

MOTIFS AND MOTIFS: ADAPTATION OF AKWETE-IGBO WOVEN MOTIFS AND ULI-IGBO PAINTING MOTIFS ON FABRICS AS TEXTILE PRINTS FOR CONTEMPORARY FASHION

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Abstract

Most cultures around the world possess cultural heritage that has been passed down from one generation to another. This heritage is expressed through various forms such as clothing, painting, body decoration, architecture, music, folklore, dance, food, and language, among others. Africans also express themselves through their cultural heritage. For instance, in Nigeria, many ethnic groups showcase their identities through diverse cultural practices, many of which remain vibrant to date. The Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria possess a rich and vibrant culture that reflects their worldview. This is evident in their dress, traditional hand woven fabrics, wall and body painting traditions, carving, language, food, and folklore, among others. In their cloth weaving and body and wall painting, symbolic motifs are used to represent aspects of Igbo culture. However, these practices are in urgent need of sustainability, which forms the basis of this study. This study posits that combining these motifs to produce designs for printed fabrics could significantly enhance their preservation. The research adopts a qualitative approach and employs design-based practical experimentation in the studio. Data were collected using a historical approach, as well as from samples of Akwete fabric and Uli as sources of design inspiration. Samples of printed fabrics incorporating a combination of these motifs were subsequently produced. The findings reveal that weaving and painting motifs are suitable for application in printed textile design and should be further explored by textile and fashion designers, as this innovation contributes to the diversity of African textiles. In conclusion, these printed designs have the potential to preserve and promote these cultural traditions while enhancing their sustainability.

Keywords: Akwete hand woven fabrics, clothing, uli traditional painting, Screen printing, African symbolic motifs

Introduction

Clothes and attires could be referred to as clothing made up of fibre and textile materials worn on the body. In every community or society most people could be found wearing clothes. There are different types of clothes worn by people depending on the body type, social and geographic considerations. According to Flugel (1976), clothing performs a range of social and cultural functions, such as individual, occupational, gender differentiation and social status. He further mentions that norms about clothing in many societies showcase standards of modesty, religion, gender and social status. This study notes that clothing is one of the three necessities of life. It serves many purposes, for instance, it serves as a protection from weather elements and things that can hurt like insect bites and stings, rough surfaces, plants that cause allergic reactions to the skin, splinters, thorn and prickles by providing a barrier which is the cloth between the skin and the environment. It can keep the body warm by wearing warm clothing made of wool and other synthetic fabrics and can also keep the body cool during hot weather by wearing clothing made from cotton. Furthermore, the body can be kept safe from some microorganisms by the wearing of clothes and covering the skin and also protect against ultraviolet radiation. Clothing have always performed numerous functions in the society. It also performs some social functions like using it in a form of adornment and an expression of personal taste or style. There are some clothing worn to protect the environment from the wearer as with doctors wearing medical scrubs. And also there are some clothing worn to prevent environmental hazards, for instance space suits, air conditioned clothing, armour, diving suits, swimming suits, bee keeper gear, motorcycle leather, high visibility clothing and many others. Clothing has been made from a wide variety of materials ranging from natural to synthetic fabrics using different techniques in production. In the world today, different cultures have invented various ways of creating clothes out of their indigenous cloths. Some cultures involve draping the cloth for example the Sari for women in India and the dhoti for their men also. Another approach involves cutting and sewing the cloth but using every bit of the fabric rectangle in clothing construction like the traditional European patterns for men's shirts and women's dresses. They used this approach to create astonishing array of styles. There are still some cultures that leave the cloth uncut because they are precious and people of various sizes or the same person at different sizes can wear the garment for instance in West Africa. Most of their garments are left uncut usually in form of wrappers tied around the waist and under the arm for the women. While the men tied some uncut fabrics around the waist in a toga style, for instance, the Ancient Romans.

