

Sirigu Symbols: A Metaphoric Element for Batik Prints

Abraham Ekow Asmah* Vincentia Okpattah

Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
(KNUST), Kumasi-Ghana

* E-mail of the corresponding author: ekowasmah@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Textile design and elements of design exist within a context—philosophical, cultural, location and gender specific—from which it emerges and without which it does not exist. Textile designers and art philosophers cannot escape the influence of past metaphors and culture any more than they can remain untouched by current trends in technology, and design. This paper seeks to establish the fact that Sirigu symbols (a thriving cultural symbolism of Northern Ghana seen as a mural wall painting) can be artistically transferred onto fabrics as batik motifs capable of meeting the contemporary concepts of textile design print. The study employed both the descriptive and experimental methods to produce samples of batik design prints for the Ghanaian market. It explored the use of mercerized cotton and vat dyes to produce fashionable clothing. The result of the study indicates that Sirigu symbols can be transferred onto fabrics to bring aesthetic variations and metaphoric significance that can compete favourably with other symbolic clothing. The concept could be explored further to inspire and educate producers as well as students to increase innovation. Discussions were based on academic, historical, cultural, philosophical and artistic contexts. The piece captured the communicative dynamics inherent in symbolic fabric design print and showed inventiveness, diversity, contrast, harmony, multiplicity and stability. The research proved that such traditional symbols still have enormous import for contemporary textile design concepts to promote the culture of Ghanaian textile products.

Keywords: culture, metaphor, aesthetic symbolism, Sirigu Symbols, Sirigu mural paintings.

1. Introduction

Textile design and culture and philosophies of art and symbolism are inseparably and organically linked together. Furthermore, they are not static or eternally patterned but one that is dynamic, fluid, constantly changing historically over time. Ghanaian textiles have its history and its own aesthetic concept as well as powerful emotional content. Such traits reflect the Ghanaian philosophy and artistry, that helps define the concepts of its people, their culture, social relationships, beliefs and understanding of human existence. In other words, Ghanaian designers enter into a mutual, impulsive relationship with their symbols whether traditional or contemporary, to gain a more insightful understanding both of themselves and of their conception of art (Asmah 2013). Such design product has an intrinsic artistic quality in its symbolic usage of motifs, and colours. *Sirigu* symbols which fit into this class are a thriving rich cultural symbolism specific to the *Sirigu* people of Northern Ghana. Research suggests that little attention is given to these symbols. Of late, local textiles in the country have been experiencing a glut and unappealing adaptation of *Adinkra* and *Kente* symbolism. This otherwise anonymous rich cultural heritage deserves to be used and hoisted in the Ghanaian textile industry. Such actions can set a cultural stage to expose the resourcefulness and originality of these motifs in *Sirigu*. Admittedly this rich cultural legacy will certainly add to the records of Ghanaian history.

1.1 Background

A rural community situated in the *Kassena Nankana* West District, in the Upper East Region of Ghana is *Sirigu*. With *Paga* as its Administrative centre, *Sirigu* is reputed for its remarkable long-established mural decorations, Architecture and pottery. These artistic traditional mural decorations give cultural identity to the people of *Sirigu*. The community is classified among the Guinea savanna consisting of natural flora limited to widely spaced trees, shrubs, and grasses. Domestic animals reared include small herds of cattle, goats, chickens and guinea fowls. Subsistence farming is their main livelihood cultivating mainly groundnuts, sorghum, and millet.

1.1.2 Batik motifs

Producing batik designs are a process of beautifying the surface or the appearance of a fabric but batik designs are much more than beautification or ornamentation. According to Wong (1972) a design on any substrate is a process of purposeful visual creation. Unlike painting and sculpture, which are the realization of artist's personal visions and dreams, batik designs convey predetermined messages to the public. The motifs commonly used in Ghana though symbolic is usually abstract (*Adinkra* symbols), figurative (derived from nature), and stylised (derived from abstract or naturalistic objects). Whatever be the case, the batik product designed has to meet consumers' requirements expressing the philosophical essence of the product. The idea therefore is to practically tackle or solve an individual or a community problem. To achieve this, the designer must understand the visual language of design (which consist of rules or concept that govern the organisation of ideas into forms) as well as

the principles of design combined into visual forms to serve the aesthetic and functional purposes of the print thus produced (Asmah 2004). It is for this purpose that the researchers deem fit to use this relegated symbol of the *Sirigu* people for the fashionable batik product as a way of projecting and promoting these rich philosophical elements.

