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Celebrating Afrikanness: Proposing a design approach that foregrounds Afrikan cultural identity and Afronowism

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Abstract

Starting in the 1990s in South Africa, according to Sauthoff, designers in general and graphic designers in particular have sought to create an inimitable design style that is imbued with a recognisable (South) Afrikan cultural identity. This is in reaction to the entrenched hegemonic influence of Euro-American design practices. Names like Saki Mafundikwa, Karabo Poppy, Garth Walker, and Sindiso Nyoni are on the influential list of designers bracketing a so-called African design aesthetic. How is this 'aesthetic' related to design that is culturally significant, according to Twigger Holroyd, and that lends authenticity to an artefact, positioning it as representative of Afrikanness?

This paper considers whether the notions of Afrikanness in design can be included in the learning and teaching processes of graphic design. The intention is not to suggest that there is a formulaic approach to designing that results in an Afrikan 'feel'. Rather, that the methodology employs Afronowism as an attitude to design that considers several ways of knowing Afrikanness, and consequently, embedding that in ways of doing. This is achieved by seeking to identify the 'essence' of cultural identity that embodies an Afrikan sensibility and acknowledges cultural diversity.

The methodology includes a multivalent approach that uses Rose's "Visual Methodologies", Hall's "negotiated reading", and Pauwel's arguments for visual analysis and selective sampling that recognise the importance of the author/designer's subjectivity in understanding the sample and analysing it. The findings allow for the development of criteria, which can then be used as a teaching strategy for a design brief and engage in a design process that is culturally sensitive, ethically aware, and humanistic. Together with visual and cultural studies, this approach to designing artefacts and visual communication creates a space of criticality and questioning for students that centres on recognition of the diverse aspects of visual culture underpinning Afrikanness. Although, in this paper, graphic design and visual communication are posited as the vehicles of learning, the methodology was conceived with broader design disciplines in mind and so serves all streams as a method.

Keywords: Afrikanness, Afronowism, graphic design, learning and teaching approach, visual methodology.

Introduction

"Afrikan aesthetic", "African style", "Afrikan sensibility", "Afrikan cultural identity", "authenticity" are all buzz phrases used to describe the elusive and unpindownable quality of "Afrikanness" that

continental Afrikan designers seek to imbue their designs with. This is frequently coupled with globalisation thinking and Afronowist¹ (Cadle 2020; 2022) design approaches, to capture the essence of that which is contemporary, signifiers of a modern Afrikan attitude. Design is a visual language that communicates meaning through a combination of characteristics; by the way that it looks, aesthetics, its affordances, textually, sonically, texturally, all towards persuasive intent and user-centricity. A design methodology based on Afronowism introduces ways of thinking to students that lead them to consider Afrikanness and the representation thereof more consciously. Consequently, this paper addresses the graphic design learning and teaching circumstance as it pertains to the representation of Afrikanness conceptually and physically and suggests a series of steps that can be followed by a student (or professional designer) to achieve this outcome. Once the relationship between Afrikanness and Afronowism is understood, a range of analytical approaches are recommended, each with their own criteria, that scaffold to illuminate how one could design towards an outcome that reflects Afrikanness.

Creating context for the Afrikanness argument

At the outset it is important to acknowledge that the distinction between graphic design as visual communication and designed artefact, and other design fields, lies largely in whether text, and hence language, is a constructed component of the communication or artefact. This resonates with Ngũgĩ's (1986) view that Afrikan language, history, and cultural identity are intertwined, and meaning in visual communication is given a more local context when text is incorporated, adding idiom, nuance, colloquial flavour and so on. However, as some designers will attest, in some instances words, no matter their language, function as design elements in a visual communication space. East African *Kanga* cloths (Figure 1) are a good example of this, where the aphorism, or *jina*, printed in capital Roman letters on the cloth, is integral to the design, even though the reader may not be familiar with Swahili or Sheng as language (Birch & Lutomia 2016, p. 40).



Figure 1. *Kanga* (n.d.), “the user of the brother remains poor” (Image: Cadle 2021)

¹ “Afronowism” is a way of thinking in the present, imagining future possibilities and practising socially engaged design with cultural significance, which reflects continental Afrikan voices, values, knowledge, and aspirations. I have discussed this concept in two previous articles, see Cadle (2020) and Cadle (2022), and here offer my encompassing definition of the word.