Cloth styles normally form first impressions based on what a person wears and also viewed as a reflection of current fashion trends within a culture. Clothing demands often change depending on the season, the popularity of designs and the attire of famous people. Wearing certain colours, brands and types of clothing allows an individual to affiliate himself with a particular group. In some societies, clothing may be used to indicate prestige, wealth, rank or status. People from different cultures wear different clothing and have different beliefs and customs about what type of clothing should be worn. For many people, clothing is a status symbol which helps to project an image. For instance, in Africa, Wayne (2015) proclaims that African clothing can be a symbol of status, creativity and allegiance to tribal roots. African clothing she further mentions, means so much more to many people that simply being a fashion statement. She observes, that designers do not make clothes just for appearance only; each symbol, colour and the shape of the clothing have specific purposes and meanings in Africa. She observed that the designs of African clothing hold significant value as they can represent social standing, age, tribal orientation and marital status. They use symbols that promote religious themes, renowned individuals, historic occasions, popular songs, religious hymns, state proverbs, metaphors and truly reflect African origin through their designs. Mc Adams (2017), is of the same view with Wayne (2015) and affirms that a special feature of traditional African clothing is its use of festive colours, intricate patterns and figurative symbols for communication. These garments are much more than mere adornments. Yankah in Mc Adams (2017) states that they are used “not just to praise political heroes, commemorate historical events, and assert social identities but also as a form of rhetoric.....a channel for the silent projection of arguments.

In West Africa, to be precise, there are lots of indigenous clothing utilized by them which have different patterns and designs to convey one message or the other. These fabrics are highly cherished by their owners and are usually handed down from one generation to the other. Nwachukwu and Ibeabuchi (2012) report, that clothing production is practiced in most urban areas and cities in Nigeria and a lot of significant design motifs are used to decorate the fabrics. These design motifs made on these indigenous fabrics cause them to be more appreciated by the people that own them because they are reflections of their culture and world view. They further report that these clothing are in form of tie-dye, batik, starch resist and woven fabrics which are produced in different parts of Nigeria. For example, the Yoruba weave Aso-oke fabrics, the Igbo weave *Akwete*, and the Tiv weave Anger and so on and so forth. The South-Eastern Igbo women produce some traditional hand woven fabrics known as *Akwete* with the aid of the women’s vertical loom. These indigenous fabrics are decorated with intricate symbolic motifs showcasing Igbo culture and worldview. Also girls and women learnt and practiced the art of body painting and wall decoration known as Uli tradition in Igbo culture. This Igbo indigenous painting also utilise some symbolic motifs showcasing Igbo culture and heritage. This study is predicated on the fact that these indigenous woven art and painting are on the decline and is of the view that if they are adapted into prints, perhaps when acquired and worn, they could serve as a reminder to the Igbo that there are some parts of their cultural heritage that needs attention and revival. This act could also help to sustain these arts in the area of textile and fashion designs.

Aim of the study

To produce some printed fabrics in the studio using *Akwete* hand woven symbols and uli traditional painting symbols for contemporary fashion.

Statement of the problem

Although the Uli painting had a long tradition in Igbo land, yet it is a culture that has been neglected due to colonization and modernization. Uli traditional art is fast disappearing and becoming extinct. Although, efforts have been made in various areas by various groups and some scholars to bring this art back to life, but the efforts are not sufficient enough. At present Uli traditional painting is in danger of being phased out, since it was a practice of handing down from one person to another through the apprenticeship system and most of the apprentices who were supposed to take over from the specialists were discouraged from the practice and preferred white collar jobs. The need to adapt Uli traditional design motifs to various forms of art has become necessary and has recently begun to be emphasized so that Uli tradition can be preserved, retained, revived and kept alive. Also the *Akwete* hand woven fabrics are not being utilized frequently in contemporary fashion partly because people demand for a cheaper and lighter fabric which could be easily accessible, procured and worn as a casual wear not only for special occasions. This study is of the view that if the two indigenous art which showcase revered motifs could be combined to produce some appropriate designs to be printed on fabrics, it will go a long way to aid their sustainability in the world of African textiles and fashion.

