

Weaving Identity into Professional Fashion: Cultural Expression and Garment Innovation among Career Women in Bolgatanga, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Fashion operates as a critical medium through which individuals negotiate identity, culture, and modernity. This study explored how career women in Bolgatanga, Ghana, express cultural identity through fashion and examined the integration of indigenous materials into professional attire. Guided by sociological, cultural identity, and cultural representation theories, the study employed a descriptive cross-sectional design with a mixed-method approach. Data were collected from 150 career women (teachers and bankers) through questionnaires and from 10 fashion designers through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative insights were thematically examined. Findings revealed that career women value fashion as a means of affirming identity and cultural pride, though institutional dress codes often restrict everyday cultural expression. African prints dominate Friday wear, while garments such as fugu and smocks are reserved for ceremonial occasions. A practical design component integrated fugu, leather, and calabash into three professional garments. Evaluation of these garments demonstrated high acceptability, with preferences leaning toward designs that subtly balanced cultural symbolism and professional aesthetics. The sheath dress with fugu side panels and calabash buttons emerged as the most preferred. The study concludes that culturally inspired professional fashion offers a pathway for cultural preservation, women's empowerment, and creative industry development. It recommends greater institutional flexibility in dress codes and enhanced collaboration between designers and artisans to sustain indigenous craft traditions while advancing professional fashion in Ghana.

Keywords: Fashion, Cultural Identity, Professional Attire, Fugu, Leather, Calabash, Career Women, Bolgatanga, Ghana.

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INTRODUCTION

Fashion, identity, and culture are deeply interconnected, with fashion serving both as a medium of self-expression and a reflection of cultural values. Scholars highlight that fashion is not merely about clothing but a communicative practice that conveys identity, social belonging, and cultural continuity (Barnard, 2013; Crane, 2012; Entwistle, 2015). It plays a dual role: reinforcing individual self-expression while simultaneously reflecting communal and cultural affiliations (Calefato, 2021; Kidd & Teagle, 2012). In this way, fashion becomes a visible marker of identity, encompassing gender, class, ethnicity, and societal roles (Chan, 2022; Davis, 2008). In African societies, clothing has historically embodied cultural meaning, with garments often signifying heritage, status, and collective belonging (Appiah, 2005; Micots, 2021). In Ghana, particularly, traditional attire such as the *fugu* (smock), woven textiles, and locally crafted accessories remain powerful markers of cultural identity (Salm & Falola, 2002). Despite globalization and western influences, cultural garments continue to shape both personal and communal identity, bridging tradition and modernity (Calefato, 2021; Mole, 2022).

Bolgatanga, in Ghana's Upper East Region, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, including basketry, leatherwork, calabash art, and the *fugu*. These crafts and attires are more than utilitarian; they symbolize cultural continuity, spirituality, and status within the community (Awedoba, 2009; Schram, 2015). However, as professional women increasingly participate in modern economic and social spaces, questions arise regarding how they integrate such cultural expressions into career-oriented fashion.

Although research has explored the connection between culture, fashion, and identity globally (Entwistle, 2015; Kawamura, 2018; Kidd & Teagle, 2012), limited studies exist in the Ghanaian context, especially in Bolgatanga. Career women in the municipality navigate complex expectations: aligning with professional dress codes while simultaneously seeking to express cultural heritage. Yet, little is known about how they negotiate this balance in everyday wear or how culturally inspired garments could be integrated into career-oriented fashion. This gap in literature restricts the capacity of local fashion industries to design garments that reflect cultural identity in modern professional settings.

The study sought to explore the intersection of culture, fashion, and identity among career women in Bolgatanga. Specifically, it aimed to first examine how career women perceive and express their culture through fashion. Secondly, to assess how cultural identity is reflected in their everyday professional attire. To design and produce garments that integrate local cultural elements (*fugu*, leather, calabash) and finally, to evaluate the acceptability of such culturally expressive garments among career women and fashion stakeholders.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do career women perceive fashion as a means of expressing culture?
- In what ways do they reflect cultural identity in their everyday professional wear?
- What processes can effectively integrate cultural materials into career-oriented garments?
- How acceptable are such culturally inspired garments among career women and designers?

This study makes several contributions. First, it fills a scholarly gap by providing empirical evidence on the cultural expressions of career women in Ghana, enriching literature on the intersections of fashion, culture, and identity in African contexts. Second, it contributes to cultural preservation by documenting and promoting the use of indigenous materials such as *fugu*, leather, and calabash in modern professional attire. Third, it empowers women by creating career-oriented garments that affirm cultural identity within professional environments. Finally, it presents economic opportunities for local artisans, particularly weavers, leatherworkers, and calabash artists, whose crafts gain new relevance when incorporated into contemporary fashion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Perspectives

Below are the theoretical perspectives, engaged in this research work.

Sociological Theory:

Sociological theory provides a foundation for understanding the role of fashion as a social phenomenon. Simmel (1904/1957) describes fashion as a mechanism that balances individual differentiation and group conformity. On one hand, individuals use fashion to express uniqueness; on the other, they adopt common styles to maintain social belonging. This tension between imitation and differentiation drives the cyclical nature of fashion (Aspers & Godart, 2013). Fashion, therefore, is not only an aesthetic practice but also a social process shaped by class, status, and power relations (Crane, 2012). In the Ghanaian context, where multiple ethnic groups coexist, fashion operates as both a unifying cultural symbol and a marker of group distinctions.

