REIMAGINING UKARA MOTIFS THROUGH SCREEN PRINTING FOR CONTEMPORARY FASHION USE

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Abstract
The rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, especially the intricate motifs found in Ukara cloth, serves as a valuable inspiration for modern fashion design. Traditionally, Ukara is used in ceremonial contexts and embodies cultural stories along with artistic refinement. This study examines how Ukara motifs can be transformed into contemporary fashion accessories through screen-printing techniques. By leveraging existing textile art expertise and applying modern printing methods, the research aims to blend cultural preservation with current fashion trends. This project aims to explore how Ukara motifs can be creatively reinterpreted and used in fashion accessories through screen printing. It involves examining the cultural and historical significance of Ukara motifs, understanding the technical methods for translating them onto different materials, and assessing the market potential for culturally inspired fashion products. The methodology includes a detailed analysis of Ukara designs, creating stencils from traditional patterns, and applying them to various substrates like cotton, silk, and synthetic fabrics to produce accessories such as bags, clothing, caps, hats, slippers, and jewellery. The study recommends boosting public understanding of cultural heritage via fashion exhibitions and workshops. It encourages local artisans to blend modern techniques into their creations and promotes collaborations between traditional artists and contemporary designers. In summary, using screen printing to adapt Ukara motifs preserves their cultural integrity while increasing their relevance globally. This innovative approach fosters a dynamic conversation between tradition and modernity, helping the beauty and symbolism of Ukara motifs inspire future generations in the realm of fashion accessories.

Keywords: Ukara motifs, screen printing, textile design, contemporary fashion, and cultural motif adaptation.

Introduction

The Ukara textile tradition is a vital component of the cultural heritage of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. These sacred indigo-dyed cloths, adorned with intricate geometric patterns and ideographic symbols, are traditionally used in rituals and ceremonies of the Ekpe society (Picton & Mack, 1989). Each motif carries profound cultural, historical, and spiritual meanings, making Ukara not only a textile art form but also a medium of cultural communication and identity. Ukara cloths are produced through a resist-dyeing process in which designs are first drawn onto the fabric using a dye-repellent substance before being immersed in indigo dye. The protected areas remain undyed, forming the characteristic patterns and symbols

(Picton & Mack, 1989). This method, passed down through generations of skilled artisans, reflects both artistic mastery and a deep understanding of traditional textile technology.

In recent decades, however, the Ukara tradition has faced significant challenges. The number of skilled Ukara designers and dyers has declined, and the increasing dominance of modern textiles and fashion has contributed to a reduced demand for traditional cloths. Many young people in Igbo communities show little interest in learning these labor-intensive techniques, opting for alternative economic opportunities. This decline represents not only a loss of artistic heritage but also a diminishing of cultural practices central to Igbo identity (Picton & Mack, 1989). Efforts to document, preserve, and promote Ukara motifs have emerged through cultural organizations, scholars, and designers, yet more comprehensive strategies are needed to ensure its survival. One promising approach is the adaptation of Ukara motifs into contemporary fashion and design. Integrating these motifs into modern products may spark renewed interest among younger generations and expand their visibility beyond traditional ceremonial contexts.

Screen printing offers a versatile and accessible technique for translating traditional Ukara motifs onto a range of contemporary textile surfaces (Ujiie, 2006). This method allows the reproduction of intricate designs with precision while maintaining the aesthetic qualities of the original motifs. Through screen printing, Ukara patterns can be creatively applied to fashion accessories such as bags, clothing, caps, hats, slippers, and jewellery, making them appealing to modern consumers while preserving their cultural significance. The incorporation of traditional motifs into contemporary design is a well-established strategy in global textile innovation. Examples include the adaptation of Yoruba Adire textiles in Nigeria and the use of Ghanaian Kente cloth in modern fashion, both of which have contributed to the revival and international recognition of these cultural traditions (Ujiie, 2006; Picton & Mack, 1989). These cases demonstrate the potential of design adaptation as a vehicle for cultural preservation and economic empowerment. Adapting Ukara motifs through screen printing may similarly open new economic opportunities for artisans and revive interest in the tradition. A growing market for culturally inspired fashion items could create jobs, stimulate local economies, and strengthen cultural pride within the Igbo community. However, the adaptation process must be undertaken with cultural sensitivity. It is essential to avoid misrepresentation, oversimplification, or appropriation of Ukara symbolism. Collaboration with traditional custodians and deep engagement with cultural contexts are critical to ensuring respectful and authentic reinterpretations.

