

Beyond Aesthetics: The Cultural Implications of Incorporating Blangidi Fabric in Baby Girl Dressmaking

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Abstract

This study investigates the multi-phased implication of incorporating blangidi fabrics in making dresses for the baby girl among Ijaw communities. Blangidi, a printed woollen flannel, has acquired cultural and social significance over the years and has become widely associated with the Ijaw and Igbo tribes of Nigeria. A semi-structured interview method was used for this study. The selection of the participants was based on a non-random purposive sampling method to choose the members of the population most suitable for this study. The result of the study affirms that the use of the blangidi fabric among the Ijaw people exceeds the aesthetic value. Along with other fabric materials worn by the people, it represents the social identity, class and nobility of the Ijaw tribe. Furthermore, the study reveals the crucial role trading blangidi serves in the economies of the local communities. Additionally, the study highlights the potential impact of using the fabric on the visual and cognitive development of the child. The high-contrast saturated colouration and the vivid motifs used in blangidi fabrics stimulate visual-manual explorations in the child. Consequently, incorporating the fabric in making dresses for the girl child should achieve more value besides the aesthetics. A conscious effort should be given to promoting the various values associated with the use of the fabric among the natives.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, Cultural Implications and Blangidi Fabric*

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Background to the Study

The woollen flannel known as Blangidi constitutes a source of cultural identity for the riverine Ijaw communities of Nigeria's Niger Delta and the Igbos of the south-eastern region. Described by Daly et al. (1984) as "printed woollen flannel," this soft and finely textured material, made from twilled wool with a stout feel, is produced in various forms of colourful patterns and designs (Cyril-Egware, 2015). Although originating and still widely produced in England (Michelman & Eicher, 2016), it has become ingrained in the socio-cultural life of the Ijaw people.

Contemporary fashion design routinely draws inspiration from African traditional textiles to introduce trends and styles (Debeli et al., 2013; Rovine, 2019). In the ever-evolving practice of fashion design, African textiles and styles have inspired designers to reshape the narrative surrounding native African fashion and the preconceived notions about it (Lifter, 2023). Several African designers are acknowledged in literature for effectively setting African fashion on global platforms through their creative rendition of African traditional fabrics. However, scholars agree that the richness of African traditional fashion exceeds its aesthetic value. Checinska (2018) emphasises the significance of clothing in African cultures and likens it to the significance of monuments in Western cultures. As such, clothing serves as a vessel for cross-generational cultural communication of meaning. It is also recognised in literature that African textiles are significant both for their ceremonial and ritualistic, secular and spiritual purposes. African fabrics are depicted as more than just materials, rather, they convey the experiences, values, cultures, etc. of the people.

This perspective provides a pointer to the multifaceted value attached to the use of blangidi fabrics among the riverine tribes of Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Blangidi fabric is central to the eastern Ijaw tribes where it is also referred to as "feni". It has evolved to become a part of the many cultural symbols of the Ijaw people. It has increasingly become a part of the daily lives of the people, influencing their traditions and identity. Moreover, the blangidi fabric continues to evolve in fashion practices, as tradition gives way to trends and contemporary fashion practices. While the continuing evolution of blangidi threatens to erode the established values surrounding the fabric, it is also a testament to the dynamic nature of cultural symbolism even in the African context. Blangidi fabrics are acknowledged to be non-indigenous fabrics by the natives of the Ijaw tribe. Rather, the use of the fabric had gained popularity among the people given the early exposure of the tribe to Western traders as early as the 1400s (Daly et al., 1886; Jones, 1963) and Eastern traders from Arab (Ezuwobomude, 2019). Through cultural appropriation, the Ijaws adopted the fabric, and by the same, it is being spread to neighbouring tribes.

