

**NARRATIVES OF THE IGBO WOMEN OF
NIGERIA: SOCIAL INTERACTIONS
ENCOUNTERED THROUGH AFRICAN
WAX-PRINTED TEXTILES DURING THE 20th
CENTURY**

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Abstract

This research explores the dynamic interplay between Igbo women of Nigeria and African wax-printed textiles during the 20th century, focusing on the social narratives and interactions embodied through these vibrant fabrics which have not been given adequate attention by Igbo scholars. African wax prints served not only as decorative attire but also as potent symbols of identity, status, and communication within Igbo communities. This is a qualitative research. Through interviews, oral histories, participant observation, archival materials, and visual analysis, this study examines how women used textiles to express personal and collective narratives, negotiate social roles, and assert agency in both private and public spheres. The research finds out the multifaceted meanings embedded in patterns, colours, and motifs, which facilitated nuanced social exchanges and reinforced

communal bonds. By centering the lived experiences of Igbo women, the research also reveals how textiles functioned as active agents in shaping cultural memory, social hierarchies, and gender relations in 20th-century Nigeria. In conclusion, they were highly revered by the women in that era, and still cherished till date, therefore the messages and untold stories of the cloth should be sufficiently relayed so as to teach and enlighten the younger ones who might be ignorant of those exciting stories.

Keywords: Igbo, African-wax printed textiles, textile designs, Dutch-wax prints, Igbo women

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, African wax-printed textiles emerged as influential mediums of expression, communication, and identity among the Igbo women of Nigeria. The Igbo people are primarily found in the Southeastern region of Nigeria. Their homeland, often referred to as Igbo land or Ala Igbo, covers several states and is characterized by a dense population, rich culture, and a history of vibrant commerce and craftsmanship. Main states where the Igbo are found: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. These five states are considered the core Igbo states.

There are significant Igbo populations in other states: Delta State (especially in the Anioma region

or rather Delta North), Rivers State (notably in the Ikwerre, Ogba, Diobu, Por Harcourt, Egbema and Ndoni areas), Benue State (Three Local Government Areas in total), Cross River State (in Western parts), Bayelsa State (in some few communities). African wax-printed fabrics are coloured with vibrancy, distinguished by their intricate, bold motifs and textured background, bright colour schemes, and symbolic patterns, transcended their utilitarian purpose to become essential elements in the social, cultural, and economic tapestry of Igbo life. These fabrics were incorporated into daily life, ceremonies, and resistance movements, becoming instruments for storytelling, status marking, negotiation of gender roles, and community cohesion. As brides, mothers, market women, and leaders, Igbo women harnessed the communicative power of textiles to articulate aspirations, maintain kinship ties, and assert their presence in public and private spheres. The patterns and colours chosen were rarely arbitrary; rather, they functioned as visual languages, conveying messages about taste, choice, status, and personal milestones.

Moreover, the commerce surrounding wax prints fostered intricate networks of female entrepreneurship and solidarity. Women's organizations, market alliances, and transnational exchanges contributed to a vibrant textile economy that both reflected and shaped shifting gender dynamics. Through oral histories, archival records,

and material culture analysis, this paper traces the ways in which Igbo women's engagement with African wax-printed textiles facilitated social interactions—enabling them to navigate the pressures of tradition, modernity, and external influence with resilience and creativity.

By centering the narratives of Igbo women, this study illuminates the enduring significance of African wax-printed textiles as more than decorative garments. They are storied objects - repositories of memory, agency, and communal identity - whose histories reveal the intricacies of social life in 20th-century southeastern Nigeria.

Igbo women are known for tying two sets of wrappers especially for meeting attendance from their waists to the ankle with a matching lace blouse or the same blouse made with the wrapper print. This dress was found to be common amongst the married females in Igbo communities. Before the 21st century, the women never joked with their cloths which they wrap about their bodies for casual and ceremonial wears. But of recent they are used to construct different styles of apparels. Eve de Negri (1976:61) noted that for some chieftaincy ceremonies in Igbo land for women, two fine white cotton cloths are wrapped about the body, one over the other. Also chudi-Duru (2017) affirmed that often for core Igbo traditional ceremonies the locally hand woven fabric called Akwete is used; this showcases interwoven geometric patterns on

the background. During 20th century, many women procured Akwete hand woven fabrics as their staple clothing but as African wax-printed fabrics which were introduced to Africa in the 18th century grew more popular they shifted their attention to them and other imported fabrics such as George fabrics, laces and other factory woven and printed fabrics.

African wax-prints were found to be used as casual wears by both genders, uniforms for women dance groups, uniforms for burial ceremonies, uniforms for wedding ceremonies and uniforms for women during the famous August meetings because of its popularity, any number of yards wanted could be bought from the market. Names given to these fabrics are not all proverbial rather majority of them are named after objects found in the living areas, recent happenings in the society, popular songs, popular catchy slangs, religious objects, masks, and funny slangs. They can also be named after and inspired by personalities, cities, building, sayings, occasions, or well-known individuals. They are worn by the Igbo either for regular occasions, formal, or special occasions. This paper investigates the multifaceted narratives woven through the experiences of Igbo women as they navigated the evolving landscapes of colonialism, post-independence transformations, and globalization, with African wax prints serving as both canvas and catalyst for social interaction.

This study answers the questions on why are the Igbo women strongly attracted and emotionally attached to Dutch-wax Hollandaise, how they derive some satisfactions when they wear them, whether they are valued and if so, to what extent? Are their names suggestive of their designs? What are their meanings? When are they worn?

