

Semiotics of Factory Printed Wax Prints across West Africa

Naa Omai Sawyerr^{*1}, Richard Acquaye², Cynthia Agyeiwaa Kusi³

^{1, 2, 3} Textile Design and Technology Department, Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi, Ghana

*Corresponding Author: naaomaisawyerr@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the topic of factory-printed wax fabrics in West Africa, focusing on their portrayal and significance within the region. The study examines the resemblances and distinctions of these prints across different countries and their applications, meanings, and interpretations. Wax prints' historical and cultural importance in West African society, culture, and economy is emphasized, highlighting the diverse meanings embedded within seemingly uniform designs. The research methodology involves qualitative research and selective sampling, with ten wax print designs chosen for analysis in Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo. These countries were selected based on their integration, trade, production, and cultural significance related to wax prints. Data collection involved meticulous observation, thorough documentation, interviews, and thematic analysis. The findings reveal both similarities and differences among the analyzed designs, each representing unique narratives and embodying cultural significance. These prints are not just patterns, but also vessels of history, with captivating stories intertwined with their origins. To ensure the preservation and relevance of these visual representations for future generations, it is recommended to undertake comprehensive documentation and cataloging of traditional wax prints.

Keywords: Design, Semiotics, Visual Representation, Wax print, West Africa



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1. Introduction

Throughout many generations, Wax prints have become an integral part of West African culture, visualizing the region's anthropology. These prints, although sharing common characteristics, hold distinct meanings and significance within the sub-region and beyond. With a wide range of colors, styles, patterns, and inspirations, they draw upon a rich heritage of sources such as Indian cotton, Javanese batiks, traditional African textiles, and even references to historical events, religious beliefs, and captivating mythology. These valuable prints were originally brought to Africa from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. However, upon their arrival in West Africa, they transformed, adopting various names and interpretations along the enchanting western coastline. For example, the Garuda bird, a cultural symbol from Indonesia, took on different identities in different places. In Ghana, it became known as the "bunch of bananas," in Burkina Faso, "the mask," in Cote d'Ivoire, "the shell," and in Togo, "the snail out of the shell" (Relph & Irwin, 2010). This study aims to explore the complexities of these symbolic differences while examining how native wax print designs are integrated into the vibrant landscapes of Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo.

This study focuses on four West African nations, namely Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire and Togo, where the art of wax prints thrives with great enthusiasm. These countries have a rich history of production, trade, and cultural significance associated with these vibrant textiles, contributing to a diverse and captivating tapestry. The variations in language, market dynamics, and color preferences among these nations create a vivid tableau that reflects their distinct identities. For instance, Nigeria developed an affinity for blueprints as early as the early 1900s, while Togo embraced deep red and yellow tones. Conversely, Ghana developed a preference for orange and black, infusing their wax prints with vibrant vitality. Cote d'Ivoire revealed in a symphony of colors, including brown, yellow, red, dark red, and green, creating a visually stimulating

experience. While previous studies have explored the symbolic significance of wax prints, such as the works by Howard, Sarpong, and Amankwah (2012) on the diminishing presence of African prints in modern Ghanaian designs, or the cultural and symbolic interpretations of specific wax print designs on Ghanaian fabrics by Impraim-Swanzy, Oduro, and Owusu (2019), and the exploration of symbolic designs in African fabrics by Labode and Braide (2022), none have examined the symbolism of wax prints across these diverse countries. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the intricate meanings interwoven within wax prints across these diverse nations.

The nations selected for this research project possess a rich heritage in the production of wax prints. Ghana has a long-standing tradition of trading these exquisite prints, dating back to the 15th century, and this tradition continues to thrive today. Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire has made significant contributions to the history of wax prints, particularly with the establishment of Uniwax in 1967. As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria has a distinguished wax print legacy, with a history of pre-colonial states and kingdoms adding to its grandeur. In addition to being the largest market for these prints, Nigeria also provides employment opportunities for its young population.

