



Design Taxonomy of Ankara Fabrics among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Textile print is one of the art traditions in Yoruba land of Southwestern Nigeria in which Ankara is one of them. Ankara fabric is originally referred to as wax resists dyed fabric which is of Indian origin diffused to Indonesia and perfected by Java. It was later introduced to West Africa including Nigeria through southwest where it was purchased and used to reflect local ideas and ideologies. This study examines the classification and categorization of designs in Ankara fabrics among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. It adopts descriptive research design using qualitative method to analyze the data. Unstructured questions were used to interview the users and retailers, while the photographs were taken with their permission. Findings show that Ankara fabric has varied designs and pattern themes which reflect the culture and custom of African people. The fabric is popular and it is highly preferred for special occasions and personal use. More also, the Chinese textile manufacturers have made their ways into Nigerian textile markets with their cheap and inferior Ankara, thereby making the Nigerian textile factories suffer patronage.

KEYWORDS: design, Ankara fabrics, taxonomy, textiles, Nigerian textiles, textile print

I. INTRODUCTION

Yoruba people are living primarily in Southwest Nigeria and Eastern Benin who speak Yoruba, a Niger Congo language. The name Yoruba is applied to a linguistic group according to Falola and Genova (2006); Basiru (2014), and the demographic statistics of 2023 rough estimate population of the Yoruba ethnic group number

about twenty-seven million which makes 21% population of Nigeria. They occupy a large area extending through Osun, Oyo, Kwara, Ogun, Ondo, Lagos and part of Kogi state of the federation of Nigeria with a common language (Sasu, 2022).

Besides the common language, the Yoruba are united by a common culture according to Fraser (2016), and by traditions as Basiru (2014) puts it, they have a common origin in the town of Ile-Ife. It was in the seventeenth century that the Yoruba succeeded in establishing a strong and flourishing state called the kingdom of Oyo, in the region between Dahomey and the Niger River. He further opined that Oyo disintegrated into numerous petty kingdoms during the first half of the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Yoruba came under the British control.

Yoruba is rich in culture and this always reflect in their art such as wood carvings, bronze casting which are prominent, architecture and also textiles to mention a few. The presence of textiles in the African world dates back to the Phoenician times. Bascom (1969) also recorded the existence of the cultivation of cotton in vast quantities among the Yoruba. At various times in history, New African Woman (2024) reiterated that migration and integration have spread African textiles to different regions of Africa and the world. African fabrics were used as a symbol of treasure around 1000 B.C. as New African Woman (2020) buttressed during the period of the trans-Saharan trade when traders used strip cloth as a form of currency. As a result African textiles became known worldwide.

Many researchers have contributed in one way or the other on textile tradition especially on printed fabrics, but their focus is more on socio-economic



aspect of the subject. The few ones that studied the theme and usages left out index studies on the designs and motifs of the fabric, therefore, the designs arrangement and classification of motifs need to be studied at this period since fabric is ephemeral and there is need to fill the dearth of literature on this subject.

This study focusses on the taxonomy of designs and motifs of Ankara fabric among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, with the aim of describing the designs usually found among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria so as to provide an historical reconstruction of Ankara fabric and to fill the gap of dearth of literature in this area of textile tradition.

Methodologically, the approach used for this study is direct field research with descriptive design using qualitative method to analyze the data. The area for the study is among the Yoruba people of south western Nigeria comprising the Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, Ogun, Ondo, Lagos states and the Yoruba people among the Kwara and Kogi states. Information were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Unstructured questions were used to collect information from both the users and the retailers, while the photographs of various Ankara fabrics were recorded with the aid of digital camera. Cell phones and tape recorder were used to collect the audio and visual information. Ankara fabrics collected were well analyzed according to the theme, design and motifs used on the fabric.

II. ORIGIN AND STRUCTURE OF ANKARA FABRIC

Ankara, which is otherwise called “African Wax Prints” according to Chichi and Howard (2016), was originally known as ‘wax resists dyed fabric’. This wax resist dyed fabric is also known as batik which is of Indian origin. Adeloje (2022) wrote that batik diffused from India to Indonesian islands and Japan, and later perfected by the Javanese before the thirteenth century. Javanese are the people who live mainly in central and eastern Java and they are the largest ethnic group constituting 45% of the Indonesia’s population of 101,742,120 in 2000 (Chuan, et.al. (2010). (Asmah, et.al (2023) also buttressed this that Batik is a technique for dyeing fabric and has been developed into an art form in Java.

