

## Methodology Article

# From Tradition to Innovation: Indigenous West African Textiles in Creative Interior Application

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**Abstract:** This design experiments convert indigenous West African textile design elements from a limited application in clothing into a breadth of interior design pieces that are expected to have a wider appeal. Textile designing is an integral part of textile production in West Africa and by far the most predominant art practice in the region. Textile production techniques vary from one place to another in the region and some of the common techniques are tie-dyeing, tritik, batik, indigo dying, embroidery, patchwork, appliqué, discharge dyeing, direct printing and resist printing. Designs are developed from sources such as body paintings and tattooing, indigenous symbols, proverbs, occasions and major events, important personalities, natural and artificial objects. Other textile design forms have also evolved from textures produced by the actual processes of fabric construction and the effects of colour variations of yarns such as stripes, bars and checks. However, fabrics are designed mainly for clothing and to some extent craft items and that limits the patronage and application of those fabrics. Furthermore, the processes of designing and production are mainly manual and so reproduction or uniformity in mass productions and mass customisation is besieged with lots of challenges. These design experiments take a more comparative view of the indigenous West African fabrics and the central motifs in the design compositions are *Adinkra* and *Adire* and the background referenced *Bogolanfini* symbols. The human centred design approach was adopted for the practical experiments; it entails as a step-by-step guide to externalise creativity, taken cognisance of the people the designs are meant for. The background data came largely from documentation, archival records, and observation of physical artefacts. This project experiments with a breadth of materials such as lycra, canvas, soft velvet fabrics, foam, wood and techniques for a range of products such as retro chairs, cushions and wall panels.

**Keywords:** Textile, Design, Indigenous, West Africa, Interior

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, textiles have been used to cover the human body and protect it from the elements; to send social cues to other people; to store, secure, and protect possessions; and to soften, insulate, and decorate living spaces and surfaces. The persistence of indigenous textile arts and functions and their elaboration for decorative effect can be seen all over. Textiles express personality, gender, age, family affiliation, social status, occupation, religion, and ethnicity. Knowledge of textile history is hence a key to understanding a multitude of human issues [1]. Reath [2] states that Painting or printing

on cloth is the simplest and probably the most indigenous method of decorating textiles. It has been used in all parts of the world since time immemorial. Textiles which characterise a particular culture frequently incorporate much of the culture's history and traditions in design, motifs, colours and usage. Such textiles provide a form of social documentation for the culture of which they are a part [3].

The production and use of textiles are major creative activities in African cultures [4]. In Africa, clothing is worn as adornment in daily life, and it is used in the disguise of dancers in masquerades. When used by persons in high political positions as stage-setting backdrops on state occasions,

textiles demand the attention of the assembled audience. Cloth has both symbolic and monetary value in African cultures. According to Dieterlen [5], the myths of the Yoruba equate nakedness with infancy or insanity and appreciate the dressed figure as a work of art. The cultural value placed on spun thread and loomed material, the legends of the Bamana allege that the cultivation of cotton and the development of weaving predate the sowing of grain. Cloth, according to the well-known structural formulation, represents culture, an improvement upon nature.

The inspiration for design is derived from culture and the spiritual world in almost everything Africans make spoons, carved calabashes (gourds), gold weights, pendants, designs in pottery and on mud walls, the details on carved house posts or on masks, as well as in the traditionally patterned fabrics of Africa. It provides a unique opportunity to learn about Africa, its costumes and its cultures. Africans often wear their art, which is rich in visual symbols. The designs carry meanings that are integral to the cultures: the coiled snake supports the world; should the snake become uneasy, his nervous undulations cause earthquakes. The symbolism, in this example, comes from the Fon people of Benin. The famous motifs of the Bambara people of the Ivory Coast include antelope heads, turtles, lizards, snakes, fish, a mask and geometric images. The use of these fabrics did more than merely cover the body; the motifs also represented a person's rank. Stories were told with each symbol and decorative line. Silk Kente cloth from Ghana is woven in a pattern of stripes and decorated squares, with each square telling a tale [6].

