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## African Wax Print Fabric Design and Production History of Akosombo Textiles Limited in Ghana

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### Abstract



Studies on the economic impacts of the wax print companies in Ghana abound. However, the design history of the wax prints design culture in post-independence Ghana has received little or no scholarly focus. This study focuses on Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) now Akosombo Industrial Company Limited, one of the giants in wax prints in Ghana. Historical research design and expert purposive sampling were used. In all sixteen (16) respondents were selected which comprised of designers, production managers, sales representatives and managers. Semi-structured interview and document review was used to collect the data while available artefacts formed part of the data collected. Historical and document analyses were used as data analysis methods. The study traced the wax prints fabric design and production history of Akosombo Industrial Company Limited, which has been in existence since 1967, highlighting its major fabric design evolution

for over five decades of its existence. The study concluded that from 1967 to 2018, ATL produced two (2) main types of designs: ABC Wax designs and Java designs. ABC Wax designs were designed and printed in England while Java designs were designed and printed in Ghana. From 1967 to 2022 the company produced its 19,837 design and counting. AICL design and print both ABC and Java in Ghana from 2018 to present (2023). The study therefore recommends that, AICL should prioritize the creation of fabric design catalogue from 1967 to 2023 for reference, and teaching and learning of designing in Textiles and Fashion related schools in Ghana. The creation of such a catalogue will serve as resource material for analysis on the ABC wax print designs and Java design and to establish how they appertain to Ghanaian culture; as well as for fabric design idea development.

**Keywords:** African wax print, fabric design, design history, Akosombo textiles, ATL

## 1. Introduction

African textiles are a significant part of the continent's art and remain one of the key precursors in understanding the socio-cultural and economic life of Africans. The available history of authentic African textiles contains a very large amount of complex entanglement of African culture (Essel, 2017). The artistic quality and simple yet sophisticated nature of West African textiles has been admired and appreciated by many observers since precolonial, colonial and postcolonial times (Ulzen-Appiah, 2005). Apart from their aesthetic qualities, authentic African fabrics give an indication of prestige or class (Orla, 2006) amongst wearers. Cloth and other textiles are a status symbol, a signal of identity, age, marital status, amongst others, especially, in West Africa (Hagen-Jurkowitsch & Sarley, 2010; Brien, 2007).

Apart from precolonial indigenous African textiles design culture, colonialists' contact informed the introduction of machine-inspired wax print fabric to West Africa. The wax print culture in West Africa was deceptively named African print to lure African buyers (Akinwuni, 2008; Essel, 2018). Studies on the economic impacts of the wax print companies in Ghana abound. The Ghana textiles and garment manufacturing companies contributed about 15% to GDP and employed over 25,000 workers (Quartey, 2006) in postcolonial times. Again, studies have explored the progress and decline of the wax print textiles industry (Quartey & Abor, 2011; Quartey, 2006). However, the design history of the wax

prints design culture in post-independence Ghana has received little scholarly focus. Filling the scholarly gap in African wax print fabric design history is important in increasing documentation of Ghana's textile design history. This would help in appreciating Ghana's contribution towards global wax print fabric designs. In the wax print business boom in post-independent Ghana, one of the pioneering textile companies featured strongly in that success story was Akosombo Textile Limited (ATL) now Akosombo Industrial Company Limited (AICL). Yet, there exists little scholarly information on their contribution to wax print design and production in Ghana. Therefore, the study traces the wax print fabric design and production history of Akosombo Industrial Company Limited (AICL). It is aimed at highlighting the major fabric design and production contributions of AICL for over five decades of its existence.

## **2. Review of related literature**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical perspective of material culture in addition to the brief history of wax print in and outside Ghana shaped the lens of this study. Material culture theory was used in guiding the theoretical lens of the study. Material culture theory concerns the beliefs-values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time and how they inspire artworks or objects produced. It operates with the view that objects or artworks created in the past are a source of historical occurrences that continue to exist in the present; and give relevant information of, and about the past. They provide an opportunity by which humans encounter the past firsthand and have a direct sensory experience of surviving historical events (Prown, 1982). Glassie (1975) has indicated that only a small percentage of the world's population is and has been literate (that is the ability to read and write) and that the people who write literature or keep diaries are atypical. Objects are used by a much broader cross-section of the population and are therefore potentially a more wide-ranging, more representative source of information than words. They offer the possibility of a way to understand the mind of the great majority of nonliterate people, past and present, who remain otherwise inaccessible except through impersonal records and the distorting view of a contemporary literary elite (Glassie, 1975). It is imperative to understand material objects and artworks in African wax print fabric design as important in increasing Ghana's textile design history.

