

Evolution of Ankara Fabrics' Techniques in Southern Nigeria from Traditional to Contemporary Period

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ABSTRACT: The interdependence of indigenous art practices and the techniques of producing Ankara fabrics in this contemporary age of technology is worthy of retrospection within the context of art history. What the world started as Ankara today perhaps originated from the artistic perspective of indigenous fabrics known as cloth weaving, tie-dyeing, and batik of the ancient craft makers before the involvement of modern printing machines which expands the scope of knowledge in the production of fabrics to the admiration of the consumers. This paper dwells on the evolution of Ankara fabrics in southern Nigeria from the cradle of textile production to the present. Despite the number of publications on Ankara fabrics among the people of Nigeria, not enough scholarly research has been given on the origin of textile traditions down to the modern era in southern Nigeria. Therefore, the concern of this study is to provide a scholarly understanding of the indigenous practices in the textile industry that culminated in the production and global adoption of Ankara fabrics in southern Nigeria, and to document the results for art-historical discourse. The study employs qualitative research and descriptive analysis to generate responses to developmental stages associated with Ankara fabric techniques and production from traditional to contemporary eras. The study discusses certain materials common to traditional textile artists and how this drives the processes of Ankara fabrics today. The result is to be kept for future generations of art scholars.

KEYWORDS: Ankara Fabric, Contemporary, Creativity, Evolution, Traditional

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional art is categorized as the art of the uncivilized age, transferred from one generation to the next through indirect skill acquisition without Western interference. Conversely, contemporary art operates from the edge of innovations and exploration drawn from the inspirations of the traditional art (Okpu 2001; Onwuakpa and Ononeme 2016: 1). Where traditional art exploits and operates on the wheel of local-oriented materials, contemporary art aligns with a wide range of experimentation of media for art production (Momaa (2024). The indigenous art of whatever form is invariably rooted in the consciousness of societal identity vested in the survival of the cultural values and motifs of the people (Okpu 2001). This study observes that the most renowned Nigerian traditional arts are known to be sculptures and textiles.

Adepegba (1995: 68-69) and Olatunji and Adiji (2023: 101) declare that there was evidence of woven fabrics of cotton material in Benin Kingdom in the thirteenth century A.D. Cotton is the commonest medium of fabric production in the Nigerian textile class especially among the Yoruba ethnic group in the Southwestern Nigeria. However, the emergence of the colonial rulers in Nigeria in the fifteenth century (Akpomovie 2011: 181) sparked the evolution of contemporary art practices. The nexus between traditional and modern art development in Africa thus provided a route for Ankara fabric production in Nigeria.

Ankara fabric is a widely accepted textile introduced by the Dutch marketers to the West African marketers in Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, and the Republic of Benin (Lasisi *et.al* 2022: 91). The fabric is ultimately made of 100% fine cotton which affords the use of wax resist batik method of cloth production that originated from Indonesia (Oyedele and Obisesan 2013: 166; Adeoti 2024: 158). However, history reveals that the batik method started with the Egyptians around the fourth century B.C. when the people employed the technique for decoration of the burial tomb popularly called mummy. This largely suggests that the Ankara wax resist technique has its origin in Africa (Nnewuihe 2020).

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The evolution of the modern Ankara fabrics came as a result of the European manufacturers who modernized the process with the introduction of roller-printed techniques different from handcrafted wax-resist dyeing common to the Yoruba people (Hilton 2024). Today, Ankara fabrics have gained different names such as Dutch Wax Print, Holland Wax, African Wax Prints, Ankara Prints, African Prints, ABC Wax, etc (Okeke 2023: 56). The fabric is interestingly increasing in popularity among the people of Africa, especially the Southern Nigerians, and it has become one of the characteristics of the cultural traditions that exposed the peoples' social lives (Nkoro 2021; Okeke 2023: 53 and Sibani 2018: 58).