The point of this inclusion is to highlight two notions; text and language are intrinsic components of graphic design communication (although other design fields sometimes use text as pattern-based visual element or as in the case above, as aphorism, or as branding tag); often not being able to decipher the text does not diminish the signification or aesthetic value of the visual communication or artefact. The suggestion in this realisation is therefore that if there is a determinant for Afrikanness in graphic design, which it would apply also to other fields of design as creative practice.

Since the idea of decoloniality gained traction, especially in the last 30 years in South Africa, the desire to inflect Afrikanness in design has been attempted by several noteworthy designers of the era. Already in 2004, Sauthoff and Sutherland drew attention to the pressing issues relating to South African design (and hence Afrikan design) as it related to design development and “its reactive relation to unique cultural, social, and economic circumstances in both historical and contemporary contexts” (Sauthoff & Sutherland 2004, p. 3). Cultural variety and understanding the value of indigenous knowledge and issues of inclusivity are identified as crucial to design education. Oguamanam (2006, p. 376) defines indigenous or traditional knowledge as “culturally coded knowledge produced, shared, and recreated among an identity group as an aspect of the cultural dynamic of its practitioners”. Cultural issues and these repositories of knowledge figure strongly in the determinant of ways of knowing. “Afrikan knowledges’ aetiologies being deeply entrenched in cultural histories [allowing Afrikan designers to mine] these rich knowledge sources, merging them with a contemporary design ethos and an abiding skill in imbuing their work with an essence of Afrikanness” (Cadle 2022, p. 32). So to, do the ideas on Afrikan aesthetics, and the vocabularies that explain their semantic range, engage with ways of knowing, like Afrikan ontologies built from “proverbs, poems, stories, legends and myths” (Van Damme 2000, p. 9-10).

Somé (1992) notes that the aesthetic in sub-Saharan Afrikan cultures is of philosophical interest as it is informed by these culture-specific vocabularies. Of interest is the observation by Ibanga (2017) that there is often dialogue with the Western aesthetic tradition. These are important considerations when contemplating Afrikanness as they support ideas on cultural hybridity. Cadle (2022, p. 37) concurs:

Central to this is recognition that Afrikanness and Afro-now-ism is about ownership of the culture, products, and practices, even as many of them are hybrids of their ancient and traditional selves, the consequence of colonial era atavism. Importantly, modern Afrikans of the post-colony have incorporated many of these influences into their notions of tradition and cultural relevance in the current era.

The ideas on cultural hybridity and hybridisation deserve discussion as both draw Afrikanness into a space that suggests one not only looks to the past for a ‘traditional’ Afrikan aesthetic, style, sensitivity, cultural identity, and authenticity but also considers how cosmopolitanism, global issues, and design culture are affective in the present. According to Julier (2014, p. 157), Zukin (1991) “contends that the new middle classes of global disorganised capitalism² (Oxford Reference 2023) exercise cosmopolitan tastes as a vehicle of their cultural capital”. This is fed by a convergence of the media industries and technologies [of dissemination, social media, streaming and the ubiquity of virtual environments] that integrate into people’s lives across [cultural] and geographic boundaries (Sturken & Cartwright 2001, p. 315). It should not be lost, in the Afrikan context of this paper, that “cultural hybridisation” is an inevitable consequence of this; “Cultural responses [...] range from assimilation, through forms of separation, to hybrids that destabilise and blur cultural boundaries” (Pieterse 1995 in Barker 2013, p.

² In the modern era, due to the demise of full-time employment, employment inequality, the growth of service industries and the informal sector, and post-modern culture it is alleged that the structures of capital (corporations) and labour (trade unions) have broken down – this is termed “disorganised capitalism”.

264) allowing opportunity for cultural differences and similarities to co-exist, and for the production of new identities and cultural forms (Barker 2013, p. 265). As a result, hybrid Afrikan cultural identity becomes a criterion for understanding Afrikanness and presents possibilities for the design (and reading) of hybrid artefacts.

