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Exploring the design motifs of Wollo Gabi in Ethiopian textiles and design development of women's fashion accessories

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Abstract

Ethiopia, renowned for its rich tradition of craftsmanship, particularly in textiles, boasts a variety of regional styles and fabric types utilised in traditional and everyday attire. This study represented a collaborative effort between two universities, Arizona State University in the United States and Wollo University in Ethiopia, explicitly focusing on Wollo Gabi, an intricately patterned, gauze-like handwoven fabric of symbolic significance. Embarking on this endeavour were four design researchers who have explored Wollo Gabi's historical lineage, production techniques and contemporary applications. Subsequently, our endeavours evolved to encompass the conceptualisation and development of designs intending to demonstrate Gabi's commercial potential in the US market. We employed a practice-based approach working with artisans to integrate diverse perspectives into the design process, fostering a more inclusive design process for product and brand development.

Keywords: Social design, Traditional crafts, Textile design, Gabi textile, Ethiopia

Introduction

Ethiopia is prosperous in various traditional costumes, showcasing diversity of ethnicities. Gümüş Çiftçi and Walker (2021) write that traditional crafts, originating from societal needs and honed over generations, have faced a decline in the wake of technological and scientific progress. Additionally, the rapid evolution of contemporary clothing, furnishings and lifestyle tastes contributes to their disappearance, as craft products are often deemed outdated. As Du Bois (2008) claims, Ethiopia's history is rich with crafts making and crafted objects, which are still prominent in daily use around the country.

Within the many currently practised crafts in Ethiopia, weaving has a significant place. Traditional Ethiopian handweaving and embroidered fabrics represent one of the most essential cultural identities in the country (Adamu & Sitotaw, 2021). According to Puarungroj and Boonsirisumpun (2019), handwoven fabric pattern designs commonly represent the traditions and culture of local communities. The ethnic and cultural diversity of Ethiopia has given rise to many unique and dynamic visual traditions (Ergetew, 2018). Gabi, Netela, Kuta and Gemis are the critical pieces of traditional dresses worn throughout the country. This paper will discuss the Gabi (Image 1), a white cotton gauze-like wrap worn over other garments. Although this type of garment is accepted as indicative of Ethiopian ethnic dress in general, it is specifically associated with the people of the highlands, especially in northern Ethiopia (Itagaki, 2013).

Gabi is woven by hand using looms that are mostly 70–90 cm wide so that both edges of the warp thread are within arm's reach (Temesgen et al., 2018). With its intricate handwoven texture, Gabi has adorned Ethiopian wardrobes for centuries. Its 100% cotton composition makes it eco-friendly, aligning perfectly with the global shift toward sustainable fashion.



Image 1: Traditional Gabi fabric. Photo credit: Hazal Gümüş Çiftçi.

In Ethiopia, there is a notable absence of scientific studies, comprehensive inventories and initiatives concerning the conservation of traditional crafts (e.g. Gabi production). Consequently, practice-based design research addresses pertinent research inquiries for this study, and this paper focuses on the initial design development of women's fashion accessories using Gabi textiles.

This initial investigation into the history and background of Wollo Gabi, how it is used traditionally and how it is developed within the contemporary Ethiopian fashion industry is a collaboration between Ethiopian and US-based designers to further explore the potential of this age-old, beautiful garment's place in the US market primarily and in potentially different markets. Since there have not been many resources about any type of crafts, let alone Wollo Gabi, in Ethiopia, we had very limited resources for the literature review. Therefore, we employed practice-based design research, starting with focus group discussions with artisans, observations, inventory for the meanings of motifs, digitisation of motifs and interviews with designers who use Gabi in their designs, and we designed proposals for women's accessories.

Methodology

The primary issue in craft and design projects lies in the lack of connection between designers, artisans and the surrounding community (Gümüş Çiftçi & Walker, 2021). With this practice-based design research, we explored Wollo Gabi motifs and investigated the design development of contemporary women's accessories using Wollo Gabi fabric by focusing on its cultural significance and motifs. Data were collected through a focus group with local Wollo Gabi handloom artisans and through interviews with designer who use Gabi for their products, complemented by observational fieldwork. Purposive sampling guaranteed a wide variety of perspectives from knowledgeable individuals. Four main categories of Wollo Gabi motifs – Nigus, Monalisa, Mekes and Sindid – are of important social significance, and the authors of this paper have examined them through focus group discussions. We then collected information about contemporary fashion design companies in Ethiopia that specifically use Wollo Gabi in their designs. With this benchmarking, we realised that there is potential for Wollo Gabi to be used in women's accessories.

