

## **THE TEXTILE THAT SPEAKS: THE ART OF THE GHANAIAN KENTE CLOTH**

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Being able to express oneself is something that people often struggle with, as it is challenging to fully outline one's emotions in words. Whether it is happiness or anger—words are often seen as not descriptive enough to fully describe how happy or angry we are. This has further increased due to technology, which implies that people can hide behind a screen and type messages rather than speaking about them (feelings) aloud. Furthermore, COVID-19 has enhanced this phenomenon, with social restrictions and limited contacts being enforced to stop spreading the virus, which has enhanced a feeling of loneliness and social isolation (for example, Hwang et al., 2020). This implies that people are increasingly struggling to fully verbalise how they feel, to paint a picture of their pain or distress, and/or their happiness.

In the past, expressing feelings, especially of oppression, may have also been dangerous. Thus, it is not surprising that different cultures have developed a way to verbalise their stories without using words to tell them. Some cultures for example use dance to express how they feel and/or to have fun, others use images in textiles to tell their story. The people of the Ashanti Region in Ghana are an example of a grouping that has discovered a way to preserve their culture and heritage by embedding it into the textiles and ‘telling’ their story—these textiles are known as the Kente cloth (for example, Whitney, 2020; Nunoo et al., 2021). Each Kente cloth is uniquely handmade and based on the colour scheme and patterns, these cloths can tell a lot about the wearer.

Ghana was previously colonised by the British, a process that was undertaken by force and thus, often not fully accepted by those being colonised. It may not be surprising that in these colonial times, there was the fear of losing one's culture. This was the same for the Ashanti tribe, which is known for having made the first Kente cloths, a tradition that can still be observed to date in Bonwire, a small textile weaving community. The Ashanti tribe did not want to change their culture and be ‘British’, but rather keep their values and traditions alive. Thus, the inhabitants of Bonwire, at the time the sole producers of the Kente textiles, which is also visualising the identity of Ghanaians, decided to embed their culture within the textiles to keep their generations informed and ‘communicate’ with one another. What needs to be understood are which elements of the textile have preserved the culture and heritage identity for over 300 years, and how has it governed the lives of the inhabitants of Bonwire until today.

This links to an earlier point made about vocalising pain and oppression. Rather than openly complaining about a situation that at the time could not be changed and may have been dangerous to criticise, these textiles communicate people's situations and in return they are able to understand the situation of their neighbours and may have been able to support them. To an outsider, these Kente cloths look like beautiful, coloured materials that can be made into garments, whilst to insiders' non-verbal cues can provide the full story (Keith, 2017).

This conceptual paper explores the textile (Kente) which serves as the identity of Ghanaians. It is handwoven with pride and all the colour and patterns contribute to its richness and the storytelling. This textile was initially created for royals, as they are luxury products in Ghana (Nunoo, 2021). Over time, the designs that were not accepted by the chief were passed down to lower social classes so that they could possess the riches of this textile as well. This paper will explore how the culture, which was saved by the inhabitants of Bonwire, has guided them for over 300 years through the designs and colours that have been embedded in the textiles. It will also consider how it speaks to the people and guides their everyday lives and also keeps them informed about their neighbour's well-being. This is a community woven together through textile heritage.

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise and revealed the importance of communication. Being unable to express oneself to some extent can have implications on a person, both mentally and physically. This also applies to small communities, in that even though they are closely knit and the inhabitants can potentially keep the conversation going, they may not be able to communicate with the 'outside world'.

Imagine not being able to talk to your neighbour from a small village next to you, who you grew up with and are close to you. As alluded to earlier, not being able to communicate verbally, for example throughout colonial times, has allowed some communities to develop non-verbal cues, for example through the use of imagery in cloths. It may thus not be surprising that some communities in Ghana do not take communication lightly, and as such, ensure that there is constant communication, even if not verbally. This paper will focus on the Ashanti tribe as their textiles are more vibrant and embody different patterns and are also the main hub of the Kente production. To explain an earlier point made further, in colonial times, there was the fear of losing the Ashanti culture by adapting to a culture that does not consider cultural values and as such, the inhabitants of Bonwire, at the time the sole producers of the Kente textiles as the identity of Ghanaians, decided to embed their culture within the textiles to keep their generations informed. What needs to be understood are which elements of the textile have preserved the culture and heritage identity for over 300 years, and how has it governed the lives of the inhabitants of Bonwire until today. As this paper considers heritage identity, it will approach the dissemination of the textiles in that light to reveal what had to be done in order to keep the culture alive.