The Ukara textile tradition represents a rich and meaningful aspect of Igbo cultural identity but is currently threatened by declining participation and the influence of modern fashion. The adaptation of Ukara motifs through screen printing offers a promising pathway for revitalisation, enabling broader appreciation, economic development, and cultural sustainability. When approached with respect and community collaboration, such adaptation can successfully bridge tradition and modern design, ensuring the continued relevance and visibility of Ukara motifs in contemporary fashion.

The Ukara textile tradition, a culturally significant art form among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, is facing a steady decline. The number of skilled Ukara designers has diminished over time, and the increasing dominance of modern textiles and fast-fashion trends has further reduced the visibility and relevance of Ukara cloth in contemporary society. This erosion poses a serious threat to the preservation of a textile tradition that embodies historical, cultural, and spiritual narratives.

A major contributor to this decline is the limited interest among younger generations, who rarely engage with the labor-intensive techniques required for traditional Ukara production. As fewer individuals acquire these skills, the continuity of the craft becomes increasingly vulnerable. The reduced patronage of Ukara textiles also signals a broader disconnect between traditional art forms and modern consumer preferences. Although some initiatives have been undertaken to document and preserve Ukara motifs, the potential for integrating these culturally rich designs into contemporary fashion has not been fully explored. Reimagining Ukara motifs through screen printing offers a viable pathway for revitalizing the tradition by creating modern, accessible fashion items that can appeal to a wider and younger audience.

However, without careful consideration, such adaptation risks oversimplifying or misrepresenting the cultural meanings embedded in the original motifs. The challenge, therefore, lies in developing an approach that both reimagines Ukara motifs for contemporary fashion use and preserves the integrity, symbolism, and cultural context from which they originate. This is the crux of this study.

Literature Review

The reinterpretation of traditional textile motifs for contemporary design has gained considerable scholarly attention, particularly within African art and fashion studies. Across various cultures, textile traditions function as both aesthetic and communicative systems, embedding histories, cosmologies, and social structures within their motifs (Picton & Mack, 1989). Ukara cloth, created through a resist-dye technique and dominated by ideographic symbols associated with the Ekpe society, stands as an example of a textile tradition where meaning and artistry are inseparable. Scholars have emphasised that the preservation of such indigenous textile knowledge depends not only on documentation but also on innovative cultural adaptation that maintains symbolic integrity while expanding functional relevance.

Within global and African contexts, the adaptation of traditional textile designs into contemporary fashion has proven effective in sustaining cultural heritage. Ujiie (2006) notes that modern print technologies—particularly screen printing—offer flexible pathways for translating complex motifs onto diverse materials without sacrificing visual clarity. Screen printing has been widely adopted in the reinterpretation of Yoruba Adire, Ghanaian Kente, and other African textiles, enabling designers to reproduce intricate patterns efficiently and introduce them to broader fashion markets. Studies further highlight that such reinventions strengthen cultural identity, stimulate artisan economies, and foster renewed interest in endangered textile practices (Ujiie, 2006; Adeboye, 2024).

Recent literature on cultural motif adaptation also emphasises the importance of safeguarding symbolic authenticity during the transformation process. Researchers

warn that motifs with ritual or esoteric significance require careful contextualisation to avoid cultural dilution or misappropriation (Picton & Mack, 1989). Collaborative engagement with traditional custodians, community elders, and practicing artisans has thus become a central recommendation in contemporary research on heritage textile innovation.

Within the Nigerian context, scholars have called for creative strategies that merge indigenous textile heritage with modern production techniques to appeal to younger audiences and global markets. Contemporary research on African textile design underscores that fashion applications—such as accessories, apparel, and wearable art—offer practical avenues for reviving interest in culturally significant motif systems (Adeyem, 2023; Ajibade et al., 2022). This aligns with growing consumer demand for culturally inspired products that blend tradition with modern aesthetics. Overall, the literature suggests that reimagining Ukara motifs through screen printing aligns with broader movements in cultural preservation, textile innovation, and sustainable fashion. The approach not only expands the aesthetic possibilities of Ukara symbolism but also serves as a practical intervention for revitalising a declining cultural practice. Despite the growing body of work on African textile adaptation, limited studies specifically address the translation of Ukara motifs into contemporary fashion products. This research therefore fills a critical gap by examining both the cultural dimensions of Ukara and the technical processes required to integrate its motifs into modern fashion accessories.

