

## **Celebrating Africa: Afro-Asian Nuances of Fashion**

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**ABSTRACT:** *As African designers with vested interest in pushing the African fashion agenda on the world fashion stage, the design team undertook this project to purposively create a multi-ethnic-inspired costume for a Tanzanian member of the Diplomatic Corps. The occasion was to commemorate the celebration (the election and swearing into office) of the first ever Black woman of Asian descent, Kamala Harris as Vice President of the United States of America (USA), a historic period characterised by COVID 19 pandemic. Inspiration was from local resources including those from the celebrant's varied background. The research design is a studio-based modelled on design-led concepts. The dress created reflects the Afro-Asian nuances of clothing traditions which speak of modesty, brightness, re-birthed and ancient costumes brewed in the African 'pot.'*

**KEYWORDS:** African identity, design-led model, ethnic dress culture practices, fashion and innovation, Tanzanian costume.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This practice-led designed project is a case of creating a unique costume to be adorned by the Tanzania ambassador on the occasion of celebrating Kamala Devi Harris' victory. The motivation was to project Africa on such a memorable occasion, and as African designers, we rose to the occasion to propose a unique costume to depict the dress culture of Asia, Jamaica and Tanzania reflecting the celebrant's descent to be adorned by the Tanzania ambassador with focus on the occasion at hand. Available literature shows interest in conceptualized design by African fashion designers, suffice it to say that each of those cases are topically, geographical and methodologically different (Culture & Costume Projects, 2021; Damalie, 2021).

The current case wittingly blends the fashion project around varied destinations and key political icons in the geo-politics of the world to project Africa particularly, espousing African identity. The project is guided by the subculture innovation, and innovation-collective theory of Sproles (1979 as cited in Rahman et al., 2014). The subcultural innovation theory is used to demonstrate culture's ability to spread new fashion among the people, while the innovative-collective theory is used to demonstrate iconic individuals such as have been used in the study as creative and innovative, and are thus treated as fashion leaders because their choices and styles can influence other consumers around the world.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Kamala Devi Harris, (born October 20, 1964, Oakland, California, U.S.), the 49th Vice President of the United States (2021) in the Democratic administration of President Joe Biden is the first woman and the first African American to hold the post. She had previously served in the U.S. Senate (2017–21) and as attorney general of California (2011–2017). As the first Black woman of Asian descent who has been elected and sworn in as Vice President of the United States of America, an inaugural ball is to be organized to welcome her into office.

The continent of Asia, one of the descent of Kamala is described as the largest continent with 60% of the earth's population. It is joined to Europe on the west to form Eurasia; it is the site of some of the world's earliest civilizations. Asia as a noun represents the nations of the Asian continent collectively. One of the indigenous dress culture in Asia is women wear the sari; colourfully patterned pieces of cloth draped around the upper body and worn over a blouse and skirt. Men wear the kurta pajama, a long - to the knee or longer - blouse with loose drawstring pants. Footwear is either sandals or slip-on shoes.

On the other hand, Jamaica which is also an ancestry of the Vice President of the USA is the fifth-largest island country in the Caribbean. The indigenous people, the Taíno, called it Xaymaca in Arawakan meaning the "Land of Wood and Water" or the "Land of Springs". Once a Spanish possession known as Santiago, in 1655 it came under the rule of England, and was called Jamaica. In Jamaica, the quadrille dress is made of cotton. It is called a bandana skirt. The skirt is worn with a ruffled sleeve blouse and a matching head tie.

The name "Tanzania" was created as a clipped compound of the names of the two states that unified to create the country: Tanganyika and Zanzibar. The name "Tanganyika" is derived from the Swahili words tanga ("sail") and nyika ("uninhabited plain", "wilderness"), creating the phrase "sail in the wilderness." Tanzanian clothing traditions speak of modesty, brightness, and ancient customs. For

a European, the first impression from a folk dress of Tanzania sometimes is like “too much.” Too many layers of cloth wrapped helter-skelter around the body, too many colours and patterns, too many weird jewels, among others but all the pieces are unified. Men in Tanzania often use less colourful garments than women (except for Maasai people). They prefer brown, beige, blue, and yellow colours. Tanzanian males wear kanzu and European-style suit jackets. The traditional male costume consists of a kanzu – white or beige coloured robe used by men in the African Great Lakes region.

