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How to cite: Ayesu SM, Anokye D, Fobiri GK, Acquaye R, Godomey B. Aesthetic and Philosophical Meanings of Indigenous Asante Kente. Textile & Leather Review. 2021; 4(4):267-281.

<https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2021.12>

How to link: <https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2021.12>

Published: 17 November 2021



Aesthetic and Philosophical Meanings of Indigenous Asante Kente

Solomon Marfo AYESU¹, David ANOKYE², George Kwame FOBIRI^{1*}, Richard ACQUAYE³, Bernard GODOMEY⁴

¹Department of Fashion Design and Textiles Studies, Kumasi Technical University, Kumasi, Ghana

²Centre for National Culture, Kumasi, Ghana

³Department of Textile Design and Technology, Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi, Ghana

⁴Department of Fashion and Textile Design, Ho Technical University, Ho, Ghana

*kfobiri@gmail.com

Article

UDC 677.024:7.01

DOI: 10.31881/TLR.2021.12

Received 11 May 2021; Accepted 11 September 2021; Published Online 24 September 2021; Published 17 November 2021

ABSTRACT

Indigenous Ghanaian woven fabrics remain traditional cultural pieces, highlighting the value and heritage of the indigenes in the communities. These fabrics are embedded with historical symbolic connotations that help the people to relate effectively and know their past. Recent studies have identified the tools, materials and new innovations in design by traditional weavers. This study seeks to highlight the aesthetics and philosophical connotations of the indigenous Asante Kente which are highly cherished by the indigenes. As a qualitative research, it adopts the narrative research design to interpret empirical information gathered from master weavers and opinion leaders from two weaving communities (Bonwire and Adanwomase) in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Information on the indigenous Kente of the Asantes is presented, which draws on the types coupled with their philosophical connotations. The worth of the Asante Kente cloth from both aesthetic and philosophical points of view is also presented in the study. It recommends further studies to promote the artefacts and the Ghanaian culture at large.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, Philosophies, Kente cloth, Strip weaving, Asantes

INTRODUCTION

In Ghana, indigenous weaving of cloth is mainly done in the Asante, Northern and Volta Regions. The traditional Asante woven cloth is known as Kente, while that of the Ewe people is known as Kete. The northerners call theirs 'Mmɔtena' or 'Fugu', with the sewed garment called smock and sometimes 'Fugu' as the raw material itself. The Fugu is completely different from Kente and Kete, in that the cloth is basically woven in plain weave structure mainly by shuttling. The common colours are black and white, although some come in other colours apart from the aforementioned. Kente and Kete on the other hand are somehow similar in structure in the sense that both fabrics are constructed predominantly by handpicking with intermittent shuttling activities. Shapes and images are introduced in both weave structures. However, the two fabrics differ in terms of yarns used, design and their finish.

The most significant difference between Ewe Kete cloth and Asante Kente cloth is that the images in the former are more representational and evolve from the weaving process, whereas the images in the latter are basically geometric shapes. However, both fabrics are woven on traditional looms that are slightly different [1]. According to Ansah [2], the application of Kente as a traditional art piece stems from both symbolical and aesthetical points of view. Every cloth comes with a name and meaning, with the various patterns and motifs that also have their own names and meanings. The names and the interpretations of these traditional artefacts emerge out of historical events, proverbial statements, achievements by individuals, the behaviour of some living things, philosophical expressions, values and norms etc. Designs and motifs are captured in geometric concepts of objects related to the actual meaning. The ideas behind most of such patterns are difficult to trace since they do not have inherent features that would make them resemble the object or concept they are portraying. Martin [3], therefore, confirms that their relationship is basically abstract instead of realistic. The naming of the designs and motifs is done by the innovators who are also mostly the weavers. These forms, names and meanings of such designs and motifs are usually given by weavers who acquire these through dreams and reflective times whenever they experience an encounter with the ancestral world. At certain times, kings and the elderly could attribute names to Kente that they particularly commissioned. The names may also be derived from the manner in which the warps and wefts are arranged in the fabric. It could be seen from the literature that Kente is not an ordinary art piece. This study reports on the beauty of the Asante Kente which is mostly embedded in philosophies. With some selected motifs and cloth designs, it looks at the artefacts from aesthetical and conceptual perspectives in order to raise an esteemed pedestal for the products.