With a practice-based design approach, we then digitised the Wollo Gabi motifs, created design proposals and manufactured the designs with artisans. This study will inform a series of co-design workshops, and these product samples along with the co-design workshops' outcomes will be promoted in the US market.

Our findings about the Wollo Gabi

The Gabi is a large, heavy, white wrap used by both men and women in Ethiopia to protect themselves from the cold air during night-time and the chilly rainy season. Its dense cotton weave serves as an effective barrier against the chill. It is woven using traditional techniques that have been passed down through generations. The production of Gabi involves several intricate steps, from collecting cotton to the final product. Gabi is a general term for Ethiopian traditional fabric. However, in different regions, Gabi has unique and varied patterns and designs that deeply collaborate with the distinctive cultural practices and societal norms of each community's culture and traditions. Regions such as Oromiya, Sidama, Welayta, Amhara, Siltie and Harary, have distinct fabric designs that express their cultural values (Adamu & Sitotaw, 2021). For instance, the Wollo Gabi, named after the Wollo community, showcases specific motifs and patterns that represent the traditions and heritage of the Wollo community from the Amhara region in northeastern Ethiopia, which was once a centre of power and culture.

The Gabi, a timeless symbol of Ethiopian cultural heritage, is more than just a large, heavy, white wrap. It is a woven tapestry of warmth, comfort and tradition passed down through generations and worn proudly by men and women across the country (Temesgen et al., 2018). The Gabi's weight becomes a source of 'grounding'. Each layer, meticulously woven from locally sourced cotton, speaks of patient hands and generations of knowledge passed down. It is a shield against the elements, a silent guardian against the bite of the night air. Wollo Gabi is distinguished by its complex patterns and colours, often blended with metallic yarns (Getachew, 2015). The Wollo Gabi is usually worn by men as a shawl on special occasions or used as a blanket in homes. The Wollo Gabi is also a source of pride and identity for the people of Wollo.

The Wollo Gabi has different names for different designs, such as Sindid, Monalisa, Mekes and King. The Wollo Gabi is a form of artistic expression and communication for the weavers, called Shemane (Image 2), who use their skills and imagination to create these unique pieces.



Image 2. A weaver (Shemane) of the Ethiopian Gabi. Photo credit: Bobo Global, 2024.

Whether draped casually over the shoulders or wrapped tightly around the body, the Gabi transcends its form to symbolise resilience and cultural pride. It is a silent testament to the Ethiopian people's enduring spirit and ability to find warmth and solace despite adversity. In the traditional production of Gabi, the journey commences with women engaging in the initial stages of cotton processing within the confines of their homes. These women acquire unprocessed cotton from the local market and separate it from the seeds, employing a tool known as Mabazecha. Once this crucial step is completed, the cotton is primed to transform into thread, facilitated with specialised equipment called Inzirt (Image 3).



Image 3. Inzirt. Photo credit: Hudson, 2023.

The resulting threads are delicately wound onto small bamboo sticks featuring hollow stems called Kesem (Image 4). Subsequently, a collection of the Kesems is dispatched to a skilled weaver. The Shemane's adept hands weave the threads into a fabric known as Shema. Intriguingly, the Shema crafted from threads produced through this intricate process serves as the material for crafting the distinctive Gabi garment.



Image 4. Kesem. Photo credit: Michael Reta.

The art of weaving, deeply ingrained in the Ethiopian tradition, is the venerable craft behind creating many exquisite traditional garments. Carefully selecting threads, colours and patterns shapes the resulting fabric's essence. This process unfolds under the diligent hands of a singular artisan, as weaving equipment is designed for operation by a single artisan.



Image 5: Mewerweria. Photo credit: Michael Reta.

The weaving apparatus comprises various components, each contributing to the construction of the fabric. One such element is the shuttle, known as Mewerweria (Image 5) in Amharic, which traverses from side to side, skilfully guiding the threads. Another pivotal part demands the alternating movement of upward and downward motions facilitated by the weaver's foot. This dance of manual and foot-operated elements intertwines the threads, giving rise to the fabric in a manner that embodies Ethiopia's rich weaving heritage. Notably, the traditional weaving process involves diverse setups of this equipment, each

contributing to the distinct characteristics of the final fabric. However, recognising the surge in demand for these culturally significant textiles, a more convenient iteration of the equipment is being introduced, blending tradition with contemporary efficiency. This evolution, in response to the growing popularity of Ethiopian fabrics, underscores the resilience and adaptability of the age-old art of weaving in the face of changing times.

