



Art and its histories

Ghana: Introduction to Kente Weaving

Narrator (Catherine King)

In the Ashanti region of Ghana, Kente cloth is a great status symbol, marking your wealth and, in the past, your office. Something to be worn on important occasions and by important people. As the art historian in Ghana, Professor Kojo Fosu wrote:

Nick Levinson

'A typical Kente fabric is woven in narrow strips. Each strip contains a series of bands, designed in intricate, multicoloured, geometrical patterns, alternated by other bands of simple, linear designs in contrasting, co-ordinating colours for harmonious effect'.

Narrator

Each pattern is named after an historical event or a person, or is connected with a proverb.

Ident: Nana Asante, master weaver & entrepreneur, Frempong

Nana Asante

An important decision which every weaver has to make is, what kind of cloth is he going to weave? Because it is the design that will determine the colours of the yarn that he has to put on the bobbin and, subsequently, on the wool.

Ident: heddles and beater

Nana Asante

The process, is to put the warp thread into the heddles and the beater and this you do according to the design pattern that you already have in mind.

After putting the warp thread into the various heddles and beater, the whole thing is brought into a loom for the weaver to start to weaving.

There are two sets of heddles. The first set is used in making patterns and the second set is used in doing regular weaving, where no patterns are required. Now, in this particular pattern, I'm using both the pattern-making heddles and the regular weaving heddles at the same time.

If you have time to watch the weaver do this piece here, it may take about half an hour or more just to do this piece. I do not know of any weaver who can produce more than this strip in a day of eight hours of hard work. It's not possible. And I can assure you that in any given village not more than 10% of the weavers are prepared to weave this, because it takes such a long time.

It does!

This is an old design - and remember, they had access to black and white, the original Kente designs were black and white. The cotton used at that time was grown as here. And the black, the indigo as on these colours, were also coloured, that were locally available dyed colours, available here.

The weaver had no contact with the rest of the world, so he had no access to the variety of colours that we have today.

We are told it was when the, the Gold Coast, then Gold Coast, weaver was in touch with the Europeans and so, certain material that they started to unravel, the Europeans, and started using, what they call silk. I'm not very certain whether it was pure silk or not.

Well, as far as I am concerned, and I've been weaving, you know, for the past forty years or more, I have never in my lifetime seen silk being used in any of the weaving villages.

What was available some thirty, forty years ago, was a kind of spun reel which was so beautiful you could rub it on your fingers and have a certain feeling of silk.

Ident: Akwasi Akwaboa, master weaver

Akwasi Akwaboa (subtitles)

With modernisation, everything is changing. In the past we used black, red and gold. Nowadays more colours are available.

Nana Asante

These are the colours you see today are new colours, colours that did not exist. And we have used them in producing traditional designs, in order to make people attracted. We have used what you call 'metallic', when you wear it to a party in the night it reflects, you see. It's metallic, yeah?