Problem of the Study

Despite the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people and the central role that African wax-printed textiles have played in their society in terms of clothing, furnishing and fashion designs, there is a notable gap in scholarly research examining how these textiles have mediated and reflected the social interactions of Igbo women during the 20th century. This study has observed that most of the existing literature focuses on the economic, aesthetic, or historical aspects of textiles in West Africa, and its utilization in fashion often overlooking the personal stories, communal relationships, and gendered experiences embedded in their use and exchange. The social media has also recorded numerous styles worn by people to showcase its designs. This lack of comprehensive narrative analysis limits our understanding of how Igbo women have utilized wax-printed textiles as tools for communication, identity formation, and social negotiation within a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. Addressing this gap is essential for appreciating the various ways in which material culture intersects with gender and social dynamics in Igbo society.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do Igbo women groups utilize African wax-printed fabrics?
2. Why are the Igbo women attached to these fabrics?
3. Why do most women of the 20th century value the gift of Hollandaise fabrics?
4. Why do some women work hard to procure some pieces of African-wax prints?
5. What are some emotional attachments to these African-wax prints by the Igbo women?

Theoretical framework

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that focuses on how individuals interpret and give meaning to symbols, objects, and interactions in their everyday lives. It emphasizes the subjective meanings and the social processes through which people create shared realities. Propounded by George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and further developed by Herbert Blumer (1900–1987). This theory helps to analyze how Igbo women use textiles as symbols to communicate identity, status, and social messages within their communities.

Feminist Theory (African Feminism/ Womanism)

Feminist theory explores the social roles, experiences, and representations of women, advocating for gender equality. African feminism

(or womanism) specifically addresses the unique historical, cultural, and social realities of African women, often emphasizing community, motherhood, and resistance against both patriarchy and colonialism propounded by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Betty Friedan (1963) - Western feminism. Date: Mid-20th century (Western feminism). African feminism/womanism was propounded by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (coined "womanism" in 1985), Obioma Nnaemeka (1990s). Date: 1980s–1990s (African feminism/womanism). This framework was used for interpreting the narratives of Igbo women, particularly how they negotiate gender roles and assert their identities through textile practices.

Material Culture Theory

Material culture theory examines the relationship between people and their physical objects, exploring how artifacts (such as textiles) embody cultural values, social relationships, and historical contexts. Propounded by Jules Prown (pioneered approaches in the 1980s) and Daniel Miller (1990s). It was used to describe African wax-printed textiles as cultural texts that carry stories, traditions, and social meanings among Igbo women. These theories provide frameworks for analyzing how Igbo women's narratives and social interactions are mediated through African wax-printed textiles in the 20th century.

Literature Review

African-wax printed textiles

African wax-printed textiles often referred to simply as "wax prints," have a fascinating history. Originating from a blend of Indonesian batik techniques and European industrial production, these textiles were introduced to West Africa in the 19th century by Dutch and English traders (Perani & Wolff, 1999). The Igbo people quickly adopted these textiles, integrating them into their cultural practices and social systems. By the 20th century, wax prints had become a ubiquitous feature of Igbo life, symbolizing various aspects of identity, social status, and cultural heritage. Archer gave a detailed story of how this fabric was birthed and how it made its way to Africa. The story goes thus, in the small Dutch city of Helmond, where, in 1846, industrialist Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen purchased a textile factory with the goal of selling upholstery fabric, bedspreads, and handkerchiefs abroad. Van Vlissingen began creating imitation batik fabric based on designs from Indonesia — then known as the Dutch East Indies — with the goal of capitalizing on new roller printing technology that could affect the look of batik without all the labor intensive work required to make the real thing. Batik originated in China and India in the 8th century, and it was refined in 13th-century Indonesia with the development of a new tool for applying hot wax to fabric known as *tjanting*. When Dutch imitators such as van Vlissingen entered the

business, Indonesians noticed small flaws in their fabrics — namely a “crackle” effect, the result of small veins of pigment leaking through the wax resist — and the Dutch East Indies even went so far as to ban their sale in the 19th century. But other areas of the Dutch empire provided a ready, if unexpected, marketplace. Vlisco fabrics became a popular item in a different part of the Dutch colonial ecosystem, starting in Ghana, which was then called the Gold Coast. Between 1855 and 1872, approximately 3,000 Ghanaian soldiers served in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army. They returned home, as servicemen often do, with a taste for items they encountered abroad. As the story continues by Archer(), the soldiers had learned to appreciate the look of genuine batik but didn’t mind the crackle of the van Vlissingen version, so they purchased bolts of it for their female relatives back in Ghana. By the turn of the century, despite the ceding of the colony to the United Kingdom, the sale of Dutch-made faux batik in the Gold Coast was robust. By the 1930s, it was being adapted to suit Ghanaian tastes, not by accident, but by design. The trend was so popular that several companies based in England, France, and Switzerland began producing faux batik fabrics in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Van Vlissingen responded by consolidating its grip on the marketplace and buying up several smaller concerns. Thus, a fabric produced in Europe with Asia in mind never quite hit the mark in its intended marketplace, but found an enthusiastic audience at the opposite end of the

empire. In 1927, the company adopted the more modern name of Vlisco. Terms such as “Dutch Wax,” “Veritable Dutch Hollandaïs,” and “Wax Hollandaïs” were also commonly used for Vlisco fabrics, but branding became more important when World War II temporarily halted production in the Netherlands. Imitators sprang into action, producing knockoffs for the West African market. In the years following the war, purveyors of Vlisco fabrics became increasingly concerned with authenticity and protecting their business from the ersatz textiles and since 1963, they have been stamped with the phrase “Guaranteed Dutch Wax Vlisco” on every selvaqe, making proof of authenticity an important aspect of the product’s allure.

Dutch wax Hollandaise (African wax prints) otherwise known as *Abada* by the Igbo of South eastern Nigeria are worn in almost every part of West Africa. They have gained so much popularity that they are being utilized in global fashion. Domowitz (1992) noted that in some parts of Africa they are named after proverbs, for instance the Anyi of eastern Cote d’ Ivoire, use them as public voices, a risk-free way to communicate. In Nigeria today, they are utilized to construct some clothing for different purposes in the contemporary fashion scene. And this practice has added much status and created awareness to these fabrics. However, the Igbo women venerate these fabrics. To the extent that most of them acquire some pieces, in order to show off some degree of affluence and

class. The main focus of this paper is the emotional attachment of these women to these fabrics based on their designs, names, social interaction and experiences which have not been sufficiently told and documented by scholars.



