

Cultural symbols in textile production and nation building in Nigeria

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Abstract: The study examined cultural symbols in textile production and nation building in Nigeria with the thesis that the preservation of a nation's culture is synonymous with nation building. People's culture is a function of the environment in which they are situated physically and naturally. Nigeria is yet to annex her cultural imperatives for nation building, especially through the vehicle of textile production and the associated designs which are the objective and fulcrum around which this study revolves. Practice led studio approach was used in the production of both the mpi-enyi and mbor batiks. In the findings, the significance of mpi-enyi and mbor cultural symbols in the exploration of batik textile design was highlighted and their usage explained. Also, the role of cultural symbols in textile production and nation building through cultural preservation, annexation of development, moral education, preservation of instruments for orderly social mobility, and economic development was explained. The study, therefore, concluded that the preservation of a nation's culture is a sine qua non for nation building. It was therefore recommended that Nigeria should place much premium on her cultural imperatives through the cultural preservation of her artefacts for the requisite nation building.

Key words: Cultural Symbols, Indigenous textiles, mpi-enyi, mbor, Nation building

1. Introduction

Textile is woven or non-woven products made from natural or synthetic fibres. The textile industry occupies a strategic position in the development of national economies. For instance, it provides employment and generates foreign exchange when exported. A lot of people are employed in the textile industry at various stages of the value chain. It also plays a significant role in revenue generation in the Nigerian economy. Due to the level of Nigeria's technological development, the Federal Government put in place policy measures aimed at restricting the importation of foreign textiles into the country in order to protect the infant domestic textile industry. Indigenous or domestic textiles are textiles or fabrics made up of high-quality materials interwoven with aspects of the people's traditions, history, and cultural innovations. Domestic textiles therefore, possess some elements of peoples' culture and their ways of life. In North Eastern Region of India for example, handwoven indigenous or domestic textiles represented some ethnic and religious symbols. This implies that symbols of peoples' culture which reflect both the material and non-material aspects of their culture could be explored in the production of indigenous or domestic textiles. Kristin (2018) argued that the nature of fabrics was such that the designs on them could be leveraged by their wearers to communicate or pass some vital information about some cultural practices to a wider audience directly or indirectly. For instance, in Southern Iraq, Fatemeh et al. (2019) observed that a significant proportion of the motifs used on their fabrics have symbolic meanings. The inseparability of communication and culture and the fact that most of our human communication is done through symbolic

means (words, signs, and symbols) learned through culture, enhances the transmission of the meanings, virtues, norms, and values systems encapsulated in the cultural symbols from one generation to another when they are adapted into fabrics worn by the people of a particular culture (Anyanwu, 2021). These aspects of indigenous textiles could be leveraged for national identity and nation building.

Cultural symbols play significant roles in indigenous textile because of their cultural implications

In Ghana, the adinkra symbols were filled with philosophical ideals that promoted proper and insightful understanding of the values, norms, and beliefs of the indigenous Ghanaians (Adom, 2016). Udechukwu (2019) in her study observed that some motifs like kola nuts, gong, symbolized different things in Igbo culture. Deriving from such symbolizations, Jhanji (2021) therefore, argued for the need to encourage the production and distribution of cultural fabrics in order to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the people. In other words, he advocated for the utility and exploration of indigenous textiles in nation building. Given the financial implications, such impetus could only come from governmental quarters through the sponsorship of research and development geared towards modernization of indigenous textiles. Such modernization of local arts could not only constitute significant changes to the textile products but could influence the communal or national setting, as the case may be (Scrase, 2003). However, in Otavalo, Ecuador, modernization of their indigenous textiles tremendously assisted in the revitalization of the community through the opening of commercial opportunities. This scenario could be leveraged upon in the socioeconomic development of the Nigerian nation. Unfortunately, studies geared towards the utilization of cultural symbols in textiles production (Negi, Anita & Anupriya, 2015; Mohamad, Suleman, Sukma & Agus, 2018; Sudana & Naini, 2015; Odey, Saliu, Achukwu & Olashina, 2018; Anyanwu, Chukueggu & Orubu, 2022a,b,c) and their roles in nation building are scanty. This research work on the use of cultural symbols in textiles production and nation building in Nigeria hopes to fill this gap in knowledge using batik textile exploration. This study, therefore, provides answers to the following questions: What are indigenous textiles? How are cultural symbols used in textile production? and What are their roles in nation building?

2. Indigenous textiles

Indigenous textiles are fabrics woven, dyed, or produced using local skills by a particular group of people and are a vital part of their cultural heritage. They are often used for both decorative and functional purposes, and can be made using a variety of techniques, such as block printing, free-hand painting, and transfer printing. Their significance derives from the fact that they represent the history, beliefs, and philosophies of a particular group of people. They are a crucial way of preserving a group's cultural heritage through the transmission of their customs and traditions to other generations.

