



Art and its histories

Ghana: Who are the Kente weavers?

Narrator

Kente can be made by anyone between a child and someone of very mature age. Here, young men in the village of Bonwire produce strips of relatively simple design. This is the start of a long road that could lead to being a master weaver, who is able to weave the most complex patterns.

Ident: Okyeame Yeboah, master weaver

Narrator

Weaving can carry high status. For example, Okyeame Yeboah is the linguist or spokesman of the Chief of Bonwire. Such a weaver could be put in charge of a weaving shed, where young people are being trained, including women for the first time.

Okyeame Yeboah (subtitles)

Our forefathers didn't allow women to weave. They believed it would prevent them from having children. Also if both husband and wife wove their marriage wouldn't work out. So they weren't allowed to weave. The project was initiated seven years ago by Anglican Missionaries.

Ident: Serwah Akoto, trainee weaver

Ident: Atta Kwami, artist

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

How has working here affected your domestic work?

Serwah Akoto (subtitles)

When I finish at 2 I go home and prepare the food.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

Do you live alone?

Serwah Akoto (subtitles)

I live with my mum.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

What about your Dad?

Serwah Akoto (subtitles)

He also lives in the village

Narrator

This is the compound of master weaver Akwasi Akwaboah in the village of Bonwire. He works with his family for himself.

Att Kwami (subtitles)

What qualities do you need to become, to be a master weaver? Is it something you are born with or can you learn?

Akwasi Akwaboah (subtitles)

You learn, you also have to have nice designs, to be fast, honest with your customers and reliable otherwise they won't return. So there are many qualities before you become a good weaver. People who know the business know who the best weaver is. It's like a driver who knows who the best driver is. That is why the people in this village say that I am the best even though I do not call myself that.

Narrator

Akwasi Akwaboah is weaving the most prestigious Kente cloth, known as Adwenisi - Adweniso. It means all design motifs are used up and requires consummate skill.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

How do you train to be a weaver and how old do you have to be to learn?

Akwasi Akwaboah (subtitles)

You can start learning from about 5 years old. Bit by bit. If you live in this community it can take 2 years.

Ident: Dorothy Ofori, trainee weaver

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

How old are you?

Dorothy Ofori (subtitles)

Seventeen.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

Have you been working here long?

Dorothy Ofori (subtitles)

Over a month now.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

Have you earned any money since starting?

Dorothy Ofori (subtitles)

Yes.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

So who does the domestic duties that you used to do?

Dorothy Ofori (subtitles)

My mother.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

So, what do you hope to gain from this training?

Dorothy Ofori (subtitles)

I'd like to take up Kente weaving professionally.

Nana Asante

I'm sure a good many of the kids you see here, it would be about 8 or 9 can weave. But they may not necessarily be able to do the warping, the designing, the heddling, and so on. Those are things that master weavers can do. And of course, in this day and age, with specialisation, there are people who'd take on that job of heddling. They do this, for a fee, so they don't weave at all.

Narrator

Nana Ashanti Frempong is Member of Parliament for this region. As a young man, he paid his way through college from his weaving.