1.1.3 *Sirigu* symbols

Like any other motifs used in batik prints, *Sirigu* symbols are either in stylized animal forms or symbolic geometric forms. According to Cowhey (1996), the predominant traditional *Sirigu* decorations are in two categories namely the two-dimensional patterns and the reliefs, or raised designs normally created on the surface area of their walls. The symbols are abstract, symbolizing the idolized elements and beliefs of the people generally taken from their environment and social lives of the people. The mode of presentation are in three different styles either in old traditional style (where old traditional colours black, white and red are used with exclusive traditional geographic symbols and totemic figures such as the cow, python and crocodile), new traditional style (where natural colours are added and more variation of traditional figures introduced) and the freestyle (where more colours and a wide variety of motifs of historical origin of the village are used). For the purpose of this paper, some selected motifs were adapted for the fashionable batik dresses.

2. Materials and Methods

Materials used for the project were as follows; mercerized cotton, vat dye, tracing paper, water, mild detergent, heat source (coal pots), metal bucket, aluminium pots, plastic cups and spoons, big bowls as dye-baths, rubber gloves, thumb-tacks, small plastic palette bowl for measuring dyes, wax, sodium hydrosulphite, sodium hydroxide, aprons and wooden ladle. Tools and equipment employed in the project included, a pair of scissors, pens and pencils, cello-tape, a ruler, tjanting, masking tape, working table, pressing iron, working shed, camera, computer, water reservoir and embroidery machine.

The investigate process riveted a review of Ghanaian metaphors related to the designing of batiks to provide a global overview of the project as well as identify the appropriate method to be adopted. Structured observation was used to evaluate the selected terms of their colour, quality, material and design. Best (1981) indicate that this exercise provided the basis for assessing the value and result of the project. To ascertain their effectiveness for both functional and aesthetic purposes, motifs and design arrangements were experimented with pieces of mercerized cotton.

3. Designing

The study seeks to establish the fact that the concept of traditional batik design arrangements and that of *Sirigu* symbols combine well artistically. The designing process addressed the concept of traditional symbolism and contemporary design concepts from the perspective of African aesthetics. Colour combinations and motif arrangements were considered during the designing process. Sketches were made for the selected *Sirigu* motifs with its envisaged end products (see figures 1&2).

3.1 Selected Motifs

Metaphoric symbols identified were made up of eight painted and five traditional motifs moulded in bas relief or incised on the walls. These motifs are richly impregnated with myths, ethics, proverbs, virtues, and reprimanding messages. The geometric motifs used are the cow referred to as the "*naafo*", *Kunyana's* cows known as the "*Akun nyanani*", the snake *buselaa*" or the python *waafoo*". Other geometric motifs considered were the "*yagimbasa wanzagsi*" (a smaller, rounded pieces of calabash), the "*zaalin daa*" the male essence, the *zaalin - nyanga* the female essence, the *Saaba* meaning "leather talisman or amulet", and the *Ligipelga* meaning "cowry". The figurative motifs are the *niila* motif described as the domesticated chicken or the guinea fowl and the fish referred to as "*ziifo*". The figurative motifs depict stylized human beings and animals, the geometric designs comprise crescents, rhombuses, triangles, and hatchings, vertical and horizontal lines. There were other figurative motifs like the cow, the "*Banga*" meaning the lizard, and the crocodile called "*Eegba*" that were not selected due to purely aesthetic reasons. The other geometric motifs also not used were the *waagne or Amizia Zuyaka* referred to as an upturned calabash, the "*Taana golma*" or "*sorgbelima*" motifs that stand for the footpaths that linked the various homesteads in the *Sirigu* community and the "*Agurinuuse*" meaning "linked hands". Below are the selected *Sirigu* traditional mural paintings and relief motifs adapted and developed for the project with their symbolic interpretations.