Cloths made with Africa in mind have philosophical significance. The industrial prints have names that could easily depict or explain the beliefs, practices and culture of Ghanaians (Orhin, 2007). The readings suggest that the patterns or motifs in the prints tell stories of relevance to the wearer, such as proverbs, poems and traditional African fables. The colours also hold philosophical significance as they can represent social standing, age, tribal orientation and marital status. In the 1960s and 1970s, textile prints had names that could easily depict or explain some beliefs, practices and culture of Ghanaians. Symbolism is one of the major attributes of African culture. In light of this, the indigenes of Africa generally take delight in beauty and symbolism and would mostly want to be projected as such.

African wax prints, also known as *Ankara* on the Nigerian fashion space and Dutch wax prints, are omnipresent and common materials for clothing in Africa, especially West Africa. They are industrially produced colourful cotton cloths with batik-inspired printing. One feature of these materials is the lack of difference in the colour intensity of the front and back sides. The wax fabric can be sorted into categories of quality due to the processes of manufacturing. Normally, the fabrics are sold in lengths of 12 yards (11 m) as "full piece" or 6 yards (5.5 m) as "half piece". The colours comply with local preferences of the customers. Typically, clothing for celebrations is made from this fabric. Wax prints are a type of nonverbal communication among African women, and thereby carry their messages out into the world. Some wax prints are named after personalities, cities, buildings, sayings, or occasions. The producer, name of the product, and registration number of the design is printed on the selvage, thus protecting the design and attesting to the quality of the fabric. Figure 1 shows an array of colourful African prints.



Figure 1: African-inspired wax prints  
Source: Field Data, 2021

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Creative Design Process

The design process is an approach for breaking down a large project into manageable parts. The process was used to define the steps needed to tackle each part of the project. It helped in the systematic flow of creativity and production to suit the overall goal of the project.

### *Design brief*

A design brief was developed with consideration to the client/customer (Burns et al., 2016). It outlines the deliverables and scope of the project including any products or works (function and aesthetics), timing and budget. Design briefs can be used for many projects including those in the fields of architecture, interior design and industrial design. They are also used to keep the project on track in terms of design and budget during the creation process and to an extent evaluate the effectiveness of a design after it has been produced.

*Customer profile:* A fashion customer profile helps brands to create products that their target market will want to purchase. The customer profile board in Figure 2 was developed from the market research in relation to the project objective. The board is a detailed description of the project's ideal customer, Ambassador Maimuna Kibenga Tarishi, the then Tanzanian Ambassador to the United Nations.



Figure 2: Customer profile

Source: Field Data, 2021

*Design Inspiration:* Designers can be inspired by a season, a culture, a place, or a variety of ideas from research. A theme board is most known and used by fashion designers as a source of the inspiration. Inspiration boards are a way for designers to establish a theme for a fashion brand, defining elements of colour, colour harmony, texture, and patterns/motifs. The theme board for this project is the coat of arms of Tanzania in Figure 3 which signifies freedom and unity. From the significance, a title and theme were derived.

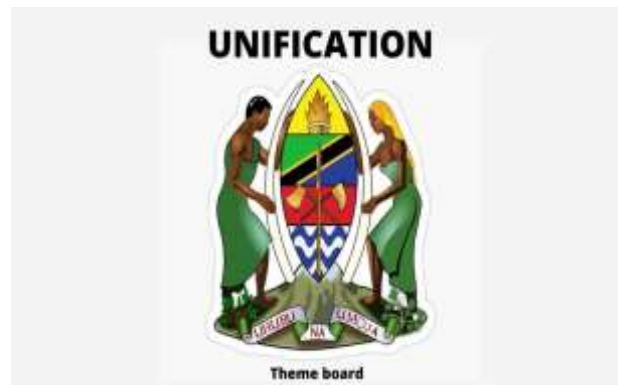


Figure 3: Theme board

Source: Field Data, 2021

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*Cultural Trends*



Figure 4: Trend board

Source: Field Data, 2021

The trend board in Figure 4 is a visual aid which helped in internally assessing the current fashion environment. Jamaican, Tanzanian and Asian styles of dressing were captured as trends for this project as illustrated.