It is worth noting that the relevance of fabrics to man has been invaluable since time immemorial. Textile plays a crucial role in human survival amid the unpleasant climate (Olatunji and Adiji 2023: 101). Oyedele and Obisesan (2013: 166) observe that fabric is very crucial in all the necessities of life to the extent that it determines man's survival at every stage of living. The significance of fabric is noticeable from the cradle of man in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve manipulated fig leaves as cover cloths, and God himself made them clothes from animal skins to cover their nakedness (The Bible - Genesis 3:7, 21; Oyedele and Obisesan 2013:166). Similarly, textile weaving made of beautiful scarlet threads of violet and bluish colours was part of God's recommendations for the Israelites as religious properties in the wilderness (The Bible - Exodus 35: 35; Olatunji and Adiji 2023: 101). Little wonder then that the integer embodiment of cultural variations and elements of peoples' way of life in society today are made known in architecture and art pieces such as sculpture and textiles (Akinbileje 2014; Ajila 2016: 63).

Akpomuvie (2011:178) observes that African countries had been remarkably making an edge in their endogenous productions of functional objects such as iron, wood, ivory as well as clothing materials before the interruption of the colonial power in the fifteenth century. Even the Ankara fabric otherwise known as English Wax which is the vogue in the fashion world today evolved from the ideas and techniques of the indigenous textile producers of the pre-colonial period (Olatunji and Adiji 2023: 101; Adeoti 2024). Moreover, the most primitive form of textile design has been a long standing vocation in Nigeria and a bedrock of contemporary fashion dresses produced from Ankara fabrics in southern Nigeria today. Labode (2013: 76); Saleh and Bello (2021 and Nkoro 2021) assert that the traditional handcrafted fabrics like tie-dye, batik, *adire eleko* (cassava resist wax), *aso-oke* (cloth weaving), Akwete, among others are the prevalent southern Nigerian fabrics of the olden days which provided grounds for Ankara fabrics today. The primordial textiles are produced from locally sourced materials ranging from cotton, local silk, bark, goats wool, and raffia which were commonly used for cloth weaving. Although, the techniques of textile production of the indigenous artists differ from the sophisticated methods introduced by the Indonesians (Akinbileje 2014: 627).

Modupe *et. al* (2018) argue that the Yoruba people in the southwestern Nigeria had played a meaningful impact in the trending development recorded in the fashion world today. The paper highlights how traditional textile had impacted diverse computerized knowledge of manufacturing fabric like Ankara and other contemporary fabrics in Nigeria.

1.2 Study, Aim and Objectives

The study is woven on the historical evolution of Ankara fabrics from the primordial era to the contemporary period in southern Nigeria to enrich the knowledge of art historians in the aspect of Ankara fabrics. The hallmark of any artistic display is to satisfy the aesthetic and functional yearning of any given society in Africa by developing a robust progressive shift of ideas of visual art pieces regardless of available media and tools at the artist's disposal. Thus, the study allows for the survey of textile production from the pre-historic traditions to the present civilized societies of Nigeria. This study is thus purposed to reveal that there is a seeming continuity in art practices. The study is to provide an art historical connection between the past and the present techniques and media of textiles, especially in the development of visual elements of Ankara fabrics in southern Nigeria.