Cultural Identity Theory:

Cultural Identity Theory (Hall, 1997; Eicher, 1995) emphasizes the communicative nature of identity construction through dress. It distinguishes between avowals, how individuals present and affirm their cultural identity, and ascription, how others perceive and categorize them (Collier & Thomas, 1988). Clothing becomes a symbolic resource through which individuals negotiate belonging, pride, and recognition. In multicultural societies such as Ghana, garments embody multiple layers of identity, ethnic, gendered, professional, and religious. For career women, wearing culturally inspired attire represents not only aesthetic preference but also a declaration of heritage in professional environments.

Cultural Representation Theory:

Hall's (1997) theory of cultural representation argues that meaning is produced through systems of representation, symbols, practices, and discourses. In fashion, clothing becomes a semiotic resource that communicates cultural narratives and identities (Kaiser, 1990). Representation is not fixed; it is negotiated and contested. A garment may symbolize prestige in one context and marginality in another. This theoretical lens highlights how culturally expressive garments, such as those incorporating *fugu*, leather, and calabash, embody identity while simultaneously reinterpreting tradition for contemporary use. Such representations not only preserve heritage but also reposition culture within modern globalized spaces (Calefato, 2021).

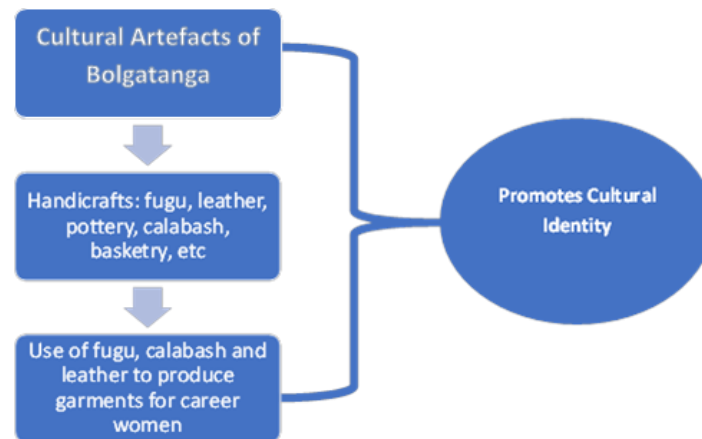


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework on the Relationship between Culture, Fashion, and Identity

Source: Researcher's Construction (2023)

Key Concepts

Understanding the relationship between culture, fashion, and identity requires unpacking the central concepts that frame this study. Each of these concepts is multidimensional and has been interpreted differently across disciplines, but together they provide the foundation for analysing how cultural expression is communicated through dress.

Culture:

Culture refers to the collective values, beliefs, practices, and material expressions that define a social group (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). It is dynamic and constantly reshaped through interaction, globalization, and technological change (Antia, 2005). In African contexts, culture is often expressed through material artefacts such as textiles, crafts, and architecture, as well as through intangible practices such as festivals and rituals (Idang, 2015).

In Ghana, clothing is a strong cultural marker. Garments such as *fugu* (smock) or *kente* cloth symbolize heritage and identity, while accessories like calabash carvings and leather crafts embody spiritual and social meanings (Awedoba, 2009; Schram, 2015). These elements demonstrate how culture is not only preserved but also performed through dress. Importantly, cultural identity in Ghana is negotiated daily, as individuals balance tradition with modern professional demands.

Fashion:

Fashion is broadly understood as a system of styles that communicate meaning through dress and appearance. It is both a cultural and social phenomenon, reflecting cycles of change driven by the need for differentiation and imitation (Simmel, 1904/1957). Scholars view fashion as more than clothing, it is a language that communicates identity, status, and belonging (Barnard, 2013; Crane, 2012). Fashion also embodies psychological and symbolic dimensions. It allows individuals to project self-expression while conforming to social norms (Entwistle, 2015). In professional contexts, fashion functions as a negotiation between individuality and institutional expectations. In Ghana, "Friday wear", when many professionals wear African prints to work, illustrates how cultural identity is incorporated into modern dress codes (Micots, 2021). Thus, fashion becomes a site where global trends and local traditions intersect.

Identity:

Identity is a multifaceted construct encompassing personal, social, and cultural dimensions (Berezin, 2021). It refers to how individuals define themselves and how they are recognized within groups. Through dress, identity becomes both visible and symbolic, allowing individuals to express ethnicity, gender, religion, or professional affiliation (Chan, 2022; Kidd & Teagle, 2012).

Fashion plays a central role in identity construction. It allows individuals to signal group belonging while also differentiating themselves (Davis, 2008). In African contexts, traditional attire communicates pride in heritage and continuity with communal values (Appiah, 2005). Yet identity is not static; career women in Ghana often adapt their cultural expressions to fit professional environments, blending Western fashion with local elements. This demonstrates how identity is fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent.

