

## Blangidi Reinterpretation: Cultural Appropriation in Contemporary Dressmaking for the Baby Girl Dress Model

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### Abstract

**B**langidi fabric is widely used by the Ijaw and Igbo tribes of southern Nigeria where it is recognised as a means of cultural identity. The woollen flannel, popularly known as “feni” among the eastern Ijaw people, is symbolic of royalty and affluence. This study explores the creative reinterpretation of blangidi fabric in making contemporary dresses for the baby girl dress model. The study observes the profound symbolic value of blangidi in the study area and highlights the basic characteristics of select blangidi fabrics that make them suitable for making dresses for the girl child. These include vibrant colours, distinctive motifs, and a soft feel. Studio-based technique was employed to conduct this study, meticulously following a six-step design process: conceptualization, sketching, lay planning, cutting, sewing, and final adjustments. This process was applied to create seven culture-infused contemporary dresses for girl models between one and seven years old. The resulting dresses, named Abaibhar, Eganga, Onyi olala, Etaria, Chiefba, Ibebh atoewoza, and Ibiere, have unique cultural narratives that serve as the backdrop for their design. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the successful integration of blangidi fabrics into modern dressmaking, highlighting numerous possibilities for a further reimagining of traditional fabrics used in Nigeria.

## **Background to the Study**

The theory of appropriation has greatly impacted contemporary African fashion (Chumo, 2023; Piancazzo, 2023; Pozzo, 2020; Lifter, 2023). This usually involves borrowing elements from one culture and integrating them into another to produce unique art. Using this approach, African designers produce innovative designs that are acknowledged globally and reflect their cultural identity. Cultural appropriation has paved the way towards international success for many African designers such as Kofi Ansah, Chris Seydou, Sade Thomas-Fahm etc. (Lifter, 2023). This study aims to utilise the principles of contemporary fashion design to produce culturally relevant dresses for girls who are between the ages of one and seven. Specifically, this involves incorporating diverse variations of the traditional fabrics of the Ijaw people – blangidi to make modern designs.

## **Methodology**

The studio-based research method was utilised to craft the dresses with blangidi fabric. Seven dresses were made, each for a baby girl model aged one to seven. The methodology utilised for the design of the seven dresses involved a six-step process. The first step involved the conceptualisation of distinctive party dress designs for the female models. The sketches were made with particular attention to cultural details. This began with pen-on-paper sketches, then digital enhancement of these sketches on a computer. Fifteen (15) sketches were, from which seven were selected for digital enhancement. The lay planning and cutting phase involved the arrangement and cutting of the fabric. Great care was taken to ensure the orientation of the motifs of each fabric was not altered. At the next stage, the fabrics were sorted, and their components reinforced in preparation for the sewing proper. In the actual sewing processes, the flat method was utilised, focusing on a single stitching line and ensuring the neat pressing of stitches, darts, and style lines. The final steps involved making final changes to the dresses, reinforcing fabrics to achieve the needed turgidity, and ensuring smooth lining and a perfect hang. The completed dresses were then packaged and made ready for exhibition.

## **Results**

The above process resulted in the creation of seven garments named:

### **Project 1**

#### ***Abaibhar (Plate 1)***

The *Abaibhar* dress, meaning "what a beauty" in the *Ogbia* language, is a vibrant red party dress for the baby girl dress model aged one. The dress is inspired by the *Isi-Agu*, a blangidi fabric with a lion-head motif, symbolising royalty. The red colour complements the *Isi-agu* pattern to create a visually appealing dress. The *Abaibhar* dress, inspired by royalty, is a blend of simplicity and grace, showcasing youthfulness with its cascading folds.

#### ***Eganga (Plate 2)***

The *Eganga*, meaning "pride" in the *Ikwere* language showcases a dark-green colour as the backdrop for an array of geometric shapes of different colours. The dress is nicely

suiting for special occasions, dinner nights, parties etc. An elegant hat that complements the dress's colour palette accentuates this party dress. An elegant train blended with a regal purple colour trails the model.

