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An Appraisal of the Aesthetic Dimension to the African Philosophy of Cloth

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Abstract

In African society, the art and life of the people symbiotically reflect each other. African art has its own history and its own aesthetic concept, as well as powerful emotional content. These traits are reflected in the African philosophy of cloth. Cloth in this context has a

metaphorical significance that helps define the concepts of the people and their culture, social relationships, beliefs and understanding of human existence. In other words, Africans enter into a reciprocal, reflexive relationship with their cloth metaphor, through which they gain a more insightful understanding both of themselves and of their conception of cloth. This understanding goes beyond the superficial beauty of the African cloth. African cloth has an inherent aesthetic in its symbolic usage, motifs, colours and even in the message it carries.

Key words: culture, cloth metaphor, aesthetic symbolism

Introduction

Like most African visual art forms, African cloth not only is created to please the eyes but also has underlying symbolism rooted in the people's values and belief system. In African belief, the function of cloth goes beyond merely covering the body to prevent exposure. Cloth conveys a metaphorical import and inherent aesthetics through its symbolic usage, motifs and colours, as well as in the messages it carries. It is in this context that Borgatti (1983) affirms that cloth use and cloth metaphors help to define concepts of humanity, culture, proper social relations and behaviour. In the Nigerian culture, because of the importance of cloth, nakedness is used to denote different types of insanity. Among the Akan people of Ghana, the kente is more than just a cloth. It is a visual representation of the people's history, oral tradition, ethical beliefs, social values and political philosophy. In essence, cloth in this context is a wordless means of communication that is understood by those who use it. This means of communication is prevalent amongst the Anyi of Côte d'Ivoire, who have proverbs integrated in their cloth. Nevertheless, it is difficult to attribute a common meaning to an art form because art can be defined differently by different cultures. The 'symbolic' expression at the heart of artistic creativity, however, is common to all cultures. This argument, according to Leuthold (2011), stems from the 'Symbolic theories' of Ernst Cassirer, who made a case that symbolisation forms the core of all activity that is uniquely human. Cassirer also noted that art is a

major aspect of this symbolic expression. Following Cassirer, this paper examines the symbolic expression of African cloth culture.

Specifically, this paper focuses on appraising the metaphorical significance of the African conception of cloth. Furthermore, using Panofsky's theory of iconography as a framework, the aesthetic themes in African cloth are articulated.

The Metaphorical Import of the African Conception of Cloth

The functions of art vary, depending to a large extent on the art's socio-cultural context. Specifically, Danto (1981) explains that art functions as metaphor, eliciting the relationship between the viewer and the artist and the art piece. This function is interpreted against the background of the theory that metaphor, as a figurative form of expression, can be employed to elicit a deeper understanding of the meaning of experiences. Feinstein (1984) has also affirmed that through a paradoxical process that condenses and expands meaning, metaphor enables us to generate vivid associations and develop deeper, more insightful and more personal understanding.

The focus of this paper is on the African conception of cloth. The intent here is to identify the underlying symbolic and metaphoric referents or attributes of cloth in African culture in its motifs, colours and usage. For instance, the patterns and colours of the Ghanaian kente cloth remind the Ghanaian of his or her ethnic values, pride as a Ghanaian and African heritage. In essence, cloth as metaphor in Africa generates deep insights and personal understanding while it unravels untold stories and captures unspoken words. It creates a situation in which Africans enter into reciprocal, reflexive relationships with their cloth. Through these relationships, they gain an in-depth understanding of themselves and of their concept of cloth.

The aforementioned further articulates the symbolic function of metaphor as a communication device in African artistic creativity expressed through cloth. The symbolic expression here is one that allows coherent "chunks" of perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential characteristics to be transferred from the known to the

less known (Ortony 1975). This function can be observed in the use of the Kanga wrap cloth from the East African coast. According to Beck (2005), the Kanga cloth has proverbial texts printed on it. The topics of these proverbial texts usually centre on love, conflict and exhortation. However, the symbolism in the Kanga cloth can only be understood by the local people or users of the cloth. Specifically, the Kanga cloth is used either when a woman wears it for others to see or when it is given to a woman as a gift on special customary occasions or festivals (marriage, end of mourning, birth of a child, religious festivals or departures). In the opinion of Beck (2005), whichever way the cloth is used, it is understood to communicate in East African culture.

