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## Incorporation of Traditional Symbols of Upper East Region of Ghana into Fugu Fabrics

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### Abstract



This research work sought to identify and discuss the socio-economic and cultural relevance of fugu (smock) fabrics, study the extent to which traditional symbols of the Upper East Region of Ghana are incorporated in fugu fabrics, and also design and produce fugu fabrics with selected traditional symbols of Upper East Region of Ghana incorporated in them. The researchers adopted the studio-based research approach as it is deemed the most appropriate for this type of research project. It involved the descriptive and exploratory methods of research. The purposive and quota sampling methods were employed in this research which made it possible to reach the fugu fabric weavers, users of the fugu, sellers of fugu and fugu fabrics for needed data. A sample size of fifty (50) was used and data gathered were obtained through the use of questionnaire and interview. The researchers found that fugu fabrics contribute a lot in the cultural and socio-economic lives of the people in the Upper East Region of

Ghana as they use them for funerals, festivals, marriage ceremonies, and it also help them earn good living through occupations such as weaving, sewing, and sale of smocks. Respondents also, generally, expressed interest in the incorporation of traditional symbols in the fugu fabrics of Ghana. The study concluded that the incorporation of traditional symbols in the fugu fabrics of the Upper East Region of Ghana will promote the cultural value of the products, enhance their aesthetic appeal, and also attract more people to purchase them. It is, therefore, imperative for fugu fabric producers and textile artists, in general, to turn attention to the fugu business and work towards the inculturation of fugu fabrics with traditional symbols of Ghana to make the industry a vibrant and more attractive one. The researchers also recommend their newly designed fugu symbolic fabrics for use.

**Keywords:** fugu, fugu fabric, Ghanaian traditional symbols, symbols, symbolic fugu fabric

## Introduction

There are quite a lot and varied textiles fabrics in Ghana. The *fugu* fabrics which are manufactured specifically in the Northern Ghana are used for various purposes, such as political, religious, social and economic. Tettefio (2009) concurs that *fugu* (smock) is a variety of loose garments produced from narrow strips of fabric woven from traditional looms in Northern Ghana. The fabric reflects the tradition, beliefs and culture of the people of Upper East Region. For instance, they are used for traditional worship, covering mouths of diseased persons, as dresses for special occasions like festivals and are worn to ward off evil forces. The *fugu* fabrics are not only for aesthetic purposes but carry underlying symbolism rooted in their values and belief system. The *fugu* fabric has fascinating colours and it is the most distinctive cloth from northern Ghana which has gained national significance.

Moreover, the fabrics offer a great deal of employment opportunities to quite a lot of people as they are engaged in fibre production, spinning, the sale of yarns, weaving of fabrics, sewing and sales of finished garments. The fabrics have been used by the people for the production of variety of items such as bags, smocks, slit and kaba, casual shirts, straight dresses and many others.

Unlike some African fabrics such as *kente* cloth (of the Asantes) which are nicely decorated with motifs and Asante traditional symbols such as *Gye Nyame*, and

*Sankofa*, the *fugu* fabrics of the Upper East Region as well as the other northern regions of Ghana are characterized by just stripes, arranged in a rhythmic order. These stripes usually run longitudinally on the fabric. Among some ethnic groups in Africa, for example, the Asantes, creating patterns and styles for *kente* and other clothes follow processes that are tied to important cultural connotations as well as events in the kingdom. Tetteh (2006) concurs that different cultures in the world have special symbols that portray their rich cultural heritage, history, and norms that identify them and are used as a means of relaying their social and personal values accepted in their respective societies.

The Upper East people, like other ethnic groups in Ghana, have unique traditional symbols which represent their cultural expressions, concepts, values and traditional mythology. These traditional symbols offer insightful information for meditation on the need to demonstrate good behavioural attitudes (Adom, Opoku, Newton & Yeboah, 2018). Kumar (2017) elucidates that people will lose the inspiration of the past, the inspiration in the ever-changing present and the inspiration to face the future that would result in the decadence of society if new and effective strategies are not implemented to propagate and preserve the traditional symbol. One of such strategies could be the incorporation of the traditional symbols as motifs into the *fugu* fabric to make it more attractive, appealing and also a viable medium for promulgating culture. In a related dimension, Sarpong (1974) established that clothing is one of the commonest media of expressing the culture of people. In spite of this, this study was undertaken with the view to bring to fore the traditional symbols of the Upper East Region and incorporate them as motifs into the *fugu* fabrics of the region in order to render the fabrics more attractive and add value to them. The study also seeks to investigate and discuss the socio-economic and cultural relevance of the *fugu* fabric in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The entire study pivoted on the following research questions:

