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Batik Textile Exploration for Preserving and Propagating Igbo Cultural Symbols (*Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu*) in Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study examined textiles, uses of clothing textiles, their distinctive characteristics and textile design. Contemporary developments on the erosion of cultural values in Nigeria, particularly in the Southeast, are due to the neglect of cultural symbols and their cherished meanings, which motivated the study. Previous studies on cultural symbols skewed towards leveraging the versatility of textiles and textile design were limited; therefore, this study filled this gap in statistics. The practice-led studio research approach was used. Results showed that textile design technology using batik textile exploration could be used to design Igbo cultural textiles through *Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu* symbols aimed at the identity of Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. The *Ejirimaraeze* symbol showed the characteristics of a traditional ruler in Igbo land, which entails four different Igbo traditional motifs associated with an Igbo traditional ruler, namely, the traditional red cap, two eagle feathers, Akaraka (symbol of destiny), Mgbaji (chain of coral beads) and their representations. The *Omunkwu*, on the other hand, symbolised “caveat emptor” or out of bounds and sacredness in Igbo culture. Through the tool of textile design, the meanings of these cultural symbols could be propagated, popularised, preserved and transmitted to future generations as a means of stemming the tide of the erosion of Igbo cultural values and the restoration of their cultural identity. It was therefore recommended that research efforts in other areas be intensified to arrest the erosion of Nigerian, nay Igbo, cultural values.

Keywords: Batik exploration, *Ejirimaraeze*, *Omunkwu*, Textiles, Textile Design,

INTRODUCTION

Textiles are anything made up of yarns, fabrics, or fibres. They are characteristically flexible, abrasion-resistant, strong, and also possess moisture control properties. These properties predisposed them for use in numerous areas such as clothing, agriculture, automotive industry, construction industry, ecological protection, electronic or smart textiles, geotextiles, home textiles, industrial textiles, medical textiles, packaging textiles, protective textiles, and sports textiles.

Olalekan et al (2025) observed that African textiles are an integral part of the continent's cultural history, with deep roots that trace back to ancient society. Far more than mere fabric, these textiles tell stories of the people who made them, reflecting societal hierarchies, regional histories, religious beliefs, and artistic prowess. In other words, Artisans carefully choose colours, patterns, and materials to convey specific messages. In African cultures, textiles do more than cover the body; they reflect a person's identity, commemorate important events, and express social status, beliefs, and

spiritual values. Through the examination of the history behind African textiles, valuable insights into Africa's rich cultural heritage are acquired, which further portrays the role textiles play in preserving invaluable symbols (Lemi, 2024).

Clothing Textiles

Clothing textiles are the most common textiles known to humanity, and they are used in manufacturing various designs chosen by the textile designer. Clothing textiles constitute the most prominent part of the technical textile industry because they include different types of textiles used mainly as clothing and footwear.

In order to factor in the prominence of clothing and footwear, certain functional properties are added to the product that improve specific and targeted objectives. It is hoped that in the future, clothing textiles will be expected to record significant growth in the market as a result of the increasing quest for functional and innovative clothing from textile designers. The reasons for these may not be far-fetched and may include factors such as the growing popularity of footwear, awareness of the

need for cultural preservation, sustainability in the fashion industry, and increasing demand for safety clothing.

Utility of Clothing Textiles

Sometimes textiles are used in materials intended to be protective, such as bulletproof vests, helmets worn by soldiers, and cut-resistant gloves used by butchers. The carpeting on the floor of a school, the gowns worn by nurses and doctors, and the sound absorption wall coverings in a theatre are all examples of textiles.

Wearable or clothing textiles are useful in different applications and across different industries. For instance, advanced textiles are employed in order to achieve specific objectives in functional clothing, as seen in outdoor gear through weather resistance and active wear, which incorporates moisture-wicking capabilities. Innovative textiles could be employed in footwear to improve comfort and performance.

Also, in sports, shoes used in running have certain features, such as breathable and supportive fabrics, just as waterproof and more durable materials are incorporated in hiking boots. Some of these textiles are used in the military as protective gear because they incorporate flame-resistant and impact-absorbing fabrics.