For instance, the indigenous Ghanaian textiles are known for their vibrant rhythms and motifs, which constitute an essential part of the country's cultural heritage and are used in numerous cultural activities. Examples of Nigerian indigenous textiles produced using indigenous techniques and hand tools include Adire (tie dye and batik), Ankara (wax prints), Aso-oke, and Akwete. They are often made from cotton and are produced using indigenous techniques and hand tools.

3. Research methodology

The research design engaged in this study was the practice led studio research approach. Most commonly, this approach entailed two different areas. The two components are not autonomous, but interrelated. A better way of appreciating this methodology is to view it as an approach that permits the researcher to integrate his/her creative practices into the research which legitimizes the knowledge they disclose and countersigns the methodologies as well as the research implements that are representative of the discipline.

For the purpose of this study, Igbo cultural symbols were transmitted on the fabric through the waxing method. The waxed fabric is allowed to get toughened and then immersed in a dye bath for a definite period. The colored fabric is removed from the dye bath and allowed to oxidize for a stated time. The fabric is then plunged in a pot of boiling water and stimulated until the wax is smelted out of the fabric. It is then cleaned and spread to dry. Finally, the designed fabric is starched and ironed to make it have sharp look.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Description of Studio Production Methods

The process and procedure that was used to produce the practical studio works were: making available the materials for the work, such as dye, caustic soda, hydros, paraffin wax, dye bath, stencil paper, starch, and pressing iron. The studio production method began with tying and dyeing five yards' of fabric. The fabric was manipulated, bounded so that during the dyeing process, some parts resisted the dye. These dyed and undyed areas formed unusual texture and pattern on the cloth which formed the background designs.

The second stage was the cutting of stencil with Igbo cultural symbols, their transference on the fabric through the waxing method. The third stage was the submergence of the waxed fabric into the dye bath for a dying process. The next stage was to unwaxing these fabrics by dipping the waxed fabric in the pot of boiling water and stirred until the wax is completely removed. The final stage was to starch, dry and iron the fabric for a sharp look.

4.2. Development of Thumbnail Sketches

Thumbnail sketches were produced through reflections and carefully viewing the photographs of surroundings, events and issues. Materials such as wooden pencil, ink and pen were used. Thus, the preliminary thumbnail sketches below were developed and used for the production of the indigenous textile design in this research:

Thumbnail sketches of *Mpi Enyi* Symbol



Figure 1: Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe, Title: *Mpi Enyi (Elephant's Horn)*
Medium: Pen on Paper, Size: 30 x 20cm, Year of Production: 2021

Thumbnail sketches of *Mbor* Symbol

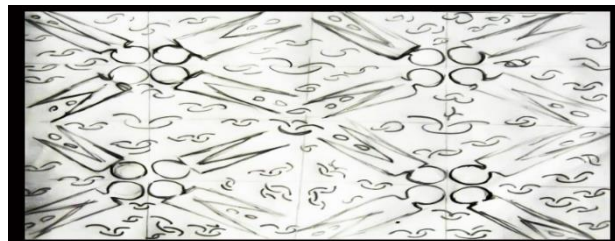


Figure 2: Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe, Title: *Mbor(Comb)*
Medium: Pen on Paper, Size:30 x20cm, Year of production: 2021

4.5 Analysis of *Mpi Enyi* Symbol



Figure 3: Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe, Title: *Mpi Enyi (Elephant's Horn)*
Medium: Batik Design, Size: 5 yards, Year of Production: 2021

The sources of these horns were from dead animals such as goats. The horn called *Odu-okike* which is hollowed is obtained from dead elephants. This horn is culturally important because only honorable men in the Southeast use them. It demonstrates the power of the king.

Horns are weapons of animals and in Igbo culture, *Mpi* or horns are symbols of power and attack. Therefore, the batik work titled *Mpi Enyi* contains these decorative elements on fabrics designed with this Igbo cultural symbol ostensibly to demonstrate the strength of the aristocrat or titled men in exercising their authority in nation building. In the absence of such strength and coercive authority represented by the *mpi-enyi motif* there will not be much significant difference between the ordinary Igbo man and a titled authority. Therefore, the *mpi-enyi* is a distinctive feature and symbol of strength and power in Igbo cultural setting which differentiates an Igbo titled man from others.

