

## Cultural and Symbolic Interpretation of Selected Wax Print Designs on Ghanaian Fabrics

<sup>1</sup>Impraim-Swanzy Enock, <sup>2</sup>Oduro Benedicta Asoh, <sup>3</sup>Owusu Okyireh Christian

<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Department of Visual Arts

<sup>1, 2</sup> Ahantaman Girls' Senior High School, Sekondi – Ghana

<sup>3</sup> Sekondi College Ghana

<sup>1</sup> Email: [eimpraimswanzy@yahoo.com](mailto:eimpraimswanzy@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup> Email: [benasod@yahoo.com](mailto:benasod@yahoo.com)

<sup>3</sup> Email: [cookyireh@gmail.com](mailto:cookyireh@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Although Ghanaian textiles have undergone several phases of ascension and declining, they are still significant in the culture of the people. Fabrics in Ghana are not only chosen for their aesthetic outlook but rather have certain cultural and symbolic interpretations which are in line with their names. The younger generation might lose certain key components of the culture with regards to fabrics and their names. They therefore choose designs and wear without knowing their cultural interpretations and the kind of signals and messages they are sending across. These names and meanings are only known to few and therefore need some form of scholarly documentation. The study made use of qualitative research methodology. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents for the study. Interviews were conducted and participant observations made at the various shops to gather data for the study. The study concluded that Ghanaian fabrics have unique names in relation to their composition and designs. Fabrics chosen based on the message the wearer want to send across, mood of the wearer or occasion and its significance are enormous. It is recommended that stakeholders in textile education and fashion should give prominence and attention to Ghanaian fabrics and the cultural and symbolic interpretations of their names.

**Keywords:** Culture, Education, Fabrics in Ghana, Symbols, Textiles

## Introduction

Before 1960, Ghana depended on United Kingdom and other European countries for textiles (Osei-Bonsu, 2001). The country did not have enough capital and technical expertise to establish and operate large-scale industries at that time. 1960s Ghana's industrialization led to the establishment of textile factories. These establishments produced unique and excellent designs and still introducing new designs day in and day out (Howard, 2014).

The rationale for the establishment of textile factories in Ghana was to embark on mass textile production to meet the clothing needs of the country, to raise the standard of living of Ghanaians and to improve upon the country's economy (MOTI, 1973).

Ghanaian wax print fabrics have unique names and meanings according to the composition and design although their origin is traced to the Dutch. It dates back to the precolonial era and still relevant in the culture of the people. Significant ceremonies such as outdoorings, naming ceremonies, puberty rites, festivals, marriage ceremonies, funerals etc. cannot be successful without the use of wax prints designs.

Ghana has been an indigenous textile producing country, well noted for the production of the Bark cloth, *Kente*, *fugu*, *Adinkra* cloth etc. Apart from the Bark cloth, all the other indigenous fabrics in Ghana make use of symbols and colours of deep philosophical meanings in relation to our tradition and culture.

A common trend of the African and for that matter, the Ghanaian, is the tendency to translate cherished ideas and values of life into symbols. A major objective of Ghanaian textiles lies in symbolism of the design and colour which emphasize the functional value of the fabric.

Textile symbols are varied proverbial sayings, myths, achievements of people in society and religious ideas have been simplified into abstract and representational symbols and given names to reflect their meanings which are very often related to the daily activities of society (Sackey, 2002).

Again, some of the symbolic Ghanaian indigenous art forms such as fabric designs, stool, ceremonial sword, linguist staff, umbrella tops have proverbial meanings and sometimes serve

pieces of admonishing for the people in their communities. They also communicate social values and concepts.

These daily activities of Ghanaian wax printed textiles apart from body clothing include, its use for the performance of rites and rituals, as symbols of status and for certain vocations.