Similarly, in the healthcare sector, clothing textiles with integrated sensors are said to monitor patients' vital signs. Furthermore, smart clothing is useful in sports, as they help athletes track their performance metrics (Innovate UK Business Connect, 2024).

Distinctive Characteristics of Clothing Textiles

Clothing, textiles, or wearables possess distinctive attributes that enhance both functionality and comfort. These attributes include moisture-wicking capabilities, which are useful in the management of perspiration and keep the wearer dry during physical activity. While breathability in textiles ensures proper ventilation, preventing overheating, flexibility and stretchiness provide freedom of movement.

Furthermore, durability is vital for garments that withstand wear and washing. Other distinctive characteristics of clothing textiles include thermal regulation for optimum body temperature, with fabrics that retain warmth in colder climates and release heat in warmer conditions; antimicrobial treatments, which address issues related to odours and bacterial growth. Also, reflective elements in some clothing textiles enhance visibility, especially in low-light settings. These characteristics increase their versatility of usage across the globe.

Textile Design

Textile design, or geometry, is both a creative and technical process involved in the conception, design, planning, and creation of fabrics. Clarke (2011), on the other hand, defined it as the creative and technical process by which threads or fibres are interlaced to form pieces of cloth or fabrics that are subsequently printed upon or otherwise adorned. Three aspects of textile design include woven textiles, printed textiles, and mixed-media textile design, and each of them employs different approaches in the manufacture of fabrics for the markets and other cultural uses.

Textile design is a highly creative field that involves the process of creating designs that are printed, woven, knitted, or other types of fabric. As a varied and wide-ranging field, textile design, in addition to surface designs, involves interior design, embroidery design, and pattern-making, as well as the running of the production process.

The textile design industry also extends to other areas, such as fashion and interior decoration (Russell, 2016), but textile design is the foundation of all fashion design, as it is used in the creation and management of fabrics through techniques such as printing, weaving, knitting, and embroidery. It determines not only the aesthetic appeal of garments but also the drape, structure, and texture.

Types of Textile Designs

There are mainly three types of textile designs.

Prints: Prints are designs that are applied to fabric surfaces using methods such as screen printing, digital printing, block printing, or hand printing. They can range from bold geometric motifs to delicate floral patterns, abstract designs, and even narrative drawings. Prints are also used to express certain cultural or social perspectives, as will be revealed in this study.

Weaving: Weaving is the process of interlacing threads to make fabrics, and it allows designers to experiment with different yarns, textures, and patterns that can produce new and innovative fabrics and styles.

Knitting: Knitting is the process of making cloth by interlooping threads with knitting needles or machines. Its versatility ranges from fine and delicate knits to thick and textured materials. Knitted materials can provide clothing with warmth, flexibility, and fascinating surface effects.

There are variations of textile patterns, designs, weaving methods, and cultural significance in

different parts of the world. Early weaving techniques were practised by many ancient cultures, including those of the Chinese, Egyptians, Africans, and Peruvians (www.mattcamron.com). Retrieved 2023-08-04.

Problem Statement

In Africa, different countries employ textiles in expressing mostly cultural issues and their way of life. For instance, *LaGamma* (2009) argued that Africans used textiles to add life to the interior of a space or increase the body decorations of individuals because their cultural textile designs involved strip-woven fibres that could repeat patterns that varied from one strip to another.

Therefore, cultural issues occupied a significant position in the choice of motifs and symbols among Africans, nay, Nigerian textile designers, especially due to the rich cultural heritage that should be preserved and transmitted from one generation to another. There is also the need to leverage the fact that textile designs could serve as billboards in the popularisation of cultural agendas.

Certain cultural symbols, such as the *Ejirimaraeze*, *Omunkwu* and their cultural significance, could be popularised and preserved when these cultural symbols are used as motifs in designing clothing for the cultural identity of, say, the Igbo nation of Southeastern Nigeria. Especially taking cognisance of the reported erosion of cultural values in recent times due to globalisation and the neglect of Igbo cultural heritages and traditions.

Mills and Fowls (2017) reported that Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) have accepted a documented guideline to assess and protect any form and objects rooted in a community's historical beliefs, customs, and practices (such as traditional motifs and their cultural implications), which could nourish a nation's future development regarding cultural identity and satisfaction.

