

Research Article

This article is published by Jozac Publishers in the *African Social Science and Humanities Journal (ASSHJ)*. Volume 6, Issue 2, 2025.

ISSN: 2709-1309 (Print)
2709-1317 (Online)

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Article detail

Received: 18 March 2025

Accepted: 28 April 2025

Published: 06 May 2025

Conflict of Interest: The author/s declared no conflict of interest.



Philosophical interpretations of traditional symbols of Gbi traditional area in the Volta Region of Ghana: Sources of inspiration for textile prints and garment designs

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15352802>

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Abstract: Though the Gbi traditional symbols are lavishly displayed on traditional artefacts such as spokesperson's staff, traditional stools, and other regalia, a preliminary survey in the area revealed a dearth in the knowledge and understanding of them. Hence, there was a need to fill this research gap by enhancing cultural heritage education on the Gbi traditional symbols using textile and garment production. Ethnography and arts-based research methods under the qualitative research approach guided the conduct of the study. A total of 68 study participants comprising spokespersons, elderly men and women, fashion and textile designers, and youth within the Gbi traditional area. A purposive sampling technique was used in their recruitment for the study. Key informant interviews, focus group discussions, direct observations, and photographic methods were the main data collection tools used for collecting data for the study. Qualitative thematic analysis was used for analyzing the qualitative data garnered. The results of the study revealed the literal and philosophical meanings of twenty Gbi traditional symbols. Further, four of the twenty traditional symbols were developed into textile motifs and used for printing fabrics that were produced into textile garments and other functional products such as armrest, chairbacks, and bedside lamp stands. The study found favourable acceptance among the people, especially the youth, who saw the textile products with the traditional symbols as vehicles for education and promotion of the Gbi traditional cultural heritage. The study concludes that there is a high potential for heightening cultural heritage education among the general populace, especially the youth, when traditional symbols of a people are used for the production of functional products in society. It is recommended that textile and fashion designers in Ghana ensure the use of traditional symbols in contemporary textile and fashion production processes to help in their promotion and their use as a medium for educating the youth, especially about the rich Ghanaian cultural heritage.

Keywords – Cultural heritage education, Garment designs, Gbi traditional symbols, Textile prints, Ghana

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of traditional symbols as sources of inspiration for textile print designs and symbolic garments is a journey that spans civilisations and epochs. From ancient hieroglyphs to contemporary adaptations, these symbols continue to weave tales of culture, identity, and spirituality into the fabric of human expression. In the ever-evolving world of fashion, the enduring appeal of traditional symbols reflect a timeless connection between the past and the present (Rice, 2020). The history of traditional symbols as sources of inspiration for textile print designs and symbolic garments is deeply intertwined with the cultural, religious, and social practices of various societies throughout time (Welters & Lillethun, 2018). These symbols, often rooted in ancient traditions, have evolved and adapted to reflect the changing dynamics of human civilization. The journey of these symbols from their historical origins to their contemporary applications in fashion is a fascinating exploration (Mukendi, Davies, Glozer & McDonagh, 2020). In China, symbols like dragons, phoenixes, and auspicious characters have been woven into silk fabrics for centuries, embodying cultural values and conveying wishes for good fortune (Erbaugh, 2022). Japanese textile art often features symbols like cherry blossoms, cranes, and waves, each with its own symbolism (Ji, Zhong, Li, Chu, Wang, Xing & Du, 2021). Ancient Egypt boasts an array of symbols with profound meanings including hieroglyphics, scarabs, ankh, and the Eye of Horus that have adorned textiles and garments, representing life, protection, and spirituality (Candelora, Marzouk & Cooney, 2022). Mediaeval Europe saw the rise of heraldic symbols, such as coats of arms and family crests, which were prominently displayed on garments to signify lineage, status, and identity (Hinton, 2022). The Middle Ages witnessed the integration of religious symbols into garments, with crosses, sacred geometry, and religious icons often featured in textiles to express faith and devotion (Loughlin, 2021). Indigenous cultures in North and South America have a rich tradition of using symbols such as totemic animals, geometric patterns, and tribal motifs in their textiles (Niwatuhereza, 2019). These symbols often carry spiritual significance and tell stories of their heritage. African cultures, particularly those in West Africa, use Adinkra symbols in textile designs. These symbols convey messages, proverbs, and philosophical concepts, creating garments that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also deeply meaningful (Legere & Kang, 2020).

The globalisation of fashion in the modern era has facilitated cross-cultural exchanges. Traditional symbols from various cultures are now borrowed, adapted, and fused into contemporary textile designs, creating a rich tapestry of global inspiration (Nithyaprakash, Niveathitha & Thambidurai, 2023). In recent times, there has been a revival of interest in traditional textile techniques and symbols. Artisans and designers are increasingly exploring ancient motifs, weaving them into modern fabrics using traditional craftsmanship (Khaire, 2021). The resurgence of interest in traditional symbols aligns with the growing trend towards sustainable and culturally conscious fashion (Boero, 2023). Consumers seek garments with a story, and traditional symbols provide a link to heritage, promoting ethical practices in the fashion industry.

Many ethnic societies have motifs and symbols that are not known and used in fabric designs in Ghana, especially the Gbi traditional area in the Volta Region of Ghana. The younger generation have either no knowledge of or forgotten about the many uses and philosophical or symbolic meanings of some traditional symbols in the society in which they are found. In effect a greater number of the youth in the Gbi traditional area are delineated from their own rich culture and are unable to identify by name and state the values of the Gbi traditional symbols in the community. This study sought to explore ways of creating awareness of Gbi traditional symbols and use them in fabric production in the Gbi traditional area. The specific research objectives that underpinned the study were:

1. Identify and describe the traditional symbols of the Gbi traditional area and their symbolic meanings.
2. Develop motifs from selected Gbi traditional symbols.
3. Design and produce textile prints and products with motifs from selected Gbi traditional symbols.

The study is significant because it produced fabric and garment designs with motifs from Gbi traditional symbols. Additionally, the study serves as model for research into other traditional symbols in other traditional societies. Further, the study provides a better insight into the roles of traditional symbols in establishing the place identity,

history and culture of the Gbi traditional area. The results of the study act as a springboard for the production of fabrics that will be used as interior decoration in vehicles as well as the production of clothes to be worn for special occasions, showcasing the rich culture of the Gbi traditional area of Volta Region, Ghana.