## 2.2. Brief history of wax print

Legend has it that the Yoruba people of Nigeria as well as the Soninke and Wolof ethnicities in Senegal in Africa practised wax-resist dyeing technique as a form of fabric decoration. The technique was handled skilfully in dying textiles to create distinctive designs. *Adire* fabric design of Nigeria, specifically amongst the Edo and Yoruba people is an example. Amubode (2009, p. 246) explained that the technique involves a 'process of protecting some areas of the fabric from the penetration of dye to create a light pattern on a dark background.' Two methods are mainly used to produce resists dyeing fabrics: tie-dye or batik.

Wax prints could be classified into, *real wax* (genuine wax print with duplex effect) and *imi wax* (Uqalo, 2015). Uniwax, Woodin, GTP, Chitenge, Veritable Java Print, Guaranteed Dutch Java Hollandis, Abada, Ankara, Real English Wax, and Ukpo (Akinwumi, 2008) are some of the wax print brand names in some African countries. Others are Lappa (Liberia, Sierra Leone), Wrappa, Pagne (Francophone West Africa), and Kanga (East Africa) (International Bicycle Fund, 1995), among others. Available studies trace the origin of the wax print to Indonesia. However, the term *African print* is used broadly to describe fabrics that are machine-printed with wax resins and dyes to generate a batik effect on both sides of the cloth, as well as those fabrics that imitate or mimic the wax-type effects. Sylvanus (2007) posited that the introduction of the European-produced wax fabric for the West African market has a long history of imitation and trade, linking Africa to Europe and Asia. Essel (2017) opined that the term *African print* was coined in reference to the Dutch wax print sold in Africa, and later evolved to include wax print fabrics of African-based printing firms. But, 'from the inception of Africa prints in Africa, there has been extensive use of nature-based design elements that were styled from non-African traditions. This shows that the term *African print*, a misnomer was coined by non-African producers just to deceive the African buyers' (Essel, 2017, p. 42). The deceit has persisted up to the present day. This was confirmed by Sylvanus (2007) that European-produced wax print does not any less represent African-ness than the Victorian corset dress represents Englishness. Various sources believed to be the true early entry points of wax print onto the African market have been given. Nielsen (1979, p. 467) argued that "Specialty African prints" is a broad phrase that is interchangeably used with "Manchester cloth" and "African prints" to denote cloth created in Europe for the African market. Regardless of the technology employed, its origin, and the designers' backgrounds, whether the designers are affected by some features of long-established African cloth design technology or not, once their target market is the African market, they loosely label the fabric as African Print

just to induce the African buyer (Essel, 2017). To this end, Essel (2017) made a definitional attempt at the term African print, referring to prints of African origin and contemporary prints by African people, other than wax print.

Essel (2017), again, argued that the Dutch wax print was brought to Africa as a *cash crop* by European traders and missionaries and, therefore, not inherently African, as perceived. Initially machine-made batiks were produced for the Indonesian and European markets but the customers considered it as inferior to the handmade one which has originality. When these fabrics were rejected by the intended consumers, they were pushed onto the African market (Sylvanus, 2007), hence causing the growth of the product in the African market. Trading European and Asiatic wax prints in the African market does not make them African prints.

### **2.3. Brief history of wax print in Ghana**

With the independence of Ghana in 1957, changes occurred in West Africa. Kwame Nkrumah promoted the development of a local textile industry resulting in establishment of a state-owned company for spinning and weaving cotton in 1959 (Hagen-jurkowitsch & Sarley, 2010). Kwame Nkrumah's initiative of the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) led to the establishments of many industries to produce for local consumption. Among these industries established was the textile industry.

Textile companies established within the period of 1960 to 1970 include Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) at Akosombo, Ghana Textile Printing Company (GTP) at Tema, Ghana Textile Manufacturing Company (GTMC) at Tema, Tema Textiles Limited (TTL) at Tema and Juapong Textiles Limited (JTL) at Juapong (Safoa, 2019). This was confirmed by Axelsson (2012) as cited in Essel (2017) that the Nkrumah led government signed an agreement with UAC (representing the Anglo-Dutch-African Textile Investigation Group) and Unilever on July 16, 1964 to establish Ghana Textile Printing Company Limited (GTP) to produce African wax prints, fancy and java prints. The Cha Textiles Group which took charge of Akosombo Textiles Ltd (ATL) from a Swiss firm (Axelsson, 2012 as cited in Essel, 2017).