1. What are the symbolic meanings and philosophical backgrounds of the traditional symbols of the Upper East Region of Ghana?
2. To what extent do the people of Upper East Region of Ghana incorporate their traditional symbols in their *fugu* fabrics?
3. How can the traditional symbols of the Upper East Region be incorporated into the designing and production of the *fugu* fabrics?
4. What are the cultural and socio-economic relevance of *fugu* fabrics to the people of Upper East Region?

## **The Concept of Traditional Symbols**

According to Gonzalez (2022), traditional symbols are physical manifestation that signify the ideology of a particular culture or that merely have meaning within the culture. In a related argument, Adom, Agyemang and Manu (2018) affirmed that traditional symbols reflect the ideals, philosophies, history, beliefs, norms, and values of particular societies and are potential instruments that can be used for cultural propagation globally. The symbols represent popular proverbs and maxims, record historical events, express particular attitudes or behavior related to depict figures, or concepts uniquely related to abstract shapes.

Ballengue-Morris and Stuhr (2001), present that traditional symbols give meaning and structure to life. Annku and Lodonu (2012) stated that Ghana has a rich cultural heritage that dates back as far as the thirteenth century. According to Adom, Asante and Kquofi (2016), this rich cultural heritage has been preserved through the various rich traditional symbols that are laden with powerful philosophical concepts and ideologies that convey the thoughts, beliefs and the entire culture of the people. Traditional symbols have the potential of binding a cultural group by fostering unity and a sense of belonging. This can be observed through the symbols of authority such as the royal skin, the stool, the sword and very revered totems that are highly upheld by some ethnic groups in the Upper East Region.

## **Designs and Symbols on Traditional Fabrics**

Various abstract designs on *kente* have a lot of symbolic names obtained from very important persons, wise sayings and significant social events (Clarke, 1997). He added that some traditional textile fabrics symbolize fertility when they are worn by women and also used to fasten their children securely at their backs. Moreover, the colours used as well as the way they are combined suggest a particular idea thereby making it potent in a certain direction. For instance, traditionalists in the Yoruba land of Nigeria burn pieces of hand-woven fabric that are used to cure women of barrenness as well as other fertility-related problems. According to Ulzen-Appiah (2005), most of the textiles of the twentieth century were not given attention by even those interested in African Art, and it is in the 1960s that the interest of those abroad grew to prompt a re-discovery of African designs inspired by the Pan African ideology of the 1960s. These developments have raised zeal in clothing styles developed from ancestral traditions of the various cultures embracing the fashions of the contemporary world. Traditional

symbols have the potential of binding a cultural group by fostering unity and a sense of belonging. This can be observed through the symbols of authority such as the royal skin, the stool, the sword and very revered totems that are highly upheld by some ethnic groups in the Upper East Region. Ulzen-Appiah (2005) said that the strength of a people's culture and greatness lies in their ability to keep alive in the dark secrecy of symbolism of the cherished truths and values of life. This implies that traditional symbols give a sense of greatness to a group as they could proudly associate themselves with those symbols. They have historical links with those objects which may include being saved by them or conquering them in a dramatic manner, in the case of animals both domestic and wild.

### **The *Fugu* Fabric**

The *fugu* fabrics which are hand-woven are made in narrow strips usually called Strip fabrics. The fabrics are made with dyed and/or undyed cotton or rayon yarns. Metallic yarns are also sometimes used for weaving. The strips are sewn together by hand or machine into the smock, consequently giving the smock a more striped pattern effect.