Wollo Gabi motif types and their interpretations

Gabi serves the Wollo community for multiple purposes – from a traditional garment worn for warmth to a cultural identity and heritage symbol. Wollo traditional Gabi has unique motifs (tilet in Amharic) with different social meanings. One of the Wollo traditional Gabi motifs is the Nigus (Image 6). This pattern features a stylised ‘W’ symbol at the centre, resembling a crown and representing the historical leadership wisdom of the Wollo society. The choice of colours, including rose and blue, along with neutral tones, signifies the balanced leadership roles of both men and women in Wollo.

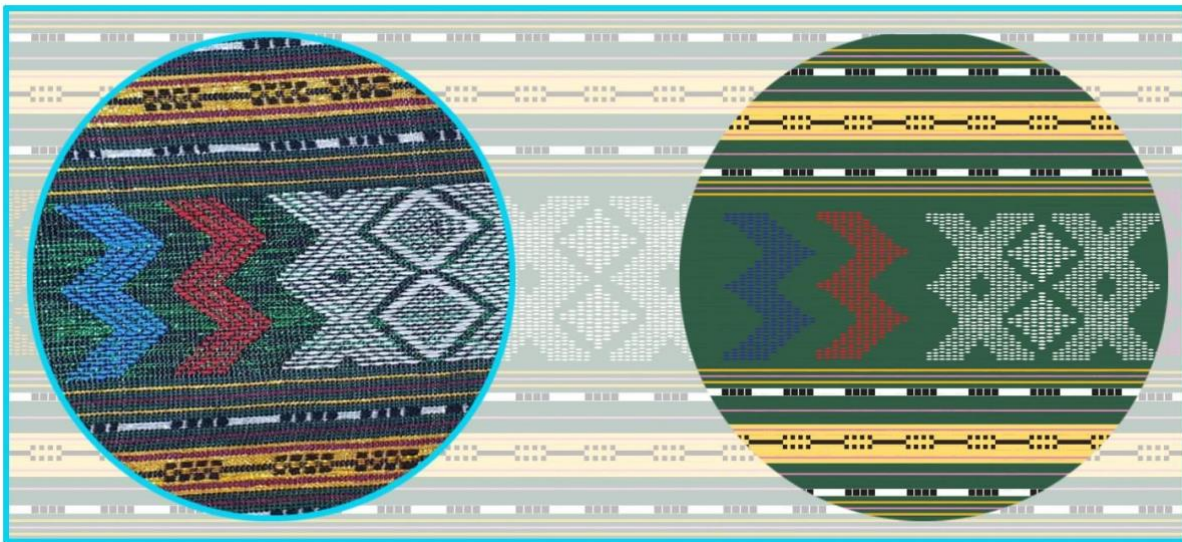


Image 6. Nigus tilet. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

The artisans who created this Gabi shared that the Nigus motif’s design aims to express the leadership qualities valued in Wollo. The contrasting colour of the ‘W’ symbol emphasises its regal significance. The combination of rose and blue represents qualities associated with all genders, creating a harmonious portrayal of leadership. In essence, the Wollo Gabi with the Nigus motif is not just a piece of fabric but a visual story reflecting the leadership philosophy and societal values of the Wollo community. Through its thoughtful design, this cultural piece invites us to explore the rich traditions of Ethiopia, specifically within the vibrant context of Wollo.

The specific variant of the Wollo Gabi motif referred to as Mona Lisa (Image 7) derives its name from the artisans’ appreciation of its aesthetic appeal, drawing parallels to the renowned beauty of Mona Lisa. This terminology is employed to underscore the tilet’s inherent beauty, analogous to the way the name Mona Lisa symbolises attractiveness. In crafting the Mona Lisa motif, the artisans of Wollo Gabi purposefully endeavour to depict the elegance characteristic of women in Wollo society. This motif serves as a visual homage to the beauty of Wollo women, and, as such, it predominantly features a palette of light colours. The deliberate choice of soft hues, such as rose, complements the motif’s thematic focus on feminine

beauty. The Mona Lisa pattern uses light colours like rose, avoiding darker shades like blue. This choice aligns with the motif's focus on capturing the graceful and delicate qualities associated with Wollo women.



Image 7. Monaliza tilet. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

A Wollo Gabi with the motif Mekes (Image 8) has a symbolic meaning. Known as the scissor motif, it gets its name from the unique form that resembles the letter 'X'. This motif uses the craftsman's illustration of cutting to illustrate the act of cutting figuratively.



