

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainable *Ashin* (Nobility Rites) Statement Cultural Dress of Tema Manhean, Ghana: Unravelling the Feminine Dress Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

The paper reviews nobility rite (*Ashin Yoo Kpeemo*) dress styles used by women of Tema Manhean. The rationale is to discover the integral concepts, and the likely framework which can aid in sustainable fashion design practice. The subject matter of concern has not received the needed in-depth attention in previous research sequels. Thematic content analysis is used as a method in distinguishing the constructs employed in sample dress statements. Seven purposefully conceptualised cultural artefacts, their sources of inspiration, as well as influencing clothing theories used were identified. Similarly, design philosophies, strategies, cultural production, and preservation methods employed were discovered. Five insiders were engaged through snowballing to help make sense of the data collected. The consequential framework discovered fills the literature gap identified in previous studies. The important discovery gives meaningful understandings into the inherent concepts and their interrelationships, thus contributing to insights into adaptable, impactful ancestral competencies in contemporary sustainable dress fashion practices.

Introduction

The case study is of interpretive paradigm (Schwandt, 1994). It is focused on identifying factors that influence the crafting of the unique *Ashin Yoo Kpeemo* initiation cultural

statement dress used by the people of Tema Traditional area in the Greater Accra region of Ghana (Damalie, 2018). The purpose is to determine the typical concepts of notable dress styles, and their interrelationships. In its quest to fill the literature gap identified, the paper further explores a likely conceptual framework using embedded lessons of identifiable elements that influence the maidens' craft as a basis. It serves as a contribution to contemporary sustainable fashion design practices when considered for use in either experimental, experiential research or mass clothing production. The case is rooted in arts, culture, dress and fashion studies, and is the third sequel teased from a study on dress design used by initiation maidens of the Tema Traditional area (Damalie, 2024).

Consistent with the motivation to strongly inspire inclusion of traditional stylists in the production of knowledge as earlier argued (Damalie, 2024, 2018; Damalie & Essel, 2024), the study seizes the moment to contribute to current conversation on sustainable fashion and textile production practices by African scholars. The study, like related previous scholarly works, places the traditional area in the spotlight of global fashion and heritage tourism (Acquaye, 2018; Damalie, 2021; 2019; Dedume et al., 2016; Essel, 2017; Nkrumah, 2022; Rovine, 2016).

As pointed out in Damalie (2024, 2018) and Damalie and Essel (2024), an *Ashin Yoo* is the daughter of a native son of Tema Manhean, who undergoes the *Ashin Kpeemo* (nobility ritual). The ceremony is recognised as the rite of passage for girl indigenes between two years of age and young adult. Both virgins and heavily pregnant maidens alike are obligated to observe the rite. The nobility initiation is *Kusum* or a custom meant to "cleans" the participating maidens like their contemporaries from other parts of Ghana who observe similar rites like *Dipo* and *Bragoro* to usher them into womanhood (Asare-Danso, 2018; Adinku, 2016; Damalie, 2018; Dedume et al., 2016), failure of which, it is believed, brings dire consequences to one's life (Damalie, 2024; 2018). The *Ashin Yei* (plural of *Ashin Yoo*) are only styled by a few recognised indigenous women stylists in the Tema Traditional area. The maidens are described as nobility maidens (not puberty maidens) because contrary to a *Bragoro* maiden, an *Ashin* maiden's initiation is not occasioned by the start of menstruation per se (Asare-Danso, 2018; Boakye, 2010; Damalie, 2018). Rather, the initiation rite for *Temamei* is a status signifier as noble cleansed maidens (Damalie, 2024, 2018). Indeed, it serves as bragging rights for indigenous families from the community (G. Ananu, personal communication, May 4, 2024).

Previous studies (Damalie, 2024; Damalie & Essel, 2024) have been silent on the angle of the subject matter analysed in this article. Damalie & Essel (2024) recently reviewed the dressing styles of Tema Manhean maidens as part of sourcing inspiration for authentic culturally-inclined designs consistent with fashion practice (Mbonu, 2014; Pozzo, 2020). The researchers in that instance focused solely on analysing unique dress details and trends that define and set the *Ashin* nobility rite maidens' dress apart from their contemporaries who observe *Dipo*, *Bragoro* and *Kusakoko* initiation rites (Asare-Danso, 2018; Boakye, 2010; Dedume et al., 2016). Suggestions made based on that study's findings subsequently contributed immensely to the

Fɛ 00Yɔ ɔ conceptual dress fashion collection created and exhibited in Takoradi and Tema Manhean (Damalie, 2024). As a sequel to the two cases cited, this paper consistently pays attention to the ten dress details of interest analysed earlier among other concepts, albeit differently.

The emphasis is specifically on lessons embedded in the iconic statement dress resulting from the use of the distinctive details described as a whole (Damalie, 2024; Damalie & Essel, 2024).

The paper's focus is thus progressively linked as yet another building block on the subject matter. It is purposefully meant to enrich the discourse on the *Ashin* (initiation) subculture, and the dress statements made in particular. It is meant to fill the gap created in the literature.

It is important to note that, ethnic cultures have gained more and more recognition at the national and international levels (Pozzo, 2020) through such scholarly engagements. This research article is of similar intent, and it fills the knowledge and practice gap identified from the previous projects conducted on the *Ashin* dress cultural practices. The paper, together with the previous sequels, gives a complete outlook as it sheds light on the prowess of culture in sustainable design thinking and preservation (Mbonu, 2014). By disentangling the statement dress, their underlying concepts and how they work together, the paper further draws researchers' attention to the obvious relevance of decades-old contribution of the indigenous women of the traditional area to sustainable dress practices. By implication, the paper highlights their contribution to the body of knowledge on sustainable fashion design practices which are replicable to impact modern relatable research projects on fashion and textiles.

Problem: Participating maidens of the Tema *Ashin Yoo Kpeemɔ* (nobility rite) use striking cultural statement dress compositions which attract viewers' admiration (Damalie, 2024, 2018, pp. 54-87). Damalie and Essel (2024) explored some unique components of the maidens' cultural statement dress which could influence conceptual dress fashion design. Suggestions based on their study's findings subsequently contributed immensely to the *Fɛ 00Yɔ ɔ* conceptual dress fashion collection created and exhibited in 2024 (Damalie, 2024). However, due to methodological constraints, attention paid to the workings of the various underlying ideas and their interrelationships that impacted the subcultural dress practices was inadequate.

There is therefore the need for a more open interrogation of the influencing causes and their interrelationships. The findings thereof will help appreciate the depth and unique importance in crafting a cultural design framework to fill that void identified in the literature.

Thus, the paper seeks answers to research questions on the inherent ideas of the cultural statement dress constructed by the indigenous women stylists of Tema Manhean— how do

the characteristic concepts interrelate? What conceptual framework can emerge as a result of the analysis of findings to guide contemporary relatable dress fashion projects?

The study reviews concepts inherent in selected portraits of the statement dress of the rite maidens of Tema Manhean. It further examines how the concepts interrelate. Further, the paper attempts to stitch the strands together, into a plausible conceptual cultural dress framework as a model that can effectively explain in essence, the influences considered in constructing the initiation artefacts, and how they can work. The result can also impact any relatable ethnic-inspired statement dress intended to reflect similar dress design outlook.

Methods

Using thematic content and trend analysis as a method, the paper explores the *Ashin* statement dress as stunning cultural artefacts (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Burke, 2011; Pasricha & Kadolph, 2009). The case is populated of secondary data (photographs) of *Ashin* maidens. The seven (7) cultural statement dress sampled fall within four thematic dress cultural practices (DCPs) used in private and public outings during the key initiation stages. The stages are named as *Ashinfɔɔ* – purification phase; *Telekɔmɔ* – pre-rite period; *Kpojiemɔ* – outdoor phase; and *Kpojei* – post rite stage (Damalie, 2024).

Consequently, the purposefully sampled artefacts form the crux of the rite maidens' DCPs because the information required is embedded therein and will help unearth the inherent concepts delicately woven into the *Ashin* dress styles, hence their selection for scrutiny. The rite maidens' preferred silhouettes, materials and colours, accessories, visual appearances and fragrances which define their shared statement dress practices during the ceremony as a whole constitute the focus of the paper. This is because they notably set the *Ashin* maidens apart in their appearance from other initiation rites maidens, and thus define the *Ashin* maidens' shared DCPs during the whole experiential ceremony (Asare-Danso, 2018; Boakye, 2010; Dedume et al., 2016). Their selection is further based on their significant effect on the *KCascades Impressions* and *Fɛ OOYɔɔ* brands fashioned respectively (Damalie, 2024, 2019).

