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Abstract

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Iconography in African Textiles: Exploring Kente Cloth and African Print Fabrics

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Traditional Textiles are major components of African cultural heritage, serving as functional items and also conveying social, spiritual, and historical meanings. The cultural significance of African textiles is gradually losing its significance among the younger generations. This study examines the iconography embedded in two prominent African textile traditions: Kente cloth and African print fabrics. The specific objectives of the study are to examine the historical origins and development of Kente cloth and African print fabrics; identify and interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in their motifs, colours, and design elements; and comparatively analyse how iconographic symbols in both textiles function as vehicles for cultural communication and identity construction. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on historical and iconographic analysis. Data were collected through document analysis of scholarly literature, visual examination of textile motifs, and archival sources on African textile traditions. The data were analysed using thematic and iconographic analysis, focusing on recurring symbolic motifs, colour symbolism, and their associated cultural meanings. Findings revealed that the design elements in these fabrics are symbolic and they reflect the values, proverbs, and philosophies of the people. Each design carries a distinct meaning,

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communicating moral lessons, historical events, or expressions of social status. The comparative analysis of the iconography in Kente cloth and African print fabrics revealed that they both serve the purpose of cultural expression and that their symbolic meanings can vary depending on context. It was recommended that African designers should continue to be innovative in their use of traditional motifs to suit modern tastes, so as to preserve the use of these traditional textiles in maintaining cultural identity.

TRADITIONAL TEXTILES FUNCTION as important visual markers of cultural identity, social status, and rituals across African countries. They serve functional purposes for body covering and beautification. In addition to their functionality, they are also rich in cultural symbolism and meaning (Labode & Braide, 2022). This makes them an integral part of Africa's material and visual culture. Among the numerous traditional textiles in different African cultures, Kente and African print fabrics, also known as Ankara or Wax print, have outstanding designs and cultural significance. They communicate unique cultural ideas and history values.

African textiles have long attracted scholarly attention because of their aesthetic qualities, symbolic depth, and role in the expression of cultural identity. Scholars across art history, anthropology, and cultural studies have examined textiles not merely as decorative materials but as important visual texts that encode social meanings, philosophical ideas, and historical narratives. Within this body of scholarship, two textile traditions, Kente cloth and African print fabrics have received considerable academic attention due to their cultural prominence and symbolic richness.

Scholarships on African textiles emphasized their cultural and ceremonial significance. For instance, Adeloje et al. (2023) argued that textiles in many African societies function as cultural signifiers that communicate identity, status, and social values. Their work established the idea that textile patterns and motifs operate as symbolic systems through which communities express shared meanings. Similarly, Adeloje (2021) highlighted the communicative role of textile motifs, particularly in Southwest Nigeria where cloth designs and colours often convey proverbs, philosophical ideas, and historical references.

More specifically, studies on Kente cloth have focused on its historical development and symbolic structure. Agboaye (2015) and Kodzo (2017) emphasize that Kente cloth embodies Akan cosmology and socio-political ideology. According to these scholars, the intricate motifs and colour combinations in Kente cloth represent moral values, leadership principles, and communal philosophies embedded in Akan traditions. These interpretations demonstrate that Kente functions not merely as clothing but as a visual language that conveys philosophical and cultural meanings.

Research on African print fabrics, often referred to as African wax prints has focused largely on issues of cultural hybridity, colonial trade networks, and global textile circulation. Adeloje (2021); Adeoti and Kalilu (2024) and Adeoti (2024) argued that African print fabrics represent a complex intersection of African aesthetics, European industrial production, and Asian batik traditions. These scholars emphasize that the meanings attached to African print motifs are often socially constructed and can vary across different African societies. Their work highlights how African print textiles acquire symbolic significance through naming practices, popular interpretation, and everyday social use.

Despite these important contributions, existing scholarship reveals several gaps. First, many studies treat Kente cloth and African print fabrics as separate subjects of analysis, with limited comparative examination of their iconographic systems. Second, while scholars acknowledge the

symbolic nature of textile motifs, relatively few studies apply systematic iconographic analysis to interpret the visual language embedded in these textiles. Third, there is insufficient exploration of how traditional textile symbols continue to function as communicative tools in contemporary African societies, particularly in relation to cultural identity and social meaning.

This study addresses these gaps by comparatively examining the iconography embedded in Kente cloth and African print fabrics. By analysing their motifs, colours, and symbolic meanings through an iconographic and thematic framework, the study demonstrates how these textile traditions function as visual systems of cultural communication. The research contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on African visual culture and highlights the relevance of textile symbolism in the construction and preservation of African cultural identity. The objectives of the study are to: examine the historical origins and development of Kente cloth and African print fabrics; identify and interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in their motifs, colours, and design elements; and comparatively analyse how iconographic symbols in both textiles function as vehicles for cultural communication and identity construction

Literature Review

Historical Context of African Textiles and the Iconography of Visual Culture

African textiles have a rich history that spans thousands of years, across numerous cultures, regions, and traditions in Africa. These textiles serve as powerful symbols of communication and cultural identity (Lemi, 2024). The history of African textiles is intertwined with Africa's social, economic, and political history, reflecting the nature and practices in African societies. The history of textile production in Africa dates back to antiquity, with archaeological evidence suggesting that textile arts were practiced in several regions of the continent as early as 5000 BCE (Adeloye, 2021). Early African textiles were made from a variety of natural fibers, including flax, wool, and cotton, as well as indigenous materials such as bark cloth. These textiles were often handwoven and dyed using natural dyes derived from plants, minerals, and insects.

