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# Symbolic values of clothing and textiles art in traditional and contemporary Africa

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## Abstract

Africa's artistic traditions constitute a primary example of its intellectual and cultural vitality. Artistic works play a vital role, especially where visual art traditions dominate; in communicating ideas about the relationship between the human, spiritual and natural worlds. This work is an analytical study of the roles that visual arts in Africa perform, focusing on the function of these arts in African society. The study combines ethnographic and art-historical methodology to symbolize the mediating functions of cloth and dress or clothing and textiles in Africa, thus emphasizing what is "important" in terms of the artistic representations. This approach reveals the transformative capacities and multi-dimensionality of art in the African society. The paper finally highlights the changes brought about by Christianity, Islam and the newer religious movements in post-colonial Africa.

**Keywords:** Clothing and textiles; Symbolic values; Mediating functions; Art traditions; African society

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## 1. Introduction

Art in Africa has always been a reflection of the culture of the people. The term 'culture' refers to the language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, roles, knowledge, skills and all other things people learn that make up their 'way of life' 'especially' dress (UNESCO, 2008). These various art cultures have majorly been considered by art historians or ethnologists in their stylistic forms and aesthetic peculiarities (Banjoko, 2009: 84), apart from their essence and relevance to the society. Art evolves from the society since it is all encompassing in the people's way of life. According to (Bewaji, 2003: 193), clothing and textiles are significant forms of African art, which play vital roles in the cultural milieu of the people. However, these have rarely been given attention by art historians as much as were given to sculpture and painting (Vansina, 1984). Textiles have been grouped as craft, minor or lesser art, and as such not much importance has been given to studying it in relation to the society's socio- cultural values.

Cloth and dress have been described as a mirror of the culture of the people in any society (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 25). They symbolize the practices of the society, bounded by the same geographical location, sharing the same cultural values. In the cultural context cloth serves basic needs as clothing and shelter (Payne, 1965). However, the function of cloth and dress has been encapsulated within boundless limits as it is discussed below:

*"Beyond basic role in shelter and protection, cloth and dress have overlapping mediating functions including (1) measurement of self and personal worth; (2) indicator of occupation; (3) measurement of social value; (4) standard of economic value; (5) definition and negotiation of political power; (6) religious signifier and repository of supernatural powers; (7) indicator of culture and change."* (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 28)

It is in view of the above that this study analyses and justifies the roles of visual arts in traditional and contemporary Africa, dwelling more on the mediating functions of clothing and textiles, with reference to Yoruba- *aso-oke*; Ashanti- *kente*; Igbo- *ukra*; Bamako- *bogolanfini* mud cloth and Kuba raffia cloth and a host of others.

## 2. Cloth and dress as measurement of self and personal worth

According to Adejumo (1998), an ideal art form is universally communicable. *Kente*, a colourful fabric of gold, yellow, red, black, green and blue, is an intricately designed piece of fabric, and a functional art that conveys messages about the historical, cultural landmarks, philosophical thoughts, religious and moral values of society (Leuzinger, 1976). Traditionally, *Kente* cloths were used only by people of certain status. The rich Ghanaian royal costumes, with heavily decorated clothes made of gold string patterns, coral beads and embroidery, were worn by their kings and chiefs to communicate their wealth and status to the world (Plate 1). This Ashanti *Kente*, also served as insignia of particular groups of people in the society. The King of Njowa of Bamum, of Cameroon in his kingly attire seated on the throne with his chiefs flanked round him (Plate 2).

Today, the Ashanti of Ghana wear *kente* cloth outside the royal court. Men wear *kente* by wrapping a piece of cloth; on average of 8 feet wide by 12 feet long, around themselves, leaving the right shoulder and hand uncovered, while women wear it wrapped round their body with or without a blouse (Plate 3) and in recent times, *kente*, are sewn into different styles e.g skirts and blouses (Plate 4), suits/jackets, on academic gowns, as clerics vestments, etc. In fact the styles and uses of *kente* cloths are unending, with various creative models.