METHODOLOGY

The narrative research design under the qualitative research method was adopted to interpret the empirical information gathered from opinion leaders and master weavers at Bonwire and Adanwomase in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Wolgemuth and Agosto [4] posit that narrative research methodology elicits and analyses stories in order to understand people, cultures, and societies. Six (6) respondents comprising of two master weavers and an opinion leader were interacted with at each of the two weaving centres.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Traditional Hand-Woven Patterns

Asante Kente is an eye-catching woven cloth mainly produced by artisans at Adanwomase and Bonwire in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. According to Owusu [5], the people of Adanwomase at that time had their own form of weaving which was quite different from what is practiced today. Woven products then were called "Asaasetoma" and had no peculiar aesthetic features unlike today. He further reiterated that weaving communities in the area had an indigenous and weird approach to weaving until at a point where people from four communities, namely Adanwomase, Bonwire, Asotwe and Nsuta-Beposo, were selected to learn the vocation properly in faraway "Bontokrom", a town said to be at the Ivory Coast border. Of the four sent on this mission, only two, that is Adanwomase and Bonwire, could learn the trade and were, therefore, certified with a unique small basket called "Sesea" (a mark of an authority in weaving) containing smaller pieces of woven patterns. Kantanka [6], cultural consultant and a master weaver, further stressed that woven Kente fabrics were made strictly for the Asante King and had no vast involvement of colour then, except for indigo and white. Different range of colours was later introduced after the Kente fabric was considered for other well-meaning indigenes as well.

Today, Kente is woven on a locally constructed loom called 'Nsadua Kofi' in long strips with silk and cotton threads. These strips are joined together lengthwise to create definite designs in the woven cloth. The cloth contains philosophical motifs which are used significantly for communication among the people. The artisans carefully create the fabric designs in the form of complex patterns following the elements and principles of design.

Variety of Kente designs have been originated, each of which has particular concept associated with it. They include: Adwinasa – its literal meaning is that all motifs have been exhausted. Adwinasa was formerly worn only by kings, wealthy people and those of high status. It symbolizes classiness, royalty, brilliance, resourcefulness, wealth, perfection and superiority. Obaakofo Mmu Man – its literal meaning is 'a whole nation cannot be ruled by one person'. This cloth was originally known as 'Fathia Fata Nkrumah', meaning Fathia befits Nkrumah as a wife. It portrays the manner in which the Akans exercise their leadership role in relation to participatory democracy. The cloth symbolizes all-inclusive democracy and a warning against autocracy. Sika Futuro – its literal meaning is 'gold dust'. Gold dust was deemed more precious among the Akans and was therefore used as a medium of exchange before the discovery of coins and notes. Sika Futuro cloth symbolises riches, purity, royalty and honour. Abusua Ye Dom – its literal meaning is 'family is a force'. The cloth was designed to exhibit the significance of family in human existence on earth. The cloth symbolizes a powerful family bond, the worth of family togetherness, collective work and responsibility and collaboration. Emaa Da – its literal meaning is 'it is happening for the first time' or 'it has no precedence'. It portrays the exceptionally creative life of the people, innovation, uniqueness, originality and great achievement. 'Toku Kra Toma' – its literal meaning is 'Toku's soul cloth'. It symbolizes brave leadership, heroism, self-sacrifice, and spiritual empowerment and rebirth. 'Woforo Dua Pa a, Na Yepia Wo' – its literal meaning is 'he who climbs a significance tree is given the needed assistance'. It symbolizes ambition, confidence, wishes, sharing and honourable activities. Kyeretwie – its literal meaning is 'the leopard catcher'. The cloth symbolizes courage, valour, bravery, extraordinary achievement and motivational leadership. Akyempem – its literal meaning is 'thousands of shields'. The cloth symbolizes military prowess, togetherness through military strength, bravery, political alertness and spiritual protection. Nyankonton (the rainbow) – its literal translation is 'God's eyebrow'. It was designed to exalt the aesthetics and puzzle of the rainbow experience. This cloth symbolizes Godly beauty, gracefulness, Godly creativity, singularity, and good signs [7].