In Swahili, kanga literarily means 'a cloth that is worn on the body'. The Kanga cloth is mainly used as a wrap for women. It is a gendered cloth, reserved especially for women. In this culture, the Kanga is said to establish a connection with the identity of the wearer through its relation to the body. The traditional Kanga cloth is a rectangular wrap printed with images and proverbs. The proverbs are used to silently communicate messages among family members and outsiders. In this case, it can also be said that the body serves as a tool through which messages are disseminated. When a woman is unable to read the proverbs, the images suggest their meaning and message. These proverbs and images are the symbolic expressions of the Kanga cloth. However, with modernity, Western styles have influenced the traditional Kanga cloth. The new Kanga does not carry the typical Swahili proverbs that send messages. Thus, the modern Kanga cloth does not hold the same cultural significance as the traditional one.

To cite another example of the metaphorical import of African cloth, the Anyi people of eastern Côte d'Ivoire employ proverbial names for cloth. Even before the advent of factory-printed cloth, this people group identified their traditional hand-woven cloth with proverbs or 'ajendera'. In research carried out by Domowitz (1992) on Proverb cloth among the Anyi people, findings revealed that even with contemporary factory-printed cloth, this Akan sub-group still uses

proverb names. Like the proverbs on the Kanga cloth, these proverb names send messages. Such messages on the cloth are conveyed through designs and are sometimes imprinted proverb text. Domowitz (1992) gives the example of a funeral cloth that has the imprinted proverb 'Owu se fie' (death ruins the family). At the same time, the cloth displays a family portrait surrounded by skull motifs. Such motifs give a deeper meaning to the cloth. They also provide the viewer with a better appreciation of the cloth, as well as an understanding of the symbolic message it carries.

Anyi cloth also has non-verbal messages expressed not with printed proverbs, but with visual designs. Importantly, such visual communication can only be deciphered and understood by the Anyi people, who have a reciprocal relationship with this cloth metaphor. In other words, the messages in the anyi cloth are not universally apparent. The ability to understand such symbolic messages comes with a certain level of competence in the culture and an awareness of the local events of that particular cultural milieu. Domowitz cites some cases in which the names of anyi cloth are derived from traditional proverbs. At other times, the associations are more complex; the names given to the cloth may relate to the design as a symbol or metaphor for something else. All of these naming practices stem from the cultural values of the Anyi people. This symbolic message further explains how cloth serves the purpose of identification and communication. According to Domowitz (1992), "communicating by means of Proverb cloth is like billboards, whose messages are repeated and reinforced, for as long as the cloths are seen and decoded".

Also important in communication via Proverb cloth are the underlying moral undertones in these messages. For instance, the spider motif on one anyi cloth stems from a local proverb that says, "What one does to a 'cenda' (a small harmless spider), one does not do to a 'bokohulu' (a large spider considered dangerous)". Looking beyond the surface motif, an informed viewer reads the ethical message that a new wife should not be maltreated like a former wife. Such a message is

intended for men who habitually acquire new wives. Cole and Ross (1977) have noted that cloths are often purchased more for their symbolism than for their design. Reflecting the role of art in most African cultures, the Anyi Proverb cloth forms a significant aspect of the Anyi oral tradition.