*Aso oke*, a traditional cloth of the Yoruba of South western Nigeria, is portrayed in three main designs; *etu*, which is a dark blue indigo dyed cloth, *sananyan*, a brown cloth woven from the beige silk of the Anaphe moth and *alaari*, which is woven from cotton fibres were also the preserves of the kings and nobles. It was recorded that the Olubadan of Ibadan (a prominent Yoruba king) at a particular time banned his chiefs from wearing *aso oke*. *Aso oke* sewn in *agbada*, *buba* and *sokoto* was one of the insignia of the Kings and chiefs in the traditional period. However, it still serves the same purpose with its heavy embroidery work, but now it is available to those who can afford it. However, different styles of dress are now produced with various types of fabrics. *Aso oke* in the contemporary times is worn during major events such as naming ceremonies, engagements, weddings, house warming and funerals. *Aso oke* was mainly sewn into traditional dress. They are now used as muffler over dress for award in ceremonies and recognition (Plate 5), and as tops over trousers for personal branding and unique identity (Plate 6). The celebrants are usually distinguished from their guests by their mode of dressing (Plate 7).

### 3. Clothing and textiles as indicator of occupation

Traditionally, Bambara (Bamanan) women of Mali, as well as those of the Minianka, Senufo, Dogon, and other ethnic groups, produce Bogolanfini, mud cloth for important life events. Men, especially hunters, wear it for hunts and celebrations. Men's shirt may be white, indigo or brown in colour. If the shirt was for hunting it would be brown and adorned with amulets, horns and other traditional medicine to help improve the hunter's effectiveness (Plate 8). In the democratic republic of Kongo, *nganga*, a diviner wears a costume covered with many symbolic objects, such as wild animal skins, bird feathers, leopard teeth, bells and anything else that is unusual. Today, mud cloth is readily available for sale in markets for men, women and others from outside of the culture. The Yoruba people of Nigeria also have particular dress for different works. The cloth for the farmer is different from the hunter, and also different from those worn for war.

### 4. Clothing and textiles as religious signifier and repository of supernatural powers

Renne and Agbaje-Williams (2005), while emphasizing the essentiality of Textiles observed that:

*"The pervasive use of textiles as dress, as altar cloths, and as sacred objects, in religious worship is expressive of the character of iwà of persons and objects associated with them, as Pemberton has observed. Yet other, more general, characteristics of cloth also contribute to their appropriateness as vehicles of religious belief and practice."*

It is expected of the African to preserve relationship between human and cosmic (celestial) realm. A lot of Yoruba religious textiles, Country cloth of the Mende in Sierra Leone, Ukara cloth of the Igbo and a host of other cloths and dress from Africa, perform religious purposes and are repository of supernatural powers. The African life is wrapped in religion (Hackett et al., 1998). This explains why the whole community faithfully carries out all rites and rituals connected with rites of passage such as in birth, puberty, marriage, death and life after death. These ceremonies symbolize religious values which govern the family and society (Idowu, 1991; Ejizu, 2013).

*Ukara* cloth is one of the textiles that show how leadership regalia often transmit the ambivalent and dangerous qualities of the wilderness into symbols of power (Plates 9 and 10). The Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria produce *Ukara* cloth, covered with *nsibidi* symbols and motifs, which was initially meant for the Ekpe society. *Ukara* cloth, an indigo stitched and dyed cloth is significant to the people of Igbo land. The cloth is traditionally used as either a wrapper, worn by high-ranking members of Ekpe group who often custom; designed it (Plate 11), or as backdrop in the throne; rooms of chiefs and kings (Wikipedia, 2012).

It also features in some masquerade costumes, such as used by the Nkanda. For the burials of its members, the society would erect a tent-like structure, and the walls made of *ukara* cloth in the deceased member's house. When it is hung in Ekpe lodges, it serves to demarcate the boundaries between the initiated and the uninitiated, hiding the source of the 'leopard voice' (Ajibade, et al, 2012). This large rectangular cloth is divided into seventy two or eighty squares, superimposed by three to five large stylized animal images (Chuku, 2005: 73). The squares or rectangles are composed of four design types of concentric rectangular boxes with various 'chequered' patterns, representational motifs; such as fish, scorpions, crocodiles, hands in friendship, war and work, masks, moons, and stars are dyed onto *ukara* cloths, which are symbolic representations of the repository power of the society (Cole and Aniakor, 1986). Other symbols include abstract or geometric signs from secret writing systems known as *nsibidi*. There are both naturalistic and abstract references, such as in the bold, chequered patterns, which symbolize the leopard's multiple spots, thus representing the leopard's claws and then symbolize the Ekpe society's power. The pythons and crocodiles also refer to the fearful and mystical power of Ekpe society.

