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Sirigu Symbols: Traditional Communicative Images For Fashion Designedprints

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Abstract:

Traditional textiles can be appreciated for their realistic and abstract communicative qualities, as other art forms are understood to express. This paper aims at utilizing the communicative abilities of culturally imbedded motifs found in Sirigu mural paintings to produce a culturally symbolic textile. Culture is expressed in textiles through colour, motif and words and Sirigu motifs are no exception. The study seeks to establish the fact that Sirigu symbols (normally seen as a mural wall painting in northern Ghana) can be transferred onto fabrics capable of meeting the contemporary concepts of textile design print. The study employed both the descriptive and experimental methods to produce screen design prints as a means of communicating and popularizing this northern Ghana symbolic concept in the Ghanaian market. It explored the use of cellulosic material (mercerized cotton) and printing inks to produce fashionable clothing's. The result of the study indicates that Sirigu symbols can be transferred onto fabrics to be used as a "language of metaphor," and also as a cultural aesthetic art piece capable of competing favourably with other metaphoric fabrics. The concept could be explored further to inspire and educate producers as well as students to increase innovation. Discussions were based on theoretical, academic, historical, cultural, philosophical and artistic contexts. The textile produced showed ingenuity, inventiveness, diversity, contrast, harmony, multiplicity, stability as well as capturing the communicative dynamics inherent in metaphoric fabric design print.

Key words: culture, metaphor, communicative qualities, aesthetic symbolism, Sirigu Symbols, Sirigu mural paintings, ceremonial objects, utilitarian.

1.Introduction

Cultural symbolism develops over time, to become a vehicle that communicates folklore, cultural belief, history, politics, status, kinship and other messages. Textiles communicate a culturally understood visual language which goes a long way to document, promote and foster good moral standard to the citizenry. These textiles serve both as utilitarian and ceremonial objects in their everyday use. They have a great cultural importance which is enhanced through repeated use of its motif and colour (Schneider, 1987; Hoskins, 1989).

Textile art has the power to express and challenge cultural norms through both realistic and symbolic expressions (Jung, 1968). Decorated fabrics with geometric motifs, figurative motifs and colours" evolve, not only as a "language of metaphor," but also as a cultural aesthetic art piece. Textiles have become modes of communication due to their abundance and role in the lives of communities. They have intimate relationships with them due to their daily contact with the skin. It is tactile, a sense-memory of touch, smell and are often associated with family history. The transfer of symbolic mural paintings with screen printing technique into a fold up, malleable, transportable fabric material creates broad possibilities for their application. Communicative motifs within the context of culture are inseparably and organically linked together. Ghanaian textiles like any other are not static but dynamic, fluid, constantly changing historically over time. Such traits reflect the Ghanaian philosophy and artistry, a metaphorical significance that helps define

the ideology of its people and their culture, social relationships, beliefs and understanding of human existence. In other words, Ghanaian designers enter into a mutual, impulsive relationship with their artistic metaphors, through which they gain a more insightful understanding both of themselves and of their concept of art (Asmahet al., 2013). This reveals the unifying nature of Ghanaian art and its culture. Sirigu symbols which belong to this category are a thriving rich cultural symbolism specific to the Sirigu people of Northern Ghana. Of late, the textile industry and other crafts products in the country are experiencing a glut and unappealing adaptation of Adinkra and Kente symbolism as the textile communicative medium. Such a rich cultural heritage ought to be raised out of their otherwise anonymous state. The Sirigu mural paintings have various assemblages of ideas resourceful enough to be used as communicative textile motifs. Researchers believe that this embodiment of ideas when utilized can set a cultural stage to expose the ingenuity and inventiveness of such rich designs to the Ghanaian populace. Acknowledgement and innovation to this rich cultural heritage will certainly contribute to the documentation of our national history.

2. Background

Sirigu is a rural community situated in the KassenaNankana West District, in the Upper East Region of Ghana, with Paga as its Administrative centre, reputed for its remarkable traditional Women's wall decorations, Architecture and pottery. This unique artistic traditional mural decoration gives cultural identity to the people of Sirigu. Ecologically the community is classified among the Guinea savanna consisting of natural vegetation limited to widely spaced trees, shrubs, and grasses where small herds of cattle, goats, chickens and guinea fowls are reared. Their main occupation is subsistence farming of predominantly millet, sorghum, and groundnuts.