Quartey and Abor (2011) asserted that nearly two decades after independence, the textile sub-sector was the major key player in Ghana's industrial sector, contributing significantly to employment and growth in the economy at the time. The Nkrumah factor of Africanising the wax print through his local

and foreign trade policies that attempted an inculturation of the wax print technology contributed to job creation (Essel, 2017). In the process of localizing wax prints, newly independent African nations began to add images of national heroes/heroines, such as traditional leaders and presidents, into the fabric design to honour them (Picton, 1995) and other traditional symbols were also featured.

### **3. Methodology**

Historical research design was used. This method was used because it involves a systematic and objective location, evaluation, and synthesis of evidence to establish facts and draw conclusions about past events. It also aimed at showing the importance of past event in present, which may inform the future. It, again, allows for study of complex relationships between historical context and culture (Lundy, 2008). Expert purposive sampling was adopted as a sampling technique. In all sixteen (16) respondents were selected which comprised of designers, production managers, sales representatives and the general managers. Semi-structured interview and document review was used to collect the data while available artefacts formed part of the data collected. Historical and document analyses were used in the data analysis process. Historical analysis was chosen because it is applied to available evidences that focus on change and time in giving the historical perspective. Document analysis was used to get in-depth understanding and produce reliable and informed outcome. In tracing the history of the ATL, information relating to the name of current club of designers in active service and the names of the respondents have been withheld for ethical reasons. The name Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) and Akosombo Industrial Company Limited (AICL) have been used synonymously in this study.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. History of ATL Designs**

Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) started production in 1967. They started by introducing their first designs named *ABC designs*, which was purely wax print. At that time, pure wax print was done outside Ghana. Their designers were outside the country (i.e. in Manchester) where the fabrics are designed, printed and brought to Ghana for marketing. This implied that the designing and production were not done in Ghana. The printed fabrics were brought to the country for sales purposes. Doing the designing and production outside Ghana created many jobs for people involved. In effect, though the people of

Ghana patronised the fabrics, it created little job opportunities in comparison to the country where the fabrics were designed and print before transporting them to Ghana. Nielsen (1979) affirmed that the term *African print* was used interchangeably with *Manchester cloth* to denote cloth created in Europe for the African market. As a marketing strategy the company collaborated with the retailer-market women who ascribed local names to the fabric to attract the Ghanaian buyers. Examples of the local names ascribed to the designs were *Akyekyede*, *Ekyir*, *Dua kor gye ehum ebu*, *Afe Bi Ye Asan*, among others. The designs were done in the UK by the Manchester group called Group Design Corporation (GDC).

When the designers (Group Design Corporation) designed, they sent it to England for printing which birthed the name *English wax*. The designers observed that the local names ascribed to the foreign-design wax print by the Ghanaian retailer-collaborators increased sales and patronage. The retailer-collaborators were predominately women alternatively referred to as *Cloth Mummies* perhaps due to their dominance in the cloth/fabric selling business in Ghana. Per Ghana's dress culture, fabrics are important lifestyle needs of much socio-cultural relevance. At the initial stages, the local names ascribed to the fabric were done after they fabrics have found their way onto the Ghanaian market. Later designs showed the local names incorporated and printed as part of the design of the fabrics. The local fabric names contributed by the retailer-collaborators were drawn from epochs, ethos, proverbs, aphorisms, visual symbolisms and cosmic worldview. As a result, the names were amusing, satirical, controversial, or cast innuendos and preached good deeds (Essel, 2017).

After the independence of Ghana in 1957, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, in his quest for the industrialization of the country went on agreement with textiles companies to partner the country for the production of textiles locally which contributed to the establishment of Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL), Ghana Textiles Print (GTP), Tema Textiles Limited (TTL) and Juapong Textiles Limited (JTL) (Safoa, 2009). Hagen-jurkowitsch and Sarley (2010) confirmed that President Kwame Nkrumah promoted the development of a local textile industry with the result that in 1959 the establishment of a state-owned company for spinning and weaving cotton was financed. ATL imported fabric printing machines, and began the production of fancy print alongside the importation of ABC wax print.

