

# The “African Print” Hoax: Machine Produced Textiles Jeopardize African Print Authenticity

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## Abstract

The paper investigated the nature of machine-produced fabric commercially termed African prints by focusing on a select sample of these prints. It established that the general design characteristics of this print are an amalgam of mainly Javanese, Indian, Chinese, Arab and European artistic tradition. In view of this, it proposed that the prints should reflect certain aspects of Africanness (Africanity) in their design characteristics. It also explores the desirability and choice of certain design characteristics discovered in a wide range of African textile traditions from Africa south of the Sahara and their application with possible design concepts which could be generated from Macquet's (1992) analysis of Africanity. This thus provides a model and suggestion for new African prints which might be found acceptable for use in Africa and use as a veritable export product from Africa in the future.

In the commercial parlance, African print is a general term employed by the European textile firms in Africa to identify fabrics which are machine-printed using wax resins and dyes in order to achieve batik effect on both sides of the cloth, and a term for those imitating or achieving a resemblance of the wax type effects. They bear names such as *abada*, *Ankara*, *Real English Wax*, *Veritable Java Print*, *Guaranteed Dutch Java Hollandis*, *Uniwax*, *ukpo* and *chitenge*. Using the term 'African Print' for all the brand names mentioned above is only acceptable to its producers and marketers, but to a critical mind, the term is a misnomer and therefore suspicious because its origin and most of its design characteristics are not African. Hence, Jefferson (1974:95) disregarded the prints as authentically African, but rather European "African Cloths", however, there has been no account made on why these cloths are neither African cloths, nor African prints.

As the design content has been in contention, attempts to redress the situation started a while ago. For example, Littrell provided a blue-print on how to improve it. She called for the viewpoints of designers, distributors, sellers and consumers so that their ideas could be conceptualized as motifs for creating a possible new design order (Littrell 1977). Hence I will focus on some Nigerian universities and colleges with art departments and has incorporated African print designing and its studio production into their curriculum from the 1970's. In a cursory examination of fabric designs representing two reputable art departments, student-designers from the departments sheepishly adopted the design format associated with the European and Asian textile firms (the works will be shown later). The way forward here is the consideration of another possible design blue-print, is the focus of this paper, although production technique is not in contention, hence least discussed in this paper.

Consequently, I will investigate the origins of African prints and the roles played by early European textile merchants and their African textile trader-collaborators in producing and exporting modified Indonesian wax batik to Africa in the name of 'African print'. Second, I examine the design content of what were produced for the African consumers at the beginning, at later times and in contemporary time to discover whether the prints are dominantly of Indonesian aesthetics blended with Dutch, Indian, Chinese, Arab and European influences or not. And finally, I argue for another alternative design model to Littrell's; first by exploring certain features of African indigenous textile designs and second by examining Macquet's themes on Africanity (1972) as sources of inspiration for providing a new blue-print.

### **Africanity: Macquet's Themes**

The reasons for the choice of Macquet's themes are significant. The Javanese, Indian, Chinese and Arab artists whose works were adopted for African print themes/designs seemed to have had tremendous knowledge and understanding of their respective worldview which has impacted on their works (see figs. 1 and 2). In like manner, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of African worldview otherwise termed here as 'Africanity' is imperative for African/Africanist designers to serve as a platform from which authentic African print ideas can be generated and produced; going beyond the ideas expressed about the nature of Black Africa not extinct in recent works (Bohannon 1964, Davidson 1969, Jackson 1970, Stuckey 1972, Diop 1974, Williams 1974, Diop 1978, Asante 1987, Ojo-Ade: 1996).

Thus, Macquet classified them under the rubric of Africanity, defining it as the unique cultural heritage shared by many of the peoples of black Africa (Macquet 1972). And in Macquet's exploration of cultural unit, she observed social, historical and geographical bonds that link the Black peoples of Africa in the areas of kinship and marriage institutions, political organizations, religious beliefs and worldviews (Macquet 1972:6).

These are therefore the common features of the Black African heritage on which this presentation hinges to establish a storehouse for tapping and symbolizing design motifs for African prints; and thus this work hopes to contribute to the deconstruction and reconstruction of the term 'African', especially as it affects the development of African designs in the textile industry.