Cloths like the wax prints, or the *adire*, originated in Europe or India and are imported to Nigeria, where they were purchased and used as or modified to reflect local ideas and ideologies. Designs for textiles like certain wax prints might originate in Nigeria, be produced on cloth in

England, Switzerland, or Holland, and then imported back into Nigeria for local purchase (Spencer, 2001).

Ankara fabrics are a sort of common materials among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. They are industrially produced, colourful cotton cloth with batik printing. Lack of difference in the colour intensity of front and back makes the fabric to be unique (Hargen-Jurkowsch and Salay, 2010). It can also be sorted into categories of quality due to the processes of manufacturing. The ‘full piece’ is sold in 12 yards while the ‘half piece’ is sold in 6 yards. A few brands are very much common and dominate the Yoruba market and even West African market as a whole. These are; ABC Wax (also known as London wax), made by Akosombo Textiles Limited in Ghana, Vlisco Wax (also known as Dutch wax) made in the Netherlands, and Hitarget Wax, made in China. Therefore, each company made several of these prints and gives each a name depending on the quality of the print (Adeoti, 2022).

Some *Ankara* fabrics are named after personalities, cities, building, sayings or occasions. The producer, name of the product and registration number of the designs are printed on the selvedge, protecting the design and allowing reading the quality of the fabric. Such registration numbers and name of the products are; Veritable Real Wax Block (CTP), Guaranteed Wax Block Print Hitarget (500106), Hallandaise Royal Wax, Super Print NTM (600401), Veritable real Wax as Hollandaise (1618001), Da Viva, Kampala Da Viva, Java Gold, Real English Wax, Guaranteed Super Woodina Prints (LW-AV-1200), Guaranteed Real Wax Beauty Lady BTL (336008), Veritable Block Wax HIFASHION (600108), Veritable Java Print, English Gold, Super Woodin, London Woodin. Other names of Ankara are Opulent Gold, Uniwax, Ukpo and Chiteng, Opulent Java, Plain Java (Deluxe), Super Cherax, China Wax Chewax, etc (Kalilu and Adeoti, 2022).

III. TYPES OF ANKARA FABRIC

There are two basic types of Ankara fabrics and mainly used among the Yoruba in Nigeria. These are resist prints called ‘wax’ and roller prints called ‘fancy’.

The wax-printed textiles otherwise known as *Ankara* in Nigeria is one in which wax has been used as a medium for blocking the penetration of dye into the fabric in certain areas so as to create a design (Kalilu and Adeoti, 2022)). It is a resist dyed cloth, or a wax resists printed cloth. In Indonesia, these hand-printed batik fabrics are



produced by applying hot wax to the cloth in the areas meant to resist the dye. This method of resist dyeing was extremely developed in Java, exported batiks to neighboring countries as well as to Europe, along with a growing trade with the colonies, various countries experimented with machine-made batik. Holland had several factories beginning in 1835 (Ajiginni, 2019) while Swiss also developed machine-made batiks by the mid-nineteenth century. But the first machine-made batiks for West Africa were produced in Haalem by the Dutch firm.

This type of *Ankara* is of resin technique whereby a machine rolled a thin resin resists in repeating patterns on to both sides of the yardage of the cotton. It is then crinkled leaving the cracks in the resist. Before the cloth is immersed into the dye bath, some cracks are made on the fabric and afterwards appear as fine thin lines. These thin lines are known as 'crackle'. The areas that are not covered with dye absorbed resin (Makinde, et.al (2009). This type is also referred to as 'genuine wax prints' which is labour intensive to produce hence, it is the most expensive.

The Javanese word 'batik' designate a technology of clothing with spares where the colouring happens with an ink repellent liquid or paste like wax, resin or starch. The spare material is applied, drawn or stamped on the fabric protecting these parts of the fabric (pattern) in the colour bath and creating a light pattern after removal.

Fancy fabrics are also called 'Imiwax', 'Java Print', 'Roller Print', 'Le Fancy' or 'Le Legos' (Makinde, et.al 2009; Essel (2017). Roller prints type of *Ankara* is not a resin technique. The design is incised on to a series of large brass rollers, one for each colour to be printed. These rollers are then attached to the printing machine one after the other. As the fabric passes under the roller, dye is applied on a single side in progression from the lightest colour to the darkest color either by engraved metal rollers or printing screens mounted on rollers. It is usually produced in a printing procedure and the costly designs are printed digitally. The technique results in relatively expensive prints that could fade more easily than wax prints. It is also referred to as 'imitation wax print'. It is very cheap, and so, this results to the difference in the quality between the two types.

