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FABRIC PATTERN DEVELOPMENT AS INSPIRED BY TRADITIONAL HAIRSTYLES FROM THE SAMBURU AND MAASAI COMMUNITIES OF KENYA

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Abstract

This paper reports a study that sought to document the development of fabric patterns that had been inspired by traditional hairstyles drawn from the Samburu and Maasai communities of Kenya. The paper describes hairstyles, a cultural resource from the two communities and highlights their use as a basis of pattern development for printing on fabric. In the visual arts, hairstyles have been explored as sources of inspiration by different professionals. They have done this for documentation, presentation and as foundation for their works. The documentation of the process of design development has however not been adequately done. It is for this reason that a study that sought to document the process of inspiration of designs from the material culture of African Communities was done. Traditional hairstyles of the Samburu and Maasai communities were studied. An exploratory research design was followed. This paper presents that design process and the patterns that were developed before printing on fabric was done.

Keywords: *hairstyles, pattern development*

Introduction

Material Culture is an essential aspect of African societies. Hair grooming and styling, as a material culture practice amongst African societies, has however had little recognition and appreciation in the arts. Historically, hair held important value in the lives of individuals of all ethnicities. It however had heightened worth in traditional African cultures (and in cultures closely related to the African descent) because of the roles it played. Reason for this is the distinctive nature and texture of black hair (Johnson and Bankhead, 2014). Another reason was that hair reflected one's status, gender, ethnic origin, leadership role, personal taste, or place in the cycle of life depending on the way it was worn. Hair was also a medium for chasing bad omen and bad spirits from the society. This was done by cutting hair off and it is worthwhile to note that different communities practised unique hair cutting styles. This made the community barber an influential person in the society. Barbers used to arrange marriages and baptise all children during tribal times. Hairstyles were also used for communication. The Mende, Wolof, Mandigo and Yoruba for example, utilised hairstyles to send a message (Nyambura, 2017). Most other hairstyles were just for beauty: since the fifteenth century Africans have been manipulating their hair into elaborate aesthetic styles by incorporating adornments such as clothes, beads and shells in the styles. From the foregoing, hair and head dressing in Africa has always had a deeper richer meaning than taste and trend. Hairstyles were done purposefully to construct social identities. They were symbolic to individual cultures even though some of the styles were shaped by influences from other cultures. Adiji, (2015) argues that hairstyles are therefore the most universal and inescapable form of body art.

This is because they occur in the context of individuals, human life and culture, ideas and history; they are uniquely distinctive, independent and self-contained, unified, devoid of the extraneous and complete in themselves

Hairstyling had been an African art form that began at birth. As indicated earlier, hairstyling was not only about beauty. It was for much more. Africans saw their hair as an important element of their spirituality and creativity. Men and women committed a lot of time to their hair (Nyambura, 2017). In East Africa, for example, only warriors of the Maasai of Kenya were permitted to wear long hair. This they did by weaving their hair in thin braided strands (Schurz, 2000). Amongst the Samburu, morans too were elected as prominent members of the society and had their hair exemplify the prestigious and vital symbol of their status and manhood in society. Hair was also seen as a source of strength, courage and masculinity. The Samburu Morans had specific hairstyles only for use by their warriors (Nyambura, 2014).

To highlight the hairstyling as a material culture in African societies, the following section of the paper details the different hairstyles of the Maasai and Samburu Morans.

Hairstyles worn by Maasai Morans

The Maasai are pastoralists from East Africa who live semi-nomadic lives. The group is well known for its strong traditions and dedication to cultural preservation. Amongst the Maasai, warriors and non-warriors were differentiated by the hair they wore. Maasai

culture and society is divided into age groups (age-sets) for both men and women, and hairstyles are dictated by these age-groups. Maasai hair is described by cultural traditions, in which each hairstyle reflects the Moran's passage from one life phase to the next, as well as one's social status in society (Bon, 2021). The phases involve:

'Enkipaata' (Pre-circumcision) life phase

This life phase entails a period when the Moran's bird hunt using stones, cubs, and arrows as a means of demonstrating to their family their capability of passing into the next step of life that is circumcision. Hair is shaved completely to symbolise this readiness. The shaven hairstyle is known as '*Embarnoto*' (Bald).