FigureI: a group of Igbo women in a cultural dance performance, tying a wax- print named 'Santana' as their uniform. Source: Chika Chudi-

Cultural Significance of wax-prints

The cultural significance of wax prints among Igbo women cannot be overstated. Each design and pattern carries specific meanings, often tied to proverbs, historical events, and societal norms. For example, certain patterns are traditionally worn during specific ceremonies, such as weddings or funerals, to convey messages about the wearer's status, role, or emotional state (Eicher, 1976). These textiles serve as non-verbal communicative tools, enabling women to express their identities and convey complex social messages. Patterns such as "Angelina" and "ABC" have become iconic, each carrying its own set of meanings and associations.

The "Angelina" pattern, for instance, is often associated with celebration and joy, making it a popular choice for festive occasions. Meanwhile, the "ABC" pattern, with its alphabet motif, symbolizes education and intellectual aspiration, reflecting the values of knowledge and progress within the community (Sylvanus, 2016).

The trade of wax-printed textiles has been a significant source of economic empowerment for Igbo women. Throughout the 20th century, these textiles were not only used locally but also became part of extensive trade networks that spanned across West Africa and beyond. Igbo women, known for their entrepreneurial spirit, played crucial roles as traders and distributors of these textiles, establishing themselves as key economic actors within their communities (Barnes, 2002).

Markets such as the famous ogbō abada (Chudi-Duru, 2017) and Aba market became central hubs for the trading of wax prints, where women negotiated prices, formed alliances, and established trade routes. This commercial activity provided them with financial independence and the ability to support their families and invest in community projects. The success of Igbo women in the textile trade exemplifies their resilience and adaptability in navigating the socio-economic challenges of the 20th century (Ogunleye, 2014). The social interactions facilitated by wax prints extend beyond economic transactions. These textiles play a pivotal

role in social gatherings, ceremonies, and rites of passage. In Igbo society, the choice of textile patterns and the manner of their display are critical in defining individual and collective identities. For instance, during weddings, brides often wear specific patterns that signify fertility and prosperity, while during funerals, mourners might wear patterns that honor the deceased's life and legacy (Picton, 1995). Furthermore, the act of gifting wax prints during significant life events, such as births, marriages, and deaths, reinforces social bonds and communal ties. These textiles are often passed down through generations, becoming heirlooms that carry the stories and histories of families and communities. This practice underscores the role of wax prints as vessels of cultural memory and identity.

Adaptation to Socio-Political Changes

The 20th century was a period of immense socio-political change in Nigeria, marked by the end of colonial rule and the subsequent struggles of a new nation. Igbo women adapted to these changes by leveraging their skills in textile production and trade. The patterns and motifs of wax prints evolved to reflect contemporary issues and events, from colonial resistance to post-independence nationalism (Schildkrout & Keim, 1998). During the Biafran War (1967-1970), for instance, wax prints with patterns symbolizing peace and resilience became popular, reflecting the

community's aspirations and struggles. This adaptability of wax prints highlights the dynamic nature of Igbo culture and the agency of women in responding to and shaping socio-political discourses.



Figure 2: an Igbo women dance group found in Ogidi town, decked in an African wax printed wrapper named '*ocheze*' (the king's stool) Photo credit: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

Methodology

This is qualitative research. The study area was randomly selected from the core Igbo states (Imo, Anambra, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi). Participant observation, one on one physical interviews and photographs were used as research instruments to collect some data. Consents were provided by some interviewees in various Igbo communities.

Findings, Results and Discussions

Result 1 from research question 1

1. In what ways do Igbo women groups utilize African wax-printed fabrics?

Most women groups always want to look the same during their outings as revealed by Mrs. Bernadine Mbelu (interviewee). When a group of women in a meeting desire to change their uniform wrapper; this is usually discussed in their monthly meetings. A name of a popular wrapper will be suggested by many of them to choose from. Usually done some months to the date they will wear the uniform. After agreeing on a particular one, a vendor is contacted that will supply to the whole women. They pay the required amount of money to the treasurer. They purchase from one vendor for uniformity. The women meeting usually change to a new uniform when they want to launch a new uniform, a new dance or a building project and other projects which they might get involved in as a support to their upgrading their communities. These uniforms are worn during festivities in their various communities by the meeting members which are only women in most cases.



Figure 3: a group of Igbo women tying a wax- print as their uniform for an outing. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

Result 2 from research question 2

2. Why are the Igbo women attached to these fabrics?

This study found out that these women usually store these printed fabrics in trunk boxes which are well secured in their homes. It should be noted that, on the demise of a mother, they are acquired or shared by the daughter or daughters of the deceased after the mourning period. It is also believed that they could be resold in case one faces difficult times; hence they possess second hand value. There are many Dutch wax printed fabrics utilized by Africans but this study concentrated on the ones termed as “*Igbo Hollandaise*”. The researcher found out that these Igbo hollandaise designs are peculiar to women, some of their names are in Igbo language with symbolic meanings and some of their names

are derived from the designs on the fabrics while some of the names do not have any relationship with their designs rather with the happenings in the society. Thus they are highly valued by them and most of the women have their experiences with these fabrics.

The usefulness of African wax printed fabrics cannot be ignored especially in Igbo societies today. These resin printed, hundred percent cotton fabric with vibrant and vivid patterns are known by their bright and radiant colours, patterns, designs and motifs which are purely symbolic, based on their world views, every day happenings, beliefs, politics, traditions and customs and so on. They are industrially produced with batik printing and there is no difference in the colour intensity of front and back sides of the fabrics and the colours are fast. This could be the reason why the Igbo women believe that these fabrics lives are eternal because they do not bring out any colour when washed. Even at that a woman Mrs Uchegbu revealed that abada is not washed any how or kept anyhow. In fact she said that to use it and construct a skirt and blouse is to render it useless, the best style for abada is tying it as wrappers around the body with a blouse to match. Although these fabrics are produced in Netherlands, the West Africans utilize them quite often to showcase their rich cultural heritage from being uniforms to a day to day wear to ceremonial clothing more than their producers.



