

# The Resurgence of Ankara Materials in Nigeria

Oyedele, Ayokanmi Motunrayo Tolulope and Obisesan Babatunde

1. Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.
2. Fine Art Department, Adeyemi College of Education Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

## Abstract

Africans create and design fabrics to express their culture. Their fabrics are either woven or printed and possess unique traits. Ankara, in the last decade has taken over the fashion scene in Africa, being used in various creative styles and applications. This paper examines the origin of Ankara in Africa. It discusses its proliferation and various ways of its adaptation as well as how to launder it.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Textile is the use of fabrics produced by weaving, knitting, felting, embroidering and other methods (Ikpakronyi 2006). The origin of textile production can be traced to the use of fig leaves as clothing materials by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:7). Man before making his first attempt at weaving had been using animal's skin, tree bark and twined vegetables for his clothing needs (Omotoso 2006). The use of clothing is exclusively the characteristic of man. Its importance ranked it second in God's divine order of provision for man's social need. (Deut. 10:18, Gen. 28:20 and 1Tim. 6:8). Popoola (2006), referring to Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of man's special needs also emphasized clothing to be second.

Clothing reflects the materials available to a civilization as well as the technologies it has mastered. Textile among Africans is an important expression of culture (Gilfoyl, 1987). Africans for over thousands of years have been creating and designing fabrics based on their culture, geographical location and the available resources. They express their thought through the medium of art. Their textile materials have complex traits which give it certain characteristic, certain design, colour, arrangement and yarn content. Africans used fabric structure as vehicle to identify a textile associated with a particular region or period (Omotoso, 2006).

The presence of woven textile in Nigeria is of great antiquity. Archaeological excavation revealed the presence of woven textile made of fabric other than cotton at Igbo-Ukwu, how and by whom they were made was not known (Shaw 1970). Resist method of creating pattern on fabrics are not new in Africa, it is common among the Yoruba of Nigeria. Resist techniques are used for batik while dyeing methods are used for tie-dye materials. Omotoso (2006) explains batik to be a manual process of applying wax, paste, starch, resin or clay on fabric as resist agent, the same technique used for producing Indonesian batik. The method can be done by stenciling or using free hand application. Lala (2003) as recorded by Omotoso (2006) opined that usage of stencil gives the desired design or pattern a perfect edge which makes it more accurate compared with free hand method. African textile are either woven or printed. The printed fabrics were first woven as plain weave in single colour before printing on them. Some examples of African textiles are Aso-oke, Adire, Kente, etc. Another fabric that has found its way into African fabric is Ankara.

## 2.0 HISTORY OF ANKARA

Ankara, though not of African origin, was embraced by Africans due to its affordability and texture which is suitable for African climate. The fabric Dutch wax, now referred to as African fabric started as a mass-produced imitation of Indonesian batik in Holland by the Dutch textile manufacturers. Javanese batik are made by hand-drawing motif on cotton cloth, it involves the use of wax and resist dye Plate 2. Indonesian batik (Javanese batik) was introduced to Holland and other parts of Europe by their colonial master the Dutch. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fabric was mass produced in Europe using engraving roller print machine and dye resistance resin to design motifs and produced batik pattern on fabric. In the course of production, the Dutch manufacturers encountered some difficulties which cause cracking effect, series of small lines and dots through which new dye used seeped into the colours around it. Due to this, the fabric was rejected by the intending Indonesian market, considering it to be spoiled and a waste. The 'spoiled textile' was brought to the Gold Coast by the Dutch merchants from where it spreads to other African markets where it was well accepted. Apart from the Dutch manufacturers, the English were also manufacturing and selling wax print textile but the Dutch wax was more popular. In order to cater for the taste of their new African customers, Dutch manufacturers made some changes to designs and motifs done on the fabric in order for it to specifically fit into African market. The earliest motifs used were plant and animal motifs which were believed to cut across all cultures, later, indigenous African motifs were used. By 1920, portraits of local community leaders and chiefs were used as motifs, such fabrics were used by Africans to celebrate their leaders and by 1950s, and portraits of Heads of States and prominent politicians were used as motifs. Names were given to prominent and popular designs with events, slogans and proverbs attached

to them. Some of the names given to the designs are 'Alakete', 'Osubamba', 'osupaeleso'. Igbalahun', all which are also name of designs on Adire cloths of the Yorubas (Akinyemi 2006).