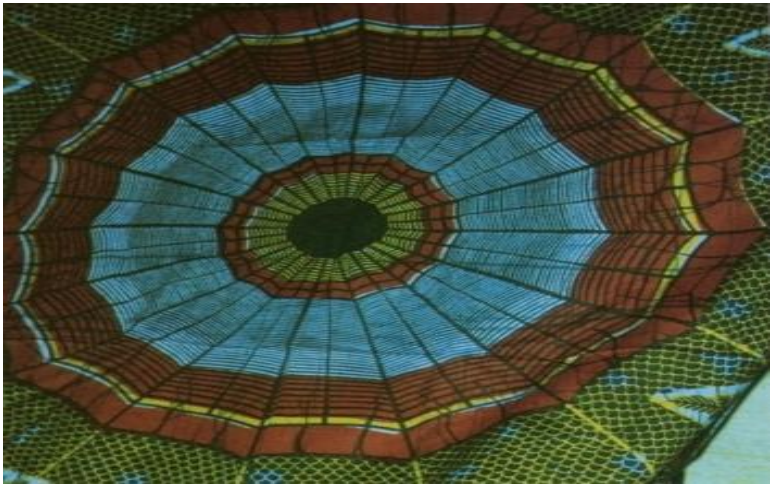

Figure 1: "Spider". This pattern recalls the Anyi proverb that advises, "What one does to the small, harmless spider, one does not do to the large, dangerous one" ***Source:*** Domowitz 1992

Traditionally, the Ghanaian kente has expressed proverbs in its designs or weaving patterns. The "Adweneasa" pattern was exclusively for kings and was made popular in the 17th century. In the Akan language, "Adweneasa" means "my skill is exhausted" or "my ideas have come to an end". This proverbial pattern metaphorically expresses the zenith of a weaver's craftsmanship. In the Akan culture, such a pattern declared the weaver a master of his art, which is indeed a prestigious status. If the kente pattern is "Aberewa Ben", then it takes its root from the saying that "a wise old man symbolises wisdom and maturity". Another notable kente proverbial pattern is the "pepe",

meaning "the balance of the weights of judgement knows no shame". In all of these examples, the proverbial patterns of the kente cloth have symbolic implications for the weaver and his status. It is on record that the largest known kente cloth (measuring 12 feet by 12 feet) is "Tikne Noko Adjina", meaning "one head cannot go into council". The cloth was presented to the United Nations by a former Ghanaian President, Kwame Nkrumah. The symbolism in a cloth of this nature is a reflection of its proverbial name and meaning.

In the Akan culture, the Adinkra is another cloth that serves as a communicative tool. This use may not be farfetched because "nkra" in the Akan language means "message". The Ashante people link such messages to the soul, which comes from the gods. Generally, adinkra cloths carry symbols and motifs that communicate significance. Often, the message in the adinkra is a reflection of what the motifs represent or mean in the Akan culture. The adinkra cloth was originally used as a cloth to wrap around a person in mourning.

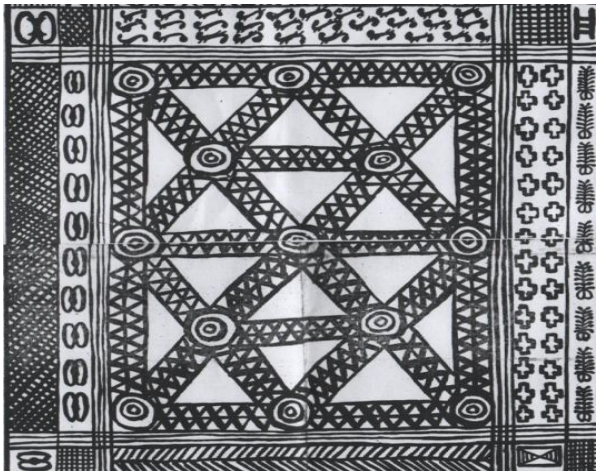

Figure 2: An assortment of Adinkra motifs

Source: Glover 1992

Now, however, it has other uses, especially when the backgrounds are colourful. Typical among the adinkra cloths is one with the motif "Akokonan tia na ennkum ba". This motif reflects the Ghanaian saying that "the hen does not tread upon its chicks". Such a design is symbolic of the king as royal yet protective of his subjects in a familial way. Another adinkra motif, "Nkonsonkonson", means "link or chain". This association is derived from the wise Akan saying that people are linked in both life and death. This expression, which says that those who share common blood relations never break apart, is symbolic of human relationships among the Ghanaians.