African cloth is often woven on a loom, which produces a strip from 1½ to 12 inches wide. These strips are then sewn together to form large textiles, blankets and clothing. The strips may be plain or beautifully intricate and colourful using undyed homespun cotton. Materials may include cotton (homespun or commercially made), silk (wild and homespun, or unravelled thread from oriental cloth) or synthetics. The use of appliqué, tie-dye, resist dye and painting are also used in the creation of these textiles. Western designers have "discovered" African textiles and are now copying some of these patterns and techniques. Even recent historical events can be the inspiration for new patterns, which, if they are popular, become standard and traditional. Indigenous textiles honour the creativity and artistry of these mostly unknown African craftsmen.

Textiles in Africa represent one of the many creative manifestations of cultural identity that have shaped communities occupying its diverse regions. Cultural, religious, and ritual meanings are conveyed in colour preferences, materials, embellishments, and design, as well as reflecting priorities associated with behaviour, age, grade, and ritual practices. Textiles and dress also function as important barometers of change, intrinsically allied to trade, inter-cultural contact, political and ideological change, and

shifting religious adherence, aspects central to understanding economic and cultural links between nations and continents.

To emphasize the historical context within which the textiles have developed and changed. In his Introduction to African Textiles and Decorative Arts, Sieber [7] states "The richness of invention and variety in the arts of personal adornment may reveal the breadth and range of the aesthetic life of traditional Africa with greater accuracy than the limited formulations that currently serve in the West as a basis for most studies of African art." The tremendous variety and innovation evident in the decorative surfaces of textiles from West Africa alone lend support to this proposition. At birth, the Bambara child receives a simple thread of cotton. "To be necked is to be speechless" say the Dogon people in Mali. Reference can be made to their mythology to illustrate the significance of textiles as the words in Africa. From birth to death, and to the next world, textile goes along with individual and community events. The fabric is words.

Any new publication on textiles and dress in Africa is keenly awaited by a growing body of researchers, collectors, and laypersons, increasingly aware of the significance and function of these items as salient markers of identity and cultural encoding. Interest in this field also reflects a more inclusive aesthetic and cultural appreciation that has evolved in the West over the last century [8]. Despite homogenising trends, even the most casual tourist visiting Abidjan, Accra, Dakar, Lagos or Lomé is stricken by the breathtaking variety of prints and colours used for the everyday clothes of its residents. Protection, prestige, power, beauty and pure decoration are some of the ways various cultures use textiles. This commonality permits all people to appreciate the textiles of West Africa. The social uses of textiles are an important aspect of understanding their role in West African culture. As noted by Nielsen [9], some examples of the fabrics are Adinkra Kente from Ghana, Adire from Nigeria, Indigo and Bogolanfini from Mali and Lapas from Liberia. Figure 1 to 4 are some examples of indigenous textiles from West Africa.



*Figure 1. Adire.*





Figure 2. Bogolanfini.



Figure 3. Fon Applique.



Figure 4. Adinkra.

Colours are cultural symbols which are vital to the people of West Africans as to most people in the world. Therefore, the beauty of colour cannot lie only in the visual value of it, but also in its significant traditional meanings [10, 11]. Additionally, gold and silver ornaments, rich costumes in woven or printed fabrics, ranging from russet-brown and indigo to yellow and the brightest scarlet. The meanings of these colours change as these colours move from one ethnic

group to another. All people, irrespective of where they may be, evolve peculiar symbolic ideas about colour, which are often revealed in their traditional practices of everyday life and in casual or religious rites [10]. Colour plays a prominent role as a visual symbolic form in establishing a subtext for ceremony or ritual occasions, establishing identities of individuals and participants, defining relationships, and by contextualising the appearance of ceremonial regalia and ritual objects. It enhances royal regalia either as a complimentary embellishment of objects to identify them to the specific occasion or as a symbol of rank and status. Colour gives religious ritual a sacred presence, reflecting the temper and meaning of the moment as well as the cycle of the ceremony. Visually prominent and ritually significant during funerals, colour serves to indicate the complex relationships of extended families during this period of mourning and transition [11].

