

UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE OKRIKA IRIA FESTIVAL DESIGNS AS MOTIFS IN TEXTILE FABRIC DESIGN.

By

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Abstract

This paper focused on the unique features of Okrika Iria festival designs as motifs in textile fabric design. The Iria ceremony is a medium of a traditional form of highlighting the rich cultural values of the Okrika people through which girls of puberty age transition to womanhood. The study, therefore, seeks to document the Iria Ceremony by using the elements and principles of design through batik techniques. This study aims to explore the Iria festival of the Okrika people as motifs on fabrics. The theoretical frameworks for this study are symbolic interactionism and aesthetic theory. Related literatures were reviewed. The design for this study is a studio exploratory and experimental approach. Data were gathered through Primary and Secondary sources. Different sketches of Iria festival motifs were developed and used for the production of fabrics using batik techniques. The findings reveal that the Iria festival of the Okrika People suffers from inadequate documentation. The study concludes that documenting the Iria cultural festival of Okrika people helps to promote, preserve and sustain the Iria culture of Okrika people in Rivers State. The study recommends that further exploration and experimentation using batik techniques should be carried out to document other aspects of Okrika cultural heritage visually.

Keywords: Okrika, Iria, festival, motifs, textile.

Introduction

Okrika is one of the ancient City State of the Niger Delta. It is presently located in two of the 23 Local Government Areas of Rivers State, Nigeria. Some of its towns and communities are situated in the Port Harcourt City Local Government Area. The two main Okrika speaking Local Government are Okrika and Ogu/ Bolo, they lie between latitudes four degrees thirty five minutes (4 35) and four degrees fifty minutes (4 55) north of the equator and longitudes, six degrees fifty minutes (6 50) and seven degrees fifteen minutes (7 15) east of the Meridian. This is entirely within the tidal saltwater zone of Eastern Niger Delta, characterised by rivers, rivulets and winding creeks. Okrika's neighbours include Kalabari to the west, Eleme and the Ogoni to the East, Diobu (Ikwerre) to the North and Ibani (Bonny) to the South. Their occupation includes fishing, farming and trading.

Body painting is a colourful art used by various African cultures to celebrate, protect, and mourn. Traditionally, body paint was mixed from natural ingredients and smoothed on the skin with fingers, sticks, or grasses. Oil, clay, and chalk were the most common paint ingredients. Specific colours are used to indicate certain periods in a person's life, such as puberty, courting, and marriage, among other things. Berber women in northern Africa paint their hands and feet with intricate henna designs called *siyala* for their weddings. (Henna is a reddish powder or paste made from the dried leaves of the henna bush.) However, body painting is used not only for special occasions among some African groups. For example, Nupe men between the ages of seventeen and thirty living in southern Sudan wear body paint to indicate their age and apply full body decorations as a kind of daily outfit (Kryolan, 2016). The author posits that in the art of body decoration, colour depicts various things. It symbolises situations, conditions and events. It can be used to convey a sense of awe or reverence. For example, red stands for fertility and marriage, yellow stands for sickness, white stands for purity or magic, and black and indigo dyes are generally used depending on the occasion.

Nigeria is a land of cultural diversity, and this is expressed by the differences in their beauty aids, despite their apparent cultural fusion. Among the people of Borno State, for example, Kanuris adopt a special way of beautifying their bodies through hair treatment, skin cleansing and

body makeup. They engage in a type of body decoration known as *henna* art. Henna art is a common name for a small shrub whose leaves are used to dye. The orange-red dye produced from henna leaves is used to dye the body red. It is also used to stain finger nails, the top of the fingers, feet, chest, hair, and dye the beards by men. Henna dye is used in most parts of Northern Nigeria, though it was once popular among women in the South. It is used during pre-marriage ceremony, known as, "The night of henna" (Moses, 2014).