3. Sirigu Symbols

Sirigu symbols are either in stylized animal forms or symbolic geometric forms. According to Cowhey (1996), the predominant traditional Sirigu decorations are in two categories namely the two-dimensional patterns which cover the whole surface area of the wall and the reliefs, or raised designs created by adding plaster to the wall. The symbols are organic or abstract, representing the idolized elements and beliefs of the people usually taken from their environment and social lives of the people. The mode of presentation is in three different styles either in old traditional style (where old traditional colours black, white and red are used with exclusive traditional geographic symbols and totemic figures such as the cow, python and crocodile), new traditional style (where new traditional style and other natural colours are added and more variation of traditional figures introduced) and the freestyle (where more colours and a wide variety of motifs of historical origin of the village are used).

4. Materials And Methods

4.1. Materials And Tools

Materials used for the project were as follows; mercerized cotton fabric, tracing paper, designed screens, mild detergent, a cake of latex foam, plastic cups, spoons and rubber gloves, thumb-tacks, small plastic palette bowl for measuring print paste, and aprons. Tools and equipment employed in the project included, a pair of scissors, pens and pencils, cello-tape, a ruler, a squeegee, masking tape, working table, metal bucket, pressing iron, working shed, and camera.

4.2. Procedure

The research process involved a review of Ghanaian metaphors related to textiles and designing of screen prints to provide a global overview of the project. Structured observation was used to evaluate the selected items in terms of their colour, quality, material and design. As described by Best (1981) this exercise provided the basis for assessing the value and result of the project. Various motifs and design arrangements were experimented with pieces of mercerized cotton to ascertain their effectiveness for both functional and aesthetic purposes.

4.3. Designing

The designing process addressed the concept of traditional symbolism and contemporary design concepts from the perspective of African aesthetics. Colour combinations and motif arrangements were considered during the designing process. Sketches of the selected Sirigu motifs with its envisaged end products were made (see Figure 1&2).

4.4. Selected Motifs

Symbols selected for the project were clearly identified by the researchers out of numerous options. The motifs were either figurative, geometric or a combination of the two. The figurative symbols depict stylized human beings and animals, the geometric designs comprise crescents, rhombuses, triangles, and hatchings, vertical and horizontal lines. Below are some of the selected Sirigu motifs derived out of the traditional mural paintings and relief motifs. They have been grouped under the figurative motifs and geometric motifs categories with their symbolic interpretations.

4.5. Figurative Motifs

4.5.1. The Cow - "Naafo"

The stylized naafo motif literally means "cow" in the Nankam language; it is a representation of the aesthetic and social-cultural significance of a family, a symbol of reverence and wealth normally used as a form of dowry. They are mostly depicted on the main trunk of buildings. This motif also symbolizes the import of cows in the Sirigu culture. The ritual relevance of a cow as the treasures or the soul of a family is strongly connected to their use for tilling farmlands and to their ability to be used as collateral or sold for money during hard times. They serve as a security and a "vital gists" which ensure the continuation and prosperity of a family or a community. Provided in Figure 1 are the various images used for the project.

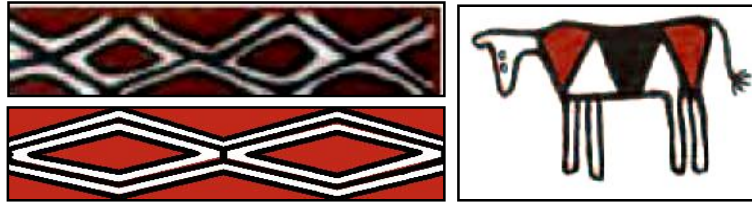


Figure 1: Abstract Geometrical Representation Of The Cow

Figure 2: Stylized representation Of The Cow

4.5.2. The Lizard - "Banga"

Throughout history the lizard is fondly regarded as an old family friend. For the Sirigu people they represent household tranquility, divine wisdom and good fortune. Not only in Sirigu but also throughout the entire continent of Africa the lizard recurs as a motif in popular culture depicting contemplation. They are usually displayed on top of the door post of the houses to invoke protective spirits. Fig. 3 shows the image of an abstracted lizard as used in a wall design.