'Emuratta' (Circumcision) life phase

In this phase, hair that grew during the healing period must be shaved to symbolise a new beginning of life and a commencement of the Moran into the next phase of life- initiation rite. '*Olmasi*' is the name given to the hairstyle.



Figure 1 'Olmasi' hairstyle worn by a circumcised boys during the healing process
 Source: masaimara.travel

'Emanyatta' (Warrior initiation ceremony)

During this ceremony, the Morans leave their homes and travel across Maasai land for seven years to learn about their environment. The Morans grow their hair at this time. The warriors' long hair symbolises manly beauty, and their hairstyle is known as **'Oltaika.'** (Fig 2)



Figure 2. Maasai Moran with 'Oltaika' hairstyle
Source: en.freejpg.com.ar

'Olng'esherr' (Junior Eldership)

The period of junior eldership, known as **'Ilmorijo'**, then follows. It is here that the wedding ceremony (**'Enkange ekule'**) takes place. The Moran is shaved to become a junior elder. This is to symbolise a new beginning in his life. **'Embarnoto'** is the hairstyle worn here.



Figure 3. A mother shaves off her Moran son's hair
Source: PD/Manuel Ntoyai

Hairstyles worn by Samburu Morans

The Samburu are quite close to the Maasai in terms of language and culture. The Samburu are a Maa-speaking nomadic community as they are a branch of the Maasai people that sprung from the same stock (Spencer, 2004). The term 'Maa speakers' refers to a large cultural group of herders who share a common language, economy, social structure and history.

The personal decoration of the Samburu is remarkably comparable to that of the Maasai. This can be explained by a common genesis and interaction that moulded their technology and ornamentation practises. Hair is one of the most important forms of decoration. Hairstyles distinguish between age and gender groups of the Samburu. A married woman usually shaves off her hair clean or wears a round hat and shaves roundly from the forehead to above the ears and at the back of the neck to create a circular hairline. 'Kub' is the name of the style (Nyambura, Matheka, Waweru & Nyamache, 2014).



**Figure 4. 'Kub' Hairstyle worn by married Samburu women
Source: marjaschwartz.com**

According to Nyambura *et. al*, (2014), the changes to the Samburu men's hairstyles happens just like it does in the Maasai community when there is a transition from one age group to another.

Circumcision Ceremony

At the start of boys' circumcision ceremony, mothers shave their children's heads leaving a small tuft of hair at the very top of the head. This symbolises the end of boyhood and entry into warrior hood. '*Imanjeu*' is the name given to this hairstyle. (Figure 5)



*Figure 5. Boys wearing the 'Imanjeu' hairstyle.
Source: Nyambura et. al., (2014)*

Moran Stage

Different hairstyles are braided during the Moran stage of the Samburu community. This all depends on the length of the hair. Warriors braid each other's hair for hours on end. The various hairstyles are for the warrior's personal pride. '*Sakara Oirena*' is the name given to virgin hair that is greased and twisted into tiny plaits and divided by separating hair across the centre of the skull. The virgin hair is normally very short.



Figure 6. 'Sakara Oirena' hairstyle worn by Samburu Morans
Source: discoverimages.com

'Sakara Oiaa' is when the hair becomes longer and can be plaited to hang loosely around the neck. 'Ilmasi Wala' is a style in which the hair is parted midway down the back and knotted into pigtailed over the forehead. This hair is referred to as 'Sorrer' if it grows to the hip. The hair can still be pulled back into two long pigtailed known as 'Ilmasi Opiaya'.



Figure 7. 'Sakara Oiaa' and 'Ilmasi Wala' hairstyles
Sources: Nyambura et. al., (2014) and pinterest.com

Hairstyles as inspirations in the Visual arts

According to Aboagye (2017), material culture and hairstyles in particular, has been explored in the visual arts by sculptors, poets, painters, photographers, traditionalists and anthropologists for documentation, presentation and as a basis of their works. A study conducted by Adiji (2015) for example, explored the use of photography as a tool for documenting traditional Nigerian hairstyles for preservation of the images in museums. The process of development of designs from the African traditional material culture inspirations to the final artworks has however not been adequately documented. It is for this reason that a study that sought to document the process of inspiration of designs from hairstyles, a material culture of the Samburu and Maasai communities of Kenya, was done.

