

## Strengthening National Identity through Co-Design: A Contemporary and Sustainable Approach to Dress Design in Tanzania

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### Abstract

This study investigates how national identity can be strengthened through the co-design of a contemporary and sustainable dress that integrates traditional textiles, national symbols, and participatory design methodologies. The research is grounded in theories of national identity, material culture, and creative industries, conceptualising dress as a medium of symbolic communication and performative nationhood. An interpretivist paradigm informed by Cooperative Inquiry within an action research framework guided the study. Qualitative methods were employed, including purposive interviews, focus group discussions, and co-design workshops involving policymakers, religious leaders, designers, artisans, tailors, and dress users from rural and urban contexts. Data were analysed inductively through thematic interpretation. Findings reveal a strong consensus that a nationally symbolic dress should be culturally appropriate, modest, affordable, comfortable, and reflective of Tanzanian values. Participants emphasised the use of kitenge fabric, artistic integration of national colours, and motifs derived from Mount Kilimanjaro, wildlife, traditional vessels, and mineral resources. Prototype designs received broad public acceptance. The study contributes to scholarship at the intersection of national identity, co-design, and sustainable fashion by demonstrating how participatory co-design and sustainable textile practices can materialise national identity through culturally grounded creative production. Motif-based kitenge patterns were developed, tested, and refined through participatory processes, alongside a conceptual production and distribution model designed to support artisan engagement, youth employment, and integration with the tourism sector. Collectively, the study offers a practical, replicable framework for integrating identity discourse into contemporary fashion design in postcolonial contexts, particularly in Tanzania.

### Keywords:

National identity, Co-design, Kitenge, Cultural symbolism, Sustainable fashion, Creative industries.

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## Introduction

National identity in the United Republic of Tanzania has historically been constructed through linguistic unity, shared historical experience, and socio-political philosophy rather than through codified material symbols (Rech 2025; Kamalha *et al.* 2026). Since independence in 1961 and the 1964 Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, Kiswahili has functioned as a unifying lingua franca, while the philosophy of Ujamaa has reinforced collective belonging and social solidarity (Barannikova 2025; Anyanwu *et al.* 2025). National symbols such as the flag, coat of arms, and the Uhuru Torch have further consolidated symbolic cohesion. In parallel, indigenous textiles including kanga, kitenge, kanzu, and Maasai shuka have continued to embody cultural pluralism within everyday life (Rech 2025; Kamalha *et al.* 2026). Despite these strong symbolic and cultural foundations, Tanzania has not institutionalised a widely accepted national dress that can visually materialise its collective identity (Barannikova 2025; Anyanwu *et al.* 2025). Periodic governmental initiatives to establish a Vazi la Taifa have generated debate but have not achieved consensus or sustainable implementation (Kamalha *et al.* 2026).

## Problem Statement

The absence of a nationally recognised dress poses both conceptual and practical challenges. In a multi-ethnic society comprising more than 120 ethnic groups, the formalisation of national attire risks privileging certain cultural narratives while marginalising others (Rech 2025). Furthermore, previous initiatives have been constrained by limited participatory engagement, insufficient design frameworks, and weak production and distribution systems (Barannikova 2025). Consequently, national identity in Tanzania remains symbolically strong yet visually under-articulated within contemporary dress practice. This study, therefore, seeks to:

- i. Examine how Tanzanian national identity can be materialised through contemporary dress design.
- ii. Explore how participatory co-design methodologies can ensure inclusivity and cultural legitimacy.
- iii. Develop and test kitenge-based motifs incorporating national symbols and natural resources.
- iv. Propose a conceptual model for the sustainable production and distribution of a nationally symbolic dress.

### **Significance of the Study and Theoretical Contributions**

This study is significant both academically and practically. First, it contributes to contemporary scholarship in fashion studies and creative arts by positioning dress as a medium of symbolic communication and nation-building, reinforcing arguments that clothing functions as a visual and material expression of collective identity (Barannikova 2025; Rech 2025). By grounding the research in Tanzania, the study further expands African-centred perspectives within global discourse on fashion and material culture.

Second, the research advances interdisciplinary and theoretical debates by integrating participatory co-design, sustainable textile practices, and national identity discourse within a rigorous practice-based framework. It demonstrates how dress can operate as a material and visual site for constructing national identity, while reconceptualising co-design as a process of cultural negotiation and identity praxis rather than merely a technical design method (Rech 2025; Kamalha *et al.* 2026). Third, the study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of Cooperative Inquiry and action research in cultural production and creative practice (Kamalha *et al.* 2026). Through participatory motif development, prototyping, and testing, it validates collaborative design as both a research strategy and a nation-building mechanism.

Finally, the research proposes a contemporary and sustainable national dress framework, supported by a conceptual creative industry model that can generate employment, strengthen local textile value chains, and enhance cultural visibility at both national and international levels (Anyanwu *et al.* 2025). By synthesising identity discourse, participatory design, and sustainable textile innovation, the study offers a replicable theoretical and practical framework for culturally grounded fashion development in postcolonial contexts.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The Literature Review and Theoretical Framework examines debates on national identity, national dress, material culture, visual semiotics, and creative industries, and positions the study within these intersecting scholarly domains. The next sub-section outlines the Methodology, detailing the interpretivist paradigm, Cooperative Inquiry action research design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, ethical protocols, and thematic analysis. Then come the results and analysis that synthesise findings from interviews,

focus groups, co-design workshops, motif experimentation, and prototype testing. As for the Creative Component sub-section, it documents the translation of national symbols and cultural narratives into kitenge-based motif development, pattern formulation, garment prototyping, testing processes, and the proposed conceptual production and distribution model. The discussion that follows interprets the findings in relation to theoretical perspectives and existing scholarship before the next sub-section acknowledges the study limitations. Finally, the paper presents its conclusions and integrated recommendations, outlining theoretical contributions, policy implications, creative industry applications, and directions for future research.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### *Conceptual definitions*

National identity is conceptualised as a socially constructed, historically situated sense of collective belonging grounded in shared memory, values, language, territory, and symbolic representation (Barannikova 2025; Anyanwu *et al.* 2025). It is not fixed or inherent; rather, it is continuously negotiated through cultural production, visual representation, and performative practices (Rech 2025). Classic scholarship further emphasises that nations are sustained through shared historical experiences and collective myths that foster cohesion among diverse populations (Smith 1991; McCrone & Bechhofer 2015).

