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Commemorative textiles: an African narrative of identity and power

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Commemorative textiles play a significant role in shaping Africa's cultural identity and expressions of power. Embedded within the cultural fabric of Africa, these textiles represent the intellectual and artistic vitality of Africa, serving as powerful symbols of its rich heritage and diversity. Through the lens of memory and commemoration, this study investigated how African cultural memory and identity are negotiated and conveyed through textiles. Drawing upon Bodnar's theoretical framework, the study examines secondary data, using a content analysis approach to discern how commemorative textiles recollect both official and vernacular cultural memories. The result showed that African commemorative textiles are mirrors of local cultures expressing social status, political authority, and economic worth, which play a crucial role in shaping collective memory, preserving cultural knowledge, and fostering a sense of belonging among communities. As preservers of the past and inspirations for the future, the textiles weave the African narrative of identity and power, perpetuating cultural heritage across generations.

Introduction

The memory of Africa's cultural richness and diversity imprinted in textiles has shaped the global view of the continent for centuries. Endured with the wisdom of arts, Africa's artistic traditions constitute a primary example of its intellectual and cultural vitality (Akinbileje, 2014). One aspect of these rich and attractive traditions is based on how the symbolic expression of identity is canvassed on a piece of dress or textile. Songolo and Hark (2014) observed that textiles play a critical role in the lives of Africans where the fabrics are used as clothing, shelter, and storage facilities.

Traditionally, African textiles play a great role in expressing cultural, social, and power status that is employed in the reinforcement of authority and unity as well as the commemoration of important events or identification of group members. Today, commemorative textiles are produced across Africa and their use extends far beyond the traditional definition of cloths. They serve as a communication device exploited by both traditional and political elites to influence public opinion or enforce wealth status in society.

For centuries, commemorative textiles have played an important role in African society, especially in West and Central Africa, serving as powerful symbols of identity, cultural heritage, and social communication tools. They are frequently used during important events to commemorate achievements of respected leaders, heroes, and historical figures, and as storage of cultural heritage Richardson, (2019). African culture and heritage are strongly represented in

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Fig. 1 The earliest Batik designs in a Javanese manuscript showing four captive Javanese princesses wearing symmetrical designs arranged in squares. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright © British Library, MSS Jav. 89, f. 136r, all rights reserved. <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2022/11/batik-designs-in-a-javanese-manuscript-serat-damar-wulan.html>.

commemorative textiles in the form of patterns, images, and colors to depict the distinctive character of a specific cultural group or community. These symbols reinforce a sense of collective memory, continuity, and belonging, which helps in conserving and transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to the next (Bishop, 2014). In Africa, the popularity of textiles is deeply rooted in many cultures, and Sylvanus (2007) called it *Africanity*, to illustrate a conceptual construction of authenticity in the context of the Western view of the African textile. Willard (2004) observed that African commemorative textiles have become effective means of communicating various social messages to the public during social events such as political rallies/campaigns, funerals, and cultural rituals among others. This practice reveals the materialization of collective community identity and social concerns.

While Fila-Bakabadio (2009) used the concept of Africanity to describe the universality of African aesthetics developed in Western contexts, Sylvanus (2007) argued that the endorsement of the Africanity concept depends on the individual's perception of a specific object rather than the object itself. This argument is based on the existing variations in both Western and African markets, where in the former, it appears as a source of renewed identity, and in the latter, it's a status symbol. In this study, however, the concept simply refers to the sense of belonging encoded in African commemorative textiles, this study asked and investigated the question of how the cultural memory of African identity and power is negotiated through textiles. Ankora (2022) showed the fundamental importance of material culture in the creation and expression of African identities in textiles by examining the relationships between traditional textiles and contemporary arts.

Using Bodnar's (1992) distinction between vernacular memory (vernacular culture) and official memory as guiding theoretical frameworks, the study examined secondary data (pictorial and literature) according to Bengtsson (2016) and Krippendorff (2018) content analysis method to understand how the imprint

textiles recall both the official and vernacular cultural memories in the African commemorative culture.

Historical narrative of African textiles

Hand-woven textiles represent the African cultural heritage of the past. However, the newly emerging vibrant colors and diversified motifs of printed textiles known as Wax or batik evoke contemporary African textiles. These textiles form part of a cultural identity and symbol of cultural heritage.