Pattern Development

Tortora and Johnson (2014) explain that in the discipline of textiles, patterns are decorative elements of ornamental designs that are done on a piece of fabric and are produced by applying the designs in a specified manner. The patterns are often described in terms of the visual pleasure they produce (Johnstone, 2017). Musa (2019) agrees with this standpoint and states that patterns in the arts are a repetition of specific visual features that are significant for human society because they influence how people perceive objects. Patterns therefore ensure continual interactions with the viewer by enticing them to look at the designs for a much longer time. Mawufemor (2019) writes that patterns are types of themes of repetitive events or objects sometimes known as elements of a set.

The elements tend to duplicate themselves in an anticipated manner (for example block, half-drop, brick and so on) thus producing fundamental patterns that have been built on repetition and regularity.

Patterns are therefore collections of elements or motifs that repeat in a predictable manner to achieve a specific effect or goal. All patterns fall into one of two categories: Geometric or Organic. Geometric patterns are rooted in geometry and are a study of shapes that can be abstracted. On the other hand, organic shapes are of two types: Realistic and Stylised. Patterns that are realistic are repeats of natural items, but those that are stylised are simpler repeats of natural objects (Ivy & Pearl, 2018). An example of these is shown below.



Figure 8. Geometric and Organic Patterns
Sources: [istockphotos.com](https://www.istockphotos.com) and www.africanfabrichouse.com

According to Debeli (2013), patterns in traditional African society represent symbols, proverbs, sayings as well as cultural landscapes and natural items. Patterns were made by employing a unique weaving process in which several fabrics of similar design and colour were woven in strips. Sewers twined the weave strips together to

create a single cohesive design, after which the strips are bonded together to generate the requisite continuous woven fabrics. Stephanie (n.d) also explains that in traditional African society patterns were created by dyeing clothing, sometimes using a substance called a resist that is applied to the surface of the fabric to repel the dye. Patterns can also be made using a stencil or stamp or can be painted or stamped.

Development of textile patterns in this modern era has been influenced by western civilization and technology (Arowolo, 2010). Agu & Ibrahim, 2021 agree that technology has brought about incredible innovation in many areas, the clothing and textile industries being no exception. Designers previously used to work manually using stencil and graph papers but they today produce innovative designs by 'playing' with a mouse or a stylus pen. The outcome of this is not only a rise in speed and increased productivity but also greater precision than the manual procedure (Aboagye *et. al*, 2017).



Figure 9. 'Nkabom' (Unity is Strength)

Source: www.ijird.com retrieved on 12/05/2022

The image in Figure 9 shows a fabric pattern derived from a hairstyle and produced after being designed using CAD software like Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop and Corel Draw in the production of

designs. What is lost however, is the process followed when deriving the pattern from the hairstyle.

Methodology

This paper reports a study that used Computer Aided Design (CAD) software to develop patterns derived from traditional hairstyles from the Maasai and Samburu communities. The study applied exploratory research design. According to Saunders *et. al.* (2007), exploratory research is conducted when there is not enough information regarding an occurrence or an issue that has not been precisely characterised. Brown (2006) on his part states that exploratory research designs are frequently used to determine how best to proceed in investigating a topic that has received little or no prior investigation.

The study this paper reports was studio based with much of the development of the patterns carried out in the art studios at at the Department of Fine Art and Design, Kenyatta University. Secondary sources of data were used to collect information on the traditional hairstyles of the Maasai and Samburu communities. This data was obtained from books, journals and periodicals.

Themes

Themes of study were first developed. These included: pre-circumcision, circumcision, Moran stage and junior eldership. They were then coded into general categories. The categories were based on the kinds of hairstyles Morans had to wear as they moved from one rite to the other. For purposes of discussion, this paper will only present hairstyles worn by Maasai and Samburu Morans during the warrior initiation ceremony of the Moran stage only.

