

A Comparative Study of History, Equipment, Materials, Techniques and Marketing Approach of Traditional Weaving in Ghana

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Abstract

Strip weaving in Ghana has been an art in transition and has been handed over from generation to generation, since its inception. This weaving tradition has gained popularity in renowned communities situated in the Volta, Ashanti and Northern Regions of Ghana which have varied ideologies pertaining to the origination, production and marketing of the final product. This paper seeks to identify the various communities and hence, compare their history, design techniques, materials, equipment and their marketing structures. Relevant data for the study were solicited using interview and observation tools from chiefs, opinion leaders, weavers and traders in selected weaving communities in the Volta, Ashanti and Northern regions of Ghana. The outcomes of this study revealed that traditional weaving, as practiced by the various communities has unique features which identifies the crafts of the communities and contributes immensely to the cultural, political and socio-economic development in Ghana. This study also contributes to the tourism awareness creation discussions; with regard to identifying the major weaving communities in Ghana, their history, approaches to weaving and merchandising.

Keywords: Traditional weaving, Comparative study, Strip weaving, Kente, Kete, Loom

1. Introduction

Strip weaving traditions are common throughout West Africa - from Senegal in the west to Cameroon in the east, and from the edge of the Sahara south to the coast. Strip-woven cloth is made by men on narrow double-heddle looms with mostly two or four heddles. Presently, these looms are equipped with up to six heddles which enable the weaver to produce more complex structures such as variations of twill weave. They weave several long, narrow bands of cloth, and then sew them together side by side to make one large piece of cloth (Picton, 1986). Special weaving or dyeing techniques may be used to add patterns, textures, and colours to the strips. These elements are often very carefully planned to give the final cloth a certain overall design. The names of cloth types usually refer to the overall quality of the cloth or the warp-stripe pattern (Avins & Quick, 1998). Apparently, pattern names reflect the colours and layout of the stripes. The Asante and Ewe peoples of Ghana are some of the most famous strip-cloth weavers in West Africa.

Avins and Quick (1998) reiterate that Asante kente is unquestionably the most popular and best known of all Africa textiles because it is produced in greater quantity, exported to more places, and incorporated into a greater variety of forms than any other African fabric. Also, it has captured the attention of visitors since at least 1817 as observed in the following descriptions of Bowdich (1966); "the general blaze of splendour and ostentation", "cloths of extravagant price" and "incredible size and weight, thrown over the shoulder exactly like the Roman toga..."(p.35). The Asante and Ewe people weave basically warp-faced strips, with sections of weft-floats. The length of these sections is often carefully planned so that when the strips are sewn together, the "blocks" of weft floats line up, often in a "checkerboard" pattern (Clarke, 2002).

Traditionally, weaving is practised in Ghana by the people of Asante, Ewe and the North (Figure 1). The Asante kente is woven in villages such as Bonwire, Woonoo, Maape, Adanwomase and Ntonso, outside Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti region. Kente is also woven by the Ewe people in the Volta Region, in communities such as Kpetoe (Agotime Kpetoe, and Agotime Abenyinase), Anlo and Somme areas (Denu, Agbozume, Klikor, Wheta, and Keta),

and Mafi-Kumase area in the Tongu District as well as Kpandu. In the Northern Region, major weaving activities are practised in Doboya, and Yendi.

The strip-woven cloth called 'kente' made by the Asante people of Ghana and 'kete' among the Ewe people of Ghana and Togo is the best known of all African textiles. Although Asante and Ewe strip-woven cloth may look very similar, there are significant differences, especially in the weft designs and in some technical areas with respect to the weaving process. Original Ewe kete is often identified by its figurative motifs. It must however be stated categorically that recent developments have seen a gradual erosion of what used to be the distinctive differences between the two. The distinctive characteristics of the Bonwire Kente is marked mainly by geometric shapes of different sizes in brilliant colours of maroon, gold, green, dark blue and black seemed to have gained an urge on the international scene over the designs from the Volta region which originally came in relatively duller colour schemes with the colours oftentimes speckled. This popularity has mainly been a result of an inadvertent promotion of the national philosophy of the "African personality", a brain child of the first president of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in which he sought among other things, to promote the African creativity and ingenuity through the wearing of Ghanaian garments both at national and international meetings he attended. It therefore became more economically viable for even Ewe weavers to produce the Bonwire type designs at the expense of the Ewe type designs.