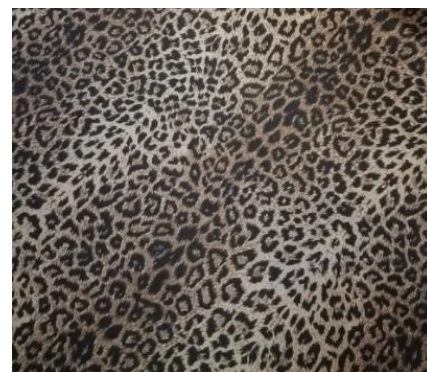
IV. THEMES AND DESIGNS OF ANKARA FABRIC

There are endless themes that could be used by the fabric designers so as to create art works that are reproducible for African print

production. The designs themselves may be representational which may be drawn from the natural world, such as, floral designs like flowers, plants or other botanical elements (Pix 1), domestic and wild animals (though they are not frequent) as in Pix 2, birds of different kinds (Pix 3), man-made objects (beads), hand-made or factory made objects (Pix 4). The non-representational imagery may be either geometry or free from abstraction (Pix 5). Natural phenomena like waves of the sea are also represented. These are common themes in the southwestern Nigeria (Adebayo and Ogunduyile, 2022).



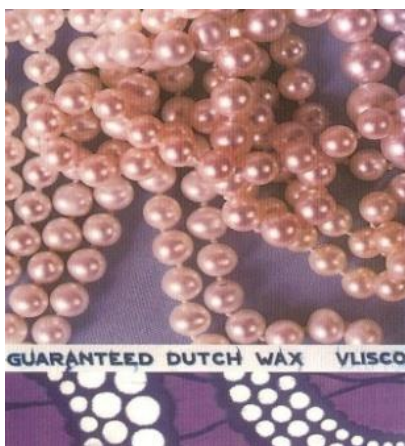
Pix 1 – Floral design
Photograph by Adeoti, A.A. (2020)



Pix 2: Animal design Cheetah's skin Courtesy: Vlisco.com African Clothes/Fashion.htm



Pix 3 – Bird design
Courtesy: Vlisco.com/African Clothes



Pix 4- beads design
Courtesy: Vlisco.com/African Clothes



Pix 5: Abstract design
Photograph by Adeoti, A.A. (2023)

From the onset, Ankara textile design has brought together myriad of influences from a wide range of sources, a practice that continues to this day. In the early twentieth century, when the exportation of wax and fancy prints in West and Central Africa was still in its infancy, the European textile industry was already linked to a far-reaching network of exchange that included India, Indonesia, Asia, the middle-east and Africa. The European textile industries employed local designers, but the prints they designed reflected the fast array of exotic influences that were filtering into Europe from these far off lands(Bhatt, 2014).

The unique characteristics of the wax process and the Javanese batik, its original source of inspiration, have had a significant and lasting impact on wax and fancy design. Indeed, some wax and fancy patterns seem to imitate Javanese motifs in its entirety. However, in contrast to Javanese taste, which calls for as few inconsistencies as possible in the printing of batik textiles, Kalilu and Adeoti, (2020) reiterated that African consumers especially the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria have come to admire and value a controlled amount of crackling and a subtle misalignment of colours on their factory prints.

Early European designers, often with the help of Africans and European merchants, European missionaries and colonial officers, researched and interpreted the interests and tastes of their clients. The practice still continues today as designers from Holland and England travel to Africa to meet with textile wholesalers and merchants and to visit markets and talk to cloth consumers about what is popular and what is not. The need to satisfy African demands led designers to draw inspiration from African material culture (Ibeto and Ogunduyile, 2015)).

The inspiration for Ankara design spans the entire spectrum of the natural and man-made world. One glaring category of design and motifs includes those derived from trade with other parts of both the European and African countries which influenced the designs predominantly among the Yoruba increase the creativity of its designs (Kuwonu, 2020).

Furthermore, aspects of the rich African culture, customs, our natural environment and everyday African society find their way into the cloth as design motif. These ranges from things related to food production and preparation like fish, fishing nets, cooking pots, recreation, traditional products such as strip weaving which is popular in the southwestern Nigeria, symbols of royalty and other traditional products (Igbuebor (2008). A



significant group of cloths are those which have come to be associated with personal relationships, beliefs and proverbs, in short the things that make the world go round in typical African and Nigeria settings.