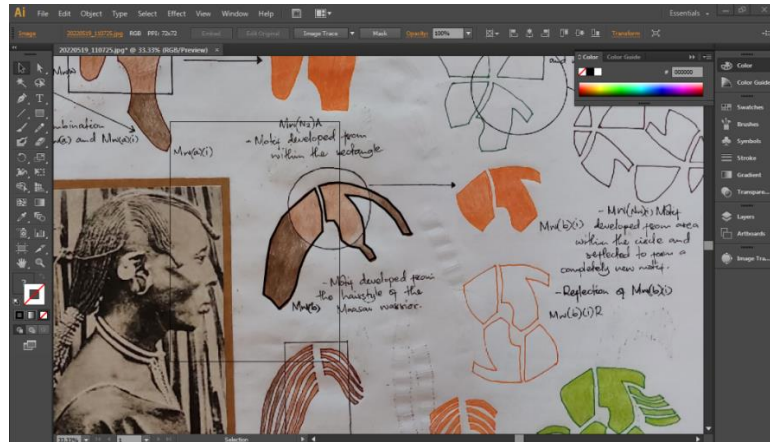


Figure 11. Transfer of the sketch to computer and trace it out using Adobe Illustrator CS6

- c) The alignment of the traced out sketch to make a motif then followed. This process was done using CorelDraw software. (Figure 12)

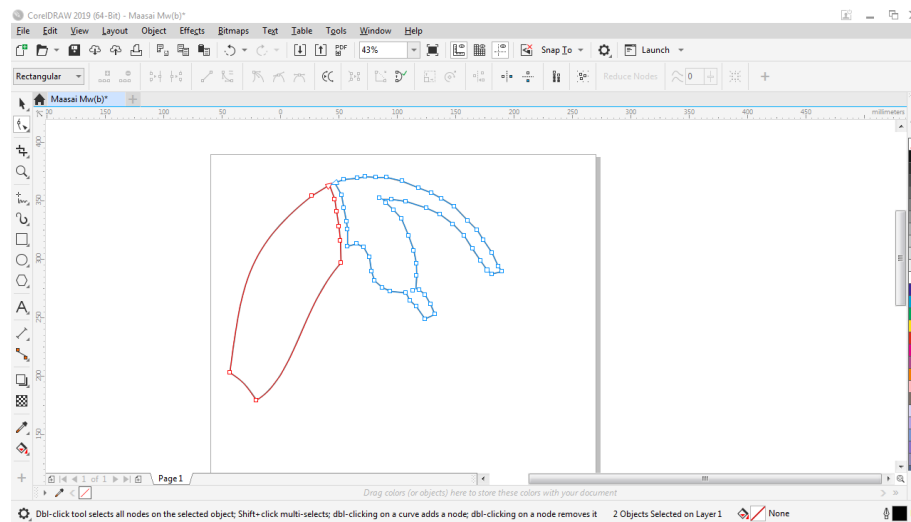


Figure 12. Screenshot showing the alignment of the traced out motif using CorelDraw, 2019

- d) The developed motif was then duplicated into a pattern using the various principles of pattern development in fabric design (Figure 13)

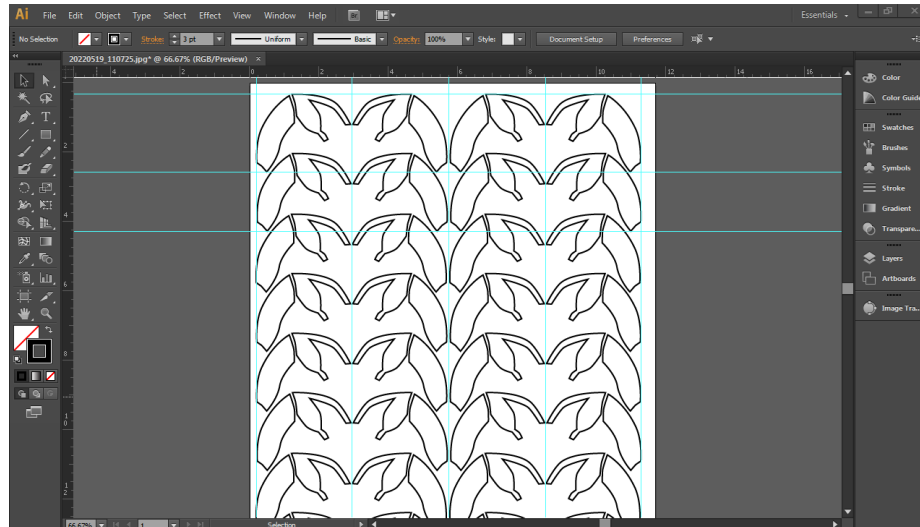


Figure 13. Screenshot showing the development of a pattern from a motif using CorelDraw, 2019

