

Cloth as Political Language: How Textile Arts Became Instruments of Ideology, Identity, and State Power

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Abstract

This paper explores the process by which cloth shifted from depicting Gods to depicting humans, and how it came to serve as a vehicle for political rhetoric, ideological indoctrination, propaganda, and community building. Centered on their use in nation-states and movements across the globe, this study contextualizes textiles as visual media for exerting state control, oppressing communities, protesting against the powers that be, and representing communal membership. Used by governments, reform movements, national leaders, and anti-colonial activists alike, clothed surfaces became battlegrounds through which systems of power were both asserted and undermined. Analyzing examples from South Asia, East Asia, and West Africa, this paper approaches the surface designs of textiles as texts that made systems of power visible. Gandhi utilized hand-spun cotton cloth to promote swaraj, or self-rule, from British textile industries. Military garments, imperial court textiles, and coats of arms across colonial regimes utilized textiles to assert their sovereignty over spaces and their rank over individuals. Kente cloth communicated chiefly authority within African states, and propaganda textiles were deployed to shape the imaginations of the Chinese masses following WWII. Employing a comparative qualitative methodology through the lenses of material culture, visual rhetoric, and archival research, this study argues that textiles served as political manuscripts that solidified power, resisted repression, and constructed ideological systems. Textiles were once used as worshipful grounds for deities to exist, and later came to represent the bodies politic that existed upon them.

Keywords: textiles, political iconography, ideology, nationalism, colonial power, material culture, visual semiotics

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Introduction

As material culture theory shows, objects play a role in the production of meaning rather than simply reflecting it (Appadurai, 1986; Gell, 2013). Textiles have historically played a role beyond mere material coverings. Across civilizations, textiles have operated as a carrier of belief, a marker of status, and a surface of representation embedded within ritual, economy, and identity. In many pre-modern worlds, surface design patterns work as an important aspect of divine iconography and cosmological narratives, transforming fabric into devotional mediums (Dehejia, 1997). The textiles used in South Asian temple hangings, particularly within Hindu ritual contexts in regions such as Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, as well as in ceremonial regalia, did not merely decorate sacred environments; they structured visual hierarchies, mediated divine presence, and transmitted cosmological knowledge. In largely oral cultures, cloth functioned as visual scripture, offering narrative continuity through repeated iconographic systems.

This section explores how visual hierarchy, as a compositional strategy within textile surface design layouts, is restructured under political regimes. Over time, shifts in political structures, particularly through colonial expansion, nationalist movements, and twentieth-century state formation, redefined the symbolic function of cloth. Authority once reserved for divine figures was transferred onto rulers, imperial institutions, and ideological symbols. Textile surface pattern work that once carried gods increasingly displayed monarchs, military insignia, coats of arms, revolutionary leaders, and political slogans. Textile design iconography moved from sacred representation to political language. This shift did not erase earlier symbolic structures in textile design or pattern representation; it redirected them. Compositional strategies such as centrality, repetition, and chromatic hierarchy were repurposed to visualize sovereignty and state power. As Barthes argues, repetition naturalizes meaning (Barthes, 1977). When rulers and ideological motifs are continually inscribed onto textiles, authority becomes familiar and appears self-evident.

Material culture scholarship reinforces this transformation. Objects shape social relations by structuring recognition and hierarchy. When worn or displayed publicly, textiles become instruments of visibility, a condition essential to the functioning of power (Foucault, 1995). Uniforms discipline bodies, ceremonial regalia stage sovereignty, nationalist cloth signals allegiance, and propaganda textiles normalize ideology through repetition. Cloth does not merely represent authority; it helps enact it.

This study examines how textiles evolved from devotional surfaces into instruments of political agenda, ideological persuasion, and collective identity formation. It asks: how did textiles transition from sacred representation to political texts, and what does this transformation reveal about the visual mechanics of power?

This question moves beyond stylistic analysis to interrogate structural transformation. The study argues that the shift occurs across three interconnected dimensions: on the textile surface (motif and iconographic change), in embodied use (how cloth is worn, displayed, or circulated), and within political context (the broader systems of authority that mobilize textile symbolism). The transformation is therefore not merely aesthetic but structural, relational, and performative.

