety of commercial products, such as coffee mugs, curtains, towels, sheets, book covers and wrapping paper (Toerien, 2003).

### **3.4 Fon Appliqué**

As with every art, Fon appliqué cloth was influenced by the repercussions of history. Created by kings, conceived by families supported by real patrons, the disappearance of the royal household should have brought on its own; but this was not the case. (Adande, 1999:1)

Fon men and boys created Appliqué fabrics; who belonged to family guilds that passed the designs down from generation to generation. The guilds maintained vast collections of visual images that a client could specify for a banner. However, the tribal kings then controlled the production and use of these works of art for the purpose of presenting themselves in splendour to the people. The artisans executed these designs to the specifications of their kings and they were hung as banners of battle in the palaces. Kent (1971) explains that each textile depicts the story of a king, chief or warrior and tells of their achievements. The banners vary in dimension, some of them being quite large (42" x 72") and the insignia of the kings and other symbols of their political power were appliqué. A popular subject for banners were the symbols of the twelve kings of Dahomey. There are some accounts that the oldest Fon applique creators avoided leaving gaps between images by arranging the overlay materials close to each other. However, checks across museums and image banks (including the Smithsonian Learning Lab) of some of the early images of the fabrics proved otherwise; the individual images were mounted separately on the background. Unlike the other indigenous West



African fabrics types that are relatively smaller in width, the Fon applique banners were big and are displayed on special occasions on rooftops, on pavilions and on large umbrellas. In some instances, mini images were appliqued on hats worn by members of the respective royal house.



Figure 40. Fon Appliqué workers in 1971, Abomey, Republic of Benin

Source: [www.unseenbenin.wordpress.com/2014/04/22/royal-cloths-of-benin/](http://www.unseenbenin.wordpress.com/2014/04/22/royal-cloths-of-benin/)

The banner is read from left to right and from top to bottom, beginning with the oldest, most ancient kings and ending with the last kings before the country was claimed by France in 1890's (Adande, 1999). There were often multiple symbols for any particular king because the meaning of an image might reflect a distinctive characteristic of the king, such as his strength, or it might commemorate a specific event or achievement during the king's reign, or it might relate to a magical story about the king.

Artists designed the compositions, using the image against a dark or contrasting background. In terms of style, the images – birds, animals, people, weapons and, occasionally, plant life such as vines and trees and fruit – were simple, direct and minimal. Fon applique could be readily identified because the symbols or insignia

have remained essentially the same for several years. Several steps such as layout, cutting and stitching are involved in making the appliqué cloth: the shape of the object is cut out and tacked onto a backcloth to hold it in position; this flexibility allows for easy re-ordering and repositioning of the various design elements. Once satisfied with the composition the artist hemmed the pattern into its definitive form after tacking in the edges. The artist also paid much attention to the outside borders of the background fabric, which are treated as a picture-frame. The fact that these works of art can be hung up and looked at explains the word "hangings" applied to them. The Fon word "avo" is used both for appliqué and plain cloth. Black and white (as shown in the background of figure 40 above) were the favourite background colours in the 19th century, however, in recent times, the background colour varies considerably from black, grey, to orange and red. Due to different background colours, the motifs and patterns such as birds, fish, and other symbols are cut out of plain weave cotton in contrasting colours and stitched onto the background.

Fon appliqués, like the Asante Kente, play on the relationship between the visual and the verbal of everyday interactions such as leadership, heroism and social attainment. However, unlike Kente, which evokes ideas, people and historical events through their colours and weave structures, Fon appliqués do so through cut-out representational images that are then appliquéd to a cloth surface. European accounts from the mid-nineteenth century illustrate the presence of appliqué cloths used as tents, umbrellas and wall hangings. Even following the defeat of the Fon kingdom in the 1890s by the French, appliqués continued to be used as emblems of power and authority for royalty and in other leadership contexts. For example, working men's social groups, who might typically share funeral expenses, still use appliqué banners with proverbial meanings (Adams, 1980). Such cloths also console mourners at funerals, in which case the clothes are referred to as "the cloth to dry your tears". Today in Benin and elsewhere the appliqué continues to contain or convey the simple, symbolic images of the older traditions. However, the pieces are less likely to contain the aggressive and war-like images of the older royal messages. Now made both for tourists and local

consumption, Fon appliquéd fabrics have become less symbolically important for locals and are seen more as items of trade.

There is a breadth of Fon applique insignia notably Houégbadja, that can be broken down into houé (fish), gbe (refuse) and aja (net). The entire name signifies that the fish that escapes the net does not return to it. This concept would typically be symbolised by the image a fish facing a net. Other ways of interpreting the names are the use of allegories of kings who identified themselves with wild animals or, less frequently, with domestic animals, whose strength or wisdom always have impressed man, for example, buffalo, lion, elephant, horse, whale, cardinal bird and chameleon. In these cases, the pictograph of the animal is sufficient.

While the symbols for many of the kings were animals or birds or the head of a defeated enemy placed in a pot, the symbol for King Agadja was unique. According to Kent (1971), King Agadja ruled during the period when slaves from Dahomey were taken to Louisiana, that is, between 1719 and 1732. His symbol was a huge sailing ship, a European caravel boat. The boat motif of King Agadja reflects a king whose accomplishments included the conquering of Whydah, a kingdom on the coast. This symbol also implies that he was complicit and co-operated with the slave trade, which has informed recent arguments implicating West African kings or leaders from this period and their active role in the slave trade. By extension, the Agadja symbols have a very forceful irony attached to them. The central image of King Agonglo is the pineapple plant, however, explanations for why he is associated with a pineapple are equivocal. Some appliqués say that Agonglo invented a type of knife with a blade whose jagged edge was like that of the leaf of a pineapple (Kent 1971). Another claim is that Agonglo, when once attacked by his enemy, took hold of a pineapple because of its protective properties, a belief reinforced by the proverb: "Lightning falls on the palm tree, but the pineapple escapes it." The images of the hanging man, egg and shark refer to King Behanzin and say something about his persistence and ambition in the face of his impending defeat by the then French army. The egg image derives from the proverb "Our world has produced an egg of which only the earth feels the weight and for which the earth desires." The hanging scene depicts a Nago (Yoruba) king who Behanzin successfully defeated despite the Yoruba



king's claim of invincibility. Figure 41 shows the royal insignia that forms the basis of modern day Fon appliqué.

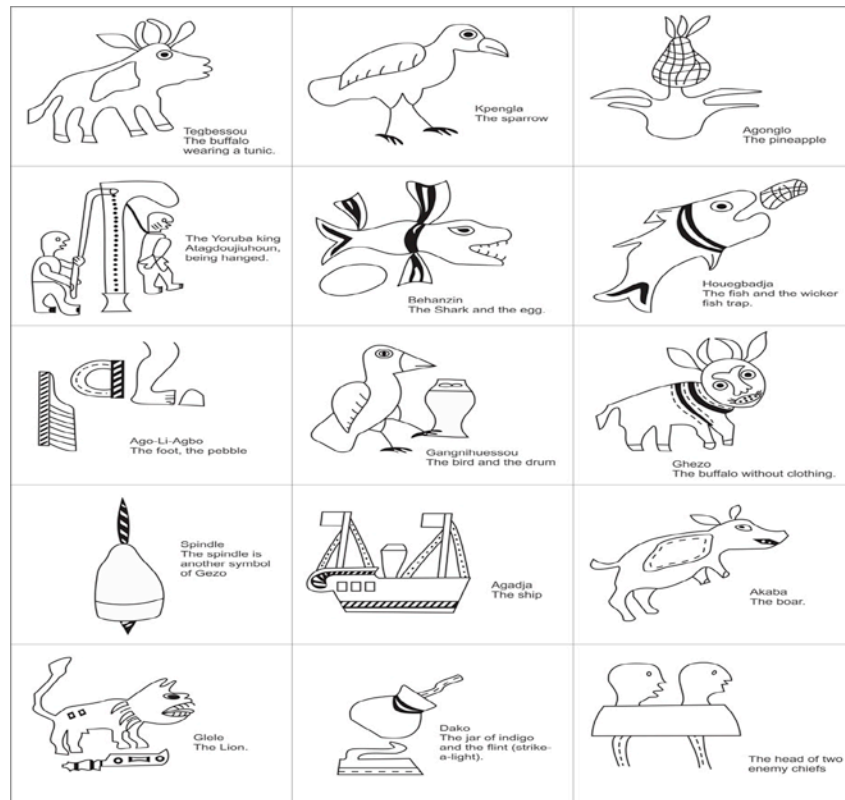


Figure 41: Fon Appliqué insignias

Source: Sketched from Kent (1971)

In recent times, these insignias are used individually or combined to design appliqué panels and sold as wall hangings. It is apparent that the original meanings and implications are not considered before they are combined. This is so because they are designed as souvenirs for the tourist market which essentially appreciate their aesthetic qualities (the characteristic strong, vibrant colours on a dark background) but are unconcerned about the composition and interpretation of the insignia. (See Figures 42 and 43).

