

Chapter Four:

A SYNERGY OF ULI TRADITIONAL MOTIFS INSPIRED BATIK AND AFRICAN WAX-PRINTED FABRICS FOR CONTEMPORARY FASHION

Contributed by

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INTRODUCTION

The word "batik" is derived from the Javanese words "amba" (to write) and "titik" (dot), literally meaning to write with dots. The earliest evidence of batik production originated in ancient Egypt, China and India over 2000 years ago and spread to Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, where it became an integral part of the culture. It is difficult to attribute the invention of batik to a single person; the art form has evolved over centuries through the contributions of various cultures and contributions. Some of the globally known batik artists are Isabella Kunzli Waller (Switzerland), who experiments with natural dyes and a combination of other techniques like "Ecoprint" or the Japanese techniques of Shibori, Tjoa siblings (Indonesia), whose batik is considered a perfect blend of Javanese, Chinese and European culture, Gabrielle Lasporte (Canada), Karamo Saidykhan (Gambia), Ellis Singano (Malawi), Annie Phillips (United States), Celia Hume (United Kingdom), among many others. The batik industry in Malaysia and Indonesia is dominated by two types of production techniques, that is, "hand-drawn batik (batik tjanting) and batik stamp (batik terap/blok). Scholars speculated that the hand-drawn was initially reserved to be worn by Javanese royalty (Steelyana, 2012). The development of the batik stamp technique in the 1840s was responsible for revolutionising batik making because it allowed for a greater production rate compared to the hand-drawn batik technique (Sekimoto, 2003). The hand-drawn and batik stamp techniques differ in terms of the tools, production time, ability to deliver complex designs, product price and volume of output. In the hand-drawn process, tjanting is commonly used to draw wax designs on the fabrics, while the batik stamp technique uses a metal block that is dipped into the molten wax and then impressed onto the fabric to transfer the batik design. In comparison to the batik stamp textile, the price of hand-drawn batik textile is more expensive, and it's produced in smaller quantities (Rahman, 2005). The batik industry in Malaysia was initially introduced by Javanese batik makers, using the wood batik stamp technique East Coast Peninsula, circa the 1920s. The development of the batik stamp in the 1930s was spurred by the demand for traditional costumes known as batik sarona (Yunus, 2011).

Batik was introduced in the 19th century by Belinda Hitan, or Black Dutchman in West Africa from Indonesia to countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Senegal and so on. Batik production differs from country and region in terms of styles and techniques. For instance, Senegal makes use of rice paste to create their textile batik, and the Bamana people of Mali make theirs by weaving

hand-spun cotton yarn in narrow strips on a man's double-heddle loom, after which the cloth is then dyed yellow and the design applied with river mud. The Ghanaian technique involves applying liquid wax with a brush or pad. Nicolau Paruque, a Mozambican artist who creates batik art representing female singers and musical instruments, is one of the African batik artists. In Nigeria, the Yorubas are well known for batik making, also known as Adire, which is grouped into Adire Eleko and Adire Eleso. The Adire holds a significant cultural and spiritual importance among the Yorubas. Nike Davies Okundaye, Nigeria's most famous fabric artist, Tunde Odunlade, Nigeria's pre-eminent batik artist and Gasali Adeyemi, who creates batik and indigo tie-dye t-shirts, are among Nigeria's batik artists.

African wax-printed fabrics, also known as Dutch wax prints, Ankara or kitenge, originated in the

19th century, from the batik textile of the former Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) and became popular in West Africa, Nigeria. The method of producing African print fabric is known as "batik", a wax-resist dyeing technique. African wax prints are important cultural artefacts that reflect the history and traditions of West Africa. African wax-printed fabrics, popularised by Dutch colonisers, have become an integral part of African fashion (Klein, 2010). The African wax-printed fabrics took their inspiration from native Indonesian designs, and are industrially produced colourful cotton cloths with batik-inspired printing (Wikipedia).