Each cluster of colours embodies associations that reflect spiritual and cultural values and symbolic references that are shared by the larger West African population and contextually defined to circumstance and ritual appearance. Black is a symbolic colour for funerals in almost all parts of Africa. It is the official mourning cloth at funerals especially the one that involves a person who died at unripe age-not the death of an old member. For the Hausa culture of Nigeria, Sudan, Cameroon, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Chad, black denotes negative and socially undesirable qualities and things that harm. White is a symbol of purity and joy, which usually won at funerals especially the type that involves a dead old member. The differences in colours of cloth at funeral services convey different messages albeit they are similar situation, but not taken as the same culturally. One, the death of the young member, is always painful because it is believed that the one has not accomplished his task in the land of the living to give him easy passage to the land of the ancestors. It is in fact taken as a double tragedy on the deceased and the bereaved. The former is going to suffer in the land of the spirits, which may cause the spirit to appear to the relations in the form of a ghost in the land of the living. Nobody wants to see the ghost of the dead because of the unpleasant sight that comes with it. The dead of the aged member, on the other hand is a welcome death, and the living make merriment to commemorate the deceased and perform rituals to herald his easy passage to the land of the ancestors. Often times, where the dead lived a good life and loved by many, the members also wish one not only easy passage to the ancestral world, but show readiness to welcome him into this world again, this informs the African belief in reincarnation. Red is a spiritual colour and has a very powerful religious significance. It is the colour of the cloth used to adorn the table in the shrine. For example, in Igbo land, the Benins and Yorubas in Nigeria, the red colour is worn by chief priest of the local shrine whenever he is at the shrine performing his duty or at the King's palace or any public place where he is called up to perform rituals or sacrifices to the gods for one purpose or the other. This colour is significantly marked out for the *Eze muo* or *Dibia*, "the spiritual king or the native doctor" respectively [12]. In Côte d'Ivoire red is for

mourning. White symbolizes spirit colours whilst red repel spirits, as on the lips of an M'pongime mask from Gabon. Blue was used for scars on, for example, the Yoruba masks of a Gelede society in Nigeria. In Ghana, white is considered in terms of ivory glass, eggshell or white, white cloth and white clay. It is used in spiritual purification, healing, sanctification rites and festive occasions. In some situations white symbolizes contact with ancestral spirits, deities and other unknown spiritual entities such as ghosts. It is used in combination with black, green or yellow to express notion, spirituality, vitality and balance. It also signifies innocence, purity, joy, victory, virginity, fairness, ghostly, blankness, emptiness, transparency, fortune, and harmlessness.