Literature review

Akwete woven cloth

The Igbo community in the Southeast of Nigeria, weave a cloth known as *Akwete* in Ndoki, Ukwu East Local Government Area of Abia State to be precise. According to Chudi-Duru (2017), this cloth is highly reputed for excellence that the name of the town “*Akwete*” was given to all the textiles produced in that area. It is woven using

the women's broad vertical loom. She further reports that the weavers make use of numerous motifs which they use in decorating the fabrics. These symbolic motifs convey lots of messages based on Igbo culture, historic acts, proverbs, happenings in the society and women's perception of life. Davis (1974) proclaims, that the weavers claim to know over one hundred motifs which were used to decorate the fabrics used as clothing. These clothing serve as personal adornments to the Igbo. They were also used for identification, spiritual protection, sold for economic purposes, given out as gifts, used to pay a girl's dowry and for decoration purposes. *Akwete* woven fabrics are only produced by females of *Akwete* town (Afigbo and Okeke 1982), the weaving practice is transferred from mother to daughter. It is believed by Nwachukwu et al (2012) that they are as old as the Igbo nation and that every woman in *Akwete* town knows how to weave. Although there are some authorities that believe that *Akwete* weaving came from other parts of the country, Cole and Aniakor (1986), still insist that Igbo weaving have been dated back to the 9th century A.D. with the Igbo Ukwu finds of woven raffia fibre cloth.

Sinha (2012) mentions that it is a prestigious cloth that has been highly prized by Igbo women for ceremonial dresses such as the "up and down" which is wrapped around the waist and another under the arms as clothing. This fabric is still woven in *Akwete* town but scantily used by people for clothing. Nwachukwu et al (2012) observe, that it comes in different colour and designs. Some of the designs are in patterns of red and black interwoven in geometric patterns on the white ground which are favoured by Igbo men mainly used as towels for bathing. The type woven from sisal-hemp fibres, are of a coarse type and there are those made from raffia fibres. They also mentioned that *Akwete* woven cloths are usually made of cotton thread which have decorative motifs which are produced with cotton thread of a heavier texture or rayon silk with tasseled ends. Oyelola (2014) also is in line with Nwachukwu et al (2012) and mention that stunning effects were produced by the weavers, who utilized abstract and figurative patterns to the plain ground weave by using additional weft threads usually rayon or lurex. According to Lamb and Holmes (1980) *Akwete* woven cloth can be divided into three main categories namely: *popo* cloth, *George* cloth and *Akwete* cloth. This study has observed that these clothing can be differentiated based on the various design motif embedded on them which symbolize and connote lots of meanings.

Ornamentation and Design Motifs on Akwete woven Fabrics

Motifs are decorative figures that are represented in a design. Every good design has repetition of motifs forming a pattern as a principle of design. The motif designs on *Akwete* woven cloths serve as ornamentation. The weavers of *Akwete* made good use of different motifs. These motifs have symbolic meanings to the weavers, wearer and the onlookers. Names are given to each motif to differentiate them from one another, Okeke (1982) and Ikegwuonu (1979) also agreed that every *Akwete* fabric bears a name which is sometimes named after the motif used for the design or the weaver herself. The creator was given patent right and when she dies the design dies with her. But such is not being practiced of late because during the course of this study in *Akwete*, it was revealed that any weaver is free to copy as many design motifs as possible from her fellow weavers. The weavers conceive their motifs through many means for example, dreams, divinity, environment, household articles, weaver's perception of life, Igbo culture and Igbo world view. Up to a number of three to four motif symbols could be woven onto a particular cloth after which one name is chosen and given to the design or pattern. These symbolic motifs have one story or the other to tell. Some of the woven designs were found to be reversible, the weavers revealed that any design that is reversible is called *Dada Nwakata* (pioneer weaver) because she was the one that started weaving such in *Akwete* town. Chudi-Duru (2017) documented some motifs, which were found to be utilized by the weavers. They are: Ocean in the river, Heart, *kufere mmiri* (across the river), *Achicha* (Biscuit), *Akupe* (hand fan), *Mgbawa* tomatoes (broken tomatoes), *Ceiling fan*, *Fancy block*, *Nnunu* (bird), *Akajiaku* (the wealthy one), *Igbe akwukwo* (box of book), *Checker board*, *Ijeagwo* (Movement of a snake), *Ikaki* (tortoise), *Flower*, *Back of snake*, *Saw*, *Chain*, *Children's fingers*, *scissors* (*Mkpa*), *Stool*, *Ebe*, *V*, *ikperendioma* (knees of the beautiful people), *Zigzag* (*Dakuru*), *Dada Nwakata*, *Nigeria Coat of Arms*, *Z*, *Variations of Ebe motif*, *Double bell*, *Necklace*, *First Lady*, *Ute* (mat), *Fig*, *Mkpuru ludo* (ludo seeds), *Mkuru oka* (corn seeds), *Wine glass*, *Fruit of the oil bean tree* (*mkpuru ugbakala*), *Christmas tree*, *Azu* (fish), *Pivot*, *Ritual objects*, *Nigerian flag*, *Variations of ikaki*, *Popo*, *Double eight*, *Kpakpando* (star), *Single bell*, *Cross*, *River*, *Olanti* (earring), *Oil boom*, *Aziza*, *Basket*, *Okwa*, *Broken plate*, *Butterfly*, *Baby lace*, *Crown*, *Comb*, *Hour glass*, *Festac logo*, *Cooking utensils*, *Anu kpo Anu* (animal swallowing another animal), *Mirror in the sun*, *Aka Abuo* (two hands), *Ugo* (eagle), *Ijikoaka onu* (unity).