The public sector workers in Ghana also wear Ghanaian wax print on Fridays as part of efforts to promote made in Ghana products. This was a directive from the former president John Agyekum Kufuor and successive governments have followed suit. President Nana Addo Danquah on his state of the nation's address (SONA) for the first year in office (February 21, 2017) worn the '*ahondze pa nkasa*' print. He wore it as a means of sending message to the opposition party thus good and quality beads do not make noise literally empty barrels make the most noise but rather good works are seen and not the noise you make. Although he looked extremely good and aesthetically pleasing, his intention for wearing the print was to communicate to the opposition and people of Ghana aside the physical appearance (<http://3news.com/infographics-recap-akufo-addos-2017-state-nation-address/>).

It is significant to state that some of these symbols and designs in the Akan fabric and other art forms also have some spiritual and philosophic meanings attached to them (Kquofi, 2012).

The study sought to investigate and unearth the cultural and symbolic interpretation of selected wax print designs on Ghanaian fabrics.

## **Methodology**

This paper which concerted on the Cultural and Symbolic Interpretation of Selected Wax Print Designs on Ghanaian Fabrics used qualitative research methodology for data collection and presentation. Both primary and secondary data were used in the collection of data. Information was gathered through the fabric traders, professionals in the field of textiles and culture, senior citizens with in-depth knowledge about the history of Ghanaian textiles, evidence and ideas from individuals, books, the internet and other relevant sources. Qualitative research answered the questions about the complex nature of the phenomena, often with the purpose of

describing and understanding the phenomena from the participant point of view (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005).

The researcher employed purposive sampling technique and snowball to get the various respondents for the study. The instruments used for the collection of data were interviews and observation. The researcher interviewed some fabric traders, professionals in the field of textiles and culture and senior citizens to collect data for the study. The researcher observed fabric designs in the various shops and other social functions such as naming ceremonies, funerals, church service etc. and photographs taken with a digital camera. This was necessary because it served as a reality check to the data gathered during the interview (Robson, 2002).

## Results & Discussion

The choice of designs and fabrics by Ghanaians go beyond the physical appearance and beauty but the symbolic and cultural interpretations of the fabric designs are also taken into considerations. Some samples of Ghanaian wax print designs are discussed below:

### **WO NSA EKYIR (THE BACK OF ONES HAND)**

From the proverb: ***Sɛ wo nsa ekyir bɛyɛ wo dɛw a, ɔntse dɛ wo nsa mu***

**Literal meaning:** the feeling at the back of your palm is not the same as that of the inner palm or the back of one's hand does not taste like that of the palm.

The motif involves two palms lying opposite to each other and two circles placed in between them, one at the right side and the other at the left side. There are series of small dot displayed in the palms. The palm is in the form of silhouette with series of dot displayed in it.



*Sɛ wo nsa ekyir bɛyɛ wo dɛw a,  
ɔntse dɛ wo nsa mu*

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:**

Doing something/performing a task by yourself is not the same as someone doing it for you. It feels more good and better to handle issues by yourself rather than leaving it in the hands of others.

**AHWERPƆW (SUGARCANE BUD)*****AhwerpƆw /wo ɔdɔ ye dɛw tse dɛ ahwer (Sugarcane)***

**Literal Meaning:** your love is sweet like sugarcane.

The motif in the fabric has direct resemblance with sugarcane stem with the bud and some lines displayed in it. It is repeated artistically to create a nice pattern.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** love is likened to sugarcane. It is a means of being appreciative to loved ones.

For instance a wife wears this kind of fabric to show appreciation to the husband for the love showered on her.



*AhwerpƆw /wo ɔdɔ ye dɛw tse dɛ ahwer*

**PRA WO FIE (SWEEP YOUR HOME/HOUSE)**

**Literal Meaning:** Clean or sweep your house (home).

The motif in the fabric has a true resemblance/ replica to the broom. It is arranged vertically and horizontally in a specific manner to create a pattern.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the fabric is associated to cleanliness. There is the saying that cleanliness is next to godliness. It is geared towards creating the awareness to women in the society about cleanliness and house cleaning. Women in the



*Pra wo fie*

Ghanaian culture are seen as the house cleaners and a dirty house is equated to a house without women or well bred women.

