Wax and Java Prints of Ghana: Usage, Forms, Names and Meanings.

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Abstract

‘Wax and Java Prints’ also known as ‘mummy cloth’ or African Prints in Ghana are machine printed cotton fabrics with attractive communicative features such as colour, motif, patterns and names. These features make the fabrics distinct and easily identifiable in both Ghanaian and international communities. The fabrics portray Ghanaian identity, interests, Art and history among others. Since the introduction of these fabrics into Africa by Europeans during the early colonial times, there has been a phenomenal increase in their demand because they satisfy a wide range of clothing needs: they are the most appreciated form of dress code for the female in Ghana especially for ceremonial occasions, such as paying dowry, birth, outdoor/naming and burial. They can also serve as cover cloth and can be used for other daily functions. Despite the fact that clothes communicate messages and fabrics have names with meanings, not many admirers of Ghanaian Wax Prints are aware of the forms, the history behind their names and their meanings, and the origin of the patterns. The study therefore seeks to educate the non-professional about the meanings, philosophical backgrounds, usage and the designs of Ghanaian Wax Prints. Using the descriptive/survey methods the study intends to describe the forms, history behind the names and meanings and the patterns of the prints from primary and secondary sources. Clothes communicate messages from the wearer to the observer whether the wearer is aware or not. It is therefore worthwhile if all users and wearers of Ghanaian Wax Prints are well informed about the designs and their meanings to promote their usage and thus contribute to their marketing.

Keywords: prints, wax, java, form, mummy cloth, dress code

Introduction

The history about the use of Wax prints dates back to colonial times when the Dutch introduced ‘batik wax resist’ textiles into Africa from Indonesia. This was done in an effort to curtail local textile production in Indonesia by producing and supplying machine made imitations of Javanese batik. However, the imitated version was rejected by the Indonesian natives but was patronised by African as one of the main foreign imports (Kudowor, 2012).

History reveals that in 1846, Dutch entrepreneur Pieter Fentener Van Vlissingen also known as P. V. Vlissengen & Co established a textile company in the city of Helmond in Netherlands which later on developed into the Vlisco Company, the sole producers of today’s Vlisco brand of wax and java prints.

YinkaShonibare 2013), notes that during the era, strict restrictions in Indonesia discouraged the sale of foreign textiles to protect locally made batik textiles. The foreign textiles which were
mass produced industrially were rejected by many people including the Indonesians but were patronised by the Gold Coasters through Trade (Bater System) and with time the fabrics spread to other parts of Africa.

There after the Europeans having studied Ghanaians through their culture and trade made changes in the designs and colour to suit their tastes. Earlier designs which were believed to be universal to all cultures included plants and animals, later on changed to the use of indigenous African motifs and colours, African Heads of State and prominent politicians as motifs. They also gave opportunities to Ghanaians to request specific designs.

As a result, the fabrics became extremely popular and overtime, Ghanaians, especially women customised and personalised the designs by naming them to promote marketing and for easy identification.

Nowadays, the fabrics are produced in Holland and since 1846 Vlisco, the mother company has been the sole producers of Java and Wax prints used in Ghana. Although other companies such as Akosombo Textiles also engage in the production of the fabrics, Vlisco brands dominate the market and are mostly appreciated and have gained a lot of prestige among Ghanaian women. This could be attributed to the special qualities of the brand in terms of their colours, motifs, names and the significance of the names in indigenous Ghanaian culture. The Vlisco Book (2012) confirms that Vlisco fabrics often have stories, names and meanings attached to them. Some of them represent personal stories picked up from the market and others are attached to special occasions, events, public figures and music. It is believed that these stories and names associated with Vlisco brands have accounted for the high level of demand for them.

Although the fabrics highly appreciated and esteemed by Ghanaians, most of the admirers are unaware of the forms and the names of the fabrics.

In this study the researcher seeks to educate the non-professional about wax and java prints used in Ghana, names and meanings associated with them and the philosophical backgrounds of the names.

**Statement of the Problem**

Despite the fact that the history of African prints cannot be traced from Africa but Asia and Europe, they have been absorbed into the African culture through the efforts of the Dutch to industrialize the batik craft of the Indonesians. Since then, they have provided one cultural identity for Africans in terms of clothing and communication. In Ghana, the sale of the prints constitute a major part of trade among women, they are the most appreciated form of traditional dress code and form part of dowry. Apart from these they are used to perform other daily functions in every Ghanaian community. In spite of these roles most users and admirers of the fabrics lack information about the forms, names, meanings and backgrounds of the names of the fabrics. There is the need to investigate the prints, the names associated with them, the meanings and backgrounds of the names and their significance in the Ghanaian society.