Horns are sourced from the bones of wild animals in Igbo land. The respects and utility of any horn is dependent on the type of wild animal from where these horns were sourced from. The societal social commitments in Igbo land is a function of the cultural symbolism attached to the wild animal from where these horns were sourced from. Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria therefore leverage the utility of these musical instruments in taking titles such as *ichi ozo* and in distinguishing themselves in certain social gatherings like marriage or burial ceremonies and similar activities. Horns are animals' weapons, that symbolized strength and weapon of aggression at the disposal of the title holder both in dignity and divinity.

For instance, the picture of *ikenga* Igbo in any Igbo setting depicts the regalia of a warrior wearing the horn and wielding a sharp knife in the right hand while holding a human trophy head on the left hand. This tradition must have been the offshoots of an ancient practice when the Igbo people were head hunters. The major characteristics of Igbo altars include the presence of sharp horns. Some of these horns such as ram horns are spiral or straight and decoratively curved with symbols of animals perching on them. These are symbols of aristocratic power.

The trumpets derived from the animal horns or bones is a status symbol of distinction in Igbo culture. The horn called *Odu-Okike* and *Odu- Mkpalo* is produced from elephant tusk. For a distinctive recognition in social status, the *Odu-Okike* and *Odu-mkpalo* which are carved out from Elephant tusks are indispensable in Igbo culture. Much premium is placed on these three symbolic trumpets among the Igbo people both for social mobility and as a status symbols.

Analysis of *Mbor* Symbol



Figure 4: Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe, Title: *Mbor*, Medium: Batik Design, Size: 5 yards, Year of Production: 2021

The batik work titled *Mbor* (Figure 4) is an indigenous textile production with Igbo cultural symbols for nation building. *Mbor* means comb and generally, combs disentangle as they sieve out bits of wreckage. They are believed to put things back in order. Combs are used on heads, and so they symbolically would bond or organize philosophies and views. Therefore, the message of the comb is synonymous with the unification of ideas for efficient service delivery, especially among women who most often use the comb, and doing this would inevitably offer some lucidity. The arrangements of the combs also depict its communication on the fabric for attractiveness.

5. Role of Cultural Symbols in Textile Production and Nation Building

There are nations based on ethnicity or those who share a common culture and tradition. In this paper, nation-building will be construed to mean the development of ethnic or civic national identity established through the mechanism of a common historical background, shared symbolism as seen in the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria.

5.1. Nation Building through Cultural Preservation

Indigenous textiles like the *mpi-enyi* motif (a cultural identity of the Igbo nation) batik were produced with Igbo cultural symbols in order to preserve that aspect of their culture through indigenous textile design and by so doing, the Igbo and Nigerian nation are being built simultaneously. The Igbo ethnic nation is part of the civic nation called Nigeria. Without the Igbo ethnic nation, the civic nation Nigeria will not be complete. In order to build the nation of Nigeria, the constituent parts must first be built. Therefore, efforts made at the preservation of cultural symbols of Igbo culture through indigenous textile production are geared towards building the Igbo nation and by extension, the Nigerian nation. A nation is destroyed when their culture is destroyed and built when their culture is preserved.

5.2. Nation Building by Annexing Development through Cultural Symbols in Textiles Production

Furthermore, culture, according to Egwemi (2009), ultimately holds the key to progress development. Europeans, Americans, and the Asian Tigers placed much premium on their culture. However, Nigeria is yet to annex her own cultural capacities (Akanle, 2012) for nation building. This, therefore, makes the revival of Igbo cultural symbols through fabric design, very urgent and compelling in their current efforts at nation building. Indigenous textile production using Igbo cultural symbols like *mpi-enyi* (Igbo symbol of strength, Divine authority and power) and *mbor* (comb) (which in Igbo is a symbol of unification of ideas for efficient service delivery) are modest efforts at reviving the meanings and implications of these Igbo cultural symbols. The lessons to be transmitted to the forthcoming generations who may ask for their meanings remain the fact that

the Igbo nation are very powerful people whose authorities are divine, and in their dealings with humanity, they remain articulate and organized. It goes to portray the Igbo nation as hardworking people who employ their God given strength to advance their course. Such spirit of hard work is urgently needed in all spheres of life in Nigeria if the nation must come out of the current economic predicament.

5.3. Nation Building through Moral Education from Cultural Symbols

As pointed out earlier, the transmission of the meanings, virtues, norms, and value systems embedded in cultural symbols from one generation to another could easily be achieved when they are adapted into fabrics worn by the people of a particular culture (Anyanwu, 2021). This further enhances the utility of cultural symbols in textile design in building the morals of the younger generation and is useful in building the Nigerian nation. There is a total of fifteen *Adinkra* cultural motifs and symbols that could be leveraged for cultural textile design.