The use of thematic content trend analysis as a method is consistent with the qualitative nature of the research design chosen (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and also within fashion design as a practice (Burns et al., 2016; Flynn & Foster, 2009; Mbonu, 2014; Pasricha & Kadolph, 2009 as cited in Damalie, 2024). Thus, the choice is deemed apt, based on the need to describe the dress details under review thematically, so as to analyse notable trends, if any, and further identify their implication and influence on contemporary sustainable dress fashion design practice.

The research instruments used are observation and interview. Five (5) indigenous women in the community were engaged through snowballing (Flynn & Foster, 2009). All of the informants have had experiential knowledge as former initiates. One of them is a trained

indigenous stylist (Gugu), three of them are opinion leaders (Ashe, Aami, and Aayoo) and the other, a parent (Oya). They were therefore deemed as credible insiders fit to provide further insights needed on the issues investigated. Permission was sought from the families engaged to use the portraits collected for academic purposes.

Results and Discussion

Statement Dress of the *Ashin* (nobility rite) maidens

Ashin statement dress is a collection of themed feminist identity artefacts symbolically used by nobility initiates from Tema Manhean during *Ashin Yoo Kpeemɔ* (nobility rite). It amplifies the world view of Temamei (the people of Tema) on cultural dress specific to the *Ashin* maidens. The cultural statement dress of *Ashin Yei* (maidens) used during all four stages are examined under six unique notable attributes, namely: silhouettes, materials and colours, accessories, appearance and fragrance in the following analysis.



Figure 1a: *Ashin Yoo* being decorated using white baked clay (Ayilo).

Source: Damalie, 2018

Figures 1a and 1b show two portraits of maidens participating in the *Ashin Yoo Kpeemɔ* ritual. The *Ashin Yei* maidens are each dressed in variants of symbolic red statement dress purposefully used during the commencement of the ritual. The red colour used in announcing the maidens as initiates is customary (*Kusum*).



Figure 1b: Back view of an Ashin Yoo in double layered bustle wraps
Source: Damalie, 2018

The portrait in Figure 1b establishes the maidens' use of the hour glass as the preferred body shape even for the relatively young maidens. The garments formed in both portraits consist of a combination of layered bustle bustier top and skirt wraps, using wax print designs as shown and typically adopted by participants at this stage. Both cloths used on the maidens indicate characteristically bright red hue backgrounds. While the motifs or patterns in the surface designs appear relatively minor in this case, they do introduce other colours to the palette, and make the preferred symbolic red background colour more prominent.

The selvages and unstitched cut edges of the **Atufo** or bustle-shaped wrap-around cloth are particularly obvious in Figure 1b which focuses on the back view of a rite maiden. The cloths are traditionally secured with straps known as **Hao** in the Gã language. The cloth strap plays a significant role of snatching in the waist thus defining the waistline as shown. It thereby emphasises the curved lines on the body shape that tend to convey a sense of sensual femininity consistent with what the dress signals. The use of the **Hao** as key dress accessory is obviously significant in the assembly of the draped pieces of cloth. Meanwhile, underneath the maidens' outer cloth, they wear underskirts of wrapped cloth. They also wear the **Bue** (an interesting padding of bright red and white loincloth). The padded loincloth is worn in a tee shape, tucked into waist beads from front to back through the crotch in between the two legs and over the buttocks. The maidens wear matching red head scarf at this stage as shown in Figure 1a. Underneath the scarf, they wear their hair plaited with black

thread. They accessorise the wrapped garment ensemble with arm and wrist beads, as well as small black and white rocaille beads. They wear a wreath of green **Nyanya leaves** (*Momordica Foetida*) around the neck to accentuate the look.

The distinct appearance worn by the maidens during **Telekɔmɔ** (pre-rite) is a shared culture. This includes the hourglass, a key silhouette used as feminist identity (as demonstrated in Figure 1b). Then again, the bodies of the maidens are decorated with naturally scented green **Krɔbɔ** (paste of dried inedible fruit) as exemplified in the portrait (Figure 1a). Figure 1a shows the look created when the upper torso and the feet of the maidens are decorated with white dots made from **Ayilo** (baked white clay). The white dots are evenly made on dark clove-stained backgrounds; they appear meticulously arranged on the bare chest, arms and feet. Tradition (**Kusum**) demands that the maidens do not wear footwear.

Aayoo (an interviewee) asserts that indeed, the choice of the bold red artefacts identifiable with the **Telekɔmɔ** ritual announces the start of the ritual to patrons in the community. Elsewhere, red is said to be the colour of power, luck and ambition. It is said to be that bold, fiery energy that says, "I am ready to win." It is believed to give extra boost of confidence, helping one to attract ... opportunities, argues Wong (D.Wong, personal communication, October 26, 2024). Underscoring Wong's assertion on the relevance of the colour red, Onya (an interviewee) argues that red may have psychological effects of mystery, fear of the unknown sojourn the maidens are embarking upon, as well as empowerment and/or passion of the participating maidens.

The dress accessories the maidens use form a core part of the garment, while the dressing accessories complement their style of dressing (Damalie, 2018). Essentially, they both add to the shared colour story. The spiced green **Krɔbɔ** used by the maidens also doubles as skin enhancer and deodoriser, while adding a green hue to their shared colour scheme. This dress component further contributes in building up the young maidens' self-confidence, argues Damalie (2018).

White statement dress used privately by rite maidens during purification

Figure 2 is the typical shared look of the **Ashin** maidens during **Ashinfɔɔ** (purification at the camping stage). In this privately-held session, the **Ashin** maiden is made to sit under a shed all day long, drenched in **Ashinmu** (batana/palm body oil). Figure 2 is an artist's impression of the **Ashin** spirit (wife to the **Basa** spirit) to whom the people of Tema hold allegiance in this regard. The painting is displayed on the clan house in charge of the rite (**Basa We**) in the traditional area.

Participating maidens dress in the symbolic white statement dress at this stage as illustrated in Figure 2. The subcultural statement dress of **Ashin Yei** at this point is made up of a single plain knee-length skirt wrap using unstitched white calico. The cloths are secured with **Hao** (strap) as a key dress accessory. The maidens' bodies are drenched in batana/palm body oil (**Ashinmu**), which is continuously applied for four days to spiritually "cleanse" them. The

maidens wear the wrapped skirt over **Bue** (loincloth). Accessories include **Nmorkofu** (olive green woven raffia) strands, batana oiled body (**Ashinmu**) and hair styled in interesting molds as seen in Figure 2. The **Ashin tɛ** (ritual stone) is carried within the hair molds.

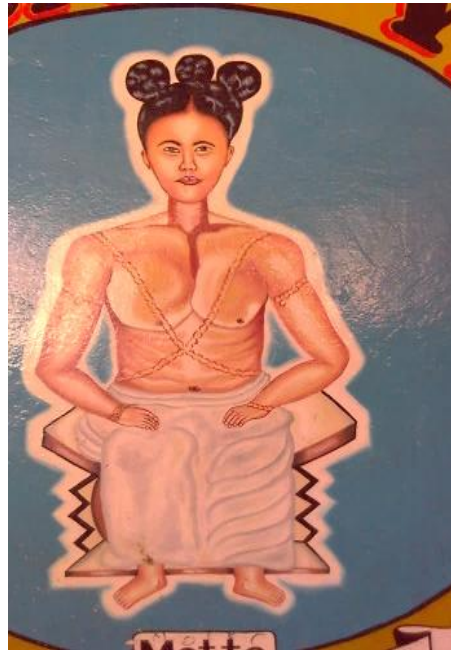


Figure 2: White Statement Dress used by the rite maidens during purification
Source: Damalie, 2018

The **Bue** loincloth plays a dual role at this point— (i) as an under garment receiving body fluids and (ii) as an absorbing agent for the extra body oil that flows down when the **Ashinmu** is applied on the body. The **Nmorkofu** (olive green woven raffia) strands crisscrossed on the upper torso further adds to the accessories to complement the wrapped skirt and other headdress details as shown in Figure 2.

Whereas the pure white skirt wrap reflects the quest to purify the maidens, others see its adoption as symbolic of the victory envisaged for participating maidens (Damalie, 2024). The processed palm/batana oil (**Ashinmu**), which is continuously applied for four days to spiritually “cleanse” the maidens, physically exfoliates their skin to attain a glowing effect (Damalie, 2024). Its significance is actually noticeable during their post-camping public dressing.