History and Location of the Gbi Traditional Area in Volta Region, Ghana

The Gbi people of Volta region are one of the Ewe speaking people of Ghana that are found North of the southern Ewes (Sakitey, 2018) in the Hohoe Municipality (Figure 1). Other people who are located in the same group are the people of Ho, Kpando and Buem. They can be classified into two broad groups based on language and origin. The first group, comprises the majority of the people, and generally called 'Wedometorwo' by other people who speak Ewe as mother tongue and have a common migration and settlement history (Ndah, Amoah, Essel, Mayona & Akotia, 2023). They are descendants of two of three major Ewe groups that migrated from Notsie during the wicked reign of Togbe Agokoli I in the 17th century (Montgomery & Vannier, 2017). The second group of Northern Ewe speaks a variety of Guan and Akan dialects, as well as Ewe as a second language, and claim different origins (Yankson, 2018). For easy clarification, the Gbi people fall into this first group and shall be referred to as the Ewe group, while the second group is also called the Guan group. The Gbi are the people of Peki and Hohoe. The people of Hohoe are settled at the north of Peki, known as Gbi Dzigbe, and Peki, which is also at the south of Hohoe, just about 50 kilometres from Hohoe, is also known as Gbi Nyigbe (Xenyo, 2021). Collectively, the different Northern Ewe groups were influenced by Akan and by German and other European missionary activities. They lived under German and British colonial rules and also shared similar socio-political and economic experiences since the independence of Ghana (Vigh, 2022).

Gavua (1980) and Konu (1981) noted that by the end of the 17th century, the different Northern Ewe groups settled in small autonomous and relatively peaceful communities in their present territory (Adom, Chukwuere, Addo, Tabi & Thulla, 2021). It was also noted that the departure of the Ewe group from Notsie and the process of migration and relocation were not sudden but took many years. The Ewe group of Northern Eweland, and for that matter, the Gbi people, left Notsie in small kin groups such as families and clans and travelled in different directions towards the Volta River (Adotey, 2018). They had settled briefly in their towns that were founded by renowned hunters and farmers who sought and found arable lands and rivers at a number of places before finally arriving at their present homeland.

The Gbi people who were hunters and farmers were joined subsequently by members of their immediate and extended families and by members of different clans from the same villages and towns. Defenses and availability of water in the form of rivers, streams, arable land and wild game were major considerations of easy settling in terms of the particular location where towns were cited (Wutich, Thomson, Jepson, Stoler, Cooperman, Doss & Westerhoff, 2023). The settlement brought about different kinds of activities to survive including traditional symbols to enrich their culture (Adotey, 2018).

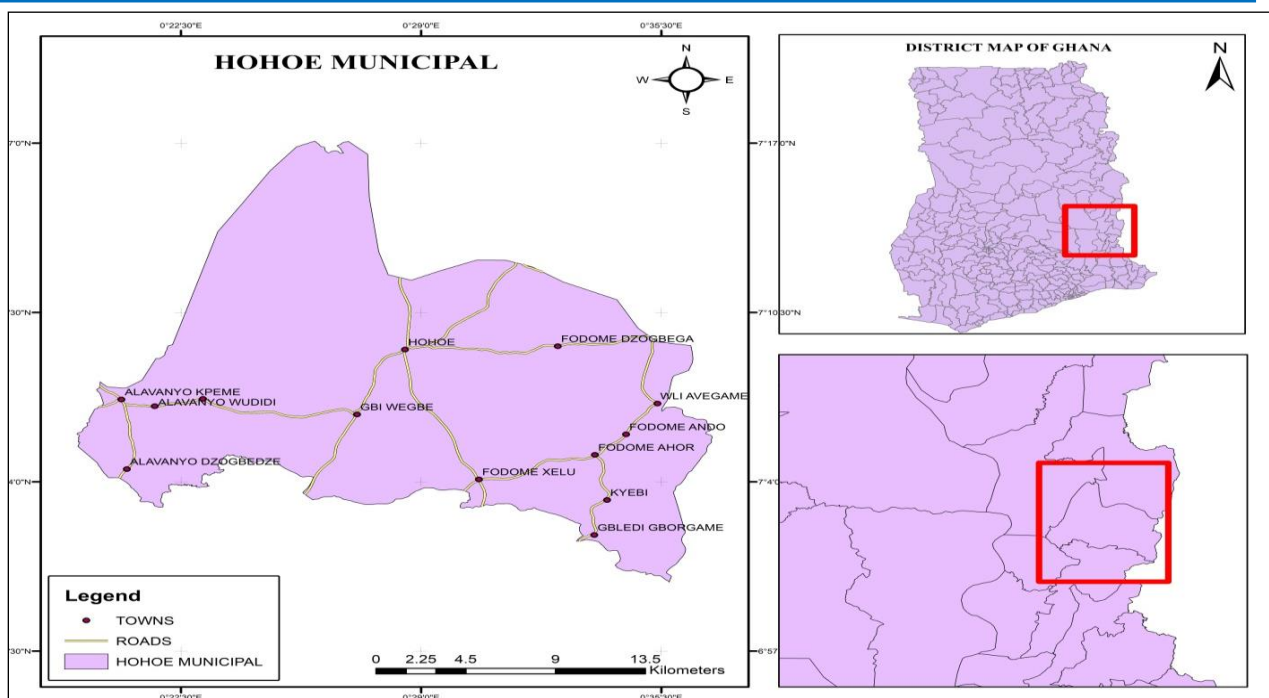


Figure 1: Map of Hohoe Municipality

Source: Ghana Statistical Service (2010)

2. METHODS

The study utilised two key research methods under the qualitative research approach, which were an ethnographic study and arts-based research. Detailed and thick data on the philosophical interpretations of selected Gbi traditional symbols were garnered via personal interviews and focus group discussions. Later, the arts-based research helped in the development and visualisation of textile motifs from the Gbi traditional symbols for textile and garment designs. The ethnographic study and arts-based research methods enabled the researchers to extensively engage the local communities as well as Fashion and Textile designers within their natural social environments to garner rich data for the study.

The study was conducted from 1st January 2023 to March 30th, 2024. A semi-structured interview guide was designed based on the three research questions. The first section sought the socio-demographic information of the study participants. The second section had visual representations of selected Gbi traditional symbols, and study participants were asked to identify, describe, and give their philosophical interpretations within the socio-cultural settings of the Gbi people in the Volta region, Ghana. The third section inquired about how textile motifs could be generated from each of the selected Gbi traditional symbols to be used for textile and garment prints as an innovative step for cultural preservation and education. The data collection instrument was initially vetted by three expert qualitative researchers for face validity. After revising the instrument based on their suggestions, it was pre-tested on three local elders who are well-versed in the culture of the Gbi people, as well as two fashion and textile designers who were not part of the original sample for the study.

The personal interviews with the spokespersons in the Gbi traditional area, as well as the fashion and textile designers, lasted for roughly one and a half hours, while the focus group discussions with the elderly men and women in the Gbi traditional area lasted for roughly two hours. Fourteen (14) personal interviews were conducted. Each of the fourteen spokespersons represented the fourteen towns that constituted the Gbi traditional area. These towns were Wudome, Abanse, now Avetile, Blengo, Tsame, Adzokoe, Dzogbati, Dzake, Torkorni, Kpoeta, Atabu, Kledzo, Wegbe, Godenu and Bla. Three focus groups consisting of five elderly men and women in each group selected voluntarily from the fourteen towns in the Gbi traditional area were interviewed on the philosophical

interpretations of the selected Gbi traditional symbols. Also, four focus groups consisting of six textile and fashion designers were engaged on different occasions for two hours a day to brainstorm the motifs that could be generated from the selected Gbi traditional symbols as well as their use in the production of textile and garment prints. All the study participants were purposively sampled based on the meeting of one or more of the following inclusion criteria:

1. The study participant should be a Gbi living and working in any of the fourteen towns in the Gbi traditional area in Volta Region of Ghana.
2. The study participant must have knowledge about the Gbi traditional symbols and their philosophical interpretations.
3. The study participant must voluntarily agree to partake in the study and be available for personal or Focus Group Discussion interview sessions.