e) Colour was then applied to the pattern using Adobe Illustrator CS6. Figure 14 shows an example from a computer screenshot.

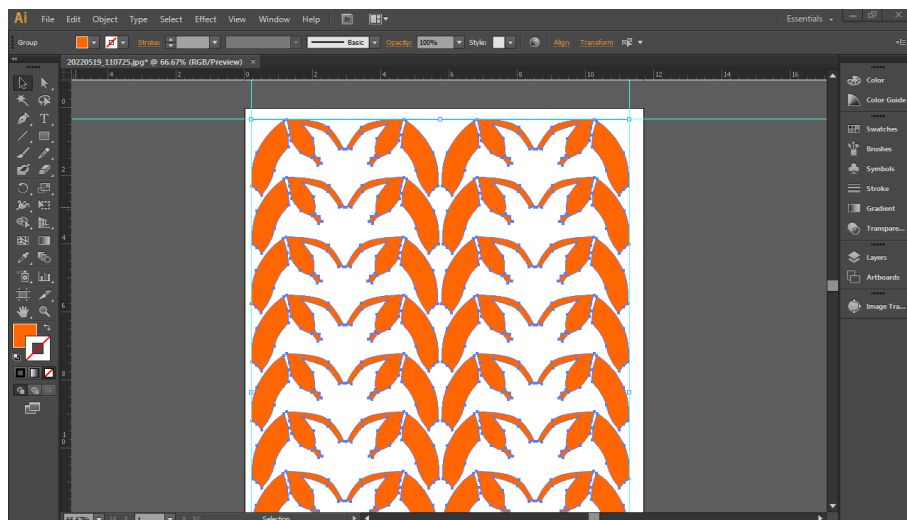


Figure 14. Colour Application using Adobe Illustrator CS6

f) Different computer effects were then applied. In Figure 15 Reflection, Superimposition and Overlay were used to create variety, interest and uniqueness.

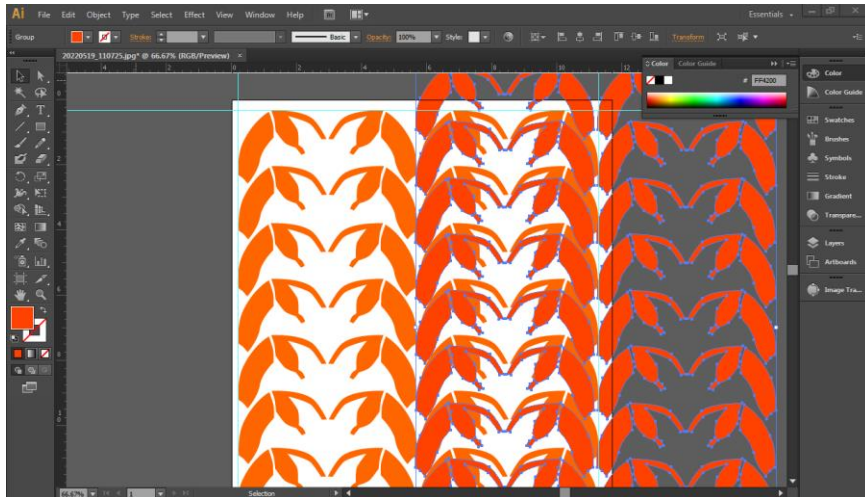


Figure 15. Application of computer effects on the select pattern

g) The process of designing on computer stopped when the desired new pattern was achieved (Figure 16)

