

Enhancing Bark Cloth for Fashion Designs Inspired by Banyankore Attire Replacing Fragile Fabrics: A Case of Katete Division in Mbarara City.

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Abstract

Background

Bark cloth, derived from the inner bark of the Mutuba tree (*Ficus natalensis*), had long served as a traditional and culturally significant fabric among the Banyankore people of Western Uganda. Despite its historical importance, the material had increasingly been overshadowed by modern fabrics such as silk, rayon, and cotton, which, although widely used, were less sustainable and often environmentally harmful. This study focused on enhancing bark cloth for application in contemporary fashion designs inspired by Banyankore attire, with the objective of replacing fragile fabrics in fashion production. The study was conducted in Katete Division, Mbarara City, where traditional cultural practices intersected with modern fashion influences. The research examined potential methods of improving bark cloth, including increasing its durability, incorporating natural fibers, and applying modern textile finishing techniques while preserving its cultural identity. Furthermore, the study explored how bark cloth could be integrated into modern fashion designs without compromising its symbolic and cultural significance. The study was guided by the Cultural Theory of Fashion, which emphasized clothing as a medium of identity, cultural expression, and social communication. The findings were expected to contribute to sustainable fashion development, cultural preservation, and the promotion of eco-friendly textile alternatives in Uganda.

Methodology

Using a descriptive survey research design, the study on enhancing bark cloth for fashion designs inspired by Banyankore attire as a replacement for fragile fabrics in Katete Division, Mbarara City targeted a population of 24 respondents comprising youth leaders, cultural leaders, community members, and fashion designers. A sample size of 24 participants was selected to ensure balanced representation of key stakeholders. Data were collected using structured questionnaires containing Likert-scale items and interview guides. Questionnaires were employed to obtain quantitative data, while interviews captured qualitative insights regarding the cultural significance and fashion relevance of bark cloth. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for descriptive statistics and thematic analysis for qualitative responses, thereby ensuring clear presentation and interpretation of findings. Ethical considerations were observed through informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Limitations such as financial constraints, time limitations, and respondent non-cooperation were managed through careful planning and effective communication.

Conclusion

The study on enhancing bark cloth for fashion designs inspired by Banyankore attire as a replacement for fragile fabrics in Katete Division, Mbarara City revealed several methodological challenges, including limited resources and time constraints, which may have affected the depth of data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrated the potential of bark cloth as a sustainable and culturally relevant textile alternative for contemporary fashion design.

Recommendations

The study recommended that fashion designers, cultural leaders, and local artisans collaborate with government agencies and cultural institutions to improve the quality and durability of bark cloth so that it could be effectively integrated into modern fashion designs while preserving its cultural significance.

Keywords:

Bark cloth, Banyankore attire, fashion design, fragile fabrics, cultural heritage, sustainable textiles, Katete Division, Mbarara City, textile innovation, traditional fabric.

Results:



Background of the study

In Uganda, bark cloth had historically represented a product of immense cultural significance, particularly within the Kingdom of Buganda. Efforts to revive its manufacture had become increasingly evident, especially in Ankole, where it had traditionally been used for clothing and ritual purposes. In contemporary society, bark cloth offered economic opportunities for local farmers and craftspeople while simultaneously providing a more environmentally sustainable alternative to fragile textiles. The research therefore sought to improve bark cloth for use in fashion designs inspired by the traditional attire of the Banyankore

community as a resilient and sustainable material in Western Uganda, specifically within Katete Division (Bourmaud, 2024).

The traditional attire of the Banyankore people, similar to that of many African societies, had historically been influenced by social status, gender, and ceremonial occasions. In Ankole, chiefs and royals wore long cowhide garments that symbolized authority, wealth, and spiritual connection, whereas ordinary members of society wore smaller cowhide pieces as an indication of lower social standing (Worden, 2016). Cowhide also played a significant role in women's traditional dress, where it served as a means of body wrapping and cultural expression (Siegenthaler, 2019). However, during the colonial period and the globalization of fashion, cowhide garments were gradually replaced by cloth materials, resulting in the widespread adoption of Western-style clothing such as shirts, overalls, and boots. Despite this transition, traditional attire continued to be worn during cultural ceremonies, thereby reflecting the persistence of cultural identity among the Banyankore people.