Table 1: Description and Sample Size of Study Participants

S/No	Description	Number
1.	Spokespersons to traditional chiefs in the Gbi traditional area representing all the fourteen towns in the Gbi traditional area	14
2.	Fashion and Textile designers from the Gbi Dressmakers Association	24
3.	Gbi Elderly Men	9
4.	Gbi Elderly Women	6
5	Gbi Youth	15
TOTAL		68

The personal interviews were audio-recorded while the focus group discussions were video-recorded. All the interviews were carefully played, listened and transcribed from the Ewe language into the English language by three experts. Later, seven of the study participants volunteered to member check the transcribed data to check accuracy and consistency of the data transcribed. The procedural steps in the qualitative thematic analysis were followed in analyzing the data garnered with the help of the Nvivo software that assisted in coding and segregating themes especially on the philosophical interpretation of the Gbi traditional symbols.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Description and Philosophical Interpretations of Selected Traditional Symbols of the Gbi Traditional Area

This section presents the synthesized views on the identification of the traditional symbols, their literal meanings and philosophical interpretations. The views presented are the verified information from the data collected from study participants after organizing a focus group discussion with representatives from the fourteen towns that make up the Gbi traditional area. The study's findings were pictorially presented with philosophical interpretations of the 20 Gbi traditional symbols in the Hohoe municipality, Volta region of Ghana.



Figure 2: Atɔtɔ le fiazikpui dzi, da foxlae

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Atɔtɔ le fiazikpui dzi, da foxlae.

Literal Meaning: Pineapple on a stool with a snake wound around it.

Philosophical Interpretation:

Pineapple is sweet but the snake is an enemy around it. It means chieftaincy is sweet but there are obstacles and challenges around it. The very people who you call friends can bring you down so as a leader you must think through every piece of advice and information before you act else, your kingdom will fall and your friends will shun your company. Pineapples sometimes taste sour. Atɔtɔ le fiazikpui dzi, da foxlae is therefore a symbol of vigilance in leadership.



Figure 3: Fiakuku le Koklozi dzi

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Fiakuku le Koklozi dzi

Literal Meaning: A crown sitting on an egg.

Philosophical Interpretation:

Chieftaincy is fragile, if you do not hold it well it will break. The linguist said the crown is delicate like an egg therefore you have to handle it with care. As a chief you must take into consideration everything you do. A Chief must be meticulous by protecting his stool and all the people under his administration. When eggs are protected, they hatch many chicks. For a kingdom to expand, it needs more people protected by the crown of peace, unity and stability. This is a symbol of good leadership.



Figure 4: Lo, Dzata, Atiglinyi, Fiazikpui, Fiakuku kple Hɔ fe fufɔfo
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Lo, Dzata, Atiglinyi, Fiazikpui, Fiakuku kple Hɔ fe fufɔfo

Literal Meaning: Assemblage of Crocodile, Lion, Elephant, Stool, crown and eagle.

Philosophical Interpretation: The crocodile is a strong animal that defends its territory, in the forest, the lion is the king of the jungle and the elephant is very strong. In the air too, the king of all birds is the eagle. If the eagle is equally strong to defend the air, it means chief is strong in the water, and forest. You cannot attack the kingdom from the air, land, water and forest. You do that at your peril.

Therefore, the crocodile is carrying the lion and the elephant, and they are also carrying the chief's stool together and the eagle is holding the crown. They are all protecting the dynasty of the clan. The various groups of people in the community comes together to protect their chieftaincy and make it beautiful and strong. This is a symbol of security and defense.



Figure 5: Kpɔ eve le fiazikpui dzi kple atamkayi

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Kpɔ eve le fiazikpui dzi kple atamkayi.

Literal Meaning: Two tigers standing on stool with two swords besides the stool.

Philosophical Interpretation: the two tigers are standing protecting the stool of Adzokoe. Meaning they are ready to guard and defend the chief and his subjects. Every member of the community is ready to lay his life to defend this kingdom from external forces and the enemies of the thrones. Therefore, any aggressor will note that, this kingdom cannot be defeated by any force because it has a strong united front. The symbol therefore is used to represent unity in strength.



Figure 6: Dadi mlɔ fiazikpuidzi

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Dadi mlɔ fiazikpuidzi

Literal Meaning: Cat lying on the stool.

Philosophical Interpretation: The cat is a gentle animal but very wild and strong among animals. It catches its preys in all angles. Therefore, any enemy scheming to overthrow the administration of the king will be caught by the vigilance of the people. The kingdom is peaceful and does not want war. But if the peace is disturbed, it can be very aggressive because they are wild at times when provoked but have remained peaceful all this while for reasons known to them. They believe in peaceful co-existence with other neighboring community because, through peace, there will be unity and development in the community and the neighbouring communities. They love and welcome visitors who will not create problems that will destabilize the peace of the people. This represents security and friendliness.



Figure 7: Nyɔnu le dugo ɖe ta

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Nyɔnu le dugo ɖe ta

Literal Meaning: A woman carrying the gunpowder.

Philosophical Interpretation: The figure represents the war-lords of the paramount chief. A woman carries the gunpowder when they are going to war, because it is only a brave woman that can protect the gunpowder well and their enemies will not get them. It is for this reason, a woman is smart and cunning. In life, it is better you keep something with women than to entrust it in the hands of men who can be easily deceived by a woman. This symbolizes bravery and strength.



Figure 8: Lo le Akpotokui denu
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Lo le Akpotokui denu

Literal Meaning: Crocodile holding mudfish in the mouth.

Philosophical Interpretation: Mudfish with a hard head and pointed fins, are very strong to protect themselves. The crocodile lives in water but rather comes out and breathe air. Therefore, during that time it catches the mudfish, the fins will pierce the crocodile and it cannot close its mouth again. When it enters into the water, it will get drown because the water will enter its nose and mouth. This symbolizes that life is fragile and it must be handled with caution.



Figure 9: Ho fo da
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Ho fo da

Literal Meaning: Eagle catches a snake.

Philosophical Interpretation: Eagle is a bird of prey and the snake is a poisonous animal. Now the eagle thinks it catches the snake for food not knowing it's taking poisonous substance. Therefore, the spirit that you are having in you, somebody else too has that same spirit. Everybody has a superior person and therefore human beings must respect each other for the community to grow. It signifies the braveness of the people and they recognized that there is somebody braver than them but when it comes to war, they have to die together. This is a symbol of tolerance and dedication.



Figure 10: Wotsɔ ɖu hã wonoa zi
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Wotsɔ ɖu hã wonoa zi

Literal Meaning: One can carry a gunpowder and still smoke.