In the Tanzanian context, national identity has historically been shaped more by linguistic unity and socio-political philosophy than by codified material artefacts (Lee 2012; Odamtten 2024). Kiswahili, institutionalised under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, functioned as a unifying lingua franca transcending ethnic boundaries, while the philosophy of Ujamaa reinforced solidarity, egalitarianism, and collective responsibility (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015; Smith, 1991).

In material and visual culture studies, dress is understood as a semiotic system that encodes and communicates identity (Kamalha *et al.* 2026). As Morgan (2018) defines, dress constitutes a bodily covering artefact, excluding modifications to the organic body. When embedded with cultural motifs and national symbolism, clothing translates abstract narratives into embodied visual form (Barannikova 2025; Anyanwu *et al.* 2025). Co-design, in this study, refers to a participatory methodology that positions stakeholders as collaborators in generating culturally meaningful

outcomes, while sustainable fashion encompasses both ecological responsibility and cultural continuity (Rech 2025; Kamalha *et al.* 2026).

***Key debates on national dress and identity***

Debates surrounding national dress frequently centre on authenticity, representation, inclusivity, and modernity. While national attire may visually consolidate unity (Barannikova 2025), scholars caution that institutionalising a single garment in multi-ethnic societies risks privileging dominant narratives (Anyanwu *et al.* 2025).

In Tanzania, identity has historically been reinforced through language, philosophy, and shared anti-colonial struggle rather than a codified national costume (Odamtten 2024; Lee 2012). Indigenous textiles such as kanga, kitenge, kanzu, Maasai shuka, and kikoyi function as cultural signifiers across more than 120 ethnic groups (Eseagwu 2025; Tanzania Luxury Safari 2025). The kanga, often inscribed with Swahili proverbs, communicates social commentary (Mietzner & Brühwiler 2025; Beck 2026), while kitenge is valued for its durability, versatility, and aesthetic vibrancy (Nobler 2021; Simals 2025).

Governmental deliberations on establishing a Vazi la Taifa have resurfaced periodically (The Citizen, 2019). Yet debates regarding inclusivity between mainland and island representations (Zanzibar Legal Services Centre, 2024), limited stakeholder engagement (Kabudi 2025), and weak participatory design frameworks (Rech, 2025; Kamalha *et al.* 2026) have impeded consensus. Another debate concerns tradition and modernity. Scholars argue that heritage motifs must be recontextualised rather than rigidly preserved to remain culturally relevant (Rech, 2025). Hybrid strategies integrating indigenous textiles with contemporary silhouettes offer pathways for balancing innovation and authenticity (Kamalha *et al.* 2026).

**Gap in Scholarship**

Although scholarship acknowledges the symbolic role of dress in articulating identity (Barannikova 2025; Anyanwu *et al.* 2025) and highlights sustainable fashion frameworks (Kamalha *et al.* 2026), limited research integrates national symbolism, participatory co-design, and sustainable production within a unified empirical model. Tanzanian initiatives to establish national attire have rarely foregrounded collaborative methodologies or systematic stakeholder engagement (Kabudi 2025; Rech 2025). Furthermore, existing literature often treats

linguistic unity, cultural symbols, textile heritage, and creative industries as discrete domains. Few studies empirically demonstrate how co-design can mediate tensions between pluralism and unity while embedding economic viability and ecological sustainability. Nevertheless, existing scholarship often addresses national identity, traditional textiles, and sustainable fashion as separate domains (Anyanwu *et al.* 2025). Limited research has examined how participatory co-design methodologies can integrate cultural symbolism, creative industries, and sustainable textile practices into the development of a contemporary national dress (Kamalha *et al.* 2026). Moreover, few studies have examined how this process can simultaneously reinforce unity, support local creative economies, and promote environmental responsibility (Rech 2025).

### **Relevant Theoretical Perspectives**

#### ***National identity and symbolic construction***

National identity is performed and reproduced through symbolic practices embedded in visual and material forms (Barannikova 2025). National symbols such as the Tanzanian flag, coat of arms, Mount Kilimanjaro, wildlife, and mineral wealth function as cultural signifiers sustaining collective belonging (Kabudi 2025; Kimambo 2013; Katunzi *et al.* 2025). When incorporated into textile motifs, these symbols transform garments into performative expressions of national consciousness (Rech 2025). Material culture theory posits that objects actively shape social relations rather than merely reflecting them (Miller 2005; Kamalha *et al.* 2026). Garments, textiles, and motifs carry embedded meanings that participate in the construction and negotiation of identity. In this way, national dress functions as a material agent, anchoring abstract ideology, collective memory, and environmental context within tangible forms. By incorporating culturally significant motifs into fabrics such as kitenge, the dress becomes a site where ideology, memory, and social meaning converge.

#### ***Visual semiotics and textile symbolism***

Visual semiotics explains how meaning is generated through signs, colour systems, and patterned repetition (Barthes, 1972; Barannikova, 2025). In Tanzanian textiles, motifs derived from landscapes, wildlife (Gumbo *et al.*, 2025; Kulunge *et al.*, 2026), and cultural artefacts communicate a sense of belonging and pride. Kitenge, through chromatic harmony and symbolic patterning, operates as a semiotic field where unity and diversity converge (Anyanwu *et al.*, 2025; Rech, 2025).