In this study, the researcher explored and experimented with the combination of batik and African wax-printed fabrics for contemporary fashion, as this has not been sufficiently explored by scholars and fashion designers. The techniques and processes of production were discussed accordingly in this study, and this idea is to promote the cultural significance of the Igbo traditional motifs and to add variety to the world of fashion. This study will be beneficial to the fashion industry as it will create new and innovative fashion designs that blend both traditional and contemporary styles. This study will also help in preserving and promoting the Igbo cultural heritage through the fashion industry, educationally, historically and culturally. It focused on exploring the potential of combining batik decorated with Uli traditional motifs and African wax-printed fabrics for contemporary fashion designs. It also focuses on promoting and preserving the Igbo cultural heritage through fashion. It produced a kimono jacket, gown, shirt and shorts appropriate for wear.

From time immemorial, people have preferred producing and sewing batik just like that; likewise, the African wax print. Hardly do you come across people combining the batik and African wax print, and there has been insufficient attention towards it. Therefore, this study is of the view that if the two are combined, it will add much variety to the world of fashion.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:

1. To produce some fabric using batik as a technique.
2. To produce some constructed clothing using the combination of the batik produced in this study with the African wax-printed fabrics for contemporary fashion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "exploration" generally means the process of investigating or examining new territories, ideas, or concepts. It involves the pursuit of knowledge or discovery, whether through physical journeys to unknown places or intellectual inquiries into uncharted subjects. According to

Wikipedia, "exploration" is the act of searching an unfamiliar area to learn about it. It involves the discovery of new information. Exploration gives one the idea that anything is possible and leads to knowledge and understanding. Exploration also refers to the process of investigating, discovering and learning about something. It often involves gathering information through various sources (research), conducting experiments, observations or surveys (investigation), uncovering new knowledge, concepts or relationships (discovery), and interpreting and evaluating findings (Analysis)

Batik

The Indonesian National Standard (2014) defined batik as a handicraft where batik wax is transferred on the fabric using a canting or stamp tool to create meaningful motifs (Affanti & Hidayat, 2019). According to Tucker (1999), Batik is a process that applies resist materials and dyes repetitively to build up the design of the fabric. Batik is a cultural heritage, primarily due to the art involved in producing batik (Rangkuti 2015). Affanti and Hidayat (2019), Situngkir (2008) state that batik is defined based on the process of using stamps or tjanting with the wax resist-dyeing process, to form meaningful design. Batik, therefore, refers to a wax-resist dyeing technique, where designs are printed or drawn onto a plain cotton fabric, using melted wax. The four types of batik include: batik tulis, batik cap, batik lukis, and batik pesisir.

Batik Tulis

Hand-drawn Batik Tulis, or "written" batik, is considered the finest and most pure traditional form of Javanese batik and also the most expensive. Batik Tulis involves intense manual focus and skills. The artist uses a small crucible of hot paraffin or beeswax with a thin spout to draw intricate, often dotted designs directly onto fabric by hand. In Batik Tulis, both sides of the fabric are treated with wax before being immersed in a series of dye baths. This repeated application of the wax ensures a strong resist that will develop clean, clear images in the final product, which can take anywhere from several days to complete.



Hand drawn batik. Cirebon, North Java

Figure 1. Hand-drawn batik
Source: google.com

Batik cap

Batik cap, or “stamped” batik, is a technique that evolved to help speed up the painstaking decorative process. Though it doesn’t use a canting or involve hand-drawn imagery, this form of Indonesian batik (along with batik tulis) is recognised by UNESCO as part of an important cultural heritage. Batik Cap involves creating the same kind of wax-resist designs, but patterns are stamped rather than drawn into the fabric. Batik Cap involves a specific copper tool called a “canting cap,” which experts use to apply repeating designs like a stamp, using wax instead of ink. This form of batik is less idiosyncratic, but the fabric is easier to create, more uniform, and thus less expensive than hand-drawn Batik Tulis.



Plate 2: Batik stamp
Source: Internet

Batik Lukis

Batik Lukis is the form of batik that involves painting patterns, images, or lines onto blank, undyed cloth using any number of tools: paintbrushes, broomsticks, toothpicks, or other found tools. Often called batik painting, it’s a slightly newer development than the first two forms and a less traditional, more openly creative style that allows for the development of new imagery and modern motifs. This style of batik is often linked to the aesthetics and personal choices of specific artists rather than to inherited wisdom and cultural iconography. The dye colours and wax designs in Batik Lukis tend to be more fun and experimental as well, and there’s more evidence of colour gradients in this style.

