

HANDCRAFTED TEXTILE DESIGNS: THE PAST, PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Azuka Abigail Nzoiwu-Ogbogu (PhD)

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria

Email; aa.nzoiwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

The paper looked at handcrafted textile design in the light of the past, present and future. Handcrafted textile design has to do with textile production done mainly with hands, facilitated by distinctive skills already acquired by the craftsman. Handcrafted textile designs include embroidery, applique, tie and dye, batik, tapestry, printing, weaving, mat-making, among others. Handcrafted textiles have existed with people globally before modern civilisation. Presently, the patronage as well as the cultural value that greeted handcrafted textiles is beginning to reduce as a consequence of foreign culture in Nigeria. Nevertheless, if the Federal government can make concerted efforts towards enforcing the ban on the importation of textile materials, more handcrafted textile enterprises would be established for the production of quality textiles at affordable prices.

Key Words: Handcrafted, Textiles, Design, Past, Present and Future.

Introduction

“Textile” was coined from a Latin word ‘*textillis*’ that connotes ‘woven fabric’. Thus, “textile” comprises materials utilised for the making of fabrics. In other words, textile designs thrive on producing artistic objects through the use of fabrics. Textile design as an applied art focuses on the design and the making clothes to provide cover for the body (Sampson, 2016).

Handcrafted textile design has to do with textile production done majorly with hands, facilitated by distinctive skills already acquired by the crafts man. It refers to fabric decorations as well as embellishments manually created with artistic dexterity (Adiji & Bankole, 2015). Put differently, handcrafted textile design is done without the aid of industrial machines or mechanisms. Adiji and Bankole added that such textile design activities include embroidery, tie-dyeing, printing, batiking, basketry, appliqué and by extension, sewing.

Traditionally, handcrafted textile designs are so unique in hand embroidery that they are widely used Nigeria which has endeared the nation to the fashion world. Thus, handcrafted textile designs, if given the requisite attention, just as it was prior to the advent of modern industrialization will go a long way in answering the unemployment question of the Nigerian youths, increase their entrepreneurial skills, encourage locally produced textiles for greater international acceptance while helping in increasing the power of the dwindling naira in the international market.

Research Problem

The problem arises from the steady decline of the handcrafted textile industry in Nigeria, an indigenous sector that once defined the nation's cultural and economic landscape. Despite a historical legacy of sophisticated craftsmanship dating back to the 9th century AD, the traditional art forms of weaving, embroidery, and dyeing are currently facing a crisis of relevance. This deterioration is primarily driven by the "nosedive" in cultural value that has accompanied the emergence of foreign cultures and the prioritization of Western education over traditional vocational apprenticeships. Consequently, the distinctive skills required to sustain these arts are not being transferred to the younger generation, leading to a significant gap in cultural continuity.

Ultimately, the study identifies a disconnect between the inherent creative potential of the Nigerian artist and the lack of a protective policy framework. Without concerted government effort to enforce import bans and incentivize local handcrafted enterprises, there is a looming threat that these unique cultural technologies will disappear. The problem, therefore, is not a lack of artistic capability, but a systemic failure to protect, modernize, and promote handcrafted textiles as a viable solution to contemporary socio-economic challenges.

What are textiles?

Textiles in a lay man's view refers to a piece of cloth which is to be worn alone. Ayesu *et al.* (2023) defined textile as clothing that is worn by a specific group of people which has strong cultural and historical roots. The word 'textiles' have become a general term for fibers, yarns and other materials that can be made into fabrics and for fabrics produced by interlacing or any other construction method. Thus, threads, cords, ropes, braids, lace, embroidery, nets and fabrics made by weaving, knitting, bonding, felting and tufting are textiles. Adeoti (2024) opined that textiles entail an art form that employs fibers and embroidery as its medium for the production of decorative and artistic objects. Furthermore, textiles include those products obtained by paper-making principles that have many of the properties association with convention fabrics.

Textiles come in different forms; in prints, dyed, and woven form, and it is being practiced from time immemorial, especially among the people of Nigeria. According to Adepegba (1995), "the earliest date of existence of woven fabrics from archaeological findings of Igbo Ukwu was in 9th century AD. This attests to the fact, that people of Nigeria, have been weaving before the Europeans came.