The fabric made with cotton is processed by spinning the cotton fibres into threads by women. The threads are then stretched and dyed in various colours. It is then dried in a drying line for period of time (Arku, 2013). Traditionally, the hand spun yarns were used but their lower production rate has called for the use of machine spun yarns in the production of smock fabrics. To achieve the hairy and heavy smock fabric effect engineered by the reliance on handspun yarns, weavers used plied yarns or combine two or more strands of yarns in weaving the fabric. This adds weight to the fabric and ensures evenness in comparison to using the handspun yarns. Nonetheless, most savannah north indigenes prefer and consider smocks woven with handspun yarns for its uniqueness and authenticity. Subjecting smock fabrics made of handspun yarns to critical visual inspection creates a fuzzier surface quality and a pattern of tiny holes and surface appearance (Essel & Amissah, 2015).

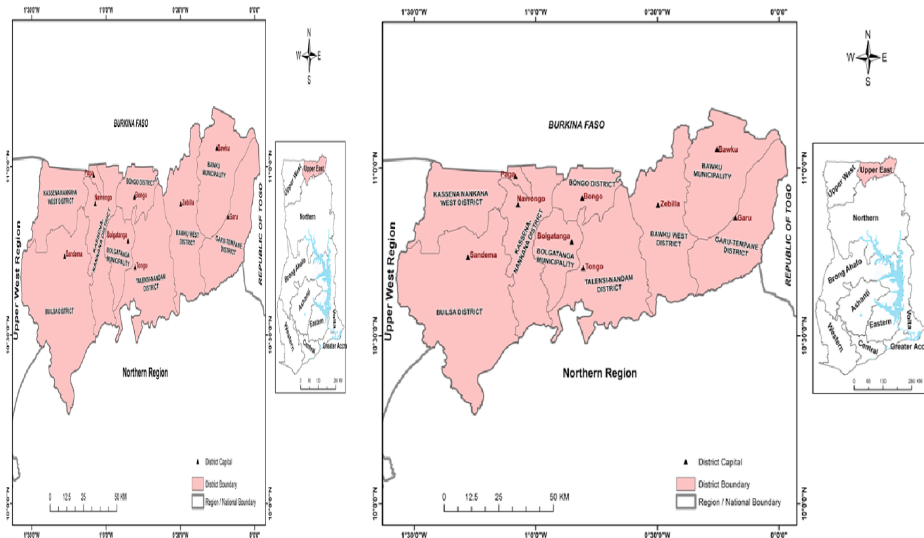
### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in the Upper East Region of Ghana between January 2020 and March 2022 due to the fact that *fugu* fabrics are highly produced there and the fabrics are critical in their culture. Historically, the Upper East Region is part of what used to be the Upper Region (Upper East and Upper West), which

was itself carved out of what used to be the Northern Region on 1st July, 1960. From 1902 the old Northern Territory was a British protectorate until 1960 when it was separated into the Northern and Upper Region. The Upper Region was later apportioned into Upper East and Upper West in 1983.

Upper East Region of Ghana is located in the north-eastern corner of the country. It is bordered to the north by Burkina Faso, the east by the Republic of Togo, the west by Sissala in Upper West and the south by West Mamprusi in North East Region. The land is relatively flat with a few hills to the East and southeast. The total land area is about 8,842 sq km, which translates into 2.7 per cent of the total land area of the country.

The region is administered politically from Bolgatanga. It has 15 administrative districts, namely Builsa North, Builsa South, Kassena-Nankana, Bongo, Bolgatanga Central, Bolgatanga East, Bawku West, Bawku East, Binduri, Tempene, Garu, Pusiga, Chiana Paga, Talensi, and Nabdam. The main occupation in the region is agriculture. Figure 1 displays the map of Ghana showing Upper East Region and Figure 2 shows the map of the Upper East Region.



**Figure 1:** Map of Ghana showing Upper East Region **Figure 2:** Map of Upper East Region

**Source** (<https://www.google.com/search?q=map+upper+east, 2022>)

## Methodology

The study was driven by the qualitative research approach. This research method was used to solicit insiders' perspectives in order to identify and describe the symbolic meanings and philosophical background of the traditional symbols of the Upper East Region as well as the socio-economic and cultural relevance of the *fugu* fabric. Ary, Jacobs, Irvine and Walker (2018) explain qualitative research as understanding social phenomenon from the perspective of the human participants in the study. This approach aided the researchers to identify some vital findings and also made equally important assumptions and recommendations.