1.3 Statements of The Problem

Despite the available publications on African wax Prints in the public domains that provoke different artistic characteristics apparent in the fabrics, there is dearth of expository scholarly discourse on the evolution of Ankara fabric based on its interrelated processes and media explorations of the traditional circumstantial practices. This has resulted into a gross misconception about the influence the traditional African textiles have on the modern techniques and processes of Ankara fabrics in the southern Nigerian. This paper observed the degree of acceptability of Ankara fabrics in this age of civilization which is to the obliteration of local skills in the exploration of locally-sourced materials as an enduring practices in the olden days. Observably, there is a lot of dependency on imported materials for the production of Ankara fabrics among the western manufacturers without giving credence to the origins of the ideas, techniques, and materials that birthed these contemporary techniques which are rooted in the traditional practices. Similarly, the advent of various swift machines in the textile industry in this era have deprived the nineteenth to twenty-first-century's generations to recognize these traditional properties as pedestals to the European textile knowledge of Ankara fabrics in Nigeria.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts qualitative approach to redefine the trajectory of Ankara fabric production which is traced from the traditional to the present. The approach is considered to explain the various degrees of adaptability that flow in the textile world. This concerns how fabrics were provided for textile design during the primordial age and later adopted as refined ideal properties of textile art in an advanced way to catch up with modern requirements. Data was collected from both primary (the interviews conducted with the ancient dyers and in the researched area), and secondary (the existing literature which also has a voice in how materials were discovered in the ancient days). Moreover, direct observation of Indigenous fabric makers such as *Adire* and cloth weaver with the way motifs and colours were applied. In-depth descriptive analysis is used to answer questions of 'what, where, and how' to gain insight into the evolution of Ankara fabrics from the traditional to modern days.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Maiwada *et al* (2012); Modupe *et.al* (2018) consider the richness of the artistic endowment of Nigerian people especially in the experimentation of locally-produced materials such as cotton, leaves, bark, roots, dye, cassava paste, and many others in connection with techniques such as spinning, cloth weaving, knitting, batik, dyeing, embroidery, and stamping. Nnewuihe (2020; Adeoti 2023: 126) traces the origin of Ankara to Batik textile of Indonesia with the use of wax and dyeing techniques to print the fabric. Adeoti (2023) observes how the process of Ankara mirrored African creative such as *Adire* and *aso oke* which were produced with beautiful and attractive colours. Areo and Kalilu (2013); and Braide (2016) claim that the various signs and symbols apparent in the traditional textile of the Yoruba are great inspirations for the diverse inventions that greet the world of art today. Areo and Kalilu observed further that the indigenous expressions of *Adire* fabric among the Yoruba people of Southern-western Nigeria are a great catalyst to the eruption of different modern ideas used in art today. Modupe *et.al* (2018) argue that the production of fabrics is of skillful exploration of cotton thread, loom, dye, wax, and printing pigments. These were integral to societal practices before the coming of the Europeans in the colonial era. The indigenous textile knowledge serves as a substratum for the various innovations that improved the usage of Ankara fabrics in the contemporary epoch. Bai and Ushie (2024) assert that Ankara has engulfed all fashion space in contemporary Nigeria to the extent that it is gradually reducing the patronage of other textiles in the Nigerian social environment. However, none of the publications trace the evolution of Ankara fabrics in southern Nigeria from the traditional era to the contemporary perspectives.

4. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

4.1 Evolution of The Ankara Fabrics in Southern Nigeria

The southern part of Nigeria has been existing before the colonial power infiltrated into the political administration of Nigeria. Southern Nigeria comprises three geopolitical zones namely the southwest where the Yoruba speaking people live, the southeast where we have the Igbo tribe and the south-south, where the Ijaw tribe dwells (Ikenanyibe 2007:44-45). The Southern Nigeria was among the created states in the British colonial system of 1914 (Falola and Heaton 2008). Watt (2008) wrote that the land boundary of the Southern people is 65,000 square miles. This study traces the evolution of Ankara fabrics in the southern Nigeria to different phases in time space.

4.2 Survey of Textile Production of the Traditional Age (Pre-Colonial Era) Before 1800s

Areo and Kalilu (2013:22) claim that the origin of traditional textile called *Adire* is unknown, the article however linked the pattern making of tie-dye to children's play where pebbles were tied to a piece of fabric and immersed in dye solution to create patterns. The history of the Ankara fabrics in southern Nigeria is similar to the pattern-making technique of the traditional dyeing technique due to African signs and symbols, forming major textures of Ankara (Balas and Greene, 2023). This idea is traceable to the pre-colonial era when African textile manufacturers were recognized as large-scale textile exporters in Africa (Jauch and Traub-Merz 2006: 12). Trask (2004) claims that many of pre-colonial materials like textiles have existed since 1500 before World War I exchange of goods with the Europeans through the slave trade system. The art produced during this pre-colonial period is a recurring symbol of the native artistic tendencies of African people (Ukim, 2020: 54). The artists then exploited local and naturally sourced media for their textile production through some established norms (Momaa 2024). The people developed skills of producing fabrics in their local understanding through their skillful manipulations of the natural materials such as cotton, silk, and raffia, before the adaptation of the traditional textile production into the ubiquitous Ankara fabrics in a technological dimension of the modern days.