The symbols and motifs used in African art, prints inclusive, often convey meanings. They are icons that have been used for over a period of time and they have specific meaning among the people (Akande, 2006). The use of beads in design represents an African saying that says 'precious beads do not make noise' meaning a good person doesn't have to blow his own horn. Some of the motifs used in African prints include geometric shapes, lines, Arabic scripts, Roman letters and numerals, animal forms, flowers, leaves, seeds, musical objects, line drawing of contemporary objects such as bicycle, cars, Television, etc. .The designs can be grouped into four: Women's life (family, love, housework), Town life and what it brings, (alphabet, television, money, power), Nature (animals, flowers, seeds, leaves) and Rhythms (music, drums). The design with bottle opener (Plate 3c&d) showcase town life with bottle opener depicting the power it brought. Designs and colour in African prints can also portray the wearer's tribal origin, marital status, societal standing as well as age. The dice-design is a symbol of nobility and is usually worn by the elderly women (Plate 3h).

### **3.0 STRUCTURE OF ANKARA**

Ankara is a 100 percent fine cotton fabric tightly woven in plain weave before different motifs and patterns were printed on it through various dyeing techniques using dye stuffs that dry faster and are easier to use. Ankara has good strength; it is firm and smooth to touch and allows body heat to pass through (Ogunbiyi, 1976). It absorbs moisture quickly and dries faster, an ability that gives it a cooling effect and makes it ideal for African climate. Ankara comes in various grades such as Real Dutch Wax, Veritable English Wax, Veritable Dutch Wax and Hollandaise Plate 1 and 3. The Real Dutch Wax being the highest grade.

### **4.0 ETYMOLOGY OF THE NAME ANKARA**

After independence, good quality fabrics from several countries flooded African markets, Nigerian market inclusive. Most wax prints sold in Africa were produced in Europe without African input. There were various grades of the Dutch wax in the market with Hollandaise reigning at an exorbitant price, unaffordable by the poor. The name Ankara originated from a girl named Ankara and was given to the cheaper version of the Dutch Wax made by the Turks which was at the reach of the poor and was considered indigenous due to its vibrant colour and motif. Over the years- with the building of textile mills and the continuous production of patterns that reflect African culture and each culture having its own preference for colour and design- African print has replaced Dutch wax.

### **5.0 THE POLIFILIRATION OF ANKARA**

Among Africans, societies, funerals, marriages and other rituals governing the physical and the spiritual world require proper cloths (Gilfoy, 1987). In Nigeria especially, there are different clothing for different places and events. Clothing for formal wears is usually made of fine fabric such as Aso-oke, Lace and Batik. During the colonial period, since most West African nations were under the rule of either English or French rule, the Dutch were seen as the 'well meaning' trader with Africans, this and also the fact that the texture of the fabric is suitable for African climate made their prints to be accepted and assimilated by the Africans as part of their culture. The prints during this period were very expensive and unaffordable by the poor but when the cheaper version of it was made, a lot of people could afford it, hence the fabric was tagged 'fabric of the poor'. Due to the cheapness of the fabric at this time, it was not considered to be a fabric for occasions or special events but was used as clothing for everyday wear, then it was used in sewing wrapper and loose blouse (iro and buba). The resurgence of Ankara was brought about by the ban imposed on importation of textile in 2003 by former President of Nigeria, President Obasanjo in an attempt to develop the non-oil sectors thereby reducing the pressure of dependency on the oil sector.

Ankara, a once before cheap fabric meant for the poor has undergone a dramatic transformation and has become the fabric of not only the poor but the rich and the famous. In time past, Ankara was regarded as too flowery and colourful and was reserved for cultural activities but nowadays, the dramatic transformation has turned it to a sizzling fashion fad and an inevitable part of all occasions.

The exponent of the use of Ankara in sewing different styles of skirt and blouse was late Mrs. Stella Obasanjo. As the First Lady of the nation, she showcased Ankara in different styles in special occasions and events. The use of Ankara by the First Lady influenced Nigerian women in using Ankara to sew different fascinating styles. The Nigerian Aso-ebi dress tradition for special occasions such as wedding, chieftaincy burial, coronation and other special events is another factor that brought about the resurgence of Ankara, due to this tradition, the fabric is now worn by all classes of people.