To reiterate, the analytical methods proposed in my 2022 argument (Cadle 2022), when collectively applied through my critical lens, and worldview, provide an effective reading of what could be considered Afrikanness in a designed artefact. Performing this process, however, requires that the researcher be familiar with the epistemologies influencing the reading, has significant experience with various models employed in visual analysis (semiotics, formal analysis, critical reflection, discourse analysis, negotiation), uses suitable samples and is able to validate the findings or reading. Developing a system that could be used by learners of design and graphic design, that is less complex and does not depend so heavily on lengthy lived experience is the desirable outcome. Understanding that “material objects, things, and substances come to have social resonance” (Drazin 2021, p. 74-75) is central to how it invokes Afrikanness. “Design comprises a professional and popular discourse by which people appreciate, approach, evaluate, and work with material things” (ibid.). The subjective nature of the aforementioned is an unavoidable tenet of visual analysis as a research approach and method. According to Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p. 57), the conscious and unconscious come into play when attempting to decipher an image and depends on dominant ideologies and meanings, memory, knowledge and experiences, and cultural influences. The image or artefact itself carries embedded dominant meanings and so negotiating meaning is an active process of decoding the design as opposed to a passive receipt thereof.

A pragmatic analysis tool

The proposition of an analytical tool to measure or identify Afrikanness begins with a design brief that sets *Afrikanness* as not only a practice outcome but as its conceptual underpinning. An important aspect of this process is that it attempts to predict or project the outcome of a design brief's Afrikanness rather than reflect on the design afterwards to establish whether the Afrikanness is characteristic of the resultant artefact. Several interconnected analytical approaches and methods are proposed to guide the learning and teaching processes of students of graphic design, enabling creative production that resonates with Afrikanness and Afronowism. Central to the visual analysis models proposed is the inherently subjective nature of the readings. There is similarity with discourse analysis in these methods, where the validation of the readings emerges from synchronous themes, codes, and signifiers. The analysis approaches and methods of reading for meaning are discussed below in the sequence in which they are applied to the artefact designed by the student, according to the “Afrikanness brief”, and to the design samples used to validate the design decisions.

Pauwels' visual method and selective sampling

Luc Pauwels (2020, p. 5) avers that the study of visual material provides “insight into the social functions of the cultural product”, the values, norms, beliefs and heritage of a society, as well as being a gateway to understanding the culture of its creator and the intended audience thereof. The visual material in this case would encompass that produced by the researcher/designer (the emic perspective), allowing for reflexivity, and read against pre-existing, or found, materials that are considered definitive or dominant signifiers of the culture (the etic perspective) (Pauwels 2020). For this exercise “Expressive/creative visual production (with [a] communicative end)” (Pauwels 2020, p. 24) is the desired outcome to be ‘measured’ against a selective sample of visual material based on relevant variables like content, style, era, author, audience or others (Cadle 2022, p. 35).

The design brief should encapsulate the Afronowist ideal and the focus on Afrikanness as an essential element of the outcome. This should then inform the development of criteria, by the student designer, to determine the selective sample, the characteristics of which should guide the design of the artefact or visual communication through a process of reflexivity.

Cadle (2022, pp. 35-36) puts forward that some of these criteria could be (these are edited to suit the tone of this paper):

- Is the design imbued with the character of an Afrikan stereotype?
- Does the design reference artefacts that are sourced from Afrika-based traders, artists, crafters, designers, or manufacturers?
- Is the artefact traceable to Afrikan production?
- Does the artefact have cultural significance where it expresses social value, historical value, or aesthetic value, according to Twigger Holroyd (2017)?
- Is the artefact found or used in Afrikan rituals, tradition, or ceremonies, and is it respectful of heritage?
- Does the artefact reflect a hybrid African cultural identity? (This criterion is newly introduced by this author as an evolution of the above five points).

These criteria serve as either inspiration to inform the design process, or as filters to exclude that which is inappropriate to the Afrikanness brief requirements. As the work of Karabo Poppy, Saki Mafunkidwe, Garth Walker, and Sindiso Nyoni is considered to be definitive of that which is Afrikan, in a contemporary sense, Pauwels' approach could include them in the sample selection. They could be subjected to the critical criteria of the flow process in Figure 2 to determine whether the characteristics derived therefrom, indeed define their work as meeting the "Afrikanness" requirement.