Importantly, Africans do not only value cloth for its texture and quality. The African conception of cloth has its own history and its own aesthetic content, as well as powerful emotional content. Indeed, African fabric, like other African art forms, represents a way of living. It renders the invisible visible. It is also in this vein that this paper employs Panofsky's (1972) three levels of meaning as the framework to further appraise the aesthetic themes and symbolism in African cloth.

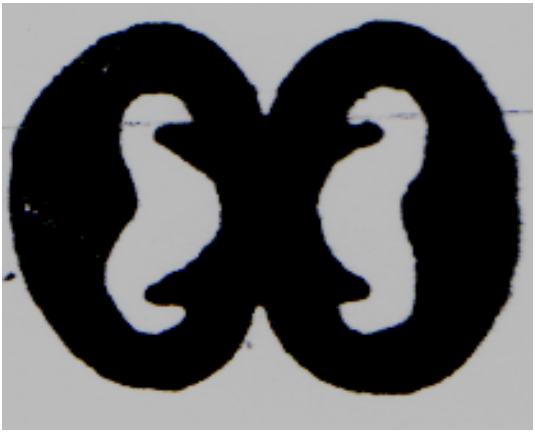

Figure 3: *Adinkra motif Nkonsonkonson* ("Link or Chain")

Source: Glover, A. 1992

Figure 4: A design of the Kente cloth typical of the royals.

Source: Blier, S. P. 1988

Aesthetic Peculiarities in the African Cloth within the Context of Erwin Panofsky's Three Strata of Meaning

Traditionally, the use of images and motifs is crucial in the interpretation of a work of art. A study of these images and motifs provides a work of art with a deeper meaning. Such a study gives the viewer a better appreciation of the work and offers him or her the opportunity to experience the art in the context in which it was created. Specifically, a study of iconography exposes us to the various levels of meaning in a work of art. It is to this end that this article employs what Panofsky (1972) terms the three strata of meaning in art to analyse the symbolism in the aesthetic peculiarities of African textiles. According to Panofsky, the first stratum constitutes a world of artistic motifs, which can be interpreted as a pre-iconographical description of the world of art. Analysis at the second level of meaning addresses a combination of the composition of art motifs with themes or concepts. The outcome of this combination is what Panofsky has identified as carriers of conventional meaning, which

can also be called images. Such combinations of art motifs and themes are called "invenzion" by ancient art theorists. Images also count as stories and allegories, which is reminiscent of most African textiles because Africans often express their world in symbols. These symbols, for Dzobo (2001), serve as sources of insight into African orientations to life. It is therefore not accidental that the African philosophy of cloth is replete with symbols. Such symbols communicate the thoughts, beliefs and values of the people, thus revealing rich cultural African traditions.

The fundamental contention of Panofsky's theory further articulates the place of iconography in a work of art. Pure forms, motifs, images, stories and allegories are essentially manifestations of underlying philosophies. These manifestations have been interpreted by Cassirer as "symbolical values". Essentially, in cloth motifs and designs, the Africans express sentiment. However, such patterns and motifs are peculiar to different cultures and may have different connotations based on their cultural contexts. Often, such motifs are identified with traits such as leadership, status, sex and even family name. It is this symbolism that makes motifs in African cloth significant.

Panofsky's (1972) expression of "symbolical" values is explained in his third level of meaning, where he discusses intrinsic content that can only be synthetically interpreted. As he asserts, "the discovery and interpretation of 'symbolical' values is the object of what we may call iconography in a deeper sense of a method of interpretation which arises as a synthesis rather than an analysis". Panofsky's argument is that to fully appreciate a work of art, we must elicit a deeper interpretation to articulate its intrinsic content. To successfully achieve this result, however, we must understand the primary or natural subject matter and the secondary or conventional subject matter.