Philosophical Interpretation: In the midst of difficulties, you cannot ignore your responsibilities as a chief. No matter how difficult a situation is, only human beings can solve it. The Gbi chiefs never neglect their responsibilities to their subjects no matter how difficult the situation could be. With tact and diplomacy, every hurdle can be cleared in the kingdom. The two Gbi divisions help to solve the problems of each other. A symbol of responsible leadership and courage.



Figure 11: Asi me safui to
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Asi me safui to

Literal Meaning: A hand holding a key.

Philosophical Interpretation: When Gbi forefathers went to war, at the war front they started having misunderstandings, so quickly the chief gathered them. The chief admonished them to unite and overcome their enemies. The Gbi have remained united in every issue that threatened their very survival. This is a symbol of unity for victory, and power of knowledge.



Figure 12: Koklo le fu de nu, avu le efe mo kpom
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Koklo le fu de nu, avu le efe mo kpom

Literal Meaning: The cock holding a bone with its beak and a dog is looking at its face.

Philosophical Interpretation: A cock does not hold a bone and a dog get worried about it, because the dog knows the cock cannot eat the bone. Therefore, you should not worry too much about something that does not belong to you. Whatever belongs to you, you will actually have it at the right time. A symbol of patience and endurance.



Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Agama mo kpom

Literal Meaning: Chameleon.

Philosophical Interpretation: Patience, This symbol reminds us of the need not to be hasty in life. There is the need for patience, and wherever you find yourself, try and learn of the character of the people in which you find yourself before you act. This is the reason why wherever the chameleon finds itself, it changes its colour to suit the environment. It also tells us that hills and valleys are not the same, meaning life is not all that smooth as you see it, because haste destroys so many things. It is only patience that can move mountain; therefore symbol encourages people to be patient. This symbolizes diversity and patience.



Figure 14: Dzakpata be q̄eviwo menya ku o

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Dzakpata be q̄eviwo menya ku o

Literal Meaning: Innocent child sitting on a python.

Philosophical Interpretation: An innocent child does not know the wildness of a python; therefore he relaxes and sits on it because children do not know death. The chiefs must know their subjects very well, because some can be dangerous. They can overthrow him if he is being careless. The chief must be careful in dealing with his subjects else, he will be swallowed one day. The symbol advises chiefs to eschew childish behaviors but rule with maturity. This is a symbol of vigilance.



Figure 15: Nyitsui le safui q̄enu

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Nyitsui le safui q̄enu

Literal Meaning: The Crow holding a key on the mouth.

Philosophical Interpretation: The crow is a very powerful spiritual bird of prey that protects the community and holds the key to their lives. The people of Gbi Wegbe believe that they have very powerful ancestors that protect them in all things. The key to life on this earth lies with their ancestral spirits that watches over them day and night. This is a symbol of protection.



Figure 16: Koklonɔ tsō akō q̄e viawo q̄zi

Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Koklonɔ tsō akō q̄e viawo q̄zi

Literal Meaning: Hen protects its chicks.

Philosophical Interpretation: The queen mother of the Hohoe traditional area protects its sub queen mothers. The mother is a great problem solver and tries its best to protect its children from hazards. Just as the hen broods over her chicks and protects them from being picked by predators like the hawk and crow, so does the queen mother who is the mother of all mothers protect all queen mothers in the various communities. This symbolizes protection, warmth and sacrifice.



Figure 17: Hɔ ɖze de klo ɖzi
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Hɔ ɖze de klo ɖzi

Literal Meaning: Eagle stands on the Tortoise.

Philosophical Interpretation: This symbol means that no matter how difficult the battle is, there will surely be success. They will look at us [Gbi people] like weak people but when they play with us, we shall conquer them. We are not weak. The eagle may appear strong but cannot prey on the tortoise's hard shell that protects it. The tortoise's shell is complete armour meant to fight its battles. It is a symbol of invisible strength and protection.



Figure 18: Asivide ɖeka le yame
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Asivide ɖeka le yame

Literal Meaning: One Finger up.

Philosophical Interpretation: The symbol means, that "it is only God that we fear". Before the chief does anything he consults God whom he fears. This is because all other chiefs are under his jurisdiction and all the indigenes cannot do anything if the chief is not informed. It is only God that is above him (Chief). I am the king of all the kings, is only God that I respect or honour. This symbolizes "in God we trust".



Figure 19: Ame adewo kɔ ta kpe
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Ame adewo kɔ ta kpe

Literal Meaning: People puts their heads together.

Philosophical Interpretation: The symbol means one person does not set rules and regulations for their community. Rather the chief takes advice from other chiefs in the community and the citizens as well. Therefore, if one person brings a problem to be solved, he does not do such work alone but rather invite other chiefs to help him solve the problem. There is council of elders who are wise and experienced so come together to arbitrate conflicts in the society. It is important to have many elders in the community because no individual has all the wisdom of the world. This is a symbol of respect for people and their views.

Name of Symbol: Fiazikpui

Literal Meaning: The Chief's Stool.

Philosophical Interpretation: One of their chiefs in history stated that he is always the landlord or landowner. Their elders therefore say that the landowner is older than the town. It simply means every town or village was founded by somebody. Everyone must obey the owners of the land. You cannot come to the community to do anything without seeking permission from the chief. This symbolizes Authority.



Figure 20: Fiazikpui
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of Symbol: Klo kple abɔɔ wotsɔ tu mlɔ wó dzi

Literal Meaning: The gun is laid on the tortoise and the snail.

Philosophical Interpretation: The symbol presents the snail and tortoise noted as peaceful animals and left to them alone there would not be a sound of gunshot in the forest. They are peace lovers and do not engage in conflicts. An Ewe adage says, 'when the tortoise travels, it is hosted by the snail'. These two animals have shells that protect them as they glide slowly. This is a symbol of humility, peace and harmony.



Figure 21: Klo kple abɔɔ wotsɔ tu mlɔ
wó dzi
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

Name of symbol: Ase le safui de asi, asi deka le yame, le bible

Literal Meaning: A hand holding a key with one finger up on a bible.

Philosophical Interpretation: The symbol rekindles the spirit of impartiality and fairness in our deliberations. This symbol remind those in authority in the Gbi traditional area to uphold the values of justice, integrity and harmony that their forebears have instilled in them. It reminds them to serve the people with humility, transparency and accountability at all times. Thus, the symbol signifies justice and integrity.



Figure 22: Ase le safui de asi, asi deka
le yame, le bible
Source: Fieldwork data (2024)

The Gbi people of Ghana have a rich tapestry of cultural wisdom and symbolism, encapsulated in various traditional proverbs and sayings (Raha, 2024). These symbols and their meanings provide deep insights into the values, beliefs, and life philosophies of the Gbi community. Through interviews and the oral traditions passed down through generations, we can explore the profound teachings embedded in these symbols.

One notable symbol is the pineapple on a stool with a snake wound around it. This imagery, as explained by Togbe Agbenya II (Personal Communication, 12/1/2024) conveys a complex message about leadership and the inherent challenges. The pineapple, known for its sweetness, represents the desirable aspects of chieftaincy—prestige, respect, and authority. However, the snake, an enemy coiled around it, symbolizes the dangers and obstacles that come with leadership. Friends and close associates, much like the snake, can pose significant threats. Leaders are cautioned not to act impulsively on advice or sensational stories, as this could lead to their downfall and abandonment by their allies (Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2016). The message is clear: leadership requires careful consideration, wisdom, and discernment.