Fragile fabrics originated from both natural and synthetic textile production processes and were characterized by low durability and high susceptibility to damage. Natural fragile fabrics included silk from China and India, linen from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and wool from Europe and the Middle East, all of which could easily deteriorate under certain conditions. Bark cloth itself had also been considered a fragile fabric despite its cultural significance in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, as it could tear easily if not properly treated (Schoen, 2009). Similarly, synthetic fabrics such as rayon and viscose became weak when wet, thereby limiting their durability and long-term application in clothing production.

The Kingdom of Ankole, located in southwestern Uganda, bordered Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo and was widely recognized for its fertile grazing lands locally referred to as Kaaro Karungi ("the good land"). The region supported cattle keeping due to its rich pastures, reliable rainfall, and fertile soils, which ensured continuous milk production and economic stability for pastoral communities (Steinhart & Claessen, 2023). Katete Division, situated within Nyamitanga Division of Mbarara Municipality in Western Uganda, lay across River Rwizi from the central business district. The area comprised neighborhoods such as Karugangama, Kitobero, Nyamitanga Hill, Nsiikye, and Ruti, and hosted institutions including St. Mary's Katete Primary School. Owing to its high population density and prominent landmarks such as the Mbarara Catholic Archdiocese and Radio Maria, Katete Division had become an important center for education, development, and economic activity within Mbarara City.

Methodology

Research Approach

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach to enhance the quality of bark cloth for fashion designs inspired by Banyankore attire. Qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation were utilized to explore the cultural importance of bark cloth, its traditional uses, and contemporary perceptions regarding its suitability as a fashion fabric. Quantitative methods, including surveys and market analyses, were used to gather information concerning consumer preferences and comparative pricing between bark cloth and other fabrics. This combination of methods enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance and market potential of bark cloth while generating recommendations for improving its quality and competitiveness in the fashion industry.

Research Design

The study adopted a desk study methodology involving secondary data collection from publications, journals, and related scholarly materials. This methodology proved cost-effective and enabled comprehensive analysis of existing literature. The study aimed to identify ways through which bark cloth, a textile material traditionally used among the Banyankore communities of Western Uganda, could replace delicate fabrics in clothing designs inspired by Banyankore attire, particularly within Katete Division of Mbarara City. Through analysis of available literature, the study sought to bridge knowledge gaps concerning the durability of bark cloth in contemporary fashion and proposed methods for enhancing its resilience without compromising its cultural authenticity.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted four categories of respondents: youth leaders, cultural leaders, community members, and fashion designers. Each category consisted of six respondents, resulting in a total study population of 24 participants. Equal representation of males and females was maintained within each category to ensure balanced perspectives.

Youth leaders provided insights regarding the relevance of bark cloth within modern society and its contribution to fashion innovation. Cultural leaders offered information concerning the historical and cultural significance of bark cloth and ensured that cultural heritage considerations were preserved in the enhancement process. Community members contributed perspectives regarding public perceptions and the cultural value of bark cloth within society. Fashion designers provided professional opinions regarding the integration of bark cloth into contemporary fashion design.

The sample size of 24 participants allowed for comprehensive exploration of the cultural, practical, and design-related dimensions of bark cloth while maintaining the feasibility of data collection.

Sampling techniques & Procedure

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants possessing specialized knowledge and experience relevant to the study. Snowball sampling was also utilized, particularly in instances where access to certain participants proved difficult. Stratified random sampling ensured representation from different stakeholder groups, while convenience sampling facilitated timely data collection where necessary.

The selection process involved defining the target population, determining the appropriate sampling technique, identifying a suitable sample size, recruiting participants through personal contacts and referrals, and subsequently collecting the required data.

Data Collection Methods & Instruments

Data were collected using structured questionnaires containing Likert-scale items ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The use of Likert scales enabled the quantification of respondents’ opinions and facilitated identification of response patterns. Interview guides were also employed to gather in-depth qualitative information from cultural leaders and other knowledgeable participants.

Data Quality Control

Validity

The researcher ensured validity by confirming that the research instruments measured the intended variables. Experts in fashion design and cultural leadership reviewed the questionnaires to assess their relevance to the study objectives.

