



## Art and its histories

*Ghana: Kumasi Market*

### Narrator (John Picton)

The market in Kumasi must be one of the largest in West Africa. You can find almost anything here, including lots of cloth. Cloth has always been important in West Africa. Long before Europeans came round the coast in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, cloth had been traded back and forth between West Africa and the Mediterranean. West African markets have always played an essential part in mediating taste between artists and their patrons.

Some cloth from Bonwire is being sewn together. But far more important, as far as this market is concerned, are the printed cotton textiles. During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dutch textile-makers wanted to copy Indonesian batiks and sell them to Indonesian people at a price that was cheaper than they could make them for themselves.

Eventually, the Dutch found a way of printing resin rather than the wax of a true batik onto both faces of the cloth. The resin resisted the dye but the results were not popular in Indonesia. Yet, quite by chance, they sold well in that part of West Africa known as the Gold Coast, today's modern Ghana.

Many of the current popular designs show the strong trace of their Indonesian origins. These cloths were first produced in The Netherlands and then, soon after the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Britain, especially in the factories around Manchester.

These resin-resist cloths are known as 'wax prints' because of their history. And they're different from the so-called 'fancy prints', which are simply printed imitations of the resist-dyed cloths.

### Atta Kwami

Money flies. Ok. It means that the money has wings. And if you have money, you will be on the move all the time.

### Narrator

As soon as these fabrics began to sell on the Gold Coast, the Dutch developed designs around local West African interests. These especially focused upon the visualisation of proverbs, already an established art tradition among people like the Ashanti. 'Money has wings' was first designed in The Netherlands, but was very popular in Ghana and was widely copied. It has also been re-designed in Ghana, replacing the bird with a hand holding an egg, and adding the words, 'Life is like an egg'. This reminds us how easily our lives can be broken and yet we hold our destinies in our hands.

We are outside the Catholic cathedral in Kumasi and a young mother is wearing a pattern we'd seen in the market. 'Money has wings'.

### Narrator

She said she wore the cloth because she liked it. Then she said she'd bought it when she was expecting her first child. The design may have made her think of the baby growing within her.

Sometimes the remnants from dress-making are patched together for resale.

### Atta Kwami

It's very beautiful, so ....

### Narrator (John Picton)

What is this hand?

*Ident: Mary Razaq*

**Mary Razaq (subtitles)**

The back of your hand is not as good as the palm. (LAUGHS) For example, when eating, you get food on the back of your hands. You have to lick it off because it is not as nice as eating with your palm.

**Narrator**

The hand was educational, as well as proverbial. The spots were originally the twelve pennies in a Victorian shilling.

**Mary Razaq (subtitles)**

If you want to see, you don't close your eyes, do you? 'You see only when your eyes are open' is the meaning.

**Marmisawa**

This one is ..... like, a Queen do not pay!

**Atta Kwami**

On what, on what occasions would someone wear this?

**Marmisawa**

Like, when they are doing something like, ..... you can wear it anytime, anytime at all.

**Atta Kwami**

OK. .... What about this one?  
Pebbles or stones in the house, okay.

*Ident: Marmisawa*

**Atta Kwami**

I want to see the old cloths ....

**Marmisawa**

Old cloths .....  
This one, this one's old ...

**Atta Kwami**

It's an old cloth.

**Marmisawa**

It's called .....

**Atta Kwami**

Okay, So it's from, early '60s ....

**John Picton**

At independence, these technologies were transferred to West Africa. Akosombo is one place in Ghana where there is a textile-printing factory.

**Atta Kwami**

This one's from Akosombo, okay. So is this the real wax?

**Marmisawa**

Yeah, it's the real wax.

**Atta Kwami**

Do you have the super-wax?

**Marmisawa**

This one is the super-wax.

**Atta Kwami**

That is the super-wax, OK.

So what is the difference between the super-wax and the ordinary wax prints?

**Marmisawa**

OK. This one has very good wax than the other one.

**Atta Kwami**

In what way? In what way?

**Marmisawa**

This one the quality is very good, this one.

**Atta Kwami**

And, and what about this one?

**John Picton**

Most of the cloths in Kumasi market are either fancy prints or wax prints made in Ghana or Nigeria.

**Marmisawa**

This is very old cloth. It's called Bonsu, it's a name, a name of a place.

**Atta Kwami**

Bonsu?

**Marmisawa**

Bonsu, yeah.

**Narrator**

Other themes included the novelties of the day, such as education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Or the mobile telephone a hundred years later.

**Atta Kwami**

When did it come out?

**Marmisawa**

This year, only this year.

**Atta Kwami**

How much?

**Marmisawa**

This one is not Ghanain cloth. It's Nigerian.

**Atta Kwami**

It's from Nigeria

**Marmisawa**

It's from Nigeria.

**Narrator**

The designs are responding to the senses both of tradition and of modernity.

*Ident: Afia Akayaa*

**Afia Akayaa**

And the English ..... one tree gets broken by the wind. One tree gets broken.

**Atta Kwami (subtitles)**

What factory is it made in?

**Afia Akayaa (subtitles)**

It's made in Ghana by Akosombo Textiles. It's nice.

**John Picton**

This is, in fact, a locally, factory-printed copy of a resin-resist cloth produced in Holland by the Vlisco factory in Helmond. And one of the problems that the Dutch-producers of these jobs have, is that as soon as they produce a new, popular design, over here the textile factory owners and designers pirate it and, so that, the very fact that the Dutch designs are copied by local factories means that the Dutch designers have to work very hard keeping on top of the whole fashion interest in these parts.

**Narrator**

The more expensive Dutch and English cloths are sold in specialist shops.

**Catherine King**

Could you explain to me why this particular cloth is so much more expensive than the Ghanain printed cloths?

**Shopkeeper**

For this one, it's an imported one, from Holland. That's why this one is more expensive than the Ghana one.

**John Picton**

So this cloth is from where?  
And do you know how they make it?

**Girl selling cloth**

They use polyester to make it.

**John Picton**

Do you mean foam rubber?

**Girl**

Yes. They have a lot of designs. When they pick their design, they put it in this thing

**John Picton**

The wax?

**Girl**

Yes. And they print it on.

**John Picton**

So they print the hot wax onto the cloth?

**Girl**

Yes. They use foam.

**John Picton**

And then the wax resists the dye.  
It's another version of how the whole Dutch wax thing came about, which involved printing hot resin onto both faces of the cloth. And, of course, they did that in imitation of Indonesian batik. And that's how this whole thing started. So this, so you've actually got a number of things going on. You've got that technique. You've then got the printed imitation of it, the fancy cloths. And then you've got this kind of thing, which is a local reversion back to where the technique originally came from.

**Narrator**

These cloths are a record of collaboration between art makers, designers, print workers and traders, and the people who buy and use them.

We can see the designers' response to local, poetic interests, visualising people's ideas about themselves and about the society in which they live.

With Adinkra and Kente, the relations of production include the African Diaspora. Wax cloths and fancy prints are the result of even wider, global relations. Studying these textiles emphasises how important it is to be open to the ways different societies define their own art-making.