It is quite interesting to note that Ekpe symbols and titles have persisted as expressions of authority, even with the advent of missionaries and colonial masters in the nineteenth century. Till today, the Efik King known as *Obong*, must hold the Eyamba title which is the highest rank in the Ekpe society (Glele, 1991). There is a combination of traditional and European regalia which shows Ekpe chiefs and kings, such as woven string cap, staff and stool, brass objects, scepters, crowns, thrones and imported hats and costumes. This combination of roles with regalia, is still been used today at such important events as the coronation of the *Obong* of Calabar (<http://www.hamillgallery.com/IGBO>).

Traditional African writing system, such as *nsibidi* symbols have continued as source of inspiration for many Nigerian contemporary artists like Victor Ekpu, whose highly lyrical and closely-scripted work (<http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/nsibidi.html>) is shown in (Plate 12). Frequently during public ceremonies one can see evidence of imported and indigenous modes of dress as well as masked leopard

representations. During ritual ceremonies the people line out dramatically with nsibidi- (<http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/nsibidi.html>) woven ukara cloth

The Ashanti religion is an amalgamation of the spiritual and the supernatural powers ([http://www.africancraftsmarket.com/Ashanti\\_people.htm](http://www.africancraftsmarket.com/Ashanti_people.htm)). There exist various religious beliefs associated with ancestors, higher gods, or 'abosom', and 'Nyame' the Supreme Being of Ashanti; these are embedded in art forms particularly in clothing and textiles. In addition these are variegated patterns of weaving with various distinctive names. Frequently the pattern symbolises the social status or clan or the sex of the person wearing it ([http://www.africancraftsmarket.com/Ashanti\\_people.htm](http://www.africancraftsmarket.com/Ashanti_people.htm)). It is within the ritual context that a complex negotiation of forces and symbols occurs, recalling mythical and historical events, and evoking divine powers and experiences (Visona, 2001:195). The Yoruba people are very versatile in their religious beliefs and performances. One of the platforms for this exhibition is in their *egungun* festivals, where the masquerade is adorned with *aso eku*, (Plate 13) covered with magical horns, statues, cowries, black medicinal soap and magical skins and an elaborate indigenous head-mask by the performers. However, there have been interactions with foreign religions, materials and creativity which have diversified these traditions to what now serves as forms of entertainment, rather than the initial ritualistic/sacred purposes; an example of Lagbaja, a contemporary Nigerian musician (Plate 14). This Lagbaja 'masquerade' appears in various costumes which are sewn with stripes of (dyed fabrics) *adire*; (printed fabrics) *Ankara*; (woven fabrics) *aso ofi* etc., to cover the entire body and worn during his performances.

## 5. Clothing and textiles as measurement of social value

The Dogon people of Mali cherish their traditional cloth so much that they have a proverb that shows the importance they attach to it. They assert that 'to sell the family's cloth is to sell the family's value' (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 31). Almost in all African countries the value of cloth and textiles is exhibited. The Yoruba will say *eniyan l'aso mi* equating the value of cloth to human beings. The ubiquitous use of family dress or *aso ebi* is of relevance in this discussion. Ajani (2012) critically examines the persistent use of a Yoruba cultural dress, *aso ebi*. *Aso ebi* practice is a cultural tradition that has endured despite modernization, among the ethnic groups in Nigeria (Plate 15). *Aso ebi* which means family cloth among the Yoruba, was practiced at onset among the families of the Yoruba and originally meant to be a family uniform to enable the quests to identify members of the family during occasion. However he discovered in recent times, that it has diffused into other groups in Nigeria. 'Aso ebi practice is a popular trend that has taken over the Nigerian fashion scene' (Ajani, 2012). He found out that *aso ebi* dresses are mostly made from *aso oke*, *java*, *Ankara*, *silk*, *George* and *guinea* materials. There are lots of commemorative cloths of different themes and motifs, in many African societies. In a year there can be nearly a complete turnover in the patterns and colour combinations available in the market. Some prints commemorate events and do not last on the shelf (<http://www.ibike.org/africaguide/textile/textile1.htm>). For example, (Plate16), (This cloth commemorates Barak Obama's election to Presidency of the United States. The caption translates, "God has given us love and peace")