The kente cloth in the Ghanaian culture is ordinarily a cloth of royalty and prestige, reserved for special occasions. Like most African visual art forms, the kente cloth is a visual representation of Akan culture, history and social values. A historical account tells us that kente

derives its name from the Ashanti word "kenten", meaning basket. This association of the kente with the basket stems from the cloth's design, which features an array of patterns and geometric shapes. Traditionally, it is believed that the kente cloth originated in the weaving traditions of the Akan culture. The legend behind this belief says that the first weavers of this cloth learned the art by observing a spider weaving its web. This mythical perspective on the cloth also links the kente cloth to the symbolic Ananse, the wisdom spider, also known as 'nature's weaver'.

Motifs and patterns in the kente cloth have names and meanings that are unique to the Akan culture. Sometimes these names are given by weavers, who claim to receive them through inspirations, dreams and communion with the spiritual realm. At other times, the names of motifs are given on the basis of the design arrangement of the warp and weft of the cloth. Motifs in the kente cloth of the Akan culture are mostly geometric, while the motifs of the Ewe kente cloth woven by the Ewe people on the eastern border of Ghana are figurative symbols. Notably, though, the motifs of all kente cloths, irrespective of origin, have names. Such names and their meanings come from the people's moral values, oral traditions, philosophical concepts, proverbs, individual achievements, attributes and so on. In essence, the kente cloth and the life of the people symbolically reflect each other. This conclusion further indicates that a philosophy of symbolic forms can be considered a benchmark for a philosophy of culture.

Continuing the discussion of aesthetic symbolism in the patterns and motifs of African cloth, the Adinkra cloth provides another example. As previously stated, the adinkra cloth is from the Ghanaian culture. 'Adinkra' is a Twi word that literally means "to say goodbye". Dzobo (2001) has identified the adinkra symbol as belonging to one of the six major groups of symbols in Ghanaian culture. In Dzobo's explanation (2001), the adinkra symbol, like all other Akan symbols, conveys the Ghanaian people's way of life. The adinkra is usually used as a traditional mourning cloth. When the cloth fulfills this function, the motif indicates its use. For instance, the motif named "owu atwedee"

symbolically means "the ladder of death, everybody climbs some day to go to God". This original (adinkra) mourning cloth has its symbolic meaning printed as a motif on the cloth. Therefore, the weaver carries clothing that transmits a message.

Figure 5. *Adinkra motif "owu atwedee"* (The ladder of death).

Source: Glover, A. 1992

There is no gainsaying that in the African philosophy of cloth, the motifs and design are often clairvoyant, and in the cloth's particular symbolic communicative usage, another axiological dimension is added.

The Ikakibite cloth is reserved for royals and for use as a ritual cloth. This cloth is made by the Ijo people of the present Rivers and Bayelsa states of Nigeria. The Ikakibite cloth serves as the royal robe of the Ijo kings or the Amanyanabo and as a special cloth used by women during the coming-of-age ceremony (iria). In the Ijo language, "Ikakibite" literally means "the cloth of the tortoise". This name is an indication of the weft pattern resembling that of the tortoise's shell. Aronson (1980) has noted that even though the Ijos refer to this cloth as the Ikakibite, the cloth actually originated with the Ijebus, who referred to the cloth as 'aso olana' or 'the cloth with design'. Significantly, the cloth's association with the tortoise emanated from the Ijo culture. According to Eicher and Erekosima (1981), the

process by which the Ijos adopted the "aso olona" cloth, renamed it and transformed it to suit their own culture is an example of "cultural authentication". Anderson and Peek (2002) have also noted that the Ijos associate the Ikakibite cloth with the tortoise motif, which stems from the mythical trickster 'Ikaki' (tortoise) of the Ijo culture. The symbolism of the tortoise motif is also rooted in the Ijo traditional proverb 'Kiri ikakiri', which says that the Ikaki or the tortoise knows everything. This proverb is another way of saying that the tortoise represents wisdom; in the same way, the Ashante people of Ghana revere Ananse the spider as 'nature's weaver'.