The Northern region of Ghana also has a very rich tradition in weaving. This tradition is centred at Daboya which is a small town located at the north-western part of Tamale and Yendi, located at the eastern part of Tamale. The uniqueness of the weaving tradition at Daboya is their skill in yarn dyeing before converting the yarns into a woven cloth. The weaving tradition in the north can be said to be unique because of the techniques and high skill employed by the weavers. This makes it easier to readily identify such products in the form of smocks ("fugu" or "batakari"), among other end uses (Tourist Attractions, 2011).

The people Asante, Ewe and Northern of Ghana are some of the most famous strip-cloth weavers in West Africa. Among these cultures, differences exist in their mode of producing the strip cloth as well as the marketing of the final product to consumers. The focus of this paper is to identify the various weaving traditions with respect to the various cultures in Ghana and compare their differences in relation to the equipment, materials, techniques and marketing strategies adopted by the weavers in the various weaving communities.

2. Methodology

Out of the several weaving communities in Ghana, the following weaving communities were sampled: Ashanti Region (Adanwomase and Bonwire), Volta Region (Agortime-Kpoetoe and Agbozume) and Northern Region (Daboya and Yendi), because of their predominant contributions and role to the weaving industry of Ghana. In part with literature review, narrative research was used to describe the lives and experiences of individuals, collect and compose stories about the various weaving communities visited for this study.

3. Results and Discussion

Relatively, history of weaving in Ghana has different dimensions with respect to the various cultures. In Adanwomase of the Ashanti region, according to oral tradition (Kwame Nsiah, personal communication December 10, 2011), it was during the reign of Osei Tutu I, the king of Ashanti kingdom that the art of kente weaving was brought to the Ashanti kingdom. However, Nsiah emphasized that Osei Tutu I travelled all the way to Bontoku in Ivory Coast and saw the practice of weaving. This practice was then introduced to the people of Adanwomase which eventually began the weaving practice in this area. Kente weaving is identified among the people as an old practice which was used to serve the Ashanti kingdom. He added that after the expedition, the woven-cloth produced is known as "Asaase ntoma" which was woven with the ground loom. The cloth was limited in width and length for human covering. When joined together, it only formed a small piece of cloth known locally as "danta" or "twokoto." This challenge was later surmounted when cotton was discovered by Osei Tutu I during a war between Asante people and the people of Nkoranza. The chief of Nkoranza when captured showed the king their cultivated cotton farms and the spinning industry.

In another vein, according to Kwame Nsiah, it is believed that Osei Tutu I sent four groups of people to the north to learn the art of spinning and weaving of cotton. These four groups of people included the people of Adanwomase, Nsuta and Beposo, Asotwe and Bonwire. Nonetheless, another school of thought has it that, Adanwomase people learned this art from the north and this is shown in the samples that their ancestors brought from the north as

evidence. These woven samples were known as “Sesie” which have resemblance to Daboya woven strips from the north. On their return, the people of Adanwomase were sent to the king’s palace to weave cloth for him. The cloths produced then were white and indigo and for all intents and purposes, the people of Adanwomase are noted for producing black and white as well as coloured pattern cloths till today.

Moreover, other scholars such as Ross (1998), Avins and Quick (1998) and Clarke (2002), including Nana Kofi Fofie (personal communication, December 10, 2011), noted that kente weaving was learnt by Asante people through the inspiration of a spider weaving its web. Weaving at Bonwire started with three sticks placed on the ground as looms and the yarns were mounted on them. This technique also resulted in a cloth which was referred to as “Asaase ntoma.” It was realised that this cloth was decorative and unique; and was shown to the chief of Bonwire – Nana Bobie, who encouraged them to continue their good work which he believed one day will bring fame and honour to the village and the Asante kingdom at large. Fofie explained that because there were not enough available yarns to weave a wider cloth, they used raffia from palm trees to weave. After weaving, the fabric resembled a basket or “kenten” as it is locally called. The kenten fabric was stiff and harsh but more beautiful than the previous cloths. Even though this fabric was wide enough, it couldn’t be worn because of the above problems associated with it.