Akwete woven motifs on printed Fabrics for Clothing purposes

These woven symbols according to Chudi-Duru (2017) were woven onto the cloth using supplementary weft thread on the women's vertical loom. They make use of shiny materials. This study is of the view that these symbolic motifs are of great importance to the Igbo. Since the motifs are woven onto the cloth only, the study is emphasizing on the adaptation of these woven motifs on cotton fabrics as prints so as to create a variety of *Akwete* fabrics and also aid its sustainability in current day's fashion. It also showcases the Igbo symbolic woven motifs

on printed fabrics and bring it into limelight since it is a cultural heritage as regards to textiles. This study observes that the weavers make use of culturally oriented motifs which they combine with modern motifs to create modern forms and concepts. It is also of the view that these modern forms and concepts should be transferred on to prints to fit well into the contemporary fashion in Nigeria. This study reveals that the production of these printed fabrics will also reach the consumers easily than the woven fabrics. The printed textiles in this study will be a means of acquiring insight into the social, religious, political and economic complexities of Igbo community, whose culture some people might be ignorant of. *Akwete* woven fabrics contain major forms of expression that the Igbo use to define themselves but their importance have almost been overshadowed by imported fabrics. This study is of the view that these printed symbolic motifs will go a long way to illuminate the past and the present mode of African artistic expression. Some *Akwete* hand woven textiles decorated with their woven symbols are placed in the plates below.



Plate 1: Akwete hand woven fabric
Source: Chudi-Duru(2025)



Plate 2: Akwete hand woven fabric
Source: Chudi-Duru(2025)

Uli traditional painting motifs

Nigeria is a society of about 250 distinct groups that comprise of creative individuals and diversified cultural background that offer immense opportunity to study different types of traditional designs and crafts as stated by Alau (2006). One of those groups is the Igbo of eastern Nigeria who practiced Uli traditional painting on which part of the study is focused. This art comprises of body and wall painting. Girls and women learnt and practiced the art of body painting and wall decoration known as Uli tradition in Igbo culture. Uli wall painting started as a tool for traditional religion. Firstly they appeared on the walls of shrine before moving to the walls of private houses. The art of mural painting is mostly developed in those parts of Igbo land where walled compound is the tradition, for instance in the Eri geo-political area of Anambra state. Those parts that do not have walls as their tradition, painted individual houses.

Historically, Uli art was found all over south eastern Nigeria, where the Igbo people mainly reside, but by the mid-20th century the tradition had almost died out. These Uli designs based on plants, animals, heavenly bodies, ritual objects and everyday life experiences were described by Willis (1989) as very elegant, she further stressed that Uli designers desire was to create harmony, clarity and precise marks that were compatible with the body which represented the welfare and beauty of a woman. Uli designs did not originate from man and did not develop naturally as reported by Okeke (1983), rather the unity of man, his environment, the ancestral spirits and substances were masterfully represented on the walls by the Uli artists. Anyaoha (2010) says that it is on record that experiments with Uli traditional designs started as far back as the late fifties by Uche Okeke. She further mentions that Okeke experimented with the Uli motifs by adapting them into his Art forms of paintings and drawings and that is what gave birth to a new style. Ikwemesi (1992) supports this by saying that the early works of Uche Okeke in the late fifties and sixties gave birth to new style in Art.