To address this question, the paper analyzes three primary case studies within a comparative framework based on visual artifact analysis specific to textile surface design pattern work: Asante kente cloth in Ghana, Gandhian khadi in India, and Mao-era propaganda textiles in

China where printed fabrics extended beyond clothing into domestic and environmental surfaces such as curtains, wall hangings, and everyday furnishings (Hung, 2011; Ross & Adedze, 1998; Trivedi, 2007). Colonial military uniforms and court brocades serve as a control case to clarify how hierarchy and discipline are visually constructed. Together, these examples demonstrate textiles functioning as sovereignty, resistance, and ideological normalization

Textile surface design becomes political language because it produces legitimacy through three recurring mechanisms: visibility, repetition, and embodied circulation. Through these mechanisms, authority is worn, recognized, contested, and normalized.

Literature Review

Textiles as Sacred and Cosmological Surfaces

Textiles have a long history as sacred media embedded within cosmological, ritual, and devotional systems. Across South Asia, Africa, and East Asia, cloth operated as more than ornamentation; it structured sacred space and embodied spiritual authority. In pre-modern South Asia, temple textiles depicted narrative cycles from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and Puranic traditions, transforming cloth into a visual scripture accessible to largely oral communities (Dehejia, 1997). These textiles were displayed in temples, carried in ritual processions, and unfolded during festivals, enabling collective viewing and shared interpretive experience.

Such textiles were not passive illustrations of myth. Rather, they mediated the presence of the divine through compositional hierarchy and symbolic density. Centralized deities, chromatic distinctions, haloed framing devices, and narrative sequencing created structured visual grammars that organized devotional attention. Repetition of these visual codes across generations stabilized shared belief systems and produced materialized theology.

Similarly, in West African contexts, woven textiles encoded spiritual authority and lineage through symbolic patterning (Picton & Mack, 1999). Cloth functioned as a visual articulation of cosmology, where color, motif, and weaving technique reflected social and spiritual hierarchies. These textiles operated within ritualized frameworks, reinforcing communal memory and structuring authority through embodied practice.

Material culture theory supports this understanding of sacred textiles as active agents rather than decorative objects. Material objects participate in shaping belief systems and social relations (Gell, 2013). Cloth, in particular, due to its bodily proximity and spatial flexibility, possesses a heightened capacity to mediate experience. Sacred textiles structured ritual environments, framed sacred architecture, and visually encoded moral order.

Importantly, this sacred phase establishes the foundational semiotic infrastructure upon which later political uses of cloth depend. Before textiles became instruments of the state, they were already understood as surfaces capable of carrying authoritative meaning.

Semiotics, Visibility, and the Material Performance of Power

The transformation of textiles into political instruments can be understood through semiotic theory and analyses of visibility. Barthes conceptualizes visual systems as structured languages in which repetition naturalizes historically constructed meanings (Barthes, 1977). Symbols

acquire authority not through singular display but through continual reproduction. Textiles, by virtue of their reproducibility and circulation, are uniquely suited to this process.

Foucault's theory of disciplinary visibility further clarifies how material surfaces produce authority (Foucault, 1995). Power operates not solely through decree but through visible organization of bodies and space. Uniforms, regalia, and ceremonial garments make hierarchy legible. They produce recognition and stabilize command structures through visual differentiation. In this framework, cloth functions as an infrastructure of recognition. A uniform communicates rank; a ceremonial wrap communicates lineage; a nationalist garment communicates allegiance. Authority must be seen to be enacted, and textiles provide that visibility.

Gell extends this argument by proposing that art objects possess agency within social networks (Gell, 2013). Objects mediate relationships and produce effects. Textiles, therefore, are not neutral carriers of political meaning but participants in its construction. Through embodied wearing, public display, and spatial integration, cloth organizes collective perception.

Together, these perspectives position textiles as dynamic political surfaces capable of stabilizing power across regimes.

Colonial Economies and the Political Reconfiguration of Cloth

Colonial expansion dramatically altered both the economic and symbolic status of textiles. Riello demonstrates how global cotton trade reshaped world systems, embedding textile production within imperial expansion (Riello, 2009). Cotton was not merely a commodity; it was central to the economic architecture of empire. Industrial textile production in Britain relied heavily on colonial raw materials and markets, restructuring indigenous weaving economies in colonized regions.