Meanwhile, Togo is a central hub for importing wax prints, acting as a bustling crossroads through which these vibrant fabrics reach eager enthusiasts. Despite Nigeria's efforts to protect its textile industry, it has previously imposed bans on European prints. However, despite these restrictions, European wax prints have managed to discreetly infiltrate Nigeria through the pathways of Togo and Ghana.

Figure 1 presents a map of Africa, focusing on the West African region. In contrast, Figure 2 offers a detailed representation of West Africa, showcasing the countries using their colonial names. This visual aid provides a necessary foundation for our comprehensive analysis.



Figure 1. Map of Africa highlighting West Africa

(Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/15/Africa-countries-WAFU-UFOA.png>)



Figure 2. West African map showing the countries with their colonial names
(Source: <https://folukeafrica.com/a-short-history-of-west-africa/>)

1.1. The Characteristics of West African Wax Prints

Machine-made cotton fabrics in West African wax prints imitate the intricate craftsmanship found in Javanese batiks but with a distinct African influence. Using engraved copper rollers allows for designing designs using heated wax or resin. Following the dyeing process with indigo, the fabric emerges with a captivating blue pattern against a pristine white background as the wax or resin is removed. Additional colors are introduced through hand-blocking or duplex printing. This technique, known as batik, involves the use of wax, clay, or starch paste to prevent specific areas of the design from absorbing color (Nielsen, 1974).

Wax prints are characterized by their bold and vibrant colors and their captivating design elements. These colors remain vivid on both sides of the fabric, challenging the traditional notion of a right and wrong side. The arrangement of colors and patterns in unconventional ways creates a visually captivating experience. The crackling effect, a distinctive feature of Javanese batik, is intentionally emphasized in wax prints for the African market (Burke, 1983). The production of wax prints encompasses various design variations and terms, such as Calico, Chintz, Crackle, Exotic, Field, Imitation African Prints, Imitation Madras, Indian cotton, indigo prints, and more. (Nielsen, 1974).



Figure 3. Calico Prints: These fine textiles have been meticulously hand-painted by skilled artisans from the vibrant city of Calicut in India. They embody the unique essence of this captivating region, radiating an unparalleled charm that is truly distinctive.

Source: Vlisco.com



Figure 4. Chintz: "floral fabric" refers to textiles adorned with patterns that depict flowers. During the 18th century, this fabric was commonly made from cotton and produced using the mordant and resist dyeing technique.

Source: Vlisco.com



Figure 5. Crackle: This phenomenon refers to the creation of delicate lines in wax prints and batiks, resulting from the cracking of the wax or resin and the subsequent penetration of dye into the fabric.

Source: Vlisco.com

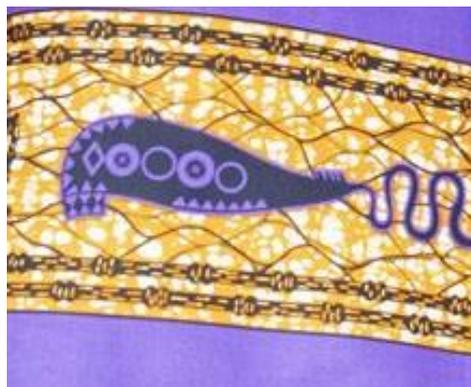


Figure 6. Exotic Fabrics: These textiles are characterized by their unique color and pattern, which deviate from the typical preferences of Western culture.

Source: Vlisco.com



Figure 7. Imitation African Prints: These textiles are produced through direct roller printing techniques, which replicate the characteristic white spots and cracked lines found in African wax prints.

Source: Vlisco.com

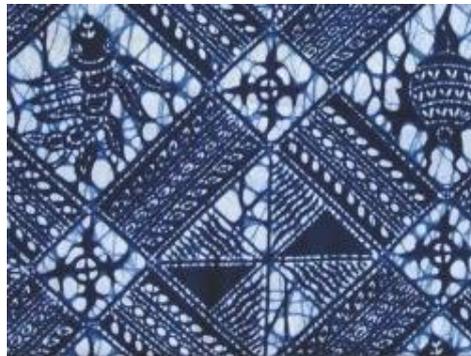


Figure 8. Indigo Prints: The term "indigo" refers to the pigment derived from the foliage of the indigo plant, which imparts a blue hue. This dye has been utilized for nearly 5000 years and likely held significant prominence as a coloring agent in ancient times.