Also, scholars such as Olutayo, Olayinka and Fadina (2011) claimed that some cultures were already marginally surviving, while Wahab, Odunsi, and Ajiboye (2012) expressed their worries about the unbridled increase in the disappearance of cultural values among the Aworis in Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area (LGA) of Ogun State, Nigeria. As if that was not enough, Udechukwu (2019) lamented about the erosion of cultural values and cultural crisis among the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. All these scenarios point to the devastating consequences of cultural erosion due to the neglect of our cherished cultural values embedded in our cultural symbols.

There is, however, a welcome development in the fact that Kristin (2018) argued that the designs on textiles may serve as active or passive objects utilised by their wearers in the transmission of some information for cultural identity. This implies that cultural symbols such as *Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu* cultural symbols could be explored through textile design to produce uniforms for the preservation and propagation of Igbo cultural identity in Southeastern Nigeria and elsewhere.

Scholars (Eje and Arum, 2021; Udechukwu, 2019; Okeke et al., 2015; Anyanwu, Chukueggu, and Orubu, 2022a, b, c) discussed other aspects of Igbo symbols, but published works on batik textile exploration for preserving and propagating Igbo cultural symbols (*Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu*) in Southeastern Nigeria are scanty.

It therefore becomes urgent and compelling to leverage the instrument of textile design and the peculiar quality of textiles, which could serve as intentional metaphors in the transmission of the rich cultural meanings embedded in the cultural symbols and motifs to preserve and propagate Igbo cultural heritage. In this study, the cultural symbols called *Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu* are examined using batik textile exploration.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design method adopted for this study is a practice-led studio research approach that allows researcher to incorporate their creative practices, creative methods and creative output into the research design and as a part of the research output.

Method of Data Collection

The methods of collecting data for the study were observation, oral interview, and information from Art books, academic journals, magazines, and internet services. This was done since the study is a qualitative research approach.

Method of Analysis

The final practical studio works were analysed based on the materials, aesthetics, history, technique, or methods that were adopted to produce the works.

Process of Symbol Selection

In this exploratory study, the selection of the *Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu* symbols was driven by a combination of cultural significance, communicative intent, aesthetic appeal, and functional necessity. This is because researchers

and designers choose symbols that can convey deep meanings, reflect community identity, or enhance the usability of the cultural textile.

The key factors that favoured the selection of *Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu* symbols include:

- (a) Cultural and Historical Significance: Symbols that represent ethnic, religious, or traditional beliefs are highly favoured as they allow textiles to act as documents of history, social structure, and community values. These symbols are often chosen to preserve cultural heritage or to foster a sense of belonging.
- (b) Communicative Power (Symbolic Meaning): Symbols are chosen for their ability to convey messages, emotions, or social status without words. For example, in many African prints, the names and motifs are selected to pass vital information or tell a story.
- (c) Visual Appeal and Aesthetic Value: The aesthetic impact of a motif (colour, shape, layout) is crucial. Symbols that are visually engaging, unique, or harmonise with current design trends are more likely to be selected.
- (d) Contextual Relevance and Familiarity: Symbols that are easily recognised and relatable to the target audience are preferred because they enhance the reception of the message embedded in the fabric.

Generally, the selection of symbols in this research was a deliberate process aimed at blending meaningful communication with visual appeal and, where necessary, functional utility.

PILOT STUDY

In this study, a pilot study was conducted by producing a five-meter length of batik fabric design with Igbo traditional motifs and the designed fabric was used to sew a cloth for a Monarch (His Royal Highness) to verify the effectiveness in carrying out the study. The pilot study plate 1 is presented below:

Description of Studio Production Methods

The following procedures were used to produce the practical studio works: making available the materials for the work, such as dye, caustic soda, hydrosulphites, paraffin wax, dyebath, stencil paper, starch, and pressing iron. The studio production method began with the tying and dyeing of five yards of fabric. The fabric was manipulated and bonded so that during the dyeing process, some parts resisted the dye. These dyed and undyed areas

formed an unusual texture and pattern on the cloth, which formed the initial background designs.