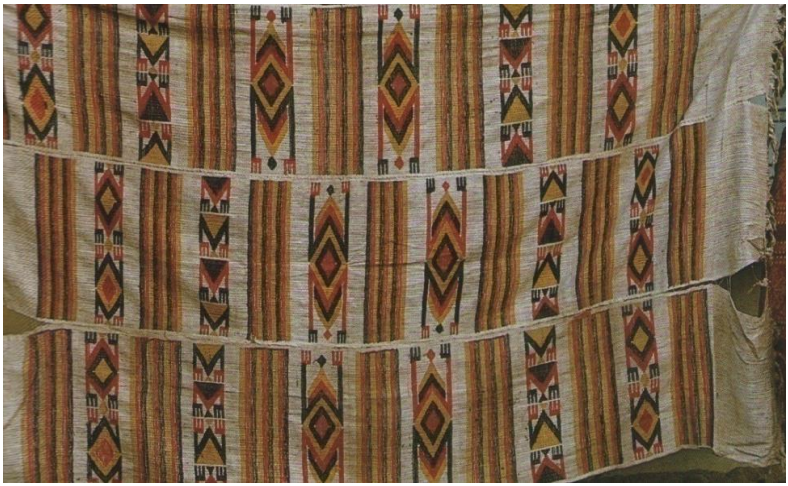

Figure 6: An example of *Ikakibite* cloth

Source: Peek and Anderson 2002

The Ikaki or tortoise image is one symbol that cannot be ignored in the historical and social context of the Ijo people. According to historical accounts, when British colonists attempted to generate strife and rivalry amongst the Ijos, the latter were quick to remind themselves of their unity with the Ikaki symbol. In essence, the Ikaki symbol served as a mark of identification and re-unification. In another vein, Aronson (1980) noted that the tortoise image and its

perceived spiritual powers have greatly influenced the Ijos' philosophy of life. It is in this context that they attach much value to the Ikakibite cloth. Today, the tortoise image is still a significant symbolic force in the socio-political life of the Ijo people. Because of this power, the motif in the Ikakibite is symbolic in meaning and lineage. The most highly placed and cherished traditional cloth in the Ijo culture bears the Ikaki motif. This unique symbol gives the cloth official status.

It is this same importance accorded to the Ikakibite cloth that limits its usage to special situations. For instance, women wear the cloth at the 'iria', or coming-of-age ceremony. The implication of the usage of the cloth for this ceremony is symbolic in Ijo culture. When women use this cloth during such a status-achieving ritual, they are being appropriated as male status symbols. In the same vein, when the Ijo priest or 'Pere' uses the Ikakibite, which is either worn or spread on the ground for divination, it is said that the cloth has a certain spirit or "oru" that invokes potency (Horton 1962). Amongst the Nembe Ijo priests, it is common to wear the "Ikagbara" or shoulder cloth, which also bears the tortoise motif. When they wear this cloth, they are said to be empowered by divination. Since the 18th century, the Ikakibite cloth has remained a major part of the king's (Amanyanabo) regalia. What is implied in this inclusion of the cloth is that just as the tortoise or Ikaki knows everything, so does the Amanyanabo. The status of the Ikakibite makes its usage significant. As stated by Aronson (2002), the cloth is so important that in the Abbi House of Buguma, all members who have the right to wear the Ikakibite (the Abbi variety) must first perform the "Egbelebge Owu" masquerade. The Abbi variety of the Ikakibite cloth is historically associated with this masquerade. Additionally, during the Buguma centenary celebrations in 1984, the commemorative statue honouring Abbi Amakri was totally enshrouded with the abbi Ikakibite cloth. This gesture was undoubtedly intended as a display of splendour, with an implicit aesthetics in the symbolic usage of the cloth.

Among the Yorubas, and specifically in areas such as Oyo, Saaki and Iseyin, the hand-woven aso-oke cloth is mostly used as a symbol of political and social prestige. The aso-oke is woven by both men and women. Asakitikpi (2007) has noted that most aso-oke woven by women serve domestic purposes. However, in places like Owo, Kaaba and Ijebu, where the weavers are predominantly women, cloth produced by women rises in prominence. Some aso-oke cloths serve domestic functions, while others convey social, political and economic status. These cloth forms also serve as symbols for religious rituals and social activities. It is also believed that aso-oke cloth produced by women weavers has spiritual and medicinal powers that bring the wearer blessings, healing and protection.