African textiles occupy a central position in the visual and material culture of many African societies. Beyond their utilitarian function as clothing or decorative materials, textiles serve as important symbolic media through which social values, political authority, philosophical beliefs, and historical narratives are expressed. Scholars across the fields of art history, anthropology, and cultural studies have increasingly emphasized the communicative role of textiles, arguing that they function as visual languages embedded with culturally specific iconographic systems.

Early scholarly works on African textiles largely concentrated on the ethnographic documentation of weaving traditions, materials, and production techniques. Scholars such as Moore (1991) and Picton (2023) have examined textiles primarily within the broader context of African material culture, highlighting their importance in ritual practices, social ceremonies, and as markers of status. While these early studies acknowledged the aesthetic and cultural significance of textile designs, their analyses often focused more on craft production and cultural usage than on the deeper symbolic meanings embedded within textile motifs.

Subsequent studies expanded the discourse by examining African textiles as systems of symbolic communication. Scholars such as Imperato and Rovine (2002) and Akou (2009) emphasized that many African textile traditions employ motifs, colour combinations, and compositional patterns that function as visual metaphors reflecting communal philosophies and moral teachings. In Akan societies, for instance, Kente cloth designs are often associated with proverbs, historical events, and

social ideals. These interpretations suggest that textile patterns operate as a form of encoded cultural knowledge transmitted through visual symbols.

There are also scholarly debates also on the interpretative frameworks used to analyse these symbolic systems. Rabine (2017) argue that African textile motifs should be understood within broader socio-cultural contexts where meaning is shaped through naming practices, oral traditions, and everyday social interactions. According to this perspective, the meanings attributed to textile patterns are not fixed but are continually reinterpreted within changing cultural environments. This approach challenges earlier assumptions that textile motifs possess singular or universally agreed-upon meanings.

Similarly, other scholars have examined African textiles through the lens of cultural hybridity and transnational exchange. Studies on African print fabrics demonstrate how global trade networks influenced the development of textile iconography across the continent. Scholars such as Akinwumi (2008) emphasize that African wax prints emerged through complex historical interactions between Indonesian batik techniques, European industrial production, and African aesthetic preferences. Within this hybrid context, African societies appropriated and reinterpreted imported textile designs, assigning culturally specific meanings through popular naming conventions and social usage.

Development of Kente Cloth

Kente cloth is one of the most famous African textiles, Its production can be traced back to the 17th century among the Asante people of Ghana. According to Kodzo (2017), the legend of Kente's origin is tied to two brothers, Kurugu and Ameyaw, who were inspired by the intricate patterns of a spider's web. They tried to replicate these patterns in fabric. This led to the first creation of Kente, which quickly became a symbol of prestige within the Asante society. The early Kente cloths were made from locally grown cotton and were handwoven on narrow-strip looms. The introduction of silk through trans-Saharan trade routes in the 18th century led to the incorporation of silk threads into Kente weaving, resulting in the creation of more luxurious fabrics (Agboaye, 2015). The introduction of silk into Kente weaving elevated the status of the fabric, reserved for royalty and dignitaries.

Kente cloth became an integral part of Asante and Ewe culture, used in various ceremonies and rituals, such as, coronations, weddings, and funerals among others. Each Kente pattern carries a specific meaning, often related to proverbs, historical events, or moral teachings. The colours used in Kente also have symbolic significance (Seidu et al., 2022). The production of Kente was traditionally a male-dominated craft, with weaving skills passed down from father to son. Kente weavers, known as "Kente priests," were highly respected members of society, and their work was considered a sacred art (Armah et al., 2023). The process of weaving Kente is complex and time-consuming. It requires great skill and precision. The patterns are created by interweaving different coloured threads on narrow-strip looms, with each strip later sewn together to form the complete cloth.

Transnational Development and Cultural Reinterpretation of African Print Fabrics

African print fabrics, widely known as African wax prints, represent one of the most dynamic textile traditions on the African continent. Unlike many indigenous textile forms such as handwoven Kente or Aso-Oke, African print fabrics emerged through complex historical processes involving global trade, colonial industrial production, and African consumer reinterpretation. Scholarly debates surrounding African print fabrics have largely focused on questions of cultural authenticity, hybridity, and the processes through which imported textile forms were reappropriated into African cultural systems.

Art historians and anthropologists have highlighted the transnational origins of African print fabrics. Scholars such as Akinwumi (2008), Edoh (2016) and Van Kessel (2018) argue that African wax prints were initially developed in Europe during the nineteenth century as industrial imitations of Indonesian batik textiles intended for Southeast Asian markets. However, when these textiles failed to gain acceptance in Indonesia, they were redirected to West African markets where they were rapidly adopted and culturally transformed. This historical trajectory illustrates how African consumers actively shaped the development and meaning of these fabrics rather than merely serving as passive recipients of foreign products.

Sawyerr et al. (2023) emphasize the role of African agency in the reinterpretation of these textile designs. Cultural theorists such as Nana Adusei-Poku contend that African societies appropriated imported textile patterns and incorporated them into existing systems of symbolic communication. Through processes such as motif naming, storytelling, and social interpretation, African print fabrics acquired culturally specific meanings that reflect social aspirations, political commentary, and everyday experiences. For example, many African prints are popularly identified through descriptive names that refer to proverbs, social relationships, or contemporary events.

Despite these scholarly contributions, debates persist regarding the extent to which African print fabrics can be considered authentically African. Some scholars view them as products of colonial industrial capitalism, while others argue that their widespread cultural adoption and reinterpretation have firmly embedded them within African visual culture. These debates highlight the need for analytical approaches that focus not only on the historical origins of these textiles but also on the symbolic meanings that emerge through their social use. African print fabrics can be understood as evolving visual systems whose iconography reflects both historical encounters and contemporary cultural interpretations. Their motifs and patterns function as communicative devices through which individuals and communities express identity, social commentary, and cultural values.