Flamboyant Statement Dress of Ashin Maidens during Kpojiemɔ (outdooing)

Two typical **Ashin yei** siblings’ shared look exhibited during the third stage of the ceremony, **Kpojiemɔ** (outdooing rites), are displayed in Figures 3a and 3b. The **Ashin Yei** are seen dressed in the symbolic colourful cultural statement dress. These are typical cultural artefacts

characteristic of the maidens' wardrobe when they complete the week-long purification requirements. Symbolically, the occasion signals the completion of the **Ashin** ritual.

The two maidens in Figure 3a are seen in two distinct dress silhouettes associated with **Ashin** maidens at this point, a bustle skirt wrap and a bustle bustier wrap using luxurious traditional woven Ghanaian Kente. Those in Figure 3b are seen in gorgeous one-colour printed exotic silk bustle bustier wraps, repeating the single layered bustle bustier wrap observed in Figure 3a. Here again, the **Ashin Yei's** use of the curvy hourglass shape is significant.



Figure 3a: Ashin (nobility rite) Maidens in Flamboyant Traditional Statement Dress

Source: Damalie, 2024

"Double layered bustle wraps" (that is, thigh-length bustle bustier-on-skirt wraps) are also used by some maidens on this occasion (Damalie, 2018, p. 68) making three different designs. Apart from the traditional woven Asante Kente, the "striped Ewe Kete," almost a look-alike to the *Fugu* cloth from Northern Ghana, is also used by some maidens (Damalie, 2024, p. 198).

Patterned silk as seen in Figure 3b as well as "embellished velvet cloths" are also used on this occasion (Damalie, 2024, p. 199). Unlike the bold red background or plain white colours symbolically associated with the pre-camping and camping stages respectively, a medley of bright colours are preferred during the **Kpojiemo**. The material culture adopted is thus extravagantly Ghanaian or exotic at this stage. This ostentatious moment is a commemorative occasion for families whose girls participate in the rite, and is used by parents to show family status (in wealth and worth).



Figure 3b: Ashin (nobility rite) Maidens in Colourful Statement Dress

Source: Damalie, 2018

According to interviewee Oya, a mother and former initiate:

"My children wore two variants of kente a day for the two days they were to converge at their father's clan house (on Friday and Saturday), making the number of kente used by my daughters four in all. What it implied is that, we were well-prepared for the **Kpeemo**. Besides, the pictures taken were all for reference, just in case one dared to insinuate in future whether my children had been cleansed? What they wore? And in which clan house they were hosted?"

The bustle garment wrap styles used at this stage have increased from one to three varied options, two of which have been subtly introduced by **Ashin** maidens' patronage over time (Damalie, 2024, 2018). Damalie (2024, pp. 198-199) demonstrates the maidens' use of equally expensive and elaborate cloth variants with even more interesting surface detailing during the outdoor ceremony. The motifs or patterns in the surface designs in the two cloths above are illusionary and relatively small. The cut edges of the cloths are unstitched, and the cloths are consistently secured with straps (**Hao**) as a key dress accessory. As demonstrated, the **Atufo** (bustle) and the strap (**Hao**) work together as key dress accessories used in shaping and securing the wrap-around cloth respectively; it helps portray the exaggerated hip which in effect forms the curvy hourglass shape as shown in Figure 1b. It is important to note that the maidens continue to use the bright red and white loincloth (**Bue**) mentioned earlier as an under garment (panties).

At this stage, the maidens' headgear is completely different compared to the two previous ones shown earlier. As shown in Figure 3a and 3b, the **Ashin Yei** wear **Oduku**. It is a local black molded headgear made with up-cycled upholstered coir strands and sparsely covered in black hair plaiting threads to add texture. The headgear is decorated with gold ornaments after it is worn in a "dancing crown" style as seen in the portraits (Figures 3a and b).

Aside the hair ornaments, the rite maidens wear a blend of colourfully strung local **Adiagba** (treasured) beads and gold ornaments on their necks, arms and wrists. The maidens' dangling gold earrings are matched with gold necklaces and unique pendants. A variety of strung **Adiagba** also adorn their necks, including the typical short strung neck beads called **Fliwa**—the queen of neck beads, and a must-wear for the maidens. They further wear blue tubular arm beads with corn cobs, and about eight rows of assorted wrist beads arranged in a colourful and orderly manner (starting with thinner or smaller sizes from the wrist bone upwards). Additionally, they wear the queen of anklets, **Ntah**, a symbolic pair of dressing accessory without which a maiden falls short of expectation. The **Ntah** feature a protective twine (**Hlorkpâa**), assortment of specific beads and orange parrot feathers, one on each anklet—implying their "totem bird" (Damalie, 2024, p. 306, 2018).

The seemingly bare body parts of the maidens such as the upper torso, arms and feet actually feature decorative smears of the scented green **Krôbô** paste and radiant yellow floral motifs. The green **Krôbô** is used to enhance the maidens' skin and adds aura to their presence as done during the pre-rites stage. Additional emphasis is placed on the face using facial décor of floral motifs made with radiant yellow **Fers** (pigment) worn on contemporary foundation. The **Fers** floral motifs, as shown, are repeated on the chest and back of the maidens. Moreover, the maidens shape their eyebrows and wear facial contouring. The components used together create a fabled look of "yesterday-today".

Their glowing skin, resulting from the exfoliation during camping creates a solid foundation for the body and facial décor. Thus consistent application of the **Ashinmu** (oil) does not only "cleanse" spiritual "dirt" but also deals with physical dead surface skin, ably aided with lime juice wash (Damalie, 2024, 2018). The maidens are expected to walk barefooted as custom demands, even at this celebratory stage. They top that up with their well-known traditional signature fragrance customised for them during the ceremony. As illustrated earlier, these distinct dressing accessories form part of the total cultural statement look crafted for the maidens (Damalie, 2018).

Ashin (rite) Maidens' Colourful Classic Statement Dress

Figures 4a and 4b show two distinct portraits of the **Ashin Yei** during the **Kpojei** (post-rites outings). As seen earlier in Figures 3a and 3b, two typical **Ashin Yei** shared look during the final stage of the nobility rites are displayed in this case as well. In the two exceptionally impressive classic statement dress displayed in the portraits, the star elements of the dress are the colourful classic prints used, with emphasis on two key combinations of accessories used in each case.



Figures 4a: Display of *Ashin* (rite) Maidens' Colourful Classic Statement Dress with focus on beaded dressing accessories

Source: Damalie, 2018



Figures 4b: Display of *Ashin* (rite) Maidens' Colourful Classic Statement Dress with focus on gold and *Bue* dressing accessories

Source: Damalie, 2018

The classic prints as worn by the maidens in Figure 4a are known by the locals as: ***Tso kome ekpee koyo*** (Gã language, meaning one tree does not create a forest); ***Akyekyedia akyi***

(Akan language describing the back of a tortoise); **Asasa** (Gã meaning a patchwork of assorted designs); **Answɛ bo** (mirror cloth). The **Tso kome ekpee koyo** cloth has been repeated in Figure 4b. The next classic print in Figure 4b is referred to as **Sɛbɛbo** (because the design resembles garden egg plant leaves).

The accessories used in Figure 4a create the cultural beads outlook and the alternate glamorous gold outlook in Figure 4b. This unique statement dress is a status signifier. The distinct style of expensive **Adiagba** (treasured bead necklaces) and **Ntah** (queen of anklets embellished with parrot feathers) combination as seen is one option. Figure 4b on the other hand shows even more exciting combination of gold and banded cloth anklets (made with **Bue** loincloth) as dressing accessories.

Figures 4a and 4b both show **Ashin** maidens during the post rite stage (**Kpojei**). The maidens are in double layered bustle dress silhouettes associated with the pre-rite and post-rite dressing (**Ashin Telekɔmɔ** and **Kpojei**) respectively. The thigh-length bustle bustier top is draped to fall over a bustle skirt wrap using industrialised classic prints. Here again, the cloths are worn over the exaggerated hips to attain the sensual feminine hourglass silhouette. The noteworthy point in Figures 4a and 4b is that, the wrapped garment used at this stage consists of only one design option. Another fact is that only colourful classic African prints are used. Both small and relatively large pattern cloths are patronised to make emphatic illusionary statements using dress as demonstrated in the portraits in Figures 4a and 4b. The cut edges of the cloths are unstitched, and the cloths are consistently secured with straps (**Hao**) as a key dress accessory, as seen in the previous portraits illustrated.