Bayly similarly emphasizes that colonial restructuring disrupted local textile networks, altering both economic autonomy and symbolic identity (Bayly, 1988). Clothing increasingly became a marker of colonial hierarchy. European dress codes distinguished rulers from subjects, reinforcing political stratification through material difference.

Thomas introduces the concept of "entangled objects," arguing that material goods within colonial contexts cannot be separated from power relations (Thomas, 1991). Cloth in colonial settings was embedded within systems of domination, exchange, and identity negotiation. Uniforms standardized identity in service of imperial discipline; court textiles reinforced elite separation through material exclusivity.

Yet colonial restructuring also produced resistance. Textiles became sites of political inversion. When Gandhi promoted khadi, he directly confronted the colonial textile economy (Trivedi, 2007). By rejecting industrial imports and advocating hand-spun cloth, khadi re-signified fabric as moral protest. Cloth moved from imperial commodity to nationalist symbol. Thus, colonial contexts reveal textiles functioning simultaneously as instruments of control and tools of resistance.

Dress, Identity, and Embodied Sovereignty

Dress studies further illuminate how textiles produce identity and authority. Eicher frames clothing as a visible articulation of social order, where dress communicates ethnicity, status, and political affiliation (Eicher, 1995). Unlike architecture or monumentality, dress is mobile and embodied; it travels with the body and transforms it into a political surface.

Ross demonstrates how Asante kente cloth encodes proverbs, lineage, and kingship through structured chromatic systems (Ross & Adedze, 1998). Here, cloth performs sovereignty through spectacle rather than bureaucratic documentation. Authority is worn and recognized in ceremonial display.

Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" provides additional insight into how shared material practices construct national belonging (Anderson, 2008). When populations adopt standardized forms of dress, whether khadi in India or uniform codes elsewhere cloth becomes a medium of collective imagination.

Through these perspectives, textiles emerge as embodied political language, transforming the body into a site of ideological inscription.

Ideological Normalization and Mass Repetition

In the twentieth century, textiles became instruments of ideological dissemination within modern nation-states. Mao-era China provides a particularly clear example. Hung (2011) demonstrates how political imagery was integrated into visual culture through posters, paintings, and textiles. Fabrics depicted workers, soldiers, and agricultural scenes, embedding revolutionary narratives within everyday environments.

Landsberger emphasizes that Chinese propaganda relied heavily on repetition (Landsberger, 2020). Repetition transforms political messages into naturalized truths. Textiles, mass-produced and integrated into domestic life, became ideal carriers for ideological normalization.

Clark argues that Cultural Revolution visual culture standardized imagery across multiple media platforms (Clark, 2008). Evans further notes that clothing was regulated to align with socialist ideals, reinforcing conformity through material practice (Evans, 1997).

Unlike sacred or elite textiles of earlier periods, these fabrics were designed for mass circulation. Ideology entered bedrooms, kitchens, and public gatherings. Cloth thus shifted from representing authority to embedding it in daily life.

Barthes' notion of myth-making is particularly relevant here: repeated imagery dissolves historical construction into apparent inevitability (Barthes, 1977). Propaganda textiles normalized ideology through habitual exposure.

Research Gap: From Isolated Case Studies to Comparative Transformation

While substantial scholarship exists on sacred textiles, colonial dress, kente cloth, khadi, and Maoist propaganda individually, few studies trace these transformations comparatively across global regions and historical phases. Existing research often examines textiles within singular cultural frameworks African dress studies, Indian nationalist clothing, or Chinese propaganda

imagery without situating them within a broader structural evolution of cloth as political language.

This study proposes a four-phase transformational model moving from sacred devotional authority to embodied sovereignty, political resistance, and ideological normalization. Rather than treating these as isolated historical moments, the study argues that they represent recurring structural reconfigurations of cloth's political function.

By placing Ghana, India, China, and colonial Europe in comparative dialogue, this research positions textiles as evolving political infrastructures. It demonstrates that cloth's political potency lies not in specific motifs but in its structural properties: visibility, repetition, portability, and embodied intimacy. This study is the first to propose a unified four-phase comparative model linking textile political functions across three continents within a single analytical framework.