Figure 3: Abstracted Representation Of The Lizard Amidst Other Motifs

4.5.3. The Crocodile - "Eegba"

The crocodile called "Eegba" in the Nankam language is believed to be the temporary abodes of the ancestral spirits Cowhey (1996) seen as a totemic object made in relief on the main trunk of architectural structures. They are sometimes depicted with two heads instead of one. (Figure 4). Other stylized examples are shown in Figure 5 (a) & (b).



Figure 4: Abstracted Representation Of The "Eegba"

Figure 5 (a) & (b): Stylized representation Of The "Eegba" Among Other Geometrical Motifs

As a totemic animal these creatures represent a deep, abiding connection with man and their deity. The Sirigu community so adored crocodile that they are worshipped and served with fowls. The crocodile symbolizes ultimate power, protection, and fertility and represent an equal balance between earth and water, re-echoing the abilities of their ancestors to live in two worlds of the natural and the supernatural. Crocodiles are fearless, remain hidden, poised, and held on a show of ultimate control. These reptiles have highly acute senses, amazing hearing and can reach out with their babies while still inside their shells indicating that the hearing abilities of their spiritual ancestors when they call for their assistance are potent. As an animal totem, these animals represent fierce protection.

4.5.4.The Python "Waafo"

The snake "busela" or the python "waafo"(Figure 6)a mythological and totemic figure believed to protect families who pay homage to it, is usually made in relief on the trunk of buildings. They are believed to nurse crying babies whose mothers have left them at home, by putting the tip of their tails in the mouths of the babies to suckle in order to stop them from crying. This sacred totemic pythons reveal themselves to those who were believed to be pure in heart. Snakes are symbolic of health and healing. That sense of renewal comes from the snake that sheds off the old (skin) and emerges shiny, bright and new after each shedding. They are considered protectors of babies, and are often seen in Sirigu mural art to convey guardianship over families.



Figure 6: An Abstracted Representation Of The Python

4.5.5.The Guinea Fowl "Niila"

Chicken "niila" or guinea fowl, (Figure 7) a symbol of hospitality depict the importance of birds in the Sirigu culture used normally above entrance ways (Asante &Opoku-Asare, 2011). The term niila describes chickens or domesticated birds bred for their flesh or eggs and forms part of the item used for a traditional marriage rite. The birds and their eggs are also used for sacrifices and offerings and are therefore very important in the Sirigu culture. Guinea fowls are notorious for protecting their younglings and can be vicious if they feel threatened. The guinea fowl is a beautiful example of how it takes a village to raise the bar on social responsibility within youth and community. Guinea fowls are considered sacred symbols in Sirigu community, and are permitted to run free in the community.



Figure 7: Abstracted Representation Of The Guinea Fowl Or Chicken, "Niila"

4.5.6.Fish, "Ziifo"

There is also the symbolic fish, "ziifo" (Figure 8) normally caught in rivers. Fish is commonly cooked, smoked or dried before use in Sirigu. To them, the fish is a feminine symbol of fertility and creativity. Contextually the fish makes an appearance in certain seasons and brings happiness and fulfilment to humanity. Through observation they have come to believe that fishes often display enormous attributes of adaptability and determination and therefore regarded as a totem. We are most often tempted to ignore their significance, therapeutic and energetic experiences fishes give to us and this easy availability causes us to take nature and her symbols for granted.

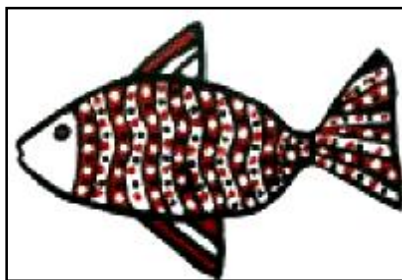


Figure 8: Abstracted representation of the symbolic fish, "ziifo".

Each of these motifs has a specific significance that is sometimes universal throughout the whole community and other times vary from house to house.

4.6. Geometric Motifs

Geometric motifs as used by the people of Sirigu consist primarily of chevron. These are V or inverted V-shaped cells organized in alternating negative and positive patterns, according to colour (light and dark) or thickness; raised or incised (Cowhey, 1996). Many of these abstracted two-dimensional motifs are derived from domestic objects such as the calabash.

4.6.1. "Wanzagsi" Pieces Of A Broken Calabash

In Sirigu culture, the Calabash has been a miracle fruit often grown as an ornamental plant. Its hard shells are used as musical instruments, utensils for drinking, cleaning of rice, storage of seeds, fish or meat, water and laundry containers and as food containers when hollowed out. It is also used in traditional systems of medicine. Reportedly, the seeds are sometimes cooked and eaten and used as vegetable, when harvested young. Due to its multipurpose usefulness and wonderful health benefits, the Calabash tree is well respected and primarily domesticated in the community (Elias and Prance, 1978).