### **6.0 FASHION TRENDS IN ANKARA**

Ankara has infiltrated the fashion world, it has gone beyond its use for wrapper and loose blouse (iro and buba), now is enjoying the favour of contemporary fashion styles; with the skills of creative designers, Ankara when blend with other matching fabrics, is made into endless styles and designs for both office and formal occasions.

#### **6.1 The Designers**

Nigerian designers are now enticed by the light nature, array of colours and pattern of Ankara fabric, which when understood and properly mixed and matched with contemporary fabrics produce creative designs that expand the creativity of the designer. These days, Nigerian designers are parading Ankara pieces in their collections. Some of the designers that boosted the value of Ankara include Cranberry, Jewel by Tina, Aimas, I-delicious, Xuly, Tiffany, Amber, Momo, Lunar, Gloss, etc. They now engage Ankara in making beautiful accessories such as bags, shoes, dresses, bracelets, bangles, hair ruffles, earrings and even bikini. African fabrics are going places with Africans at home and in the diaspora making simple but attractive attires with it (Sunday Times, July 2000). Ankara has gone beyond the closets of Nigerian designers, it has found its way into the international runways and American celebrities such as Fergie, Beyoncé and her sister Solange are now fans of the fabric.

#### **6.2 Care of Ankara**

Ankara, being a print on cotton material, has little luster and poor elasticity. It tends to colour bleed when soaked in water if it is not a good quality, this notwithstanding, the best can be brought out of Ankara if properly laundered and cared for.

#### **6.3 Washing of Ankara**

Ankara can be hand-wash or machine-wash. Generally, while washing Ankara, avoid steeping and friction to prevent colour bleeding. Hand-wash Ankara, by kneading and squeezing in cool soap solution not detergent. Machine-wash it setting the washing machine to the low setting and wash same colour prints in cool water and rinse well in tepid water, do not tumble dry. If the colour tends to bleed during washing, add table salt to the second to the last rinsing water, this helps to fix the colour and use plain water for the last rinsing. To brighten up the colour of the fabric, acid rinse can be done by adding a tablespoonful of vinegar to one quart of water for the final rinse. For the fabric to stand well when worn, it could be stiffened by starching it in cool starch solution and removing as much of the moisture as possible then dry the fabric in a cool dry place, avoid exposure to bright sunlight or great heat.

#### **6.4 Ironing Ankara Fabrics**

Ankara should be ironed when damp on the wrong side with warm iron and then aired thoroughly before storing.

### **7.0 CONCLUSION**

Ankara has invaded the fashion scene of Africa and its taking an edge over other popular fabrics such as guinea, the Yoruba Adire, Tie and Dye, Kampala and the rest. The fabric has been engaged in making various fascinating styles by celebrities and has as well become the fashion choice of many, been adapted to various creative accessories such as bags, shoes, bangles, phone pouch and so on.

However, the popularity and proliferation of the fabric seems to have concealed its origin even from the people that patronize and believed it to be a traditional fabric of Africa. Although, the fabric has been in existence in Africa for quite a long period of time and has been re-christened and nationalized as Ankara the fact still remain that it is not an African fabric but was embraced by Africans due to its variety and vibrant colour and motif which are peculiar to African fabrics, its texture which is suitable for African climate, its affordability, ease of maintenance and on a greater strength its versatility. The fabric was believed to be of African origin because of the huge market Africa has for it and the fact that it is mostly worn by them. The fabric is traditionally designed and manufacture in European factories by the Europeans and exported to West Africa while the patterns are adapted from Indonesian Batik.

Ankara, though not of African origin is embraced by Africans. It has its own virtue, whether it is the expensive one or not, when tailored in the right way as an entity or mixed with other contemporary fabrics, it looks more gorgeous and graceful. Nigeria being the fashion conscious part of Africa, through the creative skill of the designers, have taken the fabric, explore it, improve it and show case it to the world in an infinite creative applications.

### **REFERENCES**

- Adewale, G.O. 2005. Comparative Study of Yoruba and Ebirá Textile Tradition. *The Thumb Print*. 3:1-6.  
Sunday Times (July, 2000). *African fabrics are going places with Africans at home and in the diaspora making simple but attractive attires with African fabrics.*  
Akande, A.O. & Kolawole, S.K. 2006. Yoruba Forms and Motifs as Indices of Semiotic Communication. *Ijinle Asa*. 3:28-32.  
*Ankara Spectacular*. Poise. Fashion. Style. *Designs* 2 (13).