### ***Creative industries and cultural sustainability***

Creative industries, encompassing fashion and textile design, operate at the intersection of cultural expression and economic development (Howkins, 2025; Rech, 2025). In Tanzania, kitenge production supports artisans and small enterprises while contributing to national branding and tourism (Simals, 2025). Integrating sustainability ensures ecological responsibility alongside cultural preservation (Kamalha *et al.*, 2026). National dress thus functions not only symbolically but also strategically within broader economic frameworks.

### **Theoretical Positioning of the Study**

This study positions itself at the intersection of national identity theory, material culture studies, visual semiotics, and scholarship on creative industries. Building on symbolic construction frameworks (Barannikova 2025; Anyanwu *et al.* 2025), it conceptualises national dress as a collaboratively produced material artefact that performs identity through semiotic textile design. By adopting an interpretivist and participatory co-design framework, the study reframes national attire as a negotiated cultural outcome rather than a top-down prescription. Kitenge functions simultaneously as a medium and a message, integrating motifs derived from national symbols, natural resources, and traditional artefacts while embedding sustainable production practices (Rech 2025; Kamalha *et al.* 2026). In doing so, the research advances a culturally responsive, sustainability-oriented, and creative-industry-informed model for national dress development in Tanzania; one that materialises unity through pluralism, heritage through innovation, and symbolism through collaborative textile practice.

### **Contextual Background**

Tanzania's national identity has been shaped through a complex interplay of historical, cultural, policy, and industrial factors. Following independence in 1961, nation-building efforts emphasised political unity, linguistic cohesion, and shared cultural values, drawing upon Pan-African ideals and postcolonial aspirations. The early post-independence era promoted a sense of collective belonging through symbols such as the national flag, anthem, and Swahili language. Yet efforts to formalise a distinctive national attire remained limited. Historically, traditional garments like kanga, kitenge, and kanzu functioned as markers of ethnic, regional, and social identity, reflecting the country's rich tapestry of over 120 ethnic groups.

Culturally, dress in Tanzania carries layered meanings. It operates as a medium through which values, status, and heritage are communicated, while simultaneously embodying aesthetic and ritualistic significance. Traditional motifs such as geometric patterns, natural imagery, and symbolic embroidery encode stories and communal knowledge, contributing to cultural continuity. Despite this diversity, there has been no universally recognised 'Vazi la Taifa,' national dress, leaving it largely symbolic rather than institutionalised.

From a policy perspective, Tanzania has recognised the potential of creative industries, including textiles and fashion, as vehicles for cultural preservation and economic development. National cultural policies emphasise the promotion of indigenous crafts, sustainable production practices, and the commercialisation of locally produced textiles. However, specific strategies for integrating cultural symbolism into contemporary fashion design remain underdeveloped.

The industry context reflects a dynamic textile and fashion sector, dominated by both domestic production and imported fabrics. Local designers increasingly experiment with kitenge and other traditional textiles, seeking to balance cultural authenticity with market trends. Yet, there is limited systematic engagement with co-design approaches that actively involve communities in creating nationally resonant attire. This gap presents both a challenge and an opportunity to leverage creative industries to materialise national identity while fostering cultural sustainability. This background situates the current study at the nexus of historical evolution, cultural practice, policy orientation, and industry dynamics, providing a foundation for exploring participatory approaches to contemporary national dress design.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm, emphasising the socially constructed nature of meaning and knowledge (Creswell & Poth 2018; Schwandt 2014). It sought to understand Tanzanians' perceptions of national identity and dress through participants' lived experiences, recognising that cultural and symbolic interpretations are contextually embedded and subjective (Denzin & Lincoln 2018; Crotty 1998). The research employed a qualitative action research design, specifically Cooperative Inquiry, which positions participants as co-researchers (Lyman & Chung 2025; Cornish *et al.* 2023). This approach facilitated

iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, ensuring that the co-design process was collaborative, contextually grounded, and culturally relevant. Cooperative Inquiry enabled the integration of practical and experiential knowledge with theoretical understanding, allowing the co-creation of meaningful and sustainable dress designs.

The study used purposive sampling to ensure participants were relevant and had expertise. The study engaged a total of 36 participants across urban and rural settings. These included four religious leaders representing Catholic, Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist, and Islamic faiths; two representatives from the Ministry of Information, Culture, Arts and Sports (MICAS) and the National Arts Council known as BASATA (Baraza la Sanaa Tanzania) by its Kiswahili acronym; six community leaders; and 18 participants in co-design workshops. Four focus group discussions with daily dress users captured diverse perspectives from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, ensuring inclusive representation.

Data collection methods combined semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory co-design workshops. Interviews and focus groups provided insights into cultural values, perceptions of national identity, and dress preferences, while workshops enabled participants to translate these ideas into tangible design concepts and motifs.

Data analysis followed an inductive, thematic approach. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to ensure familiarity with the content. Key statements were systematically coded, and codes were grouped into broader themes, which were iteratively interpreted to generate a coherent narrative on national identity and dress design.

Trustworthiness and credibility were enhanced through triangulation across multiple data sources and methods, iterative participant feedback, and the research team's reflexive engagement. Collaborative co-design workshops further validated findings by integrating participants' interpretations into the design outcomes, ensuring both practical and scholarly rigour.

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Participants provided informed consent before engagement. Privacy and confidentiality were ensured through anonymisation protocols, including the use of pseudonyms and coded identifiers. For example, "Co-De3" indicated the

third co-design participant; “IN-L1” and “IN-L3” referred to interviewed religious leaders; “IN-V2” and “IN-V3” denoted rural interviewees; and “IN-M1” and “IN-M2” represented Ministry officials. Focus group participants were coded alphabetically (e.g., “FG-A2” signified the second contributor in Group A). This structured anonymisation ensured confidentiality while maintaining analytical clarity. Data were securely stored and only used for research purposes.

Overall, the methodology facilitated the co-creation of culturally meaningful and sustainable dress designs that authentically reflected Tanzanian national identity.