The descriptive and exploratory study methods were utilized in the research because they aided the researchers to systematically present (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012) the unique characteristics (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010) of the traditional symbols of the Upper East Region and how they can be incorporated into the *fugu* fabrics to make them more appealing. Observations of the traditional symbols of Upper East Region were carefully studied by the researchers to know precisely which of the symbols can be incorporated into the fabrics to make them philosophically and aesthetically sound. Questionnaire was designed and administered to thirty-six (36) respondents who were selected with the quota sampling technique from the weavers, vendors and consumers of the *fugu* fabrics in the study area. The quota sampling technique enabled the researchers to ensure that some differences in terms of age, sex, and educational background were considered to select the respondents for the study (Kreuger & Nueman, 2006). The entire questionnaire administered were all answered and collected from the respondents.

Personal interviews were organized to seek data from five (5) traditional rulers, five (5) opinion leaders and four (4) elderly persons who were purposively sampled by the researchers due to their distinctive characteristics (Fraenkel et al., 2012), particularly, the key positions they occupy in the study area and their willingness to ensure propagation of their culture and tradition. A total sample size of fifty (50) persons was used for this study. Ten (10) weavers, six (6) vendors and four (4) consumers of the *fugu* fabrics, totaling to twenty (20) out of the fifty (50) respondents were also sampled with the quota sampling method and interviewed, after the production of the symbolic *fugu* fabrics for the aesthetic appreciation and evaluation of the products.

Moreover, studio-based research approaches were utilized for the designing of the traditional symbols into the *fugu* fabrics. The researchers used design software such as CorelDraw, Adobe Photoshop, and Embroidery Office to design the individual symbols and arrange them in the fabrics.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Traditional Symbols of Upper East Region**

The idea of stating the traditional symbols of Upper East Region saw respondents enumerating names of animals like the *yugudir* (Hedgehog), *gbigim* (lion), *uug* (monitor lizard), *kpaung* (guinea fowl), *na'abdansaar* (chief's walking stick), *naafzuur* (cow's tail), *zun* (type of wild dog), *ponna* (frog), *kuur* (Hoe), *zambaad* (Fish) and among others.

It can be inferred from the symbols that the use of animals are very crucial with the people of Upper East Region. It was revealed that these symbols are highly revered in the Upper East Region because of the people's believe that they link to them. It was observed that these symbols are visible in the Upper East Region and are usually displayed on murals and in their proverbs as well as referenced in wise sayings.

### **Symbolic Meaning and Philosophical Background of Traditional Symbols of the Upper East Region**

The chiefs and elderly persons revealed that the hedgehog helped their forefathers to win a battle. According to them, in the olden days their forefathers were in the battle ground when all their spears got finished. They then started retreating since they had no weapon to fight and defend themselves. On their way home, they saw a dead hedgehog. They picked it and used its thorns as spikes, to fight and won the battle. The hedgehog is therefore considered as a symbol of victory.

The image of monitor lizard was also identified as one of the symbols. It is believed that the monitor lizard drew their forefathers' attention to save their child when the child was laid under a tree whilst they were in the bush working. According to the respondent, when the monitor lizard saw the snake heading towards where the child was, it quickly ran to where the peoples were working, seeing the monitor lizard, they chased it and it ran towards where the child was sleeping. When they got there, they saw the snake on the child and they quickly killed it. So, they saw that the monitor lizard is a good animal to be used as their totem (TL2, Personal communication, 14/09/2021.).



Moreover, the guinea fowl, according to the elderly persons, is also a symbol of wealth. This is because it is not everyone that possess guinea fowls and those who have them are deemed wealthy in the society. Also *kpaungkobug* (guinea fowl colour) is believed to have some healing properties. For example, when a child is always falling sick, they use the guinea fowl coloured feathers to sew a dress for the child. The sickness stops when the child wears the dress. This *kpaungkobug* was used by only chiefs and very powerful persons like herbalists and fetish priests (ELP1, 10/07/2021, and ELP2, 14/09/2021, personal communications).

It was also indicated that the lion is also a symbol of strength and power. In spite of this the skin is used by the traditional chief to symbolize kingship. This means that the royalty has power over everyone. The study also brought to light that the hoe is a symbol of hard work as it is used in weeding to produce food stuff for their consumption.