The maidens' headgear adds yet another twist to their accessories during the post-rite dressing. The symbolic culturally-chic statement headgear is made of the legendary eco-friendly **Oduku** (indigenous black molded artefact). It serves as a foundation item for tying the **Odasobɔ** (silk scarf) during the **Kpojei** (post-rite outing). The tied headdress style falls further from the hairline; framing the face of the wearer.

The maidens' use of the cultural bead outlook, and the glamorous gold outlook variants is remarkable. In one variant, the dress styles combine expensive **Adiagba** and the incredible parrot totem **Ntah**. The alternative is that the maidens are styled up in an all-gold display of merged concepts of precious gold ornaments cum elevated **Bue** (loincloth) ankle bands. The use of the ankle bands replaces the ethnic **Ntah** to complement the look fashioned. The two outlooks respectively crafted, add creatively to the varied paradigms. In each case, tradition and exotic sensibilities are either seen intricately interwoven and/or projected side by side to tell unique cultured stories.

The maidens' bare upper torso, arms and feet are decorated with the aromatic green **Krɔbɔ** used to enhance the maidens' skin tone. This adds to the aura they bring to bear on viewers as was done during the pre-rites stage. There is equal emphasis on their glowing skin, and facial décor which feature floral motifs made from the radiant yellow **Fers** pigment worn on contemporary foundation. The maidens also wear modern shaped eyebrows and facial

contours. The **Fers** floral motifs are repeated on their chests and backs. These distinct dressing accessories form part of the total cultural statement look crafted for the maidens for the post-rite outings in particular. The maidens wear their customised ethnic signature fragrance during the initiation rite. As shown in both Figures 4a and 4b, the maidens are very much in character, consistently barefooted, in touch with nature. The portrait in Figure 4b shows the gold-look with the dressing ornaments used. The maidens continue to use the bright red and white loincloth (**Bue**) as a staple item. The loincloth has further been elevated at this point into an interesting overt dress item. The notable changes notwithstanding, maidens in Figure 4b maintain all other signature details such as described earlier regarding statement body decoration, appearance as well as fragrance.

Ashin Yei's showy cultural statement dress are "symbolic status signifiers" patronised by the maidens during the post-rites activities (Damalie, 2024, p.201, 2018). The classic wax prints worn by the maidens are popular among indigenes (Impraim-Swanzy et al., 2018). However, lifestyle prints (colourful African prints without names) are also patronised alongside the popular ones (Damalie, 2024, p. 206). It is also important to note that the **Atufo** (bustle) has not only become a staple item during outings. It is purposefully used to shape the wrap-around cloth to achieve the "ideal" feminine hourglass-like shape (Eryazici & Çoruh, 2015; Kindersley, 2012, p. 432). Indeed, its use together with an underskirt further performs the job of a "farthingale" (Kindersley, 2012, p. 433) creating volume around the legs. This is observable in the process of wrapping the cloth around the maidens' body over the **Atufo** where adequate room of wearing ease is created using movements. Additionally, it ensures a good hang of the outer garment in use. **Ashin** maidens continue to use the bright red and white **Bue** as a covert dress item even as it gets introduced as an overt dressing accessory. The tied **Odasobɔ** (silk scarf) headdress style falls further from the hairline framing the face of the wearer. The petal tied ends of the scarf which appear in front as shown in Figures 4a and 4b may also be reversed to the back of the head. Either way, the headgear is normally embellished with a dual purpose (functional and attractive) "gold hair pin" (Damalie, 2018, p. 85).

Table 1 summarises findings from **Ashin** statement dress practices

3.2 Table 1: Findings from Ashin (rite) Statement Dress Practices illustrated in Figures 1-4.

Factors	Themed Findings			
	Figures 1a & 1b	Figure 2	Figures 3a & 3b	Figures 4a & 4b
Feminine silhouette(s) i. Figure type(s)	i. Hourglass-like figure type adopted	i. Natural figure type used	i. Hourglass-like figure type adopted	i. Hourglass-like figure type adopted
ii. Dress form(s)	i. Bustle bustier-on- skirt wrap design	i. Ordinary skirt wrap design	i. Bustle bustier wrap ii. Bustle skirt wrap	i. Bustle bustier-on-skirt wrap design

			designs	
iii. Technique(s) used in the designs	Double layered technique is used in making the design.	Single wrap technique is applied in making the design.	Single layered technique is applied in the making of both designs.	Double layered technique is used in design.
Material(s) employed	Industrialised wax prints/ fabrics (classics)	Plain calico	i. Traditional kente ii. Exotic silk print	i. Industrialised wax prints (classics and lifestyle designs)
Dominant colour(s)	Red (cloths)	White (cloth)	Colourful (traditional and exotic cloths)	Colourful (cloths)
Accessories used to complete:	Atufo, Bue (loincloth), Hao (strap) Beads, Krɔɔ , Nyanya leaves ,	Body oil, Bue (loincloth), Hao (strap) Nmorkofu (woven raffia)	Atufo, Bue (loincloth), Hao (strap)	Oduku as foundation mold
i. Dress				
ii. Dressing	Scarf	None	Oduku , gold and bead ornaments	Odasobɔ (luxury silk scarf)
Techniques used	i. Draping, wrapping, layering, tying, and unstitched cloth edges allowing for future reuse. ii. Single and double layering techniques are applicable.			

The summaries suggested in Table 1 show that in three out of four cases, the maidens use the **Atufo** (padding) to create artificial hips so as to attain the desirable feminine hourglass-like figure type. This body shape further contributes to the bustle-inspired garments draped and secured with the **Hao**. Indeed, the padding used in creating the outstanding figure is made up of used clothing; this eco-friendly practice encourages the reuse of existing clothing which could have otherwise been discarded.

The draping and secured methods used imply no permanent stitching of cloths, thereby encouraging the reuse and restyling of the cloths used. As shown in Table 1, the double layered wrap technique is the most frequently used by the maidens. With that the maidens “defy the norm” of baring their breasts in public (except at their clan houses where they formally converge) during the outdoor stage. Thus the maidens, without intending to, have succeeded in rebranding the **Kpojiemɔ** (outdoor stage) statement dress styles in particular as innovative and creative artefacts of their themed dress collection in practice.

The findings as highlighted in Table 1 suggest that popular industrialised wax prints engineered by modern technology is mostly used by the maidens (three out of four cases) at the beginning, during camping, and at the end of the rites. This practice implies the dress

culture practice has supported many a Ghanaian textile company, particularly the likes of Ghana Textiles Printing (GTP) (and by extension Vlisco) and Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) and their products/brands (as shown in Figures 1 and 4) which have operated in Tema and its environs for decades (Damalie, 2018).

The use of plain calico is symbolic and significant as its pure neutral state relates with their aspirations of grooming as pure maidens for their society. Meanwhile the use of cultural cloths such as Asante Kente alongside other extravagant ones with exotic sensibilities reflect the subculture's inclusiveness in their bid to create exquisite subcultural identity (emphasising Ghanaian-ness). These luxurious national cloths are valued as assets and are always in demand, thus their patronage creates sustainable jobs for artisans and traders. Their adoption attests to the subculture's long held support in favour of sustainable Ghanaian culture.

The regularly prescribed ordinary red and white cloths notwithstanding, the **Ashin** maidens have some leverage to adding individual colour options to their collective colour stories. Here again, innovation and creativity are displayed in the use of conventional materials. The question is whether with time the rite maidens will be allowed to stretch their imagination to introduce other unconventional textile fabrics, to add to the **Bue** and **Oduku**, as long as they do not deviate from the glitz and glamour associated with the outdoor and post-rite ceremonies (Figures 3a & 3b; Figures 4a & 4b) in particular. In Damalie (2024), the maidens' Asante Kente and Ewe Kete design counts showed eight colourful variants within one cycle of the ceremony, attesting to the rich material culture adopted by the subculture.

Table 1 further reveals the high sense of adaptability exhibited in the **Ashin** maidens' choice of accessories, as well as how they are used for styling and the viable ripple effects of look achieved as a result. As explained earlier, the **Atufo** (bustle) and **Bue** (loincloth) give expression to the maidens' unique cultural statements at this point compared to others as demonstrated in the statement dress used (Asare-Danso, 2018; Boakye, 2010 as cited in Abbey & Nasidi, 2023; Dedume et al., 2016).