The history of African textiles dates back to the pre-colonial era. The academic literature in this area indicates that the contemporary African textiles are the result of the European imitation of the original Javanese batik developed as early as the sixteenth century (Fig. 1). After the Dutch invasion of Java in the seventeenth century, they imitated batik production techniques and redeveloped the technology in modern-day Netherlands (Fig. 2). The nineteenth century then witnessed a rapid expansion and growth of commercial activities on the West Africa, particularly, the Gold Coast (Ghana). The boom in market opportunities in West Africa during that time led to the introduction of batik to Africa by Dutch traders (Akinwumi, 2008; Breedlove, Mikanatha (2015); Patria, 2016).

Kroese (as cited in Sylvanus, 2007), on the other hand, attributed the first appearance of batik in West Africa to the return of the African soldiers who served in the Royal Dutch East Indian Army based in Java, who were dressed and carried back home batik. Existing literature, however, found no evidence to justify that indeed the African soldiers who were recruited from the Gold Coast and served in Java were responsible for the emergence of Batik in West Africa.

In the 18th century, the Dutch commissioner established a relationship with the Asante Chief, known as Asantehene that led to Asante administrative development (Yarak, 1983). It was due to this diplomatic establishment that strong fighters were recruited from the Gold Coast for colonial battles in Java (Howard et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the claims in the



Fig. 2 An Indo-Dutch Batik Design from Elisa Van Zuylen Influenced by the Dutch Culture. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright © Adopted from Nuraryo (2020), all rights reserved.



Fig. 3 Malian Bogolan: a traditionally Malian cotton fabric dyed with fermented mud and worn by women during important periods of transition and by male hunters as group identity. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright ©The University of Wisconsin Libraries. <https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/c.php?g=178217&p=6134212>.

scholarship linking the first introduction of the Javanese batik in West Africa to the return of the African veterans from the Dutch colonial army remain widely unjustified. A study by van Kessel (2018) found no evidence in support of the role of the returning veteran soldiers in introducing batik or wax print textiles.

Evidence suggests that, after the Dutch imitated batik traditional technology and industrialized the production process, their attempt to market the products in Java was unsuccessful, and the market declined because the Javanese viewed the quality of Dutch batik as low compared to their original hand-woven version locally developed to counter the Dutch monopoly of the market (Laarhoven, 2012; Wronska-Friend, 2018). On the contrary, the introduction of batik to the West African market by the Dutch and other European merchants was embraced by local consumers, and the region witnessed a surge of batik imports from Europe (Wronska-Friend, 2018). It was from this business hub of colonial Africa that the European version of batik spread to Central and West Africa, where it subsequently gained popularity.

Through increased interaction between the indigenous people of Gold Coast and the European merchants at the time, the textile designs were then customized to suit local aspirations, which eventually made them gain strong cultural, social, and economic importance among African societies, thus, attracting the Chinese merchants who now dominate wax print textile industry Figs. 3, 4.

Despite the customization of the textile designs, the question of how these European-made products infiltrated African cultures and became African textiles remains a puzzle. As observed by Sylvanus (2007), the transformation of the original European batik to modern African textiles was based on their complex process and designs that are flexible and open to absorbing Africans' local practices and cultural values. The production of the contemporary batik has entered an era of what can be referred to as "African textiles in European technology" because African industries have only localized the designs but maintained the original European technology (Willard, 2004). Sepou (2017) attested that the notion of "*African-ness*" engrained in the current textiles sold across the continent is a mere reflection of Europeans' continual exploitative relationship with Africa.

Essel (2017) further examined what constitutes authentic African print in the context of deconstructing the concept of 'African Print' in the Ghanaian experience and argued that an



Fig. 4 A communicative African fabric design depicting the mother's love using different shades and tints orange, brown and blue. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright © Adeloje et al. (2023), all rights reserved.

authentic African print includes only prints of African origin that exclude the contemporary African prints of the wax or batik. The Africans' pride in Africanizing social events using textiles describing African traditions and heritage has become an act of neo-colonialism being promoted indirectly by the Africans themselves to generate wealth for European companies such as Netherlands' Vlisco and Britain's ABC Textiles, which have run the industry for more than three centuries.

Memory and commemoration

The notions of memory and commemoration, which deal with how people and communities remember and celebrate past events, people, or experiences, are closely related, and both are essential in forming societal identity, cultural heritage, and historical understanding (Saito, 2010).