## **Results and Analysis**

### *Analytical overview*

Data were analysed thematically within an interpretivist paradigm, drawing on interviews, focus group discussions, co-design workshops, visual motif experimentation, and prototype testing. An iterative coding process was employed, moving from open coding to axial categorisation and thematic synthesis. Participant identifiers (e.g., FGD- Focus Group Discussion, Co-De- Co-design participant; CL- Community Leader) are used to preserve anonymity while maintaining analytic traceability. The analysis generated five interrelated thematic domains: (i) Perceptions of national identity in dress, (ii) Symbolic translation into textile form, (iii) Co-Design as Democratic Negotiation, (iv) Aesthetic integration and contemporary relevance, and (v) Sustainability and creative industry feasibility. Together, these themes demonstrate how national identity can be materialised through textile-based visual language while sustaining pluralism and economic viability.

### *Perceptions of national identity in dress*

Participants consistently articulated national identity as grounded in unity through diversity. While linguistic cohesion (Kiswahili) and shared historical memory were widely acknowledged, there was a strong consensus that Tanzania lacks a visually embodied everyday symbol in dress. One urban participant explained: “National dress should carry symbols from different tribes so everyone feels represented, not just one region” (FGD-2). This statement reflects a recurring concern: that institutionalising a single ethnic garment risks symbolic exclusion. Religious and community leaders further emphasised the importance of modesty, cultural respect, and intergenerational acceptability. The data,

therefore, reveal a conceptual gap between abstract national symbolism (flag, coat of arms, National icons including Mount Kilimanjaro and Uhuru Torch) and lived material culture. Participants viewed dress as a potential bridge between symbolic nationhood and embodied daily practice.

**Symbolic Convergence: Translating Identity into Textile Form**

A key analytical outcome was the semiotic transformation of abstract national symbols into textile-compatible motifs. Rather than literal reproduction, participants preferred visual abstraction suitable for kitenge printing. Examples emerging from co-design workshops include:

- Mount Kilimanjaro stylised into triangular geometric contours.
- National icons representing the unity of the country
- Indigenous traditional dances, natural symbols, and native animals translated into repetitive pattern units.

As one participant noted: “I wanted to show our landscapes and animals because they tell the story of Tanzania. Everyone recognises them instantly.” (Co-De5). Table 1 summarises the most frequently referenced design elements during workshops:

**Table 1: Frequently Suggested Design Elements**

Colour and Design Element	Symbolism/Meaning	Frequency
Traditional Dances	Good crop harvest	16
Giraffe, zebra,	National icon (Air Tanzania), featured on currency	14
Elephant and Rhino.	Strength and power, wisdom, and national heritage. Endurance and resilience, protection and defence, and conservation and awareness.	14
Mountain Kilimanjaro	National pride, unity and freedom, natural heritage, and hope and aspiration	15
Green - Indigenous flora/fauna	Connection to land and environment: rich vegetation, fertile land, and agriculture.	12
Yellow (gold)	The nation’s mineral wealth and natural resources.	12
Black	Stands for the people of Tanzania.	12

Blue	The country's source of water: the Indian Ocean, lakes and rivers.	12
Traditional Vessels - Calabash	Preservation of Tanzanian culture	15

The convergence of these motifs demonstrates a symbolic synthesis model, integrating diverse cultural references into a cohesive visual system without privileging a singular ethnic aesthetic.

***Co-design as democratic negotiation***

The findings strongly indicate that co-design enhanced perceived legitimacy and collective ownership. Participants valued collaborative dialogue and shared decision-making processes. In this regard, a rural community leader said: "Being part of the design process made me feel my culture mattered. It was not just about showing ideas; we discussed and negotiated symbols together" (CL-3). This participatory dynamic transformed the design process from consultation to negotiation. Rather than replicating garments such as 'kanzu' or Maasai Shuka, the group collectively agreed on:

- A shared textile base (kitenge) recognised nationally.
- Flexible garment silhouettes are adaptable across gender and region.
- Motifs derived from national resources rather than exclusive ethnic emblems.

Co-design thus functioned as both a methodology and a democratic mechanism for identity construction.

***Aesthetic integration and contemporary relevance***

Prototype testing revealed a preference for contemporary silhouettes incorporating traditional textile identity. Participants favoured garments that:

- Maintained modesty and cultural appropriateness.
- Could be adapted for ceremonial, formal, and semi-formal contexts.
- Employed colour palettes inspired by the national flag without rigid imitation.

The most successful prototypes balanced chromatic harmony, proportional motif repetition, ergonomic comfort, and textile durability. However, tensions emerged regarding over-commercialisation and the risk of superficial symbolic application. Participants stressed the need for

authenticity and ethical representation. These findings indicate that national dress must operate within contemporary fashion systems rather than remain static ceremonial costume.

### ***Sustainability and creative industry feasibility***

Stakeholders highlighted the strategic importance of local production. Textile practitioners emphasised:

- Strengthening domestic kitenge manufacturing.
- Reducing dependence on imported fabrics.
- Exploring natural dyes and resource-efficient production processes.

The emerging production-distribution framework integrates designers, small and medium enterprises, artisans, and community tailors. National dress is therefore positioned not merely as a symbolic artefact but as an economic catalyst capable of reinforcing local value chains.

### ***Emergent integrated model***

The thematic synthesis culminates in a five-layer integrated model:

1. Symbolic Layer - Semiotic translation of national symbols into textile motifs.
2. Participatory Layer - Inclusive co-design negotiation ensuring cultural legitimacy.
3. Design Layer - Contemporary prototyping and aesthetic refinement.
4. Sustainability Layer - Local production and resource-conscious processes.
5. Distribution Layer - Policy support and public adoption strategies.

This model conceptualises national dress development as an interconnected system rather than a singular design act.

### **Synthesis of Major Results**

The combined analysis demonstrates the following:

- Tanzanian national identity can be effectively materialised through semiotically informed kitenge-based textile design.
- Co-design enhances inclusivity, legitimacy, and stakeholder ownership.
- Symbolic abstraction avoids ethnic privileging while preserving cultural specificity.
- Contemporary aesthetic integration ensures practical usability.