## **The Origins of African Prints**

African print was developed from batik, the latter being of Indian origin. Batik diffused from India to Indonesian islands and Japan while its subsequent perfection was made possible by the Javanese before the thirteenth century. Because batik was of Hindu origin, its sacred importance was associated with women's birth, initiation, marriage (Fig. 1) and death (Lubell 1976: 178, Lindholm 1979:32). It was particularly a medium for depicting symbols of Javanese women's fertility, such as the feature of crowned snakes; whereas among the Sawu in Sunda island of Indonesia, the cloth was used as a means of clan identification (Newman 1977:20).

The Javanese developed a high level of batik artistry before they were colonized. They produced many symbolic and non-symbolic patterns. *Parang rusak* (dagger point or broken blade) is one of the most popular patterns developed in the sixteenth century (Forge 1989:104). Also known as 'Princely Pattern', *parang rusak* was developed for and worn only by male members of Djakarta royal house (Newman 1977:20, Forge 1989:104).

While under the rule of the Indians, Chinese, Islamic clerics and the Dutch, the Javanese were influenced by an influx of new ideas from the cultures of their overlords. Consequently, some Chinese mythology and Buddhist themes were borrowed and incorporated in their batik. They included the significance of the Chinese mythical snail (Fig. 2) and dogs of Fo, which were the fabulous beasts usually found in pairs guarding the entrance of Buddhist deities. They copied from the Indian chintz particularly the 'Tree of Life' which was later adopted and used by other cultures especially the Europeans (Irwin and Bratt 1970:16, 17 – 21). And greater development of geometric designs was made manifest more than before during the short period Java was made an Islamic state, because Islam forbade the representation of human forms and the like.

By the seventeenth century, Java came under the political control of the Dutch as Javanese batik was introduced to Holland and thereafter to other parts of Europe. Yet, it was not readily accepted in Europe because of its 'exotic' design content (Nielsen 1980:2). However, the Dutch led interested European firms in developing overseas market for the machine-made batik which became known as wax print, and thus during the Dutch trade expansion, factories were established in overseas ports or possessions, including India, Java, Sumatra, Ceylon and the Moluccas (Robinson 1969:118).

By the nineteenth century, styles were derived from European peasant ornamentation and preserved in the oldest cloths served as inspirational sources for designing wax print (Muller n.d.). And design motifs universal to all cultures, such as nature-based forms: plants and animals were drawn and styled in the European format and in the manner of other foreign cultures. For example, we find decorative in-filled plant motifs on these fabrics. Like in Fig. 3, the flowers and foliage are of mixture of Indian and European origin. Some of these nature-based motifs are reminiscent of the seventeenth century Western embroidery and silk styles (Irwin and Brett 1970:19 and 70). All these added to the repertoire of design content of the print, and despite the non-relationship of the design motifs to African traditions, the cloth bearing the motifs were introduced to African communities.

## **The Introduction of African Prints to Africa**

During the late nineteenth century, the Dutch directed their textile mills in Haalem, Leyden and those in overseas to produce wax prints for the West African markets. Before then, little quantity of wax print were introduced to West Africa by the Europeans, first through Christian missionaries who needed the prints for converts; second, through the European producers who made wax prints for the African market; third, through West African soldiers who brought back Javanese batiks to their wives after serving between 1810 and 1862 in Indonesia (Nielsen 1980:3). Thus, by the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a rapid increase in the export of the cloth to Africa, and later in the twentieth century, additional bales of African prints were supplied from Japan and local factories to West Africa (the latter offered cheaper price ranges).

In this process, the marketing of the cloth at the retail level was greatly enhanced by the way and manner attracting indigenous names in form of proverbs, catch phrases, catch words, slogans, maxims and puns were given to each successful design by African traders, although the names had no connection with the designs (Beauchamp 1957:209, Nielsen 1980:10, Domowitz 1992:82 – 87). Yet, the practice then became established as one of the strategies for marketing African prints at various local markets.

## **Africinity Content in the Designs of African Prints**

It may have been observed from the above analysis that African prints were produced at various places overseas and in Europe, and that their designs had an amalgam of various artistic cultures, namely Indonesian, Indian, Chinese, Arab, Dutch and European influences. Thus, the cloths were marketed in Africa, Europe and Asia. Therefore it is worth examining the nature of those marketed in Africa to be able to appreciate the level of Africinity in their content, thus I will review a representative sample of commercially successful types referred to in literature and other well-known prints to determine the level of their Africinity content.