Assmann (2008, 2011) defines memory as a faculty that enables the formation of self-awareness that enables us to live in groups and communities, and living in groups or communities enables us to build memory. This author described memory in two forms, including cultural memory and communicative memory. Cultural memory is based on imprecise recollections of the past that are normally unpreserved, but rather cast in symbols and convey a collective cultural and identity history, meanwhile, communicative memory is non-institutional that lives in everyday people's interaction and communication.

In contemporary Africa, the memory of the past has been presented to the next generations using textiles that are considered to be archives of different cultural memories crucial in shaping

cultural identity. In the Buganda Kingdom in Uganda for example, bark cloth, made from the mutuba tree (*ficus natalensis*) and worn by royals, chiefs, and heirs during coronation and healing ceremonies, funerals, and cultural gatherings remains an important cultural commemorative textile that connects the past and present generations of the Baganda society (Nakazibwe, 2011).

Bodnar (1992) categorized memory as official and vernacular cultural memories that when they intersect, public memory is formed, which is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a society to understand its past, present, and future through commemoration. According to Bodnar, elites who want to further their agenda concentrate on promoting interpretations of the past and present reality that reduce the power of competing interests that threaten the realization of their goals through official memory. Meanwhile, vernacular cultural memory represents a variety of specialized interests that are rooted in elements of the society and occasionally can be recast by the emergence of new social units due to their diversity and constant change.

Unlike the official memory of the past, present, and imagined future that is heavily influenced by elites and civic leaders in order to reinforce social unity for the continuation of the current institutions and loyalty to the system, vernacular memory presents the past based on firsthand experience with a sense of flexibility in its organization to convey the social reality of life events.

Both Assmann and Dodnar's conceptualization of memory is important in understanding how memory is constructed, unpacked, and transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of symbols or text embedded in artifacts including textiles to substantiate cultural memory and identity.

Clothing and power identity

Clothing and power identity is a complicated and varied subject that examines the relationship between clothing and social identity, and how clothes and fashion decisions can be used to exercise authority, convey social status, express identity, and affect perceptions (Akdemir, 2018). Across different societies and cultures, clothes have always been a key communicative factor in shaping power dynamics and political strength among rivals.

In ancient Greece and Rome, imperial China, the Islamic world, and Colonial America for instance, sumptuary laws were applied to control what people might wear based on their social ranks including wealth and political power to reinforce class boundaries (Wilson, 2016). Such stratifications mean that the poor class of the society was limited to simpler clothing, while the elite class was allowed to wear certain luxurious fabrics or color codes, which made them visible to the public and bolster their position of power and control.

Africans wore clothes crafted from animal skins/hides and traditional woven materials before the arrival of the European explorers and traders. In modern days, clothing plays an important role as a medium for negotiating visual differences across cultures (Rovine, 2009). These visual differences are crucial in the identification of traditions and cultures to facilitate cultural or social affiliations. Twigg (2009) observed that "clothes display, express and shape identity by infusing it with a direct material reality" (p.1).

According to Perani and Wayne (as cited in Akinbileje (2014)), clothes are mirrors of local cultures as they possess the potential to unpack various information embedded in print about self and personal worth, occupation, social status, and standard of economic value, as well as political power. In some societies, clothes are communicative tools used to display class distinction and strength through which elites establish, maintain, and reproduce positions of power and dominance over the weak and poor in a non-institutionalized form, which Assmann (2008) referred to as *communicative memory*.



Fig. 5 An aesthetic kente fabric. King of Ashanti Kingdom wearing rich Kente cloth during festival in Ghana. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashanti_chief_in_Ghana.jpg.

The ruling classes across societies have historically used clothing and symbolic artifacts to demonstrate their power and wealth using some form of sumptuary laws based on their social ranks including wealth and political power to reinforce social stratification and class boundaries (Wilson, 2016; DuPlessis, 2019). In Ghana for example, Akinbileje (2014) observed that kings and chiefs often wore clothes decorated with gold string patterns and coral beads to communicate their financial strength to the rest of the public including their rivals. This is evident with the colorful *Kente* cloth shown in Fig. 5, which was worn exclusively by the royals of the Ashanti Kingdom since the sixteenth century as a form of cultural representation of the Ashanti people.