As earlier stated, Uli symbols are derived mostly from animals and vegetable worlds. However a few are derived from the objects that are found in the sky. The symbols are numerous and as such it is very difficult to state with any degree of certainty their exact original. Okpalaoka (1972) insists that there are no documented evidences as to who originated the idea of using the symbols or who first created the symbols. An attempt was made by him to highlight some of the common ones. "Onwa" is the moon, and it is represented by a crescent. The sun--Anyanwu,"

unlike the moon is represented by a full circle. But because of its large size one can make a distinction between it and "Ntupo"-dot, which is done with the tip of a finger. The star-Kpapando" has a striking resemblance with its Uli portrayal, but for its four pointed ends. One can easily confuse the star with "Isi-Nwaoji"-the head of kolanut, which equally has four pointed ends; but while the former is sleek in appearance, the latter is slightly robust. "Agwo"- the snake is almost as it is in real life, except for the lack of details such as patterns, defined eyes, and the forked tongue. "Ije-agawo"- the movement of a snake is depicted by a wavy line. "Agwolagwo"-coil is depicted by a coil or spirals which is reminiscent of a graphic presentation of a snail's shell. "Mbo Agu"-the claws of a leopard, is depicted with small triangles. Symbols exist for scorpion, lizard, paddle, man, canoe, crab, leaves, and others. It is therefore not impossible that for everything that existed in the traditional Igbo society, there was a symbolic equivalent. Even in modern times, new symbols are still being evolved, based on animate and inanimate objects. It is not enough to highlight the symbols and some of their sources of derivation without appreciating the intuitive abilities of individuals who have succeeded in extracting the dominants of features of these worldly elements as a result of which the symbols exist today. The refined sense of abstraction is equally worthy of note. For example, "Agwolagwo" is derived from the spiral of yam tendrils, "Ije-agwo" from the movement of snakes, while "Isi-Nwaoji" evolved from the critical observation of the kolanut.

Two words readily come to the mind of an Uli painter, environment and observation. The Uli artist as a social being lives within an environment. Her observation of the environment is always reflected in her works. Apart from decorating the bodies and walls, the Uli tradition is of great importance to the people of Igbo Land. Mba (1995) describes Uli as a body decoration generally used to enhance the beauty of the naked human body. According to Okeke (2005) the Uli tradition served as a ritual pictorial language which was employed to communicate ideas and also to beautify objects. In this way the unity of man and his environment and of spirit and substance were masterfully presented by the Uli Mba (1995) says that a girl emerging from "Ulo-nzu", or 'Mgbede'(the fattening room) decorates her body with uhie (red powder) and (uli designs), before the wedding feast. Similarly, Willis (1999) shares the same view with Mba(ibid)by saying that young women who are ready to leave the fattening room were painted with Uli. She goes on to explain that fattening rooms are where young women were secluded in preparation for marriage. The period of seclusion usually lasted about three months. During this time young women were instructed on sexual, religious and domestic matters and taught how to be good wives and mothers. Fatty rich foods were supplied by their families and sometimes by their future husbands. They were also kept sedentary in order to gain weight, health and fertility.

When girls were ready to leave the fattening room their bodies were painted with Uli so that they could be presented to the community at the height of their beauty. The Uli designs emphasize the girls' best features and highlight her physical strength. This was important because it meant the girl was able to work hard for her husband and family. The designs are often concentrated around the neck because a long straight neck was considered beautiful and strong. They also drew attention to the pubic hair, which is a sign of strength and fertility. The Uli drawn on the legs emphasizes beauty and strength. She also said that men were only painted occasionally with simpler designs than those shown here. Similarly, Shufelt (2002) observes that men also have a period of Seclusion before becoming a member of the Ozo institution, during this period, males are fattened, signifying an aesthetic value, and are painted with uli designs when becoming member of the Ozo institution thereby distinguishing him from others in the community and representing his achievements.