Specific Cultural Context: Bolgatanga

Bolgatanga, located in Ghana's Upper East Region, is renowned for its vibrant artisanal culture and strong attachment to tradition. The municipality is home to diverse ethnic groups such as the Frafra, Nankani, Kusasi, and Builsa, whose cultural practices are deeply embedded in daily life (Awedoba, 2009). Known for basket weaving, pottery, leatherwork, and calabash art, Bolgatanga has gained recognition as a hub of craftsmanship. These material artefacts are not only sources of livelihood but also embodiments of identity and continuity, linking present generations to ancestral heritage (Schram, 2015).

Festivals:

Festivals are integral to the cultural fabric of Bolgatanga. The Adaakoya Festival, celebrated annually by the Frafra and Gurune-speaking communities, marks the harvest season and serves as a platform for thanksgiving, cultural performance, and community bonding. Rituals, drumming, dancing, and traditional dress are key elements of the festival, symbolizing gratitude to the gods and ancestors (Awedoba, 2009; Der, 1987).

Festivals also reinforce social identity by bringing together dispersed community members. During such events, attire such as *fugu* is worn with pride, reflecting both cultural identity and social cohesion. For women, particularly career women, festivals provide opportunities to connect their professional and personal lives with cultural traditions by showcasing indigenous fashion alongside modern styles.

Traditional Clothing (Fugu, Leather, Calabash):

Clothing in Bolgatanga embodies cultural pride and continuity. The *fugu* (smock), a handwoven garment made from cotton strips, is the most iconic attire. It symbolizes strength, wisdom, and leadership, often worn during ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and enskinment rites (Awedoba, 2009; Der, 1987). Chiefs and elders typically wear more elaborate versions, while modern adaptations allow women and younger generations to incorporate *fugu* into contemporary fashion.

Leatherwork is another significant craft, traditionally used to produce sandals, belts, bags, and ceremonial accessories. Leather items often bear symbolic carvings and designs associated with protection, prosperity, and cultural affiliation (Schram, 2015). Similarly, the calabash,

made from dried gourds, has practical and symbolic uses. It serves as a container for food and drink, an instrument in music, and a decorative artefact adorned with carvings. In fashion, calabash elements can be repurposed as buttons or accessories, adding symbolic depth to modern garments.

Together, these materials, *fugu*, leather, and calabash, represent the ingenuity and resilience of Bolgatanga's cultural heritage. Incorporating them into career women's professional attire offers an avenue for cultural preservation while responding to contemporary identity needs.

Table 1: Cultural Elements of Bolgatanga and Their Meanings

Cultural Element	Description/Use in Bolgatanga	Symbolic Meaning
<i>Fugu</i> (Smock)	Handwoven cotton strips sewn into garments; worn by men and women during ceremonies, festivals, and leadership roles.	Strength, leadership, cultural pride, continuity of heritage.
Leather	Used in making sandals, belts, bags, accessories, and ceremonial items.	Protection, prosperity, craftsmanship, durability, and status.
Calabash	Dried gourd used as household container, decorated in rituals, or carved for ornaments and accessories.	Spirituality, creativity, transformation of nature into art.
Basketry	Handwoven baskets from straw, widely traded within and outside Ghana; also used domestically.	Economic livelihood, resilience, creativity, and community identity.

Source: Field data, 2023; Awedoba, 2009; Schram, 2015.

Gap in Literature

Existing literature has examined the intersections of fashion, identity, and culture in various global contexts (Barnard, 2013; Entwistle, 2015; Kawamura, 2019). In Ghana, scholars have explored textiles such as *kente* and the role of traditional attire in cultural preservation (Micots, 2021; Salm & Falola, 2002). However, these studies often focus on ceremonial wear or national dress, leaving everyday professional attire underexplored.

Specifically, little attention has been given to how career women in Bolgatanga express cultural identity in their workplace dress or how local cultural materials can be adapted into professional garments. This gap is significant because it overlooks both the lived experiences of women negotiating culture and professionalism, and the economic potential of local artisans whose crafts could be integrated into modern fashion.

The present study addresses this gap by (1) examining career women's perceptions of cultural expression through fashion, (2) documenting their everyday practices of cultural dress, (3) designing garments using *fugu*, leather, and calabash, and (4) evaluating their acceptability among stakeholders.



Figure 2: Relationship between Culture, Fashion, and Identity

Source: Researcher's Construction (2023)

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophy

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional design to investigate how career women in Bolgatanga express cultural identity through fashion. The design allowed for the collection of data at a single point in time from multiple groups, making it appropriate for capturing perceptions and practices across a defined population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Philosophically, the study was guided by an interpretivist orientation, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings individuals attach to their actions (Schwandt, 2014). This perspective was appropriate for exploring how fashion functions as a medium of cultural identity and expression. At the same time, quantitative elements provided descriptive statistics that complemented qualitative insights, making the approach mixed-method in nature.

Study Area

The research was conducted in Bolgatanga Municipality, the administrative capital of Ghana's Upper East Region. The municipality is a cultural hub known for its traditional crafts, basketry, leatherwork, pottery, calabash art, and the *fugu* smock. These crafts are not only economic activities but also symbolic carriers of cultural identity (Awedoba, 2009). Bolgatanga is also an emerging professional space with banks, schools, and government offices, providing a diverse pool of career women who balance professional demands with cultural traditions.