**OBATAN NA ɔNIM DZA NE MBA BEDZI** (THE MOTHER KNOWS WHAT HER CHILDREN WILL EAT)

**Literal Meaning:** it is the mother hen that knows what the chicks will eat.

The motif is made up of a conical cage with a parrot/bird inside it.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the fabric is associated with the tender, love, warmth and care of the mother hen. It symbolizes the effort of mothers in catering for their wards. It will serve as a perfect gift from children to their mother as a means of appreciating all the efforts she made in their upbringing. The fabric is worn mostly by women in Ghana.



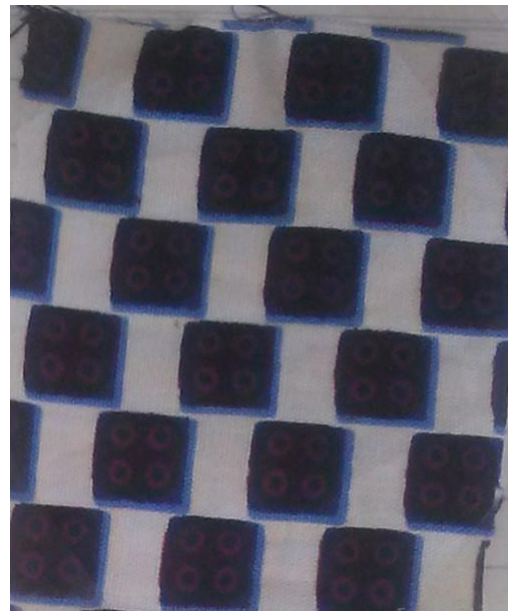
*Obatan na ɔnim dza ne mba bedzi*

**ENNYI SIKA A ɛNTOW 'BLOCK'** (IF YOU DO NOT HAVE MONEY, DO NOT LAY BLOCKS)

**Literal Meaning:** If you do not have money you do not lay blocks.

The design is made up of motif with square filled block uniformly and four circles that look like a hollow block. The motifs have a shadow around them. They are repeated systematically to produce a pattern. The arrangements are made just like how cement blocks are laid when building.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the fabric depicts the essence of money in building. Blocks are sold and



*Ennyi sika a ɛntow 'block'*

therefore without money one cannot purchase blocks. This can be used as a means of provoking and intimidating someone. For instance a landlady having issues with the tenants can intimidate them by wearing this design.

**ENYIWA BER A ỌNNSỌ GYA** (FIRE IS NOT SPARKED IN EYES RED WITH ANGER)

**Literal Meaning:** no matter how aggressive one may be, his/her eyes will not spark fire.

The design comprises five diagonal parallel lines intersecting and series of dot in the intersections. The portion of lines that do not intersect are left without any form of marks or impressions created in between.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** this design depicts patience, self control, self discipline and self containment. It also means that it is not every frowned face that depict anger.



*Enyiwa ber a Ọnnsọ gya*

**AKYEKYEDI EKYIR** (TORTOISE BACK)

From the proverb: *Huriyi si akyekyedi ekyir a, osi ho kwa. Or, akyekyedi a ọpẹ de ne yer nnya amandze na ose wọn akhiri mmesa me.*

**Literal meaning:** the tsetse fly sit on the back of a tortoise in vain. It cannot suck any blood through the hard shell. Or when the tortoise wants to put his wife in trouble he ask her to plait the hairs on his hairless back.

The motif is likened to the shell of the tortoise and comes in different colours. It is repeated in an artistic manner to create a pattern.



*Akyekyedi ekyir*

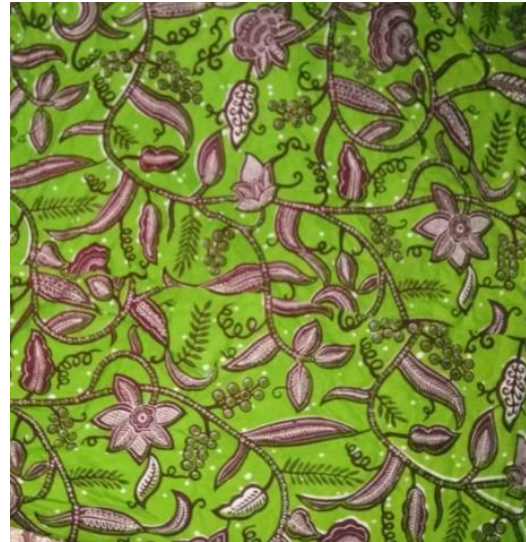
**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the animal tortoise in the culture of Ghanaians symbolize independence and self sufficiency. It again means nurturer, shy and protecting.