Figure 4: a group of Igbo women in a cultural dance performance, wearing a wax- print named ‘ocheze’ as their uniform. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

These designs are very much alive in Africa where traders and consumers give them various names for proper identification. They are identified by their names, although they have numbers given to each by *Vlisco* Company thus, they are usually identified by the indigenous names given to them by the people that make use of them (*Vlisco* 2013). They are used as methods of communication and identification among the people. They also serve as sources of inspiration for fashion designers, who are always on the lookout for newer designs that could be used for clothing construction in the contemporary fashion world. Specifically, these fabric designs connote distinctive meanings to the Igbo women such as historical, educational, archeological, anthropological, social, economic, aesthetics and other uses.

These textiles have been conserved, protected and displayed by *Vlisco* as their designs, on the contrary, in Igbo land they are appreciated and mostly found in some of the women’s’ private collections because of their emotional attachment to these designed

fabrics. According to Mrs Uchegbu (interviewee), a wrapper passed from a mother to a daughter is always cherished. It serves as a reminder of a bond that exist between a mother and a daughter. It also brings nostalgic feelings.

She mentioned that in Igbo culture, the act of passing fabrics from mother to daughter as a parting gift is a moment steeped in emotion, symbolism, and tradition. This exchange, often occurring during significant life transitions such as death, marriage, migration, or coming-of-age ceremonies, transcends the mere gifting of material items. Instead, it represents a profound transfer of heritage, values, and familial bonds.

She further disclosed that African wax prints with distinctive patterns and vibrant colours are not arbitrary. Each piece may carry a story for instance, a cloth worn at the mother's own wedding, one gifted by a grandmother, or a fabric that symbolizes a particular hope or blessing. Through these textiles, mothers impart lessons of resilience, beauty, and identity. The motifs and colours can encode messages about womanhood, aspirations, and the expectations of family and community.

According to Mrs. Ejike (interviewee) receiving such a gift, the daughter becomes a custodian of family memory and cultural continuity. She is entrusted not only with the physical fabrics but with the intangible legacies woven into their threads. The

act of wrapping herself in these clothes serves as a tangible reminder of her lineage, providing comfort and connection even in the absence of her mother. As she wears or displays the fabrics, she participates in a living tradition, affirming her role within the family and the broader Igbo community. Ultimately she mentioned that, the passing of fabrics is an act of love and faith. It is a mother's way of ensuring that her daughter carries a piece of home, history, and maternal embrace into the next chapter of her life. In the context of 20th-century Igbo society, where women navigated shifting social landscapes, these textiles offered a source of strength and continuity, anchoring them to their roots while empowering them to forge their own paths.



Figure 5: a group of Igbo women in a meeting of married women, tying a wax-print named 'ladder' as their uniform. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

African wax prints hold sentimental value as they often mark important moments - weddings, festivals, rites of passage, and even periods of mourning. The vivid patterns and colours evoke memories, while the tactile quality of the fabric provides comfort and familiarity. Over time, certain prints become synonymous with specific family

lineages or notable events, further reinforcing the emotional connection (Mrs. Nwaohiri, interviewee).

She further mentioned that this attachment is also nurtured by the social interactions surrounding the acquisition and gifting of textiles. Markets, where these fabrics are bought and sold, serve as hubs of conversation, negotiation, and storytelling. The act of gifting or inheriting wax prints strengthens bonds between women, creating a tapestry of relationships interwoven with shared traditions and values.

This study found out that African wax-printed fabrics serve as a living archive for Igbo women - a canvas for personal milestones and collective memory. Their enduring attachment to these textiles reflects a profound respect for heritage and a desire to preserve the threads of identity that connect one generation to the next.

Result 3 from research question 3

3. Why do most women of the 20th century value the gift of Hollandaise fabrics?

The use of African wax prints as gifts to a wife holds significant cultural and emotional meaning in Igbo society. Presenting these textiles is more than a gesture of affection; it is an affirmation of the marital bond and recognition of a woman's place in the household and community. Husbands often choose wax prints with patterns or motifs that convey specific messages ranging from admiration

to hopes for prosperity and harmony in the marriage. Receiving wax prints as gifts is a source of pride and joy for many Igbo women. The fabrics are frequently showcased during important social events, allowing the wife to display her husband's appreciation and generosity. In some cases, the gifting of textiles marks milestones such as anniversaries, childbirth, or the achievement of a significant family goal, further strengthening the couple's connection.

Beyond the personal relationship, the exchange of wax prints is embedded in broader social customs. Family members and friends may witness or participate in the gifting process, making it a public acknowledgment of the marital relationship. This tradition also reinforces communal values of care, respect, and unity within marriage (Mr. I Nwankwo, Mr. Nonso, Mr. D. Onwujiuba - interviewees). Ultimately, giving African wax prints as gifts to a wife is both a celebration of love and a means of weaving new stories into the fabric of family life. The textiles become treasured possessions, imbued with the memories and meanings of shared experiences, and passed down as symbols of enduring partnership and affection.



Figure 6: a group of Igbo women in a function, tying a wax- print named '*ruler*' as their uniform. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

According to Mrs Margaret Ejike (interviewee) Some Igbo women, especially in the mid-to-late twentieth century, experienced a sense of disdain and discomfort when they could not afford Dutch wax Hollandaise wrappers for important social functions. In many Igbo communities, the quality and vibrancy of a woman's wrapper were not merely a matter of personal taste they served as powerful symbols of status, wealth, and belonging. Dutch wax prints, particularly the highly prized Hollandaise brand, signified modernity, cosmopolitanism, and economic success. When invited to weddings, funerals, or other significant gatherings, women who wore less expensive, locally produced, or faded wrappers often felt self-conscious and alienated. The bright and intricately patterned Hollandaise wrappers worn by wealthier women seemed to shimmer with prestige, reinforcing social hierarchies and sometimes provoking subtle or not-so-subtle exclusion. This could manifest in the way hosts or other guests

acknowledged them (or failed to), the seating arrangements, or the way conversations flowed. For some, this disparity fostered resentment or quiet bitterness, as the inability to purchase such wrappers was a visible reminder of their limited means. At the same time, it could also lead to a form of silent resistance, with some women choosing to wear their less expensive wrappers with pride, attempting to assert that dignity and community participation were not solely defined by imported textiles. Nevertheless, the association of Dutch wax Hollandaise wrappers with prestige and social capital meant that many women continued to aspire to own them, sometimes saving for months or years to afford even a single piece for the next important occasion.