- Sustainable production aligns symbolic nation-building with economic development.

Collectively, the findings suggest that the absence of a widely accepted national attire is not due to a lack of symbolic resources but rather to insufficient integration of participatory negotiation, aesthetic refinement, and systemic production frameworks. By synthesising identity discourse, visual semiotics, participatory methodology, and creative industry sustainability, the study provides an empirically grounded and practically viable pathway for materialising Tanzanian national identity through contemporary dress practice.

### **The Creative Component**

#### *Overview and conceptual rationale*

The creative component of this study comprises a series of contemporary dress designs developed through an iterative co-design process. Drawing directly from interviews, focus group discussions, and workshop outputs, the garments integrate traditional Tanzanian motifs, national colour schemes, and culturally meaningful symbols into wearable and sustainable forms. The conceptual rationale underpinning the creative work was to bridge cultural heritage with modern design practice. Participants' lived experiences and symbolic interpretations informed the transformation of abstract national identity into tangible dress artefacts. The creative process, therefore, functioned not merely as aesthetic production, but as a research-based materialisation of collective identity.

#### *Design requirements derived from empirical data*

The data generated clear design criteria grounded in participants' perspectives. Across interviews and focus groups, the proposed dress design for Tanzanians was expected to:

- Be comfortable and respectable.
- Preserve Tanzanian customs, values, norms, and ethics.
- Recognise and reflect cultural diversity.
- Integrate traditional elements with modern features.
- Be relevant, acceptable, and affordable.
- Demonstrate originality rather than imitate Western fashion.
- Incorporate national colours (blue, green, yellow, and black).
- Feature kitenge fabric and meaningful motifs.
- Include national symbols, natural resources, and tourism imagery.
- Be technically sound and contextually appropriate.

- Symbolise unity while allowing personal identity expression.

These requirements shaped the direction of the design development process.

***Inspiration for design from results***

The main design considerations centred on incorporating traditional, natural, and national identity elements into a motif that would serve as a symbol of national identity, based on the primary research findings. Some images illustrating these national identity symbols are presented in figures 1-4:



**Figure 1.** People perform one of Tanzania's traditional dances. Photograph by Dav Jacobsen, accessible at <https://sukumamuseum.org/everybody-wants-to-greet-you/>

Figure 1 depicts one of Tanzania's traditional dances, 'bugobogobo,' which symbolises a good crop harvest. Other ethnic groups have similar traditional dances to celebrate healthy, successful harvests. Therefore, a scene like this could be effectively used as a motif on kitenge fabric. Figure 2 shows giraffes and zebras:



**Figure 2:** Images of giraffes and zebras. The Giraffe photograph was taken by Luca Galuzzi and distributed under a CC BY-SA 2.5 license. The Zebra

photograph was taken by Volodymyr Burdiak and distributed under a CC BY-SA 4.0 licence. Figure 2 shows images of a giraffe and a zebra. The giraffe is a Tanzanian national icon, featured on currency and adopted as the logo for Air Tanzania, making it a strong symbol of national identity, unity, and pride. Including it in the motif could enhance the design's cultural significance. The zebra, common in Tanzania's national parks such as Ngorongoro, Serengeti, and Selous, has visually appealing stripes that could enhance the dress's appeal. Rhinos and elephants, found across Tanzanian parks and depicted on the 5,000- and 10,000-Tanzanian-shilling notes, face threats from poaching. The government urges citizens to protect them, and the focus group recommended including a rhino motif in the design to raise awareness and support anti-poaching efforts.



**Figure 3:** Image of the Tanzanian national flag and Mount Kilimanjaro. The photograph of Mount Kilimanjaro was taken by Sergey Pesterev and distributed under a CC BY-SA 4.0 licence.

Figure 3 presents images of Tanzania's national flag and Mount Kilimanjaro, the tallest mountain in Africa. The idea of incorporating the national flag, which features black, blue, green, and yellow, into the design emerged from the focus group discussion. Participants noted that using these colours in *kitenge* would reinforce national identity, unity, and a sense of nationality. Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak and one of Tanzania's natural and national icons, was also recommended for inclusion in the design.

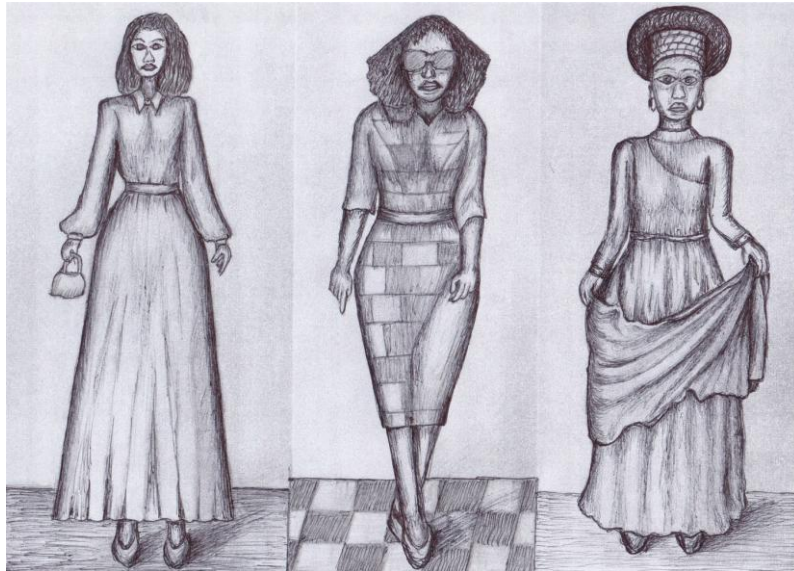


**Figure 4:** Traditional calabash vessels, also known as *vibuyu* (*kibuyu* - singular) in Tanzania. The photograph was taken by Ninaras and distributed under a CC BY 4.0 licence.