**AHONDZE PA NKASA** (PRECIOUS AND QUALITY BEADS MAKE NO NOISE)

From the Proverb: *Ahondze pa nkasa*

**Literal meaning:** Quality beads do not make noise.

The design is made up of some floral motifs which are chained together in a form of streamers. It comes with some circles which look like beads that are chained together. It comes in different colours.



*Ahondze pa nkasa*

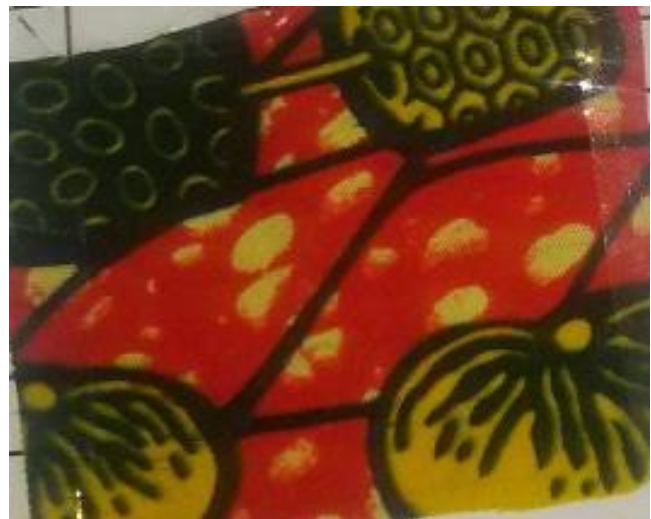
**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the design symbolically means good works/deeds will be seen by society. You do not need to broadcast it or make noise about it. It also denotes the proverb empty barrels make the most noise. A good person need not blow his/her own horns.

**AHONDZEPA TSEW WO MPANYINFO ENYIM** (PRECIOUS AND QUALITY BEADS TEAR IN FRONT OF ELDERS)

From the Proverb: *Ahondzepa tsew wo mpanyimfo enyim*

**Literal Meaning:** Precious and quality beads get torn in front of elders.

The motif is made up of beads threaded with a string. It is repeated systematically to create a pattern. It also has some floral patterns and lines as textures in the fabric.



*Ahondzepa tsew wo mpanyimfo enyim*



**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the design symbolically means good deeds are always detected by the elders and a good person always find favour before the elders.

### **SIKA TU DE ANOMMA (MONEY FLIES LIKE A BIRD)**

From the maxim: *Sika tu de anomma*

**Literal Meaning:** Money flies like a bird.

The motif is a profile of a bird in an oval shape repeated systematically to give a feeling of movement. It is also made of some horizontal lines repeated throughout the design and serves as textures in the fabric.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** it symbolizes money. If money is not handled properly will be lost. Bad or wrong investment decisions will cause one to loose money.



*Sika tu de anomma*

### **EBE KA ME HO ASEM A FA EGUA NA**

#### **TSENA DO (STOOL)**

**Literal Meaning:** if you want to talk about me take a seat

The motif is a stool repeated in a square shape to create a pattern.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the stool in the Ghanaian culture symbolizes the soul of the society. It is a symbol of authority in the traditional politics. They are sometimes used for domestic purposes.

The fabric design is a provocative and rival wear which sends signals to perceived enemies.



*Ebe ka me ho asem a fa egua na*

**NSUBURA (WELL)**

**Literal meaning:** A well of water.

The design is made of tiny dots which are in a spiral form bear a resemblance to the ripples made in a well after water is fetched from it or when a stone is dropped into its depths.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:**

Water in the Ghanaian culture symbolizes the source of livelihood and the circle also symbolizes the power and presence of God in society. This is one of the trending



*Nsubura*

fabrics in Ghana and worldwide and can be found sewn into a dress, shirt, shorts, etc. Its varying colors and bold print renders it versatile and confident.