Echeta (2005) says that Uli has been incorporated into the works of art like visual backdrops. It has also been used as an instrument of social service and function revolving around design and as health therapy at the traditional level. In Science, Uli can be referred to either the tree which is perennial or the dye (ink). It can also stand for symbolic patterns used for decoration. As a tree he goes on, it belongs to the family of communal common property, which is owned by no one. It is grown in fallow areas of Nigeria's southeastern communities among the Igbo. They are intentionally confined to vegetation boundaries that demarcate farmlands. But sadly these trees are not easily found.

Uli has provided vocation for a group of women that are local dwellers. These women were gifted naturally and were well known by their community. Their services were required and requested quite often for various reasons. He added that the religious festivals which started or ended up in shrines were prepared for by engaging the Uli designers to decorate the walls. After the communal clearing (Mbomuzo) and sweeping of the shrine sites, these women were called in to upgrade the visual attractiveness of the shrine walls.

Mba (1995) says that during the time of mourning special design like "Uli Ntuwa or Nsewa" is adopted. It is very simple with little or no aesthetic quality and is just a mere straight line which runs parallel from head to toe of the bereaved. Willis (1987) describes 'Uli ntuwa' as a long line, like oil floating in water and drawn symmetrically to divide the face. The wives of the deceased are being decorated with special Uli design on their bodies and the aim

is to wish him well in the land of the dead. She added that Uli wall decoration was a means of social differentiation; it could only be seen on the walls of those who have taken some titles.

Willis (1989) says that the Uli designs on girls' and women's bodies were very much created to represent her welfare and beauty and she recorded more than a hundred of them. The Uli artist would choose the most suiting patterns to hide areas of imperfection. For example a smaller woman with less layers of fat may have more patterns and bolder ones on that area of her body to disguise her slimness. Mba (1995) also records that Uli designs could be used to decorate a woman during her Omugwo (staying at home after child birth to look after the new born-something like a maternity leave) especially after the first born. Women also adorn themselves with these designs when they are going to the markets in those days, because market days are not every day in Igbo land. Also when visiting their friends and relatives. Diogu (1979) shares the same view with Mba (1995) which says that uli designs are used in decorating the bodies, walls of titled men's houses, walls of shrines during new yam festivals and other festivals.

The values of this tradition to the Igbo generally were really appreciated by them but due to civilization and religion, they lost interest and faced other cultures. This study hopes to rekindle people's interests not on shrines or on the body but on printed fabrics in order to create a basis for a possible adaptation of uli to diverse socio-economic uses. Some Uli wall paintings are placed on plates 3-4 respectively.



Plate 3: Uli traditional wall painting
Source: Ikwuemesi (2005).



Plate 4: Uli traditional wall painting
Source: Ikwuemesi (2005).

The idea of adapting these motifs on prints is to bring into limelight a tradition that is fast disappearing so that the cultural aesthetics of these tradition will be showcased and appreciated. Fabric prints are worn by many in the Igbo community. They are admired and could be found in most homes. Most people utilize them as their day to day wear while some they are occasional wears. Others see them as objects that could be given as gifts or sold for financial gains. The researcher is hopeful that the findings of this study will be of immense benefit to students of art and design, who may be ignorant of the adaptations of the various African traditional motifs to different art forms.

Theoretical framework

1. **Semiotics Theory, propounded by** Ferdinand de Saussure (early work, 1916); further developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. Focuses on the study of signs and symbols, their meanings and how they communicate cultural values. It is essential for interpreting motifs and their symbolism in fabric prints. Semiotics provides tools for decoding the signs and symbols inherent in Akwete and Uli motifs. They are used to analyze how these motifs function as visual "signs" that communicate meanings such as identity, heritage, or status, when adapted to modern textiles.

2. **Modernism and Postmodernism in Art, propounded by** Clement Greenberg (Modernism, 1960s), Jean-François Lyotard (Postmodernism, 1979). Modernism emphasizes innovation and breaking from tradition; Postmodernism embraces eclecticism and the blending of traditional and contemporary styles relevant for contemporary adaptations of traditional motifs. Modernist ideas supports innovation breaking with tradition by reimagining motifs in new forms. Postmodernism, meanwhile, validates the mixing of traditional and

contemporary elements, encouraging eclectic and layered designs. Both theories help frame the studio work as part of a larger artistic movement that values both heritage and reinvention.