Plate: 1: Pilot Study of a Monarch (HRH)
Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe.
Medium: Batik design.
Size: 5 yards:
Year of Production: 2021

Cutting the stencil with Igbo traditional motifs and its transfer on the fabric through the waxing method constituted the second stage. The third stage was the submergence of the waxed fabric into the dye bath for a dyeing process. The next stage was to unwax these fabrics by submerging the waxed fabric in the pot of boiling water and stirring until the wax was completely removed. The final stage included starching the fabric for a crisp appearance, drying, and ironing.

Development of Thumbnail Sketches

The development of thumbnail sketches was produced through reflections and close observation of photographs from our environment, events, and issues, using pencil, ink, and pen as a medium to produce the sketches, which guided the production of the textile design. Thumbnail sketches are initial sketch drawings used to develop the design. The development of thumbnail sketches helped in the conceptualisation and production of the textile design in this research work.

Thus, the preliminary thumbnail sketches below were developed and used for the production of the textile design in this research:

Thumbnail Sketches of Some Selected Igbo Traditional Symbols for the Study



Figure 1: *Thumbnail Sketches of Chieftaincy Cap and Elephant Tusk.*

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe.
Medium: Pen on Paper.
Size: 30 x 20cm.
Year of Production: 2021

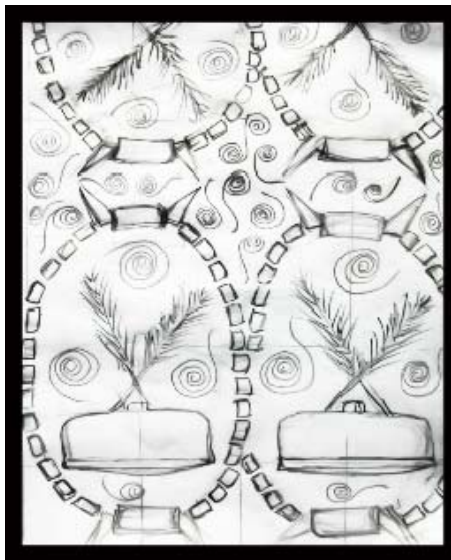


Figure 2: *Thumbnail Sketches of a Combination of Chieftain Cap, Coral Beads, Hand Fan, and Uli Symbols.*

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe.
Medium: Pen on Paper.
Size: 30 x 20cm
Year of Production: 2021



Figure 3: *Thumbnail Sketches of Royal Crown, Coral Beads and Uli Symbols*

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe.
Medium: Pen on Paper.
Size: 30 x 20cm.
Year of Production: 2021

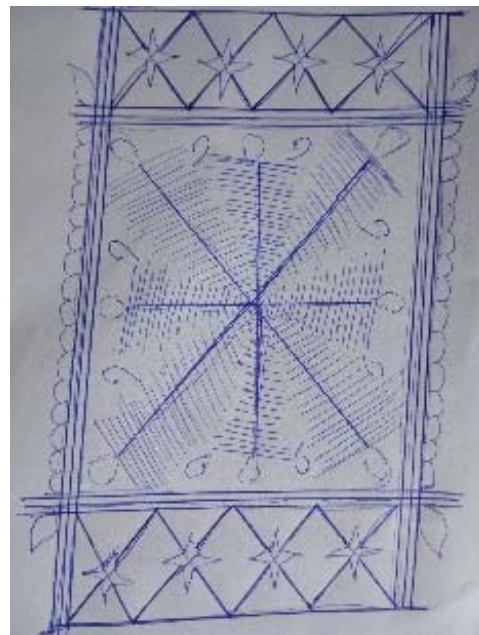


Figure 4: *Thumbnail Sketches of Omunkwu Symbols.*

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe.
Medium: Pen on Paper.
Size: 30 x 20cm
Year of Production: 2021

Transfer of Sketches

The sketches developed for the study were transferred by making sketches on the fabric, waxing the fabric using a stencil, and freehand drawing of Igbo traditional motifs.