Methodology

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design to examine the historical transformation of textiles from sacred devotional surfaces into instruments of political authority, resistance, and ideological normalization. The methodology treats cloth not as decorative craft but as an active material agent embedded within systems of governance, ideology, and collective identity formation. The research is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates material culture studies, semiotics, dress theory, and political philosophy. Material culture scholarship emphasizes that objects shape social relations, they do not simply mirror them (Appadurai, 1986; Gell, 2013). Semiotic theory further supports reading textiles as structured visual languages that encode meaning through repetition, hierarchy, and symbolism (Barthes, 1977). Foucault's concept of visibility as a mechanism of power clarifies how cloth, when worn or displayed publicly, becomes a technology of recognition and discipline (Foucault, 1995). Together, these frameworks allow textiles to be interpreted as ideological scripts that produce legitimacy rather than simply illustrate it.

Case Study Selection

This study does not seek to provide an exhaustive technical, ethnographic, or regional survey of global textile traditions. Instead, it adopts a comparative interpretive approach that foregrounds visual structure, embodied use, and political function. By focusing on selected case studies with strong archival documentation, the methodology enables cross-cultural comparison of how textile surface design operates as a political language rather than as a purely material or craft-based practice. The primary case studies include Asante kente cloth in Ghana (c.1700–1900), colonial military uniforms and court regalia (c.1700–1900), Gandhian khadi in India (1920s–1940s), and Mao-era propaganda textiles in China (1949–1976). Sacred narrative textiles from South Asia and West Africa serve as the foundational comparative baseline, illustrating earlier devotional authority embedded in cloth. These cases were selected due to their documented political significance, geographic diversity, and availability of museum and archival documentation. Together, they provide a cross-cultural framework for analyzing how textiles operate within varying political registers while maintaining structural continuity across historical transformations.

Visual Analysis of Textile Surfaces

The first analytical phase involved close visual examination of textile examples drawn from museum collections, archival photography, and scholarly documentation. The visual analysis focused on motif transformation (from divine iconography to rulers, nationalist symbols, and ideological imagery), chromatic hierarchy, compositional organization, repetition patterns, and modes of display. Particular attention was given to how meaning shifts directly on the textile surface. Sacred textiles frequently organize imagery hierarchically to communicate cosmological order (Dehejia, 1997), while kente cloth encodes political legitimacy through geometric strip weaving and symbolic color systems (Ross & Adedze, 1998). Colonial uniforms standardize identity through regulated tailoring, insignia placement, and chromatic differentiation (Riello & McNeil, 2010). Mao-era propaganda fabrics embed revolutionary narratives through repeated visual motifs and dominant red coloration (Hung, 2011). By analyzing these surface transformations, the study identifies how textiles visually restructure authority across regimes.

Embodied and Performative Dimensions

Beyond surface imagery, the methodology also examines textiles as embodied materials that shape political experience through wearing, performance, and circulation. Cloth's proximity to the body and its visibility in public space allow it to mediate political identity directly. Sacred cloth operates within ritual environments, structuring devotional participation. Kente performs sovereignty through ceremonial display, while colonial uniforms discipline bodies into visible hierarchies. Khadi transforms everyday dress into collective protest, and Mao-era propaganda textiles embed ideology within domestic routines. This embodied dimension reveals that cloth functions not merely as visual symbol but as performative medium through which political identity is enacted and normalized.

Historical Contextualization

Historical contextualization forms the second major phase of the methodology. Each textile tradition is situated within its broader political, economic, and institutional environment. Asante kente is interpreted within pre-colonial systems of governance where authority was performed ritually rather than bureaucratically. Colonial uniforms are analyzed within imperial expansion and global cotton trade networks that restructured economic hierarchies (Riello, 2009). Khadi is contextualized within British industrial disruption of indigenous weaving economies and nationalist mobilization (Bayly, 1988; Trivedi, 2007). Mao-era textiles are interpreted within socialist state formation and Cultural Revolution visual standardization (Clark, 2008; Hung, 2011). This contextual grounding ensures that visual transformations are understood as responses to structural political change rather than isolated aesthetic shifts.