Textiles must fulfill the requirements of everyday use and must be functional. Textiles are primarily weaving apparel, household fabrics, furnishings, accessories and industrial materials.

According to Elizabeth Gale (1978),

Every textile differs in the quantities it must possess.

These qualities include flexibility, strength, good draping,

Retention of shape and size, hard wearing properties, softness

porousness, absorbency, dye fastness to washing, easy laundering

and easy cleaning.

Hand Crafted Textiles

Handcraft refers to the process of using hands; manually applying the skill in making things. Craft, on the other hand, refers to 'to create with foresight and skill of execution'. By this assertion, handcrafted textiles are fabrics that are made tangible with hands in a unique place, situation, and in line with future needs (Yunkaporta, 2020). Handcrafted textiles refer to those textiles that can be produced by individual manually without recourse to industrial machines through their acquired skills derived either by inheritance from family practice or through apprenticeship.

It must however be noted that handcrafted textiles are produced in little quantity compared to those produced industrially. Handcrafts are practiced in virtually all aspects of life; however the present study is interested in handcrafts that have to do with textiles. Crafts that are associated with textiles are embroidery, applique, tie and dye, batik, tapestry, printing, weaving, mat-making among others.

Embroidery

Embroidery is of the creative textile designs that in patterns are added to fabrics to improve their aesthetic appeal. It is a technique employed in embellishing an already woven cloth. It is the addition of ornament/using a needle and yarns of various colours in bringing out the desired patterns. Similarly, Okeke (2023) defined it as the art of utilizing a needle to apply motifs as well as patterns to fabric with colourful yarns or threads. Okeke added that pearls, feathers, beads, rhinestones, and other sundry materials can further be integrated into embroidery. It is one of the oldest techniques of fabric decoration that involves stitching techniques such as buttonhole or blanket stitch, chain, satin, and Coching. History is replete with the fact that the art of embroidery originated from Islamic religion among the people of West Africa. According to Jon Mack (1989)

"Embroidery is an art generally associated with Islamic people of West Africa in the sense that Embroidery has developed there within the context Islamic culture"

The introduction of embroidery was in Northern Nigeria through their earlier contacts with traders of Arab extraction. Negri, (1976) noted that the practice of embroidery was already being done in Hausa land in 15th century in and around Kano city. The typical Emir regalia were richly adorned with embroideries. However, this did not stand the taste of time as Fulani who aligned with them within the said period discouraged such flamboyant display, culminating in a decline in embroidery art by the 19th century. With the global trend of modernization, embroidery found its way back into Northern Nigeria as a decorative art and has remained to this day. In recent times, embroidery patterns are widely used among the Hausa so much so that beyond their dresses, their caps are exhaustively embroidered with designs that are mostly linear as well as geometrical in form. Previously, cotton or natural silk thread which was either left in its original tone or dyed with indigo was used for embroidery. Jimoh *et al.* (2020) recognized the necessity of conserving traditional embroidery motifs while focusing on providing a source of inspiration for machine applications which imitated hand-crafted designs. Much as there are merits to this option, it is instructive to note that mechanical means of embroidery can never replace the uniqueness and the creative touch of hand-embroidered (manual) work.