Cultural significance

De Rijk (in Van Boeijen and Zijlstra 2020:7) states that "Design is a profoundly cultural activity which encourages a positive contribution to the inescapable changes in the world". It is a designer's role to consider the impact of their work on the present and the future, and the changes this may induce. They should be sensitive to and understanding of these implications when cultural knowledge is involved. Amy Twigger Holroyd (2017) terms this phenomenon "cultural significance" and offers advice on how this can be determined or employed. Said designed artefacts or visual communication should be read according to their social, historical and aesthetic values. Cadle (2022, p. 35) after Twigger Holroyd explains these values:

'Social value' refers to the associations that a design, product, or practice has for a particular cultural group and the social, cultural, or spiritual meanings that it holds for them. Social value may reflect a sense of identity, distinctiveness, and social interaction. 'Historical value' derives from the ways in which aspects of life from the past can be connected to the present through designs, products, and practices. It may be based on the length of time a tradition has developed, its association with specific people or events, or its rarity or uniqueness. 'Aesthetic value' refers to the visual, sensory, and perceptual experience of a design, product, or practice. It includes artefacts and patterns with uncommonly attractive or distinctive qualities that evoke strong feelings or special meanings.

Van Boeijen and Zijlstra (2020, p. 7) caution that the "culture" should not be seen in a reductionist way, as a catalogue of different, defining design styles, but rather as cultural diversity dynamically responding to continuously changing circumstances.

Gillian Rose on visual methodology

When considering how to proceed with the analysis of visual material, in this case designed artefacts and visual communication, Rose (2016) offers sane and valuable direction regarding methods.

Three issues emerge regarding the purview of this paper and how its findings impact on practice in a learning and teaching environment:

1. The design brief requires that a student, in the pursuit of the requisite outcome, should align their ideation and design response to Afronowism as a guiding principle and that Afrikanness be an embedded quality. Here, the brief can be for any category of design within graphic design – corporate identity, branding and retail, packaging, web, mobile media, for example.
2. The focus is on the site of the image, or visual object (Rose 2016, pp. 32-34) as this is where the meaning is made. The site of production and how that may affect meaning is not relevant at this stage, nor its circulation or audiences. The critical aspect is how the Afronowism/Afrikanness quality is the dominant affordance in the creative production and meaning making.
3. Only the social modality is considered here, where “social, economic, political, and institutional practices and relations [...] produce, saturate, and interpret an image” (Rose 2016, p. 374). Rose proposes several questions that the designer may ask as a way of deciphering nuance, complexity, and variations of meaning in visual objects.

Rose (2016, p. 374) proffers the following questions one might ask about the image or visual object to determine meaning.

- What is being shown? What are the components of the image? How are they arranged?
- What is its material form?
- Is it one of a series?
- Where is the viewer’s eye drawn to in the image, and why?
- What is the vantage point of the image?
- What relationships are established between the components of the image visually?
- What use is made of colour?
- How has its technology affected the text?
- What is or are the genre(s) of the image?
- To what extent does this image draw on the characteristics of its genre?
- What do the different components of the image signify?
- What knowledges are being deployed
- Whose knowledges are being excluded from this representation?
- Does this image’s particular look at its subject disempower its subject?
- Are the relations between the components of this image unstable?
- Is this a contradictory image?

Rose’s questions are generic and emerge from a position of zero context. This research however seeks very specific ‘answers’ in order to understand the things that inform Afrikanness. As Figure 2 shows, before getting to the above questions, two levels of scrutiny are applied to the designed artefact, making it necessary to customise their interrogative point of view to a more Afrikan context (Figure 2).