Source: Vlisco.com



Figure 9. Imitation Madras: This textile replicates the authentic Madras fabric originating from India, however, it was produced in Europe using either manual or mechanized looms.

Source: Vlisco.com



Figure 10. Indian Cotton Print: The term encompasses various vibrantly printed and woven cotton textiles from India.

Source: Vlisco.com

Howard and Ntiri (2013) emphasize that wax prints are distinguished by their intricate designs and bold compositions, which incorporate optical illusions and three-dimensional imagery. These prints go beyond mere visual attractiveness; they also possess a textured quality and a wide range of colors that make them adaptable for different contexts and uses. They effectively communicate to the viewer, conveying multiple layers of meaning that make these fabrics truly exceptional.

1.2. The Symbolic Significances of West African Wax Prints

In West Africa, fabric goes beyond its physical properties and takes on a multifaceted role in communication, storytelling, and cultural representation (Acquaye, 2018). Throughout history, these textiles have served as more than just decorative items but as powerful tools for conveying messages and expressing one's identity. They have played a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging and have held a revered position within individuals, families, and society as a whole. While traditional sculptures and masks have traditionally been the dominant forms of artistic expression, contemporary African artists are now embracing these textiles to bridge the gap between past and present.

The appeal of West African fabrics extends beyond their aesthetic qualities, as understanding their deeper meanings can be challenging for those unfamiliar with the culture. Due to the vastness of the region and the wide variety of fabrics available, comprehending their symbolism requires a discerning perspective. However, certain overarching themes can be identified. These fabrics often feature captivating geometric and abstract patterns, creating a visually striking contrast between light and dark shades. The designs form a mosaic of asymmetrical and non-uniform shapes, incorporating elements from everyday objects such as raffia mats and calabashes and depictions of plants, animals, and abstract symbols inspired by proverbs and the interpretation of visual and spoken language.

According to Clarke (1977), West African textiles and garments possess more than just aesthetic value; they carry religious, historical, and societal narratives. They indicate one's status, wealth, cultural or social affiliations and play a significant role in commemorating important life events. In the past, wax print designs may have featured Egyptian motifs, but these designs have evolved to incorporate West African symbols over time. European manufacturers have even incorporated African symbolism into their designs to cater to local preferences. The dressing customs of West Africa have been influenced by a select few who have laid the foundation for the socio-political, cultural, and economic landscapes that are visible today. Clothing is not simply a means of covering the body; it enhances personal and social image and identity, reinforcing social boundaries against those outside the group. In West Africa, symbols in various regions can have different interpretations and names. For instance, the *Akofena* symbol may be known as "The Corkscrew" in some areas, while in Togo, it is referred to as "The Axe." The understanding and naming of designs in West Africa are influenced by popular culture, semiotic interpretation, and local events. For example, the "bonus" ABC wax print, introduced to Nigeria in the 1950s, acquired its name due to a salary increase given to government employees on the same day. These subtle nuances add richness and complexity to the already intricate world of wax prints.

2. Methodology

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the complex designs found in West African textiles, a qualitative research methodology was utilized. This study specifically focused on the West African region, emphasizing Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo. These countries have gained recognition for their deep appreciation and fondness for wax prints (Acquaye, Sawyerr & Kusi, 2022). Despite their diverse linguistic and colonial

histories, these nations share a common fabric of language, customs, and traditional clothing, making them ideal subjects for this research inquiry. Using a narrative research design was advantageous in investigating factual information obtained from designers, distributors, retailers, and consumers in the chosen countries. As Wolgemuth and Agosto (2019) explain, narrative research methodology involves collecting and analyzing narratives to gain a deeper understanding of individuals, traditions, and communities. In this specific study, a group of 11 participants, consisting of one designer, two distributors, four retailers, and four consumers, were involved. Their narratives and experiences revealed valuable insights regarding the significance of West African wax prints and the artistic expressions embedded within these textiles.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