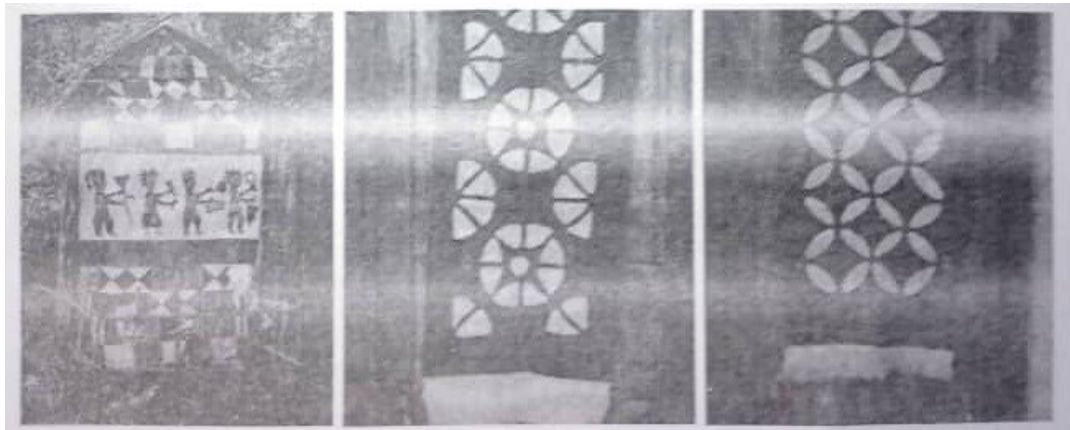
The embroidery techniques are categorized into two: mechanical and manual or hand embroidery. The distinction is quite conspicuous in the final product of the embroiderer. The mechanically embroidered fabrics are lighter in handling and weight than the hand embroidered, depending on the type of materials sewn and the space occupied by the embroidery design. Dress for men has enjoyed the attention of the traditional embroiders more than women's. Discussing the technology of production of embroidery, Adepegba (1995) observed that, "traditional embroidery found expression in men's garments only"



Embroidered cotton tunic, Ethiopia, though of Swahili coastal style, length 42 in (107cm). courtesy: John Picton and John Mack (1989).



Embroidered cotton gown, Liberia Length 35 in (89cm).



Cotton embroidered gown. Hausa but woven of Nupe cloth, Nigeria. This gown is embroidered with an expanded form of "eight knives" pattern length 59m (150cm) 1934 Beving collection. Courtesy John Picton and John Mack (1989)

A typical Hausa embroidered cap

Applique

Applique is the word used to describe the process of adding further materials to an already woven textile base. The term applique is applied to the laying of additional pieces of textile, at times supplementary materials such as beads and shells, metals

and jewellery, animal fir and bundles of medicines are added. This technique is certainly indigenous in Africa. Where applique cloth is found in Africa, it is often associated with prestige and social positions.



A shrine set up in memory of a deceased chief among the Anang-Ibibio South eastern Nigeria, displaying an applique and patch work cloth made entirely of imported cotton materials.
Courtesy John Picton and John Mack (1989)

An Applique made with Aso-oke Omotoso E.A (2008)

Tie and Dye

Tie and dye is one of the ways to bring about explosion of colours in a fabric. Ning and Song (2018) noted that tie and dye technology is the most traditional printing that can be effectively inherited in textile printing due to its long existence. In the exercise, the sections of the fabric are either tied off folded, or sometimes, clamped with blocks to keep areas from the dye, and the undyed pattern against a dyed background. Tie and dye involves folding, tying and by extension, stitching with a view to producing different designs on the finished fabric (Olayinka, 2023). There are many tie and dye techniques viz: concentric square, circle method, clamp dying, pleating method, marbling, knotting and stitching.



A typical Yoruba Woman dying a piece of cloth
courtesy John Picton & John Mack (1989)



A typical Yoruba tie and dye (Adire)
Market in Abeokuta
courtesy John Picton & John Mack (1989)

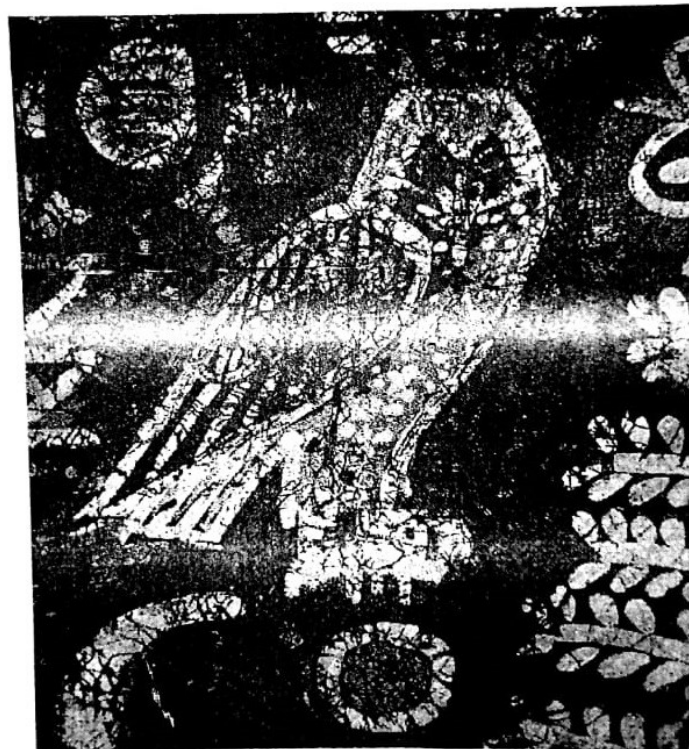
Few materials needed in carrying out this dyeing process are 100% cotton fabric strings, ropes, or raffia, stove, dyes, plastic bowls, rubber gloves, sticks to stir dye bath, chemicals i.e hydrosuphite and caustic soda, salt and spoon. Towns noted for tie and dye making in Yoruba land are Osogbo and Abeokuta while northern part, Kano is well-noted.