Asante Kente as a woven fabric is characterized by its dazzling, multi-coloured designs of bright hues, has geometric patterns and eligible designs [8]. The word Kente originates from *kenten*, the Twi word for basket [9]; it is also known as a woven cloth emerged out of the designer's creation [10]. The distinctive features of the Asante Kente from other woven fabrics is its geometric patterns and brighter colours including gold, maroon, green, black and dark blue [11,12]. The structure of the Kente strip is anchored on weft floats and geometrical patterns. The unique patterns seen in the Kente fabric are made by the combination of two decorative techniques: the creation of additional rows of weft floats on the ground weave to form diverse shapes and the total covering of the warp yarns with a block of coloured yarns [13]. This gives rise to the Ahwepan, Topreko Faprenu, and Asasia Kente designs [14].

Ahwepan is a plain woven structure which may or may not have weft stripes; Topreko Kente design is normally identified by two blocks of Babadua (a weft-faced pattern) and a block of Adwinasa pattern created by interlacing two or three weft yarns with a group of six warp yarns followed by another block of yarns. Faprenu is made with supplementary weft yarns which are made to float over several warp yarns to completely seal them before the ground weave is introduced. This 'double weave' makes use of twice the weft yarns as the ground yarns. Asasia is the most prestigious and uncommon Asante Kente design. It is a unique twill design in a diagonal orientation of weft floats. This complex weft design is woven strictly for the Asantehene [14,15].

There are basically four Kente weave patterns on which the various complex and diverse pattern originate, namely Asasia, Ahwepan, Topreko, and Faprenu.

Asasia

“Asasia” is the Asante terminology for the uncommon and most concealed type of silk Kente fabric. The uniqueness of Asasia among other silk Kente fabrics is embedded in its design structure. The details of a regular Asasia fabric are shown in Figure 1. The design could be easily analysed with a focus on the diagonal zigzag patterns, particularly the green ones. It is noticed that, just like other motifs, it has been made by using a method weavers refer to as “supplementary weft float”, in which an extra green silk yarn, in this case, “floats” on top and beneath the striped “ground” weave.



Figure 1. Regular Asasia Kente

To analyse further, the darker green coloured diagonal lines in the design are made of several picks or wefts which are successively made to pass over and under eight group of warps. This approach is repeated in the same order till the effect is complete. In a careful study of Figure 2 of “Asasia” fabric, slight difference is identified.



Figure 2. Zig-zag Asasia Kente

Upon a careful study of the first row in Figure 2, it could be realised that the usual float of the weft yarns over and under eight warps are showcased by the green silky diagonal lines. The second row, however, presents the floats in a slightly different manner which eventually sum up to the usual eight over eight weft floats. In this row, the weft yarns float over four warp yarns from one set and another four from the next set. This gives rise to a twill woven pattern shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Twill Asasia Kente Pattern

The manner in which the floats are created (the combination of four set of warps from the previous set and four from the next set of warps) creates a sharper 45° Kente design/pattern which is different from the others. Figures 4(a)-4(c) show variations of the unique 'Asasia' Kente design.