Another powerful symbol is that of a brave woman carrying gunpowder. This imagery underscores the trust and reliability placed in women within the community, particularly during times of war. The linguist describes women as smart and cunning, capable of safeguarding crucial resources like gunpowder from the enemy. This proverb suggests that in life, certain responsibilities and valuables are better entrusted to women, who may possess a strategic advantage in protection and deception (Steinmetz, Pimentel & Goe, 2021). It challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the critical role women play in the survival and success of the community. A hand holding a key is a symbol of unity and collective strength. During a period of internal conflict at the war front, the chief gathered his warriors and emphasized the importance of unity. He warned that division would lead to their defeat by the enemy (Collins, 2023). This symbol teaches that strength lies in solidarity; only through unity can great things be achieved, and adversities be overcome. This principle of unity has been a cornerstone for the Gbi people, guiding them through numerous challenges and threats to their existence.

The chameleon, known for its ability to change color, symbolizes patience and adaptability. The linguist uses this symbol to teach the importance of patience and the need to understand and adapt to one's environment. Life's journey is not smooth; it is filled with ups and downs, akin to hills and valleys. Acting hastily can lead to destruction, whereas patience can overcome significant obstacles (Vince, 2014). The chameleon's behavior serves as a metaphor for the need to learn and adapt to varying circumstances, promoting the idea that patience is essential for long-term success and stability.

3.2. Development of Motifs from the Gbi traditional symbols for the production of symbolic fabric prints

Based on the popular votes during the communal workshop, four out of the twenty Gbi traditional symbols were selected to be used in demonstrating the potentials of developing textile motifs for the production of Textile garments that reflect the place identity history and culture of the Gbi ethnic society. These four Gbi traditional symbols have been illustrated below.



Figure 23: *Ase le safui de asi, asi deka le yame le bible dzi*



Figure 24: *Nyɔnu le dɔgo de ta*



Figure 25: Dadi mlo fiazikpuidz

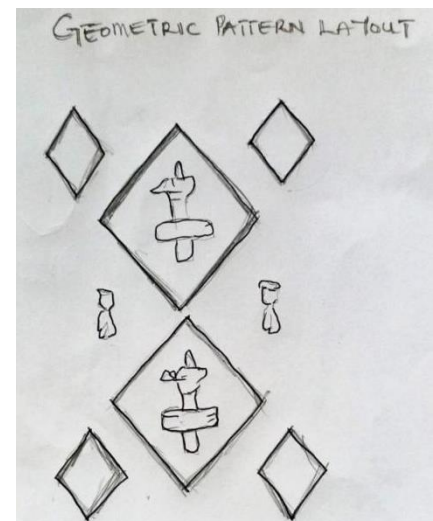
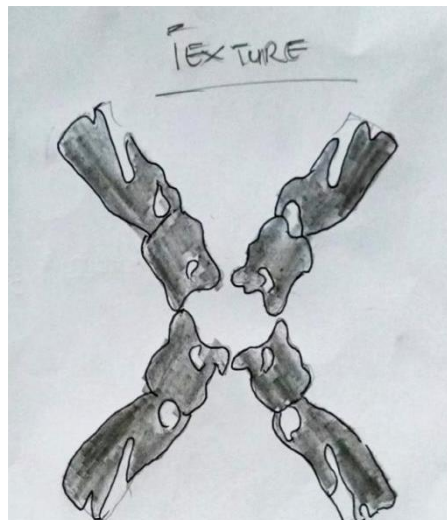
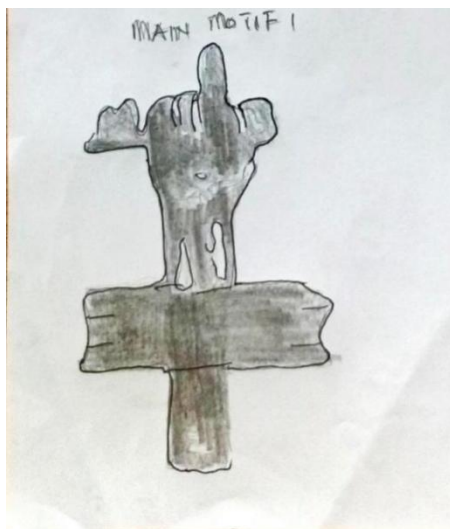


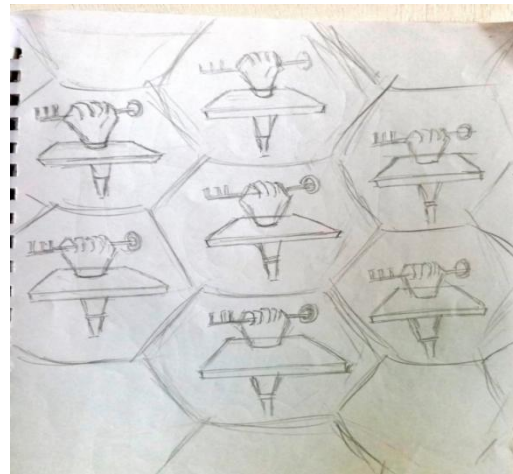
Figure 26: Koklonə tsyə akə də viawo ḍzi

Motif development and arrangement

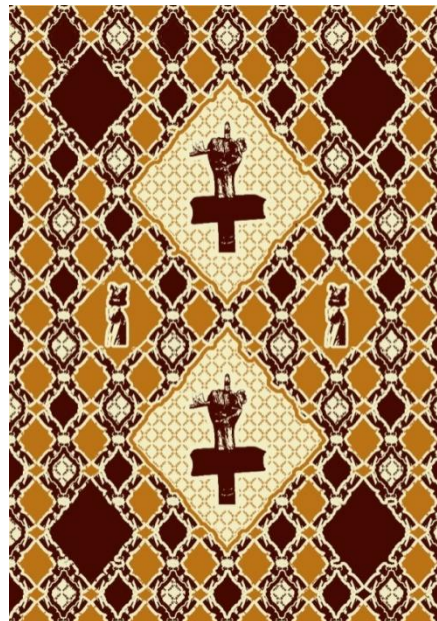
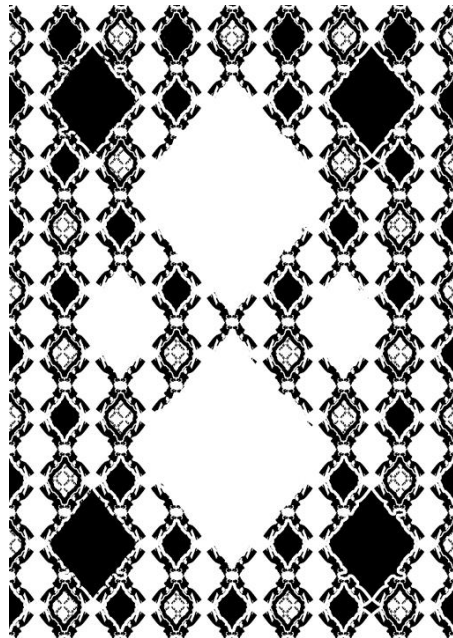
The four designs were further developed into main motifs, texture and layout for the cloth production. The procedural steps in idea development were meticulously followed by the researchers together with the sampled fashion designers and volunteered community members. Each of the traditional symbols and their corresponding designs from the idea development phase to the computer-aided designs have been shown below. In the designing the researchers worked with the fashion designers and used the Adobe Photoshop CS6 for the creation of the designs. A background with black and white was first created and was followed by the coloured version. The motifs were then arranged in it.