Heathcot (1979), in the study of Hausa crafts of dress embroidery, unveiled many West African designs and motifs. Such designs and motifs mirror the society and could be used in educating members of a society about their culture. Indeed, such cultural education would naturally include positive aspects of the cultures that engender harmonious living and amenable to economic development. Moral education is an indispensable aspect of education especially in these days of globalization and societal moral degeneration.

5.4. Nation Building through Preservation of Instruments for Orderly Social Mobility

The *mpi-enyi*, and other similar horns being a status symbol in Igbo land needed to be preserved through mechanisms such as textile design as it offers the people an orderly method of social mobility and ascending positions of responsibility. Certain responsibilities must be performed by certain individuals in a given society and there must exist an orderly system to select such individuals from the society.

To Olakunle (2020), humanity is known for competition for better life. Indeed, lofty positions is not meant for everyone and as such there is constant displacement (called social mobility) of people either from bottom to the top or the other way round in status.

Through the production of cultural symbols in textile design such as the *mpi-enyi*, or the likes, such competitions are engendered in Igbo land as people aspire to hold the *mpi-enyi* in social gatherings and whoever that is privileged to be on top exercises the requisite authority which makes for order, peace and prosperity which are necessary ingredients in nation building. No nation can prosper in the midst of anarchy or disorder. The *mpi-enyi* is held by titled men in Igbo land who exercise the authorities of their various offices and they are respected in different social gatherings.

Naturally, everybody will not exercise the authorities ascribable to the holder of *mpi-enyi* at the same time. Therefore, every individual would strive through competition and hard work to achieve their targets (Johnson, 2013). The different types of *mpi* (horns) held by different men performs different functions in Igbo land as outlined above which makes for orderliness in nation building.

5.5. Nation Building through Economic Development

When cultural symbols used in textile designs are produced in large quantity, the country so concerned will not only enjoy economy of scale in production but their foreign exchange capacities would be boosted. Furthermore, an increase in the cultural symbols in textile design goes a long way in boosting economic development as it increases youth employment.

6. Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion

6.1. Summary

This study examined cultural symbols in textile production and nation building in Nigeria. Textiles and textile products play significant roles in the Nigerian economy. Culture has been defined. Domestic textiles possess some elements of peoples' culture and their ways of life, implying that symbols of peoples' culture which reflect both the material and non-material aspects of their culture, could be explored in the production of such textiles. Also, the nature of fabrics shows that the designs on them could be leveraged upon by their wearers to communicate or pass some vital information about some cultural motifs and their symbolic meanings to a wider audience directly or indirectly. In addition, studies have shown the inseparability of communication and culture and the fact that most of our human communication is done through symbolic means (words, signs, and symbols) especially when they are adapted into fabrics worn by the people of a particular culture. Therefore, through the symbolizations of rich cultural heritages, some scholars advocated for the encouragement of the production and distribution of cultural fabrics which not only boosts the economy but goes a long way in building the nation. This is because the preservation of a nation's culture is synonymous with nation building. The Europeans, Americans, as well as the Asian Tigers, placed much premium on their cultural imperatives. It does appear that Nigeria is yet to annex the culture of her people as a veritable social capital for nation building especially through the vehicle of cultural symbols in textile production and the associated designs. This, therefore, makes the revival of Igbo cultural symbols through fabric design, very urgent and compelling. Numerous messages, beliefs, virtues, useful moral lessons, ancient wisdom, and knowledge are encapsulated in the cultural symbols that are currently on the verge of being swept away through cultural erosion. Efforts must be made to distil and drink from the wisdom of the ancient and our forebears so as to avoid the tragedy of losing our foundation and cultural identity.

Therefore, the preservation of Igbo cultural heritages such as artifacts and motifs like *mpi-enyi* and *mbor* plays the dual role of promoting past ways of life. These were useful in those days, and therefore the contemporary Igbo societies should sustain them. When the benefits of our cultural heritages are properly annexed, they will naturally boost our nation building. Cultural symbols such as *mpi-enyi* and *mbor* were explored in textile production and nation building in Nigeria using the research methodology of the practice-led studio approach. Results of the findings showed that domestic textiles could be produced using *mpi-enyi* and *mbor* cultural symbols. Findings also showed that the cultural implications of *mpi-enyi* and *mbor* symbols could be preserved through textile design. The role of cultural symbols in textile production and nation building through cultural preservation, annexation of development, moral education, preservation of instruments for orderly social mobility, and economic development were explained.

6.2. Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that Nigeria should place much premium on her cultural imperatives through the cultural preservation of her artefacts for the requisite nation building.

6.3. Conclusion

From the findings, the preservation of a nation's culture, such as Nigeria, is synonymous with Nigeria's nation building through economic development, moral education, preservation of instruments for orderly social mobility, and many more.

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