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## NEEDLEPOINT TECHNIQUE AS A MEDIUM FOR CULTURAL EXPRESSION: A CASE STUDY OF THE BAMAYA DANCE IN TEXTILE ART

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### Abstract

*The needlepoint technique, a decorative textile art traditionally used in upholstery and surface design, remains underexplored within Ghana's tertiary textile education despite its potential for artistic innovation and cultural preservation. Similarly, the Bamaya dance of the Dagomba people, renowned for its symbolic costumes, rhythmic movements, and historical depth, has received limited scholarly attention as a source of design inspiration. This study bridges these gaps by employing the needlepoint technique to reinterpret the aesthetic and symbolic features of the Bamaya dance into a contemporary textile-based interior décor piece. Adopting a qualitative, practice-led methodology, the research integrated studio experimentation, iterative reflection, and design refinement. Selected Bamaya motifs, colour schemes, and movement patterns were analysed and translated into needlepoint compositions using computer-aided design (CAD) software for pixelation, colour mapping, and stitch planning. Production processes included canvas preparation, sequential stitching, background filling, motif outlining, and finishing. The resulting wall hanging demonstrated that needlepoint, enhanced by digital tools, can effectively convey the movement, symbolism, and visual rhythm of the Bamaya dance. The work proved aesthetically appealing, durable, and contextually appropriate for interior branding, particularly in educational or cultural settings. The findings underscore the potential of integrating indigenous cultural expressions with contemporary textile practices to enrich creative pedagogy, promote skill diversification,*

*and support the revitalization of Ghanaian traditional arts. The paper recommends that the integration of traditional cultural expression with modern textile methods provides a valuable pedagogical model for future textile design education, encouraging culturally responsive creativity and innovation.*

**Keywords:** *needlepoint technique, textile art, Bamaya dance, cultural symbolism, Ghanaian crafts*

## **1. Introduction**

Needlepoint is a specialized embroidery technique used to create decorative designs on fabric or canvas with yarn or thread. It is a distinct method within textile production (Sarpong, 2016) which falls under decorative techniques. As an embroidered textile technique, needlepoint is commonly associated with surface design, upholstery, and decorative panels. According to Christensen (2015), needlepoint, also known as canvas work, involves stitching yarn onto a rigid open canvas to form large patterns or images. Belfer (2012) states that needlepoint is a valuable technique for producing unique and detailed designs that enhance textile products. Historically, needlepoint dates back to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, where artisans used needle and thread to decorate garments and tents. Auther (2009) highlights that fibre arts, such as needlepoint challenges the long-standing division between art and craft, asserting its legitimacy as an expressive and critical art form. Despite its cultural and artistic value, needlepoint has often been categorised as a domestic craft rather than fine art. Miller (2007) explains that needlepoint's structured design and geometric precision distinguish it from other textile forms.

In Ghana's tertiary textile educational curriculum, needlepoint is still negligible despite its potential for creativity, design research, and cultural expression. Opportunities to incorporate culturally based creative methods into modern interior design and textile teaching are, therefore, still underutilised (Adikorley, 2013).

Bamaya is a traditional dance of the Dagomba people in Northern Ghana. The term "Bamaya" means "the valley is wet" in Dagbani. According to the Tamale Cultural Centre (2019), the dance originated in the early 19th century to celebrate the end of a severe drought. The people performed rituals to appease the gods, during which men dressed in women's attire to symbolise humility and gratitude. The rain returned, and the community commemorated the event through this dance. Bamaya continues to be performed during festivals, funerals, and national celebrations as a symbol of joy and cultural pride (Graphic Online, 2025).

Traditionally performed only by men, Bamaya features feminine costumes, graceful hip movements, colourful attire, and rhythmic drumming (Alhassan, 2013). The performance is often preceded by storytelling that conveys moral lessons and social values. The dance movements, attire, and musical instruments hold symbolic meanings that reflect Dagomba beliefs (Asante & Nketia, 2000). Although these rich visual and performative elements are central to Dagbon culture, they have not been widely explored or translated into textile art. According to Nii-Yartey (2005), traditional dances such as Bamaya serve both entertainment and educational functions, transmitting indigenous knowledge and cultural norms. Yet

globalisation and modernisation threaten their continuity. This study seeks to reinterpret the cultural elements of the Bamaya Dance to create symbolic interior décor pieces.