Akpomuvie (2011:178) regards the innovations of the pre-colonial people as technology and advance with the production of iron, wood, ivory, and textile which includes cloth weaving, *adire eleko* (cassava resist method), tie-dye, and batik. Labode (2013: 76) states that the textile materials of the traditional period were produced from locally sourced materials ranging from cotton,

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local silk, bark, goat's wool, and raffia commonly used in weaving. Many of the common types of these traditional textiles have existed since around the fifteenth century before the coming of the colonial administrators in Nigeria (Saleh and Bello 2021). The outstanding legacy recorded from the traditional textiles evolved into the inspirational practices enjoyed in the production of Ankara in contemporary southern Nigeria (Debeli *et.al* 2013). Although, Bai and Ushie (2024: 110) maintain that fabrics productions of the periods under study are a mirror of the lifestyles, beliefs, cultures, and artistic innovations of the affected societies. For instance, Olatunji and Adiji (2023: 101) confirm that the primitive men dated back to 300 B.C. fashioned fabrics from animals' skin, furs, grasses, and leaves, a time when ordinary needles were used to turn leather into garments. They further wrote that carbon dating proves the ancient Benin Kingdom of the thirteenth century in the southern Nigeria manipulated cotton, fiber extracted from raffia palm tree into fabric.

The scholarly records from Areo and Kalilu (2013:22) claim that the Yoruba people in the southwestern Nigeria play an important role in the artistic contribution of art practices between twelfth and nineteenth centuries especially in the productions of weaving crafts, wooden crafts, leather crafts, textile crafts to mention a few. Among the techniques of fabric crafts peculiar to the Indigenous people of Southern Nigeria in the periods are cloth weaving, hand spinning, embroidery, batik, cassava paste resist method otherwise called *adire eleko* by the Yoruba tribe, manual-skill printing, and tie-dye which have been primarily taking place before the arrival of the Europeans in the nineteenth century (Saleh and Bello 2021; Olatunji and Adiji 2023: 101). All these conventional techniques of fabric-making paved the way for the different initiatives and innovations arrived at in the colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary ages. Till today, a few Nigerian fabrics producers such as Ankara and lace are still leveraging on the native ideas of the local designers which operate on batik resist printing for Ankara and interlacing of flexible materials of lace fabrics (Anyanwu *et.al* 2022: 106).

4.3 The Colonial to Post-Colonial Eras: 1800s – 1980s)

During colonial rule in Nigeria, eight textile training centres were established across the Nigerian States. About four were cited in the south, such towns like Ado-Ekiti and Oyo in 1947, Aba in 1949, and Ilorin in 1950. The target of the founder of the workshop centers was to train local dyers, weavers, spinners, ex-service workers, and textile lovers the contemporary techniques of making fabrics (Modupe *et.al* 2018: 288); Naankiel *et.al* 2016: 9). Furthermore, Naankiel postulates that the conventional ideas of fabric production paved way for the different initiatives and innovations. This was arrived at in the contemporary mechanism of fabric making in southern Nigeria, after the British textile producers headed by the Directorate of Commerce and Industry visited Nigeria shortly after the culmination of World War II in 1945. The artistic exposure of the colonial period profoundly became radical in the adaptation of the African traditional prints popularly called *adire* by the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, the prevailing cotton media, and the batik textile techniques, into Ankara Wax, which was introduced by the Indonesia marketers.

Remarkably, weaving and dyeing have increased the fame of Nigerian fabric crafts to the extent that locally made cotton thread reportedly played a major role in trading in the early arrival of foreigners. By the 16th century, cotton became major good for exportation into European countries (Modupe *et.al* 2018: 282). Thus, Areo and Kalilu (2013:22) postulate that textile art is perhaps the most adapted African art by the contemporary innovations of the western world.

4.4 Ankara Fabrics in the Contemporary Era in Nigeria (1980s To Present)

The contemporary period is considered the age of civilization where diverse contestable innovations erupted at the expense of the thriving traditional knowledge or expressions. The period began in the twentieth century to the present and revitalized the different approaches of fabric production to the explosion of public embrace in Nigeria. The primordial Nigerian artists of the middle twentieth century to the present contributed immensely to world art practices such as in sculpture, printmaking and fabric making (Areo and Kalilu 2013: 22). Braide (2016: 104) also remark on the antecedence of the *adire* fabric of the Yoruba people as a platform for modern fabric decorations such as Ankara fabrics. The Ankara fabrics otherwise called Real Dutch Wax-resist fabric is currently gaining ground in the Southern Nigeria. This popularity began around 1930s with the emergence of different festivals which resulted into the use of Ankara as *Aso-ebi* (uniform dress), cultural dress, religious wears, among other functions in southern Nigeria (Ajani 2012: 108-109; Irobunor 2019: 1, 4, 5; Onwuakpa and Nwabuoku 2024:159).