Study Population

The study population comprised two distinct groups:

1. Career women in Bolgatanga, specifically teachers and bankers, whose professional environments impose dress expectations.
2. Fashion designers, who influence the production and adaptation of garments that incorporate cultural elements.

The career women consisted of female teachers from all second cycle schools within the Bolgatanga municipality and female bankers from commercial banks in the same municipality. It is estimated that there are 176 female teachers across all the five schools and 64 female bankers in seven banks, totalling 240 career women. Additionally, there are 400 fashion designers according to the Bolgatanga Dressmakers and Tailors' Association.

Sample and Sampling Technique:

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants with direct relevance to the research objectives. The justification for using this technique is to empower the researcher to use her discretion in identifying examples that would most effectively address the research questions and fulfil the study's objectives (Etikan & Babatope, 2019). Moreover, purposive sampling is suitable when the research seeks to obtain insights from selected respondents recognized for their specialized knowledge in the subject area. The final sample comprised 160 respondents: 150 career women, consisting of 114 teachers and 34 bankers, were sampled based on Yamane (1967) formula, and 10 fashion designers were added after a level of saturation was achieved. According to Bowen (2008), a level of data saturation can be achieved with between 10 to 25 respondents. This sample size was considered adequate for providing both breadth and depth of perspectives.

Table 2: Sample Distribution of Respondents (N = 160)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Teachers	114	71.25
Bankers	36	22.5
Fashion Designers	10	6.25
Total	160	100

Source: Field data, 2023.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed two main instruments: a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Combining these methods enhanced triangulation and increased the validity of findings.

Questionnaires:

Structured questionnaires were administered to 150 career women. The questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended items covering:

- Sociodemographic characteristics (age, education, profession, marital status).
- Perceptions of culture and fashion.
- Everyday practices of cultural dress in professional settings.
- Opinions on the integration of cultural elements (*fugu*, leather, calabash) into career wear.

The questionnaires were pre-tested with a small group outside the sample to refine clarity and reliability.

Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 fashion designers in Bolgatanga. The interviews explored:

- Experiences in garment design and production.
- Attitudes toward incorporating indigenous materials into professional attire.
- Perceptions of client preferences and marketability of culturally expressive garments.

The interviews provided qualitative insights that complemented the quantitative findings from questionnaires. Audio recordings and notes were taken with participant consent, and data were later transcribed for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards in social research. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Confidentiality was ensured by avoiding the collection of personally identifiable information; instead, codes were used to represent participants. Data from questionnaires and interviews were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Permission was also sought from relevant institutional authorities, including school and banking administrators, to access participants within their professional settings. These measures upheld principles of respect, beneficence, and justice (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Data Analysis

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis. Questionnaire responses were coded and entered into SPSS (version 25.0) for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were generated to summarize sociodemographic characteristics, perceptions, and practices.

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and meanings regarding cultural expression in fashion.

Finally, findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. This mixed-method analysis ensured that numerical trends were enriched by narrative depth, yielding insights into both the prevalence and the meaning of cultural fashion expressions among career women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents

The sociodemographic characteristics of respondents provide context for understanding their perceptions and practices of cultural fashion. A total of 150 career women (teachers and bankers) and 10 fashion designers participated in the study.

Analysis of the data showed that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 26–40 years, representing young and middle-aged career women in their prime professional years. This is consistent with Ghana's broader demographic structure, where youth and young adults constitute the largest segment of the workforce (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). The dominance of younger participants suggests that fashion choices are influenced by generational shifts, with younger women more open to blending cultural and modern styles.

Table 3: Sociodemographic Profile of Participants (N = 160)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	21–25 years	24	15.0
	26–30 years	48	30.0
	31–40 years	52	32.5
	41 years and above	36	22.5
Marital Status	Single	70	43.8
	Married	80	50.0
	Divorced/Widowed	10	6.2
Educational Level	Diploma	32	20.0
	Bachelor's Degree	88	55.0
	Master's/Professional	40	25.0
Profession	Teachers	114	71.3
	Bankers	36	22.5
	Fashion Designers	10	6.2
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	36	22.5
	5–10 years	62	38.8
	More than 10 years	62	38.8

Source: Field data, 2023.

In terms of education, most career women had attained tertiary qualifications, reflecting the academic requirements for teaching and banking professions. Higher education is often associated with increased exposure to diverse fashion trends, both local and global (Entwistle, 2015). This suggests that respondents had both the awareness and capacity to make informed choices about integrating culture into professional attire.

Marital status revealed a fairly balanced distribution, with both married and single women represented. This is relevant because social roles and responsibilities often shape dress preferences in Ghanaian contexts (Micots, 2021). Married women, for example, may gravitate toward more conservative attire, while unmarried professionals may have greater freedom to experiment with fashion.

Professionally, teachers formed the largest group of respondents, followed by bankers. Teachers often engage in formal but flexible dress codes, while bankers typically operate within stricter professional guidelines. These variations influenced how cultural expressions were integrated into daily wear.

The 10 participating fashion designers had between 5–20 years of experience in garment construction and design. Their expertise provided insight into both the technical feasibility and the cultural acceptability of integrating *fugu*, leather, and calabash into modern professional garments.