Batik Pesisir

Batik Pesisir, also known as “coastal batik” or “Indonesian coastal batik,” is a stamped style of batik made on the island of Java as well as other seaside regions. The coastal tradition soared in popularity once Dutch, Chinese, and Indian merchants became involved in the batik industry. Although it is still centuries old, coastal batik is a relatively newer style that rose to popularity in the 19th century and is less tied to a specific cultural heritage. Unlike the status-signalling, age-old symbolism of more historic Indonesian styles, Batik Pesisir is more fashion-focused, more commercial, and more common. The techniques used to make it are less rigid, incorporating tools and steps inspired by foreign trade. Dutch, Indo-European, and Chinese settlers introduced a host of new motifs in the late colonial period, as well as the stamping cap that allowed the mass production of designs. A coastal batik sub-genre called Batik Belanda, or “Dutch batik,” developed

in Java between 1811 and 1946. It encompassed fabrics from a smaller, European-led batik industry, which fused Western design elements with techniques and patterns from the native Javanese tradition (its popularity faded after WWII). Heavily influenced by Islamic art in the 16th century, coastal batiks favoured vibrant reds and blues over more traditional black, brown, and ochre dyes. This kind of batik is still identifiable by the influence of foreign art on its stamped motifs and nontraditional colour palettes.

Uli traditional motifs

Okeke (2011) and Ottenberg (1975) are of the view that traditional Uli motifs originate from the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria and symbolise cultural heritage and identity. Ottenberg (1975) further states that these motifs symbolise the spiritual significance (ancestors, gods), cultural identity (Igbo values & traditions), and Storytelling (myths, historical events).

The word " Uli" means "lines" or " designs" in the Igbo language (Onwueme, 2017). From the culture of the Igbo, girls and women learnt and practised the art of body painting and wall decoration known as the Uli tradition (Chudi-Duru, 2011). Okeke (1977) is of the view that Uli is the highest form of art drawing in Igbo land, practised by women. MBA (1995) in Chudi-Duru (2011) believes that the origin of Uli in Igboland is not known; however, she speculates that it may have developed out of natural love for aesthetics or as a tool for magic and religion. She further mentions that Uli decorations started on the human body and later moved to the walls and other traditional items like carved doors, and earthen wares, among many others. Okpalaoka (1972) and Udechukwu (1990) mention that it could have started as a form of sign language or some kind of cosmetic art, a characteristic which has been retained up to the present time. They also narrated that the Uli designer or the Igbo creative thinker does not believe that Uli design came from man, nor did it evolve naturally. But the designers were possessed by the Igbo spirit of design. They further recount that the traditional Igbo belief of Ala (goddess of earth), which symbolises both beauty and goodness, is the source of both beauty and creativity, which has influenced Igbo creative thinking fundamentally. They explained that Asele is the female spirit of design, and the male opposite is Badunka. According to Okeke (1977), Badunka is the genius of the manipulative skills or design production technique. This implies that the origin of the Uli design concept is traced to both Asele and Badunka. Okeke (2005) shares the same view with Okeke (1983) in Chukueggu (2003) and Agbayi (2005) that the finest Uli artist in Nimo-Igbo mythology is Asele. He believes that Asele transcended the human sphere with her body designs and outclassed the spirits in their world. He also believes that she surpassed the manipulative skill of her male counterpart, Badunka. Agbayi (2005) reveals that Asele is the mythical artist celebrated in folk songs. She is believed to have surpassed all humans' ability of creativity and that of the ancestral world. He mentions that the Uli artist is held in awe in her society. He further explains that drawings of some animals like pythons, some species of rodents and cat families like leopards were the first Uli design motifs associated with Asele and Budunka and goes on to define his concept of uli as involving "the material and method of design presentation for body decoration and wall painting". According to Okonkwo (2006) in Chudi-Duru(2011), Uli/Uri town in Ihiala Local Government Area in Anambra state got its name from the Uli decorative art. He goes on to tell a story about Uli traditional art, which goes like this: Njuruwuwaonu (Uri) himself had three other brothers, one of whom is Okija, from the same parents. Their mother, Nwobi, was endowed with the gift of painting the human body with black dye (Uri) to the satisfaction and taste of society. It was quite probable that her skill in painting the human body was extended to painting the carved products of her son,