| Design | Description |
|--|---|
|  | <p>In the dynamic landscapes of West Africa, a distinctive design has emerged that symbolizes the intertwining concepts of remembrance and the profound value of education. Originating in the 1920s, this design adorned the clothing of individuals who embarked on the journey of learning. By 1970, a fresh wave of educational designs swept across Africa, infusing vitality into the fabric of knowledge. A reimagined version of the vintage Grafton design by Brunnschweiler materialized, featuring depictions of educational tools. Against a checkerboard backdrop, the alphabet danced, its rhythm resonating with the essence of wisdom. Amidst the checkerboards, two groups emerged, showcasing an open book, a pencil, a ruler, and a chalkboard atop an easel, flanked by two slates. This masterpiece took center stage, adorned in shades of indigo, claret, and the radiant glow of broken gourds (Nielsen, 1979).</p> <p>In contemporary times, this design has transcended its humble origins and found a renewed purpose in the realm of politics. Political parties now employ this design as a powerful propaganda tool, representing their unwavering commitment to education. The design has evolved, incorporating motifs of the digital era, replacing the blackboard with the sleek sophistication of computer imagery. It stands as a testament to the significance of literacy, serving as a guiding beacon that leads children onto the path of knowledge from their earliest years (Vodochodsky, 2022). Notably, this design is shared across all the countries selected for this study.</p> |

Figure 11. ABC / Alphabets
Source: Vlisco.com



Figure 12. Helmet /Bunch of bananas / Shell
Source: Vlisco.com

In African-inspired artistry, the Indonesian motif takes on a vibrant and captivating form, particularly seen in the intricate wings of the Garuda. This sacred avian symbol, revered in Hinduism and proudly worn as Indonesia's national emblem, underwent a fascinating transformation when introduced to the African continent. Skilled African artisans ingeniously reimagined the Garuda's wings, creating captivating symbols such as "the snail outside its shell" or an elegant cluster of bananas. The African wax print, a medium of creative expression, showcases a diverse range of interpretations of the Garuda's wings, each highlighting the continent's ingenuity and artistic prowess (Oliveankara, 2022).

Originating in 1914, this design has become a beloved classic in Ghana, affectionately known as the "Branch of Banana" or "*Kodusaw*." It holds deep cultural significance in Ghana and Nigeria, representing preparedness and resilience in the face of challenges. In the enchanting landscape of Cote d'Ivoire, it is referred to as the "shell," while in Togo, it is called the "snail out of his shell" (Vodochodsky, 2022). Various versions of this design are intricately intertwined with the annual *Abobo* festival, a lively celebration that takes place every September in the village of *Abobo*. During this vibrant event, local residents proudly dress in fabrics adorned with snail motifs, paying homage to their rich cultural heritage and embracing the values of unity and festivity (Vodochodsky, 2022).



Figure 13. Advice/*Conseille*/Macaroni
Source: Vlisco.com

Originating from Ghana, this fabric is commonly known as "*Afe Bi Ye Asan*," a name that symbolizes the intricate journey of life. In the neighboring Ivory Coast, it is referred to as "*Conseille*," representing the incorporation of wise counsel within its fabric. Ivorian mothers lovingly dress their daughters in this textile, imparting invaluable wisdom on matters of the heart. In Togo, a country renowned for its culinary delights, this design, despite having no connection to food, is affectionately named "Macaroni" due to its striking resemblance to the beloved pasta strands.



Figure 14. Record/ Target /
Nsu Bura/"Plaque-Plaque"
Source: Vlisco.com

The enduring allure of the "Target" design, created by Grafton, has long captivated residents of coastal areas, as astutely noted by Nielsen in 1974. In the vibrant landscape of Ghana, this design is known by various names such as "Plaque-Plaque," "Target," or the evocative "Nsu Bura," which translates poetically to "well" in the local language. The design, conceived in the 1960s, draws inspiration from the graceful ripples that emanate from the surface when a stone is dropped into a well. This profound symbol represents how our actions can have a lasting impact on the lives of others, whether positive or negative.