Each color or pattern weaved into the *Kente* textile carries strong information ranging from wealth, spiritual purity, and peace to healing and cleansing rituals, which demonstrates the cultural identity, values, and power of the Asante royals. Adom (2024) observed that Asante *Kente* captures the historical, political, and religious worldviews, values, and norms of the Ashantes linked to historical identity, culture, and philosophy.

In most African countries, the type and quality of clothes people wear are the immediate indicators of cultural diversity, socio-economic status, and political power. The Kalabari people in Nigeria for example, are identified using the modified version of the Indian Madras cotton cloth; on the other hand, the use of *Adire* fabrics abroad directly signifies a Nigerian notion (Rice, 2015, p. 178). According to Honeycutt (2021) and McCracken and Roth, (1989), clothes contain linguistic codes embedded in their colors, designs, or composition as a means of communication where a certain class of society conveys both the official and cultural memory about themselves, cultural norms, social or political standing to the public to influence certain societal opinions.

Commemorative textiles and the identity of power

Apart from serving the primary role of clothing, African textiles have been used as communication tools for conveying cultural, political, social, and economic information to a wider audience within a given society to stimulate a sense of remembering. Songolo and Hark (2014) stated that “one does not need to know how to read, to be able to understand the symbolic and textual messages embedded in African textiles” (p.3.). This suggests that the various artistic patterns embedded into African textiles are self-explanatory, which makes them capable of attracting attention and influencing public opinion.

Commemorative textiles refer to fabrics that are created and used to celebrate a specific event, person, or historical occasion, with designs that capture the essence of the event through visual and textual elements woven or printed onto the fabric. These textiles exist in all West and Central African societies in different themes and motifs used in commemoration of events as means of historical and social awareness that recall both the past and the present to be passed on to the next generation. The diversity of symbols and written texts on commemorative textiles reveal ideas for development and aspirations for an imagined future and presuppose situated cultural knowledge that not only communicates the past but also contributes to shaping the future (Bishop, 2014; Assmann, 2008; Bodnar, 1992). Different actors within a given society have exploited the imprint of symbolic art to commemorate various social events such as political campaigns, religious and cultural rituals, or individual achievements (Willard, 2004; Gordon, 2010).

According to Labode and Braide (2022), visual symbolism in African commemorative textiles is an important component of African cultural identity that plays a significant role in the creation of the collective identity of ethnic groups found in Africa. These textiles can ignite emotional responses, a trait that has attracted the interest of elites and civic leaders in gathering popular support and influencing official affiliation (Bodnar 1992).

The first mass production of commemorative textiles bearing images of national or cultural leaders in West and Central Africa started immediately as countries in these regions began gaining their independence. In the kingdom of Benin for example, authorities printed textiles (Fig. 6) bearing the image of His Royal Highest, Prince, S.I.A. Akenzua Oba to commemorate his coronation to the throne. This commemorative textile not only communicates the legacy of the King but also imprints a sense of memory of the Edo vernacular culture, from which the younger generation can derive an imaginary history of the past Kings of the Kingdom.

Commemorative textiles have played a significant role in expressing and reinforcing political power in various African societies, by featuring intricate designs and striking visuals that are exploited in political messaging and propaganda. With compelling visual attractiveness to the public, politicians have realized the potential of textiles as a highly effective medium for visual communication to spread political ideology to the grassroots in order to foster a sense of unity and identity among the populace. Worden (2014) for example noted that during election periods in Zambia, all political parties owned party dress with

logos and campaign slogans displayed all over the country in a quest for political support and power.

Given the visual communicative power of the African commemorative textiles, political elites have taken advantage of this