Njuruwa. He was a wood carver, but was so ugly that he felt very inferior and despised by his brothers. Even the whole community knew him as a very ugly man. The mother (Nwobi) was very worried by the thought of his son's ugliness, so she came out with the idea of painting her son's body with very beautiful designs of Uli. When this was done, Njuru became very handsome, and the Uli patterns on his body dominated his Ugliness. When he came out to the Village Square, people admired him so much that they came out with a slogan that wherever Uli designs are applied, ugliness disappears. They started calling him Uli/Uri. By calling him Uli, he replaced his name, so his descendants are known as Uli people to date.

Willis (1987) describes Uli as an art form, or painting that expresses the culture of the people, and says that the motifs represent things of physical importance, aesthetic appeal, and are relevant to traditional beliefs. Okeke (2005) explains that Igbo design elements were originally abstracted from natural objects and served as a ritual pictorial language, which was employed to communicate ideas and also to beautify objects. The Igbo were already practising the Uli art before the advent of the early European visitors. Willis (1989) believes that the Uli body paintings could be recognised by their curvilinear and dotted patterns in dark blue or black colour. She further describes the Uli patterns as elegant, as they are drawn on different parts of the body. Similarly, Oloidi (1995) identifies "Uli as a very linear, curvilinear, calligraphic, visually precise, space emanating and greatly elemental art, with highly romantic appeal and culturally implied symbolism". Okeke (1999) supports this notion and proclaims that Uli is characterised by its celebration of lines, its spontaneity, and its use of natural and negative spaces as well as the abstraction of natural and cosmic forms into linear design motifs. Ikwemesi (2005) reports that Uli is generally used to refer to the style and tradition in which it is used. He further reveals that Uli is not only the plant and the colours, that Uli is also the design elements, the symbols and motifs and that they are open to a myriad of modernising adaptations. Uli motifs have influenced modern African art, textile design (African print fabric), and fashion designs (incorporating Uli motifs into contemporary fashion).

African Wax-Printed Fabrics

African wax-printed fabrics, also known as Ankara or Dutch wax prints, are industrially produced colourful cotton clothes with batik-inspired printing and unique designs and patterns. African wax-printed fabrics originated in Indonesia, where batik, a traditional textile art form, was practised (Clarke, 2014). It was originally produced by the Dutch textile company Vlisco in the 1800s and was created specifically for the Indonesian market, but the product did not sell well in that region; instead, it was introduced to the West African market in the early 1900s. It became popular in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where it was used to make traditional clothing, and also in other African countries, including Ghana, Ivory Coast and Senegal. African printed fabrics vary across regions. For example, there are different types of African wax-printed fabrics, which include: Ankara and Adire are associated with Nigerians, Ankara and Kente cloth are associated with Ghanaians, Shweshwe print with South Africa, Wax-printed cloth with Senegal, and others. Ankara fabrics are important cultural artefacts that reflect the history and traditions of West Africa and also play a significant role in cultural celebrations, ceremonies, traditional clothing and textiles, cultural identity & expression, social status & status symbolization, and Artistic and aesthetic expression. African wax-printed fabrics have influenced global fashion, with designers incorporating them into Runway collections, Streetwear, and Accessories (bags, scarves, hats).

Contemporary Fashion

According to Okonkwo (2016), contemporary fashion refers to the current and recent styles, trends and cultural influences in the fashion industry, roughly spanning from the 1980s to date. Some of the contemporary fashion trends include: Athleisure wear (Hartman, 2018), Sustainable fashion (Jo Connelly, 2019), Street wear (Keller, 2019), Luxury fashion (Okonkwo, 2016) and Digital print and textile innovation (Braddock, 2017).



Plate 3. Contemporary fashion
Source: The Internet

Theoretical Framework

Cultural semiotics by FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE (1916). It examines the symbolic meanings embedded in visual motifs and patterns. Uli motifs originating from Igbo culture in Nigeria carry cultural significance. This theory analysed how the integration of these motifs in contemporary fashion reinterprets their meanings while preserving their essence. African wax prints also have symbolic narratives, which, when combined with Uli, create a dialogue between tradition and modernity.