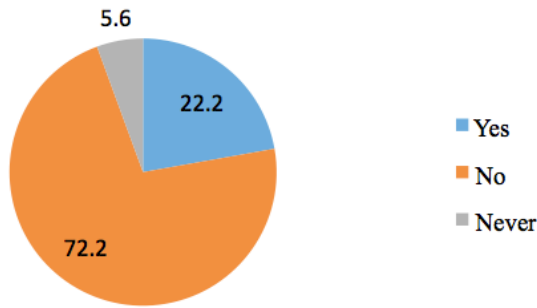
In general terms, most of the responses pointed to the fact that the items identified as totems were those that saved their forefathers in various ways. These symbols foster unity and togetherness among the people of the Upper East Region.

### **The Extent of Incorporation of the Traditional Symbols of Upper East Region in *Fugu* Fabrics**

In achieving this objective various questions were posed. These are as follow:

With the question; have you ever provided *fugu* fabrics or seen traditional symbols of Upper East Region in them before? There were thirty-six (36) responses; eight (8) of the respondents, representing 22.2%, answered Yes and twenty-six (26) denoting 72.2% answered No. Two (2) of the respondents, denoting 5.6% also answered Never. This result clearly indicates that the use of traditional symbols on the *fugu* fabrics is not common in the Upper East Region. The chart in Figure 3 depicts the responses.

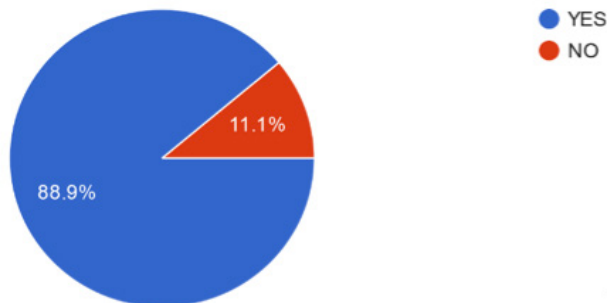
About the question of whether respondents would accept the incorporation of the traditional symbols of the Upper East Region into the *fugu* fabrics, thirty-six (36) responses were received. These indicated that 32 of them, that is 88.9%, accepted that it will be prudent to incorporate traditional symbols into the *fugu* fabric. While four (4) of them, representing 11.1% objected to the idea. This is illustrated as in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** A chart depicting the responses on whether they have ever seen or provided fugu fabrics with traditional symbols

**Source:** Researchers' field study, 2021

About the question of whether respondents would accept that traditional symbols of the Upper East Region be incorporated in *fugu* fabrics, thirty-six (36) responses were received. These indicated that 32 of them which is 88.9% accepted that it will be prudent to incorporate traditional symbols into the *fugu* fabric. While four of them, representing 11.1% objected to the idea. This is illustrated as in Figure 4.

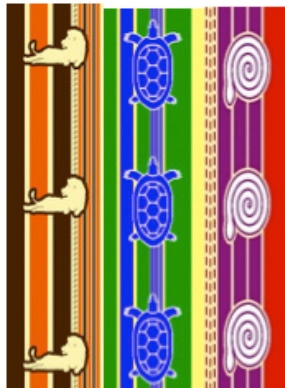


**Figure 4:** A chart showing responses on the design and incorporation of a new fugu fabric with traditional symbols,

**Source:** Researchers' field study, 2021

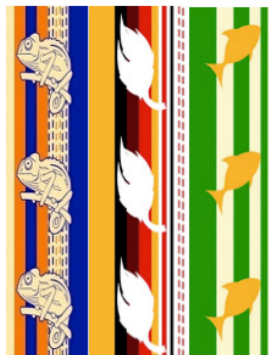
## Design and Production of the Symbolic Fabrics

The fabric was designed through the use of adobe Photoshop. In this process, the software was launched and a template was opened. Settings were made on it in terms of the size of the design, the resolutions as well as the colour scheme. The researchers then made the stripes first as used for the traditional smock fabrics. Motifs were selected and put on the striped design to give it a new look (See Figures 5 and 6). These motifs are the traditional symbols associated with the people of Upper East Region, which includes: a lion, a hedgehog, a fish, tail of a cow, a coiled snake, tortoise, crocodile and chameleon. After the production of the strips of the *fugu* fabrics the traditional symbols were incorporated on them. Several repeats were made and larger pieces of the fabric designs were obtained as shown in Figure 7.