Among the Yorubas, some cloth forms are held in high esteem. Such cloths are mostly used for important ceremonies like conferral of the chieftaincy; initiation into clubs, cults or special groups; weddings; and even funerals. Lamb and Holms (1980) noted that the "Alaari" is used by kings and high-ranking chiefs to welcome visitors into their palaces. The 'Sanyan' and 'Etu' cloth are also used by kings, but only for official functions and ceremonies. Akinwunmi (1992) noted that in Owo, the 'Senghosen', which literally means 'the cloth that takes all the money', is one of the most expensive cloths in that area. It is a cloth said to be of prestigious value, set aside for only those who can afford it. It is used for very special occasions.

Unique to the Owo people are some woven ritual cloth forms. As cited in Asakitikpi (2007), a number of taboos govern the production and use of such cloth forms. Specifically, the weavers of this ritual cloth are mostly women, who must be physically, spiritually and morally clean. The wearers (whatever the sex) are subject to taboos surrounding the usage of this ritual cloth. One major taboo that cuts across the usage of most Owo ritual cloth centres on the cleanliness of the individual, who must avoid sexual contact before and during the wearing of the cloth. In the case of women, menstruation is regarded as a state of uncleanness. Among the ritual cloth forms in Owo is the Girijo, which is produced specifically for the Ero festival (a particular

age group initiation). Notably, too, among the Bunu people of Kaaba, the aso-ipo or red cloth is a ritual cloth. The significance of this cloth lies in its ritual and political function in society.

Some basic cloths for everyday use among the Yorubas still hold power. The 'Kijapa' is one such cloth. As noted by Aremu (1982), the kijapa is said to prevent miscarriages as well as cure barrenness. It is said that the Ifa priest prescribes the kijipa cloth as a cure for women in dire need of children. It is also believed that the potency of this cloth also attracts blessings, protection, prosperity, victory and health to its wearer.

Thus far, we have tried to articulate the aesthetic symbolism in the usage of the African cloth. The philosophy of African cloth may not be fully appraised without eliciting the symbolism of its colours because the colour of the cloth and its usage frequently complement one another. Colour symbolism in African cloth culture is best understood in the context of the cloth's usage and associations. Importantly, too, colours in African cloth culture often convey particular messages.

Across African cultures, black and white are generally significant colours. Black symbolises death and sadness, while white is a symbol of purity, joy and peace. It is common to find black cloth used at funerals, especially at those of young people. In the Akan culture, the national mourning cloth is the adinkra, especially those with black backgrounds. However, in some African cultures, white is also used as a funeral cloth, especially for those who die in old age. In most cases, the deceased is wrapped in white cloth before being laid in the coffin. This gesture makes possible a final passage from the land of the living to that of the Spirits. In some areas of Igbo land, white cloth is primarily used for mourning. This custom may stem from the Igbos' early embrace of Christianity and their belief in the resurrection. They also have other cultural reasons for adopting this colour for mourning. Amongst the Itsekiris, the mourner begins with black cloth and, after a few months, transitions into wearing a dark blue cloth, then a light blue cloth.

In other African cultures, for deeper symbolic reasons, red cloth is used for funerals. Among the Ebira and Bunu peoples of the confluence area of central Nigeria, the "aso ipo" is used for funerals. According to Picton (1980), "The colour red is highly appropriate for the burial and post burial rites of a man of age, wealth and status, as far as the Igbiras are concerned, …red is a colour associated with success and achievement".

In ceremonies such as those mentioned above, the aso ipo is hung in front of the deceased's house. It is in this regard that Renne (1992) has asserted that the case of the Bunu people's use of red cloth in commemorative funerals sheds light on colour symbolism in African culture. Red cloth, in addition to being used at funerals, is also symbolic of danger and blood and at other times of spiritual power. In the Benin culture, red cloth is suggestive of threat and power and calls for respect for its wearers (Ben-Amos 1980). The Benins call the red cloth 'ododo'. In this context, ododo is different from 'baa' or the common colour red. Nevadomsky and Inneh (1983) have stated that garments in red flannel ododo are worn by Uzama chiefs, particularly at festivals. In this case, the ododo is symbolic of the strength to overcome evil or danger. Thus, when the cloth is worn at certain ceremonies, it is intended to bring additional protection against threatening evil forces.