Additionally, the maidens' use of common natural resources (soil, plant/fruit/herbs, and animal based products) for beautiful energy (exuding confidence and attraction) and protection from the environment speaks volumes of their understanding of their dress, and the prevailing multiple realities of dress (otherwise described as their world view on dress). For instance, the use of dress made of clay, spices and fruits from nature for healing is instructive. It is also remarkable how they sustain the underlying cultural belief (**Kusum**) for self-protection against the evil eye. By using nature-inspired exquisite dress accessories (**Adiagba Beads, Ashinmu, Ayilo, Gold, Hlorkpâa, Krɔ̀bɔ̀, Nyanya, Nmorkofu, Ntah**) they seek to preserve the lives of their daughters and future mothers of the society.

Oya, a parent (and former initiate) asserts, "I am of the opinion that priestesses engaged in various activities during the rites who are yet to be initiated must not be allowed to superintend **Ashin** activities." She further narrated how she had to caution another mother to

suspend her daughter’s initiation if she could not uphold the values. This is because the initiate was seen wearing slippers instead of walking barefooted. Beyond the spiritual significance, traditional healing practice encourages walking barefooted (grounding) because it is deemed to be beneficial the body. Walking barefooted allows the body to discharge accumulated electricity into the earth, and in return receive minerals (Selbi, personal communication, November 8, 2024). The adoption of plants and animal-based resources also speaks volumes of their priorities— attracting the right sources of energy and protection from negative human energies within one’s living environment. By this they draw beautiful and positive spiritual and physical strength to themselves as humans.

Table 2 shows lessons as underpinning factors embedded in the conceptualised statement dress used by the maidens.

Table 2: Factors embedded in Statement Dress Conceptualisation identified as Foundations

<p>Rationale</p>	<p>Unique customary (<i>Kusum</i>) dress of Temamei:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Artefacts purposefully crafted based on cultural belief – used as part of traditional healing; ii. Feminist in nature: Dress used for purification of the girl child – as part of her introduction to womanhood, signified by an adorable endowed adult body shape; iii. Model: Conceptualised; customised fit, design-led approach highly influenced by sustainable dress cultural practices and values; iv. Sources of inspiration: Impacted by tradition, nature, and technology (modernity) and aesthetic values.
<p>Concepts</p>	<p>Demonstrable theoretical foundations inherent in <i>Ashin</i> maidens’ statement dress:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Clothing theories tendencies adopted: Feminist, targeting only native daughters to observe rite, and thereby use themed statement dress in the course of initiation; ii. Effective balance in the use of modest and immodest clothing theories adopted; iii. Dress design philosophy illustrated: Demonstrable evidence of a blend of Gã cultural maxims (<i>Fɛ onɔ</i> – a thing of beauty; <i>Kusum gboo</i> –tradition goes on; and <i>Blema kpãa nɔ atsa</i> – continuous reliance on ancestral skill set) upheld in design thinking. iv. Design strategies observed as core approaches used: Routine design, redesign, innovation and creativity phases applied; v. Production methods employed: Drapery; economy in cut; free sizing, techniques used encourages manipulation of materials and application of sustainable dress practices. vi. Preservation through promotional strategies adopted and impact: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dress culture is diffused to other members of the society – trickle down which unconsciously inspires subsequent rite maidens’ wardrobe; • Preservation of culture through awareness creation, involvement of families and

	<p>opinion leaders;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diffusion of culture by involving indigenous community members as well as opinion leaders with different roles to play as gatekeepers. • Strict enforcement of dress code has helped in maintaining rite standards for ages.
Sustainable values taught through hidden curricula	<p>Promotion of women empowerment. Good grooming of cultured young maidens. Socialisation and bonding of community is encouraged. Shared cultural values are inculcated into maidens. Maidens become cultural ambassadors through whom cultural heritage is preserved.</p>
Sustainable practices	<p>i. Techniques applied in costume production ensure reuse of old and waste matter, encourage up-cycling of same, hence encourage reduction of waste. ii. Design theories underpinning statement dress adopted allow consistency between past and present dress compositions. iii. Predictive nature of the statement dress allows for long term preparation by parents and other relevant stakeholders (financially). iv. Prescriptive nature of the dress could allow for repeated use of family owned luxurious woven cloths (<i>Kente</i>, <i>Kete</i> and <i>Fugu</i>) and ornaments, thereby reducing cost. v. Natural means are encouraged for signature aura achieved through collective use of head covering, garment, body décor, look, body fragrance, and skin care routines. vi. Statement dress largely inspired by eco-friendly/ nature, cultural belief and technological sensibilities; recommendable design-led approach for fashion curriculum in tertiary education.</p>

Summaries in Table 2 suggest demonstrable concepts, values and sustainable practices found in the maidens’ statement dress. The subcultural artefacts which are uniquely used by **Temamei** (people of Tema) as shown in Figures 1 to 4 target daughters fathered by sons of the land (Damalie, 2024, 2018). As noted earlier, the belief is to provide traditional healing to the girl child as custom (**Kusum**) demands. It is also used to symbolically celebrate her being ushered into womanhood to benefit the further growth of that society. The model used in crafting artefacts used by the maidens (a key focus of this paper), is obviously design-led (ethnic, conceptual and customised). It is found to be highly influenced by sustainable dress values as detailed in Table 2. The sources of inspiration typically include timeless cultural belief and custom, nature and aesthetic values influenced by modernity as demonstrated in Figures 1 to 4.

More so, their design thinking is influenced by feminine considerations, such as creative philosophies and strategies, production and preservation (through promotional activities) methods which affect conception on one hand, and clothing adoption theories on the other. These in turn affect usage. Sustainable dress values inculcated into the maidens through their hidden curricula (Asare-Danso, 2018; Boakye, 2010) include female empowerment through

self-awareness and good grooming. The maidens are also taught to appreciate and use cultural and natural resources to become cultured young damsels. Through the ceremony, rite maidens are introduced to societal norms through which cultural bonding with the community is traditionally established. Shared dress cultural values are inculcated into the maidens, and they become ambassadors through whom their cultural heritage is preserved.

It is argued that in line with the theme of the paper, a host of sustainable practices are encouraged within the subcultural dress use. For instance, the statement dress compositions displayed are mostly inspired by nature and cultural belief side by side advanced technological sensibilities. Besides, the design-led techniques applied in their dress production ensure manipulation of materials in deriving style (details). The reuse of items is further encouraged, thereby reducing waste. Consequently, up-cycling of otherwise waste materials is encouraged. Then again, design theories underpinning the legendary statement dress adopted allow consistency between past and present dress compositions (Damalie & Essel, 2024, p. 15). The high predictability of the statement dress also allows for long term financial preparation by parents and other stakeholders. The prescriptive nature of the statement dress could allow for repeated use of family-owned luxurious materials (such as traditional Kente, *Kete*, and ornaments). These could help reduce cost in the rather expensive cultural production (Damalie, 2018). Meanwhile, the signature aura attained using the statement garments, accessories, body décor, look, body fragrance, and skincare routines using eco-friendly methods are commendable for people inclined to green fashion practices. They form a composite of invaluable eco-friendly ancestral competencies handed down from their forebears long before Ghana's independence in 1957.

Conceptualising the *Ashin* Dress Framework

"A conceptual framework is a structure which the researcher believes can best explain the natural progression of the phenomenon to be studied." (Camp, 2001 as cited in Adom et al., 2018, p. 439). Imenda (2014 as cited in Shikalepo, 2020) asserts that it is the end result of bringing together a number of related concepts to explain and give a broader understanding of the phenomenon under research. Four key questions guided in de-coupling the conceptualisation of the ***Ashin*** costume framework. Answers to the questions are teased out of lessons embedded in the data (statement dress) and organised in an expressive manner characteristic of the phenomena under study to arrive at the structure developed.

The first question: What likely clothing theories and design philosophies guide the design thinking of the maidens' statement dress composition?