3.1.2 The cow "*naafo*" or "*Akun Nyanani*"

The *Naafo*, (stylized) which literally means "cow" in the *Nankam* language epitomizes the importance of cows in the *Sirigu* culture, and represent the aesthetic and social-cultural significance of a family. It is normally used as a symbol of reverence, wealth and a form of dowry. They are horizontally registered on the main trunk or the upper periphery of the walls of their buildings. The import of cows in the *Sirigu* culture as the treasures or the soul of a family is strongly connected to their use for tilling farmlands and to their ability to be used as collateral

or sold for money during hard times. They serve as a security and a “vital gist’s” which ensure the continuation and prosperity of the family and the community (Warnier 2007). The motif is sometimes known as *Akun nyanani* explained to mean “*Kunyana’s cows*” (fig. 1). The motif represents a symbol of wisdom and riches and is used as a tribute to the cattle owner known as *Kunyana*. Legend has it that the cows of *Kunyana* always behave in an orderly manner; they did not stray off when grazing, but followed each other in a single file. Sketches are provided below.



Fig. 1: (a) Abstract geometrical representation of the cow: & (b) A Photoshop drawing of the cow

3.1.3 The python “*waafu*”

The python “*waafu*” a mythological and totemic figure, believed to protect families who pay homage to it is usually made in relief on the trunk of buildings. This relief work, in straight or undulating ridges is constructed either entirely or partially around a building. Pythons are believed to nurse crying babies whose mothers have left them at home, by putting the tip of their tails in the mouths of the babies to suckle in order to stop them from crying. This sacred totemic creature reveals themselves to those who were believed to be pure in heart. Snakes are symbolic of health and healing. That sense of renewal comes from the snake that sheds off the old (skin) and emerges shiny, bright and new after each shedding. They are often seen in *Sirigu* mural art to convey guardianship over families.



Fig. 2: (a) Abstracted representation of “*waafu*”: & (b) A Photoshop drawing of “*waafu*”:

3.1.4 The guinea fowl “*niila*”

The guinea fowl or the chicken referred to as “*niila*” (fig. 3), is a symbol of hospitality that depicts the importance of birds in the *Sirigu* culture *Asante & Opoku-Asare* (2011). The term *niila* describes domesticated birds bred for their flesh or eggs and forms part of the item used for a traditional marriage rite. The birds and their eggs are also used for sacrifices and offerings. Guinea fowls are notorious for protecting their younglings and can be vicious if they feel threatened. The guinea fowl is a beautiful example of how it takes a village to raise the bar on social responsibility within youth and community. Guinea fowls are considered sacred symbols in *Sirigu* community, and are permitted to run free in the community. The *niila* motif is normally used above entrance ways.

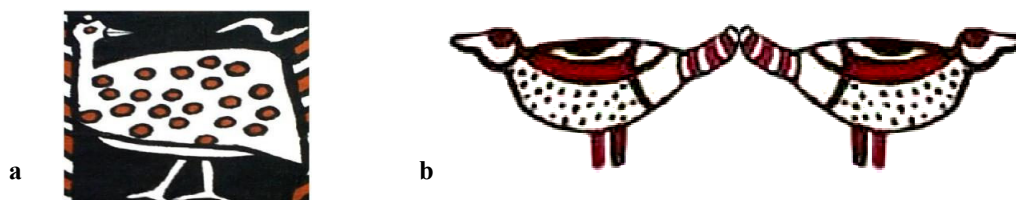


Fig. 3 (a): Abstracted representation of “*Niila*”: & (b) A Photoshop drawing of “*Niila*”

3.1.5 The Fish, “*ziifo*”

There is also the symbolic fish, “*ziifo*” (fig. 4), normally caught in rivers. Fish is commonly cooked, smoked or dried before use in *Sirigu*. To them the fish is a feminine symbol of fertility and creativity. Contextually, the fish makes an appearance in certain seasons and brings happiness and fulfilment to humanity. Through observation they have come to believe that fishes often display enormous attributes of adaptability and determination and therefore regarded as a totem, adopted these characteristics for themselves. We are most often tempted to ignore their significance, therapeutic and energetic experiences they give to us and this easy availability causes us to take nature and her symbols for granted. This is not so with the people of *Sirigu* who are intimately

connected to its source, value and her ways.