Comparative Synthesis

The final analytical stage employs comparative synthesis to identify recurring political mechanisms across the case studies. Textiles are examined through three structural dimensions: transformation of surface imagery (divine iconography to political symbols), transformation of embodied use (ritual mediation to political mobilization and normalization), and transformation of function (cosmological order to sovereignty, resistance, and ideological embedding). This comparative framework demonstrates that while the imagery and historical circumstances vary, the mechanisms of repetition, visibility, and embodied recognition persist.

Cloth adapts to shifting regimes of power while retaining its capacity to produce collective meaning.

Scope and Analytical Boundaries

This methodological approach prioritizes symbolic and political interpretation rather than technical textile analysis such as fiber composition or dye chemistry. While material properties contribute to meaning, the focus remains on how textiles operate socially and visually within systems of authority. The research also acknowledges the influence of museum curation and colonial collecting practices on archival visibility (Thomas, 1991), recognizing that preserved textiles may reflect elite or state-sponsored examples more than everyday domestic fabrics. Nevertheless, the archival record itself reinforces the central argument: textiles consistently emerge at moments of political consolidation and transformation.

Methodological Contribution

By combining visual analysis, historical contextualization, embodied interpretation, and comparative synthesis, this methodology establishes a transferable framework for reading textiles as political language. It positions cloth not at the margins of political history but at its center, demonstrating how power is woven, worn, displayed, and normalized across time and place.

Results and Discussion

From Sacred Surface to Political Script

The comparative analysis demonstrates that textiles function not merely as decorative artefacts but as instruments of political communication. Across the selected case studies, cloth operates as a structured visual medium through which authority is constructed, resistance is mobilized, and ideology is normalized. Rather than reflecting power passively, textiles participate in its production. As Gell argues, material objects can act within social systems by mediating relations of dominance, allegiance, and belief (Gell, 2013). Cloth, due to its proximity to the body and its public visibility, becomes particularly effective in this role.

The transformation from sacred representation to political instrument unfolds across three interconnected dimensions: surface imagery, embodied use, and political function. On the textile surface, divine iconography gives way to rulers, nationalist symbols, and ideological imagery. In embodied practice, textiles move from ritual mediation to ceremonial sovereignty, protest mobilization, and habitual ideological reinforcement. Functionally, cloth shifts from expressing cosmological order to enacting sovereignty, contesting imperial authority, and embedding state ideology in everyday life. The structure of authority remains; the referent changes.

Sacred Cloth as Foundational Authority

Devotional textiles in South Asia and West Africa established the visual grammar later adopted by political regimes. Hierarchical composition, central placement of divine figures, and repeated narrative sequencing structured theological authority (Dehejia, 1997). These strategies did more than illustrate belief; they organized collective participation and stabilized

communal memory. The sacred phase therefore created a semiotic infrastructure through which authority could be visualized and recognized.

When political figures later occupied these compositional structures, the underlying logic did not disappear. The centrality once reserved for gods was transferred to rulers and ideological symbols. Sacred visual hierarchy became political hierarchy.

Embodied Authority: Kente and Indigenous Political Legitimacy

In the Asante kingdom, kente cloth operated as a structured visual language of sovereignty. Color, pattern, and geometric complexity encoded lineage, rank, and political identity (Ross & Adedze, 1998). Gold signified divine kingship and prosperity, while black referenced ancestral continuity and maturity. Specific motifs embodied proverbs associated with governance and moral conduct.

The analysis reveals that kente functions through differentiation rather than uniformity. Unlike colonial uniforms that standardize bodies, kente distinguishes them through complexity. Authority is performed through visual density. When worn ceremonially, kente transforms the body into a visible site of sovereignty.

Foucault's concept of visibility as a mechanism of power clarifies this dynamic (Foucault, 1995). Governance requires recognition. In pre-bureaucratic political systems, cloth becomes documentation. Legitimacy is not written; it is woven and displayed. The body wearing kente is read as authority.

This case demonstrates that textiles produce sovereignty through spectacle and embodiment. The sacred logic of hierarchical visibility persists, but the divine referent shifts to human governance. Cloth becomes the medium through which political order is made legible.