Overall, the demographic profile highlights a diverse but representative sample of career women and designers in Bolgatanga. These characteristics shape not only how culture is expressed through dress but also the potential for adopting culturally inspired garments in professional spaces.

Perceptions of Career Women on Fashion as Cultural Expression

Quantitative Findings:

The questionnaire responses revealed that career women in Bolgatanga generally view fashion as an important medium for cultural expression. A majority (82%) agreed that wearing culturally inspired clothing affirms their identity and fosters pride in heritage, while 74% indicated that such fashion connects them to their communities even in professional settings. However, 41% noted that institutional dress codes sometimes limited their ability to wear culturally expressive garments at work. These findings align with Entwistle's (2015) assertion that fashion serves as a negotiation between individuality and social norms. They also reflect Simmel's (1904/1957) notion of balancing differentiation and conformity; women desire to express culture but remain mindful of professional expectations.

Table 4: Perceptions of Career Women on Cultural Fashion Expression (N = 150)

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Fashion helps me express my cultural identity.	82	12	6
Wearing cultural attire makes me feel proud of my heritage.	88	8	4
Cultural clothing connects me to my community, even in professional life.	74	16	10
Institutional dress codes make it difficult to wear cultural attire.	41	22	37
I would welcome garments that integrate <i>fugu</i> , leather, or calabash.	91	7	2

Source: Field data, 2023

The overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward garments that integrate local cultural materials indicate strong potential for culturally inspired career wear.

Thematic Insights from Interviews:

Interviews with fashion designers provided deeper insights into how culture is expressed through fashion. Three key themes emerged:

1. **Fashion as a Cultural Marker** – Designers observed that career women often prefer garments that subtly incorporate cultural symbols, such as trims or accessories, rather than full traditional outfits. This reflects a negotiation between cultural pride and professional appropriateness. One designer explained *"Women want to show their culture, but not in a way that makes them stand out too much at work. A small panel of fugu or a traditional accessory is often enough."*
2. **Barriers to Cultural Expression** – Respondents highlighted workplace expectations and Westernized dress codes as significant barriers. One designer noted: *"Many bankers, for example, want to wear something cultural, but their institutions require formal Western attire. They only show cultural styles on Fridays or during special occasions."* A banker also noted, *"Our office allows only suits from Monday to Thursday. Friday is the only time I can wear something African without being questioned."*
3. **Growing Demand for Cultural Innovation** – Designers reported increasing interest in modernized cultural fashion, particularly among younger career women. There was strong demand for innovative adaptations of *fugu*, leather, and calabash in professional

garments that remain elegant and office-appropriate. One designer emphasized, “*Young professionals want something new—something that looks modern but carries their heritage. If you give them stylish garments with fugu or calabash, they will wear it.*”

These themes reinforce the quantitative findings, showing that while career women value cultural expression, institutional and professional contexts shape how and when it is practiced.

Everyday Cultural Expressions in Professional Wear

Career women in Bolgatanga demonstrate multiple ways of integrating cultural identity into their daily and occasional professional attire. While Western-style formal wear dominates offices, cultural garments and accessories remain important in both routine and ceremonial contexts.

African Prints and Friday Dressing:

The most common avenue for cultural expression in professional spaces is through the use of African prints, especially during the nationally recognized “Friday wear.” On Fridays, career women across Ghana are encouraged to wear locally produced fabrics such as Ankara, wax prints, and handwoven textiles. Among the respondents, 87% reported regularly wearing African prints on Fridays, with many noting that it allows them to “represent Ghanaian identity” while adhering to workplace norms. This finding supports Crane’s (2012) argument that fashion reflects broader social systems: national policies like Friday wear institutionalize cultural expression in professional environments. For many women, Friday dressing balances professional formality with cultural pride, reinforcing identity in a socially sanctioned manner.

Cultural Attire in Ceremonial Contexts:

Beyond Fridays, career women reported wearing traditional clothing such as *fugu*, kaba and slit, and smocks during ceremonies including weddings, funerals, festivals, and religious celebrations. These garments were often described as “reserved for special occasions,” reflecting both cultural symbolism and social expectation. For instance, 65% of respondents indicated that they wear *fugu* or smocks during festivals and funerals, while others highlighted that such garments are “too heavy” or “too informal” for daily office use. Accessories made of leather and calabash (such as belts, bags, and jewelry) were also noted as occasional elements of ceremonial dress. These findings suggest that while cultural attire plays a significant role in identity reinforcement, its use in professional daily life remains limited, largely due to practical and institutional considerations.

Table 5: Everyday Cultural Expressions of Career Women in Bolgatanga (N = 150)

Cultural Expression Type	Regularly (%)	Occasionally (%)	Rarely/Never (%)
Wearing African prints on Fridays	87	10	3
Wearing <i>fugu</i> or smock at the workplace	18	42	40
Wearing kaba and slit in professional contexts	26	51	23
Wearing cultural attire during ceremonies (festivals, funerals, weddings)	65	30	5
Using cultural accessories (leather bags, calabash jewelry)	39	47	14

Source: Field data, 2023

These results illustrate that career women's cultural expressions are highly context-dependent, more prominent during sanctioned days (Fridays) and ceremonial events, but less integrated into everyday professional attire.