The Iria ritual is performed by the Okrika Tribe in Nigeria. Young women between the ages of 14 and 16 are the celebrants in the ritual. This is the age that they believe is right for marriage. Soon after they have to undergo a painful installation of brass-ring leggings. These limit leg movements for 3 weeks while each celebrant is fed well and fattened in a confined room. After those weeks of confinement, they throw a party with booths decorated by their families with photos and expensive clothing.

To begin the Iria ceremony, in what they call the market square, the celebrants have to unveil their bodies in public view. Those who can afford the Iria ceremony often get sacred art paintings on their bodies to make them feel less exposed.

Throughout history, fashion and textiles have reflected the influence of culture and conventions by the inclusion of popular motif designs. The African cultural heritage is endowed with a lot of cultural values and beliefs that are deeply intertwined with African art. The character, civility and the ideology of every nation and for that matter man is an important ingredient to the surge of history and the centre of customary formality of families. Over time, colour options and fabric choices and garment designs for bride gowns have expanded. Today, fabrics such as crepe, silk, lace, and satin are used which also include colours such as gold, pink, orange, maroon, brown and yellow. The garment design has also undergone an intriguing metamorphosis with a lot of variation in style and extent of the decoration.

Mimiko (2010) asserts that our cultural heritages have been watered down by western civilization. Gone are the days where life was treasured and values were welcome and held with high level of respect. As at then,

parents hid their faces in shame when their daughters were found to be non-virgins by their husbands during wedlock. As further noted by Dare (2010), "the notions of chastity and virginity have been rendered absurd and the moral excellence of Africa and Nigeria society has overnight transformed into moral decay" Elders are no longer respected; our rich cultural festivals and ceremonies are now seen as "old school". Civilisation was just another concept of domination: imposition of incoming new culture over traditional cultural values". It is imperative to note basically that crucial and more significant steps need to be engaged to reorder and inverse this momentary trend of cultural emptiness, without which Africa may see periods of cultural loss and dearth of African values. Hence, exploration of the Iria body decoration motif of the Okrika people on fabric is the concept of this study.

The loss of the rich iria culture

All countries around the world have their peculiar traditions, customs, and cultures. Africa as a continent has several traditions and cultures, which differ from one country to the other. It is noteworthy to mention that even in a country that has different state; each region has its own peculiar culture. Adorning the body with paints and dyes, both temporary and permanent, has been a wide practice around the globe and across centuries. The purpose for these decorations has ranged from culturally significant rituals and ceremonies to simple beautification practices. It has been noted that a man's right lies in his sureness and disposition, which is greatly fostered by his culture. Man is fundamentally the invention of his culture. Culture beats and forms a person into a specific shape. It helps one think, speak, dance and behave in a certain way. Nigeria as a country has several language groups and cultures that are unique to the people (Jackson, 2018).

These cultures might not categorically be the same amidst all countries and even inside a country, several cultures exist but there are structures that distinguish Africans from other people of the world. The subject at this point is that any person with hunger for the African culture today will accept as true that, the very measureable, spiritual and appealing traditional attire of African people had been cracked by western civilization. Present generation seems not to take into cognizance the relevance of tradition and culture. More so, the government in power seems to pay less courtesy to the tradition. This study has identified that

the culture of the Okrika people including the revered Iria Festival has been greatly influenced by the Western culture. Civilization has affected the production of the Okrika traditional motifs negatively in the sense that the production of these motifs that are beautifully decorated with traditional designs has drastically reduced, thereby leading to the loss of some historical information. The problem of the study therefore is the lack of proper preservation and presentation of the Okrika Iria Festival motifs traditional designs that could serve as means of saving information for the younger generations. The presence of historical crafts activities around Okrika people shows that these skills can be utilized in modern day technology, with time traditional Iria festival motifs will face extinction. It is from the above mentioned therefore that this study seeks to explore the unique features of Iria festival of the Okrika people as motif on fabric: studio experimentation with batik technique.