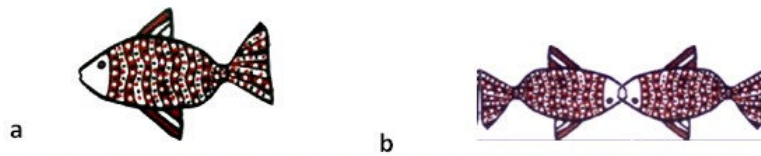


Fig. 4 (a): Abstracted representation of "ziifo": & (b) A Photoshop drawing of "ziifo"

The philosophy of some motifs has a specific significance that is sometimes universal throughout the whole community and other times vary from house to house.

3.2 Geometric Motifs

Their geometric motifs consist primarily of chevron that is, V or inverted V- shaped cells organized in alternating negative and positive patterns, according to colour (light and dark) or thickness; raised or incised. (Cowhey, 1996). Many of these abstracted two-dimensional motifs are derived from domestic objects. One example of the most functional objects used in daily life is the calabash.

3.2.1 The "Wanzagsi," pieces of a broken calabash

In *Sirigu* culture the Calabash is a miracle fruit, often grown as an ornamental; the hard shells used as musical instruments, utensils for drinking, cleaning rice, storage of seeds, fish or meat, water and laundry containers and as food containers when hollowed out. It is also used in traditional systems of medicine. Reportedly, the seeds are sometimes cooked and eaten and used as vegetable, when harvested young. Due to its multipurpose usefulness, wonderful health benefits the Calabash tree is well treasured in the community (Elias and Prance 1978). According to Haverkort (2010), when a woman dies, a full grown calabash is broken to symbolize her use of the calabash in the next world'.



Fig. 5 (a): Geometric representation of "Wanzagsi," & (b) A Photoshop drawing of "Wanzagsi,"

The extensive use of the calabash motif reflects the usefulness of the calabash. Women use the "Wanne" (the halved calabash) to fetch water, store grains and the "yagimbasa wanzagsi" (a smaller, rounded pieces of calabash) used to model clay pots. Consequently, a series of alternating negative and positive triangular motifs, (see Fig. 5 above) the most popular design is painted at the upper parts of architectural structures. According to Cowhey (1996), "the lines within the triangles of the "Wanne" motif represent the lines that naturally appear on the insides of calabashes. The rounded edges of the calabash pieces used for modelling clearly influence the curved outline of the triangles that represent the "yagimbasa wanzagsi." Another object that is commonly represented is the variety of calabash net "zaalinga," and the fish net "yoka" appears in almost every house that uses traditional decorations (Cowhey, 1996).

Zaalinga is the traditional place where women keep their calabashes for safety. It is woven from kenaf fibre and hanged in their rooms. This tool gives women easy access to any of the calabashes for water or food. There are two types of the *Zaalinga*-design according to the direction of the lines, (Haverkort 2010). The "male" and "female" variations of patterns are the series of criss-cross divided into triangular cells that represent the links in the fishnet and the double-stranded ropes of the fishnet. The *zaalin daa* (fig. 7a & b) the male essence the lines are usually depicted in a vertical manner, whilst the *zaalin-nyanga* (fig. 6a & b) the female essence is registered horizontally.



Fig. 6 (a): Geometric representation of *zaalin-nyanga*: & (b) A Photoshop drawing of *zaalin-nyanga*

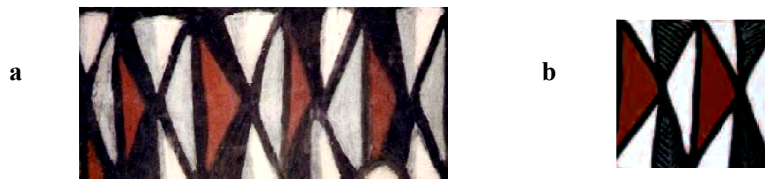


Fig. 7 (a): Geometric representation of *zaalin daa:* & (b) A Photoshop drawing of *zaalin daa*

3.2.2 The *Ligipelga*

The “*Ligipelga*” means “cowry” (fig. 8). Cowries were used in the olden days as dowry, and during marriage ceremonies in the society due to its capital. The motif is mostly painted on the main body of *Sirigu* buildings.