Garment Design Process

A practical component of the study involved designing and constructing garments that integrated Bolgatanga's cultural elements (*fugu*, leather, calabash) into modern professional wear for career women. This process followed standard fashion design procedures, including research, mood board development, sketching, material selection, and garment construction.

Integrating Fugu, Leather, and Calabash:

The design process began with an exploration of how local cultural materials could be reinterpreted for professional contexts.

- **Fugu (smock fabric):** Known for its bold woven plain/stripes and heavy texture, the *fugu* was adapted into lighter forms suitable for office wear by combining it with softer fabrics such as cotton lining.
- **Leather:** Traditionally used in accessories, leather was incorporated in the form of faux pocket, for aesthetics.
- **Calabash:** Normally used in household and ceremonial objects, calabash fragments were refined and polished for use as decorative buttons, symbolically linking tradition to modern fashion.

This integration reflects Hall's (1997) idea of cultural representation, where traditional materials acquire new meanings when repositioned in contemporary contexts.

Mood Board and Sketch Development:

A mood board was created to visualize the theme of "Cultural Identity in Professional Fashion." It featured inspirations drawn from Bolgatanga's crafts, textures, and colours, alongside silhouettes of modern professional attire. From this board, a series of preliminary sketches were developed, blending cultural motifs with sleek, office-appropriate designs.



Figure 3: Mood Board

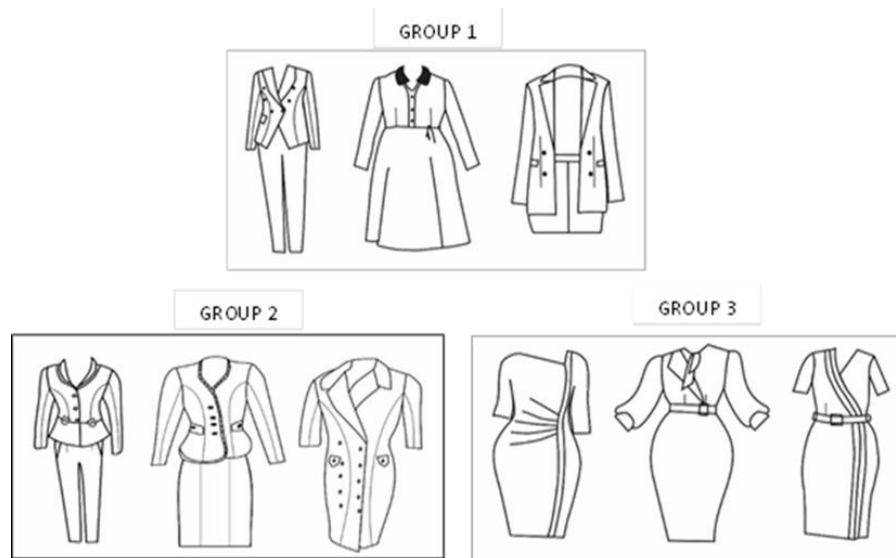


Figure 4: Selected Design Sketches

Choice of Style:

In designing the garments, the group of designs that were identified in the questionnaire as the preferred designs for career women were noticed. Garments can be designed in several forms characterized by the way the sleeves are cut, the necklines, length of garment, arrangements of fullness, and openings and fastenings in the design to reflect the taste of the user.

The preferred garments for career women using *fugu* were a below-knee level dress, skirt and jacket and a pair of trouser and jacket. Thus, a dress with elbow level sleeve, a trouser with a long sleeve blouse/jacket, and a skirt with a long sleeve blouse/jacket were designed to express the culture of the user. These designs were chosen by the stakeholders.

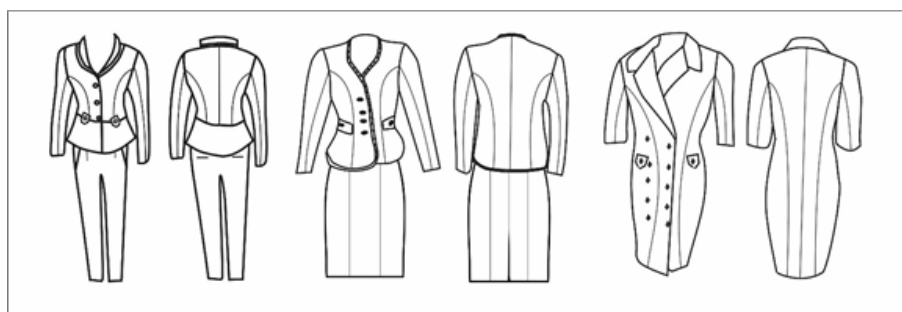


Figure 5: Selected Sketches

Fabric and Material Selection:

The final selection of materials prioritized both cultural authenticity and professional suitability. *Fugu* strips were used with neutral plain-coloured *fugu* fabrics to provide balance, while leather was used sparingly to avoid heaviness. Calabash pieces were carefully treated and attached as embellishments to ensure comfort and durability.

This stage illustrates the negotiation between functionality and symbolism, ensuring garments remained wearable in office environments while showcasing cultural heritage.

Materials/Methods (Studio Practice):

This section documents the researcher's practical work as a fashion designer, with a focus on understanding traditional costume designs among the Bolgatanga people in Ghana's Upper East Region. The studio practice included:

- Materials and Tools: Selection and use of resources essential for garment production.
- Methods: application of techniques relevant to designing and crafting traditional attire.