According to Haverkort (2010), after harvesting the calabash fruit from the farmland, the fruit is dried and the seeds removed. The hard shell is used for numerous purposes, especially by their women. Broken pieces of calabash are used for pottery-works implying the usefulness of the calabash as a motif (Figure 9). When a woman dies, a full grown calabash is broken to symbolize her use of the calabash in the next world'.



Figure 9: Geometric Representation Of Broken Calabashes

The usefulness of the calabash can be likened to the extensive use of the calabash motif. Women use the "Wanne" (the halved calabash) to fetch water, store grains and the "yagimbasawanzagsi" (a smaller, rounded pieces of calabash) is used to model clay pots. A series of alternating negative and positive triangular motifs (see Figure 9), the most popular design is painted at the upper parts of architectural structures. According to Cowley (1996), "the lines within the triangles of the "Wanne" motif represent the lines that naturally appear on the insides of calabashes. The rounded edges of the calabash pieces used for modelling clearly influence the curved outline of the triangles that represent the "yagimbasawanzagsi."

Another object that is commonly represented in Sirigu wall paintings is the variety of calabash net "zaalinga," and the fish net "yoka" which appears in almost every house that uses traditional decorations (Cowhey, 1996). Zaalinga is the traditional place where women keep their calabashes for safety. It is woven from kenaf fibre and hangs in her room. This tool gives women easy access to any of the calabashes for water or food. There are two types of the Zaalinga-design according to the direction of the lines (Haverkort, 2010).

The "male" and "female" variations of patterns are the series of criss-cross divided into triangular cells that represent the links in the fishnet and the double-stranded ropes of the fishnet. The zaalinda representing the male essence, have the lines usually depicted in a vertical manner (Figure 11), whilst the zaalin -nyanga the female essence is registered horizontally (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Geometric Representation Of Zaalín-Nyanga



Figure 11: Geometric Representation Of Zaalíndaa

4.6.2. 'Agurinuuse' Holding Hands

The word which means "linked hands" in the Nankam language is a motif inspired by holding the hands of school children en route to school. This motif (Figure 12), inspired by the unity expressed by the school kids, it is usually depicted on the main body of buildings.



Figure 12: Geometric Representation Of 'Agurinuuse' meaning "Linked Hands".

4.7. Composition Of Motifs

Apart from the choice of motifs, suggesting "legends" it also indicates the relationships between two or more motifs within a composition. Personal significance attached to these motif arrangements apart from isolated cases were related to the Sirigu ethnic beliefs. The nature of relationships between the motifs is usually determined in which case a head-to-head will suggest peace while a head-to-tail also suggest aggression. The combination and placement of relief motifs in relation to one another and the decisions that dictate these choices often reveal the values of the artist or the occupants of that mural house. All of these show the flexibility with which the motifs are approached and the inexhaustible possibilities apparent in their interactive design. The same concept of composition was also adopted for this project.

Maxwell (1990) explains that certain symbols with deep religious and philosophical meaning can later be transformed and eventually become simply decorative. On the other hand, he also claims that sometimes elements chosen for their ornamental appeal may later assume religious and philosophical meaning and significance compatible with the culture that has adopted them. Both these trends are usually apparent in the Ghanaian use of symbols for textiles and fashion design.

However, the significant reasons for the use of patterns, motifs and symbols on fabrics can be either aesthetic, socio- economical, cultural, ritual, religious and political from community to community or simply according to consumer preference. These factors usually determine the fabric types, processes, colours and motifs used (Digolo and Mazrui, 2006). Symbols and motifs have thus become a 'living' ideology within the Ghanaian society. Despite our inherited traditional symbols, the requirements of modern contemporary consumer culture have provided the need for newer and innovative symbols for our textile fabrics (Adonteng, 2009).

The following symbols chosen among numerous motif selected from various murals as stated above underwent adaptation and development: The Computer Graphics program software applications CorelDraw and Photoshop were used to copy, edit, create and manipulate the various motifs to arrive at the designs produced for the textile print designs. Virtual prototypes of the designed patterns were then reviewed and the best ones selected. The designs were transferred onto the fabrics which were then appropriately named to correlate to the original symbolism of the adapted motifs.