Some other array of cloths deal with historical and contemporary issue, this elaborates on African design motifs that reflect on culture, personal, societal, religious and political events. Ankara prints are also vehicles for the spread of ideas, emotions from one culture to another through their design motifs like fishing with net common in riverine areas like Lagos, chickens, guinea fowls and domestic animals also found their ways into Ankara prints

The patterns on *Ankara* have bold and sometimes unusual colour combination. However, it is the slight misalignment of colours and design, and the distinctive crackled effect that sets *Ankara* cloth apart from other factory produced printed cotton. To achieve the crackled effect, the process of producing genuine wax cloth is complicated and time consuming when compared to other printed fabrics, and thus, very expensive (Adeoti, 2023).

The patterns often incorporate representational motifs. While the appearance of African printed cotton may be aesthetically pleasing, the imagery chosen for patterns usually adopts symbols, proverbs, and slogans, and permits the integration of African motifs, such as those used in *adireeleko* (indigo dyed cloth produced by Yoruba women of Southwestern Nigeria using a variety of resist dye techniques).

Ankara prints designs are not limited but depend on demand by its customers. Customers play a vital role in the development of textile industries all over the world (Jean, 2014). When a design sells well, it will be “recycled” and given a new look, by incorporating new ground designs, colours and often times additional motifs which are drafted by a set of dynamic designers in the industry (Kaliluan Adeoti, 2022). For example, the ABC alphabet design first created in 1920 has a favourite concept and has continually been reworked upon in numerous variations up till date (Pix 6).

These alphabet cloths have certain design elements which are standard and unique. Also, the European designers relied on their cultural references when illustrating topics of concerns to African consumers (Oludan, 2020). This has made these children’s letter building blocks reflect the African interest in literacy and its translation in a Eurocentric world. Some other examples of old designs that are been recycled often and especially

found among the Yoruba in Nigeria are *adire-eleko* pattern (Pix 7), household chickens, sugarcane, groundnut, key, necklace, etc. These designs show the prevailing items that could be found among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria.



Pix 6: Alphabet design
Photograph by Adeoti A.A (2023)



Pix 7: Adire-eleko design
Photograph by Adeoti A.A (2023)

The machine-printed cloths are not all the same. There are genuine wax prints and there are also imitation wax prints. The genuine wax prints have been previously described, and hence is the most expensive and most labour intensive to produce. The imitation wax is the cloths printed directly by roller with imitation crackled lines.

English wax also maintains a good reputation and can be found in many parts of West and Central Africa. Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire remain among the most prolific African wax



producers, with the popularity of Nigerian wax, which is based to a large extent on its affordability. In contrast, fancy textiles, which because of their lower price cannot support the cost of overseas importation, are printed almost exclusively in Africa today where factories can be found in many countries including Nigeria (Essel, 2018).

There are endless designs and types of *Ankara* found among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria; others are Da Viva, Hitarget, etc (Igbuebor, 2008). Several of these types of *Ankara* could be found in stalls depending on the financial capacity of the seller. However, there are imitations of tie-dye and batik designs in Ankara prints (Pix 8) which are made in China. The cloth merchants in Nigeria usually take the designs to the Chinese market to produce for Nigerian users. These types are called Da Viva Kampala.



Pix 8: Davivakampala (imitation of batik)
Photograph by Adeoti A.A (2023)

Long lasting and always stylish wax textiles continue to command high prices. 6 yards (5.49 metres) can cost \$40 to as much as \$60 or even more, this is called '*Ankara nla*' meaning, 'big and expensive Ankara'. Thus, the purchase of wax is considered an investment. But less durable fancy prints in contrast, are relatively inexpensive, 6 yards (5.49 metres) of fancy textiles costs only about \$5 to \$20, it is also called '*Ankara kekere*', meaning, 'small and cheap Ankara'.

Significantly in quality, durability and price, wax and fancy are conceived as two parts of a whole in Africa and are valued in ways that are related to their market price. Both are linked through historical associations and frequently prized for the feelings of nostalgia that they can motivate. This kind of value is rooted in the importance of textiles of all sorts throughout West

and Central Africa, not only as commodities, but as symbols of wealth and a means of communicating ideas, thus bringing innovations in printing and coupled with taste of fashion (Adeoti, 2023).