The Symbolic Interactionist Theory

This theory was propounded by George Herbert Mead an American Philosopher in the year 1934. The theory looks at the relationship between self and the society. It defines how repeated meaningful interactions among individuals come to define the makeup of society from their unique perspective. Micheal J. Carter & Celene Fuller asserted that the main variant of symbolic interaction was developed by Herbert Blummer in the 1950s, blummer brought meads philosophically based social behaviourism to sociology, Blumer's theoretical orientation towards symbolic interactionism is summarized into three perspective: that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them; the meaning of things arises out of social interaction that one has with others; meaning are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process used by a person in dealing with the things they encounter. On the contrary, Manford Kuhn and Sheldon Stryker this theory as process of interaction and viewed behaviour as purposive, socially constructed, coordinated social acts informed by preceding events in the context of projected acts that occur. However, Stryker argued that interaction with individuals sets a normative expectation for action among people. This theory emphasizes that human behaviours are influenced by the definition and meaning that are created and maintained through symbolic interaction with others. The theory also states that people's identity or sense of self is

shaped by social interaction. Societies develop self-concept by observing how others interact and label them.

In relation to this study, based on the ideas derived from the perspective of the scholars being cited, using this theory in this study points out that through the interactions that the Okrika had with the Westerners and a continuous interaction with other culture groups, has created a situation where by the people try to emulate others and also adopt their way of life. However, the attitude of the Westerners socially construed the people into believing that their patterns of living was primitive, they managed to convince the people into accepting that foreign materials is superior to locally made material. This adversely had created a change towards the culture of the people. There was increase in the imitation of the westerners in the aspect of their culture especially in mode of dressing which eventually led to the eradication of indigenous costumes among the Okrika.

Theory of Aesthetics

Immanuel Kant propounded the theory of aesthetics. Kant was born in Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad in Russia) in 1724 to Pietist Lutheran parents. His early education first at a Pietist school and then at the University of Königsberg was in theology, but he soon became attracted by problems in physics, and especially the work of Isaac Newton (Susanto, 1973).

Thus far, Kant's main focus for the discussion of beauty and the sublime has been nature. He now turns to fine art. Kant assumes that the cognition involved in judging fine art is similar to the cognition involved in judging natural beauty. Accordingly, the problem that is new to fine art is not how it is judged by a viewer, but how it is created. The solution revolves around two new concepts: the 'genius' and 'aesthetic ideas' (Saja, 2000).

The fabric to be produced definitely will be appreciated by people. The production process will involve the use of all the element and principles of design. If the fabric is appreciated and loved by people and not being used, the aim will be defeated. It is on that note that the researcher decided not only to use this theory alone because, it does not completely cover the study.

Iria Ceremony

The Okrika Iria Ceremony is an ancient Tradition of the people, this is a Culture valued and respected by the women and entire people of the Okrika Kingdom. *Iria* culture in Okrika is a situation where girls or women usually dressed with different kinds of clothes like “*Igiri*” “*India*” “*Loko*” among others and are also adorn with expensive beads and jewels for the public to see them and appreciate them. According to Kengema (2016:1) *Iria* is a kind of ritual performed with traditional attires, beads and other jewels by a women who is about to get married or had just put to bed a child or lost a love one. *Iria* culture actually promotes and preserves the culture of the people. Rita (2001:1) stated that the *Iria* referred to as fattening room ceremonies and dance. It is a cultural dance and one of the famous cultural activity usually displayed or practiced by the Okrika, Bonny and Opobo women women of the eastern Ijaw tribe of Nigeria. It is a cultural dance for both young and elderly females. Its costuming is basically with textile arts, large and small coral beads on the neck, arm, wrists and ankles. The *Iria* dance serves as a cultural folklore with dignified steps that are breathtaking in any occasion. It is a special ceremony in womenfolk as it pertains to the rites of womanhood and cultural identity. According to Davis (2021) *Iria* Ceremonies is performed mostly during three occasions which includes transition from adolescence to adulthood by women, during child birth and funeral of family member and they are discussed below:

The Concept of Costume

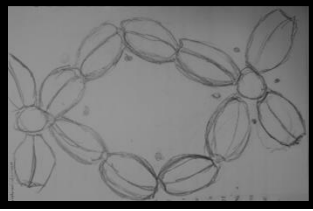
Costume according to the description of this study is described as the appearance or apparels as used by the Okrika people during *Iria* festival. According to Ellen & Joanne (2014), costumes are classified as appearance, clothing, ornaments, adornment and cosmetics as dress. They define dress to be a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears and scented breath, as well as an equal long list of garments, jewellery, accessories and other categories of items added to the body as supplements. This definition is also supported by Odoja & Phil (2016) who assert that dress is a particular style of clothing worn on special occasions when people are to appear in their fineries.

Concept of Batik Production

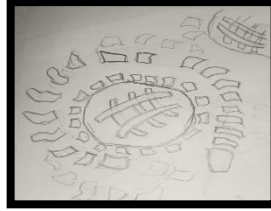
The production of various handcrafted textiles is made possible because of the availability of raw materials. The textile artisans have access to cotton, silk, dyes and imported yarns (Amubode, 2006, Ogunduyile, 2002). Consequently, the handcrafted textile industries flourish in many parts of the Yoruba land. *Aso-oke* is a traditional woven fabric among the Yoruba and it is a form of identity that links generations of the Yoruba race providing employment opportunities for both men and women. Its occupational engagement transcends age, gender and status. Right from the raw materials to then ultimate consumption, its compatibility with the local environment is noteworthy making it a suitable and veritable tool for national development.

Batik involves the application of fluid or semi-fluid substance, which solidifies on the fabric making it impervious to dye penetration and later removed. In batik, the resist is obtained by applying hot wax to either sides or only one side of the fabric. Once removed, it gives the pattern or design on the fabric. The wax areas repel or resist dye penetration. Contemporary batik technique is divided into two types; *kampala* and cassava resist method. In *kampala* technique, chantor chap (a small copper tipped hollow pen with a bamboo stem or wooden handle) is dipped into hot wax and spills wax smoothly on the fabric. A wooden stamp of engraved motif or brush can also be used to transfer design on the fabric. After thorough waxing the cloth is then dyed. The dyed cloth is boiled to remove the wax, rinse in cold water, sun dry and ironed. Unlike the *kampala* technique, cassava resist method requires some additives like alum and candle wax. Cassava flour is first mixed with cold water to form a paste. Alum and candle are then put into the boiling water to dissolve while the starch paste is poured in and constantly stirred until it hardens up. The additives help to increase the resistant properties of the starch. This is also referred to as *adire-eleko*. The starch is often applied through a stencil, cut out of a thin sheet of zinc or the metal lining of an old packing case. The stencil is placed on the fabric and the starch spread on the exposed parts using flat wood.

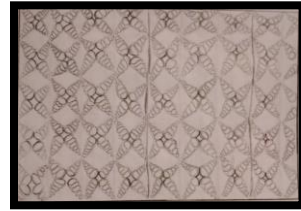
Thumbnail Sketch of adapted from iria festival



Cowry



Shells as Money



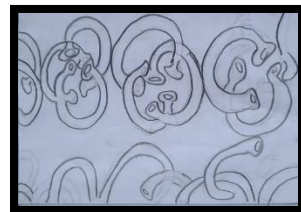
Reason Together



Flawa (Flower)



Ofongoye (Hand Fan)



manila

Analysis of *Shells as Money*



Artist: Mina Theodora Wakama
 Title: *Shells as Money*
 Medium: Batik
 Year: 2023

The title of this batik work "*Shells as Money*" which in this research is another batik work, which is produced to further showcase the value of shells in Okrika Kingdom of Rivers state, Nigeria. It also expresses and document cultural and economic usefulness of shells as a means of legal tender for business transactions in time past. Shells have played a

significant role as a form of money and trade in Nigeria's history. In various regions of Nigeria, particularly in the coastal areas like Okrika kingdom, shells were used as a medium of exchange for goods and services. They were valued for their uniqueness and scarcity, making them an ideal commodity for trade.