1. Asi me safui to

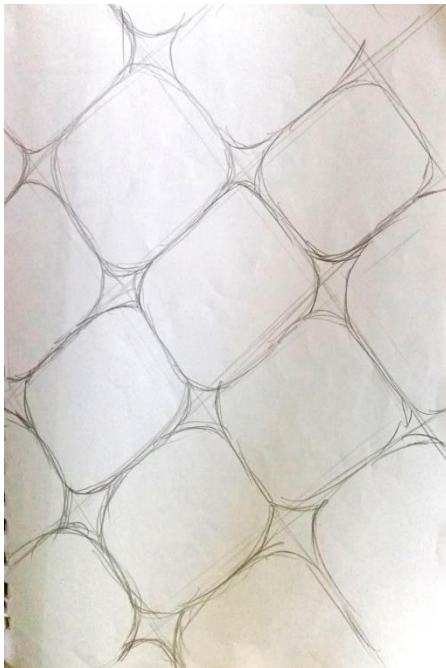
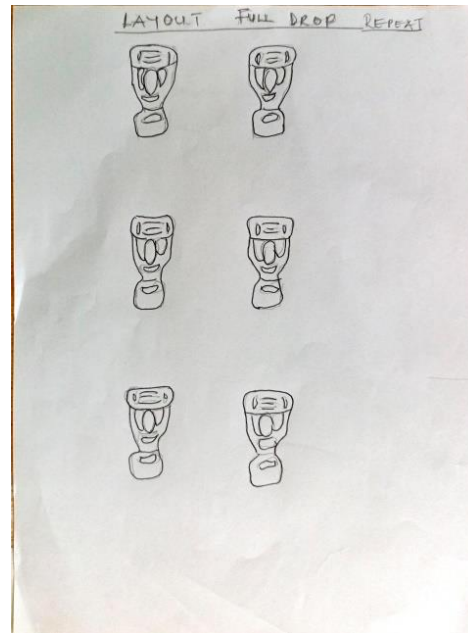
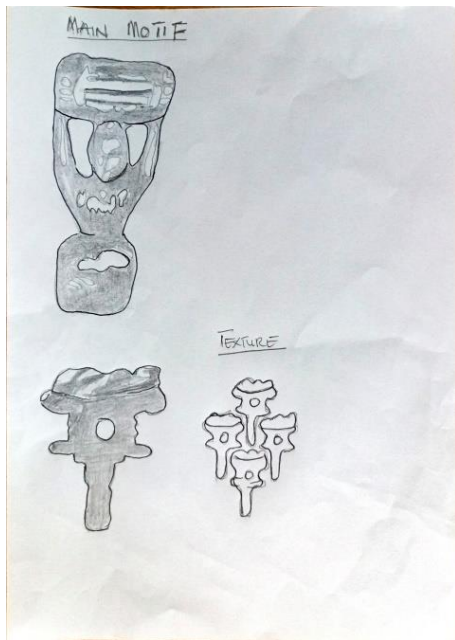