**Purpose of the Study**

There are many wax and java designs in circulation in the Ghanaian society. According to Vlisco book, since 1846, the company has produced more than thousand different designs. The purpose of this study was to provide more education on the names of the fabrics their meanings and the philosophical backgrounds of the names to promote their usage and marketing. The
study would serve as a reference material and a source of inspiration to traditional textile manufacturers.

**The study seeks to:**

- Investigate the different forms of wax and java prints used in Ghana and the names associated with them.
- Investigate the history and the philosophical backgrounds of the names of the prints.
- Ascertain the names of the prints in different languages such as Akan, Ewe and English.

**Literature Review**

The literature review presents a brief discussion on wax and java prints. It also discusses the differences between the two types of prints.

**Wax Prints**

Wax prints could be described as the imitated version of the local batik prints originally produced in Indonesia. Fair Child (2005) explains the term ‘batik’ as a method of resist dyeing that employs wax as a resist substance. The design or pattern is covered with wax and the fabric is then dyed; the wax areas resist the dye. The wax is then removed after dyeing by boiling the fabric, applying a solvent or by ironing over an absorbent substrate. This process can be repeated numerous times to obtain multi-coloured designs and imitated in machine prints.

Abraham (2013), records in his study; Transforming Classical African Textile Print Designs to meet Contemporary Trends that the term ‘wax print’ or ‘African print’ was generally used by the Europeans textile firms in Africa to identify fabrics that were machine printed and had wax resins and dyes on both sides and resemble batik.

Wax prints have become an integral part of West African life, they have the latest design, wear well, have meaningful patterns, communicates status and are included in a woman’s dowry, Sylvanus notes in Akinwumi (2008).

**Form and Features of Wax Prints used in Ghana**

They are industrially produced colourful cotton cloths: cotton is naturally comfortable, absorbent and hard wearing making them suitable for Africa’s climate. One feature of these materials is the lack of difference in the colour intensity of the front and back sides. Normally the fabrics are sold in twelve yards (12 yards) as ‘full piece’ or six yards (6 yards) as ‘half piece’.

The producer’s name and the registration number of the design are printed on the selvedge of the fabric. Apart from the above, personal discovery and observation of the fabrics through the study of Textiles show the fabrics are woven in plain weave; the simplest weaving method which makes it possible for the raw material; bleached cotton to be produced in large quantities. The fabrics are shrink resistant, crease resistant and smooth in texture. They are inelastic as compared to woollen and elastic fabrics. Due to the compact nature of the weave, the fabrics have strong ability to resist slippage hence they are very easy to sew, however they are inflammable. Wax prints are usually identified by their colour scheme, background texture, motif, company brand and name.
**Form and Features of Java Prints used in Ghana**

Kudowor (2012) observes java as resultant of various direct printing technologies to produce cheaper imitations of the original wax prints. Java prints can be differentiated from wax prints because the design only registers on one side of the fabric but has the advantage of finer detail of design and direct reproduction of photographs.

However, during the field survey, it was realised that in modern java prints the designs show on both sides and most of the respondents could not differentiate between the two fabrics. There is also an assertion that most java prints are produced by Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) while Ghana Textile Production Limited (GTP) produces more wax prints than java.

Wikipedia Foundation Incorporated confirms Kudowor’s observation by stating java prints also known as fancy prints are imitated versions of the real wax prints. They are cheap. They are also known as ‘imi-wax’, ‘le fancy’ or ‘le legos’. These fabrics are produced for mass consumption and are more intense and rich in colours than wax prints and the designs show on one side.

Most studies confirm that wax and java prints are not the same. Personally it has been realized through the study of Textiles and this research that the main difference between the two fabrics lie in the use of wax and the effect of ‘wax cracks’ and ‘wax spots’ and in the design. Wax prints normally show spots or blocks of wax which create interesting textures in the background of the design. (Refer to photographs 8 and 16) This texturing effect is achieved accidentally during the printing and dyeing processes. Java prints do not have wax spots although they also show very intricate texturing effects; an example of such fabrics is Angelina. (see photograph 18).

**Materials and Methods**

The research method adopted for the study was qualitative approach. Data was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered through the use of interview and observation guides and secondary data was gathered form library and internet resources.