Methodology and Materials

This study adopts a studio-based research methodology, which is widely recognized in art and design scholarship as an approach through which knowledge is generated by engaging directly with creative processes (Sullivan & Marshall, 2010; Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). The method enabled the researcher to interpret, experiment with, and reimagine Ukara motifs through practical engagement with screen printing. The process involved selecting appropriate motifs, refining their visual structure, preparing printing tools and substrates, executing the print transfers, and finally constructing the printed materials into functional fashion items.

Materials and tools used

The following materials were used in the production process:

Wooden screen frame, Open mesh fabric, Photo-emulsion
Sensitizer, Seriplus ink, Squeegee, Fabrics: cotton, silk, polyester
Gun tacker and pins, Foam underlay, Measuring tape/ruler
Brown paper gum, Cellotape, Zip, Tracing paper and stencil film
Drying rack and exposure unit

Production Procedure

Stage 1: This stage involved the identification and selection of traditional Ukara motifs. These motifs uch as *Ufok Ekpe*, *Congress*, *Speech*, and *Leopard Skin* were sourced from documented materials and field observations. *Plate 1, 2, 3 and 4 shows the images before being arranged into pattern.* Each motif was carefully studied for its formal structure, symbolic meaning, and suitability for adaptation into contemporary

fashion items. Once selected, the motifs were redrawn manually and then digitized using graphic design software to enhance clarity and prepare them for stencil creation.*Figure 1,2,3 and 4* This refinement ensured that the original aesthetic qualities of the motifs were preserved while making them compatible with modern printing processes.

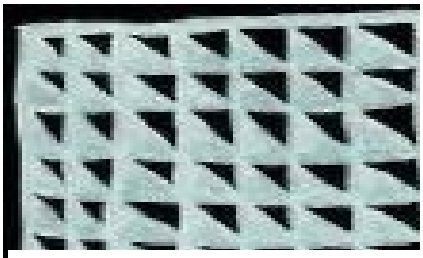

Plate 1: Leopard Skin Motif. Photo: Researcher (2025).

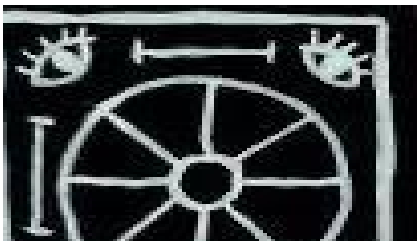

Plate 2: The Congress Motif. Photo: Researcher (2025).

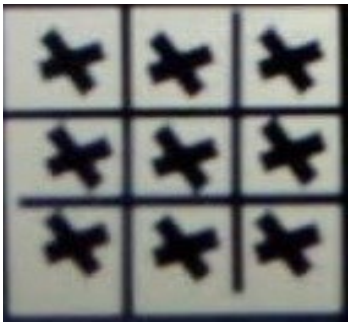

Plate 3: The Speech Motif. Photo: Researcher (2025).

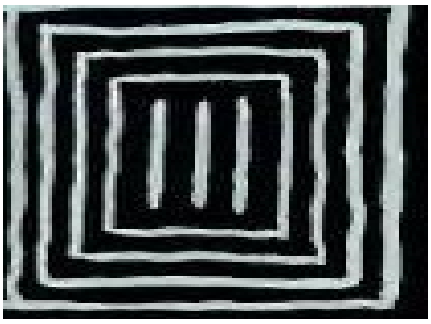

Plate 4: The Ufok Ekpe (Ekpe's house) Motif: Photo: Researcher (2025).

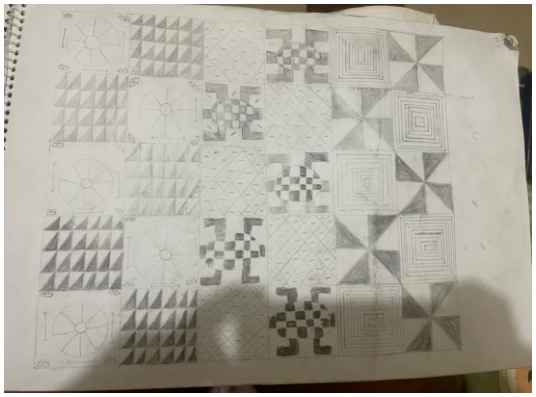

Figure 1: Developed pencil sketch of Ukara pattern. Photo: Researcher (2025).