It appears that European producers were more concerned with fabric colour preferences of various African countries. According to Nielsen, the early years of the twentieth century witnessed the export of predominantly blue prints for Nigeria while orange and black went to Gold Coast (now Ghana). Later the eastern part of Nigeria favoured deep red and yellow while Ivory Coast cherished brown, yellow, red, dark red, yellows and greens. Zaire went for brown cream, pink, purple and light green (Nielsen 1980:12).

However, the development of specialty African prints seems to have posed a great problem for the producers. As Butler stated:

It has been the life's work of many merchant converters in Manchester to produce specialty African prints for the people ... the development of a new design for this market normally absorbs more time and effort than is taken over one for the transitory fashion markets (Butler 1958:12, Nielsen 1979:467)

Perhaps it was for this reason that they produced very few designs of Africinity content, with the exception of the famous Ghanaian sword produced in their early products. Thus, thereafter the producers concentrated on the terrain they knew best as their design motifs derived from nature such as plants and animal motifs which are universal to all cultures, to form the majority of designs produced during the early decades of the twentieth century. However, other attempts were made in order to produce more Africinity content designs. For example, Beving, a Manchester textile merchant traveled widely in Africa collecting indigenous hand textiles to form an important resource for the production of African prints exported to Africa towards the middle of the twentieth century (Lubell 1976: 35).

Also, commemorative prints celebrating the local community leaders commenced in the late 1920s as portraits of certain chiefs were incorporated in the design (Picton 1995: 29) followed by those commemorating African heads of state and prominent politicians from the 1950s. And occasionally more designs featuring African cultural objects were produced from the 1960s in order to identify with the cultural re-awakening of the independent nations.

## **African Print: A Wholesale Copy**

By simply observing wearers of African print in any African community within a day or two, one can be convinced beyond a doubt that what is obtainable in the contemporary time as African print is nothing but a wholesale copy of Indonesian batik style (with its characteristic crackle effect and shadow elements).

Considering this, I cursorily assessed African prints using work from Nigerian colleges as representative examples. The works were not different from those stated above; the works tend to ape those produced by the textile firms. Figure 4 represents those selected from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria whose art development is the second oldest in Nigeria. Figure 5 reflects typically past textile students works from Yaba College of Technology Art Department, Lagos, the oldest art institution in Nigeria. Granted all these are short of the expectations, but how should the proposed African print look like? If one takes a cue from African music, much of its content in terms of song rendition has been in African dialects and languages with the percussion of many coming from African-derived drums and accessories. Hence, cannot African prints be derived from its own metaphoric dialect, languages and percussion?

Another source- inducing ideas came from Voice of America's one hour radio discussion participation programme held 14 February 2007 involving callers from Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Guinea. The radio programme, *Straight Talk Africa*, which was anchored by Chaka Sali discussed the theme "Rebranding Africa". The discussion focused on the misrepresentation of Africa in many aspects of life especially by the Western media and bodies. The following points were stressed: That no one would correct these misrepresentations unless Africans themselves do so through their own media, through dissemination by Africanist scholars and by the African in Diaspora. That re-writing African history on all facets of life is best handled by Africans and not outsiders who most often wrote with bias. That at the international level, matters reflecting the fortunes of the African were often decided with no respect of their feelings and no invitation to African governments, African experts and other relevant bodies to participate. At the end of the radio discussion, Africans were called upon by the discussants to boycott the "boycottable" particularly where there are alternatives to such decisions. Lastly, that Africans should project what is good about the continent such as what has been achieved so that the African hope could be kept alive.

What are the implications of these suggestions to the proposed project? For example, the point has been made that when the world dominant economies decided on matters affecting Africa at the international level, her participation at such a forum was often not sought. This acknowledged the European textile firm's selection and development of modified Indonesian wax batik as export product to Africa. This was a product adoption for Africa without any design content negotiation with Africans. In other words, the product was developed and renamed 'African prints' with little or no African participation.

To put a halt to this African misrepresentation, concerned and dedicated Africanist scholars, artists, designers and textile magnates should be involved in the re-branding of African print as a project. One could infer from the foregoing radio discussion that no one would re-brand African print in its present features unless some Africans and Africanists do so for Africa.

### **Future Model for African Print Design and Production**

If European print producers successfully adopted over the past one century among others European (fig. 3), Chinese, Indian and Javanese art styling for 'African' print production, then African/Africanist producers could derive and adopt authentic African design styles from a wide range of handcrafted textile traditions for which Africa is well-known internationally. The adoption of this is in line with the discussants' suggestions.