Field work was conducted at Ayigya Market at By His Grace Enterprise and Remnant Photos and Video Production Studios. The Area Manager of Woodin, a subsidiary of GTP – Premium African Textiles Company Limited at Adum Kumasi was also contacted.

The manageress of By His Grace Enterprise agreed to be offered interview and also linked the researcher to other wax prints merchandisers in the Ayigya Market. She also offered thirty samples of wax and java prints and linked the researcher to other merchandisers who offered twenty- five of the samples. Due to security reasons, she engaged her own photographer, Remnant Photos to snap pictures of the fabrics including those in her own shop.

In total, eight respondents including the manageress were contacted. Out of this number six were interviewed. The table below shows the order of activities conducted during the field survey. It also shows the corresponding dates, location of activity and respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17th July, 2014</td>
<td>Ayigya Market</td>
<td>Introduction- submission of interview guide and purpose of the study.</td>
<td>Manageress of By His Grace Enterprise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
24th July, 2014  
Ayigya Market  
Observation and interview, snapping of photographs of thirty samples of the prints, recording of the names, meaning of the names and philosophical backgrounds of the names of the prints.  
Manageress of By His Grace Enterprise, photographer + 2 fabric merchandisers

15th August, 2014  
GTP, Adum  
Introduction- purpose of the study.  
Worker at GTP, Adum

18th August, 2014  
GTP, Adum  
Interview with Area Manager  
Area Manager

21st August, 2014  
Ayigya Market  
Observation, snapping of photographs of twenty-five pieces of the prints  
2 fabric merchandisers + the manageress

All respondents were fully assured of anonymity of their responses and their identity. The photograph of fifty-five different prints was taken. However, twenty of them have been presented for the purpose of this paper. The order in which the photographs were taken followed by the corresponding discussion of the names (in Akan, Ewe and English) and the meanings are presented below.

Results and Discussion

Photograph 1: abankawa nk)ns)nk)ns)n
Source: Remnant Photo Studio

Researcher: The researcher enquired about the names of each fabrics/cloth, their meanings and the background of the names and their significance in the Ghanaian culture.


Philosophical meaning and researcher’s observation: This cloth is named as such to remind people about the law and punishment for its offenders by Government. The symbol or motif is a pair of metal rings or chain joined by a fastening around the wrist of a prisoner. Traditionally, ring symbolises honour and dignity however this ring is meant to dishonour people who offend the law: serving as a warning to offenders. The design reminds people of law and justice.

Agbo (2006) however presents a different interpretation of the symbol and notes in his study on values of Adinkra and Agama symbols that it is a symbol of relationship and unity. The cloth is
printed in the colours pink, brown and yellow. It exhibits design elements and textures such as horizontal lines, dots, waves and circles.

Photograph 2: Bonsu
Source: Remnant Photos Studio

Researcher: Name of the cloth meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: This is ‘Bonsu’ in Akan. In Ewe it is also known as ‘Bonsu’. According to her some of the cloths were named to Market them quickly. Although she could not provide the exact history behind the name, she emphasised that Bonsu is a very powerful and important mammal (fish) in the sea; because of this the market women attach the same importance and power to the cloth by selling it at a higher price despite the fact that no part of the design resembles the fish. It is patronised mostly by the elderly.

Philosophical meaning and researcher’s observation; ‘Bonsu’ is the Akan name of a very big fish in the sea, Cobb (1997) confirms in her study. It is noted for its strength, power and vigour all of which are important qualities in leadership and life in general. The cloth is printed in the colours blue, green, wine and white wax spots. The cloth exhibits curves, wavy lines, wax spots and stars.

Photograph 3: Efi Mbusua, Kpeku V)
Source: Remnant Photos Studio

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name.

Respondent: Some of the cloths have been named after their design such as ‘Efiembusua’. This cloth is known as ‘Kpeku v)’ in Ewe.
The interpretation in both languages is almost the same with a slight difference. In Ewe it means stones or gravels cloth, while in Akan it means stones or gravels found in a house. Both Ewes and Akans named this cloth after its design since the design resembles different sizes of gravels.

Researcher’s observation and philosophy: It is a common believe among Ghanaians that a house is built with different sizes of stones; no building can be built without gravels. This teaches that different experiences and lessons culminate to build life. However, none of the respondents linked this belief to the print. The main motif is printed in turquoise (blue black) against a yellow background. Elements of design exhibited are blocks and lines.

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name.