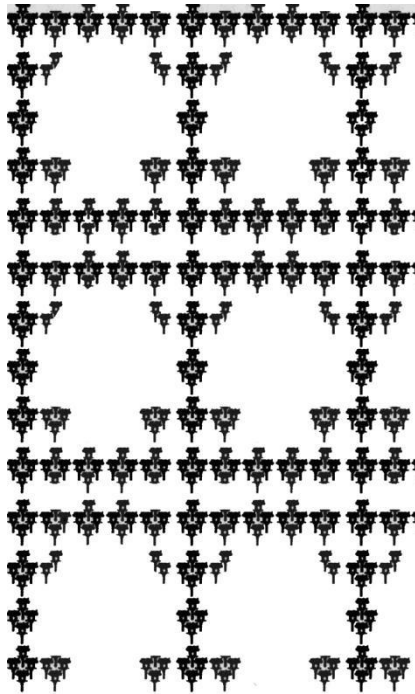
iii. Computer Aided Design



ii. Motif Arrangement

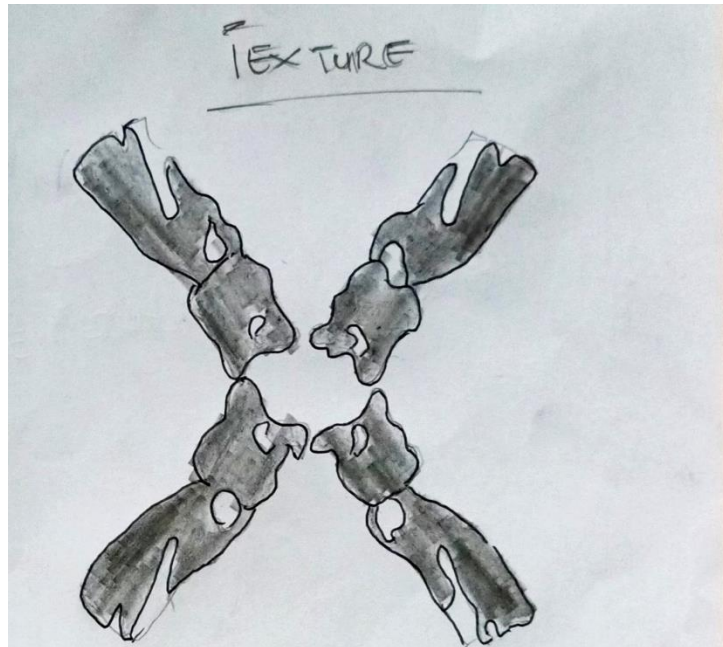


iii. Computer Aided Design

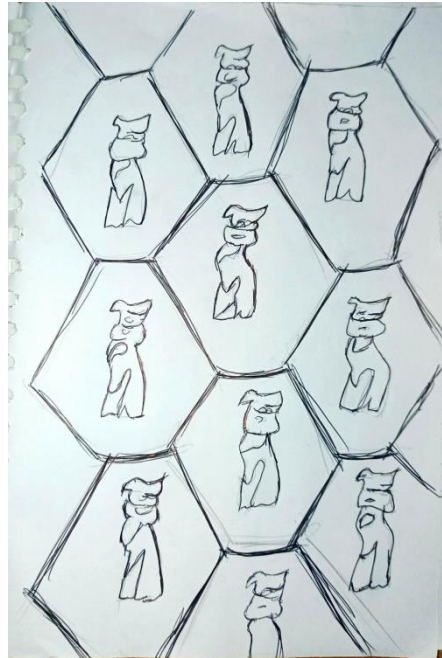
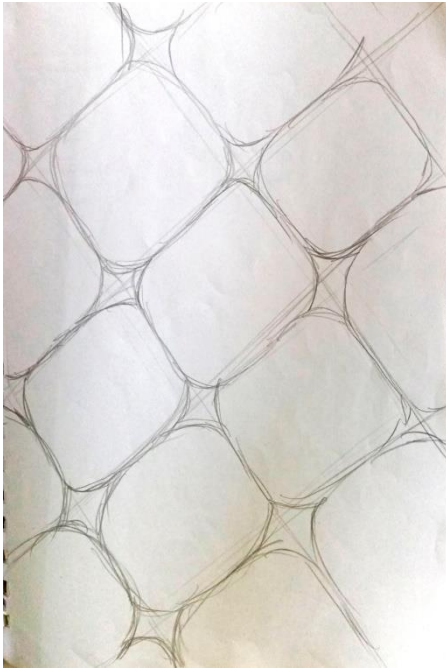


3. Koklonɔ tsyɔ akɔ ɔe viawo ɔzi

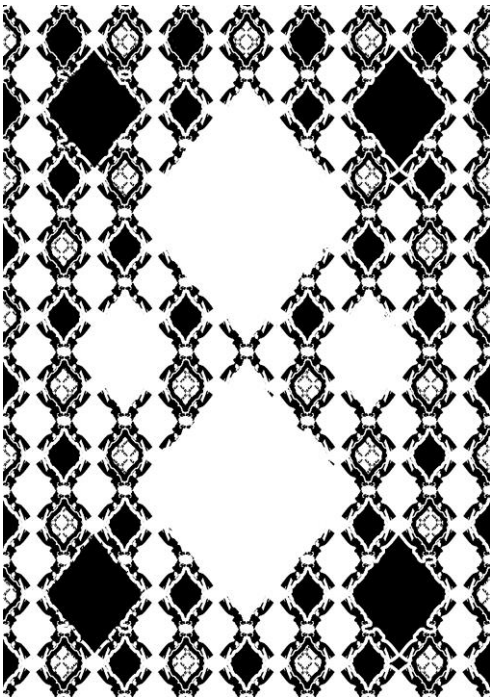
i. Motif Development



ii. Motif Arrangement



iii. Computer Aided Design



The printing process

The screen printing technique was employed for the printing. The design was transferred onto tracing paper and then developed onto a screen by developing it in a dark room. The material chosen for the printing is a cotton blend with polyester. It has the

ability to absorb the printing paste well when printed on. The printing stages began with the laying of the fabric, which was done on a printing table. It was secured using stable pins to prevent it from falling off. Later, registration marks were done on the frame as fabric to ease the printing process. The printing was first colour, and then the second colour. This was done for both clothes. Aside from the printed fabric worn on the body as a cloth (See figures 25 and 26), it was used in producing other functional products such as arm rest and chair backs (See figures 27), and bedside lamp stand (See figure 28).



Figure 27: Printed Cloth of the *Nyonu le dugo de ta* (A brave woman carrying the gunpowder) Motif

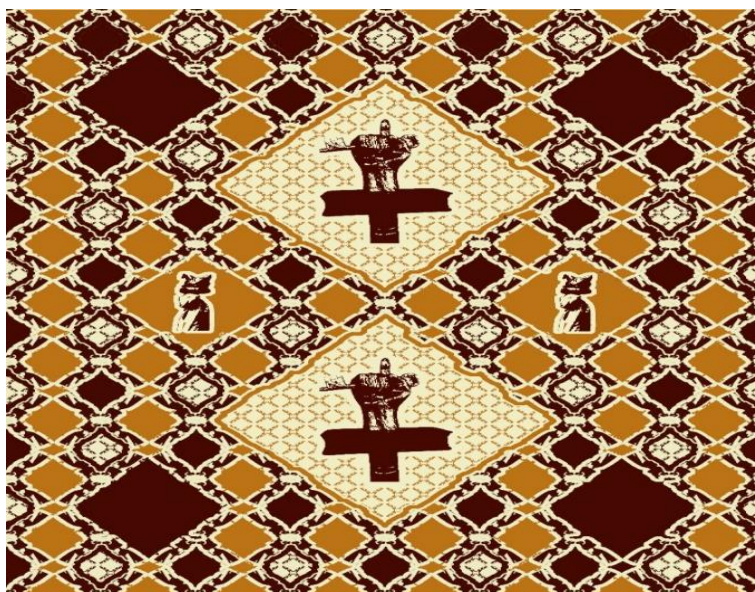


Figure 28: Printed Cloth of the *Asi me safui to* (A hand holding a key) motif

Designing and producing male wear garments with Gbi traditional symbols involves integrating culturally significant motifs into contemporary fashion. These garments can range from every day wear to formal attire, each infused with elements that reflect the rich heritage of the Gbi people. By thoughtfully incorporating Gbi traditional symbols into male wear garments, designers can create unique, culturally enriched fashion pieces that honor and celebrate the heritage of the Gbi people while appealing to modern tastes.



Figure 29: Printed fabric worn as a Cloth by a Male

Designers are able to produce distinctive and culturally rich fashion designs that commemorate the Gbi people's heritage and appeal to modern fashion tastes by combining Gbi traditional symbols into clothing intended for women.