This study seeks to reinterpret the cultural elements of the Bamaya dance, its costume motifs, colour schemes, and rhythmic patterns through the needlepoint technique. Drawing inspiration from the dance's visual and symbolic features, the study employs stitched surface design to produce a wall décor that demonstrates how indigenous cultural forms can be transformed into contemporary textile artefacts. Additionally, the study investigates the application of needlepoint as a textile technique capable of enhancing creative expression and practical skill development. By doing so, it advocates for the inclusion of needlepoint within the curricula of Ghanaian tertiary institutions.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1 Needlepoint and Contemporary Relevance**

A vital and developing medium within textile art, needlepoint and embroidery are distinguished by their rich historical background, vibrant modern techniques, and essential roles in identity building and therapeutic uses (Nahar, 2025). Needlepoint involves stitching yarn through a stiff, open-weave canvas to create patterned surfaces or pictorial designs. Historically used for upholstery and ecclesiastical decoration, it has evolved into a versatile medium for modern craft, textile art, and interior design (McGreeghan, 2025). Its origins date back to ancient Egypt, where small slanted stitches were used on tents and other fabrics, later becoming decorative upholstery in Europe during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries (Fred, 2024). In the contemporary context, needlepoint has shifted from purely functional or domestic craft to an expressive art form. Artists now exploit its rich historical lineage and stitch-based texture to explore identity, cultural narratives, and therapeutic processes (Rothman, 2015). Despite these strengths, needlepoint remains underrepresented in Ghana's textile curriculum. Its decline is partly due to competition from faster, machine-based surface design methods. However, recent trends in handmade crafts, sustainability, and cultural symbolism have renewed interest in slow, process-based textile techniques such as needlepoint.

### **2.2 Bamaya Dance as a Visual and Cultural Expression**

The Bamaya dance originates from the Dagomba people of Dagbon in Northern Ghana, and it is traditionally performed in remembrance of a severe drought that once afflicted the region. Oral traditions continuously emphasise that rains were restored through supernatural appeasement, even if historical reports vary on whether the drought happened in the mid-seventeenth or nineteenth century (Selase, 2019). In these customs, men dressed as women performed ritual dances to call for rain since it was thought that the gods would respond to women's cries more readily (Ayetey, 2009). The rainfall that put an end to the drought is symbolised by the Dagbani term Bamaya, which means "the river or valley is wet" (Ayetey, 2009). According to these traditions, men disguised as women performed ritual dances to invoke rain, as it was believed that women's pleas would be more readily answered by the gods. The name '*Bamaya*', meaning "the river or valley is wet" in Dagbani, symbolises the rainfall that ended the drought (Selase, 2019).

The dance incorporates fans, beads, and cymbal bells, which enhance rhythmic expression and visual appeal (Melloh, 2019). A typical Bamaya ensemble includes lead dancers, supporting

dancers, and drummers, particularly the *luŋa* and *guŋ-gɔŋ* who combine structured rhythms with improvisation (Disphoria, 2015). Beyond its performative function, Bamaya serves as a cultural archive that preserves historical memory, reinforces social values, and promotes group solidarity, making it a rich source of visual and symbolic material for contemporary textile interpretation. Today, the dance is performed at significant social events such as funerals, naming ceremonies, festivals, and chiefly enstoolments. The dance is characterised by expressive waist movements, rapid footwork, and dramatic costuming, the dance visually communicates its historical narrative and communal identity (Saeed, 2015). Textiles play a central role in documenting cultural identity across African societies. Motifs, colours, and patterns often embody historical narratives and social values. Scholars argue that incorporating indigenous symbolism into contemporary textile art strengthens cultural continuity while promoting innovation. Techniques such as weaving, embroidery, appliqué, and beadwork have been used to reinterpret dance, folklore, and traditional rituals.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative, studio-based approach to explore how Bamaya dance imagery can be translated into needlepoint textile art. Studio-based research positions creative making as a method of inquiry, allowing knowledge to emerge through iterative experimentation, reflection, and refinement (Nimkulrat, 2022). Studio-based research is rich with possibilities for contributing to the body of knowledge concerning creative processes primarily because it has at its core ‘making’ disciplines (Marshall, 2010). The research was conducted in a controlled studio environment, enabling systematic testing of materials, stitches, and canvas structures while reflecting on design decisions at each stage. Selected Bamaya motifs, colours, and rhythmic elements were analysed and adapted for needlepoint. Digital tools, including computer-aided design (CAD) software, supported pixelation, colour mapping, and stitch planning, ensuring precision while preserving the expressive quality of needlepoint technique.

#### **3.2 Concept Development**

The Bamaya dance originated from the people of Dagomba, Northern Ghana, and its name means "the river (or valley) is wet." The researchers sought to incorporate the needlepoint technique to interpret the rhythmic movement and motifs of the Bamaya dance by translating its spirals of motion, the tactile jingles of beads, and the ritual inversion into a richly textured textile piece that engages sight and touch. Key symbolic and aesthetic features include men dressed in women's attire, to appease the gods after a drought by showing ritual transformation, and the reversal of roles. Strong waist-twisting, swift footwork, circling drummers. All these aesthetic features were incorporated in the work with the needlepoint technique.