Within Ghana, culture plays a big part in the daily activities of an average Ghanaian. This is reflected through behaviours, speech, clothing and more importantly, the upbringing of children. Within Bonwire, we see that knowledge flow is just as important as the culture itself (Boateng, 2018). Boateng and Narayan (2017), and Boateng (2018) suggest that this transfer

of systematic knowledge flow and the knowledge sharing practices has preserved the community for this long. Knowledge was mainly transferred through generations within a family; from fathers or grandfathers to their sons or grandsons. With regards to specific elements embedded in the textile, it is however unclear how this has happened, and whether some meanings may have evolved over time. The transfer of knowledge heavily relates to the production of the Kente cloth, which is what the community was built around, hence everyone in the community being involved in the production of Kente. The textiles embody the proverbs, philosophies, heritage and value of the inhabitants on Bonwire, and not only that, but it communicates these values to them anytime they encounter a peer adorned in the textile. An in-depth review of the literature will try to uncover and reveal the elements of the textiles that have preserved this culture for such a long time, but also look at how specific communication keeps generations informed about the culture.

As suggested by Nunoo (2022), heritage plays an important role in Bonwire, and this is what drives the activities in the community. Extant literature discusses the philosophies of the textiles and gives in-depth details on the patterns and designs as well as their meanings and relevance in the community (for example, Nunoo et al., 2021, Nunoo, 2022). Kente is a textile that has served Ghana as a hidden language and a means to communicate. The art of weaving dates back over 300 years (Fening, 2006). Kente was first designed for royals and designs that were rejected were given to the lower social classes (Boateng, 2011). The Kente design is made on strips 4 inches wide and visualises different colours and symbols. Each colour and symbol has a different meaning and serves a purpose. Symbols are carefully combined on the strip to tell a story (Touring Ghana, 2016). The Kente cloth is made up of 24 strips which is wrapped around the male frame or is sewn into a top and a skirt on the female frame. The combination of the Kente strips with all the design elements and colours tell a story.

For years, the production of the Kente textile has kept the inhabitants of Bonwire on course, meaning it provided a living for them, and it (the Kente cloth) is perceived to be the most valued textile in Africa (Asamoah, 2021). Thus, inhabitants in Bonwire have maintained the culture and not strayed from it. The colours, patterns and size of the Kente are determined by gender, age, martial and social status (Fening, 2006). The Kente is made of warp and weft threads, and it is the warp threads that give a name and meaning to the cloth, as these are the threads that create the pattern (Fening, 2006; Kwakye-Opong, 2014). The names and the meanings heavily reflect the beliefs of the Akan people, as well as historic events, individual achievements, proverbs, philosophical concepts, oral literature, moral values, social code of conduct, human behaviour, the social and political organisation in the Akan society, or may even reflect all manner of people and certain attributes of plant and animal life (Fening, 2006; Boateng, 2011; Kwakye-Opong, 2014). These meanings embedded into the textiles help the youths of today to connect with their past (Ayesu et al., 2021). An example of this in relation to political considerations will be the Kente cloth presented to the United Nations in 1960. This was the largest known woven Kente and the name given to it was “tikoro nko agyina”, which is translated “one head does not constitute a council” (Fening, 2006, p.64) or one head does not stand alone.

This meaning reflected Ghana's stance in the new world order which was then being ushered by a wave of decolonisation that was emerging across Asia, Africa and other colonised territories.

Kente has also been a means for people to portray their position in society (Kwakyee-Opong, 2014). It can be noted that what they wear is different and depicts wealth unlike what the ordinary citizen would wear. This is another way in which the textile communicates; for people to know their place in society and thus render respect and reverence to those who are in a higher position. This thus shows that within the Ashanti culture, roots are very important, and it is what has kept the generations informed for over 300 years. For the upcoming generation, they need to understand the coded language which guides not just their growth, but also how they relate with others who adorn themselves with this textile. If the youth decide to step away from this culture, an age-old tradition could be lost forever. Going forward, this paper will delve further into the relevance of the textiles and which aspects have made it survive for over 300 years, and how it can inspire the future generations.

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