a) Multiple design Asasia Kente



b) Plaid-dominated Asasia Kente



c) Diamond-based Asasia Kente

Figures 4. Variety of Twill *Asasia Kente*

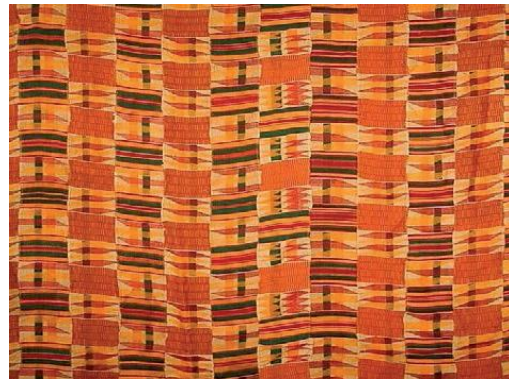
Ahwepan

'Ahwepan' in Asante Twi is normally done with a monochrome thread and two heddles. The thread is often woven plain without any designs to form the background. Sometimes, polychrome threads could be combined to do the single weaving. Double weaving is done with four heddles. Kente cloths that are woven with this method are patterned with designs on them and they normally take 2-3 months to complete. The production of such sophisticated and elaborate designs is intended to give meaning to the cognitive or

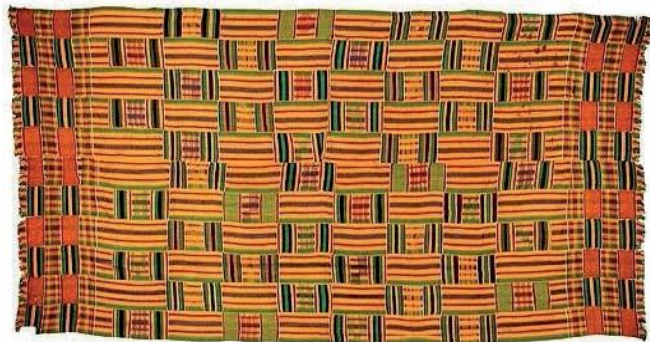
thought processes by their cultural milieu and cosmology [16]. Figure 5(a)-5(c) illustrates some examples of Ahwepan Kente.



a) Multiple-design Ahwepan Kente



b) Strip-based Ahwepan Kente



c) Basic Ahwepan Kente

Figures 5. Variety of Ahwepan Kente

Faprenu

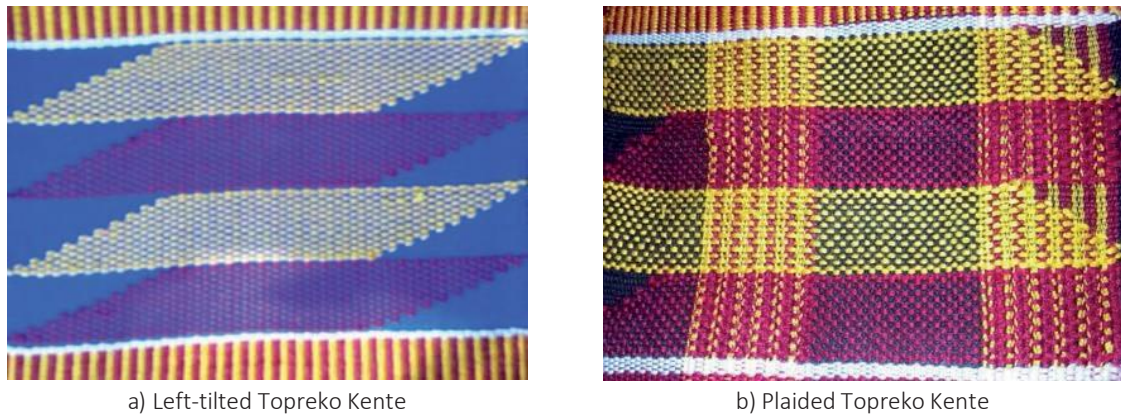
'Faprenu', as the Twi name denotes, implies that two separate heddles are designated for the actual design weft. Weft threads are mostly picked twice before an insertion of a binding thread, which is made to secure the design. Relief effects of the patterns are normally seen heavier from the surface due to more weft picks. Sometimes, less warp threads, or no warp impressions at all, are seen on the woven surface. Due to its design-oriented nature, they are mostly employed on more intricate and elaborate patterns such as 'Adwini Asa', 'Adwini Si Dwini So'. This kind of weave is mostly associated with queen mothers, signifying royalty, elegance and gracefulness. Figure 6 shows an example of 'Faprenu' Kente.