Batik

The term 'batik' was coined from the Indonesia (Javanese) words ambatik and tritik (Syed Shaharuddin et al., 2021). The term has a link with dot or wax. Siregar *et al.* (2020) defined batik as a natural procedure in which hot wax is poured in the shape of

a design onto a piece of fabric. In other words, the fabric is dyed as soon as the wax is hardened. Batik entails the use of hot wax such as bee wax on candle wax to cover the fabric for the purpose of effecting designs on the fabric. In carrying out this, the wax must not be too hot, or else the filaments of the fibres will be burnt. The application of the hot wax is done either by cutting foam into shape or with painting brush or by using tjanting- a pencil-like metal funnel special tool used by professional batik designers to produce linear effects.

Unlike in tie and dye where hot water is used in dyeing, the fabric cold water is used for dyeing batik, the reason being that if hot water is used, there is likelihood of the designs being destroyed or altered.



*Batick screen print in twelve colours on 100% Cotton
Courtesy Elizabeth Gale (1978)*

Tapestry

Tapestry is a piece of heavy fabric on which a design or representation has been woven with coloured threads, usually by hand, for decorative purposes or as a wall-hanger. If carefully looked at, a tapestry is a woven fabric that looks embroidered. The weaves on all tapestry cloths are arranged in such a manner that the most expensive and better quality yarns are brought to the surface. Tapestry is used for upholstery and in finer quality for curtains. The yarns commonly used are cotton and worsted yarns or cotton alone.

Printing

This is the process through which colour designs are produced on fabrics with dyes in paste form by positioning dyes on fabrics from especially designed machines. Printed fabrics usually have clear-cut edges in the design portion on the right side and the colour seldom penetrated completely to the wrong side of the fabric. Printed designs are done by various processes viz: block printing, screen printing and discharge printing. Those printings that cannot be done manually are: electromatic printing, polychromatic printing, micro-jet injection printing, heat transfer printing, direct roller printing, duplex printing, warp printing and differential printing.

Handcrafted Textiles in the Past

Handcrafted textiles have existed with people globally prior to modern civilization. Evidence abounded that handcrafted textiles were produced in Sahara prior to contacts with the European (Newman, 1974). Over the past decades, the Yorubas have been known to be in the vanguard of handcraft textiles especially in weaving for popular home-made indigenous fabrics.

Lamb and Holmes (1980) stated that:

weaving existed as a n occupation in
several parts of Nigeria, in Yoruba land
Iseyin and Ilorin are well-noted for it,
The eastern part is well noted for
Akwete weaving while Luru loom
Weavers are predominantly in the
Northern part (Kano and Nupe) of the Country.

The embellishment further gives a sense of creativity and cultural appreciation. Filani (1999) affirmed that, the aesthetic look of handcrafted textile was a fallout of the careful and abundant use of colours in pattern formation.

Handcrafted Textiles in the Present

In recent times as observed by the researcher, handcrafted textiles appear not to be getting the desired attention despite the social relevance of textiles in understanding the Nigerian culture. Thus, the lure for fast-money making ventures appear to have taken the attention of a record number of youths away from handcrafted designs.