There are some African wax printed fabrics which are known to be Igbo hollandaise because they are utilized quite often by the Igbo women, named by Igbo cloth traders and they bear indigenous names based on their designs and Igbo world view. Even in the markets, the researcher found out that the Igbo Hollandaise are kept separately. Through their designs they have been used to acquire insight into the social, religious, political and economic complexities of Igbo communities and beyond whose cultures people may otherwise remain ignorant about. These fabrics play important roles in the lives and ceremonies of Igbo communities. A woman was respected judging by the voluminous number of Dutch wax hollandaise fabrics acquired

in the past and present years in Igbo land. These African wax printed fabric designs have had and still have a remarkable significance as a means of communication, information and mutual association in Igbo communities.

They are also used for covering the body against cold and others that might be dangerous to the body but most important of all they are used for personal body adornment. The fabrics usually come in six yards. Two sets of wrappers are cut out of the six yards in two and a quarter inches as the measurement for each. The remaining could be used to construct the blouse. Or much still the six yards could also be sewn in to a skirt and a blouse or a wrapper and a blouse to match. They have colourful, bold and attractive designs.



Figure 7: a group of Igbo women in a function, wearing a wax- print named 'sugar-cane' as their uniform. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

There is spiritual and historical significance in the symbols, colours, designs and names given to these fabrics which are mostly related to events in Igbo

land, Nigeria, Africa and the world at large, Igbo historical proverbs and idioms, popular slangs, world leaders, house hold items, symbol of Christianity, well-known music, popular fashionable item, recent happenings in Igbo land, Nigeria, the world at large and Igbo world view.



Figure 8: a group of Igbo women in a function, tying a wax- print as their uniform. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

Result 4 from research question 4

4. Why do some women work hard to procure some pieces of African-wax prints?

Some motif designs tell stories based on Igbo traditional culture taking the place of written words to convey some messages to the onlooker, admirer and the society at large. Some of the names given to these fabrics are not to insult a co-wife or neighbour, neither is it a complaint to her husband or console a bereaved neighbour rather their names serve as an attraction to the women folk who patronises these

merchants always and also serve as a kind of competition among the women. They compete among themselves on the names of wrappers they have acquired and the ones they've not. Some set it as goals that need to be achieved. If there's any woman doesn't have a new design, she works hard to acquire it. Some of the women go the extent of depositing small amounts to the seller until the proper amount is completed, some will also look for ways to make their husbands happy until he buys new hollandaise wrappers for them. Some might also go into borrowing some money to acquire some pieces to show off in public places with the belief that they will command a lot of respect while wearing those fabrics. While some go into credit buying to pay later. They engage in this because they wouldn't want to be known as that woman that cannot buy a single hollandaise wrapper. According to some observations by the researcher, some of these practices usually get them into trouble especially when they could not keep to the agreement reached with the seller.

During the period of political campaigns, these fabrics are used for social and political activities or as uniforms, for commemorative purposes in political rallies, traditional ceremonies like weddings, child naming, funerals, birthdays, fashion shows, burials, group meetings and associations, women's home and abroad meetings in their native hometowns, religious group meeting

uniforms, family uniforms for chieftaincy or title taking and so many others.

Women's home and abroad meetings are held every August in all parts of Igbo land. It is usually in three stages firstly the meeting starts in the church, then it is held in the wider community and then in the kindred. It is a one week affair that ends with a thanksgiving in the church on Sunday of **that** week. In this meeting, several issues pertaining how the church and the society will make progress. They also discuss the wellbeing of the members and set some goals that will be achieved by the women in the church and the society at large. Some dues and payments are attached to it. They attend this meeting wearing their various uniforms- which are African wax printed fabrics.

Before a general uniform was adopted, women were tying hollandaise wrappers to the meetings. Lady Uchegbu (interviewee) reported that some women used this avenue for competition amongst themselves. Some of the women are not quite happy with themselves and their loved ones for not buying these wrappers for them. This led some that could not afford them to vehemently refuse to attend those meetings to avoid ridicules. Some women also save for some months (depending on their income) to enable them acquire a piece to be used for August meeting. The person that will keep on trying different designs of hollandaise throughout the days of the meeting without tying a cheaper African

printed fabric, was seen as a rich woman or a woman with a rich husband. These acts made the church uncomfortable to the extent that some church leaders introduced one uniform with a plain cheap white polyester blouse for all the meetings in the church while in the village/kindred meetings, a particular uniform of an African wax print was chosen. The ones chosen were usually the ones that have names. It could be hollandaise or a cheaper wax print provided they bear the same design. This brought an end to these problems that arose from the acquisition and usage of Dutch wax-printed fabrics by the Igbo women. The researcher observed in some women meetings she attended that some of them fold the selvedge (the type of fabric is usually written on its selvedge) of those cheaper wax-printed fabrics so as to deceive the onlooker not to know whether it is hollandaise wrapper or not because of the belief that cheaper wax are not for the rich.