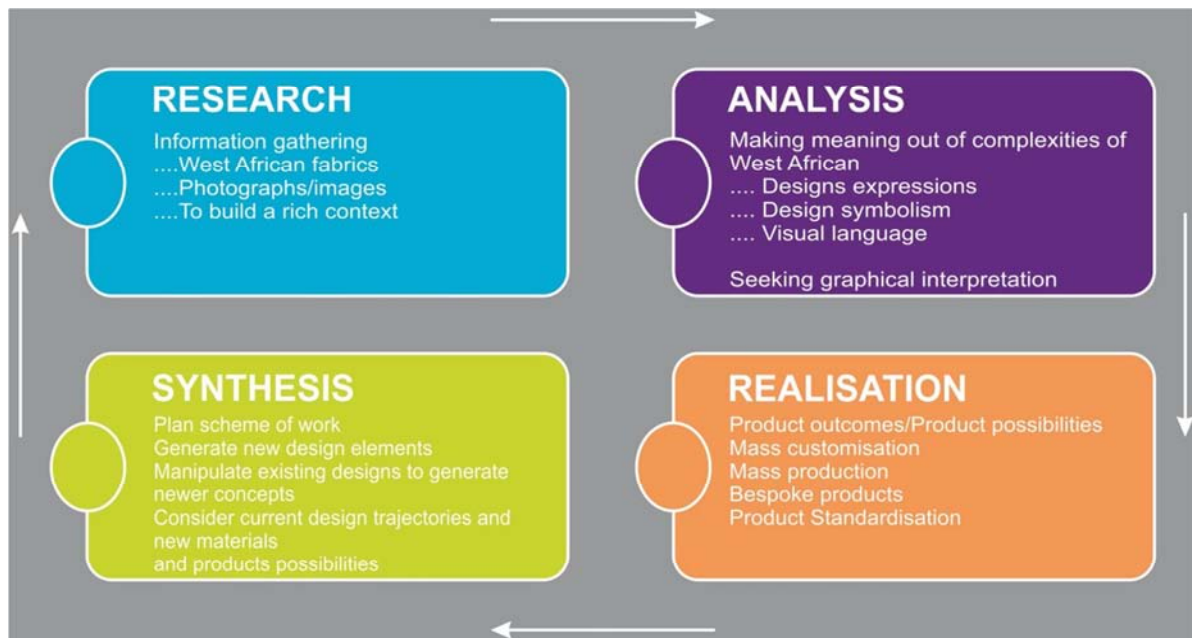
The experiments in this project do not consider the entire interior space per se. It considers various elements (add-ons) that make the interior space unique. As Sparke [13] intimated that, the modern interior must embrace that complexity, recognising and acknowledging the importance of both modernism and modernity, as well as that of the roles of "interiority" and "representation," both visual and literary. Wong, as cited by Trieste and Courier [14], inferred that rather than trying to duplicate the look; there are many ways to use elements of this stylish era in a modern decor.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The human-centred design process was adopted because it is a more creative approach to problem-solving and the backbone of design for everyday items. It's a process that starts with the people the design is meant for and ends with

new solutions that are tailor-made to suit their needs. According to [15], the human-centred design is all about building a deep empathy with the people you're designing for; generating tons of ideas; building a bunch of prototypes; sharing what you've made with the people you're designing for, and eventually putting your innovative new solution out in the world. This exactly what this study has sort of doing; there have been layers of experimentations and discussions with potential users about the viability of outlook and applicability of products.

The human-centred design consists of three phases namely inspiration, ideation and implementation. In the inspiration phase, you'll learn directly from the people you're designing for as you immerse yourself in their lives and come to understand their needs deeply. In the ideation phase, you'll make sense of what you learned, identify opportunities for design, and prototype possible solutions. And in the implementation phase solutions are brought to life, and eventually, to the user or market [16-18]. The success rate for human centred design approach is high because the very people who the design are meant for are at the heart of the design process. It could be deduced from the above that the human-centred design process is a practical, repeatable approach to arriving at innovative solutions. Instead of the three phases (inspiration, ideation and implementation) mentioned above, the researchers adopted a four-step cyclical approach for this study; Research, Analysis, Realisation and Synthesis as illustrated in Figure 5. These design processes served as a step-by-step guide to externalise creativity, taken cognisance of the people the designs are meant for.



**Figure 5.** Human Centred Design Process.

Research in this context is information gathering on Indigenous West African fabrics; It includes writing, photographs/images to build a rich context. Analysis encompasses decoding and making meaning out of complexities of indigenous West African Textile designs

expressions, Textile design symbolism, Visual language, and colour symbolism. Realisation encompasses product outcomes/product possibilities, mass customisation, mass production, bespoke products, product standardisation and seeking a graphical interpretation. Synthesis is a planned



scheme of work; generating new design elements and; manipulate existing designs to generate newer concepts

considering current design trajectories and new materials and product possibilities.