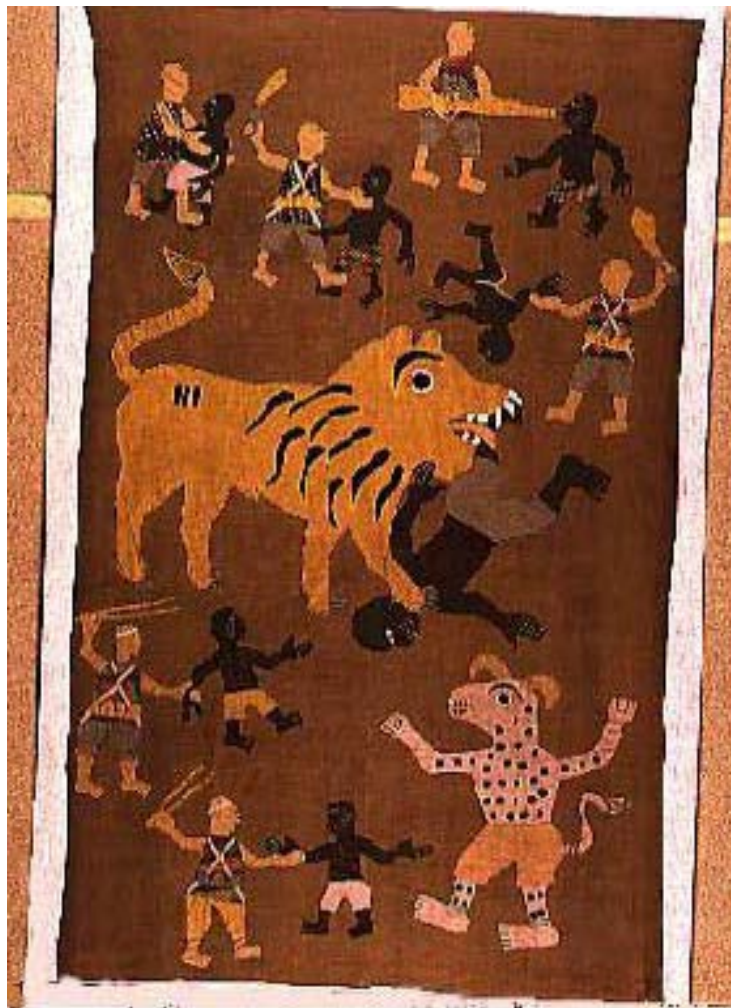


Figure 42. Hanging representing King Glele in battle

Source: <http://www.epa-prema.net/abomeyGB/resources/hangings.htm#>



Figure 43. Daguesu (Lightening-Splitting Ram) in Battle,  
Source: Mme. Leo. Fon People, Benin, 1997. Fabric Appliqué

### 3.5 Korhogo

Korhogo fabrics are produced in Côte D'Ivoire and are named after the village of Korhogo in the northern part of the country (Luke-Boone, 2001). The textiles originated as wall paintings found at the various shrines in the area. The wall paintings usually wore off quickly because they were painted with natural dyes that did not last. The need to prolong the life of drawings on the walls of shrines in the town inspired the related textile practice of making the Korhogo panels. Initially, they used handwoven cotton fabrics as background and painted with natural dyes. The fabrics were mounted in front of the shrine or homes in the morning and

removed for safe keeping at night or inclement weather. Over time, the Senufo people have developed an indigenous cottage industry in fabric production. They divide the fabric production processes along gender lines. While both men and women may tend the cotton plants, after harvest, the women usually clean and spin the cotton into yarns and the men then weave the rough yarns into strips about four inches wide on hand-loom. Several strips are sewn together to make a "canvas." Women make the dyes that the men use to design the cloth. Korhogo cloth has a relatively loose weave and sometimes stretches during machine stitching, although the amount of stretching varies with each piece of fabric. The cloth has an obvious weave and looks similar to raw silk.

The woven cloth is stretched very flat on a board and secured using small pegs. Without any preliminary sketch, the designer traces the designs with his 'knife' after having dipped it into the dye. The first lines are very fine; they are subsequently reinforced by new tracings. In more recent times, this is done using a stencil and the painting is done with a specially fermented solution that turns black between one to three hours. The design can be done in one of two ways; firstly, the pictures are painted, often with several applications of dye to darken the look. Then, either the pictures or sometimes the entire cloth is painted in another dye. This further darkens the drawings or colours the whole cloth. If the whole cloth has been covered, it is then washed, removing the dye bath from all but the designs, but permanently fixing them to the fabric (Hackman, 1998; Luke-Boone, 2001; Polakoff, 1982).

Traditionally, the mud decoration is produced using the application of two natural dyes. The first of these dyes are made from boiled leaves and is greenish-yellow in colour and the second which is coffee brown is derived from decayed swamp mud extracted from the roots of trees. An iron-bonding agent in the mud is said to cause the dye to interact with the coarse fibres and thereby create a permanent colour. The mud decoration is hand painted onto the cloth using a stencil. In another process, a yellowish solution that contains a dye from the *nigeneme* tree is painted directly, again without preliminary sketching, onto the cloth. The cloth is immersed in a black dye obtained from the Marigot (side stream of the main river), stagnant pool of water, or muddy area and on river beds. When washed later, only the

surface covered by the *nigeneme* dye retains the black dye. The *nigeneme* dye makes the black dye fast and permanent. Artists also paint directly with a mixture of dyes and *banga* and juice from the lemon. *Banga* is a strong solution which is made from burnt wood ash, which helps to make the dye permanent. This dye produces rich magenta-red and burnt sienna hues when mixed with the ingredients.

Korhogo cloth is similar to mud cloth, which uses larger, more recognisable forms to symbolise concepts and ideas. It contains stylised figures of humans and animals painted directly onto the fabric. Korhogo cloths use striking imagery and symbolism to tell stories. For example, motifs of fish represent life and abundance; birds represent freedom, goats represent male prowess and hunters represent the mysteries of the universe. Occasionally colours other than the traditional dark black-brown are used as well. Colour application is in two stages; firstly an application of yellow-brown dye and secondly an application of mud dye solution is stroked or painted onto the fabric – one directly upon the other – to form a final dark design against the natural, off-white colour of cloth. More recently, however, black ink is used in place of the natural dye and the machine-woven fabric is used in place of natural cotton (Polakoff, 1982).

Although Korhogo designs have characteristic irregular lines, clean and precise lines are more desirable than smudged ones. This is so because blurred lines are termed *jumpodie* literally meaning bad or sub-standard work. Korhogo fabrics are characterised by large pictographs of human figures, animals, birds and geometric ornamentation. Earlier images and fabrics, however, show that originally the motifs were smaller and regular in composition.

Korhogo cloth is used in making clothing and craft items, but it is most popular as a form of authentic wall decoration. The fabric is now used for clothes, as well as home furnishings and souvenir items that feed the tourist market. Originally the Korhogo cloth was used for religious purposes; it was hung on the walls of shrines and believed to be inhabited by spirits. The images represent a cherished ideal, favoured celebration or give honour to animals and plants. Figure 44 indicates examples of some of the most popular Korhogo symbols.




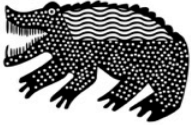

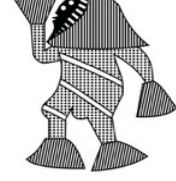
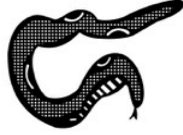





	Goat signifies Male Prowess from the beginning of time		Bird signifies Freedom		Tree signifies Society's Shadow
	Crocodile signifies The Fertility of Male		Fish Bones signifies Bareness		Hunter signifies Life's Mysteries
	Snake signifies Earth's Abundance		Swallow signifies Life's Interdependence		Chicken signifies Fertility and Grace
	Fish signifies Vitality and Abundance		Lion signifies Royalty		Guinea Fowl signifies Inner Beauty

Figure 44. Selected Korhogo motifs and their meanings

Source: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

The tree, chicken, snake, goat, crocodile, guinea fowl, hunter, bird, swallow, fish bones, fish, lion, chameleon and turtle are the common motifs for Korhogo fabrics. The tree signifies society's shadow. The tree represents the sacred woods where Poro ceremonies take place. The chicken signifies fertility and grace. The snake signifies earth's abundance and is a symbol of the earth which it encircles with its tail in its mouth. This circle represents the world; the day the snake lets go of its tail the world will cease to exist. The snake is often represented in different Senufo art objects, especially jewellery such as bracelets and rings. The Senufo constantly remind West Africans that their existence is tied to the slightest gesture of the snake.

**Goat:** this signifies male prowess from the beginning of time. The goat evokes male sexual power. It is often a liturgical subject for the Senufo sculptor who makes the statue for certain propitiatory rites by the priestess of the Sande women's society. Sande is a women's secret society across some parts of western and central Africa

that initiates girls into adulthood by a series of rituals and training in life skills. The society is believed to confer fertility, instil morality and proper sexual comportment and maintain an interest in the well-being of its members throughout their lives (D'Azevedo, 1962). The male equivalent of the Sande is the Poro.

**Crocodile:** this signifies the fertility of the male. The crocodile and the big lizard: “from the water to the shore”. These symbols are found in Senufo ritual acts and show the definite transfer from land to water. According to oral tradition, there was a sacred crocodile in the waters of Korhogo whose back was decorated with cowries. He appeared every ten years to announce future events. The ten years correspond to the ten days of the creation of the world in the Senufo religion.

**Guinea Fowl:** this signifies inner beauty. The grey guinea fowl and the domestic chicken: birds, in general, have significant roles, being animals associated with celestial powers. The guinea fowl and the chicken represent maternal virtues and feminine beauty. A bird in the sculpture is the big “Senufo calao” that symbolises hope and fertility. See Appendix 1 for the meaning of other common Bogolonfini symbols.

Figure 45 is a panel composed of some images designed purely for aesthetic appeal rather than as cloth to be read symbolically. The cloth has lost much of the meaning and symbolism of the old tradition because artisans decorate contemporary Korhogo cloth with the same stylised human and animal images used in the old cloth but give little consideration in their choice of figures and their symbolism. The maker of the panel (figure 45) employed optical balance so at a glance one would think it is symmetrical but it is not, rather, the designer has used the shape of the images and texture to create the illusion of symmetry. Korhogo fabric designs are rarely symmetrical, so the apparent symmetry, in this case, is evidence of its aesthetic rather than symbolic design composition.





Figure 45. Korhogo Panel that contains the tree, chicken, goat, crocodile, guinea fowl, bird and swallow  
Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/173881235585523031/>

The most outstanding point is the tree symbol (bottom right corner) set against the lizard symbol (the bottom left corner). Some of these compositions are a 'corruption' of the true Korhogo panels, which are in fact a sequence of narrations and are subject or theme specific. This seeming migration from authentic representation and layout protocol is evidenced in most of the indigenous design production practices under consideration in this study. The tourist market, fashion trends and other end-use application seem to influence design content and production procedures.

Figure 46, on the other hand, is a panel that contains one image that is, the Chicken which signifies fertility and grace. Such panels are made for maidens or newly married couples to give them more children and prosperity. If a comparison is made between Figures 45 and 46 the meaning of figure 46 could be confusing because the combination of attributes of the tree, chicken, goat, crocodile, guinea fowl, bird and swallow could be quite incomprehensible. This is not to infer that only one symbol should be used at any one time on a piece of fabric. For instance, a panel that contains the lion, goat and swallow can be presented to a new ruler or family head (extended family) to signify power, wisdom, prosperity and wealth.