Image 8. Mekes tilet (Photo Credit: Tewodros Tenagne).

According to the dictionary (EthioCloud, n.d.), Sindid is a phrase of great value in the language. It means 'beautiful and carefully organised'. The nomenclature of this specific theme has a tastefully straightforward history. The motif is called Sindid (Image 9) because its shapes line up carefully to create an aesthetically pleasing and well-organised pattern. Since Wollo Gabi's artisans recognise and value the delicate craftsmanship in precisely arranging this design, they have appropriately named it Sindid. The design is a tribute to the artistry and craft that characterise the cultural depth ingrained in traditional Ethiopian textiles, particularly the Wollo Gabi.

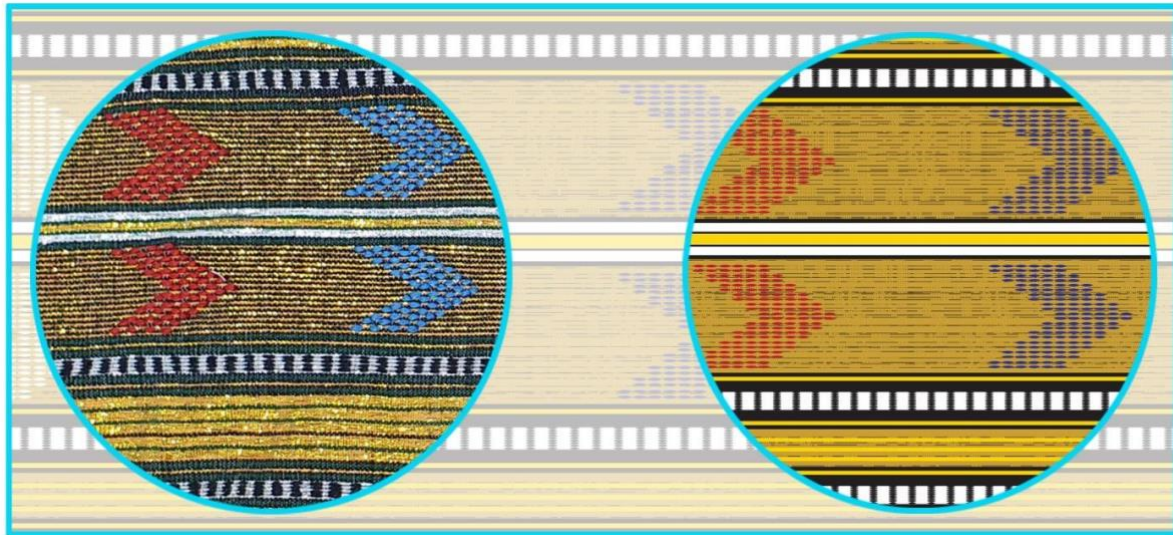


Image 9. Sindid tilet. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

Application of Gabi in the contemporary fashion industry

Using the traditional Ethiopian handloom textile, Gabi has seen an emergence and evolution in the Ethiopian fashion industry: designers and brands, such as Chewa, Sewasew and Séralesti are increasingly incorporating Gabi into their products – not only as a tribute to Ethiopian heritage but also to infuse their designs with unique textures, patterns and cultural significance. Gabi’s adaptability allows it to be used for various clothing and accessories – from scarves, bags and hats to jackets, coats and dresses. Its eco-friendly and sustainable qualities also correspond with the rising demand for ethical fashion practices.



Image 10. Chewa, Sewasew and Seralesti contemporary designs. Credit: Temesgen Agazhie.

One well-known fashion brand in Ethiopia, Sewasew (Image 10), was created by the designer Sewasew Hailu, who started her journey in 2007, aiming to blend modernity and tradition in a more compatible way (Sewasew, 2022), creating a brand that embraces current trends while echoing Ethiopia’s rich cultural heritages and legacy. The brand produces jackets using Gabi’s textures and patterns, which tell a story of evolution and tradition. In addition to Sewasew, Ethiopian-based fashion brands, such as Séralesti by Bethel Tura and Chewa by Estifanos Minchegrot, share similar brand goals. They are connecting contemporary components with traditional ones to create elegant and sustainable pieces, such as modern hoodies and jackets made from Gabi fabric. Séralesti, as a brand, adds an artistic edge to its high-quality Gabi-made jumpers and jackets (Skadmas, 2024). Together, these brands have redefined the Ethiopian fashion industry, highlighting the grace and adaptability of the 100% cotton artificial Ethiopian traditional textile Gabi.