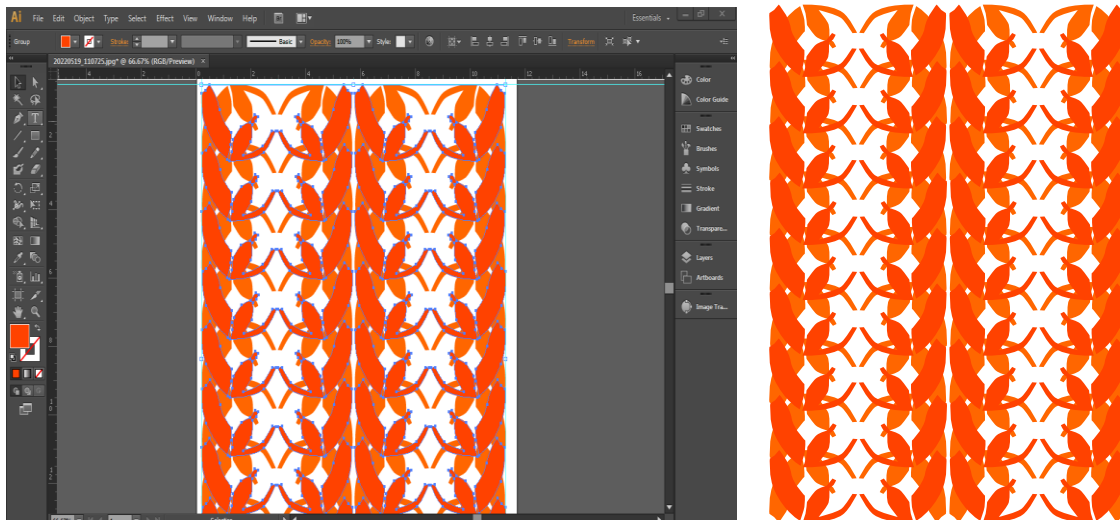


Figure 16. Developed design from Maasai Moran 'Oltaiika' hairstyle

A similar process was followed when developing patterns from hairstyles selected from the Samburu community. An example of the process is shown below:

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a) The Samburu *Sakara Oirena*’ hairstyle was used.

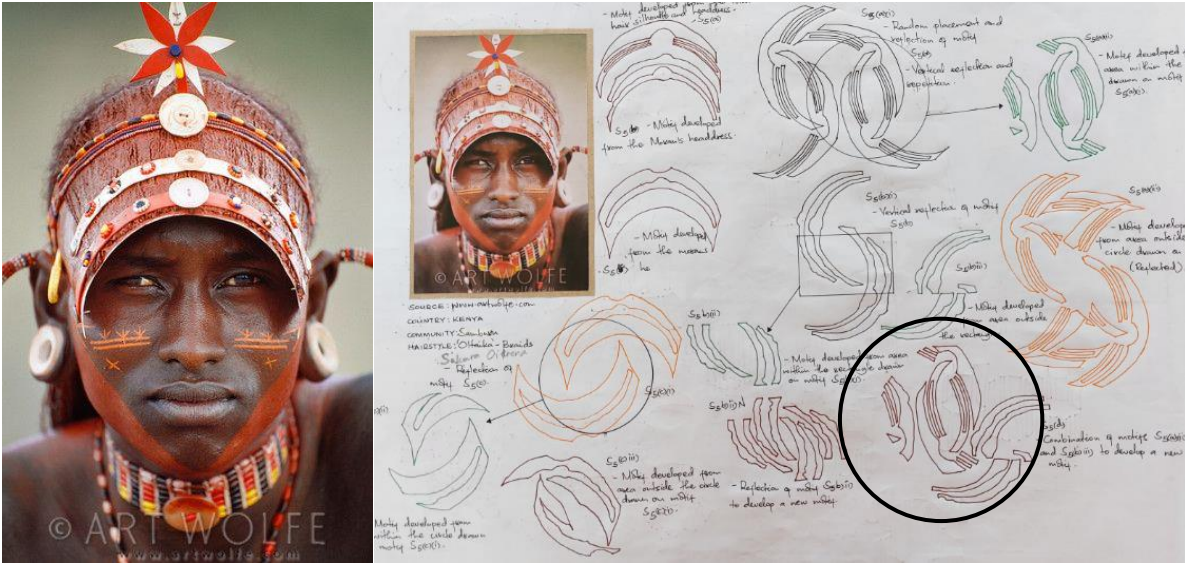


Figure 17. Development of designs from 'Sakara Oirena' hairstyle
Image Source: www.artwolfe.com

b) The sketches were then transferred to the computer and tracing out the design using CAD software.