At the designing studio, the designers at ATL 'crack' the design using brush and ink because at the time there were no computers for the production of designs. If they (designers) wanted to produce an institutional cloth, for example, they took the logo, drew it with the hand and made sure they got the repeat right. After getting the repeat right, photocopies were made, joined them to get the full size they wanted to print. After getting the print size, if two (2) or three (3) colours are to be made, they had to do colour separation for all the colours, paint everything with their hand, photocopy them, positioning them well and put it unto the 'plotter' (which is like the screen development box for screen printing). Certain chemicals were put on a compartment of the plotter for it to develop the film which was then used to develop the screen. The screen was then sent to the rotary printing machine for printing. ATL started with rotary printing machine and old java printing machine.

The introduction of computers for designing started at ATL around the 1990s with software such as Adobe photoshop and CorelDraw, for their design production alongside the drawing and painting which was manual production. After the designs have been produced from the computers, they were sent to the plotter to develop the design into a film which was then used on the screen engraver to etched the design unto the screen for printing. All these periods, it was under the management of the *Cha Group* which has other subsidiaries in other African countries specifically Togo, Nigeria, Benin and Congo. The *Cha Group* had both designers outside the country as well as other designers in the country producing designs for local production. At the same time, they (Cha Group) were designing and producing both in England and Ghana as ABC wax and ATL java print respectively to augment the high demand of Ghanaians and other African countries.

With the introduction of new management which is Akosombo Industrial Company Limited (AICL) in 2018, the designing and production of ABC wax print and ATL java print have been solely handled by locals without any foreign hands as it was during the *Cha Group* period. The ABC designs are produced by fusing classical designs with other designs to come out with entirely new designs for the production which is numbering over 19,000 designs. ABC wax print has two (2) main designs namely: *Standard Wax* and *Super Wax*. Figure 1 shows 19,837th position of the design produced from 1967 to 2022.





**Figure 1:** The 19,837th position of the design produced. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)

#### 4.1.1. Standard Wax

Apart from the base (background) colour, standard wax designs have not more than two (2) additional colours. The colours are either *marble fitter* or *solid fitter*. There are two (2) categories of the standard wax: *Standard Block I* and *Standard Block II*. Standard Block I designs attract one colour in addition to the background colour (Figure 2) while Standard Block II designs use two (2) colours in addition to the background colour (Figure 3). The number of colours used determine the category of a design.



2 (A)



2 (B)

**Figure 2 (A & B):** Examples of Standard Block I. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)



3 (A)



3 (B)

**Figure 3 (A & B):** Examples of Standard Block II. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)

#### 4.1.2. Super Wax

Apart from the base (background) colour, three (3) other colours are added in the case of *Super wax* (Figure 4). The difference between the *standard wax* and the *super wax* is the number of colours and not the designs. Wax print hardly make use of more than three (3) colours apart from the background colour. In other words, apart from the background colour, maximum of three colours are used in the fabric production.



4 (A)



4 (B)

**Figure 4 (A & B):** Samples of Super Wax fabric print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)

### 4.1.3. Fancy Print

The fancy print of ATL has lots of ranges, amongst them are *treasure*, *da viva*, *coloured fancy print*, *kente print*, *institutional cloth*, *Black and white*, *black with other colour variations*. The fancy prints are wide range of designs that meet the pockets of various categories of customers who could not afford the pure wax prints. They are also designed for affordability purposes. It comes with designs that tends to satisfy the visual curiosity and youthful design explorations. *Treasure* fabrics (Figure 5) are printed with pigment like acrylics and not the usual dyestuff used in fabric printing at the industrial settings. *Da Viva* (Figure 6), for example, was introduced to test the market to give customers wide range of designs choices and ended up doing well in Ghanaian and other African countries. *Colour fancy* (Figure 7) centre on playing psychedelic visual encounter with customers through the use of interesting colour scheme. *Kente print* of ATL (Figure 8) draw its design inspiration from existing kente designs of Ghana. This category of designs is usually a replication of woven kente designs into print. Original Kente fabric are expensive and considered as a unique fabric to be included in one's wardrobe. Putting the kente patterns into print reduces the cost of its usual woven production technique and makes it affordable for customers. *Institutional cloths* (Figure 9) are designed upon request by individuals, schools, churches, companies, amongst others, for their use. The are more of custom-made designs for customers. *Black and White* designs (Figure 10) are mostly used for thanksgiving, outdooring and other joyous celebration ceremonies. They are also used for funeral purposes. Closely related to the *Black and White* designs are *Black and Gold* (Figure 11), *Black and Brown* (Figure 12) and *Black and Red* prints (Figure 13). In Ghana's notion of colour, the reds and black are associated with sadness, mourning, death and grief while white is associated with joy and purity. The choice of colour in this category depends on the intended uses by the customer.