Respondent: This cloth has been printed in many colour ways and patronised mostly by the youth because of the attractive colour schemes. Although she could not provide the exact history and the Ewe name, she said the name is a common Akan proverb which means ‘when marrying, enquire’. This implies that before one gets married he or she must investigate the future spouse’s family. It is an advice to young people to be well informed before they get married. The name was given to the cloth for commercial reason is that are to create market for it.

Researcher: Why the use of names and not other means?

Respondent: Ghanaians especially women are fascinated about products with names and Proverbs.

Philosophical meaning and researcher’s observation: The print is in orange, yellow and turquoise. It exhibits different sizes of vertical and horizontal lines and squares. ‘Awaree’ or ‘ware’ in Akan means long. The lines shown in the design are long and continuous. It is believed that the proverb has been put on this cloth to communicate how long the distance of the journey of marriage is like. It is therefore important to enquire before entering it.
Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: The name literally means in Akan that peppers do not all ripe at the same time. In Ewe it means an immature pepper never ripens but rather rots.

Philosophical meaning and researcher’s observations: This proverb advices young people to wait for their time in life. Apart from this it serves as a warning against unhealthy competition in life. The motif in the fabric resembles the pepper plant and that could also be the reason for its name. Its colours are orange, yellow, blue and white and it exhibits blocks, spots, curved and undulated lines.

Researcher: Name of the cloth meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: ‘)baapa’ means virtuous woman The name promotes the use of the cloth by women. The history behind the name is not known.

Philosophical meaning and researcher’s observation: Although the history behind the name is not known. the design connotes the worth of a woman and the cloth is usually used as a gift to appreciate and celebrate women. The round and circular shape of the motif portrays a complete and total woman and the different curves in the shape represent the different virtues or qualities
which come together to make her complete. Its colours are yellow, lemon green, black and white, and the elements of design, diagonal lines, circles and curves.

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: The name means the back or shell of the tortoise in both languages. The cloth was named as such because the motif resembles ‘akyekyede ekyi’ in Akan or ‘Eklogo’ in Ewe.

Philosophical meaning: This part of tortoise is known to be very tough. The design portrays the need to be tough in the phase of challenges in life. The fabric is printed in blue, green and orange with white spots at the background. It shows curves and undulated lines.

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: This cloth used to be patronised by the rich and people who think high about themselves. The name means ‘precious jewels do not talk’.

Philosophy: It is a common proverb among Ghanaians and implies; precious jewels do not announce their presence, their worth is easily recognised: precious jewels represent strengths and qualities found in a person or thing. The designs presented here are in two colours. The first is a wax print in brown, blue, black and white wax spots at the back ground. The second is a java print in blue and orange. Both designs exhibit wavy lines and circles.
Photograph 9: *Enebrensogya, Suklikpe do*

Source: Remnant Photos Studio

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name.

Respondent: In Akan, when some is determined or very serious he or she is described as ‘ne niabre’ or his eye is red’. Literally the name means ‘a serious eye does not burn’.

Philosophical meaning: It is a sign of warning from a serious person ‘whose eye does not burn’. This suggests that when someone is in serious business he or she deserves cooperation from others. There are different colour ways of the design but the name best suits the red colour scheme. In Ewe the interpretation is different. ‘Suklikpe’ means ‘sugar cube’ and ‘do’ is cloth. This describes the motif in the design. The print is in one colour - turquoise. It exhibits blocks, diagonal and wavy lines.

Photograph 10: *Sika w) ntaban/ Anomabosuo, Hevi v)*

Source: Remnant Photo Studio

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: The Akan name means ‘money has wings’.

Philosophical meaning: This implies money can fly away if it is not handled properly. In Ewe ‘hevi’ is a bird ‘av)’ means cloth. The fabric is named after the motif. Its colours are blue, lemon green, brown, gold, and white observation; wax spots. It exhibits horizontal lines, curves lines and ovals.
Photograph 11: Afe bi ye san, fesiafeklemenya o
Source: Remnant Photos Studio

Researcher: Name of the fabric, meaning and background of the name?
Respondent: The name in both languages has the same meaning- some years are full of troubles. The name was coined out of the haphazard arrangement of the motifs.
It also teaches we should be thankful to God in every situation. The fabric is printed in turquoise and exhibits undulated lines and curves.