Historical Context of Political Iconography

African textiles have historically been used as a medium for political expression. During the colonial and post-colonial periods, certain textile designs were used to convey resistance against colonial rule or to celebrate independence. These textiles served as both a form of protest and a means of uniting people around a common cause (Seidu et al., 2022). The use of specific symbols, colours, and patterns in textiles like Adinkra (from Ghana) has historically conveyed messages of resistance, power, and unity. The symbols, derived from proverbs, historical events, or cosmological beliefs, often carried subtle but powerful political messages (Lemi, 2024). In modern times, African textiles continue to be used as a form of political expression. Designers and artists use iconography in their work to comment on contemporary social and political issues, such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and African unity.

Iconography in African textiles also plays a role in empowerment and representation, particularly in the diaspora. African-Americans and other members of the African diaspora have increasingly embraced African textiles as a way to connect with their heritage and assert their identity in societies where they may face marginalization (Adeloye et al., 2023). Wearing African textiles, such as Kente stoles during graduation ceremonies, has become a powerful symbol of cultural pride and achievement. The iconography in these textiles serves as a reminder of the wearer's roots and as a statement of resilience and empowerment.

Cultural Exchange and Fusion

The incorporation of African textiles into global fashion has also led to a cross-cultural exchange, where African designers are influenced by global trends, and international designers draw inspiration from African aesthetics. This blend of styles has resulted in innovative designs that blend traditional African iconography with contemporary fashion elements (Agboaye, 2015). Despite the positive development the global popularity of African textiles brings, it also raises concerns about cultural appropriation, where African designs are used without proper acknowledgment or compensation to the communities that created them (Labode & Braide, 2022). This is quite a challenge, when African-inspired designs are mass-produced by non-African companies, diluting the cultural significance and economic value of the original textiles.

To address this challenge, there is a growing movement towards ethical fashion practices that respect the cultural origins of African textiles and ensure that the communities involved benefit from their global success. This includes collaborations between African artisans and international brands, as well as the promotion of African-owned fashion labels on the global stage.

Research Gaps in Reviewed Literature

Although considerable scholarship exists on African textiles, several gaps remain within the literature, particularly in relation to the study of iconography and symbolic interpretation. Much of the existing research focused on documenting textile production techniques, historical origins, and cultural usage. While these studies provide valuable insights into the material and social contexts of African textiles, relatively limited attention has been given to systematic analysis of the visual symbols embedded within textile designs.

One major limitation in the literature is the tendency to examine individual textile traditions in isolation. For example, Kente cloth has been extensively studied within the context of Akan cultural symbolism, while African print fabrics have often been discussed primarily within debates about colonial trade networks and cultural hybridity. Consequently, few studies have undertaken comparative analyses that examine how different African textile traditions employ iconographic systems to communicate cultural meanings.

The relationship between traditional textile symbolism and contemporary cultural identity is insufficiently explored. As African societies continue to experience rapid social and cultural transformation, textile designs increasingly serve as sites where historical traditions intersect with modern cultural expressions. However, the ways in which these symbolic systems continue to shape identity and cultural communication have not been adequately examined within existing scholarship.

This study addresses these gaps by undertaking a comparative analysis of the iconography embedded in Kente cloth and African print fabrics. By applying iconographic and thematic analytical frameworks, the research seeks to examine how motifs, colours, and patterns function as visual languages that communicate social values, philosophical ideas, and cultural identities within African societies.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the understanding that textiles function not only as material objects but also as visual communication systems that encode cultural meanings. In African societies, textiles such as Kente cloth and African print fabrics serve as semiotic

artifacts, where motifs, colours, and patterns operate as symbolic carriers of cultural narratives, social values, historical memory, and philosophical concepts. The framework guiding this study integrates insights from visual semiotics, cultural symbolism, and material culture theory in order to explain how iconographic elements in textiles communicate meaning.

Textiles as Cultural Communication Systems

African textiles operate within a broader system of visual communication, where design elements serve as signs that convey culturally shared meanings. Scholars of African art and material culture have long argued that textiles function as repositories of cultural knowledge, communicating social identity, moral values, and collective history. Within this communicative system, the meanings embedded in textile designs are understood through cultural interpretation rather than purely aesthetic appreciation.

Kente cloth and African print fabrics therefore function as visual texts that can be read and interpreted. Their patterns, motifs, and colour combinations are deliberately constructed to communicate messages about social hierarchy, political authority, gender relations, spiritual beliefs, and communal identity. These textiles thus operate within a symbolic framework in which the meaning of design elements emerges through shared cultural understanding.

Semiotic Interpretation of Textile Iconography

This study adopts principles from semiotic theory, particularly the concept that visual elements operate as signs composed of a signifier (form) and a signified (meaning). In textile design, the signifiers include visual elements such as motifs, patterns, and colours, while the signified meanings correspond to cultural concepts, proverbs, social values, or historical events. For example, in Kente cloth, motifs such as Nkyimkyim symbolize the unpredictability of life, while Ohene Anewa represents royal authority and vigilance. Similarly, African print fabrics often incorporate motifs that symbolize social relationships, gender dynamics, or communal values. These symbolic meanings are culturally encoded and interpreted by members of the society familiar with the visual language. Through semiotic interpretation, textile designs can therefore be analyzed as systems of symbolic communication, where each motif functions as a visual sign representing broader cultural ideas.