**Figure 5:** Sample designs of strips of fugu with lion, tortoise and coiled snake

**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021



**Figure 6:** Sample of strips designs of fugu with cameleon, cow's tail and a fish

**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021

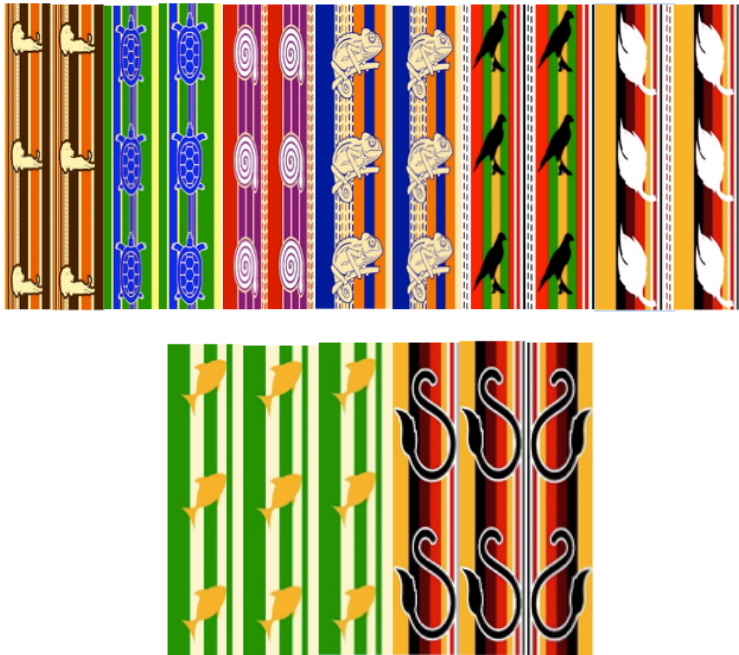
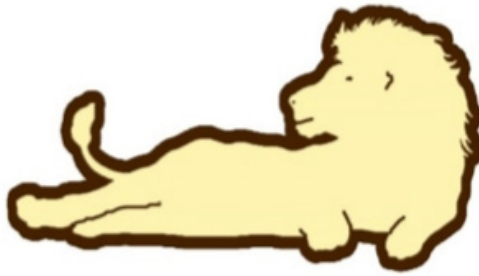


Figure 7: Sample repeats of the fugu fabric designs with totems as motifs

**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021

### **Incorporation of the northern Ghana traditional symbols into the *fugu* fabrics**

There are quite a lot of traditional symbols used in the northern regions of Ghana. These are however, not so popular as some of them are only displayed at the palaces of chiefs. Yet some of the symbols are found in their wise sayings and totems. These totems are in the form of animals adopted by the people. Two of the totems were chosen for incorporation into the *fugu* fabrics (See Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11).



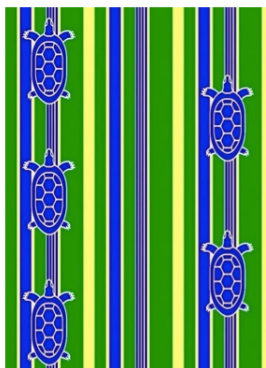
**Figure 8:** Selected lion totem for the new smock fabric

**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021



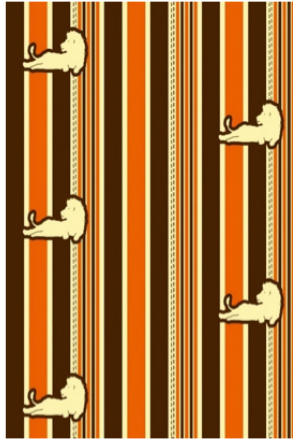
**Figure 9:** Selected tortoise for the new smock fabric

**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021



**Figure 10:** Selected sample of designed fabrics with the tortoise for the final new fugu fabric.

**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021



**Figure 11:** Selected sample of designed fabrics with the lion for the final new smock fabric

**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021

After the striped fabric was woven, the chosen symbols were then transformed into the embroidery state through the use of a laptop computer and a software known as Embroidery Office. The software aided in the separation of colours of the thread to be used. It also indicated the thickness of the stitches required for the designs. This was then inserted into the digital embroidery machine and saved into it. The next step was that the position of each symbol was marked on the fabric and that particular spot was stretched taut with an embroidery hook. The stretched area was placed on the embroidery machine and the needles set properly on it. After the fabric was appropriately set on the machine, the researchers turned the machine on and made the embroidery stitches onto the fabric. This process was repeated until all the marked areas were embroidered. The two woven fabrics were subjected through the same process and were embroidered. This brought about the *fugu* fabrics with the symbols on them. The finished *fugu* fabrics are presented in Figures 12 and 13.