Figure 9: a group of Igbo women in a function, tying a wax- print as their uniform. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

Result 5 from research question 5

5. What are some emotional attachments to these African-wax prints by the Igbo women?

During the 20th century, most Igbo women wore these prints in form of two wrappers and a blouse for almost every occasion. The women wore these wrappers to also stay at home to take care of their new born babies and other children. During this time, the babies or children sometimes mistakenly urinate or defecate on their mothers' clothing while babysitting them. Thus, according to Chief (Mrs.) Osuagwu (interviewee) it is most women's dreams that when the children grow up and start earning an income, they will replace those wrappers that were destroyed with urine or faeces. In case of a girl, when she is getting married the suitor replaces those wrappers and also from time to time, she keeps on buying those wrappers as gifts to the mother to make her happy. African wax prints were bought as gifts for the brides and their mothers as part of marriage rites. That is Dutch wax hollandaise wrappers were among the items listed on the marriage list to be bought by the husband to be for his mother-in-law. The suitor is expected to buy the number of African wax prints written on the list. These will be displayed on the day the bride price is being paid so that her (bride's mother) fellow women will see and know that her in-law is wealthy and has shown some level of appreciation. If he does not provide Dutch wax wrappers among other items, though the cheaper ones will be accepted with mixed feelings, he will be told that these wrappers

did not meet up with the customary expectation. He will also be asked to go and come back with the wrappers that have quality or pay some money which is equivalent to the ones actually expected from him.

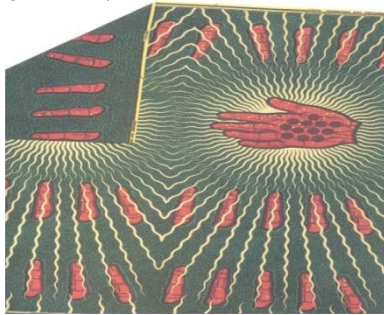


Figure10- This is known as Hand. In Igbo land it is known as “*igbaraka bia ilu m*” which means did you come empty handed to marry me? There was a time it was among the items listed to buy for the groom as part of the.

marriage requirements. **Source:**Vlisco since 1846



Figure 11: the name is *aka na-agbashelltox*, which literally means the hand that sprays shelltox. Due to the reason of the fact that in the south-eastern part of Nigeria and in Nigeria as a whole, mosquito bites are rampant, and the foremost insecticide utilized by people to kill mosquitoes was shelltox. **Source:** Chika Chudi-Duru (2023).

This study found out that during the twentieth century, a husband usually gifts the wife some Dutch wax fabrics to congratulate her, quite unlike now, the researcher observes that most women

expect nothing less than a car as a push gift. It made news during that time that a husband bought many designs of Dutch wax prints for his wife that gave birth. When a woman gives birth, in Igbo custom, it is expected that when the mother comes to visit her to help in taking care of her and the new born child. It is expected that when the visit is over, she must be showered with some gifts to go home with. This usually lasts for a period of 3 months after which she goes home with some Dutch wax wrappers and other valuables including some foodstuffs. This is to show some appreciation from the daughter and her son-in-law. This visitation is known as “*omugwo*”. When she reaches her home, other women come to welcome her. During which she shows off the gifts bought by her daughter and her son-in-law. It is a thing of pride to show off *omugwo* gifts to her fellow women who also do the same when it's their turn for *omugwo*. It is from this show of quality gifts and her appearance they will be able to ascertain if she was well looked after by her in-law or not. She also shares some of those gifts to her friends that came visiting, a times she also gives out some wrappers of lower quality to visitors.

In the past, most women buy or acquire trunk boxes so that they could store their various African wax printed textiles. They attach so much value to them in that they are not worn or washed carelessly. They spread them under a shade when they have stayed in the boxes for a long period so that they will not start growing mould since they are made from natural

fibres which are a hundred percent cotton. These fabrics in Igbo land have second hand value, they are sold by some women when they experience a kind of difficulty so as to enable them pay their children's school fees and also take care of their families. Mrs. Okoro narrated how she sold most of her Dutch wrappers when her business collapsed to further her son's education. She further mentioned that she was happy she took that step because it paid off after the son graduated from the higher institution. The acquisition of those wrappers to her is not just to show off but to solve some financial problems when the need arises. It is also believed by the Igbo that acquiring and storing some articles in form of Dutch wax hollandaise, helps to solve a lot of problems in times of difficulties.

The women usually tie them one on top of the other. At the past, anyone that sews a Dutch wax wrapper into a gown or skirt and blouse is seen as rendering the fabric useless because it is believed that this wrapper is not supposed to be cut into pieces but kept in two piece forms.

They are also used as gifts during marriage ceremonies and burials. They are used in decorating the deceased, the spouse, the children and some of the relatives. During the demise of an elderly woman that throughout her lifetime acquired many designs of Hollandaise, the children usually fix a date after her burial rites must have been completed and the memorial done after a year to share her

wrappers amongst themselves, her daughters-in-law and if any of her sons desire to keep a piece of her belongings for a sort of remembrance. The researcher observed that in some families, some of the daughters are not patient enough, as they take the design they desire forcefully without the knowledge of their siblings. An Igbo woman recounted to the researcher how her step sister was busy picking her mums wrappers from where they were packed immediately she heard she has died and was lying cold in the morgue. That really angered the whole family.

In some Igbo culture, it is believed that the last born inherits the mother's box of wrappers, while some believe that the first daughter known as "*ada*" inherits it. But for the most of the Igbo, the woman's wrappers and wealth should be shared equally amongst her children usually after her one year remembrance.

In the earlier days a woman lying in state is surrounded by the wrappers she had bought and used during her lifetime. During the course of this study, Ms. Ngozi narrated how her grandmother was decorated by surrounding her corpse with the wrappers she acquired and used while alive. This proved to people that she was hardworking and fashionable. Her casket was also decorated with some wrappers. She further mentioned that some of those wrappers were placed on her casket and buried along with her. And this showcases the love the Igbo

woman places on Dutch wax- Hollandaise wrappers even in life after death.

