

Cultural transmission and textile technology in SouthEastern Nigeria: A batik textile exploration

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Abstract: Igbo culture possesses messages encapsulated in its cultural symbols and motifs. Effectively engaging younger generations through evidence-based research is crucial for harnessing the full potential of these messages in national development. Through textile design technology, particularly in the realm of batik, one explores the rich cultural symbols and motifs to characterise Igbo apparel. This approach not only fosters cultural transmission but also ensures that these traditions are preserved and passed down, creating a meaningful connection between the past and present. Exploration of the possibility of preserving and transmitting the cultural significance of Ugwumagala and Ego kiri kiri using batik textiles constitutes the purpose of this study. Practice-led studio research approach that allows researchers to incorporate their creative practice was used. Results showed that Ugwumagala, which means chameleon, symbolises lots of virtues expected of leaders, such as caution, ease of adaptation to any situation among the Igbo people, who are almost the widely travelled ethnic groups in Nigeria and found in different parts of the world. This animal, being unpredictable and changeable, symbolises flexibility, as one could hide one's true colours to blend with the prevailing environment for safety, to socialise with every person in society. Also, Ego Kiri Kiri motifs are derived from indigenous traditional Igbo currency – Okpogho (Manila) and cowries collectively called Ego Kiri Kiri used in Igboland in the olden days. It symbolised wealth, and its excavation portends good fortune/omen in the future. Conclusively, this study has shown the potential of textile technology, while further research is recommended.

Keywords: Cultural, Ego kiri-kiri, Exploration, Textile Technology, Transmission, Ugwumagala

1. Introduction

The beauty and significance of every culture is anchored in their transmissibility to future generations. In the absence of such transmission, the probability of their being lost, diluted, or eroded through globalization becomes very high. Under this scenario, such a group becomes vulnerable to the crisis of cultural identity. Therefore, concerted efforts should be made to give traction to the clarion call by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) not only to preserve cultural and traditional heritages but also to ensure their transmission from one generation to another. There are two major aspects of culture, namely the material or tangible and the non-material or intangible aspects.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tangible and Intangible Culture

Culture has two aspects, namely the material culture or artifacts which refers to those things made or used by man to suit his ways of life such as styles of building and dressing, motifs, farming practices, hair designs, etc. and the non-material culture known as social and organizational aspects of culture (Shahamati, et al., 2024). In the growth of any society, there are synergies between the tangible and intangible cultures. In other words, there should be a link between the artifacts or material symbols with their cultural meanings such as the traditional symbols and motifs and the intangible aspects of the culture such as their beliefs, values, etc. that must have propelled the level of development achieved by that society as exemplified by the Europeans, Americans and the Asian Tigers (Mechitov et al., 2024).

2.2. Cultural Symbols and Motifs

Apart from embellishments, people from different parts of the world, including traditional Africans, used motifs as signs and symbols and as a means of identity (Jaxa, 2024). For instance, in Southern Iraq, a significant proportion of the motifs used on their fabrics had symbolic meanings (Shareef & Sani, 2020), just as in Lesotho, where the corn-cup motif, which appeared in numerous Basotho blanket designs, referred to health and prosperity (Kristin, 2018). Udechukwu (2019) observed that cultural symbols and motifs like kola nuts, wooden drums, wooden gongs, grey hairs, yellow palm fronds, and cowry, symbolized life, unity, peace, prosperity, joy, sorrow, bad omen, festivals, rituals, etc. in Igbo culture. Thereby shows that Igbo culture is rich in information, meanings, knowledge, and ideas, particularly captured through cultural symbols. However, if this wealth of knowledge is not effectively communicated, its impact on cultural transmission could be lost. Therefore, innovative strategies are essential to ensure that this valuable information resonates with the target audience, fostering a strong sense of cultural identity.