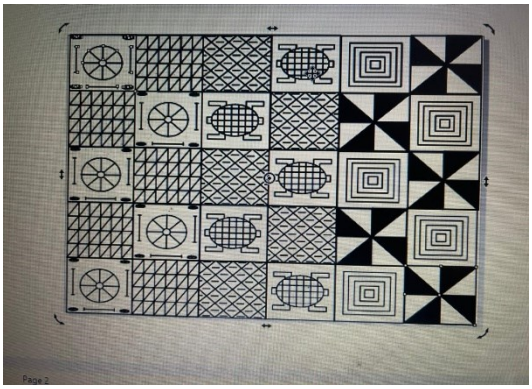

Figure 2: The computer aided design of the pattern. Photo: Researcher (2025).

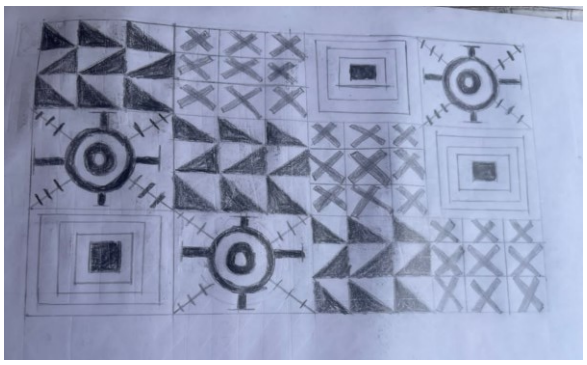

Figure 3: Developed pencil sketch of pattern created with a combination of Ufok Ekpe, Congress, Speech and Leopard skin by the researcher Photo: Researcher (2025).

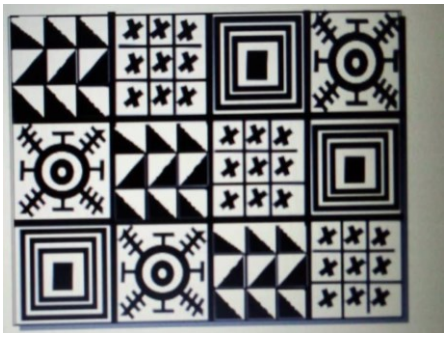

Figure 4: The computer aided design of the pattern created with a combination of Ufok Ekpe, Congress, Speech and Leopard skin by the researcher. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Stage 2: preparing the screen for printing. A wooden frame stretched with open-mesh fabric was cleaned and degreased to remove any residue that could interfere with the emulsion. The mesh was then coated with a sensitized photo-emulsion solution and kept in a light-secure environment to dry. *Plate 6 shows the coated screen before exposure*.. This formed the light-sensitive layer on which the digital motifs would be transferred. After drying, printed transparent sheets containing the refined Ukara motifs were placed on the exposure unit, and the emulsion-coated screen was positioned above them. *Plate 7 shows the printed transparent sheets before exposure.* Exposure to ultraviolet light hardened the emulsion in areas not covered by the motif, while the covered areas remained soft. The screen was subsequently washed with water to remove the unhardened emulsion, revealing the motif as an open stencil through which ink could pass during printing. *Plate 9.*

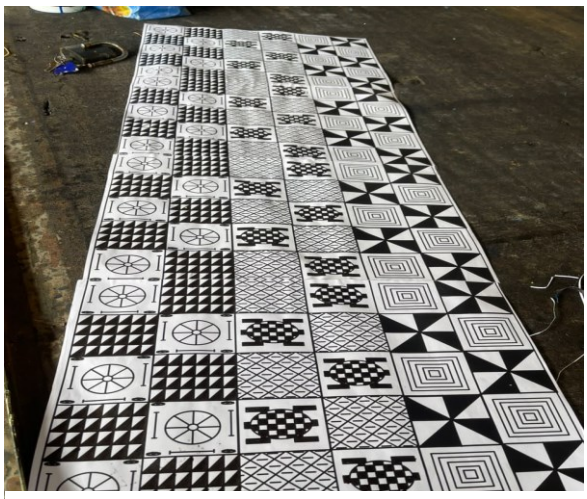

Plate 5: Printed Paper design for screen exposure. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 6: Coating of the screen to expose the printed paper design. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 7: Placing the paper design on the dried coated screen with blue emulsion ink. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 8: Exposing the printed paper design. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Stage 3: The fabric substrates used in the study cotton, silk, and synthetic materials were prepared by pre-washing them to remove chemical finishes that might interfere with ink absorption. After drying, each fabric piece was laid on a padded surface created with foam to improve ink penetration and ensure even printing. Measuring tools, cellotape, and brown gum were used to secure the fabrics in place to prevent distortion during printing.