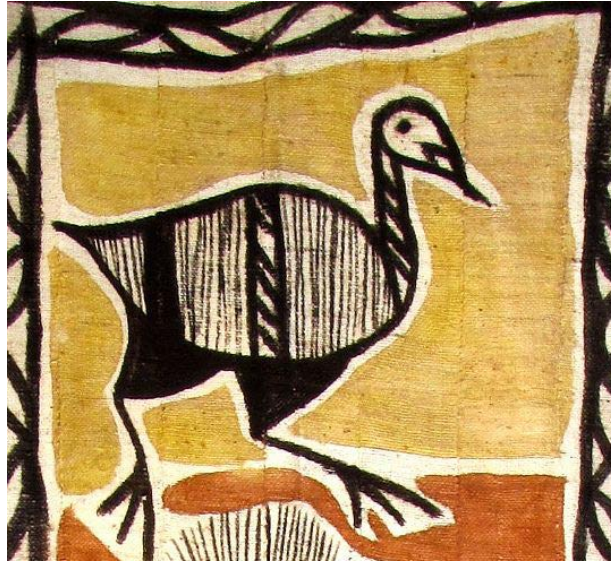


Figure 46: Chicken signifies fertility and grace – Designed for maidens  
Source: <http://www.africanfabric.co.uk/fabrics-textiles>

### 3.6 Wax Prints

Wax prints are an industrialised version of hand-drawn, hand blocked and hand dyed batik fabrics. They are products of a symbiotic relationship between European producers and Indonesian, Indian, Chinese, Arab, and more importantly African inspired designs. Howard & Ntiri (2013) explain that wax print designs are an amalgamation of various artistic cultures of these countries and continue to evolve. There has been a gradual but steady change in the designs and the colour schemes used in the printing. Core factors contributing to the change that the study identified are related to the dynamism of demand of the market as a result of the ever-changing wishes of the buyers, and, for this reason, changes have to be effected to cater for the tastes of new customers (Akinwumi, 2008). Some designs were modified due to their popularity and success through the use of memorable names such as *Aagradaa* meaning lightening in Akan – Ghana (Figure 47). The changes were influenced by traditional African motifs and symbols, historical events, prestige elements, religious inspirations and government policies, among others.



Figure 47. Aagradaa – Lightning Bolts  
Source: Tex Styles Ghana Limited, Ghana

The lightning fabric connotes danger and volatility in the West African scheme of things where polygamy is accepted in some settings, the wearer in a rival relationship seek to communicate some form of invincibility and an uncompromising posture. There is a local eulogy for lightning in Ghana that goes this way: *“I am lightning that shines brilliantly to the extent that the world envies my brightness and might. Even the sun and the moon bow to my radiance and the gods even give out their resistance”*. Even though in this instant the lightning does not shine brightly, its might has been captured in colour and form.

Wax prints present several characteristics in terms of composition and outlook. However, some outstanding characteristics are the classic geometrical optical illusions and two or three-dimensional interplay of imagery. The fabrics are heavily patterned, with bold motifs and rich colours which epitomise their appeal in every setting and application. They use a kaleidoscope of colours and are rich with textures and images. It is amazing how a few yards of material can be so influential and communicate layers of meaning to the viewer (Howard & Ntiri, 2013). The fabrics are sorted into categories of quality due to the processes of manufacturing.



What sets this unique fabric apart from all other factory-produced textiles is the colours (bright and vivid); the design elements such as lines and shapes (big and bold, delicate and subtle), its slight misalignment of colours and designs with a distinctive crackle effect. Furthermore, one production factor of wax prints is the lack of difference in the colour intensity of the wrong and right side. They are sold in 12 yards (11 metres) as “full piece” or 6 yards (5.5 metres) as “half piece”. The following are some fabric designs based on traditional and original imagery from Japanese, Indonesian, Dutch and other European designs.



Figure 48. Wax print with Javanese Motifs  
Source: Qingdao Ronvital Import and Export Company



Figure 49. Wax print with Japanese Style Design  
Source: Qingdao Ronvital Import and Export Company



Figure 50. Wax print with Javanese Style Motif  
Source: ABC Wax CTD Ghana



Figure 51. Wax print with African Calabash Flower Motif. Source: ABC Wax CTD Ghana



Figure 52. Wax print with Adinkra Motif-  
Source: Qingdao Ronvital Import and Export Company



Figure 53. Wax print with European  
Classical Design. Source: Qingdao Ronvital  
Import and Export Company

The prints, which are admired and cherished by West Africans are not really “African” in origin but have been assimilated by Africans and have undergone many visual and technical changes. The introduction of non-classical designs beside classical ones such as the ‘Unicorn designs’ and the modifications of African themes has enlarged the market, making the prints still much admired in West Africa and the rest of the world, as evidenced by the thriving wax printing factories in Ghana, Nigeria and Cote D’ Ivoire that are now meeting both local and foreign demands.

From the discussions above, West African textiles can be understood as a major form of expression that the people use to define themselves. They have used cloth not only for personal adornment but also as a powerful medium of communication for many centuries. Even though there have been various modifications and outlooks over time, West African textiles still have an exceptional significance as a means of communication, information and mutual association within the region’s diverse communities. Depending on the ‘designers’ and users, there is spiritual and



historical significance in not only the choice of colours, dyes and type of threads used but also in the decorative element, the symbols used and the figural compositions which are directly related to historical proverbs and events. They represent a form of narrative often taking the place of the written record and convey messages of importance for an individual, family, or larger society. For a long time the importance of West African textiles was overshadowed by traditional sculpture and masks, but in recent times they have become the most significant medium by which contemporary African artists are illuminating the connections and continuities between past and recent modes of African artistic expression. West African fabrics are appealing, but could be difficult to interpret or understand to the untrained mind and they vary to a large extent due to the vast nature of the region but the following general patterns cut across all of them. They are mainly geometric and abstracted shapes with a strong graphic appeal, light and dark contrasts are common and attractive features. They are highly animated and their patterns mimic the unparalleled diversity of the region. Motifs are both angular and irregular and are rendered in simple line drawings of everyday things such as raffia mats, calabash, plants, animals and abstracts generated from proverbs and by implication a semiotics of the language of the visual and the interpretation of the vocal.

Beyond the shapes, print designs also mimic the various textures and 'character' of these everyday things. For example, Adinkra takes the form of abstract blocked pattern work. This form of decoration has not been limited in the past to fabric decoration only as the symbols could be identified in the decoration of some everyday objects from earthenware bowls to canoes and even architecture. This form of decoration is very closely associated, in some instances at least, to both woodcarving and local metal work too. The main purpose of Fon appliqué insignia and the significance of its use in fabric designs is its association with ancestry and heritage. The story of succeeding generations can be foretold through the intelligent permutations of shapes and colours. However, current applications vary to a large extent and do not necessarily follow traditional design protocols. Most of the meaning will be lost if there is no conscious effort to record and transmit this to younger generations.

Much of the pattern work is produced on an unprofessional basis with no previous experience being strictly necessary. This does not mean, however, that indigenous West African design patterns are random sequences of abstract images produced haphazardly by amateur designers. The pattern work does follow traditional strictures and can be seen as an elaborate and systematic abstract matrix, which has in its remit a number of endless permutations. Some studies argue that these patterns were some form of early West African writing, though it seems that the pattern work could well be in the form of memory indicators where the patterns cause memory triggers of past events and individuals, rather than that of a formal written language (Aronson, 1999; Willis, 1998).

In the context of colour, indigenous West African fabrics are very graphic and visually stimulating. Highly contrasting colours such as black and white are common features because, symbolically, they convey two opposing moods: sadness and happiness. How the colours interplay in designs increases their graphic qualities, as well as visual energy and by extension, colour as part of the seduction to a buyer, wearer, even the seller. In itself, colour and clever combinations of colours can sell a fabric design and can often persuade a buyer that the intended design is better than it actually is. Common colours are red, golden yellow, brown and green. Black and dull yellow combinations are also very common colours. Further colour choices include browns, bronze, beige and ash (grey). These colours are widespread in the region because they are readily available in organic forms. In effect, these are colours associated with natural or organic materials and are even known by the natural forms they represent; for example, the colour yellow or high yellow is referred to as 'gold' (as in the mineral gold) and the colour brown and various shades of brown are referred too as 'earth' or 'rust'. Gold, earth or rust colours are quite widespread in most of the West African textile design traditions; examples are the Bogolanfini, Korhogo, Kola cloth and Kobene – a type of Adinkra cloth. Darker colours of the figures and the use of bold lines and geometric shapes are also common features in textile design themes in the region; darker colours and thick outlines are used to emphasise the importance of those images. Currently, artificial dyes have undoubtedly pushed the frontiers of colour choice in the region further.

Artistic representation, cultural symbols and symbolism all over West Africa are physical or visual reflections of something abstract, with a deeper meaning; the study of the motifs of all the fabric design traditions enables one to understand the deep undercurrent of this visual arts tradition. It goes beyond mere representation and becomes a facilitator of the people's language. The motifs thus become a voiceless semantic of a visual language, to be appreciated and enjoyed by all, but only to be decoded by those with knowledge of the people and its traditions. The motifs and patterns of the fabrics discussed represent and signify a great deal about the West African people and their visual connections to varieties of traditions around proverbs, gender, religious, social and, overall, the daily engagement with life. A symbol's capacity to anchor itself in the history of the people or to transcend it and inscribe itself in the collective memory can perhaps be only tested through the passing of time. Fabric design of the people as a tradition and as a product satisfies some demands because, no matter how abstract the patterns appear to the uninitiated, the motifs and symbols are clear to those with cognate knowledge about them. This is achieved by the passing of the knowledge and inherent understanding from one maker to the next generation of makers. Undoubtedly, the fabric design motifs and images discussed give a glimpse into the material culture of the West African people. Their ways of life, as well as their religious and socio-cultural beliefs, are made known through design motifs and abstract visual signs that are charged with meaning and symbolic value.