The work is just produced with dark purple colour as the background. Therefore, it reflects purple colour and white which are original colours of the fabric expresses the cowrie's shells on the fabric. The work was produced with the careful development of thumbnail sketches of the shells as a motif which guided the study with a manipulation of stencilling of the motif and waxing on the fabric with wax. The process was accomplished to achieve the production of the fabric.

The need for the production of the fabric with the shells in batik design is aimed at promoting, sustaining and preservation of the shells culture and history of Okrika people.

Analysis of Cowry



Artist: Mina Theodora Wakama
Title: Cowry
Medium: Batik
Year: 2024

This is another batik work produce in this research the depicts and expresses the aesthetic values of cowries. Cowry happens to be a type of small, brightly colored, and highly polished seashell that is found in the shells of certain marine snails. Cowries belong to the family Cypraeidae

and are commonly found in warm tropical oceans worldwide. The shells are usually smooth and have a distinctive shape, with a rounded, elongated back and a narrow opening on the underside. As it relates to the Okrika cultural history cowries have been used historically as a form of currency, jewellery, and adornment due to their unique appearance and scarcity.

Cowry shell holds great significance and importance in Okrika culture and tradition. Because previously in Okrika kingdom of Rivers state, Nigeria when cowry happens to be a currency. If a person or persons is considered to be a wealthy individual or individuals when they accumulate a substantial number of cowries in their possession. They are also considered influential and respected. The ability to acquire and display cowries reflected a person's economic status.

Quantity in the Okrika kingdom in Rivers state, Nigeria but in recent times they are reducing due to oil spillage and environmental pollution of the rivers with the Niger Delta. This made it imperative for this study to use cowry as the motif for producing the fabric because it has allowed the researcher to document the cowry that exist in Okrika kingdom of Rivers state. A critical view of the fabric shows that the fabric depicts aquatic cowry shells.

The repeated arrangement of the cowries on the fabric is unique and aesthetically appealing to behold. The production process of the fabric was similar to that of previous fabrics that have been produced and analysed in this study. This is because as a batik work wax and dye were the primary material that was used for the production of the fabric.

Analysis of *Kobiria Abe* (Bundle of Manillas)



Artist: Mina Theodora Wakama
Title: *Kobiria Abe* (Bundle of Manillas)
Medium: Batik
Year: 2024

This batik fabric, titled “Kobiria Abe”, is derived from the lingua franca of Okrika people, meaning in English translation (Bundle of Manillas). Manillas, also known as "slave bracelets," were a form of currency and status symbol in Okrika in the past. They were usually made of metal and worn around the wrist or ankles. In Okrika culture, manillas played a significant role in various aspects of society. They were used as a medium of exchange for goods and services, similar to modern-day money. Manillas were also given as gifts during important ceremonies such as weddings, births, and rites of passage. They were often used to display wealth, power, and social standing within the community. Furthermore, manillas were sometimes used as a form of identification, with specific designs and patterns being associated with different ethnic groups or regions in Nigeria. They carried cultural and symbolic significance, representing history, traditions, and family lineage. Overall, manillas were an integral part of Okrika culture in the past, serving not only as a form of currency but also as a symbol of identity and social status.

The inspiration for producing the fabric using the bundle of Manillas is derived from the aesthetic appeal of the manillas when they are arranged as it is on the fabric produced. The materials used for the production of the work are dye, wax, water, and cloth, among others. The reason why the researcher decided to use the manillaas as motif to produce the fabric was aimed at integrating the past into the present culture of Okrika people.