The answers to this question are seen in the demonstrable ways in which the maidens' dress compositions are designed, that is, the creativity shown in the themed outfits and their accessories. It is further found in the body décor designed to complement each staged garment. The next lesson is in the way the designs are organised to be used by the maidens. The maidens' statement dress are styled by recognised ethnic stylists ensuring that accepted ancestral skills are applied for consistency in the "what" and "how" regarding composition

and utilisation. The underlying reasons are found in a blend of Gã cultural maxims (**Fε onɔ** – a thing of beauty, **Kusum gboo** – tradition goes on, and **Blema Kpãa nɔ atsa** – continuous reliance on ancestral skill set) clearly upheld in their songs, design thinking, and processes. These are consistent with three schools of thought in contemporary design philosophies (Broadbent, 1980 a cited in Evbuomwan et al., 1996). Indeed, Evbuomwan et al. recommend that fusion of the three philosophies (that is semantics, syntax and “past experience”) play a more complementary role in product development. The **Ashin** dress statement actually demonstrates the level of success that can be attained in product development, particularly when beautiful rather than chaotic elements are considered as of prime importance even in the use of unconventional materials. This makes the approach used a more complete trajectory of design thinking and process.

The subculture dress practice as indicated is a preserve for only girls fathered by sons from majority of clan houses of Tema Manhean (Damalie, 2024, 2018). As such, the legendary dress is seen as a feminine identity and a preserve for only females from particular clans. Given the way the otherwise forced ritual has been embraced by participants, the feminine standpoint is inferred as a likely voice of the voiceless; especially when the maidens have over time succeeded in, as it were, “turning the tables over” by basking in the glory of nobility while subtly introducing two additional dress silhouettes to the prescribed one during **Kpojiemɔ** (outdooing) as in Figure 3b (Damalie, 2024, 2018). The original design seeks to encourage the wearing of bustle skirt wrap which results in the baring of breasts in public (as shown in Figure 3a). Hence, the findings suggest a balance of the use of dignified coverage of the maidens’ body and a level of partial nudity expected at specific times during the initiation ceremony in both private and public dress. This way, the maidens in practice blend both theories of modesty and immodesty consistent with their culture and literature (Damalie, 2018; Rouse, 2009).

The second question: What strategies drive the rite maidens’ dress designs (practices)?

In answering the second question the focus is on the uniqueness of design observed in each case of the four initiation rite artefacts, and/or the repetitiveness, similarities and differences indicated between them. Lessons embedded in the findings put forward all of the scenarios cited. There are original designs, as well as variants of the original design with observable similarities and differences from the original. For instance, the red bustle bustier-on-skirt original wrap design is the first to be used by the maidens at the beginning of the rites. The second design is the plain white wrap skirt in Figure 2. Its exclusive form, materials and colour used sharply deviate from the first design and so in this context it is seen as yet another original design. The third designs in Figures 3a and 3b relate more with the first original one in Figure 1b because of the obvious use of the curvy body shape formed with the use of the **Atufo**. The single bustle bustier wrap dress and the double bustle bustier-on-skirt wrap feature similar forms with the pre-rite dress but they come in their own different materials and colours. Other elements such as the use of more luxurious nature of materials and

medley of colours create two unique designs with striking differences that totally set each of them apart.

The last themed design (seen in Figures 4a and 4b) features a combination of details from the previous ones—the body shape and dress silhouettes; double layering technique; shared colour palette for body décor; but different cloth types, even though similarly colourful. While the third themed designs clearly manifest one level of innovation and observable creativity in the silhouettes formed, the fourth design manifests creativity and innovation in the combos created with the distinct accessories. Clearly, that is an indication that a blend of all three design strategies have equally played out, albeit, creativity and innovation are the more obvious (Evbuomwan et al., 1996). That notwithstanding, the clearly expressive design options are strictly prescribed; the silhouettes seem to have been influenced in the course of practice and in time have become a convention (Damalie & Essel, 2024). A zero waste concept is at play as part of the design thinking.

The third question: What production methods do they use?

The methods of production scrutinises how the statement dress compositions are constructed, and with what they are constructed. The findings suggest handmade techniques such as draping, wrapping, layering, tying, less cutting and no assembling with permanent means—all of which appear viable in character. The assemblage is customised, one-time use, and temporary, exhibiting a free size idea regarding fit and cloth size, a likely “one cloth size fits all” notion, and zero waste of materials. The garment designs are deconstructed once the **Hao** is untied. The head scarves go through a similar routine. The **Oduku** headgear is however taken off only when the plaited hair attachment at the edge is undone. When it comes to the bead ornaments, it is a matter of untying the knotted point of the strands of yarn used in stringing them together. The gold ornaments are unfastened to take them off. The production methods employed are eco-friendly as they advocate reuse.

The fourth question: How have they ensured continuity of the dress practice till date, given how long ago the practice has been in place?

The evidence in the data collected (photographs) and information gathered from the locals interviewed indicate that the design and use of the various statement dress by **Ashin** maidens predates Ghana’s independence (Gugu, personal communication, 2016). The obvious underlying reason for the continuity, they contend, is because of enforcement through belief; “it is **Kusum** (custom), not fetish” according to the indigenes (Damalie, 2018, p.31).

This paper upholds that beyond custom, the reason for continuity stems from the strong long- held belief that the **Ashin** deity is in charge of the rite. Thus if a maiden refuses to observe the ritual, she might suffer fatal circumstances in life including unsuccessful business ventures, infertility or painful delivery during child birth, among others. There are shared stories of victims in the community including what happened to daughters of the land in the

diaspora (Damalie, 2024). Additionally, in practice many opinion leaders in the traditional area involved at different stages of the rite processes, and parents, particularly fathers, ensure compliance. Even though the beautiful display of the craft of the dress (the focus of this paper) may be of secondary appeal, it may have its own psychological enticing role on maidens to accept to participate.

The set pieces and statement dress look crafted, spirited, outstanding, and attractive from clothing or fashion design perspective. The proposed framework is founded on the four broad concepts embedded within the maidens’ hidden cultural curriculum as lessons which seek to inculcate socio-cultural values into its younger generation the best way they know how. The experiential culture has filled the gap in the absence of formal education (Boakye, 2010) at the time when young maidens still had to be inculcated with socio-cultural values and groomed into adulthood (Asare-Danso, 2018). Besides, aspects of the dress practices are reportedly linked with the **Ashin** spirit in charge of the rite (with the same visual appearance as described in Figure 2 during **Ashinfo**) according to oral traditions (A. Tetteh, personal communication, 2016). Based on the understanding achieved, the structure provided in Figure 5 comprises of the occurring thoughts (lessons) that provide focus and direction to the inquiry made (Rallis & Rossman, 2012 as cited in Shikalepo, 2020).

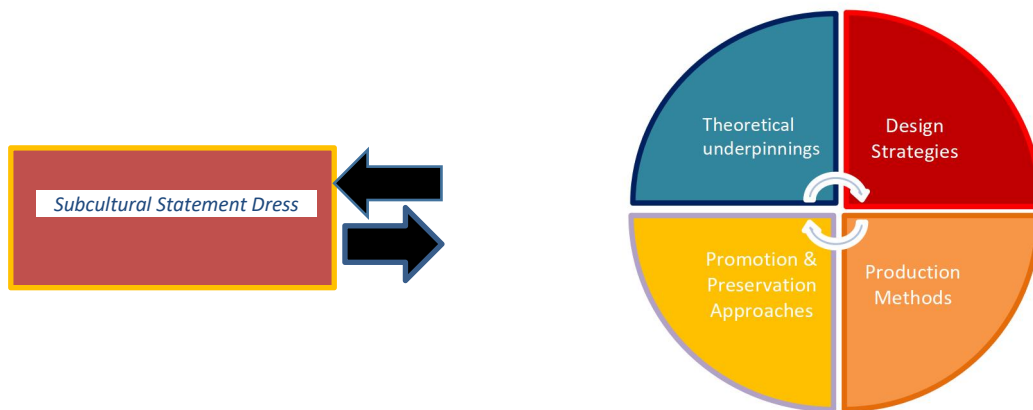


Figure 5: Conceptual Ashin (Nobility Rite) Statement Dress Framework

Source: Researcher’s Construct, 2025

The diagram in Figure 5 demonstrates a graphic understanding of theoretical and methodological concepts interpreted as characteristic of the Temamei **Ashin** maidens’ statement dress. The framework captures the ideas identified and further illustrates how they interplay with each other in the development of the artefacts, and essentially impact on the subcultural artefacts under study. The diagram captioned “Conceptual **Ashin** (nobility rite) statement dress framework” is made up of two main segments. The first is the subcultural artefacts under study. The second is the design thinking and processes underlying their conception which consists of concepts such as the theoretical underpinnings made up of the

clothing adoption theories and design philosophies adapted, design strategies applied, production methods used, and preservation (and promotional) approaches teased out from the findings. These are linked by two inner circle arrows which show in a clockwise manner how the individual ideas interplay orderly. Two outer directional arrows link the artefacts to the characteristic underpinnings. The top arrow indicates the impact the factors collectively have on the statement dress, while the bottom arrow illustrates the reflection of the concepts in the statement dress.