## **4 - PRACTICE**

### **4.0 Introduction**

The West African wax print fabric is a defining metaphor of African design, fashion and expression, an immediately recognisable icon throughout the world. However, without the mechanisation and marketing strategy of the European, and then later, Asian traders, would wax prints exist at all? Moreover, would the perception of African design be completely different (Relph and Irwin 2010)? On the back of these rhetorical questions, this chapter articulates new ways of considering indigenous West African textile design trajectories in a very dynamic global space. Sudanese designer, Omer Asim<sup>4</sup>, has suggested that West African textile fabrics could be used to produce advanced, creative and contemporary designs reflective of the limitless artistic possibilities 21<sup>st</sup> century education, technology and multimedia provide. Omer Asim adds that African designers have to be recognised for using their heritage in a way that contributes to the evolution of their culture, by creating contemporary versions of their traditional crafts. Contrary to this thesis' more liberal views on accessibility and the use of African designs by all regardless of race or ethnicity, Omer Asim believes that European designers choose certain colours or materials without necessarily understanding their value. He pushes forward the idea that the onus falls on 'local' designers to interpret culture and mediate its interface with the rest of the world to ensure its accessibility to Western understanding. However, surely in the spirit of creativity, there can be collaborations and sharing between indigenous West African designers and non-indigenes. Such collaborations and sharing would help safeguard the 'integrity' of sacred and restricted cultural artefacts and ensure that they are not 'appropriated', degraded or subverted. Such sharing would be mutually beneficial as West African textiles cannot make a significant global impact if it is seen through the parochial lenses of authenticity and indigeneity which thrive on excessive cultural retention.

Furthermore, contemporary art in most cases is a result of creative experimentation with the past and in the process, restructuring, reinventing past art traditions using modern techniques for creative innovation. Broadening creative sensibilities to normalise the use of indigenous West African textile designs would, therefore, lead to preserving ancient textile-making techniques which are on the verge of dying out,



to the benefit of the current generation and the future. Chris Seydou<sup>5</sup> a fashion designer who has endeavoured to factor into his design presentation the West African cultural heritage, is a good example of this process. He is particularly interested in the potential of Bogolanfini in the international fashion arena. Seydou indicates “I make all kinds of Bogolanfini from many materials because I work in a different technical dimension than its originators” (Chris Seydou, 1992). At six metres high, Yinka Shonibare's *Wind Sculptures* have a majestic presence, with brightly-coloured painted surfaces to replicate the patterns of Dutch wax fabrics. The works' apparent fluidity contradicts their construction in fibreglass. ‘They are trying to express movement and dynamism, to capture the volume of wind three-dimensionally. Each one is formulated by blowing the wind into the actual fabrics and then photographing them, so in a way the shapes have been formed by nature’ (Yinka Shonibare, 2013). This thesis advocates for such unorthodox collaboration in materials and design expressions. It also re-emphasises collaboration between designers and indigenous people (owners/source of design references) as the way forward. This collaboration would eliminate the issues of appropriation and reduce misrepresentation of outcomes considerably. The anxieties that come with the uncertainties of legal implication would, therefore, be eliminated. Chris Seydou and Yinka Shonibare's works cited above correlate with the liberal views expressed in this study and ties in to the various layers of experimentations and products in this practice. Perhaps, the notion of authenticity, interpretation and integrity as pertaining in West Africa must go through a re-thinking process. Figure 54 is a *Wind Sculpture* by Yinka Shonibare.



Figure 54. *Wind Sculpture*, 2013 – Yinka Shonibare

Built around different forms of fabric design traditions in West Africa, the design output focuses on artistic themes and techniques that are different from that which pertains throughout the region. Innovations, experimentations and the installation of a selection from the breadth of design ideas explored during this study are discussed. Engagement with West African Indigenous textiles resources has made it possible for the generation of design formats while developing the collection dubbed 'Cultural Conversations'. This is because of the various arguments and discussions presented in the study and also the layers of interactions between design elements, production processes and application. The designs are an essential part of the study concerning the re-evaluation of existing imagery for new forms and design endeavours and in order to build a greater awareness of West African design cultures. The design exploration in this study transcends the borders of West Africa although inspired immensely by its rich, ethnic fabric design heritage. It is intended that these designs should create a new showcase for West Africa's creative energies and reinforce the diversity of the region's design history. The practice interrogates the question of how to update designs and production techniques through the use of contemporary technological advances in digital printing and design development with the use of Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, The CorelDraw software and Mimaki and other digital fabric printers.

Some components of indigenous designs are already being recycled and reinterpreted by contemporary artists and designers (as discussed in Chapter Two) and the motifs can be seen on a number of items including jewellery and architecture throughout West Africa and across the world. It makes logical sense to support such endeavours since these motifs are meant to serve, at least in one form, the growth of tradition or continuation of life in the region. For instance, the Adinkra Fern pattern has a standard recurring 'curl' as its dominant feature. This curl has been put through a range of transformations and alterations over the years, and the motif is said to represent the young curled leaf of a fern plant and stand for the twists and turns of life. The fern symbol has been used by several artist and designer across the globe in tattoo, jewellery textiles and other surface applications and it resonate with different people from different part of the world as shown in figure 55 below.



Figure 55. *Aya – The Fern Symbol in Different Application*  
Source: <https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=fern+symbolism&source>

This feeds into the argument that, a mutual collaboration between contemporary artists/designers and indigenous people would epitomise the perpetuation of the story of generations and that of the preservation of tradition for several more generations. The design experiments in this thesis are an exploratory set of works to help establish the ideas extrapolated throughout this study. Furthermore, the experiments are considered as an initial set of works to establish a design

framework and impression. These are designs/products/samples that would be expanded and commercialised once the experimentation phase is completed. It has been established from the experiments that the design possibilities in referencing from indigenous West African cultural expressions are endless.

#### 4.1 The Design Process

The design process encompasses the various stages of design evolution and development to finished products. Most of the symbols and images referenced for the designs lack elasticity when compared with other motifs such as those found in oriental and classical designs. This is because the motifs are generally representations of humans, animals or plants and it is easy for the viewer to recognise if they are placed say, up-side-down. Because of their apparent lack of elasticity, placement or composition of designs was quite challenging. For instance when working with lines, there is some flexibility of the placing and orientation without necessarily distorting the meaning and outcome (this is illustrated in figure 56 with a random multi-coloured line oriented composition). However, the composition may appear distorted when some symbols and images are not placed ‘appropriately’ regardless of any innovation or alteration as in figure 57.



Figure 56. Simple line design



Figure 57. Motif placed up-side-down

The design process is segmented into research, analysis, realisation and synthesis. Research in this context is information gathering on indigenous West African fabrics, photographs, images and physical artefacts to build a practical or workable context for designing. The analysis encompasses decoding and making meaning out of the complexities of indigenous West African textile design expressions, textile design symbolism, visual language and colour symbolism. Realisation is the

product outcomes/product possibilities, mass customisation, mass production, bespoke products, product standardisation and the search for a graphic interpretation. Synthesis, on the other hand, is the plan or scheme of work, generation of new design elements; manipulation of existing designs to generate newer concepts and thinking through current design trajectories and new materials and product possibilities. The following section gives an account of the various experiments and design outcomes undertaken during this study. It considers trend drivers, mood images, colour directions and usage, graphic compositions, print directions and product directions. Colour has been the single most important and expressive resource for the designs.

## **4.2 Cultural Conversations**

As mentioned above 'Cultural Conversations' is a general theme adopted for the series of continued experimentation with West African motifs in this project. This theme was chosen because there is a seemingly endless cycle of dialogue between West African cultural elements used in the modern European context. It is believed that the modern design context as experimented in this study can transcend time and interact with history and traditional protocols even though the outcomes are more futuristic. Manuel Castells as cited by Tardif, (2002) contends that identity and the need for recognition, along with technological change, constitute the constants that create history. Cultural Conversations represent a stylistic evolution of combining indigenous designs with the new materials and technologies currently available. The designs aim to have a wide appeal and application despite the obvious references to West African design culture. There are combinations of unrelated motifs (combining motifs from different ethnic and indigenous design culture of West Africa) in the compositions. The combination of the various elements in the design composition seeks to create an amazing sensorial and also semantic impact when considered in their entirety. The use of colour has been an essential part of this project; the 'high impact' coloured compositions have been sourced from a cross-section of global colour trend forecasting and the landscape (ecology, culture and wildlife) of West Africa.



Trend drivers are usually catch phrases or words that underpin the designs; in this instance, words such as luxury, royalty, quality and passion. These drivers inform material, processes and outcome and by extension provide an opportunity to improve material efficiency and product output. Mood images can set the thematic setting for a design or explain its function in a piece of work. In this context, mood images are taken from West African culture, ecology, indigenous art and design practices. It is a collection of textures, images and abstractions related to the design theme as a reference point. The practice tapped into the semiotics of West African fabric culture as illustrated in the 'mood images' in Figures 58 and 59. The selection of these images is for illustration. However, the mood images selection can vary greatly depending on the desired design outcome.



Figure 58. Umbrellas Mood Images (Culture)  
Credit: Douglas Anane Frimpong - Photo Editor GCG, Ghana



Figure 59. Mood Images (Culture)  
Credit: Douglas Anane Frimpong - Photo Editor GCG, Ghana

Figure 60 is an experimental graphic composition of multiple visuals of indigenous West African textile motifs and expressions that have been used to form one cohesive design composition. The composition could be said to be a corruption of West African symbolism because it features Adinkra symbols such as *Due Afe*, *Donno*, *Bese Saka*, *Gewu Etiko*, *Krapa*, and *Funtunfunafu* which have varied meanings and to some extent contradict each other. Furthermore, traditionally the symbols are always rendered in dark block tones, but in this instance, they are mainly mid to light tones on an uncharacteristic strong cocktail of colours as a background. This composition, and for that matter most of the designs in this experiment, reinforce the idea that this study seeks to project aesthetic appeal rather than symbolic connotation; hence the combination of unrelated motifs/symbols rendered in varied forms.