Suffice it to assert that the choice of hue, motifs and symbols from African environment are responsible for the production of Ankara fabrics; and subsequently contributed to the vogue of the fabrics at every nooks and cranny of southern Nigeria in this twenty-first century. Olutayo and Akande (2009:66) buttress that Ankara is currently receiving a large patronage of the Nigerian populace owing to the quality of cotton material which is invariably 100 % in value, variety of semiotic textures which are occasionally derived from traditional environment and embellished with multi-coloured.

4.5 The Nexus between Batik Techniques and Ankara Fabrics

Batik is a method of fabric decoration whereby a liquid wax is applied to some strategic areas of fabrics to create attractive patterns through a resist dyeing process Adeoti 2023: 126). Braide *et.al* (2023: 151, 153) reveal that the application of the liquid wax may sometimes require the use of a spouted tool, foam, stamp, or stencil in repeated patterns. According to Braide *et.al*, the word 'Batik' originated from Indonesia, and it was derived from the word 'embatik' which simply means to intersperse a piece of cloth with dots, combined with a special technique of a resist dyeing process. Adeoti 2023: 126; Bai and Ushie (2024: 111) claim that the use of batik technique in Ankara fabrics started with the Indonesian textile manufacturers called Dutch merchants following the common indigenous wax and dying-printing techniques.

The contemporary artists producing Ankara fabrics in Africa gained their inspiration from the traditional idea of batik making (Braide *et.al* 2023: 152, 153). Modupe *et.al* (2018: 288) observe how technological development of the modern age has redefined and is redesigning the quality of cotton thread, printing medium, and dye chemicals used in the traditional era into a more computerized product as apparent in Ankara fabrics today. Modupe *et.al* explain further that as the artists were extracting dyes from their natural endowments resources like bark, wood, leaves, roots, and fruits, so also the technologists of the modern period are adapting the local products and materials into a more comfortable, accessible, cheaper, and fascinating one. Worthy of affirmation is the resultant effect of the native ideas and artistic skills that birthed the idea of producing Ankara fabrics in Nigeria today.

Batik fabric has surface decoration before it is immersed into the dye solution, so also the technique in Ankara has surface decoration of patterns with different colours to its uniqueness, coupled with the tribal-like African patterns, making it well accepted among the Africans. The wax-resist is used to create intricate patterns repeated all over the fabric in full, half-drop, mirror, or clockwise repeat methods of creating designs on fabric. This method makes the Ankara fabric to be referred to as African wax print (Kalilu and Adeoti, 2022)

4.6 FACTORS THAT ENCOURAGED THE PRODUCTION AND ACCEPTANCE OF ANKARA FABRICS IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA BETWEEN 1990s TO PRESENT

4.6.1. Lack of adequate local materials: As time went by, Nigerians efforts in the exploration of local materials such as cotton, dyestuff, silk and chemicals began to dwindle as a result of African exposure to white-collar jobs, and the discovery of petroleum, currently the source of Nigeria's economy. Even where the raw materials are available, the quantity are insufficient, and not of commercial standard (Olatunji and Adiji 2023: 104). Consequently, the use of locally-sourced materials for local textile suffered a severe setback while Ankara fabrics began to attract public interests of southern Nigerians.

4.6.2. Introduction of different printing machines: Between nineteenth to twenty-first century, different printing machines were brought into the country to accelerate the production of Ankara fabrics in large quantities to the sufficiency of the southern Nigerians (Modupe *et.al* 2018: 289).

4.6.3. Western education and creativity: Another factor that gave rise to the acceptance of Ankara fabrics in the southern Nigeria are creativity and education which give room for skill acquisition in a modern way. Olatunji and Adiji (2023: 104) claim that the thriving creativity and innovations is the basis of all contemporary discoveries.

4.7 THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL FABRICS OF THE TRADITIONAL ERA AND THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

4.7.1. The methods of production: The technique of producing Ankara fabrics leverages on the exploration and inspirations gathered from the traditional techniques. For the fact that there was a flourishing textile industry in those days and cotton item was considered as a major source of economy where people grew cotton in large quantity, to the point that people admired the cotton produced by the local weavers. The spillage of this African techniques of making cotton (locally) encouraged the innovation of machine in this modern age. Likewise, just as the traditional dyers made use of cassava resist paste to produce fabric before dyeing it with indigo dyes, so also the manufacturers of Ankara fabrics employed roller machines to print the fabrics by applying industrial wax onto the fabric (Adeoti 2023: 126). The innovations recorded from the contemporary perspectives often provide a lifeline conservation of the conventional techniques, ideas, motifs, and themes, (Moma 2024:1).

4.7.2. Materials used for the production: The only ideal means of collecting dyes including wax for fabrics in the traditional setting is through natural objects though with stressful and time-consuming process because of the primitive approaches involved. Despite the fact that the traditional dyers derived their dyes (indigo) from vegetables and minerals (Younas 2021: 150), and red dye was extracted from guinea corn stem and *akoko* leaves called *markhamia tomentosa*, (Areo and Kalilu 2013: 29) yet, they are very costly. Meanwhile, the modern innovation affords integrating of a collection of media from industries and technological exploration where industrial wax is produced in large quantities, easy, affordable, and accessible (MOMAA 2024:1). Additionally, textile fabrics are also sourced from both natural synthetic means. The natural fibres include cellulose and linen while the synthetic medium which are silk and rayon are derived from laboratory experimentation of chemicals (Younas *et.al* 2021: 47, 48).

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4.7.3. Instruments used for production: Before the dawn of modern technology in Nigeria, textiles were produced through handicraft process. For instance, cloth weaving was done with the use of loom, while *adire eleko* (cassava resist) is done with free hand through cassava paste (Areo and Kalilu 2013: 22, 23), whereas, modern age machines catalyze the modern means of production (Lasisi *et.al* 2023: 88), and thereby, making the production of Ankara fabrics faster with less-stress.

4.7.4. Affordability of multi-colours: The contemporary African Wax Print are more embellished with multi-colours. Chemicals applications are now used to boost the quality and value of natural dyes which come from barks, roots, berries, wood, flowers, seeds, leaves, lichens, and nuts (Younas *et.al* 2021: 51, 52). Presently, the design of Ankara fabrics in southern Nigeria combines and operates from the artistic expressions of formally trained artists - technologists in the manipulation of techniques, tools, combines with diverse experimentation which permits colour separation, textures, art lines, shapes, and African cultural symbols. (Okpu 2001). According to Younas *et.al* (2021: 51-52), there are different classes of dyes which generate colours that are incontestable in the textile industries and these include; synthetic dyes which are synthesized from the organic compound, acid dyes (amionic dyes) which are soluble in nature, basic dyes (cationic dyes), suffur dyes which are of richer value of hue brightness, and solvent dyes (reactive or direct dyes) which was first used in the textile industries in 1956.

4.7.5. Technologically-oriented: The production of Ankara fabrics requires less man-power because every operation is computerized unlike the traditional days when production of textile was in analogue.

4.7.6. Ubiquitousness of Ankara: Ankara fabrics are produced in large quantities and thus, it is much more available, inexpensive, and accessible to users. The composition of the fabric has made it suitable, usable, accessible, and admirable to all Nigerians as the fabric of the moment and for every occasion.

5. CONCLUSION

The role played by the indigenous artists cannot be undermined when it comes to surviving the artistic traditions of Africa in the world of textiles. The extant textile practices in Ankara industries today are a build-up of skills, explorations, and underlining ideas of textile industries in Nigeria. This study shows continuity in textile production especially in the production of Ankara fabric popularly referred to as African wax prints. The technique that started its journey from the wax-resist method of creating repeated patterns on cloth by hand in multiple colours has graduated to the use of different printing machines. Though, wax-resist (batik) is still trending Ankara prints are produced with higher technique, thereby making it faster, having the ability to produce many yardages in a shorter time with little or no stress attached.

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