Stage 4: Screen printing was executed by positioning the prepared screen over the fabric and introducing Seriplus ink at the top of the screen. *Plate 10*. A squeegee was drawn across the screen at a consistent angle and pressure, ensuring that the ink passed through the motif areas of the mesh and onto the fabric below. Where multi-colour prints were required, each colour layer was applied sequentially, allowing adequate drying time between layers to prevent smudging. The printed fabrics were then heat-set to enhance durability and wash resistance.

Plate 9: Washing of screen after exposure. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 10: Screen printing on the cotton fabric. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 11: Finished printed fabric. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 12: Finished printed fabric. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Stage 5: Once printing was completed, the fabrics were converted into finished fashion items.. Sewing and construction techniques were employed to assemble the pieces, and accessories such as zips and linings were added where necessary. *Plate 13.* The final products were reviewed for motif clarity, print quality, fabric response, and overall aesthetic coherence with contemporary fashion standards. *Plate 14 and 15*

Plate 13: The researcher sewing the male cloth with the printed fabric. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 14: Finished sewed printed fabric. Photo: Researcher (2025).

Plate 15: Finished sewed printed fabric.
Photo: Researcher (2025).

Results and Findings

The practical outcomes of this research demonstrate that Ukara motifs can be effectively reimagined and applied to contemporary fashion items using screen-printing techniques. The results show that the traditional motifs retained their visual integrity and cultural essence even after undergoing stylistic refinement and adaptation. The screen-printing process produced crisp, well-defined impressions of the motifs, confirming that the technique is suitable for conveying the intricate details of Ukara symbolism.

One of the key findings is the versatility of Ukara motifs when used on various fashion items. The study successfully created modern accessories like corporate shirts, jackets, tote bags, caps, hats, slippers, and jewelry pieces. These products showcase how Ukara iconography can adapt to different materials and design styles. The motifs look visually appealing, highlighting both cultural richness and modern fashion appeal.

Another significant point from this study is the potential of motif adaptation to enhance cultural preservation. By presenting Ukara designs in forms that appeal to modern tastes, the project creates a way to engage younger audiences who might not otherwise encounter or value traditional textile arts. In informal evaluations, many viewers praised the bold cultural presence of the designs, noting that the prints successfully combine heritage with modern aesthetics. This indicates a strong commercial potential for Ukara-inspired fashion items, especially among consumers who favor Afrocentric identity and creative expression.

Additionally, the findings show that incorporating Ukara motifs into corporate clothing carries symbolic importance. Combining traditional motifs with professional attire creates a new visual language for expressing cultural identity in formal settings. This has consequences for branding, cultural diplomacy, and national representation, especially in corporate and creative sectors looking for distinctive cultural expressions. Overall, the results affirm that screen printing is an effective medium for reimagining traditional Ukara motifs. It allows a balance between cultural fidelity and contemporary innovation, creating designs that are aesthetically appealing, culturally meaningful, and commercially viable.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Ukara motifs have enormous potential for contemporary fashion applications when adapted through screen printing. Through studio-based experimentation, the research demonstrates that traditional symbols can be respectfully reinterpreted without compromising their cultural significance. The screen-printing technique provided a flexible, affordable, and technically reliable method for translating intricate Ukara designs onto diverse fabric surfaces. The successful production of modern fashion accessories incorporating Ukara motifs underscores the viability of this approach as a strategy for cultural preservation. By creating visually compelling and market-friendly items, the study contributes to revitalizing interest in traditional Igbo textile heritage, especially among younger generations who are more engaged with contemporary fashion trends than with indigenous craft traditions. Furthermore, the project highlights the economic possibilities inherent in the fusion of tradition and modernity, offering opportunities for local artisans, designers, and textile producers to collaborate in ways that promote sustainable cultural and creative industries. More importantly, the ethical engagement with cultural sources ensures that the reinterpretation process avoids cultural misrepresentation. When executed with sensitivity, collaboration, and respect, such creative adaptations can support cultural continuity, reinforce community identity, and expand the presence of indigenous aesthetics within global fashion spaces. The study concludes that reimagining Ukara motifs through screen printing is not only a feasible artistic intervention but also a meaningful contribution to cultural sustainability and contemporary fashion innovation.

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