Cultural Symbolism and Social Context

The meanings embedded in textile iconography cannot be understood outside their social and cultural context. Cultural symbolism theory suggests that symbols acquire meaning through the social practices, beliefs, and historical experiences of a community. Textile motifs in African societies are therefore shaped by cultural narratives, traditional proverbs, and collective philosophical ideas. Kente cloth, for instance, is deeply embedded in the cultural traditions of the Akan people of Ghana. Its patterns and colour symbolism reflect Akan philosophical thought, moral teachings, and social structures. The cloth historically served as a marker of royal authority and ceremonial identity. African print fabrics, on the other hand, demonstrate a more dynamic system of symbolism shaped by cross-cultural exchange, colonial history, and contemporary social narratives. Although originally influenced by Indonesian batik techniques and European textile manufacturing, African communities have indigenized these fabrics, embedding them with culturally relevant meanings and symbolic interpretations. Thus, the meanings of textile motifs are shaped by historical development, social usage, and cultural interpretation.

Material Culture Perspective

The conceptual framework also draws from material culture theory, which views objects as active participants in the construction of cultural meaning. According to this perspective, artifacts such as textiles do not merely reflect culture but also produce and reinforce social meanings through their use, circulation, and symbolic representation. Within this perspective, Kente cloth and African print fabrics function as cultural artifacts that embody identity, social status, and collective memory. The production, naming, and usage of textile patterns reflect broader cultural processes including leadership structures, gender roles, economic systems, and historical experiences. The symbolic meanings embedded in textile designs therefore emerge through the interaction between the object (textile), the creator (designer or weaver), and the user (wearer or community).

Research Methods

The study adopts an interdisciplinary research design, integrating perspectives from art history, anthropology, cultural studies, and textile studies. These disciplines are combined to analyse African textiles as visual systems of cultural communication, enabling the interpretation of motifs, colours, and patterns through iconographic and cultural frameworks. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on historical and iconographic analysis. Data were collected through document analysis of scholarly literature, visual examination of textile motifs, and archival sources on African textile traditions. The data were analysed using thematic and iconographic analysis, focusing on recurring symbolic motifs, colour symbolism, and their associated cultural meanings.

Kente cloth, a handwoven textile originating from the Akan people of Ghana, is renowned for its intricate geometric patterns and vibrant color symbolism. Each motif conveys philosophical, political, and social meanings. In contrast, African print fabrics, largely influenced by Dutch wax prints, have evolved into a distinct form of visual communication, integrating both indigenous African and foreign design elements.

Data was collected primarily through a literature review, drawing from historical records, scholarly articles, and museum archives. The comparative analysis explores how Kente cloth and African print fabrics serve as vehicles for cultural identity while also investigating how globalization and commercialization have influenced their contemporary meanings. The findings of this study contribute to the discourse on African textile iconography, offering insights into the ways traditional and modern textiles function as cultural artifacts and expressions of heritage.

Analytical Structure of the Study

The study conceptualizes textile iconography through two key analytical themes:

1. **Motif symbolism:** Motifs represent the visual symbols embedded in textile designs. These motifs may reference proverbs, philosophical ideas, historical events, or social relationships. The study examines how motifs function as visual signs that communicate cultural narratives.
2. **Colour symbolism:** Colour plays a significant role in African textile iconography. Colours often represent specific cultural meanings related to spirituality, status, emotion, or social values. The study analyzes how colour combinations contribute to the symbolic interpretation of textile designs.

Results and Discussion

Iconography in Kente Cloth

Historically, Kente was worn by royalty and used in sacred ceremonies. It was a symbol of wealth, power, and cultural identification. The cloth was reserved for important occasions, such as festivals, coronations, and rituals, where it communicated the wearer's status and identity (Agboaye, 2015; Seidu et al., 2022). Each Kente cloth, was woven with specific patterns and colours with symbolic messages related to the wearer's lineage, achievements, and social status. The cultural significance of Kente is further emphasized by the roles of the weavers, who are regarded as custodians of this sacred art.

Motif Symbolism in Kente Iconography

The patterns in Kente cloth are unique and symbolic. Each pattern and design has specific meanings, often related to proverbs, historical events, philosophical concepts, or moral teachings. These symbols serve as a visual language for communicating ideas and values (Armah et al., 2023). The following are selected designs and their meanings.

1. Afa Pattern

The "Afa" pattern in Kente cloth, which translates to "I have taken it" or "I have conquered it," symbolizes achievement and triumph (Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.). The colours in this pattern depict success and power. The pattern visually communicates the concept of achievement and the pride associated with it.



Figure 1: Afa Pattern

Source: Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.

2. Ohene Anewa Pattern

The "Ohene Anewa" Kente design, translating to "The King's Eye" or "The King Sees Everything," is a powerful symbol of authority, vigilance, and the all-encompassing wisdom of a leader (Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.). This design reflects the belief that a king is not only a ruler but also an observer who is aware of all that transpires in his kingdom. The choice of colours represents royalty, wealth, and the divine nature of kingship. The design symbolizes omniscience and vigilance: This communicates that the king is ever-watchful, aware of the needs of his people, and vigilant against threats. It serves as a reminder that nothing escapes the notice of a true leader.

The design also symbolizes authority and justice: This describes the king's role as a judge who sees and understands everything, ensuring justice is upheld. This design is often worn during important ceremonies, particularly those involving the king or other leaders. It serves as a visual declaration of the ruler's wisdom, watchfulness, and divine right to lead. The "Ohene Anewa" Kente design communicates the king's role as both a protector and a judge, watching over his people and ensuring peace and order within the kingdom.



Figure 2: Ohene Anewa Pattern

Source: Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.

3. Nkyimkyim Pattern

The "Nkyimkyim" Kente design, translates to mean "Zigzag" and symbolizes the concept "Life is not a straight path,". This pattern represents the twists and turns, challenges, and unexpected changes that one encounters throughout life (Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.). This design is a visual metaphor for resilience, adaptability, and the understanding that life's journey is rarely straight. The colour contrasts emphasize the sharp changes in direction and the unpredictability of life's path. The central feature of this design is the zigzag pattern itself. This may be arranged horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, representing the various directions life can take.