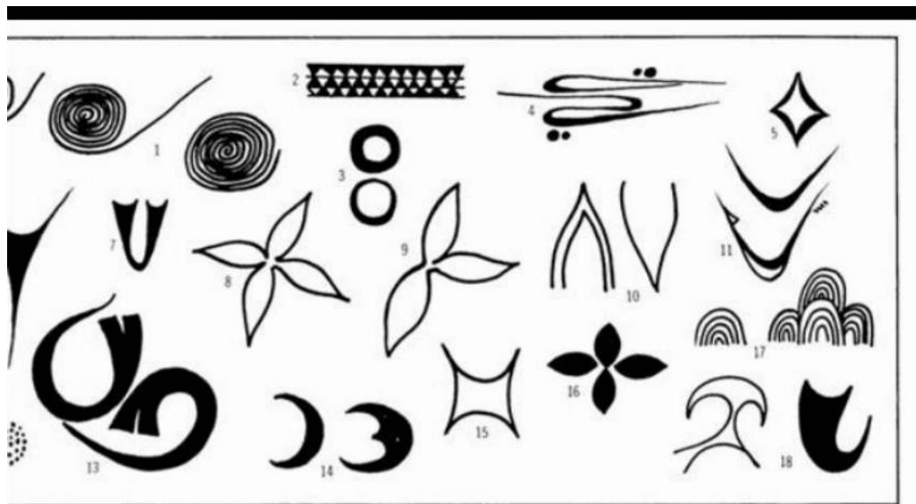
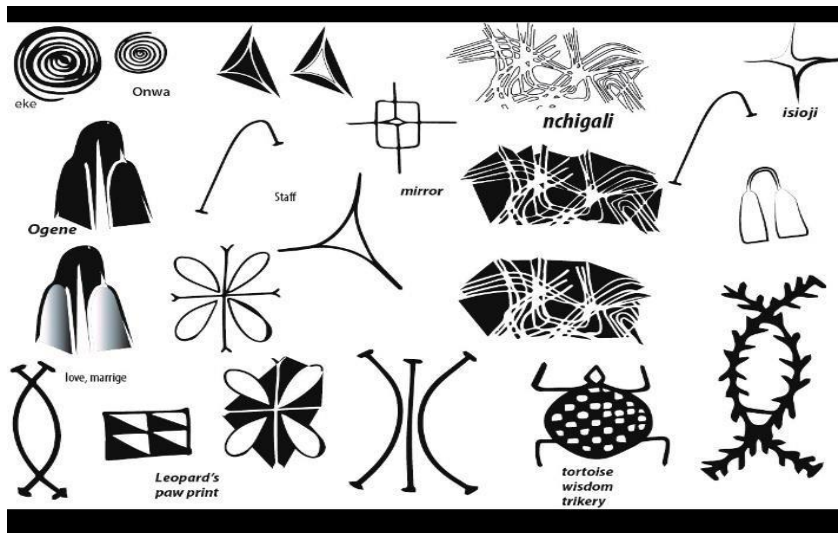
Methodology

This study adopted the studio exploratory method as the research design. Studio-based research involves conducting research within a controlled studio environment, allowing for a combination of theoretical exploration and practical experimentation.

Population of the Study

The population of the study refers to the entire group of individuals, objects or elements that share common characteristics and are relevant to the research being conducted. The Uli **designs gathered**

alongside other materials make up the population of the study. More than 40 Uli motifs are gathered from secondary sources for the population of the study.