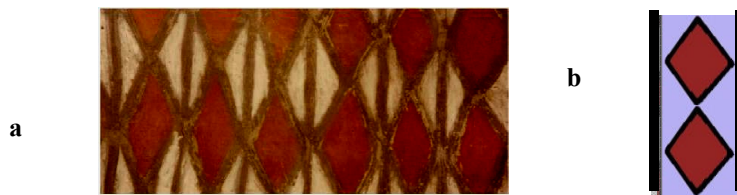


Fig. 8 (a) Geometric representation of *Ligipelga:* & (b) A Photoshop drawing of *Ligipelga*

3.2.3 Saaba

Saaba (fig. 9), means “leather talisman or amulet” in the *Nankam* language. The leather talismans or amulets may be diamond shaped or rectangular. There are normally worn around the neck or stitched on traditional dresses for protection against evil forces. The *saaba* designs like the talisman or amulet are expected to protect the residents of the building from wicked forces. The *saaba* motif ordinarily occupies the main bodies of architectural structures.



Fig. 9 (a) Geometric representation of *Sabaa:* & (b) A Photoshop drawing of *Sabaa*

3.3 Arrangement of symbols

Arrangement of symbols apart from implying “myths”; signify the relationships amid two or more symbols. Special significance appended to these motif arrangements apart from isolated cases were related to the *Sirigu* ethnic beliefs. The nature of relationships between the motifs is usually determined by their placement. A head-to-head is regarded as peaceful or making peace while head-to-tail motifs tend to represent hostility and tail-to-tail denoting care. Thus, the permutation and the position of these motifs in relation to one another and the decisions that dictate these choices often reveal the importance of the artist or the occupants of that mural house. All of these show the flexibility with which the motifs are approached and the inexhaustible possibilities apparent in their interactive design. The same concept of arrangement was also adopted for this project.

According to Maxwell (1990) certain symbols which ones held deep religious and philosophical meaning can later be changed and eventually become simply decorative. He also argues that elements chosen for their ornamental appeal may later assume religious and philosophical meaning and significance compatible with the culture. All these trends are usually apparent in the Ghanaian use of symbols for batik and fashion design. However, these significant reasons for the use of patterns, motifs and symbols on fabrics can be either aesthetic, socio- economical, cultural, religious and political from community to community or consumer preference. Such factors usually determine the fabric types, processes, colours and motifs used. (Digolo and Mazrui, 2005). Motifs have thus become a ‘living’ ideology within the society. Despite the inherited traditional symbols, the requirements of modern contemporary consumer culture have provided the need for newer and innovative symbols for textile fabrics *Adonteng*, (2009).

The following symbols chosen among numerous motifs selected from various murals as stated above underwent adaptation and development. The CorelDraw was used to develop several possible re-compositions of the

adopted symbols. Other design concepts were considered; such as colour, dominance and symmetry. Virtual prototypes of the designed patterns were then reviewed and the best ones selected. The designs were transferred onto sample textile fabrics; and then produced on the actual fabrics and later converted into fashionable attire. These final fabrics were then appropriately named to correlate to the original symbolism of the adapted motifs. The following images (fig. 10a & b) are the virtually manipulated symbols designed for the two batik fabrics produced.

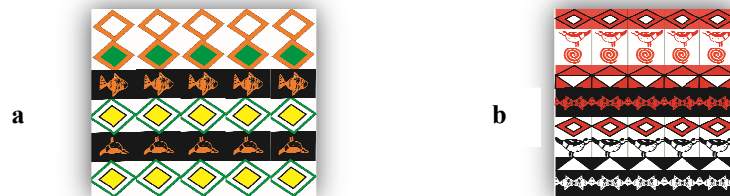


Figure 10: (a) A Photoshop representation of “My Identity” and (b) the cultural empowerment’

4. Batik Production

Batik is a “resist” process for making designs on fabric. Wax is used to prevent dye from penetrating the cloth, leaving “blank” areas in the dyed fabric. The process, of waxing to resist then dyeing, can be repeated over and over to create interesting products. Batik is especially unique due to the way certain wax blends “crackle” during handling, where fine cracks becomes visible through the wax resist allowing lines of colour on resisting areas after dyeing. In most cases, the wax penetrates all the way through the fabric, but the finer fabric weaves work best for detail work. Batik production employs a process of repeated waxing and dyeing to achieve the final result. This method requires mastery of colour mixing and over dyeing; as each layer of dye is applied over the last, a new colour emerged.