The findings suggest the world view of Temamei when it comes to the **Ashin** dress as part of their subculture; uniquely different from other known resilient Ghanaian female initiation rites dress—the likes of **Dipo** and **Bragoro** (Asare-Danso, 2018; Boakye, 2010; Dedume et al., 2016). The expressive artefacts recommend multiple realities of what the dress for rite maidens should look like in the opinion of the people of Tema Manhean – constructivist paradigm (Tombs & Pugsley, 2020). The findings further suggest that proponents of the symbolic cultural artefacts value their history, traditions, and the environment/nature — including individual sensitivities as well as cultural sustainability in constructing their unique dress identity.

The dress is coded in a blend of nature and technology; that is, traditions with hints of personal style. It has in-built creativity, and is organised in themes and worn in specific ways at specific times during the ceremony. In addition, each dress is meticulously structured. The dress' make-up further relies on in-built ancestral belief and competencies which are demonstrable in the design, production and preservation/promotional strategies employed. The dress is regularly prescribed for all rite maidens. Nonetheless, participating maidens have shown leverage with a modified style detailing in post-camping dressing or styling. Admittedly, those small changes create expectant new looks (appearances) as shown (in Figures 3 and 4).

Again, the findings strongly identify the **Ashin** maidens' statement dress as feminine; sensual; and attractive; partially revealing yet dignifying as and when required. It effectively communicates the maidens' status and is themed to signify processes of the staged ceremony. In addition, it reveals the initiates' shared cultural values. These are influenced by all-inclusive design thinking and strategy, production and preservation systems.

As suggested in the data (Figures 1 to 4), only eligible daughters (not sons) from twenty of twenty-three clan houses qualify to observe the rite. These get to use the exquisite feminist crafted statement dress, contrary to the notion that maidens from all clan houses qualify to participate (Damalie, 2018). The maidens' dress adoption and use display an effective synthesis of the modest and immodest clothing theories (Rouse, 2009). Regarding design, the findings further expose the development of their dress silhouettes through varied design thinking seen as constructivist in nature (Tombs & Pugsley, 2020). The continuous use of the same classics in contemporary times amply validates timeless beauty, and obedience to accustomed beliefs and norms. This further shows their incessant reliance on ancestral

competencies handed down from generations. These deeply resonate with Gã adages like **Fε onɔ** (appreciation for “a thing of beauty”) asserted in one of the rite maidens’ cheer songs. Also, **Kusum gboo** (tradition goes on) and **Blema Kpâa nɔ atsa** (continuous reliance on ancestral skills) find expression in the **Ashin** rite and the statement costumes used. Evidently these reasonings reflect in the archetypes under study are consistent with current schools of thought in design: semantics, syntax and “past experience” respectively, albeit in a more collective sense of design thinking (Evbuomwan et al., 1996). The blend of all ideologies contribute to the uniqueness of the artefacts crafted, seeing that it has allowed impactful adoption throughout their history (from the Gold Coast era to Ghana). It is also evident that their craft is highly influenced by sustainable design-led ideals encouraged in contemporary fashion curricula (Pasricha & Kadolph, 2009 as cited Damalie, 2019) as change agents given current global climate challenges.

Fundamental approaches of multiple strategies are implied in the mostly bustle-inspired silhouettes and in the use of materials, colours as well as accessories. The approach is consistent with the point made in Evbuomwan et al. (1996) suggesting complementary applications of strategies in design thinking. Meanwhile, the techniques of draping, wrapping, and tying of cloths and accessories, and limited stitching of the cloths during production increases the chances of reuse of most of the materials. This defining strategy of the subcultural dress is remarkable, cost effective and forward looking.

The community has adopted promotional strategies in sustaining the use of the statement dress through the involvement of the maidens’ families and opinion leaders in the ritual. The maidens are encouraged to move within the community during their public appearances making them highly visible. By this, the **Ashin** rite dress culture is diffused to all ages and classes within the community. The different roles played and the engaging activities including durbars, result in awareness creation and increased chances of cultural preservation among members of the community. This ensures that past initiates interviewed (such as Gugu, Ashe, Aami, Aayoo, and Oya) also play their gatekeeping roles as indigenes effectively (Pozzo, 2020).

Discussion of Findings

The discussion is focused on demonstrable ideas in relation to all six unique attributes, notably: signature silhouettes, materials and colours, accessories, appearances and fragrance evident in the statement dress of the **Ashin yei** presented in Figures 1 to 4. Sustainable findings, their influence on the statement dress of the nobility rite maidens, vis-à-vis their interrelationships with underlying factors inherent in conceptualisation are also highlighted. First of all, it is noteworthy that the statement dress of Tema **Ashin** maidens emphasises its feminine identity, as it is crafted with feminine attributes targeting only female initiates during the ceremony. All features of the maidens’ statement dress point to the appreciation of an empowered feminine –self, beautiful culture, and socio-cultural expressiveness through dress as a shared culture. The findings re-echo the acceptance that “body shape is an

important factor to affect the physical appearance of women" (Eryazici & Çoruh, 2015, p. 42). There is, in effect, the deliberate use of clothing and body shape in not only the communication of female identity, but also statement of her individual and family values (status), and for protection and attraction consistent with literature (Rouse, 2009). An eighty-year-old cultural stylist said she was trained by her aunt in the old Tema Township in the Gold Coast era. This ethnic stylist and other insiders interviewed assert that the decades-old initiation maidens' statement dress designs predate Ghana's independence.

The use of the statement dress first of all affirms the identity of the maidens as indigenous women of Tema Manhean. Its use further confers on the maidens the coveted title **Ashin Yei** underscoring their initiation that makes them noble members of their community (Asare-Danso, 2018; Damalie, 2024). It is obvious that the prescribed customary dress compositions of the maidens are coded in staged themes: pre-rite, camping, outdoor and post-rite— in the compositions of specific silhouettes using explicit materials, colour palettes, dress as well as dressing accessories and techniques used (Damalie, 2024). It is also obvious that the use of sustainable techniques inherent in the dress practices such as wrap-around cloths provide them with physical protection against environmental elements (like heat, cold and the wind). Meanwhile, the general styling adopted ensures dignity and comfort.

Beyond that, it is maintained that the use of locally-sourced natural dress items are for spiritual protection consistent with their **Kusum**— customs (Damalie, 2018). The natural elements used are the **Nyanya** leaves (wreath), **Hlorkpâa** (twine for stringing beads), **Nmorkofu** (olive green raffia braids), orange parrot-feathered **Ntah** anklets and even corn cobs. These accessories used in crafting the classic outfits instead of actual ornaments demonstrate resourceful, innovative and creative tendencies of **Temamei** (indigenes of Tema Manhean). Natural spices (cloves, aniseed, **Abaya** leaves and lime) are used to enhance the fragrance of the green **Krôbô** (dried fruit paste) applied as body décor. Other items such as the secretly mined **Ashin tɛ** (initiation stone) hidden in the hair of the maidens, as well as the **Ashinmu** (batana/processed palm oil) applied on the body are also from natural sources. These naturally-inspired objects believed to have spiritual impact on the nobility maidens' purification process (Damalie, 2018) are eco-friendly with no known negative impact on the environment.

The statement dress forms are not every day wear for maidens of Tema Manhean, hence their very use attracts attention of onlookers for the right reasons, namely, announcing the maidens and communicating the goings-on at each stage to patrons. Oya (a past initiate and a parent) affirmed that, to some extent the use of the statement dress reveals a maiden's developmental stage, and for that matter her suitability or otherwise for marriage at the time of initiation to interested suitors (Damalie, 2024). The use of **Atufo** to exaggerate the hips is not only a symbol of beauty and womanhood. Such endowment is also viewed as a sign of fertility and a subtle item of sensuality adding value to the maiden's look and creating a positive impression about the **Ashin** maidens as demonstrated in Figures 1 to 4. Notably, the **Atufo** dress item is made with up-cycled materials (old clothing) folded and tied in a scarf.

The padding is worn under the draped cloth used as under skirt to allow it to hang smoothly over the exaggerated hip. This makes for comfortable wearing and ease of the outer wrap-around dress as illustrated in Figure 1b (Damalie, 2018).