Common to most African handcrafted traditional fabric is its characteristic design having irregular composition style. This is in form of unlike motifs which are juxtaposed. The style has an orderly repetition on motifs which are interrupted by a shift in texture, direction or scale (Adams 1991:35). The style gives ample chance for the distribution of some design variations. The design elements in the composition are made of irregularities and regularities and these provide a source of vitality for the people to behold. The asymmetry (i.e. the irregularity) style also activates a sense of movement for its beholder unlike the symmetrical design characteristics of European and other traditions (Adams 1991: 37, 43). This characteristic style has more advantages. The style enables the beholding of varying design component shifts of same theme on the cloth surface without being bored. A great number of those fabric designers explored and created componential varieties thus making the final works more aesthetically pleasing to behold.

This characteristic African feature is found in the Zairean handcrafted Kuba embroidery (Clarke 1997: 46-63), Nigeria's Hausa embroidery (Heathcote 1974: 15-40, 1976, 1972: 12 – 19, 82, 84), in the Upper Volta weaving format of the Mossi, Nigeria's *adire eleko* (Barbour & Simmond 1971), Nigeria's *aso-oke* (Clarke 1997: 74 – 111; Lamb and Holmes 1980) and Nigeria's *akwete* (Afigbo and Okeke 1985; Aronson 1980: 62 – 66; Davis 1974: 22 – 25), Ghana's *kente* (Clarke 1997: 64 – 75), Mali's woolen blanket *ghasa* of the Peul (Imperato 1976: 56 – 59, 1973: 40 – 47) and check - motif cloth of the Mende (Sierra Leone). This characteristic feature also manifest in their indigenous dyed products such as in the resist dyed *adire* (Nigeria), Ghana's hand print *adinkara* of the Ashanti and Mali's *bogolanfini* mud cloth of the Bamana. (Clarke 1997: 86 – 93, Imperato 1970: 32 – 41 Duponchel 2004). In addition, it could be found in the decorated barkcloth of the Ganda in Uganda (Spring 1989), the Mangbetu (Zaire) and in the cut pile raffia fabric of the Pende (Zaire).

An intensive study of these African handcrafted textile traditions (Spring 1989; Clarke 1997, Lamb and Holmes 1980) will also lead to the discovery of a mine of characteristic African design motifs. It has been mentioned earlier that 'African print' motifs were sourced by the European producers from European, Indian, Java, Chinese and Arab styles, many of which are on nature-based motifs like birds, plants, etc. On the whole, there is nothing stopping Africanist designers from deriving a plethora of stylistic motifs from the indigenous African hand textiles mentioned above. In addition to the above suggestion, certain characteristic patterns/motifs associated with, for example, *Kente* fabric (Ghana) could be fused into the main theme of a chosen design as a secondary booster of the design content. Same use could be made of *adire* fabric (Nigeria), Kuba embroidery (Zaire), *bogolanfini* (Mali), and of others too in combination with the main theme of a chosen design. An injection of this new horizon into African print designs will definitely make a difference in future in terms of aesthetic preference.

Another source of inspiration that could be explored is from Jacquet Macquet's work (1972). An Africanist anthropologist Macquet defined and explored the concept 'Africanity' as the unique cultural heritage shared by many peoples of black Africa and which is distinct from, and comparable to, the Western and Asian worlds. In providing details, she observed thus:

The impression of similarity experienced in different parts of Black Africa is based on cultural similarity...They are confirmed by careful examination of specific cultural phenomena. (For example)...it is easy to perceive a certain relationship between African art works, a common quality that distinguishes them from a collection of traditional pieces from Oceania, America or Asia.

It is not because some particular feature is found in all African sculptures, and only in them, but because a certain cluster of characteristics gives African art its own special look... similar conclusions may be drawn from areas of culture other than art and language. Social institutions (such as marriage, the family and political organizations), belief systems and world views also display common qualities throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Macquet 1972: 5-6).

Macquet also provided a breakdown of the contents of Africanity thus creating a repertoire of endless themes. It is from these large numbers of subject matter that the writer is suggesting to fabric designers. The designer is to create art works that are reproducible for African print production. On kinship and marriage institutions, religion and world view, the designer could conceive, picture and review through the use and arrangement of decorative symbols on things like: kinship, dependence on lineage, the playing of roles there, going back to the ancestor and being influenced by unknown forces (for a Chinese example, see fig. 2). Other themes include the reaching of adulthood, getting married (for a Javanese example, see fig. 1), exchanging women, compensating for the gift of fertility, stabilizing matrimonial alliance, marrying several wives, making the lineage to continue, and living in a village (Macquet 1972:55-80).