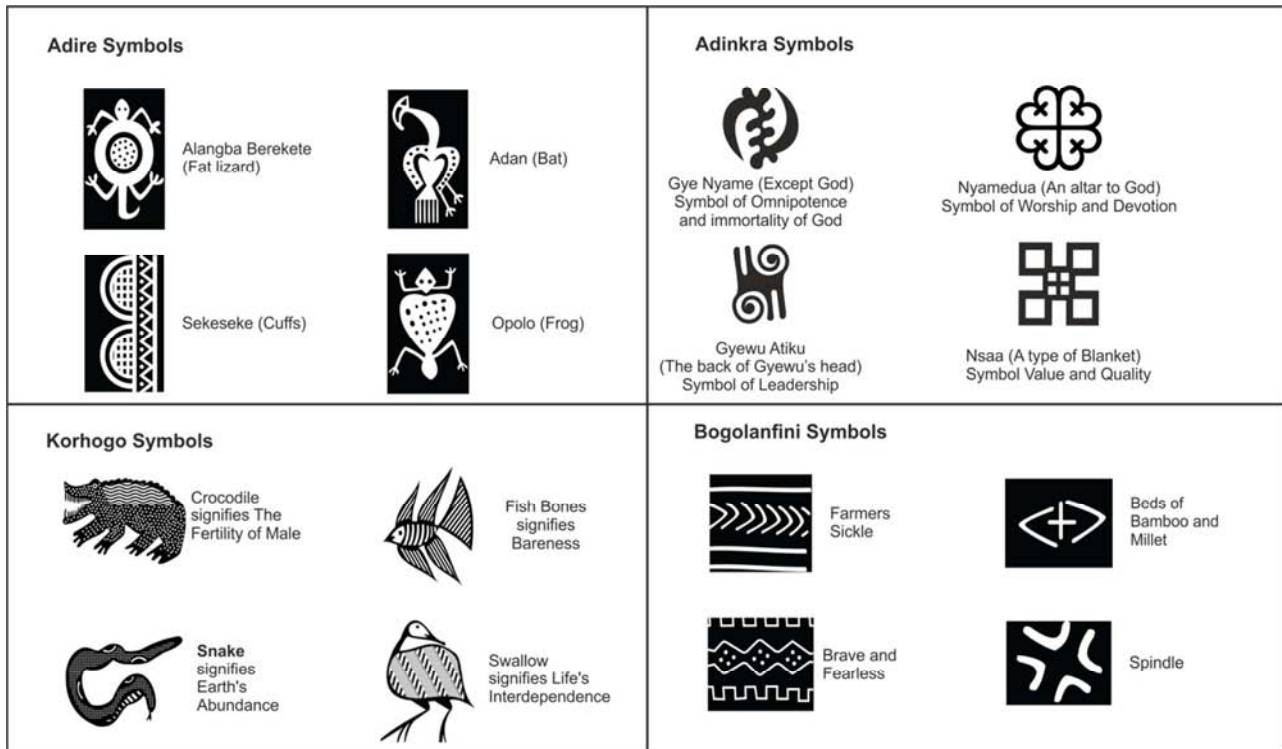


Figure 6. Selected symbols from indigenous West African textile fabrics.

### 3. Design Experiments and Products

The modern interior space is characterised by design pieces that resonate with modernity and technology. As Kleinman, et al. [19] opined, the twenty-first century, however, demands that the interior is framed in performative terms. Rapid urbanisation will accelerate the need for a theory of adaptive reuse and preservation, and emerging technologies are changing basic spatial taxonomies. The concept of adaptation is central to the historical and contemporary definition of interior design and the interior designer. And the decoration of the interior can, through the application of taste, play a role in status and identity formation and dissemination, and the importance of material exploration interplay with modernity. Some of these notions feed into the design process of the interior elements discussed in this work.