This design symbolizes life's unpredictability. It reminds the wearer that success often requires navigating through challenges and that progress is not always straightforward. It also symbolizes adaptability and resilience: The design symbolizes the need to be flexible and resilient in the face of life's twists and turns. It encourages the acceptance of change and the ability to adapt to new circumstances.



Figure 3: Nkyimkyim Pattern

Source: Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.

4. Fatene Pattern

The "Fatene" Kente design, literally means "You go straight away to Agyeman," conveys a message of directness, purpose, and determination. In the context of this design, "Agyeman" refers to a significant destination or person, symbolizing the idea of heading directly towards a goal or purpose without deviation (Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.). The design often features strong, assertive colours that represent vitality, maturity, strength, passion, and the drive to achieve one's goals.

This design symbolizes directness and purpose. It encourages a focused and determined approach to achieving success. It also symbolizes clarity and intention. It suggests that when one knows their destination, they should proceed confidently and without deviation.



Figure 4: Fatene Pattern

Source: Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.

5. Niata Pattern

The "Niata" Kente design, means "Two-edged sword," which symbolizes duality, balance, and the complexity of situations that have both positive and negative aspects (Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.). This design embodies the idea that actions and decisions can have both beneficial and harmful consequences, much like a two-edged sword that cuts both ways. The design serves as a reminder that actions can have unintended consequences, and one must be mindful of the dual nature of their choices.



Figure 5: Niata Pattern

Source: Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.

6. Trom Nwoma Pattern

The "Trom Nwoma" Kente design, which translates to "Droughts, Smooth Weave," is a pattern that embodies the resilience, patience, and perseverance required to endure difficult times, such as droughts, while maintaining grace and composure (Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.). The design reflects the smoothness and continuity of the weave, symbolizing the ability to withstand hardship and emerge with strength and elegance. The pattern depicts endurance and resilience. It also represents the ability to maintain a smooth, unbroken path despite adversity.



Figure 6: Trom Nwoma Pattern

Source: Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.

7. Kwadum Asa Pattern

The "Kwadum Asa" Kente design, translated as Empty Gun Powder Keg, symbolizes the concept of emptiness or the aftermath of conflict (Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.). This design reflects the idea of a situation that has lost its potential or power, similar to how an empty gun powder keg signifies that its explosive potential is spent. The design can be used to communicate loss of power or effectiveness, similar to how an empty gun powder keg has no explosive capability. It reflects a situation where the potential for action or conflict has been spent.

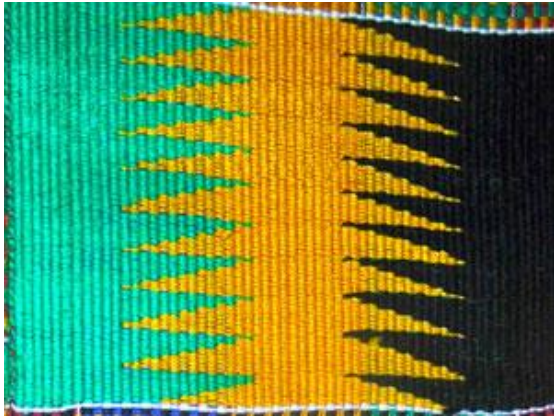


Figure 7: Kwadum Asa Pattern

Source: Culturally Situated Design Tools, n.d.

8. Adwinasa Design

This design literally means “All motifs are used up”. This pattern represents creativity and innovation (Kente Cloth, n.d.). It signifies the weaver’s skill and the idea that nothing more can be added to the design, symbolizing completeness and excellence. This design reflects the idea of having utilized all available resources or options and reaching a conclusion or end point. The design is also used to signify the successful completion of a project or goal, marking the end of a journey and the readiness for new beginnings. Its intricate and dense patterns reflect the thoroughness of the process and the achievement of reaching the end of a cycle.



Figure 8: Adwinasa Kente Design

Source: Anka Africa, n.d.

9. Sika Futoro Design

This means “Gold dust”. This pattern symbolizes wealth and prosperity. It references the historical importance of gold in Asante society, where it was a symbol of power and status. The design reflects the idea of abundance and the fine details that contribute to overall richness (Kodzo,2017). The design prominently features shades of gold, representing wealth and prosperity.



Figure 9: Sika Futoro Design

Source: Penderemingi, n.d.

10. Fathia Fata Nkrumah Design

This means “Fathia is a suitable wife for Nkrumah”. This pattern commemorates the marriage of Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, to Fathia Nkrumah (Kente Cloth n.d). It symbolizes unity, harmony, and the merging of different cultures. It often features rich and regal colors such as gold, purple, blue and deep red (Kodzo, 2017). The design also symbolizes elegance and high social status, mirroring the distinguished position of Fathia Nkrumah. It reflects the grace and poise associated with her role as First Lady of Ghana.



Figure 10: Fathia Fata Nkrumah Design

Source: Reapp, n.d.

11. Obaakofo Mmu Man Design

This design literally means “one person does not rule a nation. It symbolizes the principle of collective leadership and the importance of collaboration in governance. The design reflects the idea that effective leadership requires the involvement and contribution of many people, rather than relying on a single individual (Kente Cloth, n.d). The design symbolizes collective leadership. It emphasizes the value of teamwork and collective effort in leadership. It symbolizes the belief that a nation thrives

when decisions and responsibilities are shared among many rather than being concentrated in the hands of a single person. The design also reflects the principles of unity and cooperation, highlighting how diverse perspectives and contributions come together to form a strong and effective leadership structure.