Figure 4 shows calabashes, known as *vibuyu*, which are traditional vessels widely used in Tanzania for storing and carrying traditional medicine, water, and milk. Traditional healers also use them in rituals to invoke ancestral spirits. Incorporating *vibuyu* into *kitenge* motifs helps to preserve Tanzanian culture. On the other hand, Figure 5 shows participants during a co-design workshop, where they visualised a costume based on their own experiences. They explored concepts for incorporating national, natural, traditional, and cultural symbols, as suggested by focus groups and interviewees during data collection.



**Figure 5:** Participants of the co-design style workshop



**Figure 6:** Designs developed by participants of the co-design style workshop

Figure 7 shows designs featuring the national colours (blue, black, yellow, and green) for the proposed dress. Participants suggested and interpreted these designs using their experience, interviews, focus groups, and earlier guidelines. During the workshop, they sketched outlines incorporating national colours, natural features, resources, and cultural symbols.



**Figure 7:** Designs developed by participants of the co-design workshop

The designs in Figure 7 apply the national colours directly to the dress. However, during a focus group discussion, participants advised using these colours more artistically. In response, designs with subtly integrated national colours, along with natural and national symbols, were developed and are shown in figures 8, 9 and 10.

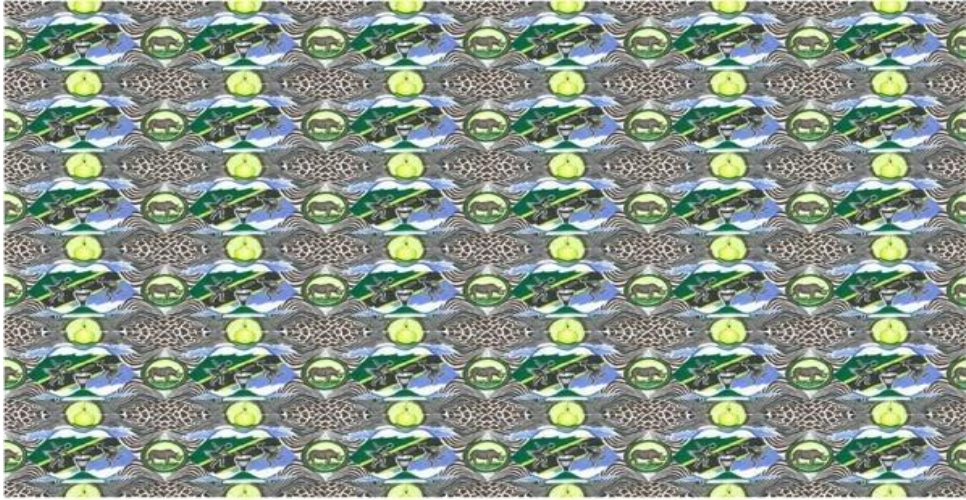
### The Setting of Pattern and Kitenge Design

During the focus group discussions, interviews, and co-design workshops, participants recommended using kitenge as a medium for motifs symbolising national identity. They suggested that garments made from kitenge with these symbols, including men's shirts, would promote national identity and unity, as kitenge is widely embraced. Physical features such as Mount Kilimanjaro, giraffes, zebras, elephants and rhinos were proposed as suitable symbols. Traditional vessels, natural features, resources, and other traditional and national symbols were also represented through kitenge. Figure 8 shows the arrangement of the ornamented experimental kitenge pattern, illustrating how ideas were drawn from the qualitative data and inspirations in Figures 1-4:



**Figure 8:** Concept for developing a pattern design and a close-up of the design (designed by Kahabi)

After the pattern for the kitenge was established, the pieces were joined to form the complete kitenge, resulting in a combination of symbols that unite the nation and strengthen national identity, as shown in Figure 9.



**Figure 9:** Full kitenge design

#### ***Testing of the kitenge design***

Testing of the dress design began after completing the two Kitenge patterns. Thirty participants from both urban and rural areas participated before the conceptual model was developed. They included 25 ordinary Tanzanian users, 3 religious leaders, and 2 policymakers, each of whom provided individual feedback. Twenty-seven participants preferred the first design (Figure 9), mainly because it clearly depicted Mount Kilimanjaro and prominently featured the national flag. They also felt the Kitenge had patterns tailored to Tanzanian needs and was fully adorned with national identity symbols. As a result, the first Kitenge design was deemed suitable for a range of wearable items.

#### ***Dress design based on results***

It is believed that combining the kitenge design, which reflects national identity, can create a suitable dress for both women and men, meeting the study's aim of strengthening national identity through attire. Participants stated that *"a Tanzanian dress should integrate aspects of national identity, offering originality, belonging, patriotism, and pride, while expressing national values"* (Participant IN-L3). They added that traditional symbols, vessels, natural and national motifs, and animals would further reinforce identity (Participant IN-L4, FG-A1, and FG-B5).

Co-design participants emphasised that the dress must uphold Tanzanian values, ethics, norms, and customs; include accessories with cultural or political meaning; use kanga or kitenge fabric; and incorporate the national flag colours: blue, green, yellow, and black (Participants FG-D, FG-C, Co-De6, and Co-De11). They also noted the need to blend traditional and modern features, incorporate local natural resources, and ensure the dress is smart, respectful, and culturally appropriate (FG-A4, FG-B2, FG-C5, Co-De5 and Co-De9). Regarding style, participants suggested men's attire should reflect Julius Nyerere's collarless shirt, worn untucked. In contrast, women could wear a long dress with a headscarf or, for comfort in warm weather, a skirt (Participant FG-A1, FG-A3 & FG-D4). Figure 10 presents the final designs and pattern placement using kitenge and plain virgin fabric produced by the local textile industry, as recommended during interviews, focus groups, and the co-design workshop, incorporating motifs of national identity.