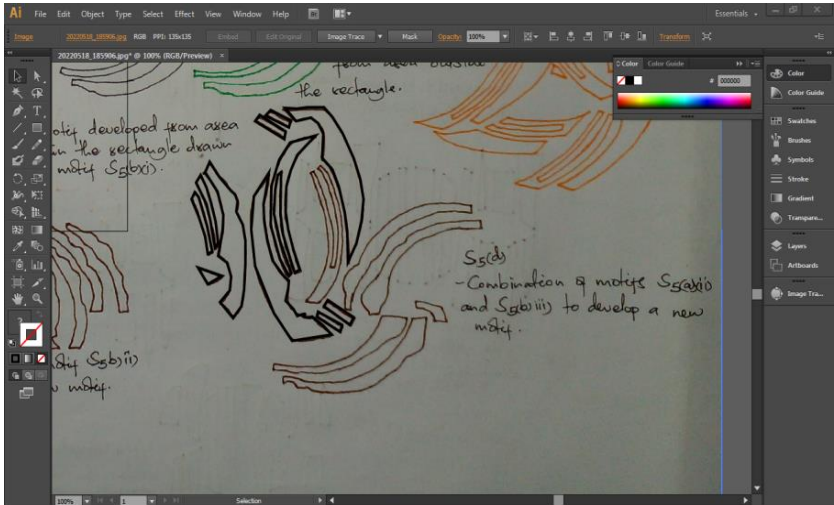


Figure 18. Transfer of the sketch to computer and trace out (Done on Adobe Illustrator CS6)

c) The traced out sketch was then aligned to make a motif.

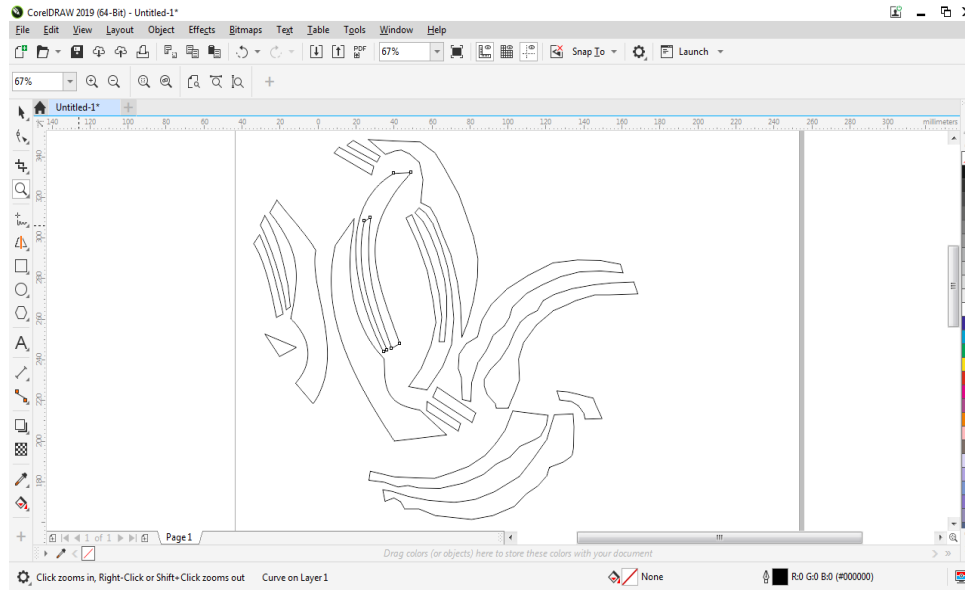


Figure 19. Alignment of the traced out sketch (CorelDraw 2019)

d) The developed motif was then duplicated into a pattern using the various principles of pattern development in fabric design (Figure 20)