### ***Onyi Olala (Plate 3)***

The Onyi olala dress, meaning "child of the wealthy" in the Ogbia language, showcases a cream and yellow design with a lion-head motif blangidi fabric. The dress's side split allows for unrestricted movement for the baby girl model. Hence, this party dress seamlessly blends elegance and comfort.

### ***Etaria (Plate 4)***

The Etaria dress, meaning "love" in Ogbia, is a sophisticated party dress. With a short, fluffy silhouette and a cascade of floral style, it depicts a cheerful elegance. The dress has many layers that blend to make it beautiful and catchy. Moreover, the blend of tradition and modernity makes the dress stand out as a timeless piece.

### ***Chiefba (Plate 5)***

The Chiefba dress, meaning "the chief's daughter" in Kalabari, is a versatile party dress for a five-year-old dress mode. In its basic form, it is an elegant off-shoulder gown with a simple frame that makes for easy mobility of the child. The dress detachable train can be added to transform the attire into a more formal, royal look for red-carpet appearances. Thus, the dress showcases creativity and adaptability.

### ***Ibebh Atoewoza (Plate 6)***

The Ibebh atoewoza dress, meaning "beautiful leaves" in the Ogbia language, is an elegant party dress. The dresses feature a blue blangidi fabric adorned with antelope motifs. To enhance the beauty of the dress, it is strategically combined with plain peach material creating stylish floral layers.

### ***Ibiere (Plate 7)***

The Ibiere, meaning "beautiful woman" in Kalabari, is a versatile and adaptable party dress which can be worn in at least four distinct styles, based on the occasion or choice. The basic style features a straight gown with delicate lace accents. It is a timeless piece for various events and parties. The second style features a standing hood behind the dress model, this adds a regal grandeur to the dress. Lowering the hood creates an illusion of elegant wings, which constitutes the third style. Also, the dress features a detachable cape from the waist of the model to the floor. This epitomises royalty and sophistication and is perfect for grand ceremonies. These styles can combine to create other styles.

## **Discussion**

Blangidi fabric is a profound symbol of cultural identity among the Ijaw tribe, and incorporating this fabric in making dresses for baby girls helps impact the cultural heritage of the upcoming generation (Michelman and Eicher, 1995; Cyril-Egware, 2016). The study's studio-based research provides a practical demonstration of the fabric's

versatility and adaptability in the contemporary fashion scene, including western-style gowns for the girl child. The fabric provides a broad spectrum of patterns and designs which makes customisation for various occasions achievable.

The vibrant colours and motifs of blangidi fabrics contribute to the unique characteristics which make it appropriate for making dresses for the baby girl. Boyatzis and Varhese (1994) illustrate that Children are drawn to and exhibit positive emotions towards vibrant colours of clothing. Designers utilise the knowledge of colours and the role they play in children's psychology in making decisions (Xie & Cui, 2016). Moreover, the colourful motifs on the blangidi fabric provide an avenue to enhance the visual development of the child (Johnson, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

This study attempted a reinterpretation of the blangidi fabric into seven stunning contemporary party dresses for the girl child. This utilised the theory and practice of cultural appropriation to blend traditional and modern design. The seven projects achieved through this study are a testament to the versatility and adaptability of African fabrics.

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## Appendix

Plate 1: Abaibhar Baby Dress



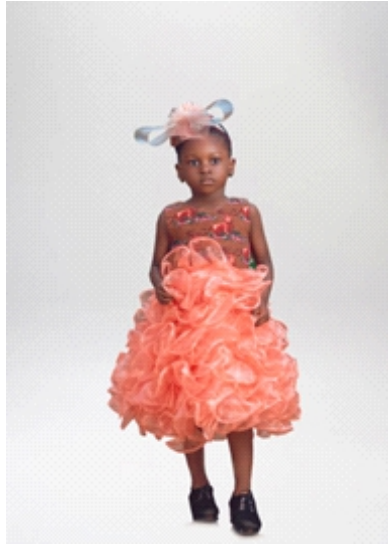
**Plate Two: Eganaga Baby Dress**



Plate Three



**Plate Four: Etaria Dress**





**Plate Five: Chiefba Dress**



Plate Six

