

Using Innovative Ankole Long-Horned Cattle Motifs Symbolizing Cultural Conservation. A Case of Isingiro Ankole Sub-Region Western Uganda

Nansereko Josephine¹, Mike Nandala², Kayamba William³

¹Faculty of Engineering, Technology, Applied Design and Fine Art, Kabale University

P.O. Box 317, Kabale – Uganda

Email: nanserekojosephine071@gmail.com

²Faculty of Engineering, Technology, Applied Design and Fine Art, Kabale University

P.O. Box 317, Kabale – Uganda

Email: mnandala@kab.ac.ug

³Faculty of Engineering, Technology, Applied Design and Fine Art, Kabale University

P.O. Box 317, Kabale – Uganda

Email: wkayamba@gmail.com

Abstract

The Ankole Long-Horned Cattle hold significant cultural value in the Ankole region of Western Uganda, influencing local traditions, rituals, and artistic expression. This study aimed to identify and extract motifs inspired by Ankole Long-Horned Cattle for textile decoration, apply these motifs in textile production to promote cultural conservation, and document the cultural significance of the cattle through textile art. A mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, was employed to capture both statistical trends and ethnographic insights. Data were collected from thirty respondents, including senior citizens, cultural leaders, and political leaders, using purposive sampling. Primary data were obtained through interviews, observations, and photography, while secondary data were sourced from books, journals, research papers, newspapers, and online materials. The study identified distinctive motifs inspired by Ankole Long-Horned Cattle that were highly suitable for textile decoration, enhancing cultural awareness, supporting education, and creating opportunities for local economic growth and tourism. The documentation of these motifs through textile production preserved the cultural knowledge and artistic expression associated with the cattle, ensuring their transmission to future generations. The study concluded that Ankole Long-Horned Cattle motifs provide a rich and sustainable source of inspiration for textile decoration, reflecting the cultural identity and heritage of the Ankole community. It recommends that local cultural leaders, traditional artists, textile designers, educational institutions, the government, and tourism stakeholders actively promote, integrate, and support the use of these motifs to strengthen cultural conservation, education, economic development, and heritage preservation.

Key Words: Key Words: Ankole Long-Horned Cattle, textile decoration, cattle motifs, cultural heritage, cultural conservation.

Introduction

Globally, cultural heritage is increasingly being preserved through creative industries such as textile production. Many communities use indigenous motifs in textile design to promote cultural identity, preserve traditional knowledge, and pass cultural values to future generations. However, globalization and modernization have contributed to the decline of indigenous artistic practices, prompting renewed efforts to integrate traditional symbols into contemporary textile products for cultural conservation (Lugira, 2019).

Across Africa, textiles have long served as a medium for expressing cultural identity, history, and social values. Indigenous motifs inspired by animals, plants, and traditional symbols are widely incorporated into fabrics for ceremonial, decorative, and everyday use. Although colonial influence and imported textiles disrupted many traditional practices, African artists and designers have increasingly revived indigenous motifs as a means of preserving cultural heritage and promoting local creativity (Tumwine, 2015).

In Uganda, the Ankole sub-region is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, symbolized by the Ankole Long-Horned Cattle, also known as Ankole-Watusi. Among the Banyankore, these cattle represent wealth, social status, pride, and community identity and feature prominently in songs, rituals, oral literature, and visual arts (Rugumayo, 2009). Historically, indigenous motifs were incorporated

into ceremonial textiles such as bitambi, but industrialization and imported fabrics reduced their use in textile production (Nabirye, 2017).

Despite these changes, the Ankole Long-Horned Cattle remain central to the social, cultural, and economic life of the Banyankore. They symbolize ancestral pride, unity, and cultural identity and continue to play an important role in traditional ceremonies. Recent cultural preservation initiatives have promoted the use of textile design as a means of conserving this heritage and strengthening community identity (Nyakoojo, 2020).

Despite the cultural significance of the Ankole Long-Horned Cattle, little has been documented regarding their use as motifs for textile decoration in the Ankole region. This study therefore sought to identify, develop, and document motifs inspired by the cattle for textile decoration as a strategy for preserving the cultural heritage and artistic identity of the Banyankore community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to produce textiles using motifs depicting Ankole Long-Horned Cattle for cultural conservation in the Ankole region.