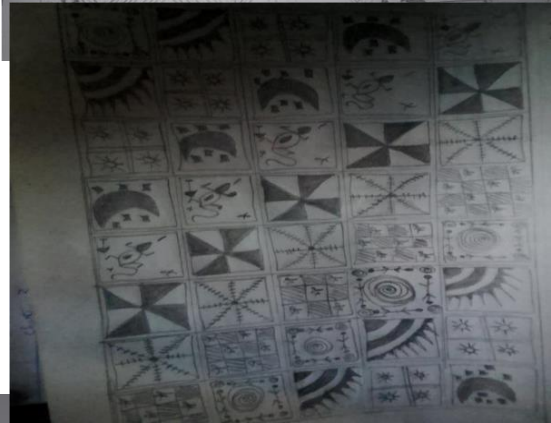
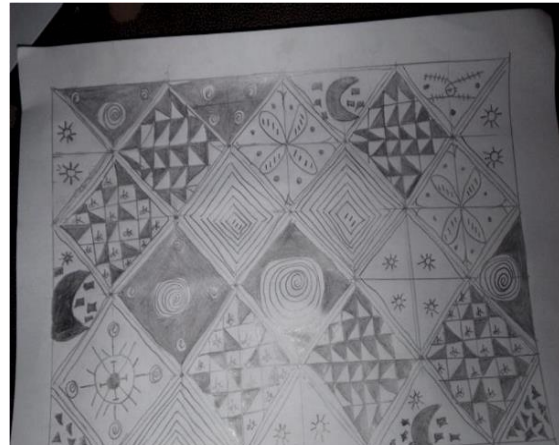
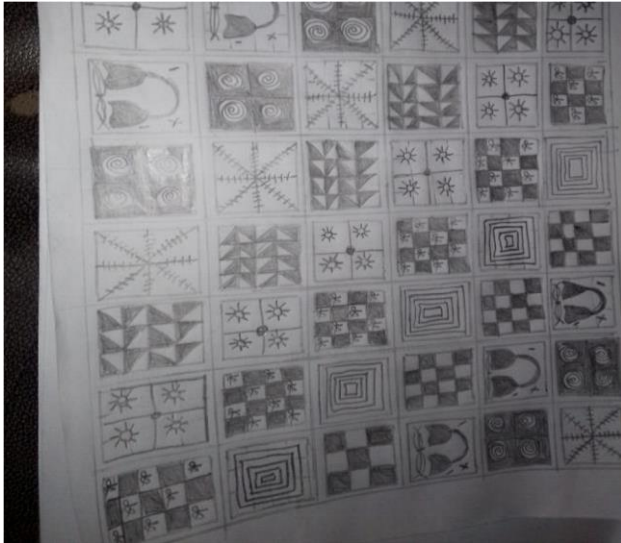


FIGS. 1. AKARAKAI/AKURAKU (SPIRAL). 2. ODIGBOMGO (VISUALLY RELATED TO A SUNBURST). 3. ONWA (MOON). 4. LUMONA. 5. AKA INO (LOZENGE). 6. ISI OJI (HEAD OF A KOLA NUT). 7. OGENE MKPIN'ABO (DOUBLE GONG). 8. AKPU (CASSAVA LEAVES). 9. ABUBA AKPU. 10. MBO OKUKO (NAILS OF A HEN). 11. ULI NSEWA OR NKO. 12. (DOTS). 13. IJE EKE (MOVEMENT PATTERN OF A PYTHON). 14. OKALA ONWA (CRESCENT). 15. OKE UNELE IN). 16. ISI OJI (HEAD OF A KOLA NUT). 17. AKIKA (HAIRSTYLES OR FEATHERS). 18. ODU EKE (TAIL OF A).

Plate 4. Uli designs Source: The Internet

Sample size

Out of the 40 motifs, 15 were utilised to produce batik fabrics.