Figure 60. Graphic Composition – Part of Cultural Conversations Collection

In some instances, a single motif was used in the composition as in figure 61. The various design components including colour are arranged, distributed and aligned in a way that not only has an aesthetic appeal but is also geared towards different product trajectories.



Figure 61. Single Motif Composition – Part of Cultural Conversations Collection

The bright, vivid, colourful and animated textile fabrics of West Africa have inspired these explorative designs. I have experimented with the idea of using bold drawings of traditional motifs with no textures. The strong background colours were intended to compensate for the lack of texture and to provide some space for the viewer to navigate through the composition. Bold drawings and a variety of geometric shapes have been used to make the designs elegant and rich to correspond with the end products. The bold motifs and geometric backgrounds filled with flat colours, optically contrast with the animated overlaid motifs. The concepts and design outcomes can be interpreted as filters through which one can look back in history and simultaneously look into the future for West African textile design practice. The designs are premised on conceptual art practices of West Africa and international perspectives of art and design production and the experiments migrate from traditional materials and practice into more exploratory materials and products.

This collection has been designed for the high-end interiors' market. Moreover, to make them high-end and luxurious, they are printed on a variety of fabric substrates that include silks, velvets, cotton and other surfaces. End-use application would be a breadth of surfaces such as walls, interiors of cultural centres places such as embassies, high commissions, communal areas and other public spaces. This series of experimentations are exploring ideas of togetherness, harking back to a time when people lived under a collective banner as a way of reinforcing their identity. The designs seek to convey fluidity, mystery, elegance and a broad aesthetic appeal. The following sections discuss specific design concepts and outcomes. It also reflects on product trajectories considering the later commercial implication of this study going forward.

#### ***4.2.1 Cultural Conversations: Vortex***

The range of designs in this category is a story with many interpretations. First thoughts inevitably turn to the boldness and sturdiness of designs. However, the vivid colours and their predictable associations with Bogolanfini fabric designs do not make up the full picture. Instead, blush colours, in broad vortex background shapes, celebrate a creative renaissance of design/colour/technology collaboration. The colours and motifs in the designs represent this duality, soft, strong colours and

radiating multi-coloured circular backgrounds contrasting sharply with dark veins and with the rudimentary white overlay of motifs. A breadth of colours such as canary yellow, rich salmon and sea blue has been set against a range of dark tones, including brown and grey, recalling the vast suburban sprawls of modern West African societies and their diversity in taste and preferences. The designs are characterised by bold circular colour blocks, rich colours and an ornate overlay of motifs. The designs could be used for products such as curtains and textile accessories.



Figure 62. Vortex - Part of Cultural Conversations Collection

#### **4.2.2 - Cultural Conversations - Fence**

These mixed motif designs recognise and reflect on how Western culture has become entirely reliant on documenting and monitoring every nuance of people's lives to maintain a regulated society. They are inspired by the theme 'fence'. The use of the term reflects an ambivalence towards the conformist demands that are placed upon people; linear and grid-like patterns reflecting the restrictions we live in. The bright colours in the composition are undeniably pronounced and can be likened to the perceived precision of technology on which society rely. Furthermore,

the geometric backgrounds simultaneously reflect both order and conformity. These designs featured wide range colours such as hot pink and dusty purple colours not typically associated with West African design traditions. Fence utilises high impact colours and could find application in accessories; for example, bags, lampshades and other interior surfaces.



Figure 63. Fence - Part of Cultural Conversations Collection

#### **4.2.3 – Cultural Conversations: Story Boards**

Story Board is a mixed motif experimental design range inspired by the diverse lifestyles of the people of West Africa. These bright and loud panel designs encompass unusual colours such as pinks, greys, cobalt blue, sulphurous yellow, rich copper and blues. The atmosphere and responses created by the combination of images in the panels evoke a sense of mysticism. Similar to all the collection in the Cultural Conversations, the compositions comprise a collection of unrelated motifs with diverse historical and ethnic antecedence. These are designs that celebrate the many facets of life in West Africa; festivals, eating together, storytelling and belonging. Inspirations such as these are in constant flux with a blurred aesthetic coupled with subtle but solid flat coloured backgrounds that are firm. Figure 64 is one of the designs in the story board category.





Figure 64. *Story Board* - Part of Cultural Conversations Collection

#### 4.2.4 Cultural Conversations - Crosses and Adinkra

This section of design explorations was inspired by linear markings, crosses (line textures) and Adinkra symbols. Linear markings or lines in the West African worldview impose human order into the disorder of nature. Lines, *ila*, to make clear, implies imprinting of culture or civilisation (Abraham 1958). The use of lines for decoration cuts across all West African design traditions and linear markings are also found in the Yoruba and other West African cultures' body decoration and markings. Such cutting of a linear scar into the body identifies and clarifies the ethnic subgroup, lineage or religious group of the individual. This also occurs in decorative body tattoos favoured by women. Similarities are found in the *Adire* patterns employing the needle as a technique for the pattern creation; *Adire alabere*. Intersecting lines are also significant as they represent the crossroad which in the Yoruba worldview symbolically implies a state of confusion; hence the saying "*Ikorita meta tii da'mu alejo*", that is, the road intersection with proper directional signs confounds a visitor to a strange location (Areo & Kalilu, 2013; Drewal 1988).

It is also taken to be the meeting point between the physical and the spiritual realms. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that sacrificial objects as a propitiation to the gods from time immemorial till the present day are placed at crossroads in most West African spiritual practices. Drawing on these lines is an act of connection between different realms of human and spiritual experiences; I have used diagonal lines of different thickness, length and colours as in the composition of figure 65. The lines intersecting at various angles keeps the eyes of the observer travelling from one side of the cushion to the other and back.



Figure 65. Cushion - Lines

As discussed in the literature review and the image analysis, Adinkra symbols were originally stamped on cloth worn by royals and people of repute, but now the Adinkra symbols are depicted on pottery, metal works, architecture, sculpture and incorporated into modern commercial designs where their related meanings give added significance to the product. Against the grain of Adinkra designs, I have used lemon green and regular green on a white background as shown in the lower part of the composition in figure 66. This cushion design in effect challenges conventions and metaphorically reinvents Adinkra designs, as Adinkra symbols are mainly rendered in monochrome (virtually black) in most textile design applications.



Figure 66. Cushion - Adinkra

#### 4.3 Design Application – Living Space Wall Panels

Wall panels are an excellent way to provide instant impact into living spaces and these panels are adaptable so that a variety of modular spaces can be constructed. Just as the influx of ideas from different sources such as Chinese mythology, Islamic geometric symbols and Buddhist themes influenced Javanese batiks and later wax prints, the motifs in the composition below (figure 67) blend two design traditions from West Africa; *Adinkrahene* and *Nkyinkyim* from Adinkra fabrics - Ghana and *Sickle* from Bogolonfini – Mali. The symbols are rendered in ash, regular brown and chocolate with a cream background that ties the scheme together. Contrary to most of the works in the entire experimentation, the manual rendering of symbols, that is, the irregular brush strokes and the choice of colour give the composition different appeal. The intended ‘imperfections’ of the images in the wall panels are set to contrast with an otherwise perfect living space. This living space portrays the ideal balance between modern and mid-century references.





Figure 67: Wall Panel

#### 4.4 - Live Project: WSA PGR Room, University of Southampton

The Winchester School of Art PGR room is used on a daily basis all year round by academics from different parts of the world for seminars, tutorials, group discussions and individual studies. The design brief included blinds, light cubes and cushions. The concept was to give the room some character with bold elements, colour and texture. Apart from the indented and transparent roof, the room lacks character; it has simple straight and white walls with a lot of natural light flooding in from the glass roof. As a designer who uses lots of colour and strong design elements in designs, it was a big challenge to strike a middle ground while introducing colour to create a fun, vibrant, yet cosy study atmosphere. Figure 68 A, B & C are some of the accessories for the decoration of the space.



Figure 68 A: Colour Intro – PGR Room Project



Figure 68 B: Colour Intro – PGR Room Project



Figure 68 C. Colour Intro – PGR Room Project

The blind design introduced into the space is an amalgamation of refined Bogolonfini grids overlaid with the Adinkra symbol ‘Hye wonnhye’ meaning imperishability, endlessness and endurance, overlaid with all over Bogolonfini textures to break up the strong colours of the background. The combination of cushions, light cubes and blinds make the room lively. The stark white walls paired with darker furniture and accents of colour from the accessories make the space have a more active outlook.

#### 4.5 Cultural Conversation Show

The design experiments culminated into a final show at the Winchester School of Art Library, University of Southampton. The show was dubbed Cultural Conversations in line with the central theme that informed the designs throughout the study. The designs for the show present an engaging examination of the textile



design traditions of West Africa as a region, exploring the various design and production techniques constituting fabric creation in Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, Mali, Benin and Cote d' Ivoire by analysing the symbols and iconography of those designs, considering the cultural implications.

The show featured a cocktail of fabrics, upholstered chairs, wall panels and digital design slideshow that featured over 200 images. The fabrics that measured 3 metres each were printed in silk, cotton panama, cotton poplin, cotton sateen, jersey and soft canvas.



Figure 69. A cross-section - Cultural Conversation Show

The fabric designs were set in mid to dark tone backgrounds in line with the general position of the practice. The strong but flat background make up for the lack of textures and so that the viewers will be able to navigate around and engage with the bold symbols. Most of the images used in the designs may appear the same and sometimes symmetrical, but that is an optical illusion. The contrast of images and colour was superlative that gave the set-up a gay ambience and some vibrant energy



Figure 70. Assorted fabrics – Cultural Conversation Show

The retro chairs (figure 71) used for the show are more complimentary but yet infuse the space with contemporary notes. These chairs were selected because of the broad surfaces to accommodate the bold and imposing images. The leg and frame are made from beech wood, foam and the fabrics are soft velvet. The fabric has water repellent property so that the chair can be wiped down with a damp cloth and given a regular brush to keep the fibres smooth, soft and sumptuous. Even though the chairs fit into the product trajectory of the research, their engagement and arrangement in the show are also signifiers of conversations in line with the central theme of the show.