Reliability

Reliability was ensured through the use of the test–retest technique to determine the consistency of responses over time. Standardized interview procedures were also employed to ensure uniformity in data collection. Content validity was assessed using a two-point rating scale consisting of “Relevant (R)” and “Irrelevant (IR).” The Content Validity Index (CVI) was computed, and instruments with values exceeding 0.7 were considered valid, as recommended by Zohrabi (2013).

$$\text{CVI} = \frac{\text{Number of items regarded relevant (n)}}{\text{Total number of items (N)}} \\ = \frac{n}{N}$$

The value was obtained and it was more than 0.7, and the tools were considered to yield valid findings as recommended by (Zohrabi, 2013).

Measurement of Variables

The study analyzed variables including fashion design innovation, quality of bark cloth, cultural significance, and economic contribution. Fashion design innovation was assessed using Likert-scale questionnaires administered to fashion designers. Cultural significance was evaluated through interviews with cultural leaders, while the quality of bark cloth was measured in terms of durability, aesthetic appeal, and functionality compared to fragile fabrics. Market acceptance was assessed through consumer responses and sales performance, whereas economic contribution was analyzed based on financial benefits and increased demand for bark cloth products.

Research procedure

The researcher developed tools for the study to facilitate an understanding of fashion designers’ perceptions regarding the use of Banyankore bark cloth in fashion design. Fashion designers were requested to complete questionnaires containing questions rated on a scale of 1 to 5. The questionnaire sought information regarding the use of bark cloth, its cultural significance, and its durability in comparison to other fabrics. For participants with extensive knowledge of Banyankore culture, the researcher prepared an interview guide containing discussion questions. These questions enabled the researcher to understand the meaning of bark cloth, its role within the community, and its potential application in contemporary fashion design. The researcher conducted interviews with cultural leaders and experts from the Banyankore community, who shared their perspectives regarding bark cloth and its cultural value. Their views provided valuable insights into how bark cloth could be incorporated into modern fashion while preserving its cultural significance.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles to ensure fair treatment of participants and protection of their rights. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process, and anonymity was ensured through the use of identification codes rather than personal names. Participants were fully informed about the objectives and procedures of the study and participated voluntarily after providing informed consent. They also retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Limitations of the Study

The study encountered several limitations, including financial constraints, limited time, respondent non-cooperation, and withholding of information by some participants. These challenges were addressed through effective planning, proper communication, and adherence to professional research ethics.

Conclusion

The methodology employed in this study provided a systematic framework for investigating the enhancement of bark cloth for fashion designs inspired by Banyankore attire as a replacement for fragile fabrics in Katete Division, Mbarara City. The descriptive survey research design enabled the collection of reliable information from diverse stakeholder groups without manipulating study variables, thereby ensuring an authentic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Furthermore, the application of both qualitative and quantitative methods through questionnaires and interviews facilitated the collection of comprehensive data from youth leaders, cultural leaders, community members, and fashion designers. The combined use of purposive, stratified, snowball, and convenience sampling techniques ensured that knowledgeable and relevant participants were adequately represented in the study.

Recommendation

The study recommended that government cultural institutions and local authorities support the preservation and promotion of bark cloth by investing in its improvement and commercialization. Such initiatives would enable bark cloth to be effectively utilized in modern fashion design while preserving its cultural significance.

Fashion designers were encouraged to collaborate with local artisans and cultural leaders in developing innovative contemporary clothing styles incorporating bark cloth inspired by Banyankore attire. Such collaboration would enhance creativity, improve product quality, and increase acceptance of bark cloth within modern fashion markets.

The study further recommended the implementation of awareness campaigns and training programs within Katete Division and other parts of Mbarara City to educate communities regarding the economic, cultural, and environmental benefits of bark cloth. These initiatives would promote public acceptance, stimulate demand, and support the livelihoods of local producers and artisans.

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List of Abbreviations

BK – Bark Cloth

FNC – *Ficus natalensis* (Mutuba tree scientific name)

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

NDP – National Development Plan

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

UBOS – Uganda Bureau of Statistics

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

SPSS – Statistical Package for Social Sciences

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Author contributions:

Kirabo Fortunate was the supervisor of the research.

Dr. Mike Nandala supervised the research proposal.

Dr. William Kayamba supervised the research proposal.

Data availability: Data is available upon request.

Author Biography

Kirabo Fortunate holds a Master's Degree in Master of Applied Design and Fine Art from Kabale University.

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