Figure 6. Faprenu Kente pattern

Topreko

'Topreko' in the Twi language denotes doing something as just an attempt or honouring something once. Therefore, as a traditional basic weave structure, both the design and binder picks make use of a single heddle each. A binder always comes to secure the weft anytime a design pick has been made. At a pick, design weft goes under one and over one, respectively, to form the pattern (Figure 7).



Figures 7. Variety of Topreko Kente

Aesthetic and Philosophical Meanings

Most Ghanaian Kente designs are not only used for aesthetic reasons but equally convey notable symbolisms grounded in their values and beliefs. In the context of Ghanaian art, its function goes beyond ordinary aesthetic appreciation to carry a philosophical basis inherent through symbolic utilization of motifs, colours and materials. According to Osei-Bonsu Safo-Kantanka, Kente fabrics, apart from their aesthetic relevance, serve as a tool for communicating our norms, values and aspirations as a people to others who seek to inquire. He further intimated that Bonwire, for instance, had comparatively little to offer in respect to actual weaving practices; however, they were the beacon of marketing and projecting these values and norms through sales and exhibitions of Kente designs.

Borgatti [17] opined that philosophy and use of fabric help to establish the concepts of humanity, culture, correct social relations and behaviour. For instance, Kente in Ghana is seen as more than a cloth. It is a visual description of people's history, social values and norms, oral tradition, ethical beliefs and political values. In inference, such Kente art in this scope is a speechless way of communication understood by the users. Also, due to cultural differences, the meaning of an art form is said to be subjective [18]. Its meaning is based on the beliefs of the people practicing it, and therefore could not be given a common meaning. Symbolic interpretation of the products is, therefore, the common thing among all cultures. As confirmed by Leuthold [19], symbolisation is vital in human activities. Cassirer [20] also posited that art plays a key role in symbolic interpretations.

The functions of art differ from time to time. To a larger extent, the socio-cultural context determines its function at a given point. Particularly, Danto [21] has it that, from a philosophical point of view, art draws a line between the audience, the artist and the artefact. This ability of art buttresses the fact that a deeper understanding could be drawn from experiences metaphorically with human creations. For example, the totality of Kente fabrics of the Ghanaians reminds the people of their ethnic values and norms. In affirmation to this, Owusu emphasizes that colours which were later introduced into the weaving vocation were born out of our everyday life activities as a people and, therefore, represent who we are, where we come from and where we are going.

In actual fact, Kente philosophy in the country provokes deeper comprehension needed to unravel untold stories and unspoken words. Ortony [22] establishes that the symbolical representation of the artefact allows a good delivery of messages to the people from more discovered facts to less discovered ones. This is made possible by the application of materials which are locally understood by the people and the users from both philosophical and aesthetic points of view, in the creation of the artefacts. The artist, who has a corresponding relationship with the culture, can be the only person to decipher and understand that which is not universally apparent by way of this visual communication. It could be said that one needs to have a deeper understanding of a given culture in order to comprehend the messages carried by the artefacts of that culture. Here are some symbolic connotations of popular designs.