Figure 71. Chairs – Cultural Conversations Show



Figure 72. Close-Up, Chair – Cultural Conversations Show

The wall panels as I refer to the 80 cm by 42 cm pieces that adorned the walls of the gallery was a collaborative work with some artist in Ghana (Amoako GH and Abraham Agbeshi of Department of Industrial Painting and Design, Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi - Ghana). Unlike all the other collections in the show, the wall panels were rendered manually after an initial composition with the computer and discussions with the artists. Also, the support is not the usual canvas, they are dyed khaki fabrics that were painted and later stretched on wooden frames. The rendering set the panels apart from the other works in the collection and gave them a unique appeal.

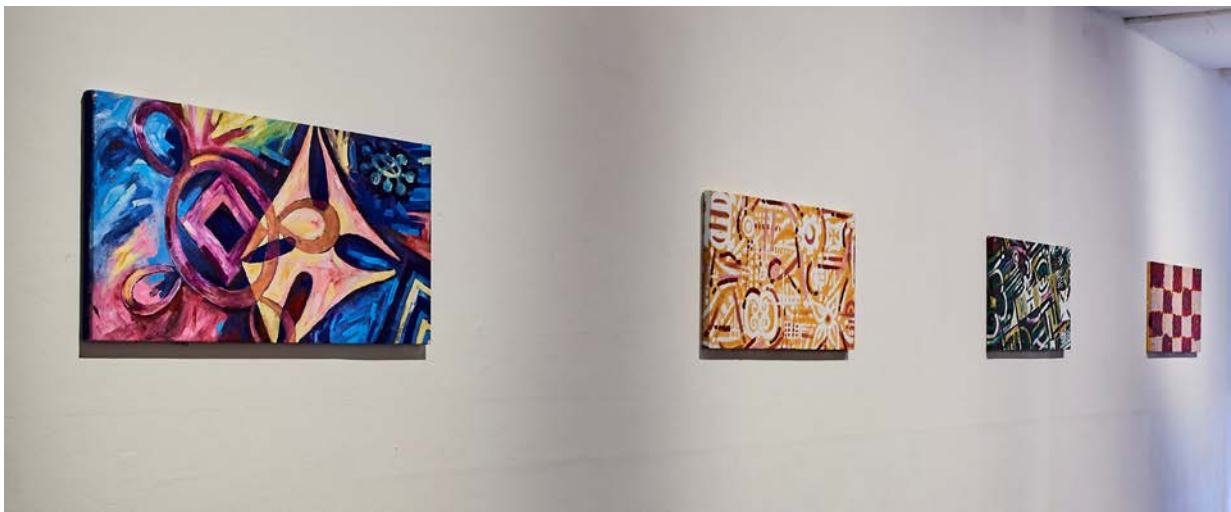


Figure 73. Wall Panels - Cultural Conversations Show

The cushions in figure 74 were hand screen printed in Ghana. They are printed with acrylic printing paste on already dyed fabrics with strongly coloured backgrounds. They are part of the preparatory experiments and are entry level designs for the show.





Figure 74. Cushions - Cultural Conversations Show

The 300 cm by 150 cm storyboard (figure 75) is a stylistic representation of Fon applique ideographs to tell a story. This is part of a contemporary narrative that put unlikely symbols together to bring reflection on indigenous West African history. The storyboard exhibited in the show is an important piece because it has taken the Fon appliqué imagery and storytelling practice and adapted to contemporary digital design and digital printing technique and to satirically put forth a dialogue to engage the viewer's thought and reflection on the role African leaders' played during the colonial era.



Figure 75. Story Boards, *The Ambush of Agadja* - Cultural Conversations Show

The piece encompasses *Tegbessou*, the buffalo in tunic at the top left; *Glele*, the lion at the bottom left; *Agadja*, the ship in the middle; *Kpengla*, the sparrow at the top right; at the bottom is a connection of slave shackles and a four-arm spindle showing the way on top and both sides. *Tegbessou*, *Glele*, *Agadja*, *Kpengla* were famous kings of Dahomey, modern-day Benin. However, as indicated in the chapter three King Agadja was vicious, and he is known for trading in slaves hence the slave ship as an insignia. This story board has recreated an ambush of Agadja by the other kings. The shackles across the bottom indicate an arrest and cessation of cruelty and the three spindle symbols spread across the board signify hope in skills and dexterity which represent the future of West Africa. The *Story Boards* reinforce the concept of cultural conversations that has been advocated through the practice and is an expansion of critical reflection and development. They emerged from a range of experimentation and testing before arriving at this final composition. Typically one composition takes up to 25 to 50 different attempts to arrive at a satisfactorily coherent piece.

The designs project the complex nature of the various propositions within the practice and research and the commercial and cultural realities within West African and global textile design as an area of practice and commercial production. It also explores the development of pan-regional design imagery that sensitively adapts symbols and patterns from the range of cultural designs. Marrying them to contemporary colours from commercial trend forecasting about upcoming fashionable colour pathways, all in pursuit of creating commercially appealing textiles for use in a breadth of product within the international design industry. The long-term aims include to increase the potential for West Africa as a textile design industrial centre in the global economy, thereby enhancing the economic growth for the region, and to raise the profile and increase the prestige of West African design traditions through sensitive adaptations and updates of the same by both West African designers and designers elsewhere. It is anticipated that this allows the West African perspective to come to the fore, that is, if designers of the region themselves are engaged in creative applications and creating cultural conversations across the different culture's design traditions. This will encourage

other designers to utilise the West African designs as a fresh expression and hence revitalising these practices for contemporary tastes and new applications.

The designs in the entire collection are a seemingly visual abstraction over naturalistic representation. This is because almost all the West African visual expressions, regardless of medium, represent objects or ideas rather than depict them. Even the portrait heads of Ile-Ife in Nigeria, usually thought of as naturalistic representations of rulers, have been smoothed and simplified to abstract and generalised stylistic norms. Design innovation for products in the various experimentations have come from art forms from various locations in West Africa. Most of the artists and designers discussed in this study use West African design forms as a way to transform society. The aspects of activism prevalent in some of their work challenge convention and reinforce the importance of creativity. The motifs used in the various compositions are signifiers, and all the experiments in this research are very much another kind of narrative and create a reference from West African themes.

Some aspects of this study, arguments and the practical component go against the grain of most established notions of conservation and the 'purity' of West African design ethics because of the obvious cultural leaps and unusual permutations, such as combining Adinkra symbols and Fon pictographs in one composition. However, all of these seeming cultural leaps create new ways for the wider world to interact with West African designs. This is so because the practical experimentation has led to a unique set of surface designs. The designs exemplify a modern adaptation of indigenous West African design symbols to wider, global markets which it is hoped will accelerate the transformation of such design forms for the contemporary market. It is believed that West African cultural expression should not be restricted by legal ownership and should be available as a resource and reference for designers. This would expand the dimension of African culture globally and allow it to become a constant part of the global design discourse. Even though it has been advocated in this study that there must be access to cultural resources, this must be accompanied by adequate documentation, reasonable education and a mutual frame of reference. This recommendation is necessary as there are variations in the cultural resources that are used; some could be used without any permission,

others could be used with permission and clearance from the 'owners' or custodians. There are other forms of cultural resources that are deemed as sacred or as items of worship and are therefore not permitted to be used in any commercial production. Since the design experiments in this study have a commercial dimension and potential such sacred symbols/objects have been avoided. The experimentation with different materials aims to offer a fresh and optimistic vision for textile production in West Africa.

## **5 – CONCLUSION**

"In my own practice, I have used the fabrics as a metaphor for challenging various notions of authenticity both in art and identity." Yinka Shonibare.

### **5.0 Indigenous West African Textiles in Contemporary Design Spaces**

The designs discussed in chapter four and those referenced by other contemporary artists and designers in the case studies provide an opportunity to reflect on issues relevant to contemporary West African design practice. Contemporary art and design practice utilise a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that challenge traditional boundaries and defy easy definition. Diverse and eclectic, contemporary art is distinguished by the very lack of a conventional, organising principle, context and philosophy. This study transcends the customary narratives that situate West African textile designs as status symbols, authentic and which must be treated in the 'appropriate context'. Departing from these customary limiting narratives, this study advocate for a new space in which designers from different parts of the world can tap the potential of the abundant indigenous design expressions in the region.

The practices and designs reflect a wide range of materials, media and technologies, as well as opportunities to rethink the extent and new dimensions of indigenous art and design. This research has explored ideas, concepts and practices that examine the past, its relevance now and looks forward to a sustainable future for indigenous design expressions. In the light of the recent diversities in art and design practices, this study does not suggest that it constitutes a singular way forward but is to be understood as part of a collective renaissance redefining indigenous West African design processes.

Though most contemporary designs are often characterised by the absence of a uniform organising principle, ideology or label, understanding the historical precedence of indigenous West African arts and design is important providing the context and also, informing my understanding of the designs I experimented with and produced for this project. I have attempted to build on timeless themes, by appraising static representations of design forms and given them relevance for a global context. The detailed case studies in the literature review of Yinka Shonibare, El Anatsui and other contemporary artists, even though utilising very

different techniques all of them have one overarching inclination, that is, to produce pieces that transcend culture but steeped in culture. Harris (2008) indicates that the works of these artists and designers re-define categorisation and transform meanings of 'art' and 'authenticity' in an era dominated by a hyper-internationalisation of cultural production. The contemporary artists discussed inadvertently advocate for a renewed interest in the fate of modern art and design and the prospects for future cultural production in a globalised art and design economy.

Contemporary art mirrors contemporary culture and society, offering audiences a rich resource through which to consider current ideas and rethink the familiar. Many works of contemporary art are characterised by a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts and themes that challenge traditional boundaries, and defy easy definition. In a globally influenced, culturally diverse, and the technologically advancing world, contemporary artists give voice to the varied and changing cultural landscape of identity, values and beliefs (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009; Ilfeld, 2012; Bonham-Carter, 2013). Audiences and consumers are playing an ever more active role in the process of constructing meaning from works of art. Crystallising the notion that the viewer contributes to, or even completes, the artwork by contributing his or her reflections, experiences, opinions and interpretations. As a consequence, international audiences are playing a significant role in revising the outmoded models of discursive control and shaping the contours of the advanced artistic debate. The increased visibility of contemporary West African art across global artistic networks presents an opportunity for critical reflection that goes beyond aesthetic appreciation and celebration. According to Wilkie (2004), several recent studies seek to address not only the limitations and perceived boundaries of West African art and design but also the socio-cultural-political-historical issues that surround the development of the field. A line of inquiry that seeks to map out certain phases of the discourse in indigenous West African artistic practice is gaining increased global critical currency.