In order to get supple yarns to weave the fabric, they travelled to the North to get cotton fibres through barter trade system where the people exchanged baskets of kola nuts for a calabash of cotton fibres. The women too were taught how to spin the cotton fibres into yarns. The fabrics produced with the cotton yarns were white in appearance and were named “akromafufuo”. After sometime, coloured yarns were introduced in the cloth by dyeing the cotton yarns with plant-extracted dyes. The dyes were in colours of red, yellow, green and black. With advancement of knowledge, a loom was constructed which was called “Nsadua Kofi”. The loom was used to weave the first coloured kente cloth which was shown to the King of Ashanti kingdom, Nana Osei Tutu I who named the cloths after the royal clan “Oyoko,” so the cloth was called “Oyokoman” meaning “the Oyoko family or nation.” Different cloth designs were created on the heels of Nana Osei Tutu’s acceptance of the first loom-woven cloth.

In Agortime, Nene Noi Keteku III (Personal communication, July 23, 2011), the chief of Agortime narrated that, Ewes learnt the art of weaving way back in Egypt where cotton weaving was predominant. He stated that their forefathers practised the art of weaving during their migration from one place to the other and left traces of the skills wherever they settled. He indicated that it is not known exactly the point in history that this ancient fabric might have emerged. But contrary to his assertion, Kwame Nsiah (Personal communication December 10, 2011), an old master weaver of Adanwomase postulates that kente weaving art in the Ashanti region actually started in 17th century. The chief further elaborated that the weaving tradition spread in Ghana especially to the Ashanti kingdom at the time of war between the people of Asante and the Ewe during the reign of King Kofi Karikari, which resulted in the capture of some Ewe weavers as war slaves. These weavers were weaving for the king and later taught the Asante people how to weave. He claimed that some of the Ewe people are still weaving in Bonwire and other weaving communities in the Ashanti region. Moreover, he explained that the name ‘Kete’ is derived from the instructional words “ke” and “te” used in instructing apprentices during weaving and these two words mean “opening of the warp yarns” and “pressing the weft yarns”.

The history of weaving at Daboya is believed to have pivoted around Sheriff, who came from Nigeria. Also, according to Gyapang (Personal communication July 4, 2010) of Daboya, weaving had been a domestic craft of the people of this community. The people of Daboya called the Wangara are believed to have migrated from Ivory Coast but due a civil war, they left Daboya to the Bolgatanga area. Over there, the indigenous people called them “Bakarambasipe” which means stranger. After the war, they came back to Daboya. Subsequently, Sheriff came from Nigeria to begin the art of weaving in Daboya. While Sheriff was weaving, Bakarambasipe people were dyeing the yarns for the weavers. Traditionally, women do not weave but were rather gathering the dye plants for dyeing. They were also spinning the cotton fibres into yarn and selling them to the dyers and weavers (Walisu, personal communication, December 2, 2009). Hand spun yarns were the main raw materials used for weaving in Daboya which produced fabrics that are rough and heavy. The fabrics produced with hand spun yarns are rough and heavier than the machine-spun ones.

Besides, Yendi weaving tradition was started by their great grand fathers when the art of dyeing was the main occupation of the people of Yendi at that time. Mossi people from Burkina Faso are believed to have brought weaving to Yendi. The combined skills of weaving by the Mossi people and the dyeing of the natives were put to

good use. The dyes were made from plants by mixing them together in pots through series of dye extraction methods. Unlike Daboya, Yendi weaves are more colourful with the inclusion of red, yellow, green, among others to their traditional colours which are blue, light blue and white. In the north, strip-woven cloth is sewn into smocks called “fugu” or “batakari.” Initially, the batakari was royal attire for dressing the king but with time, both royal and ordinary people used them.