Figure 11: Obaakofo Mmu Man Design

Source: Kente Cloth, n.d

12. Abusua Ye Dom Design

This literally means “the extended family is a force.” It symbolizes the strength, support, and unity found within an extended family network. This design emphasizes the collective power and influence that comes from close family bonds and communal support (Kente Cloth, n.d). This design emphasizes the importance of unity and solidarity within the extended family. It illustrates how collective support and cooperation contribute to the overall strength and resilience of the family unit.



Figure 12: Abusua Ye Dom Design

Source: Kente Cloth, n.d.

These patterns are carefully selected by the weaver based on the occasion, the wearer’s status, and the message to be communicated. The arrangement and repetition of patterns in Kente cloth are also significant, as they can emphasize particular meanings or create a narrative across the fabric.

Colour Symbolism in Kente Iconography

Colours in Kente cloth do not serve only decorative purposes. According to Kodzo (2017), they are as symbolic as the choice of pattern and motif. Each colour has specific meanings, often related to the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Akan people as discussed below.

Black represents spiritual maturity, death, mourning, and ancestral connection. It is often used in Kente cloths worn during funerals or in fabrics meant to honor the ancestors. White symbolizes purity, sanctity, and peace. It is commonly worn during sacred ceremonies and celebrations, such as weddings, to convey the purity of the occasion.

Gold represents wealth, royalty, and high status (Kodzo, 2017). It reflects the importance of gold in the Asante kingdom and is associated with opulence, prosperity, and the divine. Green symbolizes growth, renewal, and fertility. It is often used to represent the land and the agricultural wealth of the Akan people. Red is associated with political and spiritual power, as well as bloodshed and sacrifice. It is often used in Kente cloths worn during significant political or religious events.

Blue represents love, harmony, and peace (Kente Cloth, n.d). It is also associated with the sky and the sea, reflecting the vastness and tranquility of nature. The combination of these colours in Kente cloth has deep cultural meanings, the interplay of colours can amplify or modify the symbolism of the patterns.

Evolution and Adaptation of Kente Iconography

Kente has been used in various ways, both within Africa and globally. Designers have incorporated Kente patterns into contemporary fashion, blending traditional motifs with modern styles. This has led to the globalization of Kente, with the cloth being worn by Africans around the world as a symbol of cultural pride and identity (Adeloye et al., 2023).

The advent of digital technology has also influenced the production and popularity of Kente. Digital looms and printing techniques have allowed for the mass production of Kente-inspired designs, making the cloth more accessible to a global audience (Adeloye et al., 2023). This has however raised concerns about cultural appropriation and the commodification of traditional African textiles. Despite these changes in the technology of production and usage of the fabric, the iconography of Kente cloth remains rooted in the values and beliefs of the Akan people. The patterns and colours continue to carry symbolic meanings, reflecting the relevance of Kente as a cultural and artistic expression.

Iconography in African Print Fabrics

African print fabrics, often referred to as "Ankara", "Dutch Wax" or "African Wax" prints, are a vibrant and globally recognized symbol of African identity. These fabrics are unique for their bold, intricate designs and vibrant colours. African print fabrics are used as a means of communicating heritage, status, beliefs, and the history of the people (Adeloye et al., 2023). The patterns and motifs used in African print fabrics are rich in symbolism, often reflecting the cultural, social, and political contexts in which they are used (Adeoti, 2024). Each design carries specific meanings, which can vary depending on the region, community, and occasion. According to Adeloye (2021), here are some of the most common themes and symbols found in African print fabrics.

1. **Geometric Patterns:** Geometric designs are prevalent in African print fabrics and often represent concepts of harmony, balance, and unity. For example, repeated squares or circles might symbolize the cyclical nature of life or the interconnectedness of community members. These patterns are often inspired by traditional African art, architecture, and textiles, such as the woven patterns of Kente cloth or the intricate designs of mud cloth from Mali.
2. **Nature Motifs:** Many African print fabrics feature motifs inspired by nature, including flowers, leaves, and animals. These designs are often symbolic of fertility, growth, and the beauty of the natural world. For example, a fabric featuring a bold flower pattern might be worn to signify a woman's role as a nurturer and life-giver, or to celebrate a new beginning, such as a marriage or the birth of a child.
3. **Political and Historical Symbols:** Some African print fabrics incorporate motifs that reference significant historical events or political movements. Typical examples are fabrics produced during the struggle for independence in various African countries often featured symbols of liberation, such as chains breaking or images of leaders like Kwame Nkrumah. These prints served as visual propaganda, spreading messages of resistance and unity among the populace.
4. **Religious and Spiritual Symbols:** Religious and spiritual themes are also common in African print fabrics. For example, some designs may feature symbols associated with specific deities or spiritual beliefs, such as the Adinkra symbols from Ghana, which convey messages related to wisdom, strength, and protection. These fabrics are often worn during religious ceremonies or to signify the wearer's faith and devotion.
5. **Modern and Urban Themes:** As African print fabrics have evolved, so too have the themes and motifs they feature. In contemporary times, designs have incorporated modern and urban elements, reflecting the changing lifestyles and aspirations of African societies. For example, prints featuring images of cell phones, cars, or cityscapes are popular in urban areas, symbolizing modernity, progress, and the blending of tradition with contemporary life.
6. **Custom and Personalized Prints:** In recent years, the production of custom and personalized African prints has become increasingly popular. These fabrics are often commissioned for special occasions, such as weddings, anniversaries, or political campaigns, and feature motifs or messages that are meaningful to the individuals or groups involved. This trend reflects the growing importance of individual expression and the desire to create unique, personal connections with cultural heritage.