Source: Nwankwo (2024) Fig. 3. Uli motifs

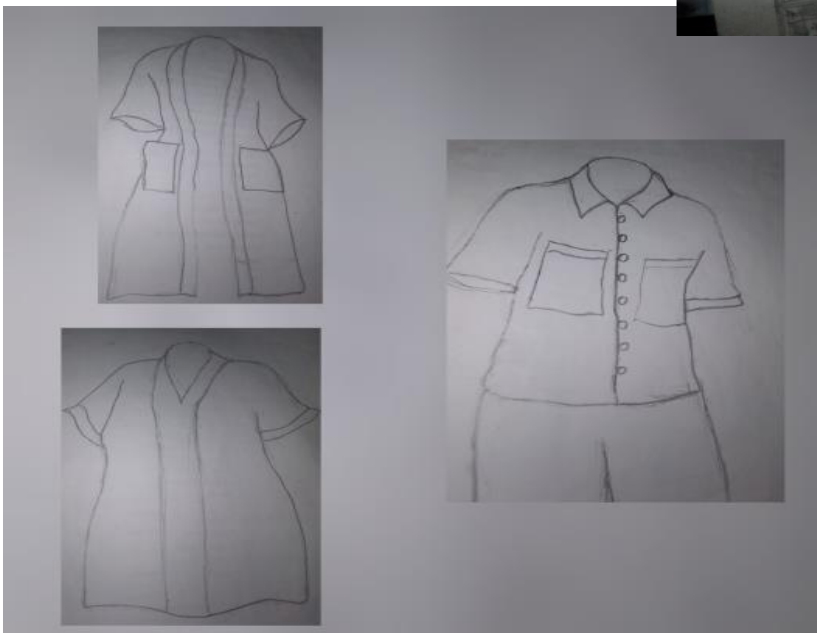


Fig 4. Fashion illustration of the works

Materials used

These are the general materials used for the project work: Brocade, wax, Ankara, foam, gloves, stove, wax table, pot, dyes, caustic, and hydros.

Practical exploration

The research explores the procedures for the production of the batik and the combination with Ankara to produce kimono jackets, gowns and shirts.

STUDIO EXPLORATION 1



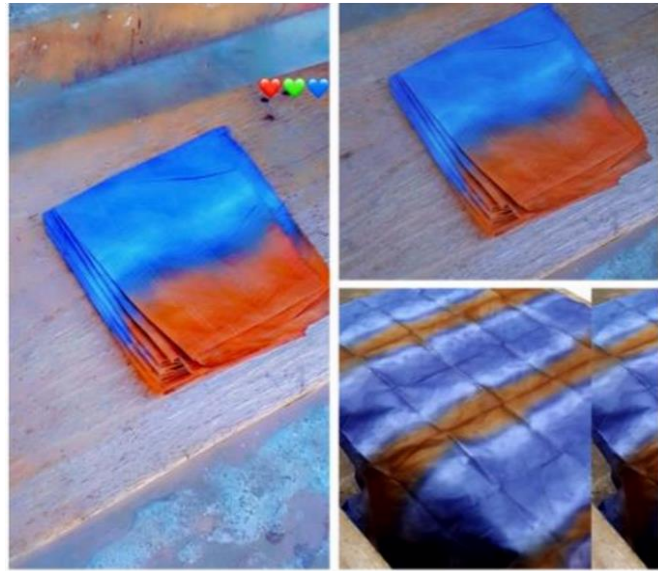
Plate 12: Cutting the brocade. Plate 13. Washing off industrial starch
Source: The researcher, 2024 Source: Nwankwo (2024)





Plate 14: Folding of the fabric
Source: Nwankwo (2024)

Plate 15: Dyeing of fabric
Source: Nwankwo (2024)



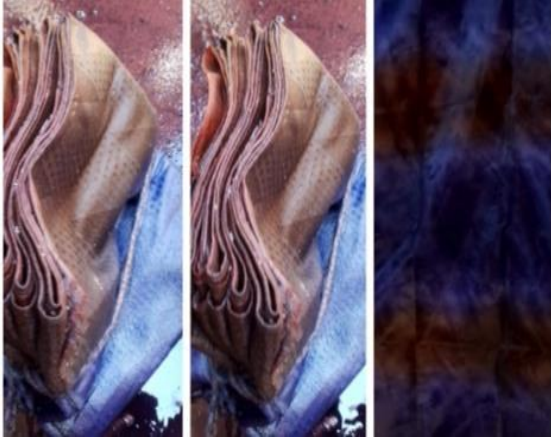


Plate 16: Oxidation process
Source: Nwankwo (2024)



Plate 17: Folding in square form and spreading on the waxing table. Source: Nwankwo (2024)