Contemporary trends in fashion have witnessed a significant transformation over the years, evolving beyond the purpose of providing covering for nakedness, to becoming a medium for expressing and reflecting societal norms and customs (Cyril-Egware, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014). It is in the light of this paradigm that this paper seeks to explore the implications of incorporating blangidi fabrics into contemporary African fashion. Given its socio-cultural significance to the identity of the Ijaw people, its use in children's garments becomes a bridge

that links the youth to age-old traditions (Ajiginmi & Okogwu, 2020). This is exemplified by the widespread adoption of the Isi-Agu fabric (blangidi fabric with a lion- or leopard-head motif) through the official and unofficial modelling efforts of media personalities in Nigeria (Ajiginmi & Okogwu, 2020).

As such, it is vital to preserve the rich heritage of the people. The study sets out to highlight the various cultural, social, spiritual and practical significance of blangidi fabric as worn by the Ijaw ethnic groups. Specifically, the study aims to explore the changing roles of traditional fabrics, especially through a specific focus on the transformative impact of incorporating Blangidi fabrics in making dresses for the girl child. The focus on the girl child for this study is not arbitrary as it holds significant insight into the foundational aspect of society. Through the dress culture of the Ijaw people, the potential impact of socialisation and communication of gender roles through the dressing of the girl child is examined.

Methodology

The study used a semi-structured interview as a tool to gather the data for this study. The study carefully chooses key participants such as artisans, elders, chiefs, traditional leaders, dealers, and consumers who could be considered stakeholders of the blangidi fabric in Ijaw land.

A flexible sample of 30 participants was reached, including traditional chiefs (5), blangidi dealers (5), and traditional fabric consumers (20, including children). The selection of these participants was achieved using the non-random purposive sampling method. The choice of this method is due to the flexibility it offers the researcher to deliberately select key members of the population who are best suited for inclusion given their privileged position and knowledge of the phenomena being studied.

This allowed for in-depth interviews of key informants and stakeholders of the Ijaw culture and the blangidi fabric. This also ensured a comprehensive evaluation from different perspectives. The selected participants were interviewed individually at scheduled dates within the period of the research. It is worthy of note that some respondents were not English-literate. This required adaptation of the interview questions to the local language. In addition to the interview, the researcher adopted the use of participant observation in an attempt to obtain data directly from actual social events. Also, this technique made the researcher a functioning member of the population. Various trips to visit blangidi traders, chiefs and culture custodians within Port Harcourt and the surrounding Ijaw villages were embarked upon.

Results

The results of the interview exemplify the opinions and perspectives of the various respondents on the significance of blangidi as well as the implication of its usage in making dresses for the female child. The outcome of the interviews has been systematically categorised into various themes to reveal the multifaceted values attached to the use of the blangidi fabric.

Theme One: Cultural and Social Significance of Blangidi Fabric

The respondents reveal the profound cultural and social significance of the blangidi fabric within the Ijaw tribes. An elder remarked, "Blangidi ...together with other fabrics that we use in our communities, showcases our identity. Wearing it is an honour to our ancestors." Therefore, the fabric is an emblem of the rich heritage of the Ijaw people. By extension, the respondents also affirm that the use of blangidi fabrics to make dresses for the baby girl promotes the culture, practices and beliefs of the Ijaw tribe.

Moreover, there is a consensus among the majority of the respondents that the blangidi alone does not embody or epitomise the dress heritage and identity of any of the Ijaw tribes. Rather, blangidi (Feni/Namatibi) is used alongside other fabrics such as George (Madras), Pelebite, Inziri, Popo, Akwa Ocha etc. to identify the Ijaw tribes. Blangidi, among these fabrics, has evolved to become an essential part of the social life of the Ijaw people. While some respondents believe the blangidi fabric is a relatively new fabric introduced to ancient Ijaw natives who had contact with the Western and Arabian traders before the coming of colonial masters, others believe it was introduced to the region following early contact with the colonial masters in the late 19th Century. Therefore, all respondents agree that the use of blangidi, alongside other fabrics used by the Ijaw tribe, can be said to have resulted from cultural appropriation.