3.1 Differences in Materials

The major material required in the weaving of a piece of cloth is yarn of various types. Among the Asante people as per their belief in the origin of weaving, they used raffia at the initial stages in the development of the weaves. They later used traditionally hand-spun cotton prior to the introduction of synthetic yarns. The main yarns currently used by the Asante weavers include rayon, cotton and silk. The first accounts of Ashanti royal silk weaving started from the 1730's when a man sent to the courts of King Opokuware by a Danish trader observed that the king “brought silk taffeta and materials of all colours.” The weavers unravelled the woollen and silk threads and mixed them with cotton and got many colours for weaving. These yarns were later purchased by the weavers from the local market or imported from southern Europe via the trans-Saharan trade (Clarke, 2002). Some of them included silk and lurex yarns which are used to weave special cloths for royals and the wealthy. The use of ready-made dyed yarns from the market led to the demise of traditional dyeing of yarns.

In the Volta Region, precisely at Agortime and Agbozume, the weavers extensively use cotton yarns due to the fact that their roots revealed a long association with the cultivation and weaving of cotton fabrics. In order to enhance the weave structures, the Ewe weavers now employ other yarn types such as silk, rayon and lurex yarns. The yarns are either dyed by the weavers themselves using synthetic dyes imported from Nigeria or use readily dyed ones purchased from the local market. The main source of yarn for the weavers in the Agbozume community and beyond is the Agbozume market. The yarns are bought in a hank or cone form of the various colours and converted into package form suitable for the weaving process. The already dyed yarns are prepared by immersing the yarns in the hank form into cassava starch solution and dried before weaving. This is done to provide extra strength and also to prevent fluffiness caused by abrasion during the weaving process. The yarns to be dyed are normally purchased in cone form and subsequently converted into hanks (Frank Galey, personal communication October 13, 2011).

The yarns originally used by the Northern weavers were hand spun and dyed locally. They are the only weaving community in Ghana that make a preponderant use of hand spun and locally dyed yarns. Unlike industrial spun yarns, dyed hand spun yarns possess certain features which are significant to the end users. They maintain their bulkiness and handling makes them fluffy thereby giving the final fabric a rough and fuller aspect. The cloth made from the hand spun yarn is prestigious and are used by the wealthy in the society. The yarns are dyed with natural dye which is quite fast to washing. Recently however, there has been the addition of synthetic indigo dye to the natural dye liquor in the dye pits before dyeing commences. Reason advanced has been to increase the colour depth. It is noteworthy that relevant accompanying dye auxiliaries like caustic soda and carbonate are omitted from the dye liquor.

3.2 Design and Techniques

Design is the major area of differences in strip weaving across these three cultures or weaving communities in Ghana. The major cultures under review are Asante, Ewe and Northerners who have some similarities but differ traditionally in their design constructions and concepts. Clarke (2002) is of the view that some design techniques employed by the people of Asante and Ewe bring the differences in their Kente cloth. The most commonly seen designs in Asante kente are produced by combining two distinct decorative techniques. First, the introduction of supplementary weft float into the ground weaves. The addition of extra weft threads to the weave structure which do not form part of the basic structure of the cloth. Instead, they float across sections of the ground weave appearing on one face of the cloth over six or eight warps then crossing through the warp to the back, floating and then returning again to the face. Rows of the weft floats are arranged to form designs such as triangles, wedges and hour glass shapes. The second technique is to create solid blocks of coloured threads across the cloth strip, entirely concealing the warp. An example of such a solid-colour warp is Sika Futuro (Gold dust), in Figure 2.