The ododo is also a familiar name in Itsekiri cloth culture. It is a scarlet cloth associated with leadership amongst the Itsekiris, usually a sash worn as part of the formal attire of the chiefs of the Olu (King). In Esan culture, the "ukpododo", meaning red cloth (because the colours are dominated by red), is a prestigious cloth. In Esan cloth philosophy, a man's wealth is not measured by the number of his wives and children, but rather by the number of ukpododo he possesses. Culturally, ukpododo expresses the wealth of the owner. This cloth also has spiritual relevance. It is used at the masquerade ritual known as 'irukpon nahimhiin', specifically in the Ugboha clan and in some areas of Esan land. In the same way, the Benins also use

the ododo as a sacred red cloth to adorn shrines. When the ododo is used in this way, it carries a spiritual meaning.

In Yoruba and Benin ritual culture, the red cloth is especially significant in the worship of certain deities. In both traditions, Ogun is depicted in the colour red. This colour is symbolic of the fierceness, violence, anger, fire and blood that are associated with it. Thus, during ritualistic worship, the devotees are usually clothed in red cloth. In the same vein, devotees of Shango and the god of thunder wear red cloth at worship. Significantly, though, these worshipers still wear white beads even in their perceived fierceness. This combination of red and white expresses the nature of the god, who is quickly angered yet quickly calmed. The white beads symbolise his periods of calm, while the red cloth expresses the actual nature of Shango: anger and violence.

White, in African colour symbolism, generally signifies purity, peace, holiness and cleanliness. Among the Dogons of East Africa, white cloth is thought to be linked to water spirits and therefore has powers of spiritual healing. In the same way, in the worship of Olokun and Malokun that is unique to the Benins and Yorubas, respectively, the use of white cloth is significant. These two gods are associated with peace, purity, holiness and sacredness. Therefore, to associate with the gods, the worshippers usually appear in white costumes. Audu (1980) has also noted that the white costumes of the priests and priestesses of these deities also carry red patterns, just as the shrine of Olokun displays red fabric at one of its corners. According to Audu (1980), red cloth in the Benin culture also symbolic of Ogun, the god of iron. This symbolism expresses the Benin religious view that Ogun and Olokun complement one another. Significantly, when Benin chiefs make official appearances or conduct transactions in the royal palace, they generally put on white garments. White, for the Benin, is the colour of chalk and stands for purity, joy and good fortune.

The symbolism in colours as it pertains to cloth in African culture is inexhaustible. However, a synopsis of colour symbolism in Akan kente cloth expresses the African aesthetic philosophy. The colours of

the kente cloth have visual effects as well as underlying symbolic meaning. In the weaving of the kente cloth, particular combinations of yarn colours reflect the significance of the cloth. The composition of designs, motifs and colours also portrays a variety of implied concepts, ranging from a simple display of the weaver's creativity and talent to religion, philosophy and expressions of family lineage. What can be deduced from these details, especially within the context of Panofsky's (1972) theory of iconography, is that the correct identification of motifs is a prerequisite for a correct iconographical analysis in the narrower sense, while the correct analysis of images, stories and allegories is the prerequisite for a correct iconological interpretation in a deeper sense.

Conclusion

This paper has evaluated both the visual effect of African cloth and the underlying aesthetic symbolism inherent in African cloth philosophy. In their culture, Africans communicate their beliefs, philosophies and understanding of human existence. The cloth as metaphor reflects all aspects of African life and the relationship between the inside and the outside. Specifically, African cloth, in the unique nature of its designs, motifs, colours and usage, often conveys messages. Only the owner of the cloth can unravel its untold stories and messages. Africans have an insightful, reflexive and reciprocal relationship with their cloth.

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