**FIE MBOSABO ("FAMILY STONE")**

**From the adage** *Efie mboziabo, otwa sen sekan*

**Literal Meaning:** Gravels in the home/house.

The design depict gravels found in the compound of Ghanaian homes. It resembles small stones that are arranged systematically to give the sense of movement.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** It is believed that a person from one's family can be wicked or



*Fie Mbosabo*

can harm one more than an outsider. This is because a family member knows everything about you and can easily destroy you based on that. The popular adage is, “*fie mbosabo se ɔtwa wua, ɔye yaw*” literally when a member of your family hurts you, it is very painful.

### **KODUSAW** (BRANCH OF BANANA)

From the adage *Esum boreɔdze a, sum kodu*

**Literal Meaning:** *kodu* in the Akan language means banana while *saw* also refers to the bunch.

#### **Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:**

The banana plant is as important as the plantain plant. Therefore if you chock the plantain plant to prevent it from falling, the banana plant must also be chocked so that when all the plantain plants have fallen, the banana plant will be able to give its fruits/food in the lean season. It symbolizes advance preparation towards the emergency period.



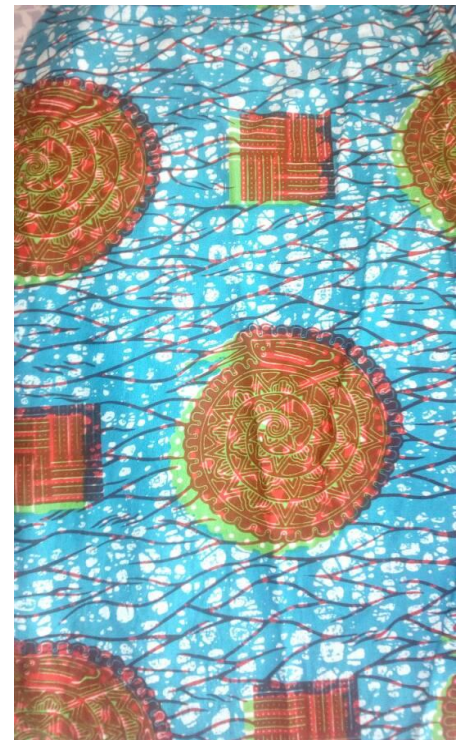
*Kodusaw*

### **AFAM NWA** (SNAIL)

The motif has a resemblance of a snail which is repeated in a systematic order to create a pattern. The design comprises concentric circles with textures and a square shape with horizontal and vertical lines. Textures in the form of series of wavy lines connecting each other are created as background for the fabric.

**Literal Meaning:** Taken as a snail.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the snail has no one to cater for it and can be picked by anyone at anytime. A person who has no one to care for or whose problems are nobody's concern can be likened to the snail. That person is



*Afam nwa*

taken for granted and treated anyhow. It symbolizes helplessness, weakness, dependent etc.

### **OWU ATWER BAAKO NFO** (STAIRCASE)

**Literal Meaning:** the ladder of death is meant for everyone.

The design is made up of series of lines arranged to depict or represent staircase. It has vertical lines that are very thick

signifying pillars holding the staircase firmly on the ground.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** Death in the Ghanaian culture is the last stage of the rites of passage. It is a transition from the earth to another world. The adage explains death as a universal phenomenon. It is inevitable, each and everyone on this earth will one day die and therefore lead an exemplary life before the last breath ceases. It sends signal of good deeds to the society.