*Colour story*



Figure 5: Colour board

Source: Field Data, 2021

The colour story consists of the choice of colours used in various artistic and design contexts. It comprises of the colour scheme (refers to all colours present on the theme board), colour ways (refers to alternate colours the garment can be produced in) colour palette (refers to the final colours which the garment will be produced in).



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Figure 6 tells the colour story represented by Tanzanian coat of arms (yellow, gold, red, green, black, white, brown, blue); the colour palette is represented by a room with chosen colours as white, blue, black, yellow, green; the colour way includes black, yellow, green and blue in Figure 5.

### *Motif board*

The motif board in Figure 6 has lines, shapes and textures which are drawn from the theme board. The board helped with the idea development of a garment as they contain essential elements that have the power to make each piece of garment a masterpiece and a unique style line. In the process of designing, different lines and shapes were picked from the theme board as the main motif from which the designs were developed. The lines and shapes were manipulated to attain the styles of the designer-approved designs. The lines and shapes influenced the features and details of the design as a whole.

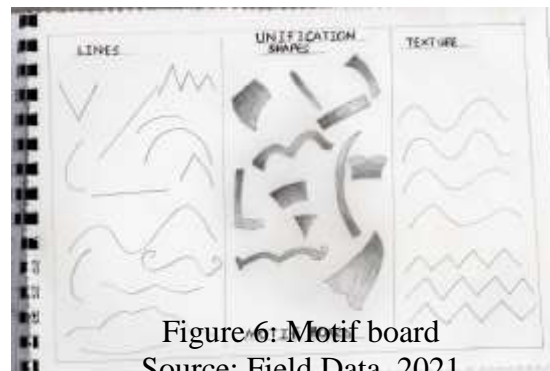


Figure 6: Motif board  
Source: Field Data, 2021

### *Style board*



Figure 7: Style board  
Source: Field Data, 2021

The style board in Figure 7 is a three dimensional view of the hand sketched *Unification Design* with colour details.

*Design board*

Design is the intended arrangement of material to produce certain result or effect. The board in Figure 8 is a three dimensional view of the hand sketched *Unification* Design. Details include a plain black floor length bustier cap dress, a top dress with shoulder cape attachment, and front fringed details from *Dagota* women of Tanzanian’s traditional costume. Unlike the style board, the design board features the colours as intended in the actual design when sewn.



Figure 8: Three dimensional views of hand sketched *Unification* Design  
Source: Field Data, 2021

*Technical drawing board*

A technical drawing in the fashion industry is equivalent to a blueprint for production. It shows the pattern cutter the shape of the garment when laid flat, without any artistic flair or stylisation. The technical drawing board comprises the design drawings to one-fifth of scale with constructional line and styling details. The technical drawings in Figure 9 served as a primary visual source to communicate the design details.

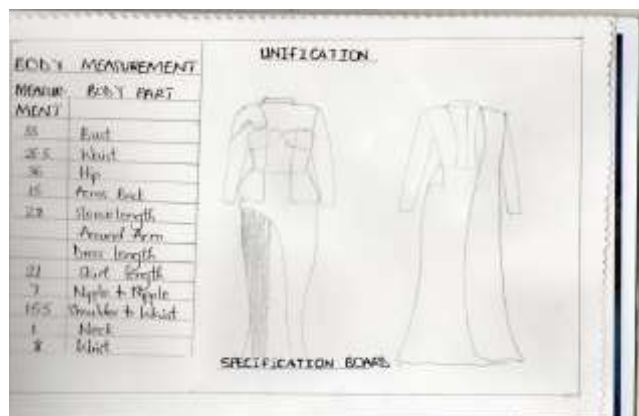


Figure 9: Technical drawing board  
Source: Field Data, 2021

*Specification board*

The garment specification sheet in Figure 10 is a technical document that contains the a technical sketch of the garment, the client’s actual measurement, construction details of the product, swatches of the fabrics and trims to be used, and the cost sheet.



