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The Truth About ‘African’ Wax Prints (Hollandais): *A Dutch Story, Not Ours*

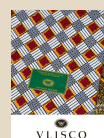
By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Vlisco top Dutch Wax

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The Truth About 'African' Wax Prints (Hollandais): A Dutch Story, Not Ours

By Idenze Ezeme · *Historical Studies* · *Ozikoro.com*



Colorful Hollandais on display, but Africa's own Akwete and Ukara tell our real stories. Photo: Ukpuru

African textiles are like colorful books full of stories, history, and culture. Fabrics like Kente from Ghana or Ukara from Nigeria carry deep meanings, passed down from our ancestors. But in markets across Africa and beyond, another fabric often gets all the attention: the so-called “African wax print,” also called Ankara or Hollandais. Many people think it’s a true African fabric, but it’s actually made in Europe, mostly by a Dutch company called Vlisco. This article explains where Hollandais comes from, why it’s so popular, and why our own beautiful textiles, like Akwete and Ukara, are often forgotten. It’s time to understand the truth and celebrate our real heritage.

The Story of Hollandais: It Started Far Away

Hollandais, or Dutch wax print, is a bright, colorful cotton fabric with bold patterns on both sides. It’s not from Africa—it started in Europe over 150 years ago, during a time when European countries controlled parts of Africa and Asia. The Dutch, who were in charge of Indonesia, saw a beautiful fabric there called batik. Batik was made by hand, using wax to draw patterns on cloth, then dyeing it to make the designs stand out. The Indonesians loved their batik, but the Dutch wanted to make a cheaper version using machines.

By the late 1800s, Dutch and Scottish traders brought these wax prints to West African towns, especially in what is now Ghana. African women traders loved the bright colours and started selling the fabric. They gave the patterns names, like “Michelle Obama’s Handbag” for a design made in 2008, or names based on proverbs and local events. Over time, people called this fabric “Hollandais” because it came from Holland (another name for the Netherlands). It became so popular that many Africans started using it for everyday clothes, weddings, and big events.

Today, Hollandais feels like part of African culture. People use it to show style and even send messages—like choosing a pattern to say something bold or funny. But the truth is, it’s still made in Europe, and companies like Vlisco make a lot of money from Africans buying it.

Hollandais vs. Our Own Textiles: What's the Difference?

Hollandais is colourful and popular, but it's very different from African textiles like Akwete and Ukara. Let's look at these two amazing fabrics to see why they're so special.

Akwete: A Beautiful Igbo Creation



Textile patterns from the Ndoki Igbo women's weaving industry at Akwete, in what is now southern Abia State. National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.

Akwete is a handwoven fabric made by Igbo women in southeastern Nigeria, especially in a town called Akwete. It's been around for hundreds of years. Women use wooden looms to weave cotton, silk, or raffia threads into stunning patterns.

Each piece takes days or weeks to make, and every design has a meaning. For example, a pattern shaped like a tortoise might mean wisdom and long life, coming from Igbo stories.



An Akwete Weaver. Part of the presentation of the Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Commerce, based in Enugu, at the 1962 Lagos International Trade Fair (postcard).