Table 6: Materials / Tools and their uses

Materials/ Tools	Uses
Pair of Scissor(s)	Cutting fabric, trimming threads, and cutting paper patterns
Rulers	Measuring fabric dimensions accurately, drawing straight lines for patterns (e.g. hemlines, seam allowances).
Pencil	Sketching initial garment designs, marking for cuts, darts, notches and writing measurements and labelling on patterns.
Pins	Temporary for holding fabric layers together before sewing, securing patterns to fabric for tracing/cutting and for marking adjustments.
French Curve	Drawing smooth curves for armholes, necklines, and hiplines, adjusting patterns curves e.g. flare, and princess seams.
Tracing Wheel	Transferring pattern markings onto fabric using tracing paper, creating perforated lines for seams, and buttons. To transfer marks from the pattern unto the fabric
Eraser	To erase any unwanted markings during drafting, sketching
Brown Paper	Used for drafting master patterns, and storing patterns.
Fugu Fabric	Construction of the garments for the career women.
Natural Leather	Producing part of the garments.
Calabash	Produce fasteners (buttons) for the produced garments.
Sewing Machine	For constructing the garments for the career women
Wood File	To shape and smoothen the edges of the calabash.
Wood Polish	Polish the surface of the calabash buttons.

**Figure 6: Pattern Drafting and Cutting Out**

Source: Photo by the researcher.

Garment Production Stage

Fabric Used in Sewing Garment for Career Women:

The most crucial component of a garment is the fabric. It does not matter how well-crafted the garment is, if it is made from the wrong fabric, it will not do justice to the design. Therefore, in fashion and designing, fabric selection is enormously essential and an integral part (Adebola, 2016). Different fabrics required for different ages, purposes, and occasions are available. Marriage costume, uniforms, casual wear, evening wear, official wear, etc., all require a different kind of fabrics and at times, a combination of many.

Fabrics that are usually used in the design of garments for career women are wax print, plain and patterned cotton, linen or woollen fabrics and Ghanaian indigenous textiles call fugu and Kente. These fabrics are either combined or used alone to give a very beautiful design to customers. The combination of these fabrics with fugu which is a Ghanaian indigenous fabric does not only make the garment beautiful but can also express the culture of the user. Some techniques were used with the fashion fabric to produce the garments so that the styles/designs could come out very well. They included the following:

Laying and Cutting Out:

The final patterns were carefully laid on the fabrics according to the grain directions of the patterns. With pins holding the patterns to the fabric, they were carefully cut out for the next step which was assembling and stitching, as shown in Figure 6 below.



Figure 7 'a': Laying and Cutting of Parts of Garments and 'b' Sewing and Pressing

Source: Photo by the researcher

Processing of Calabash and Leather:

Processing the calabash was very challenging and exciting at the same time. The calabash was first soaked in water to soften it, it was then broken into smaller units. Wood file was used to smoothen the rough edges and also to obtained the desired shapes. Wood polish was applied to give it a glossy effect. With the leather, some were dyed to desired colours and buffing done to smoothen the surface before using it to produce the items. These are shown in Figures 8 and 9.



Figure 8: Calabash Processing by Researcher



Figure 9: Leather Processing by Researcher

Design Analysis:

Design Analysis of Garment One:

The design analysis of the first design, as shown in Figure 9 below are as follows;

1. The garment design is a dress with a lapel collar
2. The dress is a double breasted with fourteen buttons for easy opening.
3. The buttons are four holes flat buttons made from calabash.
4. The jacket has faux pockets made from leather.
5. It has a dart for fitting.
6. The garment design is up to the knee level
7. It has a sleeve to the elbow.



Figure 10: Computer Generated Image of the First Design

Design Analysis Two:

The design analysis of the second design, as shown in Figure 10 are;

1. The garment design is a trouser and jacket.
2. It has a rolled collar and a front opening with three buttons for easy wearing.
3. The jacket has two faux pockets made from leather.
4. The buttons are two holes flat buttons made from calabash.
5. The garment has a panel line and is cut and joined at the waist with peplum.
6. It has a two-piece long sleeve.
7. The trouser design is close fit trouser with a zip opening.
8. The trouser has two faux pockets bound with the jacket's fabric at the back and faux French pockets.



Figure 11: Computer Generated Image of the Second Design

Design Analysis Three:

The design analysis of the third design, as shown in Figure 11 are;

1. The garment design is a skirt and blouse/jacket
2. The design is panel skirt with a built-up long sleeve blouse/jacket.
3. The blouse has faux pockets made from leather.
4. The blouse has princess lines both at the front and back
5. It has a two-piece long sleeve.
6. The blouse has a front opening with four buttons for easy wearing
7. The buttons are two holes flat buttons made from calabash.



Figure 12: Computer Generated Image of the Third Design

Final Garments Constructed:

A total of **three garments** were constructed, each representing a distinct design concept that integrated Bolgatanga's cultural elements into modern professional wear (see Figure 13).