Presentation of Studio Descriptive Analysis of Batik Fabric Design with Igbo Traditional Motifs

The studio's experimental batik fabric design with an adaptation of Igbo traditional motifs for this study was analysed and described using the following as a guide:

- i. Inspiration for the production of the batik work
- ii. Title, structure, and composition of the design on fabric
- iii. Materials relatedness and method of production
- iv. Wax and dye application and concept in the production of batik fabric design
- v. The artistic implication in the production of the batik fabric design work
- vi. Cultural, historical, and philosophical interpretation of content

The practical studio product of batik fabric design works is intended to display the adaptation of Igbo traditional motifs in the production of batik textile design. These are represented in the plates below:

Analysis of *Ejirimaraeze*



Plate 2: *Ejirimaraeze*

Artist: Anyanwu, Chinwe.
Medium: Batik Design.
Size: 5 yards
Year of Production: 2021

The piece titled *Ejirimaraeze* batik shows the identities of a traditional ruler in Igboland. It contains four different Igbo traditional motifs associated with an Igbo traditional ruler, namely, the traditional red cap, two eagle feathers, *Akaraka*

(symbol of destiny), and *Mgbaji* (chain of coral beads).

The traditional red cap or headgear is always visible among titled men in Igboland. The red cap in Igboland symbolises authority, culture, and tradition, which represent the chieftaincy institution, its power, and authority. The red caps are meant for titled men and chiefs recognised in their communities as traditional leaders: *Ozos*, *Nzes*, *Ichies*, *Ogbuefis*, etc. The categories of chiefs permitted to wear this sacred cap must have met certain standards, which they still maintain in their respective communities. For instance, they are not expected to lie, swindle, or engage in any activity that could bring the traditional institution into disrepute. The wearers of the Igbo red cap are men who have certain obligations and uphold the standards set by their communities or villages.

Putting on the red cap is not meant for everyone in Igbo land; it is reserved for a select number of individuals who are entitled to wear it (especially with eagle feathers, which, in their own right, signify prominence). Cultural experts often stress the need to preserve the sanctity of the red cap in the moral ethos of the occupants of these exalted offices. The red cap has been a real symbolic feature of the rich Igbo culture over many decades, and as such, it should be saved from abuse by maintaining all the rules and traditions associated with it.

Eagle Feathers

The eagle feather is a symbol of honour and innocence in Igbo culture. It symbolises the fact that one has achieved a feat. The Eagle occupies a significant position in the Igbo social, cultural, and religious activities and lives. This is because the eagle is a symbol of excellence. Eagle feathers are therefore symbolic features associated with the authority of the traditional ruler.

In the traditional setting, especially in a shrine, when a case is brought to the court of the shrine, and the accused's honour is vindicated, he will be issued an eagle feather as a badge of his innocence. Thereafter, the now innocent will emerge from the court of the *Agbara* (shrine) shouting *Agbara nyelum ugo!* Implying that the shrine has given me an eagle's feather and has declared me innocent. This expression and its related phrases suggest that the *Agbara* (in the original account) or the spiritual entity referenced has honoured (or restored the honour of) the subject (an act made apparent by the issuance of the eagle feather) and does not suggest that it is the literal eagle that is being offered.

Similarly, in social activities such as the taking of titles, it is noted that titled Igbo men of the *Ozo* cadre affix the eagle feather to their red caps. This is symbolic of the feat achieved, indicative of the fact that the steps leading to the *Ozo* or similar titles were demanding and could easily drain the pockets of the unprepared individual, and also a reminder of the kind of lives they are to live, a life of moral and spiritual excellence.

This use of the eagle feather as a mark of honour or great achievement is not restricted or peculiar to the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, only because the eagle occupies similar significant positions in other cultures around the world, and that accounts for expressions such as “to add another feather to one’s cap.”

This feature of the eagle’s feather leads to the concept of *itu-ugo* in Igboland, which is tied to the title-taking activity in Igbo associations and groups and the affixing of the eagle feather to the cap as a symbolic representation of having achieved an honourable feat.

From the concept comes the Igbo name *Turugo*, which means “excel” or “be honoured.” The number of eagle feathers on the “red cap,” as the case may be, illustrates the status of the cap wearer and shows the number of traditional feats the individual must have achieved within the given period.

Akaraka Symbol

The *akaraka* (destiny) symbol on the *Ejirimaraeze* batik shows that the individual was destined to rule with power, and such authority could only come from God Almighty.