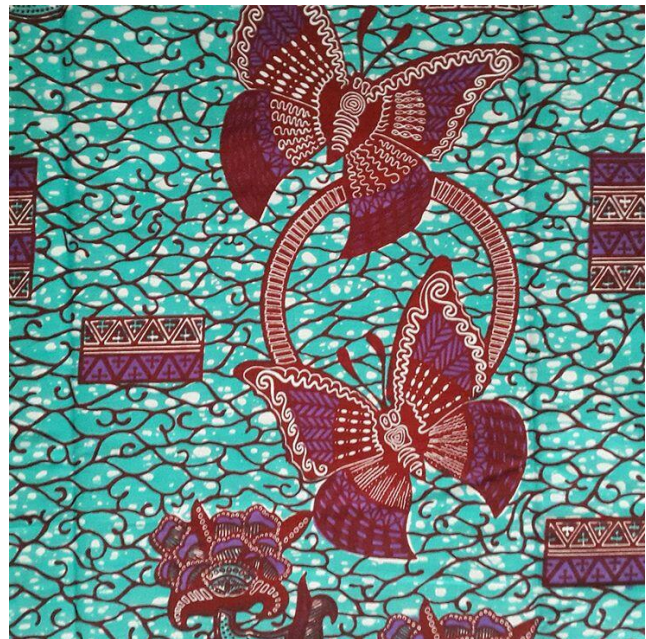
*Owu atwer baako nfo*

### **AFAFRANTA** (BUTTERFLY)

From the adage *abofra bɔ nwa, ɔmbɔ akyekyerɛ*

The design depicts two butterflies with wings touching a circle, flower patterns and rectangular shapes with zigzag lines.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** In Ghanaian traditional set up, there are roles and behaviours expected of children to



perform and put up. Children are therefore expected to behave as children and not adults. A child who is seen behaving like adult is seen to be an unrespectful child. Society therefore frowns upon such attitudes. The butterfly symbolically means transformation, balance, grace, and ability to accept change.

### MO SOA NANKA KAR

**Literal Meaning:** Carrying a python's head pad.

The design is made up of concentric circles with an outer glow around it. The concentric circle represents the snake and the glow represent the pad. The circles are repeated systematically to create a pattern. It comes with different shades of colours.



*Mo sua nanka kar*

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the python is a big and heavy snake therefore to carry its head pad means one has a huge responsibility/burden or challenge which could be likened to a financial burden, marital burden etc.

### JBRA RETWA WO DE SRADAA

**Literal Meaning:** the hardships or challenges of life can cut like a saw.

The design depicts patterns like wings with zigzag edges that looks like that of a wood cutting saw.



*Jbra retwa wo de sradaa*

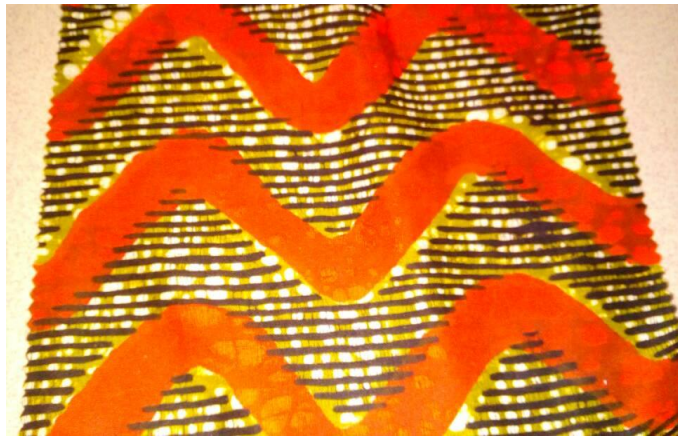
**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the Ghanaian believes that to live a successful

life, one needs effective planning. If one does not plan to live well, life can be very challenging and stressful that it will seem to be like a person is being cut by the sharp zigzag edge of a saw.

## SENKYE BRIDGE

Senkye refers to the Volta Lake found in the Volta and Eastern boundaries of Ghana.

The design is made up of thick wavy lines filled with colour and series of thin horizontal lines in the form of textures. They are arranged horizontally and repeatedly to create a pattern. The thick wavy lines are likened to the suspended bridge.