However, the main design feature of Ewe kente is the symmetrically arranged blocks of weft float designs and weft-faced stripes across the strips. A typical example of Ewe kete which has weft float designs is "adanudo" (Figure 3). It features a rich variety of weft float inlaid pictures, often on a plain background. Cole and Ross (1977)

categorized Asante patterns into four groups: Ahwepan, Topreko, Faprenu and Asasia. "Ahwepan" is a plain-weave cloth either with or without simple weft stripes and thus requiring only a single pair of heddles. "Topreko" (passed once) typically features the characteristic of kente composed of two blocks of weft-faced ("Babadua"), a block of weft-faced "adwen" created with double or triple weft threads going over and under, alternate groups of six warp threads manipulated by a second pair of heddles. This is followed by a group thread. Weavers and cloth sellers refer to Topreko in English as "single weave". The "adwen" block in "Faprenu" (thrown twice), also woven with two pairs of heddles, is created by two or three hand-picked supplementary weft threads wound on a single bobbin with the threads passed back and forth before the ground thread is inserted. It creates blocks of "adwen" so densely packed by the beater that none of the warp threads can be seen through the weft. This is referred to in English as "double weave" because it uses twice as many weft threads in relation to the ground thread as does the Topreko.

"Asasia" is the rarest and most prestigious weave cloths. It is woven on three pairs of heddles; this produces a distinctive twill pattern in the diagonal alignment of the weft floats. The third pair of heddles allows for more intricate weft patterns. "Asasia" cloths are the exclusive prerogative of the Asantehene and those he designates. Oyokoman design is the only warp pattern for "asasia".

The structure of the Asante strip cloth is centred on the creation of weft floats and geometric shapes to achieve an overall design. To the contrary, among the Ewes, the structures are dominated by figurative motifs such as stools, images, animals, birds, inscriptions, amongst other innovations by the weavers. The weavers also employ the technique of plying two different colours for a band, creating a sparkled effect. In the Ewe weaving, the images are woven with a technique such that the images are relieved only on one side of the cloth. The technique renders the design unbalanced because the right side of the piece of cloth can easily be distinguished. The Ewe designs are currently receiving a great influence from Nigeria because some of the Ewe weavers are being recruited to Nigeria to weave the Nigerians 'Aso oke', so when they come back they incorporate the style into their weaving.

Unlike the Asante and Ewe weaves which are design or motif oriented, the Northern weaves are basically coloured warp stripes mostly in blue, black and white in variant shades. Apart from these traditional colours that identify the Northern weaves, Yendi weavers inculcate other colours such as green, yellow and red, among others. This attests to the fact that differences exist in terms of the use of colour within a particular region. Another distinguishing feature of the Northern weaves is the stripes of white that are woven in the weft-wise at regular intervals.

3.3 The loom and Accessories

Until quite recently with advent of technology, the narrow strip loom is the main device used by the weavers to produce strip-woven cloths in Ghana. The looms used by the weavers are in different shapes and sizes, depending on the weaving locality and the creativity of the weavers. The accessories are basically separate equipment aside the loom for the production of the cloth. These include bobbins, shuttle, bobbin winder, shed sticks, spool rack, skein winder, heddle, reed, pulleys, among others. These accessories have unique names and meanings peculiar to the various cultures. Among Ewes, some of the accessories such as the pulleys are usually carved in the figurative forms. The carvings on the accessories make them unique but they basically perform the same functions.

Found in the Ghanaian society, strip loom is a narrow double-heddle portable loom, mounted on a simple semi-permanent frame. This makes it portable and the fact that the loom can be dismantled and re-assembled allows the weaver to travel from village to village looking for commissions. Also, it makes it possible to quickly dismantle the loom when it starts raining, or to pack up after a weaving session. This type of loom is common to several cultures in Africa, prompting several scholars to speculate about the origin and spread of this technology. Generally, they think that the strip loom spread from Asia to Africa, across the Sahara, and into West Africa. Over the centuries since the strip-loom was introduced, each local group has developed its own variations on the loom itself, as well as the design and cultural significance of the finished cloth.