#### **3.3 Tools and Materials**

Each material was chosen for its appropriateness. The main tools and materials used for the procedure include: Plastic Canvas (needlepoint mesh): A plastic canvas with an open-weave grid served as the foundation. Panels measured 36 × 23 inches. The canvas was divided into panels sized to fit the office walls, with a width of 36 by a height of 23 inches.

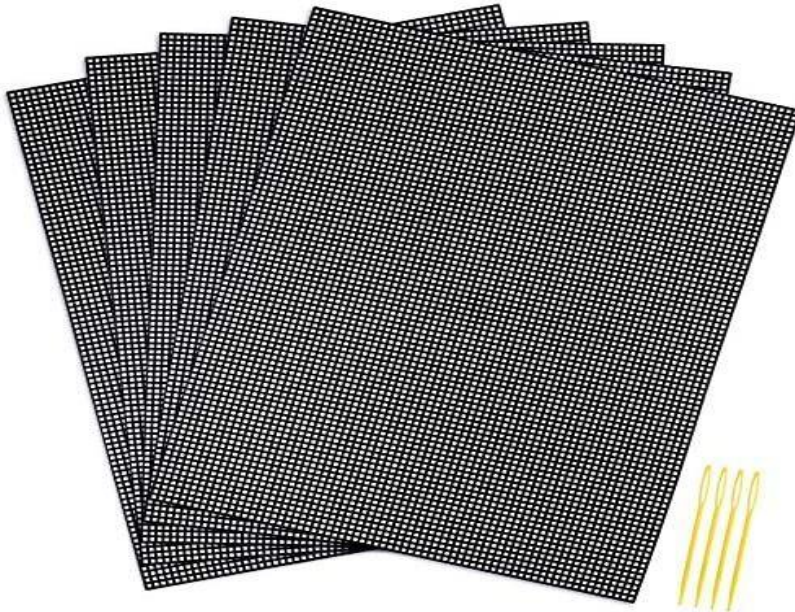


Fig. 3.1 Plastic canvas mesh  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

5 mm Polypropylene (PP) cord: This thick, durable cord was used to serve as the material for the needlepoint technique. for bold, textured stitching.



Fig 3.2 Polypropylene (PP) cord  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

Tapestry needle: A large, blunt-end needle (tapestry needle) will be used to push the 5 mm cord through the canvas grid to accommodate the thick cord.



Fig. 3.2 Tapestry needle  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

Scissors, Stitch Markers, Measuring Tape and Ruler - for accuracy and pattern maintenance



Fig 3.3 Measuring Tape  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Fig 3.4 Scissors



Fig 3.5 Stitch Markers

- The laptop is used to generate the pixelated chart.



Fig 3.6 Laptop  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

- Lighter -for burning the ends of cords to avoid fraying.



Fig 3.6 Lighter

Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

- Jute for filling the background of the work.



Fig 3.6 Jute fibres

Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

### 3.4 Design Procedure

The design process progressed from ideation to the final needlepoint execution. Researchers examined the cultural and symbolic elements of the Bamaya dance, including its movement, rhythm, costumes, and spiritual significance, to establish a conceptual foundation. Multiple design concepts were developed to capture the dance's fluid motions, swirling skirts, and collective harmony. The final piece combined carefully chosen colours, layered textures, and rhythmic stitch directions to convey the vibrancy and energy of the performance. This approach emphasised technical precision while demonstrating needlepoint's potential as a medium for cultural storytelling and contemporary textile expression.

The design process involves the following steps

1. Sketching of the images

2. Selecting the final design
3. Generating a pixelated chart of the images.



Figure 3.1 Bamaya dance made in a sketch  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Fig 3.2 Bamaya dance in CorelDRAW rendition  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Fig 3.9 Bamaya dance in Photoshop  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Design size: 200 x 145 stitches

Fig 3.10 Bamaya dance in FlossCross  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



3.11 Printed chart from FlossCross  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

#### 4. Discussion of Results

##### 4.1 Step-by-Step Procedure for Producing the Wall Decor

The wall-hanging was created through a systematic, practice-led process that translated the visual and symbolic elements of the Bamaya dance into needlepoint textile art. The process began with the selection and digital refinement of Bamaya imagery, removing extraneous background elements to focus on motifs, movement, and rhythm. These images were pixelated using computer-aided design (CAD) software, providing a precise colour map and stitch guide. Plastic canvas was chosen as the foundation, with multiple panels joined to achieve the desired dimensions (36 × 22 inches). The stitching process commenced at the lower edge, employing diagonal stitches with 5 mm polypropylene cord, guided by the pixelated chart. Colour placement was carefully matched to maintain visual consistency and accurately represent the original motifs.