The general motivation was to promote the use of Sirigu symbols in traditional screen prints, and therefore not much was altered to the original symbols adapted. Thus, the symbols were reused in their original appearance, and the colours changed to correspond with the intended purpose. The following images (Figure 13-18) are the virtually manipulated symbols designed for the screen production.

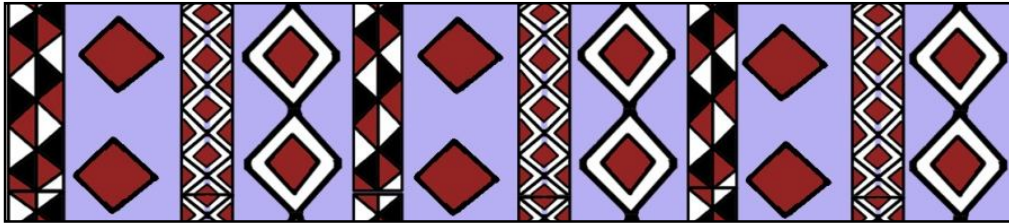


Figure 13: A Photoshop Fabric Design With The Abstract Cow And Broken Calabash Symbols



Figure 14: A Photoshop Fabric Design With The Python Symbol, "Waafo"

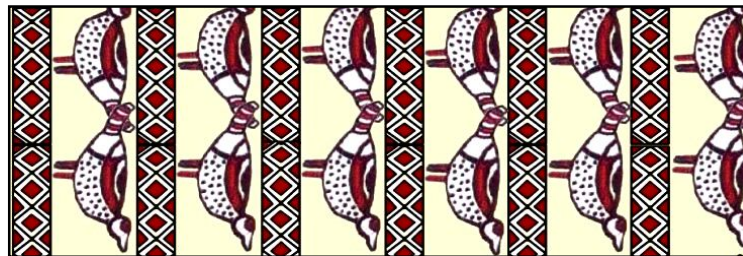


Figure 15: A Photoshop Fabric Design With The Chicken Symbol "Niila" And The Abstract Cow Symbol



Figure 16: A Photoshop Fabric Design With The Crocodile And The Linked Hands Symbol

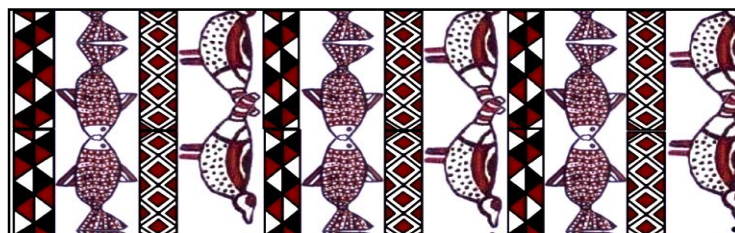


Figure 17: A Photoshop Fabric Design Having The Four Symbols, Fish "Ziifo", Chicken "Niila", The Abstract Cow "Akun- Nyana- Nii" And The Broken Calabash "Wanzagsi".

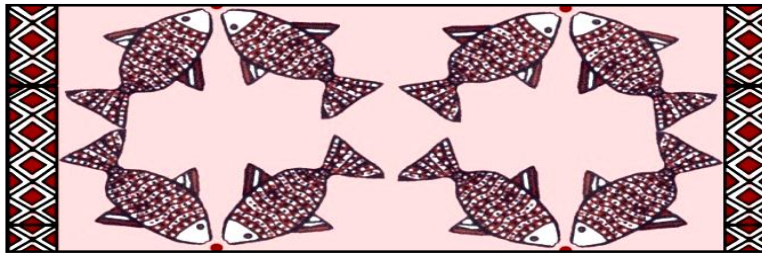


Figure 18: A Photoshop Fabric Design Having The Fish “Ziifo” And The Abstract Cow “Akun- Nyana- Nii” Symbols.

4.8.Screen Printing

- First Screen Print: ‘Harmony’

This designed fabric was produced in the colours blue, maroon and black on a white background. The designed fabric consisted of animal motifs via, the crocodile ‘Eegba’ and the linked hands motif. Three different screens were produced for each colour. With the help of the squeegee the printed paste was screened onto the fabric. The final printed fabrics were cured under high temperature to set the colours and prevent them from washing off. The qualities of both these symbols denote long held and devotional ties between people. These two symbols were patterned in simple alternating half-drop arrangement (Figure 19).