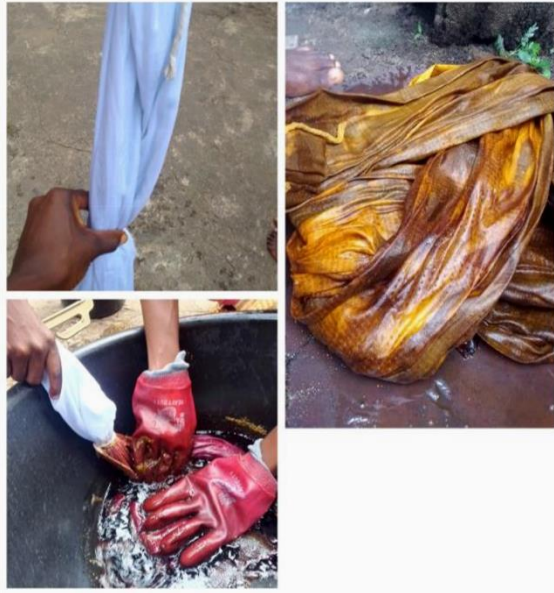
Plate 18: Waxing of the Uli designs Source: Nwankwo (2024)

STUDIO EXPLORATION 2



Plate 23: Chemical mixture





Square folding and waxing
Source: Nwankwo (2024)

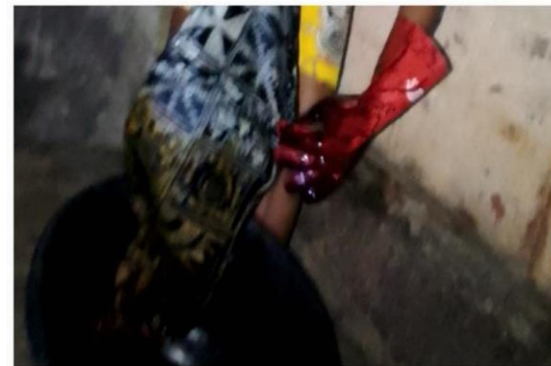


Plate 28. Dyeing the waxed fabric in black colour .Source: Nwankwo (2024)



**Plate 30. Finished work on the Bubu gown
Source: Nwankwo (2024)**

STUDIO EXPLORATION 3



Plate 31: Tying and dyeing of fabric Source: Nwankwo (2024)



Plate 32: Outcome of the dyeing
Source: The researcher, 2024
Plate 33: Waxing process



Plate 34: Dyeing the already waxed fabric Source: Nwankwo (2024)



Plate 35: Dewaxing process Source: Nwankwo (2024)



Plate 36: The finished product of the shirt and shorts. Source: Nwankwo (2024)

Results And Analysis

This aspect of the project deals with the results and analysis of the work done. This project came up after observing the need to combine batik with African wax-printed fabrics for contemporary fashion.



A kimono jacket is a simple garment and has an open structure for creative fabric use and layering. The production of the kimono jacket using Uli designs, batik technique, combined with African wax print, presents a unique intersection of cultural heritage, textile craftsmanship and contemporary fashion and also creates a fusion of global cultures. The motifs are characterised by their geometric and abstract nature, symbolising cultural values, beliefs and aesthetics.

The bubu gown, also known as "boubou", is a loose-fitting, flowing garment worn across West Africa, which symbolises elegance, comfort and cultural identity. Colours and repetitions are some of the principles of design deployed in the work. The Uli motifs' symbols blended with wax prints reflect global cultural exchanges, merging traditional African designs with international fashion trends.

Pairs of shirts and shorts are practically everyday garments that appeal to a broad audience. Combining Uli motifs with African wax prints transforms these casual wears into statement pieces that stand out in global and Afrocentric fashion. The batik process elevates the garments as handcrafted works of art, appealing to consumers who value unique and meaningful designs. This paper presents the summary of the study, conclusion and recommendations for further studies. Batik has a positive impact on Africans, as it helps in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage through contemporary fashion apparel. This project exposes the fashion designers, textile artists and readers, the importance, beauty and results from combining batik made up of Uli traditional motifs with African wax-printed fabrics, and it also encourages the production of fabrics using indigenous motifs.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In combining batik (decorated with Uli traditional motifs) and African wax print for contemporary fashion, the research suggests that it should not be overlooked but rather, should be put to use as it will help in the promotion and preservation of the cultural heritage of the Igbo through the fashion industry. Also, Fashion designers should be enlightened on the importance of utilising this combination, as it will help in adding value to the world of fashion and also create new and innovative fashion designs that blend both traditional and contemporary styles. Finally, this project emphasises that if Uli's symbolic motifs are utilised in Contemporary fashion, the Igbo cultural heritage will be able to find new channels of expressing their traditions and identity in the fashion World.

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