During the past two decades, there has been a surge of interest in the work of non-western contemporary artists. A major reason for this turn of events is partly due to



the impact of globalisation on contemporary art and culture. Like other artists who were once situated on the margins of mainstream artistic narratives, African artists have been beneficiaries of the globalising phenomenon that has included the rise of biennales and art fairs and the unprecedented surge in the worldwide art. Also, a historical re-reading of modern West African art has re-invigorated the assessment of the work of contemporary African artists in the light of modernity and, by extension, the links to traditional African art and broadened each of their critical horizons. More recently, art historical, rather than the customary ethnographic research into contemporary art has become a core area of academic inquiry in African art history scholarship. Additionally, the convergence of traditional forms and contemporary paradigms represent that same cultural production's connection to a historical past, as well as its separation from that past.

The general dimension and discourse over indigenous design elements, practices and meaning have become very dynamic. The reality is that contemporary designs are blatantly defining themselves in opposition to established traditional norms. This is synchronous with the seemingly infinite material and technological revolution that has led to the experimentation of varied products and their applications. My design work originated from the assumption, West African textile designs could play a prominent role in the contemporary applied design industry. Sarat Maharaj<sup>3</sup> posited that China and India led textile fabric production around 250 years ago with low technological equipment and cheap labour. With the advancement of technology and mechanisation between 1820 and 1840, Europe gained ascendancy during the industrial revolution. This was followed by America which took advantage of the influx of cheap labour (slaves) to its shores from the seventeen century to the later part of the nineteenth century that trooped (economic migrants from Europe and other parts of the world) to the then new world until recently. Over the last two decades China, India, Bangladesh and other Asian countries have taken the lead in world textiles production. It has been projected that with the right technology and appropriate production protocols Africa could soon join these as an active player in global textile production.

According to Ondrusova (2004) during the process of colonialism, some elements of culture disappeared while others went through a natural process of evolution through improvisation. With the passage of time, these changes accelerated the process of transformation and many elements of traditional culture and folklore either disappeared or changed drastically. Hence the supposed 'purity' of modern-day indigenous societies is debatable. This is because this 'purity' of most indigenous societies was compromised through several years of occupations, colonialism and annexations. There are attempts and a conscious effort by some of these indigenous groups to record the various stages of the change process to form the basis for a consciously protected cultural heritage of nations, providing a foundation for new cultural activities which is anticipated to lead to the continuous development of those respective cultures. In a study of Indigenous heritage and intellectual property, Lewinski (2004) asserts that for a long period indigenous people have had to face assimilation into societies radically different from their own. They have been politically marginalised and suffered from economic, cultural and religious dispossession, a situation which, to a large extent, persists today. These various levels of interaction have affected the material culture of most indigenous societies and have shaped their artistic endeavours. Therefore, those indigenous communities and their advocates claiming ownership over their cultural expressions and their concerns of appropriation would be more effectively aimed at developing and projecting these respective cultural expressions.

The concept of appropriation should not only be understood in a negative light when discussing indigenous West African textiles. Akpang (2013) argues that appropriation can be seen as a strategy of re-invention, a means of transformation, which re-states what is old in a modern context. He further indicates that the concept of appropriation/adaptation is not just an important aspect of contemporary art but a contemporary measure of self-expression which illustrates a migration from the old to the changing face of modern societies, thus, appropriated artworks can become visual documentations and metaphors of a gradual cultural re-mix.

Throughout this study, very liberal views regarding access and usage of cultural resources have been expressed as well as the general principle that traditional knowledge, cultural design elements and expressions should, as much as possible,

be accessible to all. This rule, however, must be subject to some exceptions concerning commercial application. When profit is made from their usage, royalties should be paid to the community from where the designs were originally produced. It may as well be appropriate to make such exceptions only when 'sacred images' are used and that all exceptions to the general principle must be made carefully and not go beyond justifiable limits. There should also be some level of minimal protection for certain indigenous West African design expressions or traditional knowledge because there several of them and some can be off limit per their disposition, but such kinds are in the minority and insignificant. According to Roberts (2004), there could be many definitions of, and reasons for, protection of traditional knowledge. The reasons and how they are ranked would determine what is meant by protection and would be instrumental in shaping any system that is put in place. Protecting traditional knowledge could mean preserving it, because of its intrinsic value to its owners, to the world, and to future generations; promoting it, through its widest possible dissemination and use for the benefit of the human race as a whole; controlling its use to prevent misuse and; ensuring its owners a proper share of the benefits from the use of such knowledge.

Due to the wide variety of traditions and cultures in West Africa, there can be no universal guidelines for categorising the various design forms suitable for commercial adaptation or those requiring protection against inappropriate commercialisation. A simple, coherent and practical system for implementing such attempts at sharing or protection must be adopted; cataloguing labelling and keeping them at an appropriate repository could be a starting point. As it stands, such a system is not available for indigenous West African textile designs. In the absence of clear sharing and protection regimes, indigenous West African design expressions have come into the public domain without the appropriate protocols. However, several principles and mechanisms for safeguarding certain aspects of traditions and cultures can be developed while allowing others to be explored in various ways to advance culture. Perhaps the most important 'tool' in such a system is that of education since the protection of traditional folk culture is possible only if knowledge and information about them are widely disseminated. Currently available instruments suitable for this purpose include nationally and internationally

adopted regulations for protecting intellectual property. These cover, or should cover, many works of traditional folk culture and folklore. Another suitable approach would be to build public awareness of the importance of folk culture, as this would help the public distinguish between which designs are permissible and those that are sacred. All these recommendations cannot be operationalised in the current state of seemingly disorganised documentation and administration of cultural expressions and images in the region. A frame of reference is being proposed for all West Africa indigenous design traditions and cultural expressions as part of this research. The frame of reference must be realised through collaboration with indigenous people across the region to allow for easy access and sharing. Setting out this frame of reference can be layered to factor in copyright and intellectual property in addition to the dispersion and distribution of designs and cultural expression in West Africa. The frame of reference should form the basis of further study in the area due to the wealth of West African indigenous design, and its value as a source abundant, relevant and viable for design innovation.

In conclusion, this study has gone beyond the limiting discourse of indigenous West African fabric design communication to visualise such creations as a form of accelerated revenue generation. It is anticipated that this would resonate with a wider call for a greater understanding of the social and economic benefits that this creative renaissance can bring to the region. This could be facilitated by contemporary artists' attempt to challenge both popular understandings of what design/art is in their traditional context and modern models of design and material representation. Cultural resources have positive factors and over the years they have stimulated innovation in many different social and economic spheres and have helped pave the way for other future design trends. Amongst other things, the indigenous, the religious (Christian and Islamic) and the colonial are distinct 'traditions' that have shaped the current outlook of West African textile design traditions over time, however, they are still considered distinctively African. It follows that, this same design tradition will not remain static as today's designers and artists are on the verge of delivering a powerful new form of contemporary West African arts and design that come to define the region for future generations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hidden, misunderstood or overlooked.

<sup>2</sup> Esther Mahlangu is a South African painter whose art references patterns found in clothing and jewellery of the Ndebele people. Her paintings are normally large scale and the colours and patterns are typically very colourful and geometric.

<sup>3</sup> Sarat Maharaj: Speech at the day-long symposium about contemporary textile practices and multiple cultural influences to mark the launch of Cultural Threads (Bloomsbury: 2015). Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts – London. 7<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Omer Asim is a Sudanese designer living and working in London. He graduated from The Bartlett School of Architecture before completing a postgraduate at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He later attended Central Saint Martins specialising in creative pattern cutting. Asim learnt his craft through a number of internships starting with Maurice Sedwell of Savile Row and ending at Vivienne Westwood. He launched his fashion label in 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Seydou also was known as Seydou Nourou Doumbia, He created clothing that drew on his roots in Mali, West Africa, yet his designs evaded neat categorization as African. Seydou was well known for his adaptation of African textiles, including Mali's Bogolan fabric, to haute couture.

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## **Appendix 1: Meaning of Bogolanfini Symbols**

**Farmers Sickle:** the sickle is an important farming tool in West Africa; it has a semi-circular blade attached to a short handle and is used for cutting grain or tall grass. The inside of the blade's curve is sharp so that the user can either draw or swing it against the base of the crop, catching the stems in the curve and slicing them at the same time. According to oral history this pattern has a unique story, that is, a farmer had a sickle he particularly liked because it worked well for him and he thought it deserved its 'pattern' so this symbol was developed and named the sickle. The sickle signifies hard work, productivity, harvest and abundance.

**Spindle:** this design represents the spindle which is a rod or pin, tapered at one end and usually weighted at the other, on which fibres are spun by hand into thread and then wound onto a bobbin. It is a very old and traditional design; this was originally designed to highlight the usefulness of the spindle.

**Brave and Fearless:** this pattern represents a belt used by warriors before they went off to battle. Although it is a foreign concept, the warrior belt became very essential in many West African cultures. It is believed to possess supernatural powers that make the wearer's strength invincible. Only wealthy brave men and women in some cultural contexts wear such belts for battle. The design from this pattern unit, therefore, signifies braveness and fearlessness.

## **Appendix 2: Meaning of Korhogo Symbols**

**Bird:** the bird signifies freedom

**Fish Bone:** this signifies barrenness. Fish bones indicate inevitable drought, thirst and famine.

**Fish:** this signifies vitality and abundance. Where there are fish, there is bound to be water – a vital necessity in a drought-prone area such as northern Côte d'Ivoire – so the fish represents life to the Senufo.

**Chameleon:** the chameleon is the messenger of death and the leprosy carrier. The Senufo have given the chameleon an important dual role as an animator: sometimes harmful, sometimes beneficial. It's evil side is the messenger of death and the leprosy carrier. (An initial elder who meets a chameleon in the sacred woods will soon see the end of his days.) Its good side permits the chameleon to cure epilepsy.