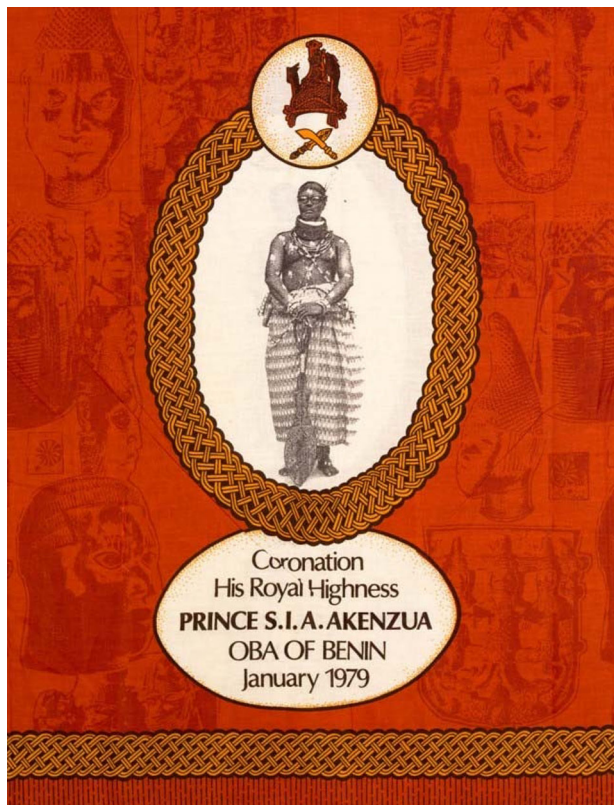


Fig. 6 Commemorative fabric with coronation image of Prince Edu Akenzua of the Benin Kingdom. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright © the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, all rights reserved. <https://africa.si.edu/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/along/commemorative-objects/>.

fabric to reinforce their authority (Bickford, 1994). Unlike the commemorative textiles that display cultural artifacts of a given society, the symbolic and textual representation of political commemorative textiles recalls the recent past objectively selected to reinforce their relevance in the current and future unity and socio-economic development of the society. In Zimbabwe for instance, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) has institutionalized different commemorative textiles within the party through which the leaders influence the society and consolidate political power. So often, the content of the past to be presented is objectively selected to reinforce the legitimacy and the socio-economic or developmental values of the existing institutions. Fig. 7 shows Zimbabwe’s former President, Robert Mugabe, and First Lady Grace Mugabe wearing a commemorative Textile during a political campaign event in Zimbabwe. This textile largely displays the photograph of the President, a tractor, and maize cob intended to influence public memory about the achievements of the president over the years. Visual narrative can indeed influence public memory, induce a sense of remembering, and help those seeking power to legitimize their claims to positions of authority. Bodnar (1992) argues that through “official commemoration, elites advance their interests by promoting social unity and loyalty for the continuation of existing institutions, and the past is only used to reinforce the legitimacy of the current institutions to maintain the status quo.

In West and Central Africa, various societies have utilized textiles for decades to commemorate different events including “independence anniversaries, a visit by heads of state, educational campaigns, memorial rituals, international and cultural events, and to honor leaders’ lifetime achievements or deceased ones (Spencer, 1982: 84). When a leader with great contribution to the society passes on, commemorative textiles displaying images of the deceased are worn by the mourners in honor and remembrance of the legacy made. This was evident in the case of the Nigerian Novelist, Chinua Achebe (Fig. 8) and the late Malawian President, Bingu wa Mutharika, where the government designed, and printed thousands of commemorative funeral textiles (Fig. 9) distributed to the mourners through churches and political parties (Worden, 2014). Wearing commemorative textiles can show affirmative attachment to the event and it strengthens



Fig. 7 Late President, Robert Mugabe and First Lady, Grace Mugabe, dressed in ZANU-PF Textile displaying Mugabe during a political event. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 International License. Copy rights © Dandjk Roberts, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=27559796>.



Fig. 8 Mourners dressed in late Chinua Achebe’s Commemorative textiles. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copy rights ©Pinterest, all rights reserved. <https://pin.it/4mgDRYh>.