3. **Studio-Based Research (Practice-Led Research) propounded by** Graeme Sullivan (“Art Practice as Research,” 2005), Christopher Frayling (“Research in Art and Design,” 1993). It focuses on knowledge and innovation generated through creative studio practice, directly related to studio experiences in textile design. This approach justifies the creative process as a legitimate form of academic inquiry. It allows one to document, analyze, and theorize the decisions made in the studio—how the researcher selects, adapts, and applies Akwete and Uli motifs, and what was discovered through hands-on experimentation with materials and techniques. Each theory offers a framework on which this research is built from the meanings of motifs, to the ethics of adaptation, the principles of design, the process of creation, and the cultural impact of the studio practice in contemporary fashion.

Methodology

This is qualitative research. The study employed studio based practical experiments using design software such as Corel draw in the design process. Data was collected using secondary sources of data. The research instruments are photography and observations. Akwete hand woven fabrics and uli traditional hand painting on walls and bodies served as the sources of design motifs for screen printing. The printing was carried out in the studio. Four samples of printed fabrics comprising the combination of the two were produced in this study.

Studio exploration

This study utilized some Uli traditional painting motif symbols and Akwete woven design symbols. Ikaki woven symbolic motif was chosen and it has many variations. The other motifs utilized are ute (mat), ukwu bench and ikperendioma motifs. The materials used during studio exploration are textile inks, acrylic colours, white cotton fabrics, masking tape, acrylic yarns, tape measure and ruler, cutter, laser print paper, computer, a piece of foam, water, rag, dye stuffs, caustic soda, sodium hydrosulphite, beeswax and paraffin wax, stove, a small pot, newspapers, an iron and 3Dfabric ink. The studio explorations are recorded below.

Studio exploration 1 procedures

Steps for the studio exploration processes:

1. Using tie-dye and batik technique to achieve a background of orange colour
2. Using a foam stamp with wax to achieve a batik background dyed with brown colour.
3. Making of design sketches with pencil on paper
4. Scanning the design sketch into the computer.
5. Using Corel draw to achieve the desired design.
6. Printing out the design on size A3 paper
7. Transferring the printed design to the screen using photographic transfer on a printing table.
8. Printing the transferred design on fabric to achieve the desired result.



Figure 1: Akwete hand woven symbols and uli painting symbols design sketch. Source: Chudi-Duru (2025).



Plate 9(right): (stage 3) tie-dyed background of orange colour and batik background using foam stamping technique with brown dye- this produced a dyed fabric ready for printing in the studio. Source: Chudi-Duru (2025).
Plate 10(left): (stage 4) printed fabric utilizing Akwete hand woven symbols and uli painting symbols placed in figure 1. Source: Chudi-Duru (2025). (Studio exploration result 1)

Steps for the studio exploration 2 processes are the same as studio exploration 1



Figure 2: Akwete hand woven symbols and uli painting symbols design sketch. Source: Chudi-Duru (2025).



Plate 11(left): tie-dyed fabric ready for printing in the studio. Source: Chudi-Duru (2025).

Plate 12(right): printed fabric utilizing Akwete hand woven symbols and uli painting symbols placed in figure 2. Source: Chudi-Duru (2025). (Studio exploration result 2)

Studio exploration results are placed in figures 10 and 12

Conclusion

In conclusion, the adaptation of Akwete fabric motifs and Uli motifs as textile prints for contemporary fashion represents a significant fusion of tradition and innovation. Through studio experimentation, these indigenous Nigerian designs have been reimagined to align with modern aesthetic sensibilities while maintaining their cultural roots. The creative process demonstrates that the symbolic language and intricate patterns of Akwete and Uli can successfully transition from traditional art forms to modern textile printing techniques, making them accessible to a wider audience and relevant within today's fashion industry. This studio-based experience underscores the enduring value of cultural heritage as a source of inspiration for contemporary design. By incorporating these motifs into wearable art, designers not only celebrate and preserve Igbo people identity but also create new avenues for cultural dialogue and economic empowerment. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of

cross-generational learning and collaboration in sustaining traditional arts. As contemporary fashion continues to evolve, the integration of Akwete and Uli motifs stands as a testament to the dynamic interplay between heritage and modernity, ensuring that these cultural symbols remain vibrant and meaningful in a globalized world.

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