With the many innovations and the ability of designers to respond to the ever-changing taste of fashion, soon, their designs gained more popularity. European factory designers began to copy indigenous designs like tie and dye designs, batik designs, etc (Barbour and Simonds, 1971); (Polakoff (1971) so as to compete with the indigenous industry. These are popularly called *AnkaraKampala* known for their printed imitations of the *adire* motifs of the Yoruba by textile factories having nearly all the techniques of *adire*. Imported wax prints, not only from Europe but also from Asia, Oceania and the Americas, flooded the Nigerian local markets, selling at low prices. Interestingly, the Japanese duplicated designs of "*adireeleko*" and tie-dye designs and used the designs to manufacture cloth for the Nigerian markets.

In most *Ankara* textile industries, especially in Nigeria, the procedures involved in their design section is the digital or computer innovation thereby making life easier for the designers. The design production are carried out both manually and perfected with the aid of computers. For examples, software is programmed to fasten designs printed through automated machines on to fabric. When a design is carried out by drawing, it is then scanned on to a computer with industrial scanning machine, so that there will be easy adjustments, manipulation, balancing of the design motifs and colours with the method of colour separation, before it is transferred onto films. This process makes way for reduction of wastage, risk and mistakes in production.

When a design is conceived by either a designer or the customer, the design is sketched or traced out on paper and later scanned on to the computer through scanner. The other process of designing is carried out through different types of software, for instance, Corel Draw software for enhancing outline, Photoshop for distinct colour quality. However, textile industries have their own customized software which is a secret close to the heart of such textile industry.

One of the most favoured Ankara fabrics is Woodin. Woodin designs are modern, vibrant and stylish. The designs are a mix of multiple colours. These colours are cool and warm and were presented in granite with small motif effect. It is a metallic print characterized by bold and graphic pearl motifs with light open and gracious drawings.



This collection radiates brilliance, magnificence and elegance from its shimmering aboriginal designs. Some design motifs may not refer to a specific moment in time, but some are intentionally commemorative or on the other way address a specific issue. The genre combines the widespread West and Central African practices of commemorating specific people or events through the naming of a textile motif, with a European sense of design that includes realistic portraits and inclusion of text (Pix 9). Oyedele and Babatunde (2013) and Oyetunji (2020) reiterated that the use of *aso-ebi* among the Yoruba is commemorative, it is an identifier of groups and a temporary leveler of status.



Pix 9 – Commemorative Ankara
Photograph by Adeoti A.A (2023)

Ankara fabric process is one of the newest innovations in the textile print section. This process has been in existence locally through the local resist dye techniques in tie-dye and batik and their various design patterns, but now finds their ways into the modern-day African fabric motif of the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria to the aesthetic appeal of the users. The indigenous design status are ranging from cult, royalty, ceremonial, political, religious and everyday life activities which are texturally depicted in Ankara fabrics among the Yoruba today. There are some concepts in the past that are being recycled and at the same time combining contemporary motif design, thereby making the fabric to be acceptable by all in the Southern Nigeria.

Although, there is preference for foreign fabric to our local ones which is leading to the decline of Yoruba local cottage industry, but it has eventually gave birth to the growth and the development of new innovations and technology experienced today

in textile industries. When a design sells well in the market, the merchants take the design to the factory for recycling, thereby giving the designers the opportunity to be more creative by adding new innovations to the old designs. The designers are not limited to a pattern. The technology in place and the taste of the consumers dictate the kind of designs to be created at a particular point in time.

V. CONCLUSION

Ankara textiles factories and industries that were once thriving in the Southern Nigeria were dwindling drastically giving way to the Chinese textile factories to bring in their cheap Ankara textile fabrics that were less inferior to the ones being produced in Nigeria, thereby jeopardizing the local textile industries. The Chinese manufacturers have made their way into Nigerian textile markets creating more dangers to the existing industries because of their cheaper and counterfeit materials that have flooded the market. Part of the challenges facing the textile industries in Nigeria are lack of funds, fierce internal and external competitions.

Ankara has gained high recognition worldwide and they are commonly used in the Southern Nigeria even when the origin and productions are foreign. With the design motifs and colour combinations, Ankara fabrics have proven to be authentically African making it to be acceptable not only among the Yoruba of southern Nigeria alone, but throughout the whole world.

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