Also, all respondents agree that the use of blangidi among the Ijaw people has witnessed several stages of modification through the years. According to the respondents, other Nigerian tribes, particularly the Igbos, used blangidi fabrics as covers for furniture. Remarkably, this practice is still prevalent in the present time, with several Blangidi fabrics being used as "Achwa Oche" or chair cloth. With time, the Ijaws popularised the use of blangidi, and it soon became a part of their cultural identity. A particular print of the blangidi fabric—Isi-agu, was soon adopted by the royal class of Igbo societies. Respondents who trade blangidi fabrics affirm that the Igbo's association of Isi-agu fabric with royalty has affected the demand and the cost of those blangidi prints. Additionally, it is agreed that the use of isi-agu fabrics has influenced the cultural significance associated with the print, as well as other blangidi prints. Consequently, blangidi is associated with royalty and high societal class. Also, the fabric is associated with affluence and nobility. This highlights the value of the blangidi fabric in the spread of Ijaw heritage and culture to other cultures of the world.

However, the respondents believe that the cultural significance of Blangidi fabrics has evolved: "Blangidi used to be purely ceremonial. Now, it is part of daily life. Any and everybody has access to buy it in the market provided they have the means." This indicates that the fabric continues to evolve and acquire diverse meanings along with society. Once reserved for the high and mighty in society, the fabric is now commonly used by all who can afford it. As an aged respondent stated, "Blangidi is present in every celebration—births, weddings, and funerals." All respondents agree that the incorporation of blangidi for making dresses for the girl child provides ample avenue to transmit Ijaw culture, values, customs, and culture. Respondents showed no resistance to the researcher's ultimate intent of using blangidi to make dresses that are not traditionally styled. They all believed that the use of blangidi would inevitably promote the cultural heritage of the Ijaw people to the international scene.

Theme Two: Economic Impact of Blangidi Fabric

The economic value of Blangidi's among traders and vendors is acknowledged by the majority of the respondents. The traders interviewed agree that proceeds from sales of blangidi fabrics constitute significant support to the economic activities in the cities and rural areas. A local trader remarked: "Blangidi is more than a fabric; it's our livelihood." This highlights the economic value associated with the trade of blangidi fabrics among the Ijaw people. The production and sales of these fabrics help in the growth and sustenance of the local economy as the wide population of Nigeria becomes more interested in Ijaw's dress culture. An elder sum this up: "Blangidi is part of our culture. In the process of preserving our culture, our culture is also preserving us the traders. This is how many of us are surviving now. It is what some of our parents used to train us. Finally, respondents highlighted the impact of evolving market trends which increases the price of certain blangidi patterns due to excessive market demand influenced by pop culture. The popularity of certain blangidi prints due to activities on various media platforms, may result in higher demand for a product.

Theme Three: Impact of Incorporating Blangidi Fabric on Child Development

In exploring the influence of Blangidi fabric on children's visual development, one participant observed, "Babies are drawn to the colours and patterns (of the fabric). It's like a visual playground for them. Maybe it's more than just clothing; it could be shaping their thinking." Most of the respondents agree that there is a possible connection between the use of blangidi fabrics, given their distinct feel and bright colours, with the mental development of children. Meanwhile, all respondents agree that incorporating Blangidi in baby girl dresses is an avenue to instil Ijaw heritage and culture in future generations. "Children learn by what they see... Blangidi imparts knowledge about our roots."

Discussion

As the interview results capture, the use of blangidi fabrics among the Ijaw tribe of Nigeria transcends mere aesthetic purposes. The use of blangidi is an effective avenue to impart the rich Ijaw culture to the girl child. Eicher & Roach-Higgins (1992) view dress as an "assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements," indicating the ability of clothing to express both its aesthetic properties and its "expressive abilities" (Hansen, 2004). Dresses are recognised as elements of non-verbal communication. Renne (in Hansen, 2004), citing numerous scholars, attests to the ability of clothing to become a medium for personal and social expression in societies. Certain fabrics, the author notes, do outlive their owners and are being passed down to the next generations, and are used as materials with social lives in the trade between tribes. The use of blangidi fabric in making dresses for the girl child is, therefore, an intentional effort to perpetuate the Ijaw culture (Johnson et al., 2014; Michelman & Eicher, 1995).