*Unification Specification sheet*

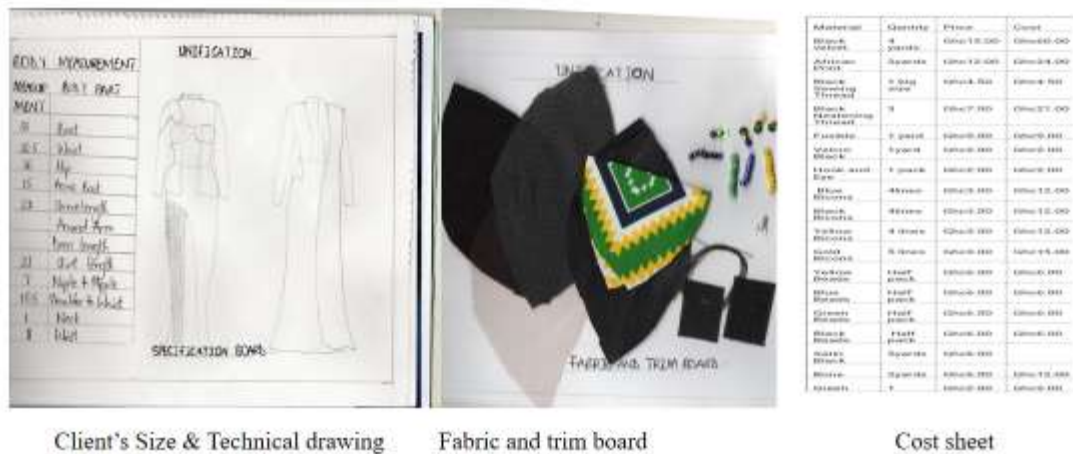


Figure 10: Specification board

Source: Field Data, 2021

**Pattern Making**

Pattern is the template from which the parts of a garment are traced onto fabric before being cut out and assembled. The process of pattern making was used to connection the design to production by creating paper templates for all components of the garment. The flat pattern making method (Carr & Pomeroy, 1992) was considered for the purpose of this project. A foundation block was made to measure, and further adapted to the various details of the design. Figure 12 shows the final pattern pieces used in cutting out spread fabrics for the design pieces.



Figure 11: Final Patterns for the Unification design made from flat pattern making method.

Source: Field Data, 2021

### *Fabric preparation and laying and cutting out*

The plain black and printed fabrics selected were pressed to remove all creases. They were then spread by hand on a larger table surface with the right side of selvages facing each other. The large pattern pieces were economically laid and pinned in position on the wrong side of the fashion plain black fabric. The same strategy was used for laying the printed fabric except that that was laid with the right side of the fabric up because the patterns were asymmetric. The patterns were laid on the fabric based on the grain instructions on the final patterns. Cutting was done based on the templates used. The main tool used was a large pair of cutting shears. The cut out pieces were sorted based on garment components and fabric colours for sewing.

### **Garment Assembly Process**

Garment parts were constructed by fusing sections, attaching notions, and joining cut out pieces together. A zipper fastener was fixed on the centre back opening created on the garment. Facings were fused with fabric medium weight vilene before attachment for reinforcement (Kludzi et al., 2019). Matching threads were used for permanent joining seams using mostly lockstitches for the seams. The dress was fully lined using taffeta fabric for a good hang, and high quality workmanship and finish, and wearing comfort when in use. The key principle here was to combine the high quality sewing techniques with effective steam pressing so as to introduce the desired fit into the garment by the time work was completed.

During finishing, all thread ends were cut off. Beading was creatively worked on the neckline and waist line. The garment was pressed off, fitted and then packaged for subsequent use by the prospective client.