Midway, the canvas was mounted to ensure stability, uniform tension, and easier manipulation of the stitches. Background areas not included in the primary motifs were filled with jute fibres to create texture and depth, while the outlines of the images were accentuated with white cotton cord to enhance clarity and visual emphasis. Throughout the process, iterative reflection guided adjustments to colour, stitch density, and motif representation, ensuring that the final wall-hanging captured the vibrancy, energy, and symbolic significance of the Bamaya dance. This method demonstrated how needlepoint can function as both a technical craft and a medium for cultural storytelling in contemporary textile design, as shown in the plates below.



Plate 4.1 Joining the canvas  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Plate 4.2 Counting the holes



Plate 4.3 (a) Stitching of the work began  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Plate 4.3 (b) Stitching of the work began



Plate 4.4 Stitching the image on canvas.



Plate 4.5 Finished images stitched on the canvas

Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Plate 4.6 Filling in the background.



Plate 4.7 Outlining the images

Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Plate 4.8 Trimming off the excess yarns at the back  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Plate 4.9 The finished stitched work  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Plate 4.10 Installing the finished stitched work  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)



Plate 4.11 Installed wall décor  
Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

The needlepoint wall-hanging successfully interpreted core visual elements of the Bamaya dance, including movement patterns, costume frills, and colour symbolism (Beaman, 2023). The pixelated design retained the cultural integrity of the original imagery while adapting it for stitched execution. The final piece measured 37 inches  $\times$  23 inches and featured rich colour blending, strong motif outlines, and durable surface texture. It was mounted in an office, where its cultural aesthetic enhanced the interior ambience. Observational feedback highlighted its

visual appeal, craftsmanship, and cultural significance. The results demonstrate that needlepoint is a viable medium for expressing indigenous Ghanaian cultural forms (Ebeheakey, 2024). The use of CAD software enhanced precision, motif clarity, and colour mapping, showing the value of integrating digital tools with traditional craft processes. The study also aligns with growing interest in culturally grounded interior décor. By transforming dance symbols into stitched art, the work bridges the gap between performance culture and textile design. This integration supports both cultural preservation and contemporary creative innovation (Oladepo-Ajagbe, 2024). After the execution of the project, a series of analysis was conducted to test the visual appeal, functionality and user response to the refurbished office.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study determines that needlepoint, though underexplored in tertiary institutions in Ghana, provides a powerful medium for cultural storyline design for interior decor. By adopting a studio-based approach, the researcher successfully merged traditional art with modern interior design. The refurbished office is now a witness to how the researcher successfully created a functional, aesthetic and culturally inspired artwork that contributes to the evolution of Ghanaian arts and culture. This study demonstrates that needlepoint, traditionally a decorative textile technique, can effectively serve as a medium for translating and preserving indigenous cultural expressions, specifically the Bamaya dance of the Dagomba people. By integrating digital design tools and a systematic, practice-led approach, the research successfully captured the dance's motifs, rhythmic movement, and symbolic meanings in a visually compelling wall-hanging (Tariq, 2025). The project highlights the potential of needlepoint to merge technical skill, creative exploration, and cultural storytelling, while reinforcing its value in interior branding and contemporary textile design. Furthermore, the study shows that studio-based, iterative experimentation enables a deeper understanding of surface design principles, colour harmonisation, and textile finishing techniques. The study shows that the Bamaya dance can be effectively reinterpreted through needlepoint to create meaningful, culturally inspired interior décor. The use of studio-based research enabled controlled artistic experimentation and systematic design development. The project highlights needlepoint's relevance to contemporary textile art and its potential for revitalisation within Ghana's textile curriculum.

## **6. Recommendations**

The study recommends reintroducing needlepoint into Ghanaian tertiary textile curricula to expand students' creative skills and promote cultural preservation. It encourages further research into adapting additional Ghanaian dances and motifs for textile applications. Incorporating computer-aided design (CAD) into studio-based courses is encouraged to enhance design precision and efficiency. Finally, culturally inspired needlepoint should be extended beyond wall-hangings to interior décor items such as cushions, panels, and room dividers to enrich spaces with indigenous identity and contemporary relevance.

Future developers should incorporate needlepoint techniques into other techniques like beading, applique, tie-dye and tufting, in order to bring innovation to the material used in textiles. Digital needlepoint techniques and embroidery should be investigated in order to improve the effectiveness of the design and accuracy. Local fibres such as jute, bamboo stripes, coil, jute and raffia should be examined to analyse the potential for contemporary needlepoint work as an alternative material. Explore new possibilities through the incorporation of textile technology in traditional craftsmanship to bring innovation.

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