These Dutch wax printed fabrics have additional value when stories are attached to them. Most of these fabric designs were named according to their designs on their surfaces while some do not portray the same meaning of the designs on them. Their names usually depend on some factors mentioned above. Mostly theses fabrics are named probably to attract attention to them and also promote their sales. Once a new design is out it is given a catchy name that is irresistible. In that manner, the new one becomes a hot cake and a taste for the women. Once a particular design and the colour is chosen for a women's meeting, the name is mentioned, it is left for the women to use that name and look for it in the market. In recent times some group of women usually set up a What Sapp group and they post the samples of wrappers they want their members to choose from regarding their uniform. When eventually the choice is made they use the picture to look for the particular wrapper in the market.

During this study, the researcher had an interaction with Hon. Mrs. Margaret Ejike (60years), the President General Agulọ People's Union (Women's wing) and a long time dealer on Dutch wax prints in Eke Awka (a big market in Awka, a town in Anambra State, Nigeria). She revealed that these printed fabrics are given names to attract more buyers. Once the traders notice that the fabric is not making any sales for them, they quickly look for a

catchy name to promote the designs on it. The given name is either based on the design on it or any other thing that is not suggestive of the design. She further disclosed there are more than three hundred Dutch-wax fabrics utilized by the Igbo women which bear different names in English or Igbo languages. For instance, mgbòlòdì, kpòtùba, ocheze, nnunụ nọ na cage and many others. The samples found during this study and their narratives according to the Igbo women are placed below:



Figure 12: this design is known as Mgbòlòdì (water leaf). It is an essential staple in Igbo cuisine and daily life, representing nourishment, fertility, prosperity, and the sustenance of the family and community. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

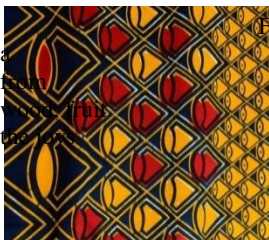


Figure 13: this design is known as okoso, traditional spinning top or toy made locally available materials such as shells, plastic or gourds. it symbolizes of youth, the cyclical nature of life, adaptability, and the enduring thread of cultural heritage passed from one generation to the next. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 14: this design is known as Santana- a car that was in vogue during the time the design was first seen in the market. Source: Chika Chudi Duru (2024).



Figure 15: this design is known as big fish. Big fish could also symbolize a wealthy person. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 16: this design is known as okeosisi. The design has endless stems and branches just like an iroko tree **okeosisi** (the great tree) embodies strength, protection, spiritual presence fertility, and the continuity of tradition. It is both a physical landmark and a profound symbol of community, ancestry, and the enduring values that hold Igbo society together. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 17 -It is called Agu na eche mba. this means the lion that guards the community or city. this design is called Lion. This is the literal image of this design. The Igbo believe that the lion is a very strong animal that can challenge any being.
Source: Hommage A L'art.Vlisco (2013)

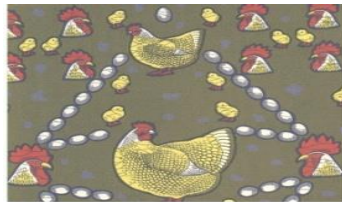


Figure 18 – the name is Ezi na Ulo. Which means the family.This design is called a happy family.It showcases a farmyard family with a cock,hen,chicks and eggs.This connotes family values and instills the essential position of its wearer in the family.It shows the hen as a mother sorrounded by her chicks and her eggs.Only the head of the cock is seen that is why the story is told that it is always full of trouble.
Source: Hommage A L'art.Vlisco (2013)

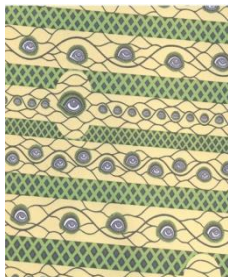


Figure 19- This design is known as “eyes”. In Igbo land, it is named *anya na ele uwa* meaning the eyes that looks upon the world. They believe there are some invisible powerful eyes (God’s eyes) that look upon the

world. It is inspired by the drawing of eye. **Source:**

Hommage A L'art.Vlisco (2013).



Figure 20: this design is known as mgbolodj (wat leaf).A type of vegetable used for soups and sauces. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024). Figure 12 is its variation.



Figure 21- This design is known as “opener” in Igbo land. They make use of this instrument in their day to day living. The design is inspired by the drawing of an opener. **Source:** Hommage A Vlisco (2013)



as
mon

Figure 22: this design is known as bow tie. This was brought in by westernization. The bow tie represents modern elegance, celebration, status, and unity. It also illustrates the blending of global and indigenous styles - a

hallmark of Igbo artistic expression and cultural identity Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

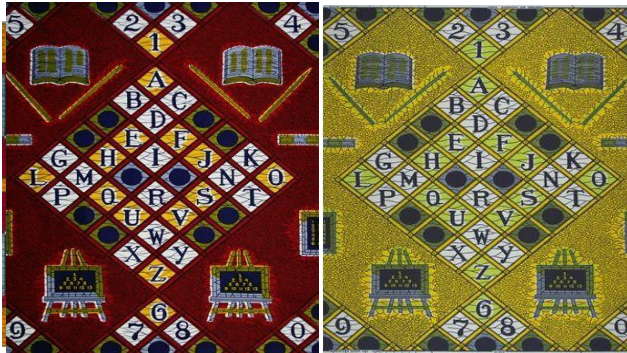


Figure 23- This design is known as “back to school or ABC” in Igbo land. The design is inspired by the English alphabets, Arabic numerals, blackboard and easel. **Source:** Hommage A L’art.Vlisco (2013)



Figure 24: this design is known as English gold. The motif design looks like a pendant of jewelry. It symbolizes wealth, status, and modernity. It represents the fusion of local and global influences, **Source:** Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 25: this design is known as step/stairs. This could be found in peoples' homes. The stairs motif with meaning, symbolizing aspiration, and the journey It serves as a visual keep striving upward, reflecting Igbo values of ambition, the pursuit of betterment. Source: Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 26: this design is known as obonma (sheath of a knife). The sheath of knife motif stands for protection, preparedness, responsible strength, and the prudent use of power. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 27: this design is known as one thousand blocks. Represents building blocks. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 28: this design is known as ọmaba. Source: Chika Chudi- Duru (2024)