### **Styling**

#### *Hair and make up*

The designers proposed a light handed makeup of foundation, eyebrow etching, eye shadow and lipstick to create a nude look to enhance the natural facial features of the adult client during use. Tanzanians wear shaved hair and so the researchers' presentation considered a symbolic black hair net cover for the head embellished with a beaded head accessory.

#### *Accessories*

The look created did not include necklace because that concept was incorporated into the neckline of the garment using colourful beads. The client's accessories included an artificial ear lobe made into an earring in order to preserve tradition. Colourful strung bead bracelets and a pair of black heeled shoes wear added to complement the look created for the customer. Figure 14 shows a model in the *Unification* ball dress.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The elegant *Unification* ball dress with Afro-Asian nuances is shown in Figures 13, 14 and 15. It is made up with an exquisite plain black velvet, tulle, and colourful African print fabric and beads. The bustier capped floor length dress has a long sari-inspired shoulder cape attachment, fringed features on a deep right cut and beaded headdress influenced by Dagota women of Tanzania's traditional dress. The ensemble included a face mask made with similar fabrics as PPE for use during the occasion in respect of the COVID 19 protocol.



Figure 12 and 13: Model in the *Unification* ball dress designed



Figure 15: Side view of the *Unification* ball dress designed.

Source: Field Data, 2021

## DISCUSSION

Consistent with the design objective, the *Unification* ball dress was made for the occasion to celebrate the election and swearing into office of the first ever Black woman of Asian descent, Kamala Harris as USA Vice President. As hinted earlier, the motivation was to push the African fashion agenda on the world fashion stage using local resources including those from Kamala's varied background as source of inspiration. The medley of concepts used as inspiration for the multi-ethnic-inspired ball dress was derived from merging a combination of Asian, Jamaica and Tanzanian dress culture concepts; considering style lines and fabric choices, which address the ancient African cultural descent of the celebrant and also the high profiled invited guest.

The elegant *Unification* ball dress made up of exquisite materials; i. e. plain black velvet and tulle, colourful African wax fabric and beads and does reflect a blend of elements of African and other regional cultures. The bustier caped floor length dress which has a long Indian sari-inspired shoulder cape attachment for instance, reflect Asian Sari details. The front fringed features on the deep right cut reflect details from

the Dagota women of Tanzanian's traditional dress. Thus, the ball dress echo rich African creativity; materials and ideas which serve as inspiration and nourishment to African designers (Moroso, 2010).

A blend of effective pattern making strategies; i. e. flat and draping informed design development. Meanwhile, the apparel parts were efficiently constructed using high quality materials and techniques. The dress was structured and finished ensuring quality standards of workmanship (Carr & Pomeroy, 1992; Kludzi et al., 2019). The integration of beading on the neck and waist of the garment as embellishment truly interpret the Dagota women of Tanzanian dress culture and is apt for the personality and the occasion. The artificial ear lobe made into earrings reflects Indian as well as Tanzanian cultures, thus it served as a means of preservation of both traditions in the design. The colourful strung bead bracelets and the pair of black heeled shoes show a blend of distinct tradition styling and global modernity. Meanwhile, the nude look created by the design team enhanced the natural facial features of the adult model. Besides, the strategy further placed emphasis on the total look rather than the apparel or makeup alone. The head covering and embellishment contributed to the matured rare elegant look created.

## CONCLUSION

The dress created for the client on the memorable occasion was derived from the merging of a combination of Asian, Jamaican and Tanzanian ethnic dress culture practices, considering their style lines and fabric choices, which addresses the ancient descent of the celebrant and also the invited guest. The underpinning theories applied guided research methods; the cultural artefacts sampled for inspiration, materials used for the design, and the prospective customer sampled to diffuse the fashion artefact created respectively. In essence, the dress reflects the Afro-Asian nuances of clothing traditions which speak of exquisite contemporary ball dress inspired by ancient costumes brewed in the African 'pot.'

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