## 6. Clothing and textiles as standard of economic value

Clothing and textile products are very lucrative once they enter into a market. Their value is mainly determined by the taste and understanding of the buyer. Likewise, the product's aesthetic qualities, functionality, ritual history or status as souvenir attracts the buyer. Yoruba dressing culture in all spheres of life, has had a great impact on other cultures (Adeniyi and Alao, 2008), through trade, movements and linkages, etc. The Yoruba people have developed distinctive forms of dress to communicate and to enhance cultural meanings. It has been noted that traders carried with them richly decorated traditional costumes across the borders to other countries, in the traditional past (Eicher, 1976; Negri 1976; Picton 1992) and till this contemporary times clothing and textiles art are being valued for economic empowerment within Africa and beyond. In visual arts, aesthetics, emotive response, provenance, (the origins and context of the product within a body of work, a cultural and historical context), (Brown, 2008:15) and understanding of the product play a major role and have become a major thrust of the economic globalisation process in Africa (Onyeonoru et al., 2003). These products also have access to international markets through trade, and thus bring funds to individuals and the nations at large.

## 7. Clothing and textiles as indicator of culture and change (the modern tendencies)

The art of Abomey appliqués came into prominence during the Dahomey Kingdom (now known as the republic of Benin along the west African coast) between 1600 and 1900 (<http://www.ibike.org/africaguide/textile/textile1.htm>). During this period each Fon (the king) had his kingship associated with special symbols and proverbs. These symbols are now used as decorations on walls, glass, umbrellas, buildings and other items in the king's palace. The production of appliqués has form into a craft. There are both traditional and contemporary forms of these appliques (Ojo, 2004 and Mozer, 2013). Apart from traditional themes, there are now appliqués pieces depicting maps of Africa, wild animals and village scenes (Plate 17). They are commonly found in market places in Benin and in tourist centers of the capital cities of neighbouring countries (<http://www.ibike.org/africaguide/textile/textile1.htm>). Appliquéd cloths which were in the past dedicated to an even surface is now advancing into volumes, with the addition of bracelets, sticks and chains for 'voodoo' initiates (Adande, 2011). The word Batik is an Indonesian origin, probably because of its location on the trade route between North and South as well as from West to East which makes the north coast of Java a tourist center. However, the technique has been in existence in Egypt by 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, probably before Egypt and Indonesia had any communication link between them (<http://www.ibike.org/africaguide/textile/textile1.htm>). Batik has existed in Africa since time immemorial but the details were not clear. In both West and East Africa it is now widely recognized as a modern art form (Plate 18). In West Africa, record of resist dyeing using cassava and rice paste has been flourishing for many centuries among the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria including Senegal. Batik art has maintained its dynamic growth up till this moment and for the past centuries has become one of the principal means of expression of spiritual values of Southeast Asia. The early batik forms were attached thick heavy hand-woven pieces of cloth. New art forms of this genre are being super-imposed on much lighter industrial cotton cloth. They are decorated with trees, animals, flute players,

hunting scenes and stylized mountains. The royal themes are also being attached to hand-woven strip cloth that can serve as runners, placemats, pillow covers among other notable artworks (<http://www.ibike.org/africaguide/textile/textile1.htm>).

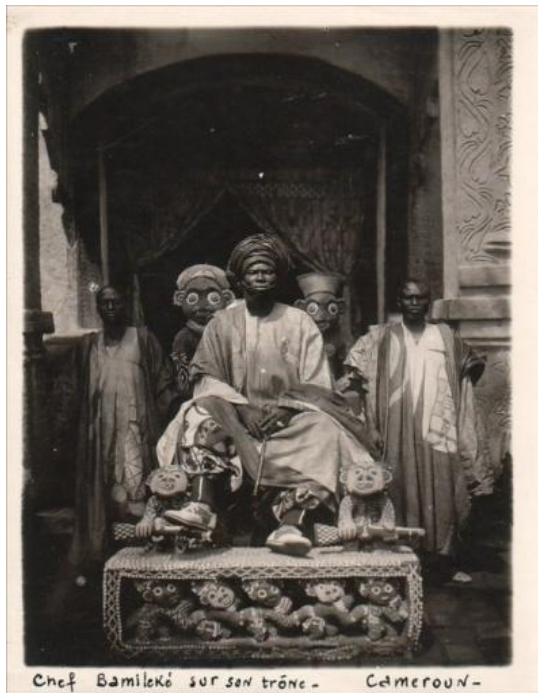
## 8. Conclusion

Cloth and Textiles have turned to a scroll where the socio-cultural map of Africa can be viewed and enjoyed; they often document the historical and symbolic past and also serve as a reference point to the world. Art appeals to our aesthetic senses and contributes to our culture. It helps establish pride in our community and gives inspiration to people. It also helps to relieve boredom with the transformation made in the decorations on cloth. Art as a creative endeavour makes us to realize our potentials and also empowers us for the realization of our goals.