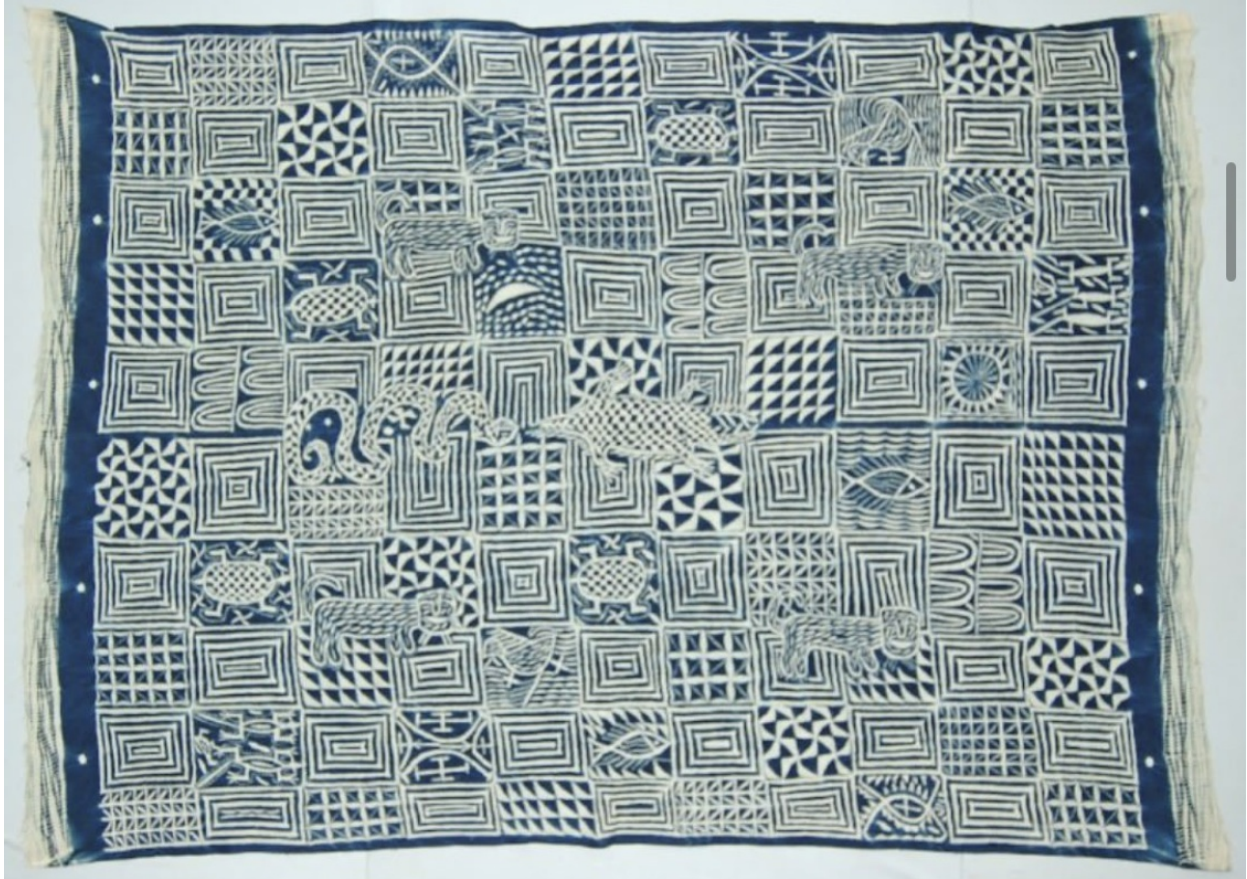
Making Akwete is hard work. Women spin raw cotton or silk, dye it with natural colors like indigo (blue) or camwood (red), and weave it into narrow strips that are sewn together. The finished cloth is strong, full of texture, and feels special. People wear Akwete for big events like weddings or when someone becomes a chief, showing pride in their culture.



Akwete (Ndoki Igbo) Weaver (Postcard).

Ukara: A Sacred Nigerian Fabric

Ukara is another Nigerian textile, made in the Cross River area by the Efik and Igbo people. It's not just any cloth—it's special for the Ekpe society, a group of men who help run their communities. Ukara is made from cotton, dyed blue with indigo, and decorated with patterns using raffia to block the dye.



Ukara cloth, a sample sourced from Ezilo, Northeastern Igbo (present-day Ebonyi State) — British Museum.

The designs, like animals, stars, or geometric shapes, are full of meaning. Some include “nsibidi” symbols, an ancient way of writing that only certain people can understand. These symbols might tell stories, share proverbs, or show important events.



Igbo Ekpe members wearing Ukara inscribed with nsibidi. Arochukwu region, Igboland, 1989. Photo by Eli Bentor, 1989.

Making Ukara is a team effort. Artisans tie raffia onto the cloth to make patterns, then dye it in indigo. Only members of the Ekpe society can wear Ukara, usually for ceremonies or funerals, to show their power and respect. It's a rare and important fabric, but not many people outside Nigeria know about it.

Hollandais: Pretty but Not Deep

Now compare these to Hollandais. It's made in big factories where machines print patterns on cotton using chemical dyes. The designs are bright and bold, but they don't usually have deep meanings like Akwete or Ukara. Some patterns might look African, but they're often created by European designers who don't know our stories. The names, like "Nkrumah's Pencils" (named after Ghana's first president), are added by traders to make the fabric feel local, but they're not part of any tradition.

Hollandais is also much cheaper to make. While Akwete or Ukara costs more because it's made by hand. But here's the strange part: in African markets, Hollandais is often sold for high prices, like it's something special. In 2014, Vlisco made 70 million yards of fabric and earned €300 million, mostly from Africans buying it.