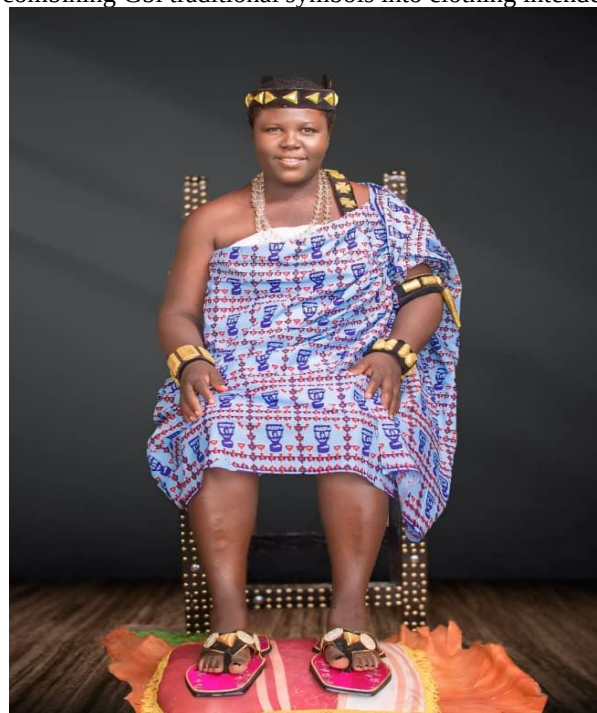


Figure 30: Printed fabric worn as a Cloth by a Female



Figure 31: Armrest and chair backs

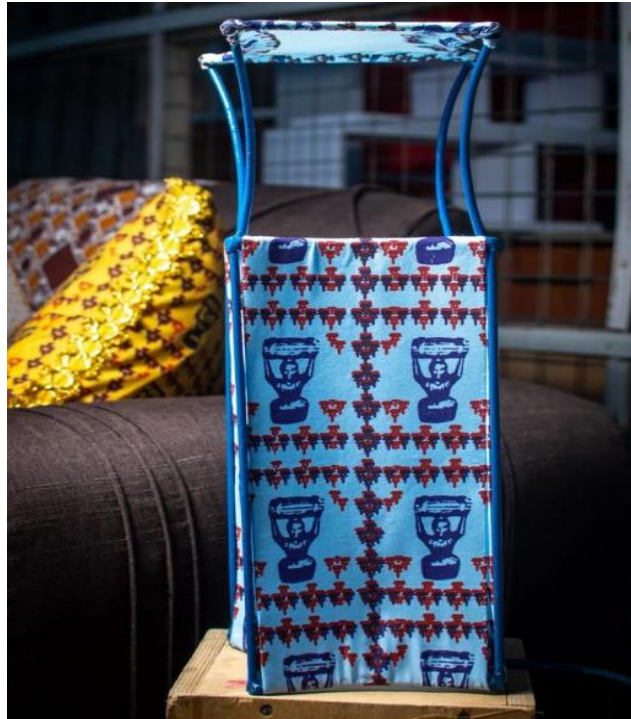


Figure 32: Bedside lamp stand

The study has discussed various Gbi traditional symbols and unearthed their literal and philosophical meanings and potential use as motifs in garment and textile production. One notable symbol is the pineapple on a stool with a snake wound around it. This imagery, as explained by Togbe Agbenya II, conveys a complex message about leadership and the inherent challenges. The pineapple, known for its sweetness, represents the desirable aspects of chieftaincy—prestige, respect, and authority. However, the snake, an enemy coiled around it, symbolizes the dangers and obstacles that come with leadership. Friends and close associates, much like the snake, can pose significant threats. Leaders are cautioned not to act impulsively on advice or sensational stories, as this could lead to their downfall and abandonment by their allies (Walker, & Kutsyuruba, 2016). The message is clear: leadership requires careful consideration, wisdom, and discernment.

Another powerful symbol is that of brave woman carrying gunpowder. This imagery underscores the trust and reliability placed in women within the community, particularly during times of war. The linguist describes women as smart and cunning, capable of safeguarding crucial resources like gunpowder from the enemy. This proverb suggests that in life, certain responsibilities and valuables are better entrusted to women, who may possess a strategic advantage in protection and deception (Steinmetz, Pimentel, & Goe, 2021). It challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the critical role women play in the survival and success of the community.

A hand holding a key is a symbol of unity and collective strength. During a period of internal conflict at the war front, the chief gathered his warriors and emphasized the importance of unity. He warned that division would lead to their defeat by the enemy (Collins, 2023). This symbol teaches that strength lies in solidarity; only through unity can great things be achieved, and adversities be overcome. This principle of unity has been a cornerstone for the Gbi people, guiding them through numerous challenges and threats to their existence.

The chameleon, known for its ability to change color, symbolizes patience and adaptability. The linguist uses this symbol to teach the importance of patience and the need to understand and adapt to one's environment. Life's journey is not smooth; it is filled with ups and downs, akin to hills and valleys. Acting hastily can lead to destruction, whereas patience can overcome significant obstacles (Vince, 2014). The chameleon's behavior serves as a metaphor for the need to learn and adapt to varying circumstances, promoting the idea that patience is essential for long-term success and stability.

Screen printing is a revered and widely used method for transferring intricate designs onto various materials, including fabric (Huang, & Zhu, 2019). This technique, known for its versatility and durability, involves the use of a mesh screen, ink, and a squeegee to create detailed and vibrant prints. In the context of textile production, screen printing offers an excellent medium for showcasing traditional motifs and symbols, particularly those with cultural significance.

The journey of creating a beautiful textile begins with the design of the motif. For this project, motifs were carefully selected from the symbols used by traditional chiefs in the protection of their community. These symbols hold great value and play significant roles in the cultural and spiritual life of the community. Each motif was thoughtfully chosen and arranged to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the fabric while maintaining its cultural integrity.

Once the motifs were finalized, the next step involved transferring the design onto tracing paper. This intermediate step is crucial for precision and accuracy in the final print. The tracing paper design was then developed onto a screen in a dark room. This development process, essential in screen printing, ensures that the design is properly etched onto the screen, ready for the application of ink. The material chosen for this screen printing project was a cotton blend with polyester. This specific blend was selected for its excellent absorption properties, which allow it to hold the printing, paste well; resulting in vibrant and long-lasting prints (Khattab, Rehan, & Hamouda, 2018). The preparation of the fabric is a meticulous process that begins with laying it out on a printing table. To ensure stability and precision during the printing process, the fabric is secured using stable pins. Registration marks are then made on the frame and fabric, which aid in aligning the design accurately during the printing stages.

The screen printing process involves multiple stages of ink application to build the final design. This project followed a two-color printing process. The first colour was applied, allowed to dry, and then the second color was printed over it. This layering technique not only adds depth and dimension to the design but also allows for the creation of more complex and visually appealing patterns. Each layer of ink is carefully applied using a squeegee, which pushes the ink through the mesh screen onto the fabric. The result of this intricate and carefully managed process is a beautifully printed textile that showcases the traditional motifs of the community's chiefs. The use of screen printing not only preserves the cultural significance of these symbols but also brings them into a contemporary context, making them accessible and appreciated in modern fashion and design.

4. CONCLUSION

The cultural wisdom and symbolism of the Gbi people of Ghana are vividly illustrated through their traditional proverbs and sayings, which encapsulate deep insights into their values, beliefs, and philosophies. This rich tapestry of cultural heritage is explored through various symbols, each conveying profound teachings that have been passed down through generations. The combination of traditional motifs with a reliable printing technique like screen printing highlights the blend of cultural heritage and modern craftsmanship. Integrating Gbi traditional symbols into contemporary fashion bridges cultural heritage with modern aesthetics. The unique fashion pieces created honor the Gbi heritage while appealing to contemporary tastes. The design process involved engaging with cultural experts, fashion designers, and all key stakeholders in the Gbi traditional community to ensure accurate representation. Screen printing is used for its precision and ability to produce vibrant prints, ensuring cultural narratives and values are embedded in each piece. This fusion of tradition and modernity preserves Gbi heritage, making it relevant in today's society and enabling younger generations to connect with their roots through fashion. Textile and fashion designers in Ghana must ensure the use of traditional symbols in contemporary textile and fashion production processes to help in their promotion and their use as a medium for educating the youth especially of the rich Ghanaian cultural heritage. Designers contribute to a broader understanding and appreciation of Gbi culture while advancing contemporary fashion. Future studies could look at the exploration of the other Gbi traditional symbols evident in their rich cultural heritage such as folklores, proverbs, folksongs and others. Such designs could be experimented with other textile production techniques.

5. FUNDING

There was no internal or external funding for this paper.

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