2.3. Transmission and Preservation of Cultural Heritage to Checkmate their Erosion

At the global level, the Declaration of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1997) shows that the responsibility of the Present Generations toward the Future Generation requires the present generation to take charge of the protection and preservation of the diversified traditional cultural heritages for future generations. The existence of Igbo cultural symbols and meanings are important just as the requirements in the UNESCO declarations. However, of much more importance are the preservation and protection of these cultural heritages and traditions and meanings through their transmission from one generation to another if the lamentation of erosion of Igbo cultural values by Udechukwu (2019) would be arrested. Mechitov et al. (2024) claimed that some cultures were already marginally surviving in Africa, while in Ogun State of Nigeria, Oyinlade (2024) was worried about the unbridled increase in the disappearance of cultural values among the Aworis in Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area, probably due to inadequate transmission of their cultural values from one generation to another.

2.4. Cultural Transmission and the Role of Textile Technology

Therefore, there is a need for evidence-based research to give traction to the Declaration of UNESCO and the reversal of the observed erosion of cultural values in Nigeria. This process would be achieved through the transmission of the meanings or implications of cultural symbols from one generation to another, hopefully through research in textile technology.

Furthermore, Kristin (2018) reported that ancient sumptuous textiles were used to signpost information about cultural identity, rank, wealth, power, or majesty, and textile patterns and their designs played major roles in the social, economic, and religious structures of communities around the world. Recent developments in the textile designs industry appear not to have factored in the need to leverage fabric designs to showcase the rich African cultural heritages and their transmission from one generation to another. When these symbols are adapted into fabrics, the products would speak the national or cultural language for the proper identification of any group or nation, such as the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, in any part of the world. This current study intends to fill this gap through the use of traditional Igbo symbols to design fabrics that would serve as billboards of Igbo cultural heritage in contemporary Nigeria.

2.5. Problem statement

Different channels, such as textile technology, religion, or even language, could be leveraged in the transmission of cultures. The appropriate channel or media could be determined by its relevance and attractiveness to the target audience. Obviously, emotions and ideas are more powerfully expressed through symbols. Cultural symbolism could be used in conveying certain societal norms, complex narratives in folklore and history (Kato, 2025). Leveraging this visual language in textile design can enhance the transmission of Igbo cultural significance. While previous studies (Cyril-Egware, 2016; Anyanwu & Chukueggu, 2021a,b; Anyanwu, Chukueggu, & Orubu, 2022a; Anyanwu, Agberia & Kehind, 2025) have explored various aspects of cultural preservation, little research has focused specifically on *Ugwumagala* and *Ego kiri-kiri* through textile technology in Southeastern Nigeria. This current exploration of batik textiles aims to fill this gap, ensuring that these vital cultural symbols continue to thrive in modern society.

2.6. Objectives of the study

The objective of this study is, therefore, the transmission of Igbo cultural heritage and traditions from one generation to another through textile technology in Southeastern Nigeria. The specific objectives include: the creation of awareness and transmission of Igbo traditional symbols of *Ugwumagala* and *Ego kirikiri*, which are symbols of prosperity and wealth and abundance, respectively, for Igbo identity through batik textile design. Concerted efforts must be made by relevant stakeholders to ensure the transmission and preservation of cultural heritage and traditions through research in textile technology.

Research efforts provide windows of opportunity for the numerous mechanisms that could be leveraged in the protection and prevention of both tangible and intangible aspects of our cultural heritages and traditions from sliding into extinction. Incidentally, the transfer of knowledge, meanings, and skills could be achieved through textile design technology in order to protect these artifacts. Furthermore, their protection from extinction could be enhanced when these artifacts are placed in the public domain through textile design, as these clothes are worn on a daily basis from one generation to another.

Therefore, among the Igbo communities, textile technology holds the key in the transmission of cultural values. This stems from the fact that when these cultural symbols are adapted into textiles, they showcase significant cultural meanings characteristic of the given cultural setting. When garments are adorned with *ugwumagala* or *ego kirikiri*, which are symbols of prosperity and wealth, respectively, and worn during special occasions such as ceremonies, they play significant roles in keeping certain cultural narratives alive.

By flooding the public space with textiles designed with Igbo cultural symbols, the rich messages and relevant histories associated with them could be appropriately communicated to the target audience among different generations. Cultural transmissions take place among individuals when certain basic concepts and values are passed down from one generation to another (Farhad et al., 2023). Through this mechanism, certain

intrinsic wisdom, folklore, stories, and skills which shape a given community's identity are shared and transmitted.

