



Art and its histories

Ghana: Kente past and present

Narrator

In the past, Kente was worn on special occasions, and by important people, such as the Chief of the Weavers. Today, these rules are more relaxed. Kente is still worn on occasions, such as going to church.

Narrator

Where did you get your cloth?

African Man

Er, my father bought it for me.

Narrator

How old is it?

African man

It's been about ten years or twenty years ago.

Narrator

Is your father now dead?

African man

He is now dead.

Narrator

When do you wear this? Do you wear it every Sunday?

African man

Not every Sunday - only special occasions.

Narrator

Do you think of your father when you wear it?

African man

Yes. I remember him very much.

Ident: Osei Antobre, master weaver and merchant

Osei Antobre

On some of the cloth for women, the colours, especially the colours, you know, you women like colours which men doesn't like it.

This is for women.

Wife

This one, too, is for women.

Osei Antobre

This is for funerals.

Narrator

Very Splendid. Sombre but very decorated.

Osei Antobre

Wearing for funerals, you cannot use white, but you can use white when you are going to service, church service, after the funeral. Thanksgiving service, you can use white. Mostly black and white.

Interviewer: (subtitles)

Today anybody can buy your cloth. Was this always the case?

Akwasi Akwaboa (subtitles)

In the old days some cloth could only be worn by the Asantehene (King). Even now, a certain cloth remains exclusive to the Asantehene. We call it 'Ase Sian' - it takes 6 heddles to weave.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

Why is there a special cloth for the Asantehene?

Akwasi Akwaboa (subtitles)

Because he rules over us. If you wear what he wears it would mean you were challenging his authority. So we don't make that cloth for anyone else.

Nana Asante

I came up with this design because the black Americans, they are national colours. And you know, Americans have black American in America. Black, green and burgundy. So I designed this. Don't you see the black, green and burgundy and they are happy that we still have Kente as something produced in Ghana. They are so proud when they wear it.

A lot of schools in America today, on graduation day, all the students lining-up for their certificates will have a piece of Kente. Black universities will have Kentes around their neck and they like to have class of 96 or 97 and sometimes we do the name of the university, or the college here.

We can write " 'Canberra University' or 'Open University', class of '98".

Narrator

The Kentehene, the Chief of Bonwire Weavers, is the official guardian of the history and meaning of Kente.

Ident: Nana Kwasi Gyamri Kentehene, (Chief of Bonwire weavers)

Nana Kwasi Gyamri Kentehene (subtitles)

Originally, this was called Obaa Kofo Mmu Man. But as our first president, Kwame Nkrumah married a lady called Fatia, the person who designed it wanted it to be a success, and took it to the elders and they named it - 'Fatia' has been added to Nkrumah!

This one is called 'Abusua Ye Adom'. It means that with your family and relatives around, your family can be a powerful force.

Nana Asante

This particular one, it's proverbial. I mean you have to mention. 'Proverbial One'. This is called 'One man does not Govern. Two Heads are better than One'. 'It takes more people to go into counsel'. They all refer to the same, and some folks simply call it 'Fatia', because a design, this design was given in honour to the wife of the President of Ghana, the Fatia, so a lot of people call this one 'Fatia', but it has got all the other names, the 'Two Heads are Better than One', 'One Person does not go into counsel' and so forth, you may call it in the name of democracy. That's what it means. But of course, that is the design. The various parties in that design also have names. For example, you see, there are nine squares here, we've got nine tufts of hair, when the chief's go in the durbah there are young girls, they ride in front of the king. And they have special design and this called nine heads are better than one. Sometimes they come before the counsel of elders.

This is in, you swerve, you wouldn't swerve if you look at it. They start from here...go that way and go that way, this way.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

What meaning does the pattern 'Adwenisi-Adwenisu' have?

Akwasi Akwaboa (subtitles)

The whole pattern is called 'Adwenisi-Adwenisu' but this particular pattern is called 'Atsem' (shield). This, 'Ohwia Tu Dei' (everyone must die). 'Atsem' again. 'Ohwia Tu Dei'. 'Nakachene' (snakes skin). 'Afafrantu' (butterfly). And so on, all the way to the end.

Atta Kwami(subtitles)

So can any skilled weaver use his own combination?

Akwasi Akwaboa (subtitles)

Yes, anyone can do that. You just use your imagination.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

Why is 'Adwenisi-Adwenisu' (design upon design) so-called?

Akwasi Akwaboa (subtitles)

Weaving it is more difficult than all other patterns.

Atta Kwami (subtitles)

Why?

Akwasi Akwaboa (subtitles)

We use more threads. Whereas other patterns require 2 or 3 strands, this requires 5

Narrator

Osei Antobre is a leading master weaver and shopkeeper in Bonwire. Master weavers are continually making new designs and naming them, sometimes to commemorate personal events.

Osei Antobre

This is 'B....'. The name was given by me. I was having a boy, was a doctor, and he died all of a sudden. Then, that means, I have spent a lot on the boy but nothing came from it.

Narrator

What does that motif mean ... there?

Osei Antobre

That, this is a stool.

Catherine King

Why was that, why, why did that represent the boy?

Osei Antobre

That maybe he was come to make a chief, to be a chief, but death came to take it, to take him away.

Kentehene

It was my forefathers who started it.

Narrator

How do the makers of Kente see their own history? The chief of the weavers at Bonwire, the Kentehene, tells the story of Kente.

Kentehene (subtitles)

There is a place 'Ahwua Kesie', where my ancestors went to hunt. One day, the elder saw a spider's web, he called out to his brother - 'Ame Yaw, Ame Yawa, come and see what this

animal has done!' So they stood and stared at it for some time. Every time they returned they noticed that the web had changed. They observed over a period of about 3 to 4 years and finally decided they, too, would practise this gift that God had given the spider.

Narrator

Archaeological evidence from tomb excavations indicates the presence of narrow, strip-weaving in the 11th century. But the technique for making patterned strips seems to date from the 16th or 17th centuries. Around 1730, Danish traders record the unravelling of imported silk to use in weaving.

Akwasi Akwaboa (*subtitles*)

Anyone can buy from me. Once you have made your choice, I can weave it for you.

Narrator

Both cloths support sales through local shops

Osei Antobre

You know, if you have, if you are a rich man, you can wear expensive one for wedding. And if you not have money as much you can easily spend lower prices.

Narrator

Both cloths are sold outside Ghana in the African Diaspora

Nana Asante

You've got to be able to come up with new designs, new patterns, in order to sustain the interest of your old customers. So that, every time I go to Chicago, Atlanta, anywhere, I will call my customers and tell them I have something new. Something that they've not seen before! And if you are an artist, you are playing with colours, you know, you change, here a bit, that bit, you change design here and so, and you always have something new. And that's the only way to sustain people's interest.

Narrator

Makers, buyers and sellers can form a circle of interactive tensions in the creation of textiles. These creative tensions are most evident in our final case-study.