5 (A)



5 (B)

**Figure 5 (A and B):** Samples of Treasure Fancy Print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022).



6 (A)



6 (B)

**Figure 6 (A and B):** Samples of Da Viva print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)



7 (A)



7 (B)

**Figure 7: (A and B):** Samples of Coloured Fancy Print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)

**Kente Print** – Replication of woven Kente designs into a print



8 (A)



8 (B)

**Figure 8 (A & B):** Samples of Kente Prints. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)



**Figure 9:** Sample of Institutional Cloth. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)

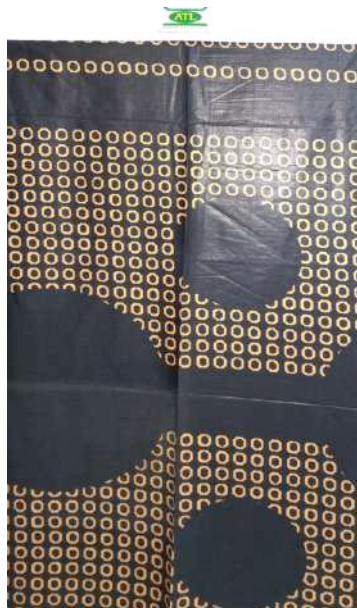


**Figure 10:** Sample of Black and White print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)





**Figure 11:** Sample of Black and Gold print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)



**Figure 12:** Sample of Black and Brown print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)



**Figure 13:** Sample of Black and Red print. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)

#### **4.2. Designers for AICL**

Before the introduction of computer software for fabric designing in AICL in the 1990s, the Ghanaian designers who started the designs with brush and paint were Augustine Djah, Edward Obeng, Philip Edu-Gyemfi, David Boafo, Samuel Agubilah, Joseph Owusu Ansah and Henry Nkrumah. These designers were pioneers in the use of manual rendition in fabric designing.

Currently, there are eight (8) designers working in the company (AICL). Four (4) out of the eight (8) do the creation of the design, two (2) do the copying (separation of colours) of the designs while one (1) is at the Accra branch who deals directly with the customers and relay the needed information to the Akosombo branch for the final designing to the requirement of the customer(s) and finally printing them in Akosombo in the Eastern Region where the printing machines are installed. One of the designers plays supervisory role in the day-to-day design work of the company.



### 4.3 Design inspiration and motif arrangement

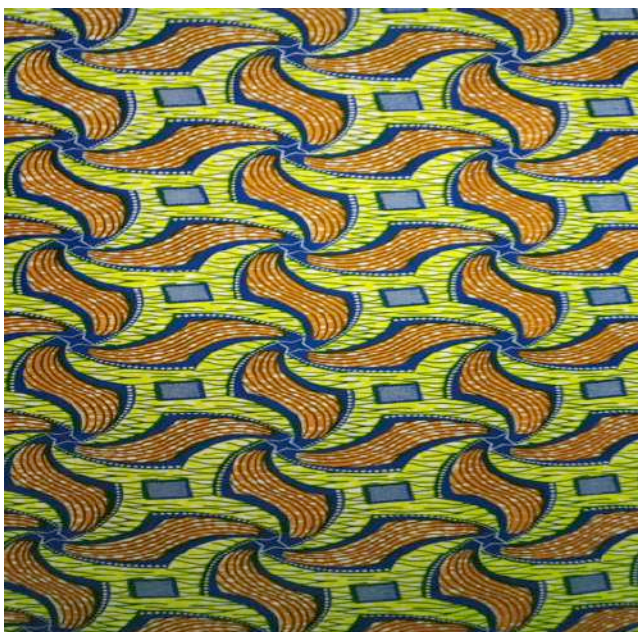
The designs/motifs are mostly derived from varied sources including classical designs (designs that are more than 10 years with timeless aesthetic value), online (special site that cannot be disclosed), nature (environment) and library and archives. *Ground motif* (Figure 14), *selvedge-to-selvedge* (Figure 15), *fusion* (Figure 16) and *border to border* (Figure 17) are industrial motif arrangements that are used. Ground motif arrangement shows authoritative presence of the motif. In other words, the motifs appear bigger and become the central focus of the entire design. The textures used are easily identifiable in such arrangement. With *selvedge-to-selvedge* motif arrangement, the design runs from one selvedge to the other as the name implies. *Fusion* features the background and the motifs well fused together to form a cohesive whole.