In conclusion, the interplay between textile design technology and cultural preservation is essential for keeping Igbo heritage alive. By integrating cultural symbols into daily life and elevating their presence, we can foster a profound understanding of our shared history. Emphasizing the relevance of traditional symbols in the modern world is crucial for the ongoing transmission of cultural identity, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Igbo culture is woven into the fabric of future generations.

3. Research methodology

Practice-led studio research approach constituted the research design adopted for this work. It is indeed a conceptual framework which gives the researcher ample opportunity to bring in their creative practice, methods, and creative output into the research design and as an integral part of the research output.

Scholars such as Smith and Dean (2009: 5) identified two related ideas. In the first idea, they argued that creative works by themselves are forms of research which also generate observable research outputs. The second idea posited that creative practice which in itself constitutes the training and specialized knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when they are making art -- can lead to specialized research insights which can then be generalized and written up as research". In their view, both the content and processes of a creative practice actually give rise to knowledge and innovations that are significantly different and complementary with other research approaches and styles. In other words, the two components include a creative output and a text component called exegesis. The two components are not independent, but interact and work together to address the research question. Another way to view the practice led approach is its visualization as a method which gives one the liberty to integrate one's creative practice into the research and in addition, legitimizes the knowledge derived therefrom and approves of the methodologies that are peculiar to the discipline. In this current study, Igbo traditional symbols of *Ugwumagala* and *Ego kirikiri* were transferred on the fabric using the method of waxing.

Later the waxed fabrics were allowed to harden and subsequently submerged into a dye bath for a specified time. After this dying process, the dyed fabric was later brought out from the dye and allowed to oxidize within a specified time. Thereafter, the fabric was submerged in a pot of boiling water and stirred to enable the wax to melt out of the fabric. Rinsing, starching and drying of the fabric constituted the next process and were closely followed by ironing to produce a brisk look. This work process showcases creativity in the use of materials, elements and principles of design which characterizes the discipline.

3.1. Method of data collection

The methods of collecting data for the study were observation, oral interviews, and information from art books, academic journals, magazines, and internet services. This was done since the study is qualitative research.

3.2. Method of analysis

The final practical studio works were analysed based on the materials, aesthetics, historical techniques, or methods that were adopted to produce the works.

3.3. Pilot study

This study involved a pilot project in which a five-meter batik fabric was produced featuring Igbo traditional symbols. The fabric was then crafted into a garment for His Royal Highness, the monarch, to assess the effectiveness of the research approach.

3.4. Description of studio production methods

The studio production process began with gathering all necessary materials: dye, caustic soda, hydros, paraffin wax, dyebath, stencil paper, starch, and a pressing iron. This process commenced with the tying and dyeing of five yards of textile material which were later manipulated to ensure that dyes did resist entering some parts of the fabric and also to create specific patterns and textures on the fabric.

Thereafter, Igbo traditional symbols were cut into stencils and later transferred into the fabric through the mechanism of waxing. In order to apply the appropriate colour, the already waxed fabric was submerged in a dye bath. The removal of the wax from the fabric after dyeing was achieved through immersing the fabric in a pot of boiling water until no trace of wax could be seen. Starching, drying, and ironing of the fabric to achieve a polished appearance constituted the final stage.

3.5. Development of thumbnail sketches

In order to develop the thumbnail sketches, issues, events, and photographs were meticulously observed. Through this observational lens and the employment of writing materials such as pen, ink, and pencil, the first sketches that guided the textile design process were developed. Both the conceptualization and production of the textile design in this research work were anchored on the developed thumbnail sketches as shown below.

3.6. Thumbnail sketch of Igbo traditional symbols



Figure 1: Title: Thumbnail Sketches of Ugwumagala, (Chameleon)

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe

Medium: Pen on Paper

Size: 30 x20cm

Year of Production: 2021

Different mechanisms, such as freehand drawings of Igbo traditional symbols, wax application with the stencils, and direct sketching on the fabrics, were employed to transfer these sketches to the fabrics.