Ewe weavers tend to use fixed looms embedded in the earth and tappers at the front rather than the portable looms anchored on a wooden base in a rectangular form, used by Asante weavers. The Northern looms are also similar to that of the people of Asante but with some fixed into the ground. Lamb (1975) had found some differences in Ewe and Asante looms. With the Ewe loom, the two back rests supporting the bar over on which stretched warp threads are placed, are nearer to each other than is the case in Asante loom. The Ewe tension device differs from that of the Asante arrangement. The Ewes use a short stick inserted into the warp from the bar which is held in position either by being tied with string or allowed to rest on the ground. Meanwhile, in the Asante loom, the tension is always held

in position by one of the loom uprights. Ewe heddle pulleys are usually carved in the shape of the head of a hen, cockerel, or human being, but in contrast, the Asante and the Northern pulleys are made of pieces of metal.

The loom (Kore) among the Northerners is similar to that of the Asante and the Ewe people. Most of the looms are the immovable types constructed with wood. The looms are constructed by the weavers themselves out of wood cut from the bush. The distance between the back posts and the front posts are the same which is the characteristic of the Asante looms. Yendi looms are the simplest in terms of structure. They are made up of two front posts which are Y-shaped with a stick across to support the stretched warp yarns. The reed and the heddle are connected to the roof of the shade with a string.

3.4 Marketing

Strip-woven cloth which began in the former Gold Coast, now Ghana as festive dress for special occasions – worn by men as a kind of toga and by women as upper and lower wrappers, has over the past forty or more years been transformed into bags, shoes, hats, ties, and many other types of apparel, including jewellery (Avins and Quick, 1998). Marketing of strip-woven cloth is one of the most important aspects of strip weaving in Ghana, West Africa and beyond. The cloth produced by the weavers is sold especially during market days in some weaving communities such as Bolgatanga in Upper East Region, and Tamale in Northern region and its environs, and in Agbozume and Agotime-Kpoetoe in the Volta Region. On the contrary, in the Ashanti Region, kente is invariably sold at retail shops along the various weaving communities and at the central business centre in Kumasi. Customers also place orders for a particular design to be produced for them. Fofie added that customers make demand through the selection of the available designs on display and if terms of payment are agreed, the weavers go ahead to weave the cloth. Apparently, timing is very important here as it takes a minimum of one month to construct an average kente cloth of 60 inches by 100 inches and three to five months to weave more complex ones.

With commissioning, there were, and still are, the commissioning of highly patterned cloth was not limited to members of Ashanti royal or chiefly elite but also to Ewe chiefly elite. Ewe weavers, in any case, work more to the market than on commission, with not only a greater variety of styles associated with different weaving centres but also with patterns intended to supply outside demands (Picton, 1986). In order to boost the demand for Ewe kete, Picton (1986) asserts that Ewe weavers imitate Asante designs in order to make the most of the demand for kente, as a form of national dress. Moreover, there is a growing interest to repackage not only kente but also the weaving communities, which has resulted in rivalry among weaving communities in Ghana, and it is legitimate because it boosts tourism as well. In the process, Adanwomase, Agotime Kpetoe, and Agbozume have established workshops and galleries, a feat that is designed to replicate and compete with the one built by the state through the Ghana Export Promotion Council in 1997 for Bonwire. This phenomenon has contributed greatly to the use and promotion of kente among Ghanaians and foreign tourists.

Traditional weavers mainly market their products to tourist who visit the village occasionally. Besides, there are stores that are privately owned some weavers and corporate groups that enjoy tremendous communal support in which merchandise (kente and its derivatives) are sold. They also travel to towns in and around Ashanti region to market their products. Interestingly, the prices of the cloth may vary depending on who is buying black or white, poor or rich and native or outsider. Promotion and exhibition of kente cloth are done through cloth festival which is celebrated every two years. The festival serves to promote both old and new methods of weaving, and history and quality kente cloth are exhibited for younger generation to adapt. Unfortunately, there is nothing like that for “fugu.”