Imperial Control: Uniformity, Discipline, and Hierarchical Standardization

Colonial military uniforms and court regalia reveal a different political mechanism: discipline through standardisation. Unlike kente, which encodes hierarchy through variation, colonial uniforms suppress individuality in favour of visual uniformity. Rank is communicated through regulated insignia placement, chromatic coding, and material exclusivity (Riello & McNeil, 2010).

The results indicate that the uniform operates as both a symbol and a disciplinary device. The uniform produces disciplined subjects by aligning bodily presentation with imperial authority. Color bands, medals, and tailored structure make hierarchy instantly legible.

Textile economies were deeply embedded within imperial expansion. Global cotton trade networks reorganized production, labor, and consumption (Riello, 2009). Cloth thus became both economic commodity and visual instrument of domination. Authority was stabilized not only through law and military force but through everyday material practice. This phase demonstrates that textiles can enforce hierarchy by standardizing identity. Visibility here does not differentiate elites through complexity; it aligns bodies through repetition. Cloth becomes a technology of order.

Political Resistance: Khadi and Collective Mobilization

Khadi represents a radical inversion of imperial textile power. Gandhi's promotion of hand-spun cotton reframed cloth as a material act of resistance (Trivedi, 2007). British industrial imports had disrupted indigenous weaving economies (Bayly, 1988). By encouraging spinning and wearing khadi, Gandhi transformed everyday dress into embodied protest.

The analysis reveals that khadi's political power lies in material simplicity. Unlike kente or court brocades, khadi rejects ornamental hierarchy. Its coarse texture and visible irregularities symbolize moral authenticity. Chatterjee describes this as the "inner domain" of nationalist sovereignty a cultural space resistant to colonial control (Chatterjee, 1993).

Anderson's concept of imagined communities further clarifies how khadi operates (Anderson, 2008). When adopted collectively, cloth becomes a visible marker of belonging. Wearing khadi signals allegiance to nationalist identity. The body becomes a moving declaration of resistance. Unlike imperial uniforms that enforce stratification, khadi unifies across class boundaries. Its repetition across public protests converts simplicity into political force. Cloth here destabilizes authority not through spectacle but through collective adoption.

Ideological Normalization: Mao-Era Propaganda Textiles

The Maoist period marks the final stage in the transformational model: ideological normalization. Fabrics depicting workers, soldiers, agricultural production, and Maoist symbolism embedded state narratives into everyday environments (Hung, 2011).

The results demonstrate that propaganda textiles function through ubiquity rather than exclusivity. Curtains, garments, and bedding carried revolutionary imagery into domestic life. Barthes describes myth as a process whereby historical constructs become naturalized (Barthes, 1977). Through repetition, political imagery becomes ordinary.

Clark notes that Cultural Revolution visual culture standardized imagery across media platforms. Textiles extended this regime into intimate space (Clark, 2008). Unlike sacred or ceremonial cloth, which appears during ritual, propaganda textiles appear daily. Ideology becomes habitual.

This phase reveals that cloth can normalize authority by embedding it within routine practice. Political imagery no longer demands attention; it becomes part of the background of everyday life. Power stabilizes through repetition.

Cross-Case Structural Transformations

Across these cases, three recurring transformations emerge:

1. **Surface transformation:** divine iconography shifts to rulers, nationalist symbols, and ideological icons.
2. **Embodied transformation:** ritual mediation evolves into ceremonial sovereignty, protest mobilization, and ideological habituation.
3. **Functional transformation:** cosmological order becomes sovereignty, resistance, and state normalization.

These transformations confirm that textiles persist as political scripts across regimes. Objects circulate within shifting regimes of value (Appadurai, 1986). Textile surface design adapts as power structures change. It remains a visible infrastructure of legitimacy.

The findings extend textile scholarship beyond aesthetic and craft-centered analysis by positioning cloth as a material infrastructure of political communication. By tracing the movement from sacred iconography to embodied sovereignty, resistance, and ideological normalization, this study demonstrates that authority operates not only through law, speech, or institutions but through visual repetition, embodied performance, and everyday material presence. Textiles do not merely encode political meaning; they stabilize and circulate it.