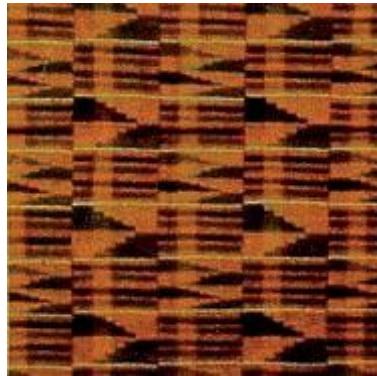


Figure 8. Adwin Asa - all motifs are exhausted

The designer of this fabric (Figure 8), in attempting to please the Asantehene, tried weaving a special fabric such as this. Led by this intent, he employed into his design all motifs then available to weavers in creating his fabric. The artist eventually claimed his exhaustion of all the existing motifs created by other weavers in the weaving communities among the Asantes. It was, therefore, graded as the highest quality Kente fabric among the existing ones by then, and used only by the custodians of the Asante Kingdom. They were the only class of people who had the authority to use the Adwin Asa Kente piece. The fabric stands for royalty, creative ingenuity, elegance, wealth, excellence, superiority and perfection in craftsmanship.



Figure 9. Obaakofo Mmu Man - a nation is not governed by one person

Obaakofo Mmu Man Kente (Figure 9) emphasizes the Akan way of governance on the bases of participatory democracy. The design is made up of nine squares which stand for tufts of hair. These symbolical hairs are locally known as Mpuankron, and they epitomise a haircut of some royals who significantly support the rulers in making decisions to effectively carry out their leadership role. This fabric which was originally named as Fathia Fata Nkrumah (Fathia befits Nkrumah) was used significantly to portray the then political

atmosphere after Nkrumah was overthrown. Mpuankron connotes participatory democracy. The cloth therefore symbolizes *participatory democracy and warning against autocratic rule*.



Figure 10. Sika Futuro - gold dust

The history of the Akans has it that, prior to the introduction of coins and notes as currency, 'gold dust' as represented in a woven cloth design form (Figure 10) was used for buying and selling as it symbolised prosperity and wealth. The complexity of the design coupled with the colours (orange, red and yellow) gives a picture of gold dust. Sika Futuro symbolises elegance, wealth, spiritual purity, royalty and laudable achievement.



Figure 11. Abusua Ye Dom - the extended family is a force

The Akans believe that the extended family is the building block of a society and, therefore, every family member has a responsibility of bringing up the family by playing their individual roles in unity, as it happens in the army. Figure 11 shows the Abusua Ye Dom Kente design. The fabric was designed to acknowledge and strengthen such positive elements of the extended family setup. In its enormous variations and background colours the cloth symbolizes strong family bond, family unity, collective work and responsibility and cooperation.



Figure 12. Emmaa Da - first of its kind

The Kente design shown in Figure 12 got its name from a remark given by one Asante king due to its unique patterns. The king was overwhelmed at the patterns when the cloth was woven and presented to him and, therefore, gave a remark “Eyi de, emmaa da”. This is interpreted as “this has no precedence”. Upon the remark given by the king, the fabric was reserved only for him. The fabric was later woven for the king and prominent people in the society. It symbolises creativity and innovation. It also stands for uniqueness, perfection and exceptional achievement.



Figure 13. Toku Kra Toma - Toku’s soul cloth

The designing and naming of the cloth shown in Figure 13 was purposed for the honouring of an Akan warrior queen mother called Toku. She was a brave and courageous queen mother who stood beside Nana Opoku Ware I, the King of the Asante kingdom (1731-1742) in a battle. The cloth was therefore designed to remind the people of her selflessness and honour her soul after she was defeated and killed in the battle. The fabric was worn by the royals and the people of higher class during important ceremonies for ancestral veneration. The fabric signifies heroic deeds, courageous leadership, self-dedication, spiritual strength and rebirth.

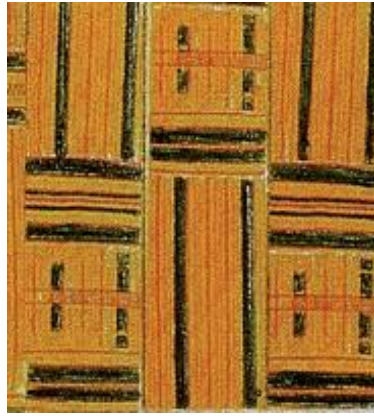


Figure 14. Wofro Dua Pa a, Na Yepia Wo - one who climbs a tree of value, gets the needed help

Figure 14 presents a Kente cloth designed to signify the need to encourage individuals who embark on positive projects in the society. Among the Akans, any acceptable practice or path taken by an individual which is perceived to yield a positive result is seen as a good tree. Those individuals, therefore, need to be supported to climb such a tree. The cloth could be presented to someone who is known to be aspiring for a valuable position. The fabric symbolizes aspiration, hope, mutual benefits, sharing and noble deeds.