Motif Symbolism in African Print Iconography

Vlisco (n.d.) and Adeoti (2024) highlighted some specific African print designs and their unique meanings. Some of these designs are discussed below.

1. **Don't get married with empty hands**

This is a popular African print design in Togo. The design depicts a bride's hands with substance of value in it. In Togo, when women are ready to get married, they assemble and assess their valuable belongings and assets to ascertain that they are financially independent from their intending husband. This African print design highlights the saying that "when a girl married with only love in her baggage, she is at a risk of running back to her mother's arms in ears quickly. This design encourages women to be valuable and financially stable before getting married.



Figure 13: Rolls Royce

Source: Vlisco, n.d

2. Wedding Flowers

This is also a popular African print fabric design. This fabric is known by different names such as “Rolls Royce”, “Mgbolodi” and “Fleurs de Mariage” which means Wedding Flowers. The design is used to depict the beauty and happiness enjoyed in marriage. It is also believed that the design brings success and wealth to the family of users of this fabric.



Figure 14: Wedding Flowers

Source: Vlisco, n.d

3. Alphabet

It is believed that this design indicate that the users of this fabric are education and can read and write. The fabric is also used to depict the beauty and importance of good education. The design also encouraged parents to save up for their children's education.



Figure 15: Alphabet

Source: Vlisco, n.d

4. Jumping Horse

This is also known as "I run faster than my Rival". The names of many African print fabrics are associated with women, family life and marital relationships. This design is popular in Côte d'Ivoire to express the rivalry between co-wives. In Nigeria, Igbo women in Nigeria love to use this design as uniform cloth to express unity at their annual August women's meeting.



Figure 16: Jumping Horse

Source: Vlisco, n.d

5. The Happy Family

This design represents a typical African family. It describes the social identity of its wearer. At the center is the mother figure, the chicken, surrounded by her children and future children (the eggs). It is assumed that the father (the rooster) is a trouble maker and only the head is shown in the design. This highlights important role of women in the family.

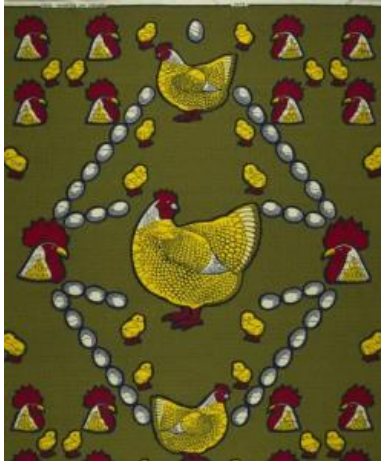


Figure 17: The Happy Family

Source: Vlisco, n.d

6. You leave, I leave

The design depicts distrust between couples. It is a warning from a newlywed wife to the husband that if he cheats on her, she will do the same. The design serves as a means to caution men from cheating as they might not be able to bear the consequences. This design was popular among women in Togo and Ivory Coast in 1983.

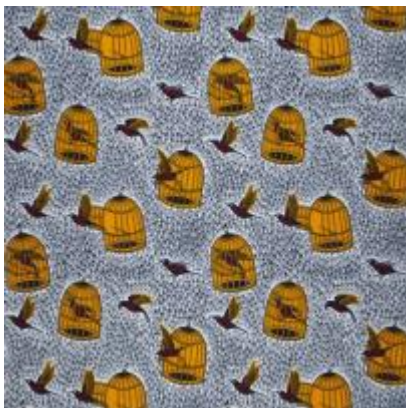


Figure 18: You leave, I leave

Source: Vlisco, n.d

Colour Symbolism in African Print Fabrics Iconography

Just as in Kente cloth, colour in African print fabrics plays a crucial role in their iconography, with each colour carrying specific meanings and interpretations (Adeloye et al., 2023). The use of colour is not arbitrary; it is also symbolic and often tied to the cultural beliefs of the users of the fabric.

Red is a powerful colour in African print fabrics, often associated with life, vitality, and the energy of the living. In some contexts, red represents love and passion. Yellow or gold is commonly associated with wealth, prosperity, and high status (Adeoti, 2024). It reflects the importance of gold in

many African cultures, particularly in West Africa, where gold has long been a symbol of power and prestige.

Green symbolizes growth, fertility, and the abundance of nature. It is often associated with the land and agriculture, reflecting the importance of farming and the natural environment in African societies. Green is also a symbol of renewal and hope, making it a popular choice for fabrics worn during new beginnings or transitional periods. Blue represents peace, calm, and harmony. It is often associated with the sky and the ocean, symbolizing vastness, depth, and tranquility (Labode & Braide, 2022). In some cultures, blue is also linked to protection and healing, making it a colour of choice for fabrics used in protective or spiritual contexts.

Black is a colour that carries multiple meanings in African print fabrics. It can represent the spiritual realm, ancestral connection, and the mysteries of the universe. In some contexts, black is associated with mourning and death, while in others, it symbolizes strength, authority, and resilience.

Adeloye et al. (2023) noted that African print designs usually do not use raw colours. Most colours are mixed before use to adjust the intensity of the colours. However, in cultures like the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria have preference for raw colours like red, yellow and black.

Comparative Analysis of Kente Cloth and African Print Fabrics

In terms of Origin Kente originated from the Akan people in Ghana. It has deep roots in the Asante kingdom and Ewe culture, dating back several centuries while African print fabrics have a more complex origin. They are industrially produced textiles, initially influenced by Indonesian batik techniques brought to West Africa by Dutch merchants in the 19th century (Agboaye, 2015; Adeoti, 2024).