These fabrics were highly appreciated by the people upon seeing them. The symbols in effect have made the fabrics more attractive, valuable and also have given meanings to them. These new fabrics remind the people of their history and foster a sense of unity among the people.



**Figure 12:** New fugu fabric with tortoise totem incorporated on it  
**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021



**Figure 13:** New fugu fabric with lion totem incorporated on it  
**Source:** Researchers' field work, 2021

## **Socio-Economic and Cultural Relevance of *Fugu* Fabrics Produced in Upper East Region.**

This topic has been discussed under the following subtopics:

### **Socio-Economic Importance of the *Fugu* Fabric in Upper East Region**

Another discovery that is of great significance is the unanimous admission of the fact that the *fugu* fabric has a good economic impact on the people of Upper East Region. In affirming this, Atampugre (2017) in his study of 'Smock Fabric Weaving in Bolgatanga' found out that the *fugu* fabric contributes a lot in improving the economic conditions of the people. All the respondents wholeheartedly pointed out that the vendors who engaged in the smock business earn good living from it. Through the business they are able to fend for themselves, their children and even their entire family. The weavers as well as those who do the sewing also attested to the fact that they make good living out of it. The respondents, further, stated that the *fugu* fabrics bring about foreign exchange and improve the standard of living of people and the nation at large.

All the respondents amounting to 100% established that the taxes collected from the *fugu* fabric vendors, weavers and people who sew the smocks are likely to contribute to the development of social amenities which will go a long way in the creation of jobs for the members of the community. They also create jobs for all people both literates and illiterates and brings people within and outside the Upper East Region together.

### **The Religious Relevance of the *Fugu* Fabrics in the Upper East Region**

Moreover, all the respondents stated emphatically that the *fugu* fabrics are intertwined with their culture and separating the two can never be possible. They added that their culture and traditions are circulated on the *fugu* fabrics. One of the traditional leaders stated that the *fugu* fabrics have been used for various occasions such as the enskinment of a chief, festivals, funeral, marriage ceremonies and other important gatherings (TL1, personal Communication: 10/07/2021). The respondent, further, indicated that the use of the smock depends on the type of cultural activity they are performing. For example, white coloured *fugu* is used for performing elderly person's funeral or marriage ceremonies. It was, further, disclosed that the *fugu* fabric is used for performing traditional dances. The people of Upper East Region also use the *fugu* fabrics to cover deceased persons and at the same time strips of the fabric (mostly white-coloured) used to cover the deceased persons' mouths.



The respondents brought to light that in the olden days, the *fugu* fabric was mostly used during festivals and funerals, but it has now become a common dress where people wear it for their daily activities; to work, church, mosque and parties. The respondents repeatedly stated that some of the *fugu* fabrics have supernatural powers. These include healing, protect the wearer from evil spirits and others.

## Conclusion

Apparently, the study has examined the traditional symbols of the Upper East Region and their incorporation into the *fugu* fabrics. This research has also discussed the socio-economic and cultural relevance of the *fugu* fabric in the Upper East Region of Ghana. From the view point of this study, the paper has obviously concluded that traditional symbols represents the cultural expressions, concepts, values and traditional mythology of the Upper East people of Ghana. The symbols which are mostly animals are very crucial to the people. It has been established that the incorporation of traditional symbols in the *fugu* fabrics of the Upper East Region of Ghana will promote the cultural value of the products, enhance their aesthetic appeal, and also attract more people to purchase them. It is, therefore, vital for *fugu* fabric producers and textile artists, in general, to turn attention to the *fugu* business and work towards the inculturation of *fugu* fabrics with traditional symbols of Ghana to make the industry a vibrant and more attractive one.

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