Figure 15. Kyeretwie - the lion catcher

The cloth shown in Figure 15 is believed to be the first coloured Kente cloth woven by the Akan traditional weavers in their history. The cloth was designed following a great incidence which took place in King Kwaku Dua dynasty (1838 -1867) [5]. The king, with an intention of testing the bravery of his warriors had given them an order to catch a leopard alive during his reign. Since then, the appellation “Kyerekwie” has been reserved for bravery leaders in the Asante kingdom to liken them to the leopard catchers. The colours in the cloth, especially the stripped black warps, represent the spots found in leopard’s fur. Previously, the fabric was designed only for the Asante king and could only be worn by other chiefs with permission from the king. It symbolizes courage, valour, exceptional achievement and inspiring leadership.

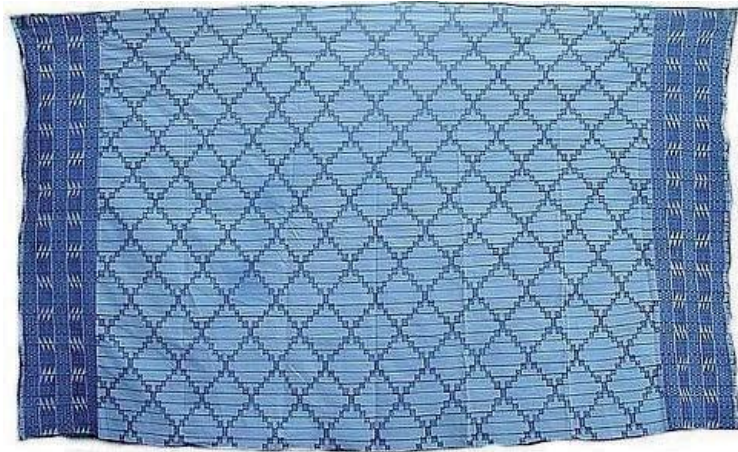


Figure 16. Akyempem - thousands of shields

The design in the Kente fabric shown in Figure 16 connotes a great number of shields used by the Asante warriors to protect the kingdom from the invading enemies. The chief among the shield bearers and the king's guards are expected to be the sons of the king. The totality of the 'Akyempem' Kente cloth revolves around philosophies which are tied to protection and royalty. The fabric symbolizes military prowess, unity through military strength, bravery, political vigilance and spiritual defensiveness.

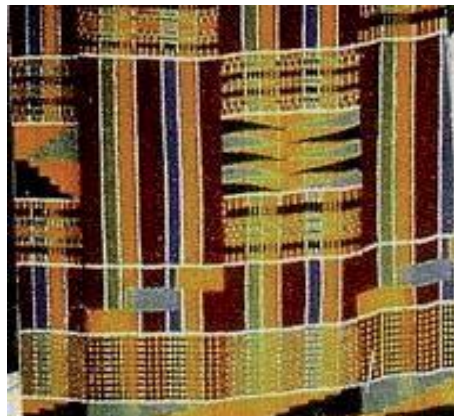


Figure 17. Nyankonton - God's eye brow; the rainbow

Figure 17 shows the Nyankonton pattern. It was designed in exalting the aesthetics and mystery behind a rainbow's development. The arrangement of warp yarns imitates the visual features of the rainbow. Historically, the utilization of pictures and motifs is important when interpreting a Kente fabric. A study conducted on these pictures and motifs provides the Kente fabric with an in-depth meaning. It provides the viewer with an improved appreciation of the work that offers the chance to encounter the art within the context during which it was created. Therefore, it is not accidental that the Ghanaian philosophy of art is gorged with symbols but rather transmits the thoughts, beliefs, values and norms of the individuals, thus revealing the rich cultural traditions of Ghana.