**Figure 14:** Sample of ground motif arrangement. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)



**Figure 15:** Sample of Selvedge to selvedge motif arrangement. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)



**Figure. 16:** Sample of fusion motif arrangement. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)





**Figure. 17:** Sample of border-to-border motif arrangement. (Source: AICL, Fieldwork, 2022)

#### **4.4. Challenges faced**

Apart from high cost of electric power, erratic power supply, high cost of raw materials, inadequate stability of the Ghanaian currency, there is high rate of piracy of design by Asiatic companies, a phenomenon that rubs ATL of its intellectual property in terms of designs. In order to curb the copying of the designs by the Asiatic companies, the government instituted a taskforce made up of staffs from all the textiles companies to identify their designs coming into the country and seizing those designs and subsequently burning them during President J. A. Kuffour's era (2000 -2008). Later, the taskforce had lots of criticisms and backlashes that made the taskforce malfunctional.

## 5. Conclusions

Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL), now Akosombo Industrial Company Limited (AICL) is one of the pioneering wax print design and production giant in Ghana. It began its operation in 1967 and has remained resilient in the face of the global economic challenges. Since 1967 to 2018, AICL has produced two (2) main types of designs: ABC Wax designs and Java designs. ABC Wax designs were designed in Manchester and printed in England hence its name *English Wax* while Java designs were designed and printed in Ghana. Though the ABC Wax designs were foreign English wax, the local names ascribed to them by the Ghanaian retailer-collaborators contributed to increased sales and patronage. When local production began, local fabric names of sociocultural relevance became a prominent feature incorporated into the fabrics. To share its design contribution with the fabric design fraternity, AICL should prioritize the creation of fabric design catalogue from 1967 to 2022 for reference, and teaching and learning of designing in Textiles and Fashion related schools in Ghana. The creation of such a catalogue will serve as resource material for analysis on the ABC wax print designs and Java design and to establish how they appertain to Ghanaian culture; as well as for fabric design idea development.

The use of computerised designs by the company began in the 1990s which complemented the manual style of fabric design. The designing and production of ABC wax print and ATL java print locally without any foreign hands began in 2018. ABC wax print comprised of *Standard Wax* and *Super Wax*. From 1967 to 2022 the company produced its 19,837 design and still counting. The number of colours used determined the category of a design - *standard wax* or *super wax*. Wide range of fancy prints that offer consumers with different designs options to select from are designed and produced locally by ATL. They include *treasure, da viva, coloured fancy print, kente print, institutional cloth, black and white, black with other colour variations*. There is the need to conduct studies on consumer preferences and patronage of the fabric designs on the market for the purpose of diversifying the designs where necessary to give the company more competitive urge on the consumer market. Management of the AICL should consider forming partnership with the textiles and fashion-oriented universities such as University of Education, Winneba (UEW), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) and Takoradi Technical University for purpose of research into new textiles material exploration, market survey, amongst others.

Early fabric designers of ATL were Augustine Djah, Edward Obeng, Philip Edu-Gyenfi, David Boafo, Samuel Agubilah, Joseph Owusu Ansah and Henry Nkrumah whose creative contributions helped the company. Conducting studies on the design concepts, styles and techniques and their major creative contributions to textiles designing would serve as a viable resource material for teaching and learning, and to help know the creators of the fabric designs people consume.

The company faces a wanton piracy of its products by Asiatic companies, in addition to the high cost of electric power, erratic power supply, high cost of raw materials, and high exchange rates. Laws are formulated to spur on development. Government should impress on law enforcement agencies to enforce the Patent Act, 2003 (Act 657) and the Copyright Act, 2005 (Act 690) to protect Ghanaian businesses in terms of their intellectual property.

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