These insights also carry contemporary relevance. National dress, protest garments, campaign merchandise, religious attire, and digitally circulated fashion imagery continue to mobilize cloth as a visible marker of belonging and allegiance. In a media-saturated environment, textiles circulate both physically and visually, intensifying their semiotic reach. The transformational model developed here offers a framework for interpreting these contemporary practices as extensions of a longer historical pattern in which cloth mediates identity, authority, and collective imagination.

Limitations

While this study proposes a comparative framework for understanding textiles as political language, several limitations shape its scope.

First, the analysis focuses on selected case studies from Ghana, India, China, and colonial European contexts to illustrate authority, control, resistance, and ideological normalization. These examples were chosen for their clarity and archival documentation, but they do not represent the full range of global textile traditions. Regions such as the Middle East, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Indigenous American contexts may reveal alternative trajectories in which textiles engage political authority differently. Future research could extend the comparative model across additional cultural and geopolitical settings.

Second, much of the analysis relies on museum collections and archival documentation. Institutional preservation often privileges ceremonial, elite, or state-sponsored textiles over every day domestic fabrics. Consequently, ordinary garments that may have carried political meaning are less visible in the historical record. Many collections were formed during colonial periods, and cataloging practices may reflect curatorial or imperial biases (Thomas, 1991). These archival conditions shape both availability and interpretation.

Third, the study prioritizes visual symbolism, embodied practice, and political function rather than detailed technical analysis of fiber technologies, dye chemistry, or workshop production systems. While this approach enables cross-cultural comparison, it does not fully address the material technologies that supported large-scale textile dissemination in colonial or socialist industrial contexts. Integrating technical textile studies or ethnographic research with artisans could further clarify the relationship between production and political meaning.

Finally, the four-phase transformational model simplifies complex historical processes. Sacred, sovereign, resistant, and ideological functions frequently overlap, and phases may coexist rather than follow linear progression. The model should therefore be understood as a structural heuristic rather than a rigid chronological framework.

Conclusion

This study has traced the transformation of textiles from sacred devotional surfaces to instruments of political authority. Across Ghana, India, China, and colonial imperial contexts, textile surface design pattern work emerges not merely as an aesthetic artefact but as political language. It encodes legitimacy, organizes hierarchy, mobilizes resistance, and normalizes ideology.

The analysis demonstrates that this transformation operates across three interconnected dimensions: shifts in surface imagery, shifts in embodied use, and shifts in political function. While motifs change from divine figures to rulers, nationalist symbols, and ideological icons, the underlying mechanics remain consistent. Visibility, repetition, and compositional hierarchy within surface design enable authority to be recognized, circulated, and stabilized.

Textile surface pattern work is uniquely positioned within political life because it operates simultaneously as a visual system and an embodied medium. It moves with the body, circulates through social space, and becomes embedded within domestic environments. Through these qualities, surface design does not merely reflect power; it helps constitute it. The persistence of politically encoded textile surfaces in contemporary culture confirms that this historical pattern continues. National dress, protest garments, and state symbolism demonstrate that designed surfaces, through motif, layout, and repetition, remain central to the articulation of belonging and legitimacy. Power is not only written or proclaimed. It is designed, repeated, and worn.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, rephrasing applications were used solely for proofreading and refining the language of this manuscript. Additionally, Gemini was used to rephrase tabular headings and organize the structure of visual elements for clarified reading. Their use was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for clarity and accuracy. Apart from the above-mentioned tools, no other generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate or alter the manuscript's content. All ideas, research design, methodologies, findings, analyses, and discussions presented in this paper are the original work of the authors, derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Appendix

Representative Museum Examples by Transformational Phase

The following examples illustrate archival and institutional documentation supporting each phase of the transformational model presented in this study. These objects are preserved across international museum collections and demonstrate the broader material pattern beyond the primary case studies discussed in the main text.