Cloth and textiles market now flourishes in many African societies; they service both local and international consumers. They are centres where various designs and culture of their makers help to showcase the rich traditions of the people. African cloth and textiles designers are often seen collecting clothing materials from different sources to be used for dresses which are later paraded at fashion shows both locally and internationally. The metaphors and ensigns of cloth and clothing, expressed in their form and colour, are not limited to the traditional milieu, but are expressed in contemporary institutions (Adesanya, 2005). From the study, it becomes obvious that cloth and textile can be used to illustrate the socio-cultural context of the African society. The vitality of African arts attests to the creativity of the people. Contemporary African art is dynamic and incorporates Western ideas and materials adapted with traditional belief system and concerns.



**Plate 1.** Chief Nana Akyanfuo in Kente Cloth



**Plate 2.** Chief Bamileko, Cameroun in Traditional aso oke dress



**Plate 3.** Ashanti Kente in both traditional and contemporary use





**Plate 4.** Man and woman in traditional Yoruba dress



**Plate 5.** Dogon boy's hunting shirt with amulets, horns and other Traditional Medicine



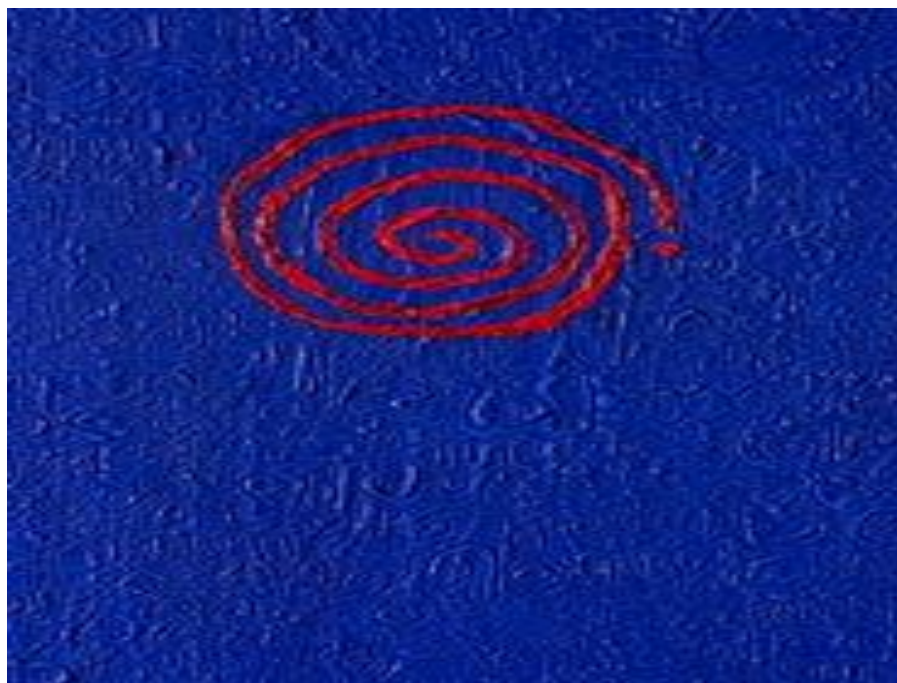
**Plate 6.** Ukara Cloth. Cotton, Dye, 256 by 198 cm. courtesy Don Cole



**Plate 7.** Close up of Ukara Design



**Plate 8.** Ekpe members in Ukara Cloth Courtesy Eli Bentor, 1989



**Plate 9.** Victor Ekpuk painting Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Artist





**Plate 12.** Batik work, Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta)



**Plate 13.** Batik Cloth with embroidery design

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<http://www.hamillgallery.com/IGBO>

<http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/nsibidi.html>

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