It is instructive to note that the patronage as well as the cultural value that greeted handcrafted textiles began to take a nosedive with the emergence of foreign culture in Nigeria. Specifically, Ogunduyile (2001) confirmed that, the advent of Western education whittled down the number of potential apprentices in textile production, given the inalienable fact that many parents would rather send their children to school than have them engage in handcrafted textile production. The illegal influx of foreign clothing despite government legislation against their importation as well as the recent technological development seemed to be major setbacks to the production of handcrafted textile designs.

Handcrafted Textiles in the Future

It is a firm belief that inspite of the seeming dwindling fortunes of handcrafted textile production, if the Federal government can make concerted efforts towards enforcing the ban on importation of textile materials, the frontiers of smuggling of ready-made fabrics will be rolled back and more handcrafted textile enterprises would be established for the production of quality textile at affordable prices. Thus, it goes without saying that prospects abound in the cottage textile industry for novel investments. The afore-mentioned, will, in no small measure, re-awaken the consciousness of the teeming youth population to be more diligent rather than indolent. That way, the trend of youth unemployment and the attendant social vices will be matters of the sordid past.

The Way Forward

The way forward for the handcrafted textile industry in Nigeria requires a synergistic approach that merges strict policy enforcement with the modernization of traditional techniques to meet contemporary global standards. , the federal government must go beyond rhetoric and actively enforce the ban on imported textiles to protect local cottage industries from being overwhelmed by cheap, mass-produced alternatives. This protectionist stance is supported by Adetoro and Ologundudu (2022), who emphasize that the revitalization of the textile sector is contingent upon creating a favorable market environment that shields local artisans from the illegal influx of foreign fabrics. By establishing a secure domestic market, handcrafted enterprises can transition from subsistence-level production to viable commercial ventures that contribute significantly to the national Gross Domestic Product.

Furthermore, the industry must undergo a strategic rebranding that integrates traditional craftsmanship with modern entrepreneurial education and technological innovation. To bridge the gap created by Western education, there is a need for a curriculum overhaul in Nigerian universities that promotes creative technology. This is echoed by Akpan and Udo (2023), who suggest that blending indigenous artistic dexterity with digital marketing and improved chemical processing can make local textiles more attractive to the youth and the international fashion community. This approach addresses the "fast-money" lure by presenting handcrafted textiles as a high-value, luxury export commodity.

Finally, as noted by Oripeloye and Hunsu (2021) regarding the reinvention of traditions, the survival of African cultural heritages depends on a renewed national

consciousness where indigenous forms are repurposed for modern usage. In the context of textiles, this means prioritizing local fabrics for official and ceremonial functions, thereby creating a steady demand that sustains the artisans' livelihoods and strengthens the local currency.

Conclusion

This paper explored the trajectory of handcrafted textile design in Nigeria, analyzing its transition from a prestigious historical craft to a modern industry in crisis. Handcrafted textiles are defined as fabrics produced manually through inherited skills, encompassing techniques such as embroidery, appliqué, tie-dye, batik, and weaving. The author highlights that these traditions are deeply rooted in Nigerian history, with archaeological evidence from Igbo Ukwu dating back to the 9th century AD, proving that sophisticated indigenous technology existed long before European contact.

However, the study identifies a significant research problem: the steady decline of this sector due to globalization and a "nosedive" in cultural value. The shift toward Western education and "fast-money" ventures has disrupted traditional apprenticeship systems, leaving a generational skill gap. Economically, the industry is stifled by the illegal influx of mass-produced foreign fabrics, which local cottage industries cannot compete with in price or scale. This decline is viewed not as a lack of artistic talent, but as a systemic failure to protect and modernize indigenous cultural technologies.

To revitalize the sector, the author proffers a synergistic way forward. The Federal Government must move beyond rhetoric to strictly enforce import bans, creating a protected market for local artisans. Furthermore, Nigerian universities should integrate "creative technology" into their curricula, blending traditional dexterity with modern entrepreneurial tools and chemical processing. Such rebranding can reposition handcrafted textiles as luxury export commodities. Ultimately, the survival of this heritage depends on a renewed national consciousness where indigenous fabrics are prioritized for official use. By treating textile design as a prestigious and patriotic career path, Nigeria can address youth unemployment and preserve its unique cultural identity while fostering economic self-reliance. The paper concludes that while modern industrialization has marginalized manual craftsmanship, the uniqueness and creative touch of handcrafted work remain irreplaceable. The survival of these arts depends on a synergy between government protectionism and a renewed interest among the youth to view textile design as a viable, prestigious, and patriotic career path.