4. Analysis and presentation of the studio batik fabric design

The underlisted key elements constituted the fulcrum around which the presentation and analytical description of this studio batik fabric design revolved.

- i. Inspiration: It was inspiration that propelled the production of the batik work.
- ii. Title, Structure, and Composition: An exploration of the title as well as the structural and compositional aspects of the design on fabric.
- iii. Materiality and Production Method: A discussion on the relationship between materials used and the methods of production.
- iv. Wax and Dye Application: Examination of the processes involved in wax and dye application, along with the conceptual approach to producing the batik fabric design.

- v. Artistic Implications: Insight into the artistic implications stemming from the production of the batik fabric design work.
- vi. Cultural, Historical, and Philosophical Context: An interpretation of the cultural, historical, and philosophical dimensions embedded within the design content.

The practical studio work produced aims to showcase the adaptation of Igbo traditional symbols within batik fabric designs, emphasizing their significance in textile production. These works are visually represented in the accompanying plates below.

4.1. Analysis of Ugwumagala Symbol



Plate 1a: Analysis of Ugwumagala Symbol

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe

Title: Ugwumagala

Medium: Batik Design

Size: 5 yards

Year of Production: 2021



Plate 1b: Analysis of *Ugwumagala* Symbol

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe

Title: *Ugwumagala*

Medium: Batik Design

Size: 5 yards

Year of Production: 2021

The piece titled *Ugwumagala* batik contains decorative elements and an adaptation of the *Ugwumagala* motif of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria into the fabric for cultural transmission. *Ugwumagala* means chameleon, and it symbolizes caution and lots of other virtues and traits or attributes expected of a leader, such as energy sensitivity (Anderson, 2016a), conservation, transformation, and personal power (Yan et al., 2023). And choices, emotional control, shape-shifting, safety, survival, and objectivity. *Ugwumagala* also symbolizes transformative

power or ease of adaptation (Anderson, 2016b) to any situation among the Igbo. The Igbo are almost the most travelled ethnic group in Nigeria and are found in different parts of Nigeria and the world in general. Enwerem (2024) showed that many Igbo people emigrated out of their traditional homeland in South Eastern Nigeria due to the absence of federal government presence, lack of jobs, and poor infrastructural facilities but Mezie-Okoye (2025) maintained that the majority of Igbo internal migrants were traders who left the South- Eastern part of Nigeria to other parts of the country to engage in business ventures, involving petty trading and importation of goods. People with such characteristic migration should be able to possess adaptive capacities to fit into their host communities and environments. This animal, being unpredictable and changeable, also symbolizes flexibility (Yan et al., 2023), as one could hide one's true colours to blend with the prevailing environment for safety, especially given these days of insecurity to socialize with every person in society.

Concerning vision, the eyes of chameleons are different from many other creatures (Yan et al., 2023). It leverages its ability to move one eye independently during hunting. It patiently waits for its prey and the right opportunity to strike. In the human world, this represents vision, perception, and clairvoyance among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. Environmental and social circumstances may necessitate chameleonic transformation among human beings generally. An important lesson from this ability to adjust to any given environment is the fact that one does not always need to stand out to make a significant difference in society. Working behind the scenes is a virtue of some achievers in society. The chameleon also knows the best time to hide and when to shine depending on its instinct. Flexibility should be an indispensable virtue and attribute needed by every human being for sustainable survival in the contemporary world with the associated vicissitudes of life. The chameleon's slow, steady approach implies that it wisely conserves its energy waiting for the right opportunity, which nature does provide.