5. Conclusion

From this study, it is believed that the art of strip weaving in the three traditions considered resulted from the transition or migration of people from one place to another. These movements can be attributed to wars, trade and farming among earlier settlements. Kente cloth made by the Asante and Ewe people as well as the cloth woven in the Northern part of Ghana has occupied a prominent role, and has achieved a tremendous international recognition which evolved into one of the tangible manifestations of an ever-growing sense of Pan-Africans. Weaving activities among the three regions studied are basically same but most significantly, the use of materials for the construction of looms and accessories, and cloth productions are influenced by the availability of the materials in the various communities. Amponsah (2010) explained that although both the Akan and Ewe people have different histories regarding kente, the purpose is not to create further contention and division among these weaving traditions. Indeed,

it is a good occasion to bring these traditions together to celebrate a common heritage. A sense of belongingness, working together, sharing of ideas and the development of techniques and designs at the expense of ethnic egocentrism and tribal sentiments should be encouraged.

The weaving industry has really made an impact on the cultural and economic sectors of the economy in Ghana. From observation, looms from Daboya and Yendi even though unique to the cultures, can be made portable just like those from Ashanti and Volta regions. Besides, broadloom technology can be introduced to weavers to enable them weave wider strips to speed up the process.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to the Traditional Chiefs and the chief weavers of the three weaving communities, and also to the detailers in woven textiles for their assistance and insight they contributed towards this research.

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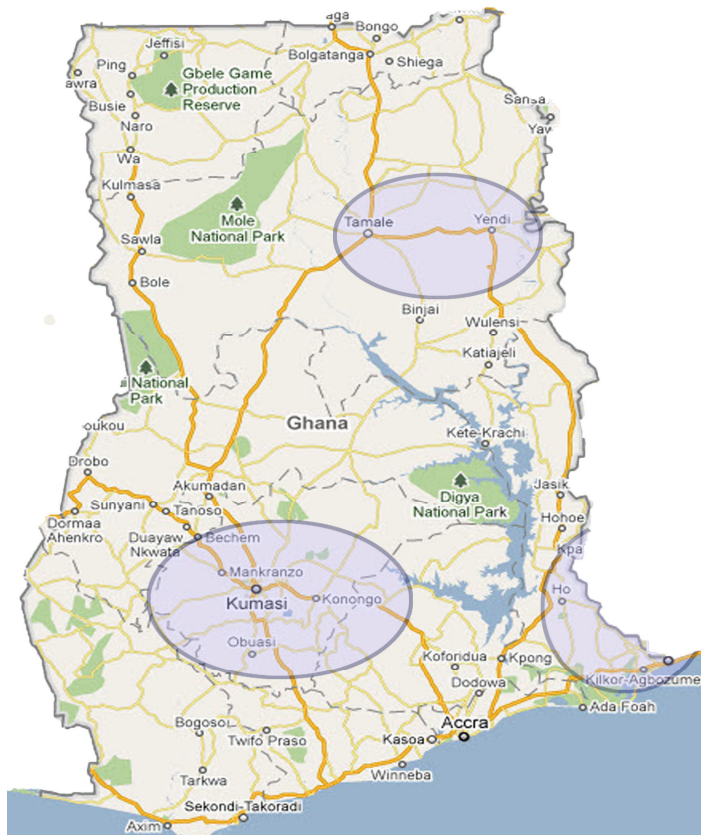


Figure 1: The designated areas represent strip weaving areas in the Ashanti, Volta and Northern Regions of Ghana (Courtesy – Google Map, 2011)



Figure 2: Sika Futuro (Gold Dust) – Asante, Ghana

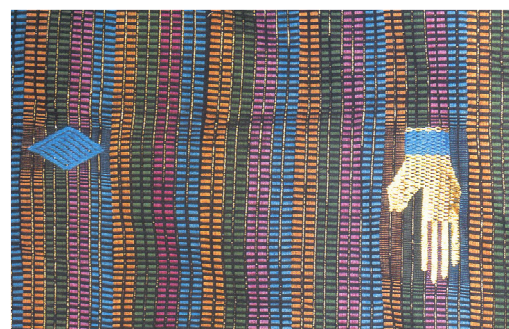


Figure 3: “Adanudo” – Ewe, Ghana

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