Literature Review

Textiles preserve culture and identity worldwide. In Europe, silk carried religious and symbolic meaning for centuries. Today, its conservation is a priority due to its fragility and limited research (Appadurai, 2004). Global studies show that motifs encode

heritage. Japanese kimono patterns record seasons and narratives (Tanaka, 2019), while Navajo weavings document tribal history and beliefs (Kent, 2020). Indian paisley designs reflect spiritual values (Ghosh, 2016), and Australian Indigenous fabrics carry Dreamtime stories (McLean, 2018). These studies confirm that textiles act as cultural records; however, most focus on well-documented cultures.

In Africa, textiles express culture and preserve heritage. Ghana's Adinkra symbols convey proverbs (Frimpong, 2019), while Kente cloth communicates social status and identity (Frimpong, 2019). Mali's bogolanfini records history and spiritual beliefs (Diallo, 2017), and Ndebele patterns appear in both textiles and wall art (Mathe, 2020). East African textiles also reinforce identity and communication. Maasai-inspired patterns in Kenya promote cultural pride and tourism (Ouma, 2020), while Tanzanian kanga fabrics carry Swahili proverbs (Mkude, 2020), and Ethiopian habesha kemis celebrate cultural heritage (Teshome, 2019). Most studies, however, emphasize geometric and abstract motifs, while animal-based motifs remain underexplored.

In Uganda, Buganda's bark cloth is UNESCO-recognized and demonstrates the role of textiles in cultural preservation (UNESCO, 2020; Nabukalu, 2021). However, documentation of other regional textile traditions remains limited (Nabukalu, 2021). Studies further show that commodification of cultural symbols without context can dilute their meaning (Smith, 2021). At the same time, digital

tools such as CAD software support the documentation and preservation of traditional motifs (Lee & Huang, 2023), while the use of local motifs in textile production enhances cultural pride and market value (Muriuki, 2021; Mukono, 2018; Wamuyu, 2022).

A key gap exists in relation to Ankole motifs. The Ankole long-horned cattle symbolize wealth, fertility, and identity (Kagoro-Rugunda, 2018; Ndengwa, 2020), yet their integration into textile design remains largely undocumented (Kagoro-Rugunda, 2018). Ugandan studies tend to focus on bark cloth and gomesi, while regional symbols from Isingiro and the wider Ankole sub-region lack structured frameworks for design and cultural conservation. Few studies have examined how cattle-based motifs can be systematically applied in modern textiles for heritage preservation.

This study therefore fills that gap by focusing on Ankole long-horned cattle motifs in Isingiro, Ankole sub-region, Western Uganda. It aims to identify these motifs, apply them in textile design, and document the process as a strategy for cultural conservation.

Methodology

Research Approach: The study used a qualitative approach. This allowed for a rich ethnographic account of the study area. It described cultural practices and experiences in detail.

Research Design: The study used qualitative research methods. Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected using interviews, observation, field notes, photography, and audio recording. Secondary data were obtained from books, journals, research papers, newspapers, and online sources.

Study Population: A total of ten individuals participated in the study. The target population included senior citizens, cultural leaders, and political leaders who were active between 2008 and 2023. All respondents were above fifty years of age. This age group was selected because of their strong historical knowledge of the Ankole long-horned cattle.

Sample Size: Ten respondents were selected for the study. Three were senior citizens, three were political leaders, and four were cultural leaders. They were drawn from different localities, and each had relevant knowledge valuable to the study.

Sampling Techniques: The study used purposive sampling. The researcher selected participants based on judgment and relevance to the study.

Data Collection Instruments: The study used descriptive and analytical methods. Data collection tools included interviews and observation checklists.

Data Quality Control

Credibility: Credibility refers to the extent to which findings reflect the true views of participants (Amin,

2005). The interview guide was aligned with the study objectives and covered textile production and cultural conservation. Two supervisors reviewed the questions, and two experts also provided feedback. Triangulation of methods improved credibility.

Dependability: Dependability refers to the consistency and traceability of the research process. A clear conceptual framework guided the study. Supervisors and two experts reviewed the research instruments. Two research assistants were trained on data collection ethics. The instruments were pilot-tested with two cultural leaders and two elders from non-sampled villages.

Data Analysis: Data Analysis was done using thematic analysis: Field notes were edited for accuracy. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher read the transcripts several times to identify key ideas, which were then grouped into themes based on the study objectives (Amin, 2005). Direct quotations were used to support findings, ensuring that participants' voices were clearly represented.