The consensus among respondents on the association between blangidi fabrics with other fabrics used by the Ijaw people is typical of the multi-layered nature of cultural identity. This also indicates the significance of clothing in defining the role of clothing in shaping the cultural identity of various tribes. This is corroborated by researches which justify the significance of clothing as a means for expressing non-material aspects of culture (Crane & Bovane, 2006; Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977). Furthermore, Bohn (2014) argues that dresses are to

be acknowledged not just for the material and cultural aspects, but as a form of communication.

Through culture-based fashion, the girl child acquires a sense of social identity and a deeper connection to the rich heritage of the Ijaw community. This resonates with the findings of Johnson et al. (2014) which establishes a relationship between "dress," "the body," and "the self." Moreover, Pozzo (2020) iterates the significance of clothing in the formation of social and personal identity. According to most ancient African histories, clothing was the most "visible expression" of social identity and class within communities (Akdemir, 2018).

Additionally, incorporating blangidi fabric in making dresses for the baby girl helps shape the perceptions of gender roles in the girl child, as clothing is a potent medium for the communication of societal expectations and cultural values (Michelman & Eicher, 1995; Shefer et al, 2017). Dresses are recognised material medium for communicating non-material aspects of culture (Crane and Bovone, 2006; Rosenfeld & Plax, 2006). Akdemir (2018) argues that while the biological classification of individuals as male or female aligns with the concept of sex, the societal and cultural perception and expectations of the genders align with gender roles. The use of blangidi for the baby girl clothing creates an early avenue to communicate Ijaw's perspective on gender roles and expectations. Moreover, the incorporation of blangidi fabric in making contemporary dresses highlights the ever-evolving gender nature of gender roles and expectations in modern society.

The evolving role of the blangidi fabric is indicative of the fabric's adaptability and easy integration into various cultures and elements of cultures. This resonates with Pozzo's notion of the significant role of clothing in expressing identity (Pozzo, 2020). The author highlights the impact of fashion as an inspiration to both adopt what is commonly practised over time, as well as to move away from the status quo. Moreover, the blangidi fabric has proven to be an effective means of cross-cultural socialisation. The influence of pop culture on the use of blangidi fabrics in Nigeria is acknowledged by Ajiginmi (2020; 2022). A notable influence on the contemporary use of blangidi fabrics is the activities of influential individuals who leverage social media platforms to popularise creative designs of fabrics using blangidi fabrics. Ajiginmi highlights the influential role of Ebuka Obi-Ochendu, a social media influencer, who has significantly contributed to reshaping the indigenous fabrics in social events in Nigeria (Ajiginmi, 2022). Other researchers have also explored the impact of prominent personalities who have popularised the use of blangidi fabrics, particularly the Isi-agu fabric (Madukasi, 2018; Ibisimi, 2014).

Although the question of what should be considered traditional African fabric and what should not arise, Akinwumi (2021) notes that most African textiles are, in fact, of non-African origin. The author argues that a majority of what is considered African—both in fabric and in fashion style, is imported from diverse countries of the world. Other fabrics worn by the Ijaw tribes, such as the George, India, Loko, and Krukrubite are all fabrics purchased from foreign traders in the pre-colonial era. These trades were critical to the cultural development of the Ijaw people, leading Steiner (1995) to conclude that the Ijaw ethnic groups have no traditional

fabric. Daly et al (1984) observe that these communities relied more on their trade interactions for fashion development. Hence, the Ijaw tribes depended on transnational trades from India, England and the Netherlands, as well as trading activities with neighbouring tribes such as Awete in modern-day Abia state, Illorin in Kwara state, and Ewe in Ghana. The Ijaw regalia is, therefore, a tapestry of elements from multiple nations. However, it has also been noted by scholars that the Ijaw tribes did not merely copy these cultures, rather, they adopted and personalised these cultures.