Our design propositions

Culturally oriented products can create stronger user bonds (Razzaghi & Ramirez, 2005). Thackara (2005) endorses this concept by asserting, “Local context is significant not only as a marketplace but also as a catalyst for innovation” (p. 74). Integrating culture into products can be viewed as exceedingly advantageous and beneficial to the design discipline and product users for a plethora of reasons (Razzaghi & Ramirez, 2005).

Our design research team in Ethiopia has laboriously created ten contemporary designs, five women’s bags, and five hats (Image 14), each crafted to honour the many cultural motifs in Wollo Gabi. We have ensured that every accessory resonates with authenticity and reverence for the culture it represents by carefully researching and paying close attention to detail.



Image 11. Mood board for designing with Gabi. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

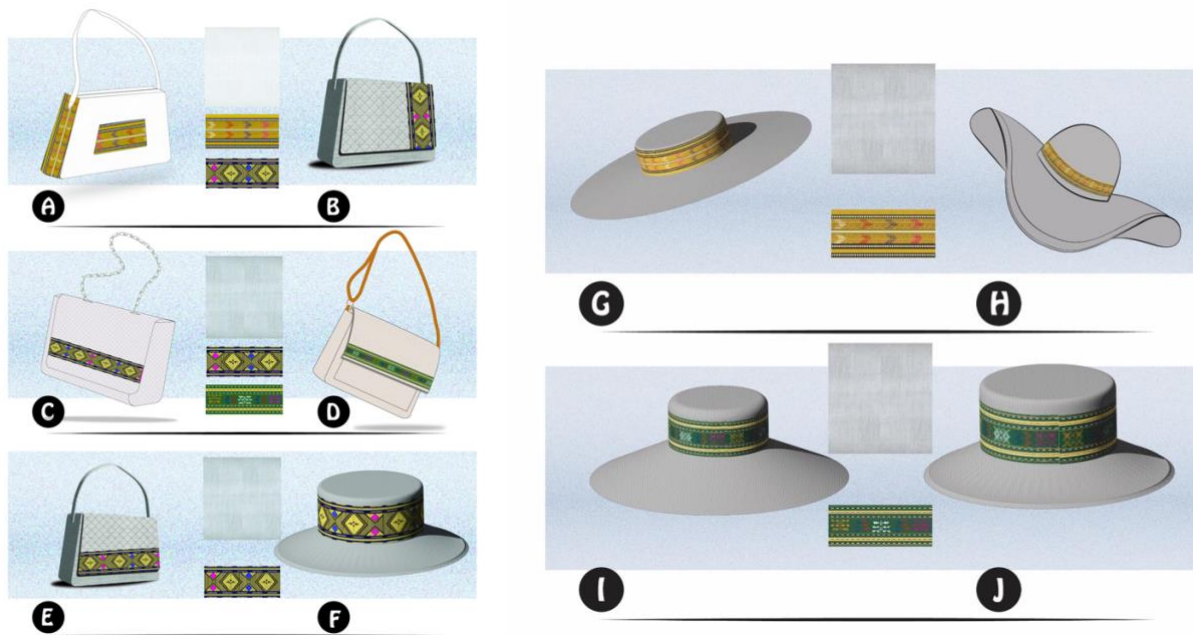


Image 12. Set of designs.

Our design propositions are adorned with Sindid, Monaliza, Nigus and Mekes motifs. Out of the ten designs (Image 12), we produced four samples (Image 13). As wearers use these accessories, they will carry a piece of Ethiopia's past into the present. Fashion becomes a canvas – a statement that transcends trends, weaving together heritage and innovation.



Image 13. Sample products. Photo credit: Temesgen Agazhie.

Our insights and future studies

Our primary objective initially aimed to establish an inventory and knowledge repository for Wollo Gabi and significant Gabi motifs, addressing a notable research gap. As we delved into understanding the Wollo Gabi, we have produced design propositions and manufactured samples for the US market.

In the light of this study, a series of co-design workshops will be organised with the designers and the artisans working at each stage of Wollo Gabi production – from yarn making to hand-weaving to sewing/manufacturing the garments. Furthermore, by focusing exclusively on women crafters, these workshops will address gender disparities within the industry and promote female entrepreneurship. Subsequent workshops will focus on design entrepreneurship and global business development, equipping participants with the skills and knowledge needed to establish their enterprises and tap into international markets.

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