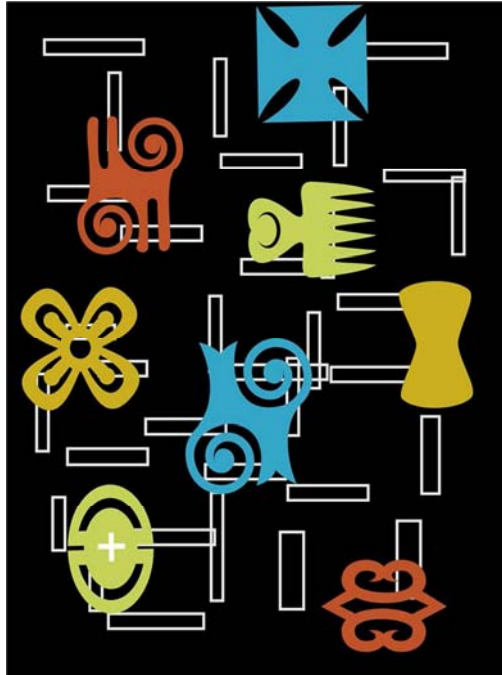
#### 3.1. Designs

The design experiments take a more comparative view of the indigenous West African fabrics as evidenced in figure 7 below. The central motifs in the composition are Adinkra and Adire and the background referenced the Malian Bogolanfini. The bold motifs in the composition reinforce a quintessential idea of West African design ideographs on one part and their incessant dominance and currency of their application several textile design trajectories. Figure 8 is a juxtaposition of two designs and a further example of the design outcome



Figure 7. Design (Graphic Composition).





*Figure 8. Selected Designs.*

### 3.2. Products

#### 3.2.1. Light Cube

Light Cubes are enclosed light dice with interchangeable cover. It is a versatile and unique feature in the respective interior space. The designs were printed and sewn beautifully to fit light cube. That means there can be five design possibilities or glowing images, one on each side of the cube.



*Figure 9. Light Cube.*

#### *Specification*

Printed on a stretched Lycra  
Five design panels, sewn as snug fitting cover  
Dimensions 40cm x 40cm  
Light bulb (various wattage)  
The plug could be UK or EU two pin

#### 3.2.2. Cushions

High quality double sided Adinkra inspired cushion. It is ultra-soft and luxurious.



*Figure 10. Cushions.*

#### *Specifications*

Deluxe double-sided cushion  
Ultra-soft cotton cover  
Polyester padded  
16 inches sq.  
Collage cushion  
Edge-to-edge printed

#### 3.2.3. Occasional Chair

Complement any room with this statement occasional chair, custom printed with these gorgeous Adinkra motifs. Such chairs are perfect for the design-conscious who want to infuse their home interior with contemporary notes. The chair had a unique decorative feature and upholstered with suede vision fabric for extra luxury.



*Figure 11. Retro Chair.*

#### *Specifications*

Handmade  
Customised  
Luxurious suede vision fabric  
Stylish Beech wood legs & frame

### 3.2.4. Multi Panel Wall Canvas

Interior panel with Adinkra and Bogolanfini reference and gorgeous composition in a creative and exciting way with a contemporary multi-panel wall sets. A stunning feature for the home or inspiring decoration for the office, these framed multi-canvas prints bring any room to life.



Figure 12. Multi-panel wall set.

#### Specifications

5 piece canvas  
Modern triptych design  
Different sizes  
Mounted onto mitred stretcher frames

## 4. Conclusion

The study has been an exploratory one to incorporate West African textile design themes in a 'the modern interior space' and considers design pieces and accessories that will add some elegance and touch to those spaces. This study further set out to identify the possible textile designs that would emanate from indigenous West African fabric design motifs. Interest in these fabrics also reflects a more inclusive aesthetic and cultural appreciation that has evolved in the West over the last century. The elements found on these fabrics have interesting shapes and arrangements that have not been done 'consciously'. The blend of a breadth of colours and the various sizes of these elements (motif) give a completely new outlook to these designs. Apparently, all these fabrics are designed for clothing, but with extensive exploration on the subject matter, it is apparent that inspirations drawn from existing indigenous fabrics from various countries across the region would be appropriate for use for upholstery, wall panels, hard interior surfaces and soft furnishings. A further exploration is therefore being carried out on such themes by capturing these to generate designs for surfaces in the interior certain

such as blinds, wall papers and partitions

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