**Hunter:** the hunter signifies life's mysteries.

**Lion:** the lion signifies royalty. The specialist in religion used lion eyes mixed with other elements to inspire fear of the chief and submission of the people.

**Turtle:** the turtle is considered one of the first animals created. It is believed that its slowness indicates its fear that the earth will crumble under his feet.

**Swallow:** this signifies life's interdependence. A Senufo chief must always have swallows in his home. With the swallows, he makes sacrifices to win the trust of the population and power over them.

### Appendix 3: Meaning of Fon Applique Symbols

**Tegbessou:** the buffalo wearing a tunic. *“A buffalo wearing clothing is difficult to disrobe.”* Under King Tegbessou, Oyo (Yoruba) captured Abomey, and after that an annual tribute, including 41 young men and 41 young women to serve as slaves, had to be sent to Oyo.

**Kpengla:** the sparrow. *“The stone in the water does not fear the cold.”* This represents the king who died of smallpox, as did many Dahomean kings.

**Agonglo:** the pineapple. This means *“Lightning falls on the palm tree, but the pineapple escapes it.”*

**Atagdoujiuhoun:** the Yoruba king Atagdoujiuhoun being hanged. Glele had captured him as he had been selling Dahomeans as slaves. When Glele died, Behanzin hanged the Yoruba.

**Behanzin:** the Shark and the egg. *“The world holds the egg which the ground wants.”* This represents the last great king of Dahomey. Conflict with the French led to his downfall. He was taken to Martinique where he died. Although his bones were returned to Abomey for burial, many Dahomeans preferred to believe he had changed himself into a bird and survived.

**Huegbadja:** the fish and the wicker fish trap. *“The fish which escapes from the trap does not return.”* The represents the second king of Dahomey who was also a cultural hero. He is credited with solidifying control of the plateau of Abomey and, among other things, introducing weaving to the people.

**Ago-Li-Agbo:** the foot, the pebble, the bow and the broom. *“Allada tripped but did not fall. This represents a king who was considered a puppet of the French; he is not usually included in the list of true kings.*

**Gangnihuessou:** the bird and the drum. This represents the older brother of the first king.

**Ghezo:** the buffalo without clothing. *“No cardinal-bird with red tail and wings ever starts a bush fire.”* This represents a powerful king who freed Dahomey from Oyo in 1827. He was in direct contact with the Ashanti King. He was defeated by the Egba at Abeokuta in 1851. Although considered humane, he refused to stop the sale of slaves.

**Spindle:** the spindle is another symbol of Gezo. It signifies that “as the thread comes close to the spindle, people should come close to Gezo for protection.”

**Agadja:** the ship “*Nobody could set fire to the tree fallen with all its limbs and green leaves.*” Agadja represents a king who conquered Whydah and extended his rule to the sea. The first to contact Europeans, his graphic symbol is a European vessel. He also conquered Allada, thus establishing the Kingdom of Dahomey as it was known to the whites.

**Akaba:** The Boar. “*Slowly, softly, the chameleon reaches the top of the bombax tree.*” This represents the son of Houegbadja the last king to rule before the coming of the Europeans.

**Glele:** the Lion. “*The lion’s teeth are fully grown, and he is the terror of all.*” Glele’s insignia is given elsewhere as the elephant.

**Dako:** the jar of indigo and the flint (strike-a-light). “*Dako kills his mother-in-law and the jar of indigo rolls.*” Other reports use the *Tacoodonou* or *Daho*. In some traditional histories this is said to be a chief of the *Fon* who murdered a neighbouring chief named *Da*, cut open his belly, *Home*, and built a palace on the body at Abomey, thus the Kingdom of Dahomey,

**The head of two enemy chiefs:** these were defeated and ordered to live in Abomey. They refused to do so, and were killed. Their heads were set on the house which had been built for them.



#### Appendix 4: Colour exploration in the study

A breadth of colours from global trend forecasters: Worth Global Style Network (WGSN) Colour forecasting, Pantone Colour Data (Global Colour Direction) and Global Colour Research (Mix Magazine) have been used in some of the experiments. I also experimented with how nature blends some unusual colours as reflected in plants, animals and other natural forms. Some of the colours were extracted and mounted as personal palettes and colour references. Figure 69 is an example of the outcome of the colour experiment.



Figure 76. Colour Palette from Personal Experiments

## Appendix 5: Reflection and Evaluation

The initial designs were rigid, repetitive and the compositions were characteristically full. This is due in part to my predisposition to West African textile designing production practices that follow a particular set of rigid procedures. Figure 70 is an example of the earlier designs.

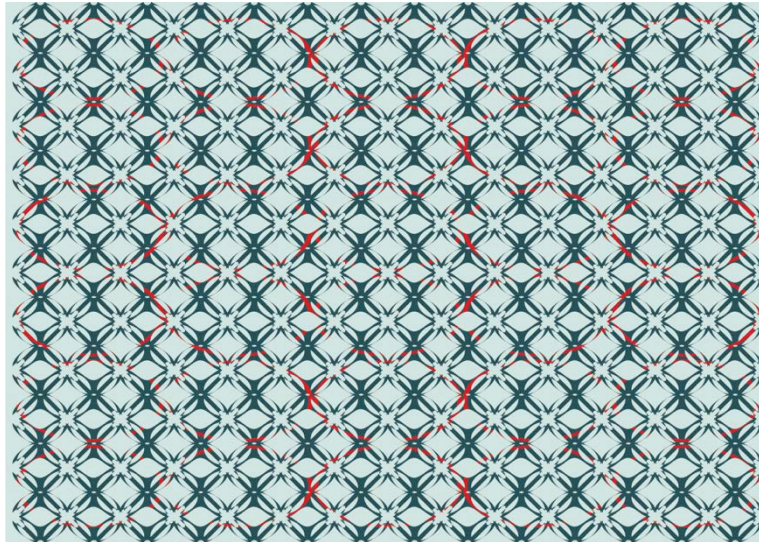


Figure 77. Earlier Design Sample

The rigidity of the design outlook was due in part to the motifs used which are tightly controlled symbols and are relatively strong graphic features. However, as progress is made through the experimentation process, the strong appearance of the motifs has been managed into more expressive forms and produced many symbolic and representational patterns.

West African symbols, ideographs and design expressions symbolise ideas, but in this experimentations the series of experimentations during this study have been translated, modernised and adapted towards several product trajectories. New designs have spaces for the eye to navigate from one motif to the other.



Figure 78. Later Design Sample

The design experiments take a more comparative view at the indigenous West African fabrics as evidenced in figure 78. The two central motifs in the composition are Adinkra and Adire and the background referenced the Malian Bogolanfini. I have migrated from the typical rust and inconsistent shades and tones and rendered it in what I have termed as high impact colours. The works apparently represent a counter-narrative of what indigenous West African designs should represent on the global market. The duality of motifs in the composition reinforces a quintessential idea of African magic on one part and the mystery behind everything that defies common knowledge on another.

Figure 52 is a design collaboration that seeks to combine manual painting, printmaking and computer application. Unlike most of the works that used white or light coloured background, these sets of experimentations utilised dark backgrounds. The composition encompasses some West African symbols in an all over distribution, and the motifs do not follow any rudimental repetition and rigid arrangements as pertained in the earlier works and experimentations. The composition does not leave much space for navigation of the eye.



Figure 79. Design Collaboration



## **Appendix 6: Digital Textile Printing**

Digital textile printing offers faster ways of printing, wider design, 'effects', and product possibilities, engineered design and an expansive range of colour possibilities. These features make product possibilities very broad, and that is the main reason why they have been used that for most of the products. Digital printing is the most significant advance in fabric printing technology since the invention of the silk screen and has brought about a revolution in textile design and application. It made it possible for me to experiment with previously unexplored sources, and to create a new visual language for surface design. According to Anand and Horrock (2004), the latest advance in textile printing can be attributed to the introduction of digital inkjet printing machines, capable of printing fabrics up to 2m in width using acid, reactive or disperses dye ink set. Generally four, seven to eight and up to twelve colours may be printed. Furthermore, in general, digital inkjet printing systems are designed principally for use with textile materials, including natural fibre-based substrates such as cotton, silk and wool fabrics as well as polyester-based fabrics, linoleum and formica.

Digital printing also supports placements and engineered designs (pre-planned product designs) as other systems are already being used for printing flags and banners and have great potential for printing short production runs of advanced technical textiles fabrics. Digital printing thrives on a chain of support systems. Bowles and Isaacs (2011) relate that digital textile printing has some major advantages over traditional printing methods in design terms. These are: immediacy; the ability to print intricate details and millions of colours as well as the possibility of printing images on a much larger scale; being able to create customized products and engineered designs, An 'engineered' or 'placement prints, are tailored to fit the pattern pieces of a garment in such a way that, when assembled, there is a degree of continuity - the design flows unbroken around the body and the image or repeated pattern is not broken by the seams. These garments are perceived as being more luxurious if a placement print were employed, as such designs are more costly and time-consuming to produce. The fact that digital tools make it easier to create an engineered print is a very exciting

prospect for fashion and textile designers alike, as both digital print and digitally-fitted garments can be brought together. Engineered prints may also be used more subtly to highlight elements such as cuffs, collars and bodices. Furthermore, regarding African prints would be able to produce the same unbroken effect seen on traditional wrapped and draped African garments made from a single length of cloth on western tailored, cut and sewn garments.

There are some computer programmes that provide a variety of drawing, painting, rendering and wide range of colour palette. Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator have been identified as the most appropriate software for digital textile designing. However, there are other software such as Corel Draw X6 and Adobe InDesign. Design possibilities are seemingly endless with inkjet printing. Interfering and overlaid abstract patterns that were very difficult to print with conventional printing have become fashionable: thanks to inkjet printing. In conventional printing, such patterns have to be separated and rastered (scanned into) at great expense and then printed with a high degree of precision. Moreover, this is due to more capable printers and more cost-efficient processes; inkjet printing is currently experiencing a huge boom and developing a production process.