Indeed, the use of the bustle which dates back to 1874-75 has shaped fashions. Its use has seen “skirts narrowed, and volume shifted to the back to form bustle.” Bustle pad support was worn under the skirt (Kindersley, 2012, p. 202). Across the centuries, the **Ashin** maidens’ rite symbolising body shape and dress silhouettes have been founded on their undergarments, key among which is the **Atufo**.

In three out of four dress cases cited in Table 1, the hourglass-like figure is the most preferred body shape used by the nobility maidens. The garment forms are mostly draped to cover the body in sustainable wrap-around designs. The double layered bustle bustier-on-skirt wrap is used at the commencement of the rite, while the plain skirt wrap is used during private cleansing. The bustle skirt wrap design is subsequently repeated during the outdoor stage of the ritual, while the redesigned double layered bustle bustier-on-skirt wrap is repeated during post-rite.

This dress code implies that the maidens also subscribe to the minimalist approach; baring their breasts privately and in public as custom (**Kusum**) demands (Damalie, 2024, 2018). Interestingly, over time the maidens have apparently succeeded in introducing the single wrap styled bustle bustier at this stage as illustrated in Figures 4a and 4b. Yet others use the double layered bustle bustier wrap style at this stage (Damalie, 2018). Thus, the nobility maidens’ typical use of the prescribed double layered bustle bustier wraps and the skirt wrap (with and without the bustle) designs as routine garment compositions is pragmatic. Some adopt the innovative and creative single bustle bustier wrap as a choice of dress form in addition by simply pulling up the extra folds on the waistline when the garment is wrapped as bustle skirt. Yet others repeat the double layered bustle bustier wrap respectively as indicated in Damalie (2018). This design option especially implies additional cost since the Kente used at this stage will have to be two-set pieces instead of the usual one large piece (normally received from the wardrobe of a rite maiden’s father). Despite the noted variation, there are obvious constants as well, all of which are sustainable in the dress design strategies adopted, particularly during the outdoor stage. Thus, even when the findings suggest that there are more dress silhouette options for the maidens to choose from in contemporary times compared to the Gold Coast era, when girls were not shy to bare their breasts as tradition demands (Damalie & Essel, 2024, p. 15), the practice in both cases embraces sustainable concepts, which is key for the sustenance of the subcultural artefacts.

Even as the origins of industrialised prints continue to attract discourse, its place in Ghanaian culture cannot be ignored (Delhaye et al., 2015; Dogoe, 2013; Impraim-Swanzy et al., 2018; Pinther, 2021). The findings further suggest textile materials used by the **Ashin** maidens include plain calico as well as the technologically advanced industrialised prints with surface designs. Also referred to as African prints (Impraim-Swanzy et al., 2018; Pinther, 2021), the

colourful fabrics continue to play a key role in every possible way including sustainable clothing practices during girls' rites of passage as the findings demonstrate. Ghanaian traditional woven cloths (Asante Kente and Ewe Kete) and exotic variants (printed silk, silk scarves, embroidered velvet) are also highly valued by the maidens; this is consistent with literature (Dedume et al., 2016; Dzamedo, 2009). Other materials used for tangible and intangible dress items include plants such as **Nyanya leaves**, processed palm/batana oil, raffia, **Krɔbo** (green dried fruit paste), lime and local spices. Soil based resources such as baked clay, gold ornaments and beads; upholstered supplies and parrot feathers are all included in resources used by the **Ashin** rite maidens. Many contemporary eco-friendly skincare industries advocate for and actually use such natural raw materials for their products. The exciting part is the design thinking that inspires the manner in which luxurious conventional as well as unconventional resources from the environment and technology are intricately woven together to achieve such sustainable glamorous artefacts used in impressive harmony.

Achieving such craftsmanship is however not surprising given that the people of Tema (originally known as *Wo Kpele*) since time immemorial have encountered many cultures and may have been influenced through such encounters. The old Tema township was established in the year 1200 (Amartey, 1991, p.17). They had sojourned from ancient Egypt through Sudan, Congo, Nigeria, Benin, and Aneho in Togo before finally arriving in the Gold Coast (Amartey, 1991, pp.14-17; Damalie, 2018). In the Gold Coast, the people of Tema as part of the larger Gã State (*Gamei*) encountered English, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Danish people (Amartey, 1991, p. 18). These groups of people are known traders, some of whom introduced textile goods such as the African prints to the then Gold Coast (now Ghana) (Acquaye, 2018; Delhaye et al., 2015; Pozzo, 2020). Like their contemporaries, the people of Tema, according to Manye Yoo, have high taste for quality products and services, and a high fashion sense. Additionally, by their natural disposition the people of Tema are hardworking (farmers, fisher folks, transport business owners, artisans and white-collar job workers) and they occupy a prime location on the Greenwich Meridian along the eastern coastline of Ghana (Damalie, 2018).

The colour stories portrayed in Figures 1 to 4 respectively further illustrates repetitive shared colours as well as customised palettes. The findings suggest the dominant colour for **Telekɔmɔ** (pre-rite) as red, with traces of green, white, black and beige among others. White is the colour for **Ashinfɔɔ**, with traces of tinted olive green from the dried woven raffia braids. For both **Kpojemɔ** and **Kpojei** (post camping stages), flamboyant colours are preferred. The materials used, and how they are put together, create the key differences in the maidens' interesting wardrobe accounts.

Observable sustainable practices include manipulative techniques applied to ensure reuse. The concepts practised further encourage up-cycling, and zero waste of resources consistent with the contemporary curricula paradigm to promote environmental sustenance (Pasricha & Kadolph, 2009). The strategies adopted in putting the artefact components together allow

consistency between past and present compositions (Damalie & Essel, 2024). This is also because in most cases the artefacts are routinely prescribed and tagged as **Kusum** (custom); only expert traditional stylists are typically engaged to dress the rite maidens. The classic nature of the statement dress allows for long term financial preparation by parents and other stakeholders. It further allows repeated use of family-owned treasures like Kente and/or Kete and ornaments, thus reducing cost.

The findings identify natural sources of inspiration, using resources which are likely readily available all year round. Again, the skincare routine taught is eco-friendly. The young maidens are directed to safe ways of enhancing their skin very early in their development, contributing to them being well-groomed damsels who are not encouraged to bleach their skin. During the post camping stages the maidens are also made to go round and visit friends and family. As they socialise with members of the community, they end up creating awareness about their sustainable statement dress culture practices as cultural ambassadors. With their role as live models thus, they diffuse information about their statement dress to all segments of the society. This helps in the preservation of their culture in the long run. The involvement of families and opinion leaders acting in different capacities further serves as a form of gatekeeping for the subcultural dress cultural practices, making its concepts viable for relatable projects.

Conclusion and Implications

The prescribed red, white and flamboyant cultural statement dress and styles are eco-friendly ideals, customarily used by maidens who participate in the **Ashin Yoo Kpeemo** (initiation rite), as tradition (**Kusum**) demands. The striking and fabled cultural statement dress exclusively used by **Ashin** maidens of Tema Manhean has withstood the test of time. The use of the locally renowned subcultural artefacts is testament to the people's response to sustainable dress culture long before present day calls to embrace eco-friendly habits in cultural clothing consumption.

The preferred feminine body shape and dress silhouettes, as well as materials, colours, accessories, and techniques patronised are timeless classics that have also remained eco-friendly. Consequently, the maidens serve as cultural ambassadors. Through experience, they are taught sustainable values in the hidden curricula of **Kusum** to ensure cultural preservation. The values espoused include female empowerment, good grooming, and high dress essence, all of which have socio-cultural relevance in many Ghanaian societies.

The conceptual framework suggested in the study is founded on four key theoretical and methodological concepts unearthed as lessons embedded in the maidens' eco-friendly cultural statement dress practices. The factors identified are experiential and are appreciated as important influencers of the striking masterpieces. Thus, they informed conceptualisation of the cultural dress framework developed to fill the literature gap identified from the

previous studies mentioned, which similarly contributes to the body of useful knowledge in line with fashion design and sustainable dress practices.

The consequential discovery of the study is the meaningful insight into inherent concepts and their interrelationships. This contribution to indigenous ancestral competencies in sustainable dress fashion practices is a useful guide to experimental and/or experiential research projects of trending global preference for exotic cultural dress fashion aspirations.

The outcome of the case stands to help researchers appreciate the depth of artistry, vis-à-vis its unique importance in appreciating African subcultural statement dress practices such as that of the nobility maidens of Tema Manhean as useful in fashion design curriculum improvement even in the 21st century.

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