Findings

This study was primarily set out to visually document Okrika Iria Body Decoration as a motif on fabric for cultural identification. The study revealed that Iria ceremony exists in Okrika Kingdom of Rivers State. This fact was obtained through oral interviews that were conducted and cognate literatures that were consulted to give direction to the study. The finding as it relates to the possibility of developing thumbnail sketches for the production of the batik fabrics that document the Iria ceremony, Kalabari. The study reveals that it is possible to develop thumbnail sketches of the Iria ceremony Okrika people of Rivers State.

Moreover, in the study, the possibility of developing the thumbnail sketch was made possible through the photographs or pictures of the Iria ceremony that were gathered during the course of the study. Interestingly, the various pictures of the different Iria were used to develop thumbnail sketch for the study. Notably, the thumbnail sketches developed guide the research to produce the batik fabrics in this research.

The practical uses of the batik technique, as a medium of producing the fabrics that document the *Iria* ceremony of Okrika, enhance the usefulness and effectiveness of the batik technique. In addition, the fabrics produced with the batik technique are aesthetically alluring and very interesting to behold by anyone who views them.

The study, which discusses how the batik technique can be explored to achieve the colour effectiveness and aesthetic appeal of the Okrika Iria Ceremony, reveals that the fabrics are very colourful and come in different shades of colours. These different shades of colours help the fabrics easily express the various kinds of Iria attire and their costumes. In this research there is no doubt, the use of the batik as technique helped to produce the delicate batik fabrics that depicts the Iria ceremony of Okrika Kingdom. Carrying out the study has enabled people to know more about the Iria Ceremony of Okrika and the colours that are essentially expressed during the ceremony.

Conclusion

This study's unique features of the Okrika Iria festival designs as motifs in textile fabric design were designed to produce batik textile fabrics for

cultural identification, to document artistically the body decoration of the Okrika Iria Ceremony. The need or inspiration for the documentation of the Okrika Iria Ceremony and its body decoration stemmed from the challenges the Iria Ceremony suffers amongst the people, which are observably neglected by some indigenes due to the influence of Western civilisation and religious beliefs. It was observed that in recent times, some people don't partake in the ceremony anymore. This situation is condemnable although some persons believe that it is an act of ignorance of some persons who do not know the cultural relevance of the ceremony to their people.

Thus, if nothing is done, the people in no time may lose their Iria Ceremony and body decoration. To prevent this, all hands must be on deck to educate the maidens of the Okrika Kingdom on the significance of the Iria Ceremony to maintain its status quo. In view of that, the research has visually document the Ceremony with the use of the symbols of the Iria ceremony as motifs to produce the fabric using batik technique, Therefore, to ensure that it lives into the future is one primary reasons why this study is interested in documenting Iria body decoration for Cultural Identification. The need for using the batik technique to produce fabrics was aimed at encouraging the use of the batik technique to produce fabrics. The study to achieve the desired aim of the study, formulate four objectives to guide the study. The objectives formulated and used for the studies were based on the challenges confronting *Iria* ceremony and batik technique.

The study no doubt has achieved its aim laudably; the batik technique was effectively utilized to document the Okrika body decoration *Iria* Ceremony. And with the interpretation and analysis of the batik fabrics produce in this study, the study concludes that the fabrics produced depicting the Okrika body decoration *Iria* ceremony has helped in the promotion, preservation and sustenance of the Okrika body decoction *Iria* Ceremony. Most importantly, it has created opportunities for similarly researches to be carried out to document other ceremonies, tradition and history of the people in visual form.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. More batik technique should be explored to produce fabrics that will continue to create more awareness on the existence of Okrika Iria Body decoration ceremony.
2. The study haven obtain the relevance of thumbnail sketch development in the production of the batik fabrics depicting the Okrika Iria Body decoration ceremony, recommends that the development of thumbnail development should be taken seriously and adopted when even one intends to produce fabrics because it help guide artist in producing artworks.
3. Due to the aesthetically appealing expresses on the production of the fabrics in this study, it recommends that use of batik technique should be encourage to be used for producing fabrics even at primary and secondary school levels.

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