Results

Respondents described the Ankole long-horned cattle as a living symbol of identity. Cultural leaders linked the curvature of the horns to strength and continuity. One elder said, *"The horns are not just horns; they show how our people stand firm through time."* Senior citizens explained that the coat patterns inspire daily design ideas. A participant

noted, *“Look at the brown and white patches. We can turn that into cloth that speaks our language.”*

Political leaders observed that horn shapes also appear in homestead gates and carvings. They added, *“If it is in our gates, why not in our fabrics?”* Participants agreed that posture, horn spread, and coat markings provide unique forms for textile patterns. Field notes showed that inspiration came directly from cattle in homesteads rather than from books.

Participants shared how extracted motifs are now applied to kitenge, gomesi, and woven fabrics. Cultural leaders demonstrated the horn silhouette as a repeating border design. One leader stated, *“This curve is Ankole. When youth wear it, they carry their history.”* Senior citizens showed how coat patterns are transformed into modular prints for bags and table runners. A respondent said, *“The patches teach children the colors of our home without words.”*

Political leaders described decorated textiles as “walking archives.” Another commented, *“At weddings, people ask about the print. That starts a conversation about our culture.”* Most participants felt that respectful use of motifs strengthens cultural pride. They believed it helps slow cultural loss by keeping symbols present in daily life.

Field notes and interviews showed that textiles serve as documentation tools. Cultural leaders explained that each motif can record clan history linked to cattle. One elder said, *“When we weave this pattern,*

we are writing what our grandfathers told us.”

Senior citizens added that weaving transforms oral stories into permanent fabric records. A participant remarked, *“Cloth does not forget like memory does; it stays for the children.”*

Respondents described textile pieces as records of coat patterns and horn types. Photographs captured samples labeled with local names and meanings. Political leaders suggested that documented textiles could be used in schools and tourism. One leader said, *“A visitor can learn about Ankole by touching the cloth, not only by listening.”* Participants concluded that textile production preserves knowledge that can be touched, worn, and passed on.

Figure 1: Motifs Inspired by the Ankole Long-Horned Cattle.



Figure 2: Innovative Textile Design Featuring Ankole Long-Horned Cattle Motifs Symbolizing Cultural Conservation.



Figure 3: Final Textile Product (Dress) Incorporating Innovative Ankole Long-Horned Cattle Motifs for Cultural Conservation.



Discussion

Respondents showed deep familiarity with Ankole cattle. Cultural leaders described them as central to identity and pride. This is in line with Kagoro-Rugunda (2018), who noted that Ankole cattle symbolize wealth and tradition. Horn shape stood out as the main motif. Respondents linked the curve to strength and continuity. In contrast to body size or color, horns were preferred for visual clarity. This is in line with Makerere University study, which noted that long horns convey strength and work well in textile art.

Elders stressed shape over color for meaning. This is in line with Frimpong (2019) and Mathe (2020), who noted that African motifs prioritize form over color. Traditional knowledge was seen as essential for authenticity. This is in line with Smith (2021), who noted that detaching designs from context reduces authenticity.

There was strong support for cattle-inspired motifs in textiles. Respondents saw them as a way for cloth to communicate Ankole identity. This is in line with Kent (2020), who noted that cultural symbols in textiles promote heritage and pride. Participants suggested both apparel and household items. In contrast to limiting use to décor, they wanted motifs wherever people gather. This is in line with Ouma (2020) and Mathe (2020), who noted that animal motifs can be applied across products without losing integrity.

Textiles were described as tools for intergenerational transfer. This is in line with Diallo (2017) and Frimpong (2019), who noted that motifs document heritage. Respondents emphasized collaboration among leaders, artisans, and institutions. This is in line with Smith and Lewis (2022), who noted that collaborative approaches sustain heritage. Most preferred natural earth tones. This is in line with Makerere University study, which noted that natural palettes enhance cultural resonance.

Respondents preferred textiles over oral tradition for documentation. They viewed cloth as a more lasting record. This is in line with Frimpong (2019), who noted that textiles serve as enduring vessels for culture. Cultural leaders were identified as custodians. In contrast to researcher-led models, participants stressed community control. This is in line with Smith and Lewis (2022), who noted that local custodians ensure authentic preservation.

Respondents supported educational use in schools and museums. This is in line with Tanaka (2019), who noted that textiles function as educational tools. Challenges included limited funding and market access. This is in line with Niwagaba (2020) and Mugisha (2021), who noted that financial and market constraints limit promotion of local crafts.