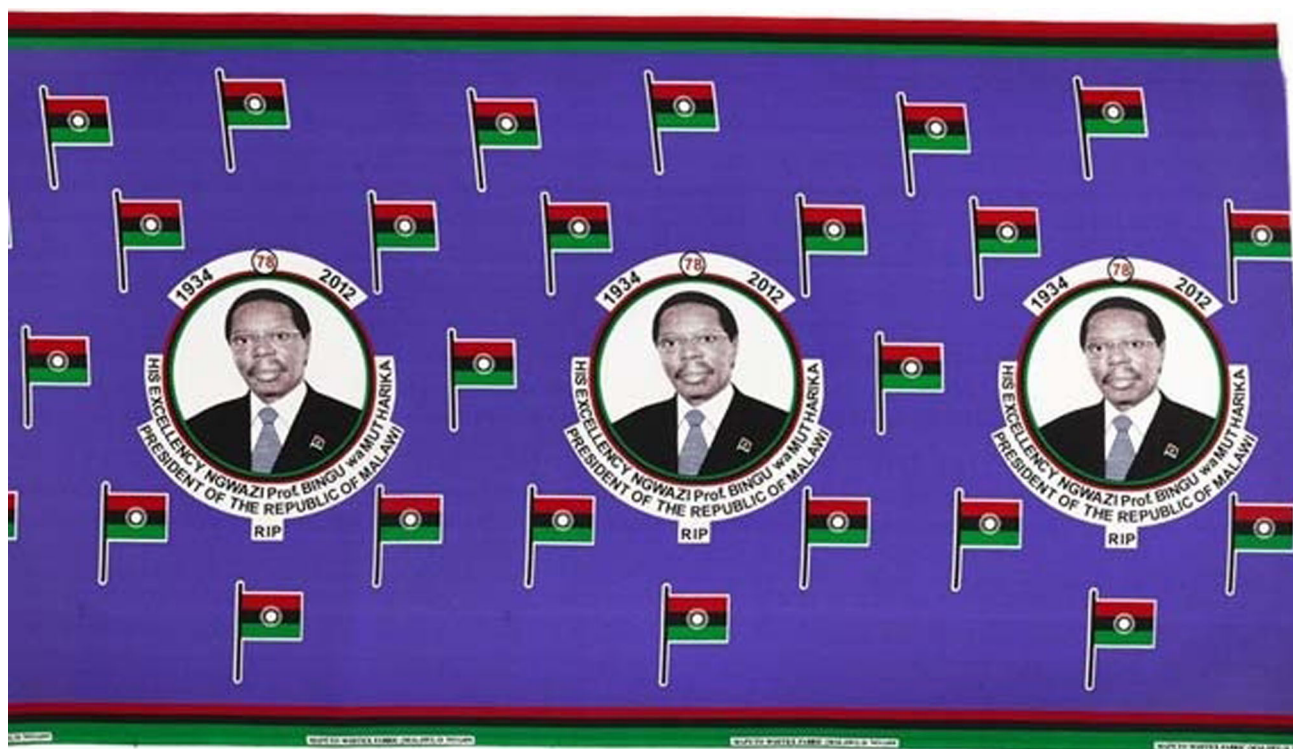


Fig. 9 Commemorative textiles for the funeral of late Malawian President, Bingu wa Mutharika in 2012. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copy rights © National Museums Scotland, all rights reserved. <https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/stories/global-arts-cultures-and-design/portrait-cloths-from-malawi/>.

an individual’s memory as well as build cohesion among different groups (Spencer, 1982; Worden, 2014).

Conclusion

The complexity of African textiles reveals a dynamic story of power and identity that has been etched into the textiles for centuries.

Through the artistic patterns of the textiles, Africa’s rich heritage and cultural diversity have distinguished itself and imprinted a lasting impression on global perceptions of the

continent. These textiles have a rich historical background stemming from interactions with Indian and European influences during the colonial era. Over time, they have undergone a transformative process from traditional to modern batik, by adapting to local aspirations and cultural values. They embrace Africanity as a reflection of a unified African aesthetic that engenders a profound sense of belonging encoded in every thread and pattern while serving as powerful tools in reinforcing authority and unity.

Clothing and power identity intertwine, with textiles acting as mirrors of local cultures and values, revealing intricate details about social status, political power, and the economic worth of individuals. Just as sumptuary laws once controlled human choices of clothing based on social rank, contemporary African textiles continue to play a vital role in shaping power dynamics and political strength among rival elites and their subjects.

African commemorative textiles have emerged as living reminders of the past, constantly shaping the present and laying the foundations for the future via the lenses of memory and commemoration. By embracing both official and vernacular cultural memories, they have become expressive storytellers of African narratives, preserving cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. During social events such as political gatherings, funerals, marriages, and other cultural ceremonies, for example, commemorative textiles have become important influential communication tools for political messaging and propaganda by igniting strong emotions, perpetuating win over the public, and promoting collective community cohesion and identity based on socially shared values, norms, and aspirations.

In essence, African commemorative textiles are essentially a perfect example of how artistic expression and cultural memory can coexist and bring people together. As the threads weave stories of the past into the fabric of the present, these textiles continue to inspire, captivate, and celebrate the enduring spirit of conserving Africa's cultural identity.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analyzed apart from those cited in the references list.

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Author Contributions

I am the sole author of this article: LDML. The article was 100% researched and written by LDML, and I confirm sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, literature review, literary analysis, generated insights and interpretation, and manuscript preparation.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

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