In terms of status, Kente was originally reserved for royalty and special occasions, symbolizing wealth, status, and cultural identity. It's often associated with important ceremonies like weddings, festivals, and funerals while African print fabrics have been embraced across African as a symbol of African identity and pride. They are widely used in everyday clothing as well as ceremonial wears (Seidu et al., 2022; Adeloye, 2021).

Considering the method of production, Kente is handwoven on a loom, with each strip typically being about 4 inches wide. These strips are then sewn together to create a larger fabric. The weaving process is labor-intensive and requires significant skill, with each pattern often representing specific meanings or proverbs while African print fabrics are produced using an industrial process where wax is applied to the cloth before dyeing to create patterns. This method allows for mass production and the replication of intricate designs on a large scale (Adeloye et al., 2023).

In terms of fibres used, traditionally, Kente was made from silk and cotton, but modern versions may also use rayon and other synthetic fibers while most African print fabrics are made from 100% cotton, but polyester and cotton blends are also common. These fabrics are valued for their durability and vibrant colours (Agboaye, 2015; Adeoti, 2024).

In terms of symbolism, the patterns and colours in Kente are highly symbolic, with each combination conveying specific messages. For instance, colours like gold symbolize royalty and wealth, while patterns might represent historical events, proverbs, or moral lessons while African print fabrics are known for their bold, vibrant designs, the symbolism behind the patterns is less codified than in Kente. African print designs are inspired by traditional African motifs or general

themes that convey specific cultural and communicative narratives, but some are purely aesthetic driven by fashion trends (Adeloye et al., 2023).

Both Kente and African print fabrics hold significant cultural and economic importance, but they differ greatly in their origins, production methods, and symbolic meanings. Kente is deeply rooted in the traditions of the Akan people, with each piece being a unique work of art that tells a story. In contrast, African print fabrics, though with communicative motifs, are more commercially driven, offering vibrant, accessible fashion with varying degrees of cultural significance and meaning.

Contemporary Relevance of Iconography in African Textiles

In contemporary times, global influences, technological advancements, and shifts in social and cultural contexts have influenced the preservation of the iconography in African textiles. African textiles, such as Kente, Adinkra, Bogolanfini (mud cloth), and others, are deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of various African communities. The iconography in these textiles serves as communicative tools that convey cultural narratives, moral values, historical events, and philosophical concepts. In contemporary times, the continued use and creation of these textiles help preserve these traditions and pass them on to future generations (Adeloye et al, 2023). The Asante and Ewe people of Ghana still produce Kente cloth using traditional patterns and colours that hold specific meanings so as to retain their cultural relevance. These designs are testaments to the artistic skill of the weavers and also a way to maintain and celebrate their cultural identity in a rapidly globalizing world.

Contemporary African textile artists and designers are increasingly blending old and new elements, creating textiles that reflect both heritage and modernity. This adaptation allows for the preservation of cultural identity while also making these textiles relevant to younger generations who may be more influenced by global trends. An example of this is the work of contemporary designers like Aisha Ayensu, who incorporate traditional African motifs into modern fashion pieces. These designs often reinterpret traditional symbols in new ways, making them accessible and appealing to a global audience while still rooted in African cultural heritage (Adeoti & Kalilu, 2024).

Conclusion

This study revealed the cultural, historical, and social significance of the traditional African fabrics. Both Kente and African print fabrics serve as powerful mediums of cultural expression, storytelling, and identification, each with its unique origins, meanings, and contemporary relevance.

Kente cloth has its roots in the Akan culture of Ghana. It stands as a testament to the rich history and spiritual beliefs of the Asante and Ewe people. Its patterns, motifs, and choice of colours portray a visual language that communicates ideas related to status, spirituality, and communal values. The traditional craftsmanship involved in creating Kente, often regarded as a sacred art form, emphasizes the cultural reverence of the fabric. Kente's evolution from a royal fabric worn by kings to a global symbol of African heritage illustrates its adaptability and enduring significance. As Kente has been embraced by the Africans in diaspora and reinterpreted in various contexts, it continues to serve as a powerful symbol of African identity, pride, and resilience.

African print fabrics, often referred to as Ankara or wax print represent a different but equally important facet of African textile traditions. While their origins are intertwined with European and Asian influences, these fabrics have been thoroughly indigenized and transformed into a distinctly African art form. The bold patterns and vibrant colours of African print fabrics reflect the diverse

cultural, social, and political status of Africa. The iconography within these prints captures a wide range of themes, from geometric shapes to nature and spirituality among others. African print fabrics have become a major fashion item in Africa and have also gained international recognition, symbolizing African creativity and innovation in the global fashion industry.

The comparative analysis of Kente cloth and African print fabrics highlights both the shared and distinct elements of these textiles. While both are rich in symbolic meaning and cultural significance, they differ in their origins, production methods, and the specific messages they convey. Kente cloth is deeply rooted in traditional craftsmanship and carries specific cultural codes that are often tied to the wearer's social status and identity. In contrast, African print fabrics, while equally symbolic, offer a broader scope for expression, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of African societies.

In the contemporary era, both Kente cloth and African print fabrics have transcended their original cultural contexts to become global symbols of African heritage. They have been embraced by the African diaspora as powerful tools for asserting identity and fostering a sense of belonging. At the same time, the globalization of these textiles has raised important ethical questions about cultural appropriation and the need to preserve and respect their cultural origins.

These fabrics are not merely decorative; they are living documents that tell the stories of African peoples, their histories, beliefs, and aspirations. As these textiles continue to evolve and adapt to new context, they will undoubtedly remain central to the expression of African identity and the celebration of African cultural heritage for generations to come. It is recommended that African designers should continue to be innovative in their use of traditional motifs to suit modern tastes, so as to preserve the use of these traditional textiles in maintaining cultural identity.

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