In Nigeria, this fabric, whose circular shape is reminiscent of vintage vinyl records, is affectionately called "Record." In the captivating realm of Togo, a range of names is used for this splendid creation, including "Consulaire," "Gbédjégan," or the delightful "Gbedze," a playful reference to a hat.

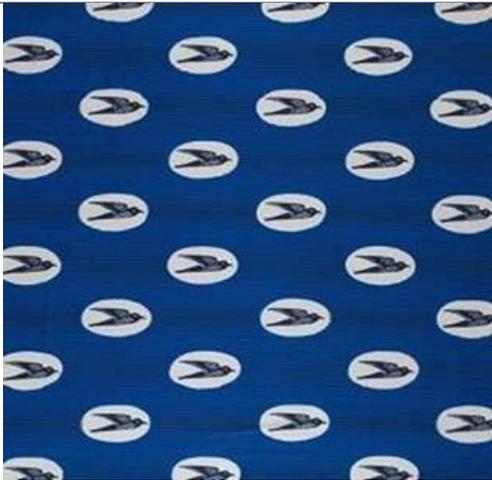


Figure 15. Speed Bird/ Air Afrique,
'Rich today, poor tomorrow'
Source: Vlisco.com

In the cultural symbolism of West Africa, the bird holds a position of prominence, and this fabric serves as a conduit for a variety of meanings. It represents concepts such as change, prosperity, freedom, and transition, weaving a complex tapestry of significance that deeply resonates with individuals (folukeafrica.com, 2022). In Ghana, it is known as "Sika Wo Ntaban," a name that subtly conveys the fleeting nature of wealth. Like a playful bird, money can disappear or become elusive, even when one believes it is securely held. This design serves as a poignant reminder that affluence is transient, capable of being swept away instantly. It also carries the weight of a humble plea, akin to extending a hand to pursue a young woman's affection.

In Nigeria's *Ebo* region, the design is referred to as *Eneke*. According to legend, this pattern grants hunters the extraordinary ability to glide through the skies without touching the ground, enabling them to maintain unwavering and precise aim. Meanwhile, in the vibrant realm of Togo, this design is whimsically named "Air Afrique." It was once featured on the attire of a domestic airline, adding a touch of sartorial elegance to the skies.

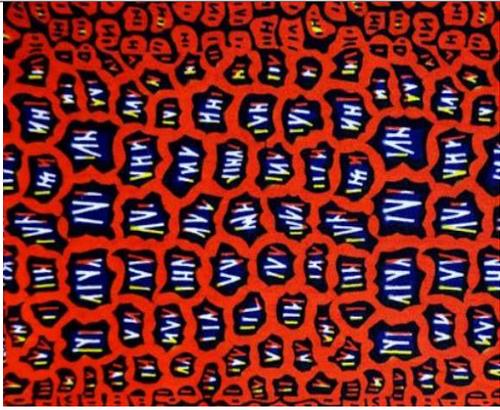


Figure 16. The Household Gravel/
Leopard Skin
Source: Vlisco.com

In 1968, a distinctive print resembling the scales of a serpent emerged and gained popularity in the United States (Nielsen, 1979). This design, characterized by shades of indigo, Othlood, and tabac, captivates viewers and evokes a profound emotional response (Nielsen, 1974). In Ghana, a local saying refers to loved ones as "gravel," symbolizing their ability to bring both joy and challenges. Meanwhile, in Cote d'Ivoire, the inspiration for this textile is believed to have originated from the combination of a panther's skin texture and the gravel found around homes. This origin story has led to endearing nicknames for the print, such as "The Household Gravel" and "Leopard Skin."



Figure 17. Cha Cha Cha/ Change your life/
Senchi Bridge/ Aganmakpo/
La Danse à la Mode
Source: Vlisco.com

Witness the magnificent creation known as the "Senchi Bridge," a grand structure that spans the majestic Volta River in Ghana. This bridge's design is inspired by its graceful swaying motion, capturing the essence of its bold and daring spirit. In Ivory Coast, it is referred to as "La Danse à la Mode," a captivating pattern representing unity and holding significant associations with fashion and dance. This pattern gained popularity following a war and became a symbol of resilience and elegance. In Togo, it is called "Aganmakpo," drawing inspiration from the ever-changing skin of the chameleon. This symbolic design represents the transformative power of change, a testament to the dynamic nature of life. This design intertwines cultures, narratives, and emotions in a remarkable fusion, inviting us to embrace the diverse beauty that enriches our world.