Originally, wax resists dyed fabrics came from Indonesia which were then exported to the Gold Coast and spread over West Africa in Central Africa. They became extremely popular and over time the Africans customized and personalized the art of batik making. Batiks made in Ghana have strong cultural, social and economic importance. The patterns tell stories of relevance to the wearer, such as proverbs, poems and traditional African fables. The colours also hold significance as they can represent social standing, age, tribal orientation and marital status. The general motivation of this project is to promote the use of *Sirigu* symbols in batik prints, and therefore not much was altered to the original symbols adapted. Thus, the symbols were reused in their original appearance, and the colours changed to correspond with the intended purpose. In this paper, two examples of the designed waxed fabrics were looked at.

4.1 Dyeing Processes

The patterns were designed and coloured with the CorelDraw graphics program to the required scale. With the aid of tracing paper and pencils, the patterns were transferred onto the various cotton fabrics and retraced with pen to help it withstand the different dyeing stages. Wax was heated in an aluminium saucepan over hot coals in a coal pot; and with the help of a tjanting tool the melted hot wax was applied to the negative areas of the fabric that were required to retain their colour (i.e. White). This was done for all the fabrics needed to be re-waxed and re-dyed with the required colours. The ratio for each 3 metres of fabric dyed in all cases was one (1) tablespoon or 15ml of powdered dye, one (1) spoon of sodium hydrosulphite and two (2) tablespoons or 30ml of sodium hydroxide. Re-waxing and re-dyeing of each designed fabric continued with the same calculation of ingredients earlier used for dyeing. The designed waxed fabric, after it had received all necessary colours in the right places, was de-waxed in a bowl of hot boiling water. The multi-coloured fabric was then dried in an airy place out of the sun and later ironed. Below in Fig 11 is an example of a final designed waxed fabric ready for de-waxing.



Fig. 11: is an example of a final designed waxed fabric ready for de-waxing

a. *First batik print; 'My Identity'*

This design adapted the fish, the abstract cow 'akun-nyana-nii', and the chicken symbols. These symbols as used in their original contexts express the qualities of wealth, prosperity, hospitality, popularity and spirituality of an individual, thus the name 'My Identity' for the first batik print in fig 12. The design pattern displayed a repetition of two chickens (*niila*) facing each other headlong in a peaceful continuous line. Below this was another line of repeated cows and then a line of fish (*ziifo*); these three consecutive patterns alternate between another three, each of which is a different arrangement of abstract cows (*Akun-nyaa-nii*). Because of the emphasis being placed on the symbols, researchers did not introduce textures into the designed pattern. Colour plays an important role in batik making and for this batik print, (Boehlke, (2005) the colours present was the white of fabric, a bluish black, green and ochre.

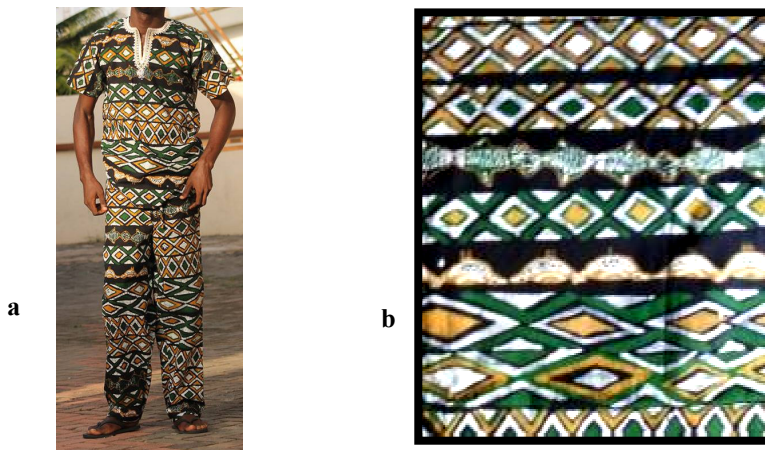


Fig. 12: Batik Print 1; 'My Identity'

b. *Second batik print; 'cultural empowerment'*

The theme for the second print was 'cultural empowerment'. It adapted the fish, the chicken, the python, the broken calabash and the abstract cow. These symbols collectively portray community, hospitality, life giving, spirituality, usefulness, respectability and wealth.