The negotiated reading

Stuart Hall’s (1980) “negotiated reading” adapts well, outside of its mass media analysis intention, to readings of design, images and visual communication forms. The significant link is the encoding/decoding process not unfamiliar to other semiotic activity where meaning is syntagmatic. One needs to acknowledge that readers of ‘texts’ employ their individual worldviews, cultural

knowledge and competencies to understand and interpret visual artefacts (Moore 1993, p. 16). The negotiated reading sits between the dominant status quo of the extant order (political, social, and cultural) and an opposing standpoint that challenges the former. In particular in the context of the Afrikan positionality (considering a perspective that embraces Afrikanness and Afronowism), these readings still conform to the Euro-American norms. The desire is therefore to express “African ways of knowing” says Geschiere (2021 in Cadle 2022, p. 31) where familial and cultural histories, traditions, language, myths, and rituals are signifiers of the “special traits of African knowledge”. Recognising that culture and its meaning are in a state of flux, influenced by ideology, modes of representation, symbolism, and interpretive frameworks based on diverse world views is key (Cadle 2022, p. 38). This implies that ‘readings’ are affected by “‘visual competence’, that includes experience of media and the visual characteristics thereof, as well as an ability to translate ‘visual indicators’” (Pauwels 2020 in Cadle 2022, p. 39). Ergo, empiricism in the practice of visual methodologies is problematic due to the reading having to consider the fluid nature of analysis criteria and the positionality of the reader.

How the flow process for mapping Afrikanness in design is applied

It should be noted that the approaches to analysing visual material in search of Afrikanness was conceived to consider existing creative artefacts and designed objects. Essentially, it was an attempt to determine whether there is a persistence of measurable Afrikan influence in design (and design education) in South Africa. Pretorius (2015, p. 10) highlights some aspects of this like developing a South African style in the 1990s based on the vernacular, naïve illustration and hand-drawn typography, or the intent to give “voice to the African story” (Van Schie 2013), and even “attempts at drawing on and integrating ‘indigenous knowledge’ into graphic design programmes” (Carey 2006). These influences and the intention to express the Afrikan aesthetic, sensibility, style, and cultural identity into design education have not been deliberately researched and evaluated. This research is attempting to show that this is an achievable end.

The starting point is now the design brief and the artefact produced by the student that needs to be measured against the Afrikanness criteria explicated previously and presented in a more focused manner in Figure 3. In order to be able to ‘measure’ the artefact by reading its Afrikanness becomes a ‘chicken and egg’ scenario. In order to determine the Afrikanness means that a student-designed artefact is required to be measured, but the artefact itself first needs to be created based on the Afrikanness principles. This seemingly intractable problem is resolved by using an iterative approach and a trigger. The trigger in this instance being the principles upon which Afronowism is based (see 1. in Figures 2 and 3). Once that leads to generating a design solution, assuming the student has a good level of design experience, exposure to media, visual studies, identity and culture studies, and principles of visual communication, it becomes possible to begin evaluating the result by employing additional methods.