Photograph 12: Wo be ka me woasem a faakonywanatena so
Source: Remnant Photos

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?
Respondent: Only the Akan name was mentioned and it means’ if you will talk about me then get a stool and sit on it’.
Philosophy: This proverb teaches the importance of discussing and resolving issues amicably not through gossip. The name was coined out of the motif in the print.
Researcher: Name of the fabric, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: In Akan, the name means it is the mother of a child who knows what he will eat. In Ewe, it means once a bird is alive it will by all means grow feathers.

Philosophy: The motif connotes the love of a caring mother. In both languages the name encourages people to have hope no matter what. Some studies show that the cloth is known as ‘you fly, I fly’ in some parts of Africa. It is used by young married women to warn their husbands to desist from flirting because they could also do likewise. The print is in black and white and exhibits a nesting bird, dots, horizontal and vertical lines.

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and the background of the name?

Respondent: The name means ‘death ladder’ in Akan and in Ewe ‘atrapkue’ is a ‘stair case’.

Philosophy: The fabric is named after the design. It reminds everyone about the fact that death is inevitable and the stages of life after death. The print is in purple, gold, brown, and lemon green and exhibits lines curves and geometric shapes.
Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: ‘As) bayere’ in Akan is a type of yam. The fabric was named after the appearance of the climbing plant. She could not provide the Ewe name.

Researcher’s Observation: The print appears in the colours blue, green, black, and orange and exhibits curves, semi-circles, wavy lines, and dots.

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: She could not provide the history behind the name ‘Felicia’.

Researcher’s observation: The photograph shows two colour schemes: pink and yellow. The pink colour scheme is wax print and the yellow, java print. Both fabrics exhibit a floral pattern, curves, lines, and dots.
Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: This cloth has two names and different interpretations. She could not explain the meaning of ‘sapi’, she however described ‘ebo)’ as ‘stone’ and ‘dadee’ as metal so the name of the fabric means ‘half stone half metal’. According to her this cloth was given a name to suit its design inorder to market it.

Researcher: During an interview with the Area Manager of GTP at Adum Kumasi, it was discovered that the cloth is also known as ‘day and night’ because of the nature of the design and its colours. He also confirmed that most of the fabrics have been given interesting names by the merchandisers to attract the market.

Philosophy; It teaches the importance of the combination of discipline and fairness. The print is green, blue, orange, black and white. It is heavily textured and exhibits design elements such as lines, dots, blocks and curves.

Researcher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: The history of Angelina was not provided by the fabric merchandisers. According to the GTP area manager, ‘Angelina’ was named by Vlisco the mother company in Holland. Recently the company celebrated Angelina week to celebrate the design in Ghana and abroad.

Researcher: Vlisco Book (2012) reveals that the origin of the motif is a coptic altar. The pattern was originally one of the most important products in the Vlisco range. It continues to be
produced by Vlisco and it has been imitated repeatedly since the sixties. The name Angelina’ has its roots in in the Ghana in the 1970s. In the late Seventies the popularity by of the print coincided with the release of the hit song ‘Angelina’ by legendary Ghanaian highlife group: the ‘Sweet Talks’. People began referring to the print after the vibrant highlife track to date. The fabric is printed in yellow, blue, orange and black. It exhibits lines, curves, dots and geometric shapes.

Reseacher: Name of the cloth, meaning and background of the name?

Respondent: ‘Nsa’ in Akan means hand and represents work. In Ewe ‘Nyasiemadu’ means I eat the work of my hand or I reap the reward of the work of my labour. The cloth is named after the shape of the motif which resembles the human hand. The cloth is printed in lemon green and brown. It exhibits lines, curves and dots.

Philosophy: Just as the sugar cane is not smooth throughout, this design teaches that life is not smooth throughout. There is the need to stop sometimes, reflect and take stock in order to make the right decisions. The print is in gold, orange and light blue. It exhibits wavy lines, curves and dots.
Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to study wax and java prints used in Ghana: their forms, names, meaning of the names, their historical and philosophical backgrounds and their significance in indigenous Ghanaian culture.

Prior to this research it was assumed that the producers of the prints were solely responsible for naming the prints, the study revealed that most of the prints were named by the merchandisers, based on the designs, motif and colour to attract the market. A few of them have names with stories and events associated with them. Examples are ObooNkwanta, Se asan, Nkrumah pencil, Akuffo, among others.

According to the Area Manager of GTP, Kumasi and the Manageress of By His Grace Enterprise, the naming strategy is the fastest way by which cloths are marketed. It is recommended that the same strategy be adopted for marketing other indigenous Ghanaian products such as traditional foot wear, jewellery and accessories and batik.

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Journal


Book


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