Figure 20. Screenshot showing the arrangement of the pattern using Adobe Illustrator CS6

e) Colour was then applied to the pattern using Adobe Illustrator CS6. Colour could be applied in one or more colours. Figure 21 shows screenshots illustration the application of one and two colour to the developed pattern respectively

One colour



Two Colour

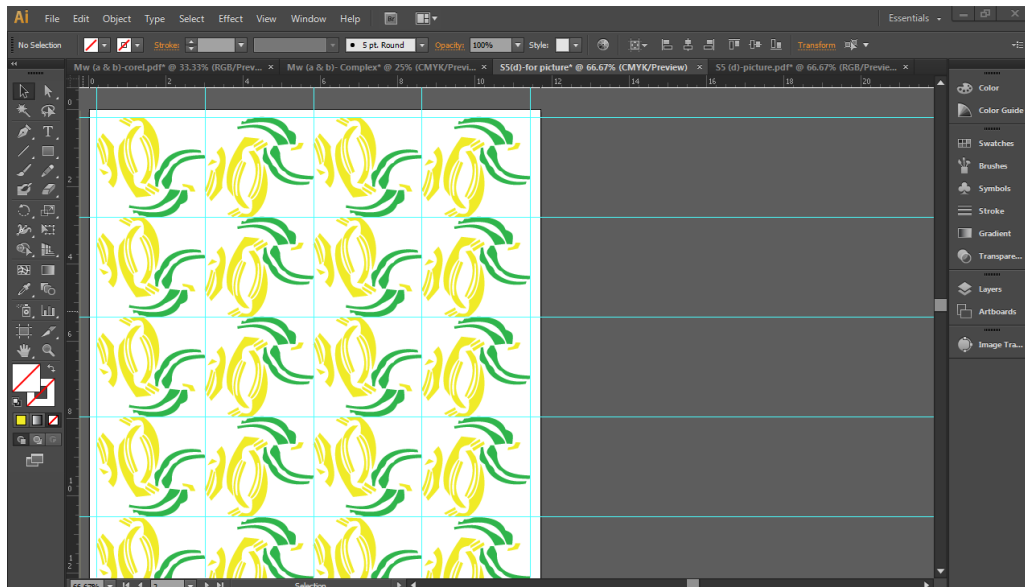


Figure 21. Colour Application to the pattern using Adobe Illustrator CS6

f) After manipulation of the coloured pattern on computer using block reflection the following are the final designs developed from the select hairstyle.

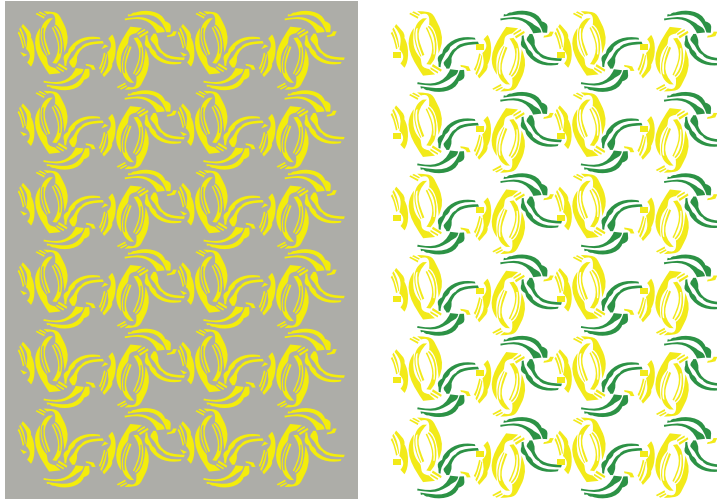


Figure 22. Final design developed from Samburu Moran 'Sakara Oirena' hairstyle

Conclusion

Patterns are probably the more visible features of fabric design. Pattern development, however, is a more obscure feature although the development has a lot more time, thought and creative input being placed into it. Patterns are often inspired by existing sources. Documentation of the process of pattern development from its inspirations is hardly ever done. This paper has attempted to document the process of design that has taken place in the development of patterns to be printed on fabrics. These patterns were inspired from hairstyles worn by Maasai and Samburu Morans. It is hoped that designers will take a cue from this documentation and capture for posterity, the creativity they infuse in the design process.

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