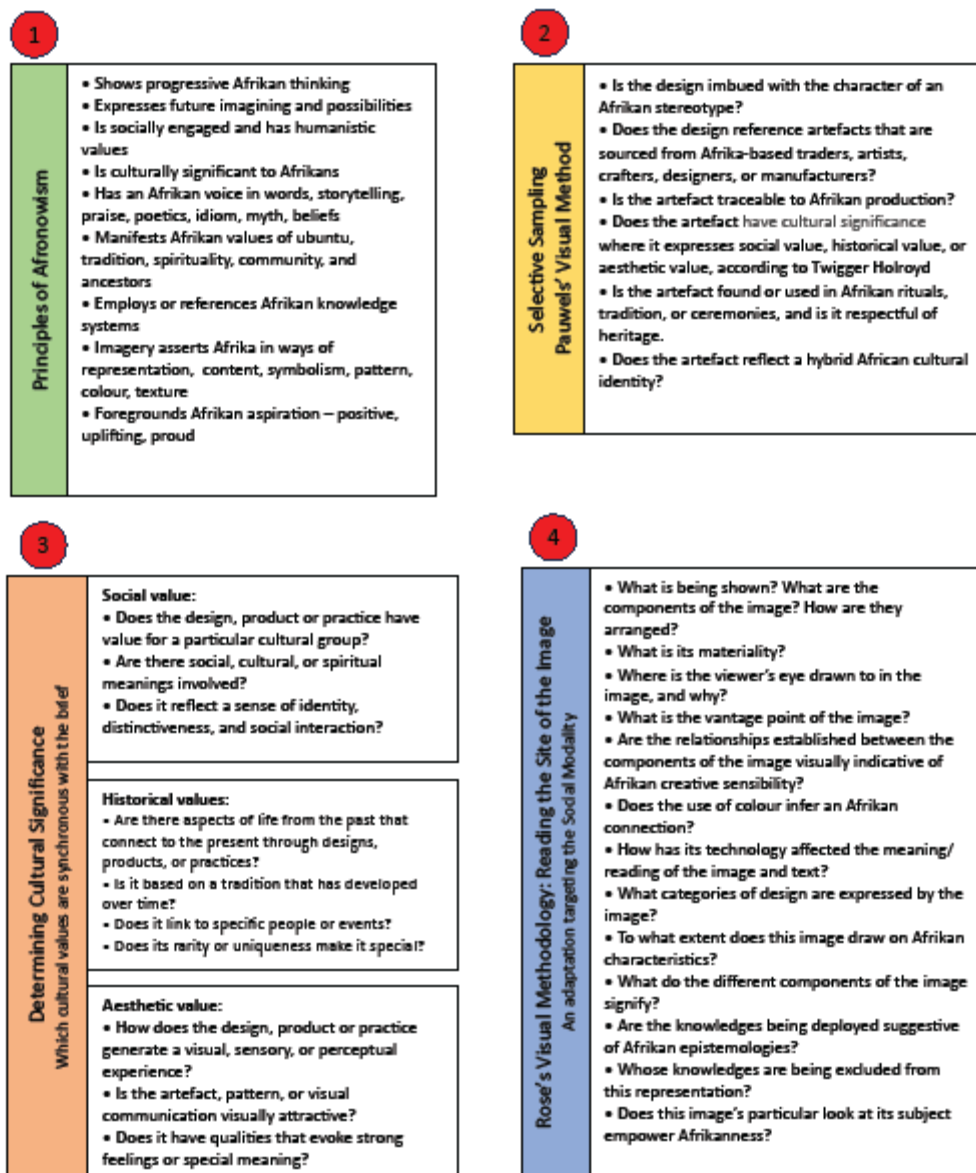


Figure 3. Analysis frameworks that inform mapping Afrikaness in a design artefact

Through the ideation and design process, the sets of characteristics, questions and values above are used to analyse the student designed artefact against the selected sample artefacts in the mindset of Hall's negotiated reading model. This is done following the numerical sequence as indicated, 1 through 4. It should be read in conjunction with Figure 2 (Cadle, 2023).

It is necessary to first identify comparable measurables for the student-designed artefact. Pauwels' method is pitted against a selection of designed artefacts already in production, or mainstream media and graphic design, negotiating their meaning and cultural significance as per Twigger Holroyd (see 2. and 3. in Figures 2 and 3). The student-designed artefact and sample artefacts are then contrasted using the negotiated reading method and by cross-referencing shared characteristics. Rose's

Methodology (see 4. in Figures 2 and 3) provides an additional layer of questioning, as identical questions are applied to the two sets of artefacts. Certain themes and similarities emerge from this exercise, becoming a self-assessment of the student's design. Does it embody Afrikaness? Where is it lacking? What factors or knowledge have not been considered? This sequence of interrogation is in itself a process of self-reflection, affording an opportunity to revisit the first iteration of the design, develop modifications or make adjustments, and then repeat the cycle again until the brief requirement has been satisfied and the proposed solution is fit for purpose.

Closing comments

Two issues emerge from this study that are worth considering. Visual methodologies are complex and subjective, requiring intellectual flexibility, and a willingness to avoid absolutism or empiricism. Primarily they offer an opportunity to attempt to make sense of the meanings construed, in this instance, by graphic design artefacts. This allows for a more intentional approach to defining Afrikaness in creative output. The same model can argue for Afrikaness in Afrikaans-speakers' "boerewors" or isiXhosa-speakers' "umqombothi" and can be applied beyond the confines of stereotypes. The multivalent methodology allowed for diverse criteria to impact the considerations and processes of graphic design learning so that cultural sensitivity is maintained, and ethical awareness and a humanistic attitude is foregrounded.

Further, it is possible to deliberately target designing for a particular value system, grounded in an Afrikanist cultural identity, and able to communicate an ethos of Afrikaness. The typical processes of design research by students should therefore consider how the design solution will lead to an outcome that enfolds Afrikaness (rather than maintains a stylistic status quo) and as a result delivers an authentic (South) African experience.

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