1. Design One (sheath dress): A fitted double breasted office dress made from fugu fabric with leather faux pockets and calabash button details, balancing professional elegance with subtle cultural symbolism
2. Design Two (Smock inspired Jacket): A tailored jacket derived from the traditional smock silhouette, redesigned with leather faux pockets and calabash buttons, into a structured form suitable for professional contexts.
3. Design Three (Two-piece Suit): A coordinated skirt-and-jacket set with fugu, calabash buttons and leather faux pockets inserts, presenting a formal option for office environment.



Figure 13: 'a' is the finished garment-design one; 'b' is the finished garment-design two and 'c' is the finished garment-design three

Acceptability of the Constructed Garments

The constructed garments were evaluated by both career women and fashion designers to determine their acceptability in terms of aesthetics, cultural symbolism, and professional suitability. The evaluation provided valuable insights into how traditional elements can be successfully integrated into career-oriented attire.

Stakeholder Feedback (Career Women & Designers):

Feedback revealed a strong appreciation for the creative use of *fugu*, leather, and calabash. Career women emphasized that the garments gave them a sense of pride in heritage while remaining suitable for office environments. Designers praised the innovation, noting that the incorporation of traditional materials demonstrated the adaptability of indigenous crafts for contemporary fashion markets.

However, some participants expressed concerns about the durability of calabash embellishments and the weight of *fugu* in warmer weather. These critiques highlight the importance of refining production methods to improve comfort and functionality.

Preference Patterns:

Among the four garments produced, the sheath dress with *fugu* side panels and calabash buttons was the most preferred (46%), followed by the smock-inspired tailored jacket (29%). The two-piece suit received 15% of preferences, while the skirt-and-blouse ensemble accounted for 10%. These results indicate a general preference for garments that subtly integrate cultural materials without overwhelming professional aesthetics.

Table 7: Preferences for Constructed Garments Among Career Women (N = 150)	
Garment Type	Preferred (%)
Sheath <i>fugu</i> double breasted dress with leather faux pockets & calabash buttons	56
Smock-inspired tailored jacket-and trouser with leather faux pockets & calabash buttons	29
Two-piece Suit coordinated skirt-and-jacket set from Fugu and leather faux pockets & calabash buttons.	15

Source: Field data, 2023

Key Reasons for Preferred Designs:

Participants provided several reasons for their preferences:

- **Professional Appeal:** The sheath dress and tailored jacket were considered “formal yet fashionable,” aligning well with workplace expectations.
- **Cultural Symbolism:** Respondents appreciated garments that showcased *fugu* in a subtle but visible way, reinforcing identity without appearing overly traditional.
- **Comfort and Practicality:** Lightweight adaptations of *fugu* and careful placement of calabash details made the preferred garments easier to wear daily.
- **Versatility:** Some designs were praised for their adaptability to both office and social occasions, making them attractive for multipurpose use.

These findings underscore the potential for culturally expressive fashion to bridge tradition and modern professionalism, provided that designs prioritize comfort, functionality, and subtle symbolism.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

The study investigated how career women in Bolgatanga express cultural identity through fashion and how indigenous materials (*fugu*, leather, calabash) can be adapted into professional garments. Findings revealed that while Western-style attire dominates daily professional

settings, cultural expression persists through African prints (especially Friday wear) and ceremonial attire. Career women strongly value fashion as a means of affirming identity and heritage, though institutional dress codes limit their cultural expression at work.

The practical component demonstrated that cultural materials can be innovatively integrated into professional garments. Evaluation of the constructed garments showed high levels of acceptability, particularly for designs that balanced cultural symbolism with professional aesthetics. The sheath *fugu* dress with leather faux pocket and calabash buttons emerged as the most preferred, underscoring the potential for subtle yet powerful cultural integration.

Conclusion

Fashion remains a powerful medium for negotiating identity in professional contexts. For career women in Bolgatanga, cultural fashion is both a marker of heritage and a statement of belonging, even as they navigate institutional expectations. By adapting indigenous materials into professional attire, the study highlights pathways for cultural preservation, women's empowerment, and creative industry development. The findings affirm that culturally expressive garments are not only acceptable but also desirable in modern professional spaces, provided they remain practical, comfortable, and aesthetically versatile.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

1. **Fashion Designers:** Designers should explore innovative ways of incorporating indigenous materials into professional wear, focusing on lightweight, functional, and versatile adaptations.
2. **Institutions and Workplaces:** Employers should consider flexible dress policies that encourage cultural expression, especially beyond Friday wear, as part of cultural promotion and diversity initiatives.
3. **Policy Makers:** Government and cultural institutions should support programs that promote indigenous crafts (weaving, leatherwork, calabash art) within the fashion industry to stimulate economic opportunities.
4. **Artisan Collaboration:** Closer partnerships between local artisans and designers should be fostered to ensure the sustainable use of indigenous materials while enhancing cultural representation in professional fashion.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies could:

- Expand the scope to include male professionals and compare gendered experiences of cultural expression in fashion.
- Investigate the long-term durability and functionality of garments that integrate *fugu*, leather, and calabash in professional use.
- Explore consumer perceptions of pricing and marketability for culturally expressive professional garments.
- Examine cross-regional comparisons within Ghana to assess how cultural expressions in fashion vary across different ethnic and occupational groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledges God, and the Department of Fashion Design and Textiles Education, Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development, Kumasi, for the hard work that was put into making this work a success.

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