**Figure 10:** The draft designs for women's wear and men's wear

#### *Testing the design of the dress*

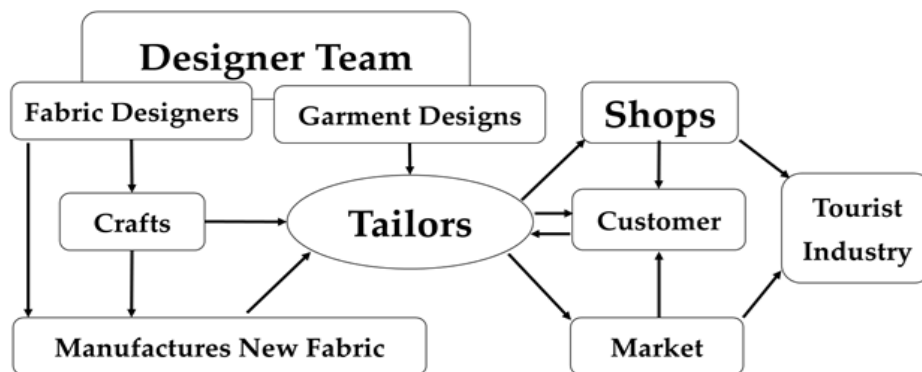
Testing was conducted after the dress design process was completed. A questionnaire was prepared for the test, using 'yes' or 'no' questions to

indicate acceptance or rejection of the dress. A total of 70 questionnaires were distributed in both urban and rural areas, and 58 were collected for analysis. All participants accepted the dress design and expressed a willingness to purchase it if it were produced and made available.

### Conceptual Model for the Design and Distribution of the New Dress

This part connects the research outcomes to broader themes, compares issues with previous studies, and proposes future directions for exploration. It provides a critical evaluation that enhances understanding of the topic under investigation.

Based on the study's findings, a new dress design for Tanzania was successfully developed by combining traditional kitenge with national identity symbols. The study also proposed a new distribution system. Figure 11 presents the conceptual model linking textile stakeholders, fabric designers, fabric manufacturers, garment designers, craftspeople, tailors, and textile shops, and outlining how the new dress would reach markets and customers, including the tourism sector.



**Figure 11:** A new conceptual model for the distribution of the dress

Figure 11 summarises the process of creating and distributing a new dress design featuring national symbols. The process begins with fabric and garment design, with the design team providing both designs and decoration instructions. Fabric manufacturers are expected to produce plain fabrics for artisans and decorated kitenge with national symbols for tailors.

After receiving the designs, artisans will work with new fabrics for redecoration, including tie-dye, batik, and hand screen printing, all incorporating national identity motifs. Once completed, these fabrics will be supplied to tailors for dressmaking, although some new fabrics may go

directly to tailors without processing. Tailors will use new fabrics and decorated fabrics, following garment designs created by the design team. The final dress is expected to meet all requirements identified through interviews, focus groups, and workshops. The finished dress will be distributed through three channels: directly to customers, to shops, and to local markets. The study also recommends creating designs that appeal to both Tanzanians and tourists, offering opportunities within the tourism sector.

Informants noted that many local tailors lose business due to the lack of an invoicing system, missing out on contracts for uniforms for schools, government staff, banks, and security companies. Therefore, tailors are encouraged to register officially to enable invoice-based payments, which would also simplify tax collection by the government.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that co-design is a powerful approach for expressing national identity through contemporary dress, reflecting both cultural heritage and community participation. Participants' insistence on inclusivity, symbolic motifs, and culturally resonant colour schemes highlights the role of dress as a medium for communicating collective memory and societal values. This aligns with material culture theory, which emphasises that artefacts, including clothing, serve as carriers of social meaning and identity (Barannikova 2025; Anyanwu *et al.* 2025).

The study also confirms the relevance of visual semiotics in interpreting design elements. Participants' selection of traditional symbols, indigenous vegetation, and colour symbolism illustrates how semiotic signs can communicate unity, pride, and historical consciousness. This supports previous scholarship that identifies clothing as a form of non-verbal narrative capable of reinforcing cultural and national identity (Rech 2025; Kamalha *et al.* 2026).

Compared with earlier research, which often focuses on top-down approaches to national dress or solely historical analysis, this study foregrounds participatory engagement. Co-design enabled communities to influence the translation of cultural knowledge into tangible design outputs, addressing the research gap related to the limited integration of local voices in contemporary national dress development. It demonstrates

that creative arts practices can effectively bridge heritage preservation with innovative design, offering a model for sustainable, inclusive cultural production.

Implications for creative arts and cultural scholarship are significant. The study illustrates that designers, cultural practitioners, and policymakers can collaboratively generate culturally grounded artefacts that resonate with diverse audiences. By combining theory with practice, the research underscores the potential of co-design to enhance both aesthetic value and socio-cultural meaning in national dress and broader creative industries.

Overall, the study contributes to knowledge by establishing a clear link among participatory design methods, visual semiotics, and material culture in the expression of national identity. It provides both theoretical and practical insights for scholars, designers, and cultural institutions seeking to develop nationally meaningful, contextually sensitive, and community-endorsed dress designs.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study acknowledges several limitations that may have influenced its scope and findings:

**Scope Limitations** - The research focused primarily on contemporary expressions of dress design within selected Tanzanian communities. While these contexts provide rich cultural insights, the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of dress across all regions and ethnic groups in Tanzania. Additionally, the study emphasised design and co-creation processes, with less attention given to large-scale production or commercial implementation.

**Sampling Limitations** - The study employed purposive sampling to engage participants with relevant cultural knowledge and design experience. Although this approach ensured the depth and relevance of the data, it limited the breadth of perspectives included, particularly those from marginalised communities or those with limited access to formal design education. The relatively small sample size, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, constrains the generalizability of the findings.

**Methodological Constraints** - The study employed an interpretivist paradigm and a Cooperative Inquiry design, both of which rely heavily on subjective interpretation and participant collaboration. While this enabled

a nuanced understanding of cultural meanings and design preferences, it also introduced potential biases on the part of researchers and participants. Furthermore, the iterative co-design process required significant time and resources, which limited the number of design cycles and prototypes that could be developed within the study timeframe.