Fig. 13: Batik Print 2; 'Cultural Empowerment'

5. Results and Discussions

The awareness batik plays in the current local textile industry and the forms appropriated by such environment of contemporary design suggest an alliance between batik art and traditional symbolism that creates a new artistic appeal and opens numerous philosophical readings to these forms. The need to promote the vast and diverse traditional metaphor and to provide a marketable batik fabric has necessitated the need to adapt these traditional symbols in batik with contemporary design arrangement to today's consumers. The motifs of the two batik fabrics produced was created from *Sirigu* murals seen by many as ordinary and inconsequential yet when used on fabric has turned out to be an artistic textile piece. The blend of colours and shape of motifs used accolade and distinguish clearly the cultural sentiments and characteristics of the people of *Sirigu*. The textile pieces are

designed to accentuate the traditional metaphors and its significance that co-exist between the traditional, contemporary and the complexity of traditional artistry. An important property of the piece is its durability. It is strong, fast to washing and light. The motifs have been used to maintain its level of abstraction, and are designed to challenge batik practitioners to new interpretations while giving costumers' an innovative option to choose from.

From the shapes of these metaphoric motifs, and design arrangements, to the techniques used in their production, the influence of the natural elements of design is evident, emphasized by the choice of motifs and its combinations of aspects of *Sirigu* culture. Using the motifs without background texture projects these symbols to the fore and reveals the true synchronization of colours administered by the *Sirigu* people. Though the two fabrics designed to select individual elements, the composition as a whole show marked unity and coherence revealed by the relationship between the open spaces and the motifs used.

The two designed fabrics named 'My Identity' and 'Cultural Empowerment' in their original contexts express the qualities of wealth, prosperity, hospitality, popularity and spirituality of *Sirigu*. In effect the batik fabrics portray collectively hospitality, selflessness in contributing to one's life, spirituality, usefulness, respectability and a sense of wealth. This is a significant attribute of most community murals as observed by Avae (1990). Charged with aesthetic zing, the asymmetrical forms, and elegant figurative and geometrical elements of the entire design convey the energy and thrill of activities evident in the subtle rhythmic movement peculiar to African textile designs. It is the summation of the way of life of the *Sirigu* community in which they are found. Since a woman titivated in a beautifully designed fabric is a reflection of how well her husband manages her at home (Adams 1993), such analogy extends beyond domestic implications and beautification. Again transferring these metaphors into batik fabric prints presents an effective platform for instructing the youth in Ghanaian northern allegories and essential cultural values.

6. Conclusions

The selected motifs of the *Sirigu* murals and the batik technique employed in this production, affirms the fact that batik fabrics could be used effectively to achieve high marketable quality products. It also ascertains that batik fabric incorporated with *Sirigu* metaphor could be a wealth of additional resources to enhance traditional batik products and to promote *Sirigu* symbolism. The visual art product created, reflects all aspects of *Sirigu* philosophy in terms of designs, motifs and colours.

Categorically, batik products integrated with traditional metaphors could be an effective means to provide alternate and unlimited opportunities for artists to explore its maximum economic benefits. The outcome of this study provides hope for our traditional symbols and the work of contemporary artists in exploring various textile techniques to finish their products. The results are that, if *Sirigu* symbols are added to the existing traditional symbols, increased options will be made available to producers. In this regard, introducing *Sirigu* symbols to the world, indirectly attract foreign investment inflows that will contribute to the development of Ghanaian relics.

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1. First Author: Abraham Ekow Asmah (SM'2000). He is a Senior Member of KNUST.

Lecturer : Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry, Faculty of Art, College of Art and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana in 2000 to date.

Author's educational background at a glance: Diploma in IRAI; BA (Hons) Textiles-1987; P.G Dip; in Art Education-1993; M.PHIL in Art Education - 2004; PhD in African Art and Culture - 2009. Research Interest: Textiles/Fashion, Integrative Art, African Art History, Art and Human Resource , Design /Computer Art, Education/Art and Culture

2. Second Author: Vincentia Okpattah (SM'2012). She is a Senior Member of KNUST.

Lecturer, Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry, Faculty of Art, College of Art and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana.

She holds B.A. degree in Integrated Rural Art and Industry from KNUST, Kumasi, Ghana in 2005 and PhD degree in Art Education from KNUST, Kumasi, Ghana in 2010. She lectures in fibres and fabrics and research interest are in fibres and textiles/ fashion.

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