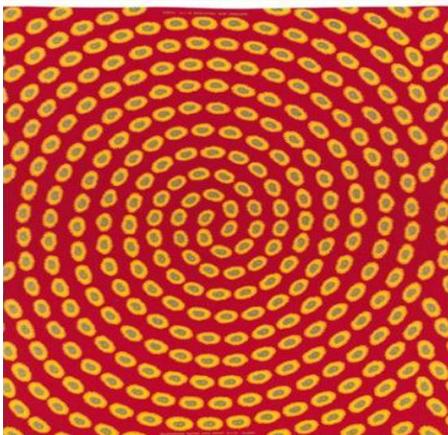


Figure 18. The Moon/ La Lune/
Tchi-koui," or "Small Change
Source: Vlisco.com

This fashionable trend has gained significant popularity among fashion-conscious individuals in Ghana. The intricate Java design has its roots in the vibrant city of Kano, Nigeria, where it originated from the ancient craft of tie-dyeing. This traditional art form is still practiced with great skill by indigo dyers in the region. In the neighboring country of Togo, this captivating pattern is known as "Tchi-koui," which translates to "Small Change" in the local dialect. This translation holds a meaningful connection, as it relates the design to the subtle currency fluctuations. This association is further enhanced by the delicate shells that were once used as currency.

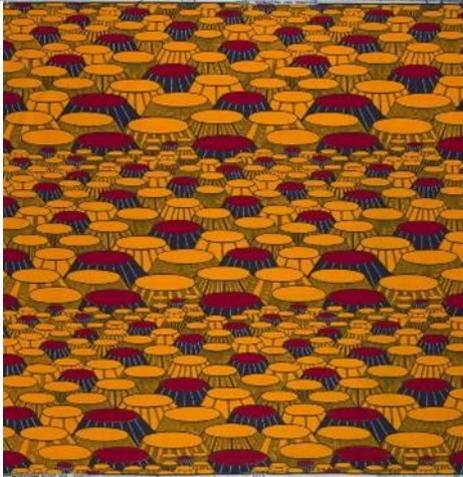


Figure 19. King's Chair/
Ashanti Chair/Oche Eze/Hene Egua
Source: Vlisco.com

Originating in 1980, this fabric has gained significant recognition and cultural importance. It is characterized by its opulent design, featuring regal seats and thrones adorned in shades of indigo blue, fiery red, and vibrant yellow (Vodochodsky, 2022). In Ghana, it is known as "The King's Chair" and serves as a revered gathering place for individuals to engage in storytelling and profound discussions about life's complexities. In Nigeria, specifically within the Igbo community, this textile is referred to as "Oche Eze" and holds great reverence. It is considered a precious possession, particularly for newlywed women, and is bestowed upon the bride during traditional wedding ceremonies. This fabric symbolizes the abundance and prosperity she brings to the union, showcasing the grandeur and splendor of her lineage.

Emerging from the historical records, this design possesses a timeless quality that continues to captivate the interests of Ghanaian fashion enthusiasts. Engraved within its intricate tapestry are two prominent motifs, each exuding its enigmatic allure. One motif resembles a tortoise's aged, translucent shell adorned with a captivating blend of mottled browns. The other motif is inward-pointing V-shapes, elegantly interwoven throughout the fabric's composition. Over the years, these motifs have sparked numerous interpretations, igniting the imagination of those who gaze upon them. While traditionally intended for women, the bold and adventurous men of Ghana confidently embrace this cloth, recognizing the robust tortoise shell as a symbol of their personal resilience and unwavering determination. Infused with artistic finesse, this design is skillfully replicated in vibrant colors, infusing vitality into patterns that gracefully dance across the fabric's surface.