The main motif comes in a maroon colour which harmonizes well with a blue and black colour all within the ‘linked hands’ motif. The black colour signifies confidence and creativity coupled with blue indicating righteousness and responsibility. The maroon colour represents the earth or land of the people.



Figure 19: (a) The Printed Fabric - “Harmony”, Sewn Into A Shirt With Its Accessory
(b) The Second Screen Print: ‘Survival’

This designed fabric was produced in the colours yellow, ochre, reddish orange, brown on a white background. The designed fabric consisted of the following abstract motif; the ‘cow’, the ‘broken calabash’, and the ‘python’, made up of the combination of Figure 13 & 14 in a series of interchanging horizontal lines. Four different screens were also used for each colour separation. The final printed fabrics were cured under high temperature to set the colours and prevent them from washing off. Collectively, these symbols signify the attributes of ‘survival’; with the cow symbolizing wealth, the calabash, service and the python, life or death. These Four symbols were patterned with simple horizontal repetitive “full-drop” arrangement (Figure20). The yellow, ochre, reddish orange and brown colours depict harmony to balance the motif arrangement, which show the recurring effect of the motifs. The brown colour signifies nature, earth or solid land on which the people live. The orange signifies confidence, creativity and excitement among the Sirigu people. The ochre also signifies fairness and virginity. Passion is shown in the design through the use of reddish orange. It illustrates or symbolizes friendship and togetherness.



Figure 20: The Printed Fabric - "Survival", Sewn Into A Dress With Its Accessories

The arrangement of the motifs as well as different shades of colours provides rhythm, variety, movements and dominance in the design. The dominant background colour of the design being yellow has been applied to achieve the solidity of forms. The figurative python and the diamond shapes in the work have been projected by the use of the white background. Geometric patterns including triangles, rectangles, and squares create movement, unity and repetition in the design. In all cases, the elements such as lines, shapes, dots and colour are arranged artistically to achieve rhythm, balance, unity, movement, variety, repetition, dominance and depth.

5. Results And Discussion

The results obtained in this project reveal the great potential Sirigu images possess for the textile industry; a summation of northern symbolic culture, fit to be used for any other unique work of art. Using the screen printing method allows these motifs contained in the composition to achieve a precise image similar to the original images used in the mural paintings. The advantage is that these metaphors are captured and preserved within the context of Sirigu symbolism without any modification in concept or its aesthetic qualities. It also demonstrates the use of colour, figurative as well as geometric shapes to express feelings and create a mood of fulfilment. It displays concentric and overlapping lines, shapes to create design features and forms based on the principles of fabric design to effectively produce a fashionable product.

The end result is the idealized, realistic and contemporary effect these elements of art, including shape, colour, space, and motif contrast between the original images on the mural painting and that of the fashionable attire create. The fabric portrays how repetition of intense colour, black line, and shapes unify, with the entire composition to help tell the story of the Sirigu people.

The frieze of the sacred totemic pythons displayed in the centre of the composition (Figure 20) dubbed "survival" rendered in lineal equilibrium is usually made in relief on the trunk of buildings. It is portrayed within the garment as the embodiment of the perceptible metaphor that express the traditions and myths of Sirigu people.

The fabric print dubbed "harmony" identifies and describes the movement, depth, character and balance implied by vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines applied in tertiary colours, based on the principle of harmony for design prints.

6. Conclusion

Having assessed the Sirigu symbols and the screen printing technique employed in its production, it can be concluded that Sirigu symbolic fabric prints could be used effectively to achieve high contemporary and communicative aesthetic quality products. It also ascertains that fabric designs incorporated with Sirigu metaphor could be a wealth of additional resources to enhance traditional screen printed fabric products. The textile fabric as a metaphor reflects all aspects of Sirigu life specifically when its unique motifs and colours are used in its cultural context. The outcome of this study provides hope for our traditional metaphors and the work of contemporary artists, in exploring various textile techniques to finish their artworks and to derive maximum economic benefits. This also offers added symbols to the existing traditional metaphors and provides designer's selective options to propel these indigenous artefacts into the international market. In this regard, introducing these textile prints can help exhibit the symbols to the world in order to attract foreign investment inflows which will contribute to the improvement of Ghanaian artefacts.

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