How Hollandais Hurts Our Textiles

Hollandais is everywhere, but it's causing problems for our own textile makers. Here's why:

- **It's Taking Over:** Because Hollandais is cheaper and easier to buy, people choose it over fabrics like Akwete, Ukara, Kente, or Bogolan (a Malian mud-dyed cloth). These traditional fabrics take a long time to make and cost more, so they can't compete with the flood of Hollandais.
- **Fewer Artisans:** Young people aren't learning to weave or dye like their parents did because it's hard work and doesn't pay as well. This means we're losing the skills to make our beautiful textiles.
- **Wrong Ideas About Africa:** Many people, even Africans, think Hollandais is a real African fabric. This makes our true textiles less famous. For example, fashion designers around the world use Ankara because it's bold, but they rarely use Kente or Ukara. Worse, some companies copy our traditional patterns for things like shoes or bags, without giving credit or money to African artisans.
- **Money Goes to Europe:** Every time we buy Hollandais, the money goes to companies like Vlisco in the Netherlands. In Ghana, local companies like Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) make wax prints, but they're owned by Vlisco too. They compete with even cheaper fabrics from Asia, which sell 100 million yards a year. Our weavers, who make everything by hand, can't keep up.

Why Do We Keep Choosing Hollandais?

If Hollandais isn't truly African, why do so many of us love it? Here are some reasons:

- **It's Easy to Get:** You can find Hollandais in every market, and it's

cheaper than handwoven fabrics. A trader in Lagos or Dakar can buy a few yards of Ankara for daily wear, while Kente or Akwete is saved for special days.

- **It Feels Like Ours:** After more than 100 years, Hollandais is part of African style. We've given it our own names and meanings, like wearing a pattern to show off or say something clever. As one woman from Senegal said, "We made it ours, even if it started somewhere else."
- **It Looks Fancy:** Vlisco and other companies make Hollandais seem like a luxury. They create special designs and link them to famous people, making us want to buy them. Our own textiles don't have this kind of advertising.
- **We Don't Know Better:** Many Africans don't know that Hollandais comes from Europe or that our own textiles are so rich. Long ago, colonial rulers made people think Africans didn't have advanced crafts, but that's not true. For example, in the 1300s, the Mali Empire made cotton-and-gold fabrics that were famous across the world.

How We Can Celebrate Our Real Textiles

We don't have to stop using Hollandais completely, but we can do more to love and support our own textiles. Here are some ideas:

- **Learn About Our Textiles:** Schools and TV shows can teach kids about fabrics like Akwete, Ukara, Kente, and Bogolan. Movies like *Wax Print* (2018) can help people understand that "the cloth we call African wasn't made in Africa." Groups like Hinkro Kente in Ghana, which teaches about real Kente, can show us how.
- **Help Our Weavers:** Governments and organizations can give money, training, and tools to weavers. Groups like cooperatives in Mali, which make Bogolan, can help artisans work together. Online shops can sell our textiles to the world, like Bole Road Textiles in Ethiopia, which makes modern designs from old patterns.
- **Make Rules to Protect Our Textiles:** African leaders can add taxes on imported wax prints to help local weavers, like Burkina Faso's leader Thomas Sankara did with Faso Dan Fani in the 1980s. They can also start "Buy African" campaigns to make people proud of our

fabrics.

- Show the World: African designers can use our textiles in big fashion shows, like Lagos Fashion Week. We can also make laws to stop other countries from copying our patterns without paying us, so our artisans get the money they deserve.

Hollandais isn't ugly, but it's not as meaningful as our own textiles. Every time we buy it, we send money to Europe instead of supporting our weavers. Fabrics like Akwete and Ukara aren't just cloth—they're our history, made by hand with love and filled with stories. A tortoise on Akwete or a nsibidi symbol on Ukara connects us to our ancestors in a way Hollandais never can.

Some people say Hollandais is now part of our culture, and that's partly true. But we shouldn't let it push our real textiles aside. Others might claim companies like Visco are doing good things, like planting trees in Africa, but that's often just a way to make us feel okay about spending money with them. We need to think carefully about what we're buying.

African textiles are proof of our creativity, strength, and history. From the sacred Ukara to the colourful Akwete, these fabrics tell our stories in ways Hollandais can only copy. By wearing, sharing, and supporting our own textiles, we can keep our culture alive and help our communities grow. Next time you see a bright Ankara print, think about the beauty of a handwoven Akwete or the power of a Ukara cloth. These are our true treasures, and it's time to wear them with pride.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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