Figure 29: this design is known as mgbawa tomatoes(broken tomatoes). Source: Chika Chudi-Duru



Figure 30: this design is known as walking stick. Walking stick is part of some peoples' dressing. The walking stick motif embodies authority, respect for elders, guidance, and the preservation of tradition. It is a visual statement of leadership and wisdom, connecting the wearer to the values and structures that sustain Igbo society. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

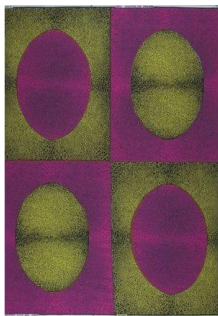


Figure 31: this design is known as jollof rice. This is a usually prepared by the Igbo with rice and some other ingredients. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 32: this design is known as sugar cane. The sugar cane motif symbolizes sweetness, joy, abundance, and resilience Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 33: this design is known as Bible and star. The major religion in Igbo land is Christianity. The design is based on the major faith of the Igbo. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 34: this design is known as scattered key. The key motif stands for access to opportunity, authority, protection, new beginnings, and knowledge. It is a powerful visual statement of aspiration, responsibility, and the readiness to unlock life's potential Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 35: this design is known as electric bulb. The electric bulb motif embodies modernity, enlightenment, hope, and creativity. It is a visual celebration of progress and the illuminating power of knowledge and innovation which the Igbo are known with. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

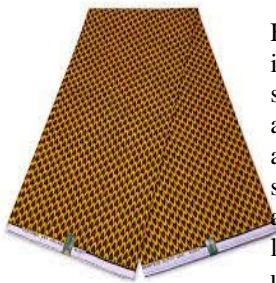


Figure 36: this design is known as ikperekpe azu (scales of fish). The scale of fish motif communicates abundance, resilience, protection, and beauty. It draws on the symbolism of fish in everyday life and the environment, offering layered meanings of prosperity, unity, and the sustaining flow of life. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 37: this design is known as heavy rain. The heavy rain motif stands for blessing, abundance, renewal, vitality, resilience, and unity. It is a visually dynamic pattern, chosen to invoke prosperity, cleansing, and strength. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 38: this design is known as *kiri-kiri* star (tiny stars). The star motif represents aspiration, guidance, spiritual connection, celebration, and beauty. Note: some designs come in different colours schemes or backgrounds for instance white, blue, yellow and red as can be viewed above. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 39: this design is known as four umbrellas. The four umbrellas motif represents royalty, authority, protection, unity, and celebration. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 40: this design is known as carpet. The carpet design motif represents wealth, elegance, cosmopolitanism, hospitality, and a strong foundation. Its intricate patterns are chosen to convey sophistication, warmth, and a connection to both global trends and cherished local values. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 41: this design is known as anya ehi (cow's eye). The cow's eye motif embodies watchfulness, protection, wealth, spiritual insight, and beauty. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 42: this design is known as bullet. The bullet motif stands for power, protection, vigilance, and resilience. It is a bold, contemporary pattern that can express both a readiness to face challenges and a celebration of strength and survival. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

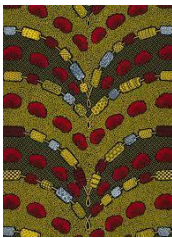


Figure 43: this design is known as necklace. The necklace motif signifies wealth, beauty, tradition, blessings, and unity. It is a graceful pattern that connects the wearer to cultural heritage and expresses aspirations for prosperity and harmonious relationships. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

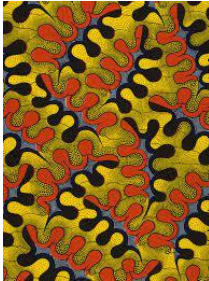


Figure 44: this design is known as Agada gbachiri ụzọ- a mighty protector has **blocked** the path. The agada gbachiri ụzọ motif stands for protection, strength, and the power to guard or defend. It is both a spiritual and social symbol, expressing the hope for safety against adversity and the resilience to overcome life's obstacles. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 45: this design is known as ruler. The ruler motif stands for precision, education, fairness, progress, and modern practicality. It conveys a respect for order, a commitment to learning, and a hope for balanced achievement. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 46: this design is known as table fan. The table fan motif represents modernity, comfort, aspiration, and the refreshing aspects of life. It is a celebration of progress and the pleasures of everyday living. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).



Figure 47: this design is known as big star.(see figure 38)
Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024)



Figure 48: this design is known as umbrella and shoe. These are fashion accessories used to compliment a dressing. Source: Chika Chudi-Duru (2024).

Conclusion

The study of Igbo women's narratives through African wax-printed textiles during the 20th century

offers profound insights into the interplay of gender, culture, and economy in Nigeria. These textiles, with their vibrant patterns and deep cultural meanings, serve as a window into the lives of Igbo women, revealing the complexities of their social interactions and the pivotal roles they played in their communities. By examining these narratives, researchers gain valuable perspectives on the historical and contemporary social dynamics of the Igbo people, highlighting the significance of material culture in understanding broader societal changes. Since the Igbo women are still using Dutch wax printed textile fabrics as one of their cultural garbs to create fashion statements till date, newer designs based on their worldview keep on making their ways into the market to aid its continuity in usage. These printed textiles have come to stay as theirs and there's no occasion they attend without finding someone decked in them. They are highly revered by them therefore the messages and untold stories on the cloth should be sufficiently relayed so as to teach and enlighten the younger ones who might be ignorant of those exciting stories.

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Interviewees

Mr. Ifeanyi Nwankwo

Mr. Nonso

Mr. David Onwujiuba
Lady Bernadine Mbelu
Lady Love Uchegbu
Mrs. Okoro
Mrs. Margaret Ejike
Mrs. Chinelo Nwohiri
Mrs. P. Ugoala
Mrs. C. Ezenna
Mrs. N. Okoye
Mrs. C. Nwaohiri
Chief (Mrs.) D. Osuagwu