A1

Sacred Phase—Divine Iconography (Devotional Authority)

Item	Object Title	Approx. Date	Location / Collection	Production Region
1	Vishnu Lying on the Serpent Ananta	18th c.	The British Museum	Srikalahasti, India
2	Kalamkari Rumal	18th c.	The Metropolitan Museum of Art	Masulipatnam, India
3	Hanging with Epic Narrative Scenes	18th c.	The Metropolitan Museum of Art	Masulipatnam
4	Forms of Vishnu	c.1900	Harvard Art Museums	Srikalahasti
5	Dasavatara Canopy Textile	19th c.	The British Museum	Srikalahasti
6	Wall Hanging (Prayer Textile)	1789	MFA Boston	Masulipatnam
7	Kalamkari Panel with Niche	c.1700	The Metropolitan Museum of Art	Masulipatnam
8	Temple Cloth	c.1900	Victoria & Albert Museum	Srikalahasti
9	Rama and Sita Narrative Textile	19th c.	University of Manchester Collection	Srikalahasti
10	Ritual Floor Spread	18th c.	Victoria & Albert Museum	Masulipatnam
11	Mahabharata War – Bhagavad Gita Scene	c.1720	Salar Jung Museum, India	Srikalahasti
12	Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi	c.1820	The Textile Museum, GWU	Srikalahasti
13	Tree of Life Kalamkari	19th c.	Kalamkari Museum, Pedana	Masulipatnam
14	Temple Hanging Depicting Ramayana	19th c.	Saint Louis Art Museum	Srikalahasti
15	NamaVali Textile (Woven with Lord Ram's Name)	19th c.	The Calico Museum of Textiles	India

Note. These examples demonstrate the devotional function of textile surfaces as narrative scripture, cosmological instruction, and ritual authority.

A2*Embodied Authority—Indigenous Political Legitimacy*

Item	Object Type	Date	Location / Collection	Cultural Context
1	Kente Cloth (Royal Strip Weaving)	18th–19th c.	British Museum	Asante, Ghana
2	Kente Cloth (Ceremonial Regalia)	19th c.	Smithsonian National Museum of African Art	Ghana
3	Court Prestige Cloth	Pre-colonial	British Museum	West Africa
4	Royal Ceremonial Wrap	18th–19th c.	UCLA Fowler Museum	Ghana
5	Asante Chief's Cloth	19th c.	Metropolitan Museum of Art	Ghana

Note. These textiles demonstrate political legitimacy enacted through ceremonial wearing, chromatic hierarchy, and visual differentiation.

A3*Imperial Control—Hierarchy and Standardization*

Item	Object Type	Date	Location / Collection	Context
1	British Colonial Military Uniform	18th–19th c.	National Army Museum (UK)	Imperial Military
2	Regimental Dress Coat with Insignia	19th c.	The Metropolitan Museum of Art	British Empire
3	Court Brocade Textile	Early Modern	Victoria & Albert Museum	European Court
4	Heraldic Banner	18th c.	Victoria & Albert Museum	European Monarchy
5	Cotton Printed Textile (Export Trade)	18th–19th c.	V&A Collections	Colonial Trade

Note. These objects illustrate cloth as an instrument of imperial distinction, disciplined identity, and transnational hierarchy.

A4*Political Resistance—Anti-Colonial Nationalism*

Item	Object Type	Date	Location / Collection	Context
1	Khadi Garment	1920s–40s	National Archives of India	Indian Independence Movement
2	Hand-Spun Cotton Cloth	1930s	GandhiServe Foundation	Swadeshi Movement
3	Congress Session Khadi Dress	1930s–40s	National Archives of India	Nationalist Mobilization
4	Charkha-Spun Textile	Early 20th c.	Calico Museum of Textiles	Swadeshi Movement
5	Khadi Protest Garment	1930s	Gandhi Memorial Collections	Anti-Colonial Resistance

Note. These examples demonstrate textile simplicity as political defiance and collective identity formation.

A5*Ideological Normalisation—State Propaganda Textiles*

Item	Object Type	Date	Location / Collection	Context
1	Mao-Era Printed Fabric (Workers and Soldiers)	1950s–60s	National Museum of China	Socialist Propaganda
2	Cultural Revolution Textile	1966–76	National Museum of China	State Ideology
3	Propaganda Curtain Textile	1960s	Landsberger Collection	Maoist Visual Culture
4	Printed Revolutionary Domestic Fabric	1950s–70s	State Collections	Socialist China
5	Red-Themed Agricultural Textile Print	Mid-20th c.	Museum Archives	Ideological Repetition

Note. These textiles illustrate how ideology entered domestic and bodily space through mass production and repetition.