References

- Adeoti (2024). Untying the thread of innovation: Challenges and prospects for Nigeria's textile arts. *EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)*, 10(1), 220-225.
- Adepegba, C.O. (1995). *Nigerian arts: Its traditions and modern tendencies*. Jodad Publishers, Ibadan.
- Ayesu, S. M., Acquaye, R., Howard, E. K. & Asinyo, B. K. (2023). Promotion and preservation of indigenous textiles and culture in Ghana. *East African Journal of*

- Education and Social Sciences*, 4(1)15-29. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2022v03i06.0252>.
- Elizabeth Gale (1978). *From fibers to fabrics*. Mills and Boon Limited, London.
- Filani, O. (1999). Trends and experiments on improvisation of art materials in Nigeria: Recycle from waste to wealth. *Journal of Industrial Design and Technology (JINDEST)*, 1(1), 24-27.
- Jimoh, K. O., Odejebi, O.A., Folaranmi, S.A. & Aina, S. (2020). Handmade embroidery pattern recognition: A new validated database Malaysian. *Journal of Computing*, 5(1), 390-402, 2020 ISSN: 2600-8238 online, September 13th, 2022.
- Lamb, V. & Holmes, J. (1980). *Nigeria weaving*. Shell Petroleum Development Company Publication, Lagos.
- Negri, E. (1976). "Nigerian Body Adornment". *Nigeria Magazine*: Lagos, Academy Press Ltd.
- Newman, T.R. (1974). *Contemporary African arts and crafts*. Crown Publishers, New York.
- Ning Y.X. & Song Q. (2018). Application of batik technology in garment design. *Textile Dyeing and Finishing Journal*, 40(09), 69-70-72.
- Ogunduyile, S.R. (2001). Cottage dyeing industry and environmental hazards created by the use of commercial dyes and chemicals. *Journal of Arts and Ideas. O.A.U., Ile-Ife.*, 6(7), 106-114.
- Okeke, N.K. (2023). Repositioning traditional hand embroidery for contemporary fashion in Nigeria. *Awka Journal of Fine and Applied Arts*, 9(1), 45-58.
- Olayinka, J.S. (2023). Analysis of consumers' preferential behaviour on local textiles (tie-dye and batik) in Ogun State, Nigeria. *Journal of Home Economics, Hospitality and Allied Research*, 2(2), 198-205.
- Picton, J. & Mack, J. (1989). *African textiles*. Haper and Row Publishers: New York.
- Sampson, A.J. (2016). The art of business of art: Trends and challenges in entrepreneurial development. "Grass root *Journal of Arts and Technical, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. IMK Prints Ltd.* 1(1).
- Siregar, Z.M.E., Ahman, E., and Senen, S.H. (2020). Knowledge, management, innovation and firm performance: A case of Batik industry in Indonesia. *Caliatea*, 21 (179), 27-32.
- Syed Shaharuddin, S.I., Shamsuddin, M.S., Draham, M.H., Hassan, Z., Mohd Asri, N.A., Nordin, A.A. & Shaffiar, N.M. (2021). A review on the Malaysia and Indonesia Batik production, challenges and innovation in the 21st century. *SAGE Open*, 11(3), 2158244021040128.
- Yunkaporta, T. (2020). *Sand talk: How indigenous thinking can save the world* (First edition). *HarperOne*.
- Adetoro, A. O., & Ologundudu, A. (2022). Impact of Import Substitution Policies on the Nigerian Textile Industry. *Journal of African Economic Studies*, 14(2), 45-60.
- Akpan, E. I., & Udo, J. S. (2023). Creative Technologies and the Future of Handcrafted Textiles in Nigeria. *International Journal of Art and Technology*, 5(1), 12-28.

Oripeloye, H. A., & Hunsu, F. O. (2021). Personal Citation, Rhetorical Practice and the Reinvention of Oriki Tradition. *Advances in Literary Study*, 9(4), 159-172.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2021.94018>