Overall, these limitations suggest that while the study provides valuable insights into culturally informed co-design practices, caution should be exercised in extrapolating the findings to broader populations or contexts. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the geographic and demographic scope, increasing sample diversity, and incorporating longitudinal studies of design adoption and impact.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### ***Conclusion***

This study has examined the potential of co-design practices to strengthen Tanzanian national identity through contemporary dress. The major findings indicate that integrating traditional motifs with modern design approaches enables the creation of culturally resonant attire that reflects collective memory, shared values, and national symbolism. Participants valued the collaborative process, which fostered creativity, inclusivity, and a sense of ownership over design outcomes. The research also highlighted challenges related to material availability, production constraints, and the balance between aesthetic innovation and cultural authenticity.

The study contributes to knowledge by demonstrating how co-design methodologies can serve as a bridge between cultural heritage and contemporary creative practice. It provides a model for integrating theoretical perspectives, including material culture, visual semiotics, and creative industries frameworks, into practical design processes, thereby enriching the discourse on national identity, cultural expression, and sustainable design in the arts.

The study's broader implications extend to creative arts scholarship, cultural policy, and industry practice. It offers guidance to designers, educators, and policymakers on harnessing participatory design to support cultural preservation, innovation, and community engagement. By fostering culturally informed design, the findings support the development of creative outputs that are both aesthetically compelling and socially meaningful.

From a policy perspective, the research underscores the importance of supporting initiatives that promote local craftsmanship, sustainable production, and inclusive cultural expression. In the creative arts, it demonstrates that collaborative, contextually grounded design can enhance both the symbolic and practical value of national dress, encouraging greater recognition of creative industries as drivers of cultural identity and socio-economic development.

### **Theoretical and Academic Contributions**

This study makes a significant academic contribution by integrating participatory co-design, sustainable textile practices, and national identity discourse within a rigorous practice-based research framework grounded in Tanzania. It extends interdisciplinary scholarship across fashion studies, material culture, and postcolonial design by demonstrating how dress can function as a material and visual medium for constructing national identity. The study further advances theory by conceptualising co-design as a form of cultural negotiation and identity praxis rather than merely a design method. Additionally, it proposes a contemporary and sustainable national dress framework that integrates cultural symbolism with responsible production models, offering a replicable approach for postcolonial contexts seeking to institutionalise national dress through creative industries.

### **Recommendations**

This study demonstrates that the deliberate integration of cultural symbolism, participatory co-design methodologies, and sustainable textile practices offers a viable pathway to strengthen Tanzanian national identity through contemporary dress design. By integrating cultural representation with responsible production systems, this approach not only reinforces symbolic cohesion but also aligns national design initiatives with global sustainability imperatives within the fashion and textile industries. Building upon longstanding national efforts to articulate identity through dress, the study proposes a structured and participatory model for the development and distribution of nationally symbolic attire – one capable of stimulating youth employment, formalising creative labour, and strengthening local creative economies. To ensure practical relevance and long-term impact, the following integrated recommendations are proposed across policy, industry, education, and research domains:

#### ***Institutional and policy frameworks***

Relevant government bodies should establish inclusive and participatory frameworks to guide the development, refinement, and voluntary adoption

of nationally symbolic dress. Any formalisation process must remain consultative to avoid cultural marginalisation and ensure representation of Tanzania's diverse cultural narratives. Policy instruments should promote the preservation of traditional motifs, safeguard intangible cultural heritage, and incentivise designers and artisans engaged in culturally grounded, sustainable production initiatives. Furthermore, structured collaboration between artisans, designers, and communities should be institutionally encouraged to reinforce authenticity and inclusivity.

***Strengthening local textile value chains and creative industries***

Strategic investment is required to revitalise and strengthen domestic textile production, including kitenge manufacturing, batik, tie-dye, and hand-screen printing. Supporting local supply chains will enhance environmental sustainability, reduce dependency on second-hand imports, and consolidate culturally embedded creative industries. Designers and creative enterprises are encouraged to adopt co-design methodologies that actively involve cultural custodians and community members, thereby enhancing authenticity and social legitimacy. Simultaneously, enterprises should prioritise innovative yet environmentally responsible material selection and production techniques to maintain both aesthetic quality and ecological integrity.

***Formalisation and capacity development of artisans***

Tailors, craftspeople, and small-scale producers should be supported through professional training, business registration, and improved access to procurement and invoicing systems. Such measures would enable participation in institutional contracts, including uniforms and ceremonial attire, thereby enhancing economic stability and integrating informal creative labour into formal value chains.

***Integration into national platforms and tourism***

The proposed dress design may be strategically promoted during national celebrations, cultural festivals, state ceremonies, and international exhibitions, as well as within the tourism sector. Embedding the design within national and global cultural platforms would strengthen symbolic visibility, expand market opportunities, and position Tanzania's creative identity within international cultural discourse.

***Educational development***

Design education institutions should integrate co-design principles, culturally responsive design frameworks, and sustainable textile practices

into their curricula. Emphasis should be placed on ethical community engagement, research-based design processes, and the integration of traditional craft knowledge with contemporary innovation. Such reforms will prepare a new generation of designers capable of producing culturally meaningful, socially responsible, and environmentally sustainable work.

#### ***Research expansion and sustainability monitoring***

Future research should further explore the intersections of co-design, visual semiotics, and material culture in national identity formation, extending beyond dress to include accessories, textiles, and performance-based cultural artefacts. Comparative and longitudinal studies are recommended to assess public acceptance, scalability, market sustainability, and long-term cultural impact. Additionally, systematic environmental monitoring should accompany implementation processes to ensure alignment with circular design principles and responsible textile production standards. Collectively, these recommendations provide a comprehensive framework for policymakers, designers, educators, and researchers to collaboratively cultivate a sustainable, culturally informed, and economically resilient national design ecosystem in Tanzania.

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#### **Declaration Statements**

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