Figure 20. Tortoise Back
Source: Vlisco.com

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3.2. Discussion

The investigation revealed that there were both similarities and differences among the examined designs. However, one design, the ABC Alphabet, emerged as a common element across the selected countries. Additionally, multiple designs were shared among three nations, highlighting the interconnectedness of their cultures. Notably, these designs hold shared meanings among nations with a common language. For example, the speed bird design, known as "Air Afrique" in Togo and Cote de Ivories, was featured on the regional airline uniform, symbolizing preparedness for takeoff. In Ghana and Nigeria, this same design is called the helmet design, representing readiness for emergencies. This whimsical nomenclature adds an element of enchantment to the narrative of the fabric.

The origins of these prints are enriched with compelling narratives that hold significant cultural resonance within Ghana, Nigeria, Cote de Ivoire, and Togo. For instance, in Ivory Coast, a fabric pattern referred to as "Afe Bi Ye Asan" in Ghana, which translates to "each year has its ups and downs," is known as "Conseille," meaning advice. This particular designation was selected due to the tradition of Ivorian women guiding their daughters regarding dating. These textiles transcend their utilitarian function as mere garments, instead encapsulating historical and cultural elements, acting as a conduit for storytelling and enabling individuals to proudly display their narratives.

Wax prints play a prominent role in West African societies, serving as decorative elements on clothing for significant events such as weddings and naming ceremonies and for everyday and professional attire. The fabric choice holds considerable significance, as it communicates meaning and symbolism. A notable example is the "Oche Eze," or king's chair, which holds great importance for newly married women in the Igbo community of Nigeria. This textile represents the wealth of the bride's family and is bestowed upon her during her traditional wedding ceremony, symbolizing the prosperity she brings to her new family.

These wax prints communicate cultural and historical information and function as symbols of social standing, indicating wealth and bestowing prestige. The ABC cloth, which holds a universally recognized meaning across all countries examined in our research, represents education and literacy. Wearing this particular pattern signifies an individual's respect for education and the significance of ensuring high-quality education for future generations. This aligns with the argument made by Relph and Irwin (2010) that wax prints serve as a powerful indicator of affluence and influence.

The creation, production, and trade of wax prints hold significant importance within the commercial landscape of our research area. The supply chain involved in this industry, which includes producers, manufacturers, distributors, retailers, and wholesalers, provides employment opportunities for a substantial number of individuals. Projections indicate that the fashion industry in Africa is expected to generate an impressive revenue of \$15.5 million within the next two years (Fashionomics, 2022). Despite recent declines, the textile sector in Ghana alone employs approximately 3000 people, highlighting the profound economic significance of this industry for the participating nations (Moulin, 2022). Therefore, wax prints extend beyond being mere pieces of fabric; they represent a dynamic tapestry that intertwines culture, history, and personal narratives, collectively forming a beautiful expression of identity and heritage.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the practice of fabric design in West Africa represents a compelling amalgamation of cultural and economic elements. Transmitted through successive generations, these elaborate designs possess deep symbolic meaning and provide insight into the material and socio-cultural values of the area. They serve as a gateway to the extensive cultural legacy of West Africa. The documentation and organization of knowledge pertaining to these traditional wax prints are crucial to preserve their lasting significance and timeless appeal for future generations. The designs examined in this research primarily derive from Vlisco, a well-known textile printing company.

In summary, wax prints have a long-standing history in West Africa, influencing its cultural, societal, and economic development. Their versatility, affordability, and ability to communicate messages and meanings

have all contributed to their widespread popularity in the region. Each design, accompanied by its designated name, varies across different regions and cultures, often carrying specific connotations related to symbols, beliefs, or events. Despite the changing landscape of the fashion industry and the emergence of alternative textiles, wax prints remain prominent in West African fashion and cultural identity. Further investigation is warranted to examine the designs produced by other printing companies, such as ABC and *Akosombo* Textiles, to uncover potential symbolic meanings embedded in their creations. Additionally, expanding the scope of research to include other countries beyond those examined in this study would offer valuable insights into the cultural significance of similar designs for these regions.

5. Acknowledgements

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6. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

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