Conclusion

This study confirms that Ankole long-horned cattle motifs, especially the horn curve linked to strength and continuity, are culturally significant and visually distinctive sources for textile decoration, with shape preferred over color and traditional knowledge seen as essential for authenticity. Respondents strongly supported using these motifs across apparel and household items, in contrast to limiting them to decor, and viewed textiles as sustainable tools for documenting heritage and passing it to younger generations. Cultural leaders were identified as custodians for community-led conservation, collaboration among leaders, artisans, designers, and institutions was emphasized, and educational use in schools and museums was supported. While challenges of limited funding and market access remain, the findings show that integrating Ankole cattle motifs into contemporary textile production can conserve culture, strengthen identity, and serve as an educational resource rooted in community practice.

Acknowledgements

The corresponding author sincerely thanks Kabale University, Faculty of Engineering, Technology, Applied Design and Fine Art, for the academic guidance and support provided throughout this study. Special appreciation is extended to the cultural leaders, senior citizens, political leaders, and all respondents from Isingiro District for their valuable participation and for sharing their knowledge of the cultural significance of the Ankole Long-Horned Cattle. She also gratefully acknowledges her supervisors, colleagues, and all individuals who contributed to the successful completion of this research through their technical support, encouragement, and constructive input.

References

- Diallo, B. (2017). *Bogolanfini: The Art and Tradition of Malian Mud Cloth*. African Heritage Journal, 14(2), 35-52.
- Frimpong, K. (2019). *Kente Cloth and Ghanaian Identity*. African Textile Studies, 11(3), 67-84.
- Ghosh, R. (2016). Paisley Patterns and Cultural Identity in Indian Textiles. *Textile Traditions Quarterly*, 21(3), 88-102.
- Kagoro-Rugunda, G. (2018). *Animal Symbolism in East African Art*. Ugandan Art Studies, 16(1), 44-60.
- Kent, D. (2020). Patterns of Identity: Navajo Weaving and Cultural Preservation. *Journal of Indigenous Arts*, 18(3), 54-69.
- Lee, J., & Huang, W. (2023). Digital Preservation of Traditional Motifs. *Textile Technology Journal*, 22(4), 77-91.
- Lugira, A. M. (2019). *African Art and Culture*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Mathe, N. (2020). Ndebele Geometric Designs: Applications in Textiles and Architecture. *South African Design Quarterly*, 22(4), 78-91.
- McLean, I. (2018). Dreamtime Stories in Australian Indigenous Textiles. *Art and Culture Studies*, 15(1), 112-130.

- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mkude, J. (2020). *Kanga Textiles and Swahili Proverbs: The Art of Communication in Tanzania*. East African Cultural Studies, 16(1), 88-101.
- Mugisha, P. (2021). *Digital Tools for Cultural Conservation in Uganda*. Makerere University Press.
- Nabirye, M. (2017). *Traditional Weaving and Dyeing Practices in Western Uganda: A Case Study of the Ankole Sub-region*. Uganda Journal of Arts and Culture, 15(3), 45–58.
- Nabukalu, S. (2021). Bark Cloth of Buganda: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage in Uganda. *Ugandan Heritage Studies*, 7(3), 34-50.
- Nyakoojo, D. (2020). Cultural Heritage and Identity in Ankole Sub-Region. *Uganda Journal of History and Culture*, 15(1), 22-37.
- Ouma, P. (2020). Maasai Beadwork Motifs and Their Application in Textile Design. *East African*
- Rugumayo, E. (2009). *Cattle and Culture: The Symbolism of the Ankole Long-Horned Cattle*. African Heritage Studies, 6(2), 87–102.
- Smith, L. (2021). Globalization and the Commodification of Indigenous Motifs. *Cultural Appropriation Journal*, 5(2), 67-89.
- Tanaka, Y. (2019). *Kimono as Cultural Identity: Patterns, Meaning, and Preservation*. Tokyo: Japanese Textile Heritage Press.
- Teshome, A. (2019). Ethiopian Traditional Textiles: Preservation through Modern Applications. *Textile Studies of Africa*, 19(4), 75-91.
- Tumwine, A. (2015). *Reviving Traditional Arts in Uganda: Challenges and Opportunities*. Uganda Heritage Quarterly, 12(4), 29–34.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Paris: UNESCO Press.
- Wamuyu, M. (2022). Incorporating Traditional Motifs in Design Curricula. *Journal of East African Education*, 13(1), 55-72.