In the realm of governance, she identified the governance in territories with each ruler being associated with the people, succession by heredity, being a courtier, administering the kingdom, centralizing, being a professional craftsman, producing folk art, hewing wood and drawing water, existing for others, serving the lord and structuring the African heritage (Macquet 1972: 81 – 112). Finally Macquet observed that the black world tend to struggle together, conquering poverty, retaining its identity yet borrowing from outside including solving the problems arising thereof. She asserted that this was the essence of traditional Africanity in the contemporary times and it will likely be so and many years to come (Macquet 1972: 113 – 131). In sum, her views on the theme of Africanity is all about the common features which united Black Africa and the problems arising from them.

Macquet's identification of these features corresponds with the theme of FESTAC Colloquiums, *Black civilization and Education* which celebrated in 1977 the heritage of Black Africa in her languages, arts, philosophies, religion, technologies , system of government and her historical traditions. According to Amoda,

Many of them (i.e. the themes) have proved the originality of our cultures, our sense of creativity and invention. Many have stressed the fact that our languages, our arts, our wisdom, our religions, our traditional medicine....have not only provided us with the reasons for our existence in the past, but also helped us in the present liberation of Africa, and should serve as a spring board for the great leap into the future (Amoda 1972: 164).

What else can we derive by adopting these themes for commercial production of African prints. The themes on the print will serve as propaganda media for celebrating the heritage of Black African in terms of its success of the past, present and expectation in the future. This will be in line with the aspiration of the conveners of FESTAC Colloquium who called for intensive use of teaching aids and other means in propagating this heritage to the Black world (Amoda 1978: 164) and, in addition for us in this paper, to those outside the Black world. Out of sheer curiosity, the latter might want to learn more about African world and civilization through the proposed African print motifs.

For the fabric designers to be inspired by this gamut of themes is challenging but desirable particularly if designers make the themes changing as design trends. Societies in the western world have benefited from changing fashionable fabric styling based on certain periodic moods of artists. The changing styles and themes were meant to attract continuous patronage of their fabric prints. For example, the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late nineteenth century influenced fabric designers who produced mainly designs with controlled crowding of arranged motifs (Arte 1998: 425 -6). Fabric designers influenced by Art Nouveau Movement (1890 – 1910) changed the existing state to designs having delicate, sinuous, wavy line-dominated motifs (Arte 1998: 530; Robinson 1969” 38; Warren 1974: 4 – 7). Art Deco period inspired the production of prints which had great emphasis upon geometric formalization of motifs in the 1920s (Arte 1998: 611). In the same vein, the proposed African print designs should change in themes from one period to another but still retaining the design characteristics earlier analysed.

## **Conclusion**

African prints remain essentially Javanese in production techniques. There is a relationship between the form styling of the present prints and an amalgam of Javanese, India, Chinese, Arab and European artistic traditions. The marketing of African prints has been greatly enhanced by the retail traders who were the producers’ collaborators; they developed provocative indigenous names for each design in their respective communities.

There has been widespread use of nature-based design motifs which were styled from non-African traditions right from the inception of Africa prints in Africa. This shows that the term ‘African print’, a misnomer was coined by its producers just to deceive the African buyers. The deception has continued up to the contemporary times.

Certain agencies must be sought for assistance in order to effect and promote a new design format derived from the best of indigenous textile traditions of Africa and ideas from Macquet treatise. Textile stake-holders such as indigenous textile magnates, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry from African countries could be sought for industrial partnership on this project.

These are the arrowheads which could be persuaded into accepting and accomplishing the project. In the alternative, the stake-holders could be persuaded into voting certain funds annually as trust fund, a coffer to be used for prosecuting this project to the stage when the fabric becomes a product of export drive from Africa. It is most likely that the Nigeria government will be interested in a project like this. For example, it provided in April 2007 the sum of 80 billion naira (\$650m) for the revival of cotton textile industry as well as for the promotion of textile export (Aregbesola 2007 : 1, *The Nation* 2007:17) In sum, the production and utilization of the proposed fabric should engender within and outside Africa a new image for Africa.

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