- Aronson, L. (1989). *Akwete Weaving: Tradition and Change. Man Does Go Naked*. Eds. B. Engel Brecht & B. Gardi.
- Awosika, B.I. (2003). *The Essential of Textile Production*. Nigeria: A Peakey and Sons.
- Catch The Trends. *Style Royale Celebrating Fashion, Style and Events*. Issue 14.
- Sunday Punch ( December 23,2012) *Celebrate, be in the Mood*. Owambe Fashion. Sunday Punch,pg.44.
- Fashion Parrazzi, Special Edition. Issue 17
- Gilfoy.S.P. (1987). *Pattern of Life: West African Strip- Weaving Traditions*. USA: Smithsonian Institution.
- Ikpakronyi, S. (2006). Classification of Modern Art by Form, Themes, Style, Technique and School. *Ijinle Asa*. 3: 78-81.
- Ogunbiyi C.O. (1976). *Home Management 2 Laundry Work*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Nigeria: Heinemann Education Books (Nig.) Limited.
- Omotoso, K. (2006).The Role of Traditional Textiles in the Transformation of Nigerian Designs, Ideals and Material Culture. *Ijinle Asa*. 3, 49-52.
- Oyekola, E. (2005). The Making of Contemporary Yoruba Batik Dressed. *The Thumb Print*. 3, 49-52.
- Picton, J. & John, M. (1989). *African Textiles*. London. The Trustee of the British Museum Press.
- Polakoff, C. (1980). *Indigo: African Textiles and Dyeing Technology*. Anchor Press NY.
- Popoola, V.A. (2001). Textile: Now and Then Inaugural Lecture Series 26 Delivered at, *The Federal University of Technology, Akure Ondo State, Nigeria*.
- Posh Designer Delight issue 50
- Shaw, T. C. (1970). *IgboUkwu*. London.Cambridge University Press.
- Shea, P. J. (1992). Textile Technology in Nigeria: Practical Manifestation. *The Historical Development of Science and Technology in Nigeria*.Ed G.T Emeagwali. Edwin Mellen.
- Spring, C. (1989). *African Textile*. New York Crescent.
- Show the Elegance in you. *Style Plus*. Issue 21
- Standing out at events*.Edimag. Fashionexclusive
- Wenger, S. and Baer, U. (1957). Adire-Yoruba Pattern Dyeing. *Nigerian Magazine*.5



Plate 1: ANKARA FABRICS

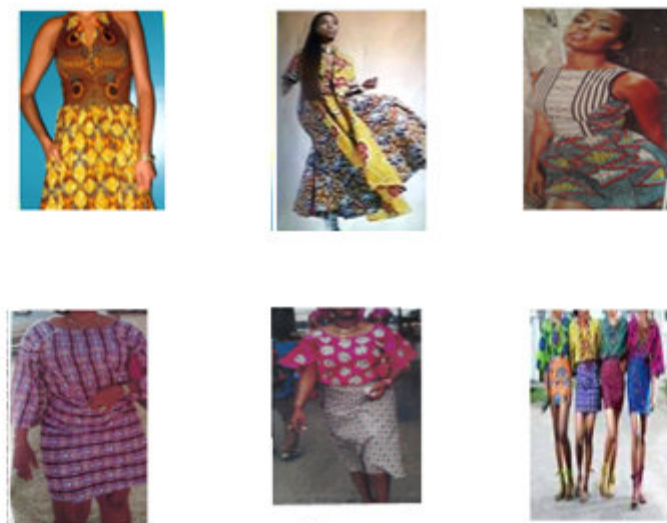


Plate 2: INDONESSIAN BATIK





Plate 3: NAMES OF ANKARA DESIGN (a)SMALL STAR DESIGN, (b)NIGHT AND DAY DESIGN, (c &d)BOTTLE-OPENER DESIGN, (e) LONDON BELL DESIGN, (f) BROKEN PLATE, (g) ROLLS ROYCE, (h) DICE DESIGN



◆ Plate 4: COMBINATION OF DIFFERENT ANKARA ◆



Plate 5: OLEKU STYLE-ANKARA AS AN ENTITY,  
ANKARA WITH PLAIN FABRIC, COMBINATION OF  
TWO DIFFERENT ANKARA