Textile Aspect of the Asante Culture

The Asantes consider their textile artefacts as a crucial means of identifying their way of life. This reflects in their indigenous festivals and other important occasions, such as marriage, funerals, child namings, puberty etc. [23]. A typical Asante would not go for a textile artefact without considering the name and

the philosophy attached to it. Values, beliefs and practices of the people, therefore, become vital in the process of projecting the textiles. Gedzi [24] argues three theories which attempt to explain the etymology of 'Asantefuo' (the Asantes). These include (a) Asan-te-fuo (producers of clay), (b) Esa-nti-fuo (because of war group) and (c) Asanteni-ba (Asante child). According to the author, the second theory, which is related to war, looks plausible. It projects the Asantes as united people and warriors. This is reflected in the naming of the 'Obaakofo mmu man', 'Abusua ye dom', 'Toku kra toma', 'Wofro dua pa a, na yepia wo' and 'Akyempem' Kente designs shown in Figures 9, 11, 13, 14 and 16, respectively. It could be said that the culture of the people greatly affects the naming of the textile artefacts.

In funeral ceremonies, the Asantes exhibit the value of textiles through the diverse philosophical meanings placed on the artefacts. In this ceremony, as confirmed by Adu-Gyamfi et al. [25], people of high authorities adorn themselves to uniquely present their wealth and social class. In this instance, it is believed that not all woven fabric designs could be worn by the ordinary persons in the society [26]. Kente is actually famous due to the association it has with royalty and rites of passage. Historically, it was woven only for royals of the Asante land.

Aesthetically, colours play a significant role in the meaning of Kente, which subsequently informs occasions they are worn to. Black, red and sometimes white are reserved for funeral celebrations by the people. White Kente fabrics are reserved for happy moments, such as wedding and naming ceremonies. As colours and Kente patterns play an important role in the lives of the Asantes, attention is always paid on the selection of the local textiles by the citizens in order to communicate effectively through their outfit.

CONCLUSION

Philosophies are backed by images, stories and forms, which make their interpretations more meaningful. In fact, the art and also the lifetime of the folk symbolically replicate one another. This shows that the philosophical meaning of a symbolic artefact stems out of the philosophies of a given culture. It is worth saying that the philosophy of Kente in the context of Ghana stems out of mysteries which are embedded in the motifs and patterns. Kente gives a true reflection of the culture of the Asante people. This helps them to communicate effectively with the artefacts among themselves. Furthermore, the philosophy of Ghanaian symbols might not be absolutely evaluated without obtaining the symbolism of the colours as its usage enhances the other. Significantly, colours in the Ghanaian art culture usually carry across particular messages. Colour symbolism embedded in the Asante Kente is best understood within the context of its utilization and associations. This study brought to light the worth of the Asante Kente cloth which could be well appreciated not only from the angle of aesthetics, but also philosophy. This paper analysed the artefacts from both the aesthetic and philosophical perspective for cultural promotion and preservation. Further studies to project the artefacts are highly recommended.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization – S.M.A., D.A. and G.K.F.; methodology – S.M.A, D.A, and G.K.F.; formal analysis – S.M.A., D.A. and G.K.F; investigation – S.M.A., D.A. and G.K.F; resources – D.A, R.A. and B.G; writing-original draft preparation – S.M.A, D.A., G.K.F., R.A. and B.G.; writing-review and editing – S.M.A, D.A., G.K.F., R.A. and B.G.; visualization – S.M.A, D.A., G.K.F., R.A. and B.G.; supervision – S.M.A, D.A., G.K.F., R.A. and B.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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