The Ijaw tribe can be said to have extensively practised cultural appropriation throughout history. The art and culture of the people have borrowed elements from various countries of the world. This is not out of place considering that they are acknowledged to be the first tribe in Nigeria to make contact with Western traders, a long time before slave masters found their way to the shores of Nigeria. Akinwumi (2021), thus, argues the appropriateness of the "African" tag given to numerous fabrics and fashion styles. This rapid adoption of the fabric across cultures has, however, led to a degradation in the cultural significance of the fabrics (Madukasi, 2018; Ibemesi, 2014). The Isi-agu fabric, which was once associated with authority, nobility and royalty, has significantly lost this cultural symbolism. While the fabric is still recognised as an element that distinguishes social class, in practice, this is no longer revered. Ajiginmi & Osaibobo (2021) and Ajiginmi (2020), argue that the dual impact of creativity and technology in contemporary times has led to the innovation of cheaper variants of many African traditional fabrics. This implies that more members of the communities who are not in the noble class can afford the materials and use them for all activities, particularly weddings and ceremonies.

On the other hand, some scholars uphold the progressive nature of nature of fashion, highlighting that evolution in fashion trends is an inevitable result of creativity (Pozzo, 2020). The Ijaw adaptation of blangidi fabrics, among other fabrics used by the local community, is a testament to socialisation across cultures. The ancient Ijaws who had made first contact with the material through their interactions with Western and Eastern traders, crafted a unique dress culture involving the use of the material through cultural appropriation. While this highlights the impact of external influences on indigenous fashion practices, it is also a pointer to the fact that creativity should not be stifled to preserve established norms. Instead, this should be considered a natural and inevitable process. This is due to the consensus among scholars that culture is dynamic and must be allowed to evolve with the society (Pinxten et al., 1988; Fischer, 2008).

Johnson (2010), corroborates the study's findings, which highlight the possible impact of the blangidi fabric on the visual and cognitive development of the child. The author argues that children often learn through association, active assembly, and visual-manual explorations. This aligns with existing literature which highlights the unique nature of visual development in children (Pereira & Smith, 2009). Unlike adults who usually perceive clear and stable objects, children's development is characterised by fragmented objects that move unpredictably. The distinctive characteristics of blangidi fabrics can aid this process of visual and cognitive development of the girl child.

Firstly, blangidi fabrics are characterised by a vast array of colourful prints. Exposure to these various colours can enhance the ability of the child to differentiate colours and provide an engaging visual image for the child. The high-contrast and saturated nature of some blangidi prints is a point of attraction to the child, as Skelton and Franklin (2020) reveal. This is typified by Skelton et al. (2022) which shows the speedy development of children's sensitivity to colours from as early as six months. Secondly, the motifs used on blangidi fabrics are diverse and can potentially engage the child. This provides ample opportunity for the child to learn visual-manual explorations (Lobo et al., 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study explores the critical cultural and social implications of incorporating Blangidi fabric in baby girl dressmaking within the Ijaw communities of Nigeria's Niger Delta. The findings of this research indicate that the usage of the fabric in making dresses for the girl child typically evokes more significance other than the aesthetic values of the fabric. For the Ijaw people, Blangidi serves as a medium of expressing the Ijaw heritage and transmitting this to the upcoming generations. The intention to use blangidi fabrics to make dresses for the girl child using contemporary fashion practices reflects a desire to export the Ijaw culture to the global fashion scene. The use of the blangidi fabric for this purpose highlights the versatility and adaptability of the fabric as a vital tool for social diffusion and cross-cultural socialisation. Additionally, the study exposes the economic relevance and the potential role it plays in the development of children's cognitive processes. In essence, the research highlights the existence of ongoing evolution of the Ijaw community through the usage of blangidi fabrics by the locals. The study advocates that the use of traditional fabrics is an essential medium for implementing cross-generational transmission of cultural practices.

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