The chameleon is a symbolically giant animal with a small stature. Its tongue could be twice the size of its body, which it uses from a long distance to capture its prey (Anderson, 2016c), thereby teaching humanity some lessons in planning, communication, and safety. Concerning sure movement and adaptation, Chameleons communicate with complex colour changes during contests (Anderson, 2016d), as different body regions convey different information. Also, the chameleon has some highly specialized feet (Yan et al., 2023) that keep it secure on many surfaces. Chameleons see ultraviolet light, which is invisible to human eyes. In the area of individuality, chameleons have different base colours for males, females, and juveniles. There is a tiny chameleon, the dwarf Brookesia, that measures only 1/2 inch (at most), meaning it can hide on the tip of a match, thus manifesting attributes of illusion and shape-shifting. They also grow throughout their entire life, shedding skin as necessary, thereby showing traits of change, maturity, and renewal. The eyes of a chameleon possess the ability to have a 360-degree view of the world (Yan et al., 2023), showing vision, awareness, psychism, clairvoyance, and the future and the past.

4.2. Analysis of Ego Kirikiri Symbol



Plate 2a: Analysis of Ego Kirikiri Symbol

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe

Title: *Ego Kirikiri*

Medium: Batik design
Size:5 yards
Year of Production: 2021



Plate 2b: Analysis of *Ego Kirikiri* Symbol

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe

Title:*Ego Kirikiri*

Medium: Batik design

Size:5 yards

Year of Production:2021

The piece titled "Ego Kiri-Kiri" features a striking design characterized by a composition inspired by traditional Indigenous Igbo currency, specifically Ego Kiri-Kiri, which includes items such as cowries and manilas that were historically used as currency in Igboland. The design incorporates three vertical motifs representing these ancient forms of currency, prominently showcasing Okpogho (Manila) and cowries collectively referred to as Ego Kiri Kiri. These motifs symbolize wealth (Jantsch & Veenhoven, 2022), and it is believed that discovering such items in one's environment or farmland signals good fortune (Youvan, 2024), especially in the Ekwerazu Mbaise area of Imo State, Nigeria. Individuals who find these currencies are thought to be destined for prosperity.

According to Butler (2021), young men often utilise clothing to express their identities, a sentiment supported by De Koning et al. (2024), who suggest that such expressions can significantly influence apparel consumption. Similarly, the youth in Igbo land can be inspired to connect with their heritage through traditional symbols, using attire designed with the Ego Kiri Kiri motif as a marker of their Igbo identity, regardless of their location. Beyond cultural identification, the fabric design serves a dual purpose: it is also believed to attract wealth to those who wear it.

5. Contributions of the Study

It has helped to revive and retain the usage of Igbo traditional motifs. This study also served as a conduit in the transmission of Igbo cultural values to the upcoming generation, such as the norms and values of caution and adaptability. From a cultural perspective, this study has contributed to the preservation of the Igbo cultural heritage through the documentation of *Ugwumagala* and *Ego Kirikiri* cultural artifacts and traditional designs.

This study has not only responded to the clarion call of the Traditional Cultural Properties (TCP) guideline to assess and protect forms and objects rooted in a community's historical beliefs, customs, and practices which could nourish a nation's future development regarding cultural identity and satisfaction but has also contributed positively to the UNESCO declaration on the responsibility of the Present Generations toward the Future Generation which requires the present generation, to take responsibility for protecting and preserving the diversified traditional cultural heritage for future generations.

6. Summary

Researching the rich cultural messages and meanings embedded in cultural symbols is essential for preserving and transmitting heritage and traditions from one generation to the next. To ensure this preservation is impactful, it must be articulated in a way that resonates across different age groups within society. Textile design and technology effectively bridge this gap, portraying the cultural heritage of society through storytelling in fabric form.

This study employed a practice-led studio research method to explore and discuss the cultural significance of Igbo symbols, particularly *Ugwumagala* and *Ego Kiri Kiri*. When worn by the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, these textile designs not only symbolize their identity but also play a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of their rich cultural heritage, contributing to the fight against cultural erosion.

7. Recommendation

It is recommended that additional methods for preserving and conveying humanity's rich cultural heritage be explored through further research. Government support for these initiatives, along with increased awareness of the importance of cultural preservation, is vital for the meaningful integration of cultural heritages into national development.

8. Conclusion

Textile technology emerges as a powerful medium for designing various symbols and artefacts, effectively bringing their cultural implications to the forefront. When these textiles are worn, they act as visible representations of desired messages within the culture.

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