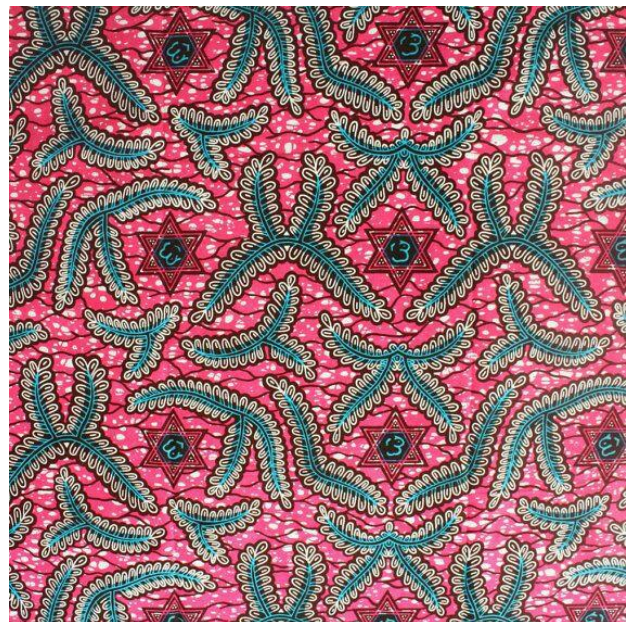
*Senkye Bridge*

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** Senkye Bridge is the beautiful suspended bridge (Adome Bridge) on the river Volta. This depicts the beauty of Ghana and its tourist sites. The bridge is one of the notable landmarks in Ghana.

## BONSU (WHALE)

The patterns in the cloth are leaves joined together in the form of groups and shaped in curves like the shape of the whale. The background have line textured effects.

**Cultural & Symbolic Interpretation:** the beauty of the cloth can be likened to the beautiful curved shape of the whale with thick wings. The whale symbolically means wisdom, provider, intelligence and kindness.



*Bonsu*

Again, the whale is regarded as a record keeper.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The focus of the study was to unearth the Cultural and Symbolic Interpretation of Selected Wax Print Designs on Ghanaian Fabrics. The findings revealed that the Ghanaian wax print designs have symbolic, philosophical and cultural interpretations attached to them. The cultural and symbolic interpretations of wax print designs in Ghanaian fabrics are educative, religious, teaches moral values, advices, communicates, encourages and provokes.

Fabric designs have been interpreted in a unique and dynamic way aside the physical composition or organization. The choice of wax design fabrics for occasions and ceremonies go beyond aesthetics.

The study concluded that Ghanaian fabrics have unique names in relation to their composition and designs. Names are given to fabric for easy identification, memorial of events, personalities and also reflection of proverbs, wise sayings, moral values, philosophies etc. Fabrics are chosen based on the message the wearer want to send across, mood of the wearer or occasion, and its significance are enormous. It is recommended that stakeholders in textiles education and fashion should give prominence and attention to Ghanaian fabrics and the cultural and symbolic interpretations of their names in the training of their students.

## References

- Amenuke, S.K. et al (1991). *General Knowledge in Art*. London: Evans Brothers Limited.
- Cohen, L. (2008). *Research Methods in Education*. (Sixth Edition). New York: Routledge
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research Design: Qualitative & Quantitative Approaches*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Dogoe, E.A. (2013). *A Study on the Rise in the Use of African Fabrics in Ghanaian and Western Societies*. Ashesi University College: Undergraduate Thesis.
- Howard, E.K. (2014), *Challenges and Prospects of Selected Large-Scale Textile Factories in Ghana*. KNUST: PhD Thesis  
<https://www.naaoyooquartey.com/ganyobinaa/do-you-know-the-meaning-of-the-designs-on-your-waxprint-clothing/4/13/2015>

<https://enam98.wordpress.com/2016/12/11/names-meaning-of-african-print/>

<http://printafricangh.blogspot.com/2012/05/african-print-fabrics-names-and-meaning.html>

<http://3news.com/infographics-recap-akufo-addos-2017-state-nation-address/>

Kquofi, S. (2012). *General Knowledge in Art for Senior High Schools*. Kumasi: Approachers Publishing.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research* (Second Edition). Oxford: Blackwell

Sackey, J. (2002). *An Introduction to Textile Technology* Vol. 3. Accra: Frank Publishing Ltd.