If God did not approve of the leadership of the traditional ruler, it would have been impossible for the individual to ascend the throne; therefore, the *Ejirimaraeze* batik showcases the identities of a traditional ruler and the properties used in identifying a traditional ruler in Igboland. *Mgbaji*, or a chain of choral beads, constitutes part of the decorative properties of the traditional institution and identity of a traditional ruler in Igboland.

Analysis of *Omu Nkwu* (Yellow Palm Frond)

There is a difference between the yellow palm frond (*Omunkwu*) and the ordinary palm frond (*Igunkwu*). The ordinary palm frond is a symbol of victory, triumph, peace, and eternal life, while the yellow palm frond, known as *Omunkwu*, represents being out-of-bounds, “caveat emptor,” seclusion, warning, and sacredness in Igbo culture.

Okeke and Chukwu (2015) noted that *Omunkwu* is culturally significant in Igboland and serves different purposes depending on the context in which it is used.

For instance, when tied around a tree—particularly an economic one—or placed on land claimed by two parties, it signifies that no one should trespass on the land until peace is restored to prevent potential conflict. *Omunkwu* also symbolises sacredness; if tied to a shrine, it indicates that non-worshippers should keep away. Only the chief priests are permitted to enter the shrine for worship. This aligns with the observations of Eje and Arum (2021), who stated that the presence of *Omunkwu* serves as a warning against theft, and anyone who sees it used as a barrier should refrain from trespassing to avoid trouble.

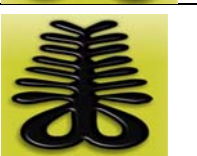


Plate 3: *Omunkwu* (Abstracted Palm Frond).

Artist:	Anyanwu, Chinwe.
Medium:	Batik Design.
Size:	5 yards.
Year of Production:	2021

In Africa, symbols are vital, multifaceted tools that communicate complex philosophies, beliefs, and societal values non-verbally through art, clothing, and rituals. They bridge the material and spiritual worlds, preserving history, fostering community identity, and encoding knowledge, such as in Akan Adinkra symbols, which represent concepts like strength, adaptability, and wisdom. Table 1 is a list of symbols in Africa with their meanings and design applications.

Table 1: Symbols, Meanings and Design Applications

S/No	Symbols from Ghana	Name	Meaning(s)/Design applications
1		Sankofa	Go back and take Learning from the past to help improve the future, or not to forget the rich cultural precepts of our forebears
2		Nkyimkyim	Twisting. Signifies prudence, vigilance and balance. Life is made up of good and bad moments.
3		Gye Nyame	Except for God. presence and protection of God, both physically and spiritually
4		Bese Saka	Cola nut. symbolises togetherness and unity
5		Aya	Self-reliance. A local plant that is known for its resilience in withstanding all weather conditions and types of soil or earth conditions
Igbo Symbols from Southeastern Nigeria			
6	 Feathers	Feathers	Epitome of innocence and purity.
7	 Fig. 15  Fig. 13 Osu title insignia	Bowl of Kola nuts	Kola nut symbolises life, vitality and is one of the most widely accepted and recognised Igbo cultural symbols
8	 Cameleon	Chameleon	Cautious virtue that is expected of a leader
9	 Cows head	Cow head	The cow head is read as a symbol of prestige. In the past, a leader was known for the number of cow skulls displayed against the altar in a man's reception hall

LIMITATIONS

Studies of this nature have their obvious limitations. For instance, space will limit the number of symbols that could be listed. Similarly, pilot studies are crucial feasibility investigations, with key limitations, primarily stemming from their small scale, which restricts generalizability and statistical power; however, the respondents from the Southeast were unanimous on the universal acceptability of the need to revive Igbo cultural heritage through wearable textiles.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Textiles and their distinctive characteristics should be utilised through textile design to propagate, popularise, preserve, and transmit the meanings embedded in Igbo cultural symbols like *Ejirimaraeze* and *Omunkwu* to future generations. This effort could not only help to check the rapid erosion of the rich cultural values of the Igbo people in Southeastern Nigeria but also contribute to restoring their cultural identity.

It is, therefore, recommended that research efforts in other areas be intensified to combat the erosion of Nigerian, and specifically Igbo, cultural values. Governments should promote Nigeria